

Gender is different

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Abstract

As a white person, I never have to think about race, except on those rare occasions when I am in a non-white majority space. I never think about being a U.S. citizen except when I am outside the country. While I have had multiple health concerns over recent years, I am still predominantly able-bodied, and [...]

Article

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I never think about being a U.S. citizen except when I am outside the country.

While I have had multiple health concerns over recent years, I am still predominantly able-bodied, and as such, I do not have to think about how to navigate my way through the world.

But gender is different.

Everybody has a gender - or more accurately, even if we don't identify with any particular gender, others will still (mis)perceive us as belonging to one gender or another. And we all are forced to think about gender all the time, whether female or male, queer or straight, trans or cis, agendered or gendered. There are always rules to follow, expectations to meet, assumptions to deal with, ideals that we will inevitably fall short of.

Some people have gender-related privileges of various stripes: male, masculine, heterosexual, monosexual, cissexual, cisgender, and normatively-bodied privilege, to name a few. Some people have more of these privileges, while others have less. But even people who have most or all of these privileges still have to deal with gender on a daily basis - the countless expectations, assumptions, norms, and so on.

All of us have the right to talk about gender, and about the gender-related issues and obstacles that we personally face. Granted, we should not do this in ways that undermine other people's identities or experiences. And we should be sensitive to people who do not have the privileges that we have - we should not drown out their voices or use our experiences to trump theirs. But as long as we are respectful of these concerns, all of us have the right to discuss gender. In fact, we should all be discussing gender, as the only way that we will ever eradicate all the various sexism that exist in the world is if we all stop projecting gendered expectations and assumptions onto one another.

There was a time when trans activists talked about the gender binary, not just to describe how we are oppressed by it, but to encourage the cisgender majority to think about how they are oppressed by it too. Maybe not to the same extent as we are. But nevertheless, if they fail to check all the right boxes

(e.g., wear “gender appropriate” clothing, take up “gender appropriate” interests and occupations, behave in a “gender appropriate” manner) then they will be dismissed, ridiculed, or harassed just as we regularly are.

Nowadays, some trans people use the gender binary solely to discuss how we are marginalized by it, while cis people are privileged by it. Some go so far as to suggest that cis people do not have the right to discuss some of their experiences with gender because they are coming from a privileged position. And this is not just a “trans thing”: some queers seek to silence the straight majority, and some women seek to silence men’s perspectives and experiences with gender. While I think that it’s gross whenever anyone denies their male, straight, or cis privilege (or when they exercise those privileges over others), I think that it is wrong to insist that others do not have the right to talk about their gendered experiences simply because they have some particular privilege or other.

If someone said to me that I should step aside and let people of color express their views about racism, and let disabled people express their views about ableism, they would have a point - not only because I am a member of the majority and experience privileges in those regards, but also because I don’t ever (or at least extremely rarely) have to deal with racism and ableism personally. But all of us face gendered expectations, assumptions, and norms on a daily basis. Gender complicates all of our lives. We all have a story to tell.

We should be expanding conversations about gender, not limiting them to a chosen few.

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