

# Gendered Double Standards and Professional Inequality in Taylor Swift's "The Man": A Liberal Feminist Analysis of SDG 5

Salwa Salsabillah<sup>1</sup>, T. Thyrhaya Zein<sup>2</sup>, Amila Nirina Nasution<sup>3</sup>, Maysa Lani<sup>4</sup>, Hafidz Raskafi Lubis<sup>5</sup>, Tengku Muhammad Zhafran Tsani Sinar<sup>6</sup>

Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan

[maysalani@students.usu.ac.id](mailto:maysalani@students.usu.ac.id)

## ABSTRACT

This study studies at how gendered double standards are portrayed in Taylor Swift's song lyrics. "The Man" (2019). The study analyzes how similar social and professional activities are assessed differently depending on gender using a qualitative descriptive method and the theoretical framework of liberal feminism. The interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña was used to examine the data, with a focus on thematic categories such sexual double standards and professional authority. The results show that similar activities, like romantic experience, financial assurance, and career aspirations, are socially valued when carried out by men but stigmatized when carried out by women. Furthermore, the study connects these poetic depictions to Target 5.5 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which deals with women's equalizer leadership opportunities. The study comes to the conclusion that popular music lyrics are important discursive tools that can promote global gender equity and critical awareness.

**Keywords: Liberal Feminism, Song Lyrics, Taylor Swift, SDG 5, Gendered Double Standard.**

## INTRODUCTION

As a form of expression that captures concepts, feelings, and societal realities, modern literary works, especially song lyrics, play a significant role in human existence. According to (Betti et al., 2023), cultural texts function as systems of representation that construct meaning rather than merely reflecting reality. In this way, people can comprehend cultural ideals ingrained in daily life, negotiate identity, and evaluate social experiences through literature and popular cultural items. Moreover, (Machin, 2010) and (Gaunt et al., 2021) emphasize that popular music should not be viewed solely as entertainment, but also as a cultural practice that communicates ideological meanings and social norms. This perspective makes literary and lyrical writings fundamental tools for comprehending how society creates and perpetuates social hierarchies, especially those pertaining to gender relations. In addition, (Björck, 2021) argues that music functions as a form of social discourse that can shape public awareness and emotional engagement with critical issues such as inequality, discrimination, and identity politics. Therefore, song lyrics occupy a significant position in both cultural production and social interpretation.

Because song lyrics frequently show social experiences and ideological conflicts in understandable ways, they have drawn a lot of attention in cultural and feminist studies among other kinds of popular culture. One of the contemporary songs that has been widely discussed in relation to gender discourse is “The Man” (2019) by Taylor Swift. This song presents a hypothetical scenario in which the speaker imagines being a man in order to highlight the differences in social treatment based on gender. The lyrics explicitly illustrate how identical behaviors, such as ambition, financial expression, and romantic experience, are interpreted differently depending on whether they are performed by men or women (Betti et al., 2023); (Ningsih & Sujiwa, 2025). In this sense, gendered social judgment in modern society is critically represented in the song. Furthermore, (Amanda et al., 2024) highlight that Taylor Swift’s works often contain feminist narratives that challenge dominant gender ideologies in popular music culture.

“The Man” is particularly crucial because it addresses the problem of gendered double standards, which are still prevalent in contemporary societal systems. As (Amanda et al., 2024) argue, Taylor Swift’s discography often reflects feminist concerns, especially in relation to women’s

struggle for recognition in male-dominated spaces. In this song, males are socially rewarded for being involved in several love relationships or flashing their money, but women are condemned for doing the same. This contrast demonstrates how cultural norms create gendered expectations that influence moral assessment and social judgment. In addition, research by (Wijaya, 2025) suggests that gendered language plays a crucial role in maintaining unequal social hierarchies, where terms associated with masculinity are often linked to competence and authority, while femininity is associated with emotionality and moral judgment. As a result, “The Man” serves as a critique of larger societal structures that control gender behavior in addition to being a personal story.

This issue’s relevance to feminist theoretical discussion highlights its importance even more. A paradigm for comprehending gender inequality as the consequence of social and structural barriers rather than biological disparities is provided by feminism, especially liberal feminism. According to (Tong & Botts, 2024), Liberal Feminism emphasizes equality of opportunity, civil rights, and the removal of institutional and cultural discrimination that limits women’s participation in public life. This perspective is supported by Wollstonecraft’s early

arguments on women’s rational equality and continues to be developed in contemporary feminist thought. Moreover, liberal feminism emphasizes the value of merit-based judgment, which holds that people should be judged on their skills rather than their gender. In addition, gender-based double standard theory explains how identical behaviors are evaluated differently depending on gender, often privileging men while disadvantaging women in social, professional, and cultural contexts (Gómez-Berrocal et al., 2022). These theoretical stances are very important when examining how language and representation in song lyrics create gendered meaning systems and either support or contradict prevailing ideologies.

Furthermore, the themes of “The Man” directly intersect with the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5)*, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (*Global Gender Gap Report, 2021*). Specifically, Target 5.1 addresses the elimination of discrimination against women and girls, while Target 5.5 focuses on ensuring equal opportunities for leadership at all levels. The themes presented in “The Man” are closely aligned with these objectives, as the song highlights how women face structural and cultural barriers in achieving equal recognition in social and professional

domains (Nkosi & Maphalala, 2025). By exposing the social barriers to female leadership, Swift's work serves as a cultural catalyst for discussing the systemic inequalities that SDG 5 seeks to dismantle (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). In addition to being a human rights issue, gender equality is an essential requirement for a world that is privileged, peaceful, and sustainable. The song highlights the importance of creating equal social conditions in which individuals are evaluated based on their abilities rather than gendered expectations (Heilman et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of literature on Taylor Swift's discography, such as the work of (Amanda et al., 2024) which identifies various types of feminism and explores the literal meaning of women's struggles, there remains a significant *research gap*. Although earlier research has effectively mapped feminist themes or the media's overall reputation, it frequently ignores the precise relationship between lyrical evidence and the technological goals of global sustainable development. By identifying the double standards and immediately connecting them to the indicators of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), this study closes that gap and offers a more useful and policy-focused analysis. Specifically, this study seeks to answer:

How are gendered double standards represented in the lyrics of "The Man" through a Liberal Feminist perspective in the context of SDG 5? Therefore, this research is expected to contribute to literary and popular culture studies, particularly in understanding song lyrics as a form of discourse that not only represents social reality but also plays a role in shaping critical awareness of gender equality in a global context (Ningsih & Sujiwa, 2025); (Nkosi & Maphalala, 2025).

## METHOD

This study examines how gendered double standards are portrayed using a qualitative descriptive method in Taylor Swift's song "The Man" (2019). A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, social representations, and ideological messages embedded within the song lyrics (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, through the lens of liberal feminism, this study applies a contextual and interpretive reading to investigate how language creates gendered meanings within patriarchal social institutions. This method allows the researcher to investigate the connection between gender inequity, lyrical expressions, and the larger conversation about women's representation in society.

The lyrics of Taylor Swift's performance of "The Man" serve as the study's main source of data. The lyrics, which have thematic and ideological components pertaining to female representation, social validation, and professional inequity, are regarded as literary and cultural texts. In the meanwhile, the secondary data comes from a variety of academic sources, such as books, scholarly journals, feminist theories, and official reports about gender equality and the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the United Nations. The theoretical foundation and contextual interpretation of the study are strengthened by these supporting materials.

Documentation and library research were the methods used in this study to gather data. Lyrical passages that reflect gendered double standards in social and professional situations are found, chosen, and categorized as part of the documentation technique. In the meantime, a variety of scholarly sources pertaining to liberal feminism, gender inequality, double standard theory, and popular culture studies are reviewed in order to conduct library research. These methods are meant to guarantee the accuracy and applicability of the information gathered in line with the study's goals.

The data were analyzed using the Interactive Model proposed by (Miles et al., 2014), which consists of four interconnected stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. In the data condensation stage, the researcher selected and coded lyrical excerpts related to thematic categories such as romantic and social behavior, leadership credibility, and professional achievement. The categorized data were then organized into thematic displays to facilitate interpretation and comparison between male and female social positioning represented in the lyrics. In addition, the analysis also followed (Creswell, 2013) qualitative analysis procedures, including organizing the data, coding textual evidence, generating themes, and interpreting meanings contextually through the framework of Liberal Feminism. Finally, the findings were connected to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), particularly Target 5.1 concerning the elimination of discrimination against women and Target 5.5 regarding women's equal participation and leadership opportunities.

## RESULT

### A. OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

In order to answer the research question, “How are gendered double standards represented in the lyrics of “The Man” through a Liberal Feminist perspective in the context of SDG 5?” this section presents and discusses the results of a contextual analysis of a few lines from Taylor Swift’s song “The Man” (2019). The main issue of the analysis is Gender-Based Double Standard, which is further divided into two main sub-themes: (1) Double Standard in Romantic and Social Behavior and (2) Double Standard in Leadership and Professional Achievement. Six lyrical data points exhibit these sub-themes.

Furthermore, this study adopts a Liberal Feminist perspective as its primary theoretical framework (Tong & Botts, 2024). According to this perspective, the noted double standards are seen as the result of socially constructed norms ingrained in patriarchal structures rather than as neutral phenomena. Three interconnected levels are used to assess each lyrical datum: contextual meaning, Liberal Feminist interpretation, and its relationship to SDG 5 aims. Table 1 displays the full mapping of the lyrical data, thematic classification, and associated SDG 5 targets.

**Table 1. Lyrical Information, Thematic Categorization, and SDG 5 Target Mapping in Taylor Swift’s “The Man”**

Data Lyrics	Category	SDG 5 Target
“They’d say I played the field before I found someone to commit to / And that would be okay for me to do / Every conquest I had made would make me more of a boss to you”	Double Standard in romantic and social behaviour	Target 5.1 (End discrimination against women and girls)
“If I was out flashing my dollars / I’d be a bitch, not a baller”	Double Standard in Romantic and Social Behavior	Target 5.1 (End discrimination against women and girls)
“I’d be a fearless leader / I’d be an alpha type / When everyone believes ya / What’s that like?”	Double Standard in Leadership and Professional Credibility	Target 5.5. (Ensure full participation in leadership and decision-making)
“They’d say I hustled / Put in the work / They wouldn’t shake their heads and question how much of this I deserve”	Double Standard in Professional Achievement	Target 5.5 (Ensure full participation in leadership and decision-making)
“What I was wearing / If I was rude / Could all be separated from my good ideas and power moves?”	Double Standard in Professional Achievement	Target 5.5 (Ensure full participation in leadership and decision-making)
“I’m so sick of running as fast as I can / Wondering if I’d get there quicker if I was a man”	Double Standard in Professional Achievement	Target 5.5 (Ensure full participation in leadership and decision-making)

## B. RESEARCH FINDINGS

### **Theme 1: Gender-Based Double Standard in Social Validation and Romantic Behavior**

#### **Data 1:**

*“They’d say I played the field  
before I found someone to commit to  
And that would be okay for me to do  
Every conquest I had made would  
make me more of a boss to you”*

Men’s romantic experiences are frequently seen more favorably than women’s in many societies. When applied to men, the term “played the field,” which describes having several love partners prior to establishing a committed relationship, is typically linked with independence, self-assurance, and masculinity. The word “conquest” in the lyrics further illustrates how sexual relationships can be viewed as accomplishments that raise a man’s social standing and public perception. Swift draws attention to a persistent social double standard in daily life.

#### **Data 2:**

*“If I was out flashing my dollars  
I’d be a bitch, not a baller”*

In popular culture, the terms “bitch” and “baller” have distinct social connotations. The word “baller” is frequently used to

characterize a person, typically a man, who boldly flaunts status and fortune and is praised for doing so. On the other hand, “bitch” is frequently used as a derogatory term for women who are thought to be overly assertive, self-assured, or reluctant to adhere to conventional standards of femininity. Swift emphasizes in these lines how gender may influence how the same behavior is seen. They are more likely to face criticism or derogatory labels when they publicly exhibit financial achievement, which is frequently interpreted as a sign of confidence. This disparity illustrates a gender-based double standard in which women are frequently expected to maintain modesty and refrain from highlighting their accomplishments, while males are encouraged to show off their success. The song challenges the disparate social expectations that are placed on men and women by using this comparison. It implies that women are assessed not just on their achievements but also on whether or not they behave in a way that is consistent with conventional gender norms.

### **Theme 2: Gender-Based Double Standards in Professional Credibility, Leadership, and Achievement**

#### **Data 3:**

*“I’d be a fearless leader*

*I'd be an alpha type*

*When everyone believes ya*

*What's that like?"*

In society, the terms “alpha type” and “fearless leader” are frequently linked to male leadership. Particularly in professional contexts, traits like self-assurance, authority, and decisiveness are often seen as inherent traits of men. Men who exhibit these qualities are therefore frequently seen as competent leaders. Women who exhibit similar traits, however, could get different responses and occasionally be seen as being overly ambitious or pushy. Research on workplace leadership and feminist studies have extensively addressed this unfair image. The query, “When does everyone believe ya / What’s that like?” deepens the meaning of the song. Instead than requesting a specific response, the speaker bemoans the disparity in trust between men and women. According to the lyrics, women would have to put in more effort to establish their competency and reliability, whilst males are frequently trusted and taken seriously more readily. The song challenges the notion that males are inherently better at leadership by using this contrast. It also reflects one of the main tenets of liberal feminism, which is that people ought to be judged on their skills and accomplishments rather than on their gender.

#### **Data 4:**

*“They'd say I hustled*

*Put in the work*

*They wouldn't shake their heads  
and question how much of this I  
deserve”*

The term “hustled” refers to diligence, perseverance, and hard work in the context of professional success. People who are characterized as “hustling” are typically thought of as aspirational people who diligently pursue their objectives. Men who succeed through hard labor are frequently more easily accepted and acknowledged by society. The lyrics, however, imply that women frequently encounter a different reality. “They wouldn’t shake their heads and question how much of this I deserve” emphasizes the uncertainty that women may encounter even after succeeding. Women are sometimes questioned about whether they really earned their accomplishments rather than being acknowledged for their efforts. Instead of their own skills and diligence, their achievement can be defined to chance, interpersonal relationships, or other outside influences. A larger gender-based double standard in professional settings is reflected in this unfair assessment. Previous studies have shown that men’s achievements are

more likely to be associated with competence and effort, while women's achievements are more often met with skepticism or attributed to external circumstances (Betti et al., 2023). Swift emphasizes in these lyrics how women often have to demonstrate the validity of their achievements in ways that men do not.

**Data 5:**

*“What I was wearing  
If I was rude  
Could all be separated from my  
good ideas and power moves?”*

The additional difficulties that women frequently encounter in work settings are highlighted in this lyric. Women are often judged on their looks, behavior, and emotional expression in addition to their ideas, abilities, and accomplishments. Swift raises the question in this line of whether women's contributions to the workplace can ever be adequately assessed without being impacted by these gender-based norms. In feminist and organizational studies, this topic has received a lot of attention. It's common for women in leadership roles to be held to expectations beyond job performance. For instance, they might be evaluated in ways that are uncommon for men, such as how they speak, dress, or display their emotions. The phrase “good ideas and power moves”

highlights the speaker's competence and abilities, which are necessary for leadership and career success. The song's lyrics, however, imply that women's skills aren't always assessed equally to men's. Rather, their accomplishments are frequently filtered via gendered expectations that affect how their contributions and actions are viewed. Swift highlights the disparate norms that still influence women's experiences in the workplace and in public life with her critique.

**Data 6:**

*“I'm so sick of running as fast as I  
can  
Wondering if I'd get there quicker if  
I was a man”*

One of the song's primary themes is expressed in this line. “Running as fast as I can” implies that the speaker has already exerted all of her effort to reach her objectives. But even after putting in a lot of effort, she still wonders if it would be simpler for her to succeed if she were a guy. The song's lyrics do not imply that women cannot achieve success. Rather, it draws attention to the unfair obstacles that women frequently encounter in social and professional settings. The expression “get there quicker” is especially significant since it suggests that women might have to put in more time, effort, and perseverance

in order to gain the same opportunities or accolades that males frequently do more readily. To put it another way, the problem is not a lack of skill but rather the unequal circumstances that lead to success. Liberal feminist ideas regarding gender inequality are directly linked to this concept. (Tong & Botts, 2024) explain that equality is not only about giving women access to opportunities, but also about removing the social barriers that make those opportunities more difficult to attain. Swift highlights in this line that, despite having same skills and efforts, women are frequently required to put in more effort to achieve the same status as males.

## DISCUSSION

### C.1 Comparative Analysis: The Asymmetric Evaluative Standard

Comparing the six lyrical passages indicates a recurring pattern: comparable actions and accomplishments are evaluated differently based on whether they are carried out by men or women. The song's primary tactic is this comparing approach. Taylor Swift only modifies the subject's gender while maintaining the same circumstances by visualizing herself as "the man." The song draws attention to social injustices that are sometimes taken for granted in daily life by using this contrast.

The professional setting exhibits a similar pattern (Data 3, 4, and 5). While female leadership is more likely to be questioned or critiqued, male leadership is frequently viewed as natural and authoritative. Similarly, women's success is sometimes viewed with suspicion, while men's accomplishments are often seen as the product of skill and diligence. Gender differences can also affect how direct and assertive behavior is seen; men are frequently perceived as determined, whereas women are perceived as aggressive or socially unacceptable. These comparisons contradict the Liberal Feminist principle proposed by (Tong & Botts, 2024), which argues that individuals should be evaluated based on their abilities and actions rather than their gender. Through these lyrical contrasts, "The Man" reflects how unequal standards continue to shape social and professional life in contemporary society.

### C.2 Cause-and-Effect Analysis: Social consequences and Structural Roots

Based on a source-and-effect standpoint, the lyrics' depiction of double standards can be interpreted as both the cause of ongoing inequality in daily life and the outcome of established societal systems.

From the perspective of Liberal Feminism, (Tong & Botts, 2024) explain that gender inequality develops from patriarchal systems that have historically shaped social, cultural, legal, and professional institutions. The unequal standards that women face are depicted in “The Man” as a component of larger societal norms that elevate masculine conduct to the status of authority and competence rather than as independent personal beliefs. Women who conduct more assertively are sometimes condemned for being aggressive or inappropriate, whereas women who adhere to traditional feminine norms are typically seen as being too emotional or weak for leadership roles. This situation reflects what feminist scholars describe as a “double bind,” where women are placed in a difficult position because no matter which behavior they choose, they are still judged differently from men (Tong & Botts, 2024).

The consequences of these unequal standards are evident in how women are evaluated and treated in social and professional environments. Because masculine traits are often regarded as the norm for authority and competence, women frequently face greater scrutiny than men when pursuing leadership roles or professional success. Their achievements may be questioned more often, while their behavior is judged according to stricter

social expectations. As a result, women may encounter additional barriers to recognition, career advancement, and equal participation in decision making processes. These outcomes demonstrate how gender based double standards continue to reinforce inequality, even in societies that formally promote equal rights and opportunities.

### **C.3 Connection to SDG 5: From Cultural Representation to Global Policy**

The lyrical evidence analyzed in this study maps directly onto two specific targets of the two specific targets of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). First, SDG 5 Target 5.1 calls for the end of all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere. This global mandate encompasses not only legal discrimination but also the deeply rooted cultural and evaluative discrimination documented across Data 1 and 2. In these data points, women’s romantic conduct, financial confidence, and overall life efforts are systematically subjected to more punitive social judgments than their male equivalents. By exposing how behaviors like “playing the field” or “flashing dollars” lead to social stigmatization for women while granting social capital to men, Swift’s lyrics illustrate the informal, yet powerful,

discriminatory barriers that Target 5.1 aims to eradicate.

Second, Data 3, 4, 5, and 6 clearly address SDG 5 Target 5.5, which asks for women's full and effective involvement and equal opportunity for leadership at all levels of decision-making. The lyrical evidence shows that the obstacles to women's leadership are mainly cultural and evaluative rather than just institutional or legal. These obstacles include a structural skepticism about women's entitlement to the success they have earned, the systematic application of extra scrutiny to women's appearance and emotional expression over their "good ideas," and the default assumption that authority belongs to a male "alpha type." Target 5.5 is to eliminate these very hidden patriarchal conditions. The continued discrepancy between official legislative pledges to gender equality and the lived social reality of professional women is highlighted by the prevalence of these biases in popular culture.

This convergence of lyrical evidence with SDG 5 aims is not accidental, according to the researchers. Swift's song, written in 2019, captures a cultural period when there was a lot of public and academic debate on the discrepancy between legal promises of gender equality and the actual reality of

systemic double standards. The song's lasting significance and its ongoing use in scholarly research on gender and popular music imply that the issues it highlights have not been significantly addressed. Thus, popular cultural texts like "The Man" have a documentary role in addition to their artistic one: they register the gap that still exists between the aspirational frameworks of global gender policy and the cultural realities that continue to shape women's lives in an approachable and emotionally impactful way.

### IMPLICATIONS

The study's conclusions have theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the analysis affirms the continued analytical productivity of Liberal Feminism particularly in its updated formulation by (Tong & Botts, 2024) as a framework for reading popular cultural texts, especially when integrated with double standard theory as a complementary descriptive instrument. The study also highlights the importance of tying textual analysis to international policy frameworks. By connecting particular lyrical evidence to SDG 5 targets, it demonstrates that popular cultural texts can serve as primary diagnostic tools for measuring and critically analyzing the gap between policy aspiration and cultural reality, rather than just being a supplement to policy discourse.

Practically speaking, the results highlight how crucial it is to critically interact with popular media in advocacy and educational settings in order to increase understanding of the structural factors that perpetuate gender disparity. Songs like “The Man” are useful teaching tools for exposing larger audiences to feminist ideas that might otherwise only be discussed in academic settings because of their emotional relevance and accessibility. This is particularly significant in the Indonesian academic context, where the intersection of popular music studies, feminist theory, and sustainable development frameworks remains an emerging area of inquiry (Ningsih & Sujiwa, 2025); (Mukminin et al., 2024). The current study advances a research agenda that takes popular culture seriously as a site of ideological reproduction and a resource for critical gender education by showcasing the analytical productivity of this connection.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of Taylor Swift’s “The Man” demonstrates that gender inequality is systematically maintained not only by overt institutional barriers, but through the subtle mechanics of language and asymmetric social evaluation. By isolating gender as the sole variable across identical social and professional scenarios, this study reveals

how deeply embedded patriarchal norms continue to distort the judgment of women’s agency. The core finding exposes a persistent structural binary: the exact same actions that grant men social capital and authoritative validation actively strip women of their credibility. This standard creates a pervasive “double bind” in professional settings, where women must navigate an environment that defaults to masculine archetypes for leadership while simultaneously scrutinizing female achievement through a lens of skepticism and superficial expectation.

These insights bridge the gap between popular culture and global policy by serving as a cultural diagnostic tool for United Nations SDG 5. The systemic biases identified in the lyrics underscore that achieving gender equity involves more than granting formal or legal access to opportunities. The cultural resistance toward female authority and the social stigmatization of their independence represent the invisible, informal barriers that actively hinder the realization of Targets 5.1 and 5.5. Ultimately, the study highlights a critical tension: even when institutional frameworks pledge progress, the lived experience of professional women remains restricted by cultural and linguistic structures that preserve male dominance.

Consequently, there is a pressing need to re-evaluate how popular media is utilized in academic and advocacy spaces. Popular culture operates as an accessible, emotionally resonant vehicle for critical gender pedagogy, which remains an emerging area of inquiry within the Indonesian academic context. Effectively addressing the gender gap requires institutional policies to look beyond numerical representation and implement cultural interventions, such as fostering critical media literacy to dismantle covert biases in everyday language. For future research, moving beyond textual analysis toward audience reception studies would be highly valuable to evaluate how these systemic double standards are actually perceived and negotiated across diverse social groups.

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