What do we mean by gender?

We all carry with us expectations of what it means to be a man or a woman in our society and we are expected to conform to society's expectation of how we should behave, look, communicate and what we should and shouldn't do. We are or have been socialised to conform to these roles by the world around us; the media and advertising we see, watch and consume, as well as in legislation.

There are lots of different rules about gender, and these give some people more power than others. This is connected to other inequalities in their life, and can determine things such as how much money they earn, the position they hold in society due to their jobs and opportunities to influence the world around them.

People who act outside society's gender norms often face disapproval, for example women who don't want children, or men who are stay at home dads.

From childhood and our early years, we are told how we should be and how we should behave.

There are certain behaviours, personality types and life choices that are considered to be specific to a certain gender. To put it simply, the messages about what it means to be girls and boys, and men and women, are made (by the society we live in), and aren't something we are just born with, because we are all different. Gender roles are learned and can vary across cultures, societies and over time.

These messages about gender roles will only continue if we all keep upholding these messages. We can change them, and make it easier for people to have free choice over their own lives.

- Gender is not the same as sex. Sex is defined by our physical bodies, and typically assigned to us at birth. There is an assumption that because our bodies look a certain way, that we will perform gender (clothes/hobbies/life choices) according to those messages we've been taught. But this isn't always the case and boxes people in.

- Gender and sex are related to, but different from, gender identity. Gender identity refers to a person's deeply felt, internal and individual experience of

gender, which may or may not correspond to the person's physiology or sex at birth.

- Rigid gender norms also negatively affect people with diverse gender identities, like non-binary people or transgender people, who often face violence, stigma and discrimination as a result of breaking the 'rules' of gender. We will look at this more a bit later on.

- Gender stereotypes are harmful as they place expectations and restrictions around what we 'should' or 'can' do in terms of our personality traits, domestic behaviour, occupations, physical appearance and this begins from a very early age.