

# The dangers of a gender essentialist approach to sexual violence

By JOS | Published: JANUARY 31, 2013

<http://feministing.com/2013/01/31/the-dangers-of-a-gender-essentialist-approach-to-sexual-violence/>

In December, when controversy about the rape apologist org the Good Men Project was all over the feminist internets, [I wrote about problems](#) with the juvenile way of thinking about people in terms like “good” and “bad.” In that post, I briefly mentioned that to address the reality of sexual violence we need a more sharply nuanced conversation all around, including when it comes to gender. The post included this line:

*Most men aren't rapists; some women are rapists; some people who aren't men or women have experiences with sexual violence.*

Community member Red [commented on the post](#), and I've been thinking about this response ever since:

*Thank you. Thank you so much. I am genderqueer and was raped 4 years ago. And I have never had my experience validated before in anything I have heard. I have been mis-gendered, mis-believed, and mis-treated in every step of my healing process by law enforcement, therapists, other feminists and my own friends. I know this comment is unrelated to the actual blog post, and I apologize for fixating on this one sentence. Feel free to delete this comment. I just wanted to thank who ever thought to write that one sentence, because for the very first time I feel like someone might understand what happened to me.*

This is heartbreaking. And it shouldn't be this way. As feminists, we have a responsibility to address the ways we talk about and do sexual violence work that exclude actual survivors.

Rape is absolutely a gendered crime. This is true of how it plays out in the real world, and of our concept of rape – both the act and idea of rape are used to perpetuate a patriarchal gender hierarchy. Violence in general is function and gendered, as Eesha Pandit made clear [in her powerful theory of violence](#). We know sexual violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women. But we don't actually know how strong the gender disparity is largely because of how gendered our concept of rape is. The FBI has [only recently begun](#) changing their archaic definition of rape from “the carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will,” an incredibly narrow definition that means FBI statistics exclude lots of female survivors, and anyone the

FBI doesn't identify as female. Because our idea of sexual violence is gendered in such an essentialist way, we don't actually have a broad picture of the gendered ways these crimes play out in the real world.

This is part of how the gender binary works. It sets up two boxes: one for the people in power – men – and one for the people to oppress – women. Anyone who doesn't fit our culture's narrow definitions for man or woman, and anyone who isn't a man or a woman, falls outside, where it's difficult to even make people recognize our humanity, let alone our experiences of oppression. There's a ton of problems with this set up, not the least of which is painting women broadly as victims and men as perpetrators. Another way gendered violence functions is by erasing the many people whose experiences of sexual violence don't fit this model – survivors who are men (cis or trans), trans women, genderqueer, two spirit, or in some other way gender non-conforming, intersex folks, and survivors of crimes perpetrated by atypical attackers, like survivors of queer relationship violence. Sadly, feminists end up perpetuating this exclusion when we talk about victims only as women and perpetrators only as men. Rape is absolutely a gendered crime, but the act of rape itself doesn't necessarily follow those rules. We need to be able to hold an understanding of rape as a genderless act *at the same time* that we recognize it as embedded in a gendered culture of violence. No one said feminism was easy.

Sadly, Red's experience is not unique. We have a very hard time recognizing and understanding sexual violence that doesn't fit the standard narrative. I have to wonder how much this plays into the widespread shocked reaction to cases like that of [Jerry Sandusky](#) or the [Catholic Church](#). It's also been difficult for these cases which involve the abuse of boys to come to light. I have to wonder about the [cases involving men](#) we don't hear about, not to mention cases involving gender non-conforming people, which most of our culture doesn't even know how to talk about.

Lori and I have [written a good deal on this site about expanding abortion care to people who aren't women but who need abortions](#). As [I wrote about that topic](#):

*Yes, the majority of people who have abortions are cis women. Recognizing that not everyone who needs to access the procedure is a woman does not erase this fact, or do anything to make abortion less accessible to this majority. I certainly do not want to see women taken out of the discussion at all – I just want to see it expanded to include everyone who's lived reality includes abortion. But **the idea that abortion politics should be focused on cis women because they are the impacted majority is pretty much the opposite of a social justice stance.** It's the people in the margins – usually a minority – who most need their voices and concerns lifted up. Because they are the easiest to forget about, the easiest to exclude.*

The same is true when it comes to sexual violence. We absolutely must continue

highlighting the gendered nature of sexual violence. But it's vital to do so in a way that doesn't leave people out. There are real world implications to only seeing victims who are cis women. Respondents to the [National Transgender Discrimination Survey](#) reported harassment and denial of equal treatment in domestic violence shelters and rape crisis centers, as well as other health care facilities and at the hands of law enforcement. Trans and gender non-conforming people are often excluded from services all together. I want to be clear: letting the Violence Against Women Act expire is absolutely despicable. [As Zerlina highlighted so personally](#), this legislation funds vital services that real people depend on. While VAWA's name is very gendered, in principal the legislation is supposed to be gender neutral. In practice, it's an ongoing process to make sure services VAWA covers reach as many people as possible. In an incredibly disturbing turn, the House GOP's apparent reason for letting VAWA expire was that it would offer too many services to immigrants, Native Americans, and LGBT folks. Yes, they killed VAWA in an attempt to ensure vital services wouldn't reach my community. We absolutely need VAWA, and we need to keep expanding its services to people who aren't cis women. One piece of positive change that has occurred within government: last year, the Department of Justice [released national standards](#) to prevent prison rape that include protections for trans and gender non-conforming folks. We need more changes like that, and less changes like killing VAWA because it might help too many LGBT folks.

Given how overwhelmingly gendered sexual violence is, it's easy and understandable to slip into essentialist language when talking about the issue, to paint all victims as women and all perpetrators as men. By missing parts of the reality, we've left space for folks like Men's Rights Activists to fill. Obviously, the feminist take on rape has much more to do with reality than the MRA take. But when you've got one side going "what about the menz!" and another side responding "but victims are overwhelmingly women!" you're having the wrong conversation. As feminists, we need to find ways to do this work that serve everyone who's been targeted with sexual violence.

Violence in general is incredibly gendered in our culture, as Maya [wrote in the wake of the Sandy Hook shooting](#). We absolutely need to be talking about violence and masculinity. We should continue taking to the streets to shout that rape and sexual violence are gendered crimes that are embedded in and perpetuate patriarchy. But we need to work to do this in a way that doesn't perpetuate the exclusions of the gender binary by leaving victims out.