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A Culture of Conformity

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A CULTURE OF CONFORMITY

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Challenge IV



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A Culture of Conformity

*A parent worries over a little boy because he innocently dresses himself
in a pink skirt instead of pants.*

*A thirty-five-year-old husband is abusive to his wife because he
doesn't feel "man enough" in other areas of life so he
acts out in order to feel powerful.*

*A female model gets death threats because she
chooses not to shave her legs.*

Some of these accounts may seem far-fetched, but unfortunately, all are founded on real issues in the world today. These seemingly different scenarios are foundationally similar, embodying a common background and theme: gender issues. The broad topic of this essay is gender and the various and oftentimes surprising problems associated with it.

In order for the following statements to be clear, the term "sex" must be defined. In recent years, the definition of gender has separated from that of "sex". There was a time when

the two terms were interchangeable, but today, a new understanding of the complexities of human sexuality has brought a need for clear meaning. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines sex as “either of the two major forms of individuals that occur in many species and that are distinguished respectively as female or male especially on the basis of their reproductive organs and structures” (Sex). This definition points toward the biological and “hardwired” factors of human sexuality, but “gender” connotes more socially influenced aspects. It refers to “the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex (Gender). This definition is not limited only to in-born aspects of sexuality but employs a more panoramic view of the topic. Gender is the main focus of this paper and thus making the distinction is necessary.

While there are different categories of gender issues in the world today, many stem from a similar underlying factor: intolerance for breaking gender norms, even when those norms are unfounded and even harmful. Despite perceived progress, many cultures, including the western hemisphere, are steeped in rigidity concerning gender norms. This breeds a social climate of conformity, which is lethal for diversity of thought and social progress. Many gender norms go unnoticed because they are so ingrained, and often, people only become aware of these social rules when someone swims against the stream and oversteps the boundaries of what is “normal” or “acceptable.” This paper aims to promote analytical and critical thinking concerning various gender norms which are present in the western hemisphere. While many of the following gender norms are not necessarily global, some attitudes are in fact pervasive around the world.

In exploring the pressure to conform to social mores and the ensuing consequences, the term “gender norm” must be defined. Gender normative, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, means “adhering to or reinforcing ideal standards of masculinity or femininity” (Gender Normative). The word does not necessarily connote normality as in what people

normally do, but rather carries a meaning of gender ideals (i.e. what an ideal man or woman is). This definition leads one to ask the question: “Who then defines what is ideal?” When thinking about who or what actually defines gender norms, there are different points to consider. For example, some believe that sacred texts such as the Bible are the origins of certain gender norms. (Note: some not only believe that the Bible is the origin, but that the norms within are prescriptive, i.e. they should still be followed today. This has created disagreement in interpretation among many Christians, particularly relating to gender roles within the church.) While the impact the Bible has made on the world is considerable, many of the gender norms today are not directly related. To illustrate, the idea of pink being a more “feminine” color or little boys should play with trucks rather than baby dolls simply cannot be attached to ancient texts in any way. A different origin must be found for these other social expectations. The range of norms, from gender roles to gender-specific colors, is widely panoramic and worth a closer examination.

In the discussion of social gender rules, a broad approach is necessary. At the base of all societies and woven into the fabric of what helps humanity function is the drive for order and reliability. This is evident in current legal systems and various other socially constructed systems. Humans have invented methods of maximizing predictability and functionality that, in certain circumstances create stability, but in other situations breed harmful rigidity. Rules and regulations, which at their most basic level are created to help society, sometimes inadvertently hurt it. In the realm of gender norms, one must transcend these social mores in order to see the issues more clearly. Although it is uncomfortable to extract oneself from the current culture, once a different perspective is taken, reversing the harms these gender norms cause becomes a

compelling impulse. In the end, after surveying the norms and their negative consequences, a solution will be proposed as a way forward in this topic of gender issues.

Some of these gender norms may seem trivial at first, but it is often the ideology behind the enforcement of these social rules that is more damaging than the rule itself. One such example is in the realm of appearance. Throughout history, cultures and peoples have labeled different appearances “appropriate” for men and women, but these change over time. There are strict “acceptability” rules for both sexes in the realm of clothing. In current times, if a person breaks the narrow dress code of society, others will be deeply disturbed and unsettled. For example, men cannot wear feminine clothing without being seen as “gay” and people would be scandalized if parents dress their male child in “girl’s clothes,” but this ideology is unfounded. Whatever society categorizes as “female” and “male” at one time is constantly evolving and cannot be absolute. Take for example a picture of Franklin D. Roosevelt from 1884 (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Corbis Bettman; “Franklin D. Roosevelt in a Dress”; *Smithsonian.com*, 1884, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/when-did-girls-start-wearing-pink-1370097/>.

At first glance, someone from the twenty-first century would immediately believe that this is a picture of a little girl, but they would be deceived. In fact, through the centuries, dresses for boys have gone in and out of style, and at one time, even boys in their teenage years wore them (Blazeski). This demonstrates the fact that whatever trend is currently in style is not inherently male or female. In viewing this particular topic apart from the cultural narrative, clothing is simply material sewn together into a form-fitting style. It cannot really be a statement carrying inherent gender meaning, and since that is the case, there should be no strict norms about clothing choice. There is a problem not only with a lack of freedom in personal expression, but also a gender culture where conformity is key.

Another unfounded theme within the topic of clothing is color choice. In the western hemisphere, pink is seen to be more suited for females and blue for males, especially for children. A simple comparison of the baby clothes aisle at any clothing store confirms this ideology (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Alexandra Huston; “Gendered Baby Items”; 2019, JPEG file.

As is evident from the photo, the current cultural norm indicates that little girls should be clothed in pink and little boys in blue. Despite the idea that this is simply “the way things are”, the

gendered meanings of colors today were once swapped completely. Jeanne Maglaty, writing about the origins of pink and blue presents an article from 1918, which states, “the generally accepted rule is pink for the boys, and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl” (Maglaty). Just like clothing, the gender meanings of color come from society as opposed to inherency. When gender norms around color are relaxed, there is often less pressure to conform, therefore increased freedom of thought. Analyzing the societal regulations that everyone follows aids in revealing how ingrained these gender rules are.

This idea of stepping out of the common way of thinking is not some abstract ideology, but a personal one. In the summer of 2016, I decided to stop shaving, and the reactions I received from others spoke to how ingrained certain ideas about appearance have become for women. While many people chose not to comment on my personal choice, there were some who gave obvious signs of revulsion. It may sound overdramatic, but the fact remains: the pressure put on women to conform to current beauty standards is almost overwhelming. The peer pressure to do away with “all the gross hair” has almost crippled my resolve, but I am determined to think critically about these gender norms. At the root of the issue, these norms have become so entrenched that people are intensely unsettled when someone steps out of the box, even for things so trivial as clothing choice or a bit of natural body hair. The censure society pours out on those who choose to discard narrow-minded and illogical expectations is staggering and in a personal way, this fact has become very clear.

In digging deeper into the subject of body hair, there are many questions one could ask, such as how shaving came about, why it is even a standard, and whether the idea is worthy of the strict social norms present today. To answer the first question, Marlen Komar, writing on

fashion history states, “Prior to 1915, body hair on a woman was seen as a non-issue thanks to the straight-laced styles of the Victorian era — with women draped and buttoned up to the chin, shaving your armpits was as odd and unnecessary as shaving off your eyebrows” (Komar). As difficult as it is for those in the “hairless-crazed” society to imagine, there was a time when body hair was not seen as a beauty issue or something to be ashamed of. But the following question is, “how did the social shift in thinking occur?” Komar explains that King Camp Gillette, the marketing genius of the shaving industry, began promoting razors for women as well as men, even when the social climate still accepted female body hair. This was done simply to boost sales. Komar states:

Gillette labeled body hair ‘an embarrassing personal problem’ and smooth underarms a ‘feature of good dressing and good grooming,’ while another ad claimed you’d be ‘unloved’ and ‘embarrassed’ if you had ‘ugly, noticeable, and unwanted hair.’ If you shaved you were dainty, attractive, and stylish. If you didn’t, you risked being pegged as the opposite. (Komar)

By changing the expectations for women, Gillette ushered in a new age where body hair was no longer seen as natural, but as something abhorrent and dirty. The ad below demonstrates this dramatic shift (see fig. 3)



Fig. 3. Marlen Komar; “The Sneaky History Of Why Women Started Shaving”; Bustle, Accessed February 11, 2019. <https://www.bustle.com/articles/196747-the-sneaky-manipulative-history-of-why-women-started-shaving>.

By simply reading the ad, one can surmise that there was a serious issue with body hair...or so the advertiser suggested, but in taking a transcendental view, hair is nothing more than hair. The beauty standards enforced on women to remove hair are not founded on anything real and are completely unnecessary. Men are not pressured to shave their legs and armpits, yet if a woman chooses to not shave, people usually do not tolerate such “liberality.”

The negative sanctions given to those who break social norms, especially in areas of personal grooming are often severe. One of the opening accounts of this paper referred to a model who displayed her unshaven legs in an advertisement. She received rape threats because

of it (Model). The fact that one could receive such threats for a personal grooming choice such as hair removal (or lack thereof) is appalling and poignant. The cultural state of western hemisphere has come to a point where people's well-being is threatened because of personal body hair choices. This only becomes obvious when a wider view is taken; when these various issues can be seen for what they are without the cultural baggage. Clothing choices, colors, and grooming habits like shaving are just a few examples of how society constructs strict norms which are not only unfounded but unnecessarily constrain people, even going so as far as to threaten people's safety in some cases.

While there are expectations about what men and women should or should not do, there are also norms about how men and women should be as well. From billboard ads to music, narrow gender ideologies abound. Children are raised to behave in ways that are "appropriate" for their sex. By simply engaging with the media, one can become acquainted with the gender norms for men and women rapidly. Some masculine gender norms and their harms will be examined first, and then some common norms for women.

Although individual thoughts can vary, the general public promotes a certain idea of a "real" man. This kind of man is powerful, successful and hypersexual, just to name a few. In fact, there are countless characteristics which society champions as "manly," some of which promote well-being for all, but many others create negative consequences, not only for men but for everyone. These harmful consequences of masculine gender norms mainly fall into two categories: psychological and behavioral. Beginning with negative psychological outcomes, by looking at the research available, it becomes obvious that this pressure to conform creates unhealthy cultures. Aylin Kaya and a team of researchers discuss the various gender norms men feel pressured to embody and the effects they cause in a journal article titled, "The Role of

Masculine Norms and Gender Role Conflict on Prospective Well-Being among Men.” In their list of perceived gender norms for males are “winning at all costs, displaying emotional control, engaging in risk-taking behaviors, acting aggressively, dominance over women, striving to have multiple sexual partners, prioritizing work, pursuing status, and heterosexual self-presentation” (Kaya, Aylin, et al.). The strict enforcement of these masculine gender norms has harmful effects. For example, they cite multiple studies all affirming the statement that masculine gender norms such as “playboy” and “[being] in a position of power” among others contribute to decreased wellbeing for those men (Kaya, Aylin, et al.). These results can be logically explained by a psychological state called GRC (gender role conflict) where individuals experience increased stress because of social pressure to conform to narrow gender norms. Not only do men experience GRC because of strict gender norms, but a deeper conundrum becomes apparent because “although endorsement of these masculine norms can be detrimental to men’s well-being, men often experience negative consequences for failing to uphold them, and even minor transgressions (e.g., engaging in a stereotypically feminine task) may threaten one’s masculinity” (Kaya, Aylin, et al.). This pressure to conform to unhealthy norms is not only negative in itself but creates a cultural climate where failure to conform breeds even more issues.

A particular psychological area where men are extremely pressured to “act like a man” is emotionality. Just like clothing, colors, and shaving, ideas about showing emotion and being “soft” are put into gendered categories. Especially in the western hemisphere, being emotional is often seen as feminine, something men should avoid, but there are harmful effects when emotions are suppressed. Brian Heilman and Gary Barker, authors of the book *Masculine Norms And Violence: Making The Connections* argue the harms of this particular norm:

Men's emotional well-being is damaged by a learned inability to recognize, communicate, and understand their emotions. Likewise, men's friendships suffer when they are not allowed to be emotionally expressive. Additionally, in settings where men are instructed to eschew many elements of their emotionality, these emotional needs nonetheless remain essential elements of all human lives. Women and girls thus become emotional caretakers and laborers for all, contributing to global inequality in unpaid care work and other household inequalities. Men's heavily curtailed and policed emotionality has a direct link with their likelihood to use and/or suffer violence. (Heilman and Barker)

Heilman and Barker bring up many insightful points. Not only do men's psyches suffer, but the whole of society as well. When cultural dogma is stripped away, it becomes obvious that expressing emotion is healthy for both women and men. It is human. When this truth is subverted, unhealthy norms arise, breeding negative consequences for everyone.

While there certainly are problematic gender norms for women, it is interesting to note that there may be even more rules for men in the current culture. It is widely agreed that the male status has been under public scrutiny for ages. This creates an atmosphere where extreme negative sanctions are given when the lines of "masculinity" are crossed. Barker and Heilman give a clear summation of the issues of psychological and emotional harms by stating in their book,

The social status of being a 'real man' – or simply a 'man' – is not automatically granted to all adult male-identifying people. Instead, this social status must be achieved, often by successfully meeting many difficult, internally contradictory standards. In many locations, for instance, a 'real man' must be simultaneously physically strong, a financial provider, a protector of his family, a husband and father, and an impervious emotional

rock. Often, he must also be heterosexual, frequently gaining increased social standing when he is more sexually active. These ideas are stereotypes to the extent that no individual man lives up to all of them, nor could live up to all of them, but they are real in the sense that they shape men's ideas and actions in profound ways. (Heilman and Barker)

These "real" stereotypes contribute to the unhealthy culture of conformity and promote lives that are fraught with unnecessary anxiety and shame. If there was no social pressure to conform to this "ideal picture of men," these harmful effects would be minimized.

The other major area of negative consequences where gender norms affect society is behavioral. This claim seems at first surprising because many people would not make a connection between behavioral harms and societal norms, but once the deeper effects are examined, the connections become obvious. These kinds of harms are much more sinister than those of gendered clothing or colors, forcing society to come to terms with the norms it has been enforcing. These behavioral harms manifest themselves in two main categories: suicide and violence against women. By looking at these somewhat surprising truths, the darker side of gender norms becomes readily apparent.

The topic of suicide is sensitive and as such, accurate information is not often available. Important statistics are hidden away. For example, the death rate of suicide for males is close to two times the rate of death among females (Heilman and Barker) and statistic dramatically increases for those who identify as homosexual (Suicide). By looking again at the gender norm traits imposed on men by society, a reason for these high statistics presents itself. Heilman and Barker wrote an entire book on the subject of behavioral harms that masculine gender norms

contribute to, including suicide. Bringing to light the connection between gender norms and high rates of suicide, they state that

Harmful gender norms likely lie at the root of suicidal ideation and suicide. Societies that 'gender' the heart such that men are told to cut off their inner lives, to repress their emotions, and to be hard-shelled workers, protectors, and lone providers contribute to a crisis of connection among men. The act of suicide may also be constructed as a masculine or masculinized action, which may explain why men are more likely to use more immediately fatal means such as firearms when attempting suicide. Data show that men are more likely to complete a suicide than women are; suicide attempts that are not fatal may be construed as a call for help, a demonstration of emotional vulnerability that entails a loss of status, or loss of socially enforced 'manhood,' for men. (Heilman and Barker)

The masculine gender norms enforced in society can contribute to this high suicide rate due to the nature of the norms themselves. What would happen if these social pressures to conform were no longer there? Based on the data, it is possible that the suicide rate for men would decrease.

Another category of behavioral harms is violence against women. This is yet another sensitive topic that does not receive enough thought in today's cultural climate (although ad campaigns like the recent Gillette commercial force society to discuss sexual harassment of women and the redefining of true masculinity). Violence and harassment are not just problems in the western hemisphere but are a worldwide phenomenon beginning to rise to the surface of public discourse.

30% of ever partnered women globally have experienced physical or sexual violence by a partner in their lifetime. The rates of this violence vary between 23% and 47% percent in different regions of the world. Many countries, however, have no prevalent data available, showing that this field of research is still developing. [...] While intimate partner violence is a global public health issue, the rates of intimate partner violence are higher in societies that exhibit higher levels of gender inequality and greater acceptance of norms that support violence against women and male control over women. (WHO)

Almost one third is an extremely high percentage rate, and WHO (World Health Organization) makes the connection between the gender norms being discussed and this staggering number. Are the masculine norms truly contributing factors in violence against women? Studies show that the answer is yes. In particular, sexual violence is deeply related to gender norm dynamics. For example, “Men aged 18 to 30 in the United States, United Kingdom, and Mexico who subscribed most strongly to inequitable gender attitudes were also significantly more likely – up to six times as likely in the United States and United Kingdom – to have perpetrated sexual harassment in the previous month” (Heilman and Barker). This statistic connects the strong relationship between certain masculine gender norms like being in positions of power (especially over women) and the like to staggeringly higher rates of sexual harassment. But is this statistic so surprising? If a person is pressured to conform to this notion of a “real man,” which often includes the objectification of women as a sexual triumph, then the natural manifestation of that ideology would be expected.

Not only is there a connection between sexual harassment and gender expectations, but there are also more physically damaging crimes as well. Heilman and Barker state that “Gender-inequitable masculinities are among the top causal factors of rape perpetration, according to a

2012 synthesis of approximately 300 qualifying studies” (Heilman and Barker). These gender-inequitable masculinities are those norms which pressure men to use others to their advantage, which is often embodied in violence against women. But why is there such a strong connection between the two? The explanation used for the sexual harassment example is here as well. Many of the masculine gender norms that men are pressured to conform and exhibit actually promote the exploitation of women. Unfortunately, when sexual control over women and being a playboy is seen as “manly,” and therefore admirable, natural consequences follow. Others agree. “Scholars emphasize that men’s use of violence against women, particularly sexual violence, is linked with a ‘culturally honored definition of masculinity that rewards the successful use of violence to achieve domination over others’” (Heilman and Barker). In one of the opening accounts, a thirty-five-year-old man beats his wife because he feels he must overcompensate for not being “man enough” in other areas of his life. Being abusive to her affirms a sense of “manliness” and power. Unfortunately, in a culture where exploiting others, especially women, is seen as acceptable and even encouraged, perpetrators will go to such lengths to achieve this so-called “manhood.”

These physical harms, which are connected to unhealthy masculine gender expectations, are an enormous problem not only in the western hemisphere but also around the world. The widespread gender norms of power and being sexually triumphant, among others, manifest themselves in real-life ways, and everyone suffers. From those who perpetrate these violent acts to the victims, to those who are not involved in the violence, masculine gender norms affect everyone, not just the men who attempt to embody these norms. Heilman and Barker close with a fitting summary, “Masculine norms have clear and direct links with many forms of violence. Too often, and with devastating consequences, societies produce a certain definition and standard

of manhood that – distinct from any immutable biological characteristics of men – fuels and sustains violence of all forms.”

Just like there are harmful masculinities for men, there are negative gender norms for women as well. While traditionally, men are championed to be assertive and dominant, women are encouraged to be nurturing, passive, pretty, and undisruptive. This chasm created by society breeds significant problems. For example, multiple studies confirm that certain female norms like beauty, gentleness, and not being in positions of power significantly contribute to depression and other mental health issues in young girls (Golden and Jacoby). In their journal article titled “Playing Princess: Preschool Girls’ Interpretations of Gender Stereotypes in Disney Princess Media,” Julia Golden and Jennifer Jacoby connect the female norms in the media such as Disney and little girls’ beliefs about themselves. Their study confirms previous research which all concludes that certain traditional norms for women, such as those listed above, have a negative effect on women and young girls’ wellbeing and their ideas of self. Golden and Jacoby cite multiple studies confirming this:

One study found that girls who accepted gender-typed characteristics and who believed that women should avoid leadership roles and constantly be gentle and affectionate were more likely to be depressed (Marcotte et al. 2002). Furthermore, Girls Inc (2006), which surveyed 1059 girls between grades 3 and 12, discovered that, even in the twenty-first century, girls still accepted traditional concepts of females, and, moreover, they internalized these ideals. Girls reported feeling pressure to be thin, kind, caring, please everyone, speak softly, and not cause trouble. Conforming to the unreasonable standards to which girls are exposed through the media generates excessive anxiety for girls (Lamb and Brown 2006). (Golden and Jacoby)

These studies make sense in light of the aforementioned gender role conflict (GRC) condition. If women and little girls are being pressured to fit into this narrow definition of “womanhood,” and even more significantly, if their only value comes through this definition, then the obvious consequences realize themselves. If beauty, or quietness, or a nurturing nature, among others, are the true meaning of being a woman and someone feels she does not fit into that box, then feelings of shame will surely follow. As stated in the Golden and Jacoby quote, these unreasonable standards forced by society and the media promote a culture of comparison and depression for not being “feminine enough.”

Another related article discusses the relationship between gender norms and success at work. *Harvard Business Review* interviewed the main researcher, Ashley Martin, discussing the studies and their implications. The conclusion of the study was that women who ascribe to and emphasize traditional gender differences, do not advance in their careers, but those who disregard so-called “gender differences” or gender norms become more successful (Torres). “Across this study and four others, we saw the same pattern: Downplaying [gender] differences made women more confident. They thought they could overcome challenges at work. They felt comfortable disagreeing with others. They said they would take more risks, take initiative, negotiate. These effects were strongest in male-dominated environments.” (Torres) This makes sense because these traits are necessary for success in the business world, but if women are being conditioned to believe that these qualities are only appropriate for men, then they will not ascribe to them. On the other hand, if women do not internalize these gender norms, they will be given permission to embody these traits. In the end, as the studies show, the specific gender norms being promoted do have an enormous effect on women in the workplace, in that success and benefits come from de-emphasizing gender norms.

As presented, there are harmful effects of gender norms for both sexes: emotionally stunted psyches for many men, increased rates of suicide, violence against women, gender role conflict on both sides, mental health issues for women, and decreased success for those who ascribe to female gender norms. This by no means is an exhaustive list. The few areas this paper has focused on just scratch the surface of gender issues, but before concluding, a short discussion on gender roles and a brief look at opposing viewpoints seems appropriate.

In the realm of gender issues arises the topic of proper roles for men and women. While this essay does not have the capacity to incorporate this theme in its entirety, suffice it to say that just like clothing choice and shaving, the gender roles present today are not absolute. Nancy Pearcey, in her book *Love Thy Body*, discusses the change in gender roles through political and economic upheavals over time.

In pre-industrial societies, most work was done on the family farm or in home industries, where husband and wife worked side by side. Work was not the father's job; it was the family industry. As a result, women were more involved in economically productive labor, while men were far more involved in raising and educating children than most are today. What changed all this was the Industrial Revolution. It took work out of the home - and that seemingly simple change dramatically altered gender roles. Fathers had to follow their work out of the home into offices and factories, which meant they were no longer intimately involved with their families. Women no longer had access to income-producing work that could be performed at home while raising children. The result was greatly constricted roles for both men and women - which in turn led to narrower definitions of masculinity and femininity. (Pearcey 217-218)

Thus, yet again, the gender norms believed to be so “in-born” are in fact socially constructed at different points in time and for different reasons. Even gender roles, constructions so ingrained in today's culture, are not completely inherent.

In coming to a close, various refutations should be considered. Some may question the perceived assumptions of this essay, claiming that some gender norms are not harmful. For example, the norms of “assertiveness” and “nurturing” are not in themselves negative. This argument is considerable, and in fact, there are many gender norms that are positive. Despite that, the thesis of this essay is not that all gender norms are harmful, because that statement would be unfounded. The assertion is that society has over-regulated norms, and therefore, has no tolerance for people who break the norms, even those expectations that are unfounded and harmful. This creates many issues because not only are these norms harmful, but any rejection of them elicits judgment, harsh criticism, and even more extreme consequences.

Another possible refutation is that the current problems are just being inflated and that there is no real reason for concern. While there are various degrees of seriousness in the topics presented in this paper, for example clothing choice compared to sexual violence, all have a similar theme of conformity and this is what makes even the seemingly trivial subjects significant. In the end, it is the principle that these gender norms are unfounded yet are adhered to so fiercely that is the problem. That in and of itself is an issue for concern, not to mention the various negative effects that the actual norms themselves can cause.

Before closing, a way forward should be proposed. In thinking about the deeper issues surrounding the topic of gender, one can create a culture not of conformity, but of individual thought and diversity by analyzing gender norms today. Thinking critically about what is

expected of men and women is the most important path forward. Again, like in the opening paragraphs, rules for society are helpful much of the time, but there comes a point when they can become burdensome and create more harm than good. At that point, it is best to rewrite the rules and cultivate a culture that is functional for all. The extreme sanctions given for breaking these gender norms must be discarded. In a practical way, this starts by changing the way these topics are thought about. One must realize that there is a problem before fixing it. Every time someone feels the pressure to conform, they should pause and analyze the reasoning behind that feeling and norm, thinking deeply about the broad effects of the rules they are expected to adhere to without question. With this kind of intentionality, societal pressures will lose their power. If people reject those constructs that have become so harmful by thinking critically about them and then rejecting those that are illogical or harmful, there will be less societal pressure to fit into the narrow gender boxes so present today. Not only will there be increased acceptance and diversity of thought, but there will also be a reduction of the harms that come inherently from these norms. This opening of the mind is necessary in order to make forward progress in the area of gender.

And this society needs progress. In closing, a transcendent view should be taken. Many of the issues present in the western hemisphere and all over the world relate to people's view of themselves and their place in society. Men often feel they must earn their "manhood." Women often are channeled, sometimes unknowingly, into roles where they are discouraged from being a leader, especially in the working world. Little boys are taught that crying is weak and that the only appropriate emotion a real man can show is anger. Little girls are brought up to believe that a majority of their worth is in the prettiness of their bodies. The currency with which this society trades is harmful and misguided. Parents should be able to dress their little boy in pink because colors are just colors and whatever is "in vogue" in this time and place changes like the wind. A

man should be able to wear clothing that he feels comfortable in without others heaping judgment and shame on him because clothes are just fabric sewn together to fit the shape of humans. I should be able to have freedom of choice in my personal grooming without the societal pressures that so quickly shame me and push me to conform because after all, hair is just hair. Men should be encouraged to cultivate their emotionality, not suppress it, because having emotions and showing them is human, not feminine. Men should not feel like they have to fit into the unhealthy and harmful definition of what a “true man” is, because what society defines as “true man” is damaging not only to the men who try so hard to earn that title, but to the rest of society as well. The overpowering of the vulnerable to simply attain a certain standard of manhood must stop. The wellbeing of every person must be considered and championed. Women should be encouraged to embody all types of traits that help them succeed. Being assertive and confident are things all people should strive for, not just men. Men and women should not feel pressured to fit into traditional gender roles, because just like clothing and colors, the definition of what a man or woman’s role looks like phases in and out as consistently as the moon. These issues must be eradicated because they are harmful, degrading and most dangerous of all, they breed a culture of conformity.

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