Goals

1. Provide an opportunity for students to uncover and creatively share their own "gender stories."
2. Explore ways that gender affects self-identity.
3. Expand awareness of how gender expectations and attitudes can limit as well as expand students' choices.
4. Understand the ways that cultural norms filter into individuals' own experiences.
5. Develop empathy with others; understand and accept a wide range of differences within and across genders.
6. Enhance narrative writing skills and/or skills in artistic design and composition.

Suggested Time

Varies

Resources

Sample "gender story" elements from ***Straightlaced***, included in instruction 3

List of brainstorm questions, included in instruction 4

Writing, art, music or other supplies, as needed

Key Messages

- Gender has a profound effect on all of our lives.
- Each person's gender story is both deeply, uniquely individual and at the same time reflective of larger social, cultural and historical contexts.

(continued on next page)

Gender Stories / Gender Self-Portraits

The purpose of this activity is to give students an opportunity to uncover and express their own gender stories. It can be done in a variety of ways and has been flexibly designed to fit a range of disciplines. Drawing on what students see in ***Straightlaced***, the *Gender Stories/Gender Self-Portraits* activity invites them to explore the various dimensions of their own gender experiences and to use creative forms such as narrative writing, poetry, spoken word, art, video and/or music to express how they see their gender journey unfolding. The creation of gender stories or gender self-portraits is intended as both a reflective individual process and an opportunity for students to share and appreciate a range of experiences from their peers.

1. Before beginning this activity, decide on the form you will have students use to create their gender stories or self-portraits—for example, poetry, narrative writing, drawing, collage, spoken word, video montage, musical composition, etc. You may choose to have everyone use the same form or provide a few different options. Either way, please spend some time thinking through and clarifying instructions for the form(s) you will present.

2. Introduce the idea of a personal gender story or gender self-portrait. This is an opportunity for students to think about their own experiences with the gender expectations, pressures, roles and opportunities they encounter in their families, cultures, peer group and society. What are some of the most important messages they're hearing and how do they interact with those? What questions, tensions or conflicts are they struggling with? What opportunities do they feel they have? What constraints do they face? What are their hopes? Their fears? Their images for who they want to be? What do they want other people to know about their gender-related journeys?

3. Review a few sample "gender stories" from ***Straightlaced*** to give students a feel for the kinds of things they may want to include in their own pieces. For example:

T'uh: T'uh likes wearing athletic clothes and is often mistaken for a boy or a lesbian because of it. Despite people's confusion and comments, she finds the courage to be herself. T'uh has developed a strong critique of media images and other pressures telling her to behave like a "young lady," and instead says, *"I really don't care what others think, because, I mean, I'm me. I like being different."*

Adam: Adam feels pressure to be strong, act tough and engage in violence; as he says, it's like someone is controlling him. He has learned to view girls as objects and frequently makes sexual comments about them even though he doesn't think it's right. Adam wears a purple shirt despite knowing that people think he's gay because of it, and thinks that negative comments about sexual orientation are a terrible and powerful tool to control everyone.

Winnie: Winnie finds herself sorting through a range of media images about how women are supposed to be—sexy, tall and thin, blond and blue-eyed, etc. She finds the images where women are "seriously like half-naked" to be disturbing and inappropriate for kids, pushing girls and women to be things that aren't good for them. She also knows that, as an Asian-American and as someone who is of average (rather than model-thin) size, her own appearance doesn't always fit with the dominant cultural standards of beauty. She works to maintain her own self-esteem in the face of these differences, explaining, *"I'm never going to be like that, simply said. I'm not going to lie to myself. But I don't think that's what's beautiful, either."*

Le and Edilson: Both Le and Edilson notice that there are different cultural expectations around gender in the US and in their home countries, and find themselves balancing between two sets of standards for masculinity. Edilson continues to get manicures, which is normal for boys and men in his native Brazil, despite being teased and questioned about the practice by his American peers. Le sees how other males in the US avoid physical contact at all cost, unlike men in Vietnam, who commonly hold hands as a sign of friendship and affection. Le also pushes the boundaries of his mother's comfort by wearing a pink hair curler, and doesn't see himself as fitting within the rigid boxes of how boys and men are supposed to be.

Jessica: At her school, Jessica feels isolated as the only black cheerleader and the only bisexual person on the cheering squad. She's often told she's "too big, too strong, too loud, [her] voice is too deep, etc." As a cheerleader, she was hurt because other cheerleaders questioned whether she was inappropriately touching them when she caught them after jumps. She faced a huge to-do about this, which involved the school administration calling her mom and the squad questioning her right to be on the team. She ultimately established a friendship with another cheerleader who stood with her as an ally, and feels that *"it really does make a difference when somebody breaks away and tries to communicate with someone when you can see that they're different."*

4. Using 4–5 questions selected from the list below (and/or additional questions of your own), guide youth through an initial pre-writing or pre-drawing brainstorm. This may be done as a silent visualization with a follow-up freewrite or in the form of an individual questionnaire. The goal here is to generate images, themes and other "seeds" for students' gender stories or portraits—not to generate the actual stories or portraits themselves.

Key Messages *continued*

- Gender experiences are fluid, not fixed–they may change from place to place, culture to culture, and over time.
- We all have multiple identities, and our "gender stories" are inextricably woven together with our experiences of race, class, culture, sexuality, language, religion, family, place and other dimensions of experience.

- What are some of your earliest memories of knowing what gender you were? How did you know? What did you think that meant you were supposed to be or do?
- Have you ever had any conflicts with your parents, your peers, or even within yourself about gender roles, "rules" or expectations? How did these conflicts play out? If they were resolved, how did that happen? If they weren't, what is still left hanging?
- How has your sense of gender changed over time?
- Who do you think has had the biggest impact on your sense of gender? Your family? Friends? The media? Culture?
- How have any of the following influenced your gender experience:
    - Your racial identity
    - Your religion
    - Your culture
    - Your neighborhood
    - How rich or poor your family is
    - The country you or your parents were born in
- How have attitudes toward gay and lesbian people affected your gender story?
- What are some of the things you like most about being your gender? What are some of the things you like least?
- Have you ever felt like you didn't fit in the traditional gender boxes or been told you weren't being the "right" kind of girl or guy?
- How is your experience of gender different from the experience of your parents' or grandparents' generation? What would you like people older than you to understand?
- If you could "do gender" any way you wanted, what would you do?

5. Drawing on the above brainstorm, move into the specific project you have chosen (for example, narrative or poetry writing, creation of a gender self-portrait collage, spoken word assignment, etc.). Explain the format(s) you would like students to use in crafting their own gender pieces, along with any guidelines you wish to set, process steps you would like them to take, and a timeline.

   Some specific ideas for writing formats, art pieces and other activities can be found on pp. 115–116, though we also encourage you to draw on your own creativity in designing this project.

   A few general guidelines and suggestions:

   - It can be very powerful for youth to incorporate their home languages, elements of youth culture, media messages that have shaped who they are, relevant ethnic and religious images, etc., in their pieces.
   - Please encourage students to think about this project as something that does not need to present a unified picture of gender. Everything they feel about gender will not necessarily fit neatly into a single package. It's fine for there to be tensions, contradictions, many faces to their experience. Help students think about how to represent these complexities artistically or in poetry or prose. That's where a lot of the richness of this work will be found.

- We recommend including a process of review and revision to give students a chance to explore creatively before focusing on technical details in the final product.

6. As this project can be very personal, you may want to put on some peaceful music or, in whatever way your context allows, let students move to different parts of the room or building to create some private space for them to work. Alternatively, you may wish to have youth complete and revise their stories or self-portraits at home.

7. Once all the projects are complete, hold a session where students can share their final creations. Invite each person to present their work at whatever level of depth and detail feels comfortable to them. Please be sure to allow each person a chance to present their story or portrait; at the same time, because of the personal and potentially sensitive nature of this project, you should include a "pass" option for anyone who prefers not to share their work aloud.

Gender Stories—Suggested Writing Formats

Open-Ended Narrative, Poem or Spoken Word Piece: An answer to the question, What is your gender story?

Key-Moment Memoir: The story of a time when students experienced, saw or learned something important about gender in their own life.

Gender Messages: A poem or narrative looking at the messages students have been told about who or how they are supposed to be. For a moving example of this type of piece, see "Girl," by Jamaica Kincaid, a powerful short poem/essay about the messages the author got from her mother about how she was expected to behave. Published in *At the Bottom of the River* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000). Can also be accessed online.

Gender and Generation: A personal essay, poem or spoken word piece exploring a student's own gender experience as contrasted with someone of the same gender in their parents' and/or grandparents' generation. If you choose this option, please note that for a variety of reasons, not all youth will be able or willing to write about their own immediate family members. It is therefore important to allow a choice of whose experiences, besides their own, young people will include in their writing. You may wish to connect this with the *Changing Faces of Gender* activity on p. 107.

Contrast Poem: A poem that explores some of the tensions or contradictions in young people's gender stories. For example:

- "On the outside… On the inside…"
- "I'm supposed to be… But I really am…"
- "In my family… With my friends…"
- "In (home country)… Here…"

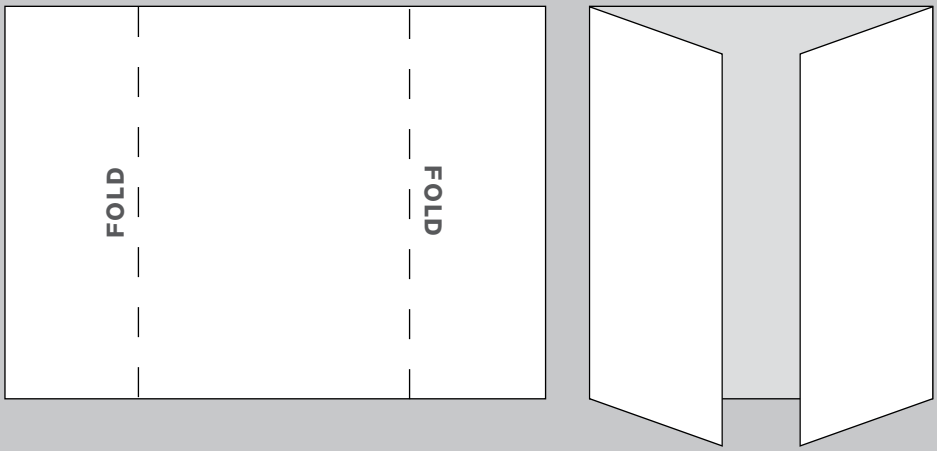
The Many Faces of Me: A poem or narrative exploring the different dimensions of a student's gender experiences as they shift from context to context, situation to situation, or over time.

Gender Self-Portrait—Suggested Artistic Pieces

Gender Self-Portrait: A symbolic portrait, using a realistic drawing or photograph of the student as a base and incorporating additional images, symbols and elements that represent attributes, feelings or experiences related to the student's gender, sexual and/or racial/cultural identities. For inspiration, groups can look at some of the symbolically and emotionally rich self-portraits of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo.

Inside/Outside: A folded drawing or collage exploring the idea that sometimes our outward selves do not reflect our innermost identities. As seen in the diagram below, images on two folded front flaps represent students' external gender experiences. These flaps open to an inside section showing their internal experiences. The outside and inside may represent:

- How others see me (outside) / How I see myself (inside)
- Who I'm supposed to be (outside) / Who I want to be (inside)
- What I show to the world (outside) / What I keep to myself (inside)



Gender Messages Collage, Mobile or Sculpture: A collage, mobile or sculpture exploring what students have been told about what it means to be the gender they are. Images and messages can be artistically created and/or taken from print media, personal or family artifacts, everyday objects, photographs, etc.

Video Portrait: A film or video self-portrait about students' gender experiences, which may incorporate photos, artistic images, interview clips, media clips, documentary footage and/or music. These can be open-ended or organized around a theme, such as:

- The Many Faces of Me
- Gender Messages
- Pressures and Opportunities
- I'm the Kind of Girl Who…/I'm the Kind of Guy Who…/I'm the Kind of Person Who…