

The Concept of Masculinity And Femininity

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Introduction

Masculinity and femininity are not fixed packages of traits naturally possessed by every man or woman. They are cultural categories through which societies interpret bodies, emotions, work, authority, appearance, sexuality, family roles, and acceptable behavior. Biological sex can influence some aspects of life, but gender expectations tell people what characteristics are supposed to count as masculine or feminine and how strongly those characteristics are rewarded or punished. Contemporary research supports a more flexible view than the traditional assumption that men are naturally strong, independent, competitive, and unemotional while women are naturally caring, dependent, expressive, and gentle. A large meta-analysis found average gender differences in agency and communion, but also showed that the size of these differences varies across time, age, culture, and measurement, and that gender gaps have generally narrowed over time (Hsu et al., 2021). Masculinity and femininity are therefore better understood as social patterns that people can express in different combinations rather than as two mutually exclusive identities.

Gender Roles

Psychological research often uses the terms agency and communion to describe traits historically associated with masculinity and femininity. Agency includes qualities such as assertiveness, independence, confidence, and achievement orientation, while communion includes empathy, warmth, cooperation, and concern for relationships. Hsu and colleagues analyzed hundreds of samples containing more than 250,000 participants and found that men, on average, scored higher on agency while women scored higher on communion (Hsu et al., 2021). These are group averages, not rules for individuals. Many women are highly agentic, many men are highly communal, and most people combine traits that older gender systems would have placed on opposite sides.

The social meaning of these traits also changes. Leadership, paid work, parenting, military service, and emotional expression are gendered differently across societies and historical periods. A woman managing a corporation or a father taking primary responsibility for childcare may have violated conventional expectations in earlier generations while appearing increasingly ordinary today. The persistence of gender patterns therefore does not prove that they are biologically fixed. Education, labor-market structures, family policy, media, religion, peer groups, and economic conditions all affect what kinds of masculinity and femininity become practical or prestigious.

Masculinities and Femininities

Gender scholars increasingly use the plural terms masculinities and femininities because no single model represents all men or all women. Expectations differ by race, class, sexuality, nationality, age, religion, occupation, and disability. [Hegemonic masculinity](#) refers to a culturally dominant form of masculinity that becomes associated with authority and legitimacy, not to the behavior of every man. It can elevate traits such as toughness, heterosexuality, control, economic provision, or emotional restraint while positioning other masculinities as less valued. Femininities also differ in status and form. Some emphasize care, beauty, modesty, motherhood, or emotional labor, while others challenge these expectations through professional ambition, political authority, nonconforming appearance, or different family arrangements.

Recent health research treats masculinity as a social system rather than simply a personality score. A 2023 scoping review of gender-transformative health interventions found that programs increasingly aim to change unequal power relations and harmful norms, not merely persuade individual men to adopt healthier behavior (Zielke et al., 2023). WHO similarly argues that work with men and boys should address the institutional and cultural conditions that reproduce restrictive masculinities, including expectations around dominance, sexual behavior, caregiving, and health seeking (WHO, 2024). This matters because gender norms can constrain those who appear to benefit from them. A man may receive greater social authority while simultaneously feeling unable to admit fear, seek help, or choose a career coded as feminine.

Health and Gender Norms

Rigid masculinity can create pressure to appear self-sufficient even when support is needed. Expectations of toughness, status, emotional control, and independence can discourage help-seeking or make vulnerability feel like failure. WHO notes that harmful masculine norms can contribute to risk-taking, alcohol misuse, unsafe sexual behavior, avoidance of healthcare, and violence (WHO, 2024). The relationship is not simple, however, because traits described as masculine can include constructive qualities such as persistence, responsibility, courage, and commitment to providing for others. Starkey and Moore's 2026 meta-analysis of masculinity and suicide found no single overall relationship across all measures; instead, outcomes differed according to how masculinity was defined. Emotional restriction and status-focused forms were more concerning, while some strength-based forms appeared protective (Starkey & Moore, 2026). This finding reinforces the importance of discussing specific norms rather than describing masculinity itself as harmful.

Femininity can also involve restrictive expectations. Women may be encouraged to prioritize attractiveness, agreeableness, care for others, modesty, and relational harmony even when these expectations conflict with personal goals. A 2024 meta-analysis examining femininity and embodiment found that endorsement of traditional feminine norms was related in complex ways to

body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, and internalization of cultural appearance ideals (Kvaka et al., 2024). These pressures help explain why gender equality cannot be achieved simply by encouraging women to succeed within institutions while leaving expectations about beauty, caregiving, emotional labor, and domestic work unchanged. Both masculine and feminine ideals can contain valuable human qualities, but problems arise when those qualities are treated as compulsory because of a person's gender.

Gender Flexibility

Research on gender-role orientation has long examined whether people benefit from possessing both agentic and communal qualities. A 2021 meta-analysis of gender roles and depression found that people classified as androgynous—meaning they reported relatively high levels of both conventionally masculine and feminine traits—tended to report lower depression than people with rigidly undifferentiated profiles (Li et al., 2021). The result should not be interpreted as proof that one psychological type is ideal for everyone, but it supports the broader idea that behavioral flexibility can be healthier than strict conformity.

Flexibility matters because different situations require different capacities. Leadership may require assertiveness and empathy; parenting may require nurturance and boundary-setting; a crisis may require courage and willingness to ask for assistance. When culture assigns one set of abilities to men and another to women, individuals may be discouraged from developing skills they need. Gender equality therefore benefits from widening the range of acceptable behavior rather than reversing the hierarchy and creating new restrictions.

Masculinity in Orwell

George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" provides a useful literary example of gendered performance and social pressure. The narrator, a British colonial police officer in Burma, does not initially want to shoot the elephant. Once a crowd gathers, however, he fears appearing weak or ridiculous if he walks away. His authority depends partly on performing decisiveness before those he is supposed to dominate. The episode can be read through masculinity because the narrator feels compelled to demonstrate control, courage, and emotional hardness even when his private judgment tells him another action would be better (Orwell, 1936).

The essay also shows that power can restrict the person who possesses it. The narrator is an agent of empire, yet the expectations attached to that role trap him. He believes he must perform the behavior expected of a colonial ruler or lose status. This resembles contemporary arguments about gender norms: a socially privileged role may provide power while narrowing the range of acceptable behavior. The narrator's fear of ridicule becomes stronger than his ethical judgment. Masculinity here is not simply strength; it is a public script enforced through observation, hierarchy, and shame.

War and Masculinity

World War I intensified debates over masculinity because military service was widely linked with courage, citizenship, sacrifice, and manhood. Men who enlisted could be celebrated as patriotic, while men who resisted war sometimes faced accusations of cowardice or weakness. The popular song “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier” expressed an alternative moral position, presenting motherhood and human life as values that could challenge militarism. Theodore Roosevelt publicly attacked pacifist arguments of this kind, reflecting a political culture in which military readiness and masculine virtue were often closely connected.

These historical examples show that gender ideals are contested rather than universally accepted. Military courage can be meaningful, but defining manhood through willingness to fight can stigmatize conscientious objection, caregiving, emotional openness, or nonviolent forms of courage. Modern gender research similarly argues that masculinities are produced through institutions such as the military, workplace, family, sport, religion, and media. Historical study therefore helps explain why present-day expectations can feel natural even though they were created and defended under specific social conditions.

Changing Gender Roles

Contemporary gender roles are changing because women’s participation in education and paid employment has expanded, men’s involvement in caregiving has become more visible, and legal and cultural recognition of diverse gender identities has increased. Yet change is uneven. Women remain more likely to perform unpaid caregiving in many societies, while men may still face stigma for choosing occupations associated with care or for taking extended parental leave. WHO’s 2024 research agenda on masculinities emphasizes that gender equality requires engaging men not merely as supporters of women but as people whose own lives are shaped by gendered institutions and expectations (WHO, 2024).

Change also produces backlash because gender roles are connected to identity and status. When old expectations weaken, some people experience greater freedom while others perceive a loss of certainty or privilege. The appropriate response is not to deny all differences between men and women or insist that everyone behave identically. Equality means that personal capacities and social opportunities should not be unnecessarily restricted by stereotypes. People should be free to be competitive or caring, emotionally expressive or reserved, professionally ambitious or family-centered without those choices being treated as evidence that they have failed at masculinity or femininity.

Conclusion

Masculinity and femininity are powerful cultural categories, but they are neither fixed biological destinies nor simple opposites. Research shows average gender differences in traits such as agency and communion, yet those differences vary across culture and history and do not determine individual personality. The plural concepts of masculinities and femininities better capture the fact that gender is shaped by class, race, sexuality, work, religion, and institutions. Contemporary evidence also shows why rigid gender norms can be costly: emotional restriction, status pressure, body ideals, caregiving expectations, and narrow definitions of acceptable work can constrain both men and women. Literary and historical examples such as Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" and World War I debates demonstrate how people may perform gendered roles because they fear social judgment. A more equitable approach does not require eliminating all cultural ideas about gender. It requires reducing the penalties attached to nonconformity and allowing people to develop a wider range of human qualities. Strength, care, independence, cooperation, ambition, vulnerability, courage, and empathy should be understood as capacities available to people rather than possessions assigned to one gender.

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