

Trans Accessibility Project: Transphobia And Discrimination

The violence, discrimination and hatred heaped upon differently-gendered people is an enormous wrong. This bigotry will stop only when the rest of "us" are able to accept our own gender conflicts and pinpoint our own prejudices about biological sex and social sex-roles.

-Pat Califia (1997, p. 10)

Transphobia is:

A reaction of fear, loathing & discriminatory treatment of people whose gender identity or gender presentation (or perceived gender or gender identity) does not match, in the socially accepted way, the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgendered people, intersexuals, lesbians, gay men & bisexuals are typically the targets of transphobia.

Transphobia and Genderism

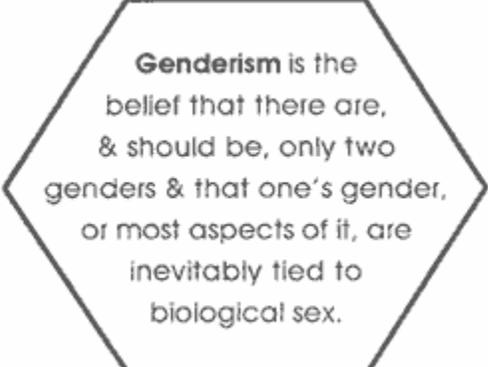
Discrimination against transgendered people (and those seen to be transgressing gender rules) is pervasive in this society. Whether it is constantly being referred to as male when you are female (or female when you are male); being denied housing, employment, medical care or legal protections; or being unable to walk down the street without being insulted or assaulted, transphobia affects all aspects of life.

Transphobia is the term used to describe the prejudice and discrimination directed at people who stray from the rigid gender expectations of our society. While the term is relatively new; the oppression that it describes is not. Transphobic remarks abounded in the 1960s when men let their hair grow and are now commonly heard by lesbians who adopt a "butch" appearance.

There can be no question that gender plays a pivotal role in how this society understands itself. Turn on the television, read a magazine, go to a movie and, if nothing else is clear in the plot, you will have no difficulty distinguishing the boys from the girls. "Male or female?" is one of the first questions asked after a birth, vying only with questions about the baby's health. At the present time, it would be inconceivable for most parents, midwives, or doctors to respond to the question of sex with, "I don't know, let's wait until the baby is old enough to decide for itself."

We live in a society which is very conscious of, and invested in, gender. Determining gender (consciously or unconsciously) is one of the first things that we do when we see another person. Even wandering down the street, we automatically incorporate an awareness of the gender of strangers passing us by. By and large, gender is the first piece of information that we receive about someone we meet, or hear described. We glean that information from the person's first name, from physical cues, from clothing (and accessories), from perfume or cologne, from mannerisms, voice and a multitude of other indicators that we perceive automatically. When there is some ambiguity in gender cues, or when we believe we have been mistaken about a person's gender, our response is

rarely ho-hum. Typical responses range from embarrassed silence to violent assaults. These responses can be seen as stemming from **genderism**. This term refers to a system of beliefs (and the discrimination that flows from it) about gender. The foundation of genderism is 2-fold: that there are only two genders and that one's identity is based in biology.



Genderism is the belief that there are, & should be, only two genders & that one's gender, or most aspects of it, are inevitably tied to biological sex.

"Genderism" is comparable to heterosexism. Just as heterosexism is a world view that recognizes only heterosexuality as natural, genderism is a world view that recognizes two distinct genders as natural and those who believe otherwise are considered abnormal. Similarly, genderism *insists* that everyone's gender identity does, and should, match their apparent biological sex. These beliefs are promoted by individuals and by institutions. When there are exceptions to these rules (and there are many), there is often extreme discomfort and confusion in others. The insistence that transgendered people accept their biological make-up as more "real" than their own gender identity is reflected in a refusal to use the appropriate gender pronouns (even when corrected); and in statements like, "You make a convincing woman, I would never have guessed you weren't one." In addition to the obvious institutionalized belief in the deviance of transgendered people (i.e., transgender identity as a psychiatric disorder), the dehumanizing of transgendered people is evident in the freedom that some people feel to question the status of a transgendered person's genitals (what they look like and whether they "work" the way they are supposed to).

Beliefs Based in Genderism

- * that biology is destiny: a biological male *must* be a man; a biological female *must* be a woman
- * that transgendered people are confused, if not mentally ill
- * that transsexuals are frauds
- * that intersexuals are "freaks" of nature, rather than natural variations
- * that a transgendered woman is really a gay man who cannot come to terms with "his" same-sex desires

It is difficult at times to know where sexism departs from genderism. It could be argued that genderism is also "a weapon of sexism" (to turn Suzanne Pharr's phrase¹). Maintaining a belief in two distinct genders requires significant and obvious differences between the genders. This makes it easier for one gender (that would be men) to justify the domination of the other. So, genderism needs gender rules dictating how men and women should look and behave. A man's masculinity is questioned if he wears earrings and a woman's femininity, if she has very short hair and wears no makeup.

Types of Discrimination

Discrimination comes in many packages. Not all of it is intentional and not all is sanctioned by the state. In some circumstances, people are unaware that they are discriminating; that is, they are not conscious of their prejudice or the effect of their behaviour. They simply have not taken into consideration the existence of

Systemic Discrimination

- * programs that accept only those people whose gender presentation matches their biological sex (addiction programs, support groups, shelters & sexual assault crisis centres)
- * rigid requirements for obtaining legal identification that matches gender identity
- * lack of specific protections for transgendered people in human rights codes & anti-discrimination policies
- * gender identity programs that refuse applicants on the basis of:
 - * poverty
 - * age (too old, too young)
 - * a history of psychiatric illness
 - * being gay, lesbian, bisexual
 - * a criminal record
 - * a medical history of cancer
 - * being HIV positive
 - * a belief by the physician that the person will not pass as a member of their gender
 - * employment in the sex trade
 - * disinterest in adopting traditionally male or female appearances

transgendered people. In other situations, discrimination is quite intentional, if not calculated.

Systemic discrimination refers to situations in which an entire group of people, on the basis of a shared characteristic, is denied the same opportunities, rights and protections as the rest of society. That it remains illegal for gays and lesbians to marry is an example of systemic, or institutionalized, discrimination; similarly, most transgendered people are denied the right to marry. Transgendered people suffer from widespread systemic discrimination which can be intentional or unintentional.

Unintentional discrimination against transgendered people is a common occurrence. Many people and most organizations do not even consider the existence of transgendered people, their needs or their experiences. The discrimination is unintentional because there is no intent to do an injustice: there is simply a failure to recognize that anyone is there. However, discrimination is defined by its effect, not the intention. Unintentional discrimination can be just as painful and destructive as discrimination that is intended. When shelters for survivors of domestic violence were originally established, they were developed for women. No consideration was given to the fact that the group we understood as "women" is diverse in biology and presentation. There was no intention to discriminate against transgendered women, but clearly that has been the effect.

Intentional discrimination refers to conscious discrimination that is justified by the belief that transgendered people do not belong and do not deserve equitable treatment. Intentional discrimination can take the form of placing insurmountable obstacles in people's paths; for example, requiring that SRS be completed in order to be eligible for services. This excludes the majority of transgendered women who cannot (or choose not to) undergo surgery. As Mirha-Soleil Ross (1995) stated, "This policy is politically problematic when we know that the TS women who need those shelters' services the most, are the ones who are probably the least likely to have the privileges required to get an SRS" (p. 10). The intention is to exclude all but a subset of transgendered women (who, in fact, already have the legal right to use the services).

Personal discrimination refers to transphobic behaviours enacted on a one-to-one basis. Personal discrimination both creates, and is a product of, systemic discrimination and also may be intentional or unintentional.

Empathy Exercise

If your gender identity matches the sex you were assigned at birth, or if you have a conventional form of gender expression, you may have some difficulty imagining how transphobia feels when you are on the receiving end of it. You may find it interesting to try this exercise.

If you are nontransgendered.....

- * cross-dress & walk down the main street in the middle of the day
- * if you are female, try wearing a dress & a 5 o'clock shadow
- * if you are harassed on the street, go to the police (similarly dressed) & try to make a complaint
- * call your family, friends & employer & tell them you are really male (if you are female)

How does it feel to even consider doing these things?

If you have tried any of them, what happened?

Examples of personal discrimination

- * displaying discomfort or fear in the presence of transgendered (TG) people
- * insulting, harassing, or assaulting a TG person
- * refusing to rent an apartment to a TG person
- * isolating TG people by insisting on *separate* services, facilities & communities
- * refusing to hire a TG person
- * withholding services or opportunities as a result of gender appearance or identity

Each of the above examples reflects people's discomfort and/or hostility toward gender ambiguity or a person who is clearly defying the expectations for his or her gender. As one woman put it: if people don't know who the man is and who the woman is, how will they know who to oppress?

The complex forms of discrimination that face transgendered people are highlighted by the issue of surgery. Many transgendered people question whether or not to have surgery or take hormones; but many organizations will accept only post-op transsexuals. This means that organizations are insisting that a transgendered woman take hormones, have her penis removed, and undergo hours of electrolysis in order to be considered female and eligible for services. Yet to get surgery, transsexuals must overcome many hurdles, including living and working in their new role for one to two years prior to surgery and finding a way to pay for it. Society says that it will not tolerate them until they have had surgical alterations; and the controllers of SRS say that they will not perform surgery until society accepts them.

All of this points to another type of discrimination that is especially brutal and offensive. One of our fundamental rights in this society is the right to refuse invasive surgery. While there are some exceptions (children and those considered incompetent), for the most part, we cannot compel someone to amputate a body part, even if keeping it might cause their death. Moreover, we cannot insist that a person undergo "cosmetic" surgery because we are uncomfortable with their appearance. Thus, it is a gross violation of human rights to force a group of people to have major surgery in order to receive social services, employment, housing and legal protections. Physical alterations for the comfort of others should not be a requirement for human rights protection.

Transphobia and Heterosexism/Homophobia

Transphobia is often confused with heterosexism or homophobia. **Heterosexism** is the umbrella term used to describe all forms of discrimination against people who are (or are

assumed to be) lesbian, gay or bisexual. Heterosexism includes the promotion by individuals and institutions of the superiority of heterosexuality over same-sex relationships. Heterosexist beliefs include the assumption that everyone should be heterosexual; that everyone is heterosexual (unless known to be otherwise); and that non-heterosexuals are somehow unnatural and abnormal. Like other forms of discrimination, it is often invisible to those who are not its targets. The term **homophobia** is often used to describe personal forms of heterosexism (as opposed to systemic forms), such as verbal and physical abuse. However, many prefer to use the more inclusive term, heterosexism to describe all forms of discrimination against lesbians, gay men and bisexuals.

There is a close relationship between heterosexism/homophobia and transphobia. For example, much homophobic name-calling is related to gender roles. Calling a man a "pansy" or a "fairy" is to call him effeminate; in other words, he is not doing his part in upholding the masculine gender standard. Gay Pride Parades are often criticized from both inside and outside the queer community because of the gender-bending that takes place with drag queens and butch dykes. "If only the boys would look like boys and the girls would look like girls," then being queer would be more acceptable to the heterosexual world. Acceptance of same-sex orientation is dependent on adherence to the rules of gender presentation.

Many assaults on gays and lesbians are directly related to their gender presentation. Women with short hair on their heads and long hair on their legs, or men wearing dresses, constitute a radical departure from acceptable gender rules. It is the appearance of gender-bending, rather than knowledge of sexual behaviours or affections, that precipitates a great deal of homophobic behaviour. Appearance is the tip-off that the person is different and "doesn't belong."

Transgendered individuals are frequently subjected to homophobic reactions even if they identify as heterosexual. A transgendered woman may be attracted only to men, yet her relationships may be considered by others to be gay. Many assaults on transgendered people are homophobic in nature, as the assailant assumes that the person is gay or lesbian.

Layers of Oppression

The discrimination experienced by transgendered people is extensive. Genderism is so pervasive that it is rarely considered to be unfair treatment. Many people are unaware of their genderist assumptions and others feel justified in excluding those who are different. When transgendered people are perceived to be gay or lesbian (although they may not be), they are subjected to the full weight of heterosexism. Those who are also members of other marginalized groups suffer additional harassment, isolation and loss. For example, a person with a disability may find validation for this aspect of their identity within a cultural community of people with similar disabilities (a deaf community, for example) or within their family. Similarly, a person of colour will usually receive validation for their racial identity, and the racism they experience, within their family or cultural communities. However, transgendered people who are rejected by their families of origin

are often simultaneously alienated from their cultural, ethnic and religious communities. Not only is their gender identity rejected, but they may lose validation for most fundamental aspects of who they are. Without these sources of support, they must also cope with classism, racism, ableism and ageism, etc. in mainstream society and in lesbian, gay and transgender communities.

Violence Against Transgendered People

Tyra Hunter

On August 7th, 1995, a 24-year old transgendered woman, named Tyra Hunter, was seriously injured in a hit & run car accident. Paramedics arrived on the scene & began treating Tyra for her injuries. When they discovered that she had a penis they stopped providing assistance & began to ridicule her. Horrified bystanders finally notified a supervisor who resumed treating her as soon as he arrived; however, Tyra died in hospital shortly after being transported there. The results of an internal investigation by the fire department were stated in a brief press release: they could not determine what had happened at the scene of the accident, despite the presence of 8 eyewitnesses.

-Califia (1998, p. 233)

Insufficient research has been undertaken to document the real extent of the violence experienced by transgendered people; however, preliminary research indicates that the incidence is very high.

Carrie Davis, Director of Operations for *GenderPac*², reported in a speech in March of 1999 that almost 60% of transgendered people are victims of violence. GenderPac is also compiling statistics on the number of transgendered people who are murdered because they are transgendered. According to their figures, currently in the United States, one transgendered person is murdered each month. It is believed that this number seriously underestimates the real level of violence because these crimes are often attributed to gay-bashing or other causes.

In a preliminary study (Gender, Violence and Resource Access Survey), 50% of the transgendered respondents reported having been raped or assaulted by a partner. Thirty-one percent of the total sample identified themselves as survivors of domestic violence, when explicitly asked (Courvant & Cook-Daniels, 1998). Of the violence and harassment that are experienced by transgendered individuals, very little is reported. This is similar to other oppressed groups and there are valid reasons for marginalized people's reluctance to report abuses. Sexual assault and domestic abuse against women are among the lowest reported crimes, in addition to having some of the lowest conviction rates. It has taken years of work by the shelter movement to get a satisfactory response from law enforcement agencies. In fact, it has taken years for domestic abuse to even be *considered* a crime; and yet, we still hear of women who are killed by their partners, even after the police have been involved. Just as crimes against women have been invisible, so too are crimes against transgendered people.

A transgendered person reporting a crime to the police has the added burden of "coming out" as transgendered: a difficult and possibly dangerous task, as many gays and lesbians

can attest. Having done this, they must then convince the police that a crime has actually taken place.

In 1993, 20-year old Brandon Teena was unable to convince police in Nebraska that he had been raped. Two acquaintances had raped Brandon shortly after they learned that he was transgendered. The police were insulting and skeptical while taking Brandon's report. The accused were eventually called in for questioning but, even after one of them claimed the other had raped Brandon, neither was charged. A few days later, these same men murdered Brandon and two of his friends. They are both serving life sentences on first degree murder convictions (see *The Brandon Teena Story* listed in [Chapter 8](#)).

Just as women have battled to have sexual and physical violence against them recognized, so must transgendered people and their allies.

Impact of Discrimination

Regardless of the nature of the discrimination suffered, whether it is because of our sexual orientation, race, age, religion, size, ability or gender identity, discrimination erodes our dignity, our ability to participate in society as equals, and our ability to experience ourselves as fully human. Riki Anne Wilchins writes:

There is something peculiarly incestuous about trans-experience. It robs us of our bodies, our intimate moments, our sexuality, our childhood. It robs us of honesty, of open friendship, of the luxury of looking into a mirror without pain staring back at us. It means hiding from friends and family, from spouses and children, as surely as it means hiding from the police car during an evening stroll, or from that knot of laughing boys down at the corner when we go out for a coke. In the end, it is as tiring as a constant pain and as barren as the bottom of an empty well at high noon. (1997, p. 21)

The impact of sustained discrimination is profound. Most transgendered people, like lesbians and members of other disadvantaged groups, grow up feeling isolated and acutely aware of being different. The constant barrage of negative messages can lead to internalized transphobia, with feelings of shame and self-hatred.

The abuse, anxiety and self-loathing instilled by genderism and transphobia permeate all aspects of a person's life. Some clinical reports suggest that over 70% of transsexuals have contemplated suicide at some point in their lives and between 17% and 20% have attempted suicide at least once. Transgendered youth report intense loneliness during adolescence and great difficulty finding acceptance or identification with mainstream youth and, often, gay and lesbian youth (Brown & Rounsley, 1996). Young transgendered heterosexuals, for example are not perceived to be so by others; and gay and lesbian transsexuals may be seen as heterosexual, though they identify with same-sex peers. The impact of growing up under the weight of discrimination can be as straight forward as knowing that you do not belong, and perhaps feeling that you do not deserve to belong.

Absence of Services

Any group faced with unrelenting discrimination will be in particular need of social services; however, as is often the case, those in greatest need have access to the fewest resources.

In 1995, Viviane Ki Namaste examined the experiences of transgendered people with health care and social services in Ontario (Namaste, 1995b). Not surprisingly, she found that transsexuals and transgenderists face a multitude of systemic barriers in these institutions and agencies. They lacked informed, safe access to hormones, were mistreated by hospital staff, were denied entry to traditional alcohol and drug rehabilitation programs and were refused access to shelters for youth, women and the homeless.

Namaste reported that very few resources exist for transgendered people with housing needs. Youth shelters were generally unsympathetic to young transgendered people; in fact, the shelters could be hostile and dangerous. Some shelters had staff members who immediately refused access to transgendered youth or made their admittance conditional on "gender appropriate" dress and behaviour. Transgendered youth were subjected to unfair treatment and blamed for the violence and the hostile attitudes of other shelter residents.

Similarly, some women's shelters refused to admit transgendered women under any circumstances, while others would offer services under specific conditions. Acceptance of transgendered women varied from shelter to shelter, making it very difficult for a transgendered survivor of violence to know where to turn.

Mirha-Soleil Ross (1995) hoped to develop a list of women's shelters that would accept and offer support to transsexual women in crisis. She surveyed 20 women's shelters in the Toronto area, from which five completed questionnaires were received. One of her questions asked if the shelter accepted transsexual women as clients. Some shelters indicated that they did, under the following circumstances:

- they must identify as women,
- or, they must have completed SRS,
- or, they must identify as women and have completed SRS,
- or, cases are dealt with individually

The questionnaire also asked if the shelter had a written policy prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender identity. None of the shelters that responded had such a policy.

The impact of discrimination is such that transgendered survivors of violence have few, if any, options available to them when they are assaulted or abused. While shelters are beginning to take notice of this issue, and some are taking a genuine interest in rectifying the situation, there is still much work to be done. Ross stated that,

the whole question of TS women in women's shelters is a perfect example of how TS's are defined, controlled and regulated by non-transsexuals, whether they be psychiatric

authorities demanding that we fit their pre-conceived and prejudiced notions of gender or non-transsexual women deciding whether or not to include us and under what circumstances. (p. 10)

While the debate about who is a woman rages, transgendered survivors of violence remain without refuge.

¹ Pharr, S. (1988). Homophobia: A weapon of sexism. Little Rock AR: Chardon Press.

² GenderPac (Gender Public Advocacy Coalition) is a non-profit group composed of individuals and organizations dedicated to pursuing "gender, affectional, and racial equality" and contesting gender-based oppression (Wilchins, 1997).

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