

# INVOKE

VOLUME 6

Gangs, Violence Against  
Women and Medicine

## Hegemonic Masculinity and Subjugated Femininity: Deconstructing the Binary

Stephanie Shin

**ABSTRACT:** Many social theories, particularly in the field of gender studies, posit that masculinity is hegemonic, whilst femininity is subjugated. Such theories lead audiences to believe that femininity is always lesser than masculinity, lacking the power we as a society attribute to men. However, whilst even the most powerful of femininities, such as normative white femininity, will never occupy a position at its apex, the gender hierarchy certainly privileges this femininity over not only others, but also alternative forms of masculinity, which exist outside of the normative realm. As such, while it can be said that femininity is not hegemonic, to say that femininity does not have hegemonic features would be irresponsible, especially when one considers the relevance of intersectional scholarship.

*Keywords:* hegemonic masculinity, femininity, binary

In our society, various social constructions define what it means to be a “man” and what it means to be a “woman”. Such constructions include not only sex and gender, but also—and perhaps most importantly—power. These constructions of power not only dictate which types of behaviour are acceptable, and for whom, but also the position of individuals in a hierarchy of privilege and authority. Hegemonic masculinity—a form of masculinity which not only serves as an ideal type, but makes all other inequality appear natural as well—is placed at the apex of this hierarchy. This same hierarchy privileges certain types of women, namely those who are white and upper class, over not only other women, but also over men who embody versions of masculinity which exist outside of the normative realm. Thus, while in relation to the dominant and socially accepted form of masculinity, which assumes whiteness and overarching power, femininity simply cannot be hegemonic. When taken on

its own, and when considering principles of intersectionality, it is clear to see that femininity possesses hegemonic traits which privileges some over others. Such unbalanced privilege and power often results in dire consequences, such as the whitewashing of otherwise intersectional issues, and the diminishing of racialized and gender diverse voices throughout society.

To fully grasp why femininity cannot embody dominance in the same ways in which masculinity can, it is essential to understand what exactly enables masculinity to be so powerful in the first place. As the discourse surrounding gender identities posits, there is a common “prescription that one must be *either* masculine or feminine” (Raymond 1979, p. 135, as cited in West, Zimmerman, 1987, p. 145). However, such categories of identity are not simply value free labels which are depicted as opposite of one another. Rather, in Western societies, the categories of masculinity and femininity certainly have

value, with greater privilege and power being awarded to those who identify as masculine. This is undoubtedly a result of the presence of the patriarchy, which not only values the masculine over the feminine, but through awarding the masculine more power in politics, property, and moral authority, actively devalues the feminine as well. Thus, in a simple ranking of masculinity and femininity, controlling for all other variables and characteristics, such as race and class, the masculine will always occupy the pinnacle of power, maintaining its position there at the disadvantage of the feminine below. As such, the very existence and maintenance of masculinity is “dependent on a contrast with femininity that is weak, subordinate, and low status” (Wade & Marx Ferree, 2019, p. 155). In this sense, not only does the masculine profit at the expense of the feminine, but individuals occupying a very specific type masculinity profit at the expense of all other individuals and identities, including those who embody alternative masculinities, such as the effeminate, queer men, and stay-at-home fathers. This masculinity is hegemonic masculinity, one which benefits from the disadvantage of others.

As previously stated, femininity is in a subordinated position in relation to masculinity. That being said, similarly to how a specific type of masculinity represses all other identities, there is also a particular—and very specific—type of woman that dominates the realm of femininity. This femininity is normative white femininity, which according to Kathy Deliovsky, is the “compulsion to adopt styles and attitudes consistent with an imposed white feminine aesthetic” (Deliovsky, 2008, p. 50). Those who embody this femininity are namely Anglo-Saxon, Protestant women who personify the conventional definition of pale and slender beauty. While they embody ideal femininity, they cannot overtake positions of power which those who embody ideal masculinity

hold, they certainly dominate and exploit the positions of women who are outside of this identity, such as racialized women who are deemed “exotic”, single mothers living in the inner city, and butch lesbians. Such an imposition of white femininity is perhaps best understood when we consider the experiences of Sojourner Truth, a black woman and former slave. Truth was silenced by white feminism over the fear that her proclamations could threaten the limited and precarious privilege that had been accrued by white activists of the time (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 153). In this silencing of Truth, white feminists affirmed their position in the hierarchy of gendered power: below white men, but above black women, effectively creating a feminist movement that excluded any woman who was not white. Thus, while not hegemonic in the sense of profiting from the subordination of all others, normative white femininity very clearly advances and maintains privilege through the continued disadvantage of other women who cannot achieve the mandated white aesthetic.

Those who embody normative white femininity not only dominate those women who are outside of the white aesthetic—women of colour or women of lower socioeconomic class—they are also privileged in comparison to various classes of *men* who are outside of the white, powerful masculine ideal. As one group of writers reminds readers, “hegemonic masculinity remains an ideal that is not realizable for most men” (Ricciardelli, Clow, White, 2010, p. 65). This unattainability is undoubtedly due to the fact that “gender is not an isolated social fact” but rather an intersection between “all other distinctions between people made important by our society” (Wade & Marx Ferree, 2019, p. 95). In this regard, the intersection of gender with ability, race, class, and so many other aspects of the human identity, positions individuals in varying positions within the power hierarchy. While the hegemonic ideal

of masculinity will invariably occupy the most powerful positions, white normative femininity, as well as other forms of semi-privileged femininity—for example, a highly educated, wealthy Asian-American woman—have the potential to accrue more power than men who are outside of the societal ideal of masculinity. Men outside of this ideal could include a working class African-American, transgender man, or undocumented male immigrant in America.

As it is clear to see, in a Western society which is still grappling with the influences of the patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity is privileged over all identities, even profiting from the disadvantage of others. In this regard, no matter how privileged a feminine body becomes, because of the patriarchy, femininity—even that of idyllic normative white femininity—does not have the capability to surpass the pinnacle of masculinity in terms of power. Thus, it cannot be hegemonic. However, to say that femininity does not have dominating features would be not only irresponsible, but would disregard much of the existing discourse surrounding ideas of masculinity and femininity. White normative femininity undoubtedly advances at the expense of not only women who are outside of this norm, but also men who are outside of socially sanctioned masculinity. As such, while it will never occupy the hegemonic apex in the manner masculinity does, white normative

femininity is, at the very least, a close second in many regards.

### References

- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139-68.
- Deliovsky, K. (2003). Normative white femininity: Race, gender and the politics of beauty. *Atlantis*, 33(1), 49-59.
- Ricciardelli, R., Clow, K.A., & White, P., (2010). Investigating Hegemonic Masculinity: Portrayals of Masculinity in Men's Lifestyle Magazines. *Sex Roles*, 63(1-2), 64-78.
- Wade, L., & Marx Ferree, M., (2019). *Gender* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D.H., (1987). Doing Gender. *Gender and Society*, 1(2), 125-51.