

# Confronting Gender Norms

By VAISHNAVI SIRIPURAPU

The notion of man and woman is so ingrained in our society that challenging this binary is perceived as deviant. With all of the strict gender-normative marketing and media that we consume every day, transgenderism is a concept that challenges these traditional gender roles and norms.

As a result, perceptions of transgender people vary greatly in society. Transgenderism is an important issue in today's society precisely because it is so misunderstood. Education and awareness serve as some of the most effective solutions to the aggression and negative stigma against being transgender.

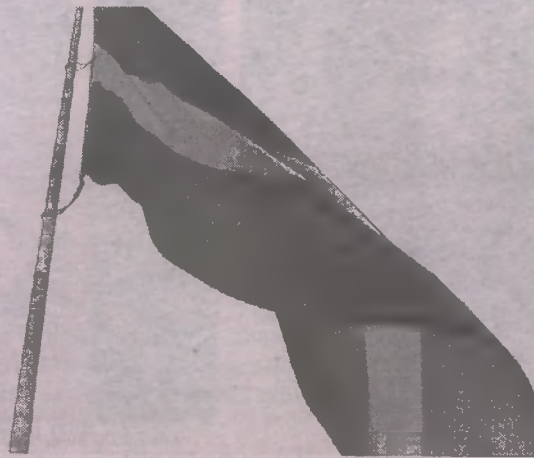
Due to the harsh gender norms that invade every aspect of our daily lives, transgenderism is an issue that challenges established societal principles and constructs. This results

from gendered language and culture being imposed upon us as children, if not by our parents, then subliminally by society. Products from vitamins to socks are marketed as "for men" or "for women".

This strict gender-normative environment breeds a strong phobia and a negative stigma against those who do not conform to these expectations. Fears of being perceived as too feminine or too masculine breeds ideals of hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity.

Resistance to challenging the gender roles and normative behavior in our society not only affects those who are transgender, but also impacts everyone in society.

There are various reasons why transgenderism is an important issue in today's society. For one, some people are still debating whether or not transgenderism is a real phenomenon. This debate distracts from a much bigger, more es-



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The transgender pride flag, above, made its debut in 1999.

sential conversation: What can we do to provide a more inclusive and supportive society to those who are transgender?

Transgender individuals are more likely to suffer physical and emotional abuse. According to the Williams Institute, 41 percent of transgender people have attempted suicide, compared to 1.6 percent of the general population (Haas, Rodgers, & Herman, 2014).

Due to the stigma against transgenderism, there is no recent data concerning how many transgender people there are in America. Demographic censuses such as the United States census only allow for two answers to the question of gender: male or female, making it considerably more difficult to accurately survey how many transgender and gender non-conforming individuals there

are in the United States.

Transgenderism is an important issue in today's society precisely because it challenges traditional norms and because the general public is still so uneducated about how to create an inclusive community.

The simplified solution to transphobia is education, awareness, and activism. We as allies can learn how best to erase transphobia in our society by being mindful of our speech; referring to transgender people as "transgender" and not "transgendered," for example. We must always be open to being educated and challenging our pre-existing ideology.

In order to promote love and acceptance of all different types of people, national campaigns, protective laws, and active educational groups should be prominent, preserved, and well-funded. Only when we as humans accept each other can we truly unlock the full potential of all humankind.

## The Passion of Nate Parker

By MAX NOBEL

When the controversy surrounding #OscarsSoWhite erupted after the announcement that there would be no non-white Oscar acting nominees for the second consecutive year, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences vowed to impose sweeping changes upon its membership. 683 new members, 41 percent of whom are people of color, were invited into the Academy's ranks. As conversations concerning Hollywood's inclusivity, or marked lack thereof, dominate media coverage, there is an explicit push across the industry to showcase a renewed diversity during the 2017 awards season.

The clear frontrunner in correcting this lack of diversity seemed at first to be Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation*, the historical drama based on the story of Nat Turner and the slave rebellion that he led in 1831. Reclaiming and repurposing its title from D.W. Griffith's KKK-championing reconstruction epic released in 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* was a passion project for its star Parker, who also directed, co-wrote and co-produced the film. Premiering to mostly enthusiastic critical reception and receiving a standing ovation before it even began screening, the movie won both the Audience Award and the Grand Jury Prize at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival before its worldwide distribution rights were sold to Fox Searchlight for a record-setting 17.5 million dollars.

This narrative was complicated upon the resurfacing of details surrounding the 2001 trial for the rape accusations brought against Nate Parker

and his *The Birth of a Nation* co-writer, Jean Celestin.

According to Jeannie Suk Gersen of *The New Yorker*, "In 1999, when Parker was a nineteen-year-old wrestler at Penn State, he and his teammate Jean Celestin, both black, were arrested and tried for having sex with an eighteen-year-old white female student at their apartment while she was too intoxicated to consent... At the 2001 trial of Parker and Celestin, [their friend Tamerlane] Kangas testified that, from a doorway, he saw Parker on top of the complainant, while she was still and silent. Parker motioned to Kangas and Celestin to join him, Kangas said, and Celestin did, but Kangas chose to leave, because he 'didn't believe that four people at one time was—you know, it didn't seem right.'"

But according to Roxane Gay of *The New York Times*, "Mr. Parker was acquitted, based partly on testimony that he and the victim had previously had consensual sex. Mr. Celestin was convicted of sexual assault and sentenced to prison, but the conviction was eventually overturned."

"In 2002, the Women's Law Project filed a federal Title IX lawsuit against Penn State on behalf of the complainant, who had dropped out of school, for allegedly failing to protect her from harassment by Parker and his friends following her rape allegations. The lawsuit claimed that the men hired an investigator who showed other students her photo, that they followed her around campus hurling sexual epithets, and that they made harassing phone calls to her room. Penn State settled that case for \$17,500," says Gersen. In 2012, following years of struggling with se-

vere mental illness, including psychosis, the victim succeeded in her third suicide attempt, at the age of 30.

*The Birth of a Nation* is itself embroiled in that personal history. The 1915 film whose name it appropriated perpetuated a stereotype of black men (largely portrayed in the film by white actors in blackface) as having an inclination towards raping white women. The 2016 film is now adulterated by the perceived rape of a white woman by a black man. There is also the 2016 film's plot, portraying the sexual violence by white men upon a

amples where the public was asked to separate art from artist as a comparison. Roman Polanski, the acclaimed director of such cinematic classics as *Rosemary's Baby* and *Chinatown*, pleaded guilty to the statutory raping of a 13 year old in 1977, fleeing to Europe before his sentencing, where he has remained ever since. Despite this, he has continued to make films, including *The Pianist* (2002), which won 3 Oscars, including a Best Director win, which was met with a standing ovation.

Bill Cosby, the formerly beloved black stand-up comic

enduringly controversial, commercially successful *The Passion of the Christ*, had suffered from alcoholism and allegations of domestic abuse prior to making anti-semitic comments following a DUI arrest in 2006. He was shunned to a far greater degree than Roman Polanski and convicted rapist Mike Tyson, sexual assaulter Tupac Shakur and Rick James, and abusers John Lennon, Josh Brolin, and Sean Penn. After a four-year hiatus, he found only middling success in the roles taken over the following six years. His quest for redemption within the industry and public is only now coming to fruition, with the successful premier at the Venice Film Festival of his conscientious objector WWII drama *Hacksaw Ridge*, his first directorial effort since the surfacing of his anti-semitic remarks one decade ago.

Nate Parker has shaped *The Birth of a Nation* as an intrinsically personal film, the story of a rising black actor who forgoes promising career opportunities to write, direct, produce and portray a story of historical and contemporary importance. His 1999 rape case informs both the portrayal of the film's events and the film's consequent significance. The question of separating him, or any of the other artists mentioned, from their art yields no conclusive answer. This will not be the last time we are asked to weigh works of art against the artists who made them, and it is important that we are informed and thoughtful in how we respond.

*The Birth of a Nation* will be released in theaters on Oct. 7.



MARK MANN (VIA DEADLINE)

The reputation of actor, director and producer Nate Parker was tarnished after he was involved in a rape scandal.

black woman (played by real-life sexual assault survivor Gabrielle Union), and making the brutal gang rape of Nat Turner's wife, an event with limited historical evidence, the turning point in Turner's choice to lead his historic slave revolt. Parker's attempts to confront his viewers with their country's unresolved history are confounded by his inability to confront his own. The conversation on race in America that he aims to promote is tainted by his personal history.

One could look at other ex-

who broke boundaries regarding race and entertainment with his sitcom *The Cosby Show*, had decades of sexual assault allegations catch up to him as news of accusations by now 60 women became viral in Oct. 2014. Organizational ties were severed, reruns were pulled, projects were cancelled, honorary degrees were rescinded, and his legacy was brought down with him.

Mel Gibson, star of the *Mad Max* and *Lethal Weapon* films and the Oscar-winning director of *Braveheart* and the