Many Canadian youths believe in old-fashion gender roles: study

Young Canadians are carrying around some gender stereotypes that seem more in line with what their parents or grandparents might have thought, a new global study suggests.

The report, released Thursday by the development agency Plan International, found 31 per cent of Canadian boys aged 12 to 17 believe a woman’s most important role is feeding her family and taking care of the home.

That compared to 15 per cent of boys in the United Kingdom, but well short of 73 per cent in India and 68 per cent in Rwanda, who answered the same way.

When the question was asked of Canadian adults, 24 per cent agreed that a woman’s primary role should be in the home.

Almost half — 48 per cent — of the Canadian adolescents polled said men should be responsible for earning an income and providing for their families. Among Canadian adults, 43 per cent felt the same way.

Among the other findings, 45 per cent of all the Canadian youths in this survey agreed with the statement that “to be a man, you need to be tough.” That compared to 13 per cent in the U.K. and 26 per cent in Rwanda.

When the question was asked of Canadian adults, 38 per cent of men equated toughness with masculinity and that fell to 21 per cent among women.

As well, 42 per cent of the young Canadians polled agreed that being a man meant taking more risks. Among Canadian adults, 41 per cent of men felt this way and 19 per cent of women did.

“The results were surprising,” said Rosemary McCarney, CEO of Plan Canada. “You think that it’s 2011 . . . and the stickiness of some of those traditional notions is not just surprising, but I think it should also be worrying for all of us.”

McCarney expressed particular concern about the survey’s findings on toughness and risk-taking for males, saying “that’s what leads to deviant behaviour. It leads to violence and bullying.”

Joan Simalchik, a professor of gender studies at the University of Toronto, also expressed surprise over the results.

“That’s not what we see at universities, and it’s not quite what we see in the real world,” she said of the idea that so many young Canadians are holding out-of-date views on the sexes.

She noted how enrolment is up for females in university studies that have been male-dominated in the past, such as medicine and law.

However, Simalchik did recall a recent case of one of her students, while interning at a Grade 7 class, encountering a negative reaction among one boy when another male pupil said his favourite colour is pink.

“Clearly there is gender patterning still going on,” she said.

On the other hand, 96 per cent of Canadian youths in the survey agreed that girls and boys should have the same opportunities and rights to make choices in life.

And 91 per cent agreed that equality between boys and girls is good for both sexes.

The survey was part of a report which offered the message that reducing the prevalence of sexual stereotypes is good for both males and females.

For example, it said research has shown that fathers who are involved with their children — despite some notions that women should be the primary caregivers — are less likely to be depressed, suicidal or violent.

As well, the report said men face a burden, particularly those in poverty, when they alone are expected to be providers for their family.

On how gender inequality hurts men in Canada, McCarney talked about “the typical male in Canada who feels pressured not to go back to school because he sees himself as being the person who needs to shoulder the household’s income, or the young boy who feels the need to act out in an aggressive way because that’s what’s expected of boys.”

The youth portion of this Canadian survey was conducted by Angus Reid online of 1,003 individuals, whose parents were panel members, between Aug. 3 and 7. The margin of error for the results was 3.02 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The adult portion involved 1,001 Canadian polled online between July 29 and 30. This had a margin of error of 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.