

# GENDER 201: UNDERSTANDING & COPING WITH GENDER ROLE STRAIN

*Brooke Wells*

In this interactive workshop, participants will learn about the complexity of gender by examining terminology and the impact of gender roles and gender role conflict/strain on health and well-being, including sexual decision-making. Participants will engage in a writing exercise designed to facilitate insight into the ways in which gender roles have impacted their lives. The workshop will end with a discussion of the ways in which participants could cope with gender role socialization and strain, including ways to expand gender roles in their communities.

## KEYWORDS

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Community  
Bias  
Effemophobia  
Gender  
Homophobia  
Masculinity  
Mental Health  
Race  
Sexual Health  
Stress Management  
Trauma

## THEME

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Society &  
Culture

## FORMAT

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Interactive  
Discussion

## TIME

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140 minutes



# PREPARATION

*The facilitator(s) should use this section to prepare for the lesson.*

PREPARATION

## WHY THIS LESSON IS IMPORTANT FOR BLACK MEN

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The impact of heterosexism, homophobia, racism, sexism, and classism on Black gay men's quality of life, sexual decision making, and health outcomes is well-documented. (Garcia et al., 2016; Van Sluytman et al., 2015) Therefore, it is critical that Black gay men develop self-awareness of the impacts of gender norms as well as coping skills to manage the impact of discrimination and rigid gender roles.

### GOAL

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Participants will experience increased awareness of the impact of gendered social expectations on their personal lives and learn about a range of coping strategies other Black gay men have used to manage these rigid and often conflicting expectations.

### OBJECTIVES

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By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Define the meaning of 'gender role socialization' and 'gender role strain'.
- Explain at least one way gender socialization and role strain can exact an emotional toll on Black gay men.
- Describe three coping strategies they would be willing to use in their lives or recommend to others when confronted with gender role strain or in response to trauma related to gender and sexuality.

## TIME

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<b>STEPS 1–4</b>	Introductions and Opening Activity	20 min.
<b>STEPS 5–7</b>	“Ethnic Hyper-Masculinity”: Video and Discussion	20 min.
<b>STEPS 8–11</b>	Telling A Gender Story	45 min.
–	Break	10 min.
<b>STEPS 12–19</b>	Coping with Gender Role Socialization and Strain	30 min.
<b>STEPS 20–22</b>	Closing Activity	15 min.

## REQUIRED BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE FOR EDUCATORS

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The ideal facilitator(s) should possess:

- Thorough understanding of and ability to explain the differences between gender identity, gender expression, sex assigned at birth, and sexual orientation. (*A visual way to understand these concepts can be found at [transstudent.org/gender](https://transstudent.org/gender).*)
- Baseline understanding of and ability to explain the impacts of gender role conflict and strain on sexual and relational decision-making.
- Working knowledge of PrEP, PEP, other HIV preventative options and treatment for corrective feedback in session.
- A list of relevant, local and national mental and sexual health resources.

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

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This lesson is written for groups of 10–15 with the support of two co-facilitators. However, it can be adapted for smaller groups. For groups of five or less participants, all activities can be completed as a full group with a single facilitator.

Because this lesson asks participants to reflect on potentially traumatic life events, having a trained mental health provider present in the session and/or serving as lead facilitator may be helpful in the event that a participant is experiencing acute distress triggered by these discussions.

## FACILITATION PREP

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The facilitator(s) should complete the following tasks before the lesson starts:

- ❑ If your space will allow, organize participant seating in a semi-circle facing the front of the room.
- ❑ At the top of a sheet of flip chart paper, draw a two-sided arrow from one left to the right of the sheet. At the end of the left arrow write the words “**Constructive for Me**”, and at the end of the right arrow write the words “**Destructive for Me**”. Place the sheet out of sight from participants until the moment in the session when you are prepared to use it.
- ❑ Copy and make cut-outs of Facilitator Resource A, “Key Terms & Definitions”. Have them prepared to use during the “Telling A Gender Story” Activity.
- ❑ Ensure technology is working properly prior to beginning the session. If a computer and projector are unavailable, print a copy of the lesson slides for each participant.
- ❑ This lesson includes discussion of the video, “Ethnic Hyper-Masculinity,” which can be found at [youtube.com/watch?v=FRITu5ntiQ4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRITu5ntiQ4). Check your space 30 minutes in advance of the session to ensure that an internet connection is available, and that the video can be seen, heard, and viewed properly. Cue up the video, and then minimize the viewing window.
- ❑ This lesson also includes discussion of the video, “Jordan Stephens on Toxic Masculinity”, which can be found at [facebook.com/watch/?v=10155162134913947](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155162134913947). Follow the same instructions noted in the previous bullet point.
- ❑ Greet participants as they enter the room, making sure to say hello and introduce yourself to each individual. Let them know where the restrooms are, direct them to any food or beverages you are providing, and invite them to take a seat.
- ❑ If applicable, prepare a list of referral services offered by your agency, including those for mental health, sexual health, identity-based support groups, and any other relevant referral source. Have copies ready to distribute to participants at the end of your session.

## MATERIALS

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The facilitator(s) should have the following materials for the lesson:

- Computer
- LCD projector, screen, and connector cables
- Speakers
- Printer paper (*1-2 sheets per participant*)
- Whiteboard or flip chart paper
- Tape (*if posting flip chart paper*)
- Sticky notes (*e.g., Post-it Notes*)
- Writing utensils (*one per participant*)

## HANDOUTS

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Each participant should be provided with the following printed materials:

- H1, “Telling a Gender Story”
- End-of-Session Evaluation

## KEY TERMS

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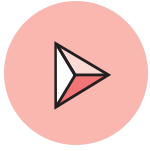
**Gender roles** (or **gender norms**): the social norms about what is acceptable and expected according to gender.

**Masculinity ideology**: how strongly we believe in those gender norms and how important it is to us to live up to those.

**Effemiphobia**: the fear or denigration of femininity.

**Gender role strain**: the difficulty of living up to these restrictive, and sometimes conflicting, gender norms.

**Trauma/Traumatic experiences**: emotionally painful and distressing events or situations that overwhelm an individual’s ability to cope and have negative psychological and health impacts.



# PROCEDURE

The facilitator(s) should follow the steps in this section to facilitate the session, and use the margin for notes and prompts.



## Introductions and Opening Activity

### STEP 1

Welcome participants to your session and conduct brief introductions with the group as needed. Review all established group agreements and reaffirm consent from the group. If group agreements have not been completed, please create them at this time (*use the Community Agreements lesson, if necessary.*)

### STEP 2

Post a clean sheet of flip chart paper, and then invite participants to take between 30 seconds and one minute to consider the following question: “If you had to explain to someone from another country what it means to be a Black man in America, what would you tell them?” Explain to participants that this should be done without talking.

### STEP 3

After one minute, instruct participants to partner up with someone with them, and then share their reflections with each other for an additional minute each (*two minutes total*). After two additional minutes, reconvene the larger group.

### STEP 4

Invite participants to share what they discussed within their smaller groups, recording all responses on a sheet of flip chart paper. Once all participants have responded, proceed through the following Discussion Questions:

1. “Does this list capture a full glimpse of what it means to be a Black man in America? If not, what’s missing?” (Record any additional new responses to the flip chart sheet.)
2. “What comes to your mind as you look at this list in full?”
3. “Would this list change if I asked you to describe the specific experience of being a Black gay man? If so, how?” (*Again, record any new responses to the newsprint, encouraging participants to consider both simple and more challenging aspects, including those pertaining to sex and relationships.*)

Thank participants for their responses.



## “Ethnic Hyper-Masculinity”: Video and Discussion

### STEP 5



**Explain** to participants that they will now be watching a video that highlights one Black man’s perspective on manhood, after which they will have the opportunity to discuss and share their own thoughts. **Cue up** the “Ethnic Hyper-Masculinity” video. **Encourage** participants to refrain from having any side conversations while the video is playing, and to reserve their thoughts until the proper time for discussion, so as not to disturb anyone else. **Play** the video.

### STEP 6

After the video ends, **proceed** through the following Discussion Questions:

1. “Does this video bring up any additional thoughts about the meaning of manhood?”
2. “On a scale of 1 (Super Easy) to 5 (Super Difficult), how easy was it to relate to the examples and challenges brought up in the video?”  
(*Invite 2–3 participants to share examples.*)
3. “On a scale of 1 (Super Easy) to 5 (Super Difficult), how easy it to talk about the things we identify with in this video, and why?”
4. “Aside from the perspective of the video, would you agree that being Black creates unique gender struggles for Black men versus men from other ethnic groups? How about as a Black gay men? Why or why not?”
5. “What would you say are the consequences for Black gay men not living up to gendered expectations?” (*As participants respond, **take note** of anything said that could be used as examples in the next activity. Use a new sheet of flip chart paper, if needed.*)

### STEP 7

**Conclude** the activity by thanking participants for their willingness to share their thoughts. **Validate** the idea that it may be difficult to call gender norms into question, or to even acknowledge those that have been ingrained in us, particularly when they’ve caused us to be marginalized at various points in our lives. **Encourage** participants to consider moving forward how, if at all, such norms and rules can be deconstructed in ways that lessen the harm they may have historically caused.



## Telling A Gender Story

### STEP 8



Divide participants into four small groups (*for groups smaller than eight participants, let participants work individually*), and then distribute one of the four Key Terms to each group from Faciliator Resource A: “Key Terms & Definitions.” Explain that you will now read definitions for each of the terms, and instruct groups to guess which definition applies to the term they have been given. As each group correctly determines which definition matches their term, give them a copy of the corresponding written definition.

### STEP 9



Once each group has their correct Key Term and definition, distribute a copy of Handout H1, “Telling a Gender Story.” Instruct the group to use Handout H1 to imagine and create a small story based on a Black man who lives in conflict with societal gender expectations. Explain that the story can be true or imagined, but that it should be a realistic depiction of a Black man's experience, and should include at least one example of the Key Term they have been given. Give the group 10 minutes to draft their story, and explain to them that they will be responsible for sharing their story with the rest of the group.

### STEP 10

After ten minutes, reconvene the larger group. Instruct the group to begin by sharing the Key Term and definition they were given, and then telling their story. After all stories are told, proceed through the following Discussion Questions:

1. “What initial comments, thoughts, or reactions do you have about these stories?”
2. “As you read and listened to these stories, what emotions came up, and why?”
3. “Are there any common themes you noticed in these stories and/or how they were told?” (Write any particular insights on a sheet of flip chart paper.)
4. “How was gender relevant in what you wrote about?” (Instruct participants to tell specific ways that both the Key Term they were assigned and others showed up in the stories told.)
5. “Out of all the stories told, which one feels closest to one you’ve heard or experienced before?”
6. “How can/do stories like this influence the lives of those who live them?”



**STEP 11**

At this point in the lesson, invite participants to share any additional stories they have that they believe help further highlight the Key Term concepts. Explain that sharing should not be meant to be exploitative, but that sometimes sharing our stories in safe spaces can be cathartic, helping us find connections with others and see that we aren't alone in our experiences. After all additional stories are shared, take a moment to acknowledge that this may have been an emotionally challenging activity for some people. If you are able, offer participants a 10-minute break.

**Break**

*Make yourself available to participants during this time for one-on-one reflection and follow up as needed. If any participants do not seek you out, but appear to be struggling or disengaged, approach them to chat or check in.*

**Coping with Gender Role Socialization & Strain****STEP 12**

Acknowledge that many of the types of experiences shared in the last activity can be traumatic for people. Invite 2–3 participants to share their definitions of the term “Trauma” before sharing the definition from the Key Terms section of the lesson. Cue up the video “[Jordan Stephens on Toxic Masculinity](#),” and then explain to participants that they will now watch a video that discusses the notion of trauma and its relationship to men & masculinity. Encourage participants to watch silently and take mental notes on anything they hear that stands out to them. Play the video.

**STEP 13**

After the video ends, proceed through the following Discussion Questions:

1. “Jordan describes trauma as a “male crisis” when talking about masculinity and men’s resultant challenges in accessing emotion. Do you agree with this idea? Why or why not?”
2. “Could naming this phenomenon as “trauma” affect how it’s seen and/or managed among Black men? How about Black gay men? If so, how?” (You may have participants who do not see gender role strain and other related phenomena as trauma. In that case, explain to participants that trauma can come from

*any experience that is emotionally painful and distressing, and that it can sit with someone and show up in a person's life in many ways—e.g., PTSD, violence, depression, etc.—long after the original stressor is gone.)*

3. “If we follow Jordan’s logic and accept that what Black men are experiencing is trauma, what would you say is/are the most effective way(s) to address it?”

**STEP 14** Explain that although there are many challenges facing men in the present day, there are many of them—Black gay men included—who are using strategies to cope with the trauma associated with gender role socialization, strain, and discrimination. Distribute five sticky notes and a writing utensil to each participant, and then explain to the group that it will now think a bit about those strategies.

**STEP 15** Instruct participants to write down one coping method they’ve used to address trauma related to gender roles, gender role strain, masculinity ideology and effemiphobia. Encourage participants to be as honest as possible, including strategies that might have been judged by others as “healthy” (e.g., substance use, self-harm). Give participants five minutes to complete their sticky notes, offering more sheets if needed.

**STEP 16** Reveal the flip chart sheet labeled “Constructive For Me” and “Destructive For Me” (*See Facilitation Prep*). Explain to participants that the sign now represents a continuum onto which they should arrange their sticky notes from most constructive to most destructive. Using either a wall, whiteboard, or the remaining sheet of paper, instruct participants to place their sticky notes along the continuum where they believe them to have the best fit. Encourage them to place them where they feel they should personally be, without worrying about others’ perspective.

*Alternate Activity:*

If you have desk space, you may wish to have participants work alone in organizing their sticky notes, or work in small groups if you have a group larger than 10–12 people.

**STEP 17**

After 7–10 minutes of working, reconvene the group, and invite volunteers to share initial thoughts and reactions to the exercise. Once initial comments have been shared, proceed through the following Discussion Questions:

1. “What are some of the strategies you came up with? How did you or do you use them in your life to combat the trauma and pressure of gender role strain and masculinity in your life?”
2. “How did you decide where to put each sticky note on the continuum?”
3. “How have your coping strategies impacted you physically, mentally, emotionally, and/or spiritually?”
4. “Do these coping strategies have different short- and long-term effects?”

**STEP 18**

Invite each participant to look at the cumulative list created by the group, and identify 2–3 coping strategies shared by others that would feel beneficial to add to their toolkit over the next two weeks.

Proceeding one-by-one, instruct each participant to name one way they will use each strategy, being as specific as possible (e.g., instead of saying “I’ll call a friend when I feel stressed”, saying “I will arrange to call my friend, <Name>, after family events where I know I will feel pressured to behave a certain way as a man.”). Encourage participants to be creative in how they might use the strategy. Highlight examples like: accessing social support; building communities of like-minded people; developing friendships characterized by trust, honesty, and acceptance; asking for help from trusted friends and family members and from medical providers; resistance, which can include educating people about their discriminatory language or behavior; intervening when it’s safe to do so; and working towards individual and inclusive definitions of masculinity.

**STEP 19**

End this portion of the lesson by thanking participants for sharing their difficult experiences and their coping strategies.



## Closing Activity

### STEP 21

Distribute a copy of the End-of-Session Evaluation to each participant. Allow participants 5–7 minutes to complete the evaluation, and collect them as they are completed. After five minutes, invite any participants who have not completed the evaluation to do so after the next activity.

### STEP 22

Close the session by thanking the participants again for their honesty and vulnerability. Offer the prepared resource list handout to each participant, encouraging them to access it as needed to further explore session topics.

### STEP 23

Offer to stay around for a bit longer if anyone has any questions or would like to talk. Prompt participants for any final questions they have. Thank participants one last time before ending the session.



## FACILITATOR RESOURCE A

### KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

Directions: See **STEP 8**.

Cut out the Key Terms and Definitions along the dotted lines. Two sets are included below.

<b>Gender Roles</b>  The social norms about what is acceptable and expected according to gender.	<b>Masculinity Ideology</b>  How strongly we believe in those gender norms and how important it is to us to live up to those.
<b>Effemiphobia</b>  The fear or denigration of femininity.	<b>Gender Role Strain</b>  The difficulty of living up to these restrictive, and sometimes conflicting, gender norms.
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## HANDOUT

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HANDOUT

### TELLING A GENDER STORY

**Directions:**

Think about a time when you or someone you know whose identity as a Black gay man, or lived experience ran in conflict with societal, family, or even their own expectations of masculinity. Tell the story of that experience, including how the protagonist felt and what they were thinking at the time, and how that experience impacted their life, relationships, sex life, drinking or drug use, or health. This story can be real or imagined, just make sure it's realistic!

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