

# Gender roles in society: a look at masculinity and femininity essay sample

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“ The Dangers of Femininity” by Lucy Gilbert and Paula Webster discusses gender roles in society, and Messages Men Hear: Constructing Masculinities by Ian Harris discusses specifically the gender roles of men. According to Gilbert and Webster, “ the two-gender system mandates masculine and feminine beings who are unequal, giving one set social power and the other none.” (41) These masculine and feminine qualities are not just determined by sex. They are defined by the certain characteristics that a person exhibits. These characteristics are shaped by the culture of a society. Males and females are encouraged to behave by these codes.

Harris has a similar argument. Harris proposes, “ gender role messages set standards for appropriate male behavior.”( 12) These messages are a set of codes that are given by family members at a young age. These messages possesses, “ ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting that form the basis for his world view” (Harris, 17). Gilbert and Webster argue that society pressures both genders to behave a certain way and that this established system is in favor of males, but Harris argues that this system can also have a negative impact on males.

Although both “ The Dangers of Femininity” and Messages Men Hear: Constructing Masculinities discuss the cultural influence of gender roles, they have some conflicting arguments on how society specifically forms male behaviors. Gilbert and Webster generalize male gender role as “ The Real Man”. The real man “ exhibits all the traits of a strong and self assured person by being rational, competitive, proud, self-protecting, physically powerful, and sexually attractive” (42). Harris, however, is more specific about male gender role. He classifies gender role in 24 messages and <https://assignbuster.com/gender-roles-in-society-a-look-at-masculinity-and-femininity-essay-sample/>

mentions that there are many other messages men receive as well. Some of these messages are considered classic because they have been established by society for many generations, but there are emerging messages that have appeared in society more recently. Harris mentions that these new messages are not popular with culture (17).

These emerging messages do not conform to Gilbert and Webster's definition of "The Real Man". Some examples of these gender roles are labeled as Good Samaritan who does good deeds and acts, nature lover who respects plants, and nurturer who is gentle and sensitive. They do not agree with being proud, self-protecting, and physically powerful as is "The Real Man". The classic gender roles, however, can agree with the definition of "The Real Man". These classic messages are defined as the Playboy who is sexually aggressive, the President who seeks power, and the Sportsman who is physically strong (13). Gilbert and Webster generalize the gender role for males, but Harris claims that there are many forms of this gender role that is accepted by society and some gender roles that are less favored, and these gender roles are vastly different.

Although Harris, Gilbert, and Webster disagree on the way society can form males, they all agree that it can be harmful to males. According to Gilbert and Webster, the gender role for masculinity artificially creates a sense of well being for males. They claim that society believes, "If a young boy manages to achieve masculinity, as defined and determined by the culture, he will find that the outcome of being a man is to feel good about himself and his work, to feel like a winner" (44). Harris acknowledges that society

deceives males into thinking masculinity messages will produce this effect. However, he extends the argument by claiming that these gender roles can be harmful to men. He defines this as gender-role stress. He gives an example by discussing a Vietnam veteran's transformation from a "tough guy" figure to a family man after the war. Initially, this person had a difficult time relating to his family until finally he had to make some necessary changes in his behavior. He realized his "tough guy" characteristics would be ineffective in raising his family. Harris claims that gender role sets standards which often do not suite the true behavior of an individual and a transition in behavior must be made (15). Gilbert, Webster, and Harris agree that the social constructs cause harm to both genders. However, Harris argument emphasizes the harm done to men, and Gilbert and Webster argument emphasizes the harm done to women.

While Harris, Gilbert and Webster argue that both genders are pressured socially to behave a certain way, Deborah Tannin strongly emphasizes that social pressures strictly exist for females. As a linguistics professor at Georgetown University, she defines "marked" in "There is No Unmarked Woman" as an entity that will define or associate something that otherwise could not have meaning by itself. The way a women acts and dresses sends a message to others of the type of person she is. Minimal differences in the dresses, hair style, and makeup strongly influence a person's judgment of a female. Tannin focuses on the gender roles effect of physical appearance on woman (492).

While Harris does not specifically discuss gender roles in females, Tannin, Gilbert, and Webster discuss these gender roles and both state that it favors men. Tannin discusses the daily issues woman have of choosing between what style of hair, clothes, and shoes they should wear which could affect the way people view them. She asserts, “ There are thousands of cosmetic products from which woman can choose and myriad ways of applying them. Yet no makeup at all is anything but unmarked.” (493) She also claims that men are unmarked. Only in the most extreme cases are they considered marked such as wearing a cowboy hat, hippie jeans, or a three piece suit. These daily consequences woman have in their gender roles are of less intensity than what Gilbert and Webster claim.

They discuss various classifications women have in society which are defined by behavior not just appearance. They have three classifications for women which are The Princess, The Good Girl, and The Bad Girl. The Princess depends on men for her needs. She is considered weak and insecure. The Good Girl is there for anyone's help. The Bad Girl does not obey the gender role of society. Gilbert and Webster as well as Harris agree that woman are disfavored in society, but Tannen's argument focuses on milder aspects such as appearance and Gilbert and Webster's focuses on behavioral aspects.

#### Work Cited

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