Trans Issues Are Women’s Issues

Posted on March 7, 2006 by earlbecke

There are very few things which I think are requirements for someone to be considered “feminist”. People can believe, for the most part, whatever the hell they want. I don’t have to agree with everything every other feminist says or does. They don’t have to agree with me. We don’t have to have the same ideas on politics, economics, class, education, literature, movies, clothing, cosmetics, shaving.

I won’t say, for example, that wearing high heels and makeup makes someone a “bad” feminist. Although you’re never going to convince me that, at this moment in time, a woman who chooses to adorn herself in this fashion is truly making a choice free of cultural influence and social conditioning — it’s still a personal decision and it’s not mine to make. Things like this, the small things, the trivial things, are still feminist issues, and they’re big ones because they’re so insidious and pervasive, but they pale in comparison to the truly horrific problems that women face in this world. I don’t care how you like to dress or what kind of sex you like to have; when we live in a world with rape, domestic violence, and female genital mutilation, I’ll take any ally who agrees on the basic concept of human rights. If the only issue we disagree on is lipstick or even BDSM, we have more in common than not.

I won’t even put stipulations on most of the bigger issues. I’m a big, huge, idealistic anarchocommunist — but I won’t say that anyone else has to be. I think there’s lots of room to work with on most issues. Different people have different opinions and experiences, and I’m glad for that diversity of thought. (On that note, the people who think that feminism is one cohesive delusional body which feeds its own beliefs through a loop of unquestioning positive feedback have obviously never actually seen a group of feminists trying — and failing — to have a rational discussion on a topic like, say, sex work.)

But there are a very few stipulations which I consider essential for someone to be a “good” feminist, and if these criteria are not met, well, that person can consider themselves a feminist all they want, but that doesn’t mean I’ll respect their opinions.

One the things I think is unacceptable in a “real” feminist is transphobia.

A feminist should never reject the experience or identity of a transwoman as being invalid, of being lesser than cisgendered women, of not being “real” — in general, or until she takes hormones, or until she undergoes SRS, or whatever predefined criteria said feminist happens to have. A feminist should never insist that transwomen are actually men and thus, that they have no place in feminism and no protection under it (or that transmen are women who are “betraying the cause” in order to “gain” male privilege, as the case may be). I understand that this attitude casts a number of prominent and influential feminist thinkers of the past and present as “bad” feminists, and that’s unfortunate but, I think, also necessary. Transphobia should never be tolerated from a self-proclaimed feminist.

Let me explain why. It’s not merely an issue of respect for marginalized people, and it’s not merely because those who hold this attitude are dismissing the perfectly valid experiences of different kinds of women (as mainstream feminism has famously done not only with transwomen, but also lesbians, poor women, women of color, and so on). These side-effects are horrible and inexcusable, but the real issue is that, at the root of transphobia are all the beliefs that feminism is supposed to be fighting.

The insistence that transwomen are not “real” women, is, at its heart, fueled by the idea that biology equals
destiny: the idea that one’s body parts define that person completely, that there is no individual room for change or variation, that a woman is only as good as her ability to give birth (therefore, as good as her uterus), or to serve as a sex object (therefore, as good as her vagina, as good as her breasts), or as a caretaker, a mother, a housewife, a passive decoration (therefore, as good as her ability to conform to “acceptable” gender roles).

And that, no matter how you disguise it or dress it up, no matter what excuses you might give about male privilege or socialization or experience in a transwoman’s history, is not feminism.

This is why transphobia is so deeply harmful to feminism as a whole. It hurts not only the statistically small minority of transgendered people within the movement, but also anyone else who believes in the idea that a woman is more than her vagina, more than her womb, more than her own victimization and oppression. Transphobia reduces everyone to a collection of parts, to be examined and scrutinized in order to see if they stand up to the test of being “good” or “real” enough — to see if they “deserve” rights and recognition.

Anyone can call themselves a feminist. Anyone can say they are whatever they want to say they are. But if they espouse ideals and opinions which run directly contrary to the ideology they claim to support and represent, they are no ally of mine.

This entry was posted on Tuesday, March 7th, 2006 at 11:18 am and is filed under Gender and Sex, Society, Feminist Movement, Rants and Rages, Queer Issues. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.

4 Comments »

1. Thanks for this. There’s a lot here that I’m starting to think about, as I have recently become friends with a trans person.

Comment by Duc — May 11, 2006 @ 12:05 am

2. Thank you! I’m sick of explaining this to people who think that gender equality only applies to the cisgendered. Much love for this!

Comment by DysPerDis — November 28, 2006 @ 5:50 pm

3. […] 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. […]

Pingback by Definition - A Feminist Weblog » There is nothing essential about being a woman. — February 7, 2007 @ 10:19 pm

4. Very well said, and very concise. This gives the lie to all who think that they are more equal than the rest of humanity. Some of us have struggled for many years in order to achieve self-acceptance and societal acceptance, and I have no time for anyone who even dares to suggest that I am not the woman I was born, just because I didn’t have the right bits in the right places at birth.

Comment by Susan Heywood — February 23, 2007 @ 9:33 am

RSS feed for comments on this post. TrackBack URI

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.