

# Woman-/-sing the convention

... or gendering it!

by Gülesin Nemutlu

*The shift to using gender as a verb (to gender, gendered, gendering, engendered) is a reflection of changed understandings of gender as an active ongoing process, rather than as something that is ready-made and fixed. In this sense, then, something is gendered when it is, in and of itself, actively engaged in social processes that produce and reproduce distinctions between men and women.*

Pilcher, J. & Whelehan, I. (2004). *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. London: Sage.

## I am a woman.

This is a biological characteristic of mine that I become aware of at a certain moment in life, which I clearly do not remember. It was some time back then. Yet, I clearly remember many moments in which I was either stopped or encouraged to act as I was expected to, as a girl, as a sister, as a young girl, as a young woman, as a woman. Yes, I am a woman and personally, I am perfectly fine with being a woman.

There is a joke that I still remember from English language classes in primary school, one of those riddles that help make language learning a bit more fun. It goes as follows: 'What's the difference between a Miss and a Mrs?' Answer? 'A Mr!' Yes, it was an educational joke which probably helped me to learn the different abbreviations in addressing people in a rather formal way. I was not aware that it was also teaching me more in a more implicit way. It was teaching me certain norms that would be difficult to challenge.

I was invited to challenge these norms through youth work practice. I remember the first time a trainer (in a youth worker training) clearly drew the attention of the group to the fact that although men made up only one fourth of the group, during the discussions we hardly heard any women speak. This one sentence was the 'click' which was followed by many discussions, reflections, readings, observations, experiences and discussions again.

So now, as a woman, I know that 'sex' refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women whereas 'gender' refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that society considers appropriate for men and women. I am aware that concepts of men and women are also categories, and these categories are not enough to explain how complex our gender and sexual identities are.



## Have a pair of gender-sensitive eyeglasses

Once you become aware of gender issues, you may develop a skill of looking at all social occasions through a pair of gender-sensitive eyeglasses; whether it's being conscious while listening to different narratives or being interested in the symbols on the doors of toilets in public spaces. But why is it important to put on gender-sensitive eyeglasses? What does it show us more than any other type of vision?

It is a pair of magical eyeglasses. It helps us to question the things we take for granted in our everyday lives while we are trying to understand how we live together in social settings. It shows a lot about power, authority and control. After all, gender is a key factor in the distribution of power, privileges and possibilities, which effects progress towards equality in societies.

## Looking at the 1st European Youth Work Convention through a pair of gender-sensitive eyeglasses

### A big conference room full of people. 350 people? Maybe 400?

The number of women in the room seems a bit higher than the number of men but it is difficult to say. Maybe the numbers are equal. Wondering if there is anyone else paying attention to this.

### Having a seat. Programme starts.

There is quite a lot of space on the stage. That should be for the people who will do the opening speeches. Chairman arrives, welcomes the speakers. Four men and one woman on the stage. All of them were invited to give their opening speeches one by one. The only one who had a remark about his/her clothing when invited to speak was the woman. Will she also receive a compliment on her smile?

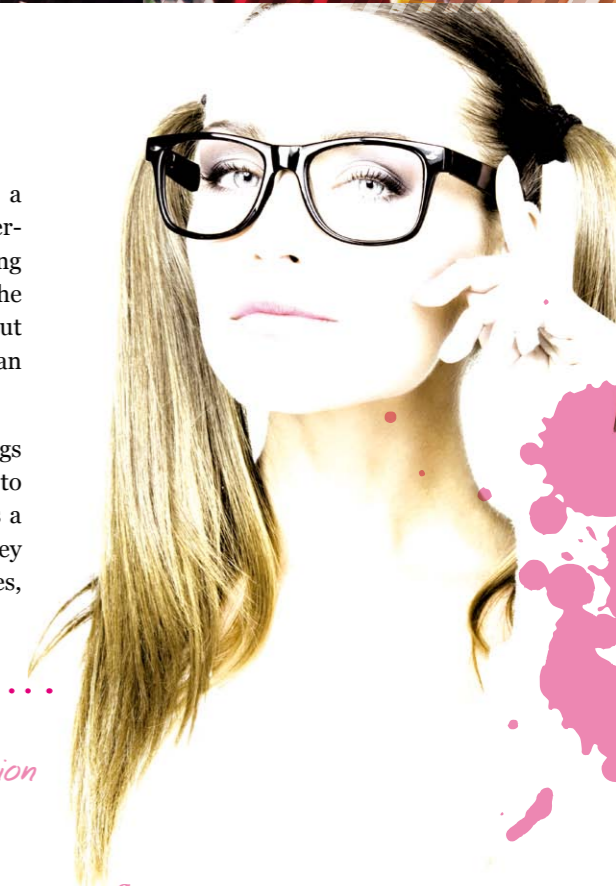
### The programme flows.

Workshops are run by facilitators. In most cases there are two facilitators, one man and one woman. So there are people who are concerned about gender balance in the sessions. A moment of relief.

### Good night eyeglasses.

### Good morning eyeglasses.

The second day. Three keynote speakers on the stage. Two of them are women and one of them is a man. One of the speeches is addressed mainly to youth workers and it is about youth work and policy in general. The other two are about actual practices – one from youth centres and one from the streets.



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Speakers are talking about the disadvantaged youth and young people on the streets. 'Primary understanding of youth work should not be securing the community from the young people on the streets through control.' Who are these young people? Are they young men or young women? Am I the only one who is taking for granted that when we talk about young people on the streets we are actually only talking about young men? Are there no young women on the streets? If there is none (which I doubt) then where are the young women? Are they already under control? How?

The programme flows. Workshops and presentations. There is a clear dominance of male presenters. Probably the same situation could be found in many other conventions on many other different topics around the world. Why did I think that a convention on youth work would have a different scene? Am I becoming sexist? Does it really matter if the speaker is a man or a woman? Does it really matter if all speakers are from a certain sex? What does it matter?

**Good night eyeglasses.**

**Good morning eyeglasses.**

The third day. There are three keynote speakers who are all male. Jokes on the stage are all about football following the spirit of the World Cup, which is going on the other side of the planet. No comments on dresses, or smiles.

Wondering if there are other participants concerned about the male dominance on the stage. Speaking with some and asking about it. All of them have similar observations, not all of them are bothered by it. A striking comment from a male participant: 'I share the observation. But we need to understand that this is the first time such an important event is organised on such an important level. Everybody wants the best experts on the stage. 'Can we conclude here? Are all the best experts on youth work men? Or is this another representation of the unequal distribution of power in the youth work field as in many others?

**Good night eyeglasses.**

**Good morning eyeglasses.**

The last day. The declaration of the general results of the 1st European Youth Work Convention is presented by the General Reporters group. The group consists of four people. Two men and two women. They are paying lots of attention to sharing the speaking time equally.

Now it is clearer to my eyes. Whenever group is formed (like a group of facilitators or a group of reporters) gender balance is considered. When it comes to keynote speakers, opening speeches and presentations done by youth organisations, there is not much one can do for the convention. There is a clear male dominance in these power positions outside the convention and what we see through our gender-sensitive eyeglasses is just another representation of the reality out there. I doubt if it is necessary to mention that all the closing speeches were made by men.

A remark at the closing: 'We hope that at the 2nd European Youth Work Convention, there will be more women at the front.' The crowd applauds.

Good night eyeglasses. The curtain of the stage is closed now. The convention is over.



### Why is it so important to consider gender in youth work?

For now, it is nearly impossible for anyone to completely step out of the social and cultural processes that have an impact on how we see ourselves, how we see others and how we interact. Interaction is one of the bases of our youth work practice. A youth work practice without gender awareness cannot challenge power relations and if this is the case, it can hardly contribute to progress towards a society in which diversity and equality can be enjoyed by all.

How about gender roles in youth work? Can it possibly be different than most other practices in society? Would you share the observation that although a majority of the volunteers in a youth organisation are young woman it is quiet common that the president, the secretary general or the board of the organisation are mainly occupied by men? Do you also know working partners in non-governmental organisations, consisting of a man and a woman, with a clear distribution of roles in which the woman takes the work related to co-ordinating and the man takes the work of representing the outcomes? Have you ever been to the general assembly of a youth organisation with an agenda point on the use of quotas to increase the participation of women and the discussion is mainly held between men? Do you recall other similar experiences?

A pair of gender-sensitive eyeglass can be good for everyone – it can be good for young men, it can be good for young women and for all those who do not want to be referred to in any way in relation to sex or gender. The gender roles that are attributed to each of us are again coming from all of us, which means there is still room for change.

Can you think of ways to tackle gender issues within your organisation? Can this be a topic for one of the next meetings? If the main objective of youth work is to provide space and opportunities for young people to shape their own futures, do you think it should be the responsibility of the youth worker to encourage young people to challenge gender roles? Personal reflection sounds like a good point to start. If you take on the adventure I send you my best wishes. You are heading for a life changing experience!

### Some resources

**Gender Matters – A manual on addressing gender-based violence affecting young people**

<http://www.eycb.coe.int/gendermatters/default.htm>

**Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

**UNWOMEN**

<http://www.unwomen.org>

