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Breaking the Gender Binary System: A Radical Solution for Gender Discrimination

Taline Abou Jaoude

Introduction

Four months before being born, a person's sex is determined and with it, society starts constructing the identity of the fetus. A nursery will be painted pink/blue, "gender appropriate" baby clothes will be chosen, and most importantly certain expectations of what this unborn child will be and what they will like will be constructed in their parents' and society's minds. If the child does not fulfil these gendered expectations, they risk facing violence, exploitation, and oppression. At a young age, this person will acquire gender-role awareness, a knowledge of what behaviors are expected of men and women in their societies (Bronstein, 2006). This will lead to the development of gender stereotypes which dictate that individuals who are born female or male reflect feminine or masculine attributes, respectively and exclusively (Steele, 2003). These oversimplified beliefs of what makes a man or a woman induce a spike in behavioral differences between boys and girls as they grow older. For example, boys tend to display instrumental learnt qualities, while girls tend to display expressive ones (Maisto and Morris, 2016). In their teenage years, having successfully gone through societal and home conditioning, as well as the gender non-sensitive education system, this teenager is ready to be sent out into the capitalist, patriarchal world. In other words, they have been, supposedly, properly "made" to fit into this world as they "fit" into the gender binary model that shapes our society.. After all these stages, this teenager is now a faithful guardian of the capitalist patriarchal system and a perfect gender police officer that bullies and harms those who were not successfully "made,," in other words, those who do not fit into the gender binary. This process is considered normal throughout most of the world.

This binary system comes with some problems of its own, the most glaring one being gender discrimination. Using root cause analysis, a scientific approach for identifying the underlying causes of a certain problem so that the most effective solutions can be identified and implemented ("What is root cause analysis," 2020), this paper aims to identify the main causes of gender discrimination in all its forms, from gender insensitive education to inequality in politics, law, and society. These causes are rooted in patriarchy and sexism, and a strong correlation between these systems and the gender binary system exists. Therefore, this paper will investigate the gender binary and its origin. All in all, this paper will try to debunk the origins of gender discrimination, in order to come up with practical solutions for breaking the binary system. The solutions that this paper presents are radical long-term solutions. However, the pressing temporary measures needed to address gender discrimination are also acknowledged. Finally, it is important to clarify that by breaking the binary system I do not mean that society should remove the binary genders, or those that identify with the categories of woman or man. Instead, I argue that society should acknowledge the existence of genders that are outside the binary. This way, we can ensure that no person faces discrimination based on their gender identity.

Origin of the Gender Binary and Patriarchal System: A history of Colonialism and Capitalism

Between biological determinism and cultural conditioning, the notion of gender is much disputed. In sociology, different fundamental theories such as the structural functional theory, the symbolic interaction theory, and the social conflict theory, define gender differently (Holmes, 2007). Nevertheless, I will limit this discussion to a brief historical timeline of gender and the gender binary system. Briefly, the gender binary system is a form of Western dominance and an issue of race and class that places white Western men at the top of the social pyramid followed by white woman as long as they protect this very system.

Gender diversity is found throughout the world. Cross-cultural comparative studies have identified the existence of genders and sexualities beyond the modern binary system in many different cultures. For instance, as highlighted in more than a hundred years of writings on the subject, in

indigenous North American cultures there are more than two gender categories (Jacobs et al., 2005). Although neither sex nor gender are binary, the gender binary system is so deeply rooted in our societies that most people think that this division is biological and was always there.

Nevertheless, the gender binary discourse is fairly new, and its emergence can be traced back and attributed to Western colonialism and the expansion of Western civilization. The worldview of colonialists was that there was a certain “civilized” way of living, and everything that did not “match” this ideal had to be exterminated or “fixed.” This notion of normal and abnormal served as the justification for Western cultures to inflict violence against other cultures. The gender binary system is one critical example of this violence. An example of postcolonial gender and pre-colonial gender binary construction comes from the Navajo culture. Before the 1890s the Navajo culture consisted of multiple genders. It was not until the 1930s that a dramatic change occurred in the Navajos’ gender system because of their exposure to Western culture and religious ideologies. A lot of Navajo moved underground and were discrete about their identities because of the influence of western culture and monotheistic religious norms that actively eradicated gender diversity. Further, Western schooling and education has prevented the transmission of Navajo tradition and thus genders beyond the binary are not known by young Navajos (Jacobs et al., 2005). Colonialism indeed ensured the spread of Western patriarchal gender norms. Yet, one might wonder who or what set these rules and norms in the West in the first place? As well, why was it essential for colonizers to establish the binary system on their stolen lands? These questions bring us to the origins of the patriarchal system.

Colonialism spread Western patriarchal norms that were already set in place in the western world. Prior to the 18th century and the rise of Enlightenment thinking, the concept of gender and sex fluidity existed in the Western world. The “one-sex model” is derived from the ideas of Galenic anatomy, which states that the reproductive organs of women and men are just interior and exterior versions of one another. This understanding gained wide acceptance at the time (Schleiner, 2000). Furthermore, in the 19th century, certain stereotypes were not established yet. For example, male children used to wear dresses, and the blue/pink distinction was the other way

around: blue was associated with girls, while pink was associated with boys. Yet, when companies discovered that by dividing clothes to exclusively fit one gender would make them gain more money, certain clothes were assigned to certain genders. And with the emergence of Freudian and Boorman theories stating that gender roles of masculinity and femininity develop in the phallic stage and are directly associated with the sex of a person, parents started to dress their children in more masculine and feminine ways (Paoletti, 2012). After the man-the-hunter theory and religious arguments began to fall out of favor, pseudoscientific practices started to lead traditionalist arguments to justify male supremacy and hegemony (Lerner, 1986).

It was not until the modern era that society began to try to distinguish “true” scientific data using what is now known as the peer-review process. In other words, scientists would review the work of other scientists to make sure that the paper follows the scientific process, the data submitted is accurate, and that proper methods were used to record data. However, this process did not necessarily prevent the rise of certain problematic scientific views, such as the dominant view within the field of phrenology that “proved,” through the analysis of skulls, that people of higher classes and from the white race were inherently better than any other race. Similarly, men displaying masculine traits were considered inherently better than women (Allen, 1984). As stated by Lerner (1986), “race, class and gender oppression are interconnected and have been from the beginning” (p. 103).

The new binary gender system imposed on indigenous cultures through colonialism is based on Eurocentric, global capitalism (Lugones, 2008). A lot of examples of how the gender binary system is an important capitalist tool can be given, but one important example of capitalist and marketing profits that arise from the gender binary can be taken from the previously discussed gender stereotypes about kids’ fashion. Companies use the “more you fragment the more you sell” strategy, which is the idea that if the product is targeted at a specific group of people this would drive the sales up since each group would have to buy their “own” products. Towards that end, companies capitalize on parents’ desires to make sure that their kids “fit in” with current trends, including the various colors and styles associated with each gender. In this way, companies ensure

that parents continue to spend money and buy new clothing for their children that “fits” their child’s binary, which in turn perpetuates the gender binary.

The gender binary system and the patriarchal system are interconnected in such a way that it is hard to establish which one originated “first.” Regardless which originated “first”, both systems reinforce each other. Without patriarchal norms and the superiority of masculinity over femininity, the binary system would collapse and without the binary system, these norms would not exist.

Origin and Aspects of Gender Discrimination

As stated previously, the hierarchal gender binary system established inequalities between women and men, and this led to discrimination against women in all aspects of life. People outside the gender binary and societies with multiple genders are therefore a major “threat” to the system, and are thus subjected to all kinds of oppression. For example, women worldwide are subjected to violence, lack of security, unequal labor laws, unequal personal laws, and many other kinds of oppression all tracing back to patriarchal norms and harmful stereotypes. Although it looks like gender non-conforming people are the only ones suffering from the binary system, if we look closer, we can see that it also harms cisgender people. Thus, sexism’s root cause is the gender binary system, and all the harmful stereotypes of the patriarchal systems on all genders can be traced back to the binary system.

Milestones on the road to breaking the gender binary

To fight this system, a lot of theories have been developed and a lot of actions are still being recorded. Perhaps the most relevant theories that integrate and advocate for breaking the gender binary would be queer theory:

In 1991, Teresa de Lauretis used the words “queer theory” to describe a way of thinking that did not use heterosexuality or binary gender constructs as its starting point, but instead argued for a more fluid concept of identity. (Giesecking, 2008, p. 737)

This theory would be beneficial to society by employing a way of thinking to solve numerous issues including gender discrimination. In research conducted to showcase gender discrimination in employment, Moss-Racusin et al. (2012) reported that randomly assigned female names were less likely to be hired by faculty members for the same position as randomly assigned male names. Such stereotypical practices derive from systemic sexist beliefs that women are inferior to and therefore less capable than men (Davies, 2018). One way of operationalizing queer theory as stated would be career development programs that take into account the complexity and the fluidity of sexual and gender identity as well as human resources departments that acknowledge the latter (Gedro and Mizzi, 2014).

Another practical example of embedding queer theory in the community would be the inclusion of queer theory in management courses taken for career development, this way managers would be aware of sexual fluidity and will be less likely to discriminate against them. One example of this comes from LebMash, one of the Lebanese NGOs I interviewed along with several other students as part of our course final project. LebMash discussed their ongoing work that includes training employees in firms, as well as doctors and medical teams, about nonbinary sexualities and how to challenge gender-based discrimination and violence.

Another policy implemented to ensure more inclusivity beyond the binary system was the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDF) initiative that created a new category of non-binary designers (TED, 2019).

Better media representation has also acquainted more people with the restrictive force of the binary system. In 2018, "Let's Breakthrough," an activist media platform, developed a resource guide known as Breakthrough @ School. This resource guide aims to help students foster a safe school environment free from gender-based violence. The digital component includes animations designed to offer audiences fun takes on communication, consent, and personal space (Let's Breakthrough, 2021). Programs like Breakthrough @ School have made made important progress

toward shifting public opinion towards gender diversity. As a result, celebrities and artists worldwide are more and more comfortable coming out as people beyond the binary.

Unfortunately, many of these initiatives are being met with heavy backlash. Implementation of these gender theories are threatening the entire patriarchal system and therefore they are met with strong opposition. Sometimes this opposition is unconscious since, as discussed, people are conditioned and constantly reinforced into the binary model and heteronormativity from a young age, which perpetuates patriarchy and the binary as the norm. Of course, the strongest support for the gender binary often comes from those who are benefitting the most from this system. If tomorrow, we were to wake up in a gender-equitable world, patriarchal men would not be able to control women and benefit from feeling superior. Worldwide, companies would lose a big part of their profits. Marketing schemes would fall out of favor, and, more broadly, the capitalist system would suffer.

Moving Forward Towards a Gender Equitable Society

After establishing the root causes of the problem and exploring previous achievements, I will now identify the best ways to induce change. We already know why the binary system was created and we already know that the West used deception, manipulation, and violence to implement their ideas. In order to achieve change, we must use new strategies and methods, since those that have been used so far have not been entirely successful. Nevertheless, we cannot assume that this system is static and only with re-colonization and brainwashing techniques would we be able to change it. A lot of socially acceptable measures could help us induce change over the long-term. Regardless of whether you believe that feminine and masculine characteristics are innate like Carl Jung's theory of anima and animus, or if you believe that children learn these stereotypes during childhood, it is evident that the gender binary should be dismantled. It is important, therefore, to start at the "source" of these learned behaviors. In other words, gender reforms should focus on children and how they develop in relation to the binary. Parents should raise their children in gender neutral ways and let them indicate which gender they identify with, if any. Furthermore,

parents must teach their children gender sensitivity. However, children can also be used as a source of knowledge for their parents. They can learn about the gender binary in schools and, as a result, they can teach their parents. Gender neutrality, when a society avoids distinguishing between individuals based on their gender, should be taught in schools, not just in theory but also in practice. Colleges and universities worldwide should include the history of the gender binary system in their curricula and schools should implement and normalize policies that promote gender equality. In her famous psychological experiment “The eye of the storm,” Jane Elliot demonstrated how easy it is to influence young kids’ minds. Jane Elliot divided the class into two groups, with one group told that they were “inferior” to the other, and then recorded the behavior of the two groups. The superior group acted in an entitled superior way after being told that they were “superior,” and the inferior group started doubting their abilities and considered themselves to be unfairly inferior even though these were fake categories. Although the focus of this experiment was on racial discrimination, it provides valuable insight regarding gender discrimination (Volk and Beemen, 1998). All aspects of gender equality are related to each other: if you educate the youths to be gender sensitive in the classroom, you will cultivate a gender sensitive future society.

Another crucial component of breaking the gender binary includes promoting freedom of expression. This includes giving people the freedom of clothing choices, pronouns, and interests beyond the gender binary. Part of this freedom of expression means increasing the media representation of non-binary groups across various platforms. This is especially important for promoting inclusivity. Books, articles, and information about the gender binary system should be available to the public and not just to scholars or those with the financial means to access such literature.

Finally, removing the capitalist system through different policies, laws, and reforms is an important step toward dismantling patriarchy and the gender binary. Again, by saying that we need to break the gender binary I do not in any way mean that we should erase the identities of “woman” and “man.” By “breaking the gender binary,” I mean acknowledging the existence of more than two

genders and breaking out of the stereotypical patriarchal notions enforced by this binary system. This is important because the system is not “broken”: it is actually working as it is supposed to. The system is supposed to uphold and maintain the gender binary. However, by breaking the system, we are truly demanding an alternative.

Conclusion

A woman not receiving an education, a woman followed on the streets by a predatory stranger, a woman harassed at work, a woman not given equal pay, a woman victim of child marriage, a woman being subjected to female genital mutilation: these women cannot simply wait for the emergence of a new system. The time needed to break the gender binary system is not a practical solution for her. For that reason, gender equitable policies must be implemented immediately to protect and support these women from gender discrimination. Policies must also work to dismantle the gender binary in order to protect and support non-binary people.

Yet, the long-term goal of breaking the system is equally as important as these immediate policies. It is a preventative measure that ensures future generations will not have to experience the same gender discrimination that we face today. It is evident that only by fixing the root causes and inducing a radical change can we permanently solve this drastic problem. Thus, temporary and preventative measures should work hand in hand to ensure the end of gender discrimination.

Somewhere far away, perhaps, in a not-so-different universe that simply developed differently from ours, people are writing white papers and policies to end patriarchy and discrimination against men. No matter how ridiculous this proposal might be, it does, however, make it painfully obvious that gender inequality was the result of a series of historical events. It was not “predetermined” or “natural.” Thus, education, policies, laws, representation, and awareness are desperately needed to try and fix the damage done by our ancestors and perpetuated by those in power.

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