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FRAGILE MASCULINITY IN *FAIR PLAY*: GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE WORKPLACE

I Gusti Ayu Mahatma Agung[1]
Universitas Udayana, Denpasar, Indonesia[1]

ayu.mahatma@unud.ac.id

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Abstract
This study examined the representation of fragile masculinity in the film *Fair Play* by focusing on how masculine identity was constructed in a competitive professional setting. The study aimed to explore how rigid masculine expectations related to success, status, and authority shaped emotional and relational conflict. The analysis was guided by the Expectancy–Discrepancy–Threat Model of Masculine Identity. The model conceptualized masculinity as an identity that depended on external validation and became unstable when expectations were not met. A qualitative research design was applied, using the film as the primary data source. The findings showed that masculinity was initially constructed through strong workplace expectations that equated competence and ambition with masculine worth. These expectations were later disrupted by changes in professional hierarchy and performance failure, creating a discrepancy between masculine ideals and lived reality. As this discrepancy intensified, masculinity was perceived as being under threat, which triggered responses such as rigidity, blame, domination, and violence. The study demonstrated that these responses were shaped by environments that rewarded competition and showed low tolerance for vulnerability. Overall, the findings highlighted fragile masculinity as a relational and context-dependent process with significant emotional and social consequences.

Keywords—fragile masculinity, gender dynamics, power relations

Introduction

Fragile masculinity refers to a condition in which masculine identity is experienced as unstable and easily threatened (Dimuccio & Knowles, 2019). It emerges when masculinity depends heavily on external validation, such as status, power, or social approval (Regina & Allen, 2023). In this condition, masculinity is not based on internal confidence or sense of security. Instead, it relies heavily on external recognition. When that validation is challenged, masculinity is perceived as being at risk (Lamarche et al., 2025). This reveals masculinity not as a natural or fixed identity, but as a socially costructed and precarious one (Young et al., 2025).

These pressures come from rigid masculinity norms that define what men are expected to be. In many social contexts, men are expected to be strong, emotionally stable, and successful (Agung & Putri, 2023). They are often measured by their status, income, and authority. These expectations are presented as standards rather than choices (Arandjelović, 2023). They are reinforced through everyday practices and social institutions, including education, family, and workplace (Agung, 2025). In professional settings, productivity, ambition, and dominance are frequently rewarded (Martin & Yoo, 2025). As a result, masculinity becomes tied to performance and status rather than to relational well-being.

The inability to fulfill these expectations can produce significant psychological and relational consequences (Allen, 2025). When masculinity is threatened, some men respond

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through externalized behaviors. These may include aggression, controlling behavior, hostility, or emotional manipulation (Vescio et al., 2025). Other men respond through internalized reactions such as shame, anxiety, withdrawal, or a sense of inadequacy (Vescio et al., 2021). These responses should not be understood as personal weaknesses. They are shaped by environments that show low tolerance for vulnerability, failure, or loss of status (Najström et al., 2026). Fragile masculinity thus reveals how rigid expectations can generate emotional strain and relational conflict (Mokhwelepa & Sumbane, 2025).

These dynamics are vividly portrayed in the film *Fair Play*, which depicts a young couple working in a highly competitive financial firm. The film shows how workplace hierarchies intersect with romantic relationships. When professional success shifts in unexpected ways, masculine identity becomes a site of tension and conflict (Berdahl et al., 2018). The male character's sense of self is closely tied to his position at work. As that position is destabilized, his responses reveal patterns associated with fragile masculinity. The workplace functions not only as a setting, but as a pressure system that intensifies gendered expectations (Mojzisch & Roswag, 2025).

Although masculinity has been widely discussed in gender and cultural studies, many analyses still focus on structural classifications or power relations. Fewer studies examine the specific forms of responses that emerge when masculinity is threatened, particularly within everyday contexts such as work and intimate relationships. As a result, the emotional and behavioral consequences of rigid masculinity norms are still underexplored. This creates a gap in understanding how gendered expectations affect everyday behavior and relationships.

This study addressed that gap by examining the representation of fragile masculinity in the film *Fair Play*. Rather than treating masculinity as a static category, the study focuses on how masculinity operates as a process shaped by threat and pressure. It pays particular attention to externalized and internalized responses to masculinity threat. The study highlights how workplace pressure and intimate relationships interact to shape gendered responses. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does *Fair Play* represent fragile masculinity within a competitive professional setting?
2. How does *Fair Play* portray responses to masculinity threat?

This study was exploratory in nature. It applied the Expectancy–Discrepancy–Threat framework to a cinematic narrative to understand how fragile masculinity operates within profesional settings. Theoretically, this study contributes to masculinity research by focusing on response patterns that emerge under pressure. It highlights fragile masculinity as a relational process shaped by hierarchy, competition, and emotional strain. Methodologically, the study demonstrates how a psychological identity model can be used in qualitative film analysis. This approach offers a way to examine masculinity in contemporary professional narratives with greater nuance.

Literature Review

Recent discussions of fragile masculinity have moved beyond viewing masculinity as a stable identity. One influential framework is proposed by Stanaland et al. (2023) through the Expectancy–Discrepancy–Threat Model of Masculine Identity. This model explains fragile masculinity as a condition that emerges when men internalize strong cultural expectations about how they should perform masculinity, yet experience discrepancies between these expectations and their realities. Masculinity becomes fragile when men's sense of identity is heavily dependent on meeting standards defined by the society. When these standards are not fulfilled, masculinity is perceived as being under threat. The model explains fragile masculinity through three interrelated stages. First, men are exposed to strong cultural expectations about appropriate masculine behavior. Second, they perceive discrepancies between these expectations and their lived experiences, whether in work, relationships, or social recognition. Third, these discrepancies produce a sense of threat to masculine identity, which may trigger emotional distress or

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compensatory responses. Importantly, Stanaland et al. (2023) emphasize that these responses are context-dependent and shaped by environments that show low tolerance for vulnerability, failure, or loss of status. This framework provides a useful foundation for analyzing masculinity as a dynamic and affective process rather than a fixed trait.

While the Expectancy–Discrepancy–Threat Model offers a clear way to understand how masculinity becomes fragile, it also has certain limitations. The model was developed mainly within psychological research settings and places strong emphasis on individual perception and emotional response. Due to this focus, it may give less attention to broader structural factors such as class, race, and institutional power. For this reason, the model is most useful when applied alongside awareness of wider social and cultural contexts. This study aims to examine how masculinity becomes unstable when professional status shifts within a workplace. The Expectancy–Discrepancy–Threat Model allows closer attention to those situational responses and emotional patterns. This framework offers a more detailed account of how threat operates at the interpersonal level. This makes it suitable for analyzing narrative developments in film, where tension and response patterns emerge across particular scenes.

Previous studies have frequently examined masculinity through the lens of toxic masculinity, focusing on aggression, dominance, and emotional repression as defining traits. Rosida et al. (2022) analyze the short film *American Male* (2016) and argue that toxic masculinity emerges from rigid social norms that equate manhood with physical strength, dominance, and emotional control. The study shows how men are pressured to conform to narrow ideals of masculinity, often leading to violence and psychological distress. These findings demonstrate how environments that stigmatize vulnerability and deviation from masculine norms can produce harmful masculine behavior. A similar pattern appears in Ayuretno and Kinasih's (2024) analysis of Nate Jacobs in *Euphoria*. The study identifies aggression, misogyny, and emotional repression as strategies used to maintain masculine dominance in the face of insecurity and fear of feminization. Likewise, Arini and Nirmalawati (2025) examine toxic masculinity in Poe's *The Black Cat* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*, showing how violence and emotional control function as attempts to assert masculine authority. Across these studies, toxic masculinity is consistently linked to efforts to preserve power, status, and control.

David et al. (2025), in their analysis of Ken in *Barbie* (2023), show that male fragility emerges when masculine identity is heavily dependent on external validation, particularly in work-related competence, authority, and recognition. Ken's emotional expressiveness, sense of inferiority, and dependence on social approval reveal that masculinity becomes fragile when men fail to meet rigid masculine expectations. Rather than portraying aggression as inherent, the study suggests that fragile masculinity creates the conditions under which compensatory or defensive behaviors may develop. A similar emphasis on emotional vulnerability appears in Dirgandini's (2025) study of *Turn to Me, Mukai-kun*, which examines fragile masculinity among single men in contemporary Japanese society. The study shows that masculinity becomes fragile when men experience a mismatch between societal expectations, such as marriage, emotional control, and success, and their lived realities. Mukai's anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional hesitation illustrate how masculinity is destabilized by constant comparison with socially imposed ideals. This perspective aligns with the study conducted by Prasad et al. (2025) of *A Little Life*, which frames fragile masculinity as deeply connected to trauma, shame, and emotional exposure.

Taken together, these studies reveal an important connection between toxic masculinity and fragile masculinity. While toxic masculinity describes the outward expressions of dominance, aggression, and emotional suppression, fragile masculinity helps explain why these responses emerge. The behaviors identified as toxic often function as compensatory reactions to perceived threats to masculine identity, particularly in contexts where masculinity depends on external validation. In this sense, toxic masculinity can be understood as one possible outcome of fragile masculinity. This conceptual shift allows the analysis to move beyond labeling behaviors as toxic and toward examining the underlying insecurity, discrepancy, and threat that make masculinity unstable.

Despite the growing body of research on toxic and fragile masculinity, several gaps remain. Most previous studies focus on identifying masculine traits or harmful outcomes, such as

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aggression, emotional repression, or dependency, rather than examining the process through which masculinity becomes fragile. Many analyses emphasize representation or moral critique, but give limited attention to the situational conditions that trigger masculine insecurity. In addition, few studies examine how professional success, workplace hierarchy, and shifting power relations shape masculine identity and emotional responses. This study addresses this gap by applying Stanaland et al.'s Expectancy–Discrepancy–Threat Model to analyze fragile masculinity as a situational process within professional settings, as represented in the film *Fair Play*. Instead of treating male responses as personal weaknesses, this study highlights how environments that reward ambition, dominance, and productivity while showing low tolerance for vulnerability intensify masculine insecurity. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on how masculinity becomes fragile when professional success shifts, and how emotional and relational conflict emerges from these pressures. By doing so, the study contributes to masculinity studies by linking fragile masculinity to workplace power dynamics and emotional regulation, offering a more contextual and relational understanding of masculine identity under threat.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyze fragile masculinity as represented in the film *Fair Play*. A qualitative approach is suitable because the study focuses on meaning, emotional responses, and identity construction rather than numerical measurement. The film is treated as a cultural text that reflects social norms, power relations, and gender expectations. *Fair Play* was selected because it centers on workplace competition and intimate relationships within a high-pressure professional environment. The film was released in 2023 and directed by Chloe Domont. The narrative focuses on a romantic couple portrayed by Alden Ehrenreich and Phoebe Dynevor, whose relationship is shaped by shifting professional status and power imbalance. These elements make the film relevant for examining masculinity under threat.

Data were collected through repeated viewing of the film to ensure careful observation and accurate interpretation. Key scenes were selected based on their relevance to masculine expectations, professional evaluation, emotional reactions, and relational conflict. The data include dialogue, character interactions, facial expressions, body language, and narrative context. Data analysis was conducted using Expectancy–Discrepancy–Threat Model of Masculine Identity proposed by Stanaland et al. (2023).The analysis followed three steps. First, the study identified masculine expectations related to success, competence, and authority. Second, it examined moments of discrepancy when these expectations were disrupted by changes in professional recognition. Third, it analyzed emotional and behavioral responses as indicators of masculinity threat, such as anger, insecurity, withdrawal, and relational tension. This framework allows the study to explain fragile masculinity as a situational and affective response shaped by workplace hierarchy and social evaluation.

Results and Discussion

This study examines the representation of fragile masculinity in *Fair Play* using Stanaland et al.'s (2023) Expectancy–Discrepancy–Threat Model of Masculine Identity. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 1, which summarizes how masculine identity develops across the three stages of the model. The findings indicate that masculinity is initially constructed through professional expectations that link ambition, competence, and authority to masculine worth. These expectations are later disrupted by shifts in workplace hierarchy and professional failure, creating a discrepancy between masculine ideals and lived experience. This discrepancy ultimately escalates into masculinity threat, triggering affective and behavioral responses such as rigidity, blame, domination, and violence.

Table 1. Representation of Fragile Masculinity in *Fair Play*

Stage of the Model	Key Events in the Film	Masculine Dynamics	Dominant Responses

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Expectancy	Anticipation of promotion; prioritization of career over relationship	Masculinity tied to ambition, competence, and professional recognition	Confidence, normalization of dominance
Discrepancy	Emily's promotion; Luke's professional failure; negative evaluation by superiors	Misalignment between masculine expectations and actual performance	Insecurity, comparison, self-doubt
Threat	Workplace rivalry; sexual accusations; refusal to withdraw; physical and sexual violence	Masculinity perceived as unstable and at risk	Rigidity, blame, domination, violence

Table 1 illustrates how fragile masculinity unfolds across the three stages of Stanaland et al.'s model. Masculinity is initially constructed as stable through professional success and recognition. When this stability is disrupted, Luke experiences a growing discrepancy that undermines his sense of masculine identity. As professional validation becomes unattainable, masculinity is perceived as being under threat. This threat produces responses aimed at restoring control and status, often at the expense of relational well-being. These findings highlight how rigid masculine expectations, when combined with competitive workplace dynamics, generate emotional strain and destructive outcomes. A more detailed analysis of these dynamics is presented in the following discussion section, where each stage is examined through close analysis of selected scenes.

Masculine Expectations and Professional Success

In Stanaland et al.'s (2023) Expectancy–Discrepancy–Threat Model of Masculine Identity, *expectancy* refers to socially shared beliefs about how masculinity should be performed. Masculinity is framed as a standard that men are expected to meet. These expectations often involve competence, ambition, authority, and professional success. Masculinity at this stage is not yet threatened. It is treated as something natural, visible, and publicly recognized. Professional achievement functions as a key marker through which masculine identity is validated.

Within this framework, the professional environment plays a central role in shaping masculine expectations. Workplaces often reward productivity, leadership, and upward mobility. As a result, masculine identity becomes closely tied to career progression and status. Success is not only a personal goal but also a social confirmation of masculinity. The following data illustrate how such expectations are established and normalized in *Fair Play* before any discrepancy or threat occurs.

Data 1

Emily : "I hear you're taking over for Quinn."
Luke : "What?"
Emily : "The guys overheard it on a call."

(Domont, 2023, 00:14:16-00:14:28)

The dialogue in data 1 establishes professional advancement as an expected outcome for Luke. The information about the promotion circulates through informal workplace networks, indicated by the phrase "the guys overheard it." This suggests that promotion is not only anticipated but also socially discussed and collectively recognized. Masculine competence is assumed rather than questioned. Luke's initial surprise does not challenge the expectation itself. Instead, it reinforces the idea that his advancement is plausible and credible within the masculine hierarchy of the workplace. From the perspective of the expectancy stage, this scene presents masculinity as aligned with professional authority and upward mobility. Luke is positioned as someone who fits the model of a successful man. There is no emotional tension or resistance at

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this point. Masculinity is stable because expectations and perceived capability are still aligned. The scene functions to define the standard against which later developments will be measured.

Data 2

Luke : "How'd I get this lucky?"
Emily : "You're talking about me? Or your job?"
Luke : "Both. You're not jealous, are you?"
Emily : "Stop."
Luke : "That wasn't a no."
Emily : "Of course it's a no."
Luke : "If I had to choose between you and the promotion…"
Emily : "You'd choose the promotion."
Luke : "…I would sit and think about it, and probably still choose the promotion. Just kidding."

(Domont, 2023, 00:15:15-00:15:50)

The interaction shown in data 2 further reinforces professional success as a central masculine expectation. Luke explicitly equates personal fulfillment with career advancement. By stating that he would ultimately choose the promotion, he frames ambition as a rational and acceptable priority. The decision is presented as reasonable rather than morally troubling. This reflects a broader masculine norm in which success and status are valued over emotional considerations. Within the expectancy stage, this scene shows how masculinity is normalized through ambition and competition. Luke's statement does not yet signal insecurity or loss. Instead, it confirms that professional achievement is treated as a legitimate measure of masculine worth. Although the tone is partially joking, the underlying message is serious. Masculinity is still secure because Luke believes he occupies the position of the successful man. The scene prepares the ground for later tension by establishing how deeply masculine identity is invested in professional recognition.

Disruption of Masculine Expectations and Identity Discrepancy

In Stanaland et al.'s (2023) model, *discrepancy* emerges when masculine expectations no longer align with lived experience. At this stage, masculinity becomes unstable but is not yet openly threatened. Men begin to recognize that they are falling short of socially defined masculine standards, particularly those tied to competence, authority, and professional success. This mismatch produces tension, comparison, and growing self-doubt. Masculine identity remains invested in external validation, but access to that validation becomes uncertain. Discrepancy is not yet an emotional explosion. Instead, it is marked by awareness, comparison, and silent recalibration. Masculine identity remains invested in success, but the certainty of belonging to the dominant position begins to weaken. In *Fair Play*, discrepancy emerges through shifts in workplace hierarchy, professional failure, and explicit evaluation by institutional authority. These moments gradually separate Luke's sense of himself as a competent professional from how he is positioned and judged within the organization.

Data 3

Emily : "He's promoting me to PM. I'm... I'm taking over for Quinn..."
Luke : "Congratulations. That's amazing."
Emily : "I'm sorry…"

(Domont, 2023, 00:22:35-00:23:16)

Emily's promotion marks the first clear disruption of Luke's masculine expectations. Earlier interactions had framed professional advancement as a natural outcome for Luke. Emily's announcement reverses this expectation and places her in the position Luke had anticipated for himself. Although Luke verbally responds with congratulations, Emily's apology signals that the promotion is emotionally and relationally sensitive. Her response suggests an awareness that this shift destabilizes the existing balance. Within the discrepancy stage, this moment creates a visible

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gap between expectation and reality. Masculinity had been aligned with upward mobility and recognition. That alignment is now broken. Luke is not yet openly hostile, but his masculine identity becomes relational and comparative. This marks the beginning of masculine instability rather than its emotional collapse.

Data 4
Emily : "25 million?? What happened?"
Luke : "Everyone thought it was gonna take off."
Emily : "Did you even understand the technology before pushing it?"

(Domont, 2023, 00:50:21-00:50:38)

Luke's professional mistake deepens the discrepancy between masculine expectation and lived reality. His decision results in significant financial loss, directly contradicting the masculine ideal of rational judgment and competence. Emily's questioning exposes not only the outcome of failure, but also the lack of careful analysis behind the decision. Luke's justification relies on collective belief rather than expertise, which weakens his claim to professional authority. According to Stanaland et al.'s (2023) model, discrepancy intensifies when failure becomes visible and consequential. Luke's masculinity had been grounded in the assumption of competence. The scene in data 4 disrupts that assumption. The attempt to prove his worth through decisive action instead confirms his inadequacy. Masculine identity remains invested in performance, but repeated failure widens the gap between expectation and reality.

Data 5
Luke : "You stole my job!"
Emily : "No, I didn't!"
Luke : "You said it was me."
Emily : "It was just a rumor."
Luke : "How do you know??"
Emily : "He didn't want to promote you. He wanted to fire you, because you're the one who's weak!"

(Domont, 2023, 01:19:20 – 01:19:31)

The discrepancy reaches its most explicit form when Emily reveals the boss's true assessment of Luke. This moment removes any remaining uncertainty about his professional standing. Masculine identity is no longer measured by effort or intention, but by institutional judgment. Being labeled as "weak" directly contradicts the masculine ideals Luke has internalized. Within the discrepancy stage, this revelation is critical because it transforms insecurity into certainty. Luke can no longer interpret his situation as temporary or misunderstood. The gap between masculine expectation and reality becomes undeniable. Masculinity remains valued, but Luke's access to it is effectively denied. This confirmation sets the conditions for the next stage, where masculinity is no longer just unstable, but actively perceived as being under threat.

Masculinity Threat and Affective Responses

In Stanaland et al.'s (2023) model, *threat* occurs when the discrepancy between masculine expectations and lived reality is no longer manageable. Masculinity is perceived as being at risk, particularly when status, competence, or authority cannot be restored through performance. At this stage, responses become reactive. These responses may be externalized, such as aggression, domination, or blame, or internalized, such as rigidity, obsession with status, and refusal to accept loss. Both forms reflect an attempt to protect masculine identity in environments that show low tolerance for vulnerability and failure. In *Fair Play*, masculinity threat is expressed through escalating responses as Luke loses professional power. His reactions shift from resistance and accusation to overt domination. These responses reveal how fragile masculinity operates when

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professional validation is denied, especially within a male-dominated workplace that rewards competition and discourages emotional compromise.

Data 6
Luke : "I'm not quitting."
Emily : "But we both can't keep working here. It's killing us."
Luke : "If it bothers you that much, then you can leave."
Emily : "Are you serious? I'm the one with something to lose."

(Domont, 2023, 01:12:11 – 01:12:34)

The exchange in data 6 illustrates an internalized threat response. Luke refuses to leave the firm despite the damage to both his career and personal relationship. Emily's suggestion is pragmatic and protective, yet Luke interprets withdrawal as failure. His insistence on staying reflects a masculinity tied to endurance, possession, and winning. Compromise is framed as weakness. Within Stanaland's model, this rigidity signals threatened masculinity. Luke cannot accept loss because his identity depends on professional dominance. The burden of adjustment is shifted onto Emily, even though she holds the stronger position as a portfolio manager. This reflects a broader pattern in male-dominated professions, where women are often expected to accommodate male ego to preserve harmony, even when they have earned their success.

Data 7
Luke : "Just admit it, Emily. Admit that's why he gave you the promotion. Because he thinks you're hot. Because he wants to fuck you. The question is... Did you let him?"

(Domont, 2023, 01:30:08-01:30:20)

The moment in data 7 represents a clear externalized threat response. Luke reframes Emily's promotion as sexual rather than professional. By doing so, he denies her competence and effort. This accusation functions as a defense mechanism to protect his wounded masculinity. If Emily's success is sexualized, Luke does not have to confront his own failure. This response reflects a common pressure experienced by women in male-dominated fields where female achievement is often questioned or dismissed (Putri & Wahyuningsih, 2025). Stanaland's model helps explain this behavior as a reaction to masculinity under threat. When men cannot reclaim status through performance, they may attempt to restore hierarchy through humiliation and moral accusation.

Data 8
Emily : "You slammed my face into a sink and raped me."

(Domont, 2023, 01:43:03-01:43:26)

The scene in data 8 represents the most extreme externalized threat response. Luke uses physical and sexual violence to reassert dominance after losing professional authority. Masculinity is no longer defended through competence or status, but through control over the body. This reflects a common pattern in which violence becomes a means of restoring power when symbolic forms of masculinity collapse (Suhadi, 2023). In Stanaland's framework, this moment signals complete masculinity threat. Luke can no longer access validation through work, recognition, or rational authority. Violence becomes a compensatory response to a perceived loss of masculine status. This scene shows that fragile masculinity can produce severe relational and physical harm when reinforced by environments that normalize dominance.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that fragile masculinity in *Fair Play* develops through a clear progression of expectancy, discrepancy, and threat. The findings show that masculinity is initially

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constructed through strong professional expectations that equate success, authority, and dominance with masculine worth. When these expectations are disrupted by shifts in workplace hierarchy and performance failure, masculine identity becomes unstable. This instability escalates into masculinity threat, producing affective and behavioral responses such as rigidity, blame, domination, and violence. These responses should not be understood as individual weakness, but as outcomes of environments that reward competition while showing low tolerance for vulnerability and loss of status. The study contributes to masculinity studies by highlighting how fragile masculinity operates as a situational and relational process within professional settings. Future research may extend this framework to other workplace narratives or real-world organizational contexts to further examine how rigid gender norms shape emotional responses, power relations, and relational conflict across different cultural settings.

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