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## Understanding Gender Identity, Expression, and the Need to End Stigmatization in African Societies

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### Abstract

This article explores the complex intersection of gender identity, cultural expectations, and stigmatization in African societies. Despite advances in global understanding of gender diversity, many African communities continue to uphold rigid, binary gender norms that marginalize individuals whose identities or behaviors deviate from these expectations. The paper examines the biological, psychological, and social foundations of gender identity, debunks myths surrounding sexual orientation and gender expression, and highlights the psychological harm caused by cultural rejection and forced conformity. It further addresses practices such as taking gender-nonconforming children to religious institutions under the belief that they are spiritually afflicted—an act rooted in ignorance and fear rather than science or compassion. The article calls for a shift toward inclusive, evidence-based education, mental health support, and societal reform. Through literature review and scientific research, it advocates for policies and attitudes that protect gender-diverse individuals from harm and affirm their right to live authentically within their communities.

**Keywords:** *Gender identity, Gender dysphoria, LGBT + in Africa, Gender Stigmatization, African cultural norms, Sexual orientation, Intersex conditions, Homophobia in Africa, Forced marriages and sexuality, Psychological trauma, Inclusive societies*

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### 1. Introduction

In many African countries, societal norms strongly enforce traditional gender roles, leading to the stigmatization of individuals who do not conform to expected gender behaviors. Boys who exhibit behavior perceived as “feminine,” and girls who act in ways deemed “masculine,” are often ridiculed, punished, or ostracized (Savin-Williams, 2006). This stigmatization stems largely from misinformation, cultural rigidity, and lack of awareness about the complexities of human biology, psychology, and gender identity. This article seeks to educate and clarify that nonconforming gender behavior is not the fault of the child and should not be met with hostility.

#### 1.1. Biological Sex vs. Gender Identity

Biological sex refers to physical characteristics, including chromosomes (XX or XY), hormones, and anatomy (LeVay, 2011). Typically:

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XX = Female

XY = Male

These are determined at conception. However, gender identity is a person's internal sense of who they are—male, female, both, neither, or somewhere along the gender spectrum. This internal identity may not align with the individual's assigned sex at birth ([American Psychiatric Association, 2013](#)).

### 1.2. Does XY Always Result in “Male” Behavior?

**No.** While XY chromosomes define biological maleness, they do not control personality, behavior, or gender identity. The assumption that biological sex directly translates to traditionally “male” behavior is scientifically inaccurate and socially harmful. Human development is far more nuanced.

Gender-related behavior and self-perception are shaped by an intricate interplay of biological and environmental influences:

- **Brain development and prenatal hormone exposure:** During fetal development, hormonal activity, particularly the presence or absence of androgens like testosterone, plays a role in shaping the brain's structure and function. However, sensitivity to these hormones varies. In some individuals with XY chromosomes, their brain may develop in a pattern typically associated with female identity due to differences in hormone receptor activity or timing ([Bao and Swaab, 2011](#)).
- **Genetics beyond sex chromosomes:** While the X and Y chromosomes contribute to biological sex, thousands of other genes throughout the genome influence personality, temperament, and gender identity. Variations in these genes can affect how a person experiences and expresses gender.
- **Epigenetics:** This refers to changes in gene expression caused by environmental factors rather than changes in the DNA sequence itself. Stress, nutrition, chemical exposure, and maternal conditions during pregnancy can all influence how genes are activated or silenced, impacting emotional regulation, gender identity, and behavior.
- **Environmental factors:** Family dynamics, early childhood experiences, cultural norms, and educational environments play crucial roles in shaping a child's gender expression. These factors can either reinforce a person's internal gender identity or pressure them into suppressing it.
- **Psychological and social experiences:** Gender identity is also influenced by deeply personal psychological experiences. How a person feels about their body, how others treat them, and how they internalize gender roles all contribute to the development of gender identity over time. Social rejection, acceptance, or trauma can significantly shape how gender is expressed or hidden.

In summary, the presence of XY chromosomes does not guarantee that an individual will exhibit stereotypically male behaviors or identify as male. Gender identity is rooted in complex biological and psychological processes that extend far beyond chromosomal definitions. Recognizing this complexity is essential to fostering a more inclusive and scientifically informed society.

## 2. Understanding Gender Dysphoria

Gender dysphoria is a medically recognized condition in the DSM-5. It refers to emotional distress caused by a mismatch between a person's gender identity and their assigned sex at birth ([American Psychiatric Association, 2013](#)). Symptoms may include anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and a deep discomfort with one's physical body.

Treatment may involve therapy, hormone replacement therapy, and, for some, surgical intervention. However, not every transgender person experiences dysphoria, and not all who do seek medical transition ([LeVay, 2011](#)).

## 3. Factors That Influence Gender Nonconformity

### A. Brain Development and Hormones

Research has shown that variations in prenatal hormone exposure can influence gender identity. In transgender women (biological males who identify as female), the structure of certain brain areas more closely resembles that of cisgender women ([Bao and Swaab, 2011](#)).

### **B. Genetic and Epigenetic Factors**

Gender identity is not dictated by one gene or one chromosome pair. Multiple genes interact to influence traits, including those related to identity and behavior. Epigenetic factors (gene expression influenced by environment) also play a role (Ward and Schneider, 2009).

### **C. Intersex and Medical Variations**

Some individuals are born with intersex traits, such as Klinefelter syndrome (XXY) or Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (where XY individuals develop female characteristics due to hormone resistance). These conditions further debunk the binary assumption that all XY individuals are biologically or behaviorally male (LeVay, 2011).

### **D. Social and Psychological Contexts**

Gender roles are socially constructed. A boy growing up among many women does not become feminine simply by proximity to female family members. Instead, gender identity is rooted in deeply felt, often unchangeable internal experiences (Savin-Williams, 2006).

## **4. Debunking Myths: Gender Expression vs. Sexual Orientation**

In African societies, boys who act “like women” are often labelled as gay. This is incorrect. Gender identity (who you are) is separate from sexual orientation (who you are attracted to) (Kinsey *et al.*, 1948).

- Many feminine men are heterosexual.
- Many masculine men are homosexual.
- Some men are bisexual.

In fact, research including studies by Dr. Alfred Kinsey and modern sexologists shows that human sexual behavior exists on a spectrum. A 2020 study published in the *Journal of Sex Research* found that many men who identify as heterosexual still report same-sex experiences.

## **5. Male Sexuality in Prisons: Contextual Behavior, Not Identity**

Incarceration adds another layer to this conversation. Numerous reports document how straight men in prisons engage in same-sex sexual behavior. These interactions often do not reflect the person’s core sexual orientation. Instead, they reflect situational and environmental factors:

- **Environmental deprivation of opposite-sex contact:** In single-sex prisons, the lack of access to women creates a closed environment where same-sex intimacy becomes a surrogate outlet for sexual needs.
- **Power dynamics:** Some sexual acts in prison are not consensual or are based on coercive hierarchies, where dominant individuals use sex to exert control or establish power over others.
- **Survival mechanisms:** In some cases, individuals engage in sexual relationships in exchange for protection, favors, or basic resources. These relationships are transactional and often do not reflect the true sexual orientation of those involved (Savin-Williams, 2006).
- **Unconscious or latent bisexuality:** An important consideration often overlooked is the possibility that some incarcerated individuals may be bisexual or pansexual but have not yet come to terms with or explored that aspect of themselves. In societies where open discussion of sexual diversity is taboo, these identities often remain unacknowledged or repressed. However, in the absence of opposite-sex partners and within the privacy of confinement, these dormant attractions may surface, prompting behaviors that reflect previously unexamined orientations.

Just as environmental deprivation can spark the expression of repressed sexual desires, it is also possible that the dominance of opposite-sex relationships in a free environment suppresses same-sex attraction in individuals who might otherwise experience it. This phenomenon is not limited to men. Women in single-sex incarceration facilities have also reported same-sex interactions during confinement that differ from their previous or post-release preferences, reflecting similar psychological and environmental dynamics.

These behaviors are often temporary and circumstantial, and many individuals revert to their prior patterns after release. However, the social stigma associated with same-sex activity in prison continues to reinforce misleading assumptions about sexuality and identity. It is crucial to understand that human sexuality exists on a broad spectrum, and situational behaviors do not necessarily define or alter an individual’s core orientation.

Finally, it is important to debunk a common myth in African and other conservative cultures: having “more XX around”—that is, being raised among many women— does not cause a boy to become feminine or identify as female. Gender identity is not contagious, nor is it shaped simply by the gender composition of one’s environment. Instead, gender identity is a deeply rooted and intrinsic aspect of the self, formed through a complex interplay of biology, psychology, and lived experience. Suggesting otherwise promotes misinformation and fuels stigma toward gender-nonconforming individuals.

## 6. The Harm of Stigmatization in African Communities

Stigmatizing gender nonconforming children has devastating effects:

- Increased mental health issues (depression, anxiety, suicide)
- School dropout or academic failure
- Family rejection and homelessness
- Social withdrawal and trauma ([American Psychiatric Association, 2013](#))

This societal pressure has also led many gay or bisexual African men to marry women in order to conform to cultural expectations, denying themselves and their spouses a fulfilling and authentic life. Likewise, some women who are not attracted to men enter marriages they never truly wanted, driven by fear of social exclusion. Many individuals are also forced to act more “masculine” or “feminine” than they feel, suppressing their true selves to avoid bullying, rejection, or being labeled as gay or deviant. Such concealment can result in severe psychological strain and a lifelong sense of being trapped in a false identity.

African cultures must begin to treat gender-diverse individuals with dignity. There is no evidence that shaming or punishing a child for gender nonconforming behavior changes their identity—it only causes harm.

## 7. Recommendations for African Societies

- Educate parents, teachers, and religious leaders on the science of gender and identity (Ward C Schneider, 2009).
- Promote mental health awareness to reduce stigma around therapy and counseling.
- Include sex education and gender studies in school curricula.
- Create safe spaces for gender-diverse youth.
- Challenge traditional norms that link masculinity and femininity to worthiness or respect.
- Actively discourage the harmful practice of taking gender-nonconforming children to pastors, prophets, or prayer houses under the belief that their identity is a spiritual attack. This is based on ignorance, not evidence. These actions instill fear and trauma in the child, often leading them to falsely claim they’ve “changed” or to suppress their true self in order to appease their community or family. Such practices reinforce stigma and can cause long- term psychological harm.

## 8. Conclusion

Gender identity is a deeply rooted and complex aspect of human existence. It is influenced by biology, brain development, genetics, psychology, and society. Blaming or punishing children for expressing their authentic selves is not only ignorant—it is harmful. African societies must rise to a new level of understanding, compassion, and science- based education to protect and uplift all children, regardless of their identity or expression.

Let us move from condemnation to compassion, from ignorance to awareness, and from stigma to support.

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