Identifying and addressing everyday gender inequalities

Ruth L Healey & Rebecca Collins

Everyone has a gender identity. Consequently, we all experience the world through a 'gendered' perspective. Yet there are significant inequalities in people's life experiences as a result of their gender. This article explores the impact of some of these gender inequalities and how we might work to address them.

Introduction
Gender inequality recognises that men and women are not always equal in society and that these differences affect people's day to day lives. The nature and level of these inequalities vary geographically due to the rights individuals are granted in a particular country on the basis of their gender. For instance, in Saudi Arabia women were banned from driving until 24th June 2018. However, even in countries where women have the same legal rights as men, gender inequalities still exist. For example, since 2015 the UK gender pay gap (the average difference between men's and women's aggregate hourly earnings) has been 14.1%. This means that from November 10th until 31st December women effectively work for free. This inequality in pay produces further inequalities in the lived experiences of individuals - lower pay makes it harder for women to afford to retrain in new careers, take time off for caring responsibilities (despite the responsibility for caring for family disproportionately falling to women) or even live alone, rather than cohabit. In the latter case, women's low pay has been cited as a key reason why women who are subject to abuse by their partners do not leave the shared home – they simply cannot afford to. This article explores the nature and impact of some of these inequalities, recognising that gender inequalities affect women, men, gender non-binary and transgender people.

Gender and gender inequalities
We talk about gender regularly. It's discussed in our news and social media feeds, it's a topic in the television and films that we watch, and it's a choice we make when we opt to be particular characters in the games that we play – but what do we actually mean by the term? When we talk about biological differences between men and women we are talking about differences in sex – the chromosomes in our genetic make-up and how that creates physically different bodies. Gender goes beyond these biological differences to recognise the assumptions people make about us *because of* our sex, e.g. women should be caring, and men should be strong. These expectations have been developed over centuries of societies attributing certain behaviours to one gender over the other leading these traits to be described as being inherently 'masculine' or 'feminine'. Yet we know from a wide range of experiences and observations that men can, for example, also be caring, and women can also be strong. This demonstrates the idea that gender is 'constructed'. In other words, 'gender' is the result of social and cultural expectations, not biology. For most people the gender they identify as (male or female) is associated with their assigned sex (cisgender). Transgender people have a gender identity different to that of the sex they were born with, and people who identify as gender non-binary feel that associating with only one gender identity (male *or* female) does not reflect how they understand themselves.

Differences in expectations of people because of their gender create significant inequalities in a wide range of contexts. For example, the belief that men cannot, or should not, show vulnerability, anxiety or sadness is one contributing factor to a UK male suicide rate which is 3.5 times higher than that for women. Might one of the most effective means of reducing male suicide, therefore, be to create new understandings of what it is to be a man that include acknowledgement and acceptance

of vulnerability? For people identifying as transgender, there can be a double burden of expectations and inequalities to navigate, as they contend not only with gender-based expectations but transphobia. Public Health England found that, in 2015, 34.4% of transgender adults in the UK had attempted suicide at least once and almost 14% of transgender adults had attempted suicide more than twice. Whilst the drivers of suicide are complex, a 2016 report by LGBT charity Stonewall stated that two in five transgender people had experienced a hate crime or incident because of their gender identity in the last 12 months.

Sexual assault and harassment
Another key dimension of gender inequality is sexual assault and harassment. This issue was at the heart of the #MeToo campaign. On 15th October 2017 American actor Alyssa Milano tweeted:
> "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too.' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem."

Within 24 hours '#MeToo' had appeared more than 12 million times across different social media platforms and by November 2017, 85 different countries had at least 1,000 #MeToo tweets. The MeToo movement first emerged 10 years ago as a grassroots campaign led by Tarana Burke (a black female activist in the US) to reach underprivileged girls dealing with sexual abuse. Whilst the majority of the posts using the hashtag were women, it was also used by some men and gender non-binary people to recognise their experiences of sexual assault or harassment. However, most commonly the hashtag was used to highlight how the subjugation, oppression or abuse of women is experienced every day.

The Citizens Advice Bureau define sexual harassment as unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature which:
- violates your dignity
- makes you feel intimidated, degraded or humiliated
- creates a hostile or offensive environment.

This may take place in a public environment e.g. the workplace, a social situation, or the high street. Sexual harassment is more commonly experienced by women, although it does happen to men, too. In part this is related to some of the gendered traits discussed above, in that masculine behaviour has been associated with dominance over women. This is known as 'patriarchy'. From a patriarchal perspective women are viewed as the property of men. In many societies, including in the UK, some men therefore consider it acceptable to make sexual advances towards a female stranger if they perceive that she is not accompanied by a man who 'owns' her. This might take the form of a male driver beeping his horn at a woman or making suggestive remarks as she walks down the street, or a colleague making inappropriate (sexual) comments about a woman's appearance in the workplace.

Sexual harassment includes making unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or physical behaviour, including unwelcome sexual advances, touching and various forms of sexual assault. Sexual assault is defined as an act of physical, psychological and emotional violation in the form of a sexual act, inflicted on someone without their consent. It can involve forcing or manipulating someone to witness or participate in any sexual acts. The Office for National Statistics (2018) estimates that during the year 2016-17, 3.1% of women (510,000) and 0.8% of men (138,000) aged 16 to 59 experienced sexual assault. Whilst the majority of sexual assaults are perpetrated by people known to the survivor, women are told by their friends and families that they have to protect themselves from strangers by being careful about what they wear and where they go at certain times of the day. The focus on women's behaviour deflects responsibility for the crime away from the perpetrator and places it on the survivor. It also creates a specific gender-based fear which influences how women experience, use and navigate a range of different spaces. This creates differences in the lived experiences of space between genders (i.e. whether and how people use certain spaces at particular

times on the basis of their gender), with women often feeling more constrained in their use of space as a result of these gender-based fears. Consider this for yourselves in the activity in Box 1.

Box 1: Interview extract and discussion

The following is an extract from an interview about the geography of fear in which the female participant is describing their thought process regarding travelling home after a night out at a friend's house.

Interviewer: So tell me about how you decided to travel home after the party.

Participant: Okay… so it had gotten to about midnight and I needed to be up early for my Saturday job the next morning so I figured it was about time I left. I'd normally walk home with Ellie as she only lives just down the road, but she was away on holiday. Mum's always on about how I should get a taxi late at night, but it costs about £7.00 and I'd much rather put that towards my summer holiday with my friends. So I decided to walk on my own, you know taking the best route. I was very careful about it.

Interviewer: What do you mean by 'careful'?

Participant: Well, Matt's house is only 15 minutes' walk away from my house if you go the quick route, but that means going through the alley way behind the chip shop. It's fine, and I'd walk that way with Ellie, but it is a little darker there and, you know, you always hear about girls getting attacked in dark alleyways, right?!

Interviewer: So what did you do instead?

Participant: I walked around along the main road – it's about 5 minutes longer, but it's well lit and there's always some cars going along. It just means that I'm not somewhere where people can jump out without me seeing them, you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Participant: … and as I was leaving Beth and Lisa said for me to message them when I got home. We always do that, you know, just to make sure we're all back safe and sound before we go to bed.

Interviewer: And what would you do if they didn't message you?

Participant: Erm… I guess I'd call them first, then maybe phone their house, perhaps the police? I don't know really, it's just a thing we do.

Interviewer: Do you carry an attack alarm?

Participant: A couple of years ago my Dad gave me and my sister an attack alarm, so it lives in my bag. Dad would be disappointed in me if I didn't look after myself and have it with me … not sure when I last checked the batteries though… Some of my female friends have an alarm too, but it's not something I really think about.

Discussion:
1) How would you have travelled home in the situation described above? Discuss this with your peers of different gender identities. You may find that your peers approach this situation in different ways, depending on their gender. If so, what are the differences and why would you make this journey differently?
2) Get an Google Map of where you live. On this map can you identify any areas that you would not walk or feel wary of walking at night on your own? Why would you not feel safe walking in these areas? What are the characteristics of these areas? Do the areas that you feel less safe in vary by gender? If so, why do you think this is? What might influence different gendered responses to certain areas?

Addressing gender inequalities

In order to address gender inequalities, it is first necessary for us to recognise the nature and scale of the issues. The #MeToo movement has gone some way to highlighting the scale of one kind of gender inequality – that based on assumptions (typically by males) of sexual receptiveness (typically of females). However, the continued emergence of stories of gender inequality – from women, men, and those who identify as non-binary – as well as still-unresolved matters such as equal pay, means there remains much to be done.

At the heart of attempts to address gender inequalities should be reflection on the many ways in which we construct – and reinforce – expectations of what differently gendered bodies 'should' be like. We are bombarded every day with messages telling us what we 'should' be like – what we should look like, dress like, sound like, behave like… often according to very narrow definitions of what is seen as acceptably 'female' or 'male' appearances. For women, this can include physical expectations, such as being slim and always wearing make-up, or social expectations, such as being the primary child carer in family contexts. For men, physical expectations might relate to being physically strong and muscular, with social expectations around being the economic 'breadwinner' or always enjoying team sports. These expectations are reinforced by many of the media images we are exposed to every day, in the roles we see men and women adopt in film, TV and advertising. Those who identify as gender non-binary, as well as women or men who choose not to conform to dominant views of femininity or masculinity, often face prejudice, even violence. For example, Arvida Byström, a Swedish model, was bombarded on social media in 2017 with threats of rape after she appeared in an advertisement for Adidas with unshaven legs. In October 2018, a Twitter user known as @DaddyFiles took to the social network to express his anger and sorrow at the bullying experienced by his five year old son for wearing nail polish. Because these individuals do not fit into easily identifiable categories of 'female' and 'male', some people can find this threatening, as it challenges what they have been told is 'normal'.

Figure 2: The impact of toxic masculinity on a 5 year old boy

Fortunately, in the last few years there has been a growing number of people challenging these narrow gender identities, instead making visible a much wider range of ways in which women, men and those who are gender non-binary can define and express themselves. Examples include:

- The 'Pussy Hat' Protests: Following the election of Donald Trump as US President in November 2016, and in response to his boasts about sexually assaulting women, women – and men – protested wearing pink knitted and crocheted 'pussy hats'. Not only was this a visually striking image, and a play on the references to women's bodies used by Trump, the celebration of stereotypically 'female' crafts of knitting and crochet emphasised women's political power.
- In 2018, in protest against the lack of government action on sexual violence against women, thousands of Indian citizens rallied in cities including Delhi, Mumbai, Puducherry, Goa, Bengaluru, and Kolkata. The protests were directly instigated by a series of high profile rapes, including the rape and murder of an eight year old Muslim girl.
- Grayson Perry, 'All Man': In 2016, Turner Prize-winning artist Grayson Perry, a heterosexual man who cross-dresses as his alter-ego, Claire, made a documentary series for Channel 4 called 'All Man'. In it he spends time in three 'ultra-male' worlds (the worlds of cage fighters, hedge fund managers, and drug dealers) in order to explore what their extreme masculinity has to tell us about the changing lives and expectations of British men.

Conclusion
Whilst progress in terms of embedding cultural change around gender identities and gendered expectations is extremely slow, we can all contribute to change through the ways that we view ourselves and each other. This requires recognising and respecting each other's experiences, even when they are different from our own. When others have experienced inequality, harassment or assault they should be supported with how they want to deal with their experience. We can also go further and challenge gender assumptions and social expectations by identifying and raising incidents with our friends and families.

Questions for discussion
1. What is 'toxic masculinity'? And how does it adversely affect individuals and society?
2. How might we go about reducing the amount of sexual harassment towards women?
3. Where do the stereotypes relating to males and females come from? What can we do to challenge these?
4. How might society and individuals support transgender people if they are experiencing difficulties?

Glossary
- Sex: The biological differences in reproductive functions between people.
- Gender: The social and cultural (rather than biological) differences between people based on their sex. The term is also used to mean a range of identities that do not conform to binary identities of male and female.
- Non-binary: A gender identity that is not defined in terms of the binary oppositions of male and female.
- Cisgender: A person whose gender identity corresponds with their birth sex.
- Transgender: A person whose gender identity does not correspond with their birth sex.
- Patriarchy: A system of society in which men hold the majority of power, authority and control rather than women or both men and women.

Key Points
• Gender is a social construct distinct from the biological differences between males and females.

• There are significant social and economic inequalities between different genders (male, female and transgender).
• Sexual harassment and assault against women is related to patriarchal structures of society.
• Addressing gender inequality requires reflection on and challenge of social expectations of people based on gender.
• As a society we must work on recognising and respecting each other and our differences.

Further reading
The gender inequality section of Inequality.org provides information about inequality by gender:
https://inequality.org/gender-inequality/
The Human Development Report on gender inequality by the United Nations Development Programme provides statistics on gender inequalities across the world:
http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii

If any of the themes discussed in the article have affected you in anyway and you wish to talk to somebody about it. Please find some support organisations to contact below:
- Samaritans https://www.samaritans.org/
- Stonewall Switchboard LGBT+ https://switchboard.lgbt/
- SupportLine https://www.supportline.org.uk

Authors
Dr Ruth Healey is an Associate Professor and Dr Rebecca Collins is Deputy Head and a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Geography and International Development at the University of Chester.