



# The Future of Gender Norms: Generating New Narratives of Transformational Change

A memo from a Foresight-Insight-Action workshop

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“

What Felt Fixed is Actually Fluid.”

—THE FUTURE OF GENDER NORMS  
WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT

# The Future of Gender is a Six-Word Story

If you had six words to describe your vision of the future of gender, what would they be?

This question was the opening assignment for two dozen social inventors and thought leaders when they convened on March 20, 2019 for a Foresight-Insight-Action workshop. Institute for the Future (IFF) designed the workshop as part of broader efforts by the Blue Shield of California Foundation to explore gender injustices as the root cause of domestic violence—and their impacts on health. The workshop sought to surface stories about the future that could help shape the Foundation and the field’s investment in new narratives and policy change.

Three big six-word stories emerged from the six-word visions that launched the workshop:

## 1 What felt fixed is actually fluid

The first and biggest story is a story of transformation of gender norms and even the nature of normative genders. What has felt fixed in the norms of the dominant culture becomes much more fluid in the future. From “blowing up gender as a norm” to “challenging expectations, every change redefining me,” participants described both the way they feel limited by gender norms and the potential for liberation from these norms: let me live, let me breathe, let me be free. Perhaps most eloquent was the tender, almost poetic expression of one vision that pointed to the past: *Bound feet. Breaking free. Grandmother’s smile.*

## 2 Humanity our core...he, she, they

But the future is not just about breaking free. It’s also about belonging. Participants acutely felt the often isolating nature of gender norms: “the future norm is present marginalized.” In their visions of belonging, they focused on inclusive pronouns.

## 3 Gender racially unscripted, positioned, experienced, resisted

Finally the vision of the future of gender is also about power and its many intersections across race, ethnicity, and economic standing. Participants anticipated a future where power has no gender, recognizing that “gender norms transfer power and unconscious mindsets.” Ultimately they sought a world where the usual scripts for gender, especially those linked to race, are rewritten to combat other systemic injustices.

## INTRODUCTION

This memo is a summary of the future of gender norms that unfolded from these opening six-word stories. It points to key tensions that will weave through the next decade of shifting gender norms: Is the future a story of **disappearing gender norms** or **a new future for all genders**? Does the new fluidity exist only within a queer spectrum, creating a **new gender binary** of cisgender vs. queer identities, or does “queer” come to embrace **a pan-gender fluidity** that includes cisgender people as well? Do shifting gender norms focus narrowly on **pan-gender power** or does it focus broadly on **intersectional gender norms** that recognize the importance of color and class in gender oppression and ultimately health?

To dive deeper into these possible futures, the workshop participants explored the key drivers of change in gender norms, including social, technological, economic, environmental, and political trends. Mixing and matching these trends, they envisioned unexpected possibilities to create mini-forecasts. Finally they imagined four alternative futures, looking for differences among futures that unfold in the larger context of growth, constraint, collapse, and transformation.

All of these processes—and the insights they sparked—are described in the following pages.

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# STEEP Drivers of Change

STEEP drivers of change point to a time of rapid reinvention of gender norms—and steep challenges as well.

To identify drivers of change over the coming decade, the workshop used the so-called STEEP framework: social, technological, economic, environmental, and political drivers that are likely to reshape gender norms in the future. Participants shared drivers that might either advance or impede transformation in each category.

## SOCIAL: Gender Fluidity

### The rise of the gender spectrum

More and more, young people identify as gender-fluid in their preferences and lifestyles. They see gender on a spectrum, rather than as binaries. This fluidity challenges everything from dress codes to single-gender schools and colleges that must increasingly confront issues raised by gender non-conforming and trans students. Everything from fashion to bureaucratic paperwork to power structures must be reinvented for these fluid, spectrum identities.

### The reimagining of traditional families

Family isn't what it was just a few decades ago. Parent roles are evolving, and in fact people are having fewer children. Even the typical American sperm count has declined. Meanwhile concepts of marriage have grown to include many kinds of non-traditional relationships, from same sex partners to polyamorous families with multiple intimate partners. These shifts have the potential to redefine the way power is distributed across gender and sexual identities—both positively and negatively.

### The growth of intersectional movements

Support for a more visible fluidity of gender also comes from the increased understanding of how different forms of oppression intersect: gender, race, economic inequality, and reform of justice systems issues are all challenging binary norms in both local communities and on the global scale. Each of the movements learns from the other (e.g., the wider acceptance of queer in the Black community), and gender fluidity is increasingly intertwined with a growing racial and class fluidity.

### The evolution of cultural diversity

Even as the so-called “culture wars” have grown more pitched, they have also created more diversity in gender norms. In the media, queer superheroes and gender-bending fashions challenge traditional retail categories like “menswear” and “women’s fashions.” In academia, increased diversity of researchers is leading to new theoretical frameworks for understanding gender. In the business sector, workers find more general acceptance of the practice of choosing one’s pronouns rather than accepting their cisgender identities. In church communities, queer people of faith are more visible and vocal. Even in the futures field, a speculative futurity is articulating cultural futures from under-represented groups.

### The tragedy of the norms

Even as norms are becoming more fluid, the strictures of familiar norms continue to wreak havoc in individual lives. Rates of violence against transgender women, for example, are alarming. Suicide rates are also gender-specific: the [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#) reports that, across the general population, suicide rates are higher among men than women, but suicide *attempts* are higher among women, who consistently experience higher depression rates. And while accurate comparative studies are incomplete, surveys suggest that suicide attempts are higher among LGBTQ people than straight people. These statistics are an invitation to look beneath the gender categories to discover underlying gender-norm drivers of depression and suicide.



## TECHNOLOGICAL: Digital Bias

### The growth of data and AI

Perhaps most important among technological drivers is the exponential growth of digital data capture and the rise of artificial intelligence tools for analyzing this data. Big data and AI are reshaping everything from household consumption to work and employment. Many of the tools are developed with the so-called “male gaze” that perpetuates male biases. At the same time, studies that compare self-reported data with AI analyses have the potential to make bias more visible, exposing violence in everything from social media groups to state systems of justice.

### The new digital influencers

Social media has driven a culture of self-made influencers who wield power to set norms, including gender norms. The abuses of 4chan live-streamed terror and viral violence are well documented. In this environment, trolling often replaces the quest for real relationships. Meanwhile, media consolidation and fake news make it increasingly difficult to decide who among the digital influencers—or even one’s friends—can be trusted. The digital biases that these influencers perpetuate escape the bounds of digital devices and permeate the “real life” culture as well. Even as the diversity of gender identities becomes more visible, the potential for digital abuse grows.

### The dilemma of transparency vs. privacy

In this world of massive data collection and machine analysis, the need for transparency competes with traditional notions of the rights to privacy. Transparency is often positioned as essential to security but is also a means to keep those in power accountable. Privacy is particularly important in a world where norms work systematically against marginalized groups. In a world of large-scale digital bias, responses to this dilemma could mean the difference between oppression and freedom.

### The emergence of a 21st century eugenics

Eugenics is defined as the science of “improving” humans through controlled breeding that favors some genetic traits over others, often practiced to advance racist agendas. As digital technologies intersect with biology in systems like the CRISPR system for digital genome editing, these tools will likely exaggerate gender norms and biases, embedding them in the core of the human genome.





## ECONOMIC: Disruption of Middle Class Norms

### The growth of economic inequality

Inequalities of income and wealth continue to diminish the dominance of a large middle class in the United States, while exacerbating the cultural gap between the wealthiest and the growing ranks of the poor. As people scramble to hold onto their foothold in the middle-class, there's a growing tendency to "other" the poor—to confound poverty with differences in race, ethnicity, and gender. The same impulse to escape the markers associated with poverty leads to gentrification or poorer neighborhoods, further displacing and marginalizing poor people, especially youth of color.

### The shifting economic role of women

The past decades have seen a steady growth in female-headed households, with 42% of today's households depending on a woman who is the sole or primary breadwinner. These patterns have increased the mental, emotional, and physical workloads of cis women. At the same time, women's roles in the workforce are shifting as more women go to college and jobs grow in women-only services and worker spaces.

### The transformation of the workforce

In the last century, work was largely defined by manufacturing jobs that privileged white workers and the social norms that evolved around this white

working class identity. In the past few decades, these jobs have declined, replaced with service jobs that are increasingly based on a gig economy that lacks the hard-won protections of 20th century jobs. This shift potentially opens the door to more diversity in the workforce, but it also makes the risks of labor exploitation greater, particularly among traditionally excluded groups. At the same time, youth entrepreneurs are creating their own sense of belonging by creating their own businesses—and in some cases breaking the cycle of poverty in their families.

### The emergence of post-capitalist narratives

For the past many decades, a capitalist fundamentalism has been the primary arbiter of what is valuable and what kind of work is compensated. This free-market capitalism has privileged the values and norms of those with the most access to capital. In an era of vast inequalities of wealth, however, this economic framework is coming under attack, and new forms of capitalism and socialism are likely to emerge. Key innovations to watch are universal basic income (UBI) and universal basic assets (UBA), both of which could transform societal expectations of individual roles in the economy.

## ENVIRONMENTAL: A New Justice

### The rise of environmental justice

Climate change and environmental degradation in general are driving new relationships between humans and the planet they occupy, with a new focus on the concept of climate justice—a recognition of the human and ethical impacts of environmental policies. Youth in particular are driving a global climate justice movement as they confront survival issues as a result of climate change.

### The threat of climate violence

Global climate change is already driving migration—both from regions that are feeling the long-term effects of climate change and from communities decimated by extreme climate events. Both of these conditions set the stage for an increase in rape, sexual violence, and sex trafficking. While seeming to pit safety and survival against environmental responsibility, climate violence actually demands solutions to both at the same time.

## POLITICAL: Unapologetic Diversity

### The rise of video accountability

The ubiquity of mobile video devices has enabled the rise of a kind of widespread sousveillance: surveillance from the bottom up rather than from top-down authorities. Starting with the Black Lives Matter movement to document abuses of blacks by authorities, this movement is already expanding to non-gender conforming groups, such as the trans community, with a goal of holding society responsible for violence against marginalized groups.

### The growth of an age-based digital divide

The demographics of the United States (and indeed the world, as a whole) is creating a clear bifurcation between an older, white population and a younger population of color. This divide is creating a distinct power shift to the digital natives who are more adept at wielding the new technologies to create political advantage. This divide is driving a lack of intergenerational connection that will stall political change over the coming decades, as Boomers and GenX continue to hold a majority.

### The ascent of women of power

The roles and norms for women continue to shift as a more diverse femininity ascends to power. The early markers of this shift are the 2018 elections of women of color, indigenous women, and trans-women. Queer femmes of color—women who eschew the traditional definitions of feminine—are also increasingly in

positions of power. These new norms are dignified by the increased visibility of women of all kinds as central characters in film—as well as increased visibility of women’s work.

### The escalation of strategies of fear

Globally, political figures are using strategies of fear and violence to advance white nationalism through paranoia, policy, and practice. These fear-based strategies have driven the rise of Islamophobia as well as a more general anti-immigrant sentiment, with immigrants of all kinds depicted as “others” who perpetrate terrorist acts, rape, and other forms of violence.

### The demand for new models of justice

In the face of over-incarceration in the United States, a growing resistance to prisons and the so-called “carceral state” is challenging American models of justice. Restorative justice seeks to heal communities where violence has occurred rather than simply punish perpetrators. It is sometimes called “redemption justice” for its focus on forgiveness in face-to-face encounters between victims and perpetrators. Cancel culture rejects people, especially public figures with egregious behaviors, limiting their power and influence. All of these alternatives seek to right the many imbalances of today’s prison system that disproportionately incarcerates marginalized people.





# Unexpected Possibilities

Drivers of change, filtered through new gender sensibilities, create novel leadership options for communities of gender.

A combinatorial forecasting exercise called “Reveal Unexpected Possibilities” invited workshop attendees to combine three or more drivers of change to create mini-forecasts of the future. The result was a set of five main stories where gender-fluid people rewrite the rules:

## 1 #StillHuman fights poverty among victims of sexual violence in prisons

Global movement building +  
Reduced middle class mobility +  
#MeTooBehindBars

Building on a movement to end gender-based violence in California women’s prisons, recently released victims of sexual violence ban together to form a new movement, called “Still Human,” to fight poverty among formerly incarcerated women.

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## 2 Superfluid parenting creates better, smarter agents of social change

Data and AI bias +  
Algorithms of oppression +  
Queer futures

Starting from the premise that data and oppressive algorithmic bias can be transformed into algorithms of compassion, queer parents develop a kind of “superfluidity” to adapt more quickly with more complex thinking and solve complex social problems like climate change, intolerance, and post-capitalist paradigms. In a world of fewer children, queer parents want more children, and they use superfluid parenting to build a generation of social and political change agents adept at using “AI with soul.”

### 3 Young women and femmes counter fake news with queer authenticity

Fake news +  
Lack of intergenerational connection +  
Women and femmes of color in positions of power

Seeing the role that the older generation has played in marginalizing both people of color and queer people, a younger generation of women and femmes of color use their growing positions of power to build a movement of authentic reporting that succeeds in marginalizing fake news.

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### 4 Queer people develop AI and big data tools to reimagine love

Queer people of faith +  
More heterogeneity +  
Big data to uncover bias in AI

In a world where queer people of faith engage in the design and development of AI tools to eliminate rather than reinforce biases in society, AI is used to scan global religious texts and identify new characters and multi-denominational themes that help reimagine what love looks like.

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### 5 Education and employment innovations foster a common humanity

Strategic use of fear +  
AI impacts on work and employment +  
Disappearance of the middle ground

In the face of AI that enhances extremism by targeting specific populations, a new gender-fluid intersectional movement focuses on creating an understanding of our common humanity through education and employment innovations. These in turn lead to “AI for good” solutions and social networks that commit to more authentic connection, creating a new understanding of a common humanity across diverse populations.

# Alternative Futures

Stories of the future are often archetypal, buried deep in the human psyche and its past. Four alternative archetypes point to four alternative futures for gender norms.

The Alternative Futures methodology was developed based on global archetypes that seem to power most future scenarios: growth, constraint, collapse, and transformation. After exploring drivers of change and clustering those drivers to anticipate unexpected futures, workshop participants were invited to delve into the four archetypal futures to create complex stories of the future of gender norms. Here is a summary of worlds they imagined:

## **GROWTH: An escalation of gender culture wars**

Growth scenarios typically emphasize an upward growth line for the economy. While often driven by existing power brokers, growth provides the opportunity for social as well as economic innovation. Viewed through the lens of changing gender norms, growth scenarios provide an opportunity for the flourishing of gender fluidity:

**People living in the margin have more power and resources as they are able to exercise their voice in public and private spheres.** Marginalized populations leverage power-building for greater representation in the workforce and government. These new leaders move to advance gender justice by working to lock down white male gatekeepers and curb the backlash. Gender fluidity mainstreams as people become more open to adopting new identities. More education and movement building continue to expand the definitions of gender and norms. Institutions evolve to introduce new cultural markers such as gender birthdays. Popular media like Pixar prominently feature trans and

gender non-conforming characters in starring roles. Tasks traditionally described as feminine or masculine are stripped of their gender markers and negotiated equally in individual relationships, families, and workplace settings. The emerging acceptance of non-binary gender identity allows people of all genders to live with comfort and safety in certain spaces and contributes to more positive health outcomes. As people feel more comfortable expressing new behaviors and identities, organizations and institutions that foster this openness see greater creativity and innovation emerging.

The same growth scenarios, however, intensify conflicts with existing gender norms and power brokers, driving backlash and violence:

**In spite of reforms, the story of gender norms is still heteronormative and dominated by white males.** Toxic masculinity and male fragility increase as men who feel threatened aim to entrench “traditional” norms further in systems and institutions. As the dominant culture clings to power, society grows more polarized with explicit tensions between traditional norms and new norms of fluid

gender, often linked to racial or ethnic oppression. The expansion of inequity erodes democratic processes, fuels fear, and increases violence against any group deemed to be “the other.” These include women, non-binary people, and people of color. Climate and the environment become battlegrounds for violent backlash.

## 🔑 CONSTRAINT: A fight against odds

Constraint scenarios typically rely on norms and values to define acceptable behavior and guide society toward shared goals. Unfortunately, these shared goals are often defined from the top down, emphasizing traditional values and norms. In this environment, gender reform faces clear obstacles:

**Limiting gender constraints arise from religion, biological determinism, and the criminal justice system.** Religious institutions seek to uphold traditional inequitable gender roles, sustaining the power of white men through increased wealth inequality, while reinforcing white femininity. Biological determinism limits gender identity from birth, based on physical traits, buttressing a gender binary with one dominant gender that overrules

free expression and parental preferences. The criminal justice system champions and enforces criminalization and oppression of non-binary fluid and transgender people through surveillance and pivotal court decisions. This legalistic paradigm employs strict standards about allowable ethical media representation to protect children from non-conforming perspectives.

At the same time, these very limits can serve to catalyze change:

**Top-down constraints on gender identity produce even greater buy-in for change among marginalized groups.** But the high stakes fuel in-fighting. In particular, youth lead the resistance to gender identity constraints as they rebel to tell their stories, carve out space for multiple identities,

and seek protections against the dominant role of biology in gender expression. Fighting against the criminal justice system takes on newfound importance as a growing prison abolition movement makes the positive gender implications explicit.





## **COLLAPSE: The chaos of a genderless world**

Collapse scenarios can be extreme. They typically anticipate the collapse of the structures that normally buttress a society, whether those structures are economic, social, political, or religious. This scenario imagines a very specific collapse of the structures of gender identity, which has a cascading effect on other structures as well:

**White supremacy and toxic masculinity collapse without the gendered underpinnings of those structures.** The advent of gender agency and the breakdown of the gender binary reinforce intersectional strategies and replace white supremacy as the dominant worldview. Families, communities, and society embrace the individual gender journey. In the expressive spaces created by collapse of the gender binary, healthy masculinity, decolonization, and racial justice grow as gender assignment is entirely self-determined. Exuberant excitement accompanies experimentation and

innovation to test and redefine new approaches to interpersonal, political, social, economic, and sexual interactions and relationships. The new language of gender agency redefines how people view intersections of biology and environment, and new paradigms of natural fluidity reshape human understanding of nature. This cultural spaciousness allows marginalized people greater access to resources and power within a more equitable labor system. Prison abolition occurs as the state recognizes incarceration as the manifestation of state-based gender violence.

This scenario might seem like a triumph of freedom of expression, but in the context of widespread collapse of social systems, it creates a kind of societal chaos not unlike that of the French Revolution:

**The chaos of gender feudalism places trans and gender non-conforming people above LGB people with cis and heterosexual people at the bottom of the pyramid as collective action is used to capture levers of oppressive systems previously used to oppress LGBTQ people.** In the most extreme situations, gender expression is banned altogether to create gender blindness. The absence of gender norms leads to mass confusion

about previously gendered roles in relationship to others and society more broadly. A breakthrough anti-gay vaccine is used to genetically modify gender to guarantee a genderless world. People are forced to use a universal pronoun. Language policing prevents curiosity. Society experiences the collapse of gender norms as a loss. Mass sadness and mourning dominate popular imagination as people feel unmoored by the lack of structure.

## **TRANSFORMATION: A new gender-centered freedom with a shadow side**

Transformation societies imagine a world that has been remade, more or less successfully, by new sets of values, norms, beliefs, technologies, and frameworks. They represent a paradigm shift:

**It is an age of lifetime gender cycling where it's common to hear, "I was pan at 13 and queer by 20."** The normalization of diverse gender identities enables super-differentiation where people can choose, mix, match, and reorganize their roles and identities based on their self-perceived strengths. This process requires storytelling that facilitates connection, understanding, and empathy as well as new sources of data. A cultural revolution leads

to the complete embrace of infinite pronouns. The Genderbread exercise to understand differences across gender, sex, and sexuality is universally adopted. Systems reorganize and optimize for liberation, equity, justice, and guaranteed safety. New gateways to work come through unions and other socialized connections based on intersectional identities.

Although transformation scenarios describe a paradigm shift, they are not necessarily utopian, and they often carry forth at least some of the seeds of dystopia from the previous paradigm:

**A Reckoning movement acknowledges the intersectional nature of systems of oppression and seeks to establish and sustain protections while maintaining freedom.** But these efforts rely on the reconstruction of a police institution and

state surveillance to curb undesirable behavior. The superfluidity of gender fuels a backlash as other identity lines grow starker to preserve stability amid the gender volatility.

It is clear that all four archetypal scenarios harbor both opportunities and threats for those who would reform gender norms in American society. Understanding these opportunities and threats across all four scenarios is essential to creating a successful path forward.

## List of Attendees

**Kimberly Alvarenga**, California Domestic Workers Coalition  
**Olivia Araiza**, Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society  
**Lonny Avi Brooks**, California State University East Bay  
**Armando Castellanos**, MILPA Collective  
**Virginia Duplessis**, Futures Without Violence  
**Heather Gilligan**, California Health Report  
**Juan Gomez**, MILPA Collective  
**Ciera-Jevae Gordon**, RYSE Center  
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**Lisa James**, Futures Without Violence  
**Emily Katz**, Northern California Grantmakers  
**Liz Manne**, Liz Manne Strategy  
**Christine Maulhardt Vaughan**, Blue Shield of California Foundation  
**Marc Philpart**, PolicyLink/Alliance for Boys and Men of Color  
**Ian Stanley Posadas**, LGBTQ Connection  
**Jacari Trent-Pontoon**, California State University East Bay  
**Bia Vieira**, Women's Foundation of California  
**Rachel Wick**, Blue Shield of California Foundation  
**Sandra Witt**, The California Endowment  
**Connie Wun**, AAPI Women Lead  
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