

A BROADER LOOK AT THE SUBJECT

Sex, gender and other little words: some notions to help understand the biographies of women, adolescents and girls with transgender life experience

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“Ain’t I A Woman?” Sojourner Truth, 1851

For some time now, a debate has been going on about the rights of women and girls with transgender life experience regarding their existence and legitimacy in the context of the negotiations for the approval of a comprehensive nationwide transgender law. The law that has been in force for over 14 years is Law 3/2007, which regulates the registry rectification of the mention of a person’s sex (at the time misnamed the *Gender Identity Law*). It regulates solely and exclusively the change of the mention of sex in official documents such as on the ID card, for which it requires being of legal age and holding the Spanish nationality. It is not therefore a comprehensive law. In addition, it requires external certification in the form of a diagnosis of mental disorder issued by a psychiatrist or clinical

psychologist and two years of medical treatment – always hormonal – , which often causes infertility.

Recognizing certain women as holders of rights based on diagnosing their identity as a mental disorder and subjecting them to a compulsory medical process regardless of their will does not seem to be the most sensible way of proceeding, as is currently being expressed by numerous international human rights organisations.

The proposed amendment of Catalan Law 5/2008 on the right of women to eradicate gender violence is a milestone in bringing, for the first time, these women, adolescents, and girls under its protection, where previously it had not done so, by expanding the forms of violence that were included in the original text. It was a necessary step forward, since these women, adolescents and girls were becoming vulnerable. From now on, in Catalonia they will be recognized as subjects of law, whereas before they were *de facto* excluded.

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The most common and transversal violence in their lives – the denial that they are women – has, however, found a breeding ground and a social climate of ignorance and unknowing, by means of which their lives are being distorted. People are disoriented, using words and concepts that are constantly repeated with different meanings, and there is an ongoing dispute over the meaning of terms such as man, woman, sex, and gender. The dissemination of the contribution of sexology can clarify much of this debate, which has feet of clay.

Rethinking the concepts of sex and gender

The idea of sex is thousands of years old, and was used by the first Greek philosophers (*The Banquet*, by Plato), for whom *sexus*, *sexare* means ‘to cut’, ‘to differentiate’, ‘separation’. In short, everything that refers to what makes us different from others, and therefore, to our identity. It is therefore about the “sex we are” (genitals, chromosomes), rather than the “sex we have” (genital practices).

What role do genitalia and chromosomes (to which this “biology” has been discursively reduced) play in this identity? A partial one, but it is not the whole story: the genitalia (a word also coming from the *genus* in Latin) are those organs that can enable the generation of next generations, which were given a different name from the concept of sex. Chromosomes were not even observable until the invention of microscopes.

This idea that genitalia and chromosomes therefore provide the “biological truth” of sex

cannot be true, and this is where the lives of, among others, people who are in a situation of transsexuality (but not only them), come into play.

Sex is not, therefore, a merely biological concept. Admitting that biological, psychological and social/cultural aspects all shape us, since all these areas are interrelated and in constant interaction in the lives of people, it is possible to emphasise that sex is, above all, biographical. Although this biography is delimited by the biological aspect (as well as by the psychological and social, which cannot be separated in anyone's life), it is much more than genitalia and chromosomes.

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In what way is sex biographical? In the same way that a woman in western society fills her identity with meaning from the events that occur in her life in a different way from another woman in a country like Iran or India, or in a community or tribe in Asia or the Pacific.

The term gender - also from the Latin *genus* - is a specific technical term in social sciences that alludes to the set of different characteristics that each society assigns to men and women. To speak of gender therefore means to refer to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a society considers appropriate for men and women.

Therefore, this is the key: if the sexes refer to what we are and what differentiates us from others, our sexual dimension refers to this identity, rather than to the one imposed and modelled by social norms. Rethinking gender means analysing all these elements in a culture, which, without a doubt, when it does not possess the flexibility that individual people need to express themselves, becomes repressive and conceals personal reality, which should ultimately be what prevails. Gender is, therefore, an instrument of analysis that allows us to identify oppression, but in no case it is the origin of identity, since, as the lives of people with transgender life experience show, identity cannot be imposed, no matter how much effort and how many conversion therapies are put in place.

The truth is that the debate about what makes us who we are has no definitive conclusion. "Who am I?" is one of the great questions in humanity. "What makes us who we are?". We have no answer to this question, nor is there a technology invented so that the answer can be found by someone other than the person themselves. Most likely, there are multiple causes that all interact with each other.

However, one thing that we do know, or that the multiple disciplines that are doing research into this subject all know, is that the biology/culture division is fictitious, since our sexual dimension is constructed by both aspects, which act in the lives of people in ongoing interaction. It is not possible to separate them as if cutting an orange. In the same way that

we cannot divide who we are into the “biological” and the “cultural”, neither does the biological reductionism of genitals and chromosomes include everybody, and neither does identity based on gender (which is translated into a “desire to be”, a “feeling of being” whose origin we cannot explain). It is time, therefore, to propose a shift in the paradigm to overcome the already stagnant sex/gender system.

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We might very well conclude, therefore, that people with this biographical transgender experience ARE women, ARE men, from the very moment in which they live and we live as such. That it is not a question of a “desire” or a “feeling of believing to be”, or at least in a different way from those who are not in situations of transsexuality, whose desire or feeling (a feeling that exists in the same way) are not questioned.

The notion of intersexuality as a continuum of the sexes

Intersexuality is a key concept that, breaking with the scheme of “genitalia and chromosomes”, can help us take this paradigmatic leap that makes us understand the sexed biography of people in this situation of transsexuality. We are sexed throughout our existence, shaping ourselves as sexed subjects. Thereofre, overcoming inequalities inevitably involves understanding the differences, valuing them, not denying them or considering them only partially. The understanding of these differences is what will lead us to abandon the sexual dimorphism/binarism, from which we are taught that the “feminine is exclusive to women” as opposed to the “masculine as exclusive to men”, “being a woman” as opposed to “being a man”, as two self-contained and opposed realities, but rather to value them as a sexual continuum.

We should therefore understand intersexuality beyond the reiterative genital and chromosomal reductionism with which the word is simplified, to speak, once again, only of genitalia and chromosomes that are “mixed” or “ambiguous”, as this word is generally used to refer to the old notion of hermaphroditism. As Magnus Hirschfeld defined it in the early twentieth century: “alongside purely masculine and feminine characteristics there are also others that are neither masculine nor feminine or more precisely, they are both masculine and feminine. And yet it is beyond doubt that this sum of characteristics does not condition the complete sameness of the sexes: the sexes may be of equal value or have the same rights, but they are certainly not the same” [1].

This is why it is wise to use the word trans as an adjective rather than as a noun. We should use language strategically and talk about *life experiences, situations or trans conditions*, and not so much that someone “is trans”. Women, adolescents and girls are not trans in themselves, they are women, adolescents and girls, and therefore trans is an adjective rather than a noun, which becomes the only relevant characteristic. It is this same

reflection, that genitals and chromosomes are not exclusive identity providers in any case (whether or not one is in a transgender situation/condition), that brings me to state that trans is a set of sexual characteristics, rather than an identity.

From this notion of intersexuality as a continuum of the sexes, transgender women, adolescents and girls emphasise that they do not need anything else to be what they already are (like surgery or hormones), and that they do not want to be anything else but what they already are. They do not have male bodies inhabited by women's souls (because, even if they have certain masculine characteristics, they are women's bodies, since each one of them is the body of a woman), they are not the bodies of men who want to be women, or bodies that are "not their own". I would therefore propose getting rid of these ways of referring to their identities (that is to say, their sexes) and their bodies.

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That is why definitions are so important, the contents with which we fill the words, both in theoretical debates and in the legal world, which is what legislates the specific realities. Moreover, it is important to make this sex education, this pedagogy necessary to refer to the lives of women, adolescents and girls in transgender situations so that we do not deny who they are or distort their biographies. There is no better way of doing this than starting to educate, to celebrate all this knowledge, this knowledge of who we are, something that is not recognized.

Some recommendations to go deeper into the subject

This is why, finally, I would recommend the following materials from the *Nenes i Nens* (Girls and Boys) project, to use them in a didactic way when starting to explain these vital transgender realities in the classroom:

- For teachers, especially those working with children and teenagers, I recommend *Nenes i nens: projecte d'educació sexual bàsica* (Girls and boys; a basic sexual education project), consisting of a book, a set of cards and a didactic unit (the latter can be downloaded free of charge from the [website](#)), to use them at home or in the classroom with children.
- In order to understand, feel and empathise with the stories of families with children in transgender situations, have a look at the study entitled *Tránsitos. Comprender la transexualidad infantil y juvenil a través de los relatos de madres y padres* (Transits. Understanding child and adolescent transsexuality through the stories of mothers and fathers) [2].
- To go deeper into and receive training in the terms used to describe these situations,

see *Términos, conceptos y reflexiones para una comprensión sexológica de la transexualidad* (Terms, concepts and thoughts for a sexological understanding of transsexuality) [3].

Finally, some encouragement for those of you who have come to this article seeking to find out how to act appropriately with women, adolescents and girls living transgender lives. The mere fact that you want to be trained and informed shows that you will know how to do it very well, because when we have seen, lived and learned so much, it is impossible not to know.

REFERENCES

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