

The Woman Question

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Abstract The author was inspired to write this article in light of the ongoing and recent claims by some radical feminists that trans women are not women. This is much more than a debate among differing theoretical positions. Women have been threatened, both trans* and cis women. The vitriol on both sides is alarming and undermining of the feminism we all share. Rather than write an academic, philosophical treatise on the meaning of “woman,” the author wrote this from her first-person experience, as someone who was “born female” and identifies as a woman but is often socially read as trans* (a trans man). The author aims to articulate a radical feminist understanding of women that shows trans women are women in concrete, personal terms.

Keywords feminism, woman, trans*, hierarchy

The dispute between some self-identified feminists and trans persons, trans women especially, and trans-supporting feminists has erupted into a full-scale ideological war. Once at the level of conflict, officially undeclared, we have moved into the territory of “you are either with us or against us,” with real threats against real people—from both sides.¹ Trans women clearly feel that their existence—and this is not a metaphor—is at stake.² Among those feminists who publicly defend exclusion of trans women from the category “woman,” some feel that women’s ability for self-definition is threatened by trans women’s claim to “womanhood.”³ All of us invested in feminism, and as such in women, have a stake in this conflagration. With that in mind, I offer the following in the style of an open letter to those who do not think trans women are women.

Let me start by stating up front, I believe trans women are women.⁴ I reject a feminism that excludes trans women. There were times in my past when I could not, or would not, have written those two sentences. One might say I have evolved on this issue. I am thankful for that. In what follows, I want to share a collection of thoughts and experiences that led me here, hoping that I might convince some to rethink their position. This is not a systematic argument addressing every objection that could be made or has been made on the subject.

My evolution starts from two facts. First, I know and care about some trans women (and trans men, too). I listened to them. Their experiences, their reality, their sometimes sense of despair and anger, their humanity is foundational for me. They own their experience, their lives; their right to live in the world is unquestionable. Starting from a position of trying to understand someone else's reality, the phenomenology of their existence, is something we should all do, whether concerning trans women or anyone else. Individual and collective empathy is too often untapped. Second, more often than not, I am identified by others, who do not know me, as a man; I would conjecture that in everyday interactions with strangers, I am taken to be a man over 90 percent of the time. This identification started happening regularly about sixteen years ago when I cut my hair very short. (I had always dressed in "men's clothing" since my teenage years. Add to this that I am nearly six feet tall and have broad shoulders and a "healthy" frame. This is the body I was given.) In fact, others so routinely identify me as a man that I am often caught off guard and surprised if someone correctly identifies me as a woman. These experiences have changed me; they are, now, a defining feature of my life. Perhaps having experienced my gender/sex so uniformly and routinely confused has allowed me to "see" things, to understand the experience of living in a world in which your body is interpreted one way and your authentic self entirely rejects that other imposed identification. I am not a man. I do not identify as a man. I don't want to be a man, trans or otherwise.⁵ I am a woman, but the overwhelming majority of humankind, men and women alike, does not yet recognize my womanhood as a way of being one.

Following up that thought, living in the world as it is, I have to fight for recognition as a woman on a daily basis. My choices are to correct people when they call me "sir" or assume I am a man, or let it go, which often means functioning socially as a man. Let me paint a brief picture of what this looks like. Doing something as basic as going to the bathroom, anywhere that is public, is a nightmare. Few places have "unisex" bathrooms. So here are my choices: go into the women's bathroom and face public shouting, alarm, ridicule, and confrontation. Or go into the men's bathroom, look down at the floor, walk quickly into a stall, and hope no one pays any attention to me but face the serious fear that they might. Mostly, I choose the men's. However, at work I can't make that choice. I can't imagine running into my male colleagues, who know I am a woman, in there. So it's the women's. But, not everyone in the bathroom at a given time knows me or knows that I work there or knows that I am a woman. I have to time my bathroom breaks for when I think no one is in there or likely to be in there. I haven't always succeeded.

One day, while using the women's restroom, on the same hallway as my office, the custodian confronted me. She was entering the bathroom to clean it. I was washing my hands. She opened the door and held it open, three other women

were attempting to enter the bathroom at the same time. She said, “WHAT are YOU DOING?” I replied, “Washing my hands?” She said, “No, WHAT are YOU DOING in HERE?” I was frozen. By now, several of my colleagues and unknown students were standing in the hallway observing the commotion, and all this was happening within earshot of the department office. The door to the bathroom was still being held open. She rephrased the question: “WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN THE WOMEN’S BATHROOM!?” I said, “I am a woman.” She just stared at me with complete confusion. I walked out. There was laughter. I didn’t look back to see who or how many were laughing. Under the circumstances, I can understand why this woman was alarmed and confused. She sincerely believed I was a man in the woman’s bathroom. Although, it sure would be nice if she and others like her would grant that people like me know which bathroom we are in and have a good reason for being in there. My saying the words “I am a woman” never occurred to her, and she could barely process them in the moment. Now, imagine confronting this EVERY. SINGLE. DAY. in dozens and dozens of ways and interactions (noting that many of you reading this won’t have to “imagine” it at all). Imagine standing over the coffin of your dead grandfather’s body, while the funeral director turns to your father and says, “This must be your son, I have heard so much about,” and all your father can say in response is a quiet “no, this is my daughter.” Imagine going to the emergency room for what you believe to be an ovarian cyst, and the physicians and nurses are so baffled they ask you your name and repeatedly check your chart for your sex identification and then ask to see your driver’s license, something you’ve already given at check-in, to triple confirm, one presumes, that you aren’t delusional. I could go on. I have hundreds of such stories. All this because your body is socially interpreted as masculine, yet you identify as a woman. These are my stories, and I was born female and assigned to the female sex, and I identify as a woman.

I didn’t make this world and its social meanings. My power to transform them as an individual is negligible, if it exists at all. Yet, I have to live in this world. I am trying to live a gender—to the extent that doing so is required for being socially intelligible—and obviously have a body, and these two things are regarded as incongruent from the dominant point of view. In this way, I share a social space with trans persons. I assume my feminist sisters would reject the suggestion that I should be forced to transition my sex or identity to conform to a world that doesn’t, on the whole, recognize my existence as a woman (though few, there are some safe spaces). Yet, in refusing to acknowledge trans women as women, this is, in effect, what such feminists are asking of trans women. What follows from the refusal of recognition may not be precisely clear as to what such feminists think trans women should do or how they should live. But insofar as claims that position trans women as “men impersonating women” are uttered, and they are, it seems to me they are saying: live your life as a socially recognized

man, make your body and gender conform, insofar as you “can’t” change your body (essentialism?), change your gender or gender presentation. Or maybe they think, “Go ahead and be as ‘feminine’ as you like, but do it with a male-identified body, and don’t claim to be a woman.”

Setting aside the presumptuousness of telling someone else how to live in their body, this seems to me to situate trans women as uniquely bearing the responsibility of confronting the false sex dualism and binary gender hierarchy we all live in. Perhaps underlying the refusal to recognize trans women as women is the belief that true liberation from sex-role oppression and gender hierarchy requires that we create a world in which sex roles disappear, in which gender is nonexistent or so completely fluid as to effectively be a noncategory.⁶ Well, we don’t live in that world, and are unlikely to. Why should trans women, as individuals, bear a special burden in getting us closer to it? Most women (including radical feminist women) live a gender that is socially recognized as in the category “woman”; that is, they conform to certain gender stereotypes of femininity. They are living and existing, with a gender and sex, in the world as it is now, not as it might be in “the ideal world.” By keeping their sex and gender, body and identity and self-presentation, coincident, don’t they further conventional sex-role notions that gender is biologically natural? Doesn’t this similarly position them in their own critique as they position trans women? The criticism of trans women as failing to act in ways that are consistent with an ideal of liberation from sex and gender is a little like criticizing any of us for making a decent living under capitalism, or investing our retirement funds in the stock market, if the aim of liberation is the destruction of capitalism as a social, political, and economic system. Even Karl Marx had to eat in the here and now.

The central claim many offer for excluding trans women from the category “women” is that trans women were not socialized to womanhood since birth and so lack the necessary lived experience, material reality, on which to base a claim to womanness.⁷ I fully acknowledge that there is a material reality to being a woman in this world. But I see two problems with this position. First, in offering this standard of womanhood, I think many are saying, in effect, “Trans women are not women *like me*.” But the material reality of women is not uniform. Intersectional analyses of gender teach that women’s experience of womanhood is importantly varied across other categories, especially across other hierarchies—including race, class, religion, sexuality, geopolitical location, able bodiedness, and age, to name a few. If we explore the points of overlap and departure among all these categories of women, we do find commonality, for example, as subordinated on the basis of sex, as subject to sexual harassment, sexual violence, and gender-based violence because of one’s sex. However, women’s vulnerability to such subordination is not identical; it varies along with other inequalities.

Second, and relatedly, asking how trans women stand solely in relation to women, typically seen as such, asks the wrong question. The crucial question is: How do trans women stand in relation to men, to the forms of male power that function to subordinate women on the basis of sex? Are trans women subordinated on the basis of their sex? Are they subordinated on the basis of their place in the sex/gender hierarchy?⁸ That is the central question, not how or who they were born as. Trans women are routinely denied employment on the basis of their sex. Denied health care on the basis of their sex. Forced into prostitution for survival on the basis of their sex. Denied access to housing on the basis of their sex. Violently attacked, and all too frequently murdered, on the basis of their sex. Much of this occurs because they are not seen to fit adequately the sex-role stereotypes of either femininity or masculinity. If subordination on the basis of one's sex is central to the social and political meaning of "woman," and it is, then what can possibly be the response to denying that trans women are precisely in this position? That they were born with a penis? I thought we were past biological essentialism, at least since Simone de Beauvoir.

This is only half the story, though. Not only must women have been born women (assigned to the category "female" at birth), they must also presently identify as women, according to some versions of the claim that trans women are not women. Trans women are missing the first necessary condition, it is said. I suppose this means that trans men are men, since they lack the second necessary condition. However, Sheila Jeffreys refuses to recognize trans men as men, routinely referring to them as "women" and "female-bodied persons" (2014: 101–22). There is an essentialism here. Putting this together, at least one frequently defended version of the standard for "woman" is "original" identification by others, as such that begins a process of socialization to femininity—as dominantly practiced and enforced—plus present subjective identification as such. I take it that this is what the phrase "woman born woman" expresses. This view further suggests that such women are uniquely positioned to advocate for the political emancipation of women as a class. If so, what should we make of all the women-born-women that don't? Do those who embrace male dominance fail to interrogate it, reenact its imperatives, and relish in the kinds of power doing so provides them? This question is especially acute when contrasted with a group of persons to have actively, and at enormous personal costs, rejected maleness, masculinity, and everything it represents. They do not want to be men in this world. They refuse. If I am choosing who "my people" are, the choice seems obvious.

Now to the topic of masculine/male privilege: some argue that insofar as trans women grew up male identified, they have a social history that includes being conferred male privilege, and this experience and the psychology constructed upon it cannot be undone. This implies either they carry the legacy of having been conferred male privilege and this is sufficient to exclude them from

the category “woman” or, having once been socialized to privilege, they can never develop the psyche of a “woman”—as if there were one such thing. These are empirical claims; one might rightly demand some evidence here. I haven’t seen any, other than the claims on blogs that individual trans women have acted rudely or entitled in some way that is interpreted as being a product of male privilege.⁹ As such, all we may be dealing with here is a hasty generalization possibly premised upon confirmation biases. But no doubt plenty of people can be jerks, and being trans* doesn’t immunize a person from any of the behaviors that we all as humans display at one time or another. Though, in any individual case of criticizing someone for being an ass, especially marginalized persons who are routinely dismissed as mentally ill, deviant, devious, deluded, and so on, a heavy dose of caution is in order.

The deeper question here is the plausibility of claiming once male privileged always male privileged. As with the category “woman,” the category “man” is varied across all kinds of differences and hierarchies. And so, generalizations often work to dismiss, exclude, or erase the experiences of some. However, socialization to masculinity is itself about socially demonstrating one’s ability to dominate—women and those men “lower” in the hierarchy. It’s quite plausible to think that many trans women’s experiences of socialization to social masculinity was an uncomfortable and unhappy experience—an experience they reject and rejected. Even more, many trans women are not identifiable as trans, and haven’t been for some time. (In point of fact, a trans woman friend of mine has escorted me to the women’s bathroom, at my request, because I knew no one would question her right to be there, and in that way she served to confirm that I had a right to be there. Another woman walking with you into a women’s bathroom is one way to avoid a confrontation.) In this respect, they experience male privilege like the rest of us do, as an exertion of power over us. If trans women are socially identified as trans, privilege preceded by any adjective is not a word that comes to mind in describing their experience. That one could claim that trans women have male privilege in any traditional sense belies any serious knowledge of what trans women’s lives are actually like. Even more curious is the seemingly broader claim underlying the position here: the denial that those socialized to masculinity could ever give up or lose male privilege. Isn’t eliminating male privilege one of the goals of radical feminism?

A final thought: feminism, as I understand it, is the theory and practice of dismantling male power, gender hierarchy, and women’s subordinate position as structurally and institutionally manifest. This requires a women’s movement, a political movement. This we all know. This movement can’t occur while marginalizing, refusing to recognize, and denying the existence of our trans sisters. Recognizing our differences as women has always been at the center of feminism

done right. Not all women are women like me or like you, and restricting the category of “woman” in this way keeps us all from further building the movement we so desperately need.

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Notes

1. A lot of this discourse has occurred on blogs and social media. There are clear, documented cases of threats to some feminists of violence, including rape, by alleged trans women (I say “alleged” because I can’t know for sure the identity of the persons making the threats). There are also cases of “outing” trans women by some feminists, including revealing their addresses, places of employment, and other information, as well as public ridiculing of their bodies. An especially cruel example is a prominent antitrans feminist holding a paper shaped like a human body that reads “sorry about your dick,” with an arrow pointing to the “genital” area of the paper doll.
2. The attempted suicide rate and suicide rate among trans persons and gender-non-conforming persons is disproportionately high, approaching 50 percent for some sub-groups within these categories (younger persons, homeless persons, and unemployed persons being especially vulnerable). See Haas, Rodgers, and Herman 2014.
3. The term *TERF* (trans exclusionary radical feminists) is often used to describe these feminists. I avoid this term because I want to address those who disagree with me on terms that will allow for open and honest listening, and labeling, as such, often shuts down those pathways.
4. This does not mean I endorse any view that situates trans* persons as biologically determined. One prominent biological explanation of trans women is that they have “female brains” but male-identified bodies. The science simply does not support this claim. Moreover, it relies on a gender essentialism that is deeply problematic and false. It’s perfectly consistent to think that sex/gender is socially constructed and that trans women are women. For discussion of the brain science, see Fine 2010 and Jordan-Young 2010.
5. Nothing in what follows aims to speak for trans* persons. I have never had the feeling that “I am a man” in any sense. Hence, my experience differs from trans* persons’ experiences in crucial ways.
6. Andrea Dworkin imagines such an ideal in her early work *Woman Hating* (1974). However, and this is critical, she says the following regarding “transsexual women”: Under

conditions in which the male-female binary is presumed to be natural and unalterable, “every transsexual is in a state of primary emergency as a transsexual. . . . Every transsexual has the right to survival on his/her own terms. That means every transsexual is entitled to a sex-change operation, and it should be provided by the community as one of its functions. . . . By changing our premises about men and women, role-playing, and polarity, the social situation of transsexuals will be transformed, and transsexuals will be integrated into community, no longer persecuted and despised” (186). She goes on to hypothesize that, under a different kind of community, one built around “androgynous identity,” transsexuality as we now know it may not exist because we will have expanded the range of possible identities and, in effect, have new ways of being. Whether one accepts or rejects the last claim, the first two are astonishing for the fact that they were written in 1974 and that Andrea Dworkin is a radical feminist heroine, if there ever was one. For an essay by John Stoltenberg, Andrea’s life partner, reflecting on Andrea’s view on trans persons, see Stoltenberg 2014. For an interview with Catharine MacKinnon on trans women, see Williams 2015.

7. Janice Raymond makes this point, as does Sheila Jeffreys. Jeffreys approvingly quotes Raymond, saying, “We know that we are women who are born with female chromosomes and anatomy, and that whether or not we were socialized to be so-called normal women, patriarchy as treated and will treat us like women. Transsexuals have not had this same history. . . . Surgery may confer the artifacts of outward and inward female organs but it cannot confer the history of being born a woman in this society” (Jeffreys 2014: 6).
8. For some relevant data, see Grant et al. 2011.
9. For an analysis of the way that trans women face stereotype threat, see MacKinnon 2014.

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