Differences in the health chances of men and women are lifelong. Gender relations are commonly seen as being determined by women’s biological potential for childbearing, but we must recognise how women’s health is governed more by social than by biological differences.

In most Western industrial societies, women have gained legal equality with men. Only a few decades ago women could not expect to be able to vote, find similar employment or be given equal access to education. However, women are still paid consistently less than men, they are more likely to live in poverty, especially in later life, and they carry the greater burden of housework and domestic care responsibilities – all of which have health consequences.

Gender imagery

Any social role, including that of being a woman or a man, is built from expectations reflecting the attitudes, norms and values of the larger society. We gain insights into these expectations if we look at the vocabulary and labels which we use to depict men and women as different. The use of such labels supports social practices which separate men and women by reinforcing stereotypes.

Exercise

List the traits or characteristics which you would associate with a ‘female’ image. Then list their equivalent (and opposite?) ‘male’ traits.

cont’d
How would you characterise yourself in relation to any of the traits you have listed?
How far do you think you fit your stereotyped image for your own sex? How well do you think this fits with your image of being a health carer?
If you have designated yourself as having displayed any ‘opposite sex’ traits, recall any example of recent activities in which you see yourself as having expressed these. How favourable or unfavourable were the reactions of other people to your doing so?

This exercise produces vocabulary such as ‘strong’, ‘thoughtful’, ‘intelligent’, ‘sensitive’, ‘emotional’ and so on. Make your list as long as possible and then compare some of your imagery with that of a friend or partner or colleague.

Words that are exclusively applied to men and women provide the basis for sexism – stereotypical attitudes and expectations which differentiate sharply between males and females, and which restrict their behaviour.

Such fundamental social arrangements are often displayed and affirmed in ceremonial and ritualised ways. As we outlined in Chapter 3, ways have to be found in which to exhibit social roles and their relationship to each other. When gender is displayed it indicates sexual identity and relationships between the sexes. As with many role performances, gender displays represent ideal rather than real relationships.

To illustrate, mass communications succeed by constructing simple but effective messages using conventions to portray idealised relationships. Kuhn (1985) has pointed out how their subtle conventions of visual imagery carry direct messages about types of people and ways of behaving that impose stringent social constraints, especially in the area of sexual identity. Traditionally, as gender images lend themselves to simple dichotomies, the presentation of sexual identity as uncompromising opposites has been an easy message to convey.

Modern mass media have also contributed to contemporary aesthetics by constructing culturally acceptable views of the human body. These images play an important part in establishing what counts as fashionable, beautiful or healthy. Economic and