

TRANSGENDER

A Gendered Perspective

Bio-LOGICAL?

Gender and transgender discrimination are based upon the same socially constructed determinants that have been assigned to what it means to be male and what it means to be female. They are also rooted in the idea that a person's gender is assigned biologically at birth and creates natural and immutable differences between women and men, and allows for the domination of masculinity over femininity through the attribution of specific gender-related characteristics. Gender is one of the first classification systems that we are taught as children, probably because it is the bedrock of how our society (and therefore the discrimination that characterises our society) functions. The challenges to the fixed notion of gender and the idea that there are biological and immutable differences between the sexes that are created by the existence of feminist and transgender identities pose a fundamental challenge to our patriarchal society.

Feminist activists and transgender activists are essentially both challenging and trying to resist and to change patriarchy by resisting the idea of a biologically determined gender binary. Feminism overtly challenges the patriarchal assertion that biology means that men are superior to women, and the transgendered community challenges the assertion that gender is biologically determined and static in their subversion and dismissal of static and binary gender identities. When transgendered people make the 'choice' to live other than as their birth gender-label, transsexual men are saying that they are 'as good as men' i.e. equal to, and transsexual women are saying that they are 'as good as women' i.e. equal to, and in this way mirror the central tenet of feminism. However the transgender community is more diverse than transsexual women and transsexual men and also includes intersex people, androgyne people and transvestite people. Androgyne people are women and men who do not accept the binary notion of gender and reject the expectations placed on women and men through the social constructs of gender in our society; and in some cases reject the notion of male and female identity completely by refusing to define their gender at all. This social rejection of static and discriminatory concepts of male and female, and the biological challenges that intersex people make to the male/female norm, can be understood as the nullification of gender, or the

nullification of the power that supports the systems of discrimination that are used to oppress both women and transgender people, and to privilege men. Again this mirrors the aims, if not the basis, of feminist activism.

There are however tensions between transgender activists and women's equality activists because some feminists are uncomfortable with the concept of gender nullification or neutrality, and what it means for women in terms of having a cohesive identity that can be used to challenge gender discrimination. In order to take a feminist position you need to be able to say whom you are fighting for (and against), and if the identity of 'woman' becomes unclear the fear is that the arguments could lose both their power and their focus. Although feminism does acknowledge that women would benefit from the blurring of gendered definitions of women and men and the idea that biologically and socially it is potentially less discriminatory to view gender (in terms of both biology and expression) as a continuum, there is fear that the erosion of a distinct female identity could result in the erosion of the progress that feminism has made for the greater equality of women.

Related to this point is the fact that some feminists have questioned the inclusion of transgender women in feminist organisations. This seems to be an articulation of the point that even women as a group that faces discrimination, discriminate against other groups and in many cases discriminate in accordance with ideas that are imposed upon them from living in a sexist patriarchy. Although the discrimination is not systemic, it is based upon the idea that some female identities are more valid than others and therefore privileges female biology over non-biological female identities. Therefore a Single Equality Bill that results in the increased visibility and empowerment of transgendered women could focus this opposition and it would be important to guard against an unexpected outcome, namely the articulation of more discrimination against transgendered women from people and organisations that are concerned with women's equality. There has also been opposition amongst some feminists to androgyne people whose appearance and name mean that it is not possible to tell what their birth

gender-label is. They feel uncomfortable with the idea of gender neutrality when the gender-neutral person could be utilising female identity for masculine gain. The challenge faced by the Bill and its application, is how it can challenge the gender norms that currently work to sustain the oppression of women and transgender people without compromising the identity and progression towards equality for either group. It is also important that women and transgendered people recognise the diversity of opinion amongst women (whosever terms you use to define 'women') and that there are many women who have bought into gender stereotyping and actively (if not consciously) work against challenging the negative gender stereotyping of women. In this light it seems unfair to single out trans-women as specifically and especially unable to understand the issues of gender equality for women.

One of the main areas where the inequalities of power between women and men are expressed, debated and challenged is in the arena of the workplace; more specifically the work that takes place outwith the home in the paid marketplace. Transgendered people are not currently widely welcome in this arena, a hark back to the discrimination faced by British women, and an area where policy and legislation could look to the women's sector for guidance in challenging this discrimination. The fact that the debate for transgendered people has stepped back to the arguments that feminists were having before women were more widely accepted in (certain) workplaces, is potentially positive in challenging discrimination against both groups. The acceptance of transgendered people in the workplace is reliant on a change in the perception of the dominant understanding of what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman, and their relative worth because of this understanding. The need to focus again on these issues in relation to transgender people could create the space to talk about these issues again in relation to women. Whilst systemic discrimination against women in the workplace results in enduring pay inequalities between women and men, and whilst men continue to limit the areas where women can work, the power that they may hold in the workplace, and devalue the areas where they do work, a step 'backwards' that challenges the basic concept of male and female and their consequent role and worth in society should be

welcomed. Where women are discriminated against for being the lesser of the two sexes (reliant on a capitalist construct of 'worth'), transgender people are discriminated against because their gender identity and/or expression of that identity can often cast them outwith both the labour market and the social reproductive market. But also because transgender people challenge the bedrock of discrimination in our society (the capitalist patriarchy): that women and men are intrinsically, biologically different and therefore are of different value in the workplace and society. And this is the challenge that women have been making for many, many years.

The echoes of discrimination between transgendered people and women continues when it is considered that transgender women face far higher levels of violence than transgender men; women who aspire to be men are more acceptable to society (and men in particular) than men who aspire to be women. This follows the dominant ideology that men are superior to women and therefore a female-to-male transgender person is trying to better themselves (i.e. become better by becoming a man) but a male-to-female transgender person is rejecting the basic premise of male superiority and taking a 'step-down' by becoming female. This seems to be taken far more seriously and far more personally by some men to the extent that it provokes far more violence. There is also evidence that more male-to-female transgender people face sexual violence perpetrated in the main by heterosexual males; again supporting the idea that anyone challenging the dominant ideology (that it is better to be a man) needs to be put back into their place by whatever means available to men.

The portrayal of women as sex objects is linked to issues with the over-sexualisation, de-sexualisation and fetishism that happens to transgendered people. For example the sexist prioritising of breasts and penises in our society means that transgendered women with breasts who choose to keep their penises, or who are mid-transition, are doubly sexualised and, like women, are fetishised for their body parts. The judgements that are made about how a transgender person chooses to change their body during their transition, whether they wish to make changes that are based on using their

body parts for reproduction or for pleasure (for example whether a female-to-male person decides to keep their vagina and reproductive organs in order to have children in the future, or if they decide that it is more important to their transition and gender expression to have their reproductive organs removed and a penis created) mirrors the feminist struggle for women to have agency over their own bodies, how they wish to present them and what they choose to do to and with them. The treatment of transgender people shows the huge amount of importance that we place on the physical manifestations of gender, and how we define and prejudice people by the labels that we put on them from gender-appearance alone. Feminist thinking has clearly articulated and argued against the discrimination faced by women and the judgements that they face because of their appearance, and transgender people are also struggling against the opportunities for sexism afforded by the objectification of female appearance.

Modern forms of communication such as the Internet have created a space where it is normal to engage with someone without gender identity being disclosed. It's allowing younger people to become more comfortable

with communicating with someone without being able to tell what their gender is straight away. People are also communicating (especially through second life games) in ways where they experiment with how they present themselves to others, including in terms of how they present their gender identity. In this way the Internet is providing a way for people to communicate and interact outwith the dominant power structure of patriarchy and the consequent norm of gender binary and sexism. Shifts such as this, coupled with the increased visibility and empowerment of transgender people through the discussion and challenges to discrimination that emerge through the implementation of the Gender Equality Duty, and in time the passing and using of a Single Equality Bill, could create an opportunity for the ideas that underpin the sexist oppression of women to be freshly challenged and their basis (that there is a fundamental difference between women and men determined by the biological sex and apparent in the superiority of men over women) significantly shifted.

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