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Article begins on next page

Queering the Trans: Gender and sexuality binaries in Icelandic Trans, Queer, and Feminist communities

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ABSTRACT:

Activists in feminist, queer, and trans movements share in common a critique of the existing gender order. Yet activists may have different understandings of what is wrong with existing gender arrangements, and different understandings of what might be required to establish greater social equality. Using data from interviews with activists in the feminist, queer, and trans movements in Iceland, this paper looks at the ways that gender equality and the gender binary is understood by individuals who identify with feminist, queer, and/or trans activism, and some of their shared and conflicting critiques of the existing gender order.

Queering the trans: Gender and sexuality binaries in Icelandic trans, queer and feminist communities

People who are involved in feminist, LGB or queer, and trans activism share many critiques of heteropatriarchal, cis normative social and political regimes. As Raewyn Connell has put it, the “intransigence of gender” is of concern to feminists as well as the queer and trans communities, since all challenge the “gender order” (Connell 2012, 865). The gender order is a wider pattern within society involving “ways that people,

groups and organizations are connected and divided" (Connell 2009, 73). Although the gender order is historically and culturally contextual, one might think that a critique of the gender binary, and of gender essentialism and heteronormativity would be shared by scholars and activists who identify as feminist, queer, and/or trans. But this is not always the case. For example, some self-described "radical feminists", such as Janice Raymond and Germaine Greer, who are also virulently anti-trans, can justifiably be seen as gender essentialists (Stone 1987; Stryker 1994; Spade 2011).

Gender equality policies do not always deconstruct the gender essentialism of the gender order (Connell 2011). Nordic feminist gender equality policies have been criticised by both scholars and activists for their uncritical and unproblematized conceptualizations of gender (Magnusson, Rönnblom and Silius 2008) as well as for foregrounding gender without paying enough attention to other inequalities (Kantola 2014). Trans lives and identities are often simplistically taken to be a kind of "natural experiment" in challenging the gender order (Connell 2010) even though the relationship of those who identify as feminist, queer, and/or trans to the gender order is invariably complex and contradictory.

Given the complexity of identities, of the reasons why people engage in activism, and of gender and the gender order, we should expect the views of feminist, queer, and trans activists regarding gender to be complex as well. Thus, those who identify as feminist, queer and/or trans activists may have many differences, as well as much in common, in their ideas about how to challenge the gender order. We believe there is much to learn about gender and the gender order by examining the ideas of feminist, queer, and trans activists, with Iceland as a case in point. We examine some of the tensions as well as consonances between ideas about gender, sexuality, and gender equality among and between individuals who identify as feminist, queer, and/or trans.

The Icelandic context

Iceland has been portrayed as a place of strong independent women. It gained international attention in 1980 for being the first European democracy to elect a female president, which had a great symbolic value for gender equality. The feminist movement has also been vital, and has been made visible internationally through the Women's Day Off (protesting pay inequity) in 1975, 1985, 2005 and 2010] (Einarsdóttir 2005, Guðmundsdóttir 2008; Kvennafrídagurinn 2010 n.d.). Women's employment rates are very high and female political representation is above 40%. Gender equality rankings place the country at the global forefront with the smallest gender gap in the world for the sixth year in a row (World Economic Forum 2014).

In queer issues Iceland is considered to be liberal (Rydström & Mustola 2007) as manifested by huge improvements in legal rights for people who identify as LGBTQ within the last two decades. Same-sex partnerships were recognized in 1996 (Alþingi 1996) as well as adoption by gay people in 2006 (Alþingi 2006) and permission to have access to donor egg and sperm for single women and gay and lesbian couples in 2011 (Alþingi 2011). In 2010 an openly gay head of state (since 2009) was the first to get married after the implementation of same-sex marriage (Alþingi 2010). Gay Pride is one of the largest outdoor events in the country, attracting almost one third of the population (Benjamin 2013, Kjaran 2014) and the image of Iceland as a gay friendly destination is being used in national marketing by the tourist industry and by local authorities (Ellenberger 2013; Gay Reykjavík, n.d.; Pink Iceland, n.d.).

Trans issues have been on the agenda for more than two decades. The first trans person was publicly registered in Iceland in 1989, and in 1996 the first gender

reassignment surgery [GRS] was performed in Iceland. Because Iceland has a public health system GRS is free of charge except for additional plastic surgery for 'cosmetic' reasons (Alþingi 2009). As of 2012 the number of registered trans(sexual) people was 23 (8 FTM, 15 MTF). The first law on the rights of trans people was enacted in 2012 (Alþingi 2012). The new law mainly confirmed existing practice in trans(sexual) medicine, established a medical board to oversee the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) and treatment of people seeking to transition their legal gender, and served to respond to legal uncertainty regarding name change (Alþingi 2009, Alþingi 2012). Thus as is common with this kind of legislation, the institutional rights of trans people and trans issues are conceptualized by the law in medical terms, although transsexual medicine is also contested within the medical profession in Iceland.

Trans issues were furthermore in the spotlight during the Constitutional Assembly in 2011-2012 that prepared a proposal for a new constitution following the economic collapse in 2008. The proposal, which has still not been finalized, includes a clause on sexuality but not gender identity. A petition from fifteen Icelandic queer/trans movement organizations to the Assembly to also include gender identity in the proposed constitution was dropped with a narrow majority (A Proposal for a new Constitution for the Republic of Iceland 2012). In January 2014 the Icelandic parliament adopted a law banning hate speech towards trans people (Alþingi 2014) despite the fact that representatives from OSCE thought it would limit freedom of expression and, therefore, urged the members of the Icelandic parliament to reject the law (OSCE 2013).

The current public policy context also makes Iceland a good case for our purposes. As a Nordic welfare state, Iceland has strong formal gender equality policies (Johnson, Einarsdóttir & Pétursdóttir 2013) and "state feminism" reflected in shared

ideals of gender equality across the political spectrum. However, like other Nordic and EU countries Iceland's Center for Gender Equality (*Jafnréttistofa*) is being called upon to broaden its mission and address other forms of inequality and their intersections. A proposal for new and more inclusive administration of equality issues was prepared by the Ministry of welfare in February 2014 although it was not put forward in the Alþingi (Velferðarráðuneyti 2014). Nordic feminism and gender equality work has also been challenged, from within as well as by queer and trans activists, as focused on heteronormative gender equality to the exclusion of other feminist concerns, and for overlooking ethnicity and nationality. Moreover, the gender equality bureaucracy has been challenged for a tendency toward complacency since gender issues are believed to be in a good shape (Magnusson, Rönnblom and Silius 2008). Icelandic human rights activists have criticized the gender only approach of the feminist movement and the equality machinery, and this has caused some internal tensions within the movement (Þorvaldsdóttir 2012). The queer movement has also been criticised, both for commercialization and elitist glorification of Iceland as a gay paradise (Ellenberger 2013) as well as for overstating the problems that queer people experience (Jakobsson 2014). Therefore, we anticipated that ideas about gender and gender equality might differ among activists who identify as feminist, queer, and/or trans, and set out to explore this question (Westbrook & Schilt 2014).

Neoliberalism and retrenchment also provide a complicated context. The Nordic welfare states depart to a large extent from the free market doctrine of neoliberalism and its idea of the "minimal state" (Irving 2013, 52). Since the collapse in 2008, however, the welfare system in Iceland has been subjected to austerity measures with negative consequences for gender relations (Árnadóttir & Bjarnadóttir 2011). The medicalization of trans issues makes the state "both antagonist and resource" for trans people (Connell

2012, 874). Countries with a strong welfare state benefit trans people and transsexual women (Connell 2012), not only regarding medical treatment and gender reassignment surgery (GRS) but also in access to basic rights to housing, income, safety, education, health and material justice in general (p. 874).

The data

We conducted 20 interviews during summer 2013, and 5 interviews during summer 2014. Our sample was gathered using a snowball method by identifying individuals who currently or in the recent past had been involved in feminist, queer or trans activism (Liamputtong 2007). One author of this paper was a board member of Samtökin 78, The National Queer Organization, when the interviews were carried out, made the initial contacts with subjects, and conducted most of the interviews. This provided trust and acceptance, based on the idea that respondents are more willing to share their experiences if they can assume that the researcher will understand them (Dwyer & Buckle 2009). The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Icelandic except for one that was conducted in English. Working from the Icelandic transcripts, themes in the interviews were identified. The transcripts were also entered in the qualitative data analysis software Atlas for further analysis. The use of English as a working language as well as the use of pseudonyms helps to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of our participants.

Our participants were chosen from three different groups: trans activists (8 interviews), lesbian, gay and bisexual activists (8 interviews) and feminist activists (6 interviews). No distinction will be made between 'transgender' and 'transsexual' among our participants (the latter referring to people who have had a GRS transition or are in

the process of transition), unless the individuals themselves identify as such or emphasize the difference, or if it plays a role for the context of their comments. The majority of our participants in the study have to some extent been involved, directly or indirectly, in one or more of the movements that represent feminism, queer and trans issues in Iceland, namely *Samtökin 78*, *Trans Ísland* and *Q, Queer Student Association*, which operate under the umbrella of *Samtökin*, and *The Feminist Association of Iceland*.

Samtökin 78 [S78] the National Queer Organization in Iceland was founded in 1978 and it now serves as an umbrella organization for the queer movement in Iceland. In 2005 bisexual people were formally included in S78 (*Samtökin78*, 2006-2007) and trans issues have been on the agenda at least since 2006 (*Samtökin78*, 2006-2007). *Trans Iceland* [TÍ] was founded 2007 as an independent unit within the S78 (*Samtökin78*, 2008-2009). *Q, Queer Student Association* was founded in 1999 at the University of Iceland as a lesbian and gay students' association but soon became inclusive of all queer sides of life, including trans. The feminist movement is a multifaceted community consisting of many formal and informal forums, some of which are mainly operating online. There are blurred boundaries between the different feminist activist forums but the *Feminist Association of Iceland* [FÍ] founded in 2003 has been the strongest. Some of the feminist activists have also become femocrats, working at different levels within the gender equality bureaucracy. The different feminist activist groups in Iceland frequently cooperate.¹

Feminist, queer and trans issues: interrelations, cooperations and tensions

¹ The most visible one is Skotturnar, a feminist network, see <http://kvennafri.is/skotturnar>.

The interviews reveal many themes pointing in different directions. One source of different views among activists is expansion of the institutional context of gender equality work. This expansion has been widely endorsed but has also given rise to skepticism and competition over scarce resources between different movements (Þorvaldsdóttir 2012). Many municipalities and organisations have already transformed their practical gender equality work into what in the Icelandic context has been called a human rights approach. This new approach formally aims at diversity, and in some cases, intersectionality. However, the legal framework has been focused on gender issues and the law continues to grant more legal protections to gender than to other inequality grounds (Þorvaldsdóttir 2012). These developments have taken place in the context of austerity measures and increasing signs of anti-feminism (see for example the webmagazine Knúz, www.knuz.is).

Feminist ambiguities on sex and gender

In general those among our informants who have been involved in the feminist community outwardly adopted a rather inclusive human rights approach, and more or less supported queer and trans issues and claims. At the same time our interviews revealed some ambiguities and perplexities over how to understand sex, gender, and gender equality in public policy positions. Feminist activists stressed the importance of taking different diversity markers into account and some explicitly mentioned how different variables intersect. However, the ambition of many feminist activists to be inclusive may fall short as evidenced by assumptions that can feed into unintentional exclusion, particularly if power inequalities are not recognized. Ingrid, who has been involved in the feminist movement for a long time, described how the newly founded FÍ in the beginning (i.e. in 2003) had the ambition of being responsive and inclusive without really knowing how to proceed. She recalled a “diversity group” in FÍ in which

lesbians, immigrants and disabled women were supposed to fight together from their different minority positions. This turned out to be a simplistic and naïve idea, she admitted.

FÍ, however, kept its supportive stance towards differences among women and alliances between minority groups. A seminar on diversity in 2007 with the title “No gender, no color” [Is. *Kynlaus og litblind*] with representatives for the queer and trans movement, disabled people, male feminist activists, and the immigrant women’s association was an effort in this direction (Feministinn 2007, Morgunblaðið 2007). The seminar was the first sign of a dialogue between these movements in Iceland, at a time when there was skepticism among feminists towards the idea of extending the gender equality work to other minority groups. Among those who were skeptical was Linda, a femocrat with a background in the feminist movement. In the interview Linda admitted that her views had changed entirely on the issue. She had been against the ‘extension’ of the gender equality concept initially, but now she found it necessary to include the variety of women and other minority groups, not least because the oppression of one group often is linked to the marginalization of another. To support her argument she referred to the Nordic debate about the interconnectedness between racism, misogyny and hate speech against feminists. She did not see any cases where trans issues and gender issues would collide.

But some tensions were lurking just under the surface in the interviews. One tension revolved around the idea of gender as a binary and what gender equality actually means for different people. Some of the cis feminists assumed that trans identity is dependent upon an essentialist gender binary view of the gender order and gender identity. They therefore saw a conflict between feminist views on the social construction

of identity versus what they perceived as an essentialist gender binary view of gender identity held by trans people. Our interviews showed, however, that there are a wide range of views regarding the nature of the gender order among cis feminists as well as among people who identify as queer and as trans. Hence, cis feminists may have been unaware of their own gender binary assumptions. Tensions in the relationship between cis feminists and people who identify as trans have been fueled by two incidents in the history of the Icelandic women's movements. First, during a visit in Iceland in 2006 Germaine Greer expressed derogatory views on transsexual women² (Vandamál Önnu Kristjánsdóttur 2010), and in a 2010 visit to Iceland Janice Raymond, invited by the united feminist community, was questioned about her transphobic views (Ármanndóttir 2010).³

In the feminist community masculinities and femininities are a frequently discussed subject and the questioning of gender stereotypes and critique of essentialism is one of its most important political issues. But a belief that gender is socially constructed does not necessarily translate into a belief that gender should not be thought of in binary terms. We found that cis feminists who were critical of gender stereotypes were not always critical of gender binaries.

According to Diane, a young feminist participant, beauty pageants have been a sensitive issue in the relationship between the feminist and the trans community. The Icelandic feminist movement has a long history of protesting beauty pageants, including a protest by KRFÍ, the Iceland's National Women's Rights Association in 1958 (Erlendsdóttir 1993, 286-7), and a protest by the Redstockings movement that

² Germaine Greer has expressed aggressive views on transsexual women that she reiterated on her visit in Iceland.

³ Janice Raymond was invited to Iceland for the conference "Women Strike Back" by Skotturnar on Oct 24, 2010, see <http://kvennafri.is/en/women-strike-back>. In a QA session she was asked about her views on transpeople (see Ármanndóttir 2010).

coronated a young cow as the winner of a beauty pageant in 1972 (Árnadóttir 2011, Tíminn 1972, Mánudagsblaðið 1972). KF, the women's political party in Reykjavik, dressed up as beauty queens at a city council meeting in the 1980s to protest a male chauvinist expression by the mayor in relation to the coronation of Miss Iceland (Dominelli and Jónsdóttir 1988, Morgunblaðið 1985, Þjóðviljinn 1985). The feminist critique of beauty pageants in Iceland is still vital (Gústafsdóttir 2011, Rögnvaldsdóttir 2013, Femínistafélag Íslands 2003); the most recent example occurred in 2013 when hundreds of women signed up for the Miss Iceland beauty pageant in protest, among these an MP (Björnsdóttir 2013).

It is against this background that Diane mentioned a transsexual celebrity woman, who presented herself in a very feminine stereotypical way. She intended to participate in a beauty pageant shortly after her GRS, during which she was intensively portrayed in the media. Aware of her greater social power as a cis woman, Diane refrained from criticising this woman, even while noting that other cis feminists had been critical of this seeming endorsement of beauty pageants by a very visible member of the trans community.

Two of our feminist participants, Ingrid and Linda, brought up the issue of public rest rooms as a matter of friction between the trans and queer community and feminists. Linda referred to the exclusion trans people can experience with gendered bathrooms whereas Ingrid contested trans' peoples fight for gender neutral bathrooms within public spaces which she described as a matter of a male-free space and safety for women. "I just find [women's bathrooms] nicer. I find it uncomfortable with gender neutral rest rooms, they are often more shabby, and I feel more relaxed [in women's bathrooms]." In her justification she brought up historical arguments regarding women's struggle for equal access to public space, which she was not ready to sacrifice

for solidarity with queer and trans people.

This tension was clearly exemplified in the views of Sheila, a leading personality in the women's movement. Despite the fact that people who are activists know the difference between sex and gender and understand that they are socially constructed, she noted that they still use essentialism for their own purposes. Her skepticism became strongest in her philosophical reflection about GRS:

"This radical repulsion of one's body which means that you want to reject it as it is... I don't think it can be healthy but I would never judge it. I simply think there must be very complicated psychic mechanisms behind such a decision... not be able to live in the body you were assigned".

We found this statement quite interesting given that it indicated the assumption that human embodiment is natural and healthy *and* gendered. As Connell points out, for almost everyone, "...social embodiment has minor incoherencies", whether one identifies as cis or trans (Connell 2012, 867).

We thus find a range of views among our cis feminist respondents regarding gender binaries. Diane was critical of thinking of gender in binary terms, and implicitly criticised a trans woman's participation in a beauty pageant as a lack of solidarity with feminist causes. On the other hand, Sheila and Ingrid, in different ways, also expressed gender/sex essentialist viewpoints that might be seen as reinforcing a binary gender order. Interestingly, these feminist-identified respondents all criticised trans movement goals, although Diane also was explicitly critical of the feminist movement as well.

Our respondents who identify as queer and as trans each have their own understanding of the gender order and its relationship to their own identity. This is

consistent with some of the contemporary literature in trans studies. As Bettcher has argued, both the “trapped in the wrong body” narrative and the “outside the binary” narrative of trans identity may fail to capture trans people’s identities, and in addition conflict with feminist views of socially constructed gender (Bettcher 2014). Connell also argues that transsexual women’s lives involve multiple valences not captured by most narratives about trans identities. This is reflected among our participants, as we will see in the following section.

Queering the gender order

Our participants in the queer community were more or less supportive and inclusive towards groups within the LGBTQ umbrella. At the same time, they referred to ‘other’ gay people’s prejudice. Moreover, they had varied understandings of sex and gender and the gender order. Some of them seemed not to have reflected upon these terms, taking the gender binary as a given, while others claimed tolerance or support for trans issues for human rights reasons but saw the issue of gender identity as partly or entirely distinct from sexuality. Still others saw gender and sexuality as fluid and interrelated. Those who identified as bisexual, pansexual or placed themselves beyond the hetero-/homosexual dualism in some respect seemed to embrace a more gender queer ideology and see gender as a fluid category.

Nora, a young bisexual activist, said she felt a bit landless since she fits into two groups and hence “not entirely into any one”. She referred to the ‘academic’ ivory tower discourse on gender and trans issues which assumes gender as socially constructed or as a performance. At the same time, she was aware of trans people’s own experience of gender as a very physical and important reality which for some leads to physical transitions. She believed that this is a contradiction that the queer community has to live

with. Another example is Sarah who identifies as pansexual but labels herself a lesbian for the sake of simplicity. She welcomed “queer” as an umbrella term because of its obvious norm- critical connotations and resistance to assimilation. She explicitly opposed the common gay jargon ‘sexuality-is-not-a-choice’: “I don’t experience it this way myself. Why can’t this be a choice for some and not for others?” She went on to critique the GRS transition for attempting to assimilate trans people into gender stereotypes.

Iris, a young activist who also had been active in the disabled movement, deliberately identified as queer since lesbianism for her meant to please people who feel a need to locate people in a specific identity. She critiqued the gender binary and rejected normalization as a way to equal rights. “We should get rid of this bullshit, this is a stupid system anyway,” she said. Katherine is a middle aged woman who identifies as a lesbian and who has been active in the Icelandic queer movement. She addressed what she perceived as conservative views in the queer community and prejudice against other groups such as bisexuals and trans people. She was inclusive, but explicitly skeptical on what she saw as too much emphasis on transsexual medicine and GRS at the cost of a non-gender conforming stance.

Thus, respondents from the queer activist community had a range of views on the gender binary and the gender order. Some were critical of policies and practices that seemed to reinforce gender binaries, and argued for a more radical stance involving critiquing and queering the gender order. Others, such as Sarah and Nora, argued that there are a range of views within the community on the gender binary and saw these contradictions as a part of the diversity of the queer and trans community.

Trans and rejection of transnormativity

The interviews with our trans participants reflected various views on identity, gender and the gender order. This manifested itself within the trans community in highly different views ranging from the assumption of an essentialist gender binary to a more subversive understanding on how individuals create and manage their own trans or queer subjectivity. The language of identities and the group formations among our respondents were very fluid; language reflects identity as well as an underlying understanding of sex and gender. We were, therefore, conscious of the question of whether to categorize respondents' identities. The trans studies literature shows that people are perceived as trans do not necessarily use the categories that are imposed on them and often have a complex way of talking about the relationship between gender, gender identity and sexual orientation (Valentine 2004).

We found this to be true in how some of our participants saw their identity. Some people chose language consciously for political reasons; others had strong feelings and opinions though their responses to our interview questions were less concise. The way our respondents categorized themselves and made sense of their self-identification gives us insight into how they negotiated their, often contradictory, position as members of a marginalized group.

Different participants had different views of the terms trans woman and trans man (Bettcher 2014). One example of a person who proudly identified as trans is Donna, a middle-aged woman who stressed the commonality of all women and the need for feminism in the trans movement. She saw trans women as yet another manifestation of the variety among women, along the same lines as black women, lesbian women, disabled women, and so on. Andrew is a young trans man among our respondents who also gave voice to a this view: "I would say that I'm a trans man ... I was born with parts

of a female body and I had to go through this correction and that makes me a trans man all my life". Embodiment was central in Andrew's self-expression; he noted that he was born with 'parts of a female body'. While some of our younger respondents were very critical of the medical framework of trans issues this view was very common, reflecting the official and institutionalized understanding in Iceland of trans as GID, gender identity disorder. Like our other respondents, Andrew was comfortable with this categorization, yet he questioned the pathologization that came with it. Betty, a young trans woman, defined herself as a woman but used 'trans woman' strategically and politically when needed, to point out and make visible her trans position, but she did not use the term personally. "Of course I'm transsexual..." she pointed out, since she went through her transition. However, this was not something she was preoccupied with or felt the need to stress.

This acceptance of the term trans was in clear contrast to other respondents who rejected the term altogether. However, the term may be rejected for different reasons. Some might have objected to the term trans because it is not Icelandic, reflecting the strong tradition of language preservation. However, views about language may have been more complicated than this. Others wanted to simply identify as a woman or as a man, and did not see "trans" as part of their identity after transition. Still others may rightly fear violence if they were to live openly as trans. Jenny, a young trans woman was an example of this. Despite having chosen to be very public as a trans person, she was troubled with the term trans. She was bothered by the 'taboo' of talking about 'a sex change.' She felt it was the best way to understand the GRS transition, as it indeed points to physical biology. She did not identify as trans, nor transsexual or transgender but rather identified as a woman with a transsexual background and felt that she fit best into the group 'woman': "You know, I just feel that I identify much more with women, and if I

feel that I face any differentiation [Ís: aðskilnaður]⁴⁴ then it is mostly because I'm barren, you understand". Jenny thus expressed an intricate and contradictory relationship to biology, on the one hand accepting the term 'sex change' while at the same time referring to biological capacities (childbearing) that excluded her from the category women.

We found that some of the younger trans participants had a more subversive understanding on their own trans subjectivity. They were more critical towards GRS as well as its underlying ideas and ideology. This was clearly demonstrated in their views towards the trans community and in particular the association Trans Iceland (TÍ). TÍ was founded in 2007 as a social platform by a group of trans people, mostly transsexual women. TÍ has always been a small and informal forum focusing on the transition and personal support while political activism has been in the background. According to our respondents, leaders in TÍ have often been persons working through their own transition, which is a complex process (Connell 2012). We found a considerable difference between the views of the trans participants, how they identify themselves and perceive the role of TÍ. The older members of the group may be critical towards the medicalization of trans issues but tended to take a pragmatic stance. They identified as trans or transsexual and saw the medicalization and pathologization of trans issues as a necessary evil to secure the accessibility of GRS and transsexual medicine. Some of the younger participants were more critical, both of identifying themselves as trans as well as in their views towards the medical framework and the entire transition process. In some respect they seemed to take for granted what the older participants had to fight for.

The difference we discerned between the older and the younger participant's

⁴⁴ This word literally means "segregation" or "distinction".

approach towards TÍ reflected different circumstances and lived experience. Teresa, a middle-aged woman among our participants, who identified as transsexual, was pragmatic and realistic while also being sensitive to the generational gap and tensions between different groups. She was critical of TÍ which she found to be too focused on transsexual people, leaving out other groups who often do not feel they are welcome: “And then I’m talking about people who we can call transgender, or even transvestite. They don’t feel that they fit in. Or they are simply driven away.”

Teresa lived abroad when she underwent her GRS. Her generation had to deal with the ‘feeling of shame’ connected to transsexual issues and the advice they got from the medical specialists was to keep a low profile and be silent. At the time of her interview, Teresa felt drained after longstanding activism and wanted her life to be more than trans. Her narrative reflected the contradiction of a life-long trans existence that differed from Reshea’s, another middle-aged woman who identified as trans. Reshea felt that ‘solidarity’ characterized the trans group which was small and close knit, and even like “one family”. There are always some people who choose to leave the group, she said, or stop identifying as trans after transitioning and just want to fit in. Interestingly, she exclusively focused on transsexual people.

The voices of the younger generation were in a stark contrast to Reshea’s. While some of them certainly agreed on the importance of the social part of TÍ, there were disadvantages. The good side of the “sewing group” or the “café feel”, as some call it, was that people came into a safe space to meet and talk, even though they went their own way once they were confident enough. But much more common were views that TÍ was like a “sewing group”, which was a recurrent term in addition to expressions such as “countless tea parties” and “dramas”.

Two of the younger trans persons, Olivia and Pat, were especially critical of the

emphasis on trans identity and the trans community in TÍ. Olivia was in the process of GRS transition and Pat was not aiming for a transition and rejected categorization. Pat referred to her/himself either as he or she, and had both a male and female name. Both talked about TÍ as a “sewing group” mainly fighting for acceptance and assimilation, and for making the system “accessible, simple and affordable” according to Olivia.

The young people’s skepticism got its clearest and most significant manifestation in the term “transnormative” which both Olivia and Pat used to describe TÍ. As Olivia explained: “The main characteristic of the Icelandic trans movement is normalizing... If you’re MTF, for example, male to female transsexual, then you must be the stereotypical woman, be in a very good condition... hmm... docile and quiet, and just be as feminine as possible. But if you’re a FTM, then you should be as masculine as possible, and if you don’t fit into these categories then you are not welcome in the Icelandic trans community”.

They emphasized that those who were not transsexual, or aiming for transition, felt excluded as revealed in the following comment by Pat: “I know that young people don’t feel they are welcome in Trans Iceland. Not that they think that they are not welcome, they just don’t feel the atmosphere at Trans Iceland meetings as welcoming”. Pat then went on to explain how trans men did not find the atmosphere in TÍ inviting; “...there were, indeed, very transnormative trans women talking about their surgeries and children, extremely normalizing discussion...” Pat said that the excluding atmosphere in TÍ had resulted in sub-group formations. Hence, trans men were sticking together, having their social gatherings “drinking beer and playing video games”. Another group formation consisted of the younger people - with trans men intersecting with the younger group.

Pat was one who went the farthest in breaking boundaries in her/his own

personal self-identification. It was therefore all the more interesting that Pat (critically) explained group formations as reinforcing gender binaries and referred to the different atmosphere and activities of the groups in gendered terms, with men “drinking beer and playing video games”, and women drinking coffee and discussing their children.

Conclusion

Given Iceland’s significant commitment to equality and inclusion, as well as the nature of activism for social change, it is not surprising to find these harmonies and tensions within and between the views of trans, feminist, and queer activists. Some of these tensions reflect different ideas about social justice priorities as well as different ideas about gender, embodiment, and identity, and trans and transgender versus transsexual identities.

Trans, feminist, and queer activists in Iceland have much to say about the meanings of gender, sex, feminism and gender equality, and their place in Icelandic society with its egalitarian aspirations. As we have seen, our respondents offer a variety of ways of understanding identities and activism in relation to challenging the traditional gender order. We find especially interesting the differing views of gender binaries among our respondents. Most feminist activists want to be supportive and receptive towards trans and queer issues. However, tensions appear when it comes to specific issues and the ambition to be inclusive may feed into unintentional exclusion, especially when cis feminists are not well informed on issues related to trans identities. The critiques of transnormativity by younger activists most especially point to the possible limitations of the 2012 law, with its medicalization of transsexual rights in an egalitarian welfare state. How will some of our respondents’ stance on broadening the

social and political meanings attached to gender create possibilities for a more inclusive egalitarian welfare state? These critiques were intriguing to us, as they provide a deep critique of the traditional gender order, and a challenge to more traditional ideas of the public policies required to promote gender equality. The critique of transnormativity can be seen as an effort to push beyond the gender binary. This raises the potential for coalitions of trans/queer/cis feminist activists working in concert to critique the gender order.

Given the election of a right wing government in Iceland in April 2013, there are threats to the protections offered by the welfare state, particularly in these times of austerity policies. It certainly seems possible that those whose gains have been most recent, such as people who identify as trans, may suffer the most, losing access to their newly gained rights and benefits. With the challenges that we have noted to expanding the mission of the Centre for Gender Equality, these tensions may result in conflicts over public policy goals both within and between movements. The present study offers us a context for examining how activists see the gender order, and how they may relate to their respective identities and ideologies as well as to the quest for greater access to gender equality for all.

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