

The Monthly Rag

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Beyond the Binary: Global Conceptions of Gender

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Think: gender. What comes to mind? Man, woman, girl, boy. There exists in our society a binary of genders, a dichotomy defining one as the opposite of the other. Images of men and women, girls and boys are quite distinct in Western society, and socio-cultural portrayals generally serve to reinforce these views. The question must be asked: do other, non-Western cultures all hold to the same gender binary?

The answer is no. They don't. Across the globe, many cultures have deeply rooted traditions of so-called "third genders" — that is, genders that do not fit neatly into the man-woman binary that pervades the West. These third genders can be based in religion, spirituality, ritual, or sexual orientation, among other facets of identity. They are reflections of the cultures which create them, and each portrays different sides of humanity. Take, for example, the Two-Spirit people of many Native American cultures. Before Western influence changed their societies, young people in certain tribes identified as embodiments of both the "male" and "female" spirit. These individuals were raised to a place of promi-

nence and, depending upon the tribe, served as healers, medicine people, storytellers, fortunetellers, or matchmakers. In many ways, Two-Spirit people were a bridge between the genders, and were symbols of tribal unity.

As socio-cultural reflections of diverse origin, some third genders have a more modern basis. Travestis, or biologically male transgendered sex workers in Brazil (and with forms in other Latin American countries), have been cited as a modern example of third gender. Many travestis do not see themselves as a third gender, but rather as homosexual men who dress as women to attract potential clients and boy-friends. Despite this identity, scholars have identified them as a third gender because of their unique, socioculturally-constructed role. From an academic standpoint, travestis represent a gender built around institutionalized homosexuality, in which the gender norms of masculinity are discarded in favor of femininity, despite male genitals.

These examples of third genders (there are countless more) in very different cultures serve to illustrate an important

point regarding global conceptions of gender. By creating a gender role, consciously (as in the case of the Two-Spirit people) or unconsciously (as with travestis), and based upon varying sociocultural theme — sometimes relating to sexual orientation, but more often with other features like work affinity, spiritual calling, or gender identity — these cultures have explored different sides of humanity.

In contrast with the comparatively unbending gender identities and roles of the Western world, these societies have developed inclusive and unique structures for their peoples. In so doing, they have in some ways bridged a major gap between two typically antithetical sociocultural constructs, masculinity and femininity. If people in Western societies were to rethink gender, and to conceive of a more gender-equitable and inclusive model of multiple genders along similar lines, perhaps many of the inequalities and prejudices faced by members of different genders could begin to be overcome. Think: gender.

Inspired by Sarah Hautzinger's 2012 Block IV course AN/FG239 Women, Men, and "Others".

"We get so mad when some nitwit says she's not a feminist. I guess if you're cool with being raped all the time and having no options in life other than being a baby machine or a prostitute, then yeah, you're probably not a feminist. But if you enjoy birth-control pills and not being beaten up by your owner—I mean, husband—then you pretty much are one so you may as well stop shaving your legs right now. **Just kidding.** Somewhere along the way feminism got a bad rep, but it doesn't mean you have to be a sourpuss or that you can't write tongue-in-cheek articles riddled with silly gender stereotypes. All it means is that you don't hate yourself." - **Lesley Arfin and Amy Kellner** in "The Vice Guide to Girls"



Self-Care: Feminism and Mental Health

Carmen Rodi, Sociology Major & FGS Minor, Class of 2013

A recent and rising part of the feminist movement is the advocacy of self-care. Despite the modern notion that feminists are full of hate, feminists are actually advocates for community, human connection and care for oneself. As the amazing feminist Audre Lorde says, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

Feminism is especially relevant due to the intersection of people's experiences with external factors and expectations:

- 30-40% of LGBT youth have attempted suicide
- 8 million Americans suffer from an eating disorder

The severity of these issues ranges, but they all show what kind of expectations accumulate to make people unhappy with who they are. To combat this, feminism helps enhance people's self-esteem by questioning and rejecting societal norms. While I can only speak on my experience, I believe feminism is equally beneficial for the personal growth of men as well as women. As bell hooks says, "when men embrace feminist thinking and practice, which emphasizes the value of mutual growth and self-actualization in all relationships, their

emotional well-being will be enhanced."

In high school, I bought into a lot of what the media presented to me, which was widely accepted by my peers. I had close friends with self-harm and eating disorder issues. It was a difficult time and I can't imagine how much harder it would have been had I not been exposed to feminism.

Learning about feminism made me refocus my values: it taught me how harmful it was to have such negative thoughts about myself and about others. I developed a passion for feminist issues at an early age and while it was sometimes hard to relate to my peers in high school, I found myself growing as my value system changed. I found a community of young women and men who collectively questioned the status quo. I began to make an effort, too, by doing little things like trading in my *Seventeen* for *BUST* magazine.

Throughout college, I've continued to explore feminism. It's helped me through a lot; I've had some troubling experiences at CC but having a strong core and encouragement for self-care has been endlessly beneficial. Feminism quite literally played the biggest role in my own sense of self and self-confidence.

In terms of the larger picture, people can't contribute to a movement of advancing social justice and supporting others if they aren't first and foremost looking after themselves. Are you overwhelmed? Is your schedule filled with meetings and work? Make sure to take time for yourself. And no matter what your stance on feminist politics is, everybody deserves to live a healthy and happy life. Feminism can be one tool to help you get there.

Not ready to seek out a counselor (note: your first six counseling sessions at Boettcher are **FREE**) or go to group meetings? Curious about learning more?

Everydayfeminism.com includes regular posts on the topic of self-worth, with everything from "How to find the Right Therapist for you," to "5 Ways to Take Care of Yourself Today," listed below:

1. Acknowledge that things are hard
2. Ask for help
3. Accept vulnerability
4. Create a routine that involves work and play
5. Do what is true to you

Author Sara Ogden expands on these ideas in the post, and concludes by saying, "We need to find sustainable ways to take care of our minds, bodies and spirits."

Do you have a question, feedback, want more info or resources, or want to contribute to our publication?
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