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What the Trans Moment Has to Offer Radical Feminism

By TransAdvocate Staff

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Abstract

TransFeminism is an ongoing series of interviews and essays focusing on the intersection of feminist and trans activism. In this installment, John Stoltenberg considers “What the Trans Moment Has to Offer Radical Feminism.” Part One: What the Trans Moment Has to Offer Radical Feminism EPUB Version | PDF Version By John Stoltenberg @JohnStoltenberg I recently read [...]

Article



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Part One: What the Trans Moment Has to Offer Radical Feminism

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By John Stoltenberg
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I recently read an essay about men and rape, written from a radical feminist point of view, which included a particular statement that jumped out at me:

Men's intrusive and abusive sexual behaviors against women (as well as against girls, boys, and vulnerable men) are so woven into the everyday fabric of life in a patriarchal society that the intrusion and abuse is often invisible to men.

What surprised me was not the author's identification of the perpetrator class men. If we're talking about rapists statistically, after all, we're pretty much talking about people raised to be a man. And given the privileged insensitivity that men are entitled to in male supremacy, the author's point about men's obliviousness to the extent and harm of rape made self-evident sense as well.

No, what struck me instead was the author's earnest attempt (within careful parentheses) to describe the victim class inclusively. In discussions of most issues of urgent concern to radical feminism, this inclusivity very much needs to be referenced: Sex trafficking, sexual harassment, intimate partner violence--these abuses and more happen not only to cis women. And radical feminist insights about those abuses can benefit many other victimized populations.

But to my mind, this is the point at which the author's case fell short. For to describe accurately the class of potential and actual victims of rape would necessarily mean including people who are trans, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, intersex, and otherwise not specifically cisgender. The impact of rape on all such diverse individuals' lives was not known (and maybe not knowable) when activism against rape arose in the so-called second wave of feminism of the 1960s and onward. But it is now known very well, especially among victim-services providers, and today to leave out such lives is to collude in their erasure.

I suspect that the author I have quoted--a vocal critic of "transgenderism"--made no mention of people with alternate sex-and-gender realities on purpose. I almost never read acknowledgment in writings by trans-critical radical feminists that what male supremacy does to "women born women" it does to a multiplicity of others as well. It's a blind spot they tend to share. But even if in this instance the omission of those many others had been unconscious or inadvertent, it would have substantially undermined the claim to truth being made--making it partly false.

Why should it matter that the sexual violence victim pool be as sex- and gender-diverse in radical feminist discourse as it is in real life? I see four important reasons:

1. Accuracy: Rape happens to a whole host of folks, and rapists do not check birth certificates or run chromosome tests before deciding whom to rape. Radical means going to the root. Radical feminism aims to go to the root of male supremacy's sexualized domination and danger, to end it, abolish it. Telling a partial truth about whom it harms is not the way to reach the root.
2. Inclusivity: Truthful inclusivity in naming who is in harm's way from rape is an essential component of building an empowered movement of resistance to rape. For someone to acknowledge as actual or potential rape victims only those who match one's natal sex is to participate unwittingly in making invisible other rape victims such that what could become broad-based solidarity against male supremacy is less likely to occur.

3. Consistency: Remaining beholden to the sex binary--the belief that the sex classes men and women are defined by nature not male supremacy--not only erases a whole lot of folks whom male supremacy targets for contempt and violence. It silences them by not listening to them. It inferiorizes them by privileging others. It minimizes their pain and trivializes their grievance. It does to them, in other words, exactly what radical feminism was meant to put an end to.

4. Efficacy: The sex binary is actually a primary driver of rape. The sex binary is enforced by rape and causes rape. The sex binary and rape serve each other and male supremacy like a circular system. Any political movement against rape that does not understand this connection is fated to fail. For humans raised to be a man, there is a male-supremacist mandate to prove one's manhood by any means necessary, which can include bullying, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and worse. Therefore policing the boundaries of who gets to count as a victim according to who fits the sex binary does nothing to subvert the binary-based belief system of the perpetrator. The sex binary, to paraphrase Audre Lorde, is male supremacy's tool. Only exploding the sex binary will bring down the master's house.

Each of these four points if paid attention to would bolster the theoretical validity of radical feminist analysis and increase the political force of its practice. Taken together they represent one part of what the present trans moment has to offer radical feminist revolution.

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