Definition – A Feminist Weblog » There is nothing essential about being a woman.
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Posted on February 7, 2007 by earlbecke

A transwoman in Vancouver has just had a discrimination suit dismissed by the Supreme Court of Canada. Heart actually has a detailed overview of the case posted at her place, but I refuse to link to it due to the disgustingly transphobic remarks she and her readers have made in the comments. (Yeah, um, don’t bother trying to argue about this. This is a queer blog. It won’t go over well.)

So instead, I’ll quote this article:

The Supreme Court will not hear arguments about whether a women’s service organization erred in excluding a trans person from working with the Vancouver-based group.

The Feb 1 decision denying “leave to appeal” to the Supreme Court Of Canada leaves Kimberly Nixon without further recourse for her exclusion from Vancouver Rape Relief.

The battle began a decade ago when Nixon filed a human rights complaint against the organization over her treatment.

The BC Human Rights Tribunal found that Nixon had been discriminated against on the basis of her trans identity and ordered Rape Relief to pay her $7,500 in damages.

But the victory was short-lived. Rape Relief appealed to the BC Supreme Court, where the tribunal’s decision was overturned. At that time, Rape Relief did not dispute the allegation that it rejected Nixon because she is trans, but argued it was allowed to do so. Nixon appealed to the BC Court Of Appeal, who upheld the province’s Supreme Court decision in 2005.

The argument here is that a woman raised with male privilege has such a different experience that she can’t relate to or counsel cisgendered women who’ve suffered violence. (Well, that’s the relatively benign argument. We won’t get into the paranoid “feminist” arguments about “appropriation” and “infiltration”, or the otherwise outright offensive arguments.) The reality is far from this simple.

The reality is that there is no universal, essential experience of womanhood. The mainstream American feminist movement has often and rightly been criticized for ignoring the experience of women of color, queer women, poor women. None of us have grown up or been raised the same way. None of our experiences have been exactly the same or meant the same thing to us, impacted us in the same ways.

My experience as a biracial, queer, ex-Mormon feminist can’t be compared to a straight, white, Christian woman. It can’t be compared to a woman who grew up in poverty, or another culture, or another part of the world. We are not the same. There is no unifying thread which connects us, nothing magical or spiritual binding us all in sisterhood with one another except those threads we weave ourselves, those bridges that we build, and our shared humanity, which, might I remind you, we also share with men.

What is this experience transwomen can never have or understand which makes them not “real” women in the social sense? We can’t argue it’s dependent on the presence or absence of female sex organs; there are women with birth defects and women without wombs. There are women who have been victims of Female Genital
Mutilation. There can be women born with ambiguous genitalia. And, so, there can be women with male sex organs, too.

An appeal to blood is useless here for the reasons stated above: not all women, even cisgendered women, bleed. Some women have reproductive health issues. Some women have been through menopause. Not all of us bleed the same way. I can hardly relate to women for whom menstruation is a horrible, agonizing ordeal — for me, it is something I hardly even think about. Given the huge amount of physical variation, the ultimately subjective nature of our interactions with our own bodies, I hardly think a woman born with a penis can be much different from me than a woman with endometriosis. Both are foreign. Both are certainly women.

There is no biological congruence. There is no identical socialization. Even women who have endured the same event will process it differently, come to different conclusions. Nobody is an island, but neither are any of us the same. It’s been argued that no one can ever truly understand another person, and I agree. Given that, how can anyone really believe there’s anything essential that ties all women together? Even if we all emerged from the same common background, I don’t think that would be true.

Those who claim transwomen experience some overwhelming male privilege which makes them incapable of understanding women, empathizing with women, being part of women’s groups, I think are woefully ignorant of what it means to grow up gender-variant or queer.

Growing up queer means that you know from a very young age that you do not belong, that there is something wrong with the world or wrong with you. Girls who are tomboys are teased, discouraged from pursuing their interests, but in many ways are tolerated because it’s okay for a girl to want to be a like a boy, to be “better”, more “masculine”, as long as she understands that she can still never be as good as the genuine article. But effeminate boys? There’s nothing worse in the world; a boy acting like a girl? That’s a huge step down. Being “feminine” is wrong, bad. Women are flawed and men who resemble women in any small or superficial way are not treated kindly.

Male privilege looks very different when people think that you’re a fag (or, for that matter, a butch dyke). You’re a target, you are harassed and tormented, beat up, murdered, simply because you challenged some sociopath’s sense of propriety. Is that privilege? Is it a privilege to be gay-bashed? Certainly, most transwomen will have had some advantages in their upbringing, but I can hardly fault any woman who wasn’t raised thinking she was worthless, thinking she simply wasn’t as good, that she was dumber, more emotional, capable of less, an object for the pleasure of men. Any woman, trans or cisgendered, who has managed to escape these messages has nothing but my astonished pleasure for her good fortune (and it’s ignorant to assume that transwomen haven’t had some exposure at least by proxy before transition, and that they don’t experience life the same way any other woman does afterward, at least if they “pass” — if they don’t, I think their experience is much worse).

Kimberly Nixon is post-op. Any arguments revolving around the presence of a penis are at this point incorrect and irrelevant (although they’d be bigoted and wrong in any case). Any arguments about her experience as a woman, her ability to empathize with female victims of violence, are similarly flawed. Transwomen experience life as women, and are disproportionately victims of prejudice, discrimination, violence. This leaves only her experience growing up as justification for the actions of Vancouver Rape Relief.

None of us have had the same experience growing up. None. Most of us have trouble understanding the forces which formed other people, looking through that lens sympathetically to try to understand why people are the way that they are, or are not. Kimberly is no different from any other woman in that regard, and it is no excuse for this kind of shameful prejudice, especially at the hands of so-called feminists.

I have said it before and I hate that it’s necessary, but I will say it again, as often as I must: any feminist who does not fight for the rights of all women is no ally of mine.
While I haven’t exactly followed this story, something that I read back on 3 Feb, struck me as particularly interesting in a sadly ironic sort of way.

Apparently, one of the arguments that Rape Relief raised during the original tribunal had to do with Rape Relief’s “concern” that Nixon’s appearance, which Rape Relief considered “masculine,” would be upsetting to clients seeking shelter. So, effectively, a feminist organisation has said that its volunteers must conform to gender stereotypes about feminine appearance.

I can only wonder how many, if any, women-born-women Rape Relief has refused to allow to volunteer for being too masculine looking.

Comment by ARConn — February 10, 2007 @ 12:08 am

2. The tragic thing is, as I see it: Ms. Nixon has used the services of a domestic violence shelter before. That is, you can argue all you like about her inability to empathize with women who’ve been through domestic violence, but she is one, and as such, probably has a lot more in common with, and more understanding of, the people she’d be counseling at a DV shelter than a cisgendered-woman coworker who hasn’t experienced domestic violence personally. (And Some People might argue that that coworker, by virtue of Being a Real Woman, intimately understands all violence toward women better anyhow, but that’s, well…)

Anyway, thank you for this. I hope you don’t mind that I’ve blogrolled you; I should’ve done some time ago.

Comment by little light — February 12, 2007 @ 8:59 pm

3. Little Light: Not at all! Being added to your blogroll fills me with glee! 😊 I need to add you to mine, too, once I get around to rebuilding my links.

Comment by earlbecke — February 14, 2007 @ 1:25 pm

Feel free to leave a comment, however keep in mind that comments are moderated and that any comments deemed to be trollish or anti-feminist will not be posted.
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http://www.melted-dreams.net/definition/2007/02/07/there-is-nothing-essential-about-being-a-woman/