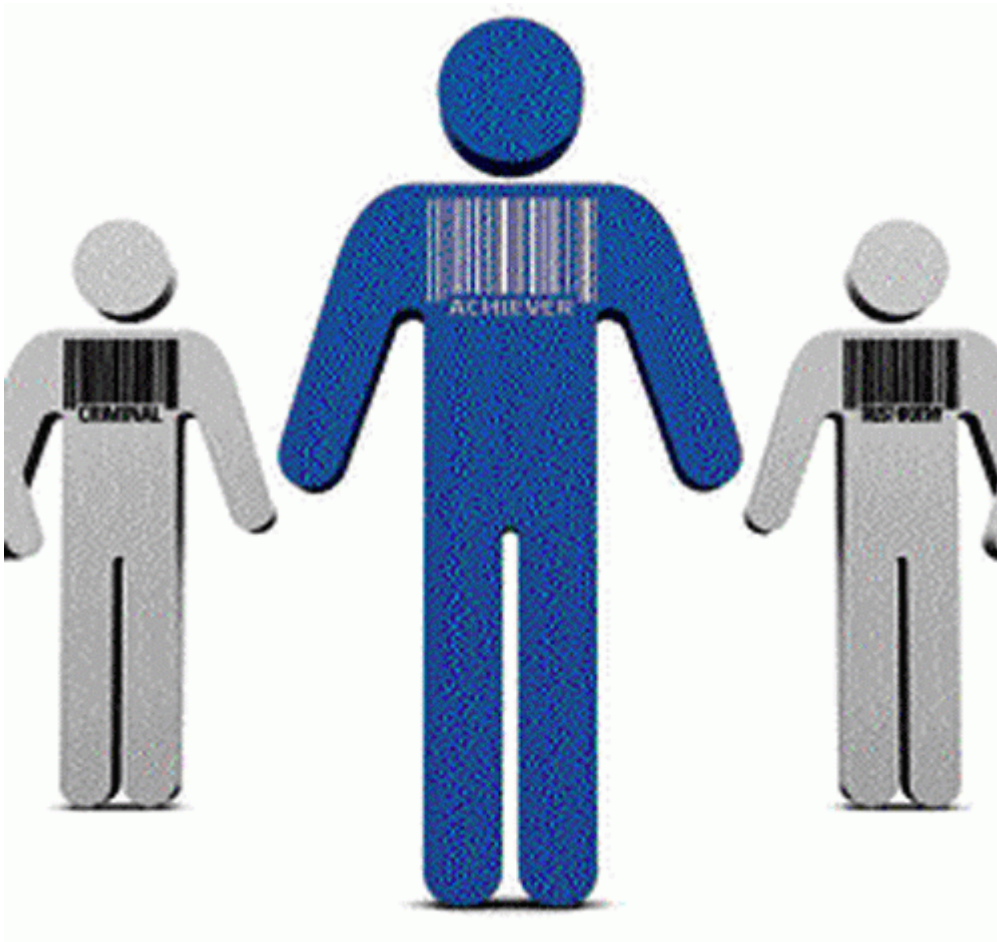


# Breaking moulds

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## Breaking moulds

Social stereotyping on the basis of gender, culture, caste, class or profession not only leads to discrimination, but also limits possibilities. However, for every stereotypical thought that stops us from doing what we want to, there is a glowing example of someone who has debunked it to succeed in life, writes Shefali Tripathi Mehta.

I was visiting a neighbour when their house-help came to ask for a two-day leave and the lady promptly told her to send her daughter to fill in. Puzzled, I wondered why the child should stand in for the mother. Was it because hers was an unskilled, menial job? Or because the maid belonged to a lower social class and was expected to oblige? The maid, anyway, replied that it would not be possible as the daughter had college to attend. Later, when I ran into the maid again, I learnt that her daughter was studying engineering. My neighbour's naiveté is pardonable if we consider that we are a society that is constantly judging people by their social standing and on other regressive standards.

It is not bigoted minds that stereotype, we are all conditioned by our environment and upbringing to see people through bias-coloured glasses, stereotyping unconsciously. In a country where our names proclaim our religion, our caste, and the region we belong to, we cannot help 'fixing' people into stereotypes even before we meet them.

"Stereotypes are categories that have gone too far," says John Bargh, a social psychologist. "When we use stereotypes, we take in the gender, the age, the colour of the skin of the person before us, and our minds respond with messages that say hostile, stupid, slow, weak. Those qualities aren't out there in the environment. They don't reflect reality."

There are no cookie cutter people. In one family alone, even between identical twins, two people are essentially and evidently different.

Our society is in flux — a generation of economically-deprived young people have with education and hard work joined the skilled workforce; an astounding number of children have become perfect examples of the slum-to-riches idiom; career women have shattered the proverbial glass ceiling; more girls are taking care of aged parents; more parents are living with married daughters; live-ins are common; only-women groups are travelling the world; more men are hands-on fathers and househusbands; and smaller cities too are becoming more cosmopolitan with populations floating for jobs more readily as technology-enabled development, awareness and knowledge-sharing reduces the barriers and world-class services and businesses gain access to these markets. Isn't it time for change of attitudes too?

### Bigotry and prejudice

Social stereotyping leads to discrimination, prejudice and limiting lives. Women, the aged, the economically deprived and the disabled are constantly 'shown their place' and constricted by a blinkered society's collective lack of imagination.

Overgeneralisations, unfair assumptions and critical judgments about people and groups are workings of fixated minds.

People will rent out a place more readily to a bank employee than to an artist. Looking for a place to rent in Delhi, we were clearly told Punjabis were not welcome. South Indians, perceived as simpler, quieter, cleaner and vegetarians, were.

Perceptions are based on long-standing traits of people belonging to a certain region, class, caste, gender or age. But it is the negative stereotyping that is ridiculous and harmful. We make irrational, skewed judgements based on stereotypes. We do not give the driver an advance on his salary so he can pay his daughter's school fee because we have had a bitter, prior experience of another driver fleeing with our money, and we easily tag all drivers as 'cheats'. At the same time, we are willing to pay for poor kids' education to an NGO even without bothering to look into their credentials, or the impact of their work. And so we ask an 18 year old girl why she hasn't learnt to cook but dismiss the same in a boy because we presume he doesn't need to.

At the workplace too people are constantly judging others — women who wear traditional clothes are conservative; women have it easy, they don't have to work as hard as men; freelancers are jobless or work for free; men who work from home are not career-oriented; people who stay back late at work are more committed... the list is endless. Some years ago, job seekers from a particular state were rejected at the first screening because that state had earned a dubious record for fake educational and work experience certificates.

The social stigma attached to physical disabilities and mental illnesses leads families of people with disabilities to hide it, which results in them not getting early and appropriate intervention and being denied of the right and opportunity to live a better life that they are capable of living. Families too suffer from being tagged unfairly. Children with disabilities are still denied admission into mainstream schools on some pretext or the other, the real reason being that the schools do not believe these kids can perform at par with the others.

In spite of our enhanced awareness and government schemes to help uplift them, children from lower castes and classes are made to help with menial tasks in schools where they go to study, and not allowed to share meals with the other students.

### Living up to labels

Stereotyping kids leads to bullying. Bullies target kids who are tagged — loser, lefty, fat, idiot — tags that can leave them scarred for life. Sensitive kids become fearful and lose interest in studies and hobbies, suffer from depression, nervousness, may start bedwetting and stammering too. Some can even become suicidal. An 11 year old boy in Canada, constantly bullied because he had muscular dystrophy, became depressed and committed suicide after being punched by a schoolmate who took away the iPhone he was carrying.

The ideal child is expected to excel in everything. Parents are apologetic about shy kids; boys are expected to participate in sports and be good in math and science. A boy who wants to be a dancer or a chef is dissuaded and mocked at for being effeminate. Girls, on the other hand, are gently steered towards careers that are considered safe and appropriate for them. In almost every way, society seems to decide who we should be, not in a schoolmarmish, scolding way, but by sending out subtle signals of what is perceived as good and what is undesirable.

Women are relentlessly knuckled down by what people think or say of them, how they will be judged. Gradually, they learn to avoid conflict situations by doing as is expected of them — to sacrifice dreams and aspirations, career and independence for family; to leave finances and paperwork to 'smarter' men; to remain cautious of the outside world at all times; and to support husband's career at the cost of their own. Most women will endure abusive marriages than seek divorce because of the social stigma attached to divorcees, because they are expected to make amends, bend.

Women who dare to break this ideal-woman mould are considered loose, fast. Similarly, we begin to tag people beyond a certain age as 'old' and expect them to change as per the perceived likeness of old age. They are expected to adhere to the unwritten codes of senior living. We are constantly telling them to slow down — 'this is not your age to go out alone/drive/do this/eat that', till they internalise and accept the idea and get straightjacketed into a routine, unchanging life. Going and sitting in the park with others their age is okay, but going to the movies with the youngsters is not. Our reactions are enough to let them know. They gradually give in and then we have the quintessential 'oldie' living, without participating in life. It is a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Indians abroad, especially students, are all bracketed together as having these stereotypical traits — good in math, simple, geeky, smelly, oil-haired, loud, socially awkward and sticking around only with other Indians.

### Defying stereotypes

For every stereotypical thought that stops us from doing what we want to, there is a glowing example of someone who has debunked it to attain their potential. In Henry Ford's words, "Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you're right."

Wrestlers in the town of Rohtak, which is famous for its wrestling akharas, laughed at a five-year-old paralysed waist down due to arthritis when he expressed his wish to be a wrestler like them. The boy defied the weakling tag and today Sangram Singh, winner of a gold in the Commonwealth Wrestling Championship, and of the title 'World's Best Professional Wrestler', is a celebrity, a television and film star who visits schools to give motivational talks to students.

Men love to make fun of erratically driven cars on the road and say, "That must be a woman!" Jokes on women drivers must amount to almost half the email forwards one receives, yet women do not allow that to put brakes to their wish and need to drive. And not just themselves. Several metros now boast of taxi services run by women — Sakha radio cab service in Delhi; Viira and Priyadarshini cab services in Mumbai.

Defying stereotypes is not the prerogative of women in big cities alone. In Coimbatore, rural women trained by Mahindra Tractors are driving tractors to plough their fields, which has ended their dependence on hired labour. Over 500 women now have licences to drive tractors and there is an ever-increasing waiting list of women who want to train. Of around 1,000 women officers in Indian Air Force today, around 80 are pilots. We have recently witnessed the courage and resilience of Squadron Leader Khushboo Gupta and Flight Lieutenant Tanya Srinivas who, along with their male counterparts, were engaged in relief and rescue operations after the Uttarakhand floods, flying their Cheetah helicopters to the Kedarnath valley. Fired by ambition or driven by circumstances, women continue to trailblaze, not shrinking from stepping into male-dominated fields.

In a unique initiative to shatter stereotypes, a voluntary organisation working with people with disabilities organises on a regular basis, story reading sessions by children who are blind for children from mainstream schools. It also organises an annual car rally in which

each car driver is accompanied by a blind navigator who reads out directions from a map provided to them in Braille. These initiatives are meant to highlight the potential of people with disabilities; demonstrate how society can benefit from their inclusion, and draw the attention of employers and facility providers, in this case, towards the abilities of people who are blind or visually impaired, and demonstrate how Braille equips them. It must be with such fortitude that 16-year-old Shristi Tiwari, who is visually impaired, has topped the humanities stream of the Madhya Pradesh Board of Secondary Education by securing 481 out of 500.

Then there are the trailbreaker senior citizens who, in their sunset years, having dispensed with society's stamp of approval, are seeking out soulmates for themselves. Eighty-one-year-old Bhramarlal Joshi married 61-year-old Pramodini Paranjape in the presence of his children and grandchildren. For a 70-year-old widower from Kollam, his three daughters gave a newspaper advertisement seeking a partner for him.

Sixty-year-old Rajan from Thiruvananthapuram is contemplating marriage to break away from the loneliness of his life.

“Once you label me you negate me.” (Soren Kierkegaard). Every child that is born has the potential to be the president of the country, the greatest musician, the best surgeon, a change agent, a leader, anyone that they desire to be, and have enough faith to work towards. It is usually the parents, elders and those around them who begin to clip the wings of their imagination, curb their flight by presenting them with lower but fail-safe, achievable expectations.

When anthropology professor Prabodh Kumar noticed his domestic help drawn to his books, he did the most unexpected thing. He encouraged her to start reading. He then asked her to write her memoirs. Thus came about Baby Haldar's Aalo Aandhari or A Life Less Ordinary that went on to become a bestseller and was translated into 21 languages, including 13 foreign languages.

Expectations of others can work both ways — encourage or inhibit. The Pygmalion Effect is a phenomenon that refers to situations where people try and meet the high expectations placed on them. In the workplace, this theory is applied by managers to bring out the best in their subordinates.

“I used to worry about the labels others placed on me... until I realised my limitations weren't coming from their labels, but from my own.” (Steve Maraboli, motivational speaker and behavioural scientist). It's not just others, we label ourselves all the time, thereby restricting our dreams and potential — I'm not into sports, I'm reserved, I won't be able to do that, I don't get math, I can't go alone, what will people say...!

The self-actualised let nothing come in way of their aspirations — neither physical disabilities, nor financial constraints. Arunima Sinha, national level volleyball player who was thrown out of a moving train and had her left leg amputated below the knee, within two years of the accident, achieved the world record of becoming the first woman amputee to conquer Mt Everest.

The Missile Man of India, our former President Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, son of a poor boatman, born and raised in small town Rameshwaram, let nothing stand in way of his big dreams.

Steve Maraboli goes on to say, “Do not dilute the truth of your potential. We often convince ourselves that we cannot change, that we cannot overcome the circumstances of our lives. That is simply not true. You have been blessed with immeasurable power to make positive changes in your life. But you can’t just wish it, you can’t just hope it, you can’t just want it... you have to LIVE it, BE it, DO it.”