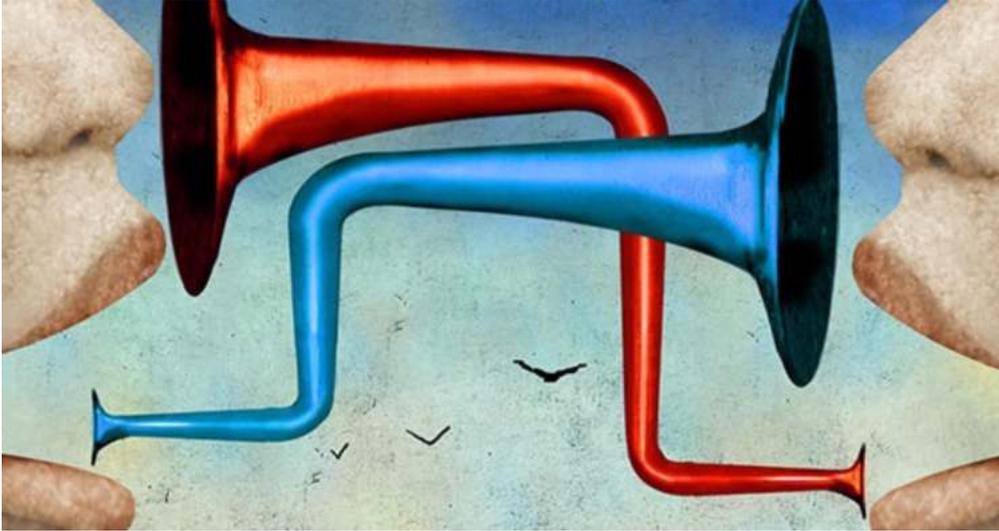


# Talking past each other about trans/gender



[Posted to Medium 16th June 2019].

I've been giving talks lately on what I see as a conflict of interest between women's rights and trans rights, and the first thing I've been doing in all of them is to stress the heterogeneity within the class of transwomen. I focus on transwomen rather than transmen because although it's trans activism that creates the conflict of interest, the conflict that arises is a matter of the push for transwomen to be treated as women in all social and legal respects, which creates a conflict with women's sex-based rights specifically. (There is no similar conflict of interest arising with transmen being treated socially or legally as men). I stress the heterogeneity within the class of transwomen because it makes a difference to the arguments, and it helps to avoid us talking past one another in the discussion. We talk past one another when we use the same words but have very different things in mind. 'Transwoman' is a great example of such a word. Consider the variety there is within the class of people who say they are transwomen:

## I. Type of transition

*Surgical transition.* Some transwomen have had sex reassignment surgery, which means their penis and testicles have been removed and replaced with a constructed vagina and vulva. (Transwomen who have transitioned surgically will almost always have transitioned with hormone replacement therapy, presentation, and declaration of sex or gender identity as well.)

*Hormone replacement therapy.* Some transwomen are on hormone replacement therapy, usually estrogen and progesterone, which changes the appearance of some of their secondary sex characteristics – so may mean, for example, that they have less body hair, and grow breasts. (There are some transwomen who *only* transition with hormone replacement therapy, presentation, and declaration of sex or gender identity.)

*Presentation.* Some transwomen present themselves in a feminine way, which might mean having long/styled hair, wearing dresses or skirts, or makeup, or high heels, or jewellery. (There are some transwomen who *only* transition with presentation and declaration of sex or gender identity.)

*(Declaration of) sex or gender identity.* Some transwomen identify as female. Some transwomen identify as women – although not all, some identify as *transwomen* specifically. (There are some transwomen who *only* transition in this way.)

A [Vox article](#)[1] from 2018 reports on a National Transgender Discrimination Survey which found that 33% of respondents had transitioned surgically (which means sex reassignment surgery, and 61% of trans people had transitioned medically (which means taking hormones). 14% of transwomen compared to 72% of transmen said that they don't want to transition surgically. If these numbers are representative across countries (which they may not be – a 2017 [BMJ cohort study](#)[2] found that only 4–5% of trans subjects underwent genital reconstruction surgeries) and between the sexes, then we can expect two thirds of all transwomen to have penises and more than one third of all transwomen to have undertaken no physical transition at all (neither surgery nor hormones). Of that remaining group of more than a third of transwomen, some do not present in a feminine way: there is literally nothing to distinguish them from a man in public settings but their own claim that they are either female or a woman (see for example civil rights activist [Danielle Muscato](#)[3], or Stonewall advisor [Alex Drummond](#)[4]).

## II. Age of transition

Some transwomen transition early in life: some in childhood; some as teenagers; some as young adults; some after retirement. Of particular interest might be whether they transition pre- or post-puberty (this makes a difference to sporting performance, and to ability to pass as women and therefore be subject to the treatment that women are subject to under patriarchy).

## III. Motivation for transition

*Body dysmorphia.* Some transwomen feel that their bodies are wrong, for example they hate their penises and are distressed by the thought of going through a male puberty which will exacerbate masculine features of their bodies.

*Gender dysphoria.* Some transwomen are okay with their bodies, but feel that their social treatment as men is wrong, for example they feel that they should be treated as women instead.

*Sexual orientation.* Some transwomen are [effeminate same-sex attracted males](#)[5], who have been socially channelled into living as women (particularly in cultures where this is a standard response to effeminate behaviour in males). (Note that if women wouldn't feel particularly threatened by having gay men in their spaces, then this is a reason to not feel particularly threatened by having transwomen of this type in their spaces either).

*Autogynephilia.* Although it's become completely taboo to even mention this, [some transwomen are male autogynephiles](#)[5], which means, sexually aroused by the thought of themselves as women. There's extensive documentation of this phenomenon in Anne Lawrence's book [Men Trapped in Men's Bodies](#)[6] (based on first-personal accounts from autogynephiles), and an account from the point of view of an autogynephile's wife in the Feminist Current episode ['What happens when your husband decides he's a woman?'](#)[7] (12th January, 2018).

*Queer theory.* Queer theory has been influential throughout parts of academia and has 'trickled down' into the mainstream in ideas about what gender is and should be. In particular, the ideas that there is no sex/gender distinction, and that everything (including sex) is socially constructed, have been used to suggest that our sex/gender should be up to us. This means that some male people may declare themselves to be transwomen simply because they don't identify with some or all aspects of maleness or masculinity. (Some such people may merely identify as nonbinary; others may identify as women.)

*Social contagion.* Some male people may be inspired to declare themselves transwomen as a result of social contagion, because queer identities of various types have become the younger generation's version of

social experimentation (and in some cases, like top surgery for transmen, perhaps also their generation's version of self-harm). [Lisa Littman's study last year](#)[8] found adolescents and young adults coming out as trans in groups, and after extensive exposure to trans content online. (82.8% of the adolescents and young adults reported on were female, with a mean age of 15.2 when they announced that they were trans.) She notes that none of those people would have met the diagnostic criteria for gender dysphoria in childhood (Littman 2018, p. 12).

#### **IV. Political consciousness**

*Feminist consciousness.* Some transwomen have done the work of coming to understand male privilege and the ways in which being socialized as male under patriarchy (especially relevant to all those transwomen who don't transition in childhood) is likely to give one a certain set of traits which are not superseded by being disadvantaged along another dimension (namely being trans). Some have not done this work. (Emi Koyama's take on this in '[The Transfeminist Manifesto](#)'[9], pp. 3–4, is good.)

#### **Why these differences matter in the debate**

When radical feminists, like me, talk about what we see as a conflict of interest between women's rights and trans rights, we tend to have a particular type of transwoman in mind; and when trans activists reject the idea that there's any such conflict of interest (and indeed, that we're *Nazis* for even suggesting that there could be) they tend to have a very different type of transwoman in mind. This difference in 'imagined person' has come up time and time again in the conversations I've had with friends and colleagues on this topic.

Consider a person for whom, when they hear 'transwoman', imagines a rather effeminate or androgynous male person, who is on hormone therapy and presents in a feminine way, who transitioned fairly young, who tends to be conscious of feminist issues, and who has suffered a lot from the experience of dealing with gender dysphoria from a young age. Now imagine this person having an argument about whether transwomen should be able to access women-only spaces, with someone who instead when she hears 'transwoman' imagines a tall, muscular, sixty year-old male, whose feminine presentation comes across as a parody of femininity, who shows zero understanding of feminist issues, and who seems to [exhibit a lot of male entitlement](#)[10] in her aggression toward the women who dare to suggest that she might not be welcome in all women-only spaces. With such very different people in mind, is it any surprise that the two sides of this debate disagree so much about whether transwomen are women, and whether transwomen should be granted access to all the protections women have under the law?

Note how much these differences affect the arguments, too. A male person identified as trans who doesn't have body dysmorphia, doesn't have gender dysphoria (or gender 'incongruence', as in the DSM-5 and ICD-11), and is motivated by queer theory, social contagion, or autogynephilia, has I think *zero claim* to be in women-only spaces. That is to say, her interests in inclusion, and how much she is 'harmed' by exclusion, count for virtually nothing compared against women's interest in having some spaces free of male people.

The same is not true of a male person who has body dysmorphia, or gender dysphoria, and who has undertaken a meaningful transition as a result of these. In the latter kinds of cases, we at least have to have a more careful conversation about how to balance the two groups' competing interests. Even though I lean towards thinking that third spaces are a better solution than transwomen's inclusion in women-only spaces, I'd be a lot happier if we were only having that conversation about male people with body dysmorphia or gender dysphoria (and perhaps even those whose motivation is sexual orientation, namely, in some nearby possible world they would have been gay men instead).

Sex self-identification is a rubbish policy option precisely because it is not receptive to any of the distinctions I've just made, and it proposes to treat as a woman anyone who merely claims to be one. That is bad for women.

**Links:**

- [1] <https://www.vox.com/identities/2016/5/13/17938114/transgender-people-transitioning-surgery-medical>
- [2] <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/7/12/e018121>
- [3] <http://www.daniellemuscato.com/>
- [4] <http://www.grrlalex.co.uk/what-is-transgender/>
- [5] <https://www.amazon.com.au/Man-Would-Queen-Gener-Bending-Transsexualism/dp/0309084180>
- [6] <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Trapped-Mens-Bodies-Autogynephilic-Transsexualism/dp/1461451817>
- [7] <https://www.feministcurrent.com/2018/01/12/podcast-happens-husband-decides-hes-woman/>
- [8] <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0202330>
- [9] <https://eminism.org/readings/pdf-rdg/tfmanifesto.pdf>
- [10] <https://www.feministcurrent.com/2019/03/20/discontinuation-of-grant-to-vancouver-rape-relief-shows-trans-activism-is-an-attack-on-women/>