

# How I Wear My Gender...

By Robin Macklin

What does it mean to be a woman? For me, womanhood is mixed bag that often resembles Pandora's box. Being a woman is highly complex, often inconvenient or painful, and yet sometimes wonderful and empowering. It is also an enigma, a word that becomes ever harder to define.

The inconvenience and painfulness of being a woman comes to my mind first. And I'm not even talking about blisters from "sexy" shoes. I have what I call "problem organs." I have always been trapped and tripped up by my biology.

Since I was sixteen, my femaleness has been equated to hospital visits, scary probing hands and cold metal, sonograms, exploratory surgeries, hormones, heating pads, nausea, shooting back pain, migraines, cysts and lumps, and breast cancer scares. And I'm only 28. I can just imagine what it'll be like at 50.

Then there are the just plain inequitable aspects. These problems include figuring out what floor provides the women's bathroom in several of the buildings on campus, as UNC-CH did not build its original campus with the expectation of admitting women to its prestigious halls.

Or it's the performance of the ultimate balancing act that I have to do when camping, which involves squatting, often in the rainy dark near a big bunch of poison ivy, while trying to pee downhill without a) falling backward or b) peeing on my shoes, underwear or pant leg.

Of course, there's also the pressure of unjust and unrealistic expectations. As a woman, I am supposed to be sexy and funny and happy all the time. I should be smart, but not too smart, lest I become a threat. I should be thin, but not too thin. I should be nurturing and love babies and puppies and weddings. I should not take it so personally if my boss says sexual or demeaning comments because really, he's just joking.

I should not walk alone at night or in large cities. I should not be so loud or swear or smoke or have provocative opinions. I should not expect to make as much money as a man, or take "his" job, or hope to be CEO of an influential company. I could hope to be First Lady, but not President. Most of all, I should not have personal rights to my body, which should be there to please others and to procreate whether I want it to or not.

But it's not all bad: there are more ingredients in the recipe that make me a woman.

Unlike men, at least I am allowed to cry, though

I suppose that doesn't make up for much, since I'm expected to be weak and hysterical anyway.

Also unlike men, I'm permitted an intimacy that they are not expected to reach with their male friends. I can share everything with my closest female friend, whether it is fears or joys or even admit dark secrets, shameful things, or relate sexual details, discussing at length strange or great or horrible moments in bed.

I'm allowed to be affectionate. I can refuse to do something dangerous, like chugging a six pack in under three minutes or jumping off of cliffs without my femininity being called into question.

Yet even here, my only definitions, the only way I know I am a "woman," are by these arbitrary measures: my biology, societal norms, and comparisons of what "men" are not. This is where it gets even more confusing: those times when my behavior goes against that criteria, which is often daily.

For example, on Sundays, I play fantasy football, watch NFL, and drink beer while knitting. I trash talk as much as the guys when I play disc golf or poker or paintball, but I never leave the house without putting on mascara. I am afraid of babies, and think diamonds are boring, unethical and a waste of money. I don't like weddings, which are expensive, boring and heterosexist, but I love the excuse to buy a new dress and dance. It seems I live within a constant dichotomy.

So am I a woman or some weird sort of hybrid? And should it matter?

At least I know I am not alone on this one. There is confusion among so many of us, those that have taken the time to question gender and challenge what it means to be a man or woman or both or neither. It is an act of constant re-definition and discovery. I guess one of the better explanations would be Meredith Brooks' lyrics from 1997:

"I'm a little bit of everything  
All rolled into one  
I'm a bitch, I'm a lover  
I'm a child, I'm a mother  
I'm a sinner, I'm a saint  
I do not feel ashamed."

And by that count, I really wouldn't have it any other way.

"I play fantasy football, watch NFL and drink beer while knitting."