

# Further Thoughts on Male Image

Posted on [December 5, 2013](#) by [Pandora](#)

*This follow-up article about **Male Image** was written in response to a comment by Molly posted to the [original article](#) below. It started out as a small reply by Pandora but soon grew to article length, at which point Tasi felt that other readers would also want to see the follow-up.*

I both agree and disagree. I totally agree that there's a strong element of worrying about what others think. That almost goes without saying for most people and in most areas of life. It's a factor that comes into play no matter what the topic, and discovering that she has a non-traditional husband is a huge topic for most women.

If that's all it were, though, the issue could be solved by the husband's agreeing to keep it strictly secret. In fact, if dealing with others' opinions were the main stumbling block, a wife would have no problem with her husband's dressing at home as long as the curtains were closed and no one ever knew. As most CDers know, the issue is rarely solved that easily.



I don't believe that we can disregard the attraction to maleness per se, the thing that women themselves tend to label "male image". You mention things like breadwinner and societal stereotypes, but sometimes those are more important to the man himself, who's been conditioned to expect certain things of himself. Traditionally men felt intensely the burden of providing well for their families, but given the economics of the U.S. for the last 30 years, that burden is shared more and more by both partners. Some women do still dream of the total provider, but not the way they once did. A wife's working, even from need, doesn't seriously cut into her ability to see her husband as "all man".

I totally agree that men who meet the societal stereotype of manliness can be less than ideal partners. A man doesn't have to be Arnold Schwarzenegger to project a fully male image, and, in fact, most of us prefer our men to not be overly aggressive and to speak more than 20 words a day. It's OK to not have rippling muscles or to coach your daughter's T-ball team, and it's also OK to be a better cook than your wife. These are modern male roles. What's not OK is to step across the line that divides male and female. I know that in reality that's a very fluid division, but I'm speaking of the general line a mainstream heterosexual woman senses when she enters into a partnership with a man. In her eyes he can earn less, cook better, be a great nurturer to the kids and still be fully male. What he can't do is need to spend part of his time *not* being a man. Whereas she might even accept his occasionally putting a silky dress on his obviously male body, once he creates a feminine persona for a part of himself, he has self-announced that he isn't comfortable being 100% male 100% of the time. As a woman who expected to partner with an "opposite" 24/7, that's a whammy.

As I mentioned in the first article, many women feel that they *should* be able to accept a partner who's outside the gender norms, especially because she already loves him as a person. Her modern brain tells her this, but she's got internal feelings pulling her in another direction. I totally disagree with those that disregard our ancient hard-wiring or claim that it doesn't matter. It's there and it causes lots of conflicts.

*Fifty Shades of Gray* is an example of this. Many women were deeply conflicted over their fascination with this series, because they knew that they "shouldn't" be attracted to the male dominant figure. Several book reviewers commented on the fact that, because in the end the female rejected her submissive role, women could have it both ways. They could fully relish the dominance-submission interplay of the book and then feel they were still meeting society's modern expectations because in the end the woman walked away. They got to have their cake and eat it too, if you will.



Why do I bring up these books? They weren't particularly well written, yet they had an adoring following amongst women of all ages, and it wasn't their rational brain doing the following. It's that old inner wiring that sometimes they themselves don't understand or even agree with, the wiring that makes them swoon in the presence of a dominant male. The image of a man who is dominant to the point that it would be socially unacceptable in today's world still has a huge pull on women's imaginations, even if they wouldn't want to live permanently with such a man in real life. Most women only admit these kinds of feelings to their best friends, but they're very much there. It's what keeps *Cosmo* in business.

Women don't expect their partners to be stereotypically "male" 24/7. When a modern couple lives together, their relationship usually plays out in such a way that the husband won't always seem like the caveman conqueror. It's real life, and we all have our ups and our downs, our good days and our bad. But in a "straight" heterosexual relationship, even on the bad days the gender lines are clear. Your wife may be laughing at your unsuccessful attempt to fix the broken shelf (less than full he-man of the stereotypes?), but she has no doubts that you're the man in the relationship, even if not a particularly handy one.



Sharing with your wife that you're also Mimi and wondering how she protects her French nails when gardening is a totally different ballgame. You may not have been a perfect male, but you *were* male. You were her ballast, the male that balanced her female. Not all women have a strong need for this yin-yang, but a large number do, and for them, how do you compromise on who's who? You feel a need to fully express who you are by living in both the male and female modes, but if she doesn't share your gender fluidity, she's just lost something huge. When you're female, where's her male partner, the one she expected to always have?

You spoke of internal conflict. Of course it causes a huge internal conflict for the woman. If she has a husband who wants to live as both male and female, what, if anything, does that say about her? I'm sure there are some women who do wonder if there's something wrong with them or if they've made a bad decision, but that's maybe an inevitable part of the early shock of learning such a drastic new piece of information about their husband.

Once the early shock and recriminations work through, though, very real issues remain. For a woman who loves the maleness of men, even real-life flawed ones, she either has to give up her own hopes of living in a fulfilling relationship or she has to break up a relationship that until then had been something she wanted. I know many will say that she can still have that fulfilling relationship much or even most of the time, but that will circle us back to the original article's concept of male image, something that lots and lots of women instinctively understand. Yes, her husband may be dressed like a total stud at that moment, but her whole image of him has changed. It's possible that she can learn to live with a less-than-full-time male, but even when he's in male mode she'll be carrying the image of him as both. For most women, it does affect the relationship. It doesn't always mean the end of the relationship, but it does mean a changed relationship.

There's one more question to consider, and that's the one of fairness. In therapy, the emphasis is almost always on supporting the needs of the TG, and those needs are very real, but often that puts the equally real needs of the partner on the defensive. When we marry, we expect our spouse to continue in the gender we first knew them as, not just some of the time but all of the time. It's such a given that it's rarely even discussed. I do think that the soul searching that follows the discovery that a partner cross dresses is a good thing. Being forced to think about our own assumptions and even prejudices is a positive experience leading to greater tolerance and self-growth. Too often, though, the woman is made to feel defective because she doesn't want a husband who is male only part of the time, and I don't know how that's different than making the husband feel defective because he needs to fully express his female side. It may be that their emotional needs simply don't allow for both to be feel satisfied in the marriage. It's not about blame, it's about differences.

I seem to have taken quite a journey through the neighborhood, but as you know, the question of how his wife or partner views him is one of the thorniest problems that a TG has to deal with. The answer for each couple will vary slightly, but there are themes that return with great frequency. Although the original article didn't deal with this, "What will the neighbors say?" is definitely one of those themes, and most women anguish over it. The concept of male image, though, is mentioned too frequently by women themselves to be dismissed as a side issue. Right or wrong, we want our men to present as men. Flawed, funny, stumbling . . . it's all OK as long as we can look at you and see that you're our men. It's when we can't that the trouble begins.

