

The Cow* in the Room

*a cow is a female elephant

In a recent essay in the *London Review of Books*,¹ the philosopher Amia Srinivasan offers a review of Dennis Baron's *What's Your Pronoun?*,² which she describes as "a delightful account of the search for what Baron [...] calls 'the missing word': a third person singular, gender-neutral pronoun." Her discussion begins with an amusing anecdote and then takes the reader on a meander through a fascinating history of and commentary on the use of pronouns in English and other languages.

As the discussion addresses the relationship between linguistic gender, legal recognition of women's rights, and the use of the third-person pronoun, one might think that the author's political point is an entirely unobjectionable one, serving the progressive cause of widening inclusion and equality. Yet the pastiche of archival research, elegant philosophical musings and literary detours serves to obscure the conceptual confusion at the heart of this discussion. By failing to address this confusion, the essay in fact contributes to a deeper confusion, increasingly prevalent in popular and academic discourse, around the reality of sex and the relationship between sex and gender that, in its turn, has some worrying political implications.

Interspersed amongst the commentary on the book Srinivasan is reviewing and her excursions into the world of English grammar are four stories of occasions on which someone "had the wrong pronouns used" for them.

The first two stories concern people—first an editor and then (amusingly) Judith Butler—referring to Srinivasan as 'he,' not in her presence, and solely on the basis of reading her name appended to a piece of her writing. The third story concerns a student of Srinivasan's whom she referred to as 'she,' a pronoun that, she says, "would typically match their first name." The error in this case, unlike in the first two, was a result of the fact that the correct pronouns for this student, apparently, were 'they/them.' Srinivasan does not tell us if she—unlike Judith Butler in her own case—had actually met this student in person or, if so, whether there was anything else about them that may have led her to mistakenly refer to them as 'she.' Nor is it clear—unlike in the Judith Butler case and that of the editor—whether encountering the student would have made her error apparent to her, even before asking the student what her preferred pronouns were. I myself had a similar experience recently when I referred to a colleague as 'he' in an email exchange—a "pronoun that would typically match their first name"—and later, on meeting the colleague in person, realized that 'she' was in fact the correct pronoun.

Srinivasan's presentation of these examples of incidents where the wrong pronoun was used leaves the reader no room for doubting their wrongness. But what does it mean to use "the wrong pronouns"? How can pronouns be wrong? How do we know when they are wrong? And why is it important to get them right? Srinivasan does not address these important

¹ Amia Srinivasan, 'He, She, One, They, Ho, Hus, Hum, Ita,' *London Review of Books*, 42.13 (2 July 2020).

² Dennis Baron, *What's Your Pronoun? Beyond He and She*, Liveright Publishing, 2020.

questions, and it is unclear whether she regards the ‘wrongness’ here as a form of moral wrongness, the source of which lies in the very act of using a third-person pronoun to describe someone without first asking them about their preference for third-person pronoun usage; or an empirical wrongness, i.e., a simple matter of factual inaccuracy.

It is instructive to put these stories side by side and to ask in what ways they are similar, and in what ways they are significantly different. Yet by not asking these questions, Srinivasan manages to elide the distinction between the incorrect assumption of a person’s sex based on a gendered cue such as a name, and the incorrect assumption of a person’s self-ascribed gender identity based on a similar cue. Although Srinivasan does not actually clarify whether or not she believes that we should always ask people what their preferred pronouns are rather than making assumptions based on physical appearance or names, her discussion clearly implies that the practice of asking people what their preferred pronouns are is entirely unremarkable and morally desirable. By avoiding the question of whether third-person pronouns should reflect people’s ‘gender identity’ rather than their sex, Srinivasan manages to suggest that even to ask such a question is problematic. But sometimes the job of philosophers is to force us to look again at supposedly unproblematic cases; sometimes it is to lay examples of everyday uses of language side by side so as to see what underlying assumptions they reveal.

Following these three stories, Srinivasan turns to an overview of Baron’s book, illustrated by several historical examples—some from Baron’s research, and some of her own.

One of the examples discussed in this fascinating historical excursion is the ruling in *Chorlton v. Lings* (1868), when Justice William Bovill ruled against a Manchester woman who had tried to add her name to the electoral register, but been struck off. She had been trying to test the legal use of the word ‘he’ as a generic, and thus gender-neutral, pronoun. The judge argued that it “would be ridiculous to support that the word [‘man’] was used in any other sense than as designating the male sex.” This ruling, as Srinivasan explains, “became official doctrine, making clear to suffragists that the vote could only be won by a law that explicitly enfranchised women—not by appealing to the supposedly generic ‘he’.” Srinivasan quotes an editorial in the *Times* that protested later attempts to enfranchise women, and to legally reinforce the idea that ‘he’ could include both sexes: “The fact that the exclusion of the sex from political life has hitherto been secured by the simple use of the masculine pronoun, without any special legislation, illustrates how absolutely inconceivable and unnatural the idea of Women’s Suffrage has hitherto seemed. If it were ever to be realised, we should have to revolutionise the commonest modes of thought and expression; to guard our most familiar language, to watch our pronouns, and to check our most constant assumptions.”

As this historical anecdote reveals, it is women as a sex class who were disenfranchised. Their being so, as generations of Marxist and feminist scholars have analysed in their work, was a consequence of the historical relationship between women’s reproductive capacity and their consignment to particular social roles within the hierarchical system of gender, reflected in and reinforced by patriarchal family structure, capitalist economic relations, and systems of political power.³

³ See Federici, S. (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia; Engels, F. (1884), *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. New York: Pathfinder Press.

Yet throughout her essay, Srinivasan hints at, but skilfully skirts, the distinction between sex and gender; a distinction which seems crucial if we are to make sense of these different examples and their social and political significance.

Sometimes, conceptual confluences casually slipped into scholarly discussion can contribute to a sense that our very language has, as Wittgenstein put it, “gone on holiday.” The task of the philosopher, in such situations, may be simply to teach the reader “to pass from something that is disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense.”⁴

With this aim in mind, I will present two stories of my own, to be considered alongside Srinivasan’s. They are both true stories, and one will probably be familiar to many. They concern a woman and a cat. I will start with the cat.

My sister and brother-in-law have a cat called Audrey. Audrey is a male cat. Some readers may be somewhat surprised by this because, if they are native English speakers or at all familiar with English names, they will know that Audrey is almost always a name given to girls. Many people will have heard of famous women with this name—the actresses Audrey Hepburn and Audrey Tautou; the novelist Audrey Niffenegger or the poet and theorist Audre Lorde, whose name is a variation on the above spelling. And so, you may assume, my sister and brother-in-law may have just been playing a little joke in giving their male cat an obviously female name; a joke that is unlikely to cause any embarrassment or social confusion for Audrey, who is, after all, a cat.

The truth, though, is quite different. My sister and brother-in-law acquired Audrey when he was a kitten. The friend whose cat had had kittens, and who offered them the pick of the litter, assured them that this kitten was female. As a typical online guide from a veterinary surgeon explains: “Many cat owners find it very difficult to determine the sex of kittens, particularly newborn kittens, and often need their veterinarian to sex their kittens for them.” When sexing kittens, the guide explains, “the easiest way to explain the difference is by saying that the distance between the anus and the urinary tract opening is much shorter in a female than in a male. Or to be blunt the holes are closer together in a girl than in a boy. This way of distinguishing between males and females is not obvious, and if all the kittens in a litter are of the same sex, it may be difficult to compare the distance between the holes in this way.” Indeed. What many first-time cat owners may assume to be the obvious indication of a male kitten, i.e. the presence of a penis, is not actually immediately recognizable in newborn kittens. It is only “as the kitten gets older (10 weeks +) and its testicles start to enlarge, [that] the scrotal sac starts to protrude outwards and become very obvious. If you can see a clearly-defined scrotal sac, the kitten or cat is a male.”

In short, my sister and brother-in-law were told that the tiny kitten they had brought home was a female and, as it clearly did not have a penis, they had no reason to doubt this. The name Audrey was chosen by my young niece, and whenever they referred to Audrey in the third person, they used the pronoun ‘she.’ About six months later, when Audrey was sprawled out on his back on the sofa on a particularly hot day, my brother-in-law, rubbing his stomach affectionately, noticed, to his surprise, that Audrey had a penis. Audrey, it turned

⁴ Wittgenstein, L. (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 464.

out, was a male. They had got used to using that name, and so they kept it. But Audrey was, and still is, a male.

The second story concerns a woman born in England in 1819 and given the name Mary Ann Evans. She grew up in an educated environment and used her talents for writing early on, developing a career as an essayist and novelist. However, the laws in England (and much of the world) at the time meant that women were not allowed to enter university, enter the professions, be financially independent, or inherit property. Although of course there were women novelists before and during this period, as historians have noted, “To their contemporaries, nineteenth-century women writers were women first, artists second. A woman novelist, unless she disguised herself with a male pseudonym, had to expect critics to focus on her femininity and rank her with the other women writers of her day, no matter how diverse their subjects or styles.”⁵ Therefore, Evans took the *nom de plume* George Eliot, believing, correctly, that the assumption that she was a man would grant her better access to the opportunities of the publishing world and the literary environment. Generations of readers no doubt still continue, on discovering that George Eliot was a woman, to register their surprise, having assumed, based on her published name, that she was a man.

But here’s the thing: Audrey actually *is* a male. George Eliot actually *was* a woman. Their bodies, in both their cases, are obviously a truer indicator of their sex, and thus of the male or female pronouns appropriate to them, than anything as superficial as a name or a profession. Audrey was mis-sexed at birth; the error became only too apparent by the time he was a few months old, and luckily the consequences for him (one can only assume) were minimal. George Eliot was not mis-sexed. Everyone who knew her had no doubt as to her true sex. Anyone seeing a picture of her today would correctly identify her as a woman, based on her physical appearance. Physical appearance, of course, can sometimes be misleading. But the sexed body rarely is. Because of the existence of gender—that system of stereotypes according to which members of the male and female sex are associated with different social roles, different emotional and intellectual abilities, different character traits and different propensities—members of the female sex are often associated with particular ways of presenting, and this of course varies across social and historical contexts. In contemporary western societies, it is still more common for boys and men to wear their hair short. Hence the association, reinforced in many popular images, between short hair and boyhood. It is thus not unusual for small children to assume that anyone with short hair is a boy, given that they will have been exposed to gendered images and stereotypes of boys and girls. They soon learn, though, that a girl with short hair is still a girl, that boys and men can have long hair, and that putting a dress on a boy does not make him into a girl (developmental psychologists generally agree that this ability develops at around the age of 5-7).⁶ They soon learn that there are more basic differences between girls and boys than the superficial ones of haircuts and clothes. Most of these differences are clearly visible, even when people’s genitals are hidden from view—differences in muscle, build, and, as they get older, body and facial hair, and the presence of an Adam’s apple

⁵ Elaine Showalter, “The Double Critical Standard and the Feminine Novel.” In *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Brontë to Lessing*, pp. 73-99. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1977.

⁶ Alcock, K. (2019) “Children, Reality, Sex, and Gender,” <https://medium.com/@katieja/young-children-reality-sex-and-gender-3421f4f165f1>.

Of course we sometimes make mistakes. Some women have more masculine physical features and appearance, and some women choose to present in ways that go against gendered stereotypes about females. I myself, although I do not exactly conform to the ideals of femininity regularly presented to girls and women in advertising campaigns and media images, have, to my knowledge, never been mistaken for a man, either by people encountering me physically or by people corresponding with me who know my name, which is, like Audrey, not one usually given to men. I do, though, regularly encounter gendered assumptions about my professional identity; assumptions that reflect the fact that we live in a gendered society, where many people still assume that males do and should occupy positions of political power, professional seniority, and higher status than females. For example, although I have a Doctorate and my husband does not, we regularly get post addressed to “Dr and Mrs J Suissa.” I do have women friends, some of whom are lesbians, who like to dress in what is generally perceived as a ‘masculine’ style, who have occasionally been mistaken for men. They find this annoying and a bit insulting, but do not usually kick up a fuss about it. They are, like most women, used to the small annoyances and personal sleights that come from being a woman in a gendered world.

For George Eliot, being mistaken for a man, albeit by people who never actually met her in person, was adaptive and useful. It was men who were accorded respect and professional standing in the world of 19th century literary society. Eliot, although she was an accomplished philosophical scholar who produced the first English translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, is still not recognized as a philosopher, and was even less likely to be so in 19th century England, where women were not supposed to have careers, let alone scholarly ones. Knowing that her chances of being accepted in the literary world as a woman were slim, she thus relied on the system of gender, and on her ability to deceptively occupy a different position in it to that allocated to her sex, in order to succeed as a writer. She did not attempt to subvert gender norms in her appearance, as portraits of her clearly show; but she did in her choice of career and her lifestyle—becoming an author and philosopher, living as an independent unmarried woman, and having a relationship with a married man, which scandalized her contemporaries.

Neither of these stories would make sense without assuming the basic conceptual distinction between sex and gender. Biological sex refers to the fact that humans, like cats and other mammals, are either male or female. This is a fundamental evolutionary fact about our existence as a species; our ability to reproduce requires fertilization of an ovum by a sperm. All mammals fall into one of two sexes: those that produce sperm or those that produce ova. The sex of a human foetus is determined at conception, and in 99.98% of cases, babies’ sex can be observed on the basis of their external secondary sex characteristics – a penis and testicles in males, and a vulva in females.⁷ Rare disorders of sexual development (DSDs), in which there is a mismatch between chromosomal sex and genitalia, or between internal and external reproductive organs, are all medically identifiable deviations from the sexual binary norm.

Being on a developmental pathway to produce large gametes is what makes female humans (commonly referred to as girls or women) female, even if something goes wrong with the

⁷ Sax, L. (2002) “How Common is Intersex?”, *Journal of Sex Research* <https://www.leonardsax.com/how-common-is-intersex-a-response-to-anne-fausto-sterling/>

development, maturation or functioning of their reproductive system so as to prevent them from ovulating or from getting pregnant; even if they choose never to get pregnant; and even if they go on to remove part of their reproductive system. The absurdity of the question “is a woman who has had a hysterectomy still a woman?” becomes apparent when one acknowledges that the phrase “a man who has had a hysterectomy” does not make any sense.

Gender, on the other hand, is a system whereby assumptions are made about people based on their sex. There is no reason why people with a vulva should be consigned to domestic duties or feel drawn to the colour pink, and no reason why people with a penis should like driving trucks and not be good at caring for children. Biology is not destiny. But most if not all cultures have assigned people with different biology different roles and characteristics within a system called gender. This is overwhelmingly to the disadvantage of the people with the vulvas. It is an inescapable fact that only the people with the vulvas, who also have on average the smaller physique, are the ones whose bodies can carry and give birth to babies. But it does not follow from this that they are not capable of doing other jobs than carrying and caring for babies; nor that their ability to conceive, carry and give birth to babies should be controlled and managed in the interests of maintaining economic power, passing on family inheritance and titles, or serving the goals of nationhood. It would perhaps make sense to think that, because the human race needs to continue reproducing in order to survive; because human infants, unlike those of other mammals, have a prolonged period of physical dependency; and because pregnancy and childbirth are physically demanding and often risky, it would be a good idea to organize society in such a way as to offer material support to those doing this labour. One may think, too, that the fact that society is not organized in this way has something to do with the fact that, for most of modern history, the people controlling governments, economies, armies and industry were overwhelmingly not the people with the vulvas. But that is a topic for another paper.

Amia Srinivasan not only conveniently elides ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ in her discussion, but also misrepresents basic facts about human biology by casually inserting a reference to “people who exist beyond the sex binary.” The examples she uses to support her rejection, in this context, of Jordan Peterson’s claim that “historically the singular ‘they’ has only been used in sentences with indefinites,” consist of Orlando, Virginia Woolf’s fictional character, and the use of the singular ‘they’ in “seventeenth-century medical texts [...] to refer to hermaphrodites.”

But as any evolutionary biologist will tell you, there are no true human “hermaphrodites,” if hermaphroditism is understood to refer to an individual possessing the glands and organs of both sexes, male and female, and capable of producing both sperm and ova. So if this is what Srinivasan means by “people who exist beyond the sex binary,” then the only such existing cases are either fictional, like Woolf’s Orlando, or fake. Although there are extremely rare cases of individuals with ovarian and testicular cells in their bodies, no humans are capable of producing both ova and sperm; the existence of individuals whose developmental pathway is genuinely indeterminate does not alter the fact that there is no third developmental pathway.

Of course it is possible that by “people who exist beyond the sex binary,” Srinivasan is actually not referring to so-called ‘intersex’ people, but is treating the term ‘sex’ as interchangeable with the term ‘gender.’ This apparent confusion between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’—whether deliberate or not—is further exacerbated by the fact that in other places in

the essay Srinivasan uses the phrase “those that exist beyond the gender binary.” If by this phrase she does indeed intend to refer to gender, i.e., the system of stereotypes and expectations associated with people’s sex, that serves to maintain females’ and males’ different positions within a patriarchal, hierarchical structure, then many if not most of us “exist beyond the gender binary.” I, for one, have never been comfortable with the gendered assumptions made about me because of my female body. I have never worn make-up in my life; I do not own a pair of high-heeled shoes; I have never felt any emotional attachment to a handbag, and I don’t really like pink; but nor am I remotely interested in cars or football, and I don’t particularly enjoy drinking beer. For most of the men and women in my life, whether or not we do or do not enjoy or relate to such “feminine” or “masculine” markers of gender is hardly a defining fact about our existence.

Let’s go back to Srinivasan’s amusing anecdote about how Judith Butler, the renowned gender theorist, ‘misgendered’ her, by referring to her in an online commentary on her contribution to an academic collection of papers, as ‘he.’ It is important to note that Butler, at least in the course of the incident in question, did not actually encounter Srinivasan. Whether or not Butler—or Srinivasan—would hold that identifying her sex as male or female on the basis of her physical appearance should have no bearing whatsoever on the question of which pronouns should be used to refer to her, in the absence of stated preference, is not entirely clear from Srinivasan’s analysis of this example. But having met Srinivasan, I am pretty sure that, even if she were to cut her long hair really short and wear jeans, a plaid shirt, and combat boots, she would be recognizable as a woman. And more to the point, as Srinivasan herself testifies, she *is* a woman. She is a woman who also happens to be a professor of philosophy which, as we still live in a gendered world, is not so common as to be unremarkable. There are many women philosophers, but it is still the case that if you say the phrase “great philosophers” to the average Westerner, they will probably picture Socrates, Aristotle, Kant, Hume and Locke. If you specifically ask them to name great philosophers of the 20th century, they may come up with Hannah Arendt, Phillipa Foot or Iris Murdoch; but the reason women are more likely to appear in this list is that women were not allowed to enter university and so would have found it very difficult to train as philosophers, much less to get access to publishing and learned societies, until well into the 19th century. In fact, my own university was the first in the country to admit women, in 1878.

If Judith Butler assumed that Srinivasan was a man because she assumed that most philosophers are men this would, indeed, be an extraordinarily telling oversight for someone who has made an entire career writing about gender. However, a likelier explanation for her mistake is that she, like most Western philosophers, probably does not read much work by philosophers outside the anglophone world, and that most people working in philosophy departments in the USA, where she is based, have names like Gerald, Martha, John, Julia and Richard; not names like Gyatri, Kwame or Amia. She may have only a glancing familiarity with names of Indian origin and, on the basis of that familiarity, may have assumed that Amia, like Aditya, is a man’s name.

Whatever the case, she did not mis-sex Srinivasan in the way in which Audrey was mis-sexed. Nor did she mis-gender her, in the sense of applying the wrong gendered pronouns, in the same way that George Eliot—a woman who had no desire to be a man, but simply wanted to get published in a gendered world in which it was mostly men doing the publishing—was misgendered. In George Eliot’s case, while, like Amia, strangers made assumptions about her

sex based solely on her name, she—unlike Amia—was deliberately trying to mislead others about her sex; the success of her career indeed depended on the misgendering working. If she had not lived in a society structured by gender; if the word “author” in 19th century Britain had not been one associated in people’s minds with men and not women, she would not have had to adopt the gendered name George in order to convince people that she was a member of the sex class that usually goes by the name George and occupies the kinds of professional and social roles not usually occupied by the class of people who have vulvas and are given names like Mary.

Most women writers today can get published using their own name. Women are now allowed to vote, attend university, practice medicine or law, drive trucks; even, since 1982, apply for a mortgage in their own name and be served in pubs. But this is not to say that the world of publishing, like many other social institutions, does not still make assumptions about people’s ability and talent based on their sex, as J.K. Rowling, P.D. James and Ann Rule would no doubt attest. In fact the author Catherine Nichols recently revealed that submitting her manuscript under a male pseudonym brought her more than eight times the number of responses she had received under her own name. Vida, the organization that undertakes an annual survey of the gender breakdown in major literary publications and book reviews, found in 2016 that the *London Review of Books* “has the worst gender disparity,” with women representing only 18 per cent of reviewers and 26 per cent of authors reviewed.⁸ The situation has somewhat improved, with the 2019 survey showing the *London Review of Books* still at the bottom of the table, with 32.64% women writers—only slightly behind *The New York Review of Books*, who published only 33.37% women.

None of the above stories make sense if we do not pay attention to the important conceptual distinction between sex and gender. This distinction, however, has been collapsed and conflated, possibly intentionally so, in contemporary popular language and policy documents, and it is obfuscated in Amia Srinivasan’s otherwise informative and entertaining essay. But the consequences of this conflation are real, serious, and, in many cases, deeply disturbing, particularly for those people who belong to the female sex.

Using the wrong pronouns to describe someone can, Srinivasan notes, be experienced as hurtful and offensive by those who are so described. I have no way of knowing whether this is true of Audrey, but it was certainly not true of George Eliot. It may well be true of trans people who wish to be recognized as members of the opposite sex to their birth sex and I, like most people I know, am happy to refer to people in whatever way they wish if doing so is what will allow them to feel included and respected in various social environments such as the classrooms in which I teach. As Srinivasan says, “aside from the matter of ideology, there are fundamental questions of kindness and decency.”

But, like with all philosophical arguments about moral imperatives, one has to ask whether the imperative to use the pronouns that people ask you to when you refer to them in the third person is an absolute one, and how it fits in with other moral values and imperatives. And it is difficult to ask these questions if the distinction between sex and gender is, as it is in Srinivasan’s essay, completely erased. It is particularly odd, in an essay about pronouns, to embark on a discussion of the centrality of language—indeed, pronouns—to women’s legal

⁸[The 2019 VIDA Count • VIDA: Women in Literary Arts \(vidaweb.org\)](https://www.vidaweb.org/)

struggles for their rights, without acknowledging this distinction. For as Susan Okin remarked, gender-neutral terms “frequently obscure the fact that so much of the real experience of ‘persons’, so long as they live in gender-structured societies, *does* in fact depend on what sex they are.”⁹

Srinivasan’s fourth and final example of the wrong pronouns being used comes from the memoir *Gender Outlaw* (1994), by trans artist and theorist Kate Bornstein, who describes being accidentally referred to as ‘he’ by an acquaintance:

“The world slowed down, like it does in the movies when someone is getting shot and the filmmaker wants you to feel every bullet enter your body. The words echoed in my ears over and over and over. Attached to that simple pronoun was the word *failure*, quickly followed by the word *freak*. All the joy sucked out of my life in that instant, and every moment I’d ever fucked up crashed down on my head.”

No one can doubt the psychological and emotional reality of Bornstein’s experience. But how different is this example from my own examples of the wrong use of pronouns? Luckily, not everybody for whom the wrong pronouns are used suffers anything like the psychic pain described by Bornstein. Srinivasan seems, by her own account, to have been amused rather than hurt by Butler’s unintentional use of the male pronoun to refer to her. I can, though, suggest another example where something significantly similar to—but also significantly distinct from—psychic pain and distress may result from the use of a pronoun.

In English and much of international law, the crime of rape is defined as non-consensual penetration by a penis. Both men and women can be victims of rape, but only males can rape, as only males have a penis, and over 90% of rape victims in the UK are female.¹⁰ In the overwhelming majority of rape cases, only a small fraction of which ever come to court, a female person—commonly referred to as a woman or girl—is forcibly penetrated in her vagina or other orifice by a male person, commonly referred to as a man.

What happens, then, when a male charged with rape or other sexual assault is a transwoman; i.e., a male who ‘identifies as a woman’? On Srinivasan’s account, it would be inexcusable—she describes it in fact as “mortifying”—to refer to such a person as ‘he.’ A rape victim in court, then—i.e., a woman who has survived a sexual assault by a man and gone through the process of reporting it, testifying to police and lawyers, and standing up in court, facing the male-bodied person who used his stronger, male body to force her to have penetrative sex with him without her consent—such a woman, facing her attacker, should be expected, against everything that her body and her eyes tell her, to use the term ‘she’ to describe her assailant. As solicitor Harriet Wistrich, head of the Centre for Women’s Justice, has noted, raising concerns about recently issued guidance to judges on pronoun use in cases involving violence against women, “Here there is a conflict between the right of self-definition and the right of a victim, who may have been violated in the most horrendous way, to describe her material reality as she perceives it. Why is the victim’s right less important?”

⁹ Okin, S. (1989) *Justice, Gender and the Family*, New York, Basic Books, p. 11

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/compendium/focusonviolentcrimeandsexualoffences/yearendingmarch2016/domesticabusesexualassaultandstalking>

Unlike some of the authors who Srinivasan quotes, I do not believe that words in and of themselves can be violent. But they can be used to obfuscate, manipulate and deceive, and they can, in so doing, obscure reality. Reality, in a gendered society where we all, men and women, have to navigate the complex demands, expectations, assumptions and limitations placed on us because of our sex, can be uncomfortable. It can cause distress, anger and despair. But if we want to make our social world more just and less oppressive, we will not get very far if we refuse to name and acknowledge reality and the distinctions that make sense of it. Srinivasan quotes the philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher, who describes the assumption that the pronouns 'he' and 'she' should only be used to describe natal males and females respectively, as leading to "humiliating exposure," for trans people, of their natal sex; a process that she calls "reality enforcement." But what is more 'humiliating,' and for whom? Why is 'reality enforcement' considered crueller, and less politically defensible, than 'reality denial'?

If we cannot answer these questions, we cannot find a constructive way forward through the legal and social conflicts that the attempts to repurpose our language for political ends are leading to. Yes, Srinivasan is of course correct that, in a sense, language "has been political all along." But whose political aims are being served by conflating distinctions and erasing words that describe women as a sex class? Whose aims are served by the policing of language, in our courts, our universities, our policy and our laws? The suffragettes and the drafters of the 1870 Bill knew exactly what and who they meant by using the word 'sex.' I have to wonder, does Srinivasan?