

# THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

## Abstract

In recent years there has been rising popular discourse around “toxic masculinity”, and the problems of a hegemonic gender structure that facilitates male violence and misogyny. In the public debate over whether toxic masculinity is fact or fiction, “toxic femininity” is often raised by men’s rights activists and others as an anti-feminist retort, to suggest that women can be “toxic” too. This paper provides a sketch of how the term has been used so far, in tandem with an overview of the limitations of the more extensively discussed idea of “toxic masculinity”. This suggests that although the term “toxic femininity” has limitations, it is useful to consider what might be “toxic” about some approaches to femininity. Drawing on existing theories of femininity, including emphasized, hegemonic, normative, and patriarchal femininity, this paper offers the notion of “rigid femininities” to explain the attachments that keep us locked in a “toxic” gender system. This paper utilises toxic femininity as a starting point for theorising femininity broadly, to conceptualise the “toxic” attachments that reinforce the hegemonic patriarchal gender structure.

*Key words:* toxic femininity; hegemonic femininity; emphasized femininity; normative femininity; patriarchal femininity; rigid femininities.

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

### Theorizing Toxic Femininity: The Rigid Femininities That Keep Us Locked In

What is “toxic femininity”, and what use might it have for thinking and theorizing femininity more broadly? The term is a spectre that sits aside invocations of mainstream discussions of “toxic masculinity”. As Terry Kupers (2005) defines, toxic masculinity refers to, “...the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (p. 714). I attend to the question of toxic femininity in this paper as a jumping off point to theoretically explore what might be “toxic” about the politics of certain approaches to femininity. In this paper I explore how toxic femininity has been conceptualised so far, in both popular and feminist discourse. Drawing on existing theorizations of femininity such as “patriarchal femininity” (Hoskin, 2017a; Hoskin, 2017b; Hoskin, 2019) I offer my own approach via “rigid femininities”, to specifically attend to the “toxic” attachments that keep the gender structure in place. This paper is not an argument that we begin using the term “toxic femininity”, rather, that we take seriously what may be “toxic” about certain political approaches to femininity.

As explored in this paper, where used to feminist ends, the term “toxic femininity” refers to the gender expectations that keep women subservient, quiet, and submissive to men’s domination and aggression. However, while such conceptualizations attempt to address the relationality between dominant forms of masculinity and subservient forms of femininity, they do so along the single axis of gender. Considering the toxic politics of certain approaches to femininity via intersections with class, race, sexuality, and more, complicates simple notions of gender hierarchy. As I argue here, though “femininity” can and ought to be untethered

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

from a conflation with womanhood, “toxic” approaches to femininity heavily police and maintain this conflation.

Given the more extensive discussions of toxic masculinity on offer, this paper first examines existing theorizations of toxic masculinity. Here, I explore the limits of this term, as a guide for later interrogation of femininity in terms of the “toxic”. In particular, I draw on Andrea Waling’s (2019) suggestion that it is strict adherence to the gender binary that we ought to attend to in theorizing of gender, rather than attempting to offer accounts of “good” versus “bad” masculinities. I then turn to an analysis of the uses of toxic femininity in both popular media and academic discourse, before focusing on existing theories of femininity, including emphasized, hegemonic, normative, and patriarchal femininity.

Finally, I develop a typology of five “rigid femininities”: Trans Exclusionary Feminist Femininity; Entrepreneurial Feminist Femininity; The Cult of Natural Femininity; Compulsorily Heterosexual Femininity; and Neo-Colonial Femininity. The use of the term “rigid” here extends from Waling’s (2019) notion that, “we need to continue to advocate for the breaking down of gender binaries...” (p. 9-10). Here “rigid femininities” is used a way to identify a set of approaches to femininity that adhere to strict and unrelenting ideas about gender which reinforce “the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 2013, p.5). Though intersectional analyses have been offered for theorizations of hegemonic, patriarchal and normative femininity previously, the focus is not only on what is cast out in the policing of these boundaries, but rather the politics and attachments that keep certain rigid notions of femininity in place. Each of these demonstrates the possible “toxic” logics of femininities that reinforce various dimensions of a binary gendered logic while maintaining racial and class norms. Here such as logic is defined as that which

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

collapses assigned female sex status with womanhood/femininity/heterosexual attraction to men, and casts this into opposition to male/manhood/masculinity/attraction to women. Rather than merely critiquing certain feminine “styles” (ways of looking feminine) or proposing “healthier” femininities (which would as Waling suggests continue to prop up hard gender binary distinctions), in this article I offer a way to navigate the politics of femininity via various intersections and attachments. This provides a different way to understand how there are hierarchies that act *within* and *between* femininities, as well as insight into how we might engage with the question of femininity to illuminate the “toxicity” of particular gendered attachments.

### **Toxic Versus Hegemonic Masculinity**

Before turning to the concept of toxic femininity, it is first useful to unpack its antecedent, toxic masculinity. The term first appeared in the 1990s, in reference to destructive behaviours adopted by men in trying to achieve notions of successful manhood (for example, see Karner, 1996). Preceding this, Raewyn Connell (1987) had already coined the term “hegemonic masculinity”, to refer to the way that men’s power is systematically institutionalized, a dominance bolstered by men themselves. As Connell (1987) suggests, “The public face of hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support” (p. 185). Connell’s aim was to outline the systematic nature of men’s domination not only over women as patriarchy theory suggests, but over men too – that is, over subordinate masculinities. In this way Connell’s theorization offered a way to understand hierarchies between men, not only between women and men. Refining the concept in 2005 with James Messerschmidt (2005), they suggest that, “Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

personality traits of individuals” (p. 836). Connell and Messerschmidt clarify that masculinities (hegemonic or otherwise) ought not be understood as an essential gender substance, but rather, as a set of practices and accomplishments. Further, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) contend that femininity ought to be given greater attention for the way that it is complicit in shaping masculinities, as “Gender is always relational” (p. 848).

While hegemonic masculinity is still a popular rubric adopted and adapted within masculinity studies, outside of the academy the term toxic masculinity has gained greater attention. Toxic masculinity is often used in a way that echoes the intent of hegemonic masculinity, to understand how gender norms also harm some men. Yet, the term is arguably a “misinterpretation” of Connell’s work (Waling, 2019, p. 5), insofar as it flattens any theorization of hierarchy for understanding masculinity. Popular media abounds with examples of how toxic masculinity explains men’s violence, the misogyny of male politicians, men’s risk-taking behaviour and more (see for example, Gill, 2019; Walsh, 2019; Milton, 2019). Along these lines the American Psychological Association has recently released guidelines about working with men and boys, though the term “traditional masculinity” is used in place of both hegemonic and toxic masculinity (Pappas, 2019).

Within the academy toxic masculinity has been taken up in small part in health and psychology, rather than gender or cultural studies. For example, as health researchers Roger Kirby and Mike Kirby (2019) suggest, toxic masculinity is a useful rubric for highlighting the gender normative behaviours that some men engage in that are harmful. They argue that cultural constructions of “blokey” identity can lead men to engage in unhealthy practices including “overindulgence in unhealthy foods, excessive alcohol consumption and smoking” (Kirby & Kirby, 2019, p. 18). Yet the

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

approach adopted in papers such as these reflect one of the key problems with the under-theorization of “toxic masculinity” in terms of its untethering from Connell’s original concept. Kirby and Kirby’s four cases comprise of a man in his 60s with alcoholic cirrhosis, a man in his thirties with HIV/AIDS, a man in his fifties with head and neck cancer, and a man in his fifties with colon cancer. Here “risky” behaviours are lumped in together as equivalent, and as demonstrating the “costs” of living up to expectations of manhood: drinking, unprotected sex, smoking, and a low fibre diet. The man with HIV/AIDS is identified as bisexual, though the sexuality remains unmarked in the other cases. In contrast to this presentation of toxic masculinity, Connell’s hierarchy would allow us to see that the masculinity of the bisexual man sits unevenly in relation to the other cases. Indeed, it might be his experience of “subordinate masculinity” that shapes his risk-taking behaviour, as he navigates a homophobic and biphobic world.

Furthermore, bringing in an intersectional lens following Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), we might understand how sexuality, race, and/or class may have shaped and informed these “toxic” behaviours. As Christie Launius and Holly Hassel (2015) suggest, an intersectional approach is vital to understanding how masculinities are shaped in relation to different aspects and expectations of identity. The limits of Kirby and Kirby’s approach here (as an example), and the ways these might be ameliorated via a broader structural theorization that turns draws on intersectionality theory is crucial for approaching the question of toxic femininity, as I turn to shortly.

Some scholars have critiqued toxic masculinity for the way that it constructs a sense that there is a contrasting “healthy” masculinity for which men should strive. For example, Waling (2019) argues that the binary of toxic versus healthy masculinity is unhelpful. She suggests that defining different descriptive forms of masculinity is

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

suspect, for the ways this serves to reify the gender binary, wherein there are some “good” masculinities versus other “bad” ones (Waling, 2019, p. 2). According to Waling, such theorizations: position men as victims rather than actively involved in maintaining gendered relations; offer only a vague notion of “healthy” masculinity; fail to recognize that some traits might be helpful in some contexts and “toxic” in others; propose new forms of masculinity that appropriate femininity while simultaneously negating femininity. Most crucially, Waling argues that responses to toxic masculinity that champion “healthier” masculinity often serve only to reinforce a strict gender binary that sees masculinity as distinct from femininity, that is, unable to incorporate things understood as “feminine” into an understanding of masculinity. Though Waling’s work focuses on discussions of masculinity, her insights are similarly useful for theorizing “toxic” femininity. How might we address what is “toxic” about certain approaches to femininity, without championing “better” forms of femininity which may inadvertently reinforce the gender binary? As I shall discuss shortly, it is precisely the politics of conceptualising “healthier” forms of femininity that can prove insidiously toxic.

### **The Uses of “Toxic Femininity”**

While toxic masculinity has been generally used as a lay term that echoes yet distorts Connell’s hegemonic masculinity, there are three ways in which toxic femininity is currently deployed within both popular and academic discourse. Examining a sketch of the discursive field of references to “toxic femininity”, we see that the popular definitions of the term differ markedly from its use in scholarship. First, the term is sometimes used in an anti-feminist way, in reaction to any use of the term “toxic masculinity”, that is, to suggest that women can be equally “toxic” to men. For example, as columnist Meghan Daum (2018) writes, “In a free society,

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

everyone, regardless of gender, is free to be a manipulative, narcissistic, emotionally destructive asshole” (n.p.). Daum proposes that toxic femininity exists because “fragility” can be “weaponized”, such as through women feigning victimhood in order to gain power over men. Yet, Daum identifies as a feminist throughout the piece, and might therefore be described in Sarah Projansky’s (2001) terms as an “antifeminist postfeminist feminist” (p. 71), that is, suggesting a “better” form of feminism as an antidote to the supposed problems engendered by feminism. Uses of toxic femininity in this vein erase and occlude gender hierarchy, masquerading as a *more* egalitarian approach to discussing harm than traditional feminist accounts that understand power as patriarchal.

Secondly, toxic femininity appears within Men’s Rights Activist (MRA) discourse, used to neutralise any understanding of power as gendered. That is, toxic femininity is used as a rebuttal to toxic masculinity for the purpose of anti-feminist sentiment. We see this, for example, in the work of Jeff Minick (2018), who writes about toxic femininity as “toxic feminism” on the conservative website *Intellectual Takeout* (which features much MRA content). Echoing Daum he writes, “Based on their sex, women fired from a job or refused promotion can claim ‘victimhood’ status, while a man who did the same would be laughed from the room” (Minick, 2018, n.p.). Various MRA Internet threads addressing the topic similarly involve discussions of examples of how women act in “toxic” ways: they are bitchy, vengeful, manipulative, and so on. Unlike Daum this commentary does not adopt a pseudo-feminist frame, though similarly presents mainstream feminism as the problem underpinning “inequality”.

Thirdly, in contrast to these reactionary uses of the term, feminists have also started to take seriously the notion of toxic femininity. These perspectives deploy the

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

terms as synonymous with adherence to normative gender roles, that is, alignment with traditional notions of femininity and “how to be a woman”. For example, in a piece from *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2018, Jane Gilmore reflects on toxic femininity in terms of the “gender roles that damage all of us” (n.p.). She argues that toxic femininity *enables* toxic masculinity:

Toxic femininity is sweet and placatory, it never demands or defends, it has no strength and can only submit without protest or defiance. Women become possessions, owned by the dominant male in their life, either their father or their husband. This concept is central to patriarchy... (Gilmore 2018, n.p.)

Gilmore uses toxic femininity in relation to women who remain subservient, quiet, and submissive to men’s domination and aggression. In this way Gilmore’s discussion echoes the ways that toxic masculinity has often been used within popular feminist discourse in recent years, as a way to identify aspects and symptoms of a hegemonic gender structure that facilitates male violence and misogyny. Similarly, Katie Anthony (2018) writing in *BUST*, suggests that “‘Toxic femininity’ (if it exists) encourages silent acceptance of violence and domination in order to survive” (n.p.). Though, she concludes that this might be more accurately and simply termed “internalised misogyny” (Anthony, 2018, n.p.).

In the limited scholarly references to toxic femininity currently in circulation, the term is also used to reflect the internalization and reification of patriarchal ideas and norms. For example, in relation to a discussion of sexual abuse, Naomi Snider (2018) refers to toxic femininity in terms of:

...toxicity of patriarchal ideals of femininity—the expectation that a woman be selfless, that she silence her own needs and desires for the sake of others—in a manner akin to that which has occurred in terms of patriarchal masculinity. It demands we examine the unconscious grip that outdated ideals of selflessness,

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

docility, and lack of sexual desire continue to have over women, and the harm such ideals cause on both an individual and systemic level. (p. 769-770)

Snider suggests that we take a psychoanalytic approach to toxic femininity, which pays greater attention to the way that women interiorize patriarchal gender expectations that ultimately enable men's abuse. Snider is careful to argue that blame should not be ascribed to individual women for reproducing patriarchal ideals. Rather, we ought to analyse the ways that women are *culturally constrained* to think and act in particular ways that *facilitate* women's precarity in sexual encounters.

Where does that leave us so far in terms of understanding "toxic femininity", and how it may or may not be useful in our own feminist work? We can reject the first and second uses of the term outright, as nullifying any recognition of gendered hierarchies of power, and as representing a reactionary response to popular feminism. Yet understanding the sketch of the popular usage of toxic femininity also provides impetus for why scholars must attend in more detail to this question of "toxicity" – in order to get ahead of more reactionary uses of the term. However, the limit of the third (feminist) approach to theorizing "toxic femininity" outlined above is its reliance solely on a single-axis approach (gender). If we agree that the third definition of toxic femininity has some merit, we must first acknowledge that many have already theorized femininity in terms of submission to patriarchal norms, albeit under different terminology. Taking these points seriously, and the limits of theorizing toxic *masculinity* as already outlined, how can we best approach this question of femininity?

### **From Emphasized to Rigid Femininities**

How has femininity been theorized by different means, and how might this be extended in light of thinking through the question of what might be "toxic" about

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

femininity? Here I turn to the concepts of emphasized femininity, hegemonic femininity, normative femininity and patriarchal femininity, in order to examine their implications for thinking through this question of “toxicity”.

Famously Connell (1987) offers an account of femininity in terms of “emphasized femininity” described as, “compliance with...[gender] subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (p. 187). As Connell and James Messerschmidt (2005) later clarify, “The concept of emphasized femininity focused on compliance to patriarchy” (p. 848). Mimi Schippers (2007) has extended Connell’s conceptualization of emphasized femininity, instead terming it “hegemonic femininity”. This contrasts with Connell’s sketch insofar as Schippers suggests we cannot see femininity and masculinity in isolation from one another – rather, we must understand the braided relation that exists between hegemonic forms of both masculinity and femininity in reproducing the gender order. As Shelley Budgeon (2014) notes, while Connell’s framework for femininity is valuable, it needs Schippers’ extension in order to adequately address changing norms of femininity. Building on this Budgeon (2014) importantly highlights how nominally “progressive” ideals of femininity can end up reifying rather than challenging binary understandings of gender (p. 330).

Others have used the term “normative femininity” to describe the hegemonic, often with linguistic slippage between the two terms, yet with the former appealing less to describing the overarching political structure than to the individual reproduction of norms. Normative femininity is used in reference to how women attempt to live up to feminine ideals, and often particularly in reference to expectations regarding the body. For example, uses of the term have centred on how women are encouraged to maintain body hair (Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005),

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

norms of whiteness in relation to beauty (Deliofsky, 2008), and the circulation of pernicious norms even in the world of women's bodybuilding such as maintaining a smaller body size relative to men (Boyle, 2005).

Lastly, the term "patriarchal femininity" is sometimes used as a way to describe the structure that informs idealized feminine norms (Blair & Hoskin, 2015), and is defined as "normative feminine ideals as they cut across dimensions of sex, gender, race, ability, and class" (Hoskin, 2019, p.687). Rhea Hoskin (2019) argues that this term accounts for both normative and hegemonic femininity yet provides a framework for analysing the overarching structure that regulates norms of femininity. Karen Blair and Hoskin (2015) also note that this term is also interchangeable with "essentialised femininity" (p. 232), which involves maintaining a strict and biologically based notion of a gender binary. Yet we may wonder, at particular intersections, what keeps us locked into emphasized/hegemonic/normative/patriarchal femininity?

Much work engaging with femininity has answered this question by focusing on what Schippers' (2007) terms "pariah femininities" or that which is non-hegemonic. For example, discussion has focused on the shaming of body hair and weight (Darwin, 2017). Pariah femininities at once involve the adoption of masculine expectations (such as being sexually avaricious) but that are still marked as decidedly feminine in their fall from grace ("slut"). These are "cast out" by hegemonic forms. Schippers notes that in identifying what constitutes either hegemonic masculinity or femininity, we cannot simply identify "ideals", but rather must analyse ideals in practice. In other words, we might identify ideal role expectations and traits for hegemonic femininity, such as heterosexual desire, passivity, and compliance, but these may vary across contexts depending on their relation to the expectations of

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

masculinity in a given place – taking into account different cultural formations – as well as what is cast out as “pariah”. Similarly to “pariah femininities”, Hoskin (2017b) uses the term “femmephobia” to describe how the boundaries of patriarchal femininity are policed and confined to traditional notions of “proper womanhood” (Blair & Hoskin, 2015, p.232). Hoskin (2017a) outlines:

I argue that femmephobia is prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone who is *perceived* to identify, embody, or express femininely and toward people and objects gendered femininely. More specifically, the individual is targeted for their perceived deviation from patriarchal femininity. (p. 101)

While pariah femininities and femmephobia address part of the question of why and how emphasized/hegemonic/normative/patriarchal femininity persists, there has arguably been less attention to looking to the political relations that maintain desire for these boundaries.

The question of “toxicity” yields fruitful results on this front. As outlined in the beginning of this paper, the feminist use of toxic femininity so far, essentially echoes the notion of patriarchal femininity, that is, the “gender roles that damage all of us” (Gilmore, 2018, n.p.). Yet while patriarchal femininity describes the structure – the top-down process – it does not directly address the question of attachment, those agentic beliefs and practices that keep us bound to this structure yet are “toxic” and damaging to us. Here we can bring in Lauren Berlant’s (2011) notion of “cruel optimism” to assist, which refers to adopting an orientation that feels at once profoundly confirming yet simultaneously antithetical to one’s flourishing (p. 1). As Berlant (2011) describes, optimism is cruel:

...insofar as the very pleasure of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming. (p. 2)

Berlant (2011) also directly describes cruel optimism, our sense of being bound to “compromised conditions” as “toxic” (p. 24). If we understand “toxicity” in these terms, the question of toxic femininity therefore becomes, what *attachments* do we maintain that keeps emphasized/hegemonic/normative/patriarchal femininity *in place*?

In order to address this question directly I deploy the term “rigid femininities”, to highlight how certain approaches to femininity cling to, repeat, and solidify hard gender boundaries that work to maintain patriarchal femininity. These femininities act to rigidly enforce normative expectations of femininity along various intersections with the gender binary.

### **Rigid Femininities**

Considering the rigidity of particular femininities helps us to understand what it means to “toxically” prop up a gendered system, to engage with a cruel optimism which believes that certain forms of femininity will provide success, liberation, or upward mobility. Transposing Waling’s (2019) commentary to femininity, we can consider the relation between femininity and the gender binary, rather than proposing “healthier” femininities. Indeed, in Berlant’s (2011) terms, many of these toxic forms *position* themselves as “healthier” femininities, promising subversion of patriarchal femininity, while nevertheless profoundly confirming it.

However, if we are to discuss femininity in terms of potential “toxicity”, what remains is the serious question of how to avoid the pitfalls that have plagued “toxic masculinity” thus far (flattening gender hierarchies, ignoring intersectionality, or reinforcing a strict gender binary), and that does not simply slip into reproducing

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

femmephobia through marking the feminine as problematic (Hoskin, 2019). Often when theories of femininity are deployed, the focus sometimes lands on how individual women embody or communicate hegemonic roles, traits, styles, or feelings. This raises a larger question about what kinds of femininities constitute or reflect the reproduction of patriarchal norms, and which do not. This becomes particularly problematic when considering intersectional issues of race, class, and sexuality in terms of different expressions of, and attachments to, femininity.

Rather, as I propose below, we might take an approach that accounts for expressions of femininity that are not personal so much as political: political styles, roles, traits and feelings, that might be reproduced by individuals but are the product of cultural norms beyond individual women. This theorization focuses on the *ideologies* that are institutionalised within some approaches to femininity. Here I consider how norms “harden” at certain intersections. While these may be concretised and recirculated via activist groups, commentators, individuals, and so on, the point is to step away from simply seeing certain individual embodiments as problematic, and instead to focus on the political frameworks being deployed by individuals or otherwise. Importantly the question of toxicity is addressed here without necessarily advocating for the language of “toxic femininity”. Instead, “rigidity” acts as the signifier to understand what is “toxic” about maintaining unchallenged and unchanging approaches to gender. The aim here is to provide an overview of how the rigid femininities approach may be applied by examining femininity with various intersections and is by no means exhaustive. To explore the cruelty of rigid femininities, five typologies are briefly offered below (with acknowledgement that there are many more), which engage with different axes as they intersect with the gender binary: gender; class; the body; sexuality; and race.

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

### **Trans Exclusionary Feminist Femininity**

Exclusionary “feminism” that takes transgender identities as its target, can be understood as one key form of rigid femininity that serves to prop up the gender binary while paradoxically adopting a “cruel optimism” that this politics will achieve gender liberation. We can understand Trans Exclusionary Feminism as a rigid *femininity* insofar as it involves heavily policing the boundaries of “proper womanhood”. Even as Trans Exclusionary Feminists following might nominally reject normative “feminine” gender presentation, in collapsing “female” with “woman” they tacitly argue for a *femmephobic* approach to femininity (Hoskin, 2017a). This reveals strong attachments held to what femininity must be excluded (trans femininity) versus included (femininity understood as “natural womanhood”).

Trans exclusionary “feminism” not only casts out trans femininities as pariah (as Schippers would suggest), it reproduces neoliberal feminist logics (Gill, 2017) of intensifying surveillance on women’s bodies such as via intense bathroom policing practices. As Sally Hines (2019) outlines, “The right of trans women to use women’s public toilets has been at the centre of feminist debate around transgender, bringing issues of everyday gendered embodied experience and regulation to the fore” (p. 151). In terms of promoting a rigid femininity, trans-exclusionary “feminism” reinforces essentialist notions of gender, be that biological essentialism – that all women must have been assigned “female” sex at birth – or social essentialism – that only those assigned “female” at birth know true socialised womanhood. Though trans-exclusionary “feminists” have long claimed that transgender women reinforce ideal forms of femininity (see Hines, 2015, for discussion), such views ironically prop up a cruelly optimistic rigid notions of femininity in terms of “how to be a woman” (that

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

is, as cisgender), undermining the ability to subvert or dismantle the gender binary, instead helping to maintain rigid notions of gender and femininity.

### **Entrepreneurial Feminist Femininity**

A second form of rigid femininity aligns with what has discussed by others in terms of “lean in” feminism (Kennedy, 2018), neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2013), postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007; Gill, 2017), and right-wing feminism (Farris & Rottenberg, 2017). This form of “feminist” femininity demonstrates cruel optimism in the Berlantian sense, that is, it serves to prop up nationalist imaginaries (such as the “American dream”) that maintain the existing capitalist class structure even as it purports to challenge the gendered “glass ceiling”. Entrepreneurial feminist femininity is hegemonic in Schippers’ terms insofar as it casts out as pariah those femininities that do not align to neoliberal structures (such as those who may rely on welfare), championing a form of neoliberal feminism built on “relentless individualism” (Gill 2017, p. 609).

Frequently this approach to femininity is analysed in terms of the normatively feminine self-presentation embodied by those women who are “leaning in”. For example, Angela McRobbie (2009) dubs what I am describing as entrepreneurial feminist femininity, as the “post-feminist masquerade” which involves “a re-ordering of femininity so that old-fashioned styles (rules about hats, bags, shoes, etc.), which signal submission to some invisible authority...are reinstated” (p. 66). However, as Hannah McCann (2018) argues, McRobbie’s and similar analyses inadvertently centre on the body, such that roles and orientations are collapsed into styles and ways of looking. Following this, we might consider how the most important aspect of entrepreneurial feminist femininity is *not* what it “looks” like, but rather, the politics championed by this approach. This form of femininity is fundamentally rigid as it

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

fails to engage with questioning the gender binary whatsoever – instead assuming the naturalness of the binary as a starting point for advocating for entrepreneurialism within the existing class and gender structure. Above all else, entrepreneurial feminist femininity reveals an attachment to the structure as it is, and merely learning how to succeed within it (whatever that may “look” like), that ultimately maintains the status quo.

### **The Cult of Natural Femininity**

However, turning more directly to questions of embodiment, third, we can also understand claims to “natural beauty” as a form of rigid femininity that ultimately underpins the hegemonic gender structure. While hyper-feminine styles cannot help but reveal the performativity of gender, by contrast “natural beauty” insidiously poses as a remedy to gender normative regimes while masking its own normative operation (McCann, 2015). Closely related to trans exclusionary feminist femininity, this form promotes the notion that socialised femininity can be stripped bare to reveal a true gendered self-underneath. As Debra Ferreday (2007) compellingly points out, such views see femininity “...as something that is superimposed on some mystical ‘authentic’ self which cries out to be liberated from the artificially imposed constraints of high heels, makeup and restrictive clothing” (p. 6).

This form of femininity operates as hegemonic in Schippers’ terms, casting hyper-feminine styles (which are often highly raced and classed) out as pariah. It also promotes neoliberal sensibilities of “intense surveillance of women’s bodies” (Gill, 2017, p. 609), in order to achieve “authenticity” via fitness, skin care, self-love and other activities that broadly fall under achieving “wellness”. This form of femininity reveals rigid attachments to the idea of a “natural” gender binary, a cruel optimism

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

that replaces one set of gendered expectations (beauty ideals) with another (natural femininity).

### **Compulsorily Heterosexual Femininity**

Fourth, we might turn to those forms of femininity that strictly reinforce compulsory heterosexuality, such that notions of “proper womanhood” are equated with femininity that is compulsorily heterosexual. This does not refer to individual (hetero)sexual orientation, so much as those political forms of femininity that actively promote heterosexuality as morally “right”, and mandatory in Adrienne Rich’s (1980) original sense. Compulsorily heterosexual femininity rigidly adheres to the heterosexual matrix that fundamentally underpins the gender binary (Butler, 1990). That is, it reinforces the coherence between female assigned sex, womanhood, femininity, and heterosexual attraction to men.

This rigid attachment to femininity as heterosexual is found in both religious and secular contexts, and brought to the fore during public debates over sexuality, such as in marriage equality campaigns. Often in these campaigns the figure of the heterosexual mother figure is deployed as moral arbiter – whether that be to denounce “same sex” marriage or to permit it (Thomas, McCann & Fela, 2019). Here, even where “same sex” marriage is granted permissibility, where the heterosexual mother figure “endorses” it, it must be enrolled/assimilated into a fundamentally heterosexual nuclear model. In these campaigns queer femininities remain largely invisible in favour of cisgender gay masculinities, with the spectre of the feminist lesbian (who may question the institution of marriage) decidedly cast out as pariah.

### **Neo-Colonial Femininity**

Last, but certainly not least, we can understand how forms of femininity which cling to and support white supremacist colonial fantasies operate to rigidly and

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

toxically cling to Western conceptions of the gender binary. The toxicity of this form of femininity is best understood in localized contexts, in relation to specific histories of (ongoing) colonization. For example, considering an Australian context we can understand how it was “founded” by European settlers on white supremacy, as Luke Pearson (2019) writes this legacy continues:

Beginning with the invasion, dispossession and regulation of Indigenous peoples, continuing with the White Australia Policy, and remaining with us today, often under the guise of ‘protecting our way of life’, promoting ‘Australian values’, ‘stopping the boats’, and celebrating ‘Western civilisation.’ (n.p.)

Neo-colonial femininity reinforces this project via a distinctly gendered lens. For example, this is expressed in the image of conservative “One Nation” politician Pauline Hanson posing as a mother washing Australian flags – an advert for keeping the current Australia Day date (known instead to Indigenous advocates as “Invasion Day”). Similarly, we see this politics expressed by Australian TV personality Kerri-Anne Kennerley stating hyperbolic views on men’s violence in Indigenous communities, and claiming victim status after being called a racist by her co-presenter Yumi Stynes (McQuire, 2019).

This form of rigid femininity is both hegemonic in Schippers’ sense, casting out anti-colonial activist femininities as pariah, and reveals a strong attachment to maintaining hegemonic Western neoliberal values of individualism under a broader rubric of Nationalist identity. Further, in adopting and championing a Western ontological framework, notions of gender that do not align with a male/female binary remain invisible, and indeed are marked as dangerous. This typology, which calls attention to the alignment between certain forms of femininity and neo-colonial projects might provide a valuable place for engaging with one intersection of race and gender that goes beyond the abundance of critiques of “white feminism” currently on

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

offer. As Akane Kanai (2019) suggests, simple disavowals of “white feminism” (often adopted by white feminists) are readily absorbed into neoliberal regimes of self-regulation (the need to mark oneself as an “intersectional feminist”). Instead, neo-colonial femininity calls on us to attend to how particular white supremacist femininities operate within a broader settler-colonial landscape.

### Conclusion

Taking into account the five typologies of rigid femininity offered here, we circle back to Gilmore’s (2018) invocation of toxic femininity as the “gender roles that damage all of us” (n.p.). However, we extend this beyond “roles”, to understand the rigid and “toxic” attachments that maintain emphasized/hegemonic/normative/patriarchal models of femininity at various intersections of gender, class, the body, sexuality, and race. Crucially to note, the typologies offered here are not exhaustive, but rather serve as a starting point for thinking about the way that certain political approaches to femininity police the boundaries of appropriate femininity not only via casting certain forms out (pariah femininities/femmephobia), but through the positive yet “toxic” attachments that they champion. Importantly, while examining rigid femininities at various intersections reveals certain “toxic” attachments, this is less about individual forms/expressions of femininity than it is about positively reinforcing *structures* of gender. It is hoped that this theorization of “rigid femininities” not only helps to address the question of what might be “toxic” about certain forms of femininity, but may also provide a fruitful approach for those seeking to rethink “toxic masculinity”.

As I have outlined in this paper, we must take care in using the terminology of toxic femininity. Instead, we might consider the productive ways that scholars have already theorized femininity, and extending these through considering what is “toxic”

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

about certain approaches to femininity. Extending these conceptualizations via Berlant's cruel optimism brings us to the question of what keeps us locked in the toxic logic of the gendered present. Unpacking various rigid femininities offers a powerful way to understand how some approaches to gender keep us locked in a toxic system.

# THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

## References

- Anthony, K. (2018). Is “Toxic Femininity” A Thing? *BUST*.  
Retrieved October 17, 2019, from <https://bust.com/feminism/195520-toxic-femininity.html>.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Blair, K. L. & Hoskin, R. A. (2015). Experiences of femme identity: coming out, invisibility and femmephobia. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 6(3), 229–244.
- Blair, K. L. & Hoskin, R. A. (2016). Contemporary understandings of femme identities and related experiences of discrimination. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 7(2), 101–115.
- Boyle, L. (2005). Flexing the Tensions of Female Muscularity: How Female Bodybuilders Negotiate Normative Femininity in Competitive Bodybuilding. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 33(1/2), 134-149.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge.
- Budgeon, S. (2014). The Dynamics of Gender Hegemony: Femininities, Masculinities and Social Change. *Sociology*, 48(2), 317–334.
- Connell, R. (1987). *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Connell, R., & Messerschmidt, J. (2005). Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829-859.
- 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*, 1(8), 139–68.
- Darwin, H. (2017). The pariah femininity hierarchy: comparing white

THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

women's body hair and fat stigmas in the United States. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(1), 135-146.

Daum, M. (2018). #MeToo Will Not Survive Unless We Recognize Toxic Femininity. *Medium*. Retrieved September 7, 2019, from <https://medium.com/@mdaum213/metoo-will-not-survive-unless-we-recognize-toxic-femininity-6e82704ee616>.

Deliovsky, K. (2008). Normative White Femininity: Race, Gender and the Politics of Beauty. *Atlantis*, 33(1), 49-59.

Farris, S., & Rottenberg, C. (2017). Introduction: Righting Feminism. *New Formations*, 91, 5-15.

Ferreday, D. (2007). Adapting Femininities: The New Burlesque. *M/C Journal*, 10(2).

Gill, R. (2019). Three Gender Norms That Reinforce Toxic Masculinity. *Ms Magazine*. Retrieved October 20, 2019, from <https://msmagazine.com/2019/09/26/three-gender-norms-that-reinforce-toxic-masculinity/>.

Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147–166.

Gill, R. (2017). The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6), 606–626.

Gilmore, J. (2018). How Toxic Femininity is Damaging Us. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved September 7, 2019, from <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/how-toxic-femininity-is-damaging-us-20180517-p4zfvt.html>.

THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

- hooks, b. (2013). *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, New York: Routledge.
- Hoskin, R. A. (2017a). Femme theory: Refocusing the intersectional lens. *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, 38(1), 95–109.
- Hoskin, R. A. (2017b). Femme interventions and the proper feminist subject: Critical approaches to decolonizing contemporary western feminist pedagogies. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 3(1), 1–17.
- Hines, S. (2015). Feminist Theories. In Victoria Robinson and Diane Richardson (Eds.), *Introducing Gender & Women's Studies* (23-39). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hines, S. (2019). The Feminist Frontier: On Trans and Feminism. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(2), 145-157.
- Kanai, A. (2019). Between the perfect and the problematic: everyday femininities, popular feminism, and the negotiation of intersectionality. *Cultural Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/09502386.2018.1559869.
- Karner, T. (1996). Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam: Masculinity and Betrayal in the Life Narratives of Vietnam: Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. *American Studies*, 37(1), 63-94.
- Kennedy T. A. (2018). Lean In and Tell Me a (True) Story: Sheryl Sandberg's Revision of Feminist History. In Delphine Letort and Benaouda Lebdaï (Eds.), *Women Activists and Civil Rights Leaders in Auto/Biographical Literature and Films* (65-88), Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kirby, R. & Kirby, M. (2019). The Perils of Toxic Masculinity: Four Case Studies. *Trends in Urology and Men's Health*, 10(5), 18-20.
- Kupers, T. A. (2005). Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment

## THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

in Prison. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61(6), 713-724.

Launius, C., and Hassel, H. (2015). *Threshold Concepts in Women's and Gender Studies: Ways of Seeing, Thinking, and Knowing*. New York: Routledge.

McCann, H. (2015). Pantomime Dames: Queer Femininity Versus 'Natural Beauty' in *Snog, Marry, Avoid*. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30(85), 238–251.

McCann, H. (2018). *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism and the Politics of Presentation*, London: Routledge.

McQuire, A. (2019). Black and White Witness. Retrieved October 20, 2019, from *Meanjin*, <https://meanjin.com.au/essays/black-and-white-witness/>.

McRobbie, A. (2009). *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, Los Angeles: SAGE.

Milton, J. (2019). This man getting his haircut with an axe and a hammer is the dictionary definition of toxic masculinity. *PinkNews*. Retrieved October 20, 2019, from <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/10/17/toxic-masculinity-man-haircut-axe-hammer-twitter-viral-video/>.

Minick, J. (2018). Why Feminists Hate Toxic Femininity. *Intellectual Takeout*. Retrieved October 17, 2019, from <https://www.intellectualltakeout.org/article/why-feminists-hate-toxic-femininity>.

Pappas, S. (2019). APA issues first-ever guidelines for practice with men and Boys. *CE Corner*, 50(1). Retrieved October 20, 2019, from <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/01/ce-corner> .

Pearson, L. (2019). It's not a few bad apples, it is the whole damn tree.

THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP US LOCKED IN

- Indigenous X*. Retrieved October 20, 2019, from <https://indigenoux.com.au/its-not-a-few-bad-apples-it-is-the-whole-damn-tree/>.
- Projansky, S. (2001). *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, New York: New York University Press.
- Renold, E., & Ringrose, J. (2008). Regulation and rupture: Mapping tween and teenage girls' resistance to the heterosexual matrix. *Feminist Theory*, 9(3), 313–338.
- Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5(4), 631–660.
- Rottenberg, C. (2014). The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism. *Cultural Studies*, 28(3), 418-437.
- Schippers, M. (2007). Recovering the feminine other: masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony. *Theory and Society*, 36, 85–102.
- Snider, N. (2018). 'Why Didn't She Walk Away?' Silence, Complicity, and the Subtle Force of Toxic Femininity. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 54(4), 763-777.
- Thomas, A., McCann, H., & Fela, G. (2019). 'In this house we believe in fairness and kindness': Post-liberation politics in Australia's same-sex marriage postal survey. *Sexualities*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460719830347>.
- Toerien, M. Wilkinson, S. & Choi, P. Y. L. (2005). Body Hair Removal: The 'Mundane' Production of Normative Femininity. *Sex Roles*, 52(5/6), 399-406
- Waling, A. (2019). Problematizing 'Toxic' and 'Healthy' Masculinity for Addressing Gender. *Australian Feminist Studies*, DOI:

THEORIZING TOXIC FEMININITY: THE RIGID FEMININITIES THAT KEEP  
US LOCKED IN

10.1080/08164649.2019.1679021.

Walsh, L. (2019). How leaders like Boris Johnson took toxic masculinity in politics to terrifying new heights. *Independent*. Retrieved October 20, 2019, from <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/boris-johnson-brex-it-politics-toxic-masculinity-corbyn-eu-a9153081.html>.



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

**Author/s:**

McCann, H

**Title:**

Is there anything "toxic" about femininity? The rigid femininities that keep us locked in

**Date:**

2020-07-05

**Citation:**

McCann, H. (2020). Is there anything "toxic" about femininity? The rigid femininities that keep us locked in. *Psychology and Sexuality*, 13 (1), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2020.1785534>.

**Persistent Link:**

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/254288>