

# Let's do gender!

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#### Part 1: Practical Guidance and Didactical Approach

##### Background and keywords:

The contemporary image of boys and men is very different from that of the previous century. It is not only women now who are striving to conform to the so-called feminine ideals such as beauty, voluptuousness, style and charm. Advertising suggests in a variety of ways that society needs men who possess both: traditional male virtues as well as tremendous charisma and a stylish appearance.

This makes it more difficult for boys and young men to find their identity. Elementary school age boys in particular perceive themselves to be caught in a "hopeless" dilemma between tradition and modernity.

This activity for boys in the final years of elementary school attempts to break free of this conflict and increase their self-esteem and make it clear to them by means of a historical and philosophical, albeit simultaneously playful examination of the masculine image that it is absolutely essential for each individual boy to find the way that is right for him in the maze of opportunities that are available.

##### Similar topics:

Finding an identity, masculine images, feminine images, historic change

##### Materials:

- Letter to the little hero
- Blankets and seats
- Dimmed light

##### Duration:

60 minutes (may last as long as you like, depending on the group and the size of the group.)

##### Number of participants:

Five boys ideally take part in the activity. It can be extended to include a group of up to 10 boys. It is important for the activity leader to be male.

##### Age:

The boys should be aged at least 9 years and over.

##### Aims:

The activity aims to familiarise the boys with different images of masculinity. On completion of the activity the boys should be able to

- distinguish between traditional and contemporary images of masculinity;

- characterise boys and men in a chronologically differentiated manner;
- recognise themselves again, or not as the case may be, in concepts and images of masculinity; tolerate and respect different images of masculinity.

**(Short) explanation:**

It is absolutely essential that the leader of this activity

1. Gives the boys the background information in the run-up to enable them to understand the letter to the little hero. Extracts from Gaarder's "Sophie's World" for example might make a good contribution. Boys must be introduced to the actual subject matter at the same time. Reference is made at this point to the activities for the 'Identity' and/ or 'Socialisation' subject blocks, which might be useful as preparation. It is essential for the activity leader to ensure that the boys have sufficient background information and illustrative material to enable them to understand the letter.
2. Ensures that the activity takes place in a "mysterious atmosphere". A camp, in the dark, around the campfire etc. would be suitable "settings". Torches, darkness and moonlight would be useful for conducting the activity.

The letter is read to the boys. Each boy receives a copy so that he can read it along with the leader. The boys are unlikely to understand the letter on the initial reading. After the letter has been read together, it is incumbent on the leader to work towards interpreting and discussing the individual sections based on specific questions (in any order). This must take place in a spirit of openness and intimacy.

The boys conclude by reading the letter (in sections) aloud again.

It is of the utmost importance for the activity leader to ensure that the boys understand the interpretations and invariably draw parallels with the present. This learning process is made much easier by providing examples from the boys' everyday life.

Letter to a small hero:

Dear little hero,

You may find yourself in difficulty because things have gone so downhill with the big heroes. You don't know what is to become of you now that big heroes are no longer needed. It would seem that these chaps have actually survived, it's just that they are no longer needed in fact. What are heroes for? What difficulty could they avert nowadays? Well? What do you think? I would willingly put my scepticism aside if I had a plausible answer. No, it's definitely over, and I understand your concern.

But I know an excellent way out of your apparent dilemma. What I have in mind sounds somewhat unusual, but don't let it frighten you, and above all, don't think that it is an easy way out. Let's do gender sounds dreadful, I know, but it's not about always giving into women's desires. On the contrary, it's about your desires!

Allow me to go back a bit so that I can explain to you what I mean. I'm digging up some old arguments and documents for this purpose. I'm a historian, I've learnt to read from old sources so I don't need to allow myself be fooled by the present, but see for yourself later, examine my arguments at leisure and look for proof to the contrary before readily agreeing to something. Because the issue here is not easy! Doing gender speculates on nothing less than the possibilities in our culture of being a man and a woman or alternatively a man or woman, you see.

If we are to develop this idea, we definitely need to put aside the idea that masculinity and femininity are something that is cast in stone, something that is eternally constant. On the contrary, masculinity and femininity are discoverable facts as well as inventible opportunities. This may sound new, but it is not at all. The figuration of humans to competent and functional figures, to useful people in society, has produced manifold manifestations of women and men throughout history, but in the past people have usually failed to attach any particular importance to precisely this difference between the genders.

It was not until the Enlightenment and Industrialisation during the past two centuries that a great deal of energy was invested in constructing a major and significant difference between men and women, and individual roles and spaces for women and men were accordingly described: the man outside, at war, in the battle, in the world of work, in politics; the woman inside, in the house, at home, with the children, and masculine and feminine characters were formed accordingly.

Friedrich Schiller expressed this very poetically:

*"The man must go out in hostile life living,  
Be working and striving and planting and making,  
Be scheming and taking through hazard and daring,  
His fortune ensnaring.  
Then streams in the wealth in an unending measure,  
The silo is filled thus with valuable treasure,  
The rooms are growing, the house stretches out.*

*And indoors ruleth the housewife so modest,  
The mother of his children, and governs wisely  
In matters of family and maidens she traineth,  
And boys she restraineth, and goes without ending  
Her diligent handling, and gains increase hence with ordering sense..  
And treasure on sweet-smelling presses is spreading,  
And turns 'round the tightening spindle the threading,  
And gathers in chests polished cleanly and bright  
The shimmering wool, and the linen snow-white,  
And joins to the goods, both their splendour and shimmer,  
And resteth never."*

Around 100 years later the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche draws a brutal distinction between men and women:

*"Man shall be educated for war, and woman for the recreation of the warrior: all else is folly."*

I certainly don't wish to imply that this is the case with you, little hero, but many people still find such maxims cool even today. They no longer reflect reality at all. They were a way of thinking that was served the era of industrial production and the creation of national armies. It is very doubtful though whether women and men found them agreeable at that time. I had real doubts when I read the following quote:

*"We wish to point out the beauties of our German Fatherland to our dear German Youth Movement, so that they are suffused with all-consuming love for it; we wish to systematically raise respect for German men and disdain for all national and international spinelessness ...in short, we wish to help to train youths and men, who are willing to live, and if necessary die, for their Fatherland. And the latter is still what matters most."*

I don't know how you see it. Should dying for the Fatherland really be what matters most in our life? The cultural historian Thomas Macho believes that he has discovered why such life-denying ideologies were still being propagated not so very long ago. In his opinion, which is expressed very scientifically, it was linked to the alleged necessity "to send their own youth to the battlefield instead of *transnational armies of mercenaries*. *The cultural invention of a national juvenile ideal was quite simply a response to a postulate for a modern military organisation ...*"

As already mentioned, times are changing, no one is more certain of this than the historians. A glance back at the era before the Industrial Revolution reveals a curious phenomenon. Around 500 years ago, at the beginning of the modern age, the assumption was that there was only one gender, notwithstanding the actual existence of men and women. In the 16th century for example, according to the theory of male and female sex organs, the vagina was a penis turned inwards and the womb a scrotum. The French writer Michel de Montaigne narrates the following story:

*Passing through Vitry-le-Francois, I might have seen a man whom the bishop of Soissons had named Germain at confirmation, but whom all the inhabitants of that place had seen and known as a girl named Marie until the age of twenty-two. He was now heavily bearded, and old, and not married. Straining himself in some ways in jumping, he says, his masculine organs came forth; and among the girls there a song is still current by which they warn each other not to take big strides for fear of becoming boys, like Marie Germain.*

This anecdote that was also recorded by Michel de Montaigne is astonishing too:

*Pliny says he saw Lucius Cossitius changed from a woman into a man on his wedding day. Pontanus and others report similar metamorphoses as having happened in Italy in these later ages. And, through his and his mother's vehement desire,*

*Iphis the man fulfilled vows made when he was a girl.*

Conversely, we could joke that our male ancestors in the 16th century were evidently quite comfortable with the idea, which was probably bandied about as well, that their penis could well be a vagina turned outwards and the scrotum a protruding womb.

Joking aside, Marie de Gournay (1565 – 1645), one of the mothers of French feminism, published a tract in 1622 on "The Equality of Men and Women", whom she dedicated to a "strong woman" the mother of Ludwig XIV. (Anne of Austria). She wrote:

*"Moreover, upon careful consideration, the human animal is neither man nor woman, the sexes being formed not to constitute different species, but for propagation alone. The unique form and distinction of that animal consist only in a reasonable soul. And if we may be allowed a laugh along our way, this popular saying will not be inappropriate: there's nothing more like a male cat in a window, than a female cat."*

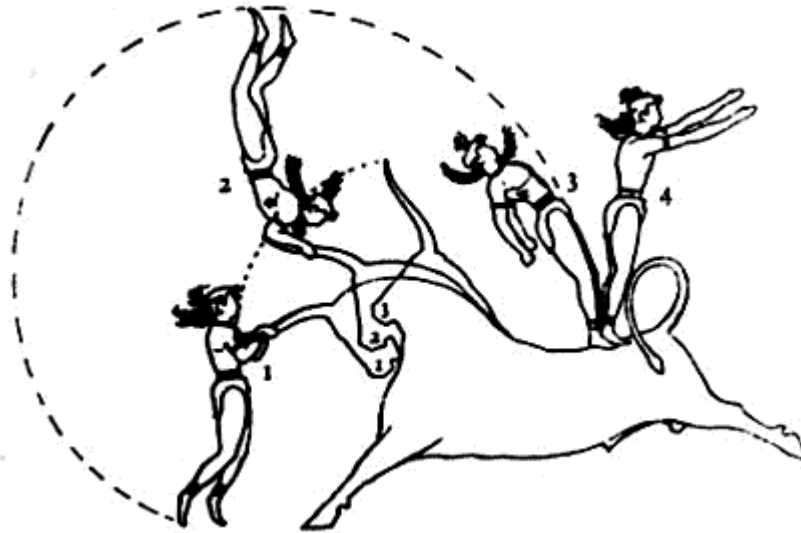
De Gournay had put her finger on one of the main ephemeral trends of the 17th century: the difference in the sexes is understood to be biological and is based on reproduction, whereas potential social roles and virtues do not need to be distinguished on the basis of gender.

The figure of the Amazon or heroine was ideal for depicting the equality of the sexes. You've heard of Joan of Arc, no doubt? In a nutshell, the Amazon model was particularly prevalent in the 17th century in France. New ideals did not emerge until later, as already mentioned, in the era of industry, militarization, and widespread elementary school education, and are no longer so ideal: the natural, sensitive, chaste and virtuous woman as a complement to the active, fighting, thinking man.

Just compare the illustrations of the Amazons, the bull jumpers from Crete and the ladies in the palace of Omphale, the Queen of Lydia, with the way Schiller describes women in his poem. All females, aren't they?



Moreover, the man in the palace at whom the women are disparagingly pointing their fingers, was Hercules, the strongest man at that time actually. He was sold to Omphale and had to serve her as a slave for three years to atone for his crimes. So you see, the greatest heroes of all time also had their world turned upside down, and as I assume that the little God Amor is at his side, these three years were not a complete disaster for him.



Bull jumping on the island of Crete was a sport in which both girls and boys took part. Drawing reconstructed from a fresco in Knossos Palace.



Laurent de Hyre (Paris 1606 – 1656): Hercules and Omphale, around 1626, Oil on canvas, 150 – 214 cm.

Please forgive me, I didn't intend to confuse you, I only wanted to show you what skills men and women can acquire and lose or relinquish. People can create their own identity, their own image. That's the whole point about doing gender. We can't do it on our own and so easily of course, it's a process that always takes place with other people in society, people who sometimes want to pigeonhole us. Your own ideas about yourself and your feelings are very important though. Be the person you wish to be! With the talents you've been given. Let's do gender!

You are right to object, we already have a gender, which is determined at our birth by those standing around and gawping. But this does not say anything about how many masculine and feminine tendencies a person has and nothing at all about how much joy, pleasure, wealth and prestige we acquire when we train our feminine and masculine sides.

Biology gives us scientific indications: visual gender identification at birth is not the only possibility of determining biological gender. On the contrary, chromosomes, gonads or hormones can also be used and these examinations demonstrate that a strictly biological and unequivocal definition of gender does not exist. We consequently do not need to think of gender in terms of two opposite and mutually exclusive categories.

As you can see, little hero, we have science on our side. The physical characteristics we happen to have are o.k., what is of greater relevance is what we make of ourselves and the world around us. It is not what we have (between our legs), but what we do, what we want to be that is important.

Our society has enabled changes to take place in recent decades. Women now wear trousers and when I was a teenager, I had long hair, which did not please my father, but that was his problem. Nowadays women can serve in the army and men can work as baby nurses. None of this is any reason to panic, not even if an Amazon were to appear on the scene again.

You should, however, examine the wealth of guidance on offer throughout the media and entertainment industry critically, just as you should my words. Above all, don't allow models to stress you.

When I walk along the streets or read the newspaper, I see that a new ideal masculine body partially clothed or completely nude is exhibited on a massive scale, in advertising, in toy figures, in cinema films and in TV films etc. In advertising, the naked or semi-naked male body has long since caught up with or even overtaken the naked or half-naked female body in terms of quantity. And I have read that the male chest measurement that is *depicted* has been increasing for three decades now. This is probably designed to signal to the public that it is possible to successfully work on masculinity. This evidently presupposes an athletic, muscular body. The fact is that men have been showing increasing dissatisfaction with their body for 30 years, and more so than women.

But who on earth has the styled ideal figure of a model with a steadily increasing chest measurement? As virtually no one has such a figure, fitness studios are doing a good trade and we are ones who are stressed. You can get into difficulty this way. It must admittedly also be accepted as a variation of doing gender, since if someone wants to be athletic and muscular, he should be allowed to pump iron and sweat. But you should not, little hero, become narrowly focused on this. You might have a good mind, a good soul, you might be a liberal bohemian, a discerning connoisseur? There is something of all of this in you. Don't allow your various talents to go to waste, just to boast.



I am at my wits' end, let women lead you into the big, wide world!

### Variations (Continuation):

Philosophising with the children plays an important role in the current pedagogical discussion. Linking the curricular topics that are set and discussed in this area might increase the boys' understanding and state of knowledge of their own objective.

### Reflection:

The following questions should play a prominent role in assessing and considering the activity:

- What does the author of the letter wish to tell us?
- What are images of masculinity?
- What images of masculinity are you familiar with from your books and from advertising?
- What is your image of masculinity? Why?
- What kind of image of masculinity do you project to the other boys in the group?
- Are you willing to change your masculine image?
- What you want to be like? Why?

The leader should determine the considerations on the whole, like the activity itself. He should summarise and put things into perspective at the end.

## Part 2: Theoretical Background and Further Information

The text operates with two logical figures:

1. "We are not born as girls ...", according to a perception at an early stage of the women's liberation movement, which led to the distinction between gender and sex (bender = social species, sex = biological species) in the Anglo-American feminist

movement. Feminists in other linguistic groups followed suit, and this idea was transposed to the view of masculinity.

2. In the Modern Age in the history of Europe, the image (self-image, image of others, mirror image, spitting image, model image) plays a role in creating a new reality. The individuality demanded by people in the Modern Age proves to be a type of spitting image. The modern person hankers after an individuality that is conveyed to him by ideal images. Ever since the technical age has made it possible to send ideal images and model images around the world, men and women have subjugated themselves to artificial norm identities... *The "projective" imagination has prevailed, not least because it has an inherent need to conquer – the need to subject the nature of the models or to make reality conform to ideals.*

This letter – formally addressed to a "little hero" – conveys the intention not to allow masculinity to appear as a biological fact or emotional state but as a cultural product. This is scientifically founded by a wide-ranging cultural comparison, inter alia, which shows "that there is apparently no culture anywhere in the world that assumes that men are inherently strong, capable and potent". They are initially moulded everywhere through trials, suffering and social constraints". Gender images – as they are called – are invariably cultural creations, it is not clear from the outset what actually constitutes a man and a woman.

The letter to the "little hero" provides insights into experiments with historical and cultural creations and will – perhaps, hopefully – encourage boys to consider the idea of conducting their own cultural experiments.

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