

What They Call “Womyn-Only” Space is Really Cisgender-Only Space

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Abstract

One of the things that has irked me about the renewed “debates” about women-only space is that the defenders of “womyn-born-womyn” (WBW) policies keep utilizing specious counter-examples to try to defend their position. For example, those of us who are criticizing a non-inclusive women’s space are asked: “would you critique a transgender-only space? No??? You’re [...]”

Article

One of the things that has irked me about the renewed “debates” about women-only space is that the defenders of “womyn-born-womyn” (WBW) policies keep utilizing specious counter-examples to try to defend their position. For example, those of us who are criticizing a non-inclusive women’s space are asked: “would you critique a transgender-only space? No??? You’re a hypocrite!” Apparently those who espouse this position need a reminder of Social Justice 101.

Women-only space is necessary. Women are oppressed under the patriarchy, and need space to heal from the wounds of male-supremacy, misogyny and sexism. Trans women are women, and thus deserve to be included in this women-only space. Transgender people are also a targeted social group, and thus need space to discuss cis-supremacy, cissexism, transphobia and trans-misogyny as an oppressed social group. The same goes for People of Color, People with Disabilities, Old People, and other targeted/oppressed/subordinated social groups within a given society.

Agent/Dominant/Oppressor social groups do not need separatist spaces to heal from oppression. They are in the privileged, dominant categories, and thus the society is set up to cater to their identities, needs, experiences and viewpoints. From the standpoint of social justice, diversity and anti-oppression work, the only reason for separate spaces for privileged/dominant/agent groups would be to work on their status as oppressors, interrogate their privilege, and talk about how to be better allies to oppressed peoples.

I would support men’s space that was formed specifically to discuss male sexism, men’s violence against women, pro-feminist allyship, etc. I would support a white caucus that was formed to discuss white privilege, white racism and learning to become better allies to people of color. I would also support a cisgender group where people learn about their cis privilege, cissexist oppression and their own role in interrupting and challenging transphobia and trans-misogyny.

However, I do not support a cis-only women’s space to talk about women’s oppression in a general sense

because it is predicated on a false boundary and an exclusionary politics. If it is cis women only, then they should be talking about their superior social status AS cissexuals over transgender, transsexual and genderqueer people. What the organizers of cis-exclusive women-only space are proposing leaves out the voices of trans women, one of the most exploited, marginalized, and oppressed groups of women all over the globe. And conference materials that posit a discussion of “radical feminist critiques of gender and queer theory” mean that radical cis feminists who are NOT trans or queer will be talking about queers and trans folks: defining our reality, distorting our lives, and using their cis-privilege to demean, degrade and debase our lives and struggles AS women. To say that this is not “fair” is a supreme understatement. Many years ago, the disability rights movement developed a slogan for their movement that is vitally important: “nothing about without us.” They were tired of non-disabled people with the full weight of individual, institutional and cultural able-bodied privilege making decisions about their lives without any opportunity to speak from their own experiential authority. The time of cisgender people getting the final say about trans peoples’ lives is also over, sorry to inform the “rad fems” of the world. But it is not surprising given that this is the same group that loves to usurp the experiences of other groups such as sex workers for their own ideological and political ends without actually listening to the full range of sex worker activists and writers views on their own lives and experiences. This is a form of discursive violence and ideological colonization that trans people, sex workers and others will flatly refuse to co-sign, whether from right-wing moralists or pseudo-radicals from the Left.

If dominant/oppressor/agent social groups are meeting together and their aim is not to further social justice, liberation and equality for the corresponding subordinated/targeted/oppressed social group within the same social identity category, then as progressives we have every right to interrogate their very reason and rationale for meeting. If men are meeting together, not to interrogate patriarchy, repudiate sexism, and explore male privilege, but to decry the supposed victimization of men by women, deny systemic sexism, or reverse patriarchal reality to posit women as more powerful in society, then this meeting is counter to social justice and would be accurately called a Men’s Rights Activist (MRA) like group and rightfully condemned. If heterosexuals meet to form a “Straight Pride Day” event in their workplace or university campus, rather than interrogate heterosexism, their own straight privilege, and their need to demonstrate allyship to queers, then one could rightfully condemn this separatist space as furthering the status quo and systemic oppression.

Similarly, a group of cis women coming together to condemn transgender and transsexual people is not a productive, healthy use of separatist space, nor is it in keeping in line with the mission of social justice, diversity, and inclusive, multicultural feminism. So, even a cursory examination of the “Rad Fem 2012” website reveals that their proposed conference is not an example of women-only space, but of cisgender-only space. And it is not a cisgender-only space to interrogate cisgender privilege, challenge cis-supremacy, discuss trans-misogyny and tactics for cis women to become better allies to trans women/people. It is a cis-exclusive women’s event designed to further transphobia, institutionalize cissexism and foster transphobia and misinformation. And what’s worse is that trans women, by virtue of our very exclusion, are not even given a chance to respond to such attacks and vitriol, thus making the conference a textbook example of something that is antithetical to progressive, “radical” or revolutionary social justice, and much more in keeping in line with neo-conservative, right-wing and reactionary political platforms. It is no accident that many “rad fems” have jumped with glee on the

cis-supremacist article “America in Transition.” This disgusting anti-trans hate article from the far-right publication “The American Spectator” is now being vigorously promoted by the “rad fem” Blogosphere. And yet they repeatedly claim not to be in bed with the right wing? Hmmmmmm.....

To recap, what “Rad Fem 2012” is calling “women-only” space is actually cisgender-only space. Even a cursory examination of their web site and a basic understanding of Sociology and Social Justice 101 reveals that their event is not comparable to other separate identity spaces utilized by targeted groups in service of healing from oppression or separate identity spaces used by dominant groups in service of progressive allyship or using privilege to transform socio-cultural institutions. Rather, this cisgender-only gathering is being utilized to further cis-supremacy, transphobia and the institutionalization of trans-misogyny in society and within feminism. Why this matters is that their attempts to call us “hypocrites” for critiquing cis-exclusive women’s space but not interrogating transgender-only space, people of color-only space, etc is specious. It is like comparing apples and oranges. I call bullshit! Their space is NOT comparable to other targeted social groups spaces because they are NOT principally a women-only space because they do NOT include all WOMEN! Their space is constructed principally a cisgender-supremacist space, and thus a more apt parallel would be to compare them to Men’s Rights Activists (MRA) political spaces, white-supremacist spaces such as the KKK and neo-Nazi party spaces, etc. Given that the architect of anti-trans feminism Janice Raymond wrote that transsexualism should be “morally mandated out of existence” then their relation to trans exterminationism and genocide should be all the more clear. And since that same founder of anti-trans hatred in feminism successfully worked to get transsexual medical care defunded by the government, and many, many transsexual people suffered as a result of this, then the comparison to established hate groups stands.

I would like to end this Blog Post with a quote by one of my personal heroes, writer, activist and warrior Leslie Feinberg:

“Transsexual women are not a Trojan horse trying to infiltrate women’s space. There have always been transsexual women helping to build the women’s movement -they are part of virtually every large gathering of women. They want to be welcomed into women’s space for the same reason every woman does--to feel safe...What should the sign on the door of the women’s movement read? I think the key to victory are these three simple words: ‘All Women Welcome.’” (from Transgender Warriors)

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