

Equality \neq Neutrality

Exploring Feminism & Gender Variance

By Rhi Etzweiler

Rhi's Note//Introduction

[Warnings for potential triggers: cis-sex and cis-gender definitions and language.]

In the fall of 2011, I had occasion to witness a rather disturbing series of events that culminated in the “outing” of a transgendered author in the gay romance niche market. Throughout the course of those weeks, and in the aftermath, a number of scathing assumptions were voiced. Based on perspectives that were so thoroughly heteronormative – or homonormative – or cis-gendered – that it created a tsunami wave of negativity.

The niche market began hemorrhaging authors, as what started as accusations against a single author snowballed into a gender policing version of a witch hunt. After a number of prominent names disappeared, the drama died down suddenly when one stepped forward and voluntarily outed himself as transgendered.

Perhaps in an effort to understand, perhaps in ignorance, he was labeled a feminist by some. An internal misogynist by others, when he refused the first. The jarring dissonance of these labels and perspectives, as they expanded to encompass others as well, became the driving force of writing this. Though borne from this series of events—as much as others that preceded it—this subject of feminism versus gender neutrality remains a difficult one to tackle.

Too many, when presented with the concept of gender fluid, gender variant, or transgendered identities, draw the conclusion that individuals are feminists. What ensues is a train wreck of misconceptions. Of highly divergent perspectives being unable to translate.

This needs addressed. It causes so many gender queer/trans*(hereafter referred to as GQ/T*) persons to hackle, and frankly, it causes a train wreck in my own mind. This is going to be some deep subject matter and heavy reading, and it's likely to tweak a few readers, but it needs said. It needs discussed. And I think I've come around, finally, to how best to present it.

Contrary to the 1998 legal amendment aligning “sex” and “gender” in International Criminal Court, the two are not the same [Oosterveld]. The first is biological, the second, a social construct. Sexual identity and sexuality are separate from gender identity, although many choose to align them under social and/or cultural convention.

The definitions provided in this text were acquired from Merriam-Webster's online dictionary database, and when that failed, I resorted to GLAAD Media Reference Guide [GLAAD].

The Meat of the Matter

We're going to break this down into pieces. Simplifying the situation into the fundamental parts, so follow along with me while I present a few foundational constructs and get us all on the same page.

The first known use of "feminism" was in 1895. The original definition of the word was "organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests." Somewhere along the way, it became "a theory of political, economic, and social equality of the sexes." That is the adjusted and "modern" definition, according to Merriam-Webster.

Just because this is what the dictionary currently defines this word as, doesn't mean that's how it is perceived or used by others, of course. Many factions have twisted this word to their own use or connotation, but this is the definition at the heart of it. So we'll adhere to this standardization, and disregard any deviations or culture-specific evolutions.

Even given that, the two presented definitions for "feminism" are so highly divergent as to mislead and incite confusion. Focusing on women's rights and interests erases the consideration of those of the male sex entirely, for one.

"Equality of the sexes," the second definition states. On a binary scale, one immediately assumes. One is either female or male, right? Intersexuals would strongly disagree on this point. But again, we'll set this aside as well—it's worth noting, though, that GQ/T* persons aren't the only ones that may take umbrage with the fundamental constructs of what feminism presents, represents, and/or is defined as.

And thus we come to our first pair of definitions:

Sex. Either of the two major forms of individuals that occur in many species and that are distinguished respectively based on their reproductive organs. [Or more bluntly, "genitalia."]

Gender. The behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex.

To simplify, gender is the subliminal signals and cues – visual, audible; gestures, facial expressions, stance, posture– that are culturally associated with a specific gendered label. It's how you draw the conclusion of whether to say, "he," or to say, "she," without ripping an individual's clothing off to examine genitalia every time you meet someone new.

Darkness and Distortion

Okay, so we're all on the same page, right? Sex is the bits you're born with. Gender is a social construct.

Stay with me, this is where things get a little complex. Firstly, because definitions are a little more difficult to acquire. For instance, Merriam Webster doesn't recognize "gender queer" as a term. It offers the following, instead:

Gender Bender. A person who dresses and behaves like a member of the opposite sex.

In this, it appears that even the English language has defaulted to the fallacy that sex and gender are equivalent. Time to invoke the GLAAD Media Reference Guide for some clarity.

Gender Identity. One's internal, personal sense of being a man or a woman (or a boy or a girl). For transgender people, their birth-assigned sex and their own internal sense of gender identity do not match [the accepted socio-cultural definitions].

Gender Expression. External manifestation of one's gender identity, usually expressed through "masculine," "feminine" or gender-variant behavior, clothing, haircut, voice or body characteristics. Typically, transgender people seek to make their gender expression match their gender identity, rather than their birth-assigned sex [as aligned by socio-cultural definition].

Using these definitions, approaching the situation from a literal standpoint stripped bare of assumptions, perceptions, and preconceptions, we begin to find the source of why a GQ/T* person would take offense to the prospect of being lumped in as a feminist. Or being advised that they should embrace such.

Suddenly, feminism is now offering itself as a broad-spectrum concept, an umbrella that encompasses GQ/T* as well? Really? When their perspectives have nothing at all to do with sex, and everything to do with gender constructs and expression, gender identity *not sexual identity*.

But the rationalization tossed around goes a little something like this:

Well, you're biologically female. So, of course. But it's okay for you to be a male feminist, too. Feminism is about sex-role liberation! Regardless of what sex you are. But you were born female, so by default, you're actually a feminist.

There are a number of fallacies going on in this conversation.

Firstly, there's the whole biological determinism issue. (Yes, another definition, to avoid confusion.)

Biological Determinism. Also referred to as genetic determinism, or biologism. The interpretation of humans and human life from a strictly biological point of view. The hypothesis that genetic makeup defines every aspect of a being and/or personality.

This erroneous thought process rationalizes GQ/T* persons as being feminist based on their biological makeup. That as their sex is female, they must therefore be feminist—if they aren't, the alternate conclusion by default is that they're internal misogynists. *Their biological sex is being used to delineate them.*

And secondly, there's this fallacy based on the assumption that sex and gender are identical. A fallacy that assumes the individual must define, or is comfortable defining, as of the female sex. Assumes the individual is comfortable with the subliminal insinuation that accompanies the "femina" aspect of that word.

The modern definition of feminism embraces “both binary sexes” but the structure of the word remains the same as it was, not neutral.

The following are quoted directly from the Online Etymology Dictionary:

Feminism. 1851. “state of being feminine;” from feminine + ism.

Feminine. mid-14c., “of the female sex,” from O.Fr. *femenin* (12c.) “feminine, female; with feminine qualities, effeminate,” from L. *femininus* “feminine” (in the grammatical sense at first), from *femina* “woman, female,” lit. “she who suckles,” from base of *felare* “to suck, suckle” (see [fecund](#)). Sense of “woman-like, proper to or characteristic of women” is recorded from mid-15c. The interplay of meanings now represented in female, feminine, and effeminate, and the attempt to make them clear and separate, has led to many coinages: *feminitude* (1878); *feminile* “feminine” (1640s); *feminility* “womanliness” (1838); *femality* (17c., “effeminacy;” 1754 “female nature”). Also *feminality* (1640s, “quality or state of being female”), from rare adj. *feminal* (late 14c.), from O.Fr. *feminal*. And *femineity* “quality or state of being feminine,” from L. *femineus* “of a woman, pertaining to a woman.”

Get the idea?

Let us, *please*, not jump to the conclusion that to object to this word is a sign of misogyny. At its core this word will always invoke the female sex/gender. Even with a “modernization” of the definition, a broad spectrum of issues exists here for many. It’s falling back into the binary, for starters. It’s assuming those associated sex/gender labels are acceptable to the individual in question. It’s assuming that the male sex doesn’t have just as many limiting socio-cultural expectations of behavior and role as the female sex does. (It insinuates that yes, feminism is about both sexes, but the focus is still on the female – the male isn’t as important, so the same old word is fine.) It’s assuming that GQ/T* persons strive to create equality of the labels. That this is their goal or motivation.

These fallacies are deceptive, twisted—cautiously, meticulously crafted – but they are fallacies all the same.

A Slippery Slope

Gender equality is not the same thing as gender neutrality. Equality is a balance between two opposing forces. The concept of neutrality would obliterate these labels, these social constructs, altogether. Why are they needed? To define ourselves? I can do that without giving label to my gender. My gender identity is only a very small part of who I am, for instance.

What are labels for, except to segregate. These are oranges, these are apples, they don’t get stored in the same containers. Segregation, discrimination, no matter how you look at it.

Feminism was a laudable beginning, a respectable start, a first step. Over a hundred years ago.

If the majority of socio-cultural constructs had not evolved past full-on oppression of the female sex, then I would agree that feminism would be the correct approach. Increasingly, it is not. I would even go so far as to say that in an increasingly expansive socio-cultural environment (thanks largely to the Internet, creating a global community), feminism has outlived its influential force. It has carried us forward, and now threatens to teeter over into the sort of gender discrimination and misunderstanding which will only carry us backward.

Because when someone looks a GQ/T* person in the eye and tells them that they just need to relax, embrace their inner feminist and stop being ashamed of being female, there is something very horrid and disgusting happening in the feminist movement.

They've begun equating sex and gender as equivalent. They've begun insisting that individuals who have a specific sex, identify with the coinciding social construct of gender. To do otherwise—if you're of the female sex, at least—is to be misogynist.

This is denial. Refusal to acknowledge the existence of or possibility. This is called deletion and erasure. The same crimes of which the original feminist movement accused the 'elitist, entitled male sex.' Let's look at these definitions for a moment, then. So that there's no confusion, and we're all still on the same page.

Delete. To eliminate especially by blotting out, cutting out, or erasing.

Erasure. Deletion by an act of expunging.

All because of an unwillingness to adhere to a socially constructed label? To accept that sex and gender are equivalent, or biologically determined? Are the people who claim to be feminist hearing themselves as they say these things to a GQ/T* person? Since when was there a law that one's gender must align to the socially acceptable label coinciding with one's sex. Since when was it misogyny to claim a male gender, to relate to one's self better in that construct than another?

Misogyny. Hatred of women.

Misandry. Hatred of men.

Is it misandry for a male to claim a gender of female, to identify more comfortably as that gender than the social construct that "aligns" with their sex?

Is it misandry for a transwoman to undergo the surgeries that would redefine their sex as female?

Why then is the word misogyny thrown around whenever a transman is involved?

Why is it misogyny for a gender fluid person to discard the use of gender labels altogether, simply because it requires setting aside the use of a female pronoun?

The answer to all of these is the same: it's not.

A failure to identify within a given label or role is not hatred. A desire to set aside segregating labels, to move beyond the binary, is not hate.

Embrace the Rainbow, Even the Shades of Gray

One last set of definitions, then. So we can all understand.

Hatred. Hate; prejudiced hostility or animosity.

Hate. An intense hostility and aversion usually deriving from fear, anger, or a sense of injury.

Hostility. Deep-seated usually mutual ill will; conflict, opposition, or resistance in thought or principle.

Aversion. A feeling of repugnance toward something, with a desire to avoid or turn from it; antipathy; avoidance as a direct result of noxious stimulus association.

Those are strong words. Not just hostility and aversion, but “intense” hostility and aversion. Impassioned, engaged emotions – the type that eclipse all else, to the point of blindness. And personally, I feel nothing but disgust (loosely, a synonym of aversion) for the social constructs and gender labels that are forced upon all of us. It is not focused specifically at “female” or “male” but both labels, indiscriminately.

Why, I wonder, would others take offense to the gender identity of another? Why would they take it as a personal affront if one elects to self-identify in a fashion that doesn’t parallel their expectations or perceptions? That doesn’t engage their labels or remain within their comfort zones?

It has nothing to do with them. It has everything to do with one’s self-identity and perspective on the social constructs within which one lives or exists. It has nothing to do with anyone else, and they should have zero impetus to weigh in on the matter. End of story, far as I can see.

So why, I wonder, are members of the feminist movement striving so hard to retain the labels that, 150 years ago, they would have gleefully cast aside like an ill-fitting pair of pants, a too-tight corset, or a rotten tomato?

What has changed? Why are they eager to be labeled and segregated? If they want to be, that’s fine. I am not going to tell them they need to relax and denude themselves of their labels. I respect their self identity and comfort zone within the parameters of social constructs.

Please, give GQ/T* persons a measure of that same respect. Please, do not assume that others are content to be labeled, delineated, in the same way. A deeply ingrained social construct like gender labels is not easily set aside—it takes conscious effort and constant vigilance, sensitivity.

Citations//Further Reading

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