

Gender neutral washrooms for everyone!

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(Final Paper)

In the last sixty years the gender binary has begun to crumble. The idea of two separate, distinct genders is outdated, as individuals who do not fit neatly into its categories require that new categories be created.. Some blur the lines between genders, dancing back and forth day to day or even moment to moment. Others cross over entirely, living their lives as the gender opposite their birth. Still others reject the idea of gender entirely, living as neither gender and simply as people. With so many people making their own gender variant ways in society, new rules and societal norms are needed to ensure every person's rights are protected. One of the most prominent examples of this is public washrooms. Gender neutral washrooms are necessary everywhere for the safety and security of every person, regardless of their personal gender.

The first thing that must be done is dispel a myth that has long propagated in our culture, that transgendered individuals are 'lying' or are not the gender they claim to be because of their bodies. Paraphrasing from Joanne J. Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed* (2002) "while transsexual people are at birth classified according to their biological sex, there is a lack of concordance between their biological characteristics (their sex) and their sense of self as a cohesive gendered being (their gender identity)" (Freeman, 2002, p. 445). Freeman's work goes on to say that modern technology has allowed physicians to offer many treatments such as Hormone Replacement Therapy or Genital Reassignment Surgery to transgendered individuals. However, many do not seek surgery, being happy with hormones, or simply dressing and identifying as their preferred gender (Freeman, 2002, p. 445). The fact that many to most transgendered

individuals are willing to permanently, medically alter their bodies is the clearest proof that these people are being truthful. Transgendered people are often thought of as the opposite of cisgendered people, those who are happy to live in the gender they were assigned at birth. Researcher Denise L. Levy states in an article for the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* “In today's society, my identity as straight and cisgender (my gender corresponds to my sex assigned at birth) means that I am often privileged. For instance, I can marry my male partner in all 50 states in the United States, I am able to find my gender on forms, and I do not have to worry about being fired due to my sexual orientation” (Levy, 2013, para. 15). Cisgendered people are undoubtedly more common than transgendered people, and this majority creates issues similar to those facing women, and racial minorities in the world.

Regrettably, this same myth leads to many transgendered individuals feeling extremely unsafe in public washrooms. Should a transgendered woman go into a women's room, she runs the risk of people identifying her as male and reacting dangerously. Were she to instead use the men's room, she is both being forced to identify herself as male, and is still at risk of men feeling threatened by her presence. If she is correctly identified as transgendered in this situation, the risk only grows. As explained in *Genderbashing: sexuality, gender, and the regulation of public space*, by Ki Namaste, “A perceived violation of gender norms is at the root of many instances of assault, harassment and discrimination” (Namaste, 1996, p. 227). The most important word of that statement is ‘perceived’. “A perceived violation of gender norms” could include any person even suspected of being transgendered, for any reason. Because

perception is different for every person, what one may describe as socially acceptable male behavior may offend another. This paper also describes a study which showed that close to 40% of 'feminine' men had been assaulted, while only 22% of 'masculine' men were (Harry, 1982). The problem, again, is how the attackers decided if a man was feminine or masculine. Being perceived as something besides what they are becomes a very dangerous situation for any person, especially transgendered people in washrooms, where others may feel insecure and threatened.

Shockingly, genderqueer and genderfluid people, who live outside of gender boundaries entirely, often find public washrooms are even less safe for them. Those who identify as genderqueer tend to reject the binary of gender entirely, choosing to live as a genderless person. Genderfluid individuals on the other hand flow freely between genders, often dressing androgynously and going along with whichever gender others perceive them as. In a study published last year, the question was posed "whether one's body needed to match one's gender identity." (Nagoshi, 2012, p. 415-416) "Two participants answered no to this question, with HM commenting that 'I identify as female because was what I was born with but I really don't care which one you think I am.'" (Nagoshi, 2012, p. 415-416). Freely flowing between genders is sometimes seen in those who feel equally comfortable in either role. In the same study, one participant commented that "It (gender) can also be situational. In certain situations I'll play a more masculine role. In certain situations I won't... When I'm talking on the phone about somebody, about fixing my car, I don't speak with a high voice" (Nagoshi, 2012, p. 415) Because these individuals freely violate gender norms, other people will frequently

misgender them. If assaults are a result of perceived violation of gender norms, then these individuals are at an unfortunately high risk because they are violating gender norms by refusing to live with them. With the current washrooms, genderqueer people do not fit in in either room, and genderfluid people, who identify as either gender, could be misgendered in men's or women's rooms.

Despite the seemingly negative reaction to gender variant people in public washrooms, there is an easy solution, gender neutral washrooms. Gender neutral washrooms were recently installed at the University of Victoria, and are significantly safer for all people. They are described as having “a stall or dividers for each toilet or urinal, sinks and mirrors and may have other useful features” (University of Victoria Pride, n.d., par95a. 3) and “are used for activities like using a toilet, washing hands, changing clothing, checking hair, changing a baby's diaper and accessing facilities with a support worker or client of a different gender” (University of Victoria Pride, n.d., para. 4). UVic illustrates that washrooms do not need to be gender segregated, because they are not meant to be used any differently by different gendered people. Transgendered people just want to use the washroom, same as anybody else, and segregation makes this more challenging and less safe for them.

Gender neutral washrooms are much safer for gender variant people because there is no need to decide which washroom to use. The first advantage of this is that there is no reason for anyone to challenge their right to be there. In a gender neutral washroom, everyone is simply a person, who just needs to use the facilities and leave. Finally, as more and more people are moving outside of the gender binary in their

identification of themselves, gender lines can not help but become even more blurred than they are now. As gender becomes progressively less black and white, societal constructs based upon a binary system of gender will swiftly become outdated, and need to be replaced. This replacement should begin soon, so that people may adapt to the changing social reality.

The goals of the transgender movement are really not all that different from any other minority fighting for their rights, being acceptance, and the right to live in society as any other person does. In Megan Davidson's dissertation *Transgender cultural activism in the united states: Sexed bodies, gender identities, contentious politics, and social change*, "concerns about employment and housing, access to education and healthcare, an end to police brutality, public violence, murder, and suicide ... Were all commonly cited as examples of success for trans activists and a trans movement" (Davidson, 2007, p. 232). These examples are very similar to the goals of feminism and most racial minorities, especially regarding violence and access to education and healthcare. Another goal often desired by such movements is free and equal use of public space, without fear of persecution. Since washrooms are a necessary part of public space design, it seems only right that all people are allowed to use them. In today's world it would be seen as unreasonable to deny access to a washroom to a person of a different race, so why should gender variant people be any different.

There are arguments against gender neutral washrooms, most often made by cis people, such as that 'young girls need protection from boys in the washroom,' though the complimenting claim of boys needing protection from girls is rarely made. Another

argument is that too few people require gender neutral washrooms for them to be worth installing, or that gender variant people should use the existing facilities, or wait until they are in private. This last reason begins to border on discrimination, because gender variant people are being denied washroom rights over their gender. Typically, the people making these claims are conservative, never stray from their gender role, and are the sort of people who often make trouble in washrooms for gender variant people. Worse, those who hold this opinion are pretending that gender variant people are a much smaller minority than they really are, and ignoring the fact that many people, even many cis people in today's society are dressing and acting less and less in accordance with their traditional gender roles and instead presenting themselves as what they want to be seen as. With cis people approaching the edges of gender variance, gender neutral bathrooms would be desirable to help ensure their safety as well, because only a perception of violation of gender norms is needed to incite an attack.

It is clear that a change is needed in our societal norms. Gender neutral washrooms are an easy to accept beginning to this change. Any business can easily implement them, and at very little cost since all that is strictly needed is a sign saying 'this washroom is gender neutral'. They will increase safety and comfort for every person, no matter what gender they choose to identify as. An excellent first step would be for all large public spaces such as malls or schools to convert half of their washrooms to gender neutral ones. Smaller businesses should consider converting their washrooms as well. Society is becoming steadily more aware and accepting of gender

variance, and so it is time to begin reforming outdated ideas and social constructs to accommodate.

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