

Student Devised Assessment IL101 - "What is a woman?"

Abstract

This essay will consider various answers to the above question, and assess their value through different disciplinary lenses. I will adopt a critical perspective, exploring why this question is asked, what it communicates, and whether such questions are useful.

"What is a man?", or "what is a non-binary person?", are equally important questions, and defining womanhood is not inherently worthier. Deconstructing manhood, womanhood, or otherwise provides a template for analysing the others; defining any of them defines all of them. I am studying womanhood as it speaks to my own identity, and has captured contemporary, English-speaking mass-media.

As a transgender woman, I acknowledge my bias towards this definition including myself. I will be considering other perspectives, and concluding that this definition is unimportant before the lived experience of trans people today.

"What is a woman?"

"An adult human female"

The Oxford dictionary definition consists of three concepts. 'Adult' and 'human' can be examined, but for our question, and its perception, they are uncontroversial in meaning, so defining 'female' is our focus.

Equating 'female' and 'woman' is a widespread, simple, but most appealingly, *scientific* idea, making womanhood a measurable trait, deducible as present or not via physical evidence. This sees particular use in healthcare, e.g., keeping records of all females to combat breast cancer, which is less common in males.

The most common rebuttal is that sex and gender are not equivalent, femaleness being a biological identity, and womanhood a gender identity. This has weight as the standard academic consensus¹, and is essential to the contemporary queer community, for whom sex and gender being distinct - and not necessarily matching - is fundamental. However, this doesn't address a deeper flaw with the definition: still assuming 'female' as well-defined.

¹ The list of institutions that recognise the difference between sex and gender includes, but is not limited to: the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, the American Psychoanalytic Association, Human Rights Campaign, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Osteopathic Pediatricians, the United Nations, and the UK's National Health Service.

The premise that the sexual binary is separate, and definite, is traditional to modern Western society. It assumes reproductive organs, hormones, chromosomes, and secondary sexual characteristics divide neatly between two categories - an incorrect assumption. Up to 1.7%² of people have intersex traits, displaying biology that is male, female, or neither [1], and all four aspects of sex have exceptions that contradict this binary. Someone female in all other traits may be born with no ovaries or womb, with no vagina, or a penis and a vagina, with male hormone levels, with XY or XXY chromosomes, with no breasts, narrower hips, or wider shoulders. In arbitrary combinations, a person may be born genetically male/female, chromosomally male/female, hormonally male/female/intersex, and with a body deemed male/female/intersex [2]. Furthermore, this addresses *birth* sex, and sexual characteristics can change; breast removal isn't regarded as making someone not female, so are breasts female to begin with?

It's arguable that, because these exceptions are rare, they can be treated as outliers, upholding the sexual binary for utility. However, just as an "F" on medical records can potentially inform medical practitioners, it can mislead if these exceptions are ignored. Someone assigned female may be incorrectly attended because they have traits typically non-female, unnoticed under the assumptions of the sex-binary. Or in our earlier example, a trans woman may be registered as sexually male, but have an increased risk of breast cancer from hormone therapy. In Britain, trans women are screened for breast cancer to mitigate this, showing utility in *disregarding* the sex binary.

In general, the medical utility of 'female' is more accurately distributed between our four biological descriptions. 'Female' can abbreviate lots of information, but is inconsistent, and such abbreviation is increasingly redundant in an age of information and digitalisation. The sexual binary, and designating someone 'female', is increasingly delegitimized [3]. Consider that ~3% of the human population is blonde, and ~2% red-haired [4], yet it would be absurd to claim "everyone has black or brown hair".

With 'female' ill-defined, and the distinction of gender vs. sex well-supported, "an adult human female" is an inadequate definition. However, this analysis retains progress: going forward, womanhood can be specified as a gender identity, rather than a sexual one.

"Someone who identifies as a woman"

The emerging progressive answer, with its primary function of including trans women. This definition champions the principle of self-identification, rather than 'objective' prescriptivism. Its subjectivity is useful in not requiring empirical evidence, because any such criteria will fail to account for the infinite variety of bodies, roles and minds a woman may occupy, as seen in attempting to define 'female'. Its inclusivity is useful, as the recognition of trans identities saves

² This figure is disputed, and experts who regard it as an overestimate argue that traits included in this 1.7% are not all classified as intersex by clinicians, however, organisations like Intersex Human Rights Australia maintain the figure based on people who face stigmatisation, and so have the lived experience of being intersex. The lower estimates of ~0.37% are still not small enough to invalidate the points raised here.

trans lives, by improving mental health and opportunities³. The often-quoted statistic that ~40% of transgender people attempt suicide is true only for those denied social acceptance or medical aid, which lower this rate to the population average [6].

This definition falters in its cyclical nature, which invites the obvious response: “someone who identifies as a what?”. It implies another definition underneath the surface that self-identified women must unconsciously sense. Despite trying to support all women, this definition gives those very people no path to identify as such. There are positives to this, as it promotes the self-discovery of identity, a freedom vital to many people, however its lack of direction makes such self-discovery difficult, creating an identity that lacks stability, another vital property.

Self-referencing also hinders this definition from spreading. People who do not consider trans women *women*, when given this answer to justify inclusivity, will be unconvinced. It can be disputed whether a definition of womanhood *needs* to persuade transphobic people - or whether minority groups generally should be expected to appeal to their oppressors - but there are undeniably people with the potential to be progressive, if educated, who this cyclical definition will fail to reach.

The infamous argument against self-identification is that such freedom will be used for harm, and this fear prioritises transgender women. Considering trans women as women allegedly allows predatory men access to women’s spaces, using self-identification as protection. The data on demographics of sexual assault/violence do not support this constructed boogiemán [7], and so this argument lacks substance, but it does prompt consideration of self-identification. What does it take to identify as a woman?

Enough political pundits mockingly claim to be transgender to dismiss the notion that identifying as a woman is just the act of saying so, implying a level of *sincerity* required to self-identify. Measuring this sincerity is impossible, but typically one can discern between someone queer, and someone parodying queerness, so how do we make this discernment? Frequently noted are the time and investment one puts into an identity they claim; most trans women will strive for years to transition, while a bad-faith actor makes temporary statements without consequence. However, this fails to account for those in poverty who cannot afford to transition, or have just discovered themselves - is there some magical length of time required to be *truly* trans? Insincere queerness is rare and reconcilable, so the concept of the ‘transtrender’⁴ does not destroy this definition’s utility, but its theoretical soundness is limited.

“Someone who identifies as a woman” achieves more than “an adult human female” via inclusivity, and rejecting biological fundamentalism, but still has inadequacies. We move onto a definition I have personally developed.

³ There exists an enormous meta-analysis of every single peer-reviewed article assessing the effects of gender transition on transgender people, published in English between 1991 and 2017, and it finds 51 of the 55 studies to be positive, and the remaining 4 to be neutral [5].

⁴ A ‘transtrender’ being an (assumed) cisgender person who co-opts queer language and presents as transgender for their own personal gain, usually assumed to be for social attention, or the social ‘debt’ of being oppressed.

“Someone who faces misogyny”

Notice the specificity of ‘face’, instead of words like ‘experience’, or ‘confront’. “Someone who experiences misogyny” implies that women who haven’t suffered misogyny firsthand are not women, whereas ‘face’ recognises that this can be indirect, internalised and long-term. “Someone who confronts misogyny” implies that women who haven’t directly fought their oppression are not women, whereas ‘face’ recognises that this struggle can be internal. *Facing* misogyny is more than experiencing external sexism - it is the spectre of sexism branded into women by a society that is systematically sexist. A woman who has never been directly abused, but struggles with dysmorphia from beauty standards, faces misogyny. A woman who feels no self-misogyny, but witnesses other women’s discrimination, faces misogyny. A closeted trans woman, who society regards male, still feels the pressure to be feminine, and so they face misogyny.

This definition retains the subjectivity of self-identification; although we can try to measure misogyny, the final sum of these experiences and their effects can only be described subjectively. The objective of including trans women also persists, as whether externally or internally, they will face these societal expectations upon realising womanhood. We achieve these while avoiding the self-referencing of the standard progressive definition.

The challenge to this definition is its reliance on misogyny. Is it right for almost half of humanity, a half that is oppressed, to be defined by negativity? Many women, cis and trans alike, find joy in their womanhood, so is it right to define an identity they cherish through its oppression? While these questions appear bleak, one can also recontextualise it positively. This definition promotes solidarity between all women, which is crucial in social progress. Cis women, trans women, women of colour, and any intersections of women, all face misogyny, and this definition highlights the universality of that experience, encouraging us to face misogyny *together*.

We can continuously debate whether this definition resigns women to oppression, or unites women in resistance, but through both, individuality shines. Just because a woman is someone who faces misogyny, doesn’t mean they are summarised by it, and their individual expression of womanhood can be focused on their battle with misogyny, or their complete freedom from it. This self-discovery is shared with the progressive definition, but is given more direction and stability. Even when all else fails, women still have a universal companionship, and even through oppression, a clear path ahead; to defy these expectations, discard these shackles, and forge their own womanhood.

A final challenge is this definition’s implication that, should misogyny be eliminated, womanhood will disappear. This loss seems damning for our definition, as it spells destruction of a cherished identity, but it is important to recognise the timescale of change - such a process would *dissolve* an identity rather than destroy it, the joy of womanhood not lost, but distributed between its aspects that brought individual joy. A woman who found joy in femininity and motherhood would remain a person who finds joy in presentation and parenthood. A butch lesbian who felt liberated in masculinity and sexuality would remain a person who feels liberated in strength and

intimacy. The identities and expressions forged by women would not disappear with the name 'womanhood', but instead become free of any final misogynistic restraints.

"Someone who faces misogyny" still has flaws as a definition, but I believe it is more useful, concrete, and hopeful than both common answers.

"Why?"

The question of womanhood can be disputed, but thinking critically we notice an assumption made in answering it; that this question is raised in good faith, and without bias. The logical purity of debate is alluring, but we must recognise that such questions are not asked in a vacuum, having political contexts that shape their meaning. Studying English-speaking mass media reveals this question is not posed for philosophical whimsy, but as a challenge to the transgender community [8, 9, 10]. From ordinary bigots to conservative pundits, when a transphobe says this, they are not asking a question to trans activists, but making a statement to their potential allies; "I have the answer, they do not", and more fundamentally, "they are the enemy". In this context, 'adult human female' mutates beyond a flawed definition, becoming a weapon of biological fundamentalism, and the reversal of social progress. These intentions being hidden behind a seemingly harmless question is part of the strategy, as the illusion of debate requires minorities to justify their own existence, and questioning such debate can be sensationalised as a threat to free speech.

How useful is it to define terms like womanhood? Popper explores this in *The Open Society* with his criticism of the Platonic-Aristotelian theory of definition. The appeal of defining terms is clarity of discussion, "*if we do not know precisely the meanings of the words we use, we cannot discuss anything profitably*" [11]. But Popper identifies that this demand for clarity only creates more complexity. "What is a woman?" precedes a higher question, "are trans women women?", which itself precedes "how should society treat trans people?", and the demand for definition degrades any progress into semantics. Popper's solution is the nominalist view that for clarity we should "*take care that the statements we make [...] never depend upon the meaning of our terms*" [11], the best avenue for discussion being practicality before semantics. This principle leads to my final answer.

"I don't care."

Ultimately, the demand to define womanhood in contemporary politics is a distraction, and the discourse of its definition forces progressivism into semantics instead of measurable, material struggles of trans people. It is a misdirection of time, energy, and media attention towards the biased interviews of cherry-picked activists, instead of the homelessness plaguing queer youths [12], towards bathroom bills instead of lifesaving healthcare, towards a culture-war of pronouns and pride flags, instead of the active war on trans people's rights.

The right-wing response to trans rights is increasingly fascist, particularly in the US, where conversion therapy, the seizing of trans children from affirming parents, and mandatory genital inspections see legality [13, 14, 15]. *“The turn to fascism is triggered when a group that is supposed to be subservient suddenly gains power and agency, and begins to revolt in ways that actually embody freedom, [...] fascism mobilises a subconscious fear of that freedom”* [16], Mason aptly describes. The attack on trans people is an attack on all marginalised groups, because victory for fascism in this conflict is our elimination, and once eliminated, we *must* be replaced by a new enemy. As an ideology of hate, fascism survives on the establishment of in-groups and out-groups, and an out-group must always exist. One can already see this in the US, as fascism achieves victory over trans rights, older layers of social progress - sexual freedom, sexual education, abortion - are threatened.

I’ve never personally been asked “what is a woman?”, but if I ever am, I will say “I don’t care”, and I will say “It’s me,

“I’m a woman.”

Critical Reflection

This SDA was created as an informal essay, as that’s the medium I’m most comfortable with, and because its content is well-suited to rigour, rather than more interpretive, artistic mediums. The nuance I desired for its topics, particularly the pedantic subtleties of ‘facing misogyny’, were not things I wanted to leave uncertain, as my intended message was very precise. Whilst artistic expression has use in political and social discourse, and can express ideas that academic literature cannot, boiling concepts down to plain language is sometimes necessary for clarity. Furthermore, the informality of the piece still allowed me to inject self-expression, such as the final paragraph being a purely personal aspect, that adds little to the conclusion other than impactful sentiment - though it could be argued that such expressions add to the work in a way no formal writing could.

The clarity I value in academic writing is something that the essay itself criticises with the introduction of Popper’s nominalist theory; perhaps in trying to be so precise, and not allowing definitions to be vague, I limited my analysis. Had I not been so particular in deconstructing the biological fundamentalist or self-identification definitions, I could have explored other definitions. For example, “a historical economic class”, which would allow me to integrate more disciplines into my essay, considering e.g., how during the slave-trade black women were often regarded as an economic unit before women [17], or how women’s economic power was stunted by the witch trials, implying a way of defining womanhood in these terms.

Another reflection is that this essay may have better suited an audio format. This retains all the specificity of written work, but introduces my own voice to its delivery, and makes the work more accessible. The freedom to include vocal emphasis and emotion would add expression, especially to the final paragraph as a passionate declaration.

Overall, I think my choice of medium, and execution, expressed my ideas well, and managed to maintain an interdisciplinary focus throughout. Sociology permeated the entire work, and naturally weaved biology, philosophy and political theory, though biology stands out as the most temporary and separated of the disciplines mentioned.

In writing this piece, I was particularly struck by Popper's work, as I have always assumed rigorously defining terminology as the path to clarity, yet nominalism refutes this convincingly. Learning this perspective progressed my own understanding of defining identities, and I believe adopting it in my conclusion makes this piece transcend the question it addresses. By deconstructing the need to define womanhood, and instead tracing these demands for definition back to the core issues they stem from, we gain understanding of how to approach the definitions of other social concepts; not by pondering philosophical truths, but by studying the lives of the people around us.

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