Background for Teachers[1]

When we unconsciously try to live up to the unattainable standards of a stereotype we can do physical and emotional harm to ourselves. Often, we don't notice this because we tend to mould ourselves to fit these stereotypes as a matter of course. This can be damaging. A boy with a very slight build who wants to be muscle-bound is fighting against himself if he tries to change his physique to match that of the stereotypical male. A girl who has an angular nose can fall into the same trap if she listens to her friends and/or relatives who are trying to convince her she needs a nose job.

It takes conviction and self-assurance to accept oneself despite of the disapproval of others. The first step is seeing that beliefs in stereotypes stem from a weak sense of self. Being accepted by others, as desirable as it may be, is not as important as self-acceptance. The strategies in this learning experience are designed to help students see the harmful effects of believing in gender stereotypes.

From infancy, our culture teaches what it means to be a boy or a girl. From the colour of clothes to the toys we play with, the messages begin at a very early age. Young people are influenced by a barrage of messages to conform to a variety of expectations, to buy this widget, and to preserve a rigid set of values that stress the differences between genders.

The world of make believe as it is presented on TV and in the movies - from thriller films to soap operas on television - has a big effect on the viewer. Even though the plot and characters are fictitious, the underlying attitudes and messages are not. They communicate cultural values, which shape the way we think and the way we interact. Understanding this, it is important to begin to unmask a double standard that is pervasive in our culture. The dichotomy is that we buy into the stereotypes that reinforce abuse, while trying to "root out" violence in our community.

In order to combat this destructive hypocrisy, students must begin to ask questions, rather than passively accepting whatever they see and hear. Recognizing media myths for what they are is a good first step. The objective here is to draw a thick line between the stereotypical behaviour of TV, film, and video heroes, on the one hand, and our own lives, on the other.

[1]**Source: used and adapted, with permission,** from the award-winning Violence-Prevention Curriculum *Healthy Relationships*, produced by the Halifax, Nova Scotia advocacy group Men For Change. In particular the background information from the following 2 lesson plans found at the Media Awareness Network:

1. Learning Gender Stereotypes - http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/lessons/secondary/gender_portrayal/gender_stereotypes.cfm
2. The Impact of Gender Roles Stereotypes - http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/lessons/secondary/gender_portrayal/gender_impact.cfm