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Toxic Masculinity and the Path to Social Equality

The social construct of masculinity has been used to describe men since the beginning of society. Quite subjective, this concept of what it means to “be a man” has changed throughout the centuries, as new social ideals come and go. In light of recent events and current culture, the term “toxic masculinity” has been coined to describe the social theory or belief that one’s manliness is determined by “violence, sex, status, and aggression” (O’Malley). Now in an age immersed not only in print media but technological media as well, the idea of what it means to be masculine has been greatly distorted and misinterpreted as something harmful. This perception of masculinity has been increasingly evident in current society as homophobia, rape culture, and violence are normalized— all of which are directly or indirectly influenced by the stride for male dominance and the desire to “be a man.” In a society that is constantly exposed to various forms of media that portray what it means to be “masculine” or “feminine,” young boys are instilled with a stereotypical and unhealthy view of how they are “supposed to act.” In order to create a world where children are not held back by existing attitudes, society must change the way they raise boys in order to promote equality and discourage the toxic masculinity rooted in modern thinking.

Masculinity and femininity are forces that go hand-in-hand. They are used to describe characteristics associated with the male and female sexes, respectively. Throughout history, the
ideal characteristics and traits for each gender have changed, but the connection between the two remains consistent. In order to understand the gender-related issues facing the world today, it is important to understand traditional gender stereotypes and how they fit into the context of the modern world. The present-day view of masculinity and femininity can be traced back to the prejudice that human society was built on: the concept that men are the superior sex. The connection and relationship between gender roles has been present throughout the centuries and evident in places around the world. Even as new societal ideals for the two genders come and go, the “ideal” man and woman are intertwined. While society’s view of gender equality has slowly moved away from past ideology, the sexist belief that men are “better” than women still exists around the world today. In a sense, this way of thinking has re-emerged in society as toxic masculinity. Embodying masculine qualities allows one to identify more with the male sex, while toxic masculinity describes the idea that manliness can be achieved by asserting dominance and superiority over women. In a fast-paced society driven by the internet and technology, it is important to recognize how the media misrepresents the meaning of masculinity and femininity which often feeds the unhealthy development of toxic masculinity.

To combat the misogyny present in current media, society must change the way they raise boys to discourage the toxic stride for male dominance over women. Children of today’s society are growing up in a culture where the internet and a world of media is at their fingertips, which can reap both positive and negative results. Kate Lombardi, author of *The Mama’s Boy Myth*, argues that as female empowerment moves forward, boys are held back and “bombarded by a culture of…violent video games, degrading pornography, and with rallying cries like ‘Bros before hoes’” (Lombardi). While girls are reinforced with their value and worth, the same
message is lacking for boys. Sexist media is still heavily prominent in modern culture, and although it may be subtle, new technology allows it to surround children from birth. This “indirect” sexism implements the stereotypical ideals of the male and female genders, which often encourage male domination and power over women. Parents must recognize this issue, and instead of ignoring it, they must use today’s culture as a way to teach their children, especially their boys, why gender equality is important. Tim King, the founder of Urban Prep Academies, a network for high school boys, believes that as boys are encouraged to reflect an unrealistic version of masculinity in the media, they “are encouraged to view girls through the lens of some idealized version of femininity” (King). In order to achieve true gender equality, which is ultimately the final goal, society must educate both boys and girls not just about their own worth, but the worth of the opposite sex as well. Both girls and boys should be taught the basic concepts of inclusion, individuality, and equality, despite the mixed messages in modern culture. In order to build a world where men and women share equal roles in society, it is necessary to recognize sexism in the media and to teach children the connection between masculinity and femininity.

The unhealthy bombardment of idealized masculinity and femininity in the media consequently affects children in educational and social environments. The violent and degrading culture surrounding young children fuel their insecurities and affect how they view and treat others. Schooling and education is one of the main outlets where children are exposed to the concepts of being masculine or feminine- and teaching boys gender equality and acceptance will help create a positive environment that maximizes a child’s learning potential. In 1972, Title IX was enacted, prohibiting “discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally funded education program or activity” (United States Dept. of Justice). Title IX was drafted in response to the
claim that exclusion in education has negative and long-lasting psychological effects on students. Now, the media of today’s age plays an indirect yet crucial role in the issue of inclusion in education. Leonard Sax, a physician and author of *The Collapse of Parenting* and *Boys Adrift*, discusses how a negative perception of masculinity has affected children in schools and school activities: “As a result, many boys today define masculinity negatively… They are anxious to shut girls out, because part of the appeal of the sport is that girls are not included” (Sax). As a result of lasting stereotypical beliefs and the modern media, children are not only discouraged by the world from a path “unfitting” for their gender, but they are conditioned to be close-minded and judgeful of each other. Teaching kids to be accepting of others not only promotes inclusivity in schools and social environments, but of self-love and positive self-image as well. It is crucial that parents in today’s society stress and demonstrate acceptance in order to help their kids build a safe space to learn about the world and about each other.

The issue of toxic masculinity in today’s society is widely debated with opinions ranging from extremely conservative to hyper-feminist. As men and women alike begin to take a stand against the misogyny rooted in our culture, biological factors interfere. It can be argued that categorizing natural or innate male behavior as “toxic” paints all men as scapegoats and consequently damages their self-worth and development, especially for young boys. Christina Hoff Sommers, author of *The War Against Boys*, advocates that while schools have worked to include girls in activities, boys are neglected as a result. Sommers discusses that instead of changing the way boys are raised, parents should “[work] with, not against, the young male imagination” (Sommers). In her opinion, as society attempts to equalize education and provide girls with the same opportunities as boys, parents and educators tend to discourage the usually
violent “natural instinct” of young boys. As a result, boys fall behind in society, especially in education. Furthermore, Sommers argues that parents should not go against their boys’ “nature,” yet it has been proven through scientific research that stereotypical behavior for men is not innate in the biology of the male sex, but shaped by society (Clemens). While young boys should not be condemned for their imagination or creativity, it is never an excuse to encourage violence or even harm others. Educators and parents must change how they raise boys, not to mutate the male sex into being more like females, but to change how young boys perceive others. The world must teach their kids outside of the societal norms in order to break the gender constructs and expectations that hold back society’s children from reaching their potential.

Social equality is a concept that has always belonged in a perfect, unrealistic world until now. Organizations and movements are emerging in order to empower women to achieve their goals. Yet as humans continue to evolve intellectually, traditional and discriminatory attitudes hold society back. One of the most significant social issues today is the development of toxic masculinity and gender inequality. “Boys will be boys” can no longer be made as an excuse for unacceptable behavior. It is absolutely imperative that parents change the way they raise children, especially boys, in order to promote acceptance and open mindedness. The human species has the potential for limitless accomplishment, but the world cannot take a step forward if its mindset is fixed on the past. While society may have a long road ahead on the way to social equality, it is almost in reach. Teaching kindness and awareness to children not only raises sophisticated men and women, but builds a more sophisticated and progressive society.
Works Cited

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