

# It's a Man's World: The Effect of Traditional Masculinity on Gender Equality

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Public and international discourse on the debate for gender equality focuses on the oppression of women, as it rightly should. However, the influence that traditional male stereotypes have on the perpetuation of gender inequality, at a transnational scale, also needs to be addressed. This essay asks how do male stereotypes affect the manner in which males engage with gender equality? By encouraging males to analyse their socially constructed gender profiles, it is possible to educate them on how their social roles may impact gender equality. This will involve analysing the entrenchment of traditional male stereotypes in society and their consequent impact on women. Firstly, the essay will establish that male stereotypes operate within a larger structure of the gender paradigm. Then, it will define gender equality and its various interpretations. This will then lead the essay to discuss the trajectory of the progress towards gender equality and why males must be viewed as fundamental actors. Certain masculinities preserve and promote the inequalities experienced between men and women, and, in order to achieve gender equality, they must be dismantled.

When analysing male stereotypes, in the context of gender equality, it is important to recognise that they do not operate in isolation. Male stereotypes, or *masculinities*, function '... as an aspect of a larger structure'.<sup>[1]</sup> This structure is *gender*. Gender denotes the social phenomenon of distinguishing males and females based on a set of identity traits. The gendering of the sexes produces and sustains socially constructed differences.<sup>[2]</sup> Men and women are constructed to behave and interact in ways that perpetuate their gendered identities. However, there is a vital distinction at work here, one that will underpin this essay — the difference between sex and gender. Although this difference is highly contentious and widely contested, it will inform the essay's discussion of gender equality. Sex and gender are classifications for differentiating between men and women. Sex, in contrast to gender, refers to the determination made based upon scientifically accepted biological criteria. The distinction of sex can be made through the classification of '... genitalia at birth or chromosomal typing before birth'.<sup>[3]</sup>

The terms gender and sex are often understood to be the same thing and used interchangeably.<sup>[4]</sup> However, this only serves to conflate biological anatomy with socially constructed identities. The problem with this misconception is that in societies, such as those in the West, it is assumed that the reproductive function of males and females is a sufficient basis for prescribing psychological and behavioural characteristics onto members of society.<sup>[5]</sup> In response to this, Peterson and Runyan assert that:

'... gender should be understood as a social, not physiological, construction: Femininity and masculinity, the terms that denote one's gender, refer to a complex set of characteristics and behaviours prescribed for a particular sex by society and learned through the socialisation process'.<sup>[6]</sup>

In other words, society, not biology, confines males and females to particular masculine and feminine character profiles. This means that gender is not fixed. Christian states that '... it is perfectly feasible for gender to change while biological sex remains the same'.<sup>[7]</sup> Gender should be considered an adjustable and fluid concept, as opposed to the more static disposition of biology.

According to Freud, the human subject has always been *sexed*, and that despite the biological differences, males

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and females have become particular social subjects.[8] The biological individual can be viewed as a blank canvas upon which gendered identities are projected and performed through socialisation. Therefore, the supposed differences between men and women are accentuated through the legitimisation of social stereotypes. These stereotypes, presented as inherent, are influenced by the social environment to which one is subjected. Male and female gender profiles are normalised to the extent that they appear natural, biological. Freud, who pioneered early psychoanalysis of the unconscious, was able to examine the '... continuity between normal and neurotic mental life, the concepts of repression and the unconscious, and the mental process to be 'read' through dreams, jokes, slips of the tongue and symptoms'.[9]

His work provided much needed insight into understanding inherent and normative views of gender identities. By definition, psychoanalytic theory aims to deconstruct what is explicitly or unintentionally communicated to illuminate the latent '... fantasies, anxieties, and desires of the speaking subject'.[10] In relation to gender, psychoanalysis stresses that our biology is experienced within culture, not nature, and '... that the effect of culture is to transform and channel biology and instinct in particular ways'.[11] Thus, the psychological differences between males and females are mostly, if not entirely, socially constructed.

This view, however, is not universally shared. In his paper titled, *Feminism Against Science*, Goldberg argues that the cognitive and behavioural differences between men and women are established through their respective physiologies, and that society and gender are a reflection of biological realities.[12] Moir and Jessel also advocate for biological determinism, arguing that to proclaim that men and women '... are the same in aptitude, skill, or behaviour is to build a society based on a biological and scientific lie', and that biological reality reveals a comparative relationship of sexual asymmetry.[13] The argument raised by Goldberg, Moir, and Jessel is allegedly based on solid scientific findings. The ethos offered by 'science' is easy to succumb to. However, these 'findings' and results are often filtered and manipulated to strengthen the author's argument. In her book, *Sex Differences in Cognitive Abilities*, Halpern contends that throughout her study, the most important lesson she learnt was that '... researchers, like the rest of us, maintain a particular world view that they use in interpreting research findings'.[14] So when analysis arguments about gender, nothing should be unquestioningly accepted as irrefutable, scientific fact.

Discussions about gender are often adjacent to discussions that attempt to determine the intellectual capacities of either sex. Debates of this nature were generated in the late nineteenth century, when it was determined, with scientific vindication, that the challenges and complexities of academia were deemed too overwhelming for the female mind.[15] This attempt to distinguish sex difference on the basis of physiology is one found in evolutionary theory. The theory argues that men and women '... pursue distinctive strategies to achieve reproductive effectiveness, with sometimes significant divergence'.[16] This view reduces human existence to the reproductive function. It supports the idea that the only factor of sexual differentiation that needs to be considered is the reproductive process.[17] The pursuit of survival is thus contingent upon successful reproduction, which creates a lineage of evolution for both men and women. Wilson, a Darwinist evolutionary theorist argues in his book, *The Great Sex Divide*, that for individuals who '... perform their sex role more successfully, their genes would have superior survival value, and so we would expect progressive differentiation of physical and mental equipment as parallel evolutionary developments'.[18] That is to say, human evolution is based on the propensity of an individual to fulfil their biological function. Therefore, sex differences are of vital importance to survival. Wilson also contends that the differences between men and women '... are observed, fairly universally, regardless of species or culture, time or place'.[19] This kind of argument lies at the very centre of gender inequality. Differentiation can unintentionally, and intentionally, cultivate a culture of discrimination. In categorising the differences between two subjects, one is automatically participating in a process of judgment. This judgment can manifest as a destructive bias or a positive comparison.

Sex difference has been biologically substantiated, and, in some cases, justified in the development of evolution. However, some argue that males and females are increasingly similar than different. For example, Epstein, in her book *Deceptive Distinctions*, maintains that distinctions based on gender identities serve more harm than good, and that attempts to divide the sexes based on intelligence present dysfunctional consequences for society.[20] In many ways, the argument returns to the age-old question: Are women mentally inferior to men? Some scholars argue in the affirmative, that men and women exhibit asymmetrical cognitive capabilities. However, scholars such as Seligman

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answer in the negative: 'no, [women] are not. Data are now being laid on the table that show that, on average, men and women are equal in mental ability'.[21] Since the late nineteenth-century, research has studied sex difference across a plethora of psychological planes, such as mental abilities, attitudes, interest, personality traits, and emotions. Moreover, Connell, like Seligman, states that '... sex differences, on almost every psychological trait measured, are either non-existent or fairly small'.[22]

Across many social and academic spheres, the question of who is the smarter sex is deemed unanswerable. Given the tendency of researchers to favour a sex, most concede then that men and women are 'even'[23] Researchers are gendered subjects, conditioned by sociocultural gender constructs. They may support the superiority of a particular sex, which in turn, is deliberately or intuitively reflected in their respective research. This is why psychoanalysis '... does not assume the existence of an *a priori* "self" or "ego"', but asserts that personal identity is contingent upon social conditioning.[24] Researchers do not operate, nor conduct their research, in isolation of reality. They are thus influenced by universal social discourses such as race, gender, and class. Absolute scientific objectivity is a standard difficult to uphold. Halpern warns of the existence of researchers that allow their bias for either sex to direct their study outcomes, such as Rushton and Jenson who '... steadfastly maintain that women are less intelligent than men'.[25] Views such as this intensify the gender divide by supporting the notion of male dominance, which further solidifies gender disparities. As Gaitanidis states, the conditions, which produce gender identities, are not quasi-universal; sociocultural and historical forces intrude in our lives to shape our personal identities.[26] Therefore, favouring certain data can be a symptom of cultural influences, such as gendered sex roles.

Sex difference has been largely debunked, or at the very least, considered inconclusive. The general consensus is that neither sex is psychologically superior. The emphasis is rather on the socialisation of difference, where the male and female gender constructs are influenced by worldviews, perceived norms and the unconscious. The variation of positions on sex difference indicates how pervasive the gender paradigm is, and how even purportedly objective areas of study, like science, can be skewed to perpetuate the idea of male intellectual dominance. The revolutionary work of feminists and social constructivists over the past four decades has highlighted the impact and influence of gender constructs on sociocultural life and knowledge.[27] Kimmel summarises the scale and influence of gender as an organising principle of society by stating, 'virtually every society known to us is founded upon assumptions of gender difference and the politics of gender inequality'.[28] This point becomes foundational when answering the question of how traditional masculinity affects the manner in which men engage with gender equality. At this juncture, the essay needs to address this question.

Debates about gender equality refer to the asymmetrical power balance experienced between men and women due to differences in their gendered identities.[29] On this, Peterson and Runyan contend that:

'... the social construction of gender is actually a system of power that not only divides men and women as masculine and feminine but typically also places men and masculinity above women and femininity and operates to value more highly those institutions and practices that are male dominated and/or representative of masculine traits and styles'.[30]

This is a contemporary analysis of modern gender constructs and the relations between the sexes, yet the idea of gender equality has been a major international principle of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[31] Despite this, Grossman and McClain argue that progress towards achieving gender equality have failed to substantially materialise, and that there still exists '... a stark gap between formal commitments to the equal rights and responsibilities of men and women and against discrimination and subordination based on sex the gendered realities of women's lives'.[32]

The term 'gender equality', when deconstructed in isolation, unveils fundamental problems. Some argue the term is a paradox; gender is a system based on difference, and thus could never transform into a state of equivalence.[33] Parvikko frames equality '... as a concept which obscures differences', and states that in contemporary liberal political thought, equality and difference are incommensurate.[34] Such difficulties in the application of the term have resulted in some people proclaiming that gender equality should be considered a discourse rather than a fixed term. This approach is much more constructive, as it recognises gender equality as a fluid concept that responds to the

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unique requirements of specific contexts.[35] Gender equality has many variants and interpretations, such as formal substantive equality.[36] This essay will consider equality as a system that facilitates equal opportunity. As echoed by men and women across all continents, in the World Development Report conducted by The World Bank, gender equality was seen to encompass three key elements: 'the accumulation of *endowments* (education, health, and physical assets); the use of those endowments to take up *economic opportunity* and generate incomes; and the application of those endowments to take actions, or *agency*, affecting individual and household well-being'.[37] This is not an exhaustive list of what constitutes gender equality, but it provides a solid foundation for what it should entail. With this in mind, the essay will now discuss the relationship between masculinity and gender equality.

Gender is an organising principle of social life, and change towards equality will require exceptional institutional and gender identity reform.[38] Realising gender equality is strongly weighted on the contribution of males, because '... the very gender inequalities in economic assets, political power, cultural authority, and means of coercion that gender reform intend to change (ultimately) mean that men control most of the resources required to implement women's claims for justice'.[39] In Australia, men make up the overwhelming majority of key decision-makers. In 2012, women comprised only 26.5% of Federal Parliament, and in the private sector constituted approximately 10% of company board members and 24.7% of managers.[40] Thus, men are an essential enabler for gender reform. Masculinities and male stereotypes must be studied and deconstructed in order to effect change in how men relate to women.

Stereotypes, or gender profiles, play an important role in the discussion of gender equality. They attribute certain characteristics to whole segments of society with the intention of presenting perception as truth.[41] In relation to gender, stereotypes form the basis of how society believes men and women should act. The scale to which gender stereotypes impact society is articulated by Epstein who argues:

'no aspect of social life — whether the gathering of crops, the ritual of religion, the formal dinner party, or the organisation of government — is free from the dichotomous thinking that casts the world in categories of "male" and "female"'.[42]

Gender stereotypes are inherently political; they can be used as tools for manipulating power relations between men and women. They are naturalised within society through a process of reproduction and maintenance. To this end, gender stereotypes become '... self-fulfilling: if we expect certain behaviours, we may act in ways that in fact create and reinforce such behaviours'.[43]

Masculinities, as is the case with femininities for women, are socially constructed gender profiles under which men are categorised. However, they are not created equal. For men, there is '... a culturally preferred version that is held up as the model against which we [men] are to measure ourselves'.[44] The dominant model to which men must aspire is what Connell describes as hegemonic masculinity. It is a location within the male gender hierarchy that occupies the hegemonic, or top position.[45] However, hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed position, and occupying the position is contestable. Masculinity can be viewed as a social order that lends analysis and structure from Gramsci's notion of class relations. As such, hegemonic masculinity retains the dominant position of social life, while other masculinities, such as homosexual masculinity,[46] and women are subordinated.[47] The current, and historical, occupier of this hegemonic position is traditional masculinity, which:

'... refers to the stereotypical twentieth-century male-chauvinist outlook and activities resulting from the kinds of gender socialisation conventionally seen as appropriate to males in Western societies since at least the late Victorian times'.[48]

An example of how gender stereotypes are cultivated in society, and how hegemonic masculinity is highly valued, is in New Zealand where some schools are pressured to employ male teachers. The rationale for this is to preserve boys' masculinity through the appointment of 'real men' teachers who exhibit characteristics consistent with hegemonic masculinity.[49]

Men who exhibit the traits of traditional masculinity are considered to possess hegemonic masculinity. In order to aspire to this social classification, there is a particular set of core features that a man must demonstrate. These

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include: power/strength, rationality, heterosexuality, risk-taking, dominance, leadership, control, and repression of emotions.[50] Given that identities, and indeed gender profiles, must be defined, reconstructed, and performed, it is argued that the construction of masculine identities by men is a conscious attempt to maintain their power within the gender hierarchy.[51] This may be true in some cases, however, to apply this universally is problematic. New contends that while 'men are frequently the agents of the oppression of women, and in many cases benefit from it, their interests in the gender order are not pre-given but constructed by and within it'.[52] To achieve gender equality, it must be recognised that hegemonic masculinities can be altered, or even replaced, through the socialisation process from which they are initially constructed.

Public and private engagement with gender equality is scarce among males, which often obscures the issue and manifests dismissive attitudes. One of the main issues regarding gender equality is that men do not comprehensively understand how traditional masculinities disadvantage women. Many men are unaware they exist within socially constructed gender structures that disenfranchise subordinated gender profiles, and therefore do not recognise a problem.[53] Thus, engaging in discussion about gender equality is often a pointless experience for men who find it challenging to appreciate how entrenched the issue is in society. Fortunately, attitudes, and the gender profiles they are associated with, are subject to social construction and transformation. Christian argues that:

'sexist attitudes and actions are currently an integral part of the dominant masculinity, but if masculinities are socially constructed by and for each generation of males growing up, rather than genetically inherited, then masculinities can change and sexism can in principle be eradicated'.[54]

However, social construction and indeed, deconstruction, is contingent upon the participation of relevant stakeholders. The supportive involvement of all those affected by gender is required to effect gender equality. In other words, the global community as a whole.

Worldwide, Plan International found three general categories for men's attitudes towards gender equality: those who recognise gender inequality and seek to address it — the smallest group; those who acknowledge gender inequality but are afraid that empowering girls will come at the expense of boys; and, those who either do not perceive an imbalance, or do not believe in equal rights — the largest group.[55] The significance of this research highlights the overwhelming percentage of men who do not recognise a problem, or do not believe in equal opportunity. These attitudes present a considerable hurdle in reaching gender equality, as they are taught to children and carried on through the generations. A research program commissioned by Plan of over 4,000 adolescent children in different countries including the United Kingdom (UK), Rwanda, and India, found that: 83% of boys and 87% of girls in India and 67% of girls and 71% of boys in Rwanda agree with the statement 'changing diapers, giving kids a bath and feeding kids are the mother's responsibility'. More than 60% of participants agreed that 'if resources are scarce it is better to educate a boy instead of a girl' and 65% of children in Rwanda and India agreed that 'a woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together'.[56] While this research was conducted among a limited sample, it highlights the startling reality of gender inequality and the continuity of male dominance.

One of the major principles of traditional masculinity that harms gender equality is that women are fundamentally inferior to men. This view can be traced back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who based this claim on the principles of reason. He surmised that 'masculinity was equated with the human rationality of men, and women were marked by sexuality, emotion, and their bodies'.[57] The notion that men are intellectually superior has already been disproved; however, what Aristotle articulates about women and their bodies remains relevant. According to the French feminist philosopher, Beauvoir, men consider humanity to be constructed in their image: 'it is clear that in dreaming of himself as donor, liberator, redeemer, man still desires the subjection of women'.[58] This idea of male superiority and female inferiority is one that must be maintained by traditional masculinity if it is to occupy the hegemonic gender identity. Attitudes that stem from traditional masculinity, such as '... the notion that "real men" are tough and hard and that the only appropriate emotion for them to display is anger',[59] present a significant barrier towards gender equality.

Due to the fact that traditional masculinity discourages the expression of emotion, men rarely discuss their feelings. Evidence of this is presented in the positive relationship between traditional masculinity and depression among male

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university students in the UK and United States. It was '... found that conformity to Western masculine norms in and of itself is a risk factor for developing depression'.[60] Men compound the issue of depression by aligning with traditional masculinity. Hanninen and Valkonen argue that the principles of masculinity inhibit the expression of weakness or emotional distress and the seeking of help to remedy it.[61] In addition, analysis into the individual accounts of men's depression '... reveals how depression threatened a man's masculine identity and how recovery presupposed reconstructing one's self-image and masculinity'.[62] This identifies a lack of openness to change in traditional masculinity. In other words, traditional masculinity is not equipped to respond to challenges that threaten its integrity, such as depression (perceived as emotional weakness) and gender equality.

Changing or altering traditional masculinity should be more widely recognised as an important step towards realising gender equality. In light of this, some gender equality advocate groups around the world have identified the need to promote masculinities that are more conducive of change. MenEngage is a group for boys and men whose primary function is to advocate for equality between males and females.[63] To this end, they have identified that '... questioning men's and women's attitudes and expectations about gender roles is crucial to achieving gender equality'. Those who acknowledge the existence of gender equality, and seek to address it, agree that equality cannot progress without the contribution of males.[64] It is increasingly evident that the deconstruction of traditional masculinity presents a primary concern, as its uncompromising nature makes it less responsive to revolution.[65]

By encouraging males to become more open and discuss their masculinities, it is possible to educate them on how their social roles and responsibilities impact women. Developing male attitudes towards open acknowledgement of the gender profiles they operate within is an important step in reaching gender equality. The absence of such progress would only serve to maintain the '... disempowerment of girls and young women down the generations — and the restriction of boys and young men to traditional "male roles"'.[66] Efforts in this approach to gender equality have yielded that: according to the United Nations Population Fund, boys that grow up with positive male role models are found to be more critical towards negative gender stereotypes and inequalities; men who maintain a healthy engagement with their children are less inclined to be depressed, suicidal or violent; and, boys that have more engaging fathers are less inclined to exhibit risky sexual behaviour.[67] Latin American NGOs also found similar character traits in young men who supported gender equality. These similarities included: having a peer-group or group of friends that were more accepting of gender-equitable attitudes; having personally suffered the negative impacts of traditional masculinity such as domestic violence; and, having a positive adult role model that represented an alternative to traditional gender roles.[68] This indicates that positive, nurturing, and engaging character traits exhibited by males are constructive towards gender equality. Furthermore, this suggests that gender equality is achievable through the deconstruction of traditional masculinity as the hegemonic masculinity.

Male stereotypes affect the manner in which males engage with gender equality, and traditional masculinity acts as the dominant masculinity for men. Although different masculinities exist for men, the idea of traditional masculinity remains the most influential. Realising gender equality is difficult, because the fundamental characteristics exhibited by traditional masculinity defend against change. For global gender equality to progress, males must recognise themselves as fundamental actors and actively work to change the patriarchal structures, which benefit them to the exclusion of all others. Without the supportive contribution of males, gender equality is doomed to perpetuate existing power imbalances that favour traditional masculinity. To progress towards gender equality, efforts must be made to deconstruct traditional masculinity.

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# **It's a Man's World: The Effect of Traditional Masculinity on Gender Equality**

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