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Moving through the world as a woman

> In feminist philosophy, it's often been thought important to answer the question 'What is a woman?' in order to delimit the purview of inquiry. Since feminism is concerned with the oppression of women, goes the thought, it should be able to determine whose oppression is at stake.
>
> - Talia May Bettcher (2017)

Who – or what – is a woman?

This question is central to any discussion of sexism. The chapters in this book tend to take 'women' as their subject, and women's activism (especially feminism and womanism) as the primary mode of resistance to sexism within the academy. As a feminist, I understand sexism to describe both the systemic marginalisation of women with regards to men, and interpersonal dynamics in which men's voices, actions and interests are prioritised over women's. This is a process which relies on the interplay of structural and individual barriers. Gender stereotypes and cultural norms inform (and are constructed through) acts of discrimination and harassment against women, while laws and institutional policies constrain women or otherwise fail to account for our needs.

To understand what sexism *is* and how it operates, however, we need to talk about *who* is a 'woman' (or, indeed, a 'man'). That is to say: who is it that is subject to sexism? Who is it that we wish to support, and who is it to which we refer when we talk about the challenges that women face in social and institutional arenas such as the academy?

I write as a trans woman. I am the subject and object of heightened public anxiety and interest; I see myself presented as a cipher, an intellectual curiosity, a threat. Debates over my belonging within the category of womanhood can be found not only within sensationalist news stories, gossip columns, reality television shows, tragic movies and legal battles, but also in feminist books, queer theory essays, medical papers and academic conferences.

As of 2018, a growing number of universities are creating trans equality policies, collecting data on the experiences of trans staff and students, and adapting gendered spaces such as toilets and changing rooms. Concurrently, a growing number of women scholars in fields such as law, philosophy, politics and disability studies are 'coming out' as 'gender critical': that is, critical of trans people's claims to gendered belonging. To paraphrase Sandy Stone (2006), it feels like my body and my experiences are the 'battleground' upon which wars over the meaning of womanhood are being fought.

This chapter is intended primarily as a thinkpiece, to encourage readers to think through these questions when undertaking anti-sexist work and assessing research findings. I utilise trans womanhood as a running example in my examination of what it

might mean to be (or not be) a woman; I also draw from the insights of other marginalised groups, including disabled and black women. The chapter begins with a look at debates over gender recognition in the UK, as an illustration of what can be at stake in these discussions. I then show how unstable and incoherent the notion of womanhood can be when we take marginal experiences seriously, before looking at how we might move forward with a political project for 'women' regardless. I conclude with an introduction to the notion of 'moving through the world as a woman' as a means for conceptualising womanhood in doing this work.

Gender recognition and the boundaries of womanhood

I was reminded of the pressing nature of these issues during the writing of this chapter, upon receiving a message from an academic mailing list. The message consisted of a forwarded email thread about a draconian proposed ban on the teaching of Gender Studies in Hungary, with the author inviting members of the mailing list to consider how we might support our Hungarian colleagues.[1] Contained within this thread was a response from a British academic who argued that her country was facing comparable challenges. She asserted that proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act 2004 – through which trans people might more easily change their legal sex/gender – threaten to fundamentally undermine women's safety in public toilets, refuges and rape crisis centres, and disrupt the collection of statistical data on gendered inequalities.[2] The idea that an easier route to legal sex/gender change is as dangerous as a government's attempt to outlaw the very teaching of gender studies shows just how fraught debates over the boundaries of womanhood can be.

People living in Britain who wish to change the gender on their birth certificate from 'male' to 'female' or vice-versa must have documented evidence that they have lived for at two years in their 'new' gender role (e.g. bank statements and employment contracts), and a letters from mental health specialists confirming a diagnosis of gender dysphoria. They have to fill in an extensive form and submit this with relevant evidence and payment to the Gender Recognition Panel, a group of legal and medical professionals who may either approve or decline the application. At the time of writing, the UK and Scottish governments are consulting on proposals to replace this with a system of statutory self-declaration, though which an individual can change their own legal sex/gender. This is similar to current arrangements by which individuals can

[1] The Hungarian government has justified this move by claiming that gender studies courses are not 'economically rational' (Adam, 2018). In the recent past, government figures have also argued that these courses threaten to destroy traditional 'values': presumably, these include traditional gender roles and the primacy of men. This opposition to feminist teaching reflects both historic dismissals of women's and gender studies as irrational or unscientific (Pereira, 2017) and a more recent international backlash against feminist ideals and social gains (Vasvári, 2013).

[2] I use the phrase 'sex/gender' for two reasons. Firstly, UK legislation does not draw a clear or consistent distinction between these concepts. Secondly, I aim to highlight how they might be understood as mutually constitutive, with social readings of sexed bodies frequently following from normative gender ideologies.

change their legal name in Britain, and follows the passage of other gender 'self-declaration' laws in countries such as Argentina, Malta, and Ireland (Davy, Sørlie and Schwend, 2018). A new UK legal framework may also recognise non-binary gender possibilities.

Many trans rights advocates, including feminist and LGBT activists, have welcomed the government consultations. They argue that the current process takes too long, is too expensive, and centres the opinion of doctors and psychiatrists rather than an individual's lived experience. However, other feminist writers and campaigners have extensively criticised both the proposed changes and the original Gender Recognition Act. They insist that gender recognition puts women at risk by enabling a male encroachment on female identity and female space. This is not a new or unique claim, but instead echoes historical 'trans-exclusionary' positions within feminism, as well as contemporary arguments from groups campaigning against trans women's access to women's toilets in countries such as South Africa and the United States (Patel, 2017).

Some argue that relaxing gender recognition laws will enable men to pretend that they are women for the purposes of invading gender facilities and disrupting women's political activities. While no evidence exists demonstrating that this is an actual problem in jurisdictions where self-declaration is already a legal reality, the scenario is frequently referred in campaigning materials, on social media, and in response to government consultations. Others posit that trans women are 'actually' men, due to the sexing of our bodies at birth and our upbringing as male in a patriarchal society. For example, a blog post on the Oxford Human Rights Hub written by two legal scholars opens with the following statement: 'In this post we use the word women to refer to individuals born as women (also known as "natal women")' (Fredman and Auchmuty, 2018). Having implicitly established that the authors regard trans women as 'men', the post proceeds to refer repeatedly to instances of male violence against women, thereby discursively positioning trans women as inherently threatening.

This ideological approach typically relies on a particular form of the sex/gender distinction, a curious combination of biological essentialism and (supposed) social constructionism. For example, Fredman and Auchmuty (2018) state that '[b]eing a woman is about sex and biology, in that our bodies determine so much of our experience, and also about the way we are constructed socially, which also helps determine our lived experiences.' This argument assumes that there is something essential and inherent about a 'woman's body', that can be shared by cis women (individuals assigned female at birth who do not reject this assignation) but not trans women. It moreover posits that there is something universal about the shared social experiences of cis women that trans women cannot share, thereby positioning the 'social construction' of womanhood as a deterministic form of socialisation rather than evidence of gender's artifice and malleability.

A less nuanced version of this position can be seen in the 'penis sticker' or #stickerwoman campaign, which is underway at the time of writing. Numerous groups

campaigning against gender recognition have printed stickers which feature a pink penis and testicles emblazoned with the slogan 'WOMEN DON'T HAVE PENISES', in reference to the fact that some trans women retain their penis due to long waiting lists for medical treatment or a personal choice not to undergo surgery. In an ironic move for organisations that supposedly oppose the symbolic and actual presence of 'male' body parts in women's spaces, these have been distributed across the UK, in locations such as university campuses and public toilets.

In this chapter I work from the assumption that the self-declaration or self-*identification* of sex/gender is the only practical means by which we can define womanhood for the purposes of resisting sexism both within and beyond the academy. As I show below, this is not simply a matter of 'trans inclusion'. Rather, it is a question of solidarity and justice for all individuals who move through the world as marginal women: those who find that their status *as* women may be questioned in the context of an ableist racist cis heteropatriarchy.

Deconstructing womanhood

In most societies people who are *identified* as women by themselves and/or others are consistently subject to multiple forms of disadvantage. In the context of universities alone, empirical research has indicated that women are less likely to be occupy senior positions, are typically paid less than men working in equivalent positions, and are more likely to be subject to discrimination, harassment and sexual misconduct (Araújo, 2014; Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015; Winslow and Davis, 2016; Anitha and Lewis, 2018). Clearly, it is important to talk about women's experiences, and the disadvantages we face.

Consequently, the very category of *womanhood* often remains unquestioned in anti-sexist work. Womanhood is assumed: we assume that we know what a woman looks like, how a woman behaves, and the kinds of challenges that women face. We may ask 'women' to respond to a survey, or we may seek to create support groups or affirmative action programmes for 'women'. Outside of debates over trans inclusion, the presumed membership of this category is rarely subject to interrogation.

However, the more carefully the category of womanhood, is examined the less coherent it appears. Social norms and gender roles differ both within and between societies, according to factors such as tradition, religion, class and caste. It is impossible to consistently define womanhood on the basis of factors such as employment, social rank, and culturally appropriate clothing or adornments. Definitions of womanhood grounded in biological essentialism do not fare much better. If we are to define womanhood on the basis of genetics, how can we account for intersex conditions such as androgen insensitivity syndrome, which mean that some people born with XY chromosomes have 'female' genitalia and secondary sexual characteristics? If we are to define a womanhood on the basis of an ability to conceive, carry a pregnancy, give birth and breastfeed a child, how are we to account for hysterectomy, mastectomy, sterility,

women born without wombs? How, moreover, are we to account for a woman's right *not* to be defined by her reproductive capacity?

Jacob Hale (1996) outlines 13 defining characteristics of women, which include biological sex characteristics, gender roles, gendered behaviour and sexual cues, and the production of a consistent gendered history. He notes that while some characteristics may be more heavily weighted than others (such as not having a penis, or providing textual cues that lead others to read the individual as a 'woman'), various characteristics or combinations thereof may serve to override or contradict others. For example, having a penis is frequently perceived as a strong disqualifier for womanhood (as seen for instance in the penis sticker campaign) but this may be socially irrelevant if a person dresses and behaves in a manner that means they are consistently read as a woman by others (Kessler and McKenner, 1978). Hale therefore concludes that none of the identified characteristics are necessary *or* sufficient condition of womanhood.

When these incoherencies and uncertainties meet with structural power inequalities, some groups effectively find themselves excluded from normative categories of womanhood. Within Western societies, this usually includes (but is not limited to) women of colour, disabled women, lesbians, bisexual women, and intersex women as well as trans women. Consequently, numerous feminist and womanist writers have analysed how 'womanhood' might become fragile or even untenable at these intersections.

For example, disabled women are frequently desexualised and/or infantilised as a consequence of their failure to meet ableist norms of (re)productive adult womanhood (Begum, 1992; Ghai, 2002; Slater and Liddiard, 2018). This may reflect the individual's actual ability to conceive or deliver a child, but more often reflects the social construction of disabled women's bodies as 'unfeminine' and thereby inherently unattractive and asexual. This is especially the case when disability intersects with other forms of marginalisation such as racism and ageism. As Jennifer Scuro remarks, 'The non-productive, non-sexual bodies of women [are] threatening to a system that wants only productive, ablebodied people to perform naturalized, domesticated and gendered tasks. Bodies that are not young, white or exotically nonwhite, and "sexy" are disposable, especially if they age and become infertile' (Scuro, Havis and Brown, 2018: 70).

Jen Slater, Embla Ágústsdóttir and Freyja Haraldsdóttir (2018: 416) describe this process as 'ableist heteronormativity'. They illustrate their argument with reference to an entry from abled researcher Slater's fieldwork diary, which describes the authors preparing for a night out in Iceland. While Slater wears no make-up and dresses as a 'scruff' in jeans, wooly jumper, raincoat and snow boots, Ágústsdóttir wears a black dress, leather jacket and heeled boots, and Haraldsdóttir is delayed because she is doing her makeup. When Slater remarks on this, Ágústsdóttir responds that it's 'it's okay for you; you're not disabled. I have to get dressed up; I don't want to live the disability stereotype'. Ágústsdóttir and Haraldsdóttir feel they have to perform as recognisably

'femme' in order to be consequently recognised *as* women. By contrast, as a *non-disabled* (white) person who was assigned female and birth and passed through the world as a woman, Slater had the privilege of being more intelligibly read as a woman by others.

This example also serves to counteract the notion that there is some universal experience of girlhood and growing up as 'female' that women might share. Disabled women such as Ágústsdóttir and Haraldsdóttir have not been raised to embody femininity or womanhood in the same way as Slater due to the infantilisation of their bodies; hence, their desire to put an extra effort into 'doing' womanhood. Contrary to the claims of Fredman and Auchmuty, there is no one means by which women are 'socially constructed'. Rather, as Emi Koyama (2006) highlights, differing experiences of girlhood and access to women's communities are mediated by factors such as dis/ability, race and class as well as by an individual's social positioning as trans or cis.

One solution to this problem is the proposal that there are many differing types of womanhood, a matter I return to. However, various writers have instead contested that if womanhood is to be defined in a normative manner that prioritises (for instance) heterosexuality, whiteness, abled bodies and middle-class sensibilities, then less intelligible 'female' subjects might in fact *not* occupy womanhood. For instance, Monique Wittig argued that 'man' and 'woman' are political concepts of opposition rather than necessarily distinct categories, and that the very idea of a woman makes little sense outside of a paternal and/or heterosexual power dynamic. Consequently, 'Lesbians are not women' (Wittig, 1980, 110).

Similarly, many black feminist theorists have argued that black women 'exceed' white definitions of womanhood within racist Western societies (Green and Bey, 2018). Hortense Spillers (1987) links the *ungendering* of black female bodies to the logic of the racial slave trade, in which African bodies were subject to a total objectification, as captive flesh rather than human subject. With a nod to Spillers, C. Riley Snorton (2017) examines how the science of gynaecology emerged through horrific experiments on captive bodies. The presumed availability of the black female body subject to these violent procedures contrasts dramatically with the contemporaneous treatment of white women patients, who were typically draped in sheets to preserve their modesty (to the potential detriment of the male doctor's actual ability to operate). Snorton (2017: 33) contends that '[i]n this arrangement, gender socially constructs sex, and captive flesh becomes the material and metaphorical ground for unsettling a view of sex and gender as neatly divided according to each term's relation to medicoscientific knowledge'.

All of this raises not only the issue of who 'counts' as a woman, but also the matter of whether or not expanding our definitions and understandings of womanhood can sufficiently address the social, historical and linguistic problems inherent in the category. Gender equality projects within Higher Education frequently construct 'women' in a generalistic manner that is both insensitive to and implicitly perpetuates

the historical ungendering of many women. For example, critical analyses of the UK's Athena SWAN gender equality charter have shown that it relies on a homogenising approach to womanhood, with little room for specific analyses of how experiences of sexist disadvantage might differ according to factors such as ethnicity, disability and trans status (Bhopal, 2018; Tzanakou and Pearce, forthcoming).

In a dialogue with Marquis Bey on black and trans feminist intersections, Kai M. Green asks: 'If the category "woman" becomes more inclusive so as to include Black and women of color, and queer and transgender women, then does the category still function in a way that is useful?' (Green and Bey, 439). Below, I argue that it *can*; but also that this is necessarily demands that we remain attentive to matters of difference and intersectional power dynamics.

Reconstructing womanhood

I now turn to look at how understandings of womanhood may attempt to account for and build across the differences and exclusions I examined above.

Ameliorative analyses of womanhood aim to 'consider what concept of woman would be most useful in combatting gender injustice' (Jenkins, 2016: 395). Sally Haslanger's (2000) ameliorative analysis echoes second-wave feminist accounts of woman as 'social class'; according to Talia Mae Bettcher's reading of this account, 'one *functions* as a woman in some context just in case one is subordinated on the basis of presumed female sex (i.e., the female biological role in reproduction)' (Bettcher, 2017: 3). This analysis takes into account that women might not necessarily have the same reproductive capacity or social positioning but acknowledges that they are liable to be subject to sexism regardless due to their presumed membership of the 'female' sex class. However, Haslanger's account relies on the assumption that an individual 'functions as a woman' if she is 'observed or imagined' to have 'certain bodily features' (Haslanger, 2000: 228). Jenkins and Bettcher respectively note that this approach may fail to account for some women, such as trans women who have not undergone body modification or otherwise do not consistently 'pass'.

An alternative approach is semantic contextualisation, which looks to how terms such as woman are used in 'ordinary' contexts, and the relevance of this usage to feminist goals. For instance, a 'woman' may be a person with XX chromosomes, or a 'woman' may be a person 'sincerely self-identifying as a woman'; these contexts usually but do not necessarily overlap, as evidenced in the experiences of intersex and trans women (Saul, 2012, cited in Bettcher, 2017: 4). Philosophers such as Jennifer Saul argue that whether or not a person counts as a 'woman' depends on what widely accepted standards of womanhood are relevant in a given context. For the purposes of feminist advocacy, the latter example ('self-identifying') is likely to be far more relevant than knowledge of an individual's chromosomes. However, Bettcher notes that this approach is still limited in that some individuals (such as intersex women) may justifiably *not* be women in some contexts.

Bettcher therefore proposes a 'multiple meanings' account, which focuses on analysing the use of the term 'woman' rather than the term's referent(s). Bettcher (2017) notes that it is the term *woman* itself that is subject to political contestation, and therefore may mean different things in different contexts. The question for feminists, therefore, is how inclusive we can make the term 'woman' while still seeking to productively account for and respond to sexism.

Following Katherine Jenkins (2016), I am particularly interested in how an ameliorative analysis of womanhood may potentially function to justify the use of a fully inclusive meaning of 'woman'. Jenkins' solution is to propose two 'senses' of gender: 'gender as class', (as in Haslanger), and 'gender as identity', which aims to account for the diversity of women's experiences. Jenkins is wary of the notion of a *feminine* gender identity that would involve having 'internalised norms of appropriate feminine behaviour' (Jenkins, 2016: 409); this, of course, would fail to account for either the diversity of femininities across boundaries of culture and class, or for women who refuse or otherwise fail to conform to normative notions of appropriately feminine behaviour. Instead, she draws on William E. Cross' (1991: 214) description of (racial) identity as a *maze* or *map* 'that functions in a multitude of ways to guide and direct exchanges with one's social and material realities'. With this in mind, she proposes that that a person has a 'female gender identity' if her 'internal "map" is formed [her] through the social or material realities that are, in that context, characteristic of women as a class' (Jenkins, 2016: 410). In this way, women whose bodies do not necessarily conform to normative understandings of reproductive possibility might nevertheless be understood to belong to 'womanhood' as a social class.

Given the inherent contradictions of womanhood, however, it is important that neither woman-as-class or woman-as-identity are understood as monolithic categories. Black feminist theorists have long highlighted that the sexism experienced by black women cannot be fully understood without taking into account factors such as racialisation, economic inequality and homophobia. The Combahee River Collective describe how they 'often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual' (Combahee River Collective, 1983: 267). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) famously described this phenomenon as 'intersectionality', highlighting how individuals encounter specific forms of marginalisation at the intersection of multiple axes of oppression. In this sense, drawing again on Cross (1991) womanhood might be a 'maze' as much as a 'map', in which an individual's membership of gender-as-class and sense of gendered identity shift according to their intersectional experience.

Moving through the academy as a woman

My womanhood can be called into question, for while I am white, abled and middle-class, my experiences as a woman intersect with my marginalisation as trans and as a

bisexual person in a relationship with another woman. What, therefore, do I mean when I say that *I* am a woman; and what might this mean for the fight against sexism in Higher Education?

Most often, I explain my experiences by saying that I *move through the world as a woman*. 'Moving through the world' is a phrase I seemingly absorbed through osmosis years ago from fellow feminists and queers. I use it to refer to the intersubjective experience of being and being seen, of internalising discourse and encountering social structures.

When I say that I move through the world as a woman, I mean that prior to hormone therapy and genital reconstruction, my sense of sexual embodiment – the experience Julia Serano (2007) describes as 'subconscious sex' – felt like a *maze* I could not solve (Cross, 1991). Now, the mental matrix that somehow marks the flesh I expect to see and feel when I behold myself, *maps* comfortably onto my body.

When I say that I move through the world as a woman, I recognise that beyond the bounds of my personal relationship with my body, sex and gender are social constructs that ascribes hegemonic power to the supposedly male and masculine. Like everyone else, I find myself negotiating a society where we cannot simply reject sex/gender because we are *gendered* constantly by others. When, like Jenkins (2016), I talk about 'gender identity', I mean that the body I inhabit, my personal interests, the ways in which I communicate, the clothes I prefer to wear all fit better into the socially contingent category of 'woman' than the socially contingent category of 'man'.

When I say that I move through the world as a woman, I mean that I am regarded as a woman by others. This is not, of course, a wholly negative experience; being a 'woman' is not about suffering, and my sense of identification is about desire and belonging much as it is about a rejection of wrongness of masculinity, and it has brought me friendship and love. However, I have also faced harassment and difficulty *as* a woman. In UK universities, a quarter of woman students have faced unwanted sexual attention (Phipps and Smith, 2012); during my student years, I was groped, leered at, and stalked. Women are overrepresented in junior and insecure positions within academia (Maddrell et al, 2016); as a doctoral researcher, I worked for part-time for years on exploitative casual teaching contracts. In some of these instances the people around me knew I was trans, and in others they did not. Regardless, in failing to *move through the world as a man* I inevitably face sexism.[3]

When I say that I move through the world as a woman, I mean that my supposedly 'male' upbringing did not prevent me from being subtly and unknowingly socialised into 'feminine' language patterns and behaviours. As a teenager, this led my peers to

[3] This is also the case for many non-binary and genderqueer individuals as well as some trans men, who may face misogyny because they are understood and treated by others as women even if they do not identify as such (Green and Bey, 2017). Bettcher's (2017) 'multiple meanings' account may be of use here, in exploring how people who are not women may nevertheless experience discrimination as such.

question my sexual orientation. In adulthood, I find myself frustrated at my own passivity, as men push past me on university campuses, talk over me in meetings, and I frequently apologise for myself in both personal and professional interactions.

When I say that I move through the world as a woman, I also mean that my experience of womanhood is mediated by my experience of being trans. Barriers to trans people's participation in Higher Education include administrative failings, hostility in gendered spaces such as toilets and changing rooms, isolation and mental health issues, all of which are likely to be more severe for trans staff and students than for their cis peers (Nicolazzo, 2017; McKendry and Lawrence, 2017). When I want to discuss issues such as this but instead find myself encouraged to debate 'gender critical' narratives and penis stickers by anti-trans campaigners, I know that if I carefully monitor my demeanour and tone I may be accused of embodying a false feminine stereotype, whereas if I overcome my tendency towards passivity and assert myself I am told that I am displaying 'male' behaviour.

I outline these experiences in part to counter the endemic *transmisogyny* present within the academy (Serano, 2007), whereby trans women such as myself experience the irony of being told that we are not (and cannot) be women, even as we face a myriad of misogynistic behaviours and structures that are only intensified by their intersection with transphobia.[4] More importantly though, I hope that readers will begin to think through how they might take an appropriately expansive approach to womanhood when setting out to fight sexism within the academy. As I have shown, this is not simply a matter of *trans* inclusion: my experiences are merely examples. Instead, I hope to promote an intersectional approach that acknowledges the breadth and diversity of womanhood, the variation in women's experiences, and the continuing *disadvantage* that those who name themselves as women face regardless due to their membership of womanhood as social class and identity.

There are numerous arenas in which we can take an expansive approach to womanhood in our work as feminist and womanist scholars. We can do so in our campaigning networks and meetings and writing, thinking about who is (and is not) present, and *which* women's experiences of sexism we are (and are not) addressing. We can think about this when we create sampling frames for our surveys and interviews and secondary statistical analyses, both for our own research and for institutional gender equality projects such as Athena SWAN. We can think about this when we organise events, when we book speakers, and – as Sara Ahmed (2017) has eloquently highlighted – when we cite others. This has to be an active politics, the *work* of naming women in a way that includes rather than excludes, recognising difference rather than attempting to flatten it.

[4] I do fear, however, that transmisogynistic readers who glance across this chapter will reject my account regardless of any appeal to their rationality or their emotions.

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