

Beyond gender stereotypes

Towards generativity in diversity

Marta Rodríguez

The author is coordinator of the academic and research area of the Institute of Higher Studies on Women at the Pontifical University Regina Apostolorum (Rome), and serves on the editorial board of the monthly Women Church World of L'Osservatore Romano (The Roman Observer). She offers here a few reflections, fruit of recent teaching and contacts with women and men from various cultural backgrounds.

The distinction between sex and gender, of which the Magisterium is increasingly taking note, has made it possible to differentiate our being men and women (sex) from the cultural interpretations that have followed us throughout history (gender). It has also made possible much-needed questioning of gender stereotypes that are reductive, or rigid readings of sexuality that limited freedom of expression for all.

Without a doubt, this is a healthy step forward. We recognized men can cry without losing their manhood, and women can drive trucks without compromising their femininity. Sensitive men are no longer castigated – or at least less so – and resourceful women finally have room for their voices to be heard. We have started internalizing that a man and a woman can do the same things in many realms – though not always in an identical manner. Similarly, another realization has also emerged: Every man carries within himself characteristics traditionally considered "feminine" and likewise every woman carries "masculine" traits. Jung intuited this when he spoke of the *animus* (the masculine principle) and the *anima* (the feminine principle) present in every person to different degrees. According to Jung, only in the encounter with 'another' can a person fully develop that which is less evident in oneself. It is not a loss of sexual differences, but a *maturation*. It is another step forward.

But...

Yet, there is a "but" that is crucial, because our ideas are still unclear relative to what it means to be male or female. And I am often asked about this by young people, including seminarians. If there are no characteristics or specific roles exclusive to one or the other, and if every man has "feminine" traits and every woman "masculine" traits ... then, *what does sexual difference consist of? Is it just a mere biological distinction that does not extend to a person's deepest inner self and identity?* Once stereotypes are eliminated, what distinguishes men and women?

St. John Paul II offered us a clue: a man and a woman are two different, complementary ways of being the image and likeness of God. But what can this mean if God is neither male nor female? *God is communion, relationship*. The three divine Persons give themselves to each other in infinite love. Perhaps, then, the difference between a man and a woman - created in his image - has to do with *the mode of self-giving*. Quite simply, we love differently.

This difference is evident in the sexual dimension and in how life is generated. It is not a biologicistic reading, but an integration of body and psyche, of nature and how life is lived¹. In a man's way of loving, there is something that refers more to penetrating, to giving, to separating, to cherishing. *He loves as a spouse and as a father*. In women, love is expressed more in receiving and nurturing, in welcoming, in uniting. *She loves as a spouse and as mother*. *But it is important to note* these are not predefined roles that could be portrayed as seriously reductive in nature. Rather, they are two different *ways of giving of oneself*, each with its different nuances that cross relational, affective and even operative realms, and they apply to everyone: married, single, or consecrated.

Masculinity and femininity are thus neither pure biological data nor mere cultural constructs. They are ways of *being a human person*, and therefore of loving. Each has their own traits, but also with great openness to countless individual nuances. Men are often tender, empathetic and attentive to details - and remain fully men. Women are frequently assertive and logical -- and remain fully woman. What matters is not adherence to stereotypical characteristics, but *the ability to offer a relational presence*. By viewing from the perspective of relational characteristics rather than stereotypes, solid frameworks are provided by which men and women can grow in their own personal identity. And this is fundamental.

Why?

Young people today find themselves without role models. Boys often do not know how to relate to women, and sometimes even fear them. Girls, although aware of their own abilities, frequently struggle to recognize themselves fully in their femininity, even to the point of sometimes feeling alienated from their own bodies. We live in a culture that is attempting - quite rightly - to overcome stereotypes. Yet it sometimes forgets that *every human reality is always expressed culturally*.

That is why we cannot completely disregard cultural expressions, because nature and culture are inseparable, and culture needs to be distinguished from stereotypes. For example, children play with balls, but if we forbid a little girl to like soccer, we are acting from within rigid stereotypical patterns. *Stereotyping is reductive and closed; cultural expression is open and personal*. The important thing is "not to throw the baby out with the bathwater."

A final consideration particularly close to my heart concerns young seminarians. Many seminarians have been taught what they must *not become*: not clerical, nor patriarchal, nor violent. But this alone is not enough. It is understandable that some even come to experience their manhood as problematic, and to be repressed. But is their manhood an obstacle to be controlled, or the fruitful ground for Christ's transformation in configuring them to Himself? What positive image of masculinity can we instead propose?

Without a clear, integrated anthropological vision and pedagogy, there is a two-fold risk: to return to stereotypical models or, at the opposite extreme, to *feminize* one's masculine identity or *masculinize* one's feminine identity, in equally distorted manners.

A teaching moment

But if instead there is such a vision, a great educational responsibility opens up for the Church. It is not only a matter of correcting past errors, but of offering young people a positive, profound sense of masculine and feminine identity. There is an urgent need for a *pedagogy of difference* that is not limited to saying "what one should not be," but rather *what one is called to become*.

Educating for difference means helping each person reconcile with his or her own body, his or her own history, and his or her own sexual identity. It means showing that males and females are not oppositional categories nor roles to be played. Rather they are forms of relationship and of gift that develop over time, in freedom, and with responsibility.

Being men and women are not just relative biological facts, but *vocations*. It is a call to express one's love, work, and presence in the world in a unique, unrepeatable way. I am born a woman, but I must also *become* a woman. It is a task and a vocation. A vocation involves one's whole being: affections, relationships, spirituality, and physicality. And a vocation is never solitary, but it finds its complete fulfillment through relationship and communion with others.

Only then does the distinction between men and women become truly generative and no longer a *barrier*, but a *bridge*. It is not a form to be copied *but a truth to be discovered and embodied*. The challenges lie not only in overcoming stereotypes and refusing to nullify differences, but in learning to live so that each human person is fulfilled and God is revealed.

¹ Several feminists speak of the body as a "relational mode", emphasizing that it is not the same to be born a woman to a woman or a man to a woman; to make love within oneself or outside oneself; to generate life within oneself or outside oneself (cf. L. Irigaray).