

## Crossing the Gender Picket Line



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If Janice Raymond's much-maligned (1979) book *The Transsexual Empire* could be summed up in a single sentence, I think that sentence would be: gender dissatisfaction is a social problem, not an individual problem. Social problems should be treated with progressive social reform, not with the medicalisation of individuals. When people from socially marginalised groups protest against their situation, we recognize that the groups they're part of are facing a social problem. We don't treat individual protesters – poor, black, old – as though there's something wrong with them for thinking that there's a problem. We aim to fix the differences in social outcomes between rich and poor, black and white, old and young. Just as we wouldn't respond to an ambitious woman with medication to dull her aspirations and keep her in the home, we shouldn't respond to men frustrated with the constraints of masculinity with medication to help them (seem to) change sex. And those men are not the only people who feel 'gender dissatisfaction': many if not most women, and many if not most men feel it too (those who feel it the most tend to be referred to as 'gender non-conforming', but I won't use this term given that virtually no one is fully gender-conforming).

Reading Raymond helped me to clarify something that's been in the background of my thinking and writing about gender for a while. Raymond puts the blame on the medical establishment, which approaches gender dissatisfaction in the case of trans people as an individual problem (this is the 'empire' referred to in the book's title). But I think we should put some blame on at least some trans (including nonbinary) people too. I think being gender non-conforming while repudiating your sex class membership can be roughly analogised to crossing the picket line, and I think considering the parallels between these two cases can be helpful in getting a handle on exactly what is different between the trans rights movement and other movements for minority groups' social and legal rights.

In a classic strike, unions organize workers to refuse to work at coordinated times, sometimes just for a segment of the working day, sometimes for full days – or even weeks (at least in the past) – at a time. Individual union-members are committed to the cause of the strike, for example because some among them are not being paid fairly for their work, or because the workplace policies are unreasonable. But there can be reasons to refuse to join the strike, or to break the strike before the union calls it off. A particular employee might run out of money and simply not be able to afford to remain away from work. Although historically fellow strikers have been angry at those who break with the collective stance (‘crossing the picket line’ is pejorative), from a moral point of view individuals can have adequate excuses for doing so, and so not be culpable for strike-breaking.

The strike, when it comes to gender, is the feminist project of stereotype-busting. Sex stereotypes are bad for everyone, because they limit freedom. Feminists historically have worked to reject the sex-stereotypes applied to women. They fought for women to be able to vote. They pushed for more women in workplaces and arenas of public life traditionally dominated by men. They taught little girls that they could be and do anything. They resisted women’s sexual objectification, in advertising and in popular culture, and through pornography. They popularised the idea that there are as many ways to be a woman as there are women, or more: you can wear pants, you can have short hair, you can love women, you can grow your body hair, you can be an engineer, you can take up space, you can speak your mind... you’re still a woman.

This is a moral project. Feminists in different eras looked at women’s inferior social position, and saw a social problem. Although there have been attempts by the medical establishment to diagnose individual women’s dissatisfaction as an individual problem, feminists generally recognized it as a social problem that needs a social solution. For example, the problem with mostly white women in 1960s America wasn’t that individual women were ‘ill’ and so couldn’t simply enjoy being housewives and mothers. The problem was that women were intellectually under-stimulated and restless, because they didn’t have lives of their own. They existed for others, for their husbands and their children. The projects that they had going on the side tended not to be challenging or meaningful enough to quell their unrest. Betty Friedan argued in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) for a progressive social solution to this problem, namely that women needed meaningful paid work outside the home.

Feminists today continue the moral project, pushing for an end to male violence against women (breaking the stereotype that women are men’s property, to treat as they like), equal representation in public decision-making (breaking the stereotype that women are disinterested in politics or power), increased representation in industries where men are dominant (breaking the stereotype that women are not talented in e.g. science, technology, engineering or mathematics), an end to sexual objectification and harassment (breaking the stereotype that women should be aesthetically pleasing and sexually available to men), equal pay for equal work (breaking the stereotype that women are not as capable as men, or don’t have as many financial responsibilities as men), and many other things. We want an end to sex stereotypes, so that people of either sex can do and be whatever they like. Sex stereotypes are bad for everyone.

Crossing the picket line, then, when it comes to gender, is being someone who reinforces sex stereotypes. This is immoral in just the same way that crossing the picket line in a strike is immoral, at least if you don’t have a very good excuse. As I said already, in the case of strikes it is possible to have a very good excuse. In the case of trans (including nonbinary) it is possible

to have a very good excuse too. Some trans people experience severe and distressing dysmorphia about their sexed bodies, to the point that they would rather not go on living if it meant living in those bodies. This is a good parallel for being genuinely unable to afford to not return to work. If the choice is between starvation and strike-breaking, we strike-break. Similarly, if the choice is between suicide or reinforcing sex stereotypes, we reinforce sex stereotypes. Blaming people in either of these situations is inappropriate. Any moral demand that requires a person to sacrifice their own life is overly demanding. I'll assume for the sake of argument that all transsexual people have this excuse, and all transgender people (including nonbinary people) do not (this will not be a perfect heuristic, because there will be some transgender people who would be transsexual if they could, and yet cannot have surgery for medical or financial reasons). Transgender and nonbinary people are crossing the picket line, and compromising the feminist project. (Often while claiming to be feminists).

This charge cannot be credibly made against any other minority group movement for social and legal rights (at least that I can think of). Some argued that the push for gay marriage was morally objectionable, because it forced a reconceptualization of marriage, when marriage has value to religious people. And indeed, were marriage not a state institution conferring material benefits, and were it instead solely a religious practice, there might be something to this claim – we might have another parallel to strike-breaking. In Melbourne (where I live), the only two characteristics protected against vilification are race and religion, which says something about which groups are seen as the most vulnerable to it. So arguably religious people are a minority group, and this group wanted to hang on to a practice that has meaning to them (marriage as between a man and a woman). But marriage isn't solely a religious practice, it's a state practice, so the charge doesn't go through.

In other more familiar cases, e.g. the movement for civil rights or women's rights, there's no plausible case to be made that people of colour or women were doing anything morally objectionable in pushing for their rights. Their gains did upset the distribution of resources and opportunities, which some members of dominant groups (here white people, men) probably did view as a net loss. But those gains did not negatively affect an ongoing project for the liberation of another minority or disadvantaged group. White people were not using their exclusive political power to achieve their own liberation before people of colour gained the vote and stopped them in their tracks. They were already liberated. Likewise men. This case – of gender non-conforming people repudiating their sex – is different. Reinforcing sex stereotypes conflicts directly with the women's liberation project.

Natalie Wynn has objected to this point by saying that if the objection was really to reinforcing sex stereotypes we'd expect to see feminists directing anger at particularly feminine women. She asked, why do feminists focus their anger on transwomen, rather than people like Kim Kardashian? (Wynn's video [here](#)[1] and a fuller reply from me [here](#)[2]). But this question can be answered. While people like Kim Kardashian do conform to sex stereotypes, they don't necessarily reinforce them. That's because, as I said already, feminists believe there are as many ways to be a woman as there are women, or more. The only thing you need, to be a woman, is to be female. After that, do whatever you like, be however you want. Being feminine is one of those ways. Because there's no 'right' way to be a woman, being feminine is not a 'wrong' way.

But the same goes for being a man. There's no 'wrong' way to be a man, including being feminine (even though of course not everyone in society agrees with feminists on this point). When a transwoman adopts femininity and takes the extra step of claiming to be a woman, he

is expressing to the world that he thinks being feminine is not a way to be a man. He reinforces sex stereotypes of masculinity. The usual criticism is made in the other direction: it is a familiar thought that transwomen reinforce sex stereotypes of femininity, because of the type of women they tend to try to be. But I don't find this particularly persuasive. If this were the only criticism, Wynn would be right to ask why we're angry with transwomen for doing this but not with women who do it. But because being trans involves a repudiation of one's sex (or one's 'gender' understood as a sex-typed social role), it necessarily involves the statement that this way I want to be is not a way of being my sex. For example, *being sexually subordinated by men is not a way of being a man; being the person who takes care of the house and raises the children is not a way of being a man; taking a passive role and deferring to the man in my life is not a way of being a man; wearing dresses and makeup and having long hair is not a way of being a man;* (you get the picture). (I take some of these examples from transwomen Raymond interviewed and quotes from in her book).

The same goes for nonbinary people, because all the ways that nonbinary people are, are ways of being their sex. It's sex stereotypes that make us think they're not. If nonbinary people would be the way they want to be (e.g. a female person with an elective double mastectomy and short hair) without claiming not to be their sex, then they would be contributing to the project of busting sex stereotypes. By claiming to be nonbinary instead, they send the message that this is not a way to be their sex, that in order to be this way you must repudiate your sex (or 'gender' understood as sex-typed social role).

This is an old point put in a new way. Feminists have long accused transwomen of reinforcing sex stereotypes. But it's not stereotypes about women they're reinforcing, it's stereotypes about men. Many people instinctively felt this when they heard about UK Stonewall advisor Alex Drummond claiming to be widening the bandwidth of being a woman, by having a beard. Feminists worldwide asked, why isn't Drummond widening the bandwidth of being a man, by wearing skirts and eyeliner? What makes it the one rather than the other? The reason feminists have been so angry with those trans and nonbinary people who don't have a good excuse for claiming trans and nonbinary status is that it's a form of crossing the picket line on the feminist project of busting sex stereotypes. This is not just an idea for a project, where there might be reasonable disagreement about which project to take up. It's a project already in full swing and which has made massive gains for women. What we need is a movement comparable to feminism aimed at freeing men from the constraints of masculinity. What we don't need is large numbers of people acting like gender dissatisfaction is an individual problem, and the solution to it is reconceptualising sex stereotypes as innate features of persons (under the banner of 'gender identity').

### **Links:**

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pTPuoGjQsI&feature=youtu.be>

[2] "A hate movement hiding behind a bunch of pseudo-feminist platitudes": Response to ContraPoints – archived at [hollylawford-smith.org](http://hollylawford-smith.org)