
GENDER

SECOND EDITION

LISA WADE

Occidental College

MYRA MARX FERREE

University of Wisconsin-Madison



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PREFACE

Writing a textbook is a challenge even for folks with lots of teaching experience in the subject matter. We would never have dared take on this project without Karl Bakeman's initial encouragement. His confidence in our vision was inspiring and kept us going until the project could be placed into the very capable hands of Sasha Levitt, who ushered the first edition to completion with her meticulous reading, thoughtful suggestions, and words of encouragement. Sasha has since become an invaluable part of the revision process, with a perfect mix of stewardship, cheerleading, and collaborative fact-checking. She has kept us on target conceptually as well as chronologically, challenged us to think hard about the points that first-edition readers had raised, and yet kept the revision process smoothly moving forward to meet our deadlines. Without her firm hand on the tiller, our occasional excursions into the weeds might have swamped the revision with unnecessary changes, but her attention to updating sources kept us cheerful with the new evidence we landed. The revision might have ballooned with the new material we identified, but her editorial eye has kept us in our word limits without sacrificing anything important. Sasha has become a true partner in the difficult process of adding the new without losing the old, and we could not have pulled it off without her.

Of course, Karl and Sasha are but the top of the mountain of support that Norton has offered from beginning to end. The many hands behind the scenes include project editor Diane Cipollone for keeping us on schedule and collating our changes, production manager Ashley Horna for turning a manuscript into the pages you hold now, assistant editors Erika Nakagawa and Thea Goodrich for their logistical help in preparing that manuscript, designer Jillian Burr for her keen graphic eye, and our copyeditor, Katharine Ings, for crossing our t's and dotting our i's. The many images that enrich this book are thanks to photo editors Travis Carr and Stephanie Romeo and photo researchers Elyse Rieder and Rona Tuccillo. We are also grateful to have discovered Leland Bobbé, the artist

whose half-drag portraits fascinated us. Selecting just one for the first edition was a collaborative process aided by the further creative work of Jillian Burr and Debra Morton Hoyt. Selecting a second was equally exciting and challenging. We're grateful for the result: striking covers that we hope catch the eye and spark conversation.

We would also like to thank the reviewers who commented on drafts of the book and its revision in various stages: Rachel Allison, Shayna Asher-Shapiro, Phyllis L. Baker, Kristen Barber, Miriam Barcus, Shira Barlas, Sarah Becker, Dana Berkowitz, Emily Birnbaum, Natalie Boero, Catherine Bolzendahl, Valerie Chepp, Nancy Dess, Lisa Dilks, Mischa DiBattiste, Erica Dixon, Mary Donaghy, Julia Eriksen, Angela Frederick, Jessica Greenebaum, Nona Gronert, Lee Harrington, Sarah Hayford, Penelope Herideen, Melanie Hughes, Miho Iwata, Rachel Kaplan, Madeline Kiefer, Rachel Kraus, Carrie Lacy, Thomas J. Linneman, Caitlin Maher, Gul Aldikacti Marshall, Janice McCabe, Karyn McKinney, Carly Mee, Beth Mintz, Joya Misra, Beth Montemurro, Christine Mowery, Stephanie Nawyn, Madeleine Pape, Lisa Pellerin, Megan Reid, Gwen Sharp, Mimi Schippers, Emily Fitzgibbons Shafer, Kazuko Suzuki, Jaita Talukdar, Rachel Terman, Mieke Beth Thomeer, Kristen Williams, and Kersti Alice Yllo, as well as the students at Babson College, Occidental College, Nevada State College, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison who agreed to be test subjects. Our gratitude goes also to the users of the first edition who offered us valuable feedback on what they enjoyed and what they found missing, either directly or through Norton. We've tried to take up their suggestions by not merely squeezing in occasional new material but by rethinking the perspectives and priorities that might have left such concerns on the cutting room floor the first time around. We hope the balance we have struck is satisfying but are always open to further criticism and suggestions.

Most of all, we are happy to discover that we could collaborate in being creative over the long term of this project, contributing different talents at different times, and jumping the inevitable hurdles without tripping each other up. In fact, we were each other's toughest critic and warmest supporter. Once upon a time, Lisa was Myra's student, but in finding ways to communicate our interest and enthusiasm to students, we became a team. In the course of the revision, we came to appreciate each other's strengths more than ever and rejoice in the collegial relationship we had in making the revision happen. We hope you enjoy reading this book as much as we enjoyed making it.

Lisa Wade
Myra Marx Ferree

GENDER

IDEAS, INTERACTIONS, INSTITUTIONS

SECOND EDITION

“

A MAN IN HEELS IS RIDICULOUS.

—CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN

”



Introduction

A mong the most vicious and effective killers who have ever lived were the men of the Persian army. In the late 1500s, under the reign of Abbas I, these soldiers defeated the Uzbeks and the Ottomans and reconquered provinces lost to India and Portugal, earning the admiration of all of Europe. Their most lethal advantage was the high heel.¹ Being on horseback, heels kept their feet in the stirrups when they rose up to shoot their muskets. It gave them deadly aim. The first high-heeled shoe, it turns out, was a weapon of war.

Enthralled by the military men's prowess, European male aristocrats began wearing high heels in their daily lives of leisure, using the shoe to borrow some of the Persian army's masculine mystique. In a way, they were like today's basketball fans wearing Air Jordans. The aristocrats weren't any better on the battlefield than your average Bulls fan is on the court, but the shoes symbolically linked them to the soldiers' extraordinary achievements. The shoes invoked a distinctly *manly* power related to victory in battle, just as the basketball shoes link the contemporary wearer to Michael Jordan's amazing athleticism.

As with most fashions, there was trickle down. Soon men of all classes were donning high heels, stumbling around the cobblestone streets of Europe feeling pretty suave. And then women decided



Shah Abbas I, who ruled Persia between 1588 and 1629, shows off not only his scimitar, but also his high heels.

they wanted a piece of the action, too. In the 1630s, masculine fashions were “in” for ladies. They cut their hair, added military decorations to the shoulders of their dresses, and smoked pipes. For women, high heels were nothing short of masculine mimicry.

These early fashionistas irked the aristocrats who first borrowed the style. The whole point of nobility, after all, was to be *above* everyone else. In response, the elites started wearing higher and higher heels. France’s King Louis XIV even decreed that no one was allowed to wear heels higher than his.² In the New World, the Massachusetts colony passed a law saying that any woman caught wearing heels would incur the same penalty as a witch.³

But the masses persisted. And so the aristocrats shifted strategies: They dropped high heels altogether. It was the Enlightenment now, and there was an accompanying shift toward logic and reason. Adopting the philosophy that it was

intelligence—not heel height—that bestowed superiority, aristocrats donned flats and began mocking people who wore high heels, suggesting that wearing such impractical shoes was the height of stupidity.

Ever since, the shoe has remained mostly out of fashion for men—cowboys excluded, of course, and disco notwithstanding—but it’s continued to tweak the toes of women in every possible situation, from weddings to the workplace. No longer at risk of being burned at the stake, women are allowed to wear high heels, now fully associated with femaleness in the American imagination. Some women even feel pressure to do so, particularly if they are trying to look pretty or professional. And there remains the sense that the right pair brings a touch of class.

The attempts by aristocrats to keep high heels to themselves are part of a phenomenon that sociologists call **distinction**, a word used to describe efforts to distinguish one’s own group from others. In this historical example, we see elite men working hard to make a simultaneously class- and gender-based distinction. If the aristocrats had had their way, only rich men would have ever worn high heels. Today high heels continue to serve as a marker of gender distinction. With few exceptions, only women (and people impersonating women) wear high heels.

Distinction is a main theme of this book. The word *gender* only exists because we distinguish between people in this particular way. If we didn’t

care about distinguishing men from women, the whole concept would be utterly unnecessary. We don't, after all, tend to have words for physical differences that don't have meaning to us. For example, we don't make a big deal out of the fact that some people have the gene that allows them to curl their tongue and some people don't. There's no concept of *tongue aptitude* that refers to the separation of people into the curly tongued and the flat tongued. Why would we need such a thing? The vast majority of us just don't care. Likewise, the ability to focus one's eyes on a close or distant object isn't used to signify status and being right-handed is no longer considered better than being left-handed.

Gender, then, is about distinction. Like tongue aptitude, vision, and handedness, it is a biological reality. We are a species that reproduces sexually. We come, roughly, in two body types: a female one built to gestate new life and a male one made to mix up the genes of the species. The word **sex** is used to refer to these physical differences in primary sexual characteristics (the presence of organs directly involved in reproduction) and secondary sexual characteristics (such as patterns of hair growth, the amount of breast tissue, and distribution of body fat). We usually use the words

male and **female** to refer to sex, but we can also use **male-bodied** and **female-bodied** to specify that sex refers to the body and may not extend to how a person feels or acts. And, as we'll see, not every body fits neatly into one category or the other.

Unlike tongue aptitude, vision, and handedness, we make the biology of sex socially significant. When we differentiate between men and women, for example, we also invoke blue and pink baby blankets, suits and dresses, *Maxim* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines, and action movies and chick flicks. These are all examples of the world divided up into the **masculine** and the **feminine**, into things we associate with men and women. The word **gender** refers to the symbolism of masculinity and femininity that we connect to being male-bodied or female-bodied.

Symbols matter because they indicate what bodily differences mean in practice. They force us to try to fit our bodies into constraints that "pinch" both physically and symbolically, as high heels do. They prompt us to invent



Louis XIV, king of France from 1643 to 1715, gives himself a boost with big hair and high heels.



One of these people is not like the others. We perform gendered distinctions like the one shown here every day, often simply out of habit.

ways around bodily limitations, as eyeglasses do. They are part of our collective imaginations and, accordingly, the stuff out of which we create human reality. Gender symbolism shapes not just our identities and the ideas in our heads, but workplaces, families, and schools, and our options for navigating through them.

This is where distinction comes in. Much of what we believe about men and women—even much of what we imagine is strictly biological—is not naturally occurring difference that emerges from our male and female bodies. Instead, it's an outcome of active efforts to produce and maintain difference: a sea of people working together every day to make men masculine and women feminine, and signify the relative importance of masculinity and femininity in every domain.

Commonly held ideas, and the behaviors that both uphold and challenge them, are part of **culture**: a group's shared beliefs and the practices and material things that reflect them. Human lives are wrapped in this cultural meaning, like the powerful masculinity once ascribed to high heels. So gender isn't merely biological; it's cultural. It's the result of a great deal of human effort guided by shared cultural ideas.

Why would people put so much effort into maintaining this illusion of distinction?

Imagine those aristocratic tantrums: pampered, wig-wearing, face-powdered men stomping their high-heeled feet in frustration with the lowly copycats. *How dare the masses blur the line between us*, they may have cried. Today it might sound silly, ridiculous even, to care about who does and doesn't wear high heels. But at the time it was a very serious matter. Successful efforts at distinction ensured that these elite men really *seemed* different and, more importantly, *better than* women and other types of men. This was at the very core of the aristocracy: the idea that some people truly are superior and, by virtue of their superiority, entitled to hoard wealth and monopolize power. They had no superpowers with which to claim superiority, no actual proof that God wanted things that way, no biological trait that gave them an obvious advantage. What *did* they have to distinguish themselves? They had high heels.

Without high heels, or other symbols of superiority, aristocrats couldn't make a claim to the right to rule. Without difference, in other words, there could be no hierarchy. This is still true today. If one wants to argue that Group A is superior to Group B, there must be distinguishable groups. We can't think more highly of one type of person than another unless we have at least two types. Distinction, then, must be maintained if we are going to value certain types of people more than others, allowing them to demand more power, attract more prestige, and claim the right to extreme wealth.

Wealth and power continue to be hoarded and monopolized. These inequalities continue to be justified—made to seem normal and natural—by producing differences that make group membership seem meaningful and inequality inevitable or right. We all engage in actions designed to align ourselves with some people and differentiate ourselves from others. Thus we see the persistence of social classes, racial and ethnic categories, the urban-rural divide, gay and straight identities, liberal and conservative parties, and various Christian and Muslim sects, among other distinctions. These categories aren't all bad; they give us a sense of belonging and bring joy and pleasure into our lives. But they also serve as classifications by which societies unevenly distribute power and privilege.

Gender is no different in this regard. There is a story to tell about both difference and hierarchy and it involves both pleasure and pain. We'll wait a bit before we seriously tackle the problem of gender inequality, spending several chapters learning just how enjoyable studying gender can be. There'll be funny parts and fascinating parts. You'll meet figure skaters and football players, fish and flight attendants and, yes, feminists, too. Eventually we'll get to the part that makes you want to throw the book across the room. We won't take it personally. For now, let's pick up right where we started, with distinction.

“

THE ONES WITH EYELASHES ARE GIRLS;
BOYS DON'T HAVE EYELASHES.

—FOUR-YEAR-OLD ERIN DESCRIBES HER DRAWING¹

”



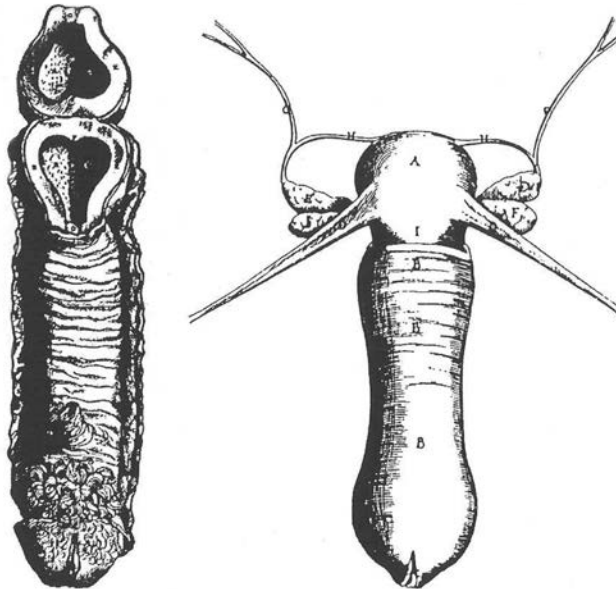
Ideas

Most of us use the phrase “opposite sexes” when describing the categories of male and female. It’s a telling phrase. There are other ways to express this relationship. It was once common, for example, to use the phrase “the fairer sex” or “the second sex” to describe women. We could simply say “the *other* sex,” a more neutral phrase. Or, even, “*an* other sex,” which leaves open the possibility of more than two. Today, though, people usually describe men and women as *opposites*.

Seventeenth-century Europeans—the same ones fighting over high heels—didn’t believe in “opposite” sexes; they didn’t even believe in *two* sexes.² They believed men and women were better and worse versions of the same sex, with identical reproductive organs that were just arranged differently: Men’s genitals were pushed out of the body, while women’s remained inside. As Figure 2.1 shows, they saw the vagina as simply a penis that hadn’t emerged from the body; the womb as a scrotum in the belly; the ovaries just internal testes. As the lyrics to one early song put it: “Women are but men turned outside in.”³

Seventeenth-century anatomists were wrong, of course. We’re not the same sex. The uterus and fallopian tubes of the female body come from an embryonic structure that is dissolved during male fetal development. Conversely, men’s internal sexual and

**FIGURE 2.1 | 17TH CENTURY ILLUSTRATION
OF THE VAGINA AND UTERUS**



This anatomical illustration from 1611 of the interior of a vagina (left) and the exterior of a vagina and uterus (right) shows the Renaissance idea of female genitalia—an internal phallus.

reproductive plumbing has no corollary inside most women. The penis is not a protruding vagina, nor the vagina a shy penis.

But the idea that we are opposite sexes is not completely right either. The penis and scrotum *do* have something in common with female anatomy. The same tissue that becomes the scrotum in males becomes the outer labia in females; the penis and the clitoris are formed of the same erectile tissue and clustered nerve endings; and testes and ovaries are both gonads that make germ cells (sperm and eggs), one just a modified version of the other. If you're curious what it feels like to have the genitals of the other sex—and who hasn't wondered?—the truth is you probably already have a pretty good idea just by having genitals yourself. Our bodies are all human, developing from the same blob of tissue, modified to enable sexual reproduction. So while it's not perfectly correct to say there's only one sex, neither is it perfectly correct to say we're opposites.

Nevertheless, *opposite* is the word we use, and it has strong implications: that whatever one sex is, the other simply is not. Today most people in most Western countries are familiar with this idea, referred to in sociology as the

gender binary. The word *binary* refers to a system with two and only two separate and distinct parts, like binary code (the 1s and 0s used in computing) or a binary star system (in which two stars orbit each other). So the term **gender binary** refers to the idea that there are only two types of people—male-bodied people who are masculine and female-bodied people who are feminine—and those types are fundamentally different and contrasting.

Because we tend to think in terms of a gender binary, we routinely speak about men as if they're all the same and likewise for women. The nervous parent might warn his thirteen-year-old daughter, for example, "boys only want one thing," while the Valentine's Day commercial insists all women love chocolate. In fact, most of us embrace gender categories in daily life and talk about "men" and "women" as if membership in one of these categories says a great deal about a person. We might say "I'm such a girl!" when we confess we're addicted to strawberry lip balm, or repeat the refrain "boys will be boys" when observing the antics of a young male cousin. If we're feeling hurt, we might even comfort ourselves by saying "all men suck" or "women are crazy." All these phrases rely on the idea that the terms *men* and *women* refer to meaningful categories.

We often talk this way but, when push comes to shove, we'll admit that we don't necessarily believe in such rigid gender stereotypes, especially when they're applied to us. When asked, most people will say they sort of do . . . and sort of don't . . . conform to the relevant stereotype. Maybe we're a woman who adores romantic comedies but is also first in line for the next superhero movie. Or maybe we're a man who enjoys a hot bath after a rugby game. This sort of mixing and matching of interests is typical. Accordingly, a large number of us don't believe we, *personally*, conform to a stereotype. And, in fact, when we stop and think about it, many and perhaps most of the people we know well don't fit into the stereotypes either. This leads us to the first of many probing questions we will attempt to answer throughout this book:

Q+A

If we don't learn the idea of the gender binary by observing the people around us, where does the idea come from?

This chapter will show that people who grow up in most contemporary Western societies learn to use a set of beliefs about gender as a scaffold for understanding the world. If we are well socialized, we will put people and things into masculine and feminine categories and subcategories out of habit and largely without thinking. We apply the binary to human bodies, believing men and women to have different and nonoverlapping anatomies and physiologies. We also apply it to objects, places, activities, talents, and ideas.

We become so skilled at layering ideas about gender onto the world that we have a hard time seeing it for what it really is. We don't notice when gender stereotypes don't make sense. Even more, we tend to see and remember things consistent with gender stereotypes, while forgetting or misremembering things inconsistent with those stereotypes. In other words, gender is a logic that we are talented at manipulating, but it is manipulating us, too.

Don't feel bad about it. Essentially all societies notice and interpret sex-related differences in our bodies, so we are no different in that sense. In fact, we'll explore some of the other ways that people have thought about gender in a later section. Before we do, though, let's take a closer look at our own unusual ideas about gender—the gender binary—and review the biology of sex.

THE BINARY AND OUR BODIES

At thirteen years old, Georgiann Davis's parents brought her to the doctor with abdominal pain.⁴ After extensive examination and testing, she was told she had "underdeveloped ovaries" with a high chance of becoming cancerous. Her parents consented to surgery to remove them. Six years later she requested her medical records in the routine process of acquiring a new doctor, only to learn she'd never had ovaries at all. The doctors had lied: In fact, she'd had testes.

Georgiann was diagnosed with what physicians now call androgen insensitivity syndrome.⁵ At fertilization, a Y sperm combined with an X egg, putting her on the biological path to becoming male. But her cells lacked the ability to detect the hormones that typically masculinize a body. So, even though she had XY chromosomes and testes that produced testosterone and other androgens, her testes remained in her abdomen as if they were ovaries, and the development of her external genitalia followed the female body plan.

People with androgen insensitivity syndrome are **intersex**, born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the typical definitions of female or male. People who are intersex remind us that while we tend to take for granted that everyone is unambiguously male or female, the path to such a straightforward body involves many complicated steps. Step one is conception. If a sperm with an X chromosome meets an egg, the fertilization kicks off the development of a female; if the sperm contains a Y chromosome, it kicks off the development of a male. Since all eggs have an X chromosome, men typically have an XY chromosomal profile and women have an XX. This, however, is just the beginning of a complex process involving at least eight steps, as shown in Table 2.1.

If the fertilized egg is XY, we should expect to see the development of testes. Setting this process in motion involves not just a Y chromosome but also several genes on the X chromosome and dozens of other genes located on yet other chro-

TABLE 2.1 | STEPS TOWARD BECOMING A “MAN” OR A “WOMAN” IN THE UNITED STATES

Step	Male Path	Female Path
chromosomes	XY	XX
gonads	testes	ovaries
hormones	androgens/estrogens	estrogens/androgens
external genitalia	penis, scrotum	clitoris, labia
internal genitalia	seminal vesicles, prostate, epididymis, vas deferens	vagina, uterus, fallopian tubes
secondary sex characteristics	pubic hair, deep voice, Adam's apple	pubic hair, breasts, menstruation
gender identity	male-identified	female-identified
gender expression	masculine	feminine

mosomes.⁶ If this situation occurs and the testes begin making their particular cocktail of androgens and estrogens, then internal and external genitalia typical of males will develop. At puberty, the boy will grow pubic hair in a different pattern than his female counterparts and experience a deepening of his voice. He will probably have less breast tissue than the average female-bodied person.

Without the intervention of a Y chromosome, a fertilized egg will follow a female development path. The fetus will develop ovaries and internal and external genitalia typical of females. At puberty, the brain will instruct the ovaries to produce a different cocktail of androgens and estrogens that stimulate feminine patterns of body fat, an upside-down triangle of pubic hair, breasts, and a menstrual cycle.

Becoming a “man” or “woman” in the United States today, though, involves more than just physical development. It is considered normal for a male-bodied person, for example, to identify as male, feel good about one’s identity as a man, and behave in masculine ways. This is his **gender identity**, a sense of oneself as male or female. Most of us also learn to communicate our gender identity through our appearance, dress, and behavior. This is our **gender expression**.

Most of us assume that one’s body, gender identity, and gender expression will all line up but, as Georgiann’s case illustrates, sometimes they don’t. Dozens of conditions can result in a body that isn’t clearly male or female, or one that doesn’t match the identity or expression of the person who inhabits it. In fact, it is estimated that at least one out of every hundred people is intersex and more than one in ten report feeling as masculine as they do feminine, or more gender atypical than typical.⁷

The 10 Percent

People with intersex bodies are living proof that not everyone fits into a gender binary that allows only for opposite sexes. We all almost certainly know at least one intersex person—and we likely don't know who they are. Like Georgiann, sometimes even the people with the intersex condition don't know they are intersex. While some people are diagnosed as intersex at birth, other times it's discovered later in life; sometimes a person never learns of it at all.

Some intersex conditions are chromosomal. While most humans have XX or XY sex chromosomes, others are XXY, XXXY, XXX, XYY, or X. These conditions are caused by an anomaly in the cell division with which our bodies make egg and sperm. Sometimes sex chromosomes “stick” to each other and resist dividing with the rest of our chromosomes. Through this process, a person can make a sperm or egg with no chromosomes or two chromosomes instead of just one. In other cases, variations in development can produce male-bodied individuals with XX chromosomes (in which a gene on the Y chromosome critical for the development of testes has crossed over onto an X) and female-bodied individuals with XY chromosomes (in which that same gene was damaged or deleted).

A person can carry XXY chromosomes, for example, if a sperm carrying an X and a Y merges with an egg with an X.⁸ A person born with three X chromosomes (after an XX egg merges with an X sperm) has what is called triple X syndrome.⁹ Some women are born with only one chromosome, which occurs when an X egg or sperm merges with an egg or sperm without a sex chromosome.¹⁰ Because the Y chromosome has so few genes, men can't be born with only a Y; an X is essential to life.

With the exception of being born with a lone Y, none of these conditions is fatal and both children and adults with these conditions tend to blend in with XY and XX people relatively easily. Most have gender identities that match the appearance of their perceived sex. Most XXX women will never even know they have a chromosomal condition at all because they typically don't exhibit any symptoms (other than being slightly tall). People with XXY chromosomes are often especially tall and have broader hips and less body hair than men who are XY. Women with only one X are somewhat more recognizable; they tend to be a bit short and have distinctive features. People with these chromosomal conditions are sometimes (but not always) infertile and sometimes (but don't always) face specific health problems.

Intersex conditions can also be caused by hormones. Sometimes a fetus has a hyperactive adrenal gland that produces masculinizing hormones. If the fetus is XX, then the baby will be born with an enlarged clitoris that resembles a small-to-medium-sized penis. Most babies born with this condition identify as female when they grow older and are perfectly healthy, as it is not a medical prob-

lem to have a slightly large clitoris. Georgiann's condition is also a hormone-based departure from the path to unambiguous male and female bodies; it is caused by an inability of cells to recognize androgens released by the testes both before and after birth. All of these outcomes occur in nature and reflect varieties of human development.

The gender binary, however, leaves no room for variety, so sometimes intersex children still undergo surgery in order to bring their bodies into line with social expectations, even when surgery is medically unnecessary.¹¹ Upon adulthood, many of these children have questioned the necessity of these procedures, noting the pain and suffering that accompanies any surgery, the frequent loss of physical function, the inability of infants or small children to give consent, and the mis-assignment of children to the “wrong” side of the binary. The work of intersex activists—those who, like Georgiann, have been trying to draw attention to the problems with medically unnecessary surgery before the age of consent—has influenced many doctors to delay surgery until people with intersex bodies can make informed decisions, but surgeries on infants have not ended. Discomfort with bodies that deviate from the gender binary continues to motivate some physicians and parents to choose medically unnecessary surgery for infants and children.

Another example of a group whose gender markers sometimes don't conform to the gender binary are, in many parts of the Western world today, called **transgender**. Also referred to simply as *trans*, the term refers to a diverse group of people who experience some form of **gender dysphoria**, a discomfort with the relationship between their bodies' assigned sex and their gender identity, or otherwise reject the gender binary.

In the United States, trans-identified people have recently gained much greater visibility. Laverne Cox, for example, star of the television show *Orange Is the New Black*, appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine and was named Woman of the Year by *Glamour* magazine in 2014. Olympic decathlon gold medalist Caitlyn Jenner announced her transition on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in 2015. Jazz Jennings, a transgender teenager, was given a reality show on TLC that same year. And in 2017, Danica Roem became the first openly trans person elected to a state legislature; she defeated the incumbent, a man who had introduced a bill that would have restricted trans rights.

The term *trans* includes people who undergo a full surgical transition, but also people who do not.



Danica Roem is a singer in a death metal band and the first openly trans person to be elected and serve in a U.S. state legislature.



Thomas Beatie was female-bodied at birth but chose to live his adult life as a man. Because he opted not to undergo a hysterectomy, he was able to give birth to three children.

Some want nothing more than to be as male or female as possible. To this end, some trans people take hormones to masculinize or feminize their bodies, have gender-confirmation surgeries to remake their bodies into ones with which they feel more comfortable, and live as the other sex. Others do only some or none of these things. Thomas Beatie, for example, made headlines when he became pregnant with the first of what would be three children. Thomas was born female but began to identify as a boy during childhood. He underwent some surgical transformation at age twenty-three but chose not to undergo a hysterectomy, preserving his ability to get pregnant and bear children.

Some trans people, then, identify as men or women, others identify as trans men or trans women, and still others identify as **nonbinary**, outside of or between the binary between male and female (also described as **genderqueer**). This includes people who identify as **gender fluid**, without a fixed gender identity. In light of these new terms, the word **cisgender** is increasingly used to refer to male- and female-bodied people who comfortably identify and express themselves as men and women, respectively.

While some trans, genderqueer, gender-fluid, and nonbinary people prefer to be referred to by the pronouns he/him and she/her, others prefer gender-neutral pronouns like the singular they/them or an alternative gender-neutral singular like ze/zir. Sometimes people choose a gender identity and stick with

it; other times they evolve. Increasingly, social organizations are responding to these preferences. Facebook now offers dozens of gender-identity labels as well as a freeform field. It also allows people to choose up to ten identities and decide which friends see which, allowing users to control how they present themselves to different audiences. Dating sites, including Grindr, Tinder, and OkCupid, now allow people to identify as nonbinary. Nods to nonbinary identities, gender fluidity, and simple nonconformity are happening throughout American society. The makeup company CoverGirl, for example, hired James Charles to be its first male-identified ambassador and Calvin Klein released a fragrance it describes as “gender free.”

These new ideas, shifting policies, and corporate decisions are increasingly inclusive of the estimated 10 percent (or more) of the human population who don’t—or don’t want to—fit into a rigid gender binary. And it’s becoming clearer, as we learn more about both biology and identity, that there is no obvious way we could place them into the binary anyway. How would we decide where people with intersex bodies go? To qualify as male or female, does a person’s body have to match every gender criterion, from chromosomes to hormones to genitals to identity? If so, what do we call the estimated 76 million people on earth who can’t claim a “perfectly” male or “perfectly” female body? Would it be better to pick just one criterion as *the* determinant of sex? Which one? Should genitals trump chromosomes? Or are chromosomes more “fundamental”?

Moreover, who cares? If bodies function but don’t fit into the gender binary, is that a problem? Who gets to decide? And where do we draw the line? How many millimeters separate a child with a small penis at birth and a child diagnosed as intersex? And if someone’s body *does* fit all the criteria but their identity and expression diverge, why not give them tools that allow them to better fit their bodies to their gender identity, just as we provide eyeglasses or allow surgery for people with limited vision? How much body manipulation is “good” and how much is “bad”? And who gets to decide what to demand or allow?

Questions abound. And the truth is, we can’t answer them satisfactorily. We can’t because we’re trying to impose a false binary on reality. Human bodies just don’t come in the neat packages a gender binary assumes. Not even, in fact, when we consider the 90 percent of the population who seem like they do.



A brand’s willingness to hire James Charles—CoverGirl’s first CoverBoy—indicates growing support of genderqueer performances.

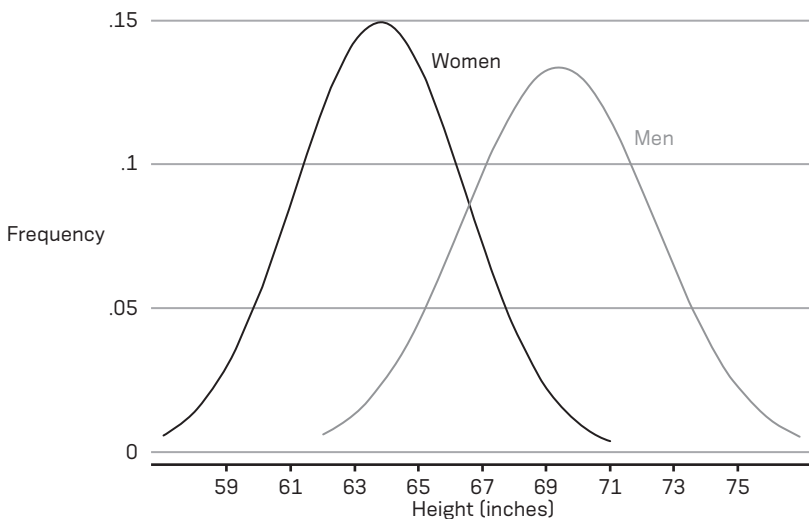
The Other 90 Percent

Remember, the gender binary doesn't just allow for only two sexes, it also makes the much stronger claim that we are "opposite sexes." The idea of "oppositeness" makes blurring the boundaries between masculinity and femininity "queer" and encourages cisgender men and women to maximize apparent difference in their gender expression, making the gender binary appear more real than it is. This is necessary because male and female bodies are not in a biological binary at all. They are far more alike than different. Even for physical characteristics on which there is a clear gender difference, we see a great deal of overlap.

Height is a great example. The average man is five and a half inches taller than the average woman.¹² So men are taller than women, right? Well, not really. The *average* man is taller than the *average* woman, but because both men and women come in a range of heights, some women are taller than many men, and many men are taller than some women. This is not a *binary* difference, one that posits that all men are taller than all women; it's an *average* difference, a measure of tendency, not absolutes (Figure 2.2).

We see this type of overlap in all sex-related traits. There are hairy women and men who can't grow a mustache; men with breasts and women with flat chests;

FIGURE 2.2 | THE RANGE AND OVERLAP IN HEIGHT AMONG AMERICAN MEN AND WOMEN



Source: Cheryl D. Fryar, Qiuping Gu, and Cynthia L. Ogden, "Anthropometric reference data for children and adults: United States, 2007–2010," National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital and Health Statistics* 1, no. 252 (October 2012).

women with strong bodies and broad shoulders and slender men who lift weights with little result. Even our reproductive abilities aren't perfectly binary. There are women who can't bear children, including all women who live past menopause. The truth is that our physical traits—height, hairiness, shape, strength, agility, flexibility, and bone structure—overlap far more than they diverge and vary widely over the course of our lives.

We *believe* in a gender binary, though, so the vast majority of cisgender people work hard to try to minimize this overlap, pressing our bodies into ideal male or female shapes. This is true even of the people we consider to be the most naturally perfect. Supermodel Adriana Lima, for example, once revealed the incredible routine she uses to prepare her body for the Victoria's Secret catwalk.¹³ Already genetically blessed with a culturally ideal female body, she nonetheless has to train, restrict, and prepare. For months before the show she works out every day with a personal trainer. For the three weeks before, she works out twice a day. A nutritionist gives her protein shakes, vitamins, and supplements to help her body cope with the workout schedule. She drinks a gallon of water a day. For the final nine days before the show, she consumes only protein shakes. Two days before the show, she begins drinking water at a normal rate; for the final twelve hours, she drinks no water at all.

While this is an extreme example, consider how much time, energy, and money nonsupermodels spend trying to get their bodies to conform to our beliefs about gender. Women choose to eat salad, for example, when they'd rather have a burger and fries, while men are encouraged to make a spectacle of overeating. Gyms are effectively gender segregated, with most men at the weight machines trying to build muscles and most women on the exercise machines trying to lose weight. Women try to tone their bodies by building lean but not overly noticeable muscles with yoga and Pilates; men drink protein shakes and try to bulk up. Gender differences in size and strength aren't very pronounced naturally, but we sure do work hard to make them appear that way.

Similarly, many women take pains to keep their faces, legs, and armpits free of hair if there is any chance of it being spotted, sometimes shaving their entire pubic area, too. Men's body hair, in contrast, is seen as naturally masculine; they



Victoria's Secret model Adriana Lima struts her stuff on the runway, displaying a body bestowed to her by nature and painstakingly sculpted by personal trainers and dietitians.

have the option to let it all hang out. By shaving, women preserve the binary idea that women don't have body hair and men do.

We gender the hair on our heads, too. Long hair and certain short styles signify femininity. Cropped hair is more masculine. Women bleach their hair blonde, sometimes platinum blonde, a hair color that is natural almost exclusively to children. Men almost never choose this color. When women go gray, they often cover it for fear of looking old. On men, in contrast, gray hair is often described as a sexy "salt-and-pepper" look.

People also tend to wear clothes that preserve the illusion of the gender binary. This starts when we're children, partly because clothes for kids are designed to emphasize gender difference.¹⁴ Color-coding is one way we do it, with reds, grays, blacks, and dark blues for boys, and pinks, purples, turquoises, pale blues, and whites for girls. Beyond the gendered superhero/princess divide, boys' clothes are also decorated with trucks, trains, and airplanes; girls' with sparkly stars, hearts, and flowers. Even the animals decorating children's clothes are gendered, with lions and dinosaurs for boys, and kittens and bunnies for girls. Girls' clothes are tighter and cut to emphasize curves that they don't yet have—shirts for girls, for example, sometimes cinch at the waist or include lower necklines—whereas boys' clothes, even in the exact same sizes, are looser, boxier, and show off less skin. Clothes for boys are even made with stronger fabrics and more robust stitching than those of girls, on the assumption, perhaps, that boys will be active in their clothes and girls will not.

As adults, these trends in color, cut, and quality continue. Meanwhile, many women wear padded or push-up bras to lift and enhance their breasts and wear low-cut tops that emphasize and display cleavage (which men aren't supposed to have). High heels create an artificially arched spine that pushes out the breasts and buttocks. Form-fitting clothes reveal women's curves, while less form-fitting or even baggy clothes on men make their bodies appear more linear and squared off. Fitted clothes also help women appear small, while baggier clothes make men seem larger. Trying on clothes designed for the other sex is a quick and easy way to test how much they contribute to our masculine and feminine appearances.

When diet, exercise, and dress don't shape our bodies into so-called opposite ideal forms, some men and women resort to chemicals and cosmetic surgeries. Men are more likely than women to take steroids to increase their muscle mass or get bicep, tricep, chin, and calf implants that make their bodies appear more muscular and formidable. Women are more likely to take diet pills. Some undergo liposuction. If they don't think they're curvy enough, some women choose to get buttock implants or have a breast augmentation. Conversely, breast *reduction* surgeries are one of the most common plastic surgeries performed on boys and men, who are often horrified by the slightest suggestion of a "breast." The surgery is now the second most common cosmetic procedure for boys under

eighteen (exceeding breast augmentation for girls of the same age) and the third most common procedure for men of all ages.¹⁵

In addition to working on the shape of their bodies, people learn different ways of moving their bodies that help tell a story of big, muscular men and small, delicate women. Masculine movements tend to take up space, whereas feminine movements minimize the space women inhabit. A masculine walk is wide, with the arms held slightly away from the body and the elbows pointed out. A feminine walk, in contrast, involves placing one foot in front of the other, swinging the arms in front of the body, and tucking the elbows for a narrower stride. A masculine seated position is spread out, disparagingly referred to as “manspreading.” A man might open his shoulders and put his arms out to either side and spread his legs or rest an ankle on a knee, creating a wide lap. Women, in contrast, are taught to contain their bodies when seated. Women often sit with their legs crossed at the knees or the ankles, with their hands in their lap, and their shoulders turned gently in.

The sheer power we have over our bodies is illustrated by **drag queens** and **drag kings**, conventionally gendered men and women who dress up and behave like members of the other sex, usually for fun or pay. Some make a hobby, or even a career, of perfecting gender display, manipulating their bodies to signify either masculinity or femininity at will.

Drag queens and kings are excellent examples of how physical characteristics can be manipulated, but we all do drag in the sense that we use our bodies to display an artificially rigid gender binary. None of the tools used by drag queens to make their bodies look feminine is unfamiliar to a culturally competent woman. Makeup, fitted clothes, high heels, jewelry, and carefully styled hair are everyday tools of femininity. The queen may wear heavier makeup, higher heels, and more ostentatious jewelry than the average woman, but it’s not really different, just exaggerated.

Surgery to correct the “ambiguous” genitals of intersex children and gender-affirmation surgery are both ways people respond to a gender binary that makes their bodies problematic; working out, dieting, and push-up bras are other ways. The cumulative effect of this collective everyday drag show is a set of people who act and look like “women” and a set who act and look like “men.” If male and female bodies *were* naturally “opposite,” as the binary suggests, we wouldn’t feel compelled to work so hard to make them appear that way. Instead, much of the difference we see doesn’t emanate from our bodies themselves but rather is the result of how we adorn, manipulate, use, and alter our bodies—including through surgery and drugs.

In sum, the logic behind the gender binary—that people come in two strongly distinct types—doesn’t account for people whose biological markers aren’t clearly in the male or female category, those whose identity or expression doesn’t match their biology, or those who are actively working to force their bodies into a binary

WARPAINT

BY COCO LAYNE



In her "Warpaint" project, artist Coco Layne shows how she transitions from appearing male to appearing female by way of her hairstyle, makeup, and clothes.

that doesn't exist in nature. Without this effort at distinction, some people would still be what our culture considers masculine or feminine, since some of our bodies do naturally conform to those types, but we wouldn't look *as* different as we do.

We do this work, though, or are forced to resist it, because we live in a society that believes in the gender binary. Not all societies do. In the next section, we'll take a quick tour through a few examples of societies that think about gender in significantly different ways. It reveals that the gender binary is just one way of thinking about the bodies with which we're born. Gender may be universal, that is, but how we think about it is not.

GENDER IDEOLOGIES

The gender binary, like the one-sex vision of the seventeenth-century anatomists, is an **ideology**, a set of ideas widely shared by members of a society that guides identities, behaviors, and institutions. **Gender ideologies** are widely shared beliefs about how men and women are and should be. The gender binary presumes that one's biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression all "line up"—that is, that we are all either male-man-masculine or female-woman-feminine. When we look around the world and backward through history, however, we don't see a universal gender ideology. Instead, we discover a dizzying array of different gender ideologies, ones that reveal that the gender binary is just one of many ways of thinking about gender.

To begin, some societies acknowledge three, four, or even five genders. When Europeans began colonizing what would become the United States in the late 1400s, more than one hundred American Indian tribes, for example, recognized people who were simultaneously masculine and feminine.¹⁶ These individuals dressed and behaved like the other sex, but they weren't considered male or female. They were third and fourth genders, described collectively today as *two-spirit*. Charlie Ballard, a two-spirit who lives in Oakland and is a descendant of the Anishinaabe, Sac, and Fox tribes, explains that a "[t]wo-spirit is a whole person that embodies feminine and masculine traits."¹⁷ The Navajo also have a fifth, gender-fluid category for a person whose gender is constantly changing, a *nádleehi*: sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, and sometimes a two-spirit. If a person is a *nádleehi*, no one is surprised by these changes, which can occur monthly, daily, hourly, or even by the minute.

In Hawaii, individuals who mainlanders might describe as two-spirit are called *māhū*. Kaumakaiwa Kanaka'ole, a Native Hawaiian recording artist who identifies as *māhū*, describes it as "the expression of the third self."¹⁸ In the Cook Islands, similarly identified people are called *akava'ine*. In Tonga, they use the



Two hijras prepare to dance during a transgender conference in New Delhi.

word *fakaleiti*. And in Samoa they say *fa'afafine*, which translates to “in the manner of a woman.”¹⁹

In Oaxaca, Mexico, feminine-acting male-bodied people identify as *muxe*; in Brazil, *travesti*; and in India and Bangladesh, *hijra*, a third sex that is recognized by both governments and used in official documents.²⁰ Unlike two-spirits and the third genders of Polynesia, who adopt the everyday behaviors and typical appearance of the other sex, hijras, muxes, and travestis perform a different and sometimes exaggerated femininity. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, who uses the pronoun “she,” is a hijra who lives in Maharashtra, India. She explains her hijra identity this way:

*Being called gay or a man really upsets me. . . . A hijra is [someone who has transitioned from] male to female, but we don't consider ourselves female because culturally we belong to a completely different section of society. . . . They say it's the soul which is hijra. We feel we are neither man nor woman, but we enjoy femininity. I enjoy womanhood, but I am not a woman.*²¹

A muxe interviewed for the documentary *Beyond Gender*, who uses the pronoun “they,” had something similar to say about identity: “There are men, women, and muxes,” they said. “I am so comfortable being in between two. I myself represent

duality of two things because I have the strength of a male and the sensitivity of a female.”²² Another interviewee explained that they thought that generally people were fearful of the spaces in between masculinity and femininity, but that “being a muxe allows you to defeat that fear so that you can be your own self.”²³

Both hijras and muxes represent a third gender distinct from gay men and from each other. They reveal that there is no universal, or natural, set of gender identities. Gender identities are specific to cultures and places, such that how a person comes to identify depends on where and when they grow up. “I don’t think that anywhere else it could be the exact same,” says a muxe in Oaxaca, “because clearly the Istmo region is a thing of its own with a history of years and years. It’s not a recent thing and this is what makes it unique. Obviously you cannot export it or replicate it.”²⁴ Caitlyn Jenner, Laverne Cox, or Danica Roem may not have identified as trans if they had grown up somewhere else or at another point in history. This isn’t to say that their experience here and now isn’t authentic, only to suggest that how we interpret our feelings about our bodies will vary depending on the cultural resources we have for thinking about gender.

Genders other than man and woman are part of traditions all over the world: Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Tanzania, the Philippines, Nepal, Oman, Benin, Myanmar, Madagascar, Siberia, New Zealand, Australia, Peru, Ethiopia, Egypt, the Congo, and likely more.²⁵ Each of these cultures differs in how it conceptualizes the categories it recognizes and what role nonbinary people play. Sometimes they are expected to “prove” their membership by changing their bodies. Travestis, for example, are expected to feminize their bodies and hijras traditionally must show impotence. Other times the only requirement is community acknowledgment, as is the case for two-spirits.

In other words, genitals don’t always determine one’s gender. This is the case for the Gerai in West Borneo. The anthropologist Christine Helliwell spent time living with this group of subsistence farmers, immersing herself in the Dayak culture. They were studying her, too, and she discovered that her gender was uncertain to them for some time. This was, she said,

*despite the fact that people [knew] both that I had breasts (this was obvious when the sarong that I wore clung to my body while I bathed in the river) and that I had a vulva rather than a penis and testicles (this was obvious from my trips to defecate or urinate in the small stream used for that purpose, when literally dozens of people would line the banks to observe whether I performed these functions differently from them).*²⁶

From her Western point of view, breasts and a vulva counted as strong evidence she was female, but not to the Gerai. “Yes, I saw that you had a vulva,” said a member of the community when she inquired, “but I thought that Western men might be different.”

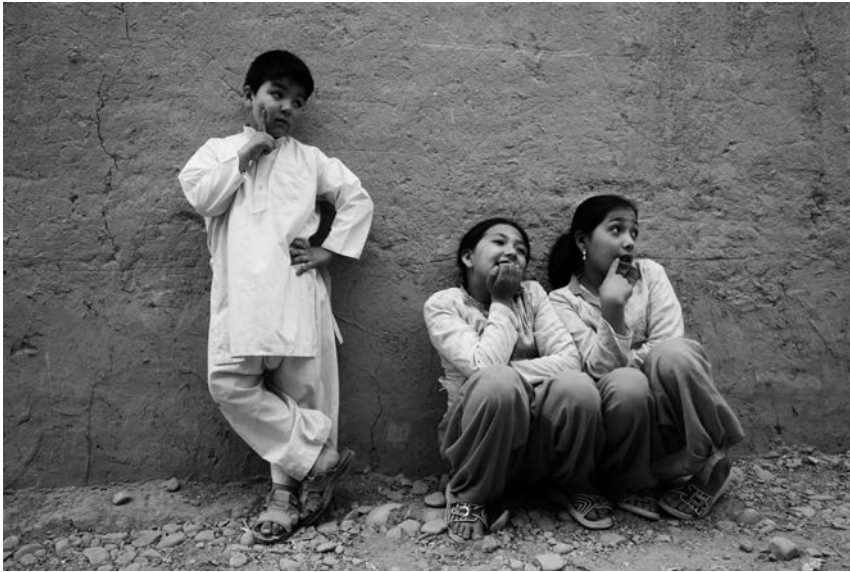
For the Dayak, being a man or woman is not tied to genitals. It is tied to expertise. A “woman” is a person who knows how to distinguish types of rice, store them correctly, and choose among them for different uses. As Helliwell learned more about rice and gained practice in preparing and cooking it, she became “more and more of a woman” in their eyes. Still, for many, her gender remained at least a little ambiguous because she “never achieved anything approaching the level of knowledge concerning rice-seed selection held by even a girl child in Gerai.”

The Dayak are not unique in divorcing gender from genitals. The Hau in New Guinea do, too. They see masculinity and femininity as parts of the character that grow and fade with age and experience. For the Hau, children become male or female at puberty and then, over the life course, men lose masculinity with every son they father and women gain masculinity with each son they bear, until elders are again genderless. In pre-1900s Japan, in the years after puberty but before boys became full-fledged adults, they could occupy the status of another age-constrained gender: *wakashu*, a highly desirable third gender permitted to have sex with both men and women.²⁷

Among the Lovedu in Zambia, gender is assigned neither by genitals nor age but by status.²⁸ A high-ranking woman “counts” as a man. She might marry a young woman and be the socially recognized “father” to their children (who are biologically fathered by the young woman’s socially endorsed lover). A similar system has been documented among the Nnobi in Nigeria.²⁹

In the Netherlands, children are taught that men and women are different but overlapping categories.³⁰ The Dutch do not teach children that men have “male” hormones and women have “female” hormones, as we typically, and wrongly, do in the United States. Instead, they teach them that all people have a mix of so-called male and female hormones, just in different proportions, which is true.³¹ Further, they also emphasize that hormone levels vary among men and among women (not just between them) and that these levels rise and fall in response to different situations and as people of both sexes age.

Sometimes the biological quirks of a community shape its gender ideology. In an isolated village in the Dominican Republic, it became common for girls to become boys at puberty. A rare genetic condition called 5-alpha-reductase deficiency became concentrated in the community. The condition made genetically male children appear to be female until puberty, at which time what had been thought to be a clitoris grew into a penis and their testes suddenly descended from their abdomen. These children would then simply adopt male identities and live as men the rest of their lives. The villagers experienced this as a completely routine event, calling such boys *guevedoces*, or “eggs at twelve.” A similar phenomenon happens among the Simbari in Papua New Guinea. They name the girls who grow up to be men *kwolu-aatmwol*, or “female thing transforming into male thing.”



Mehran Rafaat, a six-year-old bacha posh in Afghanistan, poses cheekily with her twin sisters. After puberty, she will stop playing the part of a boy and be considered a girl again.

In some places, strict social rules lead to the acceptance of temporary or permanent sex-switching. In Afghanistan, girls are not allowed to obtain an extensive education, appear in public without a male chaperone, or work outside the home.³² These restrictions are typically discussed as a burden for girls and women, but they can also be a burden on families. Daughters can only go out in public if they are chaperoned by a brother. Having a brother gives girls freedom and parents more flexibility; they can send their children on errands, to school, or on social visits without their supervision. Since boys can also work outside the home, sons can be a source of extra income. Families without sons can't do any of these things, so some simply pick a daughter to be a boy. They cut her hair, change her name, and put her in boy's clothes. This type of child is called a *bacha posh*, or "dressed up as a boy." One father of a *bacha posh* explains:

It's a privilege for me, that she is in boys' clothing. . . . It's a help for me, with the shopping. And she can go in and out of the house without a problem.

Sex-switched children are accepted in Afghanistan. In fact, the phenomenon is common enough that most people are unsurprised when a biological girl suddenly becomes a social boy. Relatives, friends, and acquaintances accept and participate in the illusion. Later, when the child reaches puberty, she becomes



Haki is one of the remaining “sworn virgins” of Albania. Born female, Haki has lived her entire adult life as a man.

female again. Meanwhile, the family might choose a younger sibling to take over her role.

Unlike a *bacha posh* in Afghanistan, girls in Albania can live as boys *and* grow up to be socially recognized men.³³ To do so, girls have to publicly promise they’ll remain virgins. The role of the *virgjinesha*, or “sworn virgins,” emerged in the early 1400s when war left a dearth of men in many communities. Since only men had certain rights—to buy land, for example, or pass down wealth—all families needed either a biological man or someone who could stand in for one. Many girls would take the oath after their father or brother died. A similar identity emerged in the African Dahomey Kingdom in the 1700s; when the male population was decimated by war, women were allowed to become warriors, but only if they promised to remain childless.³⁴

“It was my decision as well as the family’s,” explained Nadire Xhixha, who became a *virgjinesha* at thirteen years old when the only boy among her eight siblings tragically died. Speaking of her young adulthood, she said: “I lived freely, like all men back then. I smoked, I drank *rakia* [fruit brandy] and did many other things that were characteristic of men at the time.” Xhixha lived the rest of her life

as a man: “I’ve never done women’s domestic chores such as cleaning and cooking. I lived in the village and worked alongside men. I worked hard. I worked like a man and lived like one.”³⁵ Xhixha is one of a dwindling group of sworn virgins who still live in Albania today. As women are granted more rights, fewer girls feel the need to adopt a male identity for themselves or their families.³⁶

How many genders are there? Is gender flexible? Can it change over the life course? Is it harmful to adopt a different gender identity for strictly practical reasons? Does it have anything at all to do with genitals? The answers to all these questions make sense only in concrete and specific times and places. Our sexed bodies are real, but gender ideologies can vary considerably, leading us to interpret our bodies, and our feelings about them, in many different ways. Might we have identified differently if we had grown up with different opportunities or faced different demands?

The ideology that dominates in the West—the gender binary—is somewhat unusual in requiring all bodies to fit into two and only two categories. It demands that certain traits and talents align with our bodies throughout our

entire lifetime, to the exclusion of aspects of one's personality or other factors such as age, status, or expertise. We impose this binary on our bodies, as we've discussed, but also, as we'll talk about next, everything else.

THE BINARY AND EVERYTHING ELSE

Gender is a **social construct**, an arbitrary but influential shared interpretation of reality.³⁷ Social constructs are the consequence of **social construction**, the process by which we layer objects with ideas, fold concepts into one another, and build connections between them. The metaphor of "construction" draws attention to the fact that we are *making* something. This construction is "social" because, to be influential in society, the meaning ascribed to something must be shared.

Consider the word *hippo* as an example. The word doesn't look or sound anything like an actual hippopotamus, but English speakers have agreed that this particular assortment of lines and curves means a giant, gregarious, aquatic artiodactyl with stumpy legs and thick skin. And, likewise, when I say "hip" plus "oh," you know what I mean because we've given that order of those sounds that meaning.

Language is just an elaborate series of social constructs, but so is much of our daily lives. Most of us, in fact, start off every morning with a social construct: breakfast. In the United States, people sometimes call breakfast the "most important meal of the day." In parts of Eastern Europe, like Poland and Hungary, they double down on this idea, enjoying a traditional "second breakfast" (as do the Hobbits of Middle Earth). During the Middle Ages in Europe, though, they skipped breakfast altogether. The influential thirteenth-century Dominican priest Thomas Aquinas called breakfast *praepropere*, roughly translated as "the sin of eating too soon." It was allowed only for children, the elderly, the weak, and hard laborers.³⁸

Whether one eats in the morning, and how often, is a social construct; so is what one eats. In the United States, it's traditional to eat either bacon and eggs or something sweet like cereal or pancakes, but breakfast varies around the world. In Korea, a traditional breakfast includes a savory broth-based soup with vegetables, something most Americans would recognize as lunch. In Japan, breakfast is often a rice stir-fry with dried fish in soy sauce. In Istanbul, it includes a healthy serving of olives. In Iceland, a slurp of cod liver oil. In Egypt, fava beans and a tomato-cucumber salad.³⁹ The variation in traditions reveals that "breakfast food" is a social construct.

We gender sweet and savory foods as feminine and masculine, respectively, too. Women can and do eat bacon and eggs for breakfast, but shoveling in a good,

hearty portion of salty, fatty protein is a manly way to eat breakfast. And while men often have a sweet tooth, a waffle drenched in syrup-covered strawberries with a dollop of whip cream is a meal more easily associated with women. This gendering of breakfast food is an example of the social construction of gender.

The Social Construction of Gender

In the process of socially constructing the world, we often layer objects, characteristics, behaviors, activities, and ideas with notions of masculinity or femininity. Sociologists use *gender* as a verb when talking about the *process* by which something becomes coded as masculine or feminine. So we will sometimes say something is “gendered” or that we “gender” or are “gendering” things.

We gender just about everything. Ask yourself: Who, stereotypically, is a sports fan? Who do we expect to play rugby? Soccer? How much opportunity do women have to play American football? Men are allowed to figure skate, but are male figure skaters “masculine”? Are women basketball players feminine? Who cheers for whom?

Who, stereotypically, drinks Diet Coke? Coke Zero? Monster energy drinks? At dinner, who do we expect will order a steak? A salad? Who do we think is more likely to become a vegetarian? At a bar who, stereotypically, orders beer? A cosmopolitan? Whiskey? White wine?

Who, stereotypically, plays the drums? The flute? Who DJs? Who dances? Who sings? Which teenagers, typically, babysit? And which mow lawns? Who do you expect to major in computer science, engineering, physics? How about nursing or elementary education? After college, who, stereotypically, becomes a therapist? A CEO? For those who do not go to college, who do we expect will become a construction worker? A receptionist?

Even animals are divided by gender. In children’s books, mice and rabbits are usually made to be female, but wolves and bears are made to be male. Are men, in their heart of hearts, allowed to love unicorns? Are women expected to have a pet snake?

Dogs, physics, energy drinks, and bacon and eggs. All these things are associated with masculinity, thrown together in a senseless pile. Whiskey and lawn-mowing share little in common, except that we associate them with men. Likewise with femininity. Nothing connects Diet Coke, ice skating, and being a therapist except the cultural prescriptions tying them all to women. Our social constructs, then, the collection of things we lump together as masculine or feminine, don’t rely on logical connections between and among them. Instead, they are a jumble of unrelated ideas.

Not only are these things mostly unrelated, they’re often contradictory. Consider how women are believed to be naturally inclined to do the most selfless

job in the world (raising children) at the same time they're stereotyped as vain and overly concerned with trivial, superficial things (like fashion and makeup). If the latter is true, do women really make good parents? Likewise, men are believed to be especially capable of running a company, but they are also stereotyped as dopes who can't be counted on to remember to run the dishwasher. Are they focused and competent or not?

The gender binary also causes us to falsely *disconnect* masculine ideas from feminine ones, making it harder to form connections between these ideas. For example, even though we are taught that women have small hands and good coordination, making them ideal for needlework and sewing, we rarely notice that such characteristics would also make them excellent surgeons. The ways in which sewing and surgery are alike tends to escape our notice because they've been socially connected to femininity and masculinity, respectively, which we culturally expect to be opposites. Likewise, because we imagine men to be rational and women emotional, we think that the opposite of rational is emotional. In fact, rationality and emotion are linked.⁴⁰ When people suffer brain trauma that interferes with their ability to feel emotions, their decision-making powers are inhibited because emotion is a key part of careful decision-making, not its antithesis. Our association of emotion with women and rationality with men, however, falsely presents them as opposites.

Seeing Gender

We've grown up learning to see gender in the world and, sometimes frustratingly, we see it whether we like it or not. Metaphorically, this is because we wear **gender binary glasses**—a pair of lenses that separates everything we see into masculine and feminine categories. We acquire prescriptions for our gender binary glasses as we learn the ways of our culture. As we grow up, our prescriptions get tweaked as ideas about gender change around us. Some of us may even have weaker prescriptions than others. We all, however, own a pair.

If we belong to multiple subcultures, as most of us do, we may even have several different pairs of glasses. Sometimes we'll disagree about gendered meanings because someone else sees things a bit differently. A guy who grew up in Taos, New Mexico, with a father who sells healing crystals may have a different idea about what counts as masculine than his college roommate whose dad is the football coach. But when they argue, they will likely still argue about what is and isn't within the category of masculine. In other words, they may have different prescriptions, but they are both wearing glasses.

Our glasses help us see the world the way most other people around us do, but they also help us preserve the binary itself. We actively *use* our glasses, in other words, to gender the world around us. We need to do this because reality

doesn't conform to a simple pink and blue vision of the world. Faced with these contradictions, our glasses encourage us to engage in progressive **gender binary subdivision**, the practice by which we divide and re-divide by gender again and again, adding finer and finer *degrees* of masculinity and femininity to the world. In one study, for example, boys showed little interest in My Little Pony toys until a researcher painted one black, gave it a mohawk, and added spiky teeth.⁴¹ You can make a unicorn masculine after all.

We can do this progressive subdivision with just about anything. Dogs are masculine, for example (as opposed to the feminized cat), but poodles are feminine. Among poodles, though, the large standard poodle is a more masculine sort, while the teensy toy poodle is more feminine. Similarly, most people agree that cooking dinner is considered a feminine task, unless dinner involves grilling steak in the backyard or is done for pay at a restaurant. Housework is feminized and yard work is masculinized, unless we're talking about flower gardening, a subcategory of yard work associated with women.

The process of subdivision makes gender a complex cultural system rather than a single, rigid division of the world into masculine and feminine. In fact, subdivision is necessary for the whole idea of the gender binary to survive. Any time a challenge arises, like the poodle, we can protect the binary by dismissing deviations from it with reference back to the binary itself. If the guitar is a masculine instrument, how do we explain the pretty girl singing a love song while gently strumming a guitar cradled in her lap? We subdivide the guitar into electric (more masculine) and acoustic (more feminine) and further subdivide playing styles such that gentle strumming is feminized, and louder, more aggressive playing is seen as more appropriate for a man.

Likewise, if emotion is coded female, then what is anger? The masculinization of anger is a result of subdividing emotions in order to preserve the idea that women are more sensitive than men. Somehow our belief that men are prone to anger coexists with our belief that they rationally control their emotions. We don't resolve the contradiction by admitting the stereotype is false. Instead, we resolve it by subdividing emotions into masculine and feminine types. Because of the gender binary, men can be angry without being labeled "emotional."

Subdivision allows us to dismiss the toy poodle, pretty strummer, and emotional man as exceptions and not question the rule. In this way, we can maintain the illusion that the gender binary occurs naturally. Divisions of gender also make the gender binary appear to be timeless, even as cultures are constantly changing and the rules are being rewritten. When women began wearing pants in the mid-1900s, for example, their choice of attire was viewed as breaking the rule that men wore pants and women wore skirts. In the 1940s, the actress Katharine Hepburn was more than a little scandalous in slacks. By the 1960s,

tight jeans and hip-hugging slacks further feminized pants, subdividing that category of clothing to reaffirm the binary. Today the binary persists despite women's ubiquitous adoption of pants. It just looks a little different: Men wear "men's pants" and women wear "women's pants." Progressive subdivision, then, makes the gender binary endlessly flexible, able to accommodate whatever challenges and changes emerge over time.

Thanks to our gender binary glasses, gender becomes part of how our brain learns to organize the world. Cells in our brains that process and transmit information make literal connections so some ideas are associated with other ideas in our minds. This phenomenon, called **associative memory**, is a very useful human adaptation. It's how we learned to think "big mouth, sharp teeth" and then "danger!" It's why we couldn't separate the idea "red" from "stop" even if we tried. (Both associations today can save our lives.) Associative memory latches onto gender, too, so when we grow up with a gender binary, our brain forms clusters of ideas revolving around the concepts of masculinity and femininity. Our brains, in other words, encode the gender binary.

Researchers can tap into our subconscious brain organization with the Implicit Association Test (IAT).⁴² The IAT measures subconscious beliefs by comparing how quickly we can make connections between items. We are faster to connect two associated items than nonassociated items. In one study, gender-stereotyped words like *mechanic* and *secretary* were flashed on a computer screen, followed by a male or female name.⁴³ The viewer's task was to identify the name as male or female as quickly as possible. Results showed that, on average, it takes longer for a person to identify a name as male if it was preceded by a feminized word like *secretary* than with a masculinized word like *mechanic*. Viewers have to cognitively "shift gears." Many studies have confirmed this experiment, showing that we unconsciously associate feminine things with one another and masculine things with one another. (You can take the IAT yourself online at www.implicit.harvard.edu/.)

Another term for such embedded associations is **stereotypes**: fixed, oversimplified, and distorted ideas about categories of people. People who explicitly endorse gender stereotypes tend to show the strongest unconscious associations, but even those of us who refute stereotypes test "positive" for them on the IAT. Stereotypes are a natural way for human brains to work and it may be impossible to rid ourselves of them. Knowing them simply means that we're well socialized to a particular culture. We can be aware of how they distort our perception of reality and try to counter our brains' automatic stereotyping, but only if we have attention to spare.⁴⁴

When our ability to think about resisting gender stereotypes is inhibited (when we are distracted or asked to respond quickly), essentially all of us revert to stereotypical thinking. For instance, when asked to perform the challenging

task of recalling a series of random words, study respondents often use the gender binary as a scaffold on which to structure their recollections. In one such study, people were offered a set of masculine, feminine, and neutral words like *wrestling*, *yogurt*, *bubble bath*, *ant*, *pickup truck*, *shirt*, *water*, *steak*, and *flower*. When asked to recall the words later, respondents would cluster the words by gender, saying *wrestling*, *pickup truck*, and *steak* in a row, then *yogurt*, *bubble bath*, and *flower*.⁴⁵ Sometimes they would even add gendered words that weren't on the original list, adding *beer*, perhaps, or *perfume* because they fit so nicely with the concepts of steak and flower. Somehow, they just seemed to belong.

Socially trained brains help us get along with others whose brains are similarly trained. In other words, our gender binary glasses give us **cultural competence**, a familiarity and facility with how the members of a society typically think and behave. It's how we know *most people* think unicorns are supposed to appeal only to girls, even if we personally believe that the love of unicorns should know no bounds. This knowledge is important. In order to interact with others in a meaningful way, we need a shared understanding of the world. How do we communicate the idea of hippo, after all, if we're the only person around who thinks it's pronounced "washing machine"?

Whether out of conviction, mere habit, or the desire to see the world in the same way as people around us, we routinely apply a gender binary to characteristics, activities, objects, and people. This isn't reality; it's ideology. Our culture posits a gender binary, and we apply that binary to our world by peering at it through gender binary glasses. And those glasses, it turns out, bring the world into false focus.

Blurred Vision and Blind Spots

Our gender binary glasses enable us to perceive the world the way the people around us do, but they also often distort our vision.⁴⁶ Our lenses warp reality, causing us to dismiss, forget, and misremember the exceptions to the rule we encounter daily. Without this distortion, this constant *inattention* to deviations from the binary, the gender binary would appear patently false. It's preserved not because it's real, then, but because we learn to ignore or un-see evidence that falsifies it.

In a classic study, for example, five- and six-year-olds were shown both stereotype-consistent pictures (e.g., a boy playing with a train) and stereotype-inconsistent pictures (e.g., a boy cooking on a stove).⁴⁷ One week later, asked to recall what they had seen, children had more difficulty remembering the stereotype-inconsistent pictures than the stereotype-consistent ones. They also sometimes reversed the sex of the person in the picture (e.g., they remembered

a *girl* cooking) or changed the activity (e.g., they remembered a boy *fixing* a stove). Many later studies have confirmed that children are more likely to forget an experience that deviates from stereotypes—skateboarding girls or belly-dancing boys—than one that fits in.⁴⁸

This is true of adults, too. Stereotype-consistent experiences are more likely to be remembered and remembered correctly than stereotype-inconsistent ones.⁴⁹ We pay less attention to stereotype-inconsistent information and are quicker to forget it. When it is ambiguous as to whether what we are observing is stereotype-consistent or stereotype-inconsistent, we tend to assume the former, strengthening our preconceived notions. We may assume, for example, that a man who shoves a woman is attacking her, while a woman who shoves a man is defending herself, using gender stereotypes to interpret the encounter. Further, when we actively seek information, we tend to seek that which affirms our beliefs, not that which challenges them. Whenever stereotypes are activated, those stereotypes influence our attention, thinking, and memory, and they do so in their own favor.

Stereotypes are so powerful, in fact, that they are a source of false memories. In one study, people were asked to watch a dramatized account of a bicycle theft.⁵⁰ The actors playing the thieves varied. In some videos, the criminal was a masculine man, in others a feminine man, a feminine woman, or a masculine woman. Study subjects could remember more about the theft if the criminal conformed to gender stereotypes. This is because, just as with the words *yogurt*, *bubble bath*, and *flower*, it is easier to remember a set of ideas if they conform to a preexisting schema (in this case, criminal behavior = masculine = men). The authors write, “When eyewitnesses are exposed to a theft, gender schemas will enhance recall,” but only if the criminal followed gender expectations and conventions.⁵¹

This phenomenon applies even to memories we would think would be impervious to such effects. In one surprising study, French high school students were asked to fill out a quick survey about whether men or women were better at math and art.⁵² Reminded of the gender stereotypes, they were then asked to report their own scores on a national standardized test they’d taken two years prior. Amazingly, women underestimated their own performance on the math portion of the test and overestimated their performance on the art portion. Men misremembered in the opposite direction.

In these ways, and in many others, our gender binary glasses distort what we see. They often bring things into false focus and affect our cognition and memory. When we see counterevidence, it tends not to enter into our daily interpretation of the world. We may soon misremember it as having confirmed our preexisting beliefs. And our brain has been trained to direct us to make gender-stereotypical associations even if we are consciously prepared to say those stereotypes are wrong.

Revisiting the Question

Q+A

If we don't learn the idea of the gender binary by observing the people around us, where does the idea come from?

Everywhere!

Humans socially construct their worlds and gender is one way we do so. We use a gender binary to understand things, ideas, objects, activities, places, and more. We even apply the binary rule to our bodies, often treating gender-nonconforming bodies as in need of being fixed and putting responsibility on them for the misfit between their experience of gender and our cultural norm rather than on the gender binary itself. Many other cultures offer more space between and outside of male and female gender categories. This has been changing in the United States, as all cultures change. Still, despite growing awareness of nonbinary bodies, most Americans are still uncomfortable with the more than 10 percent of people who challenge their placement on the binary.

The gender binary also continues to press the remaining 90 percent to embody the gender binary much more closely than they naturally do. Meanwhile, everybody tends to underperceive variation in gender identity and expression. We apply a binary gender ideology to the world and what we end up seeing and remembering is false on many fronts. We assume our culture's arbitrary connections are the only way that the binary can be organized, erase nonbinary alternatives in our and other cultures, and subdivide our gender categories to draw attention away from the ways the binary doesn't work. This leads us to forget that gender stereotypes fail to describe most people we know well, including ourselves, and fail to notice that masculinity and femininity are jumbled and often contradictory categories. Our gender binary glasses distort our cognition, influencing what we see, as well as if and how we remember it.

Next . . .

The idea that gender is socially constructed likely bumps up against things we hear about blue and pink brains, the male sex drive, or female empathy, all seemingly irrefutable biological differences between men and women. With this in mind, we'll tackle this question next:

Q+A

The gender binary might be an ideology, but there are real differences between men and women, right?

This question is so much harder to answer than you might think.

FOR FURTHER READING

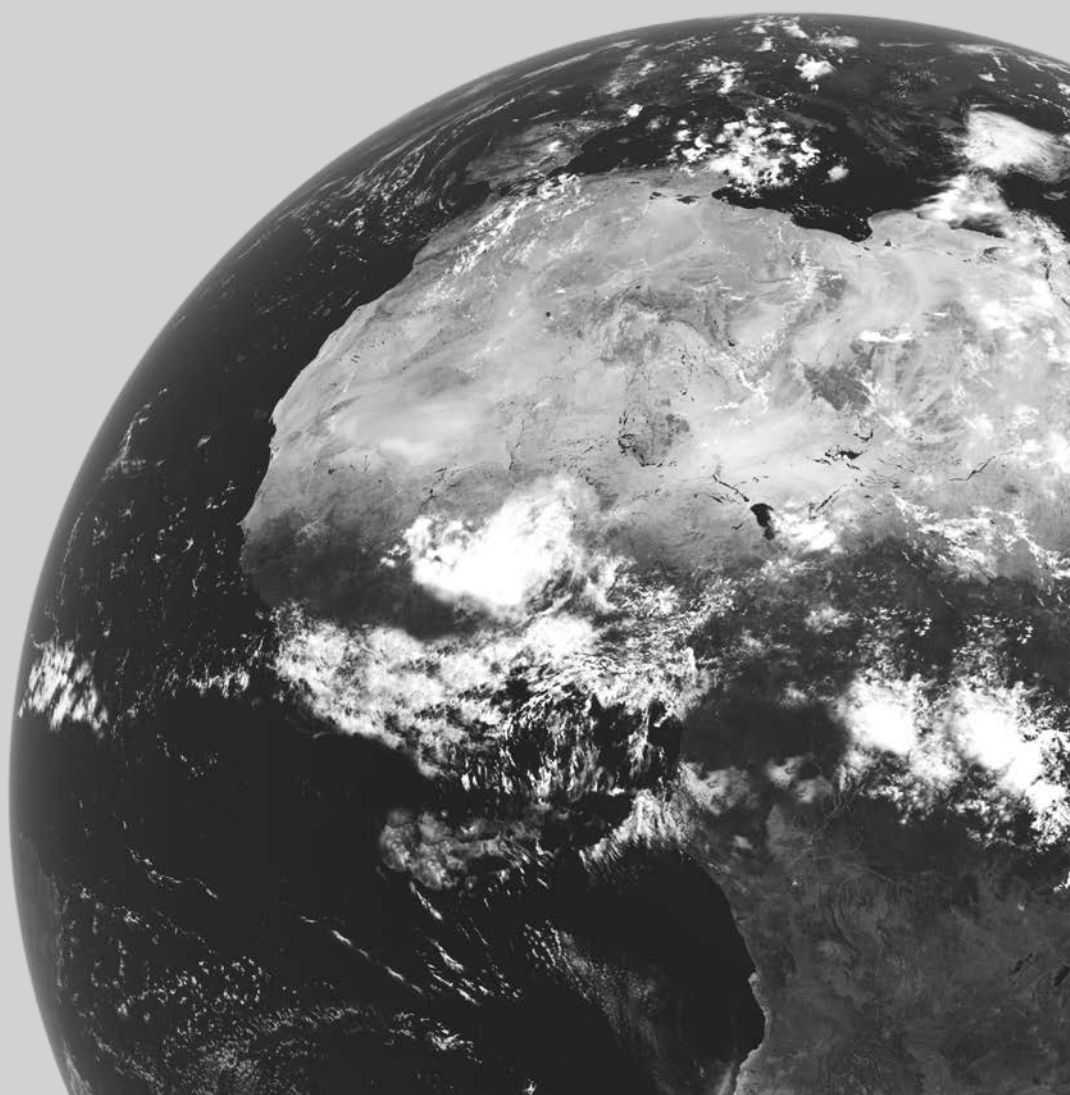
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“

MEN ARE FROM NORTH DAKOTA,
WOMEN ARE FROM SOUTH DAKOTA.

—KATHRYN DINDIA¹

”



Bodies

In a part of the ocean so deep that no light can reach it, an anglerfish hunts. She attracts prey with a glowing lure that springs from her forehead and looks suspiciously like something other creatures would like to eat. No matter if they are bigger than she, as she can swallow prey up to twice her body size.

She pays no attention to her male counterpart, who is tiny in comparison. Females can grow over three feet long, but males are never longer than a few centimeters. He, in contrast, needs her desperately. Born without a lure, a male anglerfish can't catch prey and, without a stomach, he couldn't digest it if he did. A male's only chance at survival is finding a female before he dies of starvation. If he's so lucky, he'll latch onto her with his mouth, initiating a chemical reaction that slowly dissolves his face into her body. Eventually he will lose all his organs and his entire body will waste away, except his testicles. A healthy female anglerfish will carry many pairs of testicles on her body, all that is left of the males who found their fate with her.

This is high **sexual dimorphism**. The phrase refers to typical differences in body type and behavior between males and females of a species. Across the range of species on Earth, some are highly sexually dimorphic and some are less so. The high end includes the green spoonworm (the male lives its entire adult life inside the



In some species, males and females appear very different from each other; in other species less so. Elephant seals, lions, and anglerfish are all species that are more sexually dimorphic than humans.

female's digestive tract); peacocks (males carry a resplendent half-moon of a tail with which to dazzle relatively drab females); and elephant seals (males outweigh females by about 4,600 pounds).

Other species have much lower sexual dimorphism. The male and female Fischer's lovebird, for example, look so much alike that even ornithologists (professional bird-folk) can't tell by looking. They have identical plumage, near-identical behavior, and their genitals are inside their bodies. Very experienced bird handlers might be able to tell based on feeling the width of a bird's pelvis (the females' are wider to allow egg-laying), but most people have to resort to genetic testing to know for sure.

Considering the range of sexual dimorphism among animals helps us put human sex difference in perspective. Given some of the extremes, we should be rather impressed by how obviously similar we are. If humans were as dimorphic by size as elephant seals, for example, the average man would tower six feet above the average woman. If we were as sexually dimorphic as the blanket octopus, the human man would be no bigger than a walnut. Human men don't have appendages that human women do not have (beyond the genitals, of course), like the horns of the Alaskan moose or the rhinoceros beetle, the mane of the lion, the poisonous claw of the platypus,

or the bulging cheek flaps or bulbous nose of the orangutan and the proboscis monkey, respectively. Nor do human males come in pretty colors like the male species of many birds. If we were like Northern cardinals, men would be bright red with a black mask around their eyes and throat and women would look more or less as they do now.

Male and female humans are not exactly the same but, as Dorothy Sayers once said: “Women are more like men than anything else in the world.”² Yet, we’re more clearly male and female than your average pair of lovebirds. That’s why we posed the question we did at the end of the last chapter:

Q+A

The gender binary might be an ideology, but there are real differences between men and women, right?

Most Americans believe that men and women are “basically different” in many ways and that biology explains much of this difference.³ This chapter reviews the research on sex differences and similarities with the aim of understanding whether and how men and women are basically and biologically different. Are we different? How different are we? And is biology why? Prepare to be confused. These questions are much more difficult to answer than you might think. The answers involve a model of the relationship between biology and society that is far more complex than even scientists once imagined.

RESEARCH ON SEX DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

From a practical perspective, getting a clear understanding of how men and women are alike and different is a real challenge. As you’ll see, whether we find differences, what causes those differences, and how large they are varies over time and across cultures; bodily differences respond to psychological manipulation and practice and training. They’re also sensitive to how we design studies and define measurements. We would have to amass a lot of evidence and consider all the possible influences in order to determine which differences we find consistently and which we don’t. And that’s just what a team of psychologists led by Ethan Zell did.

Zell and his colleagues combined over 20,000 individual studies with a combined sample size of more than 12 million people.⁴ It included over 21,000 measures of 386 traits: data on differences between men and women in thoughts, feelings, behaviors, intellectual abilities, communication styles and skills, personality traits, measures of happiness and well-being, physical abilities, and more.

TABLE 3.1 | THE SIZE OF OBSERVED SEX DIFFERENCES

Size of the Difference	% of Variables in Each Category
Negligible to Nonexistent	39%
Small	46%
Medium	12%
Large	2%
Very Large	1%

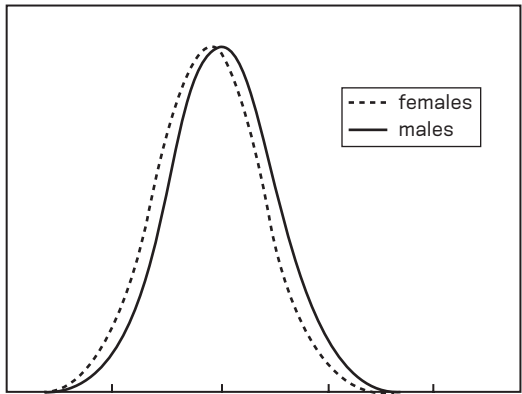
They separated the variables into ones for which there appeared to be negligible to no difference between men and women, and those for which there was evidence for small, medium, large, or very large differences. Table 3.1 shows the results: 39 percent of possible differences were negligible to nonexistent, 46 percent were small, 12 percent were medium, 2 percent were large, and 1 percent were very large.

The average difference between men and women—on all traits included in the study—fell into the small category, illustrated by the bell curve in Figure 3.1. The graph represents levels of self-esteem (from low on the left to high on the right) and the height of the curve represents the number of people who reported each level. Few people have very low self-esteem (far left) or very high self-esteem (far right). While Zell and his colleagues’ analysis offered good evidence for a statistically significant difference between men and women, it’s not a large one.

Other variables that fell into the categories of small to negligible to non-existent difference included reading comprehension and abstract reasoning; talkativeness, likelihood of self-disclosing to friends and strangers, tendency to

interrupt others, and assertiveness of speech; willingness to help others; negotiation style, approach to leadership, and degree of impulsiveness; symptoms of depression, coping strategies, life satisfaction, and happiness; vertical jumping ability, overall activity levels, balance, and flexibility; willingness to delay gratification and attitudes about cheating; likelihood of wanting a career that makes money, offers security, is challenging, and brings prestige; and some measures of sexual attitudes and experiences (e.g., disapproval of extramarital sex, levels of sexual arousal, and sexual satisfaction).

FIGURE 3.1 | AN ILLUSTRATION OF A “SMALL” DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN



Medium-sized differences included physical aggression and visual-spatial abilities (turning a two- or three-dimensional object around in one's head), while the largest sex differences were for some measures of physical ability, especially throwing (because these differences are related to size, they are particularly pronounced after puberty). Large differences were also found in some measures of sexuality: frequency of masturbation and approval of casual sex.⁵ Two traits show especially strong sexual dimorphism: sexual identity (most men identify as male and most women identify as female) and sexual object choice (most men are sexually interested in women and most women in men). Are these, then, the “real differences” our opening question asked about?

It depends on how you define “real.”

DEFINING DIFFERENCE

When we wonder about the real differences between men and women, it's helpful to consider what kind of evidence we would need to conclude that we've discovered them. Is it enough just to be able to measure differences, like Zell and his colleagues did? Is it important that those differences be stable? That is, should the characteristics we're measuring be relatively unchanged across an individual's life? Or, even more, true throughout human history? To count as real, do they need to be found in all or most societies? Would finding a biological cause of the difference make it seem *more* real? And if we do find a biological cause, does it count as real only if it resists cultural influences like education and training? The following sections explore these questions by considering different definitions of the word “real.”

Definition 1: Sex differences are real if we can measure them

Zell and his colleagues noted differences on 61 percent of characteristics. These are real in that the studies they included in their summary really observed them in real life. They are **observed differences**: findings from surveys, experiments, and other types of studies that detect differences between men and women. Is this what we mean by “real”?

Maybe not. There are lots of reasons why differences might be observed, and we might consider some of those observations to be more indicative of an underlying truth than others. For example, people sometimes act differently if they're being observed. Women smile more often than men, and men are more likely to engage in heroic helping behavior than women, but only if they know they're being watched.⁶ Men are just as likely as women to offer emotional support to friends on social media via a private message, but less likely to do so

publicly.⁷ When people think they're alone or acting without an audience, sex differences can fade or disappear.

People also lie. Men typically report higher rates of masturbation than women, but when scientists do studies in which they increase the motivation to be honest (by, say, hooking up a man to a fake lie detector) and decrease their motivation to lie (by ensuring that the answers are anonymous), the frequency with which men report masturbating drops to the same level as women's. We see similar patterns in reported number of sexual partners and age at first intercourse.

In other cases, psychologists have discovered that they can manipulate study results quite easily. If you remind study subjects of a stereotype right before the test, in a trick called **priming**, test scores will reflect that stereotype. For example, if women are asked to identify themselves by their gender immediately before a test of empathy, the ability to understand and sympathize with others' feelings, they will do better than those who didn't answer a gender question.⁸ Because women as well as men tend to associate empathy with women, priming women to think of themselves as women encourages them to focus on these capacities and may motivate them to try to do better. For men, reminding them that they're male lowers their scores.

You can also depress women's scores on empathy tests simply by asking them to imagine themselves as men for a few moments before they begin the experiment. In one study, women were asked to write a fictional story about a day in the life of a person named Paul.⁹ Half were asked to write in the first person ("I") and the other half were asked to write in the third person ("he"). Women who wrote in the first person did better on the empathy test than their male counterparts, but women who had imagined themselves to be men did just as badly as the male study subjects.

Does this mean that women have an ability to be empathetic that men don't have, but only if they're motivated to be so? Nope. Men can be motivated to score higher on tests of empathy, too. You can do this by tricking them into thinking that the task they're performing is one that men are stereotypically good at (perhaps telling them that you're measuring leadership ability) or by offering a social or financial reward for doing well.¹⁰ Similarly, men (presumably heterosexual ones) will do better on tests of empathy if they're told that women really like sensitive guys.¹¹

Observed differences may also be quite obviously the result of social and cultural conditions. We might observe that women are more likely to carry a purse and have long hair and men are more likely to carry a wallet and wear their hair short. That's real, but these are simply **learned differences**, ones that are a result of how we're raised (for example, religion or parenting) or our socio-cultural environment (like education or media consumption). We know, for

example, that parents tend to see their sons as big, strong, and active and their daughters as little, pretty, and cute, then treat them accordingly.¹² Girl babies are more likely to be talked to; boy babies more likely to be handled. Accordingly, girls may develop quicker and stronger language skills than boys, while boys might outpace girls on motor skills. Is that what we're getting at when we're asking the question about real differences? Probably not. Some differences are simply a result of how we're treated.

The differences Zell and his colleagues observed, then, are real in that we really observed them, but they don't necessarily stand up when we poke and prod at them. Some are quite obviously just norms for men and women, unrelated to anything but culture. Others can shift, reverse, and disappear when we manipulate the conditions of the data collection. Perhaps what we need is a definition that carries more heft and stands up under such examination.

Definition 2: Sex differences are real if they are observed in all or most contemporary and historical cultures

Questions like the one this chapter is exploring—regarding the “real” differences between men and women—imply that we're interested in universal human truths, ones that are true around the world and throughout history. If we could find such a difference, we would have a compelling reason to think it was real. The majority of research on sex differences, however—in fact, the majority of research on behavioral differences of all kinds—uses subjects only from societies that are Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic, five words that add up to the acronym WEIRD.¹³

And it turns out these samples really are weird: only 12 percent of the world's population lives in such a country and the people who do have been shown to be quite unusual compared to everyone else. When we do research that compares across cultures (over time and across countries and subcultures within a country), we discover that our weird samples have resulted in unusual findings, ones that don't stand up when we do research elsewhere.¹⁴

Let's take math ability as an example.

In 1992 the toy company Mattel released a talking Barbie doll that said, among other things, “Math class is tough!” Many people still believe that girls and women struggle in mathematics more than boys and men.¹⁵ At the time Barbie was making her confession, it was true. Disparities in skill emerged in high school, with boys scoring slightly higher than girls on the math portion of the SAT, the standardized test for college admissions.¹⁶ In the intervening twenty years, however, the gap has narrowed as girls have started to take math classes at the same rate as boys. This equivalence in test results suggests that

the difference in performance in the 1990s had more to do with training and practice than gender.¹⁷

If we look at mathematical abilities across developed nations, girls do about as well as boys in about half the countries.¹⁸ In the other half, boys outperform girls. In a few outlier countries, such as Iceland, girls outshine boys significantly. So, whether men or women appear to be better at math depends on what country you're looking at. Still, boys do better than girls more often than girls do better than boys, so maybe that's evidence that boys are slightly better than girls at math on average.

If you look a bit closer at the data, though, you'll also discover that this is true only if you compare boys to the girls in their own country. Math ability varies so widely across societies that sometimes girls who do worse than boys in their own country do significantly better than boys in other countries. For instance, though Japanese girls do less well than Japanese boys, they generally outperform American boys by a considerable margin.¹⁹

How we measure math ability also matters. Even if men and women are equally capable on average, men are more likely to be math geniuses.²⁰ Boys outnumber girls in the top 1 percent of math ability. Among twelve- to fourteen-year-olds, math prodigies are more likely to be male at a ratio of 3:1. So that's impressive. But, less impressively, boys are also more likely than girls to struggle with math.²¹ Boys are more likely than girls to get nearly all the answers on a math test right, but they're also more likely to get nearly all the answers wrong. So when boys do better, they are usually also doing worse.

But, this, of course, also varies by country, over time, and across subgroups. Even among those whose math scores are in the top 1 percent, boys outperform girls among only some parts of the U.S. population. White male students outperform white female students at this high level of ability, but among Asians in the United States, girls outperform boys. Looking cross-culturally, girls also dominate the top 1 percent in Iceland, Thailand, and the United Kingdom. Boys, then, do not always outnumber girls when we look at the highest-scoring students. And in the United States, as girls and women have closed the gap between the average ability of males and females, they've also been closing the gap at the highest levels of mathematical ability.²² We mentioned earlier that today boys outnumber girls at the genius level 3:1; in the 1980s, the ratio was 13:1.²³ That's quite a remarkable catch-up.

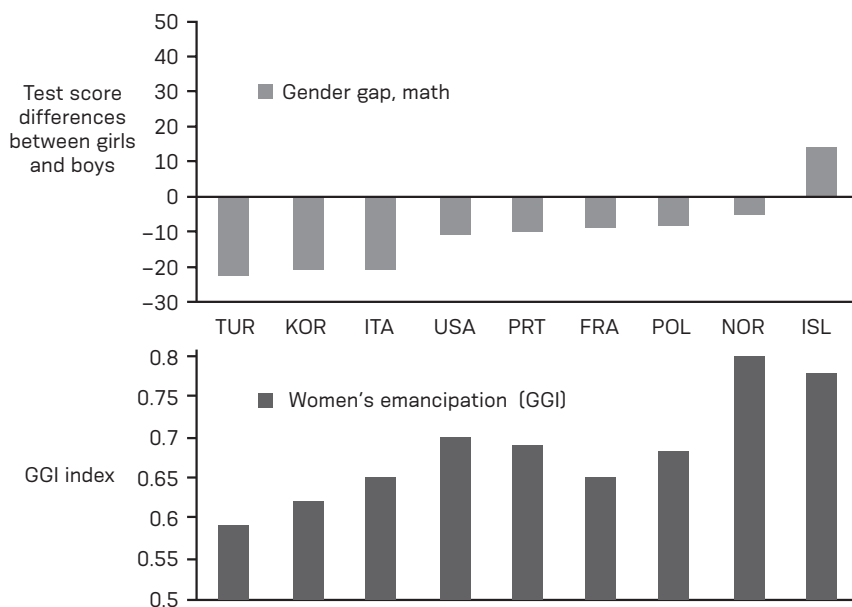
In any case, performance on the standardized tests used to evaluate ability doesn't predict who will get the highest grades in math classes. Girls in U.S. high schools and colleges get higher grades in math than boys.²⁴ While only a few decades ago most math majors were men, today they're about 50 percent female. Six times as many women get PhDs in mathematics today as they did in 1976.²⁵ And neither high scores on the SAT nor high grades predict who will opt

for math-related careers. Many high-scoring girls don't go into these careers, and many poorly scoring boys do.

So, are men better at math than women? In part, it depends on how we test for math aptitude. If you go by standardized tests, sometimes boys outperform girls, but if you go by grades, girls outperform boys. If you test for genius-level math ability, boys in some populations outperform girls, but if you test for average level, girls and boys come out about even. And lastly, if you look at the most poorly performing students, girls come off looking much more capable than boys. But none of these generalizations about difference is consistent among groups in any given country, across countries, or even over time in a single population.

In fact, the best predictor of whether boys or girls do better in math is *belief*. Sex differences in math ability are lowest in countries whose citizens are least likely to believe that men are better at it.²⁶ There is a strong correlation between sex differences in math ability and the level of gender inequality in a country (Figure 3.2).²⁷ The differences diminish, and then disappear, as men and women

FIGURE 3.2 | GENDER GAP IN MATH ACROSS COUNTRIES



Note: With the exception of PRT (Portugal) and Iceland (ISL), the countries are abbreviated as their first three letters.
Source: Guiso Luigi, Fernando Monte, Paola Sapienza, and Luigi Zingales. "Culture, Gender, and Math." *Science* 320, no. 5880 (2009): 1164–65.

become more equal. It's all about practice. When girls are required and encouraged to take the same classes as boys and have the opportunity to go into math-based careers, we see the lowest sex difference on tests of math aptitude. All this suggests that the sex difference in math performance has more to do with training, practice, and opportunity than gender.²⁸

This complex story about math ability is just one example of the way that observed sex differences often vary over time and across cultures. It isn't true of every observed sex difference. For example, female advantage in reading and male advantage in mental rotation (the ability to imagine an object rotating in your mind) do seem to be cross-culturally consistent, but the magnitude of the advantage varies considerably.²⁹ Men's greater interest in thrill- and adventure-seeking compared to women has remained constant since 1978, but the size of the difference has shrunk.³⁰

When observed sex differences show variation over time and across cultures, it suggests that they are not inevitable and universal. When we see less variation, assuming they are "real" is more plausible. When sex differences resist cultural influence, it might be a hint that they are not just related to gendered stereotypes and opportunities, but may be part of being biologically human. That's our next definition.

Definition 3: Sex differences are real if they are biological

Biological differences include ones caused by our genes, hormones, and our brains. Let's review what scientists know about our bodies and how they do, don't, or might contribute to sex difference and similarity.

GENES Our **genes** are a set of instructions for building and maintaining our bodies. Each of us has a unique set of genes, our **genotype**, and an observable set of physical and behavioral traits, our **phenotype**. By our current working definition, the differences described by Zell and his colleagues are biological if they are phenotypes expressing differences shaped by our genes.

Individuals defined as genetically female carry XX chromosomes and genetically male individuals carry XY. Most people assume that the Y, by virtue of being present in most men and absent in most women, is a source of sex differences. In fact, it's not.³¹ At least, not directly. As the image on the next page shows, the X chromosome is far larger than the Y chromosome and has ten times as much genetic material.³² Research is still ongoing, but so far it seems that the Y chromosome doesn't do much other than give XY fetuses functioning testes and facilitate male fertility. Weirdly, it also causes hairy ears.³³ That's it.

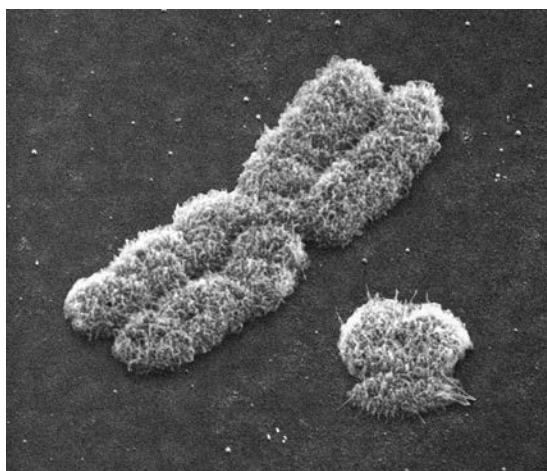
Once the Y chromosome has set a body on the path to being male, though, other genetic consequences follow. Some genes are expressed only if they are

in a male or female body, such as the genes that allow a woman to breastfeed. The expression of others is influenced by their hormonal environment. The baldness gene, for instance, thins hair on the head only in the presence of high levels of testosterone, so most women who carry the gene don't show signs of baldness. Curiously, the same gene that produces high voices in women also gives men low voices.

The fact that most women have two X chromosomes and most men have only one seems to be a greater source of sex differences than the presence or absence of the Y. Human beings need only one X chromosome (that's why men can exist with only one of them) and so women's two Xs are redundant. The female body responds by using only one at a time. Which one they use, though, is random. In some cells the X chromosome they received from their father is active and, in others, the one they received from their mother.³⁴ This means that XX women can put a more diverse set of genes to work than can XY men. Twice as much. And that has some interesting effects.

Men's single X chromosome, for example, is why they are more susceptible to recessive traits, ones that won't be expressed in the presence of a gene for a dominant trait. If a trait carried on the X chromosome is recessive, men are more likely to show that trait, since they need to inherit only one gene to express the trait, whereas women need to inherit it on both their Xs. The inability to see the difference between red and green is an example. Men are fifteen times more likely than women to be red-green colorblind. If their single X has the gene for colorblindness, the cells in their eyes won't be able to detect the difference. No backup. Women, on the other hand, have to inherit two copies of the gene to be functionally colorblind. If they inherit only one gene for colorblindness, then some of the cells of their eyes will be colorblind and the other half won't be. So, such a woman will see the color differences better than the average colorblind man (though not quite as clearly as if she didn't have the gene at all).

Genetic influences like these contribute to some average physical differences between men and women. They also determine whether we develop ovaries or testes. This then sets most of us on hormonal paths to have male or female bodies, which influences physical outcomes like throwing ability. But the sex chromosomes themselves—despite being one of the biological differences between the categories male and female—don't seem to cause all that many differences of interest.



Despite its mighty reputation, the Y chromosome contains substantially less genetic material than the X chromosome.

Most people, when inquiring about “real” sex differences, aren’t thinking about breastfeeding, colorblindness, and hairy ears. They’re thinking about the things that Zell and his colleagues measured: personality traits, emotional states, cognitive abilities, and physical potential. Most of those things, though, don’t have sex-specific genetic causes. At least, not ones that we’ve discovered. To consider biological contributors to these other characteristics, we have to consider the influence of hormones and brain function.

HORMONES Our **hormones** are messengers in a chemical communication system. Released by glands or cells in one part of the body, hormones carry instructions to the rest of it. They trigger masculinization and feminization in utero and at puberty. They regulate basic physiological processes, like hunger and the reproductive cycle. And they influence our moods: feelings of happiness, confidence, and contentment. They are part of what inspires us to have sex, get into (or run away from) fights, and settle down and raise a baby.

Importantly, it’s a mistake to use binary language and say that men have “male hormones” and women have “female hormones.” All human hormones circulate in both men’s and women’s bodies, but some of them do so in different proportions. Men tend to have higher levels of androgens and women higher levels of estrogens. It’s also wrong to say that androgens are “masculinizing” and estrogens are “feminizing.” Estrogen sometimes has the same effects in females that testosterone has in males. During fetal development, for example, it is estrogen, not testosterone, that produces the changes in the male brain that differentiate men from women. Just as we are not “opposite sexes,” our hormones are far from opposite in their chemical structure, presence, or function.

Still, differing levels of these hormones might contribute to sex differences. Testosterone usually gets the most attention. In fact, testosterone is strongly related to sex drive in both women and men and may be related weakly to physical aggression in men.³⁵ Since most men have more free testosterone than most women, this fact might partially explain why men are, on average, more aggressive than women and report higher sex drives (though social explanations for these likely play a role, too).³⁶

Testosterone levels also correlate with visual-spatial ability, such as mental rotation.³⁷ Very high and very low levels of testosterone are correlated with poor visual-spatial ability, so high-testosterone women and low-testosterone men do best on visual-spatial tests because they both fall into the middle range. As men’s and women’s hormones fluctuate, their performance on tests fluctuates as well; women score better right before ovulation (when their testosterone levels are highest) and men score better in the spring (when their levels are lowest).

There is good evidence, too, that the hormone cycles that regulate women’s menstrual cycles correspond to mild changes in mood, sexual interest, and partner choice,³⁸ but we see no changes across the menstrual cycle in women’s

memory, creativity, problem-solving ability, or athletic, intellectual, or academic performance.³⁹ Men experience hormone fluctuations as well, on both daily and seasonal cycles (testosterone is higher in the morning than other times of day, and in the fall compared to other times of year for men in the Western Hemisphere). Interestingly, studies of mood fluctuations in men find that they are just as emotionally “unstable” as women.⁴⁰ In other words, men get “hormonal” sometimes, too.

The relationship between hormone level and observed difference isn’t straightforward, though. Men’s bodies respond similarly to wide variations in testosterone levels (between 20 percent and 200 percent of normal). In contrast, women have been shown to be more sensitive to lower levels of testosterone, so women exposed to small amounts of extra testosterone tend to respond similarly to men exposed to large amounts.⁴¹ That might explain why men and women don’t show greater differences in sexual desire.

The differences that correlate with hormone levels are also quite small. Hormone fluctuations that regulate mood, for example, are a relatively minor force in determining our state of mind compared to, say, whether it’s Monday morning or Friday afternoon.⁴² And, in any case, none of these differences has been shown to have an impact on a person’s ability to be successful at work. Average differences in mental rotation ability, for instance, don’t affect whether men or women are capable of working in jobs like engineering or architecture.⁴³

In sum, we find differing levels of androgens and estrogens in men’s and women’s bodies and those hormones have been linked to a limited number of observed differences: levels of aggressiveness, sex drive, and visual-spatial ability, as well as when (but not whether) we experience changes in mood. All the effects are small, with the possible exception of sex drive.

These may be good candidates for the “real” differences we’re after. And hormones may also indirectly produce sex differences by influencing the development of our brains.

BRAINS The fetal brain develops in a sex-specific hormonal environment and there is research suggesting that sex differences are a consequence.⁴⁴ Scientists have documented average sex differences, for example, in brain anatomy (the size and shape of its parts), composition (characteristics of the tissue), and function (rate of blood flow, metabolism of glucose, and neurotransmitter levels).⁴⁵ Women have smaller brains on average (mostly explained by their overall smaller size), and men and women have different ratios of gray matter to white matter in some regions.⁴⁶ None of these differences is particularly pronounced and all are average differences with significant overlap (like the bell curve illustrating sex differences in self-esteem in Figure 3.1).

When we look at all the differences at once, though, we discover that female-like structures in a single brain often coexist with male-like structures. One study,

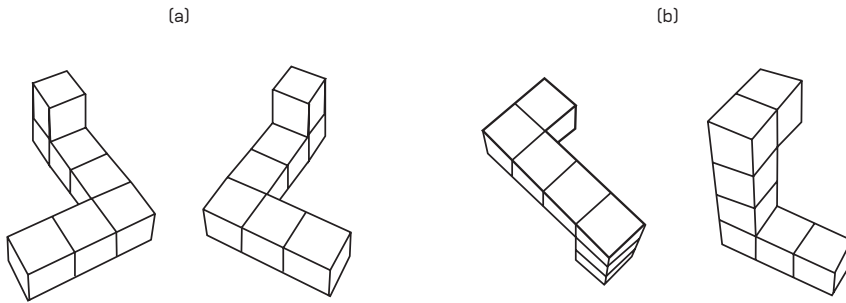
for example, examined 625 brains, measuring the ten regions with the strongest evidence for sexual dimorphism.⁴⁷ Only 2.4 percent of the brains were internally consistent: all male-like or all female-like. This means that 97.6 percent of us are “gender nonconforming” in our brains and more than half of brains show substantial overlap.⁴⁸ What scientists have found, then, is that there are average differences between men and women in some structures and functions of the brain, but that tells us little about what any given person’s brain will look like.

To complicate things further, studies tying these differences to traits or abilities remain largely elusive.⁴⁹ In other words, we don’t know what the differences found in some parts of the brain actually *do*. Since it’s unethical to expose developing fetuses to varying levels of hormones merely out of curiosity, directly testing what the effects might be in humans is difficult. One theory is that some of these physiological differences may actually be functioning to compensate for others, producing similarity from difference.⁵⁰ That is, our bodies may be evolved to enable sexual difference for the purposes of reproduction, but also compensate for any maladaptive differences that arise as a consequence of the tricky task of building male- and female-bodied people. So, counterintuitively, some differences might cause sameness. That’s not the kind of “real” difference we’re after either.

We do know that girls who are exposed to unusually high levels of androgens during fetal development are more likely than other girls to prefer “boy” toys and choose boys as playmates; they display more aggression and less empathy; and they’re more likely to identify as nonheterosexual and express dissatisfaction with being a girl or woman.⁵¹ But there’s no reason to expect these girls’ brains to be any more sex-typed than your average person’s. Hormones likely have some influence on fetal brain formation, but the outcomes are far from straightforward.

Other research also suggests that gender identity and sexual orientation are determined in part by hormonally caused brain differences, though the evidence is not especially clear or strong.⁵² The genitals develop earlier in pregnancy than the brain, so it’s possible that the hormonal environment of the developing brain could be different from that of the developing genitals, creating discrepancies between the two. This might explain why some people experience same-sex desire or gender dysphoria, which is the feeling that one’s biological sex and gender identity don’t match. Research evaluating whether queer-identified women’s or trans men’s brains share traits with heterosexual, cisgendered men’s brains, and queer-identified men’s and trans women’s brains share traits with heterosexual, cisgendered women’s brains, is going on now—again, findings are suggestive but not especially clear or strong. Most neurologists believe that hormonal influence on the brain during fetal development plays a role, but only a small one.

We are able to observe differences between male and female bodies by looking at genes, hormones, and brains. These are biological, to be sure. But are they real? Some biological features are mutable, responsive to efforts to shift or dis-

FIGURE 3.3 | EXAMPLE OF A MENTAL ROTATION TASK

Mental rotation tasks like this one measure how easily and accurately you can determine whether two figures are identical except for their orientation. Assembling jigsaw puzzles is one use of this skill.

rupt them. Because we have bodies, *everything* about us is fundamentally biological, but biology isn't always destiny and biological traits aren't always fixed. If biologically based differences can be decreased in size, erased, or reversed quite easily, do they still count as real?

Consider mental rotation, our very best candidate for a large biological cognitive sex difference (Figure 3.3). It turns out that mental rotation can be taught, quickly and easily.⁵³ One study found that assigning women to a semester of *Tetris* (a simple video game that involves rotating and fitting various geometric shapes into one another) almost closed the preexisting gap between men's and women's scores.⁵⁴ In another study, just ten hours of video game play reduced the gap to statistical insignificance.⁵⁵ In a third study, five and a half hours of video game play erased the sex difference.⁵⁶ And in a fourth experiment, just two minutes of practice before the test did the same.⁵⁷

It turns out that whatever natural ability an individual has for mental rotation, both men and women can improve with a little bit of practice.⁵⁸ Indeed, the difference between the scores of people with training and people without training is larger than the difference between men and women.⁵⁹

While this finding doesn't rule out an inborn biological advantage for boys, neuroscientist Lise Eliot argues that ultimately, sex difference in mental rotation ability is probably the result of the fact that we don't teach mental rotation in school (so no one learns it there), and boys have a greater likelihood of learning it elsewhere (playing with building toys, spending lots of time with video games, and being involved in sports).⁶⁰ This theory gets added support from evidence that the sex difference we see in children from middle- and high-income backgrounds is not seen in children from low-income backgrounds, where boys don't have as much access to video games and building toys.⁶¹

Even the most robust cognitive sex difference we've ever measured is mutable, minimizable, and even erasable by instruction and practice, undone with just a few minutes of *Minecraft*.⁶² As two prominent cognitive scientists explained, "Simply put, your brain is what you do with it."⁶³ In fact, lots of observed differences respond to intervention (and we will discuss more examples in the next section). For now, let's consider one final definition of real—the most strict of all.

Definition 4: Sex differences are real if they are biological and immutable

Perhaps a sex difference could count as real if it were observed, had a known biological cause, and could not easily be overcome by social interventions like training and priming. Sex differences in size and, by extension, throwing ability and some other physical differences would qualify. Gender identity and sexual orientation may be good candidates. And there are others, to be certain. Possibly different levels of sexual desire, aggression, empathy, and thrill-seeking. And, of course, there are the hairy ears.

But the majority of the sex differences documented by Zell and his colleagues probably would not qualify under this definition. This is a good time to remember the anglerfish. We're sexually dimorphic in that we reproduce sexually, and the process of making us reproductively male and female appears to lead to some other average differences. But on the spectrum of high-to-low sexual dimorphism, we're on the low side. We're of a similar size and weight, we have (almost) all the same appendages, we have the same desires, traits, and physical and cognitive abilities, even if there are some average differences here and there. Why do we think we *should* be able to establish a whole host of large, immutable biological differences between men and women, beyond the very necessary physical differences required for sexual reproduction, in the first place? We're quite clearly not "opposites."

But . . . why not? Why *aren't* we more different?

Well, that's another kind of question altogether.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE SEXES

If it seems odd to ask about the similarities between men and women instead of the differences, it's because it is. What we call "science" today began to emerge during the Enlightenment in the 1700s. It would come to challenge religion as the arbiter of what was true and right. At the time, most men believed that it was obvious that women were an inferior category of human and they set about

using science to prove it. Since distinction is a necessary precondition for hierarchy, a science of sex differences emerged.

When scientists posed their research questions, then, they almost exclusively posed variants of the one with which we began this chapter: “What are the real differences between men and women?” And they have been asking versions of this question for over 300 years. They’ve measured, weighed, poked, prodded, imaged, and assayed men’s and women’s bodies to find proof of the gender binary. It’s a wonder, really, that they haven’t found more definitive and more consequential differences.

It took a very long time before anyone thought to wonder whether there were any *other* questions to ask. Like what explains our similarities. To close out this chapter, then, let’s explore some of the theories for why human males and females are so much alike. We’ll explore three: biosocial interactions, intersectionality, and evolution.

The Natural Power of Human Culture

One of the things that makes humans stand out from all other animals is the extent to which we wrap ourselves in culture. We live on the same planet as all other earthly beings; we encounter the same trees and look at the same sky. But we live, simultaneously, in our collective imaginations, in a world that we invent, one with things that don’t exist in nature: corporations, economies, wedding vows, holidays.

By virtue of being cultural, we’re also diverse. Take any two human societies 3,000 miles apart and you’ll find countless differences in their cultural practices and ideas. As a species, in fact, our ways of life are not just more varied than those of any other primate on earth; they are more varied than those of every other primate *combined*.⁶⁴ That is why reality shows like *Wife Swap*—in which two women from two very different backgrounds swap families for the purpose of producing mayhem—can run for seven seasons. Commenting on this, psychologist Cordelia Fine observed: “Other animals are fascinating, to be sure. Many are highly flexible and adaptable. But there just aren’t that many ways to be a female baboon.”⁶⁵

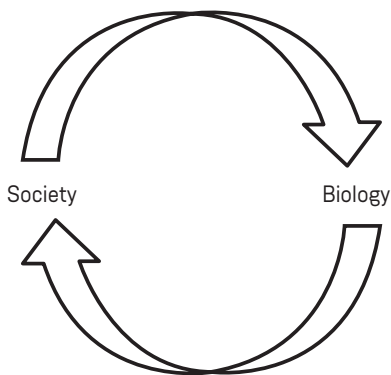
This diversity is not merely cultural, though; it’s *natural*. That is, it’s our biology that makes it possible for us to be culturally different from one another. Understanding this is important because it helps us avoid the discredited and fruitless argument referred to as **the nature/nurture debate**. The “nature” side is premised on the idea that men and women are *born* different, and the “nurture” side presupposes that we *become* different through socialization alone. Both sides are wrong.

Scholars from all disciplines now overwhelmingly reject **naturalism**, the idea that biology affects our behavior independently of our environment. Likewise, we reject **culturalism**, the idea that we are “blank slates” that become who we are purely through learning and socialization. This should make sense. Any given sex difference can’t be purely a result of “nurture” (a culturalist assumption) because it is only through our bodies that we encounter our social world. Nor can it be purely “nature” (a naturalist assumption) because our bodies don’t exist in a vacuum. We begin interacting with the environment from the moment we are conceived, and all our biological functions evolved in the context of that interaction.

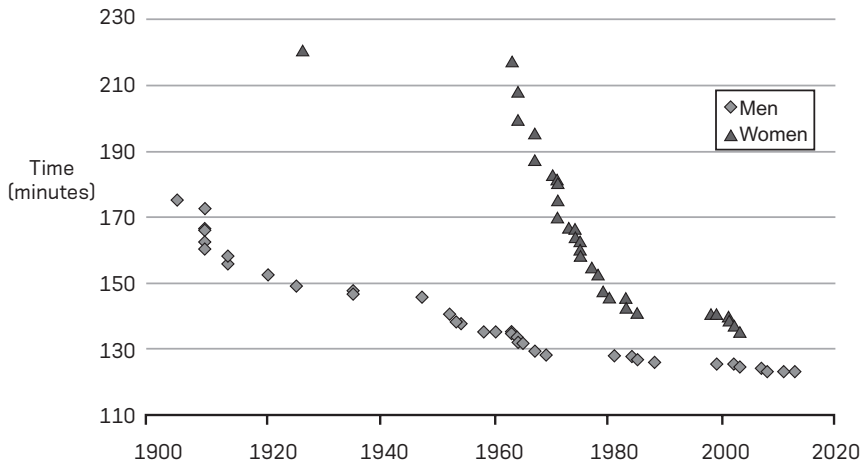
Instead, to understand humanity we have to consider **biocultural interaction**: how our bodies respond to our cultural environment and vice versa (Figure 3.4).⁶⁶ To describe our species with only nature or culture is like describing a rectangle with reference to only its length or width. Without both pieces of information, there is no rectangle.⁶⁷ Likewise, without both biology and culture, it’s impossible to understand what it is to be human. The evidence for this is so overwhelming that scientists now agree that it makes no sense to talk about “human nature,” except insofar as “the social is the natural.”⁶⁸

Perhaps the most obvious example of biocultural interaction involves physical characteristics like flexibility, strength, and speed. Within biological limits, our bodies react to use by developing the capacities we ask of them. We can get faster if we train, stronger if we lift, and more flexible if we stretch. In societies that ask people to develop these capacities, they will. And in ones that ask women and men to develop different capacities, men’s and women’s bodies will be more different than they would be otherwise.

FIGURE 3.4 | BIOCULTURAL INTERACTION



Consider marathons. Women in Western societies were discouraged from running for centuries and formally excluded from competing in marathons until the 1970s. In that time, men got much faster. When women were first allowed to compete, they were much slower than men, but they’ve gotten faster, too. In fact, they’ve gotten faster much more quickly than men ever did. Men collectively took approximately thirty years to shave thirty minutes off their best time; it took women only five.⁶⁹ Today the men’s record is still faster than the women’s record, but by less than ten minutes (Figure 3.5). What men and women are allowed and encouraged to do by culture shapes what their bodies are capable of doing.

FIGURE 3.5 | MARATHON WORLD RECORDS BY GENDER

Source: International Association of Athletics Federations.

This is true of our brains, too.⁷⁰ Remember those kids playing *Tetris*? Consistent with what we know about brain plasticity, the change in ability manifests itself in our neuroanatomy. In one study, the brains of twelve- to fifteen-year-old girls were measured before and after a three-month period during which they played *Tetris* for an hour and a half each week.⁷¹ At the end of the study, their brains were heavier and showed enhanced cortical thickness, with heightened blood flow to the area. Another study showed shifts in brain function.⁷² Practice matters. Changes in the brain have been documented in response to a wide range of activities: juggling, dancing, singing, meditating, and even driving a taxi.⁷³ Of course they have. Our brain is a cultural organ, responding to our social environment.

Even our hormones and our genes are designed to respond to culture.⁷⁴ When we experience a culturally defined “win,” for example, our bodies cooperate by using hormones to make us feel good about it.⁷⁵ Testosterone rises and falls in response to our interactions. If a man is anticipating a competition, his levels will rise. If he wins the contest, they’ll go up further; if he loses, they’ll go down.⁷⁶ This is true not only for sports, but for games like chess, too.⁷⁷ It also works if he’s just sitting on the couch watching his favorite team.⁷⁸ If he does something he thinks is cool—like drive a sports car—his testosterone gets a bump; if he does it in front of other people, it jumps even higher.⁷⁹ In the immediate aftermath of the 2008 presidential election, for example, men who supported the losing

candidate saw a drop in their testosterone levels; those who supported the winning candidate did not.⁸⁰ We think of behavior as being “testosterone fueled” when, in fact, it’s also “testosterone fueling.”⁸¹

Emerging evidence suggests that this is true in at least some ways for women, too. In one study, for example, women asked to exert power over others under experimental conditions found that doing so resulted in a rise in testosterone.⁸² The authors suggest that gender differences in who is expected, allowed, and enabled to exert power may shape the average hormonal profiles of men and women. “A lifetime of gender socialization,” they write, “could contribute to ‘sex differences’ in testosterone.”

This phenomenon has society-wide implications. In men, forming a committed romantic relationship produces a decline in testosterone.⁸³ Having a baby can bring that testosterone level down even more.⁸⁴ A study of two communities in Tanzania found that such hormonal shifts can happen at the group level, too.⁸⁵ Hadza men were involved fathers, taking care of children alongside women. Datoga men did not parent, leaving the work to mothers. The difference in behavior was reflected in their testosterone levels: On average, Datoga men had higher levels than Hadza men.

Our genes also respond to the environment in a process called gene-environment interaction. Instead of dictating our phenotype in a simple, one-directional way, our genotype is flexible.⁸⁶ Each gene can express itself in many, sometimes thousands of, different ways. Our bodies adapt on the fly, smartly designing and redesigning themselves in response to the challenges of their environment. Even identical twins become genotypically different over time.⁸⁷

Highly aggressive people, for example, often carry genes for aggression, but we have learned that having those genes does not, in itself, make a person violent. To express themselves in ways that facilitate violence, the genes need to be triggered by trauma.⁸⁸ Living in a happy home with loving parents decreases the likelihood that a person genetically predisposed to aggression will become aggressive. In contrast, poverty, a dysfunctional family life, and abuse all increase the chances that the genes for aggression will be “turned on” and lead to violent behavior. Genes matter: A person without a genetic predisposition for violence probably won’t grow up to be violent, even if he or she suffers trauma.⁸⁹ But genes don’t work in a vacuum. A person with the genetic predisposition may never become violent at all; it all depends on the quality of his or her life.

In some cultures, men are nurturing; in others, they are less so. In some environments, people genetically primed become aggressive; in others, they don’t. Why? Because humans are not strictly evolved to be either nurturers or warriors. Instead, biology has given them the potential to be either, and more. Our brains, our bodies, the chemicals that circulate within them, and the genes that build them are all prepared to respond to our cultural environment. We have evolved to be flexible.



If fathers are actively involved with their children, their bodies respond in ways that help them be good dads.

So, in societies in which men and women are pressed into very different social roles, we might see the sexes developing quite different strengths and weaknesses. But these aren't necessarily "real." They're biological, to be sure, but they're embodied through a process of gender segregation and differential treatment. They are **deceptive differences**: ones that, by being observed, can make it seem as if men and women are more sexually dimorphic than they are across different times and cultures.⁹⁰

Alternatively, in societies that put men and women onto the same path, they might look more alike than different. Our own society is probably somewhere in between. There are many ways in which we raise our girls and boys very similarly: they live in the same houses, have access to the same foods, go to the same types of schools, and so on. Then again, we dress them differently, buy them different toys, and encourage different activities, on average. Based on these facts, we should expect some differences (in sportiness, for example, or interest in dance), but also quite a lot of similarities (like the increasingly equal mastery of mathematics). If human bodies are designed to rise to the cultural occasion, embodying a gender binary is one way we do it, but challenging that gender binary is another. So sex similarity is as much a human biological possibility as sex difference.

Intersectionality: Putting Gender in Context

Another reason why men and women are so much alike is because they share so many other identities in common. Male-bodied and female-bodied people may be biologically designed to play different roles in reproduction at some point in their lives, but they are often the same race, class, nationality, religion, and more. Sometimes people live in societies that expect very different things from men and women. And while there are ways in which biology predisposed us to be different, the manifestation of such differences may be muted by the things men and women share: national, regional, and local cultures, for example, and the quality of their education, their diet and health, their occupations, their family structure, and social networks. And some male- and female-bodied people identify and express themselves as women or men, respectively, or trans, gender fluid, or nonbinary. Others belong to subcultures that otherwise encourage gender-nonconforming behavior, like some queer communities.⁹¹

Differences and similarities between women and men are filtered through these other life experiences. Men, for example, have 20 to 30 percent greater bone mass and strength than women, making women twice as likely to break a bone and four times as likely to be diagnosed with osteoporosis.⁹² Genes and hormones contribute to this discrepancy, but an individual's bone health is also strongly affected by diet, leisure activities, and type of work.⁹³ Accordingly, among ultra-Orthodox Jewish adolescent boys, the gender pattern is reversed.⁹⁴ Boys in these communities are tasked with intensive study of religious documents from a young age, so they spend much less time exercising and more time indoors than other boys their age. As a result, their bones never grow as strong as those of their sisters, who have lighter study loads, do more physical chores, and get more sunlight. Both the biological and the cultural influence of gender on bone mass and strength, then, is mediated by the power of religion.

The idea that gender is not an isolated social fact about us but instead intersects with our other identities is called **intersectionality**.⁹⁵ We are not just males and females. A woman might be a white, middle-class, married woman who is religiously observant—once Catholic, now Evangelical Christian—and a parent of a two-year-old (with one on the way), who loves karaoke and votes Democratic. Or she might be an Eastern European immigrant to Milwaukee who moved to New Orleans, fell in love with jazz and bourbon, and plays rugby. Or perhaps a purposefully childfree bisexual Texan who works for the Girl Scouts, manages her epilepsy, collects Legos, and likes to spoil her quirky nephew.

We're going to talk a lot more about intersectionality later. For now, just notice that *all* the things that make us who we are shape our individual personality traits, emotional tendencies, cognitive abilities, and physical potential. When men and women share other identities and life experiences, those things



Sometimes men and women have more in common with each other than they do with others of their own sex.

bring the sexes together, producing even physical similarities as our complex bodies respond to shared cultural environments.

Evolution, Similarity, and Variation

Human males and females evolved to have different roles in reproduction: one sex carries, delivers, and nurses the babies, and the other contributes new genetic material. Given this, it is tempting to look to theories of evolution for straightforward accounts of “real” sex differences. And, in fact, it’s common to hear people arguing that because we’ve evolved to have different roles in reproduction, we’ve also evolved to have different roles in *life*. This, however, doesn’t stand up to the facts. There is overwhelming evidence for the process of human evolution, but not for the idea that men and women have evolved to be two very different kinds of humans, and especially not “opposite sexes.”

To start, evolution-based thinking about humans often asserts that the so-called **nuclear family**—a mother and father with children who live together without extended kin—is natural. But this family form didn't exist until very recently. For most of our species' existence, humans lived together not in heterosexual pairs but **kin groups**, culturally variable collections of people considered family.

In **forager societies**—ones in which people migrate seasonally, following crops and game across the landscape—groups were relatively egalitarian. The responsibility for providing food fell on both men and women, and food was shared with everyone in the group.⁹⁶ Because everyone traveled together, evolution as a process would select for similarity in walking speeds. Similarly, both women's and men's bodies responded to their shared environment, whether a hot or a cold one, by adapting together to regulate body temperature by size and shape and color. Thus, some local groups evolved to be characteristically taller or shorter, heavier or lighter, darker or lighter.⁹⁷

Instead of difference, then, there are good reasons we might have evolved similarities. Our ancestors lived together in common environments. They knew the same people, ate the same foods, traveled the same territory, shared the same beliefs, and raised the same kids. If it's evolutionarily adaptive for half the population to be good at something (making pottery, for example, or remembering where the bison graze), it could hardly be evolutionarily adaptive for the other half of the population to be bad at it.

It might even be deeply maladaptive. In a crisis, it could be fatal for a tribe to consist of two types of people who are incapable of taking on the work assigned to the other. Sudden shortages of male-bodied or female-bodied members in a group demanded that the other sex be able to cross the cultural divide. Think of the millions of single fathers across the world today. It simply doesn't make sense that men and women would evolve to have wildly different cognitive abilities, levels of physical strength, personality traits, or emotional dispositions. Being able to share responsibilities and substitute for one another is actually incredibly useful. Adaptive, even. There were (and are) strong evolutionary pressures toward sameness.

This is true even in terms of reproduction and childrearing. Children were born to women but raised by the larger group. Fatherhood was a social rather than a biological concept. First, we don't know how much early humans understood about what role men played in reproduction. And, second, because men had a genetic interest in all the group's children—any of whom could be defined as part of his lineage depending on the rules of the particular society—whose sperm were involved wasn't really relevant. As a result, women's sexuality was generally less tightly regulated than it has been in the past few hundred years. Without an interest in establishing paternity, there was also little need to control a fertile woman's sexual behavior.

Instead of being a strictly biological behavior, both men and women have always made sexual decisions in response to cultural rules.⁹⁸ Cultures, for example, sometimes assumed it was women rather than men who were more sexual; sometimes they expected fathers to initiate sons into homosexual relationships.⁹⁹ Overall, outside of the imperative to form nuclear families, there was more tolerance of homosexual behavior and more room for third genders (like the *māhū* of Hawaii, the *muxe* of Mexico, and the *hijra* of India discussed in the last chapter).¹⁰⁰ In fact, bi- and homosexual behavior may well have cemented alliances between people of the same sex, strengthening each of their positions in their groups and enhancing their access to reproductive sex (as it does among Bonobo chimps, our closest relative).¹⁰¹ Tolerance of same-sex behavior also opened up possibilities for gender reassignments (like the Albanian sworn virgins) and female “husbands” (like among the Lovedu in Zambia).

The notion that men evolved to be promiscuous and avoid emotional entanglements with women is also a myth. The ability of men to “sow their seed” (to impregnate as many women as they can) is based on the idea that there was an endless field of fertile women to plow.¹⁰² This was almost never the case. At any given time, the majority of women in a kin group were too young or too old to get pregnant; were already pregnant, with reduced fertility due to breastfeeding; or were infertile for unknown reasons. Even sex between two healthy fertile individuals only results in a pregnancy 3 percent of the time.¹⁰³ And, outside of monogamy, another guy’s sperm might get to the egg first. Most men would have been lucky to sire twelve to sixteen children in their lifetime, not so many more than women’s birthing nine to twelve. Instead of sowing seeds, a man’s reproduction was probably maximized by having regular sex with a single woman or a few women with whom he was friendly.

Gender does appear to have mattered to most or all human groups throughout the history of our species, and we have almost certainly evolved to notice and care about the difference between males and females, but even this is not sufficient for producing evolved sex differences. Communities typically gendered their tasks, but *how* they were gendered varied. Bearing and nursing children was an exception, of course, because only (some) female-bodied people could do that. But in foraging societies, maternity would have been more of a life stage than a lifestyle. Hunting large animals often involved whole communities working together or groups of men of certain ages or statuses. Some forms of provision (gathering, farming, and hunting smaller animals) were more likely to be women’s than men’s work.¹⁰⁴ Still other tasks, like building houses, were sometimes considered feminine and sometimes masculine work according to the idiosyncrasies of cultural groups. Even after settled agriculture emerged, tasks and statuses were jumbled in multiple, cross-cutting hierarchies of value.¹⁰⁵ Our ancestors lived intersectional lives.

In other words, the social constructions of gender among early human groups were just as cross-culturally variable, historically changing, and ideologically jumbled as ours. None of this was consistent enough to account for an evolution into an “oppositeness” that spans the whole human species. Instead, current ideas about the “real” differences between men and women are based on what we see now in our WEIRD (Western, educated, industrial, rich, democratic) societies, which are really new ways of organizing gendered social life largely explained by the consolidation of power into large countries.¹⁰⁶

To summarize, the idea that humans have evolved rigid and specific roles for individuals of each sex—that our different reproductive roles make for different life roles—doesn’t do justice to the diversity of our ancestral environments, the power of our cultures, or our actual evolved biology. We have always had complex social lives (where gender was just one thing that mattered) and have always needed to cooperate and respond to unpredictable environments. All this means that, for humans, sexual dimorphism in nonreproductive capacities would not be particularly advantageous. We shouldn’t be so surprised, then, to discover that research on sex differences has detected more overlap than the gender binary would predict. There may be ways in which we are different, and in some cultures those differences may be quite pronounced, but we also have the biological capacity to be quite alike.

Revisiting the Question

Q+A

The gender binary might be an ideology, but there are real differences between men and women, right?

Well, sure. But it’s not nearly as simple as it sounds. As H. L. Mencken famously observed: “There is always an easy solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.”¹⁰⁷ It would be easy to say that the sex differences we observe are biological and immutable. It would be equally easy to say that they are cultural and easily undone. Neither is true.

Instead, both the sex differences and similarities we see are the result of a complex interplay between biology and society. These dynamic intersections are progressive (each moment we are someone slightly different from the moment before), contingent (what happens is dependent on what is happening both inside and around us), and probabilistic (making it more likely for some outcomes to occur and less likely for others, but never entirely determining the future). To paraphrase Edward O. Wilson, biology has us on a leash, but the leash is very, very long.¹⁰⁸

If the biological flexibility enabled by that long leash is adaptive, allowing us—both as individuals and as a species—to respond to whatever environmental

demands we encounter, then sex should be no exception. The gender binary that characterizes men and women as “opposite sexes” isn’t reflected in the science and fails to do justice to what we know about human biology and history. Moreover, what differences we do find are also shaped by life experiences that are not centrally about gender.

For the remainder of this book, then, it’s important not to fall back on explanations that offer simple answers. Biology matters, gender matters, society matters, and they all work together to make us the people we are. That’s our true nature. We’re an extraordinary species with a rich sociocultural life, one that men and women share, and our bodies have been designed for that flexibility.

Next . . .

OK, fine, so establishing that men and women are substantially different from one another isn’t as easy as pop culture leads us to believe. But it still *seems* like men and women are different. They move differently, decorate themselves differently, choose different college majors and careers. If these differences aren’t biological and immutable, then what are they? It’s a good question:

Q+A

If men and women aren’t naturally opposite, then why do they act so differently so much of the time?

It’s time to put the “social” in social theory.

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“

YOU'RE BORN NAKED AND THE
REST IS DRAG.

—RUPAUL

”



4

Performances

In the last chapter, we reviewed what we know about the role of biology in contributing to the gender binary. After searching our genes, hormones, and brains for the source of our differences, we concluded that while men and women may not be biologically identical, we're not particularly dimorphic either. This may be because, while there are some biological forces pushing us apart, there are likely others—the potential evolutionary benefits of similarity, the responsiveness of our bodies to cultural influences, and the intersections of our identities, for instance—that bring us closer together.

We've also conceded that we do act in gendered ways much of the time, leading us to pose the question:

Q+A

If men and women aren't naturally opposite, then why do they act so differently so much of the time?

Indeed, men and women do seem to be quite different in their choices about how to use their time and effort, often in ways that match stereotypical expectations. Women, for example, are 3.9 times as likely to major in education as men, while men are 4.3 times more likely to major in engineering.¹ Men prefer to play sports for exercise, while women are more likely to do Pilates, yoga, or dance.² Women are



When men and women hold hands, who leads and who follows? How do we learn to hold hands “right”? Gender becomes part of how we inhabit the world, sometimes in the subtlest of ways.

more likely than men to say that religion is “very important” to them and participate actively in religious activities.³

Even though we are rather similar, then, we often make divergent choices. These choices apply to an amazing range of activities and are both obvious and subtle. It’s not just in careers and activities. We embody gender in little ways, too. It’s in how we look at our fingernails, for example (with our hand held out and fingers splayed or with the palm turned toward us and the fingers curled in), how we hold a cigarette (between the thumb and forefinger or between two forefingers with the palm facing in), or how we hold hands with a partner of the other sex (men’s palms are usually pointed backward and women’s pointed forward such that her body is placed just slightly behind his as they walk). So, there are many differences between men and women in *practice*.

In this chapter, we explain such gendered social patterns as a consequence of social interaction, working on, through, and sometimes against individual biological or psychological predispositions. We argue that we learn complex sets of gendered expectations that tell us how to behave as men and women in varying situations. We sometimes act in gendered ways out of habit, but also come to understand that if we fail to do so, others may tease, hassle, or hurt us. We aren’t simply socialized as children into gendered roles that we

then automatically perform as adults. Instead, the process of acquiring a gendered sense of self is an active and ongoing one.

None of us, however, simply follows gendered expectations thoughtlessly. We become crafty manipulators. We make exceptions (for ourselves and others), and we apply very different standards depending on the situation and the person. In response, we each develop a way of managing gendered expectations that works for us as unique individuals—sometimes, even, as gender-nonconforming ones.

Sometimes it's easy to follow the rules and sometimes it's incredibly hard. Following rules creates cultural boundaries that are often painful for the people who are on the wrong side of them, by choice or circumstance. Sociologist Michael Kimmel says it beautifully:

For some of us, becoming adult men and women in our society is a smooth and almost effortless drifting into behaviors and attitudes that feel as familiar to us as our skin. And for others of us, becoming masculine or feminine is an interminable torture, a nightmare in which we must brutally suppress some parts of ourselves to please others—or, simply, to survive. For most of us, though, the experience falls somewhere in between.⁴

The guy who hates football or has a gluten allergy to beer sometimes feels like an outsider. So, too, does the woman who wants to wear a tux to the prom or can't walk in heels. The man whose body is limber and powerful and who loves to dance to classical music may in fact train rigorously to be a ballet dancer, but he pursues these pleasures at the risk of critical assessments from others who question his gender or his sexuality. Likewise, women who are tall and strong and enjoy playing basketball sometimes find that the pleasures of their own bodies can come at a cost to their social life if others judge them to be “unfeminine.”

Still, because it's easier to obey gender rules than break them—and life is challenging enough as it is—many of us behave in gendered ways most of the time. So, we contribute to those gendered patterns that we see around us, sustaining the illusion that the gender binary is natural and inevitable.

HOW TO DO GENDER

Sociologists use the phrase **doing gender** to describe the ways in which we actively obey and break gender rules. **Gender rules** are instructions for how to appear and behave as a man or a woman. They are, essentially, the social construct of gender restated in the form of an instruction. Such a rule was at the

center of a story told by psychologist Sandra Bem about her four-year-old son, Jeremy, who decided to wear a clip in his hair to preschool one day. Bem recalls:

Several times that day, another little boy insisted that Jeremy must be a girl because “only girls wear barrettes.” After repeatedly insisting that “wearing barrettes doesn’t matter; being a boy means having a penis and testicles,” Jeremy finally pulled down his pants to make his point more convincingly. The other boy was not impressed. He simply said, “Everybody has a penis; only girls wear barrettes.”⁵

Jeremy’s schoolmate stated his objection in the form of a general rule. It wasn’t that *he* didn’t like it when boys wore barrettes, or that *Jeremy* specifically didn’t look fetching in a barrette, it was that only girls and no boys under any circumstances should wear one. Jeremy’s schoolmate articulated a rule for all boys that Jeremy had broken: *Only girls wear barrettes*.

You could likely brainstorm hundreds of such rules if you tried. They apply to every area of our lives, specifying how we should dress and decorate our bodies and homes, what hobbies and careers we should pursue, with whom we should socialize and how, and much more. Most of us do gender when we get ready in the morning; stand, sit, and walk; choose leisure activities; do our work; curate our personalities; and do routine activities like eating, bathing, driving, and even having sex.

Every day we do thousands of things that signal masculinity or femininity and we do them according to gender rules. When using social media, for example.⁶ Women’s choices tend to reflect the rules that they are supposed to be attractive, social, and sweet. They are more likely than men to try to make themselves appear beautiful or sexy in their pictures and to feature friends and family members. Women also post more pictures overall. Men, in contrast, appear to respond to gender rules that dictate they be active, independent, and anti-authority. Their profile pictures often include images of them playing sports, looking tough, and getting into trouble. While women are almost always looking into the camera, men will sometimes be looking away. Men are also more likely than women to be alone in their pictures or posing with expensive objects. There are gender differences in how men and women react to others online, too. Women are more likely to react and more likely to do so positively, with congratulations or encouragement. Men’s reactions are more likely than women’s to be argumentative, insulting, or ironic. These are, of course, only average differences, and the men and women you know may be different, but most people follow the rules much of the time.

Many of us learn a huge variety of gender rules implicitly, gradually absorbing them as we become increasingly acculturated into our families, communities, and societies. Some rules are relatively rigid (e.g., men do not wear eye-shadow), while others are more flexible and negotiable (if, in your part of the

world, men do not have long hair or wear lipstick, how long is too long and does lip balm count?). You can also likely brainstorm rules that straightforwardly contradict one another, because the rules vary among cultures, change over time, and shift across contexts. We tend to become most aware of the rules when we are trying to master new ones; for example, we self-consciously “try on” adult gender attitudes and behaviors as we enter adolescence or when we choose a “look” and set of friends upon entering a new school.⁷ At such transition times, our self-consciousness about gender conformity rises because we are aware that social acceptance can be at stake.

Cross-Cultural Variation in Gender Rules

Most gender rules are simple cultural agreements. For instance, grown men in the United States are supposed to physically touch each other only in very ritualized ways (like the back slap in the “man hug” or the butt slap in football for a job well done). In France and Argentina, however, men kiss on the cheek when they greet one another. In some Middle Eastern societies, men even hold hands.

Likewise, whereas skirts are strongly feminized in the United States, men wear kilts in Scotland and, in Arab countries, men wear a white robe called a



President George W. Bush welcomes Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah to his Texas ranch. Holding hands is not an accepted way for two adult men to touch in the United States but is a common practice in some Middle Eastern cultures.

thawb, often with a pink-and-white head covering. The color pink doesn't have feminine connotations in Arab countries the way it does in the West. And in Belgium, pink isn't for girls, nor is it gender neutral; it's for boys. Flowers are another icon of femininity in the West, but certain floral patterns on a kimono clearly signal masculinity in Japan.

What women and men *don't* wear is also dictated by gender rules. In the United States, it's against the rules for women to expose their breasts in public. We take this so seriously that whether women should be allowed to breastfeed in public is still a hot debate. This obsession with hiding women's nipples seems unduly conservative from a European standpoint; in some parts of Europe, it is perfectly acceptable for women to sunbathe topless. Americans might be surprised to hear that Europeans describe Americans as irrationally prudish. Many Americans, as well as Europeans, in turn, condemn the "veiling" practices associated with Islam. Like Europeans judging Americans for covering their breasts, Americans tend to think it is irrationally prudish for women to cover their heads. Only because the idiosyncrasies of our own culture tend to be invisible to us does it seem obvious that women should cover some parts of their bodies but not others.

It often isn't until we read about, travel to, or move to a different country, or otherwise very different cultural milieu, that we encounter rules that are noticeably unfamiliar to us, revealing our own rules as culturally specific. When we do, we become briefly aware of making choices, deciding either to follow or flout these local gender rules, before they again begin to seem "normal." For example, one study of Japanese women who went to work at multinational firms abroad found that carrying a briefcase or drinking beer with colleagues was initially alien to their idea of femininity. After becoming more comfortable in their new environment, however, many did not want to be assigned back to Japan, where this would not have been acceptable behavior for a woman.⁸ We get practice at adapting to new gender rules throughout our lives because the gender rules we encounter are constantly undergoing both subtle and dramatic shifts.

Historical Variation in Gender Rules

While the rules for doing gender often feel timeless, they are, in fact, always changing. Consider the earring.⁹ In the 1920s, only women of Italian and Spanish descent and sailors pierced their ears. For the women, it was an ethnic practice, similar to the small dot or *bindi* that Hindu women wear on their foreheads, while sailors wore them in the hope that a gold earring might serve as payment for a proper burial were they to sink, wash ashore, and be found by strangers. An American girl born in the 1930s wouldn't have pierced her ears,

but she might have worn clip-on earrings. Clip-on earrings went out of style and pierced ears went mainstream in the 1960s.

In that decade, boys probably wouldn't have worn earrings of any kind. When their sisters and all her friends were getting their ears pierced, the only young men doing so were hippies and homosexuals. Twenty years later, during the '80s, male musicians and athletes popularized wearing earrings, but only in one ear. If a man decided to get an ear pierced, he would have gotten it in the left ear if he identified as heterosexual and the right ear if he were gay. A few decades after that, the side of the head would be irrelevant and the piercings would have signified nothing.

Whether and which ear is pierced is no longer culturally meaningful, but earring style remains so. Women are more likely to wear either elaborate or dainty earrings to signify femininity; men typically wear simple studs or small hoops. And now we pierce other things, too, and in gendered ways. Belly-button piercings are found almost exclusively on women, whereas men are more likely to stretch their earlobes with plugs or pierce their septum (that wall of tissue that separates the nostrils).

Gender rules change. They change across time, as the earring example illustrates, and also from context to context.



Michael B. Jordan, villain of the mega-hit superhero movie *Black Panther*, wearing his earrings. Or, to protect the gender binary, we might say "studs."

Contextual Variation in Gender Rules

Many of us take for granted the rules that guide our own gender display and easily adapt to cultural change. Our flexibility tends to mask the fact that the United States itself is a turbulent mixture of subcultures. Accordingly, doing gender, even in our daily lives, requires that we simultaneously know the rules of the cultural mainstream as well as those of the alternative cultures we visit. In other words, we need more than one pair of gender binary glasses.

Goths are a striking example. Amy Wilkins, a sociologist who studied a group of self-identified Goths in the Northeast, explains that they defy conventional gender expectations. Both women and men strive to attain a distinctive, even frightening appearance:

Goths tell the world and each other who they are by making their bodies freaky. Goth bodies are cloaked in black, pierced, tattooed, dyed, powdered white. The Goth style juxtaposes medieval romanticism with bondage wear; puffy velvet with

*skin-tight PVC. Goths may sport dog collars and spikes, or fishnets and corsets—all in somber colors: black or blood red.*¹⁰

Goths cultivate a countercultural appearance, but they also go to work at places like banks and elementary schools. Some of them “do Goth” all the time, but most will adjust to more mainstream expectations when necessary, washing off the white powder when they’re at work and leaving the dog collar at home.

Goths are an example of **cultural traveling**, moving from one cultural or subcultural context to another and sometimes back. Belinda did another kind of cultural traveling when she came out as a lesbian. As she joined a new community, she encountered people who policed her into a whole new set of subculture-specific gender rules:

*Basically, within the lesbian community, I was completely made fun of. I used to have people make fun of me for carrying a purse and looking “too girly” and, “Oh, you’re not really gay.” Just those kinds of comments. So that was really hard for me when I was coming out because I just wanted to be taken seriously, you know? . . . So, my response to that [when I first came out] was to kind of change to become less feminine, change my body posturing and the way that I dress and cut off all my hair and that kind of stuff.*¹¹

Like Belinda, many of us have to adapt to new contexts and even adjust our look for different audiences. We all make cultural adjustments throughout our day and week. A guy driving home from a night at the sports bar with his buddies, during which he yelled at the TV, threw back beers, and pounded the table, will likely resort to a polite and professional manner the next morning at work. Both of these self-presentations are versions of masculinity. Likewise, a college student may comfort crying children at her job at a day care center, look to hook up at a party that night, and drag herself to class in sweats the next morning prepared to discuss the week’s reading. In each context—the nurturer, the flirt, and the student—she does femininity differently.

The gender rules that apply to varying contexts can be quite nuanced. Knowing exactly what style and behavior rules are appropriate for a wedding (is it a day or night wedding?), a first date (is it coffee or dinner?), and a job interview (do you want to project creativity or reliability?) requires sophisticated calculations. Most of us make these cultural transitions rather easily, often flawlessly. And thank goodness. People who are incapable of “tuning” their behavior to the social context are at risk of coming off as psychologically disturbed or willfully deviant. The same glowing, silver gown that made an actress seem so glamorous on the red carpet at the Oscars would make her look drunk or deranged if she wore it at the grocery store the next morning.

In sum, we learn a set of gender rules that is specific to our societies. We also learn how that set of gender rules varies—from the funeral home to the class-



Attendees at a Gothic festival in Poland congregate, showing off their unique fashion. They likely tone down their appearance when in less Goth-tolerant settings.

room, from Savannah to San Francisco, and from age eight to eighty—and how to adjust to those changes. We don't get just one pair of gender binary glasses when we're kids; we get many pairs. And we're constantly getting new prescriptions as needed.

LEARNING THE RULES

Children begin to learn gender in infancy.¹² They can tell the difference between male and female voices by six months old and between men and women in photographs by nine months old. By the time they're one, they know to associate deep voices with men and high voices with women. By two and a half, most children know what sex they are and are “reaching out to social norms,” trying to learn the rules.¹³ By three years old, they tend to prefer play partners of their own sex and think more positively about their own group compared to the other.

Parents sometimes have to make hard decisions about how much to encourage their children to embrace or reject gendered expectations.¹⁴ Some are adamant that gendered behavior is biological and see gender nonconformity as a sign that something is terribly wrong. Others feel equally strongly that gendered behavior is purely social and unnecessarily constraining and are as quick to

push their children away from stereotypical behavior as other parents are to encourage it. Most parents are somewhere in between and, for reasons we'll explore later, are more comfortable with their girls' gender nonconformity than their boys'.

Children grow up in households, then, with varying levels of gender conformity and adherence to gendered divisions of labor. Sometimes taking out the trash is a dad's job, sometimes it isn't, and sometimes there's no dad. All children, then, learn the gender rules followed in their homes, but they also have to contend with an outside world that generally affirms gender difference. Most toy stores still sell "boy toys" and "girl toys," categorized in binary ways and coded with gendered messages about which sex is smart, caring, pretty, and tough.¹⁵ Teachers sometimes separate school activities and games into boys versus girls; community and school sports are usually sex segregated, such that girls and boys rarely play alongside or against each other.¹⁶ More often than not, children's television and books tell gender-stereotypical stories.¹⁷ By the age of five, kids have absorbed a great deal of complex and even contradictory information about gender.¹⁸ These are a child's first pairs of gender binary glasses.

Once children have gender binary glasses, they often begin to act in ways that reflect them, especially if their parents or peers reward or display gender-stereotypical behavior.¹⁹ Children orient themselves to toys they believe are gender appropriate and begin to make assumptions about other people based on their gender. In preschool, they use gender as a criterion for whom to befriend and play with. They actively engage with the gender binary, sometimes even inventing gendered beliefs based on their observations, like one four-year-old who announced confidently to his parents on the way home from an Italian restaurant: "Men eat pizza and women don't."²⁰

Developmentally, gender rules are absorbed just like all the other rules kids are busy learning, like how to cross the street safely, what's fair between siblings, and how to behave in a classroom. Growing up is all about learning rules, and kids themselves can be pretty rigid about doing things "right." This rigidity peaks around age six, which is exactly when many parents throw their hands up and give their sons toy guns and their daughters Barbie dolls. Though this rigidity is often used as evidence that gender is biological, psychologists have shown that it is largely because children aren't yet capable of absorbing and negotiating the rules in their full complexity.²¹ Childhood rigidity is a learning phase more than proof of biological predispositions.²²

As children learn that gender norms are not quite so strict, they become much more flexible about their own and others' conformity to gender expectations. They also actively resist these expectations and, as the story about Jeremy's barrette suggests, they teach each other the rules they (think they) know. Children, then, are participants in their own and others' socialization. They, like

us, are negotiating gender rules from the get-go and setting up consequences for both one another and the adults around them. Sociologist Emily Kane, for example, describes giving into her preschool boy's desire for a set of trading cards glamorizing images of violent combat.²³ She preferred not to encourage her five-year-old to identify with this version of masculinity, but when her husband found him quietly crying after school because he was excluded from playing with his friends—"all the boys had these cards," he explained—she relented.²⁴ It was a choice between allowing her child to have a toy that she did not like and a son's loneliness and alienation. She bought the cards.

As we grow up, our ability to do gender in ways others will accept is not so rigid as to require a specific set of trading cards. Especially if we're exposed to children and adults who resist gender rules, we begin to see more flexible possibilities for ourselves.²⁵ We also learn to navigate gender rules in more sophisticated ways. Most of us become more tolerant of ambiguity and contradictions. But we continue to reach out to gender norms, continually learning and adjusting to new sets of gender rules that we encounter as we interact with new people, new places, and a changing social terrain.

Learning the rules, then, is a lifelong process that we actively negotiate. This means that a model of socialization in which genderless children are taught a gender role in their childhood, one that they then carry out over the rest of their lives, is wrong. This assumes that children are victims of their environment, infected with rigid versions of masculinity or femininity, never to recover fully. This is the model of socialization that assumes giving boys trucks or girls Barbie dolls is "injecting" children with a "virus" of sex-typed dualism that they will carry in them forever.

This "injection" idea of socialization fails on three fronts. First, it suggests that socialization is somehow finished by the time we're adults. Second, it leaves no room for the possibility that we actively consider and resist gender rules, something that Jeremy was doing even in preschool. Third, because the model fails to acknowledge that people resist and change gender rules, it can't explain cultural changes, such as the ones that made pierced ears acceptable at different times for women and men.

Accordingly, sociologists prefer a **learning model of socialization** that suggests that socialization is a lifelong process of learning and relearning gendered expectations as well as how to negotiate them. We don't *get* socialized once and for all but are constantly *being* socialized. This gives us credit for being *smart* members of our culture. We aren't cultural dupes; we are cultural *experts* who consciously and strategically adapt our behavior to changes in our social environments. We do this in negotiation with others, learning to manage conflict along the way, though usually without resorting to dropping our pants like Jeremy. We may get Barbie dolls but use them in unexpected ways, digging holes with their pointed toes or throwing their heads around like balls. Boys who are

encouraged to play with trucks rarely grow up to be truck drivers. We are presented with symbols of gender from our childhood onward, but how we use the meanings our culture intends them to convey is partly up to us.

WHY WE FOLLOW THE RULES

Like the contents of the gender binary, then, the rules only *seem* simple and stable over time. Instead, they are complicated, constantly shifting, and even contradictory. We learn them, better understanding their intricacies as we grow older. And we follow them, more or less, much of the time. We do so out of habit, for pleasure, and because of encouragement and punishment from others.

Habit

Sometimes we follow gender rules because they are part of our culture. We simply become habituated. We get used to walking and sitting in a certain way, own a wardrobe of already appropriately gendered clothes, and have experiences in rewarding gender-conforming activities.

All this repeated practice allows us to do gender without really thinking about it. Psychologists call such frequently repeated behaviors “overlearned”; they are learned not only by our minds but by our bodies—like riding a bike or typing on a keyboard—so we no longer need to think about them.²⁶ Men’s shirts, for example, are typically made so that the buttons are along the right and the button holes along the left; women’s shirts are typically made the opposite way. When was the last time you had to stop and think about the relative location of the buttons and button holes on your clothes while getting dressed? Your hands just automatically go to the right places. Such overlearned knowledge often becomes especially noticeable when someone transitions from identifying and displaying masculinity to femininity, or vice versa.

Once we have overlearned a rule, we don’t experience it as oppressive but as natural, however arbitrary it may be. Accordingly, it’s often *easy* to follow gender rules, especially ones that are fundamental in our culture; we mostly do so unconsciously. American men don’t often deliberate, for instance, about whether to pee sitting down or standing up. We potty train boys in the sitting position, but then make active efforts to train them to pee standing up such that, as men, the position is something they mostly take for granted as normal. On the flip side, it never occurs to most American women to pee standing up, even though, with parental training and practice, the majority could probably do so with little mess

(or, at least, no more mess than that frequently left behind by men). In some parts of the world, such as Ghana or China, women do stand up to pee, whereas men in Germany and Japan often do not.

Many of the gender rules that we follow, then, are simply a matter of habit, overlearned and often nonconscious.

Pleasure

More than simply being habitual, following gender rules can be quite pleasurable. For a man who has overlearned conventional American masculinity, it is rewarding to enact that masculinity at a sports bar with the guys. He knows the script, the beer tastes great, and his team might win. The same is true for enacting those aspects of femininity that are overlearned. Many women, for instance, enjoy dressing up and looking nice in a specifically feminine way.

For just this reason, we may especially enjoy opportunities to do gender elaborately. You may relish formal events like quinceañeras, bar and bat mitzvahs, high school proms, and weddings. These events all call for strongly gendered displays: suits or tuxedos for men, dresses or gowns for women. It can be fun to pamper yourself at the salon, bring flowers to your date, and open doors or have them opened for you. It feels great to know that you look especially beautiful in your dress or unusually dashing in your tux. Success is intrinsically rewarding, and that is no less true when the success comes from performing gender in ways that other people admire.

Some of the pleasure of doing gender can come from doing gender in defiant ways. Evan Urquhart, for example, a self-identified “butch lesbian woman,” initially started wearing men’s clothes because she wanted to attract women who liked women; in the queer circles in which she lived, wearing men’s clothes—breaking mainstream gender rules, that is, but following subcultural ones—was one way for her to communicate a lesbian identity.²⁷ She was surprised to discover, though, that wearing men’s clothes wasn’t just effective at attracting the attention of the kind of women she liked; it also *felt* good:

I realized almost immediately that I was feeling far more comfortable and confident and that I liked the way I looked in the mirror for the first time in my life. Other people who knew me said I looked more natural, more like my clothing fit my personality. It felt a bit like I'd been wearing an uncomfortable, ill-fitting costume all my life.

Doing masculinity was pleasurable for Evan, and so she adopted the style. Since she was part of a subculture with a set of alternative gender rules that enabled her presentation, she was able to do gender in that way and enjoy it.



There's nothing new about drag: Even in 1915, people found it fun. This group of women is enjoying a night on the town donning suits, drinking beer, smoking cigars, and playing pool.

Observation

Sometimes we follow the rules simply because we're being observed. Consider the act of farting, a great example of a behavior that is sensitive to context. In a study of 172 college students, over half of heterosexual women, but only a quarter of the heterosexual men, reported being anxious about the possibility that someone might overhear their flatulence.²⁸ For men, a good fart can be a source of pride. "Because if it's strong," said one, "it's more manly." Almost a quarter of heterosexual men said they sometimes farted in front of people on purpose; only 7 percent of heterosexual women said the same. Nonheterosexual men, interestingly, were the least comfortable with others' awareness of their flatulence, and nonheterosexual women sat squarely between heterosexual men and women.

Of course, the nature of the audience matters, too. If observation changes what we do, then who is doing the observing is part of why. A study of women's

public eating—dining in restaurants with a companion—found that women dining with male companions took smaller bites and ate more slowly than women dining with other women.²⁹ They were also more likely to sit still, maintain good posture, and use their napkins more delicately. The author of the study, sociology major Kate Handley, explained:

When their companion was a man, women used their napkins more precisely and frequently than when their companion was another woman. In some cases, the woman would fold her napkin into fourths before using it so that she could press the straight edge of the napkin to the corners of her mouth. Other times, the woman would wrap the napkin around her finger to create a point, then dab it across her mouth or use the point to press into the corners of her mouth. Women who used their napkins precisely also tended to use them quite frequently.

In contrast, women dining with a female companion generally used their napkins more loosely and sparingly. These women did not carefully designate a specific area of the napkin to use, and instead bunched up a portion of it in one hand and rubbed the napkin across their mouths indiscriminately.

Both the farting and the eating examples reveal that gender isn't necessarily a part of who we are but rather something we perform when others are listening or watching. Sometimes those others, moreover, aren't simply passive observers but people who actively encourage or punish us.

Policing

Sometimes we follow the rules because breaking them can attract negative attention. Let's revisit the story of Jeremy and his barrette. Jeremy's indignant schoolmate felt confident that he was entitled to enforce the unwritten rule that boys don't wear barrettes. Despite Jeremy's protestations, his schoolmate remained insistent, pushing Jeremy to defend his decision to wear one. Sociologists use the term **gender policing** to describe responses to the violation of gender rules aimed at promoting conformity.

When we are policed, we are being taught that negative consequences will follow if we fail to learn the rules and follow them, at least when someone is watching. Gender policing happens every day. It comes from our friends, our love interests, our parents, bosses, and mentors. It's part of our daily lives. Some of it can be brutal and painful (especially for people who don't fit in binary boxes), but much of it is friendly and humorous or takes the form of teasing. Consider these stories from our students:

- As James came in from a Saturday night with friends, his father warned, "Get to bed. We're going to the woods tomorrow." "Nah, Dad," the son

replied. “I can’t.” His dad began to tease him, saying: “What? You too good to go hunting with your dad now?”

- Chandra goes to her economics class wearing sweats, a ponytail, and no makeup. A guy with whom she’s been flirting all semester says to her, humorously, “Aw! What’s with the sweats?! I thought you liked me!”
- Sun, waiting in line to use a single-stall bathroom, sees that the men’s bathroom is open and starts toward it. As she walks in, her friend says, “You’re not going to use the *men’s* bathroom, are you!?”

In each of these stories, a person breaks a gender rule and is then subjected to a demand for them to give an **account**, an explanation for why the person broke the rule that works to excuse his or her behavior. In the first example, James’s disinterest in going to the woods with his dad broke a common rule in rural working-class communities: *Men should want to hunt*. When Chandra’s guy friend used her appearance to suggest she wasn’t interested in him, he affirmed the rule: *Women should dress up for men they want to impress*. Sun’s friend expressed surprise that Sun would dare to use a restroom labeled “Men.” The rule is clear: *Use the appropriate gender-designated bathroom*.

A raised eyebrow, a derisive laugh, or a comment like “Are you sure you want to do that?” are what sociologists think of as **accountability**, an obligation to explain why we don’t follow social rules that other people think we should know and obey. We are reminded of our accountability to gender rules when people raise an eyebrow at our behavior, quiz us on our decision-making, or offer mild disapproval. Being held to account is a gentle way to induce conformity. It is easier to avoid awkward questions and others’ approval is rewarding. Over time, accountability can make big differences in our lives. Asking women to account for their ambition, for example, may undermine their willingness to develop or indulge it, while calling men to account for being insufficiently ambitious will steer them toward seizing challenges and showing off their successes.

Mildly negative reactions to gender nonconformity, though, and the threat of being unpopular, are reasonably tolerable prices to pay for the freedom to be ourselves. What is less easily tolerated are demands for an account that are intended to shame us and push us back in line. This more aggressive response to breaking gender rules is captured in the term **policing**, a response to the violation of gender rules that is aimed at exacting conformity. When women are called “dyke,” “bitch,” or “cunt,” they are often being policed for being strong or assertive, characteristics that a binary lens sees as masculine and unacceptable for women. Conversely, when men are called “pussy” or “girl,” they are often being accused of not being strong or assertive, and in the logic of the gender binary, that means not masculine. The accusation that a woman is being “bossy” or the put-down phrase “nice guys finish last” applied to a man who isn’t sufficiently aggressive are ways that both women and men do gender policing.

Because of policing, the risks of nonconformity go beyond just being judged, though that can be bad enough. We can lose our friends, lovers, or the support of our parents. We may be fired or passed over for jobs or promotions because our gender display doesn't please clients or coworkers. Gender policing can also be emotionally and physically brutal. The FBI reported 1,363 victims of hate crimes against sexual minorities, trans, and gender-nonconforming people in 2016.³⁰ Sexual minorities break the rule that *men should have sex with women and women should have sex with men*. Trans and gender-nonconforming people break the rule that *people's gender identity and performance should match their apparent biological sex*. Sometimes the consequences for breaking these gender rules is living with other people's discomfort; sometimes it's violence.

Because the rules themselves vary situationally, so does the nature of our accountability and our risk of being policed. It is certainly dangerous to be queer in some contexts, but it can be quite fun at Halloween or at gay-friendly bars. Middle school boys who study hard may be teased for being "fags," but if they adopt a tough-guy performance to avoid taunting, they may be policed by their teachers and parents for trying to look and act "hard," especially if they are not white. Female athletes may be told by their coach to be more aggressive on the field but policed by their parents or peers if they don't show a more "ladylike" gender performance off it. We, like Jeremy, are policed into multiple and even contradictory gender displays by people with various, often clashing agendas.

Some of us may also be more heavily or lightly policed than others. In contexts where there is a high tolerance for both gender nonconformity and sexual minorities, identifying as nonheterosexual can be a blanket excuse, getting people out of following lots of rules, even those that have nothing to do with signaling sexual attraction. In contexts where there is low tolerance, though, sexual minorities may feel that their safety depends on hyper-conforming. Cisgendered men and women, especially if their bodies naturally fit into gendered expectations (like short, thin women and tall, strong men) may face fewer demands for accountability than people who identify as trans or whose bodies don't give as strong cues about being female or male. A less obviously male or female person may threaten others' sense of right and wrong, making them feel entitled to push that person to "prove" who they are by adorning themselves in the signs of masculinity or femininity, like gendered jewelry, clothes, shoes, and hairstyles.³¹

Both policing and the milder calls for gender accountability are more influential if they come from someone we care for (like your girlfriend or boyfriend) or who has power over us (such as your boss). We also hold ourselves accountable, kindly and cruelly. We watch TV and read fashion blogs or lifestyle magazines to learn how, and how not, to dress. We read the sports section to make sure we can talk about who won the big game last night and how. We stand in front of the mirror and inspect our faces, scrutinize our bodies for too much or

not enough hair, and hope for bumps and bulges in gender-appropriate places. We anticipate not just questions, but consequences, if we fail to meet gender standards.

We inspect our behavior no less than our bodies: Were we too loud or forward? Too meek or agreeable? Sometimes we call ourselves ugly names or feel shame or disgust. We punish our bodies with overexercise or starvation. We police our words and our tone of voice, watching to ensure that we don't sound too opinionated (if we're women) or too emotional (if we're men). We may force ourselves to major in engineering when we really prefer English literature because we know we'll later be judged by the size of our paycheck; or we may choose to stay single because our friends will never let us hear the end of it if we let them know we're gay; or we may not tell a guy that we like him because we fear being seen as "desperate."

We even recruit others to help keep us accountable. We ask each other to evaluate our bodies, our clothes, and our interactions with others. When women get ready for a party together, they frequently ask one another to assess their outfits, looking for a second opinion as to whether they are wearing just the right clothes. Many women try to follow this tricky rule: *Women should dress sexy but not slutty*. "You can wear a short skirt or a low-cut top," we hear, "but not both." There may be nothing malicious in this; it is simply women trying to help their friends follow the rules that they know apply to them.

We also use media, often unconsciously, to advertise and test gender rules with our friends and family. When we get together to watch the Oscars and snark at the outfits or take pleasure in laughing at a man's failure on some reality TV show, we are telling each other what makes a person likable, look good, or deserve respect. Often, our evaluations are gendered. Through these routines, we learn what our friends think is ugly, slutty, sloppy, gay, bitchy, weak, and gross and, accordingly, how we should and shouldn't dress and act around them. Collective reactions to celebrity fashions and personalities, then, can serve to clarify and affirm rules, giving us resources to avoid being policed.

And, of course, we participate in policing others directly. We create consequences for those who break the rules. We kindly ask for accounts when we want to warn our friends and family members that they are at risk of being policed by someone less benevolent than we are. If we are deeply disconcerted by seeing a rule we care about broken, we may give in to the temptation to be mean-spirited or cruel in policing even those we call friends. We may even feel a sense of injustice or unfairness if the rules we follow—sometimes at a sacrifice—are broken by others who can do so without apparent consequences.

Between accountability, the social demand for an explanation, and policing, we collectively ensure that our choices about whether and how to follow gender rules have real social consequences. Some are mild and some are severe, but they all shape the distribution of rewards and punishments. Facing this, we

have three choices: follow the rules, break the rules and face the consequences, or figure out how to persuade others to let us break the rules.

HOW TO BREAK THE RULES

Breaking gender rules is routine. Sometimes we break the rules because it is impossible to follow them, no matter how badly we would like to. The mother undergoing chemotherapy, for example, may not be able to care for her husband and children the way she feels she should. The aging man may not be able to perform sexually the way men are told they must. Likewise, the guy who is five foot two simply can't be taller than most women.

Other times, rules are downright contradictory, like the one that says that men should be able to drink a lot of alcohol but also remain in control. Or maybe we're part of a subculture that requires breaking gender rules endorsed by the mainstream, like the female rancher whose daily life involves getting poop on her shoes. Sometimes we don't have the resources to follow a rule, like the man who can't afford to treat women on dates. At times we break a particular rule because we have concluded that following it is personally undesirable or socially wrong, like people who identify as nonbinary and mix and match forms of gender expression.

Although policing is about using social pressure to make noncompliance costly, not every deviation from a gender rule results in negative consequences for the rule breaker. Remember the three stories discussed earlier in this chapter? In each case, it turns out, the rule breaker got away with breaking the rule. Each avoided any penalty by offering an acceptable account.

Let's revisit the stories, this time following them through to the end:

- As James came in from a Saturday night with friends, his father warned, "Get to bed. We're going to the woods tomorrow." "Nah, Dad," the son replied. "I can't." His dad began to tease him, saying: "What? You too good to go hunting with your dad now?" James just said, "No, football tryouts are next week and I was gonna run drills with Mike in the morning." "Go get 'em, son," said his father.
- Chandra goes to her economics class wearing sweats, a ponytail, and no makeup. A guy with whom she has been flirting all semester says to her, humorously, "Aw! What's with the sweats?! I thought you liked me!" And she smiles and replies, "Hey! I just came from the gym." He reassures her, "I figured. I was just kidding."
- Sun, waiting in line to use a single-stall bathroom, sees that the men's bathroom is open and starts toward it. As she walks in, her friend says,

“You’re not going to use the *men’s* bathroom, are you!?” Sun says, “I wouldn’t, but I really have to go!” Her friend nods sympathetically.

As these stories illustrate, we can get away with breaking rules if we have a good excuse. When the characters above say, “Football tryouts are next week,” “I just came from the gym,” or “I really have to go,” they are offering an account to justify why they are breaking the rule.

These accounts may or may not be true, but they offer a sufficient explanation to others that makes gender nonconformity *incidental* rather than *intentional*. That is, the rule breaking isn’t interpreted as an attack on the rule itself but an unfortunate and unavoidable deviation. In this way, accounting does more than excuse one’s behavior. By explaining why an exception should be made in their case, the speakers are affirming the rule itself. So James *really* is saying: “[Of course I would go hunting], it’s just that football tryouts are next week.” Chandra is saying: “I [would have dressed up for you, but I] just came from the gym.” And Sun is saying, “I wouldn’t [use the men’s bathroom normally], but I really have to go!”

Importantly, these speakers didn’t respond, “Actually I don’t like hunting” or “Who says I have to dress up for you?” or “It’s stupid that I can’t use the men’s bathroom!” Such responses reject the rule altogether. This is actually quite rare; people don’t usually defy gender rules outright because confronting them head-on can cause conflict. Instead, if the rule breaker affirms the legitimacy of the rule, the one asking for an account is usually satisfied, and conflict is avoided.

Interestingly, such verbal affirmations of the rule often work just as well as a change in behavior; infractions are punished only when they aren’t excused. That’s why trans men are more likely to be victims of hate crimes than guys dressed up like women at Halloween. Halloween is an account. It is a way for men to say, “[I would never dress like a woman normally, but] it’s Halloween!” A trans person has no such excuse. The Halloween reveler is an exception that proves the rule; being trans is an attack on the rule itself.

In addition to learning the rules in all their variety, then, part of gender socialization is learning what exceptions and accounts are acceptable in different social circles. Accounting is therefore a skill. Jeremy had not yet mastered the art of accounting. He wasn’t sophisticated enough to negotiate his gender with his schoolmate and resorted instead to dropping his pants, a rather primitive way of proving he was a boy. Explicit conflict over gender rule breaking is typical of younger kids who have just begun to learn the rules and haven’t yet mastered the act of explaining away violations. In contrast, adults tend to be quite good at offering accounts, though some of us are better at it than others.

But there is always the risk that our accounts will fail. Our student Jeff spoke of his failed account:

I told my guy friends I couldn't hang out with them because I was going to a movie with my girlfriend. They asked me what movie and I said, sheepishly, because I knew they were going to laugh at me: Sweet Home Alabama. They laughed hysterically because I was going to see a "chick flick."

Jeff broke a rule: *Guys don't watch chick flicks*. And his friends policed him by laughing. So Jeff offered an account, but it didn't work:

Even though I really did want to see the movie, I said: "Because [my girlfriend] wants to see it, and if she's not happy, then I'm not happy." This just made them laugh at me more. "You're totally whipped!" they cried.

Jeff's account failed to excuse his rule breaking (seeing a chick flick) because it broke another gender rule about heterosexual relationships: *Men don't submit to their girlfriends' desires*. While Jeff's account might have worked in an all-girl or mixed-gender group, his account wasn't accepted by this particular group of young, single men, who responded to his accounts with shaming and sanctioning. Despite his best efforts, his gender performance was policed.

We make strategic decisions as to when and how often to test the limits of our rule breaking. We may tend to overconform when we are in an unfamiliar setting but break lots of rules in a familiar setting, and we may even provide accounts on behalf of others when we know them or the setting well. "Janice is taking up the trumpet just like her big brother," we might comment. "I suppose the family can't afford another instrument." Or "John is being so quiet and self-effacing; he must be really nervous with his father in the room."

Higher social status usually provides greater immunity from others' policing. Those of us who think more quickly on our feet, are opinion leaders among our peers, or are exceptionally well liked or charismatic can get away with an amazing amount of rule breaking. You probably know someone who gets a pass on rules. And some people like to test the rules more than others, trying to see how much they can get away with. We all probably know someone like this, too, just as we know people who are extremely risk averse. All of us, though, break the rules at least a little bit. We sometimes make strategic gambles, breaking the rules in situations where we suspect we will have our accounts accepted or the stakes are low if they are not.

Like following the rules, breaking the rules can be fun, empowering, and rewarding. The risks of breaking a rule may be outweighed by the value of doing something you want or nudging the world toward a future society you'd like to see. When a woman wears sweats and a baggy T-shirt to class, she sends the message that she doesn't care what anyone else thinks, and that can be empowering. Wearing sweats and a baggy T-shirt, however, is only defiant in the context of a rule against doing so. So breaking rules doesn't mean you're "free" from



Thanks to her lovable personality, comedienne and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres gets a pass on strict gender rules. Her talk show continues to attract record numbers of audience members, even as she dons menswear, keeps her hair short, and appears with her wife.

them. It is as much a reaction to the rules as following them. Even the shape of rebellion, then, is determined by the gender binary and its dictates.

In sum, because we can't or don't want to follow gender rules, we break them quite frequently. We can do this fairly easily most of the time, so long as we offer a "good" excuse, one that affirms the rule that is being broken. All of this affirmation makes the rules seem legitimate and true. That is, we manage simultaneously to break and affirm the rules, making it seem like everyone buys into them, while still accommodating a wide range of both male and female behavior.

THE NO. 1 GENDER RULE

Gender rules vary across cultures, subcultures, and history; intersect with other identities; and vary in strength. But one rule transcends all identities and is true across cultures and subcultures and throughout recent history. That rule is *do gender*.³² No matter how you do gender, if you want to be

treated like an integrated member of society—a person whom others want to know, work with, play with, and love—doing gender in some recognizable way is compulsory. In the West, this generally means that you *must* identify as a man or a woman, not both, and not something else. And you *must* perform a culturally recognizable form of masculinity or femininity, especially if you could conceivably pass as the other sex and/or naturally look a little androgynous. Usually this performance is expected to match one's genitals. Even in places that are welcoming of trans men or women, people who identify as trans are usually expected to do a recognizable version of masculinity or femininity. And cultures with more than two genders also expect the members of third, fourth, and fifth gender categories to be recognizable as such.

If you do not do gender, you become **culturally unintelligible**. You will be so outside the symbolic meaning system that people will not know how to interact with you. This is the experience of one sociologist, Betsy Lucal, an androgynous-looking woman who doesn't do femininity. She writes:

Using my credit cards sometimes is a challenge. Some clerks subtly indicate their disbelief, looking from the card to me and back at the card and checking my signature carefully. Others challenge my use of the card, asking whose it is or demanding identification. One cashier asked to see my driver's license and then asked me whether I was the son of the cardholder. Another clerk told me that my signature on the receipt "had better match" the one on the card.³³

What Lucal understands all too well is that if you really don't or can't do gender, it is a serious communicative crisis for everyone interacting with you. Consequently, most of us do gender at least a little—and usually more than a little. Doing gender preserves our membership in our cultural community and ensures that those around us treat us with a modicum of benevolence.

This need to be culturally intelligible is why we see gendered social patterns. We see them because everyone is doing gender. We may not do it all the time, we may not do it enthusiastically, and we may not do it in the same way. We may not even do it in accordance with our genitals, but we do it. And while we don't



Trans women like Caitlin Jenner can avoid some policing by following the gender rules that newly apply to them.

hesitate to provide accounts in order to break the weaker rules, the strong rules are followed by almost everyone, lest one face truly harmful and dangerous levels of policing. The strongest rule of all—the rule to do gender—has nearly 100 percent compliance.

Thus, while the contents of the gender binary are constantly shifting as we move across time and space, the binary itself persists. It persists in our minds (because we fashion our perception of the world to match it); it persists in our bodies (because we adorn and manipulate them to reflect it); and it persists in our society (because we perform it in interaction with others).

Revisiting the Question

Q+A

If men and women aren't naturally opposite, then why do they act so differently so much of the time?

We see gendered patterns in society because we learn rules for gendered performances through lifelong processes of socialization. The gender rules themselves are incredibly complex, varying across time, cultures, subcultures, and even contexts. We adjust our gendered performances, often seamlessly and unconsciously, as we encounter different situations and audiences.

Sometimes we follow these rules because it is enjoyable to do gender well. Much of the time, however, we follow them out of habit. At other times, we quite consciously follow rules. We may do so because we feel accountable to ourselves and others. Or we may expect and want to avoid policing.

Being policed by others pushes us to comply with gender norms in order to avoid feeling humiliated, stupid, or excluded—or to avoid physical harm. And we police others, too, because it can give us the inverse feeling of satisfaction, superiority, and entitlement. Accounts are a way of deflecting the negative consequences of rule breaking. They are part of the ordinary give and take of social life, in which making ourselves understandable to others is how we participate in creating shared meanings.

Even rule breaking, though, has a way of affirming the binary and its rules. If we know the rules, we can offer a good excuse, one that assures the questioner that we are committed to the rules, just like he or she is, in all cases but this one. As long as most people, most of the time, can offer satisfactory accounts for rule breaking, such violations will not undermine our collective enforcement of the rules and the gender binary they uphold.

Accountability, accounting, and policing all function to produce and protect the gender binary in the face of bodies, personalities, interests, and inclinations that are diverse, regardless of the gender label we hang on ourselves. If we were naturally feminine or masculine in this binary way, there would be no need to police gender performances. Because the rules are complex, and even contra-

dictory, we learn to do gender and account for rule breaking in many different ways. The fact that we can know, follow, and justify different sets of rules for different contexts is another indication that our gender is not simply a part of our biology over which we have no control.

Somewhere between reaching out to learn the rules, learning how to follow them flexibly, accounting for the many instances in which we break them, and seeking subcultures that share our sense of what rules were “made to be broken,” we manage to develop a way of doing gender that more or less works for us, given our opportunities and constraints. We grow up into culturally adept, gendered adults and leave some of the rigidities of childhood behind.

Next . . .

Our strategy for managing gendered expectations, of course, is also shaped by other personal characteristics, such as our social class and residential location, race and ethnicity, immigration status, sexual orientation, age and attractiveness, and our physical abilities and disabilities. It is to this fact that we turn next, asking:

Q+A

If gender is just one part of who we are, why isn't it crowded out by all the other things about us that are meaningful and consequential?

The answer will add many more layers of complexity to our theory of gender.

FOR FURTHER READING

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“

EVER SINCE
I'VE BEEN IN A
WHEELCHAIR, I'VE
STOPPED GETTING
CATCALLED.

—FEM KORSTEN¹

”



Intersections

By now you've been introduced to the idea that gender isn't something we are, but something we do. Gender rules offer guidance on how to act, and we often follow them. People we interact with push us to follow gender rules, too. While we sometimes break them, we usually do so in ways that affirm the rule itself. As a result, gendered patterns emerge.

One might observe, however, that gender is just one of many things about us that make us who we are. Some of us fit easily into the gender binary, but many of us don't; some bodies bring admiration, other bodies bring pity or derision; some of us have lots of money to spend, others have less. Our gender, then, sits alongside many other socially salient facts about us. Accordingly, we asked:

Q+A

If gender is just one part of who we are, why isn't it crowded out by all the other things about us that are meaningful and consequential?

Other things don't crowd out gender because the other things about us are themselves gendered. Gender, in other words, *inflects* all our other identities, just as our other identities inflect our gender. Gender isn't more important than age, for example, nor is age more important than gender. Instead, there is *a gendered way to age*.

Age is what sociologists call a **social identity**, a culturally available and socially constructed category of people in which we place ourselves or are placed by others.² Many social identities carry substantial personal significance and interpersonal consequence. In the United States, these include sexual orientation, race, citizenship status, gender, class, age, religion, disability status, body size, whether we live in an urban or rural environment, and arguably more. These identities *matter*. We read other peoples' appearances, body language, accents, turns of phrase, and fashion choices for signs of these identities and tend to filter information about people through them.

Our social identities can be intensely felt and deeply meaningful, but we don't come to them in a vacuum. Through the process of distinction, our cultures invent them and give them meaning and value. Because they are social, some identities bring us **privilege**, unearned social and economic advantage based on our location in a social hierarchy; others do not. These identities—including gender—then interact to shape our lives in complex ways.

This is how it comes to be that there is a gendered way to age. Likewise, there is a gendered way to manage being rich or poor. Whatever our race, we experience it in gendered ways, too. Similarly, the experiences of being gay or straight, or an immigrant, native-born, or indigenous are all simultaneously gendered. All these things together make up our complex social identities, shaping the kinds of gender rules to which we are held accountable and our ability to both follow and break them.

This chapter explores how gender interacts with some of our other identities. It first reintroduces the idea of intersectionality—the term used to describe this phenomenon—then explores how some social identities carry expectations that require or inspire people to do gender differently. It would be impossible to do justice to every intersection of culturally relevant identities; there are thousands of such intersections. Instead, this chapter simply offers some models of how gender might intersect with other social positions. Be alert for other intersections and think about how gender intersects in sometimes surprising ways as identities combine to make us the unique individuals we are.

INTERSECTIONALITY

When asked to imagine a “man” or a “woman,” most Americans don't at first envision a female coal miner, a native of Mexico, or a man in a turban. The mythical inhabitants of the gender binary—the prototypical man and woman who usually come to mind—fit into a rather narrow slice of reality. They are usually white, middle or upper class, heterosexual, able bodied, urban, Christian, and

native-born American. In other words, the gender binary *normalizes* one kind of man and one kind of woman by setting aside other types of people. This is good for maintaining the binary because marginalizing certain populations as exceptions, like subdividing, keeps the story of gender difference simple, but it doesn't reflect real life.

In real life, we're not just male, female, trans, or nonbinary—we don't just have a gender—instead, we're multifaceted individuals with many identities. Accordingly, understanding how we do gender has to address that complexity.³ We introduced this perspective in Chapter 3 as intersectionality, a term that refers to the fact that gender is not an isolated social fact about us but instead intersects with all the other distinctions between people made important by our society.

When we do gender, we are also expected to account for all these other identities. We do gender, for example, but also parenthood. When those two identities combine, we get motherhood and fatherhood, two intersectional identities that are policed very differently. How we follow or break the social rules related to motherhood and fatherhood is further shaped by what is possible given our income, marital status, and health as well as whether we are at risk of discrimination due to our race, sexual orientation, or religiosity (or lack thereof).

Juggling all these identities, we hope to build lives that are consistent with our values and goals, while adapting to the unique positions we occupy not just on—or off—the gender binary, but a much, much more *complicated* cultural map. If this sounds fraught with difficulty, it is—and much more so for some than others. Still, all of us try our best to manage the expectations, opportunities, and constraints we face. Finding a way of doing gender that works for us as unique individuals who are also shaped by other aspects of our identity and the material realities of our lives is called a **gender strategy**.⁴

Our varying strategies add up to many culturally recognizable masculine and feminine archetypes. There is the Girly Girl, who emphasizes her femininity most of the time; the Tomboy, who rejects many feminine characteristics; the Jock, whose identity revolves around sports; and the Dork, who prefers *World of Warcraft* to football. These recognizable stereotypes (no less socially constructed, of course, than “man” and “woman”) guide us in carving out an identity that we like and can feel good about. From there, we try to “be ourselves,” breaking the rules associated with the subcategories of masculinity and femininity in order to try to be recognized as not *just* a Party Girl, Farm Boy, or Science Geek.



Do these folks look “normal”? If so, it's only because American culture centers white, middle-class heterosexuals, defining everyone else as outside the norm.

The remainder of this chapter looks at how some of our personal characteristics and social identities shape our gender strategies, including our economic class; the countries, states, and cities where we live; our race and ethnicity; our immigrant status and whether our country's official language is our first language; our sexual orientation; and what our body looks like and can or can't do. Remember that these aren't the only important social identities we carry, and this chapter only scratches the surface of all the ways even this handful of identities intersects. It's simply an introduction to how this thing called *intersectionality* works.

ECONOMIC CLASS AND RESIDENCE

Many countries, including the United States, are characterized by significant inequalities between the richest and poorest members of society. Middle- and upper-class families tend to live in cities and suburbs surrounded by excellent social services, educational opportunities, and employment options. In contrast, many poor and working-class people live in modest suburban developments, inner-city neighborhoods, or small communities in rural America, including on land reserved for Native American nations, most of which have fewer resources and opportunities than wealthy communities. These variables—economic class and place of residence—intersect with each other and with gender, making certain gender strategies more available to some Americans than others.

Individuals with higher incomes and greater wealth have more resources to shape their lives to match their ideals. Many men in high-pay, high-status occupations, for instance—men who work as lawyers, doctors, and account executives—often invest heavily in their career and identify strongly with their job. A senior personnel manager named Bill, a participant in a study on workplace norms, revealed that his life was focused almost exclusively on work.⁵ He argued that no one in his line of work could get ahead without putting in at least fifty or sixty hours per week. Emily, his wife, stayed home and took care of their house and four children. Of his marriage, Bill said,

We made a bargain. If I was going to be as successful as we both wanted, I was going to have to spend tremendous amounts of time at it. Her end of the bargain was that she wouldn't go out to work. So I was able to take the good stuff and she did the hard work—the car pools, dinner, gymnastics lessons. . . . Emily left Oakmont College after two years when we got married. . . . I really had it made. I worked very long hours and Emily just managed things.⁶

Earning more than enough money to support his family on one income, and married to a woman whom he believes is happy to manage things at home, Bill's

gender strategy was to excel in the masculine pursuit of extraordinary career success. He was a Breadwinner.

Because Emily was married to a Breadwinner, she had the option of choosing a Family Focused strategy that allowed her to concentrate on raising children, being a good partner to her husband, and keeping a beautiful home. Some upper-class married women embrace this strategy; they welcome the opportunity to be out of the rat race and feel good about investing in their children's or husband's success. Others may feel pressure from their spouses or others to stay home. In either case, to be Family Focused is also to risk becoming financially dependent on their partner (for now) or their children (later).

Some affluent married women may reject this binary division of labor from the start and instead bargain with their husbands for a Co-Breadwinner strategy in which they nurture their own careers, too. Because they earn enough money between the two of them, Co-Breadwinners can have paid help take care of the housework and childcare that a Family Focused spouse would do. This was the strategy adopted by another family. Both lawyers, Seth and Jessica identified strongly with their jobs and could afford to hire a nanny, a housekeeper, a gardener, a driver, and a neighborhood boy to play with their son, allowing them to put in a combined 120 hours of work each week.

Our gender strategies are not only a reflection of our personalities but also the twists and turns of our lives.⁷ Both women and men are more likely to adopt a Family Focused strategy when they encounter limited job opportunities, marry someone with a high-paying job, or discover, perhaps to their own surprise, that they prefer parenting. Men and women are more committed to careers when they discover that they enjoy and are good at them. In other words, the strategies that we plan for as teenagers and young adults often turn out to be maladaptive or otherwise unsatisfying, so we often end up being happy in places we never intended to go.

Our strategies, though, are never just a result of personality and chance; they are also contingent on our class status. Few families can afford to leave a spouse at home, like Bill did, or hire as much domestic help as Seth and Jessica did. Instead, most two-parent families need both incomes to make ends meet. If they have children, these families' options are limited to Breadwinner/Supportive Spouse or Super Mom/Super Dad. Supportive Spouses take a part-time or low-effort job that allows them to prioritize a partner's Breadwinner role, producing a one-and-a-half income compromise for the family. Super Moms (and sometimes Super Dads) take on the challenging task of working a full-time job, being a parent, and being responsible for housework and other family needs, including—if married—supporting their spouses' work. Most single mothers are pushed into the Super Mom strategy by default; they must do it all because there is no one else, they're unlikely to make enough money to hire outside help, and the workplace is unsympathetic and inflexible.⁸

Importantly, there are still a lot more Super Moms than Super Dads and many fewer female Breadwinners than male ones. This is in part because which strategy we choose is influenced not just by our preferences and resources but by how other people judge our choices in light of our gender. Men who focus on work are less likely to face policing than women, especially if the men are Breadwinners. In some instances, men can do minimal amounts of childcare and be considered model fathers. “I get more credit than she does,” said one postal worker dad who made a point to be an involved parent.⁹ “I just feel like I’m doing what any person should do,” said another involved dad, shaking his head over how his wife’s friends swooned over his participation.¹⁰ Women, in contrast, are held to a higher standard and are more likely than men to be blamed if the house is messy or the kids are misbehaved. Men, for their part, are judged more harshly for failing to earn enough income.

Working-class men who want to be involved fathers may raise eyebrows if they opt to be a Stay-at-Home Dad; the Super Dad is a more socially acceptable strategy. A study of working-class emergency medical technicians, for example, showed that these men prioritized their families alongside their work.¹¹ As one explained: “[I]t’s long hours at times, but honestly, I get four days off in a row with my kids. How many people get that much?”¹² Implicitly contrasting himself with the Breadwinner who can’t take off much time from work, this Super Dad embraced active parenting as part of his gender strategy.

Working-class men try to carve out a masculinity that both feels good and is possible given their circumstances, sometimes actively contrasting their blue-collar masculinity with that of white-collar men whom they may disdain as “wimps” and “paper-push[ers].”¹³ Construction workers sometimes adopt this gender strategy.¹⁴ Their bosses may be Breadwinners, but because they also stay in air-conditioned trailers in front of computers all day, the workers can claim to be the “real men” doing the “real work” on site. They may “not know what fork is used for salad,” like their bosses do, but they know “which drill bit is used for different forms of masonry under different and varying conditions,” something their managers do not know.¹⁵ With this logic, these Blue-Collar Guys can embrace a strategy that is available to them *and* feel good about themselves as men.

Similarly, women who grow up on farms or ranches may be accustomed to dressing and acting in ways consistent with the work they do to help their families.¹⁶ In response, some of these women may embrace the Tough Gal strategy. Ester, for example, grew up on a farm and enjoyed the physical and often dirty work: “I helped my dad a lot on the farm, raising . . . livestock,” she said.¹⁷ “I really enjoyed driving the farm machinery! It just empowered me, driving a tractor or truck.” Teresa, who grew up in a similarly rural town, said of her high school: “There were farm girls [who] might dress up for the prom, but they also could slaughter a hog.”¹⁸ Tough Gals may take pride in their ability to do things asso-



Working construction requires skill, strength, and a tolerance for risk, all things that may make these men feel good about themselves as men even if they aren't drawing paychecks as large as some.

ciated with boys and men, while also disdaining the Girly Girl as overly soft or dependent. Like Blue-Collar Guys, they may contrast their own femininity with that of different kinds of women in ways that make them feel good about who they are.

All these examples demonstrate that our gender strategies aren't simply products of our individual personalities and luck. They are also shaped by the constraints and opportunities afforded by our class status, the places where we grew up, and the norms of local subcultures. In the next section, we'll discuss how our gender identities also intersect with race.

RACE

Like our economic class and place of residence, race shapes our gender strategies and gender shapes our experience of race. Race—like gender—is a social construction and an important distinction in American life.¹⁹ Some racial groups are denigrated, others valorized; all are subject to advantages and disadvantages related to their unique histories. In this section, we look at three examples: the experiences of gender for black, white, and Asian Americans.

African American Men and Women

The United States sustained a system of racialized slavery for over 200 years. This system of **racism**—social arrangements designed to systematically advantage one race over others—was justified, in part, by the argument that white elites weren't captors but caretakers. Proponents of enslavement argued that the complicated responsibilities of freedom were simply too much for black people's simple minds.²⁰ Black men were stereotyped as jolly buffoons who were helpless to take care of themselves, let alone anyone else. Like women and children, it was argued, black men needed a "master" to take care of them.

After emancipation in 1865, the stereotype of black men as weak and ineffectual was no longer useful to white supremacists. Much more useful was the idea that black men were aggressive, prone to criminality, and sexually dangerous. With this justification, the white population terrorized the black community in a vicious, violent, and often deadly campaign to keep black people "in their place."²¹

Beliefs about black people in the United States still reflect these strategic stereotypes designed to shore up white power. Black people are stereotyped as tougher and more athletic than white people, meaner and more aggressive, and prone to criminal behavior and sexual promiscuity.²² These characteristics, notably, are also stereotypes of masculinity. Black men, then, are frequently stereotyped as *hypermasculine*: super aggressive (as athletes or criminals) and super sexual (as players, philanderers, and potential rapists). In other words, for black men, being black *intensifies* expectations based on their gender.²³

This stereotyping starts when boys are children. Sociologist Ann Ferguson showed how teachers in the United States interpret the bad behavior of white and black boys differently.²⁴ White boys are seen as inherently innocent; they may misbehave, but it is not out of malice. Black boys, in contrast, are stereotyped as prone to criminality; their misbehavior is "stripped of any element of childish naïveté."²⁵ As a result, black boys are more likely than white boys to be suspended from school.²⁶

As early as kindergarten, parents of black boys start teaching their sons how to manage other people's racist ideas.²⁷ If they want to be seen as "good," black boys have to perform an unusual degree of deference, to behave in ways considered "sissy" when performed by white boys. Even otherwise innocent behaviors may be read as suspicious if performed by a black child. A woman named Rebecca, for example, recalled trying to explain to her teenage nephew that a hoodie wasn't necessarily just a hoodie on his young, black body:

I tried to explain that to him because he didn't understand. He said, "I am just wearing my hoodie." [I said,] "But baby, I understand what you are doing, and

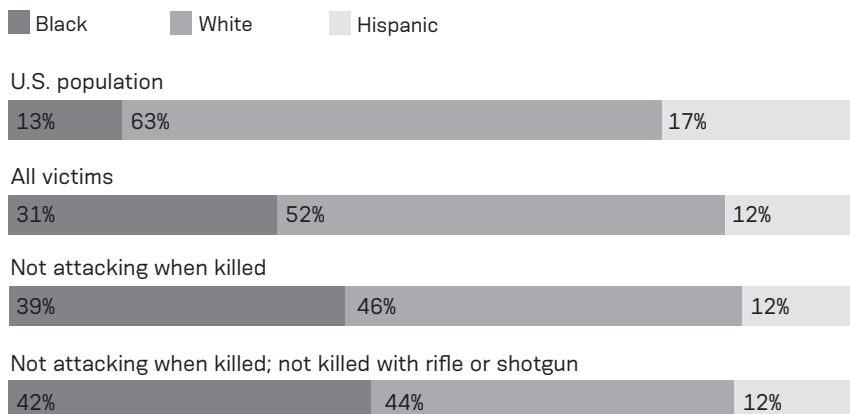
there is nothing wrong with that, but if you walk through the neighborhood near my school, [people] see something different.”²⁸

It wasn't fair that he couldn't wear what his white peers could wear without the risk of attracting unwanted attention, Rebecca said, but it was reality.

This “enactment of docility” and hyperawareness of others’ prejudice is simply preparation for adulthood.²⁹ Indeed, some adult black men report adopting strategies designed to manage the racist hypermasculine stereotypes that others attribute to them. Some take care never to raise their voice. Others make a point to dress professionally even in nonprofessional settings. Some report never jogging in white neighborhoods, lest it look like they’re running away from or toward something or someone.³⁰ The journalist Brent Staples, a six-foot-two black man, describes whistling classical music when he walks on dark streets late at night. “Everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn’t be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*,” he writes wryly.³¹ The Gentle Black Man, and other strategies meant to defray mistrust based on one’s skin color, is a way of doing masculinity that some black men use to avoid being stereotyped as a Dangerous Black Man.

This does more than just interrupt racist narratives; it’s a survival strategy. Young black men, even teenagers and young boys, are twenty-one times more likely to die at the hands of police than their white counterparts, despite the fact that they are less likely than young white men to be engaged in criminal activity (Figure 5.1).³² In the majority of cases, black men who die at the hands of police

FIGURE 5.1 | KILLED BY POLICE DURING ARREST, BY CIRCUMSTANCES



Source: 2012 Supplementary Homicide Report, FBI.

are unarmed and nonviolent. In fact, they are more likely to be unarmed and nonviolent than men of other races who die in this way, suggesting that in many cases the *only* thing threatening about a black man is the combination of his race and gender.³³ This is what motivated the creation of the hashtag #blacklivesmatter and inspired Colin Kaepernick and many of his fellow professional football players to kneel for the National Anthem before games.

It's not only black men who are imagined to be more masculine and more threatening than white people; black women are also attributed traits associated with masculinity. Like the stereotypes of black men, these stereotypes of black women are related to what white elites found useful.³⁴ Slave captors required both men and women to do hard labor and suffer harsh punishments, and enslaved women were sometimes forced into sex and required to produce children for their master. If black women had been stereotyped as physically frail, emotionally delicate, and sexually pure, as white women were, then none of this could be justified.³⁵ To protect both the institution of slavery and the ideology of gender, black women were stereotyped as more like black men than white women: masculine instead of feminine.

The stereotype that black women are unfeminine persists today, such that black women are frequently confronted with the perception that they are less feminine than white women, regardless of how they act.³⁶ That is, a black woman's race *interferes* with people's perception of her as feminine. Because of this, the Girly Girl strategy is harder for black women to pull off than the Tough Gal strategy. This is especially true if they appear more "African": have tightly curled hair, darker skin, broader noses, and fuller lips.

The contemporary notion of the Strong Black Woman—a black woman who can withstand any amount of disappointment, deprivation, and mistreatment—has its roots in this idea.³⁷ So does the notion of the Angry Black Woman, which includes the idea that black women are louder, pushier, and more demanding than other women.³⁸ Research on health care suggests that this stereotype leads physicians to take black women's pain and suffering less seriously.³⁹ When black mothers struggle to make ends meet when working poorly paid jobs, instead of being praised as Super Moms, they're often denigrated as "welfare queens": not just poor mothers but bad ones.⁴⁰ These same stereotypes are also part of why the sexual assault of white women is taken more seriously than that of black women.⁴¹

And, just like black boys and men, black girls are punished more severely than white girls by their teachers and are, as adults, more likely than white women to be killed in interactions with police.⁴² Intersectionality scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw has jumpstarted a campaign, represented by the hashtag #sayhername, that aims to draw attention to the police violence disproportionately faced by black women.⁴³



People gather in Union Square in New York City to participate in a #sayhername vigil for black women and girls killed at the hands of the police. Drawing attention to the fact that black women also are being killed makes the media more accountable for the gendered way dangerous overpolicing is being depicted. (Photo source: Mia Ferminadoza)

To counter stereotypical beliefs and the accompanying risks, many black women try to overcompensate by doing more femininity than they would otherwise.⁴⁴ In some cases, this may be because they know a performance of femininity will be rewarded, whereas failing to do it will be punished. The writer Hannah Eko, for example, a black woman who is frequently misgendered, observes that avoiding this requires her to do more femininity than similar-looking women with different skin tones:

*I'm supposed to go to frustrating lengths to "prove" I'm feminine and offset my blackness (keep my hair long, my voice soft, my clothes appropriately girly), while women who are white or lighter in appearance are given more latitude for experimentation.*⁴⁵

On white women, she notes, androgynous clothes and very short haircuts are seen as playfully "boyish"; on black women, they're intimidatingly "manly."

But there are costs to conforming to white standards of beauty. Because femininity is implicitly white, doing femininity can feel like doing whiteness. So some black women may feel that adopting a Girly Girl strategy is capitulating to or internalizing racism. "Our oppression has been so well done," said an

African American teenager named Nia, “we don’t even see that our own values in terms of beauty are very skewed.”⁴⁶ For her, resisting white standards of feminine beauty was “empowering.”

Nia embraced a Black Is Beautiful strategy. Such a strategy might involve selecting African-inspired clothing styles and colors, wearing headwraps or hairstyles like braids or dreadlocks, and reframing characteristically black features as both feminine and beautiful. But because black femininity is policed differently than white femininity, these women likely pay costs—both interpersonal and professional—for this self-love, and contend with a higher likelihood of being mistreated or even abused by authority figures.

For black women, then, the Girly Girl, Tough Gal, and Black Is Beautiful strategies are always both gendered and raced. Each comes with both benefits and costs, sometimes deadly ones. Black women, though, are not the only people in America struggling with intersecting expectations. Asian Americans are, too.

Asian American Men and Women

Asian American men face a predicament precisely opposite that of African American men. While black men are stereotyped as hypermasculine, East Asian men are stereotyped as deficiently masculine. If black men and women are masculinized, Asian men and women are feminized.⁴⁷ Asians of both sexes are assumed to be smaller, lighter, and less muscular than whites. Asian women are stereotyped as quiet, deferential, and shy, while Asian men are often depicted as less masculine than other races: nerdy, not brawny; passive and reserved; even deficiently sexual.

These stereotypes don’t come out of thin air but, like the stereotypes of African Americans, are rooted in history.⁴⁸ During the gold rush of the 1800s, the United States brought Chinese men as laborers, often against their will. Tens of thousands of men, living in all-male groups, had to learn how to perform domestic tasks for themselves. Later, when they were forced out of their jobs in farming, mining, manufacturing, and construction, they became servants or opened businesses offering domestic services to the wider population. By virtue of doing “women’s work,” East Asian men were feminized in the cultural imagination.

For Asian men, then, racial stereotypes interfere with their ability to conform to gender expectations. Some Asian men try to counter this stereotype by acting more aggressively than they otherwise would.⁴⁹ Gary, a Chinese American lawyer who describes himself as a “jockish type,” explains: “Well, I think the stereotype is that Asian men are docile. . . . That is the reason I decided to be a trial attorney—to cut against that.” Being a trial attorney requires Gary to fight on behalf of his clients, a behavior that is inconsistent with the Asian stereotype.

Gary's Assertive Asian gender strategy—being gregarious, dating frequently, excelling in athletics, and achieving in a job that requires him to be aggressive—has worked out well for him: He is a very successful lawyer. But it is also a daily battle. Most of his potential clients, he explains, have never encountered a Chinese American lawyer and worry that he won't be able to represent them well. "Do I have to overcome [the stereotype] every day?" Gary asks himself out loud. "Yes, I do." He has to prove to others, continually, that he is not passive in the courtroom.

Asian women are also racially feminized. In the mid-1800s, thousands of Chinese and Japanese women were brought to the United States against their will to work as sex slaves.⁵⁰ A trader might pay a starving family in China \$40 for a daughter and then sell her to a brothel in San Francisco for \$2,500. The large numbers of Asian prostitutes, alongside the Japanese geisha stereotype, hyperfeminized Asian women as demure, passive, and sexually available.

The stereotype lives on as Asian women continue to face a hyperfeminization relative to white women, an intensification of gender expectations like that experienced by black men. Asian women are often expected to be passive and deferential and may receive unwelcome attention for these presumed traits.⁵¹ Karen Eng, a Japanese American, describes the stereotypical Asian woman:

*The fantasy Asian is intelligent yet pliable, mysterious yet ornamental. She's also perpetually prepubescent—ageless and petite, hairless, high-pitched, girly. . . . As I once overheard someone saying, she's "tuckable" under the arm.*⁵²

This fantasy Asian girl appeals, particularly, to men who want a submissive girlfriend or wife, but Eng has no interest in being "tuckable." She doesn't want to be anyone's geisha or China doll, but some men assume that she will be: "No matter how many combinations of combat boots, 501s, and ratty Goodwill coats you wear," she says, "they still see a little Oriental flower."⁵³

Eng doesn't adopt an Oriental Flower strategy because it conflicts with her self-concept. Instead, she uses an Assertive Asian strategy of her own. Lisa, an eighteen-year-old Korean American, has adopted this strategy, too:

*I feel like I have to prove myself to everybody and maybe that's why I'm always vocal. I'm quite aware of that stereotype of Asian women all being taught to be submissive. . . . I don't want that to be labeled on me.*⁵⁴

But while Gary can use his identity as a man to account for behavior inconsistent with the feminized Asian stereotype, Asian women can't account for their counterstereotypical behavior that way. Accordingly, some Asian women

use different strategies for different audiences. Andrea, a twenty-three-year-old Vietnamese American, describes her strategy switching:

When I'm with my boyfriend and we're over at his family's house or at a church function, I tend to find myself being a little submissive. . . . But I know that when I get home, he and I have that understanding that I'm not a submissive person. I speak my own mind and he likes the fact that I'm strong.⁵⁵

Asian women and men, then, like black men and women, face challenges because of the way gender stereotypes intersect with beliefs about their race.

White American Men and Women

In contrast to African and Asian Americans, white Americans are racially *unmarked*. The **unmarked category** is the social identity that is assumed for a role or context without qualification. Taxi drivers are assumed to be male and nurses female, which is why we still sometimes hear phrases like “female taxi driver” and “male nurse.” Likewise, though same-sex marriage is legal, it’s still largely assumed to be between a man and a woman unless it’s marked as a “gay” marriage. Being unmarked means that it’s likely that others see us as the norm in a specific role. In contrast, being marked is an acknowledgment that we’re an outlier or deviation.

Unless marked with a modifier like Cuban or Native, then, Americans are generally assumed to be white (and Christian, middle class, heterosexual, etc.). “American” and “white American” are usually synonymous, which is why politicians can get away with saying things like “real Americans” or “working families” and most people understand they’re contrasting white Americans to immigrants, people of color, Muslims, and people using stigmatized government benefits.

Because white Americans are unmarked—considered just “regular people” in the United States—they are also considered “normal.” This includes being “normally gendered”: whites are not seen as too masculine or too feminine, or not masculine or feminine enough, based on their race alone. Consequently, if they have the personality and resources for it, white men and women can rather easily adopt any of a range of gender strategies, including the most widely prized ones. In high school or college, a young woman who is born into the middle class with genes that give her light skin and a petite, thin body type can be an All-American Girl, while the young man who is sufficiently athletic, racially white, and class privileged can be an All-American Guy.

By virtue of being unmarked, white Americans also carry the stigma of being “regular,” “plain,” and “uninteresting.” Whiteness is even sometimes used as a metaphor for normal or boring: Nonexperimental sex is “vanilla,” clean-cut people are “white bread,” and an unimportant untruth is a “white lie.” This is another reason

why the Family Focused, Supportive Spouse, and Breadwinner are implicitly white strategies: They are imagined to be the opposite of cool, exciting, or dangerous.

Accordingly, some middle-class white people try to distance themselves from the respectable but bland image that is bestowed on them by virtue of their race and class. The Goths discussed in Chapter 4 were doing just that. Most were white and middle class and “doing” freakiness was a way for them to “become a little cooler” and “differentiate themselves from the mainstream.”⁵⁶ They enjoyed the disconcerting effect their appearance had on others. Unlike, say, black men, who are often perceived as threatening, white folks have to work hard to make other people uncomfortable.

White people don’t always carry every possible privilege, though. When being white intersects with being poor and living in an urban neighborhood, these realities intersect with whiteness. Sociologist Amy Wilkins studied poor, urban white women who lived alongside and identified with their black and Puerto Rican neighbors.⁵⁷ These women adopted the “street” fashion, mannerisms, and language of their neighbors of color with whom they shared a class but not a racial background. This Tough Gal strategy offered white women freedom from the more restrictive gender rules for middle- and upper-class white women—they could be assertive, outspoken and openly sexual—but the strategy came at a cost. The women of color in their neighborhoods sometimes called them “wannabes” and described them as imposters. Summarizing, Wilkins writes,

*White girls who “don’t know who they are.” They’re loud, annoying, always fighting, too proud of having sex. They wear the wrong clothes. They smoke the wrong cigarettes. They talk wrong, have the wrong attitudes, and have the wrong priorities. And they have the wrong boyfriends.*⁵⁸

By virtue of being white, these women had to try harder to enact the Tough Gal strategy, and the women of color around them recognized it as overdone and possibly even inappropriate. From the perspective of the poor white women who adopted this strategy, however, being a “wannabe” was one of their best options. Without class privilege, these young women didn’t have the option to be an All-American Girl, so being a Tough Gal gave them “an inhabitable, if stereotyped and degraded, persona.”⁵⁹

These discussions of the options typically faced by white, black, and East Asian men and women are only a peek into how race, like economic class and place of residence, shapes opportunities for performing gender. People from Latin America and the Middle East as well as South Asians and Native Americans have their own particular challenges that are not captured by these examples. And an increasing proportion of all Americans are identifying as multiracial, which further complicates the strategic choices available. But intersectionality is about more than just race and class. We turn next to sexual orientation.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

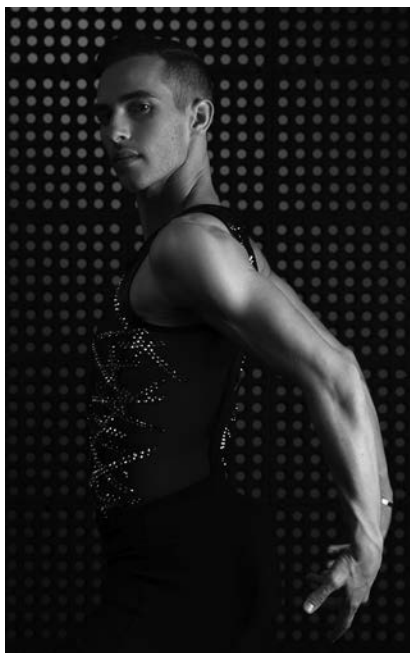
Contemporary Western societies are strongly **heteronormative**, designed on the assumption that everyone is heterosexual. Just as most tools are designed for right-handed people and most homes for the able-bodied, our society is designed primarily for heterosexuals. Accordingly, the unmarked sexual orientation is heterosexuality. The most commonly used marked categories are *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual*; together, these groups are considered **sexual minorities**.

Unmarked individuals are generally presumed heterosexual unless there are culturally recognizable signs indicating otherwise. In the United States, some of these culturally recognizable signs are directly related to sexual orientation (for example, displaying a “gay” wedding photo at work), but many are instead related to gender expression: Effeminate men are read as gay while masculine women are often assumed to be lesbian. Indeed, some of us claim to have excellent “gaydar,” or the ability to detect, radar-like, sexual minorities in our presence. What we are looking for is neither the presence nor the absence of sexual desire for people of the same sex, but rather gender deviance: “swishy” men and “manly” women. That is, we are looking for people who are breaking gender rules.

The American tendency to expect gay men to act feminine and lesbians to act masculine means that heterosexuals may be motivated to avoid gender-bending strategies. A heterosexual woman who performs “too much” masculinity may be suspected to be a lesbian. This may or may not bother her on principle, but she may consider the possibility that it will be interpreted as a signal that she’s sexually uninterested in men. To attract men’s sexual attention, she may feel she has to do a certain amount of femininity. Likewise, some heterosexual men may avoid feminine styles and interests for the same reason: it might send the wrong signals. Societies that conflate gender-bending with same-sex attraction create incentives for heterosexuals to conform to gender norms lest their identity be mistaken.

Facing these same constraints, but often with different motivations, sexual minorities do gender in a variety of ways depending in part on whether they want to “pass” as heterosexual. Many want to keep their sexual orientation a secret from at least some people because of **heterosexism**, individual and institutional bias against sexual minorities. Since our gaydar is tuned to detect gender deviance, gender conformity is an excellent way to hide in plain sight. Brandon, for example, a white gay man living in rural Colorado, explained how he tries to pass as heterosexual: “I try to live as straight a life as possible. Whether it’s dressing, the car I drive, the area I’m in. When I fill up at a gas station, my greatest fear is to look at another guy the wrong way.”⁶⁰

Brandon feels compelled to hide his sexual orientation because of **compulsory heterosexuality**, the gender rule that men be attracted to women and women



Olympians Gus Kenworthy and Adam Rippon both identify as gay but have adopted very different gender strategies.

to men. In some cases, breaking this rule can attract vicious or violent policing, especially if one is gender nonconforming.⁶¹ Even for sexual minorities living in places where being “out” isn’t dangerous, though, following gender rules can be advantageous. Many people are more tolerant of sexual minorities who are gender conforming than those who are gender deviant. Asked how she would feel about having a lesbian roommate, for example, a college student expressed just this sentiment:

*If my roommate was a lesbian and she was more feminine, I think I would be more comfortable. . . . [If she was] like me—she looked girly—it wouldn’t matter if she liked guys or girls. But if it was someone that was really boyish, I think it would be hard for me to feel comfortable.*⁶²

Likewise, a gay Latino man insisted: “I could never bring home someone that was the stereotype of a *joto* or *maricón*,” using derogatory Spanish words for feminine-acting gay men. “He wouldn’t fit in with the family.”⁶³ People who are gay or lesbian, but not *queer*, are sometimes more accepted, both among sexual minorities and in the wider society.

Because sexual minorities face prejudice not based just on their sexual orientation but also their gender performance, some sexual minorities adopt a Not

Too Queer strategy. Some women do this because femininity suits them. Others do so because—as with black women—presenting a conventionally (white, heterosexual) feminine appearance brings rewards, while failing to do so brings costs. One tall, forty-one-year-old white lesbian copywriter named Rebecca, for example, explained that she uses makeup to mute her “difference” from heterosexual coworkers and clients: “I even try to take a little bit of that threat off, you know, by saying you don’t have to worry about me being different.”⁶⁴ Some gay men also adopt the Not Too Queer strategy.⁶⁵ This overall strategy of minimizing difference is also called **homonormativity**, a practice of obeying most gender rules with the noted exception of the one that says we must sexually desire and partner with someone of the other sex.

One challenge for women and men who adopt a Not Too Queer strategy is recognizability. In a heteronormative society, gender conformity may make same-sex sexual orientation invisible.⁶⁶ Gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals may want to be visible for multiple reasons: They may want to upset heteronormativity, find people to date or marry, or ward off unwanted attention from the other sex. With this in mind, they might adopt a Recognizably Butch or Queer strategy.⁶⁷ For women, this strategy might involve adopting more masculine clothes and mannerisms and avoiding makeup and long hair. One forty-year-old woman explained:

*I have a dyke look that I assume when I want to fit in more with lesbian social settings, and I think I’ve been more careful about keeping my haircut very crisp and clean so I can look more dyke-y when I want to.*⁶⁸

Doing gender in a way that communicates our sexual identity to both mainstream society and subcultures can be especially tricky for people who identify as bisexual. If gender nonconformity marks one as gay or lesbian, and conformity marks one as heterosexual, what is a person who is attracted to both or all sexes to do?

Race matters here, too. Sexual minorities of color often discover that queer spaces are also white spaces, while communities of color can be homophobic spaces, ones that are not just oriented toward heterosexuals but hostile toward sexual minorities.⁶⁹ Malachi, for example, a two-spirit-identified member of the Sturgeon Lake First Nation, explains how his people had lost sight of their third-gender tradition in the process of colonization, leading him to face homophobia at home. In a nearly Canadian city, he encountered more tolerance for his gender identity and sexual orientation but less for his race. In the urban gay community, he explained, “there still is all of the stereotypes and being discriminated for being aboriginal.”⁷⁰

The way that racial stereotypes are gendered affects how much femininity needs to be performed if lesbians and bisexual women want to be seen as less

“different.”⁷¹ Because stereotypes about East Asians include the idea that they are more feminine than white people, Asian lesbians may not need to work as hard to seem “normal,” but they may have a harder time being recognizably lesbian or bisexual. One Cambodian American lesbian explained that she felt she had to adopt a combination of Recognizably Butch and Assertive Asian to get people to see her as she is:

*I guess that's one reason why I'm so in your face and out about being a dyke. . . . I'm invisible as a lesbian because I look in [an Asian] cultural way—that is, where I have long hair, you know—and I despise that invisibility.*⁷²

For Asian lesbians, doing femininity makes them extra invisible.

Conversely, to be seen as feminine, black lesbians have to confront stereotypes applied to both black people and lesbians, both of which masculinize them.⁷³ Accordingly, they may face more pressure than either white or Asian women to perform femininity, since appearing heterosexual may be one of the few nonstigmatizing identities that they carry, especially if they are also working class or poor. In a study of black lesbian women in New York City, for example, those who adopted a Recognizably Butch strategy knew they were risking policing from the wider society, including their own African American community.⁷⁴ About half chose to dress in a more feminine way for this reason, though a fifth described choosing to dress somewhat masculine and the rest adopted a variety of gender-blending styles. Those who didn't adopt a masculine look risked being invisible as queer in the predominantly white lesbian feminist community. Notably, even black women who did adopt more masculine styles often went unnoticed by white lesbians, perhaps because the white women attributed whatever masculinity they did perceive to the black women's race.

In some parts of the West today, then, sexual minorities are embraced; in others, same-sex desire is still stigmatized; and whether we want to be out is also dependent on our particular personalities. Whatever the case, our gender performances are read as signs of our sexual identity. How all of this works, of course, can change, if one crosses a border and encounters a new set of cultural rules.

IMMIGRATION

When people move from one country to another, the gender strategies they employed in their place of origin may suddenly be impossible or undesirable. Immigrants may find themselves in an entirely different social class or a strange new living environment. They may be struggling to learn a new language and face **xenophobia**, institutional and individual bias against people seen as foreign.



Members of Trans Queer Pueblo, a group that advocates for the rights of LGBT undocumented immigrants, participate in the Phoenix Pride Parade. People of color who are also sexual minorities and immigrants face harsh policing across all their intersectional identities.

In some cases, they are suddenly a racial or ethnic minority and unfamiliar with the stereotypes others apply to them.

When sexual minorities migrate from one country to another, for example, they encounter new cultural rules about how to do gender that intersect with the recipient country's unique approach to sexual orientation. Americans tend to endorse group identities based on interests or membership in political, religious, and ethnic groups. Accordingly, many believe that people have a right to be "out" and recognized for one's sexual identity. In France, though, sexual orientation is supposed to be a marginal part of one's self concept, eclipsed by a generic Frenchness. What's important, one man explained, "is that you're French before anything and we don't care if you're anything else."⁷⁵ Wearing your identity on your sleeve is considered distasteful and making a big deal about coming out is seen as overly theatrical.

When Xavier moved to the United States, he welcomed the opportunity to adopt a gay identity. "I don't feel there is one way to be an American," he explained. "You can hyphenate your identity in the U.S. while you can't really in France." Danielle, who immigrated to France, enjoys her new country for just the opposite reason: "[I]n the U.S., people want to know your label immediately," she explained. She prefers things the French way.

Some immigrants have a harder time finding strategies that connect their gender identities, sexual desires, and national, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. A study of men who immigrated to London from sub-Saharan Africa found that many were happy to be living in a society that was more accepting of homosexuality, but they still resisted identifying as “gay.”⁷⁶ The term implied a lifestyle they didn’t embrace. One African immigrant explained:

*If I say gay, it comes with lots of associations and ideas in terms of how you live your life, what kind of culture you are into, what kind of music and kind of the whole construct around that label that most of us, even me, I don’t associate myself with.*⁷⁷

This man was still trying to find a gender strategy that bridged the gap between his cultural background and the gender rules and gay culture he encountered in London.

Just as sexual minority immigrants may begin rethinking their identity, men and women who migrate as married couples may begin rethinking what it means to be a husband and wife. Doing so may mean adjusting to a new economic class; their skills and educational degrees may not translate into the same privileges in their new country, while smaller social networks and language barriers limit job choices.⁷⁸ Some immigrants adjust their ideas of masculinity and femininity accordingly.⁷⁹ Immigrant couples who once enjoyed the Breadwinner/Family Focused strategies may discover that their new circumstances require them to establish economic and domestic in- or inter-dependence.⁸⁰

Wives who migrate without their husbands, for example, often face very low wages and little job protection but feel great pride in being able to help support their families back home.⁸¹ Wives who stay home may discover that an absent husband similarly requires them to take on tasks previously ruled unsuitable for women. One woman, for example, who stayed in Mexico while her husband went to the United States, remarked on her responsibilities for taking care of both the feminine and masculine tasks of the home and joked: “Now I am a man and a woman!”⁸²

Husbands who migrate without their wives may also develop skills that they were able to avoid learning in their home countries. A migrant to the United States named Marcelino, for example, explained how his circumstances required him to adjust his gender strategy:

*Back in Mexico, I didn’t know how to prepare food, iron a shirt or wash my clothes. I only knew how to work, how to harvest. But . . . [here] I learned how to do everything that a woman can do to keep a man comfortable. . . . Necessity forced me to do things which I had previously ignored.*⁸³

While many men migrate in order to fulfill the masculine responsibility of bread-winning, in the process they may develop feminine skills to counterbalance the loss of female household support.

Married couples who migrate together must adjust their gender strategies as a couple. Some wives transition from Family Focused to Super Moms. A Mexican migrant to the United States, for example, explained: "I now have three jobs. I take care of the house and kids, I take care of my husband, and I clean hotel rooms. I work ten hours a day outside of the home and six hours in the home."⁸⁴ Like all Super Moms, migrant mothers struggle to keep up with the demands on their time, even if they enjoy their newfound opportunities and responsibilities.⁸⁵

In response, some migrant women begin to change their ideas about what kind of woman they want to be and what kind of husband they prefer. Rosa, an interviewee from El Salvador, explained:

*Maybe it's the lifestyle. Here [in the U.S.], the man and the woman, both have to work to be able to pay the rent, the food, the clothes, a lot of expenses. Probably that . . . makes us, the women, a little freer in the United States. . . . In this country if you are courageous and have strength, you can get ahead by yourself, with or without [a husband]. . . . I would say that's why here the woman doesn't follow the man more.*⁸⁶

When women like Rosa embrace a new gender strategy in response to new cultural and economic realities, they often ask their husbands to embrace a new gender strategy, too, one more like the Super Dad. Ricardo talked about the adjustment:

*Here we both work equally, we both work full-time. . . . If she is asked to stay at work late, I have to stay with the children. . . . In El Salvador it was different. I never touched a broom there [laughing]. . . . Here, no. If she quits, we don't eat. It's equal.*⁸⁷

Jacobo, from Guatemala, is enthusiastic about his wife working and has high hopes for her future:

*There are many opportunities here [in the U.S.] and she is smart in business and she can learn English quickly. . . . It upsets me to find her at home all the time [babysitting], when she could be doing something better.*⁸⁸

Not all migrants adopt sharing strategies. Some men, like Ricardo and Jacobo, respond positively to the change that comes with economic interdependence; other husbands resist. Likewise, some women pine for the days when they could be Family Focused or afford maids and nannies. Whatever choices migrants

make, however, are shaped by the differently gendered opportunities and constraints they encounter, as well as those related to their other identities.

Stories of immigration reveal how dependent our gender strategies are on our social context. Travel from one geographical place to another creates both new opportunities and new constraints, all of which interact with gender. There are other kinds of traveling, too, which brings us to our final set of identities: aging and disability. Both are a kind of travel: through time into an older body or through accident or illness into a body that works quite differently.

ABILITY, AGE, AND ATTRACTIVENESS

Bodies are one of our most potent resources for doing gender. Our body's age, abilities and disabilities, and degree of conformity to conventional standards of attractiveness combine to shape what gender strategies we can pull off.⁸⁹ To begin, let's consider ability and disability.

The Gender of Disability

Thanks to **ableism**, individual and institutional bias against people with differently abled bodies, disabled people are often at a disadvantage when interacting with other people and making their way in their society. In addition to contending with ableism, disabled men and women also face specific challenges when attempting to do gender.

When asked to describe what it means to be a man, Jerry—a sixteen-year-old wheelchair user with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis—emphasized self-reliance. A man, he explained, is “fairly self-sufficient in that you can sort of handle just about any situation in that you can help other people and that you don't need a lot of help.”⁹⁰ For Jerry, growing up meant struggling to live up to his idea of manliness:

If I ever have to ask someone for help, it really makes me feel like less of a man. I don't like asking for help at all. You know, like even if I could use some, I'll usually not ask just because I can't, I just hate asking.

Not only did Jerry himself feel like less of a man as a result of his disability, but his female peers similarly didn't seem to see him as a “guy.” “I might be a ‘really nice person’ [to them],” he said, “but not like a guy per se. I think to some extent that you're sort of genderless to them.”⁹¹

Like Jerry, most disabled men have to accept not only an inability to be self-sufficient but also the inability to live up to other masculine ideals, like the

ability to be physically assertive and sexually successful. If a disabled man has the resources to live alone and pay for renovations, technologies, and human assistance—that is, if he is quite wealthy or commands a very high salary—he may be able to retain much of the illusion of self-sufficiency he enjoyed before he was injured. Damon, for example, a quadriplegic who requires twenty-four-hour personal care, was able to feel independent because he could afford to be so. Explaining, he emphasized that he has help, but *he* is in charge, “directing” both people and activities:

I direct all of my activities around my home where people have to help me to maintain my apartment, my transportation, which I own, and direction in where I go. I direct people how to get there, and I tell them what my needs will be when I am going and coming, and when to get where I am going. . . . I don't see any reason why [I can't] get my life on just as I was having it before.⁹²

For Damon and some other disabled men, regaining independence is an Able-Disabled strategy that preserves a sense of masculinity. It may even enhance it, given that men with disabilities must overcome great obstacles to have what other men may take for granted.

Not all men, however, have Damon's resources. A study of young black and Latino men from impoverished inner cities found that adapting to degrees of paralysis due to spinal cord injuries left them feeling like “half a man.”⁹³ They pointed to the inability to enact the same highly physical masculine Tough Guy strategy that their neighborhoods encouraged and they had once enjoyed. “No longer could the men walk with a swagger and stand tall in a way that emanated power; no longer could the men have sex anywhere at any time; no longer could the men physically fight a potential threat.”⁹⁴

In the absence of money, disabled men may opt to adopt an Emphatically Hetero strategy designed to remind others that they retain a distinctly masculine sexuality.⁹⁵ A man named Roger, for example, experienced problems with memory, speech, and motor control caused by brain injuries sustained in a car accident. To compensate, he embraced the sexual objectification of women, plastering his living space with images of “bikini-clad women lying on cars and motorbikes.”⁹⁶ When the female sociologist who interviewed him entered his home, he immediately winked at her and asked her to do his dishes. His humor emphasized the fact that while he was disabled and she was not, he was still a man. Enacting a more youthful version of this strategy, a young man named Dag who was paralyzed at twenty-two used a programmed speaking device to whistle at women.⁹⁷ Dag's strategy, like Roger's, was a way to remind others that he was not just male but masculine.

Sports are another arena that offers disabled men the opportunity to assert their masculinity. Wheelchair rugby, originally called “murderball,” is an aggres-



Wheelchair rugby allows disabled men to reclaim their masculinity by proving that they are just as assertive and competitive as they were before their injury.

sive and risky contact sport that enables players to prove their athletic prowess and fearlessness in the face of danger. The fact that they play through their particular physical limitation suggests an extraordinary degree of manliness, counteracting the loss of masculinity they experienced when they were injured.

If men's identities are troubled by an inability to be *assertive* with their bodies, women's identities are more often tied up with their ability to be physically *attractive*. Like able-bodied women, disabled women learn the cultural rule that it's important for women to be sexy at the same time that stereotypes of the disabled portray them as unsexy, even asexual.⁹⁸ Beth, a woman with multiple sclerosis, writes: "I am sure that other people see a wheelchair first, me second, and a woman third, if at all."⁹⁹ Disability rights activist Judy Heumann explains:

*You know, I use a wheelchair, and when I go down the street I do not get to be sexually harassed. I hear nondisabled women complaining about it, but I don't ever get treated as a sexual object.*¹⁰⁰

Some women respond to this degendering and desexualization by trying to conform to gendered expectations as much as possible. Harilyn was one of these women. She writes:

I was determined to prove I was a "normal" woman. I deliberately sought the most handsome man to parade around. . . . I became pregnant out of wedlock at

*seventeen, which was extremely affirming for me. One of my proud moments was parading around the supermarket with my belly sticking out for all to see that I was indeed a woman, and that my body worked like a normal woman's body.*¹⁰¹

Occupying a position in “no woman’s land” can inspire women to hyperconform, as Harilyn did, but it can also give them permission to resist cultural definitions of femininity.¹⁰² Some disabled women find that their injury or illness gives them the insight and permission they need to escape from rigid standards of beauty. As one disabled woman with some difficulty with motor control explained: “If I tried to put on mascara, I’d put my eye out, you know; I could never physically do it.”¹⁰³ For her, being unable to enact the Girly Girl strategy has been liberating:

*It's meant that I'm dealing with having a better balance in life as a person, not just as a person with a disability. So I think that we're able to be who we are as women 'cause we don't fit the stereotype maybe.*¹⁰⁴

Class also plays a role. Siv had adopted a Family Focused strategy before an accident left her paralyzed from the chest down with only some arm movement.¹⁰⁵ Fortunately for her, this didn’t disrupt her gender strategy very much; with her husband’s income and her disability check helping to pay for help around the house—a housekeeper and nurse—she was able to continue on as the emotional center of her family. Siv “came out with her femininity intact.”¹⁰⁶

Disability interacts with masculinity and femininity, as well as other things about us, making the transition to a life with a disability different for men and women. Age is another life transition, one that we all face, and one that intersects with attractiveness in gendered ways.

Age and Attractiveness

Society has strict age-related rules that pressure us to “act our age.”¹⁰⁷ So, as we grow older, our ability to “pull off” different gender strategies changes. Sociologist Cheryl Laz explores the language we use to discuss the ways in which age limits our behavior:

*“Act your age. You’re a big kid now,” we say to children to encourage independence (or obedience). “Act your age. Stop being so childish,” we say to other adults when we think they are being irresponsible. “Act your age; you’re not as young as you used to be,” we say to an old person pursuing “youthful” activities.*¹⁰⁸

Staying up all night at clubs is typically seen as fun-loving for young adults; among forty-somethings, a sign perhaps that someone is failing to “settle down.”

Becoming a parent is believed to be a blessing at thirty, a curse at thirteen. Learning to snowboard seems typical for a twenty-eight-year-old but risky for a fifty-eight-year-old. Just as there are gender rules, then, there are age rules. These rules press us to “do” our age by doing things that are judged as neither “too immature” nor “too old” for the number of candles on our birthday cake.

These age-related rules are gendered. Socially, men and women age at different rates and in different ways. Playing with dolls may be tolerated in a two-year-old boy who isn’t expected to know the rules, but worrisome in a twelve-year-old boy who, by then, is seen as breaking a rule that he is supposed to want to obey. Girls, in contrast, can play with dolls throughout childhood and even collect them in adulthood with little to no need to account for that interest.

People learn early on that age matters for how they do gender. Consider Anna-Clara, Fanny, and Angelica, three eleven-year-olds already well versed in these rules. Anna-Clara explains:

*Frankly it’s ridiculous to wear thong [underwear] at our age. Eighth, ninth grade, that’s when girls start to be mature enough for it. When you are, like, in the fifth grade, it looks ridiculous if you walk around with thongs.*¹⁰⁹

Anna-Clara’s friends, Fanny and Angelica, may admire high heels, but they believe they’re not yet ready for them. Angelica recalls: “I saw these beige boots, which I thought were nice. But I wouldn’t buy them. They had rather high heels.” Fanny concurred, remarking that she’d be more than happy to police Angelica if she were to break this rule: “If Angelica wears such shoes, I tell her that they’re adults’ shoes.”

These eleven-year-olds will eventually age into thongs and high heels—their brothers will not, at least not without paying pretty severe consequences—but they will also age back out again. This is because, in addition to age-related gender rules, aging limits and changes our options for how to do gender in more physical ways. As we age, our appearance and physiology may no longer support certain strategies (like high-impact athleticism and long days in fashionable shoes); our bodies become increasingly disabled by injury, illness, and time; our age is interpreted by others as ugliness; and we come to face **ageism**, an institutionalized preference for the young and the cultural association of aging with decreased social value.¹¹⁰

Because more emphasis is placed on women’s physical attractiveness than men’s, however, women lose more esteem as they age.¹¹¹ For women, writer Susan Sontag explains, beauty is tightly tied to youth: “Only one standard of female beauty is sanctioned: the girl.”¹¹² In other words, for women, preserving youthfulness and preserving attractiveness are one and the same. For men, she argues, there are two standards of beauty: the boy and the man. This allows

men to transition to a different attractiveness as they age, one not available to women. She writes:

The beauty of a boy resembles the beauty of a girl. In both sexes it is a fragile kind of beauty and flourishes naturally only in the early part of the life-cycle. Happily, men are able to accept themselves under another standard of good looks—heavier, rougher, more thickly built. A man does not grieve when he loses the smooth, unlined, hairless skin of a boy. For he has only exchanged one form of attractiveness for another: the darker skin of a man's face, roughened by daily shaving, showing the marks of emotion and the normal lines of age. There is no equivalent of this second standard for women. The single standard of beauty for women dictates that they must go on having clear skin. Every wrinkle, every line, every gray hair, is a defeat.¹¹³

Once a woman's youthful beauty fades, she will be expected to adopt a strategy of invisibility. The asexual and maternal Grandma, perhaps. Duncan Kennedy, who studied fashion-advice TV shows, explains:

Old women . . . are expected to accept the conventional social assessment that they are sexually unattractive, and dress so as to minimize their sexuality. If they dress sexily . . . [they] are likely to be interpreted as rebels or eccentrics or "desperate," and sanctioned accordingly.¹¹⁴

Women have to get the timing just right. If they adopt this strategy too early, they'll be accused of "letting themselves go." If they wait too long, they'll fail to "age gracefully." The term *cougar* reveals this kind of policing, implying that older women who are interested in sex with younger men are predatory animals.

We see such bias, for example, in the evaluation of the "realness" of marriages between men and women when one is an American citizen and the other is attempting to immigrate. In a study of an advice forum for people attempting to get their partners to the United States, concerns about what marriages are fraudulent are both gendered and aged.¹¹⁵ When the American partner is a woman who is older than her male partner, observers tend to assume that the younger man is exploiting her. On the assumption that no young man would genuinely choose to be with a woman who is "past her prime," observers raise a "red flag" on the relationship. "Sorry to be blunt," said one such observer to a woman seeking advice, "but you sound desperate. You see it as love. He sees it as his ticket to America."

In contrast, when an American man is seeking immigration papers for a substantially younger woman, his behavior is regarded as "rational" instead of desperate—a logical choice for a well-resourced man who desires a sexually available and grateful domestic helper. This is the case even when he explicitly

uses an agency that matches U.S. men with women seeking such a “ticket” into the country. A healthy relationship is assumed to involve his money and her attractiveness, so in these gendered calculations an older man and young woman look right together. Determining whether a couple is attempting to defraud the U.S. government, then, is a gendered process related to beliefs about what kind of age-discrepant relationships are “normal” and “believable.”

Aging is gendered, but it’s also intersectional, and it takes more of a toll on some groups than others. Class-privileged All-American Boys may grow up to be Breadwinners and, then, Distinguished Gentlemen, replacing the admiration they enjoyed for their looks and physical fitness with the admiration that comes with building a successful career and becoming a valued leader. An aging body may be harder on a Blue-Collar Guy who relies on his body’s ability to do the demanding job on which his sense of masculinity rests. As his physical abilities fade, he may come to rely on his ability to demand respect as a family Patriarch.

Wealthier women can look younger longer with excellent nutrition, good medical care, expensive beauty products, well-made and well-fitting clothes, gym memberships, personal trainers, and even cosmetic procedures. Some older women with high levels of cultural recognition participate actively in public life as Grande Dames. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Jane Fonda, and Oprah Winfrey are proud older women who get respect, but not everyone has the resources or profile required to do so. And, no matter how many resources a woman has, her aging appearance will likely be judged and penalized more harshly than a man’s.

Aging can be worse for working-class women like service workers and home care workers who, like working-class men, also work in physically demanding jobs. Sometimes their work trades directly on their attractiveness. Waitresses and receptionists, for example, may see their employability slip or their raises and tips decline as they age, without having the class privilege that enables them to replace looks with occupational success. It’s a cruel reality: Because beauty is expensive, working-class women, on average, lose their looks more quickly than more class-privileged women, at the same time that losing their looks carries greater costs.



In her eighties, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is known for wearing a “super diva” T-shirt during workouts. She is one of a small number of women who has been able to combine authority and attractiveness to become a widely admired Grande Dame.

Moreover, women who live in unsafe urban environments, who have few opportunities for exercise and few amenities for doing so, may be more likely to be obese in middle age and to have age-related diseases like high blood pressure and diabetes.¹¹⁶ The passing years take a greater toll on the poor and people of color than others. New research now shows that the persistent experience of discrimination over a lifetime does harm to the body, aging both men and women more quickly and contributing to illness.¹¹⁷ Attractiveness and ability intersect, influenced by our other identities and circumstances, shaping our gender strategies throughout our lives.

Revisiting the Question

Q+A

If gender is just one part of who we are, why isn't it crowded out by all the other things about us that are meaningful and consequential?

Gender isn't crowded out by other characteristics because it doesn't compete with those things, it colludes with them. Gender intersects with our other socially salient identities, inflecting them with gendered meaning, and every social position allows for different combinations of distinctions that carry costs and rewards. As we carve out a masculine or feminine identity, we develop strategies designed to manage all these expectations, constraints, and opportunities.

Some gender strategies are more realistic for us than others. Our individual characteristics, the organization of our societies, distinctions of value in our culture, and economic resources available to us all affect what we can pull off personally. Where we fall in this complex landscape of inequalities shapes the consequences for deviation from and conformity to gender rules. In simple words, we don't all have the same choices for doing gender.

Given our lot in life, most of us try to adopt a gender strategy that maximizes our own well-being and life chances. We often try to claim widely admired identities and distance ourselves from stigmatizing ones, but we don't all have the same resources to do so. So we often choose the least stigmatizing identity we can, like the "wannabes"; reject the rules, like those who insist that Black Is Beautiful; or try to negotiate with what is valued, like Blue-Collar Guys. We also experiment with multiple strategies across different situations, like the women who oscillate between Oriental Flower and Assertive Asian, or we use positive elements of masculinity or femininity to push away stigma, like the Able-Disabled and the Not Too Queer. We accept that others may accuse us of de-emphasizing parts of ourselves, like the black woman who attempts All-American Girl or the working-class man who is a Super Dad. We know we can't be everything to everyone, but we walk the tightrope of social disapproval across the complicated set of distinctions as best we can.

Next . . .

We are diverse individuals, with identities that go far beyond just gender, who use our free will and cultural competence to manage others' expectations of us. This is much easier for some of us than others, and some of us have much better options. Yet, we see a pattern in how men and women respond to these challenges: Men tend to find the gender binary, the science that attempts to uphold it, and the social rules that enforce it, less objectionable than women and people of other genders. And men have a much weaker tradition of protesting the way things are and asking for change. This seems like a good time to pose the question:

Q+A

If both men and women are constrained by a binary gender system, why is it that more women than men find this system unfair?

This question brings us to the part of the book where we directly tackle the issue of inequality.

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“

WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN!

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

”



6

Inequality: MEN AND MASCULINITIES

For a study of men's experience reading lifestyle magazines, a young man named Reid was asked to reflect on the impact gender rules had on him: the rules that a man should be emotionally and physically strong, at the top of his game professionally, and sexually successful with women. In response, Reid said that aligning those expectations with his real self was a type of work: "[R]econciling the expectations that other people in my life may have of what a man should be," he said, was something he had to actively do.¹ Finding a gender strategy that felt "right" to him didn't come entirely naturally. He didn't find the work especially onerous—"It's pretty easy for me," he explained—but he acknowledged that it wasn't so easy for others.

The last chapter discussed how living in a gendered society requires men and women to develop culturally recognizable gender strategies. This chapter explores, in more detail, what that looks like for men, arguing that a rigid gender binary system that requires us to do gender in specific ways is not optimal for either men or women. Men don't always experience this as a burden but, as Reid's comments suggest, it's still work.

This chapter also considers why men haven't been on the forefront of the movement to challenge the gender binary. The political activism aimed at changing gender relations has been called

“feminism” and the “women’s movement” because it has been primarily led and supported by women. Even today it is women, more than men, who object to the way their lives are gendered.² This leads us to our question:

Q+A

If both men and women are constrained by a binary gender system, why is it more women than men find this system unfair?

This chapter resolves this question by looking at how the costs and rewards of doing gender are distributed unequally. While men and women both need to do gender in order to be seen as fully functional members of society, we do not do gender in symmetrical ways, and the consequences of our gender performances are not the same. This is because the gender binary is *hierarchical*. It places men above women, values masculinity above femininity, and routinely brings men and women together into relationships in which women are positioned as helpers to men.

This is bad for both men and women, but in different ways. For men more than women, it narrows the range of life experiences that seem acceptable and right. For women more than men, it results in reduced social status, lower financial rewards, and an expectation that men’s needs and interests should take priority. Gender inequality, then, isn’t just about preferring men over women. It involves a far more complex calculus. Let’s begin with an example.

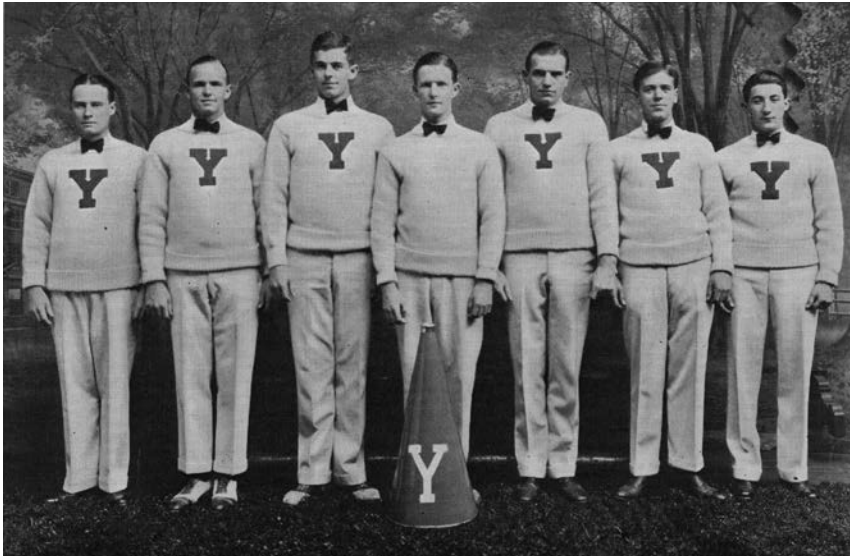
THE GENDER OF CHEERLEADING

At its inception in the mid-1800s, cheerleading was an all-male sport. Characterized by gymnastics, stunts, and crowd leadership, it was considered equivalent in prestige to that flagship of American masculinity: football. As the editors of the *Nation* saw it in 1911:

The reputation of having been a valiant “cheer-leader” is one of the most valuable things a boy can take away from college. As a title to promotion in professional or public life, it ranks hardly second to that of having been a quarterback.³

Indeed, cheerleading helped launch the political careers of three U.S. presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, Franklin Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan were cheerleaders.⁴ Actor Jimmy Stewart was head cheerleader at Princeton. Republicans Rick Perry, Tom DeLay, and Mitt Romney all led cheers for their schools’ teams.

Being a cheerleader was a “great responsibility” and a “high honor.”⁵ Comparing cheerleaders to Pericles of ancient Athens—statesman, orator, and military



The men of the Yale University cheerleading team stand proud in 1927.

general—the *New York Times* in 1924 described Stanford University’s all-male cheerleaders as “lithe, white-sweatered and flannel-trousered youth” projecting “mingled force and grace” and a “locomotive cheer.”⁶ As late as 1927, cheerleading manuals still referred to the reader exclusively as a “man,” “chap,” or “fellow.”

Women were first given the opportunity to join squads when large numbers of young men were deployed to fight World War I, leaving open spots that women were happy to fill. The entrance of women into the activity, though, was considered unnatural and even inappropriate. Argued one opponent in 1938:

*[Women cheerleaders] frequently became too masculine for their own good. We find the development of loud, raucous voices . . . and the consequent development of slang and profanity by their necessary association with [male] squad members.*⁸

Cheerleading was too masculine for women.

When the men returned from the war, there was an effort to push women back out of cheerleading. Some schools even banned female cheerleaders. In 1939, Gamma Sigma, the national college cheerleaders’ fraternity, refused to include female cheerleaders or recognize squads that did. “Every year there is a campaign to take them in,” said the fraternity’s president, “but every year we keep them out.”⁹ Ultimately, of course, the effort to preserve cheer as an exclusively male activity was unsuccessful. With a second mass deployment of men during World War II, women cheerleaders were here to stay.



By the 1960s and 1970s, cheerleaders were primarily female and the activity became less about leadership and more about support and sexiness.

But that wasn't the end of the story. Instead of changing how we thought about women, the presence of women in cheer changed how people thought about cheering. Because women were stereotyped as cute instead of "valiant," cheerleading's association with women led to its trivialization. By the 1950s, the ideal cheerleader was no longer a man with leadership skills; it was someone with "manners, cheerfulness, and good disposition." In response, boys pretty much turned away from cheerleading altogether. By the early 1960s, men with megaphones had been replaced by perky girls with pom-poms:

Cheerleading in the sixties consisted of cutesy chants, big smiles and revealing uniforms. There were no gymnastic tumbling runs. No complicated stunting. Never any injuries. About the most athletic thing sixties cheerleaders did was a cartwheel followed by the splits.¹⁰

In the span of a hundred years, cheerleading evolved from a respected pursuit to a silly show on the sidelines. As it became more female, its value and prestige declined. By 1974, those same Stanford cheerleaders were described as "simple creatures" who needed only two things: "blondeness, congenital or acquired, and a compulsively cute, nonstop bottom."¹¹

We've seen similar changes repeatedly in recent American society: in leisure activities like cheer, but also in occupations like "secretary," and in literature and the arts. We may even be seeing such changes right now, as women are increasingly entering college majors like biology or careers like law. The "demotion" of an arena of life as it undergoes a "sex change" is common. Understanding these demotions requires exploring the relationship between gender and power.

GENDERED POWER

Patriarchy: Then and Now

America and many European societies were patriarchies well into the 1800s and, in some cases, the 1900s. The literal meaning of the word **patriarchy** is "the rule of the father." It refers to the control of female and younger male family members by select adult men, or patriarchs.

In fully patriarchal societies, only patriarchs have rights. Women have no right to their own bodies and no right to the children they bear. Men decide where the family lives and whom their children marry. If a woman works outside the home, she does so only with the permission of the head of household (a father, brother, or husband), and her earnings are given directly to him. A patriarch may have social and legal permission to punish his wife or wives and his children physically, brutally if he chooses. He is "the king of his castle," so his word is law at home.

Meanwhile, because men alone have legal and civil rights, only men are entitled to act freely in the outside world, where they may—or may not—choose to represent the interests of their wives and children. In societies like these, women cannot vote, serve on juries, use birth control, work after marriage, keep their own wages, attain a divorce, have custody of their children, enlist in the military, own property, hold political office, or sue for discrimination, among many other restrictions.

Life really was like this for a long time, but as democracies replaced monarchies, the relationship among citizens changed, first among men with wealth and then among wider classes of men. Democratic states offered a new political bargain that gave rights to an ever-increasing range of men. Patriarchy was slowly replaced by a **democratic brotherhood**, the distribution of citizenship rights to certain classes of men. Each newly incorporated class of men—sometimes represented by political parties, unions, or fraternal associations like Elks and Knights of Columbus—often tried to keep the next class of men out. But slowly, as poor men, men of color, immigrants, and indigenous men fought for the rights of citizenship offered to elite men in these early democracies, the brotherhood grew.

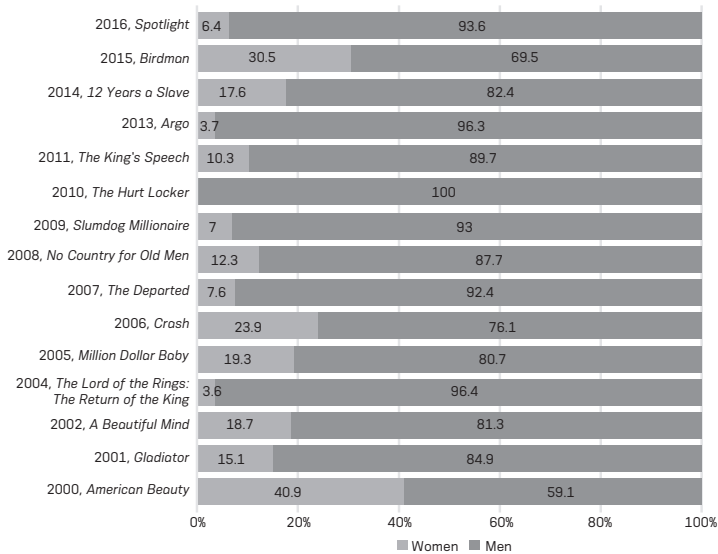
Women had to fight, too. Only gradually, in struggle after struggle, did they see victories, earning one hard-fought right at a time.¹² These struggles have changed both laws and customs so that today most Western countries are based upon **formal gender equality**—the requirement that laws treat men and women as equal citizens. Incredibly, though the idea is rather new and was once considered absurd, equal rights for women has come to be seen as common sense. Most people in most countries today, that is, see both classic patriarchy and its modified form in democratic brotherhoods as deeply and unacceptably unfair.

However, even as patriarchy has steadily declined as a principle of law, its underlying way of *thinking* about gender still persists. First, even though people no longer need to be male to count as full citizens, men continue to be conceived of as the generic human, with women as deviant from the norm. Men, in other words, are the unmarked human. This becomes clear when we consider how political concerns are separated into *political issues* and *women's issues*; the bathroom symbol for *men's* is the same one used for *person* on “walk” signs and elsewhere; classes on gender are often assumed to be primarily about women, as if only women are gendered; and cartoon animals, in the absence of cues like hair bows or long eyelashes, are assumed to be male.¹³ Men's identity as men is often invisible, even to themselves, while women's identity as women is usually centrally important. All too often, in other words, men are people and women are women.

Some argue that *man* stands in for *human*, so the stick figure in pants, for example, really does reflect all of us. But that's not how our brains work. Studies show that the words *he*, *his*, and *man*, when used generically to refer to individuals or the human race, tend to conjure up images of men, not men and women together.¹⁴ The words *human*, *individual*, and *person* work the same way.¹⁵ Women are all too often excluded from the terms in practice, even if they're in the definition. One sign we still live in a modified patriarchy, then, is the persistent centering of men as normal or neutral and the marginalizing of women as a modified, nonneutral type of person.

We see this in media, too, where men's characters and stories predominate (Figure 6.1). A study of the top-grossing 200 nonanimated films in 2015, for example, found that only 17 percent were headlined by women without a male co-lead.¹⁶ Male characters received almost twice as much screen time as women and had more than twice as many lines. Half of the movies that have won Best Picture since 1929 fail to pass the Bechdel Test, a check as to whether a movie has even a single scene in which two named female characters talk to one another about something other than a man.¹⁷ We see similar dynamics in comics, primetime television commercials, video games, children's books, and cartoons.¹⁸ Girls and women don't take center stage in American media as often as boys and men, reflecting the general belief that women can identify with men (because men are people), but men can't identify with women (because women are women).

FIGURE 6.1 | PROPORTION OF WORDS SPOKEN BY MEN VS. WOMEN IN BEST PICTURE-WINNING FILMS*

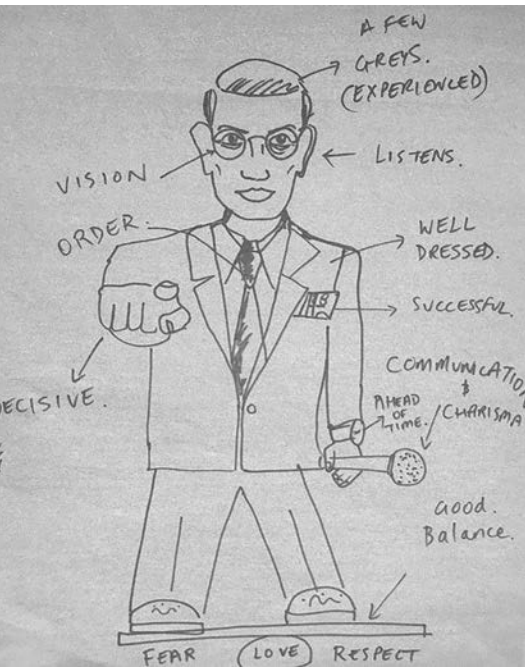


*All female and male characters who speak more than one hundred words.

Source: Data from Hanah Anderson, "The Pudding," <https://pudding.cool/2017/03/film-dialogue>.

Second, patriarchal thinking persists in the continued equation of power with masculinity.¹⁹ In both classic patriarchies and democratic brotherhoods, the right of an individual to act in the world authoritatively was contingent on being male. To have power was to be a man. In other words, power itself was gendered. In contemporary American English, masculinity and femininity are still used as synonyms for power and powerlessness, respectively. According to thesaurus.com, synonyms for the word *power* include *male*, *manful*, *manlike*, *manly*, and *masculine*, while synonyms for *weakness* include *effeminate*, *effete*, *emasculate*, and *womanly*.²⁰ Likewise, the word *femininity* is said to be synonymous with the terms *docility*, *delicacy*, and *softness*, whereas the word *masculine* is taken as synonymous with the terms *courageous*, *hardy*, *muscular*, *potent*, *robust*, *strong*, and *vigorous*.²¹

These synonyms reveal that gender is a metaphor for power.²² To be seen as less masculine is to be seen as less powerful, even feminine. Conversely, to be powerful is to invoke the aura of masculinity. If we want to tell someone to stop being weak and grasp power, we tell them to *man up*. If we want to communicate that a person, idea, or institution is strong, we often do so with gendered language: powerful cars are "testosterone-charged," aggressive rock music is



This drawing of an ideal leader assumes a male body and masculine demeanor are essential.

“cock rock,” and to find one’s courage is to “strap on a pair.”

In the media, just as men are overrepresented, they are more likely than women to be portrayed as aggressive, brave, and physically strong.²³ An analysis of 34,476 comic book characters, for example, found that male superheroes were more likely than female ones to have super strength, stamina, and invulnerability.²⁴ In contrast, female superheroes specialized in mental instead of physical powers, like empathy, precognition, or seduction. Even among superhumans, then, masculinity is closely tied to strength and invulnerability, with feminine powers more mental and manipulative.

Most societies today are a far cry from classic patriarchies, where fathers were little kings, or democratic brotherhoods, where men closed ranks to exclude all women. But neither is patriarchy wholly gone. Instead, American and many other societies are contradictions: characterized by both some degree of formal gender equality and the persistence of patriarchal ideas. We call these modern societies **modified patriarchies**, societies in which women have been granted formal gender

equality but where the patriarchal conflation of power with men and masculinity remains a central part of daily life.

Most of us live in societies, then, that are widely, even if unofficially, characterized by patriarchal relations. Specifically, three relations of inequality shape the hierarchical nature of contemporary gender dynamics: sexism, androcentrism, and subordination.

Relations of Inequality

Sexism is the favoring of male-bodied over female-bodied people, both ideologically and in practice. It’s the best word to describe valuing male over female children, the belief that women are naturally weaker than men, or the conviction that men are better suited for public office.²⁵ Evidence of sexism is ubiquitous. In a recent study, for example, 127 professors of biology, chemistry, and physics were asked to evaluate the application materials of a fictional person seeking a laboratory manager position.²⁶ Half the professors received a résumé with a

female name; the other half received the exact same résumé with a male name. On average, compared to male applicants, females were rated as less competent, less hireable, and deserving of less mentorship and a lower salary. Both male and female professors showed this bias.

Psychologist Janet Swim and colleagues reviewed 123 similar experimental studies asking subjects to evaluate writing, artwork, behavior, job applications, and biographies attributed to fictional men or women.²⁷ The aggregated study results show that, holding everything else constant, women are evaluated less positively than men. The same résumé, piece of art, or life's work is seen as less impressive if the evaluator thinks it was created by a woman instead of a man. Our legacy of patriarchal gender relations tilts people's preferences toward men, putting a thumb on the scale in favor of male-bodied people.

If sexism is sex-based prejudice, then **androcentrism** is gender-based prejudice: the granting of higher status, respect, value, reward, and power to whatever is seen as masculine compared to what is seen as feminine. Androcentrism is different from sexism because it doesn't reward people with male bodies over people with female ones; instead, rewards accrue to *anyone* who can do masculinity. Androcentrism means what is valued in men (masculinity) tends to be valued in everyone, but what is valued in women (femininity) tends to be valued only in women. This is why women wear pants, but men don't wear skirts; why women become surgeons, but men have largely abandoned pediatrics; and why women have pushed their way into soccer and ski jumping, but men are leaving synchronized swimming and softball to the ladies. It's why girls who are boyish are affectionately called tomboys, but boys who act girlish are derisively called sissies.

The pattern is clear, for example, with first names.²⁸ Once a traditionally male name starts being given to girls, the rate at which parents give it to boys starts to decline. The name Leslie, for example, was almost exclusively for boys until the 1940s.²⁹ As it rose in popularity for girls in the 1970s, it fell in popularity for boys. A selection of names that have undergone a similar "sex change" are listed in Table 6.1. Such changes are always from male to female. The very fact that parents may give their daughters traditionally male names is evidence that a touch of perceived masculinity is considered good or advantageous for girls, but femininity does not do the same for boys.

In a third relation of power, men and women are brought together into hierarchical relationships. The placing of women into positions that make them subservient to or dependent on men is called **subordination**. Nursing, for instance, is not just feminine and female, it also puts nurses into a subordinate relationship with doctors.³⁰ Doctors tell nurses what to do; nurses "help" doctors do their job. The same is true for the gendered relationships between managers and their assistants, dentists and dental hygienists, and lawyers and paralegals.³¹ These

TABLE 6.1 | U.S. NAMES GIVEN PRIMARILY TO GIRLS THAT WERE ONCE GIVEN EXCLUSIVELY TO BOYS

Addison	Bailey	Hadley	Lindsay	Monroe	Shelby
Allison	Beverly	Haven	Madison	Paris	Stevie
Ashley	Blair	Kelsey	McKenzie	Peyton	Sydney
Aubrey	Cassidy	Kennedy	McKinley	Presley	Taylor
Avery	Dana	Lauren	Meredith	Reagan	Whitney

Source: <https://nametrends.net/>.

occupational roles are gendered. In the United States, women represent 90 percent of registered nurses, 91 percent of receptionists, 95 percent of administrative assistants, 95 percent of dental hygienists, and 86 percent of paralegals.³² Some men become receptionists and paralegals, of course, but this doesn't change the underlying understanding that it's "women's work." Likewise, women become managers and dentists, but typically the support they receive from subordinates is still provided by women.

Because the subordination of women to men is seen as normal, we sometimes even see it between men and women in otherwise equal positions.³³ Sociologist Patricia Yancey Martin, who spent years observing interactions in Fortune 500 companies, recounted many ways in which women were expected to help or support male colleagues as if they were an assistant.³⁴ In one case, two vice presidents stood talking in a hallway as a phone rang, unanswered. After a few rings, the man asked the woman why she wasn't answering the phone. In fact, this was no more her job than his, but because she was a woman, it just seemed to make sense that she do it. Even when they have the same job title, women are more likely than men to be asked, or silently expected, to make the coffee, plan parties, take notes, order food, and clean up after meetings, as well as attend to clients or colleagues having emotional breakdowns. Notably, none of this work brings any rewards or accolades for women. It is just expected of them.

When roles are gendered, then, they often place a woman in a position subordinate to a man, helping him (and cheering him on) as he does the high-profile, exciting, well-rewarded work. The supporting role is a distinctly feminine one, and it brings men and women—and masculine and feminine activities—into a distinctly close yet unmistakably hierarchical relationship. And as we just saw, this sometimes happens even when men and women are otherwise equal.

We do not live in a world that simply insists upon gender distinction. We live in one that imbues men, masculine people, and masculinized activities with more visibility, status, value, and power than women, feminine people, and feminized activities. This is what makes gender about power, not just difference. These

asymmetries in the gender binary—and the relations between men and women that emerge—make doing gender a *different* challenge for men and women. For the remainder of this chapter, we'll talk about how men negotiate the hierarchical gender binary.

GENDER FOR MEN

Doing Masculinity, Avoiding Femininity

Sociologist Emily Kane was interested in how the hierarchical gender binary influenced parents' interactions with their kids, so she set out to interview parents about their children's gender-conforming and nonconforming behavior.³⁵ She found that parents of boys expressed near universal distress over boys' interest in the "icons of femininity."³⁶ Kane explains:

*Parents of sons reported negative responses to their sons' wearing pink or frilly clothing; wearing skirts, dresses, or tights; and playing dress up in any kind of feminine attire. Nail polish elicited concern from a number of parents, too, as they reported young sons wanting to have their fingernails or toenails polished. Dance, especially ballet, and Barbie dolls were also among the traditionally female activities often noted negatively by parents of sons.*³⁷

Parents' negative reaction to boys' "feminine sides" reflects androcentrism and the stigmatizing nature of femininity for men. They took for granted that feminine interests and behaviors were inappropriate and were confused when their boys acted this way. It suggested something was *wrong*. "Is he going to grow up to be gay? Trans? Does he have a bad relationship with his father? Is his mother too overbearing? What is going on!" The behavior demanded explanation. Kane found that even parents who were tolerant of gender deviance themselves often sought to protect their sons from social disapproval by discouraging their adoption of femininity in public.

Kane's research was conducted in the early 2000s, so it best describes the childhood environment of today's young adults. While newer data, from 2017, shows that about 68 percent of Americans believe that it's a "good thing" for parents to encourage children to explore the toys and activities typically associated with the other gender, a gender difference remains: 76 percent of people think this is a good idea for girls, while 64 percent think it's a good idea for boys.³⁸ Younger people and women are more supportive of cross-gender play than older people and men, but no matter how you slice the data, people tend to feel more comfortable when girls do it than boys.

Because of these lessons, boys tend to grow up learning to avoid femininity. A whole host of slurs reflect this imperative: like *sissy* or *soft*, used to suggest that a boy is not boy enough, and *cuck* or *pussy-whipped*, applied to men who are perceived to be overly deferential to women. Likewise, insults like *girl* and *woman* literally use a female identity to disparage boys and men. Other common slurs reference women or femininity, like *bitch* and *douche*. All these terms reflect a sexist and androcentric world, telling both boys and girls, in no uncertain terms, that being feminine makes you a girl and being a girl is worse than being a boy or man.

The slurs related to homosexuality—*fag*, *homo*, *gay*—send the same message. Being gay is actually incidental.³⁹ Any man or boy who is perceived to be feminine attracts these slurs. In fact, studies have shown that boys and men often actively avoid calling *known* homosexuals by these terms, even when they otherwise liberally pepper their language with them. In one study of college athletes, “everything was fag this and fag that,” but after some of their teammates revealed their sexual orientation, the athletes stopped using it in reference to the gay players.⁴⁰ “They say, ‘this is gay,’ and ‘that’s gay,’” one gay athlete explained, “but they don’t mean it like that.”⁴¹ In other words, they don’t mean “gay” as in *gay*; they mean “gay” as in *feminine*. Accusations of homosexuality are forms of gender policing. This is true, also, of slurs like *cocksucker* and the phrase *suck my dick*; each denigrates someone who sexually services a man—male or female—and thereby inhabits the feminine side of the binary.

The chorus of slurs stigmatizing men who perform femininity sends a consistent message, a rule designed to guide all men’s behavior: *Guys, whatever you do, avoid acting like a girl*. In at least some parts of their lives, then, men face enormous pressure to avoid doing anything associated with women. And, indeed, 69 percent of young men say that they feel at least some pressure to be ready to throw a punch if provoked, 61 percent say they feel pressure to have a lot of sexual partners, and 57 percent say they feel pressure to talk about women in a hypersexual way.⁴²

These same young men, though, are less likely than men of previous generations to see themselves as “very masculine.” Only 24 percent describe themselves that way and, even among older men, only about third do so.⁴³ Since many men don’t naturally feel this way, being sufficiently masculine and avoiding femininity can require constant vigilance, extending to the most trivial of things—even what men are allowed to drink. In an online slideshow with the title “Drinks Men Should Never Order,” the list of drinks men are compelled to avoid includes anything blended or slushy; Jell-O shots or anything “neon”; white zinfandel; drinks with “an obscene amount of garnish”; anything with whipped cream; anything that ends with “tini” (except an “honest” martini); malt beverages (unless they are “40s”); anything with Diet Coke; cosmopolitans (they’re “downright girly”); wine coolers; anything that comes with an umbrella; anything fruity (including

fuzzy navels, Bacardi breezes, mai tais, screwdrivers, margaritas, daiquiris, and Alabama slammers); all mixed drinks (seriously, all of them); and anything with a straw.⁴⁴ A similar slideshow (there are dozens) concludes with the insistence that, above all else, a guy can't have anything "she's having" on the assumption that anything a woman drinks is immediately off-limits for men.

Because of androcentrism, *anything* a woman does can become off-limits for men. One result is **male flight**, a phenomenon in which men abandon feminizing arenas of life. This is what happened with cheerleading as well as to many classic boys' names. As we've hinted, the same happens in professional occupations.⁴⁵ A study of veterinary school applications, for example, found that for every 1 percent increase in the proportion of women in the student body, 1.7 fewer men applied.⁴⁶ One more woman was a greater deterrent than \$1,000 in extra tuition. Male flight exacerbates the trend toward feminization initiated by women's entrance, quickly ramping up the pace at which a given domain seems inappropriate for men. And like we saw with cheerleading, once an activity or occupation becomes feminized, its value is diminished.

Men will even flee quite valuable arenas to avoid femininity. Consider education. Women are now outperforming men at all levels of schooling. They are more likely to be identified as "gifted and talented" in elementary school, half as likely to be held back a year in middle school, and less likely to drop out of high school.⁴⁷ They get higher grades in high school and take more advanced classes.⁴⁸ In fact, there is no longer any level of higher education in which men dominate. Women earn 61 percent of associate's degrees, 57 percent of bachelor's degrees, and 60 percent of master's degrees. They even earn 52 percent of PhDs.⁴⁹

As girls and women have come to excel in school, boys and men have increasingly associated education with femininity. Thinking studiousness is for girls, they don't study or, if they do, they may hide their hard work.⁵⁰ Underachievement is seen as cool for men, especially if they pretend not to care. Accordingly, men have become less interested in educational achievement than women, especially if they've strongly internalized the rules of masculinity.⁵¹ Will men abandon education because women are getting too good at it? What else will they let go once schooling, "honest" martinis, and "James" have gone to the girls? And why are men doing this to themselves?

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemony is a sociological concept used to help us understand the persistence of social inequality. It refers to a state of collective consent to inequality secured by the idea that it's inevitable, natural, or desirable. An idea is hegemonic only when it is widely endorsed by both those who benefit from the social



Quarterback Tom Brady represents the hegemonic man, one who, by virtue of seeming to live up to masculine expectations, affirms the idea that men are superior to women.

conditions it supports as well as those who do not. Hegemony, then, means widespread consent to relations of systematic social disadvantage.

The phrase **hegemonic masculinity** refers to a type of masculine performance, idealized by men and women alike, that functions to justify and naturalize gender inequality, assuring widespread consent to the social disadvantage of most women and some men.⁵² The practice of hegemonic masculinity creates the “real man” in our collective imagination who theoretically embodies all the most positive traits on the masculine side of the gender binary. He has the athlete’s speed and strength, the CEO’s income, the politician’s power, the Hollywood heartthrob’s charm, the family man’s loyalty, the construction worker’s manual skills, the frat boy’s tolerance for alcohol, and the playboy’s virility.

We then attribute these individual traits to the category “man.” All men, simply by virtue of being men, can make a claim to all of them, even if they aren’t able to achieve the impossible goal of being all those things. A married father who loves only his wife, for example, may nod approvingly at the playboy and say, “*We men* love to chase women.”

Meanwhile, the playboy, who is a struggling musician, can point to the politician and say, “*We men* are in control,” while the politician points to the frat boy and says, “*We men* like to party hard.” That frat boy may be getting solid Cs, but he can point to the doctor and say, “*We men* are ambitious,” while the doctor, who may never have punched anyone in his life, can cheer on the professional boxer and say, “*We men* know how to fight.” The boxer, who voluntarily submits to getting hit in the face, can point to the scientist and say, “*We men* are logical.” You get the idea. Just by membership in the category, all men get to identify with the characteristics we attribute to men in general. In this way, men benefit from the hegemony of masculinity. They can lay a socially valid claim to advantage by virtue of the traits attributed to their sex.

Interestingly, not all the traits believed to be typical of men are good. In fact, many are negative.⁵³ Television commercials often show men as bumbling parents, perpetual adolescents, and sex-crazed losers. They drink too much and fight too easily. Because masculinity is hegemonic, though, men’s bad behaviors are either excused, with the typical “boys will be boys” account, or used to allow them to avoid subordination in “helping” roles.

One negative stereotype, for example, is that men are dirty. If so, who can blame them if they don't help keep the house clean? "I have a very high threshold for squalor," one man said, comparing himself to his wife. "If my partner could bear the filth past the point that I get triggered to clean I believe the situation [would] lean more in her favor."⁵⁴ "It is not that it is women's work," said another, "women . . . are [just] far more particular about cleanliness than men."⁵⁵ Aw shucks, these guys are saying, the women around me just happen to have higher standards of cleanliness, so I guess they will have to do the grunt work.

Similarly, the stereotype that men are bad with kids is used to excuse dads from having to take care of them, the stereotype that men are competitive gives them a pass for being uncomfortable if their wives make more money, and the stereotype that they're "naturally" aggressive gives them permission to lose their temper. "I stepped on toes," said a businessman about being confrontational at work, but insisted: "If you want to play it safe . . . you don't get a hell of a lot done."⁵⁶ "It don't matter how much a man loves his wife and kids," said another man about the stereotype that men are sexually insatiable, "he's gonna keep on chasing other women."⁵⁷

Such accounts are called **exculpatory chauvinism**, a phenomenon in which negative characteristics ascribed to men are offered as acceptable justifications of men's dominance over women.⁵⁸ *Exculpatory* means "to free someone from blame," while the word *chauvinism* refers, in this context, to bias in favor of men. Exculpatory chauvinism, then, refers to the tendency to absolve men of responsibility for performances that embody negative male stereotypes, while simultaneously offering social rewards for such behavior, such as free time from family life, success at work, and a license to enjoy dominating others.

Men, in this logic, aren't all good and they're certainly not necessarily *better* than women; they're just *better suited* to lead, score, decide, and defend. Exculpatory chauvinism doesn't say that men are superior human beings, just that they're "designed for dominance."⁵⁹ So, for men to be seen as rightly in charge, it's not necessary for male stereotypes to be positive; men need only to position these stereotypes in such a way as to reap the rewards of the most highly valued parts of life.

Importantly, however, the benefits of masculinity are not awarded equally to all men. Some men are able to enact more of the features of hegemonic masculinity. And some are able to get away with more "bad" behavior than others. Hegemonic masculinity helps men, but it also hurts them, and it does so unequally.

The Measure of Men

Failures to embody hegemonic masculinity can cause some men to be seen (or even see themselves) as lesser men. These judgments establish and reflect a

hierarchy of masculinity, a rough ranking of men from most to least masculine, with the assumption that more is always better. Along the hierarchy we find multiple **masculinities** that vary in their distance from the hegemonic ideal, the nature of the deviation, and in their intersections with other identities. The plural of the word refers to the fact that men do masculinity differently given their social positions, intersectional identities, and the highly variable contexts of each interaction. They do so, though, not without consequence, but in ways that advantage and disadvantage them.

Because hegemonic masculinity draws on values associated with the privileged ends of *all* hierarchies in a society, not just the gender hierarchy, the ability to embody this ideal is greater for a man in Western societies who is well educated, tall, affluent, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, fit, Christian, and native-born. Accordingly, men who are subordinated in other hierarchies are vulnerable to being judged as failing to embody hegemonic masculinity and as rightly belonging lower on this hierarchy. This is why Asian men are often imagined to be not manly enough, and why disabled and aging men sometimes feel like they're losing their masculinity; society defines "real men" as something they're not. Black and white working-class men are often portrayed as particularly strong with hard-working bodies, but black men are seen as lacking the economic power that "real" hegemonic masculinity implies and white working-class men's masculinity is deemed compensatory and imbalanced: tough to the point of brutishness and, thus, unintelligent and prone to violence.

Men who are physically weak, emotional, uncool, or who break important gender rules are all vulnerable to being defined as lesser men. Boys and men report that having a chubby or fat body is read as weakness, while lean bodies with large muscles communicate confidence, power, and mental strength.⁶⁰ Beginning in earnest in the 1980s, the mass media in the United States have held male bodies up to greater scrutiny, often idealizing hard-bodied, bulging physiques that are unattainable for most men.⁶¹ As a result, negative body image is increasing among men and boys, and is especially noticeable among sexual minority men.⁶²

Even men who are blessed with the physical bodies, cultural identities, social circumstances, and personalities that allow them to perform hegemonic masculinity most easily will never be able to rest assured that they are "real" men. Men's ability to meet these standards is limited by the inherent contradictions of the ideal. Consequently, men's social status is always at risk, no matter how privileged they seem. All men fail sooner or later. They will fail, first, because the hegemonic man is an impossible fiction: a jumble of idealized, contradictory elements. A person can't be both a perfect husband and a playboy, a team player and an aggressive egotist, or hard bodied and hard drinking. No single man will ever be able to approximate the full scope of hegemonic masculinity.

Meanwhile, as contexts change, the masculinities men are expected to perform often shift around them, making for social traps into which men can fall. For example, considering the rules of “guy talk,” Evan put it this way:

*There is . . . your kind of dodgy uncle who takes you to the pub or you're out with the boys and that [locker room talk is] just a normal common talk. . . . So you're under pressure to express masculinity at the pub, but then once everyone's around, you're expected to invert that, that's where the conflict is. And then there's corporate pressure and societal pressure basically to suppress it, but there is this kind of masculine pressure to exaggerate it.*⁶³

Evan is aware that a crass sort of guy talk is demanded in some contexts and punished in others. While he has agency to choose what types of masculinity to do and knows the rules about when and where to deploy each type, he is also sensitive to the constant possibility that he might misjudge a situation and do the wrong masculinity at the wrong time.

At an even more basic level, men will fail to live up to hegemonic masculinity because hegemonic masculinity claims that its performers never lose. Yet, no one can win all the time. A man's masculinity is potentially undermined by competitive losses, disability, or age. All men will at times, or eventually, find themselves lacking in some way, leading every man “to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.”⁶⁴ As Michael Kaufman, a scholar of masculinities, explained:

*Whatever power might be associated with dominant masculinities, they also can be the source of enormous pain. Because the images are, ultimately, childhood pictures of omnipotence, they are impossible to obtain. Surface appearances aside, no man is completely able to live up to these ideas and images.*⁶⁵

But many men try. They try to “stay in control,” “conquer,” and “call the shots”; they try to “tough it out, provide, and achieve” and, in the meantime, they have to repress the things about them that conflict with hegemonic masculinity.⁶⁶ They have to try not to feel, need, or desire the things they're not supposed to feel, need, or desire. To do otherwise is to face to **emasculation**, a loss of masculinity.

“Fragile” Masculinity

Men's calculated and even exaggerated avoidance of femininity is described in pop culture as a type of fragility. As sociologist Gwen Sharp explains it, it's as if “masculinity is so fragile that apparently even the slightest brush with

the feminine destroys it.”⁶⁷ Sensitive to emasculation, men are more likely than women to respond to gender cues on products, avoiding those that signal femininity.⁶⁸ As a result, some companies design products intended to soothe and reassure men of their manliness. Often this is subtle, but sometimes it’s not. Products like “Brogurt” (yogurt for men), “Brogamats” (yoga mats for men), “mandles” (candles for men), and “Kleenex for men” are tongue-in-cheek. Or are they? They certainly work to reassure men that their dabbling in femininity won’t diminish their manliness. And when we spy the sleek, dark gray line of Dove Men Care personal grooming products, or others like it, we’re seeing the same phenomenon.

Fragile masculinity is premised on the notion of **precarious masculinity**, the idea that manhood is more difficult to earn and easier to lose than womanhood.⁶⁹ A woman is something one *is*, while a man is something one *does*, meaning that womanhood is bestowed at birth, but manhood is attained and sustained through action. Testing this idea, psychologist Jennifer Bosson led a study in which subjects were asked to finish the sentences “A real man . . .” and “A real woman . . .”⁷⁰ The results revealed that men usually completed the first sentence with an action (for example, “A real man works hard”) and the latter with a trait (“A real woman is honest”). Women just *are* women, but men have to prove they’re men every day.

In the face of a threat, the precariousness of masculinity can lead to **compensatory masculinity**, acts undertaken to reassert one’s manliness in the face of a threat. In a subsequent study, Bosson randomly assigned male college students to either braid ropes or braid hair. After five minutes of braiding, the men were told that they could choose their next activity: hitting a punching bag or doing a puzzle.⁷¹ The men who braided hair were twice as likely to choose boxing as the men who braided rope. Braiding hair, in other words, was emasculating enough that these men sought out an activity that allowed them to reestablish a sufficient level of masculinity.

Other scholars doing similar studies get the same results. Men whose masculinity is threatened do more pushups, consume more energy drinks, and report an increased likelihood of buying an SUV.⁷² They are more likely to exhibit homophobia, endorse male superiority, excuse violence and sexual assault, and want their country to go to war.⁷³ Researchers have also found that because expressing care for the health of the earth is considered feminine, men litter more than women, recycle less, eat less sustainably, and use more energy.⁷⁴ Some men even go so far as to avoid ecofriendly branded colors. The future of life on our planet, in other words, is in the hands of men who are made nervous by the color green.

Importantly, it’s not necessarily women who men are nervous around. Much of the policing of men is done by men themselves. In a set of interviews with college students, men talked about the importance of seeming masculine in front

of their male friends. Chauncey described putting his “man face” on.⁷⁵ Jason reported that he only listened to R&B music when he was alone. Kumar would do “stupid hook-up things . . . just to kind of prove yourself.”⁷⁶ Chet talked about the difficulty he had being open with even his closest friends: “If a guy starts opening up to another guy, he will joke around like, ‘You look like you are ready to make out with me.’ . . . I have done it.”⁷⁷ Men must do masculinity in order to avoid policing, much of which comes from other men.

Classic patriarchies and democratic brotherhoods were always as much about relations among men as they were about relations between women and men; modified patriarchal relations still are. Hegemonic masculinity doesn’t simply position men above women, it arranges men in a hierarchy all their own, one that takes into account all of men’s intersectional identities. This hierarchy grants men the privilege of looking down on women, but it also positions them such that other men may be looking down on them. To be a man in America is to be arrayed in a hierarchy according to how well one does masculinity and threatened, constantly, with the possibility of failure and slippage.

Because many men are toward the bottom of this hierarchy, or were once or will be, it’s simply not true to say that all men always have more power than all women. Being male is an advantage, yes, and being a *masculine* male is a greater advantage, for sure. But men who can’t or won’t do masculinity, or whose masculinity is stigmatized, will find themselves near the bottom of the masculine hierarchy. Women with other kinds of privilege—like race or class privilege—may enjoy greater overall social esteem.

Because gender is not the only game in town, men’s disadvantages can significantly outweigh their gender advantage. White women have more wealth and live in better neighborhoods than black men (and black women) do, for example, and can mobilize racial power to continue to exclude them. Moreover, because of **colorism**, a racist preference for light over dark skin, a light-skinned Latina woman may have more social power than a dark-skinned Latino man. Because we are also arranged in a class hierarchy, a male gardener likely has significantly less esteem and opportunity than the rich woman whose flowers he cultivates; because of disability stigma, an able-bodied woman may be taken more seriously than a man with a spinal cord injury; because of religious prejudice, a Christian woman may pass through airports with more ease than a Muslim man. It’s important to remember that some women have significantly more power, resources, and status than some men, even if men, on average, have more than women. As Kaufman explains: “Within each group, men usually have privileges and power relative to the women in that group, but in society as a whole, things are not always so straightforward.”⁷⁸

As a result of the expectation that men live up to an impossible ideal, the uneven way in which masculine power is distributed, and the pressure men face to be someone they’re not, many individual men do not *feel* particularly

powerful at all. Many feel downright powerless in many areas of their lives: at work, in their relationships, and in relation to other men on whose judgment their status in the hierarchy of masculinity depends. Men, it turns out, often feel a disconnect between who they are and the power “men” are said to have. There is a good reason for this, but it is not, as some like to argue, because we no longer live in a society characterized by gender inequality. Instead, hegemonic masculinity affirms men’s power over other men as well as men’s power over women.

For men, then, there are also costs to pay. And because gendered hierarchies are strongly and even violently policed, both conformity and resistance can be dangerous.

The Danger of Masculinity

Extreme conformity to the more aggressive rules of masculinity, or **hypermasculinity**, is glorified in many corners of our culture.⁷⁹ We particularly idealize in some music genres (such as rap and heavy metal) and in action movies and video games that glamorize male violence and erase its real-life consequences. We also see hypermasculine performances by some athletes (especially in highly masculinized sports like football and hockey). These performances naturalize male violence, aggression, and anger. Moreover, because hegemonic masculinity assumes one can never be too masculine, men’s violence can be justified by saying that they’re protecting or defending someone or something good (see, for example, the good guy with a gun in countless Hollywood movies every year).

Despite the prevalence of hypermasculinity, men are *not* naturally violent. Instead, men must be trained to resist the sensation of empathy and encouraged to enter dangerous situations enthusiastically.⁸⁰ We see hypermasculinity nurtured in some fraternities, occupations, military units, police squads, neighborhoods, gangs, and prisons. Men in these situations may avoid demonstrating feminized qualities like empathy, nurturance, kindness, and conflict avoidance in favor of exaggerated performances of verbal and physical aggression. Almost no man does hypermasculinity all the time, but sometimes a man’s mother, girl-



The movie poster for *300: Rise of the Empire* glamorizes hypermasculine violence.

friend, or wife is the only person who ever sees him without his hypermasculine mask.

Suppression of empathy often starts somewhere around middle school. To be close friends, men need to be willing to confess their insecurities, be kind to each other, and sometimes sacrifice their own self-interest—a description of friendship that men themselves articulate and say they want. This, though, is incompatible with the rules of masculinity that define bonds among men as based on competition and expressed in aggressive acts. So as boys grow up to be men, they learn to resist the impulse to connect nonhierarchically with other men.⁸¹

Psychologist Niobe Way interviewed boys about their friendships in each year of high school. She found that younger boys spoke eloquently about their love for their male friends but, at about age fifteen, this began to change. One boy, for example, said this as a freshman:

*[My best friend and I] love each other . . . that's it . . . you have this thing that is deep, so deep, it's within you, you can't explain it. It's just a thing that you know that person is that person. . . . I guess in life, sometimes two people can really, really understand each other and really have a trust, respect and love for each other.*⁸²

By his senior year, he had changed his mind:

[My friend and I] we mostly joke around. It's not like really anything serious or whatever. . . . I don't talk to nobody about serious stuff. . . . I don't talk to nobody. I don't share my feelings really. Not that kind of person or whatever. . . . It's just something that I don't do.

In part because of the rules of masculinity, adult, white heterosexual men have fewer friends than women and other men.⁸³ Since friendship strongly correlates with physical and mental health, this is one way in which closely following the rules of masculinity is bad for men.⁸⁴ There are many others.

HARM TO THE SELF Taking masculinity to an extreme makes men dangerous to others, but it also threatens to make men dangerous to themselves. Men are significantly more likely than women to disregard their own safety. They are more likely than women to break seat belt laws, drive dangerously, smoke cigarettes, take sexual risks, and abuse drugs and alcohol; they make up 75 percent of those arrested for drunken driving and 82 percent of those arrested for public drunkenness.⁸⁵ They are almost three times more likely to die in a car accident.⁸⁶ They go into dangerous jobs and may resist safety rules, accounting for 93 percent of occupational deaths.⁸⁷ Among teens who help their families



Professional bodybuilder Ronnie Coleman breathes pure oxygen immediately after competing in Mr. Olympia. Organizers make oxygen available backstage because contestants are frequently lightheaded after their performance.

with farm work, boys are less likely than girls to use protective gear and take safety precautions.⁸⁸

Some argue that being male is the strongest predictor of whether a person will take risks with their health.⁸⁹ Men are less likely than women to undergo health screenings, get regular exercise, see a doctor if they feel sick, and treat existing illnesses and injuries.⁹⁰ The association of lotion and body care with women leads men to dismiss the importance of sunscreen. It should then come as no surprise that men are two to three times more likely than women to be diagnosed with skin cancer.⁹¹

Likewise, high school and college athletes accept competitive demands that they exercise so hard that they overheat and collapse on the field, while body builders can die from the damage done to their bodies with steroids and diuretics. The image above shows Ronnie Coleman breathing through an oxygen mask, immediately after walking off the stage at the Mr. Olympia competition. He would take first place. Photographer Zed Nelson explains that oxygen is frequently administered to contestants: “The strain of intense dieting, dehydration, and muscle-flexing places high levels of strain on the heart and lungs, rendering many contestants dizzy, light-headed, and weak.”⁹²

Sociologists Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe summarize the research on men and self-harm:

*As with crime, much of this health-damaging behavior may be symbolic, intended to signify capacities to control one's own life, to be invulnerable and needless of help, and to be fearless and hence not easily intimidated by others. The effort to signify a masculine self . . . can be toxic.*⁹³

In fact, men are more likely than women to avoid seeking help for depression and are three and a half times more likely than women to commit suicide.⁹⁴

HARMING OTHERS Men are also more likely than women to commit violent acts against others. This is partly a result of men's anti-empathy training, and possibly also a form of compensatory masculinity. Men account for 88 percent of those charged with murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, 77 percent of those charged with aggravated assault, 70 percent of those charged with family violence, 78 percent of those charged with arson, 86 percent of those charged with robbery, and 91 percent of those charged with unlawful carrying of weapons (Table 6.2).⁹⁵

Though men enact the overwhelming majority of violence, the gendered nature of violence often remains invisible because we tend to accept that men

TABLE 6.2 | ARRESTS BY SEX, 2016

Offense charged	Percent male
Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter	88
Rape	97
Robbery	86
Aggravated assault	77
Burglary	81
Arson	78
Larceny-theft	58
Motor vehicle theft	78
Fraud	62
Embezzlement	51
Vandalism	78
Weapons; carrying, possessing, etc.	91
Drug abuse violations	77
Driving under the influence	75

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Crime in the U.S., 2016." Retrieved from <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016>.

are naturally this way. Though this may slowly be changing, the fact that it is men who commit most violence is taken as ordinary and unremarkable. So, the fact that gang violence, suicide bombings, serial killings are also all overwhelmingly perpetrated by men seems normal, as does the fact that, of the 216 mass shootings in the United States since 1996, only five were committed by a woman acting alone.⁹⁶

Men are also more likely to join violent hate groups, those organized around hatred toward and the enactment of violence against others: white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups, for example, and Islamist jihadist collectives.⁹⁷ Women join these groups, too, but they are a minority and are less likely than male members to engage actively in physical fights, train for violent conflict, or enact terrorist plots. Research on what attracts men to these groups reveals that many are not particularly drawn to the hateful ideology so much as the promise of a connection to especially masculine men who affirm their own manliness.

Young boys are often targeted as recruits. Many, like those who engage in other violent behavior, are on the bottom end of the masculine hierarchy, bullied and made to feel small and weak. Hate groups promise them “an alternate route to proving manhood.”⁹⁸ Tore Bjørgo, for example, a former skinhead from Sweden, described the appeal of the hate group this way:

When I was 14, I had been bullied a lot by classmates and others. By coincidence, I got to know an older guy who was a skinhead. He was really cool, so I decided to become a skinhead myself, cutting off my hair, and donning a black Bomber jacket and Doc Martens boots. The next morning, I turned up at school in my new outfit. In the gate, I met one of my worst tormentors. When he saw me, he was stunned, pressing his back against the wall, with fear shining out of his eyes. I was stunned as well—by the powerful effect my new image had on him and others. Being that intimidating—boy, that was a great feeling!⁹⁹

The attraction of hate groups can’t be explained by masculinity alone, but we can’t explain the appeal without it either.

Hegemonic masculinity—this single standard of esteem for men—makes the position of even the most advantaged men perilous. Meanwhile, it sometimes presses them to put themselves or others in danger, or actively do harm even to those whom they profess to care about, whether these are their “brothers” in a fraternity or an army unit or a romantic partner. This is what is called **toxic masculinity**, strategic enactments of masculinities that are harmful to both the men who enact them and the people around them. While the hegemonic ideal is not the same as the toxic versions that are drawn from it, some men’s efforts to live up to it can be harmful.¹⁰⁰

So why don’t parents, boys, and men just say no to hegemonic masculinity?

Bargaining with Patriarchy

Instead of repudiating hegemonic masculinity and the harm it can do, many men embrace strategies that allow them to benefit from being men, even if it simultaneously gives other men status over them. In other words, being *girly* places one at the bottom of the male hierarchy, and that's bad, but being *a girl* would be even worse. Accordingly, many men, even those who populate the bottom rungs of this hierarchy, will defend hegemonic masculinity, and many parents who want their boys to have as much status as possible when they grow up will do so, too.

This is called a **patriarchal bargain**—a deal in which an individual or group accepts or even legitimates some of the costs of patriarchy in exchange for receiving some of its rewards.¹⁰¹ Both men and women make patriarchal bargains. When men do so, they accept some degree of subordination on the hierarchy of masculinity in exchange for the right to claim a higher status than women and some other men.

Few men make these bargains out of a simple desire to exert power over others. Instead, they make them because status translates into resources that raise their quality of life and protect them from stigma and physical harm. Esteem from others—and the intimacies, connections, and jobs into which it translates—offers people autonomy, safety, and life satisfaction. Men make patriarchal bargains because they want to maximize their happiness, not necessarily because they desire to dominate other men and women. They may be encouraged to do this from the time they're little by parents who want them to succeed, understanding that raising a boy who refuses to play by patriarchy's rules opens him up to criticism and limits his options in life.

Patriarchal bargains, then, are about figuring out how to thrive in a patriarchal society. For men, fundamentally, they're about investing at least a little in their identity as a man—the kind of person patriarchy has historically privileged—and finding pleasure, or safety, in distancing oneself from women, femininity, and feminine men. This includes not only doing masculinity and avoiding femininity, but putting men first and women second: seeing other men as more valuable, important, and authoritative people in general (while making exceptions for specific women like mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives).

We start making patriarchal bargains as children. Sociologist Michael Messner described a moment during his boyhood when he made such a bargain. He sensed early on being a boy and not a girl was important and that being a boyish boy was important, too. It was easy to figure out that sports were a “proving ground for masculinity” and that excelling would bring approval. Attracting this esteem, however, also meant enforcing the hierarchy as he ascended it. In particular, he recounts teasing and bullying a nonathletic boy. This, he explains, was

“a moment of engagement with hegemonic masculinity” where he acquiesced to patriarchy, agreeing to uphold a masculine hierarchy that empowered him but disempowered others.¹⁰²

All along the hierarchy of masculinity, men make patriarchal bargains. Men often rise to the top of the hierarchy exactly by doing so and, once they’re there, their privileged status depends on enforcing it. At the highest levels of large, powerful corporations, for example—where 80 percent of the leadership is male and 72 percent is both white and male—high-status men often close their networks and hoard information and opportunities.¹⁰³ One way they do so is by forming cliques—or “old boys’ clubs”—that women and less privileged men have a hard time breaking into.

In the study of interactions of Fortune 500 companies discussed earlier, for example, male employees often socialized, but only among themselves.¹⁰⁴ Women weren’t invited to these bonding sessions and, if they invited themselves, tended to feel unwelcome. Men of color often felt the same. Masculinity can be mobilized to create pleasurable bonds among men, but that bonding is also exclusionary, leaving out specific kinds of others in order to protect the masculine hierarchy.

Because patriarchal bargains involve valuing other men more than women, sometimes men forget that women are part of their audience at all. Jokes that sexually objectify or demean women, for example, are sometimes told in front of women because the men telling them are trying to impress their male colleagues or friends. What women think of these jokes isn’t part of their calculation, because their performance of masculinity really isn’t for them. In one workplace incident, for example, a man brought a pair of women’s underwear to a board meeting and pretended to discover them in his pocket. The men in the meeting laughed uproariously; the women did not.¹⁰⁵ The men were surprised at their female colleagues’ objection to the hijinks, claiming it was only to be “funny.” They had made a patriarchal bargain long ago, one that focused their attention on other men who, not incidentally, were also usually the ones who held the keys to raises and promotions. They were unpracticed at considering how a woman might respond to such a joke because considering women’s responses wasn’t something they routinely did.

Men lower on the masculine hierarchy also make patriarchal bargains. Gay men, for example, have a choice: They can choose to emphasize their masculinity so as to maximize the power that comes with being men or align themselves with women against the gender binary. Sometimes they do the former. In one case, a group of gay male students formed a college fraternity.¹⁰⁶ Though they had two relevant identities—they were *gay* and they were *men*—they allowed heterosexual *men* to be members of the fraternity, but not *gay* women. In this way, they sought to highlight the more socially valuable identity. The brothers only welcomed women as “little sisters,” the (ostensibly heterosexual) women who play a supportive role in Greek life. One brother explained:

I would prefer straight women because the lesbians would try and take over. A straight woman might enjoy being a little sister and attending functions and hanging out, while a lesbian would consider the role subordinate and get tired of it quickly, trying to dominate and manipulate the program. Basically, a straight woman might understand the role while a lesbian would not. . . . I see their role as supportive and basically helping out.¹⁰⁷

As this quote illustrates, these gay men welcomed women into their fraternity, but only as subordinates. Meanwhile, they were enthusiastic about making alliances with men of all sexual orientations.

Nerds, dorks, and geeks form a trifecta of subordinated masculinities marginalized by some combination of social awkwardness, lack of athleticism, and a penchant for video and role-playing games. These men often know they're near the bottom of the hegemonic hierarchy of masculinity, but rather than reject hegemonic masculinity, they embrace their position in exchange for the right to exclude, subordinate, and sexually objectify women.¹⁰⁸ This practice exploded into public awareness in 2014 with the controversy now known as #gamergate. Male gamers mobilized as defenders of their male-dominated world, targeting a group of women who were publicly questioning the sexism prevalent in video games.¹⁰⁹



Fans in Tokyo line up to play the new *Grand Theft Auto* video game. The game's advertising prominently features a buxom blonde in a bikini.

This bonding among men crosses racial and class lines, as illustrated by the career of white rapper Eminem. Throughout his career, Eminem has aligned himself with black people, both musically and politically, at the same time that he has embraced misogyny and homophobia.¹¹⁰ In his ninth album, released in 2017, he critically refers to President Donald J. Trump's support of Confederate monuments and associates him with Nazis and white supremacists. On other tracks, though, he raps graphically about women's body parts, alternating compliments with gendered insults and sexual demands. On still another track, he takes the perspective of a serial killer who targets young, beautiful women. In calling for Trump's impeachment and criticizing his policies for their impact on people of color, Eminem claims a position on the political left, but his politics do not extend to support of women, nor to black men who are gay. Eminem has made a patriarchal bargain.

Paradoxically, it may be the men who benefit the least from hegemonic masculinity (including poor men, black men, nerds, and gay men) and the men who benefit the most (like the leadership at Fortune 500 companies) who defend it most aggressively.¹¹¹ Men at the bottom of the hierarchy are trying to hold onto what little privilege they have, while men at the top are invested in resisting any change to the hierarchy on which they are so comfortably perched. All men, however, are pressed to bargain with patriarchy, one way or another, in an effort to squeeze some benefit from the gender binary and its attendant hierarchy. When they do so, they affirm hegemonic masculinity rather than attack it, aiming to improve their position, not tear the whole thing down. At the very least, this protects them from the negative consequences of challenging the system.

CAN MASCULINITY BE GOOD?

In America today, some men are actively trying to find new ways of being men, ways that don't hold up patriarchy, reward hypermasculinity, or oppress women or other men. They are acting to distance themselves from sexist, androcentric, subordinating, and toxic forms of masculinity. In doing so, they're asking whether it's possible to identify as a man and do masculinity in a way that is good for them and for others.

These men are inventing and adopting what are called **hybrid masculinities**, versions of masculinity that selectively incorporate symbols, performances, and identities that society associates with women or low-status men.¹¹² These men may mix aspects of femininity into their personalities, "queer" their lifestyles, resist the impulse to climb the masculine hierarchy, and refrain from making choices that advantage them at the expense of others. Hybrid masculinities are

interesting because they potentially undermine the importance of gender distinction, give femininity value, de-gender hierarchical relationships, and deconstruct the hierarchy of masculinity.¹¹³

Hybrid masculinities, then, could be an exciting step toward a more gender-equal society. Unfortunately, while there is considerable academic study left to do and much more everyday experimentation left to try, the existing research doesn't yet support the idea that men who adopt hybrid masculinities are doing so in ways that substantially undermine gender inequality. Instead, they do more to obscure it: feminizing or queering styles of expression but failing to do much to challenge men's hold on powerful positions.¹¹⁴

An example, to start: For over a decade, and on four continents, an anti-rape campaign that used the slogan "My Strength Is Not for Hurting" aimed to teach young men not to sexually exploit others.¹¹⁵ The goal was admirable, but in emphasizing men's strength and their responsibility to protect women, the campaign reinforced the idea that women are weak and in need of protection, as opposed to the idea, for instance, that women have rights to their own bodies that deserve to be respected. The campaign tried to persuade men to be chivalrous instead of exploitative, but it didn't challenge the underlying unequal relationship between men and women.

Scholars argue that these hybrid masculinities aren't living up to their potential for several reasons. First, some hybrid masculinities are largely symbolic. A corporate boss, for example, may heartily endorse the formation of a support group for his female employees but resist investing resources into understanding their problems or helping them succeed. A married man may identify as gender egalitarian and supportive of feminism but neglect to do his fair share of the housework and childcare. Or a heterosexual man may condemn homophobia and befriend gay men but vote for politicians who are anti-gay because they promise to keep his taxes low. Supporting women, identifying as gender egalitarian, and embracing sexual minorities help move our societies toward greater equality, but more concrete changes—shifts in our laws, how we spend money, and how we organize families—are needed to realize it.

Second, men who adopt hybrid masculinities sometimes ask for "extra credit" for being "good" men. The faith-based pro-family organization "Promise Keepers," for example, a nearly thirty-year-old movement that operates on three continents, is based on the idea that men should be good caretakers of their family, but also naturalizes men's role as the head of the household.¹¹⁶ Like the "Strength" campaign, the "Keepers" movement encourages men to adopt a hybrid masculinity that incorporates a feminine ethic of care, but it also positions men's power over women as inevitable. In the anti-rape campaign, it's inevitable because men's ability to overpower women is unquestioned (in fact, fighting back stops an attempted rape 82 percent of the time).¹¹⁷ In the "Keepers" case, men's control of

women is guaranteed by divine decree. God says so. The implication is that a woman should be grateful to be married to a man who doesn't exploit his (rightful) power over her.

The final problem we find with hybrid masculinities is the tendency for men who adopt them to use them to claim status. When men claim to be "good men," they are often also claiming to be "better" than men they identify as "bad," and those men are usually ones who are already on the lower end of the masculine and other hierarchies. In this case, differentiating between "good" and "bad" men just becomes another way to affirm, not break down, hegemonic masculinity and the hierarchy of men.

One study, for example, examined the ideals adopted by rich young men attending a therapeutic boarding school: a rehabilitation-focused school serving high school-age boys who had developed drug and alcohol problems, with tuitions ranging between \$4,500 and \$9,500 a month.¹¹⁸ Most boys initially resisted the idea that they needed to be open about their personal pain, share their emotions, and develop expressive communication styles. As they adjusted to their new school's expectations, however, they reframed these typically feminized traits as characteristic of a secure and healthy masculinity, contrasting themselves with boys and men whose masculinity was still fragile, compensatory, or toxic.

This translated into a sense of entitlement to the class privilege that they would have upon graduation. School administrators taught them to lead off-site Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and sponsor community members, thus putting teenagers in charge of men of all ages, from varied backgrounds, with substantially more experience with both addiction and recovery. Nonetheless, the school encouraged the young men to see themselves as "leaders" of these "lesser" men, thanks to their enlightened masculinities. This further prepared them to go on to lead as privileged adults. "My dad and I used to have major trust issues," said one of the boys:

[He] used to threaten to kick me out, take me out of the will, all that. Now that we've worked through our issues and actually talk and trust each other with things, he's talking about putting me in charge of one of the divisions of his company after I get a degree.¹¹⁹

As this quote shows, these young men may have redefined their masculinity, but they have used that redefinition to justify stepping right into their position at the top of the masculine hierarchy. Moreover, by adopting a hybrid masculinity, they now thought that they weren't just *lucky* to have dads who could launch their careers, but genuinely *deserving* of that advantage by virtue of being better men.

Men who adopt hybrid masculinities often see themselves as the "good guys," but they still value the fact that they're *guys*. Continuing to embrace an

idealized masculinity that they believe differentiates them in important ways from women, they remain invested in gender distinction and seem to resist giving up the substantive advantages being male affords them.¹²⁰ In this way, hybrid masculinities are just another patriarchal bargain, a way for men to distance themselves from recognizably sexist, androcentric, and subordinating attitudes and behaviors, but in ways that still give them benefits over women and other men.

So, *can* masculinity be good?

We don't know. Gender scholars—including many, many men—have spent a lot of time trying to answer that question.¹²¹

The trouble is that we live in a modified patriarchy, a culture in which masculinity has been used to symbolize and represent superiority over women and lesser men for more than four thousand years. Masculinity *is* power; it's always been power. Power is part of the definition—masculinity is synonymous with measures of strength, dominance, and high status—and its meaning is gained in the context of a gender binary. So its very existence is dependent on a contrast with a femininity that is weak, subordinate, and low status.

If we somehow excised from masculinity the dominating, toxic, and compensatory behaviors, alongside all the other bad things like being afraid to express emotions, then what is left is a series of *wonderful* traits: duty, honor, hard work, sacrifice, leadership, and the like. And that's lovely. But for these to be traits of men, we must also say that women are not these things. And is that true? Is that fair? Are women not dutiful, honorable, and hard working? Do they not sacrifice? Can they not lead? The truth is that “good men” aren't good *men*, they're good *people* and they share good traits with women, who are good people, too.

Can masculinity be good? We don't know. We know that *men* can be good. But whether they need masculinity to do it is an open question.

We also need to ask: Is masculinity good for men? On that we have stronger data. Masculinity is one of the things that make men feel good about themselves, but it's also a substantial form of oppression. In many ways, it hurts men. It hurts some men a lot. It hurts men who disinvest in masculinity and pay the price as well as many of those who embrace it. After all, it is some men's belief that they *should* somehow be better than women and other men—that they are failures if they're not—that is the cause of much of their sadness, self-loathing, and silent suffering.

Revisiting the Question

Q+A

If both men and women are constrained by a binary gender system, why is it more women than men find this system unfair?

There are good reasons for men to find the system unfair. Because gender rules make femininity only for women, men must avoid performing it. Their daily lives and social interactions with both men and women are constrained by this imperative. As a result, men may repress those parts of themselves that don't reflect hegemonic masculinity and emphasize those that do, sticking only to man-approved masculinity, at least in public or around certain kinds of people.

It's no surprise, then, that men sometimes find the rules of masculinity to be strict, arbitrary, and even painful. Many men, though, follow gender rules and press others to do so, too, because upholding the hierarchical gender binary means preserving the privileges that come with maleness. This means often rough policing of the boundaries of masculinity. This can make masculinity dangerous, creating circumstances in which men are pushed to make dangerous choices, exposed to violence, or incited to harm others.

Under these conditions, men make strategic choices. Sometimes, they have to choose between following the rules or being seen as a failure; at other times masculine privilege may feel like the only kind of advantage they have. Men also may think that the costs of getting too close to femininity are too high. Accordingly, most men make patriarchal bargains in at least parts of their lives.

Still, no amount of bargaining protects them from the fear of emasculation. Wherever they fall in the hierarchy, all men have to live with some fear of losing the traction they've gained and sliding down to join those on whose disadvantage their advantage depends. Ironically, men who may have the most to gain by rejecting the gender binary—those who fail to approximate the hegemonic ideal, live miserably under its rules, or are victimized by others for their rule breaking—are often the ones who are the most defensive about it because their grip on it is most fragile. They defend hegemonic masculinity because at the very least it guarantees them superiority over somebody: women.

This helps explain why so few men actively challenge the gender binary, but we have yet to tackle why so many women do. To answer our question fully, we need to understand women's experiences.

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SOME OF US ARE
BECOMING THE
MEN WE WANTED
TO MARRY.

—GLORIA STEINEM

”



Inequality:

WOMEN AND FEMININITIES

The last chapter focused on how gendered power shapes men's experiences. This chapter discusses women's lives. It argues that, on the one hand, women have a lot more freedom than men to enjoy both masculine- and feminine-coded parts of life, a freedom that offers women many exciting opportunities and simple pleasures. On the other hand, because doing femininity is at least somewhat compulsory, and we live in an androcentric society, women also have to adopt gender performances that harm them as individuals and produce group disadvantage. After reviewing the realities facing women, the chapter concludes with an overview of the big picture. But first, the chapter starts the way the last one did: with cheerleading.

CHEERLEADING TODAY

As you now know, in the 1800s male cheerleaders were respected for their ability to lead a crowd. Women joined teams during World War II, eventually prompting men to abandon the activity. By the 1960s, cheerleading teams were essentially all female and served simply to support male athletes. No longer equivalent to being a quarterback, cheerleading was now a cute sideshow to the main event.



Cheerleaders at a University of Nevada, Las Vegas, basketball game blend feminine grace, peppy enthusiasm, and impressive athleticism.

It wouldn't stay this way. Eventually, cheerleading would be remasculinized—by women. By the 1990s, cheer involved intense athleticism. Gymnastics were back and stunts became increasingly difficult and dangerous. An entire industry was built around cheer competition.¹ Between 1990 and 2012, injuries among cheerleaders would increase almost twofold; concussions almost tripled.²

Today, men are slowly returning to cheerleading. Recruitment aimed at men again appeals to their masculinity, emphasizing physical strength and, this time, access to women. “Want strong muscles? Want to toss girls? Our Cheer Team needs stunt men!!” encouraged a recruitment poster at a university.³ “In cheerleading,” echoed a football player-turned-cheerleader, “you get to be around all these beautiful women.”⁴

Despite these changes, cheer retains feminine dimensions. Female cheerleaders wear sexy outfits that offer their bodies as spectacles for others to enjoy. A cheerleader's primary job still is to root for football and basketball teams. That is, it remains largely a “feminine auxiliary to sport,” not the serious main event.⁵ Cheer also retains a performative aspect that seems unsuited to men. Sociologists Laura Grindstaff and Emily West, who did research on cheerleaders, explain:

Appearing before a crowd requires that cheerleaders be enthusiastic, energetic, and entertaining. This is accomplished not just through dancing, tumbling, or eye-catching stunts, but also through the bubbly, peppy, performance of

“spirit.” . . . It includes smiling, “facials” (exaggerated facial expressions), being in constant motion, jumping, and executing dynamic arm, hand, and head motions—all considered feminine terrain.⁶

As one male cheerleader said, somewhat embarrassedly, “a game face for a cheerleader is a big smile,” not exactly the threatening grimace or strained expression associated with the competitiveness or exertion believed to characterize “real” sports.⁷

Most people still associate cheerleading with femininity and, as a result, continue to take it less seriously than other physical activities. As a result, despite the high-impact athleticism that now characterizes many squads, less than half of U.S. high school athletic associations define high school cheerleading as a sport and neither the U.S. Department of Education nor the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) categorizes it as one.⁸ Instead, cheerleading is frequently labeled an “activity,” akin to the chess club. Accordingly, cheerleading remains unregulated by organizations responsible for ensuring the safety of athletes, leading to higher rates of injury among cheerleaders than among American football players.⁹ Among all types of high school and college sports, cheerleading accounts for a whopping 66 percent of injuries to female athletes with the potential to result in permanent disability.¹⁰

Cheerleading is somehow simultaneously masculine and feminine, hard-core and cute, athletic and aesthetic, admired and belittled. It also sexualizes femininity, making women’s ability to appeal to assumed-heterosexual men centrally important, even if they’re pulling off impressive physical feats at the same time. It is, in other words, very much like what being a woman can feel like today. Unlike men, who are encouraged to avoid femininity and do masculinity, women are strongly encouraged to embrace *both*.

GENDER FOR WOMEN

In many ways, the daily lives of women are much less constrained than those of men. Unlike men, who face policing when they do gender in ways that are associated with the other sex, women’s performances of masculinity are often regarded positively, such that women today are doing almost everything men do. People are starting to notice that girls are pretty great. In fact, in a dramatic change from the past, American parents may no longer prefer having sons to having daughters.¹¹

Emily Kane, the sociologist who documented parents’ nervousness about their sons’ performances of femininity, for example, found that parents weren’t at all troubled by their girls’ gender-nonconforming behavior.¹² In fact, they were downright tickled if their daughters wanted to wear a dinosaur backpack, collect



Many people admire women who enter masculine occupations, not only because they are defying stereotypes but because, by virtue of being associated with men, such occupations are more esteemed than feminine ones.

bugs in the backyard, or dress up like a superhero. They favorably described their daughters as “rough and tumble” and “competitive athletically,” even endorsing their girls’ interest in icons of masculinity like trucks and tools.¹³ And while they felt a need to uncover a reason for their sons’ preference for girly things, their daughters’ interest in masculine things needed no such explanation. Since masculine activities are highly valued, it made perfect sense that girls would be drawn to them and parents would be proud.

Adult women benefit from this greatly. Women now have the freedom to enjoy the complex flavors of scotch, the rigorous training of law school or the military, the risks and rewards of casual sex, and the thrill of learning to fly an airplane or compete in extreme sports. They can become construction workers or architects and feel the deep satisfaction of watching one’s work materialize; they can become surgeons or CEOs and choose to take responsibility for human life and corporate profits. In fact, in 2016 the very last occupation off-limits to women in the United States—combat positions in the military—was officially opened.¹⁴

These developments are all rightly interpreted as signs that women have gained much equality with men, a state of affairs most Americans endorse. Measured by the scope of gender rules, then, the life options of women in contemporary Western societies are undoubtedly more open than men’s. It’s a good time to be a woman. But there’s a catch.

The Importance of Balance

While women are allowed and even encouraged to do masculinity, a woman who performs *too much* masculinity attracts the same policing as a man who does even *a little* femininity. Women who perform too much masculinity violate the gender binary and break the number one gender rule, the rule that one has to identify as male or female and perform gender in a way that's consistent with their identity. In other words, if women want to do masculinity, they have to balance it with femininity.

Women who do this, who carefully walk a line between masculinity and femininity, are the new female ideal. Only 32 percent of Americans say that people look up to “womanly women” (compared to 53 percent who say that they look up to “manly men”).¹⁵ Not surprisingly, then, only 19 percent of young adult women today describe themselves as “very feminine,” compared to about a third of Gen Xers and Boomers and the majority of those in the generation before.¹⁶ While men still resist describing themselves as “nurturing” and “sensitive,” women are about as likely or even more likely than men to describe themselves as “physically strong,” “assertive,” and “intelligent.”¹⁷ The model woman, the one all women are supposed to try to be these days, is *not* the perfect picture of femininity; she is both feminine and masculine.

Reflecting this change in the ideal woman, media coverage often fawns over women who do both masculinity and femininity gracefully. Christmas Abbott, for example, is a CrossFit competitor, nationally ranked weightlifter, and the first woman to serve in a NASCAR pit. Media profiles of Abbott highlight her achievements in these masculine-coded arenas, but they often also balance their glowing accounts with references to her femininity. At CNN, for example, the narrator concludes with the reassurance that Abbott “refuses to leave her femininity behind” and “remains a woman in every sense.” Onscreen, Abbott explains:

*The ongoing joke is, if I'm not in tennis shoes, I'm in pumps. And I love wearing dresses and curling my hair. But that doesn't mean that I don't like to get dirty. You know, I like to work. I like to be physical in my work. And I think that it's been overlooked that women can do both.*¹⁸

Abbott asserts that doing “both” is an “overlooked” possibility for women, but in fact, it's a widely endorsed ideal. Elsewhere, a profile of Abbott in *Cosmopolitan* emphasizes that she “doesn't have to choose between being strong and beautiful.”¹⁹ She replies: “You can be a gym rat and turn around and be a hot little minx.” At the tattoo-focused *Inked* magazine, where she is profiled and photographed naked, it is remarked that her tattoos include everything from butterflies to pistols and a figure holding both a flower and a sword.²⁰ The message,



Presenting oneself as a sex object is one way for women who do masculinity, like CrossFit competitor and weightlifter Christmas Abbott, to balance their gender performance.

she explains, is “Be nice to everybody but always be ready to protect yourself.” Now *that’s* balance.

What people find so impressive about Abbott is not simply the fact that she excels in masculine areas like NASCAR and weightlifting. Instead, it’s in her balance of both masculinity and femininity: She’s strong *and* beautiful, in sneakers *and* heels, in dresses *and* dirty. And the beauty, heels, and dresses aren’t incidental; they’re a critical part of her self-presentation.

As Abbott illustrates, women have the opportunity to do masculinity and earn the esteem that comes with valued traits and activities. But there are limits to how much appropriation of masculinity will be tolerated by others. Being intelligent, ambitious, outspoken, and sporty is great, but being properly feminine is essential. In this way, doing femininity can be understood as an account for breaking the rule that requires women to leave the guy stuff to guys. It’s a way of saying: “I know it looks like I’m encroaching on men’s territory but be assured I know my place as a woman.” When women acquiesce to the requirement that they perform femininity, it is a way of letting the men around them know that *they know* that they’re still first and foremost female. Presenting themselves as objects for the heterosexual male sexual imagination, as Abbott does, is one very effective way to do this.

The requirement that women balance masculine interests, traits, and activities with conventional femininity is called the **feminine apologetic**. The term points to how a woman’s performance of femininity can be a way to soothe others’ concerns about her appropriation of masculinity. Abbott “gets away with” being masculine by also performing a conventional feminine sexual attractiveness. She, like other women in the West today, is allowed to do “anything she wants to do,” as long as she also sends clear signals that she wants men’s approval. This is the lesson Barbie teaches us so well: Barbie can do anything—she can be a doctor, an astronaut, an athlete, or a presidential candidate—but the important thing is that she look good while doing it. Barbie’s relentless takeover of so many masculine arenas would be quite a bit more threatening if she wasn’t doing a bang-up job of performing femininity, too.



Like Christmas Abbott, the character of Wonder Woman, played by Gal Gadot in the 2017 feature film, is both sexy and strong. A male love interest affirms that she's still feminine enough to fall in love.

Abbott has an advantage in this regard. She was born blond into a society that privileges whiteness, with features considered conventionally pretty. It's easier for her to do the feminine apologetic than it is for women who aren't at ease with or granted as much femininity to start. A woman named Zoe, for example, who identifies as a black lesbian, invokes Barbie when explaining the difficulty she had identifying with the femininities she saw represented around her: "I never felt like a girl," she said. "There weren't even black people on TV when I was growing up. The white people were Barbie, and I am not Barbie."²¹

Zoe couldn't identify with Barbie and didn't want to be an All-American Girl, so figuring out a balance between masculinity and femininity that others would approve of was more challenging for her. Women who are ascribed masculinity by American culture—like queer and black women—may not have as many options for mixing in masculinity. Instead, they may be forced to perform a feminine apologetic regardless of whether they deliberately mix masculinity into their personas.

For black women, this is often a question of hair.²² Femininity is implicitly white, so light-colored, long, straight, or gently wavy hair is associated with femininity. Accordingly, black women with curly or kinky dark hair have to decide whether to leave it natural, wear wigs, or try to force it to resemble a white aesthetic. Many high-profile black women do the latter, including women as



Regardless of their personal preferences, both Beyoncé and Solange Knowles must make strategic decisions about what to do with their hair, knowing that others will evaluate them based on their choices.

powerful as Michelle Obama and Beyoncé. Others choose to stay natural, like Beyoncé's sister, Solange Knowles. Sometimes they do so because it fits with their identity and politics. This was certainly true for Jenny, an African American woman. She explains her decision to wear hers in dreadlocks:

I consider myself in a constant state of protest about the realities of cultural alienation, cultural marginalization, cultural invisibility, discrimination, injustice, all of that. And I feel that my hairstyle has always allowed me, since I started wearing it in a natural, to voice that nonverbally.²³

While black women can choose to wear their hair in ways that reflect their own personal values and aesthetics, they must also contend with the way others respond to them. As Jenny knows very well, on black women in America, hairstyles aren't personal, they're political. Black women's hair has been the subject of decades of lawsuits.²⁴ Natural hairstyles like twists and braids were not allowed for women in the military until 2014.²⁵ In 2016, a U.S. federal court held

that it's legal for an employer to fire a person for their hairstyle; in the case at hand, a woman who wore her hair in dreadlocks.²⁶ By forgoing the natural, black women can offer a feminine apologetic, and possibly a race apologetic, too, one that can help them succeed in white-dominated spaces. Making their hair look less "black" is a way of saying: "I'm not *that* kind of black woman." The kind, that is, that doesn't know her place.

Referencing this kind of policing in the voiceover for a Nike commercial, the tennis champion Serena Williams, herself African American, states matter-of-factly, "I've never been the right kind of woman. Oversized and overconfident. Too mean if I don't smile. Too black for my tennis whites. Too motivated for motherhood."²⁷ The visuals show her, victorious on the tennis court, with natural hair, and the narration takes a turn: "But I am proving, time and time again," she says, "there's no wrong way to be a woman."

Serena is indisputably one of the greatest athletes—of any gender—of all time. If anyone is proof that women can do and be anything, she is it. But her claim that there is no wrong way to be a woman is aspirational. We're not there yet.

Right Balances and Wrong Ones

Women do sometimes refuse or fail to perform enough conventional femininity to effectively soothe the concerns of the people around them. In practice, then, there are wrong ways to be a woman. We call them **pariah femininities**: ways of being a woman that, by virtue of directly challenging male dominance, are widely and aggressively policed.²⁸ Women who perform pariah femininities are ones who don't defer to men (*bitches*, *ballbusters*, *cunts*, and *nags*), who don't seem to care if men find them attractive (*dykes* and *hags*), who have or withhold sex without concern for whether men approve (*sluts*, *whores*, *teases*, and *prudes*), or who do not form households with men (*shrews*, *spinsters*, and *old maids*).

Such women don't balance, they *defy*. They refuse to perform a femininity that compliments hegemonic masculinity. Or, they simply cannot do conventional femininity. They have too little money, the wrong mix of identities, or the wrong bodies: ones that are overweight, disabled, old, or otherwise not amenable to a sexualized gaze.

These femininities are described as *pariah* because they are stigmatizing to the women who adopt or are ascribed them. To do them is to risk rejection, verbal attack, violence, and even ostracism. Choosing these identities can be exhilarating, because defiance is a thrill, but doing so puts women at risk of attracting the familiar slurs, and worse.

The punishments for women who embody pariah femininities reveal that women are afforded the opportunity to balance masculinity and femininity, but not exactly as they like and not in any proportion they please. Women must do

enough femininity and the *right kind* of femininity, given their subcultural environment and mix of identities. A woman working on a construction site, for example, might talk dirty and wear coveralls like her male colleagues but also need to prove her femininity by regularly going on dates with men. An out lesbian working as an aggressive prosecutor at a law firm may be expected to wear a pencil skirt, heels, and colorful blouse to court. A woman from a conservative religious background may be allowed to pursue a high-powered career, so long as her family knows that she plans to quit her job as soon as she marries. What mix of femininity and masculinity women choose to perform depends on their particular intersection of identities and context, but one thing is for sure: if you're a woman, your gender presentation needs to be balanced just right.

Because a central feature of socially constructed womanhood is attractiveness to presumed heterosexual men, that aspect of femininity—being conventionally sexually attractive—is often a nonnegotiable part of striking the right balance. Some behaviors cross an invisible line. Half of high school girls play sports, for example, and a quarter pursue careers in science, technology, or math, but only 5 percent of women let their armpit hair grow.²⁹ Studies show that a majority of college students identify women with armpit hair as radically feminist, overly aggressive in their gender politics, and possibly man-hating.³⁰ Women whose choices signal a rejection of the sexualized definition of femininity are perceived as especially threatening.

In sum, the requirement that women do femininity, combined with the more recent option also to do masculinity, gives women a great deal more behavioral freedom than men have today. Women can adopt a wider range of interests, activities, and behaviors, while men are mostly constrained by the imperative to avoid femininity. Women, of course, also face constraints related to their gender performance, but women's constraint is of a different sort than men's: She can do (almost) anything she likes, so long as she also acts to affirm the hierarchical gender binary on which men's privilege and power depend. That means doing sufficient levels of a certain kind of femininity, particularly the imperative to make herself attractive to heterosexual men.

The constraints women face, though, extend further. Not only are they required to do specific amounts and kinds of difference *from* men, they are required to do inferiority *to* men. Because femininity is, by definition, disempowering.

Doing More, Winning Less

Recall that we live in a modified patriarchy, one that associates power with men and masculinity and powerlessness with women and femininity. Whatever personality traits, styles, activities, and spheres of life are deemed feminine, then,

are going to be subject to the three relations of gender inequality: sexism, androcentrism, and subordination.

SEXISM Because of enduring sexism, a woman's mere femaleness is always a possible source of prejudice. As we discussed in the last chapter, this means that whatever women do, they have to do it better than men if they want to be evaluated as equally good. One well-documented case of such prejudice is the orchestral audition.³¹ Beginning in the 1970s, some orchestras switched to "blind" auditions. The hiring committee would sit in the theater and see only a large blind or screen. The musician would walk forward from the back of the stage, sit behind the screen, play, and leave. They would be heard but not seen. The hope was that the process would result in the committee hiring the best musician, without regard to sex, race, or any other prejudicial factor.

At first, there was no change in the proportion of women hired, suggesting that sexism was not to blame for the low numbers of women in orchestras. But then someone noticed a sound: footsteps. When a woman walked across the stage, the click-clack of her high heels, compared to the clop-clop of men's flats, was giving her away. When they required all musicians to take off their shoes before they walked across the stage, the likelihood that a woman would advance to the final rounds rose by about 50 percent.

For better or worse, life isn't a barefooted, blind audition. In most circumstances, all other things being equal, a woman can be as good as a man—as smart, creative, talented, hard-working, strong, devoted, diligent, or accomplished—and she'll be evaluated as less than. Even when she does more, when she outperforms her male counterparts, she's likely to win less.

ANDROCENTRISM Women must also contend with androcentrism. Because femininity is disparaged relative to masculinity, the gender rules that require a feminine apologetic also require women to perform a devalued identity.³² Many traits associated with femininity are quite actively disparaged in our societies. Some of us think that focusing on the feminized task of raising children makes women boring or unambitious. We look down on mom-related activities—like scrapbooking, recipe swapping, and attending PTA meetings—or make fun of "mom jeans" and "mom hair." On the flip side, women who are obsessed with fashion are "shallow." If they wear skimpy clothes, they're "insecure." And if they get cosmetic surgery, they're "desperate." Meanwhile, if a woman can't manage both to mother and conform to a culturally determined definition of sexual attractiveness, she fails doubly.

Sometimes androcentric disparagement of people who do femininity is shrouded in what sounds like a compliment. Sociologists call this **benevolent sexism**: the attribution of positive traits to women that, nonetheless, justify

women's subordination to men.³³ We may put women on pedestals and revere them on the assumption that they're supportive, loving, patient, and kind, but this reverence is a double-edged sword. Women's ability to love others, in this narrative, is beautiful, but it's also an emotional weakness that threatens their ability to compete and dominate in work, sports, or politics. Being nice doesn't win games, promotions, or elections.

Likewise, conventionally feminine women are admired for their graceful and small bodies, but it's also believed that these bodies leave them incapable of strenuous physical tasks and vulnerable to attack. This leaves them in need of assistance and protection from stronger, more physically powerful people (that is, men). Benevolent sexism, by making women more dependent on men by virtue of the positive characteristics attributed to femininity, ultimately positions women as inferior. In this way, it is the inverse of exculpatory chauvinism. While the latter uses negative stereotypes about masculinity to justify men's dominance, the former uses positive stereotypes about women to justify their subordination.

Androcentrism is why we can't speak of a hegemonic femininity the way we speak of a hegemonic masculinity. Recall that the hegemonic man represents all the traits we value in an ideal *person*. That's why both men and women are encouraged to emulate him. There is no hegemonic femininity because feminine traits and activities are seen as desirable only for women. There are idealized femininities, certainly, that women can strive to attain, but feminine traits and activities are not *universally* desirable. No version of femininity is seen as good for everyone, male and female alike.

SUBORDINATION Finally, because power is gendered, the requirement to do femininity is also the requirement to do subordination. The areas in which women are seen as naturally superior to men, for example, are often self-sacrificial. Women, it is believed, are better suited than men to forgo their leisure time, educations, and career aspirations in order to help others. The icons of femininity—mother, wife, nurse, secretary, teacher—are supportive, not leading roles, and ones that leave women less intellectually developed, accomplished, and impressive than men.

Someone doing femininity well smiles at others sweetly, keeps her voice melodic, and asks questions instead of making declarations. A conventionally feminine person lets others take care of her: open her door, order her meal, and pay her tab. A feminine sexuality is one that waits and responds, never acts or initiates. A feminine body is small and contained; “[m]assiveness, power, or abundance in a woman's body is met with distaste.”³⁴ Subordination is about never bothering others with one's own discomfort or concerns.

Sociologist Dana Berkowitz's research on Botox, for example, a toxin injected into the face to smooth wrinkles, found that it specifically reduces women's abil-

ity to project *negative* emotions that might cause discomfort in others: scowls of disapproval, grimaces of distaste, furrowed brows of worry, and tight eyebrows of anger. It even erases what is known as “resting bitch face,” ensuring that women always look pleasant.³⁵ Botox, then, enables women to do femininity better by ensuring that no one around them is able to read their faces for unladylike thoughts.

Women can feel the need to do this even in extreme circumstances.³⁶ A study of white, middle-class Midwestern American mothers revealed that many of them tried to be nice even in the midst of giving birth. They showed interest in others, tried to be gracious, and avoided raising their voices or making demands, preferring to try to “give birth like a girl.” If they failed, they apologized, to their husbands, the staff, and anyone they might have bothered. One of these mothers, Valerie, recalled her experience:

I remember between contractions here, I could hear the other people in the next room, and I remember thinking—’cause I was very loud at this point—and I remember thinking I felt bad because I was being so loud and this poor woman [giving birth] in the next room must be thinking awful thoughts about me.³⁷

In the next room, it turned out, the other woman giving birth was worried about Valerie. She sent in a note later, via the nurse, letting Valerie know that she hoped her labor went well.

Being considerate of others in the middle of giving birth is very nice indeed, but it may come at the cost of one’s own well-being. It’s hard work to try to be lovely while undergoing one of the most demanding and painful experiences of any human’s life. And withholding information or not standing up for oneself under such circumstances can be dangerous. Understanding that there are costs to being unladylike, though, some women “discipline themselves from the inside out.”³⁸ They put others first, even when it is difficult or dangerous to do so. That is the very definition of subordination.

All of this is, truly, about power. To do femininity is to do deference and to do deference is to do femininity, so much so that even computerized assistants, like Siri and Alexa, default to female.³⁹ More broadly, the bodily styles, facial expressions, and demeanors we associate with femininity are all associated with deference. Whatever the power hierarchy, the performance of femininity overlaps with the performances of those who are interacting with people with power over them: job applicants with their interviewers, enlisted soldiers with their superiors, and students in the offices of their professors. Femininity, the philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky writes, is “a language of subordination.”⁴⁰ We know this because we see it used to indicate subordinate status in other contexts:

In groups of men, those with higher status typically assume looser and more relaxed postures; the boss lounges comfortably behind the desk while the applicant sits tense and rigid on the edge of his seat. Higher-status individuals may touch their subordinates more than they themselves get touched; they initiate more eye contact and are smiled at by their inferiors more than they are observed to smile in return. What is announced in the comportment of superiors is confidence and ease.⁴¹

Likewise, speech forms associated with women—hedging (“I’d kind of” and “It seems like”), hyper-politeness (“I’d really appreciate it if” and “If you don’t mind”), and questions in response to questions (like answering “When would you like to eat dinner?” with “Around seven o’clock?”)—are actually typical not just of women, but of all people in weak positions relative to others.⁴²

When women refuse to do subordination—when they don’t keep their voices down, offer a pleasant countenance for men, or defer to male authority—they stray into pariah territory. And that makes them a target of **hostile sexism**, the use of harassment, threats, and violence to enforce women’s subservience to men. Hostile sexism relies on patriarchal gender relations, since the anger some men feel toward women is rooted in a sense of entitlement to having women in the roles of carers, helpers, sex partners, or admirers. When women don’t subordinate themselves to men, then, it can feel to some men like an assault on their rights. This can lead some men to feel a sense of **aggrieved entitlement**, anger that something men rightfully own or deserve is being unjustly taken or withheld from them.⁴³

Compared to such hostile sexism, it’s easy to interpret benevolent sexism as expressing a female-friendly gender order, but that’s not how it works. They are two sides of the same coin: Benevolent sexism rewards women’s subservience with men’s approval, protection, and support (sometimes called “chivalry”), but if women fall or jump from their pedestal, hostile sexism takes its place. Protection and support are revoked in favor of verbal or physical assault. Benevolent sexism is Plan A; hostile sexism is Plan B. Reflecting this, societies usually either have low rates of hostile and benevolent sexism or high rates; the two types of sexism rise and fall together.⁴⁴

Take street harassment as an example, remarks some men make in public to women they don’t know. Often these oscillate between niceties and sexualized hostility. Compliments can quickly turn into insults and threats if they are not met with the response the men think they deserve: a feminine apologetic in the form of a smile, a “thank you,” or another polite response. Women who ignore or reject men’s compliments are often subjected to a vicious onslaught of insults or threats. Likewise, in intimate relationships, attention and flattery can quickly turn toward control and coercion.⁴⁵ And women who become the targets of such hostility are often blamed for it on the assumption that they could have, and

should have, offered a feminine apologetic to appease their partners.

Benevolent sexism isn't a kindness, then, it's a trap. If both the risk and protection are at the hands of men—that is, if *men* are the problem and *gentlemen* are the solution—then women are always positioned such that they need men in order to be safe. Moreover, it's difficult to know which men are threats and which are protectors. Should a woman accept this man's offer to walk her home? Who is more dangerous to her: the man in the alley or the man she's suddenly alone with on the street at night? The latter she thinks of as a friend but, then again, three-quarters of women who are sexually victimized are assaulted by someone they know.⁴⁶ What to do? This is the type of difficult calculation women make routinely as part of their strategic practice of femininity.

In this sense, hostile sexism is a measure of the cracks in the system. If women never challenged male authority—and if sexual minority men, gender-nonconforming men, and trans men and women never behaved in ways that undermined the gender binary—there would be less need to reassert patriarchy by force. In fact, it is sometimes the lowest-status men, desperately holding onto the bottom rungs of the masculine hierarchy, who are most threatened by disruptions to gender distinction and hierarchy. In a study of gamer behavior, for example, it wasn't all men but rather the men with the lowest scores who most aggressively attacked women players.⁴⁷ This suggests that sexually charged taunts, insults, pranks, and violence are about gender policing: putting “uppity” women back “in their place” so as to preserve the gender binary and the illusion of male superiority.



Cartoonist B. Deutsch illustrates what it feels like to be sandwiched between both hostile and benevolent sexism.

Women, then, have more freedom than men to do gender as they like. They can do both masculinity *and* femininity. However, the combination means women are required to adopt features and behaviors that are actively disparaged, indicate weakness, or naturalize service to others. And, if they don't want to do these things, there is a carrot and a stick—a benevolent and a hostile sexism—that may change their minds. With these three strikes against them, women struggle to attain the power, prestige, and personal accomplishment that are the currency of masculine arenas. And, whether or not they strike a balance that pleases others, both doing—and not doing—femininity can be dangerous.

When Being a Woman Gets Dangerous

HARM FROM OTHERS In 2014, at the University of California, Santa Barbara, a college student named Elliot Rodger murdered three Asian men before setting out to get revenge on women. In his video manifesto, he proclaimed:

*I am going to enter the hottest sorority house at UCSB and I will slaughter every single spoiled, stuck-up, blond slut I see inside there. All those girls I've desired so much. They have all rejected me and looked down on me as an inferior man if I ever made a sexual advance toward them.*⁴⁸

When all was said and done, he'd injured thirteen and murdered six. Then he killed himself.

Rodger felt that he was positioned unfairly low in the masculine hierarchy. Mixed Chinese-British ancestry, he considered himself superior to Asian men by virtue of being half-white. He was especially infuriated when black and Asian men, who he considered lesser, “won” the “prizes” to which he believed he was entitled, specifically socially desirable women (white, blonde, and attractive).

Rodger did not believe, deep down, that women had the right to deny him their bodies. He felt *entitled* to sex with these women. His desire to kill them, in other words, was motivated by the belief that they were not obeying the rules of femininity, which included subordinating themselves to his sexual needs. His mass shooting was an act of gender policing and an example of hostile sexism rooted in aggrieved entitlement.

When aggrieved entitlement leads to murder, the crime can be described as a misogynistic murder. **Misogyny** refers to men's fear and hatred of women with power. And **misogynistic murder** is the killing of women by men who are motivated to punish women for (attempting to) exercise that power. Such murders are disturbingly common. In 1989, Marc Lepine murdered fourteen women in a killing spree in Montreal, during which he repeatedly screamed, “I want women!” and “I hate feminists!” In 1996, Darrell David Rice murdered two women camp-

ing in Virginia, explaining that they “deserved to die because they were lesbian whores.”⁴⁹ In 1998, a teacher and four female students, chosen because of their sex, were killed by Arkansas middle schoolers Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden. In 2006, Charles Roberts IV went to an Amish schoolhouse, separated the boys from the girls, and shot ten girls, killing five. In 2009, George Sodini, angry at being sexually “rejected” by women, walked into an aerobics class and sprayed bullets into the crowd of female strangers.⁵⁰ In 2010, Gerardo Regalado killed his wife and then shot six more women at a Florida restaurant, sparing the men. In 2016, Arcan Cetin, a man with a history of domestic violence and sexual harassment—who had once allegedly told a friend, “American girls hate me”—went to a makeup counter in a Macy’s and killed four women and a man.⁵¹ In 2018, at least two men would praise Elliot Rodger shortly before engaging in mass murder. One of them was Alek Minassian; he mowed down pedestrians in Toronto, killing ten, mere minutes after vowing on Facebook to “destroy” women who sexually rejected him. The other was Nikolas Cruz. Promising “Elliot Rodger will not be forgotten,” Cruz walked into Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, with a semi-automatic weapon, killing three adults and fourteen teenagers.⁵²

It is obvious that the victims of such mass killers are innocent of any blame, but the same inference is not always made when homicides and abuse are carried out by the partners, ex-partners, or would-be-partners of specific women. This is the kind of abuse and homicide we see daily. Approximately 25 percent of women have been victims of intimate partner violence, compared to 11 percent of men.⁵³ About 4.5 million women have had an intimate partner threaten them with a gun.⁵⁴ Acting on such threats, boyfriends and husbands commit 39 percent of all female homicides; in contrast, girlfriends and wives commit 3 percent of male homicides.⁵⁵ Twice as many women as men will be victims of sexual assault, and both men and women are substantially more likely to be assaulted by men than women.⁵⁶ Sometimes even mass shootings aren’t impersonal: 54 percent involve the targeting of an intimate partner or family member.⁵⁷ A quarter of all casualties of mass shootings are children known to the shooter, primarily his own or his intimate partner’s.

In the United States, sexual minorities and people who are gender nonconforming are sometimes attacked or killed because they violate gender rules; trans women and men who display femininity are most often targeted.⁵⁸ It is estimated that transgender women are more than four times more likely than other women to be killed; trans women of color are at particularly high risk.⁵⁹ Policing gender, in other words, can be truly violent. In 2017, sexual minority cis men and trans women accounted for 85 percent of those killed in gender- and sexual orientation-related hate crimes, reflecting the pattern of violence against not just those who deviate from the binary but those who adopt femininity when they do.⁶⁰

Such murders, and other forms of hostile sexism, are not caused by women or gender nonconformity but by men's misogyny and homophobia.⁶¹ They are caused by a mixture of hatred, anger, and fear. This is not a problem of individual men, and it certainly can't be chalked up to mental illness. This is a social problem. It's the persistence of patriarchal ideas—the idea that women and feminine people should subordinate themselves to men and masculinity—that fuels aggrieved entitlement and the violence that comes with it.

(MIS)MANAGING HARM When women set out to manage the violence they expect or experience from men, they sometimes engage in self-harm or victim blaming. Women often blame themselves for the violence they suffer and offer excuses for men. In one study, even the volunteers at a domestic violence shelter who insisted on principle that women were never to blame for their own assaults, were in practice quite likely to offer women's own behavior to explain what "set him off."⁶²

On college campuses, women sometimes accuse sexual assault victims of being "naïve" or "stupid." "She somehow got like sexually assaulted," said one woman about an acquaintance who'd been victimized. "All I know is that kid [that raped her] was like bad news to start off with. So, I feel sorry for her but it wasn't much of a surprise for us. He's a shady character." By suggesting that she and her friends knew better than to hang out with the perpetrator, she suggests that information and social savvy can keep women safe.

For many women, imagining that the target "must have done something" wrong or stupid gives them a false sense of security. It also requires women to restrict their lives in the hope of staying safe, or at least safer: monitoring what one says online, for example, not being out alone after dark, and never getting too drunk. Being opinionated, out alone, or drunk does not warrant being attacked, but deciding that being these things is somehow "stupid" or reckless does increase the likelihood of self-blame should things go wrong. As Laurie Penny says about suggestions that her writing provokes internet trolls:

*What makes victim-blaming so insidious is that it isn't just about shifting the blame—it's about sending a message to anyone else who might be dumb enough to think they can do whatever that victim was doing and get away with it.*⁶³

Notably, dividing women into those who are and aren't smart enough to protect themselves from violence also undermines the solidarity necessary to fight to end it once and for all.

Many women find themselves in a double bind: If they are vulnerable and deferential, they are easy prey, but if they are self-protective and self-assertive, they are pariahs. This is, of course, only if they don't believe they are capable

of protecting themselves in the first place. In the West, women's bodies are socially constructed as weaker and more fragile than men's—inherently vulnerable to and helpless in the face of men's violence—and women often internalize this idea.⁶⁴

Even women who are born male-bodied often come to believe this. Interviews with trans women show that as individuals transition from male to female, most learn to embody a sense of physical vulnerability.⁶⁵ Trans women, like cis women, are more likely than cis men to be subject to sexually objectifying gazes and touched without permission. Meanwhile, adopting women's fashions—heels that shorten and unbalance their stride and skirts that restrict how they bend and sit—reduces the power and freedom women sense in their own bodies. They're also subject to all the stereotypes about the female body, including the idea that it is inherently vulnerable to men's stronger and more violent bodies. Despite being socialized as men and being, on average, taller and more muscular than cis women, trans women often come to feel similarly vulnerable. A trans woman named Rebecca, for example, said the following when asked if she walks alone at night:

*I just don't do it. I used to when I was a man. Yeah, I'd be anywhere I wanted to. I didn't fear anything but as a woman, yeah, I'm very cautious. . . . Because we are victims. We're the type of person that other people prey upon because we're the weaker sex, so to speak.*⁶⁶

Having internalized the idea that women are “victims” and the “weaker sex,” Rebecca now acts accordingly. Between her sense of herself as vulnerable and the very real statistics on trans women's victimization, it's easy to see why.

Part of women's struggle to redefine femininity is overcoming an inability to imagine that they are loud, strong, angry, or dangerous. Self-defense instructors, for example, often teach women who assume, wrongly, that they are helpless to defend themselves against a man. In fact, maneuvers that take little strength—a thumb to the eye socket, a punch to the throat, an elbow to the nose, a quick kick to the knee cap, or a twist of the testicles—can often bring an attempted assault to an end.⁶⁷ Research has shown that hollering, fighting back, or fleeing reduces the likelihood of a completed rape by 81 percent, without increasing the severity of injuries sustained by victims.⁶⁸

Women are powerful, but they often don't recognize, or they resist using, that power. This is a problem even in Sweden, one of the most gender-egalitarian countries in the world. To that end, kindergarten teachers in Sweden are now actively and effectively teaching girls how to yell.⁶⁹ Called a “compensatory gender strategy,” the idea is to counter the gender-stereotypical socialization the

kids are getting elsewhere. Boys, then, are being taught to give massages and girls are being told to “throw open the window and scream.”

How individual girls and women manage risks of violence will vary, of course, but the collective challenge women face is in finding a way to fight back against misogyny. To the extent that conventional femininity offers only a choice between victim (helpless but protected by benevolent sexists) or pariah (powerful but punished by hostile ones), women will find it difficult to claim a strategy of self-assertion that is effective, feels good, and is tolerated by the people around them.

Bargaining with Patriarchy

Though women have choices about how to do femininity, and options for mixing in masculinity, they are still subject to rules and restrictions when it comes to their gender performances. Women, then, like men, make patriarchal bargains to maximize their autonomy, safety, and well-being in the face of sexism, androcentrism, and subordination. Whereas men are presented with essentially one kind of bargain, adopting hegemonic masculinity as much as they can or else accepting low status in the masculine hierarchy, women can choose among three types of bargains.

One bargain involves trading one's own attainment of power for the protection and support of a man. This bargain involves performing **emphasized femininity**, an exaggerated form of conventional femininity “oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men.”⁷⁰ With this strategy, a woman attempts to perfect a performance of femininity in exchange for the support of a man who will share his privilege with her. Stay-at-home moms, for example, have struck one such patriarchal bargain, making their family-focused strategy their side of a gendered economic deal. They provide feminized, unpaid work in the home for their husband and children. In return, their husbands share their income and benefits: providing a well-stocked kitchen, vacations, affordable health insurance, and a secure retirement.

Other women—disparagingly called “gold diggers”—offer their beauty and attentiveness to economically successful men. Aspiring models who work the high-end party circuit, for example, can get work as nonsexual partners for very wealthy men.⁷¹ The women get designer clothes, gourmet meals, and luxury trips in exchange for performing a “strategic intimacy” that allows the men to feel attractive and important. Likewise, in high-end clubs in Vietnam, corporate men hire beautiful women to smooth their negotiations with male clients.⁷² In some cases, a woman doing emphasized femininity may become a rich man's wife. In exchange for financial support, these women promise to keep their bodies taut, their clothes flattering, and their hair and faces attractive. The man

has a lovely companion, then, to appreciate and display, either as a “trophy wife” or a temporary companion.

The family-focused wife and the lovely companion are making the same patriarchal bargain: doing a version of emphasized femininity in exchange for male support. In both cases, the woman’s performance contributes to men’s relative status, helps men succeed economically, and enhances men’s quality of life. Women have traded the direct attainment of their *own* power for the indirect attainment of *his*. Neither raising kids nor being beautiful pays the rent, ensures women they won’t be destitute when they’re old, or makes their voices heard.

Thus, the position of those who perform emphasized femininity is always precarious; they can’t control how much reward men offer and on what terms. They are dependent on men’s ongoing willingness to support them, even as the things they have to offer decrease in value. Children grow up and leave the house, and beautiful faces and bodies face the march of time. It’s a risky bargain for women: what upper-class men have to offer (money and status) are universally desirable goods and likely build over their lifetimes, whereas the bargaining position of women who are counting on their emphasized performance of femininity inevitably will weaken.

Being a doctor’s wife is risky, so instead many women have decided that it is safer and more practical to become doctors themselves. Women with ambitions to enter male-dominated professions may make a patriarchal bargain that involves being “just one of the guys,” a strategy sociologist Michael Kimmel refers to as **emphatic sameness**. In his study of the first women to integrate military schools, Kimmel found that some women tried to make the fact that they were female as invisible as possible.⁷³ Distancing themselves from other women, they tried to be “cadets” instead of “female cadets.”

Many women do emphatic sameness, downplaying the feminine in themselves in exchange for the right to do quite a bit of masculinity. These women may declare majors associated with men and deride women who major in feminized subjects like literature or elementary education. They may make sports a central part of their lives and dismiss cheerleaders as not real athletes. They may choose not to have children and decide that mothers are not serious about



To this day, Marilyn Monroe remains an icon of emphasized femininity.



An emphasized sameness approach allows this woman to blend in with male recruits to the New York Police Department.

pursuing personal or professional accomplishments. By embracing androcentrism, they hope to avoid both benevolent and hostile sexism.

In fact, doing emphatic sameness is a way for some women to gain power as individuals in a society that values masculinity. The bargain has limits, though. First, this strategy is probably only possible in very specific kinds of masculinized contexts, those where men have agreed to tolerate the presence of women who are very successful in the performance of masculinity. Everyone at the military school Kimmel studied, for example, was doing masculinity. That's how everyone—male or female—fit in and succeeded. In such a context, the requirement that women balance masculinity with femininity may be relaxed.

Second, emphatic sameness is a limited individual bargain because it depends on the denigration of femininity in general. The majority of women who do emphatic sameness reject femininity but are still understood by others to be female. They may not be rewarded for their performance of femininity, but the expectation that they will reveal their intrinsic femininity at some point remains. If they are heterosexual, finding a sexual partner may demand being disavowed as a “pal.” If they are not, being perceived as asexual may be the only way to avoid pariah status. In either case, their bargain backfires: they end up embodying the very thing they've agreed is valueless.

Moreover, this bargain reinforces the idea that women and girly stuff are trivial and worthless. So, the emphatic sameness bargain undermines attempts

to empower women *as a group*, even if it allows individual women to have more power than they would otherwise. Notice that the most successful women (surgeons, judges, politicians) usually rely on a team of less advantaged women (housekeepers, nannies, nurses, secretaries). The surgeon may have achieved a level of prestige usually reserved for a man, but she does so on the backs of other women who do devalued, still-feminized work on her behalf.

Most women don't do either emphasized femininity or emphatic sameness consistently. In different contexts or times of their lives, they may strike different bargains. They alternate between masculinity and femininity in accordance with a patriarchal bargain called **gender equivocation**, using masculinity and femininity strategically when either is useful and culturally expected.

This was the case, for example, for a group of young women studied by sociologist Nikki Jones.⁷⁴ These women were all enrolled in a violence-intervention project located in a low-income, mostly African American neighborhood of Philadelphia. Living in high-violence neighborhoods, the women had developed strategies for both doing gender and staying safe. Like their male peers, they were willing to fight to protect their reputation. Despite this Tough Gal strategy, the women understood that in some contexts they were required to perform femininity and were rewarded for doing so.

Jones documents a young woman, Kiara, collecting signatures for a neighborhood petition. She approached strangers assertively to discuss the petition, strategically drawing on both feminine flirtation and masculine argumentation to get signatures. She would flirt with male acquaintances walking by, but then defiantly criticize the police as they passed the station. She was, when she needed to be, she said, "aggressive for the streets," but could also, when it was useful to her, be "pretty for the pictures."⁷⁵ When it came to her gender performance, Kiara equivocated, using whichever strategy provided the best bargain at the moment.

These patriarchal bargains—emphasized femininity, emphatic sameness, and gender equivocation—are not equally available to every female-bodied person. The women studied by Jones largely didn't have the option to choose emphasized femininity; their Tough Gal strategy acknowledged that knowing how to fight "like a man" was necessary to survive in their neighborhoods. Likewise, the ability to perform emphasized femininity to land a rich husband depends in part on a person's particular body and face. Not everyone is born with a conventionally attractive, physically able body that they can train to be slim and graceful. It helps to have some money to start with, too. Conversely, some women may not have the temperament to be a family-focused parent or the ambition or opportunity to pursue a demanding career. Most women aim to find a bargain that seems practical and potentially rewarding, even if not ideal. However, no matter what bargain women make, there is a cost to be paid.

It's called the **double bind**, a situation in which cultural expectations are contradictory, making success unattainable. Satisfying only one or the other

expectation inevitably means failure, and it is impossible to do both. In the case of women in contemporary Western societies, the double bind refers to the idea that to be powerful is to fail as a woman and to succeed as a woman is to give up power.

Women can and do fall from grace in either direction. We see this phenomenon, for example, in sports. South African Olympian sprinter Caster Semenya is an example of a woman who was attacked for doing too little femininity, whereas tennis player Anna Kournikova is an example of an athlete who did too much. Semenya's physical body, surprisingly fast races, and refusal to do femininity both on and off the track led to an investigation of her biological sex that threatened her career. Under this pressure, she submitted to a public makeover—a last-ditch attempt at an apologetic.

In contrast, Kournikova's successful embodiment of femininity pushed her out of her tennis career and into modeling. Today she is frequently mocked as one of the worst professional athletes of all time; the fact that she was once ranked eighth in the world is eclipsed by her sex appeal. She still frequently graces the covers of men's magazines.

Backlash against female politicians also often reflects the double bind. Women candidates have some ability to gender equivocate on the campaign trail, but this bargain doesn't necessarily help them.⁷⁶ On the one hand, women are criticized for not being sufficiently feminine. In 2012, Geun-hye Park, then a candidate for president of South Korea, was criticized by her opponent for not having children. Her opponent's spokesman said that she "has no femininity" because she wasn't "agonizing over childbirth, childcare, education, and grocery prices."⁷⁷ Both Julia Gillard, former prime minister of Australia, and Angela Merkel, the current chancellor of Germany, have faced similar charges. Because these female leaders don't have children, critics said, "they've got no idea what life's about" and are not "real women."⁷⁸ Even women with children can find their emphasis on gender sameness—their toughness or status in masculinized positions—used against them. One need not approve of all of Nancy Pelosi's or Hillary Clinton's political positions to recognize the hostile sexism underlying the caricatures of them as emasculating shrews.

On the other hand, if female candidates do emphasized femininity, this tends to hurt them, too.⁷⁹ Consider the treatment of Sarah Palin, the Republican choice for vice president, during the 2008 presidential primaries. On the campaign, she emphasized her femininity with long hair, stylish clothes that hugged her body, and a cheerful demeanor. But because she performed femininity, Palin was seen as pretty but incompetent: a contrast to the masculinized image of a smart, strong, and effective politician.⁸⁰ Male commentators gushed over her attractiveness, saying that she was "by far the best-looking woman ever to rise to such heights" and "the first indisputably fertile female to dare to dance with the big



Caster Semenya's astonishingly fast times on the track and disinterest in performing gender while she raced prompted the International Association of Athletics to investigate her biological sex. Her makeover for *You* magazine (right) was an effort to assure others of her femininity.

dogs." But they also pejoratively called her "girlish," compared her to a "naughty librarian," and dubbed her "Caribou Barbie." A pundit for CNBC claimed that she was politically successful only because "men want to mate with her" and said that he (and other men) would vote for her because he wanted her "lying next to me in bed." It wasn't long before she became a joke to much of America, inspiring MILF memes and look-alike stripper contests in Las Vegas. While Palin certainly had her faults, her downfall was also distinctly gendered.

On a national stage, how can an ambitious woman strike a balance between masculinity and femininity that pleases everyone? If voters tolerate some kinds of balances but not others, and the balances they tolerate differ across regions; between the cities, suburbs, and countryside; up and down the class ladder; and along the political spectrum, among other divides, how can a woman ever escape the double bind?

Women, like men, make patriarchal bargains to maximize their autonomy and well-being. Men face substantially tighter restrictions than women, but the

bargains available to them—while fewer than those available to women—offer greater rewards. Women enjoy more flexibility because there are more socially endorsed strategies for them to use, but no matter what bargain women seek to make, the outcomes are not in their favor.

THE BIG PICTURE

Gender inequality has been a part of Western culture for a very long time. Through all that time, people have been actively challenging the basis, logic, and fairness of patriarchal ideas and practices. Today, those people are called feminists.

Feminism, most simply, is the belief that all men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. The word was borrowed from the French in the late 1800s, when many women around the world were still the property of men by law. It has been used ever since to describe efforts to reduce women's disadvantage relative to men and free both men and women from harmful and oppressive gender stereotypes.

While feminism is principally concerned with gender inequality, intersectionality—differences among men and among women—has become central to the conversation. Especially since the 1970s, scholars and activists have been theorizing what it means to include all women in their mission.⁸¹ Ultimately, it became clear that if one cared *strictly* about gender inequality, a feminist utopia was entirely compatible with other types of injustice. In this imaginary world, women would simply be equal to “their” men—ones of the same race, class, and so on. If those men were disadvantaged by other forms of injustice, then women would be, too. This was morally objectionable to most feminists because it charted a feminism for only rich, white, and otherwise privileged women. Many argued this was not feminism at all.

Today many feminists, arguably most, take as their target the **matrix of domination**, a structure in which multiple hierarchies intersect to create a pyramid of privilege, leaving on top only those people who are advantaged in every hierarchy.⁸² As a result, when someone identifies themselves as feminist today, they often mean to say they're part of a network of activists targeting a wide range of injustices. Other social justice movements have pushed for this more inclusive feminism, arguing that it's important to consider not just one injustice at a time, but how they work on each other simultaneously to create bargains that are not merely patriarchal but also cement class, race, and sexuality as interacting systems of inequality. In this sense, intersectionality has been theorized as not just part of our identities or social locations, but as a call for social practices that challenge unjust systems of all kinds.⁸³

In addition to embracing intersectional analysis, feminists have been on the forefront of theorizing masculinity and the way the gender binary might be harmful to men. Many men today identify as feminist or pro-feminist, and they have formed organizations aimed at fighting gender inequality and its harmful effects on both men and women.⁸⁴ In Canada, men founded the White Ribbon Campaign, an effort by men to end men's violence against women, now active in sixty countries.⁸⁵ The National Organization of Men against Sexism in the United States works toward gender equality on the belief that "men can live as happier and more fulfilled human beings by challenging the old-fashioned rules of masculinity that embody the assumption of male superiority."⁸⁶ And Men Can Stop Rape works to promote "healthy, nonviolent masculinity" and "cultures free from violence."⁸⁷ There are many more such organizations around the world.

Even in the very early years of feminism, people understood that it had the potential to change men's lives for the better as well as women's. The early feminist Floyd Dell, writing in 1917, argued: "Feminism will make it possible for the first time for men to be free." He believed feminism was the path to full humanity and the only hope for true love between men and women. Criticizing the elite marriages he saw around him, he wrote:

*When you have got a woman in a box and you pay rent on the box, her relationship to you insensibly changes character. . . . It is no longer a sharing of life together—it is a breaking of life apart. Half a life—cooking, clothes, and children; half a life—business, politics, and baseball. It doesn't make much difference which is the poorer half. Any half, when it comes to life, is very near to none at all.*⁸⁸

Dell would likely be impressed at the lives women are leading today, thanks to a real reduction in both legal and interpersonal forms of explicit sexism. But he'd be deeply troubled by the continued pressure men face to live half a life.

This pressure has, in fact, been getting worse, not better. Since the 1970s, both men and women have become increasingly androcentric.⁸⁹ Men are feeling more pressure than ever to conform to a narrowing range of acceptable masculinities. Even hybrid masculinities—those that mix femininity in—seem to uphold patriarchal relations. Our societies have yet to deliver on the promise to men that Dell envisioned.

As we've seen, contemporary gender relations are not ideal for women either. It will become increasingly clear in the coming chapters that women's bargains with patriarchy are limited in rewards. Mixing in more masculinity helped accelerate women's participation in the economy in the 1960s but the increases stalled out by the 1990s.⁹⁰ The percent of women in the workforce, for example, went up by 30 percentage points between 1962 and 1992 but has only

risen a few percentage points since. The gap between women's pay and men's also narrowed substantially during these years but has been relatively stable since the mid-1990s.⁹¹ Between 1971 and 1981, sex segregation in white-collar occupations declined precipitously, but since the mid-1980s it's been steady. The percent of PhD recipients who identify as female went up by about 20 percentage points in the ten years before 1981 but took another thirty years to move another 20.⁹²

This state of affairs inspired scholars to argue that the United States and other similar Western countries are in the middle of a **stalled revolution**, a sweeping change in gender relations stuck halfway through.⁹³ Women have increasingly embraced opportunities in masculine arenas, but few men have moved toward feminine options. This new gender order hurts both men and women, but differently; men suffer more *as individuals*, while women are harmed more *as a group*.

Men are harmed as individuals because hegemonic masculinity pushes them to obey its imperatives. Androcentrism restricts men's lives, asking them to destroy or hide parts of themselves that don't fit the hegemonic model. As a result, they have narrower life options. Some men find this oppressive; others don't, not because it isn't repressive—there's no doubt that it is—but because there are worse things than being boxed into valued and rewarded roles in society. A lot of men aren't that upset, it turns out, by being told they shouldn't do something they learned to not want to do, concluding that it's OK to leave high heels, dirty diapers, and salads to women. Masculinity is oppression, in other words, dressed up as superiority, which isn't so bad, at least for those whose superior standing doesn't seem to be slipping away from them.

Our gender regime is bad, then, for men's mental and physical health as individuals, but collectively works out better for men on the whole. As a group, men benefit because hegemonic masculinity is socially and economically rewarded; it is the face of power, which they see as theirs. Men face less pressure to bother with things we've learned to belittle, to defer to others, or to sacrifice their own needs. In fact, because men are required to eschew femininity as much as possible, men are free to grab brazenly for power, act on self-interest, and mobilize support from other men for their success in ways that are actively disparaged for women. When the gender binary does exact costs from men, they are more likely to interpret this as individual failure than systematic outcomes of patriarchal legacies.

In contrast, as individuals, women benefit from the greater flexibility that modified patriarchy affords them but face more harm as a group by the costs that sexism, androcentrism, and subordination still impose collectively. All women, regardless of the bargains they strike as individuals, must contend with the risks of assault and the possibility of becoming a pariah. All their diverse strategies are fitted within the boundaries of gender inequality. Collective costs include benevolent or hostile sexism, being hamstrung by the double bind,

dependency on men for safety and support, and the requirement to adopt devalued, subordinating, and sexualized gender performances.

All this limits women's ability to perform gender in ways that truly disrupt the system. Women as a group pay more of the costs of the hierarchical gender binary, then, measured by the economic vulnerability and physical danger they face; as such, women are more likely to name and resist the unfairness of these costs.

The revolution is yet unfinished, but the resistance is hard to miss.

Revisiting the Question

Q+A

If both men and women are constrained by a binary gender system, why is it that more women than men find this system unfair?

The gender binary is a distinction, not just a difference; it's about hierarchy. The masculine side of the binary is presumed to be not just different but *better than* the feminine side. And most of us have internalized this idea, at least a little, learning to see men and masculine people as more valuable and impressive than women and feminine people.

As a result, girls and women are generally encouraged to mix a little masculinity into their personality and enter previously male-dominated leisure activities and occupations. Unlike men, for whom the other sex's territory is stigmatizing, for women, it can be quite appealing. It feels good to excel in arenas that others value. It brings status and reward, sometimes even from the people whose opinions matter most: men with good positions in the masculine hierarchy and control over most social rewards. Why wouldn't women want to embrace the opportunity to do a little masculinity, or even quite a lot? In fact, women's eagerness to incorporate masculinity and move into masculine arenas is proof of femininity's low value. In hindsight, one of the reasons women have been so keen to embrace masculinity is because it feels good to be seen as better than the women who do not. This is their patriarchal bargain.

Women who do just masculinity, though, or who don't perform the right kind of feminine apologetic, will not be rewarded. They will be policed, often and severely, and even women with flawless performances still may face abuse and be blamed for provoking it. Yet all women must do at least some femininity and, when they do, they'll be performing a devalued identity, one that seems rightfully subordinated. As individuals, women can resist these mechanisms of oppression by deftly doing masculinity and strategically appropriating masculine roles. Some women will do so spectacularly, rising to the corner offices of the biggest companies and powerful positions in our government. But women

as a group will never be on an equal footing with men because men aren't required by virtue of their gender to perform powerlessness and deference.

This is why women, more so than men, have fought to dismantle patriarchy. It's also why the word "feminism," and not "masculinism," has come to represent the movement, though today it is as much about freeing individual men from repressive gender rules as it is about giving women the choices patriarchy denies them. Likewise, feminists are increasingly intersectional in insisting that liberating both men and women will involve challenging every axis of all our societies' intersecting oppressions: racism, colorism, ableism, heterosexism, class inequality, and prejudices based on religion, immigration status, cognitive difference, physical size, mental illness, and more. The real story about gender and power isn't a simple one about women's disadvantage, then, but a complicated one that reveals the costs that a hierarchical gender binary imposes on the vast majority of us, a system of unequal gender relations that is just one part of a wider matrix of domination. And feminism is what we call our efforts to undo it.

Next . . .

Thus far we've discussed the social construction of gender in our ideas, the policing of gendered performances in interaction, and patriarchal power relations. These are all very powerful forces. But what about free will, self-determination, and personal initiative? We're a free country, after all—isn't it still possible to reject the gender binary; ignore what other people say; refuse to accept or enact sexism, androcentrism, and subordination; and live a life free of all this gender stuff, even if that means paying some social costs? How about deciding to give up male privilege or to live with the low status of a social pariah? That line of inquiry leads us to our next chapter:

Q+A

When it comes down to it, regardless of social construction and social pressure, don't we live in a society in which it's possible to just be an individual?

It turns out, no.

FOR FURTHER READING

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NOTHING IS POSSIBLE WITHOUT
PEOPLE, BUT NOTHING LASTS
WITHOUT INSTITUTIONS.

—JEAN MONNET¹

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