

access to the means of transitioning. Thankfully, some have already begun working toward this goal, designing programs that provide trans people with affordable access to information, hormones, and the appropriate medical tests to ensure a safe transition.<sup>81</sup> Others in the field of psychiatry have similarly advocated that mental health professionals move away from the gatekeeper model and toward one focused on helping the transsexual manage the emotional stress and obstacles they are faced with when transitioning.<sup>82</sup>

While all of these changes represent a promising start, true equality for transsexuals and transgender people will remain elusive as long as gender variance remains pathologized by the American Psychiatric Association, which publishes the *DSM*. Human beings show a large range of gender and sexual diversity, so there is no legitimate reason for any form of cross-gender behavior or identity to be categorized as a mental disorder.

That said, I also take issue with those who argue for completely demedicalizing transsexuality, or who advocate removing GID from the *DSM* without first ensuring that there are provisions in place to allow people who choose to transition affordable access to transsexual-related medical procedures. Some have suggested creating a medical diagnosis for transsexuality to replace the current psychiatric diagnosis of GID; this makes sense, being that most transsexuals feel that our problem lies not with our minds, but with our bodies.<sup>83</sup> Once these medical provisions are in place, the importance of psychiatrically depathologizing transgenderism cannot be underestimated. After all, it is the popular misconception that gender variance constitutes a mental illness—that transsexual and transgender people are the ones who have the problem—that enables cissexual and cisgender prejudice against us.

Julia Serano - Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism & the Scapegoating of Femininity

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## Dismantling Cissexual Privilege

UNTIL NOW, DISCOURSES ON transsexuality have invariably relied on language and concepts invented by clinicians, researchers, and academics who have made transsexuals the objects of their inquiry. In such a framework, transsexual bodies, identities, perspectives, and experiences are continuously required to be explained and inevitably remain open to interpretation. Corresponding cissexual attributes are simply taken for granted—they are assumed to be “natural” and “normal” and therefore escape reciprocal critique. This places transsexuals at a constant disadvantage, since we have generally been forced to rely on limiting cissexual-centric terminology to make sense of our own lives.

In recent years, the rise of transgender activism has provided a new paradigm for understanding the experiences of the gender-variant population (of which transsexuals are a subset). According to this model, gender-variant people are oppressed by a system that forces everyone to identify and be easily recognizable as either a woman or a man. This perspective has led transgender activists to primarily focus their attention on opposing binary gender norms—

particularly those that place limitations on one's gender expression and appearance—and to celebrate and create cultural space for those who defy, transcend, or fail to identify within the male/female binary. While transgender activism has undoubtedly benefited the transsexual community in many ways, it has also made invisible many of our distinct issues and experiences. To a large extent, this is because transgender rhetoric favors the perspectives of those who identify outside the male/female binary (whereas most transsexuals typically identify within it) and those whose gender expression and appearance does not conform to the binary (whereas transsexuals typically cite the discrepancy between their subconscious sex and physical sex as the major obstacle in their lives).

While I believe that creating space for people who exist outside of the male/female binary remains a cause worth fighting for, those of us who are transsexual must begin to simultaneously develop our own language and concepts that accurately articulate our unique experiences and perspectives and to fill in the many gaps that exist in both gatekeeper and transgender activist language. I contend that this work should begin with a thorough critique of *cissexual privilege*—that is, the double standard that promotes the idea that transsexual genders are distinct from, and less legitimate than, cissexual genders. Before describing how cissexual privilege is practiced and justified, we must address two underacknowledged yet crucial aspects of social gender that enable cissexual privilege to proliferate, yet remain invisible: *gendering* and *cissexual assumption*.

### Gendering

Most of us want to believe that the act of distinguishing between women and men is a passive task, that all people naturally fall

into one of two mutually exclusive categories—male and female—and that we observe these natural states in an unobtrusive, objective manner. However, this is not the case. Distinguishing between women and men is an active process, and we do it compulsively. If you have any doubt about this, simply observe how quickly you determine other people's genders: It happens instantaneously. Not only that, but we tend to make the call one way or another no matter how far away a person is or how little evidence we have to go by. While we may like to think of ourselves as being passive observers, in reality we are constantly and actively projecting our ideas and assumptions about maleness and femaleness onto every person we meet. And all of us do it, whether we are cissexual or transsexual, straight as an arrow, or as queer as a three-dollar bill.

I call this process of distinguishing between females and males *gendering*, to highlight the fact that we actively and compulsively assign genders to all people based on usually just a few visual and audio cues. Recognizing the ubiquitous nature of this phenomenon calls into question most definitions of "gender" itself. We can argue all we want about what defines a woman or a man—whether it's genes, chromosomes, brain structure, genitals, socialization, or the legal sex on a birth certificate or driver's license—but the truth is, these factors typically play no role whatsoever in how we gender people in everyday circumstances. Typically, we rely primarily on secondary sex characteristics (body shape and size, skin complexion, facial and body hair, voice, breasts, etc.), and to a lesser extent, gender expression and gender roles (the person's dress, mannerisms, etc.). I will refer to the gender we are assigned by other people as our *perceived sex* (or *perceived gender*).

A major reason the act of gendering remains invisible to most people is that, in the vast majority of cases, our assessment of a person's gender tends to be in agreement with that person's gender identity and the gender assignments made by other people. (If the genders we assigned to individuals regularly differed from the assignments made by other people, the guesswork inherent in gendering would become far more obvious to us.) However, as a transsexual, I have been in numerous situations (particularly during my transition) where two or more people simultaneously came to different conclusions regarding my perceived gender—that is, one person assumed that I was female, while another assumed that I was male. Such instances demonstrate the speculative nature of gendering. I have also found that people's experiences and preconceptions around gender dramatically affect the way they gender other people. For example, back when I identified as a male crossdresser, I found that I could "pass" as a woman rather easily in suburban areas, but in cities (where people were presumably more aware of the existence of gender-variant people) I would often be "read" as a crossdressed male. Most cissexuals remain oblivious to the subjective nature of gendering, primarily because they themselves have not regularly had the experience of being *misgendered*—i.e., mistakenly assigned a gender that does not match one's identified gender. Unfortunately, this lack of experience usually leads cissexuals to mistakenly believe that the process of gendering is a matter of pure observation, rather than the act of speculation it is.

### Cissexual Assumption

The second process that enables cissexual privilege is *cissexual assumption*. This occurs when a cissexual makes the common, albeit

mistaken, assumption that the way they experience their physical and subconscious sexes (i.e., the fact that they do not feel uncomfortable with the sex they were born into, nor do they think of themselves as or wish they could become the other sex) applies to everyone else in the world. In other words, the cissexual indiscriminately projects their cissexuality onto all other people, thus transforming cissexuality into a human attribute that is taken for granted. There is an obvious analogy to heterosexual assumption here: Most cissexuals assume that everyone they meet is also cissexual, just as most heterosexuals assume that everyone they meet is also heterosexual (unless, of course, they are provided with evidence to the contrary).

While cissexual assumption remains invisible to most cissexuals, those of us who are transsexual are excruciatingly aware of it. Prior to our transitions, we find that the cissexual majority simply assumes that we fully identify as members of our assigned sex, thus making it difficult for us to manage our gender difference and to be open about the way we see ourselves. And after our transitions, many of us find that the cissexual majority simply assumes that we have always been members of our identified sex, thus making it impossible for us to be open about our trans status without constantly having to come out to others. Thus, while most cissexuals are unaware that cissexual assumption even exists, those of us who are transsexual recognize it as an active process that erases trans people and their experiences.

### Cissexual Gender Entitlement

For most cissexuals, the fact that they feel comfortable inhabiting their own physical sex, and that other people confirm this sense of

naturalness by appropriately gendering them, allows them to develop a sense of entitlement regarding their own gender: They feel entitled to call themselves a woman or a man. This is not necessarily a bad thing. However, because many of these same cissexuals also assume that they are infallible in their ability to assign genders to other people, they can develop an overactive sense of *cissexual gender entitlement*. This goes beyond a sense of self-ownership regarding their own gender, and broaches territory in which they consider themselves to be the ultimate arbiters of which people are allowed to call themselves women or men. Once again, most cissexuals are unaware of their gender entitlement, because (1) the processes that enable it (i.e., gendering and cissexual assumption) are invisible to them, and (2) so long as they are cissexual and relatively gender-normative, they have likely not been inconvenienced by the gender entitlement of others. Because gender-entitled cissexuals assume that they have the ability and authority to accurately determine who is a woman and who is a man, they in effect grant a privilege—*cissexual privilege*—to those people whom they appropriately gender. To illustrate this point, imagine that I'm approached by someone who appears male to me (i.e., I gender them male). If they were to introduce themselves as "Mr. Jones," I would probably extend them cissexual privilege—that is, I would respect their male identity and extend to them all of the privileges associated with their identified sex. I might call them "sir," grant them permission into a male-only space, find it appropriate when they tell me they're married to a woman, etc. However, if I were gender-entitled, there might be some instances in which I'd refuse to extend them the privileges associated with their identified sex. For instance, if the person introduced themselves as "Ms. Jones," but I chose to view the gender

I'd initially perceived them as (i.e., male) to be more authentic or legitimate than their female identity, then I would be denying them cissexual privilege. Similarly, if I were to learn that "Mr. Jones" was transsexual and had been born female, and if that knowledge led me to re-gender him as female rather than male, I would again be denying him (in this case) cissexual privilege.

An excellent example of how gender entitlement produces cissexual privilege, and how that privilege can be used to undermine transsexual genders, can be found in the following Germaine Greer quote:

*No one ever asked women if they recognized sex-change males as belonging to their sex or considered whether being obliged to accept MTF transsexuals as women was at all damaging to their identity or self-esteem.<sup>1</sup>*

The immediate sense that one gets after reading this quote (besides nausea) is Greer's severe sense of gender entitlement. Despite the fact that she knows that transsexual women identify as female, Greer refers to us instead as "sex-change males," demonstrating that she feels entitled to gender us in whatever way she feels is appropriate. Similarly, because of her cissexual assumption (i.e., her belief that cissexuality is "natural" and goes without saying), she doesn't bother defining exactly what she means when she uses the word "women"; in her mind, it's a given that she is referring only to cissexual women. Greer grants these women cissexual privilege when she suggests that they (along with her) are equally entitled to be consulted about whether transsexual women should belong to their sex or not. It is particularly telling that Greer uses the word

“asked” in this context. After all, nobody in our society ever asks for permission to belong to one gender or another; rather, we just are who we are and other people make assumptions about our gender accordingly. Thus, when Greer uses the words “asked” and “obliged,” she is not talking about whether trans women should be allowed to be female, but whether or not our femaleness should be respected and legitimized to the same extent as cissexual women’s femaleness. By applying different standards of legitimacy to people’s identified and lived genders based on whether they are cissexual or transsexual, Greer is producing and exercising cissexual privilege.

### The Myth of Cissexual Birth Privilege

Since cissexuals are generally unaware that their gender entitlement arises from the acts of gendering and cissexual assumption, they often find themselves having to justify their belief that their gender is more legitimate or “real” than that of a transsexual. The most common myth used to justify this cissexual privilege is the idea that cissexuals inherit the right to call themselves female or male by virtue of being born into that particular sex. In other words, cissexuals view their gender entitlement as a birthright. This is often a deceitful act, as many (if not most) cissexuals in our society tend to look disparagingly upon societies and cultures that still rely on class or caste systems—where one’s occupation, social status, economic disposition, political power, etc., is predetermined based on an accident of birth. So while most Western cissexuals frown upon birth privilege as a means to determine these other forms of social class, they hypocritically embrace it when it comes to gender.

Once a cissexual assumes that their gender entitlement is a birth privilege, then it becomes easy for them to dismiss the legitimacy of

transsexuals’ identified and lived sex. After all, in their eyes, transsexuals are actively trying to claim for themselves a gender that they are not entitled to (having not been born into it). However, as a transsexual, I find several obvious flaws with this “birth privilege” argument. First of all, the sex we are assigned at birth plays almost no role whatsoever in day-to-day human interactions. None of us need to carry our birth certificate around with us to prove what sex we were born into. And since I have been living as a woman, I have never had a single person ask me whether I was born a girl. Indeed, cissexual assumption essentially renders my birth sex irrelevant, as others will automatically assume that I was born female (based solely on the fact that they have gendered me female).

Gender-entitled cissexuals may try to claim that I am actively setting out to “steal” cissexual privilege by transitioning to, and living as, female, but the truth is that I don’t have to. In fact, I have found that cissexuals dole out cissexual privilege to complete and total strangers rather indiscriminately. Every time I walk into a store and someone asks, “How can I help you, ma’am?” they are extending me cissexual privilege. Every time I walk into a women’s restroom and nobody flinches or questions my presence, they are extending me cissexual privilege. However, because I am a transsexual, the cissexual privilege that I experience is not equal to that of a cissexual because it can be brought into question at any time. It is perhaps best described as *conditional cissexual privilege*, because it can be taken away from me (and often is) as soon as I mention, or someone discovers, that I am transsexual.

Cissexuals may want to believe that their genders are more authentic than mine, but that belief is dishonest and ignorant. The truth is, cissexual women feel entitled to call themselves women