



PRESS RELEASE

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The feminisation of men leads to a rise in homophobia

Researchers at UNIGE have shown that some men turn to homophobia as a way of reasserting their masculinity and compensate for the feminisation of men in society.



Juan M. Falomir, Professor in the Psychology Section in UNIGE's Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (FPSE).

High resolution pictures

Before the feminist revolution in the late 1960s, men largely built their masculinity on traits that opposed those assigned to women. Since then, society has been moving more and more towards gender equality, and men can no longer rely on this anti-feminine norm. What are the effects of this shift on masculinity affirmation? Researchers at the University of Geneva (UNIGE), Switzerland, have revealed that some men assert their manhood by stressing their heterosexuality, in order to compensate for this feminisation of men. This move marks a clear rejection of homosexuality, seen as the personification of the feminine man. The UNIGE results, published in the journal *Sex Roles*, reflect the difficulties Western societies have in granting homosexuals the same rights as heterosexuals, with some men leaning on homophobia to help them find their place in an increasingly egalitarian society.

Prior to May 1968, the social norms that male identity was built on were founded primarily on the male-female opposition. A woman, for example, had to be sensitive and attentive, and was obliged to prioritise the family at the expense of her career. A man, on the other hand, had to be self-assured, independent and strong - and, above all, he had to be not feminine. The masculinity constructed on this opposition was a more fragile concept than femininity: a man was meant to prove his manliness to society by regularly acting in a way that showed he was not a woman.

Masculine construction: in need of guidance

Western society has been moving in the direction of greater gender equality since the feminist revolution. As well as focusing on their careers, women can now be self-sufficient and strong. Meanwhile, men are allowed to show their emotions and take care of their families. The anti-feminine norm can no longer serve as a model for constructing male identity, and it is said that there is a "crisis of masculinity". What are the implications on what it means to be a man today?

A team led by Juan M. Falomir, Professor in the Psychology Section in UNIGE's Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (FPSE), has recently investigated the relationship between the decline of the anti-feminine norm and homophobia. "The homosexual stereotype includes the idea of someone who transgresses gender identity by embodying femininity in a man," says the professor. "We wondered whether the feminisation of men had a direct impact on the decrease or rise of homophobia."

Anti-femininity and heterosexuality: an interconnected system

The UNIGE psychologists used a questionnaire to test the effects of the demise of the anti-femininity norm. It included items measuring agreement with the key features of masculinity: avoiding femininity, restricting emotions, self-confidence, aggression, domination, attraction to sexual activity and homophobia. Three groups of heterosexual men then had to state whether they agreed or disagreed with 50 or so items related to these norms. “The first group was a control group, meaning its members had to complete the questionnaire without any prior information. With the second group, we highlighted the masculinity and anti-femininity of men in society today through the presentation of various studies before filling in the questionnaire. Conversely, we told the third group that men today had never been so feminine,” explains professor Falomir. In a second study, the researchers only retained the last two groups, with participants answering another questionnaire that measured their attitudes towards homosexuals (their rights, sense of morality, the emotions they feel and their behaviour) and the affirmation of their own heterosexuality. Contrary to all expectations, the results indicated in overall terms that homophobia and the reaffirmation of heterosexuality were much stronger for the last group – where men were presented as being increasingly feminine – than for the other groups.

“It’s an interconnected system”, explains professor Falomir. “In decreasing the significance of the anti-femininity norm, men compensate by emphasising the importance of the heterosexuality norm. Homophobia is the alternative way of asserting their masculinity.” As the UNIGE psychologists continued their study, they noted that the rise in homophobia is not caused directly by a desire to reassert the male-female opposition (the gender dichotomy). Femininity is no longer considered to be a characteristic that is unique to women since men are becoming more sensitive and emotional. But this acceptance of the feminisation of men seems to be happening at the expense of homosexuals, because masculinity is now affirmed more by heterosexuality. We should note, however, that this increase in homophobia is found mainly among more “traditional” men. So-called “modern” men, by contrast, react better to the feminisation of men and have a better perception of homosexuals.

The feminisation of society is delaying the acceptance of gay rights

These results reflect the fact that our Western societies, which are establishing gender equality as a fundamental principle, are still reluctant when it comes to the rights of homosexuals. “The more we even up the genders, the more difficult it becomes for ‘traditional men’ to manage this equality and continue to construct their masculinity. As they can’t differentiate themselves from women any more, they see homophobia as a way of restoring their manhood,” concludes professor Falomir.

contact

Juan M. Falomir

Full professor in the psychology section

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences

+41 22 379 93 16

Juan.Falomir@unige.ch

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UNIVERSITÉ DE GENÈVE
Communication Department

24 rue du Général-Dufour
CH-1211 Geneva 4

Tel. +41 22 379 77 17

media@unige.ch

www.unige.ch