

Deciphering The Asymmetry in Gender Discourse: Femininity's Dominance and the Underrepresentation of Masculinity in Sociological and Media Studies

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Abstract: Contemporary gender studies have been profoundly shaped by the intellectual force of feminist scholarship, which succeeded in unveiling patriarchal structures that long controlled knowledge, representation, and institutional arrangements. Feminist interventions opened doors for women's voices to enter arenas from which they had historically been excluded. Yet, in the course of rebalancing an inequitable system, gender scholarship inadvertently developed a conceptual asymmetry: femininity became the central lens through which gender is interpreted, while masculinity remained comparatively unexamined. This imbalance has shaped the ways sociology and media studies articulate gendered identities and power. Masculinity, frequently treated as the default or "unmarked" category, has escaped critical scrutiny even as feminist theory subjected femininity to rich analytical and empirical investigation. The invisibility of masculinity within academic discourse has limited the development of a genuinely holistic understanding of gender as a relational system.

This paper addresses this epistemic gap by examining how masculinity has been framed, muted, or stereotyped within sociological theory and media representation. It argues that masculinity, far from being a static or homogeneous category, is a social formation shaped by class, race, sexuality, and postcolonial experiences. Treating masculinity as a legitimate site of inquiry does not diminish the achievements of feminist scholarship; instead, it expands the terrain of gender theory by engaging with neglected dimensions of power, emotion, identity, and representation. The study proposes a dialogical model in which femininity and masculinity are understood as co-constitutive categories, each shaping and reshaping the other within specific social contexts. It also explores how media narratives, educational practices, and institutional arrangements have deepened the imbalance in gender discourse by diversifying portrayals of women while confining men to rigid stereotypes.

By situating masculinity within a broader sociocultural and theoretical framework, the paper contributes to gender studies by offering a foundation for epistemic symmetry. It encourages sociologists, educators, and

media practitioners to adopt integrative approaches that recognize the plurality of masculinities and their embeddedness in intersecting structures of power. Ultimately, the study calls for an inclusive gender imaginary—one that moves beyond polarized binaries and opens space for transformative understandings of all genders.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Masculinity, Femininity, Dominance, Representation, Asymmetry, Sociology, Media

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The overarching aim of this study is to examine the epistemic imbalance in gender discourse, particularly the tendency of contemporary scholarship to center femininity while leaving masculinity less theorized. Although feminist scholarship has radically transformed the gender landscape, the insufficient academic engagement with masculinity has limited the field's ability to fully analyze gender as a relational phenomenon. This research therefore seeks to reposition masculinity within sociological and media contexts, not as a counterweight to feminist achievements but as a complementary site of inquiry that enriches gender theory.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To trace the historical evolution of feminist scholarship and analyze how it shaped gender studies in ways that unintentionally marginalized masculinity.
2. To investigate the reasons for masculinity studies' limited institutional recognition in sociology and media studies.
3. To examine portrayals of masculinity in mainstream and digital media, identifying patterns of stereotyping, oversimplification, or silence.

4. To conceptualize masculinity as a relational construct shaped by intersections of class, race, sexuality, and cultural location.
5. To propose a balanced theoretical model that treats femininity and masculinity as mutually constitutive social identities.
6. To contribute to the development of inclusive pedagogical and media literacy frameworks that encourage critical engagement with all gender representations.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach, which aligns with its conceptual interest in exploring meanings, interpretations, and cultural narratives surrounding gender. Qualitative inquiry allows for deep engagement with the symbolic structures that shape identity, representation, and discourse. Rather than aiming to quantify behavior, this approach uncovers how gender categories are constructed, maintained, and contested. It facilitates the interpretive analysis necessary for examining the epistemic imbalance between femininity and masculinity within academic and media contexts. Sources include theoretical texts in feminist and masculinity studies, sociological research on gender relations, and media analyses drawn from film, advertising, and digital culture. Using thematic analysis, the study identifies conceptual patterns that reveal how masculinity is framed or overlooked. The methodology is grounded in a commitment to understanding gender as relational, fluid, and embedded in power structures. This approach supports the project's aim of contributing to a more equitable and nuanced gender discourse.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Analytical Imbalance: While feminist theory produced transformative insights, its central focus on femininity left masculinity conceptually underdeveloped and often treated as the unexamined norm.
2. Academic Marginalization: Masculinity studies remain peripheral within university curricula, resulting in a one-sided understanding of gender.
3. Media Stereotyping: Representations of men in mainstream media continue to emphasize dominance, stoicism, or detachment, limiting the scope for complex portrayals.

4. Intersectional Variability: Masculinity is not monolithic; it varies across class, race, sexuality, and cultural settings, making intersectional analysis essential.
5. Need for Epistemic Balance: Achieving equitable gender scholarship requires treating femininity and masculinity as interdependent constructs.

INTRODUCTION: MAPPING THE GENDER DISCOURSE IMBALANCE

Gender studies emerged as one of the most dynamic and politically significant academic fields of the modern era. Rooted in the intellectual traditions of feminist activism and critical theory, the discipline challenged entrenched hierarchies of knowledge and representation. Feminist scholars exposed how social science and cultural production had long been shaped by male-centric perspectives that positioned women as secondary subjects. By interrogating the structural roots of inequality, gender studies brought issues of labor, sexuality, domesticity, and representation into mainstream discourse.

Yet, within this transformative movement, an epistemic imbalance gradually took shape. Femininity became the primary focus of gender scholarship, while masculinity—though omnipresent socially—remained conceptually invisible. This invisibility is not accidental; it reflects the status of masculinity as the default category within patriarchal systems. Because male experience was historically treated as synonymous with human experience, masculinity seemed undeserving of scrutiny. Feminist scholarship, focused on correcting centuries of exclusion, naturally devoted its energies to analyzing women's lives, representations, and struggles. The unintended consequence was the marginalization of masculinity as a theoretical subject.

This asymmetry has significant consequences for sociology and media studies. When masculinity is treated as a fixed, undifferentiated norm, researchers fail to examine how men themselves are shaped by social expectations, emotional constraints, and cultural narratives. The result is an incomplete gender theory—one that richly examines femininity while leaving masculinity insufficiently theorized. This study seeks to address this gap by repositioning masculinity as a dynamic, relational, and culturally embedded identity.

I. Feminist Scholarship and Its Transformative Influence

The foundations of gender studies were laid by feminist thinkers who sought to reclaim women's agency in intellectual and institutional life. Simone de Beauvoir's critique of women's social construction, Betty Friedan's analysis of domestic confinement, and later Judith Butler's interrogation of gender performativity transformed the way scholars understood power, identity, and gender norms. Feminist scholarship challenged the idea that social roles were biologically determined, revealing instead that gender identities are constructed within systems of cultural and political power.

Feminism's greatest achievement was its ability to disrupt longstanding patriarchal narratives that positioned men as universal subjects. Feminist theory provided the conceptual vocabulary needed to critique systems of male dominance and to articulate women's experiences as legitimate objects of inquiry. It democratized knowledge by revealing that what had been treated as neutral social theory was often male-centric and exclusionary.

However, this critical reorientation also produced an unintended effect: the conceptual centrality of femininity. The analytical spotlight shifted so intensely toward women's lives that masculinity, paradoxically, remained largely unquestioned. Feminist scholars certainly acknowledged men as beneficiaries of patriarchy, but masculinity itself was seldom treated as a socially constructed category with internal variations and contradictions. Only later waves of feminism, especially intersectional and queer perspectives, began to critique this gap. Still, masculinity studies remained institutionally marginal.

II. Masculinity Studies: The Missing Half of Gender Inquiry

Masculinity studies emerged partly in response to this imbalance. Early scholars recognized that understanding men's experiences was not a diversion from feminist politics but a necessary extension of gender analysis. Masculinity, like femininity, is constructed through social norms, cultural expectations, and power structures. R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity played a pivotal role in theorizing how certain forms of masculinity achieve cultural dominance over others—not only subordinating women but also marginalizing non-conforming men.

Despite such conceptual developments, the academic reception of masculinity studies has been mixed. Many sociologists and educators remain wary of centering men for fear it might reproduce historical inequalities. Others perceive masculinity as too stable or universal to warrant detailed analysis. These assumptions overlook the complexity of masculine identities, which vary widely across cultures and social groups.

Until masculinity is treated as an independent subject of inquiry, the field of gender studies will remain incomplete. Masculinity is not merely a backdrop against which femininity is articulated; it is an active, dynamic, contested terrain that shapes and is shaped by social institutions.

III. Media's Feminized Lens: Representation and Silence

Media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding of gender. Over the past few decades, feminist narratives have gained considerable visibility, resulting in more varied depictions of women across cinema, advertising, and digital spaces. While this is a necessary corrective to historical underrepresentation, it has also created a new representational asymmetry.

Masculinity remains confined to narrow archetypes—stoic, aggressive, emotionally constrained, or hyper-rational. These portrayals reinforce harmful myths of masculine invulnerability and silence men's emotional needs. By contrast, contemporary media often embraces more emotionally expressive and diverse portrayals of women. As a result, femininity appears as a dynamic field of identity, while masculinity remains stagnant and stereotyped.

Even media discussions of the so-called "crisis of masculinity" tend to sensationalize or pathologize men's experiences rather than contextualizing them within broader sociological shifts. Digital media, although offering alternative spaces for men to discuss identity, mental health, and vulnerability, remains fragmented and rarely reaches mainstream platforms.

A balanced media landscape requires the portrayal of men as complex individuals shaped by emotions, relationships, and social pressures—not merely bearers of dominance or dysfunction.

IV. Sociological Blind Spots: Gender Theory and the Male Subject

Sociology has historically reproduced masculinity's invisibility. Classical theorists largely wrote from the vantage point of male experience without naming it as such. When feminist critiques exposed this androcentrism, gender scholarship underwent a paradigm shift. Yet, the pendulum swung so far toward femininity that masculinity was again left underexamined.

Contemporary sociological research often concentrates on issues such as women's empowerment, gender-based violence, and workplace participation. These are crucial areas, but their dominance has overshadowed questions about how men navigate shifting emotional expectations, changing family roles, or economic pressures. The persistent treatment of masculinity as the unmarked category obscures how gender norms shape men's vulnerabilities and emotional landscapes.

Recognizing masculinity as a relational construct does not contradict feminist commitments; it strengthens them. Patriarchy constrains all genders, albeit unequally. Examining masculinity's internal contradictions allows scholars to better understand how gender systems operate and how they may be transformed.

V. Intersections of Class, Race, and Sexuality in Masculinity Studies

Masculinity is deeply intersectional. Dominant images of manhood are shaped by race, class, caste, sexuality, religion, and geography. The global image of the "ideal man"—often white, heterosexual, upper-class, able-bodied—masks the diversity of masculine experiences.

Working-class masculinities, shaped by labor and economic precarity, differ dramatically from middle-class constructions that privilege professional success and emotional discipline. Racialized masculinities, particularly among marginalized communities, are frequently associated with deviance or threat in media narratives. Queer and non-binary masculinities challenge heteronormative assumptions by exposing gender's performative nature. In postcolonial societies, colonial legacies continue to shape ideals of masculinity by privileging Western norms over indigenous forms of male identity.

Studying masculinity through an intersectional lens prevents the reproduction of exclusions and highlights the plurality of gender experiences.

VI. The Politics of Knowledge Production

Academic institutions determine what counts as valuable knowledge. The marginal status of masculinity studies reflects broader institutional and ideological trends. Many universities house masculinity studies within feminist or cultural studies programs, limiting their theoretical independence. Funding often prioritizes research on women's empowerment or gender equality initiatives, while studies on men's emotional or identity struggles may be perceived as less urgent. This institutional imbalance creates hesitation among scholars who fear that studying masculinity will be misinterpreted as anti-feminist. Yet, a balanced approach to gender requires examining how power shapes all identities. Critical masculinity studies do not reinforce male privilege; they interrogate the norms that sustain gender hierarchies.

Achieving symmetry in gender discourse requires curricular reforms, interdisciplinary collaboration, and recognition that understanding masculinity is integral to dismantling patriarchal systems.

VII. Media Literacy and Educational Reform

Education plays a central role in shaping gender consciousness. Integrating masculinity studies into sociology and media curricula can foster critical awareness of how gender norms affect not only women's opportunities but also men's emotional lives and social identities. Students benefit from analyzing how masculine norms influence behavior, vulnerability, communication, and mental health.

Media literacy is equally important. Teaching individuals to decode representational patterns in film, advertising, social media, and pop culture empowers them to challenge stereotypes. For example, students can critically examine why men are often portrayed as emotionally detached or why women's representation has diversified while men's remains narrow.

Digital platforms have created new spaces for male self-expression—podcasts, independent films, online communities—where men explore relationships, mental health, and identity. Educational institutions can integrate these resources to promote more inclusive discussions.

VIII. Discussion: Reclaiming Symmetry in Gender Discourses

A comprehensive understanding of gender requires recognizing the relational nature of femininity and masculinity. Feminist scholarship exposed the

structural biases embedded in social institutions; masculinity studies extend this critique by examining how men's identities are shaped by those same structures. Gender justice is not a zero-sum project. Rather, it requires dismantling norms that restrict all genders.

Portrayals of masculinity that emphasize dominance, invulnerability, or emotional suppression harm both men and those around them. Similarly, portraying femininity exclusively through empowerment narratives can obscure the diversity of women's experiences. Creating symmetry means encouraging both men and women to adopt qualities such as empathy, care, vulnerability, and resilience. A dialogical gender framework avoids polarized thinking and builds space for mutual transformation. Such an approach not only strengthens academic inquiry but also supports healthier social relationships and institutional practices.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN INCLUSIVE GENDER IMAGINARY

The epistemic imbalance in gender discourse reflects broader cultural hierarchies of visibility and value. Feminist scholarship transformed the academic landscape by making women visible as subjects of inquiry. The next step in this intellectual journey is to extend the same level of critical engagement to masculinity. This does not diminish feminist achievements; it enriches them by providing a fuller understanding of how gender operates.

Masculinity and femininity are not opposites; they are intertwined identities shaped by social forces, cultural narratives, and institutional structures. An inclusive gender imaginary recognizes this interdependence and commits to studying both with equal theoretical depth. Balanced scholarship has practical implications for policy, education, media representation, and mental health awareness. By integrating masculinity studies into gender discourse, scholars can create more comprehensive frameworks capable of addressing contemporary social challenges.

In the long run, achieving symmetry in gender analysis is not merely an academic goal—it is an ethical imperative. A society that understands gender as a shared human experience, rather than a battlefield of competing narratives, is better equipped to foster empathy, equality, and collective well-being. Only by interrogating both femininity

and masculinity can gender studies realize its transformative potential.

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