

Research Paper

## Exploring the Factors Behind the Rejection of Traditional Gender Roles: A Preliminary Study amongst Gen Zers

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**Abstract:** Generation Z's increasing rejection of traditional gender roles, which have long defined the expectations, behaviours and attitudes of both men and women, is evident in contemporary society. The vastly progressive perspective of Generation Z on traditional gender roles, has caused a generational divide with older generations, causing conflicts between families, in workplaces, and in overall social interactions. Previous research suggests these unaddressed conflicts can influence the level of harmony in relationships, specifically the multigenerational ones. Hence, this study aims to explore the factors behind Generation Z's rejection of traditional gender roles, in the hope that building an understanding of such would lead to the development of strategies to bridge the generational gaps. Through a social constructivist paradigm, a focused ethnography was conducted with a select group of participants in order to gauge the underlying nuances and narratives that determine what the perceptions are with regard to the values and beliefs of these individuals over a three-phased focus discussion. The study found that the identified strategies would involve an alignment through varying levels of normalisation, augmentation and liberalisation.

**Keywords:** Gender roles, rejection of traditional roles, Gen Z, multigenerational gaps

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## **Introduction**

Generation Z, composed of individuals born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s, seems to espouse an overall prevailing sentiment in favour of challenging conventional gender norms, opting instead a more fluid and free-form perspective to gender expression in all aspects of life. For instance, a particular issue which Generation Z has been prominent in shifting attitudes is transgender rights; a concept that inherently clashes with the traditional idea of gender norms. Evidence of this is seen in literature concerning the judicial and generational dispute over transgender rights, as it outlines how Generation Zers have been rejecting rigid gender roles, the idea of a strict binary-gender, and proceeding to redefine gender classification on their own terms (Stern et al., 2018).

Traditional gender roles is a concept embedded deep in civilisations throughout history, dictating from a patriarchal foundation, the opportunities, vocations, earnings and various other aspects that are deemed “appropriate” for both men and women. The reinforcement of these very “fixed” ideals came from the most influential components of individuals’ lives, namely religion, media, family and education, ensuring conformity to expected roles. However, feminist movements arising throughout the 20th century have contributed to the growing dissent against the expectations of traditional gender ideals assigned to women in all aspects of life (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004). Generation Z in particular, has grown up in a time of immense technological advances, allowing easy access to foreign ideas, and increased exposure to diverse perspectives on gender. Although previous research does indicate that this might be one of the reasons Generation Z is more likely to reject traditional gender roles, there is little attention paid to the particulars of other contributing factors.

For instance, how throughout history, religious teachings have been reinforcing traditional gender roles (Morgan, 1987), and how Generation Z’s increased access to research on religion and acceptance of questioning has led to the rejection of said traditional gender roles. There needs to be an extension on such previous research, delving deeper into the specific links between enforcers of traditional gender roles (such as religion as previously mentioned), and the inverse results (rejection instead of conformity) these enforcers have had on Generation Z, and how this has occurred. Hence, this study’s objective is to attempt to fill in these blanks, specifically to determine the factors behind the rejection of traditional gender roles among Generation Z and how do these factors influence the modern society.

## **Literature Review**

### **Gender Roles**

Gender roles play a significant part in how individuals behave in relation to themselves, in interactions with others and as part of the wider society. The idea of

gender roles and norms are ever-changing, as new definitions emerge constantly with each succeeding generation (Wienclaw, 2011). Hence, the aim of our research is to examine a more particular, current aspect of this recurring phenomenon, which is to explore the factors behind the rise of Generation Z's rejection of traditional gender roles. Generation Z is a label ascribed to individuals born between 1997 and 2012.

“Gender roles” can be defined as expectations and norms placed on individuals, and the roles that men and women are expected to occupy based on their sex by society, in the context of its values and beliefs about gender (Blackstone, 2003). An example of a “traditional” gender role which has been popular until recent years, is prescribing a woman to follow the feminine gender role of being nurturing and motherly (Blackstone, 2003). A deeper exploration into the definition of traditional gender roles is included in the next section. In order to fully encapsulate the aspects of our study, this literature looked into the historical context of gender roles, Generation Z's new gender ideologies and norms, as well as the factors behind changing gender roles as highlighted in previous research.

Additionally, the purpose of this literature review is to provide an in-depth understanding of the factors behind Generation Z's rejection of gender roles, through the examination and discussion of previous research on said subject matter. This review seeks to contribute to the general discourse on current gender roles by examining the impact of Generation Z's rejection of the “traditional” gender norms. This objective can be achieved by thoroughly analysing the historical context of gender roles; a brief overview into the context-relevant origins of each succeeding generation's definition of gender roles, allowing us to comprehend the evolution of gender roles and norms to date.

It also examined the gender norms and ideologies preferred by and normalised by Generation Z in contemporary society, in order to make comparisons with “traditional” gender roles, which will provide a pathway to achieving the first research objective of this study, which is to explore the different reasons as to why Generation Z seems to be rejecting the aforementioned “traditional gender roles”.

### **Origins of Gender and Gender Identity as a Concept, and a Brief Exploration of Traditional Gender Norms**

This review aims to provide a comprehensive overview on what is meant by traditional gender roles, and a brief exploration into the potential process by which individuals learn about or develop their respective gender identities. This is done by discussing the initial basis of gender roles which includes the specific distinction between the term “gender” and “sex”, an examination of “traditional” and “non-traditional” gender roles in past existing literature, and by exploring the factors that contribute to the formation of an individual's gender identity. When discussing the

specific traditional aspects of gender roles, it is important to highlight the distinction between gender and sex.

Blackstone (2003) highlighted that gender is often confused with sex, whereas both are different concepts. Sex is a biological term defined on the basis of an individual's primary sex characteristics. Gender, on the other hand, is a social construct. One of the first social scientists to make this distinction between gender and sex was Ann Oakley. According to Oakley, gender exists in correlation to the biological division of sex into male and female but it involves the division and social valuation of masculinity and femininity. Therefore, gender as a social construct can be defined as individuals, groups and societies ascribing particular traits, statuses or values to an individual purely based on their sex (Blackstone, 2003).

Gender roles are discussed in relation to an individual's gender role orientation which is often described as either traditional or non-traditional. Traditional gender role orientation puts emphasis on the differences between men and women and believes that each sex is naturally drawn to particular behaviours. Gender roles in the traditional sense have been practiced since centuries and stay relevant to date. These gender roles define men to be assertive, dominant and leaders while women are submissive, nurturing, and passive. These roles come into practice within the family first and foremost where men are expected to be breadwinners and lead the family while women are expected to carry out domestic tasks at home. Moreover, even in today's world when women form a large portion of a nation's workforce, these gender roles continue to come into play whereby women are mostly considered for jobs like secretaries as opposed to men who are considered for positions of manager and executive (Blackstone, 2003). Taking another instance, there used to be negative social perceptions about men in professions such as nursing, which is attributed to characteristics that are associated with female gender roles, thereby labelling men in such professions as "feminine" or "effeminate", themselves (Teresa-Morales et al., 2022).

The social learning theory was adopted as the theoretical foundation to examine specific factors that affect changes in gender roles such as the context of the generational era. The social learning theory suggests that children develop their gender identity by observing and imitating the gender-based behaviour of others. How individuals further react to these imitations contributes to the development of the gender identity (Libre Texts, 2021). This process of learning and internalising the set expectations for gender is called gender socialisation. The main agents of gender socialisation are family, peers, school and media. Family is said to be the most important agent for gender socialisation. According to scholars, the reason girls and boys take on different identities of masculine and feminine beings is because parents treat boys and girls differently through different behavioural patterns and expectations. Hence, the attitude and values of parents are significant in shaping an individual's sense of gender identity and gender roles (Hoominfar, 2021).

## **Gender Norms and Ideologies of Gen Z in Contemporary Society**

The currently popular and generally accepted gender norms in the pre-mid-Millennial and Generation Z's time, are generally broader in their scope of expectations and acceptance, in comparison to traditional gender roles as described above. One of the factors behind this could be the growing prominence and focus on the “need to address outdated and detrimental gendered stereotypes, and norms, that can support societal and cultural change through individual attitudinal and behaviour change” (Stewart et al., 2021, p.1).

Some current gender norms that are now generally more commonplace and accepted include, but are not limited to, women being in the workforce and even “breadwinners” instead of being solely housewives, and men becoming primary caregivers for their children, staying at home and taking up the family-centred roles. For instance, Ortiz-Ospina et al. (2018) examined the rise in female labour force participation in contemporary societies globally. In regard to married women driving this increase in rich countries, this source stated that “evidence shows most of the long-run increase is attributable specifically to an increase in the participation of married women” (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2018,); this directly clashes with the traditional gender roles of married women which are mainly invested in family such as household chores and childcare (Khalili, 2023).

The concept of “stay-at-home” father as the primary caretaker who does not contribute financially, has been rising in popularity and in numbers, especially in the period from the late 20th-century and throughout the 21st-century, as demonstrated in a study by Rushing & Powell (2014). In particular, the aforementioned study used previous research to address and analyse the family dynamics that take the form of “women and men challenging the stereotypical gender roles and participating in non-traditional roles of employed mothers and caregiving father” (Rushing & Powell, 2014, p. 410).

Furthermore, the study indicated, that “the family dynamics of a working mother and stay-at-home father provided a positive parent-child relationship, enhanced parenting cohesion and enhanced quality time” (Rushing & Powell, 2014, p. 410). This positive notion associated with the “working mother, stay-at-home father” dynamic is an excellent representation of the currently accepted and practised gender norms, which contrasts greatly with the traditional “working father and stay-at-home mother” dynamic, as described by Perrone (2009). “Traditional gender roles dichotomised work and family and defined men’s role as the provider and women’s role as the family caregiver” (Perrone, 2009, p. 4).

In comparing the literature, we find blatant contrasts in the accepted gender norms, between Generation Z’s perspectives in modern society today, and traditional gender role expectations prominent in the pre-21st-century society. Both Ortiz-Ospina et al. (2018) as well as Rushing and Powell (2014) highlighted and

examined the rise of non-traditional gender role occupations, and the challenging of traditionally-set expectations by both men and women, with a focus on the increasing rates of married women in the workforce and stay-at-home fathers.

Perrone (2009) provided valuable insights on the traditional gender norms found in societies historically, forming a basis for comparison with the current norms as described by both Ortiz-Ospina et al. (2018) as well as Rushing and Powell (2014). By comparing and contrasting literature, a clear distinction can be made between traditional and modern gender roles popular with Generation Z. Hence, our study aims to contribute to the discourse about the factors behind this shift; examining how and why Generation Zers' current views on gender roles, norms and ideas were formed.

### **Gen Z's Rejection of Traditional Gender Roles**

Generation Z has grown up in an era of rapid globalisation, constantly going through phases of societal and economic shifts, as well as constant technological advancements and the ubiquitous presence of social media. Owing to these factors, Generation Z has been questioning, rejecting and redefining gender roles far more rapidly and on a larger scale compared to similar phenomena experienced by previous generations. Numerous existing research have demonstrated Generation Z's rejection of gender roles and their alignment with non-traditional gender roles.

This study aims to identify the traditional gender roles that are being rejected, and to understand the factors behind this. According to Tasnic (2021), Generation Z is more supportive of gender flexibility, with 62% of the generation's individuals holding a positive outlook towards it, as opposed to 55 % among older generations that share the same positive sentiment. This statistic proves how the trend of gender flexibility which is known to break traditional role patterns, has surged in its momentum and is more prevalent among Generation Z. Similarly, around 60% among Generation Zers is in support of same-sex marriage, indicating a clear deviation from traditional gender norms, which only recognises and accepts heteronormativity.

Additionally, 32% of individuals from Generation Z reject the traditional patriarchal setting of father being the head of the family, as opposed to only 30% of individuals from older generations doing so. Generation Z is also more likely to be familiar with and accepting of people using gender neutral pronouns, which also suggests that a large portion of Generation Z actively advocate for broader gender-identification options, instead of strictly adhering to the binary gender-labelling system of only "Man" and "Woman" being included in online forms (Parker & Igielnik, 2020).

Another reason behind the rejection of traditional gender roles by Generation Z could be attributed to them being the most ethnically diverse and educated generation. They also happen to be comparatively more exposed to and adept at technology, and more active on social media compared to previous generations, due

to the rapid nature of technological advancements throughout their childhood and adolescence.

Media is both an agent of socialisation and has grown to be a widely utilised tool for inspiring and leading social change, such as the “MeToo” movement, which fought against the stigma attached to victims of sexual harassment, prominent in previous generations (Fairbairn, 2020). Similarly, social media has been widely used for various other sorts of activism in recent times by Generation Z, which makes up for the majority of social media users. This suggests that due to this generation’s constant exposure to media with such evolving speed and uninhibited access, Generation Zers are more aware of a wide scope of topics, prone to join advocacies and movements, and become the main movers and contributors of major social shifts such as the rejection of traditional gender norms.

Having compared the different literature pertaining to the possibility that globalised society, technological advancements and media act as agents of socialisation that could explain Generation Z’s rejection of and deviations from traditional norms and ideologies, the study can now further explore the factors behind Generation Z’s rejection of traditional gender roles, on a deeper, more nuanced level.

### **Methodology**

A variety of qualitative methods was used for this ethnographic research, which included interviews, audio and visual record keeping, and observation. The overall scope of this study, as well as the analysis and interpretation of collected data, were guided by the theoretical framework of the social constructivism theory, which posits that the acquisition of knowledge and core beliefs is a social process.

Empirical evidence was gathered through active observation by the researchers throughout the interviews with the selected participants. This section details the use of social constructivism as this study’s conceptual and theoretical framework, the utilisation of qualitative research methods for data acquisition, the criteria and corresponding non-identifiable background information of the participants, the phases of the interview and questions, as well as ethical considerations that were maintained throughout the study.

### **Data Gathering**

This study utilised a qualitative research method, specifically interviews, to collect data, using social ethnographic questions to elicit nuanced and rich perspectives and insights. The interviews were conducted physically in three separate phases, with gaps of two (minimum) days to three (maximum) days in between each phase, to ensure each participant’s answers met internal validity. In each phase, each participant was interviewed separately, by one interviewer/researcher at a time. The researchers

were perceptive of both the content of the verbal answers, the tone of each answer, body language and facial expressions, all used in combination to record the empirical material from each session. Additionally, audio and video recordings were carried out for all participants with prior consent. After the collection and compilation of the data, semantic and latent coding was used to further analyse the empirical material.

### **Study Participants**

All participants voluntarily embarked on this journey and agreed to be interviewed throughout the three phases. These participants matched the following selection criteria:

- (a) All participants must be from Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) and represented different ethnicities.
- (b) Male and female participants from the middle-range years of Generation Z (16 to 20 years old).
- (c) Male and female participants from the earlier-range years of Gen Z (22 to 27 years old)

Various background details obtained about the participants included age, nationality, religion, current profession or level of study, and family structure; all influential factors in shaping their perspective on gender roles.

### **Phases and Interview Questions**

As mentioned earlier, interviews were conducted physically in three separate phases, with gaps of 2–3 days in between each phase, to ensure each participant's responses met internal and external validity. Phase 1 focused on acquiring detailed background information of the participants, such as their family dynamics and nature of upbringing. The data from this phase provided a strong basis that enabled the researchers to delegate questions that probed further into the issue in the following phase. The questions in Phase 2 were geared towards obtaining the participant's personal perspectives on how aspects of their lives have influenced their current gender ideologies, in order to examine Generation Z's current gender norms, and self-awareness of influences of their ideologies. Lastly, Phase 3 focused on contemporary topics of debate concerning gender norms in policy and society. This phase aided in acquiring in-depth, personal accounts on real-life issues regarding gender norms, providing insights to help realise the second research objective.

The nature of the questions according to their respective phases, as well as the spacing between the phases were crucial details in our methodology, as they provided an ideal, gradual probing process into the participant's individualistic perspectives, which is a vital aspect that needs to be present in the responses, in order to achieve

both our research objectives in a non-reductionist, valid manner. In addition, this research followed Sharp (1999)'s five principles of ethical considerations to ensure that a comfortable and trustworthy process was adopted in the ethnographic interviews. The principles involved contemplation on whether or not the purpose of the research was in conflict or harmful to the purposes of the target group.

### **Data Analysis**

The findings of the study were derived by meticulously analysing the narratives and perspectives gathered from the focused ethnographic interviews. The three individuals interviewed were carefully selected to make the findings as diverse as possible, with various perspectives. The thorough interviews which also ensured that the participants felt comfortable throughout the process enabled them to be openly expressive with their thoughts and perspectives. The interviews were also rigorously transcribed and the transcripts were reviewed again after completion to ensure that all the empirical material was well recorded and no piece of information was missed. The empirical material was then thoroughly analysed and sorted into different categories and themes.

Utilising qualitative data analysis (QDA), the empirical material was organised into different themes through coding, categorising and compartmentalising. The participants' responses were highlighted with different colours with each unique colour representing or reflecting a unique theme. This coding technique made it easier to group the responses into similar patterns. For instance, the colour red was used each time the participants mentioned their family as a factor behind their thoughts about gender roles.

Next, similar patterns were connected and they were then grouped together based on recurring concepts into final themes. For instance, the coded elements like family and media were grouped together as agents of socialisation and based on that, a theme about the "role of socialisation agents in the rejection of traditional gender roles" was deduced.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings are discussed next in relation to the research questions, by elaborating how various factors that influence the rejection of traditional gender roles have impacted how Generation Z perceives and deals with the world around them.

### **Normalisation of Households with Non-traditional Dynamics**

The growing trend of non-traditional household dynamics in today's modern society is apparent in both this study and previous works in the field. There is a prevalent sentiment among Generation Z that disregards any particular preference for the

takers of a specific role in a household, such as the traditional preference of men as breadwinners and women as caretakers. This is evident from the responses of all three participants in response to a hypothetical situation, where their male spouse asks to stay at home, or the female spouse asks to be the financial provider.

One of the female participant's response was:

*I think it mostly depends on circumstances and preferences, you never know if the guy or girl is gonna end up with a higher paying job, so it can be either way - it can even change throughout, so I think both partners should be flexible in a way, and it shouldn't really matter, that's how I believe.*

A similar sentiment was shared by the male participant:

*If they wanna stay back and look after the household, it's their choice. If they wanna be the breadwinner and want me to stay back and look after the household, I'd be fine with that!*

Hence, it can be inferred that there is a sense of acceptance of the role preferred by their hypothetical future spouse, regardless of gender. The rise of non-traditional household dynamics is affirmed through previous research such as Ortiz-Ospina et al.'s 2018 study on the rise of female labour force participation in contemporary societies globally. This study highlighted the shift in financial responsibilities between married couples — “The evidence shows most of the long-run increase is attributable specifically to an increase in the participation of married women” (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2018).

The stark contrast between Generation Z's more progressive views on household dynamics and the strict traditional gender-based delegation of roles could be attributed to the family as an agent of socialisation. For instance, when asked about the primary influence on their stance on gender roles, the theme “Family” appeared to be prominent.

The male participant credited his comparatively open-minded stance to the influence of his parent's perspectives, throughout his upbringing:

*Biggest factor was probably how my mother and father raised me, and a little bit of my sister as well, so they didn't really have a strong opinion on gender roles, they were pretty neutral about it, so that's probably the biggest factor.*

Thus, this finding concurs with Ortiz-Ospina et al. (2018) who reiterated that the normalisation of non-traditional household dynamics among Generation Z, can be attributed to the family as an agent of socialisation influencing their progressive stance.

## Augmentation of Gender Homogeneity

Another progressive concept gaining traction in contemporary society primarily led by Generation Z, is gender-neutrality and inclusivity. For instance, our study suggests that Generation Z displays a more open-minded mindset concerning the inclusion of individuals who do not fit into the traditionally defined binary genders, such as non-binary and transgender individuals. In response to a question inquiring their opinions on establishing bathrooms specifically for transgender folk, one of the participants responded:

*With regard to the services for transgender, I think often times transgender people face violence. So, if we need to put policies or services that protect people no matter who they are, it should be done.*

This response delineates the popular sentiment among Generation Z, that not only should society tolerate such individuals, but there should be earnest attempts of their integration and protection on institutional levels. This finding is corroborated by Tasnic's 2021 work on Generation Z redefining gender roles and challenging patriarchy, in which the findings found that Generation Zers demonstrate more active support and acceptance in regard to gender flexibility and same-sex marriage, compared to previous generations. Similarly, Parker and Igeielnik (2020) highlighted Generation Z's openness to the usage of gender-neutral pronouns, and advocacy for the institutional broadening of gender-identification options and systems.

The findings also revealed another contributing factor to the conception of Generation Z's gender-progressive mindset, which is exposure to media that acts as another agent of socialisation. For instance, our male participant's response to a question about the influence of social media on gender norms, indicated the convoluting nature of young people's perceptions in accordance to their media consumption and exposure. The participant shared, "You know how social media is constantly representing new pronouns and gender roles, so in that sense yeah." — addressing the particular influence of social media on Generation Z's openness to gender-neutral pronouns and inclusive opinions.

Lalwani et al.'s (2022) work validates this finding as it highlighted the direct influence of social media marketing on increasing gender-fluid notions among Generation Z. The study found that "Men and women's clothing distinctions are no longer significant, with many consumers preferring a more neutral approach to fashion and expression", in regard to Generation Z's shift to gender-neutrality, even in fashion. This notion depicts Generation Z's apparent view of gender as a social construct in itself, and their deconstruction of the traditional binary gender reality, driven by media socialisation.

### **Liberalisation of Bodily Autonomy**

Finally, this study also highlights the growth of movements and advocacies for women's bodily autonomy as opposed to restrictive traditional gender norms. The findings show an increasing employment of a feminist lens by both female and male identifying Generation Zers, in advocating for the rights of women to choose what they do with their bodies and lives such as choosing to be childfree. In regard to the increasing number of women choosing to be childfree in contemporary society, opinions on the phenomena by our participants were primarily supportive and neutral.

In particular, our male participant asserted, "*My thoughts, like I said – your choice, your life, your choice.*" This response represents the monumentality of Generation Z's rejection of traditionalistic gender-based stipulations, as the findings suggest how even the men of Generation Z are moving away from patriarchal notions of dictating women's choices. This specific phenomenon of men rejecting such engendered roles as seen in our findings is further validated by Rushing and Powell's (2014) study depicting the rising numbers of stay-at-home fathers in modern society. This study proves the dissolution of the traditional notion of women's inherency to motherhood. Therefore, previous research in this field along with this study's findings demonstrate Generation Z's collective movement against the patriarchal dictatorship over women's choices, and towards the liberalisation of women's bodily autonomy.

### **Conclusion**

The basis of our study is to explore the factors behind Generation Z's rejection of traditional gender roles, and to examine the phenomena's implications on contemporary society. Upon analysis of the empirical material, the findings of this study highlight the roles of family and media as agents of socialisation, as well as growing up in an era of rapid technological, economic and societal changes as the primary factors behind their anti-traditional gender ideologies. Additionally, the implications on modern society include normalisation of households with non-traditional dynamics, augmentation of gender homogeneity, and the liberalisation of women's bodily autonomy. The findings provide grounds for further discourse in the field of gender inequality and gender-based societal conflicts, and in turn, building a foundation that can help shape and formulate solutions at the institutional level, such as progressive policy changes constructed to alleviate global gender issues.

Additionally, the findings of this study offer a preliminary but crucial step in better understanding the scope of Generation Z's collective identity, values and beliefs, allowing for further discussions on how to mobilise its progressive traits in creating positive, impactful change. For instance, the apparent feminist-oriented views of the male identifying individuals of Generation Z could be a powerful force

if mobilised effectively, in aiding the feminist movement's efforts in building a gender equitable society. Similarly, the popularity of advocacy in this generation could also prove to be beneficial in mobilising collective, grassroots movements against governmental fallacies, impactfully combating social issues on an institutional level. In conclusion, Gen Z could be an immensely useful tool towards bettering society by harnessing its collective power to make impactful positive change in our society.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

A prominent deduction that can be made from the study's findings is the emancipation of Generation Z. Owing to that, further research can be done to directly study how this emancipation shapes the attitude of Generation Z about different social issues like gender equality, women empowerment, rights of the LGBTQIA+ community and how with their sense of awareness and social justice could positively contribute towards alleviating other imminent global issues like climate change, ethical consumerism, religious freedom, and such.

In addition, the significance of this study could be further used to propel other studies that cater to shaping future policies and challenge how education is conducted in institutions. Lastly, the implication of this study is more in-depth studies of communities and individuals that can be a part of a broader solution to overcoming the generational divide caused by disputes over differing views on gender norms, leading to the evolution of a more harmonious and tolerant societies.

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