

Youth Primer on Gender Expression and Gender Non-Conforming Individuals



Introduction

There are different forms of expression, including mannerisms, dress sense, behaviour and speech. These are normally dictated by social and gender norms. However, for gender non-conforming and cross dresser individuals, they are likely not to conform to any specific gender. Drag queens similarly dress in defiance of societal norms.¹ Others may express their fluid gender by dressing as either gender would.² The way one presents themselves in public society plays a role in how they are treated. There are assumptions on sexual orientation, incidences of violence and limits to expression imposed on individuals living their truth outside of societal norms.



Conceptualization of gender expression

Gender is a social construct.³ Gender roles play a critical role in how women or men dress and express themselves. Whether masculine or feminine, there are significant nuances in how gender manifests in homes, work and even religion. For example, Islamic countries have legislated how women are to dress: cover their whole bodies.⁴ Societal influence has limited gender to the two binaries of man and woman. However, there is an increase in visibility of non-normative forms of express. Celebrity Harry Styles, notably wore a dress for a Vogue cover, emulating gender fluidity.⁵

It is important to note that one's choice of behavior is influenced by the ideology of society.⁶ However, there can be rebellions and disruption against the norm, as was the stonewall riots.⁷ This sparked activism advancing non-normative gender identities.⁸ These have varied from protest action to pride marches and Afro Punk festivals; where expression through mannerisms and dress sense are fluid and non-normative.⁹

¹ C Greaf (2016) Drag queens and gender identity 'Journal of gender studies'

² Noah Sanchez (2016) Understanding Crossdressing, Gender Fluidity, and Why It's Not a Problem

³ Chafetz, J. (2006). *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*. Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media.

⁴ Deana F. Morrow, Lori Messinger (2006) 'Sexual orientation and gender expression in social work practice: Working with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people'

⁵ Bonnie Fuller (2020) Liam Payne Applauds Harry Styles for Wearing A Dress On 'Vogue' Cover: 'I Thought It Was Great' Hollywood Life

⁶ F Harris III, RT Palmer, LE Struve (2011) "Cool posing" on campus: A qualitative study of masculinities and gender expression among Black men at a private research institution" The Journal of Negro Education

⁷ M Stein (2019) The Stone wall riots: a documentary history

⁸ R J Stoller (1964) A contribution to the study of gender identity

⁹ Arnold H. Grossman PhD, Anthony R. D'augelli PhD & Nickolas P. Salter BS (2008) 'Male-to-Female Transgender Youth Gender Expression Milestones, Gender Atypicality, Victimization, and Parents' Responses' Routledge

Challenges to gender expression

There have been violent and oppressive responses against variant gender expression.¹⁰ Identity, ideology and individualism politics have driven the backlash. Nuanced by morality and underlying belief systems;¹¹ influencing perceptions of the need to fight for the purity and protection of their values, norms and culture in society. This results in stigma, discrimination, and human rights abuse against those of non-normative gender expression.¹²

This has forced performative gender expressions that have attempted to establish their own norms. It also causes varying portrayals of masculinity or femininity, ultimately determined by the societal environment.¹³



Expanding on stigma and discrimination

There are significant levels of ignorance on gender fluidity, expression and diversity.¹⁴ This is the underlying basis for discrimination despite rationale largely driven by more ideological perceptions. Botswana have been reported as in denial or not accepting of non-normative gender identity.¹⁵ It can also be attributed to harmful gender norms reflective in broader society against the bodily autonomy and integrity of women.¹⁶ Leading to ostracization and non-recognition in society,¹⁷ impacting equality and dignity of non-normative gender expression related experiences.

There are elements of respect and prestige for normative gender expression in society.¹⁸ The beneficitation of complying to norms advances economic activity, civic participation and opportunities for personal development in the spirit of societal values. This is further strengthened at family levels, where there are implications against acceptance at home – leading to family rejection.¹⁹ Thus, society rewards and

¹⁰ D Cameron (1998) Performing gender identity 'language and gender'

¹¹ C W Sherif (1982) Needed concepts in the study of gender identity 'Women's quarterly journal'

¹² W Wood (2015) Two traditions of research on gender identity 'Sex roles'

¹³ T Nyong'o (2010) The unforgivable transgression of being Caster Semenya 'Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory'

¹⁴ C Cooky (2013) ... Makes a Woman a Woman?" Versus "Our First Lady of Sport" A Comparative Analysis of the United States and the South African Media Coverage of Caster Semenya

¹⁵ Alex Müller (2020) 'Report: Legal gender recognition in Botswana' <https://www.southernafricallitigationcentre.org/2020/11/10/report-legal-gender-recognition-in-botswana/>

¹⁶ Simpson, E. K. (2018). Influence of Gender-based Family Roles on Gender Transition for Transgender Women. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 365-380.

¹⁷ Spencer, S., Meer, T., and Müller, A. (2017) "The Care is the Best You Can Give at the Time": Health Care Professionals' Experiences in Providing Gender Affirming Care in South Africa." *PLoS One*, Vol. 12, No. 7, July 2017

¹⁸ Müller, A., Daskilewicz, K. and The Southern and East African Research Collective on Health (2019) Are We Doing Alright? Realities of violence, mental health and access to healthcare related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression in Botswana. Amsterdam

¹⁹ T Kgosiemang (2020) 'Transgender persons in Botswana live a miserable life' <https://www.weekendpost.co.bw/29506/news/transgender-persons-in-botswana-live-a-miserable-life/>

punishes gender performance directly and indirectly.²⁰



What does it mean to be gender non-conforming?

People who do not conform to societal norms in dress and/or behaviour based on biological sex.²¹ They may present either or none of femininity or masculinity. Some identify as transgender,²² or happen to be gay, lesbian or bisexual. This reflects how intersecting in identity, fluidity and sexuality individuals can be, further

reflecting possible vulnerabilities and complexity in lived experiences.

Family has a significant influence on individuals.²³ It lays a foundation on norms and acceptability.²⁴ Botswana perceives ‘normal’ families as those headed by a mother and father,²⁵ anchored on tradition and heteronormative norms. Thus, gender roles are default nuances in language, knowledge sharing and care work. Children typically imitate those around them;²⁶ this can have an adverse impact for those who are non-conforming. Such impacts include low esteem, no sense of belonging or self-stigma. This is further polarized by formal education systems that affirm or further confirm with family ideals and norms.²⁷

Gender non-confirming children, youth and adults are always in conflict with their social environments.²⁸ Thus, even the workplace is often a challenge. More glaringly is more than half of a research study’s participants being unemployed,²⁹

²⁰ Chafetz, J. (2006). *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*. Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media; Coltrane, S. (1998). *Gender and Families*. London: Rowman & Littlefield

²¹ Ellen Friedrichs (2018), What It Means to Be Gender Non-Conforming ‘<https://www.liveabout.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-gender-non-conforming-1415327/>’; E

Prusaczyk, G Hodson (2019) ‘The Roles of Political Conservatism and Binary Gender Beliefs in Predicting Prejudices Toward Gay Men and People Who Are Transgender’ Springer; E Prusaczyk, G Hodson (2019) ‘The Roles of Political Conservatism and Binary Gender Beliefs in Predicting Prejudices Toward Gay Men and People Who Are Transgender’ Springer.

²² RC Plis - 2015 *Families in Transition: Gender Non-Conformists and their Kin Networks in the Mid-Southern US*

²³ Maundeni, T. (2008). *Changing Family Systems: A Global Perspective*. Gaborone: Bay Publishing.

²⁴ Jaime Marks, L. C. (2009). Family Patterns of Gender Role Attitudes. *Sex Roles*, 221-234.

²⁵ Bronstein, P. (2006). The Family Environment: Where Gender Role Socialization Begins. *Oxford series in Clinical Psychology*, 262-271.

²⁶ Corbett, A. (2004). *What is a Family? And why it Matters : Achieving a Workable Definition*. Canberra: Tasmania Family Institute.

²⁷ Coltrane, S. (1998). *Gender and Families*. London: Rowman & Littlefield

²⁸ Simpson, E. K. (2018). Influence of Gender-based Family Roles on Gender Transition for Transgender Women. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 365-380; Alex Müller (2020) ‘Report: Legal gender recognition in Botswana’ <https://www.southernafricalitigationcentre.org/2020/11/10/report-legal-gender-recognition-in-botswana/>.

²⁹ Coleman, E., Bockting, W., Botzer, M., Cohen-Kettenis, P.T., De Cuypere, G., Feldman, J., et al. (2012) “Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming People” *Int J Transgenderism* 13(4):165–232

unable to meet their needs³⁰ or secure meaningful healthcare.³¹ This highlights the limited means of equitable participation in homes, school, work, and health.

Expanding on Mental Health

Mental health is further aggravated by hate speech, physical abuse and sexual violence.³² Depression is the most common condition for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals in Botswana,³³ followed by anxiety.³⁴ An example of an aggravating circumstance to mental health is in having a national identity card that contrasts one's expression.³⁵ Further leading health professionals to contact law enforcement and breaching duties of care and respect. This highlights the discriminatory experiences gender non-conforming individuals must constantly face.³⁶ The only way to avoid this is in having the resources to seek legal recognition through the courts.³⁷

Conclusion

Gender as a social construct is performed and expressed in ways that differ among individuals. There are contrasts between individualist and collectivist perceptions on gender roles – with elements of culture, religion and history dictating prevalent norms and values. There is a need to further interrogate gender expression in lived experiences. Particularly against a backdrop of violence, harmful norms, and ignorance.



³⁰ T Kgosiemang (2020) 'Transgender persons in Botswana live a miserable life' <https://www.weekendpost.co.bw/29506/news/transgender-persons-in-botswana-live-a-miserable-life/>

³¹ Müller, A., Daskilewicz, K. and The Southern and East African Research Collective on Health (2019) Are We Doing Alright? Realities of violence, mental health and access to healthcare related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression in Botswana. Amsterdam; Botswana Ministry of Health and Wellness and United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2017) Assessment of Legal and Regulatory Framework for HIV, AIDS and Tuberculosis, Gaborone.

³² Spencer, S., Meer, T., and Müller, A. (2017) "The Care is the Best You Can Give at the Time": Health Care Professionals' Experiences in Providing Gender Affirming Care in South Africa." PLoS One, Vol. 12, No. 7, July 2017

³³ Müller, A., Daskilewicz, K. and The Southern and East African Research Collective on Health (2019)

Are We Doing Alright? Realities of violence, mental health and access to healthcare related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression in Botswana. Amsterdam

³⁴ LM v Attorney General of Botswana 2019 All Bots 46 (HC)

³⁵ Reuters (2017) "Botswana court orders government to recognize transgender woman as female"

<https://www.reuters.com/article/usbotswana-lgbt/botswana-court-orders-government-to-recognize-transgender-woman-as-female>

³⁶ Colizzi, M., Costa, R., Todarello, O. (2015) "Dissociative symptoms in individuals with gender dysphoria: Is the elevated prevalence real?" Psychiatry Res. 226(1):173–80

³⁷ Ethan (2017) "Kgositau v Attorney General and Registrar of National Registration" 8 August 2017, <https://eathan.org/kgositau-v-attorney-general-and-registrar-ofnational-registration/>

Recommendations

Government

1. Governing bodies must employ policies that are inclusive and accommodating of gender diversity.
2. The health system must be reformed to be equitable for gender fluidity.

Society

1. There is a need to deconstruct gender binaries in society, schools, work and other public engagement spaces.
2. There needs to be more perceptions and practices that are reflective of empathy, respect, and kindness in society.
3. Public education drives are important, but underlying values should reflect in the treatment and dignity of all people despite their differences.

Individuals

1. Increased visibility in media and public society will lead to more acceptance in the long run, however caution on personal safety and non-violence are critical.
2. All areas of influence, at home, school, church and others are an opportunity for constructive dialogue, however this must not come at a cost of burn out or compromised mental and physical wellbeing.

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Additional resources can be found below: <https://successcapital.africa/news/basics-of-lgbtiq/>