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Sex and Gender Diverse People's Presence in the Women's Activism Movement

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One of the glories of the 20th and 21st centuries is that women all over the world have been, are becoming, and will become more strident activists than the last few millennia have permitted. We of the female sex are cutting the chains that have bound, constrained, and imprisoned our thoughts, deeds, ideas, bodies, social and political power. From Emmeline Pankhurst chaining her to the railings of Downing Street to get votes for women to Benazir Bhutto holding the highest political office in Pakistan presiding over a country dominated by the will of men, women have and are taking part in life's debates. As women we are as different as the stars in the skies with our various belief systems, political perspectives, opinions and sexualities. Our role in modern society is more than simply domestic servant, childrearer and concubine.

Many women throughout the world, however, are still imprisoned by societies that devalue their worth as thinking acting intelligent human beings. Whilst as women we are very different, one of our strongest reasons to work together as activists is to make a better world where we have our rightful place as decision-makers on all issues, but particularly peace, health and welfare.

The question in defining any group of human beings, even though you may be half of the human race, is what defines you as being what you are. In other words what makes you a woman. This question is more complicated than it initially seems. Is it because you have a vagina? Well some women are born without vaginas – does that make them less than women in the women's movement?

It can't be because you have XX chromosomes because some women have XY chromosomes or XO or a profuse combination that deviates from the average genetic female code.

Is it because you have breasts? Well what about women who do not grow breasts or have them removed because they have had cancer or are afraid that they may be susceptible to breast cancer. Are these women any less female?

Do women who become bricklayers or road diggers forsake their goddess side or enrich and strengthen it? Seeking power to survive and evolve is a human trait after all, not an interpretation of masculinity or femininity.

Because a woman decides to remove her facial hair, is she any less in touch with her whole self than the bearded lady? Being stereotypically feminine is, after all, as valued an expression of womanhood as having a baby in hobnail boots in a paddy field.

Many women have abandoned the decision to be mothers because they have wished to pursue interests in their own life. Some have pursued aggressive careers in the world of commerce and industry, often getting ahead by emulating the behaviour of males. Does this make them out of touch with mother earth?

Does a girl who looks very boyish score points on the dyke scene, stick out like a sore thumb in the suburbs or adjust to being seen by some people as a substandard female? Body fascism comes in many forms even by women towards women.

A birth certificate with female on does not make a woman either. It is a bureaucratic record of medical first impressions that can sometimes later sometimes found to be incorrect. Should the owner of a female self and a male birth certificate be penalised for the mistakes of others that assumed the facts about their sex incorrectly?

Being a woman can only be a process of self-identification, for each woman is a different interpretation of herself. Just as men should not tell us what it takes to be a woman neither should other women exclude the diversity of people identifying as women. The women's activist movement can be a safe place for those who are seeking female space because they identify as female. Acceptance is a natural gift that women are able to utilise to create safety and acceptance for people who identify as female and those who are transsexual, transgendered, intersexed, and androgynous or those who may identify as having no sex or gender. Those female-identified individuals who seek space in the women's movement need to feel safe and not oppressed by discrimination, hierarchical femininity or a fascistic attitude of only women born one hundred percent women, which none of us are, after all.

Sex and gender diverse people identifying as female have always been part of the women's movement - it is just that we have been hard to see. I have campaigned for nuclear-free zones, ecological reform, human rights, animal rights, gay and lesbian rights, as well as the rights of sex and gender diverse people, sometimes in and out of the women's movement. Until I was 15 I lived as a boy, but for the past 33 years as a woman.

Other female identified sex and gender diverse people include:

The British transsexual woman April Ashley, who campaigned and stood on protest lines against nuclear power and weapons.

Carmen Rupee, transgendered Maori woman from New Zealand, now based in Sydney, who spent many years fighting for the rights of gay and lesbian people.

Sister Mary Elizabeth, a transsexual Episcopalian nun gets up at 4am every morning to run the internet based AIDS Education Global Information Service. This is one of the world's largest net-based information services constantly kept up to date from her mobile home in Missouri, USA.

Jani Farrell-Roberts was a Catholic priest until she transitioned into a pagan priestess. She has extensively fought for rights of people working under slave labour conditions in diamond mines in South Africa. Her writings campaigned for the rights to practise alternative pagan religions and she has also helped fights for aboriginal rights in Australia. In 1996 she was welcomed by Aboriginal women in Uluru (formerly known as Ayer's Rock) to help those women tell the world that they wanted equal protection for their sacred space. In 1997 Jani lived in the ancient Lyminge Forest in the UK alongside other eco-warriors and protestors in support of the local community action group to prevent the British government selling off the land to a private enterprise.

Norrie May Welby Norrie is Australian-based but does not wish to be called Australian. She works as the Metropolitan Outreach Coordinator for the Sex Workers Outreach Project in Sydney. Her name is norrie mAy-welby, and while she can accept that others will change the casing to conform with their expectations, there is a hyphen to be observed. She sometimes identifies as a woman, and sometimes as androgynous or intersexed. Norrie has campaigned for many years for equal rights for female, male and transgendered sex workers. She has also been a fervent anti-war demonstrator. She says she sometimes identifies as a woman and sometimes as bi-gendered or sexed.

Pat Califia, the American writer transitioned from being a woman to identifying as male so should he now be excluded from female activism even though he still writes in a lesbian magazine and has been an integral part of the women's movement for so many years?

Georgina Beyer, the New Zealander, has fought for the rights of Maori people, sex workers and the gay and lesbian community. As the world's first openly transsexual Member of Parliament she has demystified much of the misinformation and folklore about the impaired intellectual ability of sex and gender diverse people.

Del La Grace Volcano, the photographer who used to be the lesbian-identified Della Grace became, as he calls himself, "intersex by design", being neither male nor female or sometimes both. So does he qualify for a place in women's activism because he is not woman identified? Well the answer can only be yes if he chooses to be female identified at the time of access. All women have the right to refuse entry to male identified persons into female space if they feel it is an intrusion on that female space. But if Del has a beard, dresses in male attire and presents as male, but tells us this is his day for identifying as a woman, then should we admit him/her to female spaces?

Rosalynne Blumenstein in New York spent many years working for the rights of gay, lesbian and sex and gender diverse people as well as working to help recovering drug addicts and people with HIV and Aids.

Before becoming a high-profile activist for trans-lobby group Press for Change in the UK, Stephen Whittle, a female-to-male transman, was active in the women's movement.

There is an endless list of women and female identified people, some of whom identify as such full time or part of the time, who are sex and gender diverse and who have been activists both in and out of women's activism. Some of those women have not been out about their sex and gender diversity status and some have been. As activists supporting causes they are an integral part of female-identified activism.

Sometimes, however, well known feminists through ignorance, malice, or both choose to take a pot shot at sex and gender diverse people, in order to bolster their own egos. In 1998 Germaine Greer in her book *The Whole Woman* devoted a chapter to what she called Pantomime Dames, citing sex and gender diverse people as sad travesties who were not welcome in the real world of women.

The writer Janice Raymond in 1979 in her book *The Transsexual Empire* accused transsexual women of being men who sought to rape women by invading their female space. Such madness is in itself a betrayal of the qualities of womanhood, which seeks to protect the vulnerable and is a direct modelling of more aggressive male behaviour through warring tribalism.

In 2003 in Victoria, Australia a women's festival Lesfest succeeded in gaining an exemption from the Equal Opportunities Act to allow them to implement a policy of "lesbians born female" only. Although this has since been withdrawn on procedural grounds, it is another example of how women practising body fascism and gender apartheid, can rape the identities of other women just as well as men.

Since the women's movement started to accept transsexual, transgendered, intersexed, bigendered and non-gendered people as part of the movement there has been much debate as to who really qualifies as female. The emerging class system has been divided into post-op...pre-op, with a dress...without a dress, looks female...does not look female, talks female...does not talk female, has a female birth certificate...does not have a female birth certificate...and a mélange of erroneous categorisations.

The ultimate insult to sex and gender variant people is the "womyn-born-womyn-only" policy that was adopted at the Michigan Women's Festival in the USA. As far as I know, no females are born women only as children and children cannot be truly sexed until all the manifestations of sex and gender identity emerge.

As a woman who has been a seasoned campaigner for 33 years on issues such as human rights, animal rights, ecological issues, anti nuclear polices, and the quest for peace, I have worked alongside thousands of other women. Some of those women have not known that I am a woman of transsexual origins and some have. My genitalia as far as I am concerned are between myself, my lesbian life partner, and my gynaecologist. As a campaigner I hope I have been judged on my efforts, not the history of my sex.

At 15 I marched in London's Trafalgar Square to free the black political prisoner Angela Davies. At 42 I danced on the tables at the Houses of Parliament in Westminster when MPs voted to overturn Section 28 – a notorious piece of legislation brought in by Margaret Thatcher to prevent education on homosexuality in British schools. At 47 I boycotted a major American scientific conference where I was due to speak because I objected to war being waged on Afghanistan. In between those times I have spent my whole adult life campaigning about many issues supported by the women's movement as a woman within that movement.

During all that time as a woman campaigning in the women's movements I had a male birth certificate because although a mistake was made at birth, I am unable to change the certificate to read female even today.

Women for peace is the greatest trait that we can create as women when we come together so it is of paramount importance that we as women of all shapes, colours, sizes, religions, beliefs, and varying kinds of sex and gender diversity create peace between ourselves. Women and all female identified people can and should be part of the women's movement and women's activism, making us always inclusive and never exclusive.

Post Workshop Analysis

The workshop for which this paper was written to stimulate discussion gave up interesting perspectives from the participating women which I think are incredibly important to consider. These women truly gave of themselves into the process of discussion. Firstly what became evident immediately is how confused members of the women's movement are concerning issues of sex and gender diversity because the majority of women have no education, knowledge or exposure to this area. Even women who consider themselves to be politically correct can feel swamped and confused when they have their perceptions of the male and female bipolar models shattered by the idea that at least one in around a hundred people have some form of sex and gender diversity. It was hard for some women to understand that because someone sports facial hair, does not have breasts, or may appear extremely boyish that does not mean that they are not necessarily female.

Many women who position themselves in what can be known as the women's movement or women's activism polarise themselves as being profoundly different from males. One of the ways women activists sometimes try to strengthen their self-evolving identity, as women empowering themselves, is to reject any possible male attributes or characteristics, be them physical or mental, and that also means aspects of other women that they may view as being threatening because they may be considered masculine.

The women in the workshop were wholly unaware of the presence or the numbers of other women in the women's activism movement who were sex and gender diverse. The

ignorance of that fact often lead women into sideline issues of whether they wanted people who were sex and gender diverse in women's space at all.

One woman talked about how she did not want her space to be invaded by someone who was male posing as female. She felt that would make her feel vulnerable in a space that she wanted to be all female. She was unaware of offensive she was being to women that may appear masculine to her but was female identified and lived at least part time as non-male.

In many ways SAGE agrees with this woman in that we would not want to see women compromised by men posing as women in order to gain access to female space. These cases must, however, be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. We at SAGE believe that any women or female identified person who is not respectful of female space or seeks to damage the well being of a woman or women should be excluded from that activist movement.

Participants struggled with the task of rationalising the logic of allowing human rights and access to women's spaces for people who are female identified. Some women had phobic reactions and talked about rejecting people with masculine histories. One girl said that she did not feel comfortable sharing her female history with someone who had been raised with male privileges. All males, however, do not share what feminists often see as male privileges and female activists often lose sight of the fact that in western society, many women also have many privileges.

Some women had already done a great deal of consideration of these issues and formed the ideas that people identifying as female could be asked, if there was any doubt how they identified, and their answer would go towards whether they were acceptable or not in that female space.

Other women had no objections to anyone identifying as female being part of the women's activism. They saw the movement as needing to be all encompassing and not oppressive by rejecting subgroups of people who may not identify as female or non-male in exactly the same way as they personally did.

Many women wanted to judge people calling themselves female by their appearance and did not realise that they themselves were being body and gender fascists in doing that. Juxtaposed to this was a keen and genuine desire of the women present not to be unfair to others and they made a respectful earnest attempt to carefully consider the issues that were being discussed.

What was hopeful was that every women in the workshop did a great deal of soul searching to try to find a right answer to their question of accepting people who are sex and gender diverse as activists within the women movement. Not all could get to that space but the general consensus was that the issues that were raised were far more complicated than they had previously thought.

It was farsighted of Bridgett Newman the organizer of the conference to invite a member of SAGE to facilitate the workshop. Sex and gender peoples presence in the women's movement, activism and spaces has often been a contentious issue for many separatists who choose to prejudicially reject people they deem not to be real women. We suggest that all women's conferences now begin to address these issues and teach other women that women come in all shapes, sizes and varying biological and sociological forms of femaleness.

Recommendations

SAGE supports all people who present calling themselves female in gaining access to female activism. We recommend that if women are in doubt as to whether someone is female or not that a simple discreet enquiry to that person is not an unjust or insulting way to find out if that person identifies as female. We support self-definition and do not believe that any individual who presents themselves as female should be harassed to prove that they are female as women come in all different kinds.

This paper has specifically dealt with sex and gender diverse people who are female identified working as activists in the women's movements. Since the women's movement is often about liberating oppressed women and giving them equal human rights then SAGE sees segregation of female identified people from mainstream women as discriminatory and we recommend women's activist movements avoid this at all costs.

We also recommend that women open up their activist spaces to people who are non-male identified and who would receive extreme rejection in male spaces, and whether those persons identify as non-male full time or part time is irrelevant. Womanhood should never be an exclusive club like the white supremists or religious separatists.

SAGE is an organisation that campaigns for and educates on the issues and human rights of people who are sex and gender diverse, including those who are transsexual, transgendered, androgyne, multi-gendered, non-gendered.

www.sage-australia.org

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