

Not A Feminist By Birth Or Biology

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Abstract

I've been over at Feministing all day, writing responses to "You learn something new every day." The post is a response to The BBC's recent coverage of a debate with Julie Bindel. Julie believes that sex reassignment surgery is a "mutilation." The debate over there is one of the best I've ever encountered. There's a [...]

Article

I've been over at Feministing all day, writing responses to "You learn something new every day." The post is a response to The BBC's recent coverage of a debate with Julie Bindel. Julie believes that sex reassignment surgery is a "mutilation."

The debate over there is one of the best I've ever encountered. There's a whole lot of cross talk and listening, and very few personal attacks. This is the first time I've ever posted about this in a forum where I didn't feel like I was talking to a wall.

I've included some of the comments, and my responses, under the cut.

"Many feminists believe that the behaviours and feelings which are considered typically masculine or typically feminine are purely socially conditioned. I don't want to sound pissy but a lot of them are. And we've had this discussion a while back when there was a post about transgendered kids and the whole playing dress up, etc."

This story in the BBC isn't about transgender people, it's about transsexuals and the surgery they have. Transgender is an umbrella term, for anyone that is gender variant and is not what is being discussed here.

"Wearing make-up and dresses aren't inherently female, there was a time when both men and women did that. The current concept in America of what's "masculine" and "feminine" didn't come into being until fairly recently, what with the shaving of the legs and under arms, etc."

As if that's what being transsexual is? You don't have surgery so you're able to wear dresses.

"I'm not transgendered but I consider myself a very masculine woman and often times it has to do with gender performance (again, wearing make-up, etc.) I don't like that stuff but I have no idea if it's because of something innate or what."

Being transgender and transsexual are different. Not all males are black, but some blacks are males.

Not all transgender people are transsexual. Transgender is an umbrella term for gender variant people. Transsexuals are people that are receiving hormones and typically are on track for surgery.

“What gets me is that, hypothetically, if we had a society like that you saw in THX 1138 where there is no specific gender difference then what constitutes transgendered?”

I'd still live in this body. Testosterone and estrogen regulate how bodies behave, from body hair texture, skin, fat redistribution and more.

“I know I probably sound ignorant but that's because I am:) I actually know very little about transgender issues and internally/mentally what that feels like. I just question that if there we didn't have gender performance how would that articulate itself.”

I'm glad that you preface your comments. So many people pretend to know what it's like to be transgender or transsexual. And it's all well and good to talk about what ifs, but we have to LIVE in this society. It isn't some abstract idea, it's a reality.

“What I found most enlightening was talking at great length to the friend I mentioned above-she said something that struck me as quite significant. She said that talking about feeling as though one was a woman in a man's body was not, in her opinion, the technical literal truth, but was the best available way to express the feeling of being trans-that it is as close as our language allows in our cultural context, not a bedrock stone-set truth. Understanding that-understanding language as an imperfect medium for conveying a highly complex gender experience.”

YES! THANK YOU!!!! The only thing I would disagree with is your use of the word “gender.” I'm not going to have surgery to change my gender. I already live as a woman. Not all transgender people have surgery. Many live socially as women, but when they remove their clothing they are obviously male bodied. I've taken hormones going on six years and my penis isn't fully functional. I don't want the secondary sex characteristics of a male. I don't want the effects that high doses of testosterone cause. The best way to fix all of these things is through surgery.

“Given that many if not most gendered behaviors are socially constructed, it doesn't seem to me to be that far-fetched to accept that in a given number of cases, the way that the socialization process interacts with a person's inborn character is going to produce a gender-identification that is counter to what was intended.”

Julie wasn't discussing behaviors, she was discussing SURGERY.

“I've always supported the right of people to get sex change operations more on libertarian grounds than feminist ones. From a feminist point of view I have often been uneasy when I listen to transgendered people talk about their desire to change sexes. One event in particular sticks in my mind where a M2F friend of mine talked rattled off a long list of negative masculine stereotypes in his reason to become a her. I remember thinking you don't have to cut your dick off to not be a jerk.”

GRRRRRRRRRRRRRR. So you judge all transgender/transsexual people based on who you've talked to?

For the longest time, I felt like your friend, but I couldn't articulate

"I kind of get what you're saying... but I still can't quite comprehend what makes someone a woman, other than physically being female (whether you're born that way or became that way through surgery and hormone therapy). So let's say I am a person with a penis but I like to wear makeup, dresses and high heels. Does that make me a woman? Or just a man who likes to wear makeup, high heels and dresses?"

You can be transgender and not want surgery.

"Limiting ourself to the example at hand, some people have a deeply private personal preference (as if she wants or abhors a sex change operation) and then they build a theory why this preference is vastly superior, and why people who make opposite decisions are bad, stupid or misguided."

Can I get an amen?

"Liberal feminist decry limits on choice and opportunities: should women work or stay at home? Should the girls be dressed in pink? Should people who feel that they have wrong sex undergo operations to change their sex? Personal! personal! personal! Not so liberal people (radical?) think that one should take sides."

Exactly. It kind of reminds me of the gay marriage fight. If you don't like sex changes, don't have one!
?

"That's a cool response EG. I know that when I think of myself I think of myself in "masculine" terms and whenever I've had to dress up like a girl (most often when we go to straight dance clubs) I fell kinda like I'm in drag, especially if I'm wearing a dress. Oddly enough I love actual drag queens and their exaggerated femininity."

Many drag queens fall into the umbrella of transgender, but most times they aren't transsexual. (Drag is a gender performance). One of my lovers was a drag queen. She is transgender. She's never done hormones, but moves in this society as a woman. She's transgender, but isn't a transsexual.

"I was never the girl to want to play w/dolls and whenever my mother would take me shopping for clothes I'd always head to the boys section first because I thought their clothes looked better. All though high school I wore my dad's and my brother's hand me down pants and shirts (pants complete with belt). It was frustrating for my mother, (who would always pull the "it's my money" when she forced those flowery clothes on me) and for me 'cause I know she wanted a traditional girl. But she loves me and now she gets that I really just am not "feminine", though it really pleases her when she hears I bought something pink or I'm wearing a dress."

*Even when I picture myself in my head I'm a lot more butch than I actually look, so seeing myself in a mirror is sometimes disappointing that I don't match to what's in my head. Though I did read a book by Joe Quirk called *Sperm Are From Men, Eggs Are From Women* and in that he detailed how sometimes in the womb female fetuses are doused with an extra bit of testosterone and male fetuses get that extra bit of estrogen. It doesn't make you gay or transgendered but it results in people like me, girls who like to rough house and skip the baby doll. (not saying that regular girls can't do this either, I just found that interesting 'cause it described me perfectly.)*

What I find interesting about this is how society treats masculine women compared to feminine men. Do you think your mother could accept a male child that wore dresses all the time, instead of pants?

"You know, sojourner, I think that for a lot of us, or I should stop generalizing and say that for me, my image of transwomen was formed by mainstream media representations, until, of course, I actually met real transfolk. And that representation is a very femme-y one-high heels, hose, long hair, long nails, etc."

Again, can I get an amen? Stereotypes usually don't fit everyone. But what if a transwoman is very femme-y? Is that a bad thing? IMO, gender shouldn't be destroyed, it should be liberated from a sex binary (male=masculine=man/ female=feminine=woman).

I can't pretend to have expert insight into what makes any of us have the gender identity we do; my feeling is that my identity as a woman is born of having to construct an identity on the subordinated side of the gender hierarchy. It's kind of easy to see how that happened for me; I'm not sure how it happens for transwomen, but until I learn how, I can accept that though their path to womanhood is somewhat different than mine, they get there just the same.

I agree totally, but I'd remind you that the BBC story was about surgery, not gender.

"And re the girly image of trans women, it's definitely true for me and I have never met a trans woman in person."

Unless you've done either a gene/jean inspection, how do you know this to be true?

"I have been struggling with this issue myself for some time. On the one hand, i believe unequivocally in transgender legitimacy and transgender rights. On the other hand, I do believe that the vast majority, if not all, of gendered behaviors are at least partially socially constructed. And on the third hand, I have my own experience as a gender atypical person. Growing up I felt very much like a boy trapped in a girl's body, very much a tomboy, mostly guy friends, and all that. As I got older and discovered feminism, I became much more at ease with being a woman, but I still identify as a butch lesbian. Aside from the occasional women's t-shirt, it's all guy's clothes and mohawks for me. I consider myself masculine and my whole life rejected femininity as something that I was supposed to be, but I feel 100% woman. If feminism had never happened, though, if I had never seen that I can be whatever I want to be as a woman, I think I would probably have ended up a transman."

So much to do about CLOTHES! And to think, we're accused of being caught up in fetishizing clothes! Having surgery isn't about gender, it's about having your gender identity and your body in sync. There's so much more to being transsexual than clothes.

"Where this stops being an interesting socio-biological question and starts being a social-political issue, I think, is with the somewhat recent phenomenon of butch lesbians transitioning to men en masse. There is no corresponding sex exodus in the gay male community, and this is leaving a lot of people with uneasy questions about to what extent some of these transitions have to do with latent sexism."

This kind of thinking really angers me. It's as if there is some agenda afoot to destroy the lesbian

community. Having top surgery and taking testosterone isn't about who you're having sex with.

"Men are respected more, your masculine identity is supported instead of questioned, and society tells us implicitly oh so often how much better it is to be a man. My butch girlfriend exclaimed to me one day after she and her mom got into a big fight about the clothes she wears, "This is why people transition!" Of course, this isn't true for all FTMs, but it does make me wonder to what extent it might be for some."

You used the label "FTM" but that's used under the context of transsexual, not transgender. Your girlfriend is wrong. People don't take testosterone because of societal pressures. This isn't a game. Many of the effects of hormones are irreversible.

"One of the reasons radical feminists often unfairly get the "transphobic" label is because they protest certain transwomen suppressing the right for biological females to have events in women-only spaces. Since certain women-only events have historically been co-opted by non-trans men until effectively quashed, they interpret this as an affront on women's autonomy and right to set limits. From what I understand, the same thing is happening in the queer community by marginalizing lesbian identities in favor of being lost in a broader queer-trans label. I am a new radical feminist and spoiled by heteronormativity, so please correct me if I'm misstating this issue."

So? Many women protest Augusta for its "men only" golf course. Your point is? A "woman's" autonomy? That gets to the point quickly, because it's obvious that I'm not a woman to you. You're engaging in biological essentialism.

I think that some semblance of gender identity can be inborn, but the social constructions surrounding them are sometimes fetishized by transwomen whose public well-being is hinged upon "passing" for female, hence the preoccupation with patriarchal lies about what women are. That preoccupation with oppressive constructions is what so many feminists find distasteful

The tricky thing in all this is, the only way you'd know someone is transgender is if they don't fully "pass." The truth in that is pretty ironic.

"There is still a reluctance by many transwomen to call themselves feminist largely because of some of the writing during the early 1980's against transwomen by second wave "feminist", and because of the controversy surrounding the michigan womyn's festival and the controversy over the "womens only spaces issue".

I have more trouble IDing as a lesbian than I do as a feminist. So many people have differing ideas about what a feminist actually IS, while most people have concrete ideas about what a lesbian is.

"I am a firm believer that gender is a social construction and a perception, not biologically determined."

I don't think many transgender/transsexual people would disagree with you on that.

"As such, it is hard for me to grapple with the idea of children receiving hormonal suppression because they displayed behavior or preferences towards what society insists should be reserved for

the opposite genitalia.

Why is that? In those cases, the suppression wasn't done because of gender, but of birth sex. A case here in Indiana is the most popular one. The boy tried to cut his penis off with a pair of scissors. It's a matter of body, not of clothes or toys.

"However, when faced with arguments that playing dress-up, wearing gendered clothing or playing with gendered toys means that children should be given medically oppressive hormonal therapy because we sure wouldn't want a little boy to enjoy wearing dresses and makeup and playing with dolls SEEMS very counterfeminist.

I would NEVER advocate that either, and I'm a dye in the wool transactivist. But if you dig deeper in these cases, it isn't about gender, but body dysphoria.

"Having agency over your own body and health should be the case for everyone, but unfortunately that doesn't seem to be on the agenda for some people."

That's why I wrote a post over at transadvocate.com titled Pro Choice is Pro Trans. The right to an abortion and the right have sex reassignment surgery (SRS) are essentially about the same issue, the right to have control over your own body.

"I WAS indeed familiar with only one male who identified as female, and he did fetishize my body more than any misogynist I've encountered in my personal life. He was my boss, and I was too young and dumb to do anything about it. His actions represent a MINORITY of transwomen I'm sure, but that is the reason not all biological women want it to be mandatory for transwomen to be admitted into women's spaces-it's for the same reasons they want to be free of MEN sometimes."

You're using ONE PERSON or ONE GROUP OF THINKING to define the whole? At the core of the Michfest debate, it is a debate about biological essentialism.

Not all men contributed to negative experiences for women, so should they be mandatorily given the right to hang out in a battered women's shelter? Should lesbians be forced to let me into cordoned-off events because my experience of growing up as a girl trump their experience of growing up as lesbian girls? Give me a break.

So transwomen=men? I didn't know Michfest was about pitting one oppression with another. As for a battered women's shelter (and rape shelters), you don't think a transwoman can be battered or raped? I've been living this way for six years and have been sexually assaulted. Again, what I have issue with is that this is some type of battle of the sexes.

"Gendered behaviour is most certainly the product of socialisation; hence the significant cultural differences in what constitutes "masculine" and "feminine" dress and behaviour. Gender identity, on the other hand, shows remarkable resistance to even extreme social pressure.

One only need look as far as Asia to see how this resistance plays out. Transgender/transsexual people in much of Asia are the lowest of the low. I have a friend that lives in Maylasia, and she's struggled

with this for very basic reasons. Living as a transwoman in Malaysia brings her poverty and violence, but living as a male is safe and secure. If this was all just socialisation, do you honestly think people would choose to live under that type of oppression? I can't fathom it, personally.

"This is an issue I have been struggling with lately, ever since a coworker revealed himself to be transgendered (I refer to him as he because he identifies as male until he gets his surgery, which is scheduled for December, at which point he will identify as she). I have always supported people's rights to identify with whatever gender they like even though I too believe that most facets of gender are socially constructed. But then I met this person and discovered he was a complete piece of shit. My hate for him is boundless because he wants to be a woman and yet is not a feminist. He seems to think that being female means being pretty, weak and infantile. He conforms to every stereotype of a Barbiesque girl and thinks everyone should be skinny and "perfect". He refuses to do any manual labour because that's for boys. He has stated that he wants to be a woman because he wants a sugar daddy to take care of him. He is egotistical, arrogant, condescending and constantly insults everyone around him, calling us fat and so on. Basically he is just an all-around horrible person to be around. Ever since I started working with him and getting to know him my opinion of transgendered people has gone down. And I have to consciously remind myself that most transgendered people aren't like him. I'm sure most of them are great people. One bad apple doesn't spoil the bunch. So in all sincerity I thank all of you who are transgendered and have posted here to share your stories. I truly needed to be reminded that he is an exception and not all transgendered people are jerks."

Heh. That just proves transfolk can be just as ugly and misogynistic as the rest of society.

"For another thing, I wouldn't write your coworker off just yet. Perceptions and attitudes often change dramatically in the process of transition. A big part of transition is jettisoning the attitudes and behaviours that one learned as a way of passing as a man (in this case). Stereotyped, unnuanced, and sometimes even condescending attitudes about women (or men, as the case may be) are not entirely uncommon in pre-transition transpeople both as part of the need to pass as the gender they're perceived to be and due to the fact that, despite their identity, they have not yet had an opportunity to experience what life is like as a person of the gender to which they are transitioning."

EXACTLY! I can't tell you how much my own perspective on all things gender, have changed since transitioning. It's different than I thought in a 1000 different ways. The biggest thing is safety. I never realized how much safer I was, living as a man.

"And as for "RadFem" events that exclude transwomen, well... I have mixed feelings. But I feel like, well, would a Jewish person want to force their way into a neo-nazi rally? Why would I want to go somewhere that I'm not wanted? Sure, it's not right, and it's unfortunate, but... Why keep butting my head against a brick wall? There are plenty of places I am welcome. And nearly everyone in every group can find an example of places they are not welcome. For example, I would wager nobody here would be welcome at a Promise Keepers event. And why would we want to go anyway?"

? That's why I'll never go (Unless I need an Indigo Girls fix, and they're playing there).

“It depends on who you ask. And I think one of the huge problems in this tired radfem/trans debate is each side taking such a hard-headed stance. The semantics involved can make arguments appear where there are none. We all just want to feel respected. We want our needs and boundaries recognized. But my respecting your desire to have bio-women only gatherings doesn’t mean I can’t feel somewhat excluded. And there’s nothing wrong with that, is there?”

Very true. I think that’s where these kind of debates tend to head south. When respect isn’t given or perceived, that’s when the arguments tend to fall into personal attacks, instead of valuable educational exchanges of ideas.

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