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Transgender Debate: Against Exclusion

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Melbourne - There has been widespread opposition to a decision to exclude transgender women from the Network of Women Students Australia (N.O.W.S.A.) collective. This opposition has come from numerous alternative newspapers, including *Melbourne Star Observer*, campus women's collectives, e-mail networks and queer collectives.

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Contributors to these forums have criticised the N.O.W.S.A. collective's decision, and in particular the Left Alliance members who argued for it, as biologically determinist, inward looking and exclusionary.

The alternative positions all insist that women's oppression is social, and that therefore anyone who suffers that oppression should be included in feminist organising.

The N.O.W.S.A. decision has had ramifications in the women's liberation movement around the country, setting the precedent for transgender women to be excluded from the "Reclaim the Night Collective" in Perth, and has brought discussion around the issue into numerous campus women's departments.

The exclusionary arguments are epitomised in an article by Jessica Whyte, a Left Alliance member, in the women's collective edition of *Catalyst*, the R.M.I.T. student newspaper. Whyte's article uses separatist and biological determinist arguments to discredit the struggle that many transgender women face - to be recognised as who they are, rather than being attacked and rejected.

Whyte states: "... a person who had spent all their life as a man could not possibly be entirely free of patriarchal conditioning". But that says nothing about their experience as women in a sexist society.

Social Categories

Left Alliance members have gone so far as to say that transgender women are not "real" women. The problem with this argument is that it relies on a biological definition of women.

We live in a society that categorises people into rigid and often oppressive social and sexual stereotypes.

From the moment we are born we are taught - implicitly and explicitly - that there are two genders based on biological sex, male and female, and that each gender carries with it an appropriate behaviour. Those born with female sexual organs are women and therefore "feminine", and vice versa for those born with male sexual organs.

Society not only dictates that people conform to these gender roles, but that we treat the roles as self-evidently "natural".

The women's movement should recognise the oppressive nature of this gender stereotyping. It defines women primarily as mothers, wives, child-carers, launderers, cooks.

Feminists need to challenge this. We need to recognise that gender is socially constructed. Any social construction which tries to dictate even the most personal and individual aspects of our lives (i.e. how we identify ourselves) is something which we need to fight.

The biological determinist arguments put forward by members of Left Alliance give credence to the hierarchy theory of oppressions: that "women born women" are more oppressed than transgendered women. Thus only those "more" oppressed (or perhaps "really oppressed" should be allowed in women's campaigns and spaces.

Politics

This logic leads to exclusion: the idea that only the most oppressed can genuinely speak, participate, organise and make decisions.

Politics is leached from this argument. It ignores that fact that commitment to feminism is not in our genes.

Being born a woman does not guarantee support for women's liberation. In fact, many women believe that existing gender relations are not oppressive to women, but rather "natural".

In the arguments of the N.O.W.S.A. collective, the political positions and consciousness of women are not considered important. In reality, both are the building blocks of any political movement, but the Left Alliance argument allows all "women born women", irrespective of their politics to participate.

Meanwhile, transgender women, many of whom politically support the aims of the women's movement, recognise that existing gender relations are oppressive and those who experience oppression both as women and transgendered women, are excluded.

Biological determinism is deeply fatalistic. It means that women's liberation will always be unattainable while men exist.

Arguing that specific social conditioning is fixed and hence, unchangeable, faces exactly the same problem. If this were the case, how do we explain the women who are socialised by the dominant ideologies of society, yet develop a feminist consciousness?

How, in fact, do we achieve any sort of liberation at all if we can't change people's consciousness?

Another argument for exclusion is that transgender women have led a life of "male privilege". This denies the fact that many transgender people realised from an early age that they do not fit the gender role dictated to them by society.

They suffer oppression as transgender people - being forced to conform to stereotypes that contradict their identity - and the minute they identify as a woman, they take on the oppression that all women face, issues of body image, sexual harassment, and unequal wages and so on.

Individualising oppression

Left Alliance members arguing for exclusion claim that a "man" choosing to have a gender reassignment is legitimising the gender roles constructed by society. Whyte writes " ... this same man could help break down notions of sex-determined gender by refusing to behave in a way which society views as acceptably masculine".

This completely individualises transgenderism, blaming the victims of oppressive gender stereotyping rather than the system which creates it. Why should it be up to individuals to "break down notions of gender" to the extent that they live a life of persecution and depression due to being trapped in the wrong body?

The argument also implies that there is a great degree of choice involved, when transgender people are often aware of their true identity from a young age, and merely seek to change their body or their appearance to fit who they are.

Undergoing gender reassignment is not a political act: it's a personal decision to assert one's identity. Politics comes into it when a woman (transgender or otherwise) becomes aware of women's oppression and decides to get active in feminist organising.

Woman-only space

This brings us to the question of whether transgender women should be allowed in women-only space is to provide women with a place in which "... they will feel free from the intimidation or discomfort they may feel around men. If women do not feel comfortable in the presence of a male-to-female transsexual then the point of women's only space is nullified".

This reduces women's rooms, something women have fought so hard for, to a comfortable social space. In fact, women's rooms are politically useful only when they are used for feminist organising - a place where women can come together to organise for liberation without the barriers many find to their ability to speak out.

Women-only organising space cannot be reduced to somewhere we can go to feel "comfortable" Indeed, if we are going to address entrance criteria, let's call them "feminist rooms" and only welcome those who identify as women and want to work to build the women's liberation movement.

The crucial point is this: transgender women are oppressed by the same systemic structures and ideologies that all women are oppressed by - from sexual harassment and unequal wages through to gender stereotyping and physical abuse.

It is logical that all those who suffer from the same oppression should organise together - the self-organisation of the oppressed. By excluding transgender women from feminist organising, however, we are not allowing this to happen, but are acting in collusion with the sexist system by policing its oppressive gender boundaries.

Attempted censorship

Since the initial decision by the N.O.W.S.A. collective, and the resulting criticisms, the same Left Alliance members have attempted to censor discussion. They put a motion (leading up to "FemX", the National Union of Students' women's policy conference) to stop collective members from expressing their opposition to the exclusion of transgender women.

The N.O.W.S.A. collective has expressed opposition to the ongoing debate in many forums, including the *Green Left Weekly*.

Democratic Socialist Party members were criticised for "going to the media". This, according to the collective, "shows no respect for the decisions of the N.O.W.S.A. collective".

The opposite is true: it is essential that this debate be ongoing and widespread. It is a question of how to build a strong women's

movement - a crucial issue for all who seek to fight against injustice.

Such issues cannot be confined within one group. This is an issue that affects all women.

Serious feminist organising is based on making political discussions public; forging alliances between organising collectives; strengthening the movement and raising the level of consciousness and understanding of the issues.

In the face of increasing attacks on women's rights, women's organising cannot afford to be atomised. With energy and urgency, our aim is to build the biggest movements and committees to combat all oppression, rather than to divide the oppressed by the policies of exclusion and personal politics.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.