

Cisgender Privilege

On the Privileges of Performing Normative Gender

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The latin prefix “cis,” loosely translated, means “on this side,” while the prefix “trans” is generally understood to mean “change, crossing, or beyond.” Cisgender people are those whose gender identity, role, or expression is considered to match their assigned gender by societal standards. Transgender people are individuals who change, cross, or live beyond gender.

Privilege is the “cultural currency” afforded to a person or group of persons who are recognized as possessing a desired social or political characteristic. Privilege is the stability society affords us when we don’t rock the boat.

Gendered privilege is the collective advantages that are accepted, most often unknowingly, by those who are not positioned in opposition to the dominant ideology of the gender binary. Simply put: A person who is able to live in a life and/or body that is easily recognized as being either man/male or woman/female generally needs to spend less energy to be understood by others. The energy one need not expend to explain their gender identity and/or expression to others is gendered privilege.

The following questionnaire was inspired by Peggy McIntosh’s article “Unpacking the Invisible White Knapsack” (1988). This questionnaire is intended to inspire some insight into the privileges of those who are, for the most part, considered to be performing normative gender. It is certainly not an exhaustive list, nor can it be generalized to people in every social position. Gendered privilege is experienced differently depending on the situation and the individual people involved. Readers of this article are encouraged to adapt the questions to suit their own positioning and to come up with questions that can be added to the list.

1. Can you be guaranteed to find a public bathroom that is safe and equipped for you to use?
2. Can you be sure to find a picture of someone whose gender expression resembles yours somewhere on a magazine rack?
3. Can you be reasonably sure whether to check the M or F box on a form?
4. Can you be reasonably sure that your choice of checked box on such forms will not subject you to legal prosecution of fraud or misrepresentation of identity?
5. Are you able to assume that your genitals conform relatively closely to portrayals of "normal" bodies?
6. Can you expect to find a doctor willing to provide you with urgent medical care?
7. Are you able to make a decision to be a parent without being told that you are confused about your gender?
8. Can you be confident that your health care providers will not ask to see your genitals when treating you for a sore throat?
9. Can you be confident that your health care providers will provide treatment for your health concerns without assuming that you chose to be ill?
10. Can you obtain a passport and travel without government employees asking explicit questions regarding your genitals?
11. Do people often act as if they are doing you a favor by using the appropriate pronouns for your gender?
12. Can you undress in a public changing room without risk of being assaulted or reported?
13. Are you able to discuss your childhood without disguising your gender?
14. Can you provide government identification without risking ridicule for your name or legal sex status?
15. Do you need to prove your gender before others will refer to you with your chosen name and pronouns?
16. Can you wear a socially acceptable bathing suit?
17. Does the government require proof of the state of your genitals in order to change information on your personal identification?
18. Are incidental parts of your identity defined as a mental illness?
19. Can you reasonably expect to be sexual with your consenting partner of choice without being told you have a mental illness?
20. Do other people consider your lifestyle a mental illness?
21. How many mental illnesses can be put into total remission through medical surgeries?
22. Can you expect that your gender identity will not be used against you when applying for employment?
23. Do your sexual preferences cause people to assume that your gender identity is mistaken?
24. Can you expect to be reasonably eligible to adopt children if you should choose to?
25. Do people assume that they know everything about you because they saw an investigative news episode about plastic surgery?
26. On most days, can you expect to interact with someone of a gender similar to your own?
27. Can you expect to find a landlord willing to rent to someone of your gender?
28. Do teachings about your national and cultural history acknowledge the existence of people of your gender identity?
29. Can you be sure that your children will not be harassed at school because of your gender?
30. Can you be sure that school teachers will not try to convince your children that their understanding of their family members' bodies is incorrect?
31. Are you able to use your voice and speak in public without risk of being ridiculed?

32. Can you discuss feminism with others without the appearance of your genitals being called into question?
33. Can you freely use checks, credit cards, or government-issued ID in a grocery store without being accused of using stolen finances?
34. Can you wait at a bus stop at noon without passers-by assuming that you are working in the survival sex trade?
35. If you are asked for proof-of-age in order to purchase tobacco or alcohol, can you be reasonably sure that the cashier is trying to prove your age, not your gender?
36. Can you be reasonably sure that, when dating someone new, they will be interested in getting to know your personality over and above your medical history?
37. Can you smile at a young child without their parents scorning or explaining you to the child?
38. Can you be sure that your gender identity doesn't automatically label you as an outsider, an anomaly, abnormal, or something to be feared?
39. Can you argue for gender equality without your right or motivation to do so being questioned?
40. Does the state of your genitals cause you to fear violence if they are discovered?
41. Are your height, weight, muscle mass, or hair follicles used as "proof" that your gender identity is mistaken?
42. Are your height, weight, muscle mass, or hair follicles consistently pointed out as being incongruent with your gender?
43. Are your basic healthcare needs minimized by others who contrast them in priority with lifesaving surgeries?
44. Can you find a religious community that will not exclude you based upon your genital or hormonal structures?
45. If you are having a difficult time making new friends, can you generally be sure that it is not because of your gender identity?
46. Can you choose whether or not to think of your gender as a political or social construct?
47. When you tell people your name, do they ask you what your "real" name is?
48. Can you consider social, political, or professional advancements without having to consider whether or not your gender identity will be called into question as being appropriate for advancement?
49. Do people assume that they have a right to hear, and therefore ask, about your intimate medical history or future?
50. Can you find gendered privilege in other places?