

The Concept of Masculinity And Femininity

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Masculinity and femininity are cultural patterns through which societies interpret bodies, behavior, work, emotion, power, family, and identity. The original essay correctly observes that gender expectations vary across time and place and uses George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" and World War I as examples of people acting under social pressure. It begins, however, with absolute claims that men are always treated as strong and women as weak. Gender norms are influential but never universal. Individuals and communities produce multiple masculinities and femininities shaped by race, class, sexuality, age, disability, religion, occupation, and nationality. World War I did not single-handedly create modern gender equality, but it intensified debates about military manhood, women's labor, pacifism, citizenship, and political rights.

Sex, Gender, and Social Expectation

Sex commonly refers to biological characteristics, while gender concerns identities, roles, meanings, and social organization. The distinction is useful but not absolute because societies interpret bodies through culture and because biological traits themselves vary. Gender norms tell people how men and women are expected to dress, speak, work, desire, lead, care, and respond emotionally. These expectations are learned through family, school, religion, media, peers, law, and institutions. They can feel natural because they are repeated from childhood, but historical change demonstrates that they are not fixed.

Masculinities and Femininities in the Plural

Scholars increasingly use plural terms because there is no single masculinity or femininity. A military officer, father, athlete, artist, religious leader, and factory worker may be judged through different standards. A form honored in one community can be criticized in another. Women also negotiate competing expectations of motherhood, beauty, independence, sexuality, career, piety, and care. Plural language avoids treating one dominant ideal as the behavior of every person.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity refers to a culturally dominant ideal that legitimizes men's authority and ranks other masculinities and femininities beneath it. The ideal may emphasize toughness, heterosexuality, economic provision, control, competitiveness, and emotional restraint. Few men embody every feature, yet the standard can influence institutions and personal judgment. Men who appear gentle, dependent, fearful, gay, disabled, poor, or insufficiently dominant may be stigmatized.

The concept does not claim that every man holds power over every woman; hierarchies among men are central to it.

Emphasized Femininity

Dominant femininity has often rewarded accommodation to male authority, beauty, care, emotional service, and heterosexual desirability. Women may gain approval through these roles while remaining constrained by them. Femininity can also be constructed around competence, strength, religious devotion, motherhood, activism, or professional success. The same behavior may be judged differently depending on race and class. A confident man may be called decisive while a confident woman is labeled aggressive, demonstrating that gender is embedded in evaluation.

Gender as Performance

Gender is performed through repeated actions, language, posture, clothing, occupation, and interaction. Performance does not mean that identity is fake. Repetition makes social categories appear stable. People can comply, reinterpret, or resist expectations, but they do so within institutions that attach rewards and penalties. A boy told not to cry learns that emotional control affects social acceptance. A woman entering a male-dominated occupation may adjust voice or dress while also changing the occupation's culture through her presence.

Emotional Norms

The original essay associates masculinity with being hard-hearted and merciless. Many societies reward men for appearing calm under danger while discouraging fear, grief, or dependence. Emotional restraint can be useful in crisis, but compulsory suppression can reduce help-seeking and intimate communication. Women may be permitted sadness but criticized for anger or ambition. Healthy emotional development allows people of all genders to recognize feelings and choose proportionate expression rather than follow rigid scripts.

Work and Provision

The breadwinner ideal links masculinity with paid work and economic provision. Men who lose employment may experience shame not only because of income but because work has been tied to identity and authority. Femininity has often been linked with unpaid domestic and caregiving labor, even when women also earn wages. Industrialization, war, education, and service economies changed the division of labor, but unequal pay and care expectations remain. Gendered work is created through institutions, training, discrimination, and household negotiation rather than natural ability alone.

George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant"

Orwell's essay describes a British imperial police officer in colonial Burma who does not want to shoot an elephant but feels compelled to perform authority before a crowd. The narrator fears appearing weak and ridiculous. His action demonstrates how masculinity and imperial power reinforce each other. He is legally and militarily dominant, yet he experiences himself as controlled by the expectations attached to that dominance. The crowd's presence turns personal judgment into a performance of colonial mastery.

Imperial Masculinity

Empire often represented European men as rational, disciplined, brave, and entitled to rule, while colonized peoples were stereotyped as childish, irrational, or dangerous. Such gendered narratives justified political hierarchy. The imperial officer was expected to show decisiveness and suppress uncertainty. In Orwell's story, this standard contributes to unnecessary killing. Masculinity becomes dangerous not because courage is bad but because authority must be displayed even when conscience advises restraint.

The Fear of Ridicule

The narrator's fear that the crowd will laugh at him is a social sanction. He acts to preserve an image rather than respond to the immediate threat, which has largely passed. The episode shows that masculinity can be policed through humor, shame, and observation rather than formal law. Similar pressures operate in fights, hazing, dangerous work, driving, alcohol use, and military settings. A culture that equates caution with cowardice can produce preventable harm.

Power That Restricts the Powerful

Orwell's paradox is that the ruler loses freedom by having to perform rule. This does not make colonizer and colonized equally oppressed; the narrator still possesses a weapon and state authority, while Burmese people live under occupation. It shows that systems of domination also script the behavior of dominant actors. Gender analysis should preserve this difference between constraint and structural power. Men may be harmed by patriarchal expectations while still benefiting from institutions that privilege men.

World War I and Military Manhood

World War I mobilized millions of men and connected citizenship with willingness to fight. Recruitment propaganda emphasized duty, courage, protection of women and children, and fear of public shame. Men who did not enlist could be portrayed as cowards or insufficiently masculine. These pressures differed by country, class, race, and stage of the war. Military masculinity valued endurance and obedience, but trench warfare exposed soldiers to industrial killing that challenged older ideals of individual heroic combat.

Technology and the Warrior Ideal

Machine guns, artillery, poison gas, aircraft, tanks, and mass logistics changed warfare. Leo Braudy and other scholars note that industrial war complicated romantic images of face-to-face honor. Soldiers could be killed by distant and anonymous forces, while courage often meant enduring bombardment and maintaining collective discipline. Technology did not eliminate heroism, but it changed the relationship between bodily strength and military effectiveness.

“I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier”

The 1915 antiwar song “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier” voiced maternal grief and opposition to war before U.S. entry in 1917. Its speaker challenges the expectation that motherhood exists to supply sons for military sacrifice. Critics, including former president Theodore Roosevelt, attacked the song as unpatriotic and used gendered language to argue that parents should raise courageous citizens. The debate demonstrates that motherhood and manhood were mobilized politically on both sides.

Theodore Roosevelt’s Response

Roosevelt reportedly argued that the song’s logic was as objectionable as refusing to raise a daughter to be a mother. His comparison linked male citizenship with soldiering and female citizenship with reproduction. It presented both roles as obligations to the nation. The statement is useful evidence of gender ideology, not proof that Americans uniformly accepted it. Pacifists, socialists, religious groups, feminists, and families contested militarism.

Pacifism and Masculinity

Opposition to war was sometimes feminized or described as cowardly, but male pacifists constructed alternative masculinities around conscience, moral courage, labor solidarity, or religious faith.

Refusing combat could require substantial bravery when the state and community imposed prison, stigma, or violence. This demonstrates that masculinity is contested. Courage can mean fighting, protecting others, enduring hardship, or refusing an unjust command, depending on the moral framework.

Women's Wartime Labor

As men entered military service, women expanded participation in factories, transport, agriculture, offices, nursing, and public service. Women had always worked, especially in agriculture, domestic service, textiles, and family businesses, so the war did not introduce women to labor for the first time. It changed visibility, occupations, wages, and national rhetoric. Governments and employers praised women's contribution while often treating it as temporary and maintaining unequal pay.

Nursing and Care

Military nursing placed women near injury, infection, trauma, and death and required technical competence and emotional discipline. Nursing could be represented as an extension of feminine care, allowing women into war without fully challenging gender hierarchy. In practice, nurses developed authority, expertise, and resilience. Their work complicates any opposition between masculine courage and feminine nurture.

Women in Uniform

Women served in auxiliary, communications, medical, and support roles and, in some contexts, took on responsibilities close to combat. Uniforms changed public images of women's bodies and national service. Participation did not erase discrimination or grant equal military status. It provided evidence that competence was not limited by traditional domestic roles.

Postwar Employment

After the war, many women were expected or required to leave positions for returning men. This rollback shows that wartime necessity can suspend gender rules without permanently changing power. Some women retained new skills, expectations, and political networks. Long-term change emerged unevenly through labor demand, education, organizing, legal reform, and another world war. World War I was a catalyst rather than a complete revolution.

Women's Suffrage

Women's suffrage movements long predated World War I. In the United States, organizing stretched across generations, and western states enfranchised women before the federal amendment. Wartime service strengthened some arguments that women had earned full citizenship, while activists continued direct political pressure. The Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920, but racial discrimination prevented many Black, Native American, Asian American, and Latina women from exercising the vote fully. Gender progress cannot be separated from race and citizenship law.

First-Wave Feminism

The original essay dates feminism to around 1840, likely referring to organized women's-rights activism associated with events such as the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. Feminist thought and women's resistance existed earlier. The "wave" model is a later organizing metaphor and can obscure movements outside Europe and North America, labor activism, antislavery work, and continuous struggle between named waves. It remains useful when treated as a broad chronology rather than a complete history.

Race and Gender in Wartime

Black men were expected to demonstrate military loyalty while serving in segregated units and facing racism at home. Black women supported communities, worked, organized, and challenged both racial and gender discrimination. Indigenous people, immigrants, and colonial subjects also encountered different expectations of military service and citizenship. A universal story of "men went to war and women entered factories" centers White middle-class households and overlooks a more complex labor and military history.

Class

Working-class women often had less freedom to withdraw from paid labor before the war, while middle-class ideals treated domesticity as respectable femininity. Working-class men might be judged by physical labor and wage provision, whereas elite men could demonstrate masculinity through command, education, or political authority. Military rank also reflected class structures. Gender norms operate through material conditions and cannot be separated from economic position.

Sexuality

Heterosexuality has often been built into dominant masculinity and femininity. Men suspected of homosexuality could be stigmatized as weak or unfit, while women outside marriage were judged as deviant. Wartime same-sex communities and later cultural change challenged these assumptions. Contemporary analysis recognizes that gender expression and sexual orientation are distinct, though social stereotypes frequently confuse them.

Disability

War produced large numbers of disabled veterans whose bodies challenged ideals of male physical wholeness and independence. Societies had to reconsider work, family provision, dependence, rehabilitation, and citizenship. Some veterans received honor and support; others experienced stigma or inadequate care. Disability reveals that masculinity based entirely on bodily strength is fragile and exclusionary.

Trauma and Shell Shock

World War I brought attention to shell shock, now understood through a more complex history of trauma, neurological injury, stress, and military medicine. Soldiers with psychological symptoms were sometimes accused of cowardice or weak masculinity. Others received treatment. The conflict exposed the harm caused by demanding emotional invulnerability. Modern military culture continues to address the tension between resilience and help-seeking.

Family and Fatherhood

Masculinity is not limited to soldiering and breadwinning. Fatherhood can involve emotional care, household labor, teaching, and vulnerability. Wars separated fathers from children and intensified the cultural role of mothers, but letters and family memory show men expressing affection and fear. Historical evidence challenges the stereotype that men naturally lack tenderness. Social permission influences which emotions become visible.

Media and Gender

Songs, posters, newspapers, films, and literature communicate gender ideals. Recruitment posters used women's imagined judgment to pressure men, while antiwar songs used motherhood to challenge sacrifice. Orwell's essay exposes performance through narrative. Media does not simply reflect society; it provides scripts people use to understand themselves. Repetition can normalize

stereotypes, while alternative representation can expand possible identities.

Modern Workplaces

Gendered expectations continue in leadership, policing, military service, nursing, education, technology, and caregiving. Women may face a double standard between warmth and authority. Men entering care professions may experience suspicion or receive accelerated promotion. Flexible work and parental leave can reduce inequality only when men are encouraged to use them without penalty. Organizational culture matters as much as formal policy.

Health Effects

Rigid masculinity can discourage preventive care, mental-health treatment, and disclosure of victimization. Rigid femininity can encourage self-sacrifice and normalize unequal care burdens. These are population patterns, not universal traits. Gender-responsive health practice should expand options rather than assume how any individual behaves. People benefit when strength includes asking for help and care includes boundaries.

Violence

Some masculine norms reward dominance, retaliation, and risk, but violence is not biologically inevitable for men. Most men do not commit serious violence, and men can challenge peers, support survivors, and model nonviolent leadership. Prevention should address power, childhood exposure, weapons, alcohol, group norms, and institutional accountability. Telling boys simply to suppress aggression can be less effective than teaching emotional literacy, consent, conflict resolution, and moral courage.

Changing Femininities

Women's increased participation in politics, education, paid work, sport, military service, and public leadership has broadened femininity. Change does not mean that caregiving, motherhood, beauty, or domestic life lose value. The issue is whether these roles are chosen and respected rather than imposed as the only legitimate path. Equality expands the range of identities available to everyone.

Changing Masculinities

Contemporary masculinities can include involved fatherhood, emotional openness, artistic expression, care work, disability, and nonviolent leadership. Traditional ideals remain influential and can coexist

with new forms. Change often produces backlash from people who interpret equality as loss. A healthier model does not demand that men reject strength or ambition; it disconnects those qualities from domination and contempt.

Conclusion

Masculinity and femininity are changing social constructions rather than fixed lists of male and female traits. George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" shows how imperial masculinity pressures a man to perform dominance against his own judgment. World War I intensified military expectations of men, expanded women's visible labor, challenged older warrior ideals, and contributed to political debates about citizenship and suffrage. It did not erase gender inequality, and many wartime changes were reversed. Gender norms are also shaped by race, class, sexuality, disability, and culture. The central lesson is that strength, courage, care, reason, and emotion are human capacities. Societies become more equitable when individuals are not punished for expressing them across traditional gender boundaries.

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