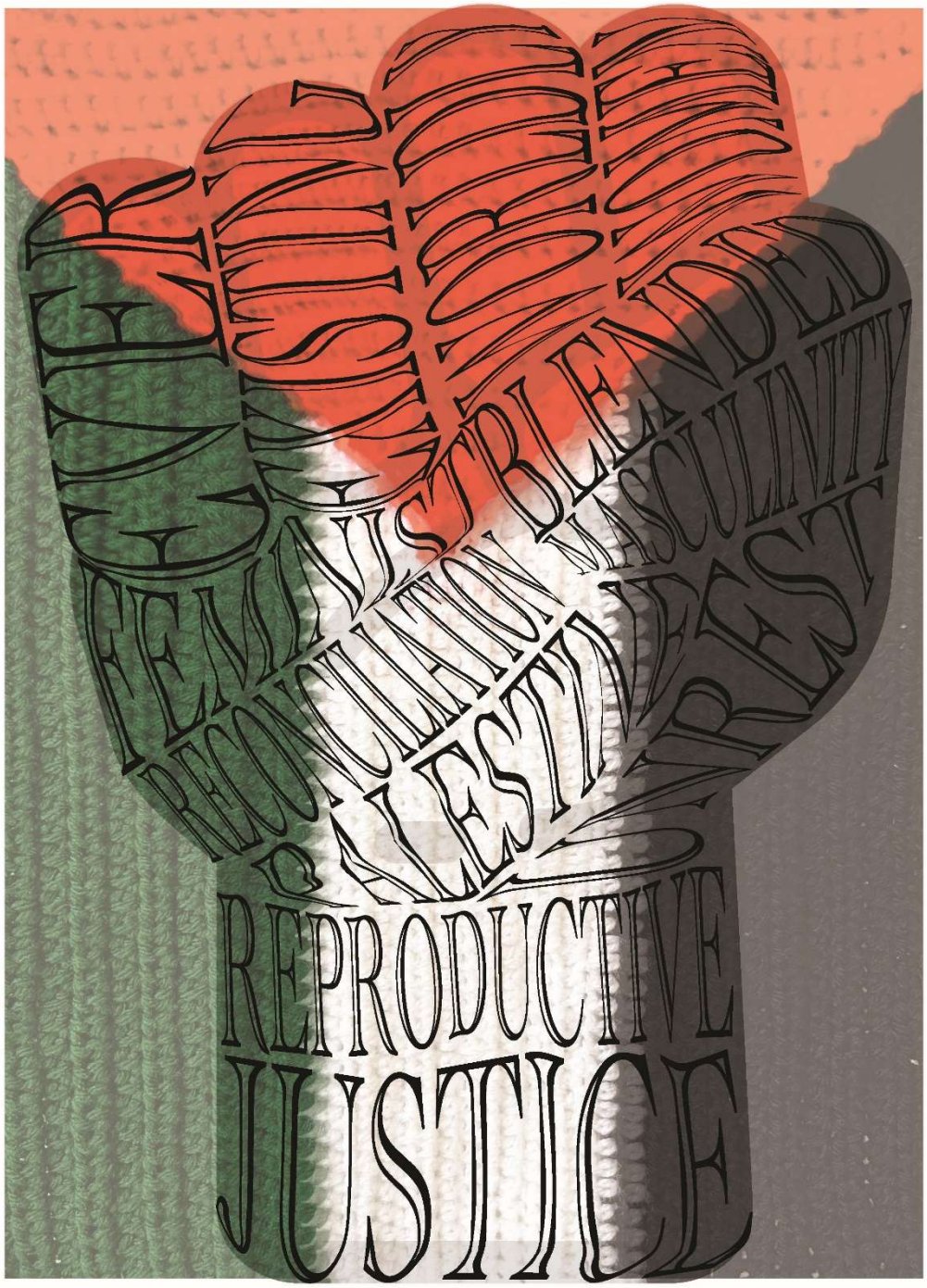
BLENDED
FEMINISM
RECONCILIATION
MASCULINITY
REST
REPRODUCTIVE
JUSTICE

Dissenting Voices

VOLUME 13 (SPRING 2024)

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

I am thrilled to introduce Volume 13 of *Dissenting Voices*, a student engineered e-Journal collaboratively designed, authored, and published by undergraduate Women and Gender Studies majors as an extension of their Women and Gender Studies Senior Seminar at SUNY Brockport. This volume showcases the work of six incredible feminist scholars who poured their time, passion, sweat, and maybe even a few tears into their contributions to the project.

Dissenting Voices grows out of a course learning structure where Women and Gender Studies students reflect upon their undergraduate experience in the discipline, and through engagement, activism, and synthesis of acquired knowledge establish a theoretical foundation to inform future feminist practices. Course readings comprise students' discipline-specific interests, enabling an intellectual forum in which students dialogue on a women and gender focused topic. This work culminates in a meaningful capstone project grounded in contemporary and emerging feminist scholarship.

"Our Voices", a progressive narrative written collaboratively by the authors with each contributing a sentence and building off that which came before, can be read as a manifesto of sorts. A call to action. "We raise our voices, our fists, in resistance!" "Our Voices" hints at the range of perspectives to come while reminding us that the connecting thread between them all is resistance to oppression in its various forms.

In the pages that follow, you will read about the disproportionate impact of anti-abortion legislation on communities of color and the negative mental health impacts of deadnaming on transgender youth. You will follow one author's journey as she seeks to answer the questions, "how do women in the Middle East view their lives", and "do they want or need change"? and another's sharp analysis of the continued exploitation and colonization of Palestine, Haiti, and various African nations. You will witness one author's well-crafted argument that trad wives, even as they repudiate feminism, deserve the support of feminists to choose the trajectory of their own lives—even when that trajectory seems anti-feminist. And you will be introduced to the ways in which veganism and feminism are deeply intertwined as emancipatory philosophies and ways of life. Buckle up and let the Women and Gender Studies Senior Seminar Class of 2024 take you on a wild ride. You just might come out a changed person on the other side.

The volume cover art, collaboratively conceived by the authors represented within, features a photograph of a Palestinian flag crocheted by Josie Westmiller for the specific purpose of this cover. The overlaying fist design, created by Jesse Hall, contains key words from each of the pieces in the issue. With this design the authors wished to draw attention to the ongoing destruction of Palestinian lives and land, a specter that haunted our work together throughout the semester, no matter the topic of each individual essay.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the following people who have helped to make this issue of

Dissenting Voices possible. Thank you to our editorial board for giving of their time and expertise by way of reviewing multiple essay drafts -- Dr. Mariel Rivera, Dr. Kyle Green, Dr. Elizabeth Thorpe, Dr. Pilapa Carroll, Dr. Cody Miller, and Dr. Carl Davila -- thank you! A big, special thank you to Pat Maxwell, our Managing Editor for putting all the pieces together! Thank you to Dr. Barbara LeSavoy, the founding faculty member and long-time Executive Editor of *Dissenting Voices*, for your brilliance, your vision, your persistence. And thank you to all of you, our readers.

With voice and fists raised in resistance,

Bek Orr
Associate Professor, Women and Gender Studies
Executive Director, *Dissenting Voices*

Note The essays appear in alphabetical order by first name, an editorial decision borrowed from a feminist practice in the 1970s of forgoing patriarchal surnames as identifiers. For example, the Lesbian Herstory Archives extensive collection of books and monographs is organized by authors' first names.

OUR VOICES 2024

We raise our voices, our fists in resistance.

We insist that all individuals should have the right to bodily autonomy and reproductive healthcare.

Our goal is to push back against society norms around gender expectations, and we realize the deep connection between veganism and feminism.

We, as feminists, advocate for the rights, mental health, and well-being of transgender individuals.

We lay bare our frustration and fight through our wearied eyes and souls as we grapple for empathy and equality for all.

We recognize intersectionality and use that to combat injustice.

Bella Markarian, WGS, SOC, 2025
Elisabeth Marryshow, WGS, SWK, 2024
Jesse Hall WGS, SWK, 2024
Josie Westmiller, WGS, 2024
Keegan Beamish, WGS, COM, 2024
Sofia Magnante, WGS, PSH, 2025

DISSENTING VOICES COVER DESIGN

Cover Art by Josie Westmiller and Jesse Hall, conceptualized and created in collaboration with all WMS 421 class members.

WOMEN'S LIVES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE HIJAB

BELLA MARKARIAN

The oppression of women is a thread that has woven together cultures and religions from across the world. Though many women have begun to sever that tie; this bond still holds strong within the Middle East. While this could be for a multitude of reasons, a couple of questions stand at the forefront: How do women in the Middle East view their daily lives? Do they want or need change? Do our internal biases as Americans affect our perception of these women? By analyzing these questions, while including literary and media analysis, I hope to better understand the lives of women in the Middle East and how American views are imposing on their lives. Specifically, I'm interested in the role of the hijab in women's religion and activism across the Middle East, as well as the lack of coverage of their strides and victories in Western media.

Literary Analysis

These question that I have asked about the women in the Middle east are similar to questions that have been asked about women within our own society in the United States. One of the main reflective pieces of our time is the *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Freidan. When the first wave of feminism had receded after white women gained the right to vote, white women outwardly shared their newfound comfort in their roles as housewives. What Freidan found however, was an underlining yearning for more than roles within the house. Her section on "The Problem with No Name" addresses the way women in the United States felt in the 1950's without the ability to pinpoint the cause of their despair (Freidan, 1963). This despair is not solely confined to the United States, but is applicable to women all over the world, which can lead to a feminist revolution anywhere. For some women in the Middle East these fights have already begun. For example, Leila Ahmed's *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* discusses not only the current revolution against the hijab but also the hijab's history. Ahmed examines the diversity and complexity of feelings surrounding the headdress. To understand how these women's lives are structured, it is important to know where the traditions and cultures are rooted. *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present* by Nikki Keddie (2007) delves deeply into the history

of these women's pasts. Fully understanding how these women operate daily and how this is affected by their culture can help outside advocates understand what they need help with and even if they need help at all. It can also further our understanding of their relationship to the hijab and its standing in their culture.

To have well rounded research that examines this topic through different lenses, I made sure to find sources that reflect various ideologies and viewpoints using a different cultural perspective. "Women's Oppression or Choice? One American's View on Wearing the Hijab" by Lacey Sloan (2011) does a great job of weighing both sides of the argument, maintaining a liberatory feminist perspective often followed in America while still holding the ideologies and understandings of women's lives in the Middle East. This allows the American reader to better comprehend the cultural and societal aspects of their lives while using a theoretical lens that they are accustomed to.

While getting the information from these women directly would be the best way to understand their lives, the current war climate restricted my ability to get firsthand stories from individuals. Instead, I found two sources with first-hand accounts of acts of oppression towards these women: *Personal Experiences of Oppression of Women Stereotypes in the Middle East: Both East and West are Guilty* by Dina Abdelzaher and Amanda Bullough (2013), and "Palestinian Working Women in Israel: National Oppression and Social Restraints" by Suheir Abu Oksa Daoud (2012). These works fill in the gaps of their own narratives to further build the framework of their relationship to the hijab, and their social and cultural relationships.

Finally, the last point of textual analysis I would like to discuss is media coverage. While there are dozens of articles based on media coverage or lack thereof, two stuck out to me. Both "The First Ladies and the Arab Spring: A textual analysis of the media coverage of the female counterparts of authoritarian oppression in the Middle East" by Elza Ibroscheva (2013), and *Muslim Women in War and Crisis Representation and Reality* by Faegheh Shirazi (2010) do a fantastic job of making sure there is attention brought to the media coverage that is allowed of these groups while prying the doors open further so that we can better understand the conditions these women are subject to.

While the aforementioned works are not as thoroughly analyzed and presented here, I wanted to show that there is already thorough coverage on many aspects of this topic. However, my question remains. If there is a multitude of scholarship on many areas of this topics, as well as several different approaches, why do so many unanswered questions remain?

The Hijab

The hijab is a topic that holds a lot of controversy not only in America but in many communities that require specific dressings, either modest or cultural. The hijab is also commonly referred to as the veil, which is a term that is often used interchangeably within these cultures and religions. For non-hijab wearing Americans,

they often label it as an oppressive tool used by "The Man" (or the patriarchy) to revoke women's bodily autonomy. However, to others, and especially those who do decided to wear the hijab, it is a sign of devotion to their religion and their God. Making sure to included voices that are a part of the veiling community, Sahar Amer says "…for some Muslim women, veiling is a practice that sits squarely at the crossroads of religious, political, feminist, economic, and sociocultural traditions" (2014, 131). There is not only one lens to view the hijab, but rather a point at the intersections of several different frameworks that you can fully understand its meaning. However, many strongly believe that any form of religious dress, in this case the hijab, should be a personal choice that is respected by others, especially those from other cultures and faiths.

The mandated use the of veil in some Middle East countries is something that has faded in and out of use through time. However, whether mandated or not, many women continue to veil themselves. As a non-religious American, I have always been curious as to why they chose to participate in veiling. The short film *I Wasn't Always Dressed This Way* (Martins, 2013) addresses this question and gives us the ins and outs of veiling as a sign of acceptance, especially when converting to Islam. As the film moves through separate subsections, a key point of this film titled "Empowerment through the Veil" is something that carries weight through the film. A recent conversation with a colleague helped me to understand the message given in this section. He said "when you go to a bar or to the beach and you can tell you have eyes on you how do you feel? Does it make you want to cover up or get out of view? Consider that for these women, it could create a sense of security and allow them to live their lives more freely". This perspective creates a real-life connection for non-hijab wearing individuals. Often for women in America there is a sense of comfort in leaving the house in baggy sweatpants and an oversized shirt, for hijabi women, the veil is their comfort.

On the other hand, many American women would not agree and impose their views onto these women who veil. We have since taken a completely different approach to gain our sense of safety and freedom. Instead of covering up to protect from prying eyes, we wear as little as we see fit and take a stance against the sexualization of our bodies, no matter what we are wearing. Why is one way viewed as inferior to the other? Ethnocentrism, or "the evaluation of other cultures according to preconceptions originating in the standards and customs of one's own culture" (Oxford Languages, n.d), bias, racism, and nationalism, which are often implicit, could be the cause. Unfortunately, these teachings are deeply rooted in many countries around the world, which only exacerbate engrained thoughts and hatred towards others. I firmly believe that there is simply a lack of empathy and understanding of other cultures that would allow us to empower each other. After the horrific terrorist attack in New York City on September 11, 2001, and the fall of the twin towers, many have used this as a reason to make islamophobia more acceptable. However, this isn't just one-off individuals--

news and even government propaganda can often perpetuate these ethnocentric ideologies. During the early 2000s the ideas of the hijab as a tool for oppression was used as a coercion technique to persuade the American people to support the war in Iraq. "It is only since then that Muslim veiling has been associated with the oppression of the woman and the backwardness of Islam" (Amer, 2014, p. 198).

Media Coverage

While the choice of veiling is something that should be empowering, the enforcement of wearing the hijab is something that was being fought against in Iran. However, media coverage shown in the States didn't do this fight justice. As the Veil was required by the government and heavily enforced by the morality police, tension grew among the women of Iran. Just over a year ago Mahsa Amini was murdered in Tehran as she refused to comply with strict hijab standards. As the Woman, Life, Freedom movement sparked against these stringent rules, Mahsa quickly became the martyr. Even though this is still a relatively recent event, the media coverage died off almost as fast as it came about. When you google "Hijab riot Iran" or "Hijab riot Iran today" the most recent article is dated November 4, 2023, and entitled "Freed Researcher Says Anti-Hijab Protests Changed Iran, Its Prisons" (France-Presse). This article discusses the ways Fariba Adelkhah, French Iranian anthropologist and scholar, saw how the Iranian government was cracking down on the mandatory veil use, even inside the prison. She continues to explain how the protest even continued inside, by those who were arrested simply for being women. While the media had focused on the streets outside, Adelkhah argues that these women's work was more pronounced in the prisons, and inside activism eventually led to the awarding of the Nobel Peace prize to Narges Mohannad. Most importantly, she ends the article on an uplifting point of

> Today, like-minded Iranian women greet each other when they go out without their headscarves. Before it was "unthinkable," said the researcher [Adelkhah]. Now they tell each other: "'You are so beautiful!'" (as cited in France-Presse, 2023).

On April 19th, 2024, an article titled "The Islamic Republic of Iran Uses Global Distractions to Further Crack Down on Women" informed the reader that their fight may not be over yet (Team MTHS). Under the guise of tension and war in the surrounding Western world, the Islamic Republic of Iran is further oppressing their women. Even as Israel has begun to set their eyes on Iran, the article reports that the morality police still focus their fight on the women and girls. Nahid Naghshabandi, Iran researcher at Human Rights Watch, reported to the More to Her Story Team (MTHS) that "Iranian authorities have prioritized their brutal repression of women, including reported arrests under Iran's draconian compulsory dress laws" (para. 14). Not only has the morality police increased their pressure, but they've also increased their numbers: "I saw 30 police in one street trying to arrest women. Usually, it's three or four," Nelly Bagheri told MTHS. The increased presence and force is something that is all too familiar for many

revolutions across the world, however their voices have yet to be silenced.

Supporters of these women and their fight for freedom are spreading the news through social media outlets. According to MTHS, @AlinejadMasih posted on X, "If the world does not unite with us, the women of Iran, to fight against one of the most dangerous regimes, believe me, this virus will spread to infect the rest of the world" (2024). For women in the US, many may feel that virus has already spread with the overturning of Roe v. Wade. With the current political climate around the world, many minorities and more specifically non-white, non-heterosexual, or non-male human beings are feeling unprotected and targeted to revert back to "the good old days".

In similar fashion, "Letter from Afghanistan: A Slow Death" is a first-hand account of an Afghan girl from prison after she led a protest against the Taliban. She openly discusses how she felt after the Taliban's initial entry into Afghanistan: "… after the Taliban entered Afghanistan, girls fell silent and watched. Everyone waited, expecting resistance and defiance, but no one took initiative" (Habibzadeh, 2024). As she goes on to discuss the way she took charge of the situation and rounded up her fellow classmates to ensure their right to education, she explains that these actions would be met with significant pushback from the Taliban. In spite of threats and intimidation, she and her friends persevered to fight for their rights and equality. Although she knew the Taliban's threats held weight and acknowledged that the final destination of her protest would end in prison, she fought to help end the inequalities and oppression of women and girls under the Taliban. In her words that ring so loud and clearly "… the Taliban actively impeded women's progress and systematically organized in such a way to neutralize the resistance efforts of people like me" (as cited in Habibzadeh, 2024).

With such courageous women, why is there little to no media coverage on these subjects? Is it that Americans don't want to see these people as self-sufficient and able to fight for themselves so that when and if needed the United States government can prey on our savior complexes and promote the need for our military presence? Or is it the Taliban's way of withholding information to make it look like everyone is complacent in the laws they are enacting?

Conclusion

Although the three guiding questions for this work haven't been answered, the search for answers led to the finding of holes in available scholarship and media coverage. These women deserve the same chances, freedoms, and liberties of women in any other free country. In reflecting on this work, how is American freedom supposedly different from Middle Eastern oppression? While Americans don't have a mandated religion with rules, there are several areas of legislation where freedoms are being stripped away or are threatened. Lured into a false sense of security by the patriarchy, women and minorities across the world are all living in similar situations; however, we each have our own sense of nationalism and bias to allow ourselves to believe we are better off than others. Finally, while the ability of these women to fight for their own

freedoms is boundless, it has been eye opening to more issues and questions not only of the Middle East, but how women of any minority group are being treated.

Personal Statement

As a non-religious white, middle class, cis-woman, I understand that my view can come from a place of privilege. I want to make it clear that I also come from an Armenian background, and I have a genuine curiosity for the countries, cultures and religions surrounding Armenia. While my interpretations of the first-hand accounts and scholarship may not be perfect, it does not come from a place of malice. In my attempt to educate others, I am also educating myself, and I hope that I have done these women justice.

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WHEN COLONIZATION IS NOT HISTORY: THE CONTINUED EXPLOITATION OF PALESTINE, HAITI, AND AFRICAN NATIONS

ELISABETH MARRYSHOW

A developing country is best described by "having smaller economies, generally speaking developing countries have more corrupt and less functional governments, lower literacy rates and life expectancies, and weaker human rights protections than developed countries" (Kulik, 2024). My *Dissenting Voices* piece is focused on the reason that most developing countries are underdeveloped and its consequences, with a focus on Palestine and Africa. The colonialism in Palestine and across the continent of Africa has had a profound and lasting impact on the socio-economic, political and cultural contexts of these regions, which contributes significantly to the conflicts, economic disparity and social injustice that are ongoing. By examining the systemic impacts of colonial oppression in places such as Palestine and Africa, this paper aims to illuminate the connection of these countries' colonial histories and address the root causes and effects of oppression. I chose this topic because seeing how people in powerful positions of government are allowing the innocent people in Palestine to be killed for their own economic gain is unbelievable, and I'd like to spread as much awareness about Palestinians as possible. This topic resonates with me because I am Haitian and seeing the people of Haiti go through similar trials right now makes this even more important to me. This does not only affect Palestinians. I will also bring in a discussion of colonialism in Africa because the same countries that are allowing the genocide in Palestine to happen are also profiting from the exploitation of the people and natural resources of Africa (such as America, the United Kingdom, Israel, etc.).

The existence of poverty in developing countries is a complex issue with multiple contributing factors. While internal factors such as corruption, weak governance, and lack of infrastructure do play significant roles, the influence of major country superpowers cannot be overlooked. One of

the main ways these countries have contributed to poverty in developing countries is through historical exploitation and colonization. During the era of European colonialism, many of the current developing countries were subjected to exploitation of their natural resources, forced labor, and economic policies that favored their colonizers. This exploitation has left lasting scars on the economies and societies of these countries, contributing to their current state of underdevelopment (Heldring & Robinson, 2013).

Due to the complexity of the topic at hand, a short history lesson is necessary. Palestine is a place that has strong ties to the major religions of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. These three religions trace their origins to what is modernly called Palestine. From 1517 to 1917, Palestine was a part of the Ottoman Empire. After the end of World War 1, the British took over control of Palestine. In 1947 the United Nations (UN) proposed an idea that would separate Palestine into one state for Arab people and another one for Jewish people. The city of Jerusalem has religious importance to the Palestinians and the Jews, so it was decided that it would be a capital for both and have special status.

> [On] May 14, 1948, as soon as the British Mandate expired, Zionist forces declared the establishment of the State of Israel, triggering the first Arab-Israeli war. Zionist military forces expelled at least 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and lands and captured 78 percent of historic Palestine. The remaining 22 percent was divided into what are now the occupied West Bank and the besieged Gaza Strip (Haddad, 2022).

This is only a small percentage of the vast history of Palestine, and only the beginning of the Israeli government's reign of terror on the people of Palestine.

Israel's occupation has been accompanied by numerous human rights violations, including restrictions on freedom of movement, arbitrary detention of Palestinians, demolitions of Palestinian homes, and violence against civilians. The people of Palestine living in the occupied territories are subjected to military checkpoints, barriers, and a permit system, severely impacting their daily lives and access to basic services (Amnesty International, 2024). Despite many attempts to gain peace between Israel and Palestine by outside countries and Palestinians, the conflict remains unresolved. Efforts such as the Oslo Accords and subsequent negotiations have failed to produce a lasting solution, with key issues such as borders, settlements, Jerusalem, refugees, and security remaining contentious (Al Jazeera, 2024).

> The first Oslo Accord…was signed on September 13, 1993. The agreement between the Israeli and Palestinian leadership saw each side recognize the other for the first time. Both sides also pledged to end their decades-long conflict…Oslo II, was signed in September 1995… [it was] supposed to bring about Palestinian self-determination, in the form of a Palestinian state alongside Israel…The Oslo Accords witnessed a slow decline, with Israel continuing its occupation of Palestinian land and refusing to withdraw militarily from the majority of the West Bank while continuing to

> conduct raids into land considered under the full administration of the PA. Following [the death of Israel's Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin], a number of Israeli leaders who opposed the accords came to power, among them current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Al Jazeera, 2024).

The relationship between Israel and Palestine is characterized by a long history of conflict, displacement, and mutual distrust.

On October 7th, 2023, the Palestinian resistance group Hamas launched an attack on Israel. They killed around 1,000 Israelis and kidnapped around 250 others. I remember the exact moment I heard about the attack; I knew immediately that Israel would respond with a deadly vengeance—and they did. On that day, I had no idea that it would be as devastating and excessive as it is currently. As a result of what happened on October 7th, the Palestinian people have been targeted more violently than they were before. People refer to this conflict as the "Israel-Gaza war", however all of Palestine is being targeted, not just Gaza. Palestine does not have its own army, so how can people really refer to it as a war is an important question to raise. There has not been enough aid sent by Israel to these innocent people since the start of this "war". People are contracting diseases because of the lack of resources for their menstrual cycles, there have been a great number of deaths due to illness, lack of water, and malnutrition.

> [A] lack of fuel for water desalination has left 95% of Gaza's population without access to safe water, increasing the risk of diseases like cholera … An Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) food security analysis shows that 100% of Gazans are at imminent risk of famine, further driving medical needs (International Rescue Committee (IRC), 2023).

As of February 19th, 2024, the death toll has risen to 29,000 people killed (Shurafa & Magdy, 2024). During the first month of the "Israel-Hamas War", I thought that other countries would come together and put an end to the devastation, but it still has not happened. However, there has been an increasing number of countries calling for a ceasefire, and there have been millions of people protesting for this cause throughout the world. During a UN vote on December 12th, 2023, 153 countries voted for a ceasefire, with 23 abstaining and 10 opposing. Unfortunately, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China and the Russian Federation all have veto power within the UN, and during that vote on December 12th, the United States vetoed the call for a ceasefire (Iqbal, 2023).

Exploring how powerful countries such as the United States, France, Israel, England, etc. have contributed to the perpetuation of poverty and war in developing countries is very important. Social media has helped raise awareness to make sure that people will see the devastation and the pain of the innocent people being targeted. Some people would say that most media outlets have been biased during the Israel-Palestine conflict, and I would agree. When it comes to major news outlets, you will see they very obviously do not support the people of Palestine, and rarely express empathy towards Palestinians.

> Major U.S. newspapers disproportionately emphasized Israeli deaths in the conflict; used emotive language to describe the killings of Israelis, but not Palestinians; and offered lopsided coverage of antisemitic acts in the U.S., while largely ignoring anti-Muslim racism in the wake of October 7 (Johnson & Ali, 2024).

Social media has allowed for Palestinian people to show firsthand evidence of their constant pain and fear without the bias of U.S. news outlets (Yusef, 2023). According to a United Nations expert, they consider Palestine to be the target of a genocide (Farge, 2024). While others (such as Israel) may not agree with classifying the conflict as a genocide, I do. They are unfortunately not the only state that is the target of a possible genocide. In Sudan, Congo, Haiti and many other countries, people are being forced into modern slavery, being starved, and murdered.

Another way these powerful countries maintain their economic dominance is through their unequal trade relationships with low-income countries. The global economic system, shaped by institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organization (WTO), often favor the interests of wealthy countries at the expense of the poorer nations (Lederer, 2023). Trade agreements and tariffs are structured in a way that negatively affects low-income countries, by making it difficult for them to compete in the global market and continuing their dependence on developed nations (Andetunji, 2023).

> The IMF's rules unfairly favor wealthy nations…During the pandemic, the wealthy Group of Seven nations, with a population of 772 million, received the equivalent of $280 billion from the IMF while the least developed countries, with a population of 1.1 billion, were allocated just over $8 billion (Lederer, 2023).

Many developing countries are burdened by high levels of debt owed to wealthy countries and international financial institutions. An example of a country burdened with this is Haiti. They gained their independence from France on January 1st, 1804.

> Haitians were forced to pay the descendants of their former slave masters, including the Empress of Brazil; the son-in-law of the Russian Emperor Nicholas I; Germany's last imperial chancellor; and Gaston de Galliffet, the French general…for crushing an insurrection in Paris in 1871. The burdens continued well into the 20th century. The wealth Ms. Present's [a Haitian citizen] ancestors coaxed from the ground brought wild profits for a French bank that helped finance the Eiffel Tower, Crédit Industriel et Commercial, and its investors. They controlled Haiti's treasury from Paris for decades, and the bank eventually became part of one of Europe's largest financial conglomerates. Haiti's riches lured Wall Street, too, delivering big margins for the institution that ultimately became Citigroup. It elbowed out the French and helped spur the American invasion of Haiti —one of the longest military occupations in United States history (Porter et al., 2022).

Haiti is currently one of the poorest countries in the world because its wealth

has been unfairly seized. In the past, loans provided by these institutions often came with strict conditions attached, such as implementing restraining measures and privatizing some key industries. These structural adjustment programs have had devastating effects on the economies of developing countries, leading to less social spending, increased poverty, and widening income inequality. Leading countries often outsource their labor-intensive industries to developing countries where the labor is cheap, and the regulations are a lot more lenient. This practice, which is known as globalization, has led to the increase of sweatshops and the exploitation of workers in countries that have weak labor protections. While multinational corporations profit from cheap labor, workers in developing countries are often paid low wages, have to deal with unsafe working conditions, and they are denied basic labor rights.

The pursuit of economic growth by these powerful countries has also contributed to environmental degradation in developing countries. Deforestation, pollution, and loss of biodiversity have negative consequences for the health and livelihoods of people in developing countries, intensifying poverty and inequality.

> Israel has clear-cut and uprooted tens of thousands of trees in order to build settlements on Palestinian agricultural and grazing lands, leading to increased soil erosion. In 2021, the Israeli army uprooted, destroyed, and burned approximately 19,000 trees. Some settlements have also been built on nature reserves in the West Bank. Israeli settlers produce twice as much solid waste per capita than Palestinians, and Israel dumps approximately 90% of the wastewater generated by illegal settlements into the West Bank, discharging 52 million cubic yards of untreated sewage each year in addition to other hazardous materials such as infectious medical waste, metals, batteries and electronic industry byproducts. Many settlements are strategically located on hilltops above Palestinian towns and villages so polluted settlement wastewater and other contaminants run directly into the Palestinian communities below (Institute for Middle East Understanding (IMEU), 2022).

Israel is not the first and only colonizer to commit green crimes either as a tactic against the current inhabitants, or to commit these crimes because they just do not care about the land they are colonizing. In Johnson Atoll and the Marshall Islands, there are still environmental health impacts that linger because of the U.S. Government testing weapons (which continued until 2007). A good number of areas in these territories have been left uninhabitable and condemned due to the highly toxic chemicals that are still present. In San Juan and St. Croix, major corporations such as CVS, Virgin Rum Distillers and Bacardi have all discharged dangerous chemicals such as Agent Orange and Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) on the islands (Rudge, 2022). Addressing global poverty requires addressing the root causes of inequality and injustice perpetuated by these major powers. Efforts to promote sustainable development, equitable trade, and respect

for human rights are essential in creating a more just and prosperous world for all.

A forgotten consequence of war, destitution and/or colonialism is period poverty. When it comes to talking about conflicts between countries, the general public often does not think about how people who are menstruating deal with their cycles. This subject either does not cross their mind or they assume that the people with periods somehow have some way to handle it. “Period poverty is defined as inadequate access to menstrual hygiene tools and education, including but not limited to sanitary products, washing facilities and waste management” (Davies et al., 2021). Period poverty is a broad issue rooted in socio-economic disparities, cultural beliefs, and inadequate policy responses. In Palestine and Africa, factors such as poverty, poor sanitation infrastructure, and limited access to education exacerbate the challenges faced by menstruating individuals. Cultural taboos and stigma surrounding menstruation further compound the issue, leading to shame, secrecy, and discrimination. In Palestine, the ongoing political conflict and economic instability exacerbate the challenges of period poverty. Many Palestinian adults and children struggle to access menstrual hygiene products due to financial constraints and restricted mobility imposed by checkpoints and barriers from Israel. After the most recent assault on Palestine began, the lack of period resources increased. Women have begun to take period delaying pills and use scraps of whatever they can find to replace a pad (Alsaafa & Amer, 2023). They have been forced to use pieces of their shelter tents, or pieces of clothing (Anera, 2024). They also do not have running water that they can use to shower consistently or clean up after themselves (Alsaafa & Amer, 2024). Additionally, cultural, and religious norms often dictate silence and shame around menstruation, hindering open discussions and access to education (Hassan et al., 2023).

In Africa, the challenges of period poverty are also deeply entrenched in their own version of socio-economic inequalities and cultural practices:

> Menstruation is taboo in East Africa, often even between women, meaning communication barriers are blocking progress toward menstrual hygiene education, and, therefore, healthy MHM [menstrual hygiene management]. In this region, menstrual blood is considered dirty and is associated with disease. For example, girls in Kenya are told to hide and avoid discussing their menstrual bleeding. This taboo is perpetuated because menarche is a cultural signal that a girl is sexually mature and eligible for marriage. Fear of rape or young marriage are some of the reasons why girls keep their menarche a secret from their parents and peers (Kearon, 2021).

Limited access to clean water, sanitation facilities, and healthcare services make menstrual hygiene a challenge for millions of African people. Taboos in society and traditional beliefs perpetuate stigma and discrimination, impeding efforts to address period poverty effectively. “The World Bank estimates at least 500 million women and girls globally lack access to the facilities they need to manage their periods.

Meanwhile, 1.25 billion women and girls have no access to a safe, private toilet; 526 million don't have a toilet at all" (Pycroft, 2022). Despite these challenges, there are efforts underway to address period poverty in Palestine and Africa. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based initiatives, and international partnerships are working to provide menstrual hygiene products, education, and infrastructure to marginalized communities. In Palestine, organizations like Anera are raising awareness and distributing wet wipes, hygiene kits, clean underwear and more to the people who need it (Anera, 2024). Comparably, in Africa, initiatives such as Huru International are promoting menstrual health education in schools and providing sustainable menstrual hygiene solutions to communities (Huru International, 2024). Period poverty is a complex and serious issue that requires united efforts at the global, national, and community levels to address effectively. With increased awareness, advocacy, and investment in menstrual health and hygiene, progress can be made towards ensuring menstrual equity for all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic status or geographical location. By prioritizing the needs of menstruating individuals and implementing holistic interventions, we can work towards a future where menstruation is no longer a barrier to health, dignity, and opportunity.

Period poverty, green crimes, raging economic disparities, and human rights violations are just a few reasons why some developing countries are so underdeveloped. Colonialism has led to some countries being stripped of most of their valuable resources, unstable governments, and

> today, many post-colonial… governments have adopted unjust colonial practices and policies as a means to preserve their dominant status. Rights with regards to traditional lands, resources, and cultural language are denied to many populations, as groups that were marginalized under colonial occupation continue to be marginalized under postcolonial governments…Human-rights violations, including horrific events of mass murder and genocide, can be found in postcolonial [states] (Marker, 2003).

Most African nations, Haiti, and Palestine are all countries/states that need to be seen by us. They have all been exploited by (mostly) western nations (such as France, England, Israel, and America). Every day I see social media posts from people who live in developing countries that are being used for their resources, or places where the citizens are being treated like intruders on their own land. My reason for writing this paper was to give people a bit of information on what is occurring in the world that they may or may not know about. My goal is that everyone who reads this will feel a push to start advocating for those less fortunate and raise awareness around important topics such as this.

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MASCULINITY REIMAGINED THROUGH A VEGAN LENS: A MANIFESTO

JESSE HALL

This essay provides an opportunity to dismantle masculinity and power structures by applying a vegan lens. Part manifesto and part critical analysis of media representations of what it means to be a man, I am exploring this topic using historical, nutritional, and health data. Men are navigating a complex web of cultural norms, stereotypes, and peer perceptions that push a mainstream dietary preference that reinforces traditional notions of strength, virility, and dominance, and that subjugate the idea of veganism. This topic is important because it sheds light on the imbalance of power that exist against amongst various groups of people, highlighting the marginalization of women and animals. I hope readers will see that performative acts of masculinity, often in the form of the consumption of animal products, only further divide the people and animals of the world. There is a better way to navigate a relationship with one another and our Mother Earth. The deep overlap between feminism and veganism must challenge traditional notions of masculinity.

Masculinity and I

A person's relationship to a topic matters, and my road to veganism and authentic gender expression has not been a straight path. Thirty plus years of my life have been spent replicating the persona of a boy/man. I've defended this ideal of belonging to a gender which has not always been in alignment with my personal views of the world. Advocating for and protecting those closest to me was imperative, especially woman-identifying friends and family. Internal conversations questioning life's purpose, what has been deemed true, and the way things really work in society have been common. Reluctantly, I've flowed with the grain of society on my appearance and how I think a man is supposed to act. It's been a personal mission to elevate the ideal of what a man should be, never truly questioning if I fit the role. The more I internalized emotions and exhibited outward expressions of anger, it felt foreign and created rifts in relationships of great importance to me. White heterosexual male was a label given to me. There have been times I needed to defend my sexuality when it has been called into question. The soft tone of my voice has resulted in being misgendered. In those moments, it seemed imperative to correct strangers. Growing

up, even the feminine friendships that have shaped the person I am today would bring questions and concerns from fellow guy friends. The "bottling in" method never worked, and with this revelation the more I would speak and continue to analyze these ideas and thoughts that race in my mind, a different world began to take shape. One where a binary box did not accurately encapsulate how I see myself. Now identifying as non-binary and using they/them pronouns, this piece is in part a love letter to my former self, and to those who may be navigating their identity while also vegan.

Veganism and I

I've self-identified as a whole-food, plant-based eater for approximately eight years. This means I only consume foods that come from plants, and I invest in products that maintain a vegan label. Using my resources on items that make a commitment to not using animals or testing on them has been added to my moral code. Originally, my desire to combat hereditary heart health issues led me to adopt a whole food plant-based diet. I was curious if there was a relationship between the foods we eat and our overall health and wanted to know if I could optimize my own wellbeing. When sharing this piece of my identity with others, the responses have been wide-ranging. Some respond with mockery and a comical, "Do you just eat lettuce and grass clippings?", or "Where do you get your protein?". This is typically followed by "I could never! I love *insert animal product here* too much!". There are times when people have immediately become defensive.

I have discovered that food choices tie deeply with other aspects of how we see ourselves. This is how we share in community with one another, and when someone chooses a path that is not the mainstream, this can lead to internal questions that some people don't want to engage in. Here I give a personal account of this internal struggle as someone who once identified as a cisgender, animal consuming man, and how veganism has played a role in reshaping my place in the world and my relationship to myself. Of course, not all vegans and/or men have the same experience.

Socially Constructed Boxes

Most of the world falls into and abides by the binary system of men and women. This is largely referred to as a gender identity or expression which may or may not be in alignment with someone's assigned sex at birth. It wasn't until I started my major in Women and Gender Studies that I could understand that gender and sex are not the same thing. There was more nuance and space for more identities than the two I had been taught growing up. If much of the world falls into one of these two boxes, it's important to understand some possible notions or characteristics of these identities. Men are expected to fall into the assertive and dominant roles, while women are meant to be more emotionally expressive and attentive to others. These differences influence how each gender moves through the world. Carol Adams, a prominent vegan and ecofeminist, draws on these cultural expectations for men to be dominant, linking men's domination of women and animals and calling on the need for vegan feminism to counter this

reality. This highlights the belief that women and animals are comparable. Since patriarchy is the largest societal system where men wield the most social and physical power, this can showcase some possible interactions of both men and women. Men tend to be the head of households and make many decisions regarding the family's wellbeing.

Adams looks to a Greek myth of Zeus who yearned for and desired Metis the goddess of knowledge so he rapes and swallows her whole (Adams, 2019). There are layers to this story that reveal a portion of our humanity; there is power and control. Men have constructed a world where they have placed themselves on top of it. In this example there is the act of consuming Metis which transforms her into a thing to be used. Zeus exerted his dominion and eats her to always have Metis for guidance within. This is only a tale, but it demonstrates that Zeus and Metis are not equals and represents the reality that under patriarchy women are in service to men. Ahmed breaks down the origin of the word woman,

> …the word woman teaches us how the categories that secure personhood are bound up with a history of ownership: woman is derived from a compound *wif* (wife) and *man* (human being); woman as wife-man also suggesting woman as female servant" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 224).

Differences between men and women are interweaved through history, stories, and modern representations in society. Words and stories can be tools to heal or wound one another. Similarly, Tong and Botts (2019) state "animals, like women, are consumed as objects of pleasure in a cycle of objectification (animals equal food), then fragmentation where (animal carcasses are dismembered so as to be turned into food), and finally consumption (on our dinner plates)" (p. 210). This is a normative view of animals and what they provide for humans. By classifying animals in the category "other than humans," there is a division in likeness allowing the perpetuation of unequal treatment. When something happens to one's kin, there is a greater potential to stand in solidarity for fair treatment. This can also mean that the further detached a person is from a being's hardship, the easier it is to see that struggle as separate from our own. This dehumanization has crossed species boundaries in our modern culture; picking and dissecting portions men find desirable on women such as the way they look and the roles that they take on in the household. Women are depicted as the homemakers, even to this day. An advertisement for medication in the treatment of headaches depicted an exhausted mother. The children in the commercial were asking repeated questions about homework and food preparation. The dad offers her headache medication as a way of helping her, but not interjecting and tending to the kids (Atma & Awad, 2023). This commercial aired in 2022. This is only one small example of the expectations that are created for women and the roles they provide in domestic duties within the home. When we can create these structures that dehumanize women or show animals to be lesser than, it is easier to use these beings as resources.

The intersection of man and vegan makes up a very small percentage of the American

population. These are outlier voices that seldom get mainstream attention. A recent 2023 study indicated 6% of American women eat a vegetarian diet in comparison to only 2% of men, and the overall percentage who eat vegan is lower at just 1% of all Americans (Jones, 2023). There are some positive notions of elite male vegan athletes, but this is not the norm. The data supports that 1 in 100 elite athletes identifying as man may choose a vegan diet (Jones, 2023) and when they do, they're often criticized. Any news of this diet choice is often coupled with statements that these athletes are plant-based and not vegan, establishing a difference in the two. Plant-based diets tend to be more focused on personal health and include foods such as "fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, oil, whole grains, legumes, and beans" (McManus, 2024). Veganism typically is associated with the ethical portion of abstaining from consuming animals (meat). By using specific verbiage, the ethical conversation is typically avoided.

Standard American Diet & Veganism

The vegan label can be seen in opposition with the Standard American Diet (SAD). The American belief and ideology are that "real men" eat meat. Meat and animal products are associated with wealth, wellbeing, and status in the United States. The Standard American Diet is high in fat, cholesterol, ultra-processed foods, and added sugar, with research indicating a 28% increased risk of a major cardiovascular event, 22% increase of heart disease, and a 37% heightened risk of heart failure (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2023).

One doesn't have to look far in advertisements or television to see depictions of a dad around his barbecue grilling some form of meat. These roles are reinforced and depict a reality for men within it. How animals are transformed to that grilled item for human consumption is something we should all be aware of. Animals don't have a choice in this process.

"Imprisonment is the act of putting somebody in a prison or a place from which they cannot escape; the state of being there" (Oxford University Press). The current factory farming systems use these means to hold substantial amounts of animals in a confined space, with limited movement, and without the ability to leave. Yet, we still use the word "farm" to create the belief this is something ordinary and that we should not be concerned. "A farm is a human construction designed to meet human needs" (Leder, 2012). We have created nursery rhymes and picture books to teach children about what a "farm" looks like. Happy animals that make noises and then create food. As if they are choosing this life and are enjoying their inevitable fate. We paint the picture of a farmer in a straw hat who is happy to feed the plump animals and collect the naturally produced eggs. What we do not teach openly is that this is nothing more than propaganda. These living beings who end up slaughtered and on plates for the satisfaction of acquired tastes have no autonomy in their outcome. One life shouldn't be more valuable than another because of a metric of intellect, language, and problem solving. Why do these other animals never see the light of day, receive the joy of family connection, or the

experience of nursing their young? Imagine if we could understand all the diverse voices and hear all the fears, happiness, and the breadth of other emotions we know to exist in these sentient beings. We are instead plagued by social influences, such as advertisements and social media, that unknowingly guide us towards what we should and should not consume.

Influences of Social Structures

We, the people (and animals), navigate life dictated by social powers and structures. There are those who wield influence and those with limited choice and authority in these spaces. Now speaking specifically about animals—humans are the domineers of these lives that are reproduced and turned into products. These animals have no choice. Transparency and a reality controlled by another for the direct benefit of humans should be the ethical focus. As humans we can choose how we identify and represent ourselves in this world. Relinquishing my identity as a man is an active statement and shift in power. Without that title there's an agreement of not reaping certain privileges that have been bestowed to this gender identity. There was a memorable Fourth of July with friends where typical barbecue meat filled noses and the neighborhood air. A friend asked why I wasn't partaking in the varied grilled animal parts. Reluctantly, in a low tone, I mentioned how I no longer ate meat (at this time dabbling in vegetarianism). This immediately brought baffled questioning and attention to whether I was a true American or even a man. I couldn't understand how someone I viewed as a friend could jump to such a conclusion because of my opting out of a particular food item being offered.

Masculinity and Food Choices

The ideals surrounding masculinity significantly shape an individual's food choices. That experience with friends on the Fourth of July altered how I talked and expressed my beliefs on food in social gatherings. It is socially acceptable for a woman to eat a salad, often it is even encouraged; a hunk of meat is the preferred choice for a man. A study looking at the consumption of meat across the lifespan of men and women show an increased rate through the various stages where masculinity was in intensifying stages of development (Ritzel & Mann, 2021). This research also confirmed that men eat more meat than women. The bigger the better. Meat seems an expression and extension to manhood. Marketing tactics are shaping views and thoughts into the things we believe or the ideas that are natural.

If masculinity and femininity must be worked at and reinforced, then these truths can be questioned as more of a performance than an innate character trait. What if the foundation of the Standard American Diet is threatening men's existence and what makes them who they are or could be? At the primal state, staving off threats from predators and passing on our genetics is the root of species continuation. I would say these ideals don't hold the same weight and worth that they once did. There is also a fundamental misunderstanding of how the Paleolithic humans survived. We have a notion of hunting and gathering painted as a strong man with a carved spear bringing home a

large game to feed his family. However, research has displayed that this is not correct. “The diets of Paleolithic humans were often predominantly plant-based-containing starchy vegetables and even cooked whole grains” (Hull et al., 2023). It is time to rewire these pre-evolution mechanisms and expand what it means to be in relation to the living world around us.

We can contemplate life, existence, and purpose, so why do we still lack the thought work around our food systems and who should eat what? The means of feeding large amounts of calories to one animal to then be consumed by another is inefficient. If these food structures of the meat and dairy industry need governmental subsidies to maintain viability in market competition, this seems very much counterculture of the capitalist structures that the strong survive and those inefficient businesses will fail. This very notion should be headliner news and create a wave of change of what we put on our plates and how we treat these vessels we have been given. The gender spectrum is complex; this research and manifesto is looking to use a vegan ecofeminist lens to analyze masculinity and how it is represented. With a feminist critique, society can rethink and redefine masculinity. Veganism can be a catalyst to further blur these hard lines and uplift not just people but those other living beings we have labeled as things and food.

Masculinity as Defined by Society

Masculinity has many versions, iterations, and presentations. Much of my life has been against the grain of what most would consider normatively boy or man. Whether there truly is an actual norm is something to unravel and question as well. I felt different growing up—I was trying to elevate what the standard of treating one another should be based on the male figures around me.

Shepard Bliss equated toxic masculinity to a sickness, and with the notion it can also be cured (Harrington, 2021). It is important to note that toxic masculinity does not mean that all masculinity is inherently negative. Rather, it showcases specific aspects of masculinity that can be less than ideal. These notions require men to hide emotions, engage in specific activities, and interact in a way that is deemed “manly” by society. These roles can be harmful to both men and society at large. My deepest conversations growing up were with women friends and they were deep, rich, and explored the terrains of the uncomfortable. I knew even at a young age that those who presented as men were not the source for this wisdom or a place of safety. Feelings are tools of communication and ways for one to articulate their inner works through moments of stress or times of change. Emotions should just be that and not owned or specialized by any one group of people.

Toxic masculinity is an extreme that promotes and encourages dominance, aggression, emotional repression, and denounces traits traditionally labeled as feminine (Harrington, 2021). Not every man will exhibit this or is predestined to navigate the world in such a manner. These traits of masculine and feminine need to be looked at with the possibility of a mixture instead of a this or that. There was a point in our evolution that being able to process things

quickly as safe, dangerous, right, or wrong served a purpose in preservation to life. According to psychologist David Lisak, this framework could pressure men to narrow ideas of being tough, unemotional, and sexually aggressive and anything that pulls them from this identity as threatening. (as cited in Handel & Handel, 2017). Even the idea of asking for help can be viewed as an inability to perform. We should be in community with one another. Opposition only serves a purpose when resources are limited. Is the world truly finite, or is our thought process stuck in a way that no longer serves the advancement of all?

Power and Masculinity

A major issue lies in the balance of power and the small percentage of people who maintain most of the wealth. It is beneficial for some to keep the hierarchy as it is. If individuals remain in their traditional roles, the status quo remains. People with limited economic means tend to maintain whatever social class they were born into. A similar lens can be applied to gender norms. The importance of this and looking at this divide among gender is everyone's ability to maintain or achieve their basic needs. When we squabble about fundamental rights for the oppressed not many changes occur. The ones on the top, predominately white men, continue to reap the rewards and herd others along much like farm animals for slaughter. Looking at developed countries around the world, government and controlling forces show the persistence of institutions being run by men as the way business is done. Hooks states, "Even though representations of domestic violence abound in mass media and discussions take place on every front, rarely does the public link ending male violence to ending male domination, to eradicating patriarchy" (hooks, 2000, p. 113). Power is largely beholden to one gender of the human species. This translates to decision making predominantly by men for the whole of society and impacts how people interact and exist with one another. Hooks also goes on to stress that these shifts in eradicating oppressions cannot be obtained solely on the backs of women all becoming feminists, but in collaboration with men to end sexism (hooks, 2000).

Patriarchy is the dominating social structure, though many early and contemporary feminists look to elevate the status of women to an equal standing of men. Men are the standard. Looking at our general understanding of the world, the voices of humankind are not fully represented if half the people in the world do not have an equal voice that is heard and valued. Women and animals are not resources or things to extract what the world wants from them. Toxic masculinity can perpetuate gender-based violence, discrimination, and reinforce harmful power dynamics (Harrington, 2021). The question is expressed but rarely asked, what is a man? I have been a father, protector, provider; someone who exhibits control and order. I've also been one to cry, to ask for help, to lean on those I love when the world is heavy and busy with all the noise. The definition of a man is likely to encompass different things for each person. As I've shed my own gender and the labels placed on me much like little pieces of armor, my being has become calmer, and an internal balance restored.

Those things never protected me but hindered this all-encompassing possibility of these energies shaping the human I am becoming. These other examples are mimicked and replicated by what we see in the world around us and can be very rigid. If we instead imagine a possibility that has limitless edges and boundaries, would the labels of masculine and feminine even be needed?

Blended Masculinity

If traditional forms of masculinity can be confining and limiting to the possibilities of how someone interacts in society and with one another, blended masculinity looks to push the edges of these boundaries. Greenebaum and Dexter see hybrid masculinity as a form of masculinity expanding and altering traditional notions while not completely rewriting what it is (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2017). This just scratches the surface of what can be while still holding on to the position and privilege as a man. It is flirting with feminine energy, yet still holding close to the other shield of identity. When I first came across this idea of blended masculinity it was the first thing that made me consider my own stance and where I fit it in all. The difference lies in my relinquishing these two and embracing what works for me, not confining myself to one narrative. I imagine my identity will continue to evolve as I begin to understand more fully what it can be.

Not Masculine. Not Feminine. Both?

"Men use food as a means of subscribing to and reinforcing the norms, expectations, and behaviors of their gender" (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2017, p. 637). The advertisements and images in the world show a connection between meat and manhood. It is displayed as being tied to wealth and power. There was a Burger King related promotion that was driving the message that the consumption of eating burgers was a fight against the softening of manhood (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2017). This advertisement is equating softness as something lesser than. Masculine and feminine energies seem to be at war with one another and to possess both qualities is not an idea embraced by the majority. This speaks to feminine and masculine energies well. It is part of a system which makes a whole. While they could exist separately, the power comes from wielding both these forces in a way that is a respectful acknowledgement of each other. One is not better than the other; they are simply different. "Hybrid masculinity is one type of alternative that focuses on the ways that men actively challenge and reinforce hegemonic ideas of manhood" (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2017, p. 639). When considering diet choice, choosing a vegan diet as a man denounces the idea and need to use animal beings for food, strength, and virality. This can act as an example leaning into blended masculinity; rejecting the notion that it needs to look a specific way. Although this may not be the driving force for one to choose a vegan lifestyle, the message is sent that knowingly or not, the individual's outward gender expression is tied to the food that one consumes.

One of the major health benefits I experienced after switching to a vegan diet was the realization of improved energy levels and reduced grogginess associated with the SAD diet. I was able to replace

foods in my diet in a manner first for health. Then after learning how American food production systems operated, I was playing a small part in an ethical rebellion. Humans are capable of murder, genocide, rape, abuse, and torture. These are things the world can do without. Therefore, veganism can be a form of political voice advocating for a more ethical, compassionate, and sustainable approach to food choices. By choosing a plant-based diet, men challenge the typical power standard in society. This act can make a connection to foster a sense of empathy and solidarity with marginalized groups such as women and animals. This aligns with the broader feminist principles that reject objectification and mistreatment of living beings. Having a more interconnected relationship with the environment and nature encourages a more progressive idea of what it means to be masculine. Blended masculinity is an idea that has allowed me to sit in contemplation with my own identity and labels that have followed me much of my life. A combination of masculinity and femininity seemed to make more sense internally, yet this masculine shell presents itself in ways that others continue to box me in a category that I've outgrown. How I see myself is one of the most important aspects to the ripple connections I leave in the spaces around me. Being masculine, feminine, and neither of these allows me to live outside a definitive box in an existence that is an acknowledgement of all my fellow humans. I do not desire to be part of those who wish to control, and I also do not want to be controlled.

Veganism is Feminism

"The United Nations report characterized the livestock industry as one of the top sources of a broad range of environmental problems, including the loss of biodiversity, land degradation, water shortage, and pollution" (Rothgerber, 2013, p. 363). It is no secret that many individuals who identify as vegan do so for the animals. There are other profound benefits to one's own health and the environment, too. A study performed by Rothgerber found that this reason was expressed mostly by women. "In line with predictions, men expressed more favorable attitudes toward eating meat, denied animal suffering, believed that animals were lower in the hierarchy than humans" (Rothgerber, 2013, p. 366). These out of touch ideals can be linked to not being part of the oppressed and suffering. Sitting in positions of power can afford this luxury. Imagine if power structures flipped over night what kind of cries and calls would bellow from men demanding changes, fairer treatment, and equality for all. Knowing the cultural norms within American society, men who engage in veganism often contribute to the broader animal rights movement by challenging industries built on the exploitation of animals. Each time we spend our resources it is a vote in capitalism of the industries we want to see grow and prosper. Businesses take notice when consumers demand more transparency of goods produced. "There would be no eating of domesticated animals if female animals weren't kept pregnant to produce the animals being consumed. There would be no milk, if cows weren't kept lactating; no eggs if chickens weren't kept ovulating" (Adams, 2006, p.122). Though Adams has some strong viewpoints on how factory farming

perpetuates its business, the truth is without human intervention this system would not be sustainable or viable to meet the demands of human patrons. The idea that intellectual beings are intervening in the reproductive autonomy of animals in an unnatural way to manipulate the offspring and bottom-line product should be posing some real ethical questions. This advocacy aligns with principles of justice for the vulnerable. "The consumption of meat entails the power and domination of the nonhuman animal" (Calvert, 2014, p. 18). Another aspect of rethinking the traditional perception of masculinity is pushing back against general dominance. When violence and control are interwoven into the foods we eat several times a day, there must be a cosmic disruption to our inner beings. Much like desensitization of the violence we see in the world around us, it becomes background noise and our norms shift. Why are we just accepting these things as unchangeable and relinquishing the power we all possess to do more?

Researchers have tied the treatment of animals to that of women. This is often the strongest tie between feminism and veganism. Hamilton refers to Carol Adam's work in their research citing the "theories of objectification and male violence against women to human violence against animals, claiming that these processes connect to and reinforce one another" (Adams, 2000, as cited in Hamilton, 2016, p. 114). Look at the language used by men towards woman which often objectifies, sexualizes, or demeans women. This reinforces these power dynamics and hierarchies. Bailey believes that it is "morally wrong for feminists to eat meat" (2007, p. 50). This draws another connection between the treatment of females and that of animals. In addition to the obvious violence that animals undergo because of meat consumption, there is much to be said about the inherent dominance, and exploitation of bodies that occurs when one is farming animal products for food or byproducts. The words we use matter and when we choose to use language in a way that is devoid of life it becomes easier to justify the actions and decisions of those who support these industries. This can be tied to the exploitation of women. "It is the commitment to non-violence as the basis for an ethics of eating- and of living- and not all ill-conceived comparison between violence against women and violence against animals, that makes veganism a feminist issue" (Hamilton, 2016, p. 126), all justifications which allow a woman to choose veganism and not have society question the decision. It sends a much different message when a man makes an active decision against these ideals which enforce dominance and control. There is power in choosing a way against such norms. Men who adopt veganism choose to stand against these oppressive realities and instead send a message of compassion and empathy.

Impact of Consuming Meat

"Recent research has found that the ten-year mortality risk for meat consumers increased by over a third and by almost 50 percent for those who consume excessive quantities of red meat" (Coyle & McKinstry, 2023, p. 2). These food choices are not just having profound impacts on the world but also on the individual who is making the active decision to ingest these animal

products. At the center of all this there is decreased life expectancy and poorer health. Is there an ultimate benefit in holding onto these oppressive ideals of our food production? Increases in cancer rates, decreased life expectancy, and quality of life are linked to what we are putting on our plates each day. Factory farming has explicit laws and policies that shield these industries from the public eye on how they operate and how that animal goes from a living being to a package wrapped in plastic devoid of any resemblance of life. Imagine if we were more intimately tied to this entire process of a living animal being transformed into the portioned pieces of tissue and organic material which ends up on a plate. "Humans conducted animal farming at a staggering scale: in 1961, the world had a standing population of 4.4 billion chickens, a number that increased to 37 billion chickens in 2020" (Coyle & McKinstry, 2023, p. 2). What groups of people and animals were displaced to be able to clear this land for factory farming? The toxic runoff of fecal and waste matter is another major contributor to our environmental depletion. There is not enough land to sustain this idea of animals living a good life before slaughter. Hence, we have these factories piling animal body upon body to ensure the product maintains the taste and texture consistency people have come accustomed to. There's an incredible tax on our resources to produce animal protein and the inputs to feed, cage, and slaughter will not measure up to the actual costs on the world and our communities. "Theoretically, replacing 100% of beef, pork, or poultry with vegetable proteins would reduce dietary greenhouse gas emissions by 49.6% compared to the previous omnivorous diet" (Polyak et al., 2023, p. 2). We still don't see this as a mainstream way to combat the rising temperatures of our planet.

> Findings support the main idea that a well-balanced consumption of whole plant foods (fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds) without animal-based foods seems appropriate not only from a health perspective but also in reducing water and land use and greenhouse gas emission (Polyak et al., 2023, p. 12).

As an intellectual world, we can reduce environmental impacts, harm to other living beings, and improve human health in the same capacity. Yet, this largely gets no publicity or support from governing power structures.

Shifting Perspectives

Some men may come to a plant-based diet for health reasons and find a positive ripple impact on a wider range of societal issues. That was a driving force when doing my own personal research on ways to impact heart health and lower risk for heart disease with nutrition. Speaking to the truth I know, the world looks different now since removing the consumption of animal products from my life. I want to know where products come from, how they were produced, who they were produced by, and what the company stands for. Focusing on whole plant foods can also increase energy levels and positively impact healthy weight levels. "A whole food plant-based diet has potential to prevent, treat, and reverse a host of cardiometabolic chronic diseases" (Hull et al., 2023, p. 16). Optimal health is tied to reproduction, one's ability to protect and interact with their family, and how they

present themselves in the world. "The premise that Paleolithic humans survived mostly on wild animal products is flawed. The diets of Paleolithic humans were often predominantly plant based" (Hull et al., 2023, p. 15). We were gatherers, and animals served a purpose in this food cycle but was never the core to survival. What the earth provided in other nutrients from the land was the foundation. Industries want an individual to believe that the consumption of animal products is the only way for optimal health. Science and medicine have had profound discoveries and yet we just keep getting sicker as a society. Men are sold this idea through propaganda that high levels of animal protein are the only way to build the physique that is desirable by others. The truth is that a plant-based diet has been shown to provide all nutrients that one needs and leads to better health overall. This way of eating is just avoiding the death of an animal and going directly to the plant source which has actual fiber and micronutrients.

Another point of consideration is the reproductive health of people. "Infertility affects about 15% of the world's population; male factors of infertility are responsible for 40%-50% of these cases" (Kljajic et al., 2021, p. 365). Being a "man" is often linked to the ability to reproduce. When studying the link between a vegan diet and sperm count, it was found that a vegan test group had increased sperm count when compared to individuals consuming a standard American diet. "Total sperm count was significantly higher in the vegan group compared to the non-vegan group and total motility as well was significantly higher in the vegan group" (Kljajic et al., 2021, p. 368). When defining masculinity as the ability to carry on one's bloodline, diet should be considered in the ability to do so.

Conclusion

The deep overlap between feminism and veganism must challenge traditional notions of masculinity. As norms associate masculinity with consuming meat, there are evolving perspectives on health, ethics, and environmental sustainability that challenge these and redefine what it means to be masculine. This shift is deeper than what one chooses to consume to fuel their body, but instead creates a bridge to depart from stereotypes. It challenges the historical link between strength and the consumption of animal products, in addition to redefining what it means to project dominance. Embracing a plant-based diet transforms into a statement of autonomy, compassion, awareness, and a reembracing of what masculinity could mean. The landscape of food choices and masculinity exemplifies the power of personal decisions. Those decisions should not be dictated by what society desires, but instead based on what is right, inclusive, and conscious. In addition, it is imperative that we continue to apply a feminist lens to our environment. This transformation of study will change the framework for more than just diet. "Women's studies as a project is not over until universities cease to be men's studies…To build women's studies is to build an environment that needs to be transformed by women's studies…" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 112). We have a collective intellect in this world that largely silences a

point of view because of predetermined sex characteristics. What we eat is just the beginning. A new world can begin to take shape; one where regardless of gender, outward expression, human or animal, you are treated with equity. Our decisions define not just what we eat, but who we are and what we stand for. It is time we take this power and use it for good

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THE OVERTURN OF ROE: INFLUENCING MATERNAL MORTALITY

JOSIE WESTMILLER

> Overturning Roe and outlawing abortions will never make them go away. It only makes them more dangerous, especially for the poor and marginalized.
>
> *Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 2022*

This paper explores the history of abortion in the United States, the overturn of Roe v. Wade, maternal mortality in the U.S. prior to and within the post-Roe era, effects of current abortion restrictions, and the overall devastating reality for many marginalized communities in the United States. Abortion remains controversial, especially within the U.S., and has gained widespread attention since the overturn of Roe v. Wade on June 24, 2022. We must acknowledge that Church and State be separated when discussing the topic of reproductive healthcare. The right to bodily autonomy and equal and safe access to reproductive healthcare should not be an issue that is debated or politicized. This topic is crucial, as limited and banned abortion access is life-threatening to many individuals in America. I hope to bring knowledge on the detrimental impacts of abortion restrictions and the vital need for safe and accessible reproductive healthcare for all.

Keywords: Abortion, Maternal Mortality, Bodily Autonomy, Roe v. Wade, racial disparities

Introduction

When discussing the topic of abortion, it is important to remember that restrictions and bans affect everybody, and that inclusive language should be utilized. Birthing people is a great inclusive term and will be used throughout the course of this paper. Even though a large majority of people impacted by abortion restrictions are cisgender women, it is important to acknowledge that many trans and nonbinary folks are also affected by these restrictions.

Since the overturn of Roe v. Wade, the abortion bans that have been implemented have created serious obstacles, led to individuals suffering harmful medical issues, and have exacerbated the already high rates of maternal mortality in the United States, illustrating why the need for

safe abortion access is vital.

Before Roe

Within the United States there has always been a constant effort by many to regulate and restrict the reproductive rights of birthing people. Much of this effort is rooted in power, politics, religion, and the want to control reproductive healthcare access. Before Roe v. Wade was implemented abortion was a forbidden topic and was out of reach for many birthing people in America, especially birthing people of color. During the years leading up to Roe v. Wade many circumstances were not taken into consideration when discussing abortion access. For instance, people who were sexually assaulted or suffered issues with their pregnancy were forced to carry the baby to full term, but between the years of 1967-1973 some states finally made exceptions for abortion to be an option in rape and incest cases. However, this was still very inaccessible for many. Gold (2003) states,

> …the process to obtain approval for a legal abortion could be arduous. In many states, it involved securing the approval of a standing hospital committee established specifically to review abortion requests. Either as a matter of state law or hospital policy, these committees frequently required that additional physicians examine the woman to corroborate her own physician's findings that an abortion was necessary to protect her life or physical health.

The process required for an abortion to be performed after a person was sexually assaulted was so complex and difficult that many people would be denied, not believed, or would perform the abortion themselves under unsafe circumstances, leading to significant issues. Many individuals were forced to raise the child themselves and forgo adoption due to being denied an abortion. In addition to this, many birthing people were fired from their jobs during their pregnancies once they began showing. Governmental services such as food stamps, day care, subsidized housing, and much more were inaccessible for many.

Prior to Roe v. Wade many individuals in need of an abortion would travel abroad, or when abortion became legal in New York in 1970, many would travel there. Most of the time, these abortion procedures were performed with very little anesthetic, leading to physical pain and immense guilt. People who did not possess the means to travel elsewhere to seek abortion turned to unsafe abortion practices also known as back-alley abortions[1]. Many unsafe abortions were self-inflicted and were done using metal coat hangers, pills, having someone else perform the abortion, and so on. It has been estimated that throughout

[1] A back-alley abortion is a term used to refer to an illegal and dangerous operation that was performed to end a pregnancy and was done by someone who wasn't medically trained. (Cambridge University Press. (2024). Back-alley abortion. In *Cambridge English Dictionary*. Cambridge University Press and Assessment. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/back-alley-abortion). Back-alley abortions were very common throughout the years leading up to the passing of Roe v. Wade in 1973.

the 1950s-1960s, 200,000-1.2 million illegal abortions were performed. Many of them led to physical harm, hemorrhaging, and death, illustrating the immense need for safe abortion access. According to Nawaz (2022), "In New York City alone abortion accounted for half of all childbirth-related deaths among non-white and Puerto Rican women". Since abortion access was inaccessible, especially for people of color, it only exacerbated the use of self-inflicted abortions or seeking an abortion from someone unqualified, leading to botched abortions and death. Even though safe abortion access was legalized in New York in 1970, it was expensive—still inaccessible for many. A vast majority of those individuals were people of color, due to poverty and many other social factors.

On January 22, 1973, Roe v. Wade was implemented. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the United States Constitution protects the right of birthing people to have an abortion and also protects their privacy. After this was ruled, many people in America finally had safe access to abortion, but this did not end the immense rate of maternal mortality among birthing people of color. This was and still is influenced by the ongoing racial disparities within healthcare and the issue of black birthing people not having their pain levels fully believed or acknowledged. Suliman (2021) states, "This crisis is driven by unconscious bias in the medical system and its actors", citing a 2016 survey finding that many white medical students believe the myth that people of color have "thicker skin and less sensitive nerve endings". Even though safe abortion was made accessible within the U.S., systemic racism within the medical field is still very much alive -- especially regarding black maternal health.

Fifty-One Years Later…Overturned

After years of unrest and people fighting for their right to bodily autonomy, progress was ripped away on June 24, 2022. The U.S. Supreme Court voted to overturn Roe v. Wade, creating unfathomable hardships for many birthing people in America. Due to this ruling, all fifty states can now choose whether abortion should be banned, restricted, or continue to be legal and easily accessible. Many states that have chosen to limit or ban abortion are in the South, in places where marginalized groups, such as women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community, already face increased and varied forms of oppression. Not only are these marginalized groups of people discriminated against daily, but they also suffer the highest rates of poverty, mental health issues, and violence. Due to the overturn of Roe v. Wade, many birthing people, especially in Southern states, will be influenced to resort back to unsafe abortion practices that were prevalent before Roe v. Wade passed. When individuals do not have access to safe abortion, they are forced to seek unsafe and clandestine procedures, or they are led to the consumption of alcohol, narcotics, or other harm to themselves to terminate their pregnancy.

Not only has the overturn of Roe v. Wade caused a recurrence of unsafe abortion practices, but it has also exacerbated the already prevalent issue of systemic racism within the medical field in the United States. Black birthing people already face high

rates of systemic racism in America, and in addition to this they also suffer higher rates of various health conditions and mental health issues. Texas Tribune writer Cecilia Lenzen (2022) states

> Almost 40% of Black people who give birth experience maternal mental health conditions, according to a 2021 report from the Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance. Compared to white women, Black women are twice as likely to experience maternal health conditions but half as likely to receive treatment for them.

This is detrimental to birthing people of color as they are silenced and dismissed within healthcare, causing them to face maternal morbidity and mortality. Not having safe access to abortion will only increase these issues.

Maternal Mortality Before Roe v. Wade

The issue of maternal mortality among birthing people of color was prevalent within the United States well before Roe v. Wade was overturned. Many factors have played a role in this prevalence, such as discrimination, systemic racism within healthcare, medical gaslighting, poverty, lack of access to abortion, lack of proper medical care, and much more. Njoku et al. (2023) reference reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that 50,000 women in the U.S. experience complications due to pregnancy and black women are three times more likely to die from pregnancy related complications as opposed to white women.

> The estimated maternal mortality rate in 2019 was 20.1 and, in 2020 was 23.9 per 100,000 live births which represents about 861 maternal deaths. For Black women that rate is about 55.3 per 100,000 live births, representing an estimated 1,800 maternal deaths (Njoku et al., 2023).

This illustrates that black maternal mortality is the highest of any racial group, and these numbers were calculated prior to the overturn of Roe v. Wade. There are underlying medical conditions that impact black birthing people at higher rates such as hypertension and chronic heart disease (CDC, 2021). Not only do black birthing people have an increased risk for certain health issues, but they must endure discrimination, marginalization, and the abhorrent treatment from many in our society. Regarding healthcare for black birthing people, racism is and has always been deeply ingrained within the U.S. healthcare system leading to devastating black maternal health outcomes and lack of adequate care.[2]

From the year 2021-2022, before the overturn of Roe v. Wade, the increase in maternal mortality among women of color was significant. For example, a study titled "Maternal Mortality Rates in The United State, 2021" states, "In 2021, the maternal mortality rate for non-Hispanic Black women was 69.9 deaths per 100,000 live births" (Hoyert, 2023). This illustrates that in 2021 maternal mortality rates among

[2] According to the National Library of Medicine, "poor maternal health outcomes for Black individuals are caused by factors of racism that are embedded in healthcare and affect marginalized groups of individuals disproportionately" (Njoku et al., 2023).

black birthing people were higher than any other racial group. The study also showed that between 2020-2021 maternal mortality rates increased for all racial groups. This illustrates that within the two years prior to the overturn of Roe v. Wade maternal mortality was increasing across the board, not for just one racial group. It is important to note that the statistics previously discussed are specific to cis women and do not specify including non-binary and trans individuals. The statistics could be even higher, but alone these numbers are very concerning and show just how prevalent the issue of maternal mortality is within the United States.

Post Roe Era

Since the overturn of Roe v. Wade on June 24, 2022, there has been an increase in the literature surrounding the issue by both pro-choice and pro-life individuals. There has also been much literature surrounding the influence current abortion restrictions are having on maternal mortality and the hardships these restrictions are causing birthing people around the country. According to Planned Parenthood Action Fund (2024), abortion is restricted in twenty-eight states, many of which are in the south. In a 2023 report released by Physicians for Human Rights, it is discussed that doctors in states that restrict abortion could face legal issues and criminal charges if they provide abortion services. The article mainly focuses on the state of Oklahoma's current abortion restrictions. According to the authors, "Health professionals are forced to balance their obligations to provide ethical, high-quality medical care against the threat of legal and professional sanctions" (De Vos et al., 2023). This is not an issue occurring only in Oklahoma, but it is one that has occurred in many other abortion-restricted states. Not only are doctors at risk of facing criminal charges but so are patients, putting their lives and health at risk as a doctor can deny an abortion at any time.

This is a very dangerous situation especially when it comes to ectopic pregnancies[3]. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists state, "Any application of an abortion ban that affects those in need of treatment for ectopic pregnancy is inappropriate and will certainly cost lives" (ACOG, n.d.). When doctors and patients are at risk of facing criminal charges, it can lead to a delay and lack of effective treatment, especially in cases of an ectopic pregnancy. Something like this also puts birthing people of color at more of a serious risk for maternal mortality. Doctors being able to choose if they provide lifesaving abortion care or not can increase the already high rates of systemic racism that exists in healthcare. As of December 5, 2023, maternal mortality in states with abortion restrictions is 62% higher than states that do not have restrictions. According to Kheyfets et al. (2023),

> States with abortion bans or restrictions experience adverse outcomes including limited maternity care providers, maternity care deserts, higher rates of maternal mortality and infant death,

[3] An ectopic pregnancy is when a fertilized egg implants and grows outside the main cavity of the uterus. From: *Ectopic pregnancy*, by Mayo Clinic, (https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/ectopic-pregnancy/symptoms-causes/syc-20372088).

especially among people of color, elevated death rates for birthing individuals of reproductive age, and greater racial disparities in healthcare.

It has been proven that in states which lack safe abortion access maternal mortality is increasing, and not only that, but influencing systemic racism among black birthing people.

Intersectionality, Abortion Access, and Maternal Mortality

Many other social factors play a role in safe abortion access. Now more than ever it is important to acknowledge the role that intersectionality plays in safe abortion access and maternal mortality. According to the National Partnership for Women and Families, in the states that have restricted or banned abortion 2.9 million are disabled women, 12.5 million are women who are economically insecure, and all these individuals are of different races and ethnicities (Robbins et al., 2023). There are many factors that play a role in one's access to abortion and reproductive healthcare. Some of those factors include race, financial status, education level, physical ability, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

There is a large gap in current research regarding how maternal mortality and abortion restrictions impact trans, non-binary, and disabled individuals since the overturn of Roe v. Wade. Much of the literature surrounding this topic specifically focuses on cisgender women, making the literature very binary. One of the very few articles regarding the LGBTQ+ community and the overturn of Roe v. Wade states "Many transgender men, nonbinary people, and intersex people can get pregnant and do need abortions. Recognizing this reality increases awareness for healthcare providers and others to improve access to reproductive care to all who need it" (GLAAD, 2022). Even though cis women are the largest population affected by abortion bans and maternal mortality, it is important that the struggles of trans, non-binary and disabled folks are taken into consideration.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The overturn of Roe v. Wade has created immense suffering, struggles, and hardships for many. This decision has put marginalized and vulnerable communities at risk such as cis women, trans folks, nonbinary people, disabled individuals, and people of color. Abortion restrictions will only continue to increase the already high rates of maternal mortality in America as many birthing people cannot access safe abortion services. Restricting abortion does not stop it from happening, but only influences unsafe abortion practices. We must also acknowledge that abortion restrictions have and will continue to influence systemic racism that has plagued the U.S. healthcare system for years, leading to maternal mortality. Every person deserves the right to bodily autonomy and to make their own choices no matter their race, gender identity, sexual orientation, economic status, education level, physical ability, and more.

When it comes to the issue of restricted abortion access, many people first want to go after the U.S. Supreme Court and ask why they made the decision to overturn Roe. v Wade. and why they have no consideration, compassion, or empathy for

birthing people in America. The Supreme Court is very powerful; their minds can't be changed within one day. Roe v. Wade cannot be brought back within one day. It is something we must fight for. To fight for this change and the right to bodily autonomy we need to utilize our voices. We can use our voices in many different ways such as protesting, advocating through social media, donating to organizations and agencies that provide reproductive healthcare and education (especially those local to us), taking the time to educate ourselves through scholarly articles and the personal stories of others, educating those around us who may be confused, informing people on the services available to them, providing support to those who have sought out services, and most importantly voting. It is very important to always exercise your right to vote, not only in presidential elections but also state and local elections. Vote for those who advocate for marginalized communities and reproductive rights. Overall, there are many steps we can take to implement positive changes for reproductive healthcare and safe abortion access in America.

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AGE OF EMPOWERMENT: A FEMINIST DISCOURSE SUPPORTING TRADITIONAL WIVES

KEEGAN J. BEAMISH

This essay seeks to explore the complex historical relationship between conservative women and feminism, examining the religious influences that shape the worldview of trad wives, and synthesizing recent research to elucidate the motivations behind the rise of traditional wives and the feminist discourse surrounding this phenomenon. By delving into these intricacies, I aim to foster a deeper understanding of the evolving landscape of gender politics and cultural ideologies in contemporary society.

Introduction

The emergence of a faction known as "trad wives," a contraction of "traditional housewives," has caused a significant stir on social media, highlighting the convergence of conventional gender roles, American Christian values, and anti-feminist rhetoric. Alena Petitt, who proudly identifies as a housewife, has defined the role as one of "submitting to and spoiling her husband like it's 1959." Moreover, she underscores the significance of etiquette—a subtle reference to her area of expertise—by emphasizing the importance of "traditional English manners, lifestyle, and values" (Hunt, 2020).

While not all women adhere to identical notions and semantic definitions of what it means to be a trad wife, the underlying belief in Christian values generally remains prevalent among women in this category. The Global Network on Extremism and Technology conducted a ten-month study on thirty-six women who self-identified as trad wives, revealing that "these women use ideological radicalization, social media influencing, and a sophisticated understanding of social media platforms to commodify right-wing ideology" (Sykes & Hopner, 2023). To clarify, right-wing ideology aligns with conservative views on aspects such as supporting free markets and limited government, rugged individualism, traditionalism, opposition to LGBTQIA+ rights, progressivism, reproductive autonomy, and feminism.

Centering on traditionalism, this paper will delve into the specific intersection and relationship between trad wives and feminists. As Gloria Steinem, founder of

Ms. Magazine and a leader of second-wave feminism, articulates, "Feminism is simultaneously a struggle for women's lives and bodies and a struggle against the authoritarian mindset" (MceGhee & Ikebe, 2011). In the context of trad wives, the liberatory core of the feminist movement aims to advocate for the right and ability of all women to have autonomy and the choice to live their lives as they see fit. This inherently underscores feminist support for women choosing to become housewives if that is their preference.

Nevertheless, trad wives, situated at the intersection of Christian traditional values and opposition to feminism, embody a foundational principle of rejecting feminism. Often, these women perceive feminism as pitting femininity against feminism, eradicating men from the family structure, posing a threat to Christian religious values, and undermining the familial structure, along with various detrimental and crude stereotypes such as the imagery of burning bras (Proctor, 2022). This mindset can be traced back to the radicalization of the term "feminism" in many Christian denominations, distorting the concept of women's liberation to appear anti-theological, anti-Christian, and anti-Biblical. As a result, a prevailing norm has emerged within this group of women, opposing feminism on the grounds that it is considered un-Biblical and not aligned with their view of femininity.

Clearly, the principles of feminism provide numerous inherent reasons why those identifying as feminists should support trad wives: feminism advocates for women's autonomy. Within the framework of feminism, women's autonomy is considered an inviolable right that is consistently fought for. Examining the emergence of trad wives contributes significantly not only to the feminist discourse but also to the evolving conversation about women in religion. A literature review will encompass the established benchmarks in this field, followed by a research methods section leading to the synthesis of this paper in the discussion and conclusion sections.

Literature Review of Christian Nationalism

To comprehend the underlying risks associated with "trad wives" and Christian ideologies, it is crucial to grasp the foundation of Christian Nationalism. Amanda Tyler, representing the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, a religious organization dedicated to upholding the separation of church and state in support of religious liberty, succinctly encapsulates the essence of Christian Nationalism:

> At its core, this idea threatens the principle of the separation of church and state and undermines the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. It also leads to discrimination, and at times violence, against religious minorities and the nonreligious. Christian nationalism is also a contributing ideology in the religious right's misuse of religious liberty as a rationale for circumventing laws and regulations aimed at protecting a pluralistic democracy, such as nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQI+ people, women, and religious minorities (Graves-Fitzsimmons & Siddiqi, 2022).

Christian nationalism has roots that extend

far beyond recent hashtags, with documented cultural shifts reflecting its influence over decades. What is notably new, however, is the widespread dissemination of Christian nationalist ideas through channels such as email, social media, television, news networks, and various platforms designed for the rapid exchange of information. Beyond mainstream platforms like X, Instagram, and Facebook, individuals often leaning towards extremism converge virtually on platforms such as Gab, Natural News, Brighteon, and CloutHub, which "out themselves as havens of free speech on an Internet that has begun (belatedly, according to some) to police conspiracy theorists, armed right-wing groups, white supremacists and Christian nationalists" (Jenkins, 2021).

Moreover, fifty percent of Americans believe that the United States should be declared a Christian nation, with thirty-nine percent advocating for U.S. laws to be rooted in Christian values. Among all Americans, twenty-nine percent identify as Christian nationalists or sympathize with the ideology (Public Religion Research Institute, 2023). This reveals the substantial dangers associated with this detrimental ideology and its potential to shield individuals from embracing alternative perspectives. In presenting a counter argument, it becomes imperative to explore the impact of Christian nationalism online, examining factors such as the reach of its influence, connections to extremist groups, search frequency, and the prevalence of disinformation in search results.

Previous research on understanding the connection between the Christian rejection of feminism and Christian nationalism is crucial for grasping the inherent risks associated with certain ideologies within the Christian community. This research provides comprehensive insights into Christian nationalism, highlighting its roots, impact, and widespread dissemination across various channels. The essence of Christian nationalism, as articulated earlier by Amanda Tyler from the Baptist Joint Committee, is not a mere abstract concept but poses tangible threats to the separation of church and state. It fosters discrimination, violence, and the misuse of religious liberty to circumvent laws intended to safeguard a pluralistic democracy. The revelation that fifty percent of Americans consider the United States a Christian nation, with a significant portion advocating for laws rooted in Christian values, underscores the substantial dangers associated with this ideology.

Furthermore, the above writing accentuates the contemporary dimension of Christian nationalism, emphasizing its online presence and influence on platforms that often attract individuals leaning toward extremism. Given that a sizable percentage of Americans identify with or sympathize with Christian nationalist views, the paragraphs underscore the urgency of exploring the impact of this ideology, particularly in the online realm, where it may shield individuals from embracing alternative perspectives and perpetuate disinformation. In essence, studying the connection between Christian nationalism and the rejection of feminism unveils critical insights into the socio-political

landscape, contributing to discussions on religious influence, extremism, and the preservation of democratic values. My research builds off this framework.

Rejection of Feminism by Christian Women

Christian women who reject feminism often do so due to a complex interplay of factors deeply embedded in their religious beliefs. Hawkgrrrl's 2017 blog post on Wheat and Tares, a website name inspired by religious roots, touches upon various dimensions of concern. One significant aspect is the apprehension about religious extremism, where certain extreme interpretations or practices within the faith may deter women from identifying with feminist ideals. The patriarchal roots and context of the Bible also contribute to this rejection, as traditional interpretations may reinforce gender roles that align with a more conservative worldview. Furthermore, hawkgrrrl's blog post highlights the presence of individuals who actively benefit from maintaining the inferiority and subjugation of women. These individuals may exploit certain interpretations of scripture to justify and perpetuate gender inequalities. Such manipulation of religious teachings can instill apprehension among Christian women, creating a reluctance to embrace feminist principles.

There is also a perceived risk associated with deviating from traditionalism towards women's autonomy and liberation. The fear of eroding a traditional family structure and disrupting other Christian norms adds another layer to the hesitancy toward feminism. The comfort derived from adhering to familiar and established practices within the faith becomes a significant factor in resisting change.

Wilcox's (1989) article titled "Feminism and Anti-Feminism Among Evangelical Women" delves into the divergence of thought and practice present in biblical interpretations. While the Bible contains passages that can be construed to support both feminist and anti-feminist readings, the prevalence of anti-feminist interpretations within evangelical preaching is emphasized. The research suggests that biblical teachings form a foundational framework for some evangelical women's political attitudes. Consequently, these teachings may act as constraints, preventing them from adopting certain feminist positions due to their commitment to a particular scriptural interpretation. The intricate interplay of religious, social, and political factors underscores the complexity of the relationship between Christian women and feminism within the context of their faith.

Expanding on the reasons why Christian women might reject feminism, it is essential to explore the intricate interplay of religious, social, and political factors that shape their perspectives. The academic insights provided by Wilcox (1989) shed light on the dichotomy inherent in biblical interpretations. The Bible, as a foundational text, presents passages that can be interpreted to support both feminist and anti-feminist readings. However, the prevalence of anti-feminist interpretations within evangelical preaching becomes a notable focal point in understanding the divergence.

The research underscores how evangelical

women influenced by their religious community often find themselves exposed to anti-feminist narratives that become ingrained in their belief system. The commitment to a particular scriptural interpretation acts as a significant constraint, shaping their political attitudes and guiding their rejection of certain feminist positions. In essence, the teachings derived from biblical scriptures form a fundamental framework that informs the worldview of these women, influencing their stance on gender- related issues.

A pertinent and compelling example is a widely viewed TikTok video by content creator Lily Kate, who has a follower count of nearly 50,000 and is accumulating over 1.6 million likes. Posted on December 12, 2023, the video has garnered almost 4 million views, 7,319 shares, more than 23,000 saves, and over 250,000 likes. In the video, Lily Kate declares, "I'm not a feminist," before offering a series of statements such as, “I can see men and I don’t immediately feel threatened,” "Of course I can wear dresses and feel pretty," "I don't hate children," and "I can actually cook” (Kate, 2023). Although not explicitly identifying as a trad wife, a deeper exploration of Lily Kate's social media profiles reveals her alignment with Christian, pro-life, anti-feminist, and conservative ideologies, solidifying the link between her views and anti-feminism.

This case is significant as it exemplifies another instance of Christian women rejecting feminism. Lily Kate not only disseminates misinformation but also perpetuates misconceptions about feminism. It is worth noting that feminism affords her the freedom to appear on talk shows, practice her religion, hold her beliefs, and dress as she pleases in public. The dissemination of such misinformation not only distorts the true essence of feminism but also harms women's perception of it.

The detrimental effects of misinformation about feminism and women are evident. Lily Kate's example is emblematic of this harm. Christian women often maintain a complex relationship with feminism, rejecting it on grounds of perceived biblical, traditional, and moral conflicts. As illustrated earlier, their rejection stems from viewing feminism as incompatible with their beliefs and values. This dynamic relationship between Christian women and feminism within the context of their faith is further nuanced by the societal and political landscape. The complexity arises as these women navigate the intersections of their religious beliefs, societal expectations, and political ideologies. By highlighting the multifaceted nature of these influences, Wilcox (1989) emphasizes the need for a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the rejection of feminism among some Christian women.

In the broader scope of my paper, this research sets a foundational understanding of the framework, moral considerations, and the fundamental nature of Christian women who reject feminism. It not only explores the reasons behind their stance but also emphasizes the need for a comprehensive examination of these factors. By doing so, this research contributes to a more nuanced and informed discussion about the complexities surrounding the rejection of

feminism within certain Christian communities, providing valuable insights for further academic inquiry and societal dialogue. While there is still more research needed in spheres such as politics, voting blocks, trends in age behavior, and beyond, my study specifically focuses on the relationship between feminists and trad wives through the medium of TikTok.

Trad Wives on Social Media and Their Impact

The presence of traditional wives and conservative Christian influencers holds significant weight. The search term "Conservative Christian Women" garners upwards of 25 million views, while "Trad wife" boasts over 73 million views, accompanied by more than 19,000 posts. The hashtag #tradwives collects over 50 million views and includes 1,486 videos. Similarly, #conservativewomen boasts over 41,000 posts, and #christianwomen has over 70,000 posts.

One self-proclaimed trad wife, Estee Williams, has over 178,000 followers and a total of over 1 million likes. Estee features a pinned video on her TikTok page captioned "What is Tradwife" (2022). This video alone has garnered 1.5 million views and has been shared over 3,000 times. Estee's TikTok content delves into conservative beliefs with titles such as "For better, for worse. NOT divorce," "How to be a Traditional Wife part 1," "Tips to Attract a Masculine Man," "Biblically Submissive Wives," "Independence doesn't equal fulfillment," and "The Trad wife Movement". Notably, "The Trad wife Movement" (2022) video has amassed over 117,000 views and 380 shares. "Independence doesn't equal fulfillment" (2023c) has over 120,000 views, 331 shares, and 780 saves. "Tips to Attract a Masculine Man" (2023d) boasts over 147,000 views, 347 shares, and 983 saves. "Biblically Submissive Wives" (2024) has accrued over 342,000 views, 152 shares, and 1,123 saves. Lastly, "How to be a Traditional Wife part 1" (2023a) has soared to over 1.3 million views, 6,216 shares, and 8,553 saves. Evidently, the reach of influence of just one trad wife influencer is extensive.

As another example, a woman with the profile name Gwen The Milkmaid boasts over 66,000 followers and a total of 1.5 million likes (n.d.). Her pinned and most-watched video on her profile is a testimony (2023b) she shares of coming to God while she bakes in the kitchen. In the video caption, there are hashtags #christiantestimony and #godsaves. When searching #tradwife on TikTok, one of her videos appears from March 25th, 2023. In it, she lip-syncs to a sound that says, "I think men are better than women," with another voice in the audio interjecting, "she's kidding," to which the original speaker responds, "no, I'm not; they provide for us, and we must obey them because they are our masters" (2023a). This video has garnered over 347,000 views, 382 shares, and 823 saves. Clearly, this is another example of a woman linking traditional Christian values with being a traditional wife. As the audio implies, she believes women must submit to men as they fulfill their expected gender role of provider.

To contextualize the impact of TikTok creators like Estee Williams and Gwen The Milkmaid within the social sphere, a mere scroll through the #tradwife search results

reveals a plethora of videos featuring these self-proclaimed trad wives. Additionally, one encounters content from individuals who may not explicitly identify as trad wives but incorporate the hashtag into their video captions. These videos typically depict activities associated with perceived traditional wife roles, such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and serving their husbands in various capacities.

A 2022 study delves into the ramifications of these women's presence on social media. The study elucidates,

> A growing alt-right community on YouTube known as traditional or "trad" wives create videos about femininity, beauty, and relationships. However, viewers who seek out these channels for clothing or hair styling tips leave with another kind of styling: populist messaging that frames feminism as an elitist threat to the "real" femininity of everyday women (Zahay, 2022).

In essence, this research underscores how the infusion of Christian moral values and rigid gender norms recontextualizes feminism as a threatening force to be avoided.

With their extensive reach, these women cater to a diverse audience, often extending beyond their immediate sphere of influence. However, the danger arises when alternative forms of femininity are stigmatized, and feminism is portrayed as something to be feared and shunned.

To grasp the significance of these women's presence on social media, it is essential to establish the framework within which they operate, the extent of their content's reach, and the demographics of their audience engagement. This section provides an overview of these aspects, laying the foundation for understanding the connection between trad wives' rejection of feminism (albeit from a skewed perspective), the complex dynamic between feminists and Christian women, and the expansive influence wielded by trad wives through their content.

To conclude this section, it is crucial to recognize that, like much content on social media, the portrayal of traditional wives may not always reflect reality. For a woman to adopt the traditional wife role and stay at home, she typically requires substantial financial support from her husband. While this arrangement provides her with the chance to concentrate on domestic responsibilities, it also results in her financial dependence on him. This underscores the socioeconomic privilege embedded in single-income households, where one partner can afford to stay home, and raises concerns about potential financial disputes and abuse.

Moreover, it is important to challenge the notion that traditional wives do not engage in work. While they may eschew office or corporate jobs, the tasks they undertake at home, such as cleaning, cooking, childcare, and household management, constitute significant labor, both physically and mentally. Ironically, feminists have long recognized the value of this work and have advocated for houseworkers to receive wages, thereby granting financial autonomy and empowerment to women in similar circumstances (McKeen, 1994).

It is worth noting that the situations of traditional wives may differ from those of

women advocating for wages for housework. However, both underscore the importance of recognizing and valuing the labor performed within the home, challenging traditional notions of work and gender roles.

To synthesize, the influence wielded by traditional wives and conservative Christian influencers on social media is significant and far-reaching. The sheer volume of views, likes, and shares garnered by content related to traditional wifehood underscores its resonance within online communities. Through platforms like TikTok, influencers including Estee Williams and Gwen The Milkmaid have amassed substantial followings, disseminating messages that intertwine traditional Christian values with the roles and expectations of a traditional wife.

The impact of these influencers extends beyond mere entertainment or lifestyle content. Studies such as Zahay's (2022) reveal how the portrayal of traditional femininity on platforms like YouTube can subtly frame feminism as a threat to traditional values, fostering a narrative that divides women into opposing camps.

It is essential to recognize the complexities inherent in the portrayal of traditional wives on social media. While these influencers may champion traditional gender roles and domestic duties, their portrayal may not always align with the realities faced by women in similar situations. Financial dependence on a spouse and the undervaluing of domestic labor are just some of the challenges faced by traditional wives.

Moreover, the dichotomy between traditional wives and feminists highlights broader societal debates about gender roles, autonomy, and empowerment. By acknowledging the nuances within these discussions and the diverse perspectives at play, we can better understand the evolving landscape of gender politics and cultural ideologies in contemporary society.

Research Methods

In the initial phases of this research endeavor, a comprehensive approach was adopted to gather data from TikTok, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. The objective was to procure measurable metrics such as video shares, views, saves, post counts, view counts associated with specific hashtags, follower counts on individual accounts, and total likes on those accounts.

Given TikTok's prominence as the second most popular platform among Gen Z, constituting forty-five percent of usage as of 2023 (Statista, 2024), the exploration primarily focused on various TikTok hashtags. These encompassed #tradwife, #tradwives, #traditionalwives, #traditional-wife, #christiangirl, #christian-woman, and #christianwife.

Furthermore, an inquiry was conducted into automatically generated search terms following the "trad wife" query on TikTok. These terms spanned a spectrum of topics, including "tradwife propaganda," "tradwife outfits," "tradwife divorce," "tradwife satire," "tradwife meaning," and "tradwife controversy."

It is worth noting that the majority of videos surfaced by these searches and hashtags did not originate from authentic trad wife content creators. Instead, they featured women from diverse backgrounds, including atheists, non-believers, feminists, other Christians, and general commentators, who vocalized opposition to the trad wife movement. These creators cited concerns such as the spread of misinformation, negative impacts of religious indoctrination, or marginalization based on religious principles. Moreover, they advocated for enhanced education on social issues, particularly regarding the accurate definition of feminism, and highlighted potential risks associated with embracing the trad wife lifestyle.

Despite the initial intent to locate videos featuring self-proclaimed feminists or women expressing support for trad wives, such content was notably sparse. Those that did emerge often presented arguments grounded in biblical interpretation favoring the trad wife lifestyle. Remarkably, these videos were typically categorized under hashtags #tradwife and #feminist, representing distinct ideological spheres. The prevalent content observed predominantly comprised women critiquing and responding to trad wife narratives, underscoring the potential hazards associated with extreme manifestations of this lifestyle and ideology. The synthesis of these studies, coupled with existing literature on feminism and traditional Christian wives, contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping the relationship between feminism and trad wives.

On a personal and reflective note, my journey into this research was propelled by a dual fascination: firstly, with the intriguing sociological dynamics at play, and secondly, by my unique position straddling the spheres of faith and feminism. As someone deeply interested in understanding how societal norms and beliefs shape individual identities, I found myself drawn to the complexities surrounding traditionalist wives and feminists. Throughout my graduate studies, my aim is to delve deeper into this complex interplay, uncovering the intricate web of influences that mold perceptions and behaviors within these communities. This includes examining phenomena such as Christian nationalism, Christian feminism, civic religion, and the evolving discourse surrounding women's rights within the sphere of faith. My focus lies in unraveling the multifaceted connections between religious and political ideologies, seeking insights into the social, political, environmental, and behavioral factors shaping the interaction between these two demographic groups. Through rigorous analysis and exploration, I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the nuanced dynamics that define contemporary gender discourse.

Undertaking this thesis challenged me, as I find certain aspects about trad wives deeply disturbing, challenging, and confusing. Nevertheless, as an intersectional feminist, I made the decision to confront these complexities and research the history between feminists and trad wives, striving to uncover the true essence of trad wife ideology. While my research predominantly discusses the

dangers inherent in the ideology and practices of trad wives, it is crucial to acknowledge that videos in support of trad wives are not solely tied to conservative, Christian women with extreme views. Instead, they often depict women exploring and embracing the roles of wifehood and motherhood, finding fulfillment in staying home to care for their households.

To capture a comprehensive understanding, I turned to TikTok, which is a significant repository of data reflecting the attitudes and behaviors of Gen-Z. My methodology encompassed a thorough exploration beyond mere hashtags, extending to search terms, related queries, videos, profiles, and any pertinent content touching upon trad wives, feminists, and the discourse in between. Adopting a meticulous and impartial approach, I committed to watching entire videos without bias or selective filtering, ensuring the integrity of my data collection process. Every piece of content—be it a video, hashtag, soundbite, or other TikTok source—was meticulously documented to inform my findings.

Throughout my research journey, I remained mindful of the intricate intersections of gender and identity. Upholding principles of equity, I navigated through TikTok's diverse landscape with care and diligence, leveraging all available data without prejudice or preconceptions. By incorporating a wide array of perspectives and experiences into my analysis, I aimed to present a nuanced and inclusive portrayal of the relationship between trad wives and feminists within the digital realm. This thorough approach allowed me to uncover patterns and insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play in online discourse surrounding gender roles and ideologies.

Results

The research collected data from TikTok, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods to obtain measurable metrics such as video shares, views, saves, post counts, and follower counts associated with specific hashtags. Focus was placed on hashtags including #tradwife, #tradwives, #traditionalwives, #traditionalwife, #christiangirl, #christianwoman, and #christianwife, as well as auto-generated search terms following the "tradwife" search on TikTok.

The majority of videos surfaced by these searches and hashtags did not originate from authentic trad wife content creators. Instead, they featured diverse voices including atheists, non-believers, feminists, other Christians, and general commentators expressing opposition to the trad wife movement. Concerns highlighted included misinformation spread, negative impacts of religious indoctrination, and potential risks associated with embracing the trad wife lifestyle.

Content featuring self-proclaimed feminists or women expressing support for trad wives was notably scarce. When present, it often offered arguments grounded in biblical interpretation favoring the trad wife lifestyle, typically categorized under hashtags #tradwife and #feminist.

Overall, the prevalent content observed

predominantly comprised critiques and responses to trad wife narratives, emphasizing potential hazards associated with extreme manifestations of this lifestyle and ideology. This synthesis of data contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping the relationship between feminism and trad wives within the digital realm.

Discussion

At the outset, it is crucial to establish a clear understanding of the terms under examination. Trad wives, as a contraction of "traditional housewives," embody a commitment to traditional gender roles, emphasizing women's role as primary caretakers of the familial household and their submission to husbands. However, alongside this characterization, it is pertinent to acknowledge the potential dangers associated with this mindset.

Research has shown that certain individuals within the trad wife movement utilize social media platforms as tools for ideological radicalization, leveraging sophisticated strategies to promote right-wing ideology, including anti-feminist beliefs (Sykes & Hopner, 2023). This not only underscores the complexity of the trad wife phenomenon but also highlights the nuanced interplay between traditional values, social media, and political ideologies.

In contrast, feminism, as a movement advocating for social equality, women's rights, and the freedom to choose one's path, stands as a counterpoint to the traditionalist values espoused by trad wives. Yet, within the realm of feminist discourse, there exists a spectrum of perspectives on the trad wife movement. While some feminists critique the restrictive nature of trad wife ideology and its potential to perpetuate harmful gender norms, others advocate for a more nuanced understanding that recognizes the agency and autonomy of individual women, including those who choose to embrace traditional roles.

The culmination of the collected data reveals a prevailing trend among feminists on TikTok: the lack of support for trad wives, underscored by concerns over the repressive nature of the lifestyle, the propagation of disinformation targeting feminism, and the broader issues encompassing domestic abuse, financial autonomy, and extremist political ideologies.

It is pertinent to acknowledge the distinction frequently made by women, whether trad wives or not, between the roles of homemaker, stay-at-home mom, and trad wife. While the former two roles are often viewed as personal choices aligned with individual circumstances, the latter is deeply entrenched in the notion of male dominance and spousal submission. This distinction is vividly illustrated in instances such as the video featuring Gwen The Milkmaid (2023a), where she lip-syncs to an audio asserting the superiority of husbands over women.

Despite the rarity of TikTok content explicitly supporting trad wives, those few who do often intertwine feminist principles with the concept of empowering women to live as they see fit. For instance, a user named Steph | Name Consultant,

challenges the traditional notion of a trad wife by advocating for a feminism that champions choice and equity. In her TikTok video, she aptly states,

> As I see more and more 20ish year old trad wives talking about submitting to their husbands and blaming feminists for the loss of femininity…Remember you can chose to stay home, wear makeup, keep house, watch the children and also be a raging feminist without submitting to jackshit" (2023).

Her video title says it best, "Feminism is about choice and equity, it's a positive term". This perspective emphasizes the idea that feminism encompasses the freedom to make individual choices, including the option to embrace traditional domestic roles while retaining autonomy and agency.

Moreover, while some videos express support for trad wives, they also caution against romanticizing the role of the homemaker, emphasizing the labor-intensive nature of household responsibilities. These expressions of support are often accompanied by disclaimers reflecting the nuanced discourse surrounding feminism and the diverse interpretations of its tenets.

Despite varying interpretations, a common thread emerges from definitions of feminism: the pursuit of equity and the freedom to choose one's own path. Dictionaries and academic sources alike define feminism in terms of social equality, women's rights, and the opportunity for fairness and equal rights. For example, Merriam-Webster uses the words "social equality" and "women's rights and interests" in its definition (2024). The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus uses the words "rights, power, and opportunity" in its definition (n.d.). The APA Dictionary of Psychology uses words such as "opportunity", and "fairness and equal rights" to define feminism (American Psychological Association, 2018). Ultimately, this data underscores the fundamental essence of feminism: empowering women to lead lives of their choosing.

In synthesizing the gathered data, it becomes evident that while tensions between trad wives and feminists persist, there are nuanced perspectives within both movements. Feminism, at its core, encompasses the principles of choice, autonomy, and equity, which extend to women's choices regarding their roles and identities. As such, feminists should support the agency and autonomy of trad wives, even as they critique the potential limitations and harms associated with traditionalist ideologies. By fostering dialogue, understanding, and solidarity across ideological divides, we can navigate the complexities of gender, religion, and ideology, ultimately striving towards a more inclusive and equitable society where all individuals are empowered to live authentically and pursue their aspirations freely.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the culmination of this research journey sheds light on the intricate relationship between traditionalist wives and feminists within the digital landscape of TikTok. Through a comprehensive approach encompassing both qualitative and quantitative

methodologies, data was gathered to explore the dynamics shaping this complex interplay.

The findings reveal a predominant trend of opposition to the trad wife movement among diverse voices on TikTok, including atheists, non-believers, feminists, other Christians, and general commentators. Concerns raised encompassed the spread of misinformation, negative impacts of religious indoctrination, and potential risks associated with embracing the trad wife lifestyle. While content explicitly supporting trad wives was scarce, those few who did often intertwined feminist principles with the concept of empowering women to make choices aligned with their own aspirations and values.

Furthermore, the discourse surrounding trad wives and feminists on TikTok highlighted the nuanced perspectives within both movements. While tensions persist, feminism, as a movement advocating for choice, autonomy, and equity, inherently supports the agency of women in defining their own paths, including their roles within traditional or non-traditional domestic settings.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of fostering dialogue, understanding, and solidarity across ideological divides. In our current times, where reactionary comments are more commonplace, there is a pressing need to comprehend both the foundations of feminism and the principles of trad wifery. It becomes evident through the examination of pioneering feminists and academic definitions of feminism that feminism inherently supports the choices of women, including trad wives, despite the explored research highlighting the negative reception and dangers associated with trad wifehood. By acknowledging the diversity of perspectives and experiences within both the trad wife and feminist movements, we can navigate the complexities of gender, religion, and ideology, striving towards a more inclusive and equitable society where all individuals are empowered, validated, and autonomous.

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WE ARE NOT CONFUSED: MISGENDERING EFFECTS ON TRANSGENDER YOUTH

SOFIA MAGNANTE

> Misgendering "denies a person the autonomy to determine and outwardly express their gender, whether it was done unintentionally or maliciously. Denying a person their autonomy is a form of violence and coercion" (Imani Shannon, 2022).

This essay expands on the injustices of misgendering and its effects on transgender youth while delving into the many differing aspects of the deteriorating self-esteem through others denying people's autonomy. This topic is important because constant misgendering can lead to low enough value of life that leads these transgender youth to suicide. We need to protect trans kids.

The importance of being seen and respected is increasingly important because research has shown that "82% of transgender individuals have considered killing themselves and 40% have attempted suicide, with suicidality highest among transgender youth" (Austin et al., Abstract, 2022). Having more than half of transgender youth considering killing themselves is infuriating because if people were more accepting of minorities, then suicide rates would decrease. In a study reported by the Trevor Project', it was found that "Transgender and nonbinary (TGNB) youth who reported gender identity acceptance from at least one adult had 33% lower odds of reporting a past-year suicide attempt" (Trevor News, 2021). Misgendering is a term that refers to someone using a pronoun that does not correctly reflect the intended recipient's gender identity. Being transgender means to identify with a gender that one was not assigned at birth. Those who do identify as male or female and were assigned that at birth are cisgender individuals. Transgender is also an umbrella term that refers to those who fall under the category of transgender, including non-binary and gender-fluid individuals. For example, "most people–including most transgender people –are either male or female. But some people don't neatly fit into the categories of 'man' or 'woman', or 'male' or 'female'" (A4TE, n.d.). These individuals do not neatly fit into categories of man or woman or what we also call the gender binary. To explain further,

> The idea that there are only two genders is sometimes called a "gender binary," because binary means "having two parts" (male and female). Therefore, "nonbinary" is one term people use to describe genders that don't fall into one of these two categories, male or female (A4TE, n.d.).

Those who are gender-fluid are more so "fluid" where they can be one gender, multiple genders, or no gender. Another important identity to include is Intersex. Although these individuals are of their own distinctiveness, they do not fall under the transgender umbrella. Intersex as an identity is similar to transgender in that they have existed in other cultures prior to this era.

> Intersex is a general term used for a variety of situations in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the boxes of "female" or "male." Sometimes doctors perform surgeries on intersex babies and children to make their bodies fit binary ideas of "male" or "female" (Planned Parenthood, n.d.).

Intersex people are calling on doctors to stop this practice because it violates human rights by performing surgeries without the newborn baby being able to decide once older and autonomous. The impact will linger:

> In the following decades, some people who underwent these surgeries as children began to speak out against them as human rights violations. Some said they had been assigned the wrong gender, while others had endured severe complications, including sexual dysfunction and infertility (Compton, 2018).

The term LGBTQIA+ is essential to transgender issues because it is about gender expression and sexual orientation. The abbreviation stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more.

Combating Myths about Trans Identity being a "Trend"

Transgender youth, specifically, are a large target of transphobia because they can be seen as confused about their gender or to be following a "trend." Transphobia is strong prejudice against transgender individuals. The driving force behind transphobia are ignorant individuals, right-wing politicians, and their followers. Currently, "right-wing anti-trans narratives are proliferating in the political sphere, setting up 2022 to be the worst year for anti-trans legislation in history. Already, more than 70 anti-trans bills have been introduced in state legislatures" (Caraballo & Greensmith, 2022). This idea of transgender individuals following a trend stems from more people feeling more comfortable coming out. Transgender people have always existed and will continue to exist. Right-wing *Daily Wire* host Michael Knowles called to eradicate transgenderism from public life. He stated, "Nobody is calling to exterminate anybody, because the other problem with that statement is that transgender people is not a real ontological category—it's not a legitimate category of being". Knowles continued, "There are people who think that they are the wrong sex, but they are mistaken. They're laboring under a delusion. And so, we need to correct that delusion" (as cited in Wade & Reis, 2023). Ignorant people do not think about other cultures and do not realize that this is not some new trend because identities similar to transgender people have and always existed. A lead journalist on race and color explains this, "Gender non-conformity is not a new phenomenon or trend—in

fact, gender diversity can be seen throughout history in countries around the world -- from ancient Greece to India to the Americas, according to historians" (Alfonseca, 2023). Transgender identities have been seen through the Hijra people of South Asia and Two-Spirited Lhamana people in Indigenous cultures. The Hijras are a population in South Asia that were born male who dress in traditionally feminine attire and makeup or who are born intersex. To reiterate, intersex is not a transgender identity, but past cultures would view the identity in ways that are similar to how we see transgender now. The two-spirited Lhamana people in Indigenous cultures refers to "both male and female spirits in one body" (Alfonseca, 2023), which is similar to gender-fluid identities. The two-spirited people were also seen as "gifted" or "honored" by carrying two spirits.

School Systems and Trans Students Today

Being in school and coming out as trans can be difficult because of name and pronoun changes being more laborious. In most cases, children grow up in one area and will grow up with their peers, which in turn makes it more difficult to change pronouns and names because they are the same people the student has been surrounded by since they were very young.

Some states are more pro-trans than others. According to the "State Legislative Tracker 2024: Pro-LGBTQI+ Legislation Affecting Schools", New York leads with 26 pro-trans bills, followed by Pennsylvania having 19, Minnesota having 15, and Massachusetts at 11 bills. Some other states have around 7 or 8; the rest have 2 to none. This illustrates how certain schools have many Pro-LGBTQI+ policies, while others have barely any.

An ACLU 2024 map shows a total of 531 anti-LGBTQ+ bills in the U.S. That many bills in the U.S. just against LGBTQ individuals! Although these bills are overall anti-LGBTQIA+, many are forced outing in schools along with censorship and other restrictions in school like sport activities.

Children are intelligent and can understand more than people think. They know if they do not feel comfortable in their own skin, and in the few cases that some children have transitioned and later decided to detransition, they still should be supported in figuring out who they are. It is suggested that

> …rates of regret have declined over the years as patient selection and treatment methods have improved. In a review of 27 studies involving almost 8,000 teens and adults who had transgender surgeries, mostly in Europe, the U.S and Canada, 1% on average expressed regret (Tanner, 2023).

Lack of support can harm any age group, especially youth. As a child who does not have much autonomy, a lack of support can make existing even harder. Autonomy means to be able to self-rule and make your own decisions without censorship. Children, to be able to do much of anything, need to go through their parents, depending on the parents. Lack of parental support for their child's identity can give that child even less autonomy, less options to be who they are openly, and more deteriorating mental health. Children who grow up in a household without positive relationships will have lasting effects of low self-esteem, feelings of loneliness, and often experience anxiety. Research on adolescents and children has "provided

evidence for an association between gender noncon-formity and internalizing symptoms, including anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms, internalizing symptoms, and suicidal ideation" (Munroe, 2020). Even if parents are supportive in every aspect of a child's life, if when they come out as transgender the parents do not take it well, these aforementioned effects can still come through. While there are not extensive studies on family functioning with "TGD (transgender and gender-diverse) youth, Munroe (2020) states

> there is clear precedent for the construct's relevance. Among cisgender children and adolescents, poor family functioning has been implicated in the development of and poor recovery from internalizing and externalizing psychopathology.

Being a reassuring parent through youth, discovering who they are is crucial in their development and can act as a protective factor from increasing mental health struggles.

Another important concept to think of when considering this topic is intersectionality, or the overlap of social categorization like class, race, gender, economic status, sexual orientation, and so on. Schmitz et al. (2020) hypothesized that marginalized groups that are in multiple minority groups experience more stigma with "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ+) young people of color encounter interlocking systems of social prejudice and discrimination". This in turn increases mental health issues and minority stress, which is the elevated level of stress that those in minorities tend to face. Minoritized communities already face so many hardships compared to the majority, but individuals with multiple minorities make it all the grimmer. There is evidence that "marginalized youth must navigate multiple sources of structural stigma and ensuing psychological stress, which can be particularly salient in our present sociohistorical moment, including perceptions of structural racism, gender policing, and religious discourses" (Schmitz, 2020). Obviously, these intense stressors are going to affect mental health and do nothing but cause harm to those who are multiply marginalized. The world is so diverse and that is such a beautiful thing about the human race, but many people do not contain the same viewpoint and continue to participate in personal prejudices that do nothing but wound harmless individuals who are simply living. Ignorant and close-minded people are the stem of these problems regarding minority disparities. It is hard to educate everyone, so there will always be individuals that will not be supporters of those who identify as transgender or anything outside of what society had once deemed "normal". However, if more people were open to learning and understanding, then living would feel so much safer for those at the margins.

Common Issues Facing Trans Teens

There is an importance for transgender youth in having a chosen name. While not everyone decides to change their name, for the people that do it is crucial for their name to be respected. If they are not able to express themselves at home, they may be able to have an outlet in school depending on the school, its location, and beliefs of the school administrators, teachers, and students. "Transgender youth with a chosen name, disclosure of gender identity to supportive family and teachers predicted chosen name use at home and school, respectively" (Pollitt et al., 2021). This is why chosen names can be so significant. It

shows that the individual is supported and surrounded by the right people, which in turn will keep their mental health more intact. Even if this child is located somewhere that is generally unsupportive of LGBTQIA+ individuals, I would hope that there is at least one person, parent, friend, or school staff who will make the child feel seen by using the name they want to be called. Yet, even in supportive communities, people still struggle to adjust to change in name or anything else, and what can come with that is hearing one's dead name, which is so disheartening. The term "dead name" refers to the name that transgender persons are given at birth and no longer use. According to Russel et al. (2018),

> for transgender youth who choose a name different from the one given at birth, use of their chosen name in multiple contexts affirms their gender identity and reduces mental health risks known to be high in this group.

Imagine you are in school and one day have something embarrassing happen to you. The other students then refer to you using an embarrassing nickname from that event. I imagine that feels similar to transgender individuals who are called their dead name, a label they cannot escape from. The use of chosen names is statistically shown to improve transgender individual's lives. A 2018 study by the Journal of Adolescent Health "found that transgender youth who could use accurate names and pronouns experienced 71% fewer symptoms of severe depression, a 34% drop in reported suicidal thoughts and a 65% decrease in suicide attempts" (as cited in Henry, 2021). Chosen names are proven to be impactful. Even if it does not help everyone, it can help someone. Even though there are people that do not feel the need to change their name, most individuals feel more aligned with how they identify if they are able to present in a certain way. Names can often reflect that. Calling someone by the proper name gives off the same effect as calling them by the correct pronoun. To put it into perspective for cisgendered individuals, imagine you were born and identify as a woman but appear more masculine just because of your style. Being called he/him pronouns would probably feel uncomfortable. This is the same case, except more so because trans try so hard to present a certain way that portrays how they feel and identify.

Having a good self-image is important to mental health, more than people would like to think. Many falling under the transgender umbrella experience body dysmorphia. This means that they focus a lot on believed flaws about their bodies and get feelings of distress due to it. Some people go through their childhood feeling confused over the intense emotions on their bodies and not know what it was. Sometimes, labels can be helpful to make others feel that they are not alone. Chella Man shares a personal account:

> I simply wish I knew the word "dysphoria" existed. If I had understood the blend of intense emotions stemming from my experience with gender identity, it would have brought me an incredible amount of comfort and relief. I would realize there must be an entire community in the same boat as me if there is a label for it" (Man, 2018).

Thinking about these issues through a psychological lens such as the bioecological model can show different perspectives on how much the ideals of society affect transgender individuals. This bioecological model

> is based on the idea that the relationships children have with parents and caregivers impacts their development—and that these relationships are affected by their work, school, and community settings, which are in turn affected by broader social, cultural, and policy conditions. These many layers of relationships and environments interact with each other —ultimately influencing how children develop and become resilient (Center for Child & Family Well-Being, n.d.).

The microsystem is the innermost layer and is the most influential, comprised of children's parents, teachers, friends, romantic partners, or even bullies. Society puts a lot of stress on appearance and impacts people more than they realize. The macrosystem is where social and political beliefs are categorized in the bioecological model, showing the impact society's ideals have on a person. There is a stress on people's bodies, shown through the "Thin Ideal" where women have been expected to fit the mold of being thin. A study by Mitchell et al. found misgendering was correlated to body dissatisfaction and dietary restraint. Just as there is a strain on women, there are strains on transgender individuals; they are transitioning or transitioned to a gender they were not born as, which ignorant people see as "wrong." Due to the strain, eating disorders or dietary restraints are common among transgender persons. Mitchell et al. state

> people who have taken fewer transition steps do not simply experience more misgendering and less congruence independently, as a result of having bodies/appearances that more closely resemble their assigned sex. Rather, misgendering relates to less congruence regardless of one's stage of transition, demonstrating that even subtle discrimination can be negatively associated with transgender individuals' body image and eating behaviors" (p. 1300, 2021).

Since society puts such a strain on how women are meant to be feminine and men are meant to be masculine, this furthers the dissatisfaction that transgender individuals feel about their body. Male and female are such tight boxes, hard to fit into even for some cisgender individuals. For example, if someone was assigned female at birth but transitioned to be male, they may still have breasts, especially for youth that may not be able to have top surgery. This will make this individual extremely uncomfortable because having breasts is an association with women and femininity, which this person does not identify with, furthering body issues and mental health.

Steps to Supporting Trans Youth

Transgender people are people, and all I want is for others to understand that. Misgendering someone repeatedly can harm them, they could develop eating disorders or restraints, self-esteem issues, body dysmorphia, other mental health issues, and even have suicidal ideations and attempts. I just want people to understand that the constant lack of respect and misgendering leads people to suicide.

Making mistakes is understandable. Change is not easy, but the fact that people just refuse to try simply because it is not what they believe in is not okay. There are steps that you can make to support transgender individuals starting with

> Let them know they are loved. Children need support from their parents and other adults in their life. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to express love—you just need to be

> supportive, accepting, and loving (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2021).

Even if parents may not be supportive, I hope that there is at least someone from school, adult or peer, a family member, family friend, or anyone that can be supportive of all transgender youth. If you come across or are surrounded by transgender youth, please let them know they are loved. At least one support can improve their lives.

The second step is to encourage discussions to help the child or adolescent open up about their experiences. Being an ear to listen is so important, especially if this child does not have much or any supports.

The third step is more specific to community members and parents: advocate for them in their school. Advocacy does not have to be specific to one child; there could be many transgender students. Making a broad statement about how to be more inclusive can help a lot. Children spend most of their time at school, so having that system and people there being supports are so beneficial.

The fourth step is to

> Help them connect with other individuals. Check to see if their school has a Gender & Sexualities Alliance (GSA); if not, advocate for one at (sic) be started. Introduce them to online resources and groups that will empower them, like The Q Card Project, Q Chat Space, The Trevor Project, and the It Gets Better Project" (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2021).

This is imperative because having someone to relate to is needed, no matter what age. Having resources and places where they can talk or even read about other's experiences will help youth feel less alone. There are so many people who share their experiences.

The fifth step is to educate yourself. This is the most basic, easy, and useful thing that someone can do. Simply being educated can halt more issues because you could educate others. Even though it is not your responsibility, education can help alleviate certain stigmas surrounding transgender identities.

Conclusion

I am non-binary. Yes, I am feminine. No, I do not owe you androgyny. Yes, my name is Sofia, but I like my name. Why change it? No, you may not like that, but I will not suffer my whole life to be easily digestible. Many people judge others based on how they dress, how they talk, how they have their hair, etc. In the case of transgender individuals, it can be incredibly important to be perceived a certain way. Of course, people do not live to be easily digestible for others, but it helps to be seen if they are seen as the gender identity they are. There are also those who fall under the trans umbrella, like non-binary, which may stray away from trying to dress to appear a certain way or gender. Androgyny, or appearing neither feminine or masculine is what people assume non-binary or queer gender people should present. Appearance does not equate gender, yet that is how many view the world. For reference, I dress rather femininely, so people assume I go by she/her pronouns when in fact I do not. We are not confused. We know who we are. No this is not a trend; I have been going by they/them pronouns for almost four years now. I do not see myself drifting from my identity just because it is not easy for others to understand. Educate yourself and figure it out because I am not here for you. I am here for me.

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