

On The Outside Looking In: A Transwoman Challenging Stigma

By Mikayla Cadger

Today, we celebrate International Women's Day. It is a focal point in the Women's Rights Movement, it's a day to celebrate the social, economic, and political achievements of women, and to remember the oppression and historical struggle of those women that rose above it. We celebrate Women with a day of civil awareness, as unique and beautiful creatures whose impact on society is profound and should be upheld. Like the women taking part here, I feel blessed and privileged to be asked to be included in this panel. More than ever, I am sensitive to the controversy that can occur surrounding the inclusion of Transwomen—from this panel, to Womens Only spaces, to our community as a whole. It is a gift for me to finally have a group of amazing women around me who mentor, guide, and support me. It is also a gift that I never take for granted, because a commodity that is scarce is highly coveted. But why would examples of women for me to emulate and have guide me been in scarce supply? It is not because I couldn't find women who qualified. It's because I didn't qualify. In fact, in taking part in this conference, which theme is 'Choosing to Challenge', amongst these empowered women who have the strength and leadership to share their experiences with others- there may always be those that will not agree with my participation, let alone support who and what I am. And what I am is a proud Transgender woman. I am also an advocate, an activist, a writer and a poet. Each of these pursuits stem from my desire to see things change for Transwomen. That is why I choose to challenge stigma and discrimination. My greatest wish is to see the normalization of Trans people in our society. My lived experiences, including being discriminated against almost daily, and the fact that I'm the survivor of a gender-based violent attack; these things fuel my passion and desire to see that change occur. That fight has been far from easy. And it's not getting any easier.

Words have power. Social media has become the de-facto public square in modern times. There are few things right now that are being fought over in that public square that are more contentious than Transgender issues. Social opinions based on fear or hate towards "acceptable targets" drive this discourse, while making a meme out of the Trans movement. What we seek are equal rights, acceptance and assimilation. Granting those rights to Trans people doesn't require the rest of society to give up a piece of what they already have... it's not pie. Instead of making progress what we are now seeing is a backlash. Anti-Trans hatred, anger, threats... Those are being made exponentially worse because The Trans movement has now been lumped into the ideology of the Left, and the disdain for identity politics is growing. Instead of focusing on our own gender dysphoria, Trans people are confronted daily with society's dysphoria towards us. We have just seen the voting of The Equality Act in the US, which in theory should be a monumental achievement for Trans Rights. Instead, it is being framed as elevating the rights of Trans women over biological women. It is being called an attack on feminism and women's rights. They say society is being forced to ignore gender in place of gender identity as the norm by which people enjoy benefits or access.

From bathrooms to Transwomen in sports to dating, these issues need a nuanced approach that addresses the concerns of all involved. Instead, we are being targeted, when individuals behind the anonymity of their keyboards unleash this hatred and vitriol. They call us predators, freaks or say we have a mental illness. They attempt to take away our validity and disregard our internal sense of identity. They violate our dignity, intimidate, harass, and degrade us. When censored for this rhetoric,

most cry foul and complain about free speech rights. On behalf of the whole Trans community, I must ask...what about the violation of our basic human rights? Free speech should never include hate speech. Hate only creates hurt.

The foundation to this argument is that Transwomen are born biologically male, so they aren't women, and to claim otherwise is delusional, and not rooted in science. That we must not think biology is real. If your concept of what makes someone a woman solely hinges upon their internal and external reproductive organs, then you are not just narrow-minded, you are insulting ALL women. When you are born with a feminine mind, as well as the spirit and soul of a woman, your heart and emotions are female, the eyes through which you see the world are purely feminine, and then you take medical steps to alter your physical body to align with your gender identity, including changing your chemical structure by instituting a hormone regimen that is identical to Cisgender women... yet in the eyes of many we still aren't women. None of what I've mentioned thus far takes into account our lived experience. We must consider those factors, all of which go into the female life experience.

Here is the reality. Since transitioning I have been subjected to the male patriarchy that dominates our society, the same patriarchy and discrimination that all women know well. I am now quite familiar with the concept of the 'pink tax'. But more than that, I have been catcalled, sexually assaulted and raped. I'm objectified almost daily, and I'm now desensitized to getting treated as if I'm helpless or incapable of managing without a man's help. On top of that, I get DOUBLY discriminated against...both as a perceived 'real woman' within that very patriarchy, and then the standard discrimination when someone reads me as Transgender.

Sadly, those aren't the only challenges I face as a Transwoman. I regularly face challenges to my validity, my dignity, and my very existence. The fact is that truth and reality are not based on the relationship between concepts in your mind and what I've described in the real world, based on my actual experiences. I live my life as a woman. From my clothing to my lifestyle, to my preferences to my desires to my legal name, birth certificate and gender marker, which I am so proud to say finally reflects the truth.

Through my own journey the obstacles I've faced have definitely shaped the woman I have become. Being victimized will do one of two things: it either breaks you or it makes you... and my own experience has galvanized me in my desire to fight back. Because of that, I actively seek ways to challenge stigma, both in my daily life, and in my Trans Activist efforts. I believe that if you are capable of finding your voice, in whatever context or capacity you can, you have a responsibility to use it. We need to be the change we want to see.

That's why I post about Trans issues online. I have both started and take part in a number of Trans support groups on Facebook. I have worked hard to help initiate Trans positive programs at my place of work- one of which has obtained a grant from TransCare BC. This has enabled WISH to put together a Trans-specific clothing and empowerment program that will directly benefit our Transgirls. I publicly speak about Trans issues, often putting myself at risk of being targeted. I am in the process of filing a Human Rights complaint against the Province of BC related to the lack of access to affordable and life changing medical procedures that currently cost thousands of dollars out of pocket for Trans people. And lastly, I write. I write articles and essays on Trans issues, cultural commentary and stories about being a Transwoman, and I write poetry. I write for many reasons. As a way to vent. To heal. To educate. To inspire. I realized the power that words truly have. They are like keys. If you choose them correctly,

you can either open hearts, or shut people's mouths. Because of that, my poems mean a lot to me. They are raw, emotional, and speak to the truth of not just being a Transwoman... but of being a woman. And finally, I'd like to say that real courage comes in being exactly who you are, in a world that tells you to be someone else. Some people are born into their bodies, others have to fight for theirs. Do not make the mistake of judging my whole based on only my parts. I am a woman. Every hour of every day, and in each and every way.