

# Revisiting Men's Rights: Addressing Societal Pressure on Men and Men's Mental Health

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### Abstract

*The paper tries to raise awareness of the often-overlooked issue of men's rights. Which mainly focuses on three critical concerns: the psychological pressure placed on men by societal expectations, the harmful effects of gender stereotypes on their well-being and the insufficiency of legal frameworks in addressing the unique challenges faced by men. Using Joseph Pleck's Gender Role Strain Theory, the paper analyzes how men are socialized under the culturally ascribed rigid and stereotypical masculine norms which burden their emotional expression and result in emotional restraint, internalized stress, along with the high propensity of developing mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. These issues are explored through the lens of *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara, a touching narrative that portrays the profound effects of societal pressures on masculine identity and emotional well-being. Through the lens of this tragic novel, this paper seeks to illustrate how rigid expectations of masculinity shape individual experiences and in turn, inflict greater psychological and social distress than is understood. The analysis reveals that there is an emptiness in men's identity and that masculine roles should not be placed under constant guidelines and a legal system designed to dictate what masculinity entails. In conclusion, the paper advocates for a more nuanced understanding of masculinity and the development of a revised framework that prioritizes the mental and emotional well-being of men.*

**Keywords:** Men's Rights, Gender Role Strain Theory, Mental Health, Masculine Identity

### Introduction

Traditional societal norms have established male superiority and enforced rigid standards of male behavior. According to societal standards men must maintain constant strength and dominance with no deviation from established behavioral stereotypes. Society reached a stage where men's emotional states and traumatic experiences remained suppressed because they were never properly examined. Joseph Pleck developed Gender Role Strain Theory (GRST) to analyze the stress and conflict produced by traditional gender norms. The theory reveals how people suffer negative outcomes when they either fail to match societal expectations or adhere to them too strictly. Pleck's theoretical framework explains how traditional gender role expectations generate internal conflict and emotional suppression leading to psychological strain. The novel *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara explores the emotional experiences of men who deal

with trauma and the pressures of societal expectations on their identities. This paper concentrates on how the impact of societal norms affect the well-being of men while also highlighting three critical issues: Societal expectations create psychological burdens for men while gender stereotypes damage their mental and emotional health alongside insufficient legal frameworks to address these challenges. Through theoretical and literary analysis the paper presents an argument for enhanced societal and legal reforms to better support men based on a more nuanced understanding of masculinity.

### **Materials and Methods**

The research was conducted using a combination of literary analysis, thematic exploration and review of scholarship articles to examine the impact of societal expectations on men's mental and emotional well-being. The primary text used for analysis is *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara, a novel that offers a detailed portrayal of men navigating societal pressures, trauma and rigid gender roles. Through thematic analysis the characters' experiences are explored which reflects psychological and social challenges faced by men. In relation to Joseph Pleck's Gender Role Strain Theory, key themes such as emotional suppression, internalised strain and the consequences of societal expectations are identified and analysed.

Additionally, this paper draws on a range of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, psychological studies, and reports on men's mental health, to provide context and support for the arguments presented. Legal case studies and policy analyses were reviewed to evaluate the gaps in existing frameworks addressing men's rights and mental health.

The qualitative research focuses on the intersection of literature, psychology and the rights of men through which there is understanding of the topic. The limitations of the research are that the analysis is mainly through the lens of *A Little Life*, where only the protagonist is seen as the voice to all the men in general and does not include the experience of diverse men. Furthermore, the paper focuses solely on literature and case studies, and primary data collection is neglected. Despite these constraints, the paper provides a robust foundation for understanding the societal and psychological dynamics affecting men.

### **Mental Health Pressures on Men**

Societal expectations are the leading cause for the psychological trauma of men ("Redefining Masculinity: How Societal Expectations Impact Men's Experience of Depression"). These expectations and their inability to live up to what their surroundings expect restricts them from showing vulnerability even to their close relations. Cultural norms often stigmatised vulnerability, labeling it as weakness, which leads to emotional suppression. In 2021, the suicide rate among males were 4 times higher (22.8 per 100,000) than among females (5.7 per 100,000), (National Institute of Mental Health). This is often due to untreated mental health conditions which are a result of the societal pressure that men should always endure their struggles silently.

The concept of toxic masculinity increases this issue, as men are expected and trained to avoid emotional vulnerability which contributes to loneliness, depression, and anxiety. For instance, in *A Little Life*, the character Jude struggles with past trauma and abuse. His reluctance to confide in others stems from the shame he carries about his abuse, as well as his perception that admitting to his pain would burden those around him. This could also be seen as where showing weakness is not something which men can do because of the prevalent social norms. His inability to share his trauma reflects real-world trends where men often suppress their struggles, fearing judgment or dismissal.

## Stereotypes and Societal Expectations

Gender stereotypes often portray men as the sole breadwinner of the family. A man is mostly expected to do the external work and concentrate on providing for the family rather than taking care of the children. The pressure that they are put through to take care of the family even if it is a dual-income family is always overlooked. Their need to be emotionally and physically strong to take care of the family mostly leads to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, further damaging mental and physical health. Most men say men face at least some pressure to be emotionally strong (86%) and to be interested in sports (71%), (Parker et al.).

In *A Little Life*, Willem feels a profound sense of responsibility toward his close friend Jude, acting as both his emotional anchor and caregiver. Though Willem himself suffers with his internal struggle, he wants to be the caregiver of Jude, and he ends up neglecting his emotional wanting of connection and healing. Willem also suppresses emotional grief when his brother dies as he was prioritising others. Willem's sacrifices and emotional suppression underscore the damaging effects of societal expectations that men must always "push through" without acknowledging their vulnerabilities.

## Legal Gaps for Men

Men usually face challenges with the legal system, in areas like family law and false accusations. Usually it is the mothers that get the custody of the children when said child is below the age of 5 as a mother is considered to be a natural caregiver. This bias leaves many fathers marginalized in their children's lives, contributing to emotional distress and societal alienation. False accusations in correspondence to rape and sexual assault leads to men social rejection, job loss, and long-term psychological effects (Wikipedia Contributors).

The novel *A Little Life* doesn't address the legal system but it can be associated with the ideas from the novel. Jude's reluctance to seek help reflects the societal stigma men face when addressing injustices. Men are hesitant to pursue legal battles because of societal expectations and Jude's silence highlights the lack of support and safe spaces for male victims (Dim and Lysova). Willem's care for Jude emphasizes the emotional toll of caregiving and the lack of legal or institutional support for trauma. The novel points out the lack of institutional support aimed at relieving the burdens men carry, illustrating the difficulties faced in securing justice or advocacy.

## Interpretation & Discussion

The results demonstrate how negatively stereotypes, societal pressures, and legal loopholes affect men's wellbeing. According to Joseph Pleck's Gender Role Strain Theory, these difficulties have their roots in traditional gender norms. According to Pleck's theory, psychological distress can result from conflict caused by rigid and traditional masculine roles.

## Societal Pressures and Mental Health

According to Joseph Pleck's Gender Role Strain Theory, men are frequently subjected to irrational expectations due to traditional gender roles, which can cause stress when these expectations are not fulfilled (1995). Pleck's theory of discrepancy strain, in which men experience distress when their actions do not conform to conventional masculine ideals, is consistent with societal expectations for men to appear stoic, independent, and emotionally resilient.

The stigma against vulnerability is a clear indication of this strain of discrepancy. Men are socialised to repress their feelings out of fear of being judged or rejected, which frequently results in untreated mental health problems. Men are four times more likely than women to commit suicide, according to a National Institute of Mental Health statistic, which highlights the disastrous effects of internalised emotional suppression (National Institute of Mental Health).

In “A Little Life”, Judes’s inability to share his trauma reflects the oversocialized concept of emotional restraint in Pleck’s dysfunction strain, as he does not try to confront the trauma even with the understanding that someone loves him deeply. His love also does not help him; he cannot overcome the societal expectations of emotional self-reliance and stoicism, which serve as barriers to him opening up. The taut nature of Pleck’s theory provides insight on the imbalanced norms that cause men to internalize suffering and shun relational help, which manifests in isolation, depression, and anxiety.

### Cultural Roots of Stereotypes and Consequences

Sociocultural stereotypes of men as champions of the family responsible for finances and defenders of the family unit strengthen dysfunction strain. Functioning on the assumption that violence is the only means of protecting a family and that providing shelter for loved ones is the top objective, emotional and nurturing skills are neglected (DeGue et al.). Willem’s persona is characterised by stereotypically feminine characteristics, such as providing care and being emotionally accessible to his loved ones. One could interpret this as Hanya Yanagihara’s attempt to question social mores. Social conventions have made him a target for the concept of stoic endurance, despite the fact that he defies the conventional notion of men being emotionally unavailable. The tremendous emotional weight Willem carries highlights the price of defying conventional roles in a culture that still associates masculinity with strength, resiliency, and selflessness, even as he redefines masculinity through his empathy and vulnerability. His silent suffering serves as a reminder of how men’s emotional well-being is negatively impacted by inflexible gender norms, even when they try to question them.

### Legal Gaps and Their Impact

Gender Role Strain is also maintained by the legal system, which discriminates against women while serving to marginalize men. Pleck calls this ‘institutionalized strain’—social constructs maintain traditional roles for men and woman, while disadvantaged men end up as the custodial parent (Pleck). Cores of their children and pushed aside parent experience a staggering screen of emotional anguish and social isolation infused with rigid social expectation shaped psychological challenge.

The absence of organizational aid to men suffering trauma from caregiving or even abuse is a blatant oversight. A Little Life does not examine the legal context, but focuses on the grave consequences of caregiving that is not acknowledged. The novel shows the gaps in the societal and legal structures regarding the support of men’s emotional well-being.

In order to fill these gaps, the legal systems need to shift to accommodate men’s requirements, specifically in terms of custody disputes and scenarios involving false allegations. Traditional notions of gender roles should be eliminated, enabling a more sophisticated understanding of parenting and caregiving as well as feelings. Supporting and attending to men’s emotional pain can create better overall conditions for everyone, as A Little Life demonstrates.

### Conclusion

This paper highlights the social issues that men encounter with society, stereotypes, and poor legal frameworks. It illustrates how women’s systematic gender roles cause emotional suppression, conflict, and deterioration of mental health through men’s experiences in A Little Life using Joseph Pleck’s Gender Role Strain Theory. Avoiding vulnerability causes emotional problems which makes men depressed and anxious. Men are further alienated legally, especially in custody disputes, and this does not help make emotionally distressed men feel better. Any changes could

beneficial to all, promoting a better society. There has to be a change in social perception and legal policy which will lead to better mental health among men and a more caring society.

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