

GENDER · SEX ROLE STEREOTYPES

FEMMININE
masculine

—Mary Leinfelder

Gender describes the primary sexual characteristics of pole or hole¹, beard or breasts; it is a biological fact. Sex role prescribes the grouping of traits into masculine or feminine categories; it is an arbitrary socio-politico-cultural norm. Sexist society mistakenly equates gender with sex role, erroneously linking the unchangeable biology of maleness and femaleness (transsexuals excepted) inextricably to the arbitrary sociology of masculinity and femininity.

This erroneous linkage has roots deep in the sexist ideology of our white male defined culture. Furthermore, male culture has assigned to the 'feminine' matrix qualities deemed unwanted by males: passivity, emotionality, etc.; it has glorified the 'masculine' matrix with emphasis on competence, effectence, etc.; and has maintained the linkage of biological gender to socially defined/assigned traits. This results in a population of warped half-humans, grouped by gender at opposite ends of the mas/fem scale. (Biology dictates sociology. . .)

This arbitrary divisiveness is reflected in power relationships throughout society: males have power and privilege; females have slavery and low self-esteem. Such power distribution along sex lines prohibits the existence of full "personhood". To eradicate such distribution, which means to do away with at the very roots, is the revolution.

But the revolution isn't happening instantaneously, so what about everyday?? Chipping away at sex role stereotypes in words, dress, work, sexuality, etc. can be a beginning, even if it is on a superficial and symptomatic level in relation to the extent of the total battle. The quotidian struggle can seem like reformism, yet if small changes are pursued with larger changes in the vision/goal, small changes can be productive. Chipping at symptoms of a disease does nothing if the root cause is not also under attack; persons engaged in hammering at sexist roots can simultaneously chip away at symptomatic stereotypes that cause pain daily.

The proscriptive power of sex role stereotypes has already done untold damage to human personalities: many of the traits we once had the potential to develop may be unrecoverable, modified into nonexistence by social pressures. The salvage operation becomes a battle line offensive against those sexist symptoms that add up to a severely hampering society.

WORDS Words solidify and extend concepts. The concepts of femininity and masculinity are false dichotomies by which humans are arranged; these false labels cannot be used in a feminist vocabulary. To describe personal traits, use the word for the trait. Restore the importance of individuals' distinctive ways (non sex role specific) by restoring specific descriptive words. Meanings like sensitive, gentle, etc. are not conveyed by the word feminine, and an intellectual, aggressive person is not to be described as masculine! Being trait-specific might help too in the salvaging of characteristics nearly lost to social pressures — restore by giving positive emphasis.

His and her, she and he interfere terribly with personhood untainted by sex role insinuations. Imagine if pronouns revealed the color of persons; to so clearly reveal the gender is even worse. At least one underground publication³ has experimented with using "co" for genderized pronouns: "coself" for her/himself, "cos" book for her/his book, etc. Use of the specific person's name rather than genderized pronouns sometimes helps — and the more we can use non-gender-specific names the better. Saying the word *person* rather than woman or man can also expand consciousness of the unnecessary but automatic sex distinctions made in everyday speech.

There's certainly room for new concepts and new words in any revolutionary vocabulary (though spreading the meaning of a new concept/word in fact may be reduced to a fluke of the media in this world. . .).

DRESS Dress is superficial and symptomatic, yet it is an important socio-cultural indicator of sex role. Studies show that among children⁴ clothing and hair styles are far more salient indicators of 'gender' than body size or even genital design. (And the children's way of making distinctions is 'taught' to them by the dominant social pattern.)

Androgyny or 'unisex' in clothing/appearance seems a possible route towards equal treatment as persons. "If no one can tell which gender I am, they can't impose an arbitrary sex role on me" is the back-of-my-mind thinking. Breasts and beards on many interfere with adoption of a gynandromorphous appearance though, so it's clearly not much of a solution. Showier tactics like drag can be useful: the shock value of it (genderfuck) puts the person in drag on the battle line. (Drag for shock value or comfort, etc. but please not for any glorification of stereotypical mas or fem positions.) The tactical value of drag doesn't go very far — drag is barely available to us as females. The words bull dyke sometimes get evoked, but pants, boots, short hair, hats, body hair on females are far more acceptable than a dress on a male. Androgyny (gynandromorphism) may be convenient, and drag may be tactically useful — but we still have to get beyond any sex role connotations carried by clothing/appearance so persons can wear whatever whenever.

WORK This stratified society bases itself on a layer of service jobs to which females are relegated (the age-old servant caste) and for which the pay is shit. Only the neediest males (usually non-white) have to take service jobs and suffer the indignities of servicing other humans at low pay. But even higher pay will not convince males to do service jobs, for they are tainted by feminine (servant) connotations. Males must accept themselves in service positions like childcare, secretarial, nursing, but that is predicated on an entirely changed social system (can we even get beyond 'servicing'?). Females are and must continue actively pursuing instrumental jobs like doctoring, research, mechanics, etc. Females must not only develop the mind set that encourages us to trust our competencies, we must pursue the

development of physical strength in order never to be at a physical disadvantage in relation to males. Size differentials are of far less importance than attitude and development differentials — an attitude of equality can be displayed by females, and greater physical strength and preparedness can be developed. The bravado and protective bullshit that feeds so many male egos (and is overfed by undeveloped flowery females) can be diminished by females ending any compliance with the game. Every person is as strong and as competent as coself prepares and believes coself to be.

SEXUALITY In the ideal condition of full and equal personhood, love relationships and sexuality among persons should be possible regardless of gender. If the genital design were accepted as only one aspect of the widely varied traits found in human persons, hetero and homo sexual limitations on human sexuality would both be senseless. Further, were sexuality expanded far beyond 'fucking' towards sensuality of the total being (polymorphism), all personal relations could have sensual/sexual aspects.

Meantime there's the power differential perverting all these 'if only's'. Females are still recovering from Freud's sentence of passivity, masochism and narcissistic doom in our sexual relations with dominant males, and smouldering at the vaginal hype perpetrated on us by the power class. Phallic culture has poisoned so much of our world and our selfhood that wanting never to see another prick is understandable. When devalued as a class, females are hardpressed to value one another; feminist self-identification is bringing new highs in sisterlove. (In this space I'll leave it at that. . .)

Dress like an androgyn (or flashier), assumes a genderless name, take a 'cross-sexed' job, and co is still only involved in the symptomatics of sexist society. Eradication of sex role stereotypes means (rhetorically put) sexist society must end. Males must lose their privileges (social, economic, cultural, politics, physical, emotional, sexual); females must have control over the institutions that affect our lives (social, economic, cultural, political, physical, emotional, sexual). ETC. Then maybe all persons can be treated equally as 'persons' regardless of genitalia. While we work towards the complete revolution, let's at least get small changes happening everyday.

1. Lifted from N.O. Brown's *Love's Body* (the only unsexist phrase in the entire ms.)

2. The line of Simone de Beauvoir suggests that barely powerful males, in awe and fear of certain aspects of females, assigned all potentially weak and emotional traits to females as if to exorcise such from males selves, and underlined male aggressivity, competence, etc. for self-production.

3. Movement for a New Society publications (Phildelphia)

4. Kohlberg, Lawrence in *Development of Sex Differences*, ed. E. Maccobby, Stanford University Press, 1970.



photo by Valentine

