**“The history of gender is necessarily comparative.” Discuss.**

When determining the necessity of the comparison, it is of fundamental importance to examine what constitutes the requirements of a comparison. The Cambridge Dictionary simplistically defines the term ‘comparative’ as ‘comparing *different* things’, the English Oxford Living Dictionary’s definition provides an effective elaboration: ‘the systematic observation of the similarities or *differences* between two or more… subjects of study.’ When used in conjunction, the definitions successfully coalesce with an underlying similarity: (somewhat ironically) both emphasise the ‘perceived differences’[[1]](#footnote-1) between two subjects. It is these differences that provide the foundations for the study of the history of gender, but perhaps more significantly, it is what is done with these comparative differences and how much of a necessity societies judge them to be, that determines the impact the history of gender can have on global societies.

It is of fundamental importance to consider the role of the historian when determining the necessity. Arguably, gender comparisons have become so ingrained within society that historians themselves have a comparative lens to analyse both present and past societies as they are ‘shaped by… the… social climates in which they live.’[[2]](#footnote-2) This establishes a level of bias within historiography; historians are incapable of presenting gender without the necessity of comparisons. Alternatively, the use of comparisons for historical analysis may be a more accurate reflection of the past. The responsibility of a historian is to ‘*reconstruct’[[3]](#footnote-3)* and document the past, therefore the social forces operating within the society should be reflected given that historians are the representatives of the society they are writing about. Thus by consciously rejecting the necessity of comparisons, historians may be excluding a fundamental aspect of the past society in their documentation, possibly curating an inaccurate portrayal. It is also important to recognise that the historian’s role is not to implement change, but rather to study the change and the factors that may result in it. Ultimately, the history of gender is necessarily comparative for historians as long as the inequalities exist. However, this does not mean that the necessity is permanent: instead, with the changing of time, historians will need to develop their approaches to historical analysis.

Undeniably, past Western societies have been constructed on the rigid comparative differences between men and women. This generated a rigid hierarchical structure, usually at the relentless disadvantage to women. Therefore the use of comparisons may provide an invaluable perspective into previous social normality. For example[[4]](#footnote-4), prior to 1882 women had no right to their own property or money within marriage[[5]](#footnote-5), they did not receive the vote until 1928[[6]](#footnote-6), and it wasn’t until 1991 that marital rape was considered illegal[[7]](#footnote-7). The comparisons are endless, and are a powerful and significant reflection on the existence of social inequality, which itself is a product of how important society necessitates comparisons to be. Therefore comparisons help reconstruct a society where women were unequivocally seen as minors to men legally, socially and economically. In the past, these comparisons were preserved in law, allowing them to be socially preserved therefore fuelling the patriarchy. The comparisons provided the foundations of society, to judge whether they were necessary or not would have been to directly question the stability of the society in which you lived. Comparisons therefore act as a significant historical barometer for social inequality, a useful form of historical analysis for the grander scale of social and historical comparison, as Professor Cott said: ‘understanding of the past… [requires the study of the]… differentiation of womanhood and manhood.’ But to naively assume that all comparisons have disappeared in present society is both optimistic and factually incorrect: they remain applicable to current societies. Despite the correction of many of the comparisons, significant inequalities prevail. This maintains the inequality under which women often suffer, where one woman is killed every 3 days at the hands of her partner[[8]](#footnote-8), 10% more women than men earn below the living wage[[9]](#footnote-9), and there are double the number of chairmen or CEOs called John in the FTSE 100 companies than there are women[[10]](#footnote-10). Evidently the comparisons remain a powerful social force, and are a necessity for as long as inequality between the two genders persists.

However social transformation throughout Western history results in a reduction in the necessity of comparisons. Arguably gender is now viewed as a ‘contiuum’[[11]](#footnote-11), a dynamic scale rather than rigid binaries, due to the increasing social acceptance (or at least awareness) of more transient gender identifications, such as bigender or gender fluid. This expansive range of gender classifications questions the socially upheld necessity of identifying as either a man or woman, which reduces the need for comparisons simply because ‘opposite’ genders do not exist. Not only does this undermine the rigidity of gender as the foundations for identity, but it also demonstrates that comparisons are unnecessary; not only is gender changeable and potentially adjustable but it is hugely individualised. These limbo gender states successfully confront social conceptions, which is perhaps why, they are often victimised by society; as these non-binary identifiers are at ‘higher risk for discrimination and violence’ by ‘not conforming to society’s expectations of gender.[[12]](#footnote-12)’ Crucially, non-binary genders reduce the necessity of ‘society’s expectations’ by emphasising the futility of the gender assigned stereotypes where individuals are required to adhere to the socially enforced rules and expectations of ‘sexual comportment.’[[13]](#footnote-13) Fortunately, gender history establishes a climate where the social conceptions of gender can be challenged and deconstructed, revealing the intersectionality of gender; the comparisons are ultimately redundant because the perceived gender binaries are dependent on one another. Inevitably, this threatens ‘the stability of gender identification’[[14]](#footnote-14) by revealing the inherent instability of the values society is structured upon.

Global societies continually utilise gender comparisons to fortify the curated concepts of masculinity and femininity. Gender norms are therefore ascribed as an exaggeration and extension of biological characteristics, where the socially enforced importance of anatomical differences allow societies to designate ‘institutionalized sex-appropriate roles’[[15]](#footnote-15) on which societies are founded. These curated roles are idolised within most societies, for example, the importance of transformation into manhood is prevalent throughout all cultures, from the Boy Scouts aiming to ‘make big men out of little boys’ to the Ethiopian Amhara tribe where boys verify their masculinity (*wand-nat*) through whipping ceremonies and burning their arms with embers.[[16]](#footnote-16) Despite the evident cultural difference, in both cultures boys are conforming to fulfil social expectations, they are changing to comply with the glorified and socially necessitated transition into manhood. Therefore conceptions of masculinity are enforced through the training and pressuring of individuals to conform. Femininity is also curated from biological distinctions, in Western societies the idealised woman has become an exaggeration of her anatomical traits. These comparisons have become such a necessity that they now incentivise individuals to surgically change the pre-existing biological differences: for example, 5% of women in the US have received breast implants to enhance the social ideals of their gender.[[17]](#footnote-17) Evidently, gender ideals have become naturally unattainable given that bodies need to be surgically changed to fufill them; society effectively corrupts biological comparisons by prioritising the need to fulfil socially applied perceptions of gender. Therefore, concepts of masculinity and femininity are not ‘natural condition[s] that come… through biological maturation’[[18]](#footnote-18) as society would have us believe, but rather artificially constructed products of society. We are socially conditioned into fulfilling the gender comparisons and are blind to the fact they have become the tool used by society to exert control.

It is important to consider whether the comparisons offer any advantageous benefit to society. In 2005 an experiment for IZA was conducted to measure the competitive behaviour of men and women. Significantly, it found that male behaviour was predominantly ‘influenced by social norms’ and they will only ‘compete against women if men believe the women will conform to what men expect to be typical behaviour.’ This serves as a powerful contrast to the fact that the women ‘only choose to compete when… clearly deemed favourable.’ The experiment offers a useful social microcosm; with men as the upholders and mouthpieces of the comparisons, the primary instigators of inequality. And where women are expected to conform more than men, to the ‘favourable’ comparisons of the social authority, they ironically help in the self-defeating establishment of a ‘claustrophobic and limiting’[[19]](#footnote-19) society for themselves. This experiment proves women are governed by the expectations and the comparisons inflicted upon them predominantly by men, forcing them to partake in the self-destructive act of fulfilling the identities expected of them. Arguably, men are also victims of the system; they are required to be the instigators of social requirements to ensure that society maintains control through the gender separation or polarisation through comparisons. Therefore, when judging the necessity of comparisons, it is essential to establish the consequences of using them: there is a risk that they could become the making of the society, rather than a reflection of it.

What is frightening is society’s continual reversion to comparisons for the implementation of stability. To a certain extent, they have become so fortified that the debate as to their necessity is itself unnecessary: as they have transformed into a source of social dependency, on which society is reliant upon to function. A useful example of this is the 18th century French Revolution, a time of mass social disorder, in which there emerged the opportunity for change: the chance for women to redefine their place in society. In the 1791 Declaration of Rights to Women, Article 1 stated ‘Women are born free and are man’s equal in law’, this proto-feminist, unequivocal critique of the previous regime calls for a radical reformation of the system. This declaration embodies the opportunism that emerged from social chaos allowing women to successfully ‘invert… order in all things’[[20]](#footnote-20) as they attempted to redefine gender to such an extent that they strived to remove the socially upheld comparative differences. The comparisons had been the obstacle in the establishment of equality. Yet, less than two decades later, the social developments were reduced to an ephemeral status, no more than a mark of the temporary social turbulence. This was perhaps due to what women’s rights came to connote, as Burke so eloquently describes: ‘the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest women’ - the new woman embodied social upheaval, her existence needed to be reduced to a temporary status because of the threat she posed to masculinity, the previously undisputed source of authority. The French Revolution serves as a powerful example of how ‘old notions of gender…serve… to validate new regimes’[[21]](#footnote-21) given that the easiest route to social control is through the well-established gender comparisons; a pre-existing structure where everyone is allocated their position. The socially judged necessity of the comparisons has established a dependence on the structural binaries of gender, the comparisons have become so fortified that they now embody social normality.

However, globalisation has been the catalyst for the deconstructing of the previously rigid gender comparisons in many global societies. In Saudi Arabia, the comparisons were born from religious nationalism, providing a demographic framework, evidently a social necessity.[[22]](#footnote-22) However, the West’s increasing influence through the rapid expansion of the oil industry caused mass westernisation, establishing a source of threat to traditional Saudi Arabian culture. Somewhat justifiably, their desire to conserve gender comparisons was a preservation of their culture, providing a defensive barrier to change. Women came to symbolise[[23]](#footnote-23) the remnants of the cultural ideals and values the country was founded upon, therefore in need of protection. Yet the unstoppable force and attraction of the West has resulted in the emergence of a new woman, a source of transience between varying societies, countries and values. She does not belong solely to Saudi Arabia; she is a product of Western influence, therefore symbolising the destruction of their culture by the West. The comparisons, once the undisputed foundations of society, now embody the fragments of their fading cultural and social identity. Ultimately, Saudi Arabia reinforces their necessity as a form of social self-preservation, once these comparisons have been broken; a society is vulnerable to change. Undeniably, the comparisons have a value; they are the social instrument allowing a society to uphold its identity.

Most importantly, it is what Western society has done with the comparisons. Accompanying social modernisation has been the establishment of a market based upon them, where women have become the ‘consumer victims.’[[24]](#footnote-24) Not only does this justify comparisons by providing them with a monetary value but it allows them to flourish by emphasising the economic success that they have caused. This successfully masks the fact that the marketization has also ‘exaggerated… imbalances of power’[[25]](#footnote-25) that already existed, and society has exploited its economic power to obscure the reinforcement of gender comparisons. The economic glorification of comparisons distracts us from impacts it has had: the exaggerated victimisation of women under the burden of the market who are ‘required to market their sexual attractiveness to men, who… hold the economic power’[[26]](#footnote-26) which inversely underlines the stereotype and expectation of masculinity as the primary source of dominance. Therefore, gender has become an ‘artificial product’[[27]](#footnote-27) of society with financial significance which has exacerbated the consequence of comparisons as an instigator of gender inequality. This further limits the possibility of reducing their social necessity because comparisons are now fundamental to both the structure and functioning of society.

Gender has been exploited by societies throughout history to establish social hierarchy and to justify the maintenance of gender inequality. The comparisons have become more than a necessity; they are essential to both past and present societies, so essential that they have remained relatively unquestioned throughout history. Currently, our concept of gender is so corrupt that we are not only incapable of seeing a society without comparisons but we have developed a damaging economic dependence upon them. Gender historians need to reject the rigidity of the concept of gender as a binary (which only justifies the comparative differences of the genders), and embrace the opportunity for change; rejecting the comparisons as a necessity to abate social inequality. Although it is the historian’s role to document and depict past social values, historians must avoid succumbing to the socially necessitated framework of gender comparison. Ultimately, gender history must not conform to social expectations by relying and presenting the comparisons as a historical necessity.

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1. Sonya O. Rose, *What is Gender History?* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. in the UK [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Paula Bartley, *The Changing Role of Women 1815-1914* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/228746/0167.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <http://www.refuge.org.uk/get-help-now/what-is-domestic-violence/domestic-violence-the-facts/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-23953573> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/mar/06/johns-davids-and-ians-outnumber-female-chief-executives-in-ftse-100> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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19. Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls, The Return of Sexism* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Edmund Bruke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*  [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Scott [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Which is arguably very similar to Western society’s dependence on gender differences for social structure, but arguably theirs is to an exaggerated extent. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Reich [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Walter [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Mackinnon [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Gilmore [↑](#footnote-ref-27)