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ILO International Training Centre, Module on Gender, Poverty and Employment

The concept of ‘gender roles,’ refers to the activities ascribed to women and men on the basis of their perceived differences. Gender roles are socially determined, change over time and space and are influenced by social, cultural and environmental factors characterizing a certain society, community or historical period. Gender roles aim at setting boundaries between what is perceived as appropriate for women and for men in the society with regards both to the public and private domains. Such roles are accepted as ‘natural’ and internalized by girls and boys from a very early age, through the gender models they learn through their social environment. In most societies, individuals are strongly pressured to abide by such models, not only directly by the family or the community, but also indirectly by the role models underlying the social fabric – the labour market, public policy, the taxation system etc., which often act as deterrents to social change.

Both women and men perform multiple roles in their lives, in the productive domain – which includes activities related to the production of goods for consumption or trade and income-generating activities – and in the reproductive domain – which includes tasks and activities relating to the creation and sustaining of the family and the household.

Nevertheless, in most societies, men’s roles in the productive domain is prominent, whereas their reproductive – or domestic – role is just subsidiary. Men’s productive work, usually takes place outside the home, allowing them to perform their roles sequentially rather than simultaneously. In most countries, men are more involved in decision-making processes within political activities: they sit in assemblies and councils and direct more government agencies than women, therefore holding a greater political power and being able to exert stronger influence on their communities. Also, they usually hold greater economic power: they run more medium- and large size-companies and business activities, and proportionally earn more income at all occupational levels compared to women. Men’s contribution to domestic activities is often limited to tasks that involve some financial decision, like children’s education, house purchases etc.

Women, on the other hand, usually have to juggle various tasks simultaneously, because of their tendency to perform multiple roles within the reproductive and productive spheres (this is often called ‘multi-tasking’). Women have been described as often having a ‘triple role’:

- A productive role: Although women across the world do engage in paid work or income-generation activities, they tend to lose out in terms of access to, control over, and benefits from productive resources.
- A reproductive role (or domestic role): reproduction refers to all activities necessary for the maintenance and survival of human life. Examples include bearing, looking after and educating children, cooking food, washing clothes, growing or foraging for food for home use...A distinction can also be made between mothers and non-mothers.
- A community management role: This term is used to describe on activities usually carried out by women – as an extension of their reproductive role – for the benefit of the community, for example, the provision and maintenance of scarce resources of collective consumption, such as water, health care and education. This work is mostly unpaid and voluntary. Community management activities performed by men tend to be of more visible and higher social value (e.g. administration of local justice).

Women's reproductive role and community management role are often perceived to be 'natural': as they do not generate income, they are often invisible at the national economic level, even though the same tasks do constitute a professional profile. For example, if a mother or other female relations take care of children during 'working hours', they are not financially rewarded; however, professional 'carers' receive remuneration for the same tasks and are considered in economic statistics. The professionalization of domestic tasks, on its turn, partially contributes to the concentration of women in certain categories (nurse, domestic help etc), which reinforces the stereotype according to which women have a 'natural' quality for domestic work.

Crisis Changing Gender Roles

- External sudden events or crises, like war or famine, can radically change the roles of men and women. During World War II (1940-1945), the number of economically active women increased dramatically for the first time in Europe.
- Crisis situations can affect women and men differently because of their gender roles. Studies by the Asian Institute of Technology and ILO examined the effects of women workers in five Southeast Asia countries and identified severe discrimination against women workers as a direct outcome of the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. The most notable effect being women's disproportionate retrenchment and discrimination in access to employment and training.
- Sometimes after a crisis, old attitudes to gender roles may return and a gender role that was accepted during the crisis (e.g. women being active in armed struggles) are no longer accepted, as many women combatants found after liberation struggles in Latin America. Sometimes gender role changes may be permanent.
- Although conflict affects an entire population, because of their gender roles, men and women experience and respond to conflict differently, e.g. when men leave to fight, women have to take over the tasks previously done by men in addition to their own tasks.