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She, He and Ze All Have the Right to Make Own Identity Choices

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She, He and Ze All Have the Right to Make Own Identity Choices

By **Leandra Preston-Sidler**
UCF Forum columnist
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As a Women's Studies instructor, I spend much of my professional life reading about, thinking about and discussing gender issues. As a feminist, I also devote much of my personal life to such endeavors.

And then this came up recently in the first online discussion of my summer "Introduction to Women's Studies" course: A student proclaimed that in this day and age "gender does not matter anymore because androgyny and transgender issues are more visible and socially acceptable than ever."

While I hated to burst her bubble of optimism about the state of gender today, my soon-to-arrive baby girl and the load of pink clothes I already have halfway through my pregnancy were just some of the reasons I intercepted her proclamations.

Visibility and social acceptability are not mutually exclusive. I see more discussions about transgender issues than ever on social media, in popular culture, in journal articles, and, thankfully, in the textbooks I use in my courses. We integrate such important issues around gender into our work and classrooms, not only in gender-based courses, but (I like to think) across the board. However, it is flat wrong to say that gender is a non-issue or that transgender as an identity is socially acceptable by the mainstream.

Gender is a primary determinate of who we are perceived to be, whether we agree with it and whether we identify with our preconceived gender determination. Class and race,

among other categories, are also powerful determinates but those intersect with gender in specific ways so gender is always an issue.

From the time we are born, our sex and correlating gender expectations drive our paths through life. This is not to say we cannot disrupt or challenge those paths, but folks will try to get us back on the “right” one with all their might - and with varying consequences if we resist.

Issues around sex and gender have been heatedly floating around my social networking circles recently. An uncomfortable divide seems to be brewing among those who see feminist assertions around gender as a challenge to transgender identities, and vice-versa. Both feminist and trans issues call into question the notion of nature versus nurture regarding gender, and rightfully so. If individuals do not, cannot or will not fit into a distinct, predefined gender category or, as in some cases, feel they are “born into the wrong body,” gender as a social construct is further complicated.

This is a much larger issue but is one worthy of addressing on at least a cursory level and part of the response I gave my student about why gender as an issue still matters.

The question of whether gender matters extends beyond queer or transgender issues and is deeply entrenched in traditional conceptions of manhood and womanhood and the implications of such. I have a nontraditional student in my class, too—a great grandmother—and she laments how broadening understandings of gender have infringed upon traditional arrangements.

For those who fit nicely into prescribed gender roles, having a door courteously opened may matter. But for those who do not subscribe neatly to the categories of “man” or “woman,” social acceptance of varied gender roles may be a matter of life or death, as violence against and suicide among gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals are pressing realities. Being able to move freely and comfortably in one’s world is something we all have a right to enjoy without judgment or harm. Door-opening has become more than a gendered courtesy and to some that may seem like progress.

Frankly, as someone who fits into my prescribed gender role, whether as a choice or biological imperative or something I have neatly acquiesced to, I value my right to choose my career, my role in my home and marriage, my ability to choose to have a child without fear of the state interfering, and my safety. And I strongly believe that no matter how one looks or identifies or feels or fits in or doesn't, she or he or ze has a right to access these choices without impediment, challenge or fear.

I hope my daughter, whoever she turns out to be, will have the option to identify as and love who she chooses, to play dolls or drums or something radically in between — even if she does start with a closet load of pink clothes.

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