

How to Abolish Gender

By Morgan Pratt

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I. Purpose

The present structure which dominates gender in our society, patriarchy, is incredibly oppressive, and calls to dismantle it have rung for generations. However, these calls are often entrenched in an oppressive gender binary. What if we did not stop at patriarchy and dismantled gender hierarchies entirely? This article does not intend to make a case for or against this project, but rather hopes to investigate how one could go about dismantling gender from a policy perspective. Of course, because gender has sociological, cultural, medical, legal, historical, and religious influences, its abolition requires a complete rewrite of the most basal aspects of society. Doing so would certainly require much more than policy action alone. However, because our society constantly reinforces gendered material divisions through its institutions and economic incentives, to abolish gender requires the elimination of these structures through policy action. Policies like universal health care, abolishing the prison industrial complex, establishing universal basics and a care economy, guaranteeing housing as a right, and modifying our bureaucracies can drastically reduce the material reproduction of gender and effectively lay the foundation for a social movement to eliminate its influence entirely. This article will begin by establishing a shared understanding of the terms, history, and criteria necessary to discuss gender abolition before outlining concrete policy steps.

II. Terminology and definitions

Though colonialism, imperialism, and globalization have created major similarities in terms of division of labor and hierarchy, the conceptualization of gender at present varies across cultures. For the purposes of this article, the gender and policy contexts will be that of the United States. Gender is understood to be the socially constructed set of behaviors and presentations aligned to two sexes: male and female. Sex here is also understood to be a social construction, grouping disparate phenological characteristics (i.e. chromosomes, genitalia, body hair) into two categories. Neither term adequately captures the diversity that currently or has ever existed in any society. We need more terms, lest we replicate the violent process through which our society enforces these norms onto people. Transgender people are those whose gender does not match the sex they were assigned at birth, the inverse being cisgender. Intersex people are those who do not fit neatly into either sex construction. Gender non-conforming (GNC) people are those whose gender does not fit into either binary social construction.

III. A brief history of gender

Men and women have existed as categories for a very long time, but modern conceptualizations of gender—in terms of roles and the division of labor—have not existed for very long at all. Early human societies were much more egalitarian and, where there was a division of labor, the different roles were not seen hierarchically until the invention of private property.¹ This innovation drove men to wage labor and created the incentive to modify familial relations and law to ensure property could be passed to future generations. It was not until industrialization that cleaning and other activities now known as chores began to be associated with women. In pre-industrial America, women seldom cleaned and instead focused on creating items for the household such as candles, soap, and stockings.² During industrialization, production of these items was formalized and commodified, driving women to adopt different unpaid labor as they were still largely shut out of the wage labor system. Today, we can understand gender as a class system dividing and assigning reproductive labor, including sex, birth, childcare, and homemaking, which helps to reproduce life.³ In this system, men are the dominating class who benefit from the labor of others with minimal participation themselves.

Throughout the evolution of this system, the roles and performances associated with each gender have been enforced through sexual⁴ and structural forms of violence.^{5,6} Colonialism and imperialism are the forms through which European notions of gender, marriage, and patriarchy ossified and spread throughout the globe.⁷ This proselytization both severely limited gender variance worldwide and caused the European system to become more inflexible (in order to resist the influence of outside variation it encountered during colonization).⁸ Due to the aforementioned incorporation of law into gender relations, enforcing gender relations gradually became an important function of the state.⁹ Today, the combination of sociocultural and legal criminalization of gender non-conformity and the increased presence of legal structures in the lives of marginalized populations has resulted in transgender and GNC people experiencing massively disproportionate rates of arrest, imprisonment, and violence.¹⁰ In modern society, gender is not only a psychic phenomena, but one that is reproduced through labor inequalities, law, and violence. To abolish this system requires these methods of reproduction be interrupted.

IV. Criteria

¹ Engels, Friedrich, 1820-1895. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. New York: International Publishers, 1942.

² Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race, & Class*. Vintage, 1981.

³ Flores, Emma, and Vikky Storm. *Gender Accelerationist Manifesto*. 2019.

⁴ ActionAid UK. "Gender Equality: The Key to Ending Violence Against Women." IPPF, ActionAid UK, n.d.

⁵ Flores, Emma, and Vikky Storm. *Gender Accelerationist Manifesto*. 2019.

⁶ Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke UP, 2015.

⁷ Daring, C. B., et al. *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*. AK Press, 2013.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Engels, Friedrich, 1820-1895. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*

¹⁰ Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*.

Just as there is ambiguity in the term “gender,” so too is there ambiguity in the goal of gender abolition, especially in terms of government policy. Could the government just stop recording gender on official documents and law to abolish gender overnight? While this may remove some barriers, especially for transgender and GNC people, this strategy can also be harmful. Instead of eliminating bias, not disaggregating data based on gender more profoundly affects systems by obscuring the harm they do to oppressed groups.¹¹ Further, this strategy does nothing to address the material conditions and systems that reproduce gender. In other words, a genderless society is not one that is gender-blind, but rather one that has identified and eliminated the barriers to an equal society.

Because our relationship to gender is so deeply rooted in many important structures, including our own bodies, it may help to use an analogy as a goal. An ideal genderless society may treat sex the same way it treats other medical categories: decoupled from social constructions and labor divisions. One example is blood type. In America, most people are aware of what blood type they have and no one denies that it has important—at times life-threatening—medical implications, but we do not prescribe any behaviors or labor onto people of different blood types, much less enforce them with violence. A similar arrangement could be possible for a genderless society.

Finally, in dealing with gender and society, one must also contend with sexuality reproduction. It may be immediately unclear how sexuality would function in a society without gender, but one could look towards LGBTQ+ spaces for examples of sexuality decoupled from heterogenous gender roles, genitalia, and gender. This still leaves the topic of pregnancy and the division of reproductive labor. Transhumanism, the idea of overcoming biological limitations with sophisticated technology, envisions a world where medical technology advances to achieve universal fertilization and for fetuses to develop outside of wombs, completely decoupling gender and reproductive labor. Modern fertility technology already allows for some decoupling, but gendered reproductive labor divisions and biological limitations remain significant.¹² While it is certainly easier to visualize an equitable distribution of reproductive labor with advanced technology, it is by no means necessary. What is important is that society values the work that goes into pregnancy and provides just support and compensation.

V. Policy steps

Though it is impossible to completely eradicate the influence of gender on society through policy action alone, because the state mediates the experience of gender and because policy materially reinforces this system, policy changes are necessary for gender abolition.¹³ The following is an incomplete list of policies that would greatly reduce the importance of gender (as well as other forms of oppression) in our lives. Of course, these policies are not truly separate and effective implementation would require designing each policy with the others in mind.

¹¹ Perez, Caroline C. *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. Abrams, 2019.

¹² Mock, Jillian. “How Close Are We To Making Babies from Bone Marrow?” *Discover Magazine*, 10 Aug. 2020.

¹³ Daring, C. B., et al. *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*. AK Press, 2013.

a. Universal health care

Reforming the medical system is necessary not only because marginalized genders and sexualities have remarkably worse health outcomes¹⁴ and greater unmet gender-affirming medical needs, but also because the medical system itself is used by the state to further oppression and ossify gender norms.¹⁵ Though not a panacea, universal health care, including mental health care and coverage for reproductive and gender-affirming procedures, would undermine the material basis for gender by equalizing and improving health outcomes.

Investigating existing health disparities shows why this is the case. Marginalized genders and sexualities have poor health outcomes not only due to discrimination both within¹⁶ and outside the medical system, but also due to how health care is provisioned in the United States. Because health care coverage is predominantly tied to employment,¹⁷ other structural barriers such as poverty, criminalization, and education also manifest as lack of health care.¹⁸ Providing health care universally eliminates this disparity. Additionally, because most US health care is for-profit,¹⁹ switching to a universal, public system would reduce incentives to promote unnecessary or dangerous treatments to marginalized groups.

Universal health care does not eliminate disparities based upon discrimination, but it does offer some relief. Notably, gender-affirming procedures such as hormone therapy or breast reconstruction surgery are often provided to cisgender people as part of insurance plans (during menopause or after an accident, for example), but considered elective or medically unnecessary for transgender and GNC people with the same aims.²⁰ Likewise, intersex people are frequently forced to have surgery at birth to conform to binary conceptualizations of sex.²¹ Through these practices, the medical field economically and anatomically reproduces and enforces gender and sex norms. A robust, universal system of health care coverage is necessary to prevent this.

Without universal health care coverage, the effects of gender will persist in disparate health outcomes for people with marginalized genders and sexualities.

b. Abolition

Starting when heterosexual, monogamous marriages became the foundation of the capitalist reproductive unit, the state has used law to criminalize sexuality and gender

¹⁴ Gruberg, Sharita, et al. "The State of the LGBTQ Community in 2020." Center for American Progress, 6 Oct. 2020

¹⁵ Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke UP, 2015.

¹⁶ Mirza, Shabab A., and Caitlin Rooney. "Discrimination Prevents LGBTQ People From Accessing Health Care." Center for American Progress, 13 Aug. 2019

¹⁷ Collins, Sara R., et al. "Trends in Employer Health Care Coverage, 2008–2018." Commonwealth Fund, 21 Nov. 2019.

¹⁸ Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke UP, 2015.

¹⁹ US Census Bureau. "Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2019." US Census Bureau 15 Sept. 2020.

²⁰ Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke UP, 2015.

²¹ Pham, Larissa. "Intersex Activist and Writer Hida Viloria on Being 'Born Both'." Rolling Stone, 20 Mar. 2017.

expression that does not conform to this description.²² The effects of this are felt today, where transgender and GNC people, especially those who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), are overrepresented in the criminal punishment system.²³ In addition to imprisonment or deportation, contact with this system can have long-lasting material effects through stigmatization; lack of access to jobs, education and loans; disease and injury; and death.²⁴ Policing also has a profound oppressive effect through violently enforcing universal conformity to gender norms.²⁵ Though this especially affects transgender and GNC people, the cultural effect of these hundreds of years of oppression affects how everyone behaves and interacts with others.²⁶

Reforming this system is not an option because reform usually means a greater presence of the criminal punishment system into people's lives, increasing the contact and, subsequently, the criminalization of transgender and GNC people,²⁷ and because, historically, reforms have been ineffective.²⁸ To resist criminalization's material reproduction of gender, we must remove existing structures and redesign the system in accordance with abolitionist principles.

Though a deep review of abolitionist literature is beyond the scope of this article, its main tenets are to meet community needs to address the social determinants of crime, demilitarize the various institutions that fuel punishment, and shift to a restorative and rehabilitative model of justice.²⁹ This approach understands that the safest areas are not those with the most prisons or police but the opposite, and that lack of access to resources is a primary driver of crime.³⁰ Here, community needs include access to housing, health care, and dignified employment, which are discussed in depth elsewhere in this section. Some institutions to reform or eliminate include education, surveillance, immigration, and government benefits.³¹ Finally, a restorative and rehabilitative model of justice not only centers victims in the process of justice, but also acknowledges that activities like sex work and drug use must be removed from the criminal sphere entirely. From there, one must undermine the institutional and ideological supports for today's criminalization, including those that cause us to police gender norms.³²

²² Daring, C. B., et al. *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*. AK Press, 2013.

²³ Stanley, Eric A., and Nat Smith. *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. AK Press, 2015.

²⁴ Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2010.

²⁵ Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke UP, 2015.

²⁶ Daring, C. B., et al. *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*. AK Press, 2013.

²⁷ Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke UP, 2015.

²⁸ Kaba, Mariame. "Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police." *The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia*, 12 June 2020.

²⁹ Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Seven Stories Press, 2011.

³⁰ Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke UP, 2015.

³¹ Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2010.

³² Daring, C. B., et al. *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*. AK Press, 2013.

Without abolishing the prison industrial complex and rebuilding it with abolitionist principles, society will continue to reproduce gender divisions through criminalization, mass incarceration, death, and lack of access to loans, education, and jobs.

c. UBI and the care economy

Among the most pernicious economic forces that reproduce material divisions by gender are unpaid and exploitative labor. In addition to receiving higher wages in every country on Earth, men also do less to reproduce their household's labor (i.e. chores, cooking, childcare). Some estimates say the average American woman does the equivalent of \$40,000 worth of unpaid labor each year.³³ These disparities are exacerbated for BIPOC women.³⁴ Additionally, people of marginalized genders and sexualities are more likely to experience exploitative labor relations,^{35,36} and many do not have the economic security to leave these situations. These structures effectively channel money to cisgender (especially white) men at the expense of everyone else. Policies like universal basic income, monetizing the care economy by paying people who care for dependents, and a jobs guarantee are necessary to interrupt these processes. These policies not only enact justice through funneling more resources towards marginalized groups and compensating them for the work they already do, but also reduce their dependence on exploitative structures—including domestic ones.

Without these policies, gender will continue to be reborn through the unequal distribution of wealth and income as well as the dependence on exploitative structures favoring the privileged class.

d. Housing

As with other material aspects of society, those who conform to gender norms have greater control over housing. This results in a greater dependence on men within traditional family structures and higher housing insecurity for those who do not conform to gender norms.³⁷ Not only does the state criminalize—and thus violently enforce gender norms upon³⁸—people experiencing homelessness,³⁹ having a criminal record is also used to deny access to housing in a vicious cycle.⁴⁰ In order to break this cycle, there must be a system in place that guarantees housing for all with no exceptions. This could be done through some combination of effective expansion of public housing,⁴¹ increasing regulations on or seizing

³³ Hess, Abigail. "Here's How Much More Women Could Earn if Household Chores Were Compensated." CNBC, 11 Apr. 2018.

³⁴ Glynn, Sarah J. "An Unequal Division of Labor." Center for American Progress, 18 May 2018.

³⁵ Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke UP, 2015.

³⁶ Raynor, Scott. "Transgender Issues in the Workplace." EVERFI, 19 Feb. 2020.

³⁷ Brennan, Maya, et al. "Five Facts About Housing Access for LGBT People." Housing Matters, 13 June 2018.

³⁸ Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke UP, 2015.

³⁹ Sharma, Bidish, and Jessica Brand. "The Criminalization of Homelessness: Explained." The Appeal, 29 June 2018.

⁴⁰ Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2010.

⁴¹ Stüven, Merrit. "Centering Community Needs Through Public Housing." Progressive Policy Review, 4 Mar. 2021.

vacant properties,⁴² implementing rent controls,⁴³ reforming zoning laws,⁴⁴ and emphasizing affordability in new developments.⁴⁵

Universal access to housing would help to deemphasize gender in a number of ways. First, because society normalizes dependence on men for housing, it would lessen the control sexist, homophobic, or abusive patriarchs have over their dependents' housing as they would always have an alternative. Next, it would reduce or eliminate homelessness, both a cause and a consequence of violent gender enforcement by the state. Finally, with universal housing, the state would have one fewer method of weaponizing gender norms through criminality.

Without these reforms, gender would continue to play an important role in people's lives through maintaining the dominance and control men have over people's material conditions and regulating people's access to housing based on conformity to gender norms.

e. Bureaucratic reforms

What should be the last stage of the policy action to reduce the influence of gender is reforming or eliminating policies and practices that require the disclosure of gender. Examples include drivers licenses, benefits applications, and marriage. This comes from the understanding that measuring and using gender as a requirement to access government services can result in both the stratification of services based upon gender and the exclusion of people from services whose gender does not match societal norms. Specifically, many transgender people find a patchwork of different policies both between and within states on how to change their gender as officially measured by the state. Any discrepancy in their gender between documents or agencies can result in denial of services or harassment.⁴⁶ Likewise, though no longer the official practice of the state, jobs with more women tend to have lower wages⁴⁷ and services used by fewer men tend to face gendered attacks in the media and then through political action, leading to their degradation.⁴⁸

Thus, the measurement and administration of gender by the state and other bodies causes and enables harm. Ending this is necessary to end gender. However, as is the thesis of this work, doing so before extensive policy action and a successful social movement have interrupted the material reproduction of gender would instead make this process of continuous inequality harder to measure. Therefore, ending the bureaucratic measurement and administration of gender is necessary, but must be the last stage in a society-wide transformation.

⁴² O'Sullivan, Feargus. "Barcelona's Latest Affordable Housing Tool: Seize Empty Apartments." Bloomberg, 16 July 2020

⁴³ Das, Kamolika. "Lower Rent Means More Cash for the Basics." DC Fiscal Policy Institute, 12 Mar. 2020.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The Editorial Board. "A New Approach on Housing Affordability." The New York Times - Breaking News, US News, World News and Videos, 12 July 2019.

⁴⁶ Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke UP, 2015.

⁴⁷ Perez, Caroline C. *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. Abrams, 2019.

⁴⁸ Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke UP, 2015.

Without ending the measurement and administration of gender, it will continue to be reborn through bureaucratic discrimination and the unequal provision of resources to sectors or services with proportionate more people of marginalized genders and sexualities.

VI. Conclusion

Though the implementation of these policies will make enormous strides in reducing the material consequences of gender, and although policy action is necessary to abolish gender, policy action alone is insufficient. To truly eliminate the influence of one of the most pervasive psychic phenomena from our society would require a popular mass movement mobilizing and educating large swaths of society. Further, this social movement could not focus on gender alone if it hopes to be successful. The disparities caused by gender are part of the capitalist superstructure, meaning they are inextricably linked to ableism, neuronormativity, and racism. This is reflected in the fact that many of the above policy recommendations also disproportionately benefit those affected by racism, neuronormativity, and ableism. However, as with gender, these policies are not enough to solve these issues alone.

Like those of marginalized gender and sexualities, those with disabilities and/or neurodivergencies are more likely to be poor, homeless, and marginalized by a variety of institutions affected by the above policy recommendations. However, many of the spaces built by and for people of marginalized genders and sexualities are not friendly to those of different abilities.⁴⁹ Given the fact that people of marginalized genders and sexualities are more likely to have a disability,⁵⁰ and that neurodivergent people are more likely to reject gender norms,⁵¹ a special attention to ability and neurodiversity is necessary in the implementation of the above policies and accompanying social movement.

The same must be done for race. Intersectionality teaches us that women and GNC people of color experience unique oppression not captured when maleness or whiteness is seen as the default.⁵² Thus, eliminating oppression based on gender requires paying attention to these unique intersections. Likewise, some antiracists contend that racial liberation can only come with the abolition of gender.^{53, 54} That being said, gender-inclusive spaces often reproduce racial inequalities, especially assimilationist LGBTQ+ groups solely focused on bureaucratic reforms.⁵⁵ Because of the intergenerational conceptualization of race and unique history of oppression at the intersection of race and gender, successful gender abolitionist policy and a successful social movement to support it must be anti-racist.

⁴⁹ Ratcliff, Ace T. "Built-In Ableism Makes Queer Spaces Inaccessible to Disabled People." Bitch Media, 19 June 2020.

⁵⁰ Ascher, Eric. "More Than One-Third of LGBT Adults Identify As Having a Disability." Respect Ability, 29 June 2018.

⁵¹ Glidden, Derek et al. "Gender Dysphoria and Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review of the Literature." *Sexual Medicine Reviews* vol. 4,1 (2016): 3-14.

⁵² Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

⁵³ Jade, Rebecca. "Black Gender Abolition?" GUTS, 22 Mar. 2018.

⁵⁴ Bey, Marquis. "Blackness, Gender, and the Non-normative." AAIHS, 2 Apr. 2018.

⁵⁵ Daring, C. B., et al. *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*. AK Press, 2013.

Missing from this discussion have been the downsides to gender abolition. The binary, patriarchal gender system in place today has established deep roots in culture, religion, and people's understanding of themselves. The truth is that, today, this system is something many people are not willing to give up. And sometimes for a good reason: some gendered divisions today exist to mitigate abuse from cisgender men. Further, a movement to abolish gender should not force people to divorce themselves from harmless gender expressions they enjoy, even if those are the present gender binary; policing androgyny would hardly be better than policing patriarchy. Any social movement or policy implementation scheme must carefully contend with these realities to be successful and responsible.

In summary, the road to gender abolition is complex and all-encompassing. It would affect nearly every aspect of society and every individual. That being said, there is a place to start. By implementing universal health care, abolishing the prison industrial complex, establishing universal basics and a care economy, guaranteeing housing as a right, and modifying our bureaucracies, we can severely limit the material consequences of gender. People of all genders would then have much more equal lives—free to dress, act and love without the fear of massive material consequences and structural violence that exists today. A world without gender is then ours for the making.

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