1 Gender

The study of gender is an important area in sociology. While 'sex' is used to refer to the physical differences between males and females, gender is used to describe the different patterns of behaviour associated with males and females — their gender roles. In all societies there are some differences in the ways in which males and females are treated, and are expected to behave. However, there are considerable variations between societies (and sometimes, within the same society) in what is considered 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour.

Gender socialisation and roles

Gender socialisation in childhood

Almost from birth, children are socialised into their male or female gender role. In Britain, this socialisation includes different types of clothes, toys and games, which in turn leads to different types of behaviour.

Activity (class)

Below is a list of words which can be used to describe people. Study the list carefully, then put each word into a column under the appropriate heading, depending on whether you think it is a word which is mainly used to describe males, females or equally used for both:

Word	Mainly males	Mainly females	Equally both
Clever			
Shy			
Aggressive			
Bold			
Dainty			
Attractive			
Sympathetic			
Ambitious			
Logical			
Strong			
Elegant			
Ruthless			
Witty			
Catty			
Powerful			
Gossipy			
Caring			
Emotional			
Athletic			
Creative			
Graceful			
Capable			
Domestic			
Sensitive			

Compare your list with the rest of the class. Was there broad agreement over some words? Did the results tell you that we do associate certain characteristics with different genders?

Sexism

To be sexist is to treat somebody as a sexual stereotype rather than as an individual. There have already been many references to sexist behaviour in this chapter. Thus, for a teacher generally to 'guide' girls towards English rather than physics at 'A' level, for a comic or magazine generally to portray 'girls' as 'after boys' are examples of sexism. Of course, the more people are socialised in a sexist way, the more they will act and think in a sexist way.

Sexism — an example from the language of journalism

News stories also tend to treat men and women differently. Women are often described by their physical characteristics even though these may have nothing whatever to do with the story, e.g. 'Mr. X's solicitor, slim, blonde 34-year-old Mrs. Blank, reported that her client. . .'

The National Union of Journalists believes that most newspapers, magazines and books discriminate against women so automatically that it is almost unconscious. They have published a list of commonly used phrases, together with a list of more appropriate substitutes. Here are some items from their list:

Instead of:	Try:
businessman	business manager; executive
newsman	journalist, reporter
foreman	supervisor
steward, stewardess	flight attendant
chairman	chairperson
mankind	humanity, the human race
man-made	synthetic, artificial, manufactured
housewife	consumer, shopper, cook
girls (of over eighteen)	women (especially in sport)
John Smith and his wife Elsie	Elsie and John Smith
authoress	author
spokesman	official, representative

Conjugal roles

The social roles of husbands and wives within a marriage are known as *conjugal roles*. Conjugal roles refer to the parts played by husbands and wives in activities such as housework and other household tasks, child care, budgeting and family decision making. There are two main types of conjugal role, segregated and joint:

Segregated conjugal roles occur where there is a very clear distinction between the husband's and the wife's household tasks and responsibilities. Typically, the husband does the traditional 'masculine' activities, such as household repairs and decorating, taking major decisions such as moving house and buying a new car, while the wife is responsible for the traditional 'feminine' activities of housework, cooking and child care.

Joint conjugal roles are those in which household activities are seen as the joint responsibility of husbands and wives, and husbands play a significant part in child care and houswork, while wives are also involved in financial decisions. It is important to remember that probably very few couples fit exactly into one category or the other.