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**ANALYSIS OF PERCEPTIONS BEFORE THE ASSUMPTION OF**  
**UNEXPECTED GENDER ROLES**

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*Abstract*

Today, people are differentiated based on sex even before birth. Something which is biological in principle gradually transforms into a social construction which assigns men and women to different gender roles. The present research consists of the assessment of an activity based on students' perceptions in the face of unexpected gender roles. The object of this activity was to show men the day-to-day experience of women in relation to both verbal and physical abuse. The activity took the form of a performance with a number of actresses adopting male roles in relation to the men who were object of this research. A quantitative method was used and the information was collected with a Likert-type questionnaire previously validated by experts. The questionnaire was applied to 84 Education students who observed the activity. The results reveal that when men are harassed, they feel surprise at first but if the harassment extends in time they feel assaulted and very uncomfortable. A certain level of resistance was also seen on the part of the observers of these events when it came to move into action or offering help.

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**Keywords:** Harassment, higher education, students' perceptions, unexpected gender roles.



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## 1. Introduction

Gender roles are cultural and personal in nature; they are roles that men and women are supposed to assume according to certain social mandates. They are behaviours considered to be proper for men and women within a specific society and which dictate the way men and women should think, talk, dress and interact within a social context.

In a patriarchal society like our current one, these gender roles are clearly identified as such, as noted by Goicoechea & Sesma (2018). Women are supposed to be accommodating, loving, emotional, weak, sensitive, empathetic, submissive and caring, that is be for others, whereas men are supposed to be virile, strong, dominant, controlling, block feelings, be trusting, assertive, aggressive, providers and independent, in other words be for themselves.

These sexist stereotypes not only describe the characteristics assigned for each sex, they also prescribe them, that is, they impose the feelings, emotions, behaviours and even the activities that each gender has to carry out.

This role differentiation as claimed by Conway, Bourque, & Scott (1996), which is still relevant today, affects all aspects of life. It is related to the personality that each person is expected to develop according to their gender, and also to the social and domestic behaviour, occupations and even the physical appearance required in order to belong to the “normality” of one’s society.

In view of all this, gender stereotypes are clearly the basis of sexism as it is based on them that females and males are conceded certain “privileges”. They suppose a generalization of certain prejudices or pre-conceived ideas which leave aside people’s personal individuality and they are disseminated not only through socializing agents such as families, schools and peer relations but also through more external agents such as the mass media.

*“Women and men have experienced a very different socialization process. We have thus gradually acquired ways of thinking, of engaging with each other, of doing , of having fun, of feeling, of working..., that is, general ways of being in the world, of living, which, being determined by different factors of this process, have contributed to the fact that women and men have a very different historical experience”* (Urruzola, 1996, p.82).

Gender stereotypes lay the foundations of power imbalance given that behaviours are regulated based on those cultural norms which legitimize the use of force as an instrument of power (UNIFEM, 2000).

Thus, there exists a relationship between sexist stereotypes and violence, at times very tangible as is the case of gender violence and other times less so, as in the case of sexist micro-aggressions.

### 1.1. Sexist micro-aggressions

Sexist micro-aggressions include different situations in women’s daily lives and are very closely related to this supposed male superiority versus a supposed female inferiority. That is the true logic behind these behaviours.

According to the Real Academia Española Dictionary (DRAE), sexist micro-aggressions do not exist. However, Bonino (2004) describes sexist micro-aggressions in the following way,

*“Sexist micro-aggressions are soft or very low-intensity domination attitudes, latent and denied forms and ways of abuse and imposition in daily life. Specifically, they are cunning domination*

*skills, subtle or insidious behaviours, repetitive and almost invisible in nature, which men continuously carry out” (p.2).*

Therefore, the definition itself refers to a series of very subtle sexist behaviours –hence “micro” – which we assume as natural and day-to-day and thus we do not perceive. They represent obstacles and resistance in relation to real equality for women in daily life. Street harassment and cat calling are examples of sexist micro-aggressions.

Both are considered violence because they are unwanted by women and cause insecurity, disgust and sometimes even fear, when for men they are just fun.

## **2. Problem Statement**

According to the National Street Harassment Report (2014), 65% of women have suffered street harassment sometime in their lives. It is therefore a fact; women suffer street harassment and go through public spaces in fear. This reality seriously affects women’s freedom and safety. In view of this, Spain ratified The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), which states that parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person is subject to criminal or other legal sanction (B.O.E. 137, 2014).

This research aims at raising awareness on this subject. It was carried out thanks to an initiative by the *Delegación del Rector para la Igualdad y la Acción Social de la Universidad de Málaga*, which funded the activity, called *Mujeres y Hombres ¿Y viceversa?* (Women and Men. And vice versa?).

This practice consisted of a performance in which an all-woman cast adopted male roles in relation to men, the target population in this research.

The object of this was to show men women’s day-to-day experience in relation to verbal and physical harassment in order to generate empathy and awareness in terms of the magnitude of the problem.

## **3. Research Questions**

We proposed the following questions in order to carry out the research:

- Are men aware of the distress they cause with certain sexist behaviours?
- Would they be able to stand these behaviours if they were the research subjects?
- How would the men in the audience behave when presented with this?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

This study has a dual purpose. First, to analyze men’s perceptions when they assumed unexpected gender roles. Arising from this we then aimed to raise their awareness of the fact that deeply rooted sexist behaviours in our society are today considered sexual violence and are therefore penalized by law. An action procedure was designed to achieve these aims.

Three different spaces were identified at the University of Malaga Faculty of Education Science: the hall, the cafeteria and an Education course first year classroom.

The previously described performance was shown in these three places.

## 5. Research Methods

This study included a series of differentiated parts. First, a performance was staged in which two actresses harassed men in the hall of the Malaga Faculty of Education Sciences. Then the performance was moved to the cafeteria at the same Faculty. Here the level of harassment was increased and an actor was harassed by the actresses in a more visible way.

The performance then continued in an Education course first year classroom and the actresses once again harassed the boys in the class.



**Figure 01.** Scene 1: Hall



**Figure 02.** Scene 2: Cafetería



**Figure 03.** Scene 3: Classroom

All three scenarios were recorded both in video and audio form. Then, based on the data protection law, the people involved were informed of the purpose of the research and they were asked to sign an informed consent for the use of their image and audio.

The procedure was different in the case of the Education course first year classroom. First, students were informed on the purpose of the research and were then invited either to stay and sign the consent form or to leave the class while the performance took place. It is worth noting that all the students in the class agreed to participate.

After the performance, all those who had taken an active or passive part or had been in the audience were invited to a discussion group in order to find out how they had experienced it and their feelings. Finally, an online questionnaire was used to assess the whole activity.

### 5.1. Desing

A mixed methodology was used; qualitative (through watching video) and quantitative (with the questionnaire). A Likert-type questionnaire previously validated by experts was designed. Ten people with experience in gender equality and research methodology reviewed the questionnaire and assessed the pertinence and content of each of the items. The experts' feedback was taken into account to write the different versions of the final instrument which included, apart from the socio-demographic variables (gender, age, level of studies), eleven more questions on students' ideological stance (non-party political), street harassment, gender discrimination, gender stereotypes, and finally, on the activity carried out.

## 5.2. Sample

The final version of the questionnaire was sent to 84 Education students who observed or experienced the activity, as some of them were key characters in the situations presented.

## 5.3. Analysis

At this point in the study, and given the amount of data collected, especially qualitative data, we present a descriptive analysis of the variables involved.

**Table 01.** Summary of data obtained after the performance

Ítems	% Yes	% NO
Ítem 4 Do you see yourself as a feminist?	64,3%	1,2%
Ítem 5 Have you ever suffered sexual harassment?	66,7%	13,1%
Ítem 6 Have you ever witnessed a sexual harassment situation?	76,2%	23,8%
Ítem 7 Have you ever felt discriminated against for gender reasons?	55,9%	29,7%
Ítem 8 Have your co-workers' attitudes ever made you feel uncomfortable?	33,4%	65,5%
Ítem 9 Do you think that the gender stereotypes imposed by society on men and women harm you?	79,8%	6,00%
Ítem 10 Do you think that having children can harm your professional career?	42,9%	44,00%
Ítem 11 Has today's performance and debate opened your eyes?	88,1%	6,00%
Ítem 12 Please rate "Women men, and vice versa"? (Did you like it?)	75,00%	19,1%

The Likert scales in the questionnaire were assessed through a comparative parametric analysis of two independent groups with the t-student test, and variance quality was assessed with Levene's test. SPSS Statistics V22.0 was used to this aim.

## 6. Findings

In terms of socio-demographic variables, it is worth highlighting that all the people in the study were university students given the context where the research was carried out; the age range was 19-21 years old (57.1%), (73.8%) being women as the courses studied at the Faculty of Education Sciences are gender biased.

The vast majority of respondents consider themselves feminist (64.3%) including both genders. This is worth noting here as in our experience these concepts are hard to assimilate given the bad press they in the context of the patriarchy.



Item 9 (Do you think that the gender stereotypes imposed by society on men and women harm you?) reveals significant gender differences. Women consider these stereotypes harm them (Mean=4.71) while the percentage in the case of men is lower (Mean=3.32). This difference is significant with  $t=5.03$ , with 24.32  $df$  and  $p \leq 0.0005$ .

The last Item revealing significant data is number 10 (Do you think that having children could harm your professional career?). The differences are remarkable. Women claim it does harm their career (Mean=3.29) while men claim it does not (Mean=1.95). This difference is significant with  $t=4.14$ , with 55.13  $df$  and  $p \leq 0.0005$ .

The assessment of Items 11 and 12, which are related to the activity carried out, is quite good. 88.1% considered that the activity had opened their eyes in relation to gender stereotypes, and the whole activity was assessed as very positive (75%) i.e. the whole activity, including the performance and the discussion group.



**Figure 05.** Ítem: Activity assessment

## 7. Conclusion

The results lead to the conclusion that when men are harassed, they feel surprised at first but if the harassment is extended in time they feel assaulted and very uncomfortable. A certain level of resistance was also seen in those watching the situation when it came to moving into action or offer help to the people assaulted.

It is worth noting that the activity was seen as very enlightening and opened many eyes; it even promoted empathy in the discussion group afterwards.

The male population admitted that sexist micro-aggressions are the order of the day and that they are imperceptible unless one suffers them firsthand.

The big issue in the discussion group was education in values and the need to promote change so that education at all levels includes subjects that would efficiently work in co-education rather than being relegated to specific days celebrating events related to this topic.

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