

3, Simone de Beauvoir

I'd like to begin my essay by my interpretation of the quote I chose. I personally believe the author is saying that gender is not determined by the sex assigned at birth. According to the author, being a woman is a role into which the individual progresses during an unspecified amount of time. I'd also like to mention that even though I will be mostly writing about women and womanhood in my essay, most of my claims can be easily applied to men and manhood as well.

I define gender as a social role because it is a construct which determines the actions and behavior expected from the individual. This social role is assigned to the individual usually directly after birth based on physical traits (primary gender traits such as the genitals and secondary gender traits such as the neurochemical situation). However, this assigned social role doesn't always correspond to the individual's self identity and it can actually often interfere with this person's personal freedom.

Another term I will be using is gender roles, which are the collections of behaviors and beliefs which are connected with gender. They dictate what should a person look like and behave like based on their gender.

Today's society divides people into two genders/sexes - male and female. The division into genders is applied in almost every aspect of the individual's life – both treatment received from other people and expectations the individual is supposed to fulfill (career-wise, family-wise, appearance-wise etc). People are also forced to be attracted to the opposite gender by our heteronormative society. Generally speaking, the more expectations of society people fulfill, the better treatment they receive. Negative backlash, such as discrimination is often present if the individual doesn't behave the way the social role dictates.

A controversial discussion can be led when the topic of people born with primary gender traits belonging to both genders (abnormal genitalia) comes up. The society is not really sure how to treat or judge a person who can't be sorted in the stereotypical male/female division system. That is why often gender assignment surgeries occur soon after birth of such individual or before the beginning of puberty, to 'make things easier' both for the person

and the society. Surgery or not, said individual may or may not be comfortable with the gender chosen and many of them actually prefer to keep both gender traits. They are often judged for it and the society is confused in how to treat them.

This is also why I believe gender as a social construct harms people's personal freedom. Not everyone identifies completely with the gender they are born into. The right to self-identity is definitely a part of the individual's personal rights and it should be granted. Our physical traits should not determine so much about what is expected from us. Luckily, today's society is becoming more open-minded in most parts of the world so some level of self-identity is granted. However, most of us still have gender stereotypes and connections coded in our brains and we use these beliefs to judge people and give out treatment and behavior corresponding with the results of our judgement.

To transit back to the quote, I will first comment on the biological determination of gender. As I already mentioned, gender is biologically determined by our physical traits. The sex hormones which our bodies produce can also influence our behavior in a more stereotypically manly/womanly way – for example, testosterone, the male sex hormone, is connected to aggressivity, therefore men are seen as more aggressive than women because they produce more of this hormone. Physiology of men and women also determines their behavior when it comes to reproduction and the reproductional behavior of both genders is also setting up a bar for people's behavior in other areas of life. For example, as the female body sustains and helps create the child during pregnancy and also creates a source of nutrition for the child afterwards (breast milk), women are often seen as more caring and nurturing in other areas of life as well.

The psychological determination of gender is much more complex. Gender identity is definitely influenced by the person's upbringing – the individual's family and the environment around support most types of behavior and interests which are stereotypically connected with the gender the child is assigned. To give an example, toys are a gendered product – most dolls at the market are targeted at girls and most toy cars are targeted at boys. Another example is the colour-coding of children: girls are traditionally dressed in pink and boys are dressed in blue. The children are also learning gender roles by observing and copying the adults in their lives. Religion shows children what men and women are supposed to be like as well. The child essentially becomes a man or a woman by being raised a certain way.

Another way which makes children and especially teenagers accept their gender more are ironically the struggles connected with it. Sharing the social problems induced by gender and gender roles with other people of the same gender brings the individual psychologically closer not only to the people, but also to the culprit of said problems – gender. Especially being a woman in modern society means conquering many struggles, which make many

women wear womanhood as a badge of pride - which might also be another interpretation of the *becoming a woman* mentioned in the quote.

However, not every individual accepts the gender identity which is forced onto them by their family, environment or struggles. Self-identity may differ from what the child is taught to feel. Many people are partially or completely uncomfortable in the identity they live.

And it isn't only gender identity which makes some people suffer – it is also said gender roles. Even though a woman may be completely comfortable with her identity as woman, embracing it and being happy with it, she can suffer because of the roles society is forcing her into playing. As women are seen as nurturing mothers (based mostly on their biology and reproductional behavior of their bodies which I explained above), they are often forced to actually become mothers and also to behave more caringly towards other people. To elaborate more on the same example, people are taught to judge women who choose not to become mothers harshly. Women are often put in front of a decision of choosing between their family and career. Neither decision is the right one for the society's judgement. Choosing career means not playing the expected mother role. Choosing family means not discovering their full potential as individuals. Choosing both means not being consistent enough and not putting enough effort into either. On this example of social judgement it is very visible what toxic concept gender roles actually are. No matter what a woman chooses in this situation, she will always receive negative backlash.

Inequal comparisons between men and women are also harming many. As aggressivity is seen as a male trait (it is commonly induced by testosterone, the male sex hormone, as I mentioned above), men are supported in using it to their advance. The perfect example is a typical workplace – while an ambitious and aggressive male boss is admired and respected, an ambitious and aggressive female boss is usually complained about and described by derogative terms. To turn the example around, society also dictates that a heterosexual man should make more money than his partner. Therefore men who have economically (or socially) superior female partners are seen as weak, submissive and unmanly by the society.

Another point worth mentioning is the problems transsexual people face. If a person takes on a different gender identity, many people don't accept it and refuse to see them as the gender said person identifies with. A very recent example can be provided – the controversial decision of some states of USA which forces people to use the public toilet meant for their biological gender, not necessarily the gender corresponding with their identity. The purpose of this decision is to stop men from dressing as women and then spying on them at the toilets. It seems as if no one has considered how spied on might a transgender woman be at the men's public toilet.

These problems with gender identity and gender roles raise a question if gender is even a needed concept. The first point I'd like to make in regards to this question is that gender

isn't as important as it used to be. The human race isn't threatened by extinction, so reproductional traits of people aren't an important enough factor to use for sorting people. This way of sorting people persists mostly because people are taught to cope with the world around them by classifying it and the categories of men and women are inherited from our culture. Also, gender identity is an outdated concept because it isn't always as rigid as it was seen in the past. An individual's gender identity may be fluid – there's individuals ('genderfluid') whose identity changes and said individuals may feel like a man one day and like a woman the next. Another group of people identifies as 'agender', which means that they consider themselves genderless and they do not identify with either gender.

Although the points I made speak more for the unnecessary of genders, I cannot imagine a world with no gender. Considering that the biological traits that create the social concept of gender are actually necessary for our survival as species, erasing them is impossible. What the society is capable fo getting rid of is the gender roles, mostly by enlightening the members of the society and discussing the problems that gender roles bring.

To conclude, one truly rather becomes a woman than being born one in my opinion. The need to reshape the social norms and constructs to actually take this thought into consideration is becoming more and more apparent. Another thing that needs redefining is womanhood, manhood and gender in general. These concepts will hopefully slowly evolve and modify to accomodate society's needs better and to make the topic less problematic for all of us.