

# Feminism beyond the Binary

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*Trans and feminism: how do they fit together (or not) in the 2020s?*

If you followed Australian media during early 2022, you'd be forgiven for thinking the sticking point was trans women. As the nation barrelled into a federal election that polls (correctly) predicted would oust the incumbent LNP, conservatives fighting for electoral survival imported TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) talking points from Britain to dogwhistle to their base. For several months, trans women were the political football *de jour*. It was ugly. Warringah Liberal candidate Katherine Deves stoked alarm about trans women in sport; health secretary Brendan Murphy was asked to define 'woman' in Senate estimates; *Age* columnist Julie Szego claimed it was 'inevitable' that trans rights were in competition with women's rights.<sup>1</sup> The key idea behind all the noise? Trans women are not 'real' women and their attempts to claim womanhood pose a threat to cis women everywhere.

In the face of such fearmongering, the trans challenge to feminism seems obvious: how to accommodate trans women within the centuries-old women's movement? How to build a trans-inclusive feminism that everyone can get behind? This is how the issue is framed in Finn Mackay's lauded *Female Masculinities and the Gender Wars* (2021). For Mackay, a transmasculine sociologist at the University of Bristol, the task for feminism is to balance trans inclusion against some cis feminists' desire for 'single-sex' (or trans-exclusionary) spaces.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Cam Wilson, 'Katherine Deves wasn't chosen in spite of her views on trans people. She was chosen because of them', *Crikey*, 19 April 2022, [crikey.com.au/2022/04/19/katherine-deves-trans-warringah-liberal-party/](https://crikey.com.au/2022/04/19/katherine-deves-trans-warringah-liberal-party/); Josh Butler, 'Coalition members back bill to exclude trans women from female sports', *Guardian*, 20 April 2022, [theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/apr/20/coalition-members-back-bill-to-exclude-trans-women-from-female-sports](https://theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/apr/20/coalition-members-back-bill-to-exclude-trans-women-from-female-sports); Julie Szego, 'Trans rights should not automatically trump the rights of other groups', *Age*, 6 April 2022, [theage.com.au/national/victoria/trans-rights-should-not-automatically-trump-the-rights-of-other-groups-20220405-p5aaus.html](https://theage.com.au/national/victoria/trans-rights-should-not-automatically-trump-the-rights-of-other-groups-20220405-p5aaus.html).

2 Finn Mackay, *Female Masculinities and the Gender Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 217–19.

But I want to suggest otherwise. To my mind, the hysteria around trans women is a red herring. A feminism inclusive of trans women has been theorised and enacted since the 1970s. It's not that complicated. Trans women are women and should be treated as such. They pose no threat to cis women (and, on the contrary, experience high rates of violence and abuse). There is no evidentiary basis to think otherwise. Of course, the trans and cis experience is not identical, but the category of 'woman' has never been monolithic—as Black women, migrant women or lesbian women can attest. Any feminism worth its name must include and fight for all women. Sisterhood not cisterhood, as the saying goes.<sup>3</sup>

To reprise this question, and engage with the handwringing about trans women's womanhood, is to unnecessarily complicate a straightforward issue. Moreover, it plays into the hands of anti-trans figures by engaging on their terms. To seriously entertain the notion that trans women are in any way 'problematic' risks legitimising a fallacious narrative that scapegoats an oppressed minority and detracts attention from real feminist issues.

But that is not to say that transness presents no challenge to feminism. On the contrary, trans visions of gender pose a profound provocation to the 'women's movement'. Yet the real challenge is not about the borders of womanhood but the borders of feminism itself. If we accept the reality of nonbinary genders, and hence acknowledge the existence of people other than 'men' and 'women' (cis or trans), what does that mean for a political project traditionally structured around advancing women's interests in the face of male domination? A feminism for the 2020s must be a feminism that can reckon with the existence and patriarchal oppression of non-women such as nonbinary, genderqueer, transmasculine, transfeminine, agender and Two-Spirit peoples.

Put simply: how to reimagine feminism beyond the gender binary?

This is no small task, as it requires the 'women's movement' to grapple with what Cameron Awkward-Rich terms the 'displacement of *women* as the imagined subject of feminism'.<sup>4</sup> A shift of this magnitude cannot be accommodated with window-dressing gestures such as the in-vogue

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3 On the long history of transfeminism, see Cameron Awkward-Rich, 'Trans, feminism: Or, reading like a depressed transsexual', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 4 (2017): 819–41.

4 Awkward-Rich, 'Trans, feminism', 830.

language of ‘women and nonbinary people’—rhetoric that subsumes nonbinary genders within the master category of ‘woman’.<sup>5</sup> Nonbinary thinking is not additive; it is transformative. It demands a structural remaking of the way we conceive and articulate a feminist politics.

A daunting task, indeed. But there are certainly good reasons for doing so. Here are several.

First, the gender binary underpins patriarchy. According to Yale trans philosopher Robin Dembroff, patriarchy is based on three ideas: first, that ‘male’ and ‘female’ represent a natural, immutable and exhaustive binary; second, that males should be masculine and females feminine; and third, that masculinity is superior to femininity.<sup>6</sup> If patriarchy is built upon this hierarchical binary, it follows that the feminist project of dismantling patriarchy requires the disavowal of binary gender. In the words of British trans critic Shon Faye, ‘[t]he global dominance of men over women can never be dismantled while simultaneously maintaining, preserving and reinforcing the binary model of sex and gender’.<sup>7</sup> Feminism’s success thus arguably depends on nonbinary thinking. Without it, even the most earnest efforts to topple patriarchy may struggle to address the problem at its root.

Second, the binary is a Western model of gender imposed as part of the colonial project. Indigenous cultures worldwide have long recognised gender diversity. For instance, an estimated 168 Indigenous languages in the United States have terms to describe genders other than man and woman.<sup>8</sup> Javanese culture recognises a third gender of transfeminine people called *Waria*.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, in Samoa, *Fa’afafine* is a third gender, a femme nonbinary space. As *Fa’afafine* Amao Leota Lu puts it, ‘binaries are such a colonial way of thinking’.<sup>10</sup> For Indigenous peoples, the gender

5 For an expanded discussion of this point, see Yves Rees, *All About Yves: Notes from a Transition* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2021), 185–88; Jinghua Qian, ‘Walking away, backwards; or, woman-lie in women’s lit’, *Feminist Writers Festival*, 20 November 2020, [jinghuaqian.com/2020/11/20/walking-away-backwards-or-woman-lite-in-womens-lit/](http://jinghuaqian.com/2020/11/20/walking-away-backwards-or-woman-lite-in-womens-lit/).

6 Robin Dembroff, ‘Trans women are victims of misogyny, too’, *Guardian*, 19 May 2019, [theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/19/valerie-jackson-trans-women-misogyny-feminism](http://theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/19/valerie-jackson-trans-women-misogyny-feminism).

7 Shon Faye, *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice* (London: Penguin, 2021), 242.

8 Margaret Robinson, ‘Two-Spirit identity in a time of gender fluidity’, *Journal of Homosexuality* 67, no. 12 (2020): 1677.

9 Mama Alto in *OMG I’m QTPOC*, ed. Bobuq Sayed (Melbourne: Drummond Street Services, 2019), 16.

10 Amao Leota Lu, ‘Fa’afafine: All hail the queen (Samoan sashay)’, *Archer Magazine*, 5 September 2019, [archermagazine.com.au/2019/09/faafafine-all-hail-the-queen-samoan-sashay/](http://archermagazine.com.au/2019/09/faafafine-all-hail-the-queen-samoan-sashay/).

binary was a weapon of colonisation. Wiradjuri trans researcher Sandy O'Sullivan describes the gender binary as 'a sharpened tool of cultural decimation' that erased existing complexities of gender and essentialised First Nations peoples as 'reproductive stock'.<sup>11</sup> In short, the gender binary has not only enabled patriarchy but also other systems of oppression such as colonialism. For feminism to be truly anti-colonial and anti-racist, it must divest from binary gender.

Third, the enforcement of the gender binary harms everyone, whether cis or trans. As the trans critic Jinghua Qian recently explained, 'cis people still suffer under this binary. How many cis women have discomfort with womanhood because it does have so many social constraints? The way the gender binary is enforced affects everyone'.<sup>12</sup> Nonbinary thinking has emancipatory potential for all humans, as it challenges the paradigm in which assigned sex determines a narrow and violently policed gender performance. In Dembroff's words, nonbinary gender 'threatens those who wish to preserve social control over sexed bodies', as it creates 'a fissure between reproductive features and social possibility'.<sup>13</sup> Hence, even though nonbinary people may only ever be a small minority, their existence opens up freedoms for everyone else. 'I see transness as a synonym for freedom. I see transness as a synonym for escape', says English trans artist Travis Alabanza.<sup>14</sup> A feminism that incorporates nonbinary ontologies promises to further the liberation of all genders.

At the All About Women festival at the Sydney Opera House in March 2022, a capacity crowd attended a panel on 'Beyond the Binary'.<sup>15</sup> The session was one of the first to sell out. Despite its female-oriented name, the festival and its audience recognised that feminism was no longer just a matter for women. This is not to say that everyone must live beyond the binary, or that women no longer matter within feminism.

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11 Sandy O'Sullivan, 'The colonial trappings of gender', in *Nothing to Hide: Voices of Trans and Gender Diverse Australia*, ed. Sam Elkin, Alex Gallagher, Yves Rees and Bobuq Sayed (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2022), 138.

12 Jinghua Qian quoted in Caitlin Cassidy and Brigid Delaney, "'I was really scared": Grace Tame opens up about mental health, and more from All About Women', *Guardian*, 14 March 2022, [theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/14/cis-people-still-suffer-under-the-gender-binary-six-lessons-from-all-about-women](https://theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/14/cis-people-still-suffer-under-the-gender-binary-six-lessons-from-all-about-women).

13 Robin Dembroff, 'Why be nonbinary?' *Aeon*, 30 October 2018, [aeon.co/essays/nonbinary-identity-is-a-radical-stance-against-gender-segregation](https://aeon.co/essays/nonbinary-identity-is-a-radical-stance-against-gender-segregation).

14 Travis Alabanza in *NB: My Non-Binary Life*, BBC Radio, 2019, episode 8.

15 'Beyond the binary', 13 March 2022, hosted by Yves Rees, All About Women festival, stream. [sydneyoperahouse.com/products/all-about-women-2022-beyond-the-binary](https://sydneyoperahouse.com/products/all-about-women-2022-beyond-the-binary).

The point is that feminism, as a political project, can and must recalibrate itself to the vast terrain of human genders that already exist if it is to challenge oppressive forces and thrive in coming decades. In Shon Faye's words, 'not only do trans people need feminism, but feminism also needs trans people'.<sup>16</sup>

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16 Faye, *The Transgender Issue*, 239.

This text is taken from *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal: Number 28*,  
published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,  
Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/LFHJ.28.10](https://doi.org/10.22459/LFHJ.28.10)