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"One is not born a woman,
but becomes one."

Outline

1. Introduction:

- Hook

- General Statement

- Thesis Statement: Simone de Beauvoir's famous line, "One is not born a woman, but becomes one," from her seminal 1949 Book **"The Second Sex"** highlights that womanhood is socially constructed. This essay argues that femininity is shaped through socialization, cultural norms, historical and religious constraints, education, media influence, and individual agency, demonstrating that gender identity is learned, negotiated, and actively formed rather than biologically predetermined.

2. Arguments in Favor of de Beauvoir's Assertion:

2.1. Biological sex versus Gender Identity

Gender identity is shaped by societal norms and

learned behaviors rather than biological sex.

2.2. Family Socialization and Gender Identity

Case in point: study published in *Developmental Psychology* (2014)

2.3. Education and the Reinforcement of Gender ^{the} roles

case in point: A study published in *British Journal of Education Psychology* (2012)

2.4. Peer influence and the reinforcement of Gender norms

Case in Point: Kägesten et al. (2016) Study on peer and parental influence on gender attitudes.

2.5. Media influence and the construction of femininity

Case in point: Geena Davis Institute's study on Gender representation in family films

2.6. Cultural Traditions and the normalization of femininity

case in point: Margaret Maerl's research on cultural variability of feminine traits across societies.

2.7. Legal and Historical structures shaping womanhood

Case in point: Legal restrictions shaping womanhood

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in early 20th century Western societies.

2.8. Religion and the socialization of femininity

case in point: Influence of religious communities on girl's gendered behavior.

2.9. Economic dependency and the construction of femininity

case in point: World Bank (2025) report on women's economic empowerment in Pakistan.

2.10. Beauty standards and Societal Pressure

case in point: WHO (2023) study on Media influence and Adolescent Girl's Body Image.

03 **Conclusion:**

Essay

Human identity is often assumed to be a product of biology, yet centuries of social experience reveal that much of what defines an individual is learned. Societies assign roles, behaviors, and expectations to individuals based on perceived gender, shaping identity through culture, tradition, and institutions. From family upbringing to education, media, and law, these forces create a framework that dictate what it means to be a woman.

Understanding this process is essential to analyzing the social construction of gender.

Simone de Beauvoir's famous line, "One is not born a woman, but becomes one," from her seminal 1949 book "The Second Sex," highlights that womanhood is socially constructed. This essay argues that femininity is shaped through socialization, cultural norms, historical and religious constraints, education, media influence, and individual agency, demonstrating that gender

identity is learned, negotiated, and actively formed rather than biologically predetermined.

The first point in this argument is that biological sex alone does not determine the social roles, behaviors, or identity of an individual. Although males and females differ anatomically, the qualities and expectations associated with being a woman are shaped by societal norms rather than inherent biology. These expectations define how women should act, think, and relate to others, creating a socially constructed identity. Research in psychology and sociology indicates that traits traditionally considered "feminine", such as emotional sensitivity or caregiving behavior, develop through repeated social reinforcement rather than natural predisposition. From childhood, girls receive explicit and implicit cues to adopt these roles, showing that gender identity is learned. This distinction demonstrates that gender is a social construct, supporting de

Beauvior's assertion that womanhood is something one becomes rather than something one is born with.

Moreover, Family socialization play a foundational role in shaping girls' understanding of what it means to be a woman. Family is the first institution of learning for children.

From infancy, children are guided toward behaviors and responsibilities society considers appropriate for their gender. Parents provide subtle cues through daily interactions, chores, and play activities, which influence interests, attitudes, and self-perception. Combined with parental reinforcement of gender-typical play and interactions, these patterns contribute to the social construction of femininity. A study published in *Developmental Psychology* (2014) found that girls assigned household chores at a young age were more likely to internalize caregiving and domestic roles as central to their identity. Thus, family provides the first framework for gender

socialization, shaping the early process of becoming a woman.

Significantly, schools play a critical role in shaping gender identity by reinforcing societal expectations of femininity. Classrooms and curricula often channel girls toward traditionally feminine subjects and behaviors.

Teacher expectations, classroom feminine activities, and peer interactions subtly encourage compliance with gender norms. This institutional guidance complements family socialization,

further shaping the understanding of what it means to be a woman. A study published in the British Journal of Educational Psychology (2012) found that teachers unconsciously provide more attention and encouragement to boys in mathematics and science, while girls receive more reinforcement in reading and arts. Therefore, education systematically shapes girls' behavior and expectations, reinforcing socially constructed ideas of womanhood.

Notably, peer interactions significantly shape how girls internalize socially constructed ideas of femininity. From early childhood, peers reward behaviors that align with gender norms and discourage those that do not. Approval, inclusion, or social disapproval teaches girls which attitudes and behaviors are socially acceptable. This ongoing feedback reinforces internalized notions of what it means to be a woman. A review published in June 2016, co-authored by Annika Kägesten and colleagues from Johns Hopkins University and the WHO, analyzed 82 studies across 29 countries. It found that interpersonal influences, particularly from peers and parents, are central in shaping adolescents' gender attitudes, and that these processes differ for girls and boys. Hence, peer groups actively enforce societal gender norms, demonstrating that femininity is shaped through social interaction than biology.

Equally important, media serves as a powerful

agent in shaping and reinforcing socially constructed ideas of womanhood. Televisions, films, advertisements, and social media portray idealized images of women, emphasizing beauty, domesticity, and passivity. These repeated portrayals create standards for behavior, appearance, and aspirations, signaling what society expects of girls and women. Over time, media exposure shapes beliefs about femininity and acceptable gender roles. This has a historic root, as after the World War-II, media broadcast a new propaganda of a housewife's lifestyle as the only proper way for women to reach happiness.

The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media consistently reports that in family films, female characters are significantly under-represented and are more likely to be portrayed in stereotypical roles compared to male characters.

However, media functions as a structural force in gender socialization, systematically shaping femininity.

Additionally, cultural traditions play a decisive role in defining and normalizing socially constructed expectations of womanhood.

Customs, rituals, and social practices prescribe specific behaviors, dress codes, and responsibilities for women. These traditions present gender roles as natural and unquestionable, even though they are socially produced. Through repetition across generations, culture transforms social expectations into accepted norms.

Anthropological research by Margaret Mead, particularly in "Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies" (1935), demonstrated that traits considered feminine vary significantly across culture. Mead showed that behaviors labeled as gentle, submissive, or nurturing in women were not biologically fixed but culturally assigned, differing sharply from one society to another. Consequently, cultural traditions legitimize and reproduce femininity, supporting de Beauvoir's claim that a woman-

head is socially constructed rather than biologically fixed.

Moreover, legal and historical institutions have played a significant role in constructing and restricting women's social identity. For centuries, formal legal systems defined women primarily in relation to men, limiting their autonomy and public participation. Restrictions on property ownership, education, and political rights reinforced dependence as a feminine norm. These institutional barriers transformed social expectations into legally enforced definitions of womanhood. Until the early twentieth century women in most Western societies faced legal barriers to voting and property ownership. In Britain, the Representation of the People Act (1918) granted limited voting rights, and married women's property rights were restricted until the Married Women's Property Acts. These laws show that social institutions not biology, shape expectations of womanhood.

Hence, historical and legal frameworks actively constructed womanhood, confirming that gender identity emerges from social systems rather than nature.

In addition to, religious teachings influence societal expectations for women, contributing to the social construction of femininity. Faith traditions provide guidance on behavior, responsibilities, and social roles, which shape girls' understanding of what is expected of them.

These teachings are reinforced through rituals, community practices, and moral instruction.

Over time, such socialization helps define culturally accepted forms of womanhood.

Studies show that girls growing up in religious communities often adopt behaviors and responsibilities emphasized within their faith, such as caregiving, modesty, and participation in communal life. However, religious teachings can act as a social mechanism that reinforces culturally defined roles.

Equally important, economic structures reinforce the social construction of womanhood by limiting women's financial independence. Limited access to employment, unequal pay, and societal expectations to prioritize domestic work create economic dependence on men. This dependence normalizes caregiving and domesticity as core aspects of femininity. These financial constraints strengthen socially defined gender ~~roles~~ roles. A May 2025 World Bank report, "Women's Economic Empowerment in Pakistan" estimated that 47 million women in Pakistan are not in the labour force, and about 55 million remain unbanked. The reported gender gap in earning stands at 18 percent. Consequently, economic dependency institutionalizes socially constructed gender norms.

Additionally, societal beauty standards shape femininity by teaching girls what is considered acceptable or desirable in

women. From childhood, girls are exposed to expectations about appearance, body shape, and grooming. Compliance with these standards becomes linked to social acceptance, confidence, and perceived value. Over time, these pressures reinforce the learned behaviors and roles associated with womanhood. The World Health Organization (2023) reports that exposure to unrealistic beauty ideals in media and advertising increases body dissatisfaction and affects mental health among adolescent girls. Therefore, beauty standards function as a social mechanism that enforces gender norms.

In a nutshell, Simon de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born a woman, but becomes one", highlights that femininity is the product of social, culture, and institutional forces rather than biological destiny. Family, education, peers, media, cultural

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traditions, legal systems, religion, economic structures, and societal beauty standards all contribute to shaping what it means to be a woman. These factors interact to teach, reinforce, and normalize specific behaviors, roles, and expectations, demonstrating that gender identity is actively learned and performed. Recognizing womanhood as socially constructed challenges assumptions about natural differences. It also underscores the importance of creating more equitable environments where individuals can define their identity free from restrictive norms. Understanding these social forces encourages critical reflection on how society shapes gender and opens possibilities for change.
