Empowerment Through Oppression:
Breaking Down Normative Notions and Expectations in Gender Roles

From the moment of birth, children are given a system of two sexes, two genders, and an ideal to fulfill for each. Despite there being six markers of sex, a person is labelled based only upon their genitals\(^1\). Similarly, the spectrum of gender is watered down into men and women, and the expectation is that sex and gender will “match”. This system privileges heterosexuality, because the assumption is that a person must express their gender identity in order to be attractive to people of the opposite sex and gender. Gender is more than attracting a mate – it is a co-constituted foundation of society and interactions with other. Yet, many people do not fit into the binary assigned and enforced by every institution, and are instead seen as either confused or deviant.

Not only is heterosexuality privileged with these binaries, so is whiteness. The “ideals” of masculinity and femininity have an underlying theme of whiteness. Even a cisgender black woman who conforms to all gender standards may find herself being told she is “pretty for a black girl”\(^2\). Similarly, sizeism and ableism are prevalent in society and all of the ideals for sex, gender, and heterosexuality affect and are affected by these factors.

These normative notions greatly marginalize transgender individuals due to their refusal or inability to live within the binary systems set out for society. Transgender individuals can lay along the spectrum of possibilities for gender expression and identity. Just as intersex people do
not “fit in”, and are treated as unnatural, so are people who identify as transgender. The transgender community faces obstacles in legal issues, such as trying to change names on passports or other identification, and medical issues, such as receiving the proper hormones. Often, these people are told they have to have already had a sex-change operation, or be looking for a surgeon, in order to enjoy the privilege of having their legal documents match themselves. In addition to being oppressed by the heteronormative culture and privileges, transgender individuals often find themselves the victims of invasive conversation. Cisgender individuals do not usually face questions about their genitals, or how they have sex, or whether they are planning on surgery, but will ask transgender people without any embarrassment.

However, even as they are attacked, transgender people can also be empowered by their identity. They live outside the norms, and are able to show the flaws in the gender binary and in stereotypes. By refusing to be complicit in society’s standards, they show others the possibility of existence along a spectrum instead of two poles. Transgender politics also reveals discrimination, and not only against queer people. For example, many trans men have found their work lives to be easier after transitioning – even if they worked in the same industry, or even with the same people. The same person was seen as more qualified and efficient simply because of identifying as a male instead of female. However, racism is also revealed – many black or Asian men did not receive the same treatment as their white counterparts after transitioning. A person who identifies as transgender can be empowered by the freedom of living as they choose, not as they are told, and as demonstrating the fluidity of gender.

Bigger people, whether unhealthy or not, are stripped from the idea of having a sexual identity or adhering to gender norms at all. “Fat” people transgress the normative notions of gender and sexual appeal because of their size. Standards of gender, even clothing, makeup, and body
language, are dependent upon the size of a person. A woman is supposed to be sexually attractive to men, but if she has too much fat, she is automatically seen as repulsive. This is true of all sex and gender expressions. These ideas assume and privilege sexuality, rather than health, natural body size, or self-contentedness. Instead, society has created a checklist of qualities considered attractive. Bigger women, for whom it is often unhealthy to reach that idealistic size, are not only ugly, but also fat pigs, worth less than others, who should be grateful for any attention they receive\textsuperscript{6}. Men have the same standards, but a man is not necessarily disqualified from being dateable if he is bigger, unlike women. The weight falls on both sexes, but lies heavier on women than men, just as any other physical “problems”. However, a “fat” person can also contest these notions, by embracing their bodies and loving themselves regardless of size, revealing both sexual appeal and happiness to be independent of weight.

How is a man able to be strong and manly to support and protect “his girl” if he is stuck in a wheelchair? Disability transgresses societal binaries just as transgender and “fat” individuals. In fact, the name alone suggests inferiority. In fact, people with disabilities are not only treated poorly, but are often seen as having lives not worth living. There is much debate about the rights of parents to terminate a pregnancy if advanced prenatal testing determines that the infant will have a disability\textsuperscript{7}. Now, though, many people are finding the term “different ability” to be more appropriate. Despite the challenges they may face, because of the way society is arranged to fit able-bodied people, people with different abilities are still successful and happy\textsuperscript{8}.

Despite the oppression that people who transgress social binaries face, there is also the possibility to overcome stereotypes and promote social justice through information about living outside of norms. There is still much discrimination, but hopefully society will soon accept people as different, not right and wrong.
Bibliography

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