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**What Do We Want? To Eliminate Gender! When Do We Want It? Later!**

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**Abstract:** Gender eliminativism, also known as gender abolitionism, is the view that we should get rid of gender. I defend gender eliminativism by suggesting that many arguments that ostensibly call for rejecting it are in fact just arguments for delaying it. Although it may be true that presently gender eliminativism should not occur because of the role gender plays in people’s identities, because of the need for gender to remedy oppression, because elimination is not pragmatic, because elimination is utopian, and because we should have more rather than fewer genders, these are all reasons to delay, rather than deny, gender eliminativism.

We ought to eliminate gender, but not yet. Many of the best arguments against eliminating gender evaporate if we take the elimination of gender to be a utopian proposal about the future rather than a practical plan for action at this moment. Thus, defending the latter claim (we should not eliminate gender right now) is a way of defending the former claim (we should eliminate gender).

Section 1 explains what gender eliminativism is and provides some reasons to endorse gender eliminativism. Sections 2 through 6 argue that many objections to gender eliminativism evaporate if we accept that gender eliminativism ought not to be immediately pursued. Section 2 addresses gender eliminativism’s alleged harmfulness to oppressed people, including transgender people. Section 3 focuses on the usefulness of gender for eliminating present oppression. Section 4 discusses whether gender eliminativism is pragmatic. Section 5 addresses the worry that gender eliminativism is objectionably utopian. Section 6 looks at how acceptance of more genders is related to gender eliminativism and describes in detail how this defense of gender eliminativism opposes discrimination against transgender people. Section 7 explores the questions of when to eliminate gender. Section 8 considers an objection from Matthew Cull based on how gender eliminativism would ostensibly harm transgender and cisgender people and section 9 considers an objection about whether my argument is trivial.

**1. What is Gender Eliminativism?**

‘Gender eliminativism’ in the sense used here is the view that we ought not to have genders (Rubin 1975, 204). It is also known as gender abolitionism (Mikkola 2011, 74–75; Hester 2018, 22; Lawford-Smith 2021; Earp 2021).[[1]](#endnote-1) A nearby view is the one defended by Sally Haslanger, who argues we should get rid of current genders (Haslanger 2000).[[2]](#endnote-2)

The details of gender eliminativism are fraught, because what it would mean to eliminate gender depends on what one’s theory of gender is. Shulamith Firestone, for instance, understands gender as involving practices of procreation and gestation, such that to eliminate gender we would likely have to gestate humans in artificial wombs rather than our bodies (Firestone 1971, 206–7).[[3]](#endnote-3) Those who think that gender is a social system instead argue that to eliminate gender only requires ‘the elimination of the social system which creates sexism and gender,’ which would create a ‘genderless (though not sexless) society’ (Rubin 1975, 204).[[4]](#endnote-4)

Broadly, though, all agree that eliminating gender would at least entail eliminating social practices that currently depend on (and perhaps constitute) gender. For example, if we eliminated gender, we would not use gender categories like “woman” and “man” to describe human beings, or to sort them into categories that determine what bathrooms, sports leagues, jobs, or marriages they can avail themselves of, nor would we expect people to act in various ways in virtue of their gender. There would be neither gender roles nor gender identity: nobody would act in certain ways in light of their gender or conceive of themselves as having a gender.[[5]](#endnote-5) Just as many people raised outside of caste society do not think of themselves as belonging to a caste or act according to caste norms, a society that has eliminated gender would not have people who think of themselves as having a gender or act according to gender norms. There is much more to say about gender eliminativism, but this paper’s focus is not on describing it, but on examining whether it is a project for the present, or the future.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Beyond the minimal agreement that eliminating gender would entail eliminating social practices that depend on gender, the specifics of gender eliminativism depend on what theory of gender we pick. There are many competing theories of gender, so there are two approaches one might take. The first is to pick one’s preferred theory of gender and to argue from that perspective. The second is to attempt to be ecumenical and to therefore offer an argument which works for most or all theories of gender. This second option is the one I choose here. My arguments below do not assume any particular view of gender is correct. Some specifics will depend on which particular theory of gender one chooses to adopt, but the arguments I offer below are designed to be broad enough to accommodate most (if not all) extant theories of gender.

There are many arguments in favor of gender eliminativism. Some argue that it would promote equality because insofar as people are divided into genders, they are in this way unequal (Connell 1987, 287–88; Wright 2011). The thought is that there are not defensible reasons for dividing people into different categories which have social consequences if we could avoid doing this, and gender is an example of this kind of division (as are other possible divisions, like caste divisions). Others argue that gender abolitionism would reduce oppression because gender norms are inherently oppressive, and thus we cannot elimination oppression entirely unless we eliminate gender (among other sources of oppression) (Frye 1983, 33–36; Wittig 2013; Escalante 2015; Nicholas 2019; Bussell 2021, 184–87; Lawford-Smith 2021, 1022; Bey 2022; Gheaus 2023).[[7]](#endnote-7) So for instance because gender norms are such that men are expected to act in one way and women in another way, people who transgress these norms face consequences ranging from social opprobrium to legal sanction. Because people cannot be justifiably punished merely for failing to adhere to gender norms, we ought to get rid of the gender norms, which amounts to getting rid of gender. Others view gender abolitionism as a crucial part of larger utopian projects, like socialism or posthumanism (Haraway 1990; Gleeson 2017; Escalante 2018; Hester 2018; Metcalfe 2021). One might also argue for gender abolitionism by analogy to racial abolitionism, the view that there should not be races (Bey 2022, 96). One’s reasons for defending racial abolitionism may also entail an endorsement of gender abolitionism.[[8]](#endnote-8)

I believe that arguments like these present a convincing case for gender eliminativism.[[9]](#endnote-9) I thus endorse gender eliminativism, and I am largely going to take its truth for granted. Because gender abolitionism is controversial, this approach may seem unwarranted. There are three reasons I adopt this approach. First, as I will argue below, delaying abolition helps deal with many objections to abolitionism, so in effect I will be providing some arguments for abolitionism rather than taking it entirely for granted. Second, even if one disagrees with gender abolitionism, it can still be helpful to think about the topic in depth, because this expands our understanding of gender (even if only by pointing out some entailments of gender abolitionism that are not to its credit). Third, I do not have space to recapitulate all of the arguments about gender abolitionism, nor is there any reason to repeat what its various defenders have said already.[[10]](#endnote-10)

If gender abolitionism is right, then we ought to get rid of gender. (This is a big “if,” but as noted above, the goal is not to entirely substantiate that presupposition but instead to defend its plausibility in the face of some possible objections.) So why would we delay? Why not eliminate gender now?

There are five main issues with eliminating gender now that can be solved by delaying gender abolition until the future. First, many oppressed people have identities that are tied up with gender, and eliminating gender while these people are oppressed will in many cases hurt them, but we want to avoid harming people in precarious situations. Second, we need to employ gender concepts to address oppression right now, and keeping the concepts around by using them constantly will prevent us from eliminating gender. Third, waiting is pragmatic. Fourth, gender abolitionism is in some ways a utopian vision, and there can be reasons for not trying to immediately pursue a utopian goal if one cannot effectively implement it. Fifth, one way to get to gender abolitionism may be to create, rather than destroy, genders, in which case heading “away” from our target may help get us there.

**2. Gender is Integral to the Identities of Many Oppressed People**

There are many people for whom gender is a central part of their identity. Charlotte Witt argues that for everybody, gender is uniessential, which means that we would not be who we are absent our gender (Witt 2011). Even if we do not agree with Witt that gender plays this central role in everyone’s life, we can still recognize that for many people, it plays a very important role.

Gender is particularly relevant to a number of people who are oppressed in ways that would entail further harm if gender were eliminated. Transgender individuals, for instance, ‘often face oppression that is closely tied to denials of the legitimacy of their genders’ (Jenkins 2016, 401). It is not hard to see how a campaign to eliminate gender entirely could be taken (rightly or wrongly) to entail the denial of the legitimacy of the genders of transgender people.

The damage we should worry about, though, is not just limited to intensifying or giving rise to new gender-related injustice. In many cases, eliminating gender might harm oppressed people merely by removing an important part of their self-conception.[[11]](#endnote-11) As Matthew Cull argues, gender abolition would worsen the hermeneutical injustice of misgendering by removing the possibility of (e.g.) a transgender woman identifying as a woman, a transgender man identifying as a man, and so on (Cull 2019, 9–10). This damage would hardly be limited to transgender individuals. For example, many cisgender women (indeed, on Haslanger’s account, all women) are oppressed, and for many of those women, their womanhood plays an important role in their identities. Because we cannot abolish gender without abolishing the role it plays in people’s self-conceptions, these cisgender women (and all other oppressed people for whom their gender is important) will end up worse off.[[12]](#endnote-12)

This argument is not about the role that gender plays in the psyches of any given oppressed person insofar as one is a member of certain groups, like “woman” or “transgender woman.” The point is instead a simple, pragmatic one. We don’t want to harm people, and we have especially strong reasons to avoid harming people who are oppressed or otherwise badly off. Thus we should delay the abolition of gender until there are not significant numbers of oppressed people who will be further harmed by gender abolition.

The most straightforward way to accomplish this would be to eliminate oppression. Once there are not many (or, perhaps, any) oppressed people, there will not be many oppressed people for whom gender is a crucial part of their identity. Cull’s argument that gender abolition would worsen the existing hermeneutical justice of misgendering, for instance, could be resolved by eliminating misgendering (Cull 2019, 10).[[13]](#endnote-13) Another possible solution would be working towards a world in which, although there are still many oppressed people, these people rarely have self-conceptions that are inextricably tied to their gender. If people do not have identities that are closely tied to their gender, then gender can be eliminated without hurting people.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The gender abolitionist can be neutral between these two options in the context of defending gender abolitionism. The first is obviously attractive, because we ought to mitigate oppression. But it may be easier to accomplish the second.[[15]](#endnote-15) We can also pursue both options simultaneously: eliminate oppression *and* work towards a world in which not everyone identifies with genders as much as they presently do. Figuring out how to approach this question is a project for eliminativists which is separate from, but important to, eliminativism. (One worry is that there is no good way to pursue the second option: if we try to make gender less important to people’s identities, this will necessarily entail harming people for whom gender is an important aspect of their identity. I address this objection below, in section 8.)

**3. Gender is Useful for Addressing Present Oppression**

 One common worry about gender abolitionism is that absent gender, and especially absent a concept of “woman” that refers to people who are oppressed in certain ways, we will not be able to remedy present injustices, because to understand and to organize against these injustices requires seeing how they are based on gender.[[16]](#endnote-16) Analogously, we might think that in order to eliminate racism, we must engage in affirmative action programs that are targeted based on race. This would be impossible if we eliminated race, because then these programs could not be targeted. And so, if these programs are necessary in order to achieve racial justice, it would be wrong to eliminate race. The same sort of thing may be true for gender.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In other words, it is quite commonplace to think that so-called “color blind” practices are not always or even typically good for racial justice. Indeed, “color blindness” can often be a manifestation of white supremacy (Mills 2007, 28). In order to address white supremacy and other ills of racism, we must be alive to the ways in which race functions, which may entail treating people differentially on the basis of race, and thus denying (rather than accepting) racial abolitionism (Wright 2011, 405). The same might be true of gender. We may need to treat people differentially on the basis of their gender in order to remedy gender discrimination, and thus we would be ill-served by eliminating gender (which would make it impossible to treat people differently on the basis of their gender) if our goal is to remedy gender discrimination.

Although I am not confident that applying gender concepts like “woman” to existing people is strictly necessary for addressing present injustices, including present gender-based injustices, I am happy to grant that it is for the sake of the argument. This gets us an argument against eliminating gender *now*, but not against eliminating gender *ever*. Once we have dealt with gender injustice, we can then eliminate gender and stop applying gender concepts to anyone.

One might object that we will never get rid of gender injustice, and thus gender abolitionism will never be appropriate. This prediction may be accurate. Even if it is accurate, this is hardly something we can know with any reasonable degree of certainty. Once we expand our time horizons out far enough, we can only be uncertain about whether gender injustice will ever disappear. The only way to substantiate a claim that gender oppression will *never* disappear is to commit to the claim that gender will never disappear. If gender abolitionism were impossible, then this of course would tell against the argument here, which relies on the correctness of gender abolition. Because I here assume gender abolitionism is correct, to the extent that this objection is tenable, it is outside the scope of this article.[[18]](#endnote-18)

**4. It is Pragmatic to Delay**

One argument Mikkola uses against abolitionism is that it is not pragmatic to try to get rid of gender, because there are more effective things we could use our resources on than trying to eliminate gender (Mikkola 2011, 75):

The abolitionist strategy runs into difficulties if many social agents are unwilling to follow it through... I agree with Haslanger that a change in our self-understandings is called for; but I wonder if the change that she is calling for is the right kind of change given that ordinary thinking does not see the viability of eradicating gender. Again, my point is strategic: accounts that have abolitionist implications are likely to be extremely demanding. It will take a lot of convincing to make ordinary social agents view their gender as not being even in part a positive social identity and to make them refuse to be gendered women and men, if social agents do not believe to begin with that this is necessary. And, one might wonder, whether scarce feminist resources should be directed at something other than trying to convince social agents to revise their self-understandings in this manner.[[19]](#endnote-19) (Mikkola 2011, 75, internal citations omitted)

 If Mikkola is right, then this is an argument against gender abolitionism for as long as gender abolitionism is not pragmatic.[[20]](#endnote-20) The gender abolitionist is not limited to sitting around and waiting, though. They certainly are not committed to fighting *against* gender abolitionism because it is not presently pragmatic. Rather, the gender abolitionist can work towards a world where gender abolitionism is more pragmatic than it currently is.[[21]](#endnote-21)

The gender abolitionist can acknowledge that their proposal strikes many people as outlandish and unworkable, and help to alleviate this by explaining what gender abolition is and what it would entail, without committing to the view that we should actually carry out gender abolition right now.[[22]](#endnote-22) The gender abolitionist can also work towards mitigating gender oppression without explicitly taking an abolitionist stance (or without thinking the abolitionist stance ought to be implemented right now). Because gender and gender oppression are inextricably tied to each other (according to the abolitionist), anything that helps reduce gender oppression will make the elimination of gender itself less of a stretch and thus less outlandish.

For example: we might work towards social norms that allow people of any gender to have any occupation without this seeming strange or contrary to nature. We might aim to make it the case that women can be scientists, firefighters, elected officials, doctors, lawyers, and chefs, and that men can be nurses, nannies, and receptionists.[[23]](#endnote-23) As we succeed in changing the norms and people become less resistant to anyone of any gender having any job, we lower the barrier for eventually accepting a genderless society. One of the objections someone might have offered, which is that in a genderless society people will end up in jobs they are not suited to because they will not have gender to guide them, will disappear. We might similarly work towards a world in which clothes, hairstyles, makeup, and so on are not gendered, such that anyone can look however they’d like without being castigated for being gender non-conforming. Insofar as we succeed, we lower the barrier for accepting a genderless society. And so on.

Strictly speaking, though, none of this is necessary for defending the main argument, which is that even if abolitionism is not pragmatic, this need not be permanent. The argument that gender abolitionism is not pragmatic is a fine argument only as long as it’s true, and it need not be true in the future. Whether it will or will not be true in the future is an empirical question on which I take no stance. The claim I defend is just that if (and perhaps when) we reach a point at which it is not true, gender abolitionism can then be pursued without counting as a waste of resources that could be better used elsewhere. Until then, we should not abolish gender, because it would be pragmatically bad in the sense of being a bad use of resources.[[24]](#endnote-24)

**5. Gender Abolitionism as an Objectionably Utopian Project**

It may be that gender abolitionism is a utopian project, by which I mean that it aims at a state of affairs which is tremendously unlikely. There is debate about whether a utopian goal is for this reason objectionable (see e.g. Sen 2006; 2009, 100; Gheaus 2013; Lawford-Smith 2013; Estlund 2014; Valentini 2017; Wiens 2012; 2015a; 2015b; Wolff 2015, Enoch 2018; Forthcoming).[[25]](#endnote-25) On one extreme is the view that utopian goals are never objectionable and that they are always useful: one must always have the best option in sight in order to guide one’s theorizing and actions. On the other extreme is the view that utopian goals are never useful: one will always go astray by aiming at an unlikely goal rather than at something else, like for instance aiming to avoid bad things rather than to accomplish the best things.[[26]](#endnote-26)

The degree to which gender abolitionism is utopian depends in part on one’s theory of gender. The more society would have to change to get rid of gender, the more utopian the project is. Firestone’s vision of gender, for instance, is quite utopian, because it requires artificial reproduction in order for us to achieve abolition.[[27]](#endnote-27) The degree to which utopian goals are for this reason objectionable depends on one’s theory of utopianism. Both of these topics are large topics in their own right, and I will be ecumenical here. For the sake of the argument I will grant the anti-utopian view its strongest claim, which is that we never ought to aim to implement a utopia, because aiming at such an unrealistic goal will lead us astray. Having granted this, we must now ask whether gender abolitionism must always be utopian. If it could ever be a non-utopian goal, in the sense of being realistic rather than unrealistic, then the anti-utopian arguments would have no bite against gender abolitionism.

Because I am here being ecumenical about what gender abolitionism would entail, I will not take a stance on whether it is ever likely to be a non-utopian (i.e. realistic) goal. My argument is that insofar as gender abolitionism is objectionably utopian in the sense of being so unrealistic that it is not something we ought to aim for, this is an argument for delaying it, not denying it. The objection against a utopia is not that the utopia itself is bad: if it were bad, it would not be a utopia. The objection is instead that using the utopia as a goal or target to work towards will sometimes set us back rather than help us forward. To the extent that it is presently true, gender abolitionism, like other objectionable utopias, should not be pursued. But this may be a temporary situation, for all we know. In the future, the utopia may be plausibly reachable, and for this reason it may not be objectionably utopian (or even properly speaking “utopian” in the first place, because if a target is plausibly reachable it is no longer utopian in the relevant sense).

This argument works for all versions of gender eliminativism against all versions of the utopianism objection, because it grants the strongest version of the utopianism objection and remains ecumenical about what gender eliminativism entails. But we can make the argument even more certain by adopting the most objectionably utopian form of gender eliminativism, according to which eliminating gender would require substantial genetic engineering to eliminate sexual differences, along with technologies like artificial wombs to enable continued existence. If any version of gender eliminativism is objectionably utopian, this one is, because it is the most unrealistic in terms of requiring the largest changes (including technology that we do not currently possess). Even granting this most utopian form of gender eliminativism, the argument works fine. Until we have the requisite technologies, and the capacity to employ them universally and without objectionably interfering with autonomy, gender eliminativism is (we will assume) a bad goal to aim for. But unless it is literally impossible to develop the requisite capacities to eliminate gender, this is just a reason to wait until the capacities are developed.

Analogously, communists do not think that it is any objection to communism that its implementation depends on and must await certain technological developments generated by capitalism (see e.g. Bukharin 2021 [1926], 141). As Marx and Engels put it, ‘the first direct attempts of the proletariat to attain its own ends, made in times of universal excitement, when feudal society was being overthrown, necessarily failed, owing to the then undeveloped state of the proletariat, as well as to the absence of the economic conditions for its emancipation, conditions that had yet to be produced, and could be produced by the impending bourgeois epoch alone’ (Marx and Engels 2018 [1848], 47). These premature attempts were objectionably utopian (Marx and Engels 2018 [1848], 48-50).[[28]](#endnote-28) But of course these objectionable utopian visions of socialism do not present a reason to reject socialism entirely, according to Marx and Engels. If it would be unreasonable to attempt to implement communism before the situation is ripe, this is merely a reason to delay. The same goes for gender. No matter how objectionably utopian gender abolitionism is, the best this can get us is a reason to delay gender abolition.

Notice the “present oppression,” “pragmatism,” and “utopianism” objections all share similar concerns: aiming to eliminate gender now would have bad results.[[29]](#endnote-29) What they disagree about is precisely why it would have bad results. The first objection suggests that gender eliminativism would worsen (or at least fail to alleviate) present oppression. The second objection suggests that pursuing gender eliminativism would set back various projects and thus cost too much compared to what we could do with our resources instead (whether or not we in fact managed to eliminate gender, which according to this objection might be possible, albeit very costly or unlikely). The third objection claims that we cannot presently eliminate gender, or at least the chances of doing so are very low, and for this reason eliminativism is a bad goal. Although all three of these bad results are different sorts of bad results (and although all three arguments draw on different points and emphasize different worries), they all aim to establish the same central claim: we should not eliminate gender now. They are all thus subject to the same rebuttal on behalf of gender eliminativism. That we should not eliminate gender now is no objection to the idea that we should eventually eliminate gender, just like the claim that we should not implement socialism before the conditions for the destruction of classes have been attained is not an objection to socialism.

**6. Creation, Rather than Destruction, May be the Path to Destruction**

Finally, there may be a way in which embracing gender can further the cause of gender abolitionism. The proliferation of genders that accompanies a wider understanding of different cultures, on the one hand, and recent trends in gender identification, on the other, may both actually promote, rather than conflict with, gender eliminativism.[[30]](#endnote-30) These sorts of proliferations may not help promote gender eliminativism, but if they do, then this can transform some arguments against gender eliminativism into arguments for it.

The first sort of proliferation is that which results from an examination of different gender norms across time and place. Examples of so-called “third genders” abound (Nanda 1986; Herdt 1996; Towle and Morgan 2002; Richards et al. 2016; Barker and Richards 2015; Vincent and Manzano 2017).[[31]](#endnote-31) The phenomenon is similar to the idea that race does not “travel” — that is, different societies around the world at various times and places have different races (Root 2000, S631-2; Mallon 2004; Glasgow 2007).[[32]](#endnote-32) Someone in one society might belong to a gender that is outside the common binary, but in another society with just two genders, they would have to be a man or a woman.

Just as race’s failure to travel is sometimes used as grist for the racial eliminativist, gender’s failure to travel might help spur gender abolitionism. For this to be true, though, we must first understand and accept that there are many more genders than what we may have previously thought, which means engaging in a process of increasing our commitment to the existence of genders. Thus first we would not be eliminativists, because our goal would be to increase the number of genders by increasing recognition in each society of the genders in other societies. But, as this process continues, we would eventually become eliminativists, because as the number of categories proliferate, people would become less attached to their provincial categories and hence to the entire categorization system itself.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The second sort of proliferation is based on the relatively recent phenomenon of people who belong to many new genders apart from the traditional third genders. Older examples include genders like butch and leatherdyke and newer examples include genders like demigirl (Hale 1997; Bergman 2010; Rubin 2011; Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski 2012; Steinmetz 2017). One possible direction for this to go is the creation of more and more genders, such that dozens and then hundreds of genders are recognized.

This process has been endorsed by Sandra Lipsitz Bem, who describes it well:

I propose that rather than trying to dismantle the two-and-only-twoness of gender polarization and compulsory heterosexuality by *eliminating* gender categories, we instead dismantle that two-and-only-twoness by *exploding* or *proliferating* gender categories. In other words, I propose that we let a thousand categories of sex/gender/desire begin to bloom in any and all fluid and permeable configurations and, through that very proliferation, that we thereby undo (or, if you prefer, that we de-privilege or de-center or de-stabilize) the privileged status of the two-and-only-two that are currently treated as normal and natural. If a thousand categories seems too many, let’s begin with at least 18. (Bem 1995, 330)

Similarly, Cull says:

Imagine a society wherein a radical pluralism about gender categories was adopted, such that new genders were adopted all of the time, to the desires of the individual members of the society. Suppose one were in a “deviant space” according to the gender concepts of that society, excluded and disapproved of because one did not fit into any of the current concepts. It seems that one could merely innovate, create a new category that did include you, in order to no longer exist in a “deviant space.” This itself does not decrease the number of acceptable ways to exist in society but rather increases them.[[34]](#endnote-34) (Cull 2019, 7)

Bem and Cull presents these proposals as alternatives to eliminativism. In one sense, they *are* alternatives, because creating more genders is not the same as eliminating genders. However, even if creation of more genders is in this sense incompatible with eliminating genders, if creation moves us towards a future in which there are no genders, then the two options are only mutually exclusive in the sense that baking a cake is mutually exclusive with eating that same cake. Temporally they cannot coincide (one cannot simultaneously bake and eat the same cake), but one can lead to the other (one can eat a cake after having baked it, and the baking leads to the eating, because it results in an edible cake).[[35]](#endnote-35)

To see how creating more genders could possibly lead to abolition, consider the sorts of things one might point to in order to claim that abolition is impossible or undesirable. If one thinks that we cannot abolish gender because there are two sexes, and two genders that match the sexes, then this would be utterly unconvincing in a world with thousands of genders, because at that point nobody would believe that there are two genders, one for each sex.[[36]](#endnote-36) If one thinks that we cannot abolish gender because men and women are innately different and we need our gender categories to recognize this, again this will make no sense: we will have to posit so many innate differences that it will be hard to see why they matter enough to recognize with gender categories in the first place. So, more gender at first may set us on the path to no gender later.

An analogy with this process can be seen by looking at marriage. Clare Chambers, who argues that there should be no legal recognition of marriage in society, also thinks that ‘in some societies the journey to the marriage-free state may be smoothest if it goes via same-sex marriage, and in such societies it may be counter-productive to abolish state-recognized marriage as soon as it is extended to same-sex couples’ (Chambers 2017, 85). Just as someone whose goal is to get rid of marriage can support not just the retention but the extension of marriage in certain circumstances in our non-ideal world, someone whose goal is to get rid of gender can support not just the retention but the extension of gender in certain circumstances.[[37]](#endnote-37)

The view that abolition can follow from, rather than compete with, proliferation is one that others agree with. Gabrielle Bussell, for instance, argues that ‘if the ultimate goal of gender fluidity (or gender voluntarism) is to diminish the significance or power of gender categories, then it would seem that this view ought not be regarded as an objection’ to views like Haslanger’s which recommend abolition (Bussell 2021, 187). ‘How this abolition comes to be, I take it, is the question that is of importance here. In other words, [proliferation and abolition] aren’t in competition, since Haslanger’s view is about why we should abolish gender categories and the gender fluidity view concerns how we go about doing so’ (Bussell 2021, 187).

 Lawford-Smith similarly thinks that new genders help put us on the path to abolition (Lawford-Smith 2021, 1037).[[38]](#endnote-38) However, she also thinks that in cases of zero-sum competition, like allowing people assigned male at birth onto a women’s sports team or choosing people assigned male at birth as representatives for a women-only political party, acceptance of the identities of transgender individuals will not help put us on the path to abolition (Lawford-Smith 2021, 1038–39).[[39]](#endnote-39) In principle the eliminativist can ignore this, because whether she is right or not, gender eliminativism and gender proliferation as a route to it are both defensible. However, because I wish to disabuse anyone of the notion that gender abolitionism or anything linked to it needs to be at odds with present acceptance of transgender identities, I will note how the abolitionist can disagree.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Lawford-Smith’s claim about what will put us on the path to abolition is an empirical hypothesis which I take to be incorrect. She believes that in many cases, treating (e.g.) trans men as men and trans women as women will work against abolishing gender. However, the abolitionist can point out that widespread acceptance of transgender identities and the attitudes towards gender that this acceptance engenders is exactly the sort of thing that causes people to reflect on gender in ways that are more amenable to abolition.[[41]](#endnote-41) For instance, one recent estimate suggests that approximately 30% of transgender adults in the United States identify as nonbinary, compared to about 8% of cisgender LGBQ adults and 1% of all adults in Brazil (Wilson and Meyer 2021, 2; 2021).[[42]](#endnote-42) Insofar as adoption of nonbinary genders helps contribute to abolition (which Lawford-Smith accepts), acceptance and promotion of transgender identities seems to be very valuable.[[43]](#endnote-43)

As Cull points out, ‘the proliferation of gender categories does in fact create more and more space for acceptable behaviour’ in ways that attack gender oppression (Cull 2019, 7). In general, it is a mistake to present the options of gender abolition and acceptance of gender norms as mutually exclusive, as Lawford-Smith does, just as Lawford-Smith correctly notes that it is a mistake to contrast acceptance of nonbinary identities with gender eliminativism, as Bem and Cull do. Some specific gender norms reify gender norms broadly speaking, and other specific gender norms put us on the path to dismantling gender norms broadly speaking. The gender norm “women will defer to men” reifies gender norms broadly speaking, and the gender norm “women will not defer to men” puts us on the path to dismantling gender norms broadly speaking. Eventually the abolitionist wants us to do away with all norms, but for now, the norms that lead us to abolition are acceptable.

Some gender norms are more traditional and more strongly-defended than others, and it is these which often oppose gender abolition. There are sometimes people, including transgender people, who, through their behavior, support some norms that oppose gender abolition, examples of with Lawford-Smith cites (Lawford-Smith 2021, 1027–28).[[44]](#endnote-44) But there are many people, including many transgender people, who, through their behavior, support the norms that help lead us towards gender abolition.[[45]](#endnote-45)

So, although properly speaking, the gender abolitionist can be neutral about Lawford-Smith’s claim that acceptance of the identities of transgender people will set back abolitionism, this is an empirical claim about which skepticism is well-warranted. Even assuming Lawford-Smith is right, this just gives us a reason to put off abolition, because we ought to prefer accepting the identities of transgender people over making progress towards abolition.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Finally, returning to the general claim that proliferation may lead to abolition: the argument is not that proliferation is all that is required to achieve abolition.[[47]](#endnote-47) The claim is just that proliferation may be one ingredient in the mix that leads to abolition. It is possible that this argument is too hopeful. Maybe the elimination of gender does require moving away from, rather than towards, proliferation.[[48]](#endnote-48) At worst, though, this just throws us back to the earlier reasons to delay abolition. Thus we would endorse proliferation not as a stepping stone towards elimination but as a non-ideal amelioration tactic to be undertaken while abolition is not plausible. This amounts to biting a bullet in the sense that I would like to endorse the creation of more genders in an ideal sense, not merely as a second best. But it does not amount to biting a bullet in terms of whether abolitionism is plausible, because the alleged implausible consequence of abolitionism — that we ought not to create more genders right now — is avoided.

**7. If Not Now, When?**

I have argued we should delay gender eliminativism until it can be carried out without leading to undue oppression, until it can be carried out without getting rid of anything we need to fight against oppression, until it is pragmatic to undertake, until it is not objectionably utopian to pursue it, and until it makes sense to move from the creation of new genders to the undermining of gender altogether. If I am correct, then many arguments against gender eliminativism are defused by realizing that they are temporary. Having established that many arguments against it are just arguments for delaying it, we might then ask “if not now, then when?” Once the above-mentioned obstacles are overcome, what more must we wait for?[[49]](#endnote-49)

As noted in section one, a full answer to this question would require a defense of fuller explication and defense of gender eliminativism, which I cannot accomplish here, and which is perhaps otiose in light of the above-cited extant defenses, many of which I take to already be dispositive with respect to whether gender eliminativism is compelling. However, unless we can discover more reasons to delay beyond those I have dealt with, we should eliminate gender as soon as possible, which means eliminating gender once we have resolved the above-mentioned issues. This gives us a relatively well-described target to aim for, because we know what we need to solve, and (once we have solved these things) we will be in a position to say gender should be eliminated.

So, once we have either eliminated oppression, helped to make gender less central to the identities of oppressed people, or accomplished a mixture of both, we will have fulfilled one criterion for achieving a society in which gender should be eliminated. Similarly, once we have eliminated oppression or we think we have tools to eliminate oppression that do not require taking note of gender, we will have fulfilled another criterion. Once we have developed ways to make elimination more pragmatic, or once we have acquired more resources such that the pragmatism concern is less relevant, we will have fulfilled a third criterion. Once we have reason to think gender eliminativism is not objectionably utopian (perhaps because we think gender is entirely social and only requires changing social structures, in which case elimination is perhaps not overly utopian, or because we think gender is partially biological and we have developed things like effective artificial wombs), we will have fulfilled a fourth criterion. And once the creation of more genders has created a situation where we are not so attached to the gender system itself, we will have fulfilled the fourth criterion. There is extensive work on many of these topics, like for instance what amounts to oppression, what role gender must (or need not) play in eliminating oppression, and so on.[[50]](#endnote-50) So we have a pretty good idea of when we should eliminate gender: when it is no longer better to delay. And we have a pretty good idea of what makes it better to delay, and thus what we should look for (and what we should work towards accomplishing) in order to discover whether it is still better to delay, or whether the time for elimination has come.

We do, I think, have reasons to delay at this moment.[[51]](#endnote-51) These reasons may be persistent. They may last forever, in which case gender eliminativism will always be a project for the future. But although this may be bad news for those of us who must live with gender, it is not bad news for gender eliminativism. Gender eliminativism is not harmed by the possibility that it may need to be eternally delayed. You ought to go to the dentist sometimes to get your teeth checked for cavities. This is true even if you must keep putting off the appointment, perhaps because you are permanently stranded on a desert island. Even if you spend the rest of your days away from a dentist, this is no argument against the claim that it would be good to visit a dentist when you can. It is also true even if you spend the next five months away from a dentist, perhaps because you are temporarily stranded on a desert island. This is no argument against the claim that it would be good to visit a dentist when you can: as soon as you are rescued, you should see a dentist. It is also true even if you spend the next five minutes away from a dentist, perhaps because you are stuck in traffic on your way to your appointment with the dentist. As soon as you are free from the traffic, you should continue to the dentist.

In all of these cases, the lesson is the same. The length of the delay is not relevant to the truth of the claim that the goal is a desirable one. We can also add uncertainty about the length of the delay into the example, and see that the result remains the same. If you are stuck in traffic for an indeterminate amount of time, or stuck on a desert island for an indeterminate amount of time, it remains the case that it would be good to go to the dentist.[[52]](#endnote-52) It is not as if the claim that it would be good to go to the dentist is merely about a perfect world in which everything goes as well as possible.[[53]](#endnote-53) In many non-ideal worlds, it would still be good to go to the dentist. The only way in which the claim about the dentist is about an idealized world is that it is about a world in which there are dentists you are in principle able to get to (once you get off the island, or get out of traffic). These worlds may be non-ideal in many (or even most) ways.

Similarly, it is no problem for gender abolitionism if we are not able to get to a place where we can safely abolish gender, or if we are not right now sure about whether or when we will get to a place where we can safely abolish gender. It can still perpetually be true that it would be better if gender were eliminated.[[54]](#endnote-54) In other words, gender eliminativism is the view that it would be good to eliminate gender, for whatever reason or reasons support the view: gender entails oppression, gender eliminativism is part of the project of implementing socialism, gender is inegalitarian, or whatever.[[55]](#endnote-55) These reasons may be outweighed right now. They may be outweighed perpetually. But reasons that are outweighed are still reasons.

It is true that the world in which gender can be eliminated is more ideal than the world in which you can go to the dentist, because what keeps you from the dentist is merely something like being stuck on the island, or being stuck in traffic, whereas what keeps us from eliminating gender are, among other things, injustices like oppression. So, the elimination of obstacles to going to the dentist does not make the world more ideal, whereas eliminating oppression does make the world more ideal. But it is not as if the world must be *perfect* before we ought to eliminate gender. The only ways in which it must be more ideal are those related to the above-mentioned reasons to delay. Many more ills, like (for example) economic inequality, racial inequality, health disparities between people born in different parts of the world, speciesism, various forms of ableism, and much more besides may persist in contexts in which we have nevertheless made enough progress to be able to eliminate gender. So although there is a sense in which we should wait to eliminate gender until things are better, it is not as if this, or your dentist appointment, need to wait until the world is otherwise perfect.

**8. Objection: Abolitionism Will Always Hurt**

There are many objections to gender eliminativism, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to address all of them. I focus here instead on one main objection to the present proposal that we delay gender eliminativism until the above worries have been resolved. The objection is that there is no way to overcome the first worry about gender’s importance to marginalized people. Above I argued that there are two routes for the eliminativist to take: work towards a world in which people are not marginalized, and work towards a world in which gender is not an important part of marginalized people’s self-conceptions. These two routes are not mutually exclusive: both can be pursued simultaneously. However, Cull is skeptical that there can be any success here. They write:

What might a nonviolent elimination of gender and trans identities look like? How on earth could one reach a society where trans people no longer identify as member of genders, and do so happily? If such a society is even possible, it seems like getting there is going to be extremely difficult, and no abolitionist has provided even the beginnings of a story as to how we might get there.[[56]](#endnote-56) (Cull 2019, 12)

The objection is threefold. First, it may be there is no possible genderless society where transgender people are happy. Second, even if there could be a society like this, it is not clear how to get there. Third, even if it is possible to get there, perhaps this will require violence.[[57]](#endnote-57)

Properly speaking these are not actually objections to gender eliminativism. Rather, they are expressions of skepticism about the possibility of there being a possible happy genderless society, and about the possibility of getting to that society, and about the possibility of doing so peacefully. In cases like this, nothing succeeds like success. By this I mean that the best response for the abolitionist is to simply work towards a world in which both the marginalization of transgender people and identification with gender are less prevalent, and to do so peacefully. As time goes on, to the extent that incipient gender abolitionists are successful, it will become more apparent to Cull and other skeptics what a genderless world would look like and how we might make it there without violence. As noted above, it is certainly premature to suggest that gender *must* be with us forever, and that gender eliminativism *must* be unworkable. As Nicholas puts it, ‘why don’t we try? We haven’t tried it, so we don’t know how we might feel, and be able to behave, without the determinations of oppositional sex and gender. Shifts in thinking about the body and ‘sex’ indicate that it might at least be a possibility’ (Nicholas 2014, 207).[[58]](#endnote-58)

However, because many may find Cull’s skepticism compelling, there are four things the eliminativist can say in reply. First, there is the “partners in crime” response. Gender abolitionism is a view about justice: it says that a just society will have gotten rid of gender. Like most other idealized views about justice, it does not have a particular story about how to get there in a morally acceptable fashion. Rawls does not tell us how to change any existing society into one that obeys the principles of justice (Rawls 1971). The same goes for many idealized pictures of society. The job of finding a moral way to implement the ideal is a separate one from sketching the ideal itself. There may be *no* moral way to make it to the ideal, in which case gender abolitionism ought to be eternally delayed. But this does not mean gender abolitionism itself is a bad thing: if by accident gender were abolished, we would have reason to keep it abolished, rather than bring back gender, and to be happy that it had been abolished (even if we are simultaneously unhappy about the costs that this entailed).

Second, it is uncharitable to ask the eliminativist to demonstrate that the route to a genderless society is not “extremely difficult.” That is an unreasonable request. Some good things are extremely difficult to achieve. A society in which nobody is oppressed is extremely difficult to create, but this is no objection to someone who argues that we ought not to have a society with oppression. It would be misguided to defend oppression on the basis of the difficulty of avoiding oppression. Similarly, it is no use to defend gender merely because it is hard to get rid of.

Third, we have to be careful to make sure we have the right concern in mind. Cull argues that it’s not clear how there could be happy trans people in a society without gender. But in a society without gender, nobody would be trans or cis: these are terms that require gender to make sense.[[59]](#endnote-59) Cull’s criticism makes more sense if we worry about people who used to be trans or cis who are unhappy in this society, and about people who are trans (or cis) and who are unhappy during the process of abolition. The abolitionist might say that people in the former category can simply keep their gender, forever, until they die. Gender is not passed on to children genetically.[[60]](#endnote-60) Everyone can keep their existing genders, the abolitionist can say, so long as they don’t foist them on anyone else. As time goes on, every gendered person will die.

In other words, Cull equivocates by claiming that for the abolitionist, ‘trans people need to be eliminated from society’ (Cull 2019, 12). If by “trans people” we mean actual trans people, then the abolitionist will say no such thing: actual trans people, and actual cis people, do not need to go anywhere. If by “trans people” we mean the category picking out people gendered in a way they were not assigned at birth, then the abolitionist needs to eliminate this category in the same way the abolitionist needs to eliminate cis people. This kind of eliminativism is not nearly as worrisome, because no existing person’s identity needs to be given up.[[61]](#endnote-61) Just like Ambedkar suggests eliminating caste via intermarriage, which prevents it from being reproduced without wiping it away from existing people, the gender eliminativist can suggest eliminating gender (in the future) via not gendering newborn children (Ambedkar 2014 [1936], 20.5).

If the worry is instead that something along the way will trouble existing people, then we have to be more precise about the objection. What precisely is the abolitionist arguing that we ought to do, which would harm existing people? The abolitionist need not suggest that anyone’s gender identity be disrespected. The clearly damaging things an abolitionist might in principle urge, like suggesting that we do not respect the gender identities of transgender people, are things which the abolitionist need not urge. They can simply delay abolition until it is possible to accomplish harmlessly.

Fourth, it is too high a bar to expect the gender abolitionist to sketch a perfect society where nothing bad ever happens when this standard has not been met by the opponent of abolitionism, either. Our present society hardly protects transgender people, or many cisgender people. Things certainly have to change. But it is not clear what picture we might have of a better present society that would not be subject to exactly the same criticisms Cull levels against abolitionism. Cull argues that proliferation is an alternative to abolition, and yet provides no explanation of how we are meant to achieve a society in which everyone can identify as a new gender if the existing categories are too restrictive. It is easy to make problems for abolitionism because it is easy to make problems for any theory having to do with gender. We are in a deeply non-ideal situation and any theory we propose about how gender ought to function is either going to be wildly idealistic, or it will fail to describe a world in which all problems are fixed.

**9. Objection: Triviality**

A second objection one might make is that is no real distance between the position of the gender eliminativist and the position of the opponent of gender eliminativism if in fact we must eternally delay gender elimination.[[62]](#endnote-62) Both views amount to the same thing, which is a denial of gender eliminativism right now.[[63]](#endnote-63) A related worry is whether my view is trivial. I am suggesting we should eliminate gender when objections against eliminating gender clear up, but without a commitment to the view that they definitely will, and without a timeline for when this will happen, the point reduces to the tautological claim that we should eliminate gender when there are no reasons opposing the elimination of gender, which is something everyone can agree with, from opponents of gender eliminativism to defenders who think we should pursue it right now. But if everyone can agree with the point, it is empty and unilluminating.

Although in principle everyone can agree that we should eliminate gender once all the reasons not to eliminate it have been cleared up, there is substantial disagreement over what those reasons are (and thus over what it would mean to clear them up). Many opponents of gender eliminativism, who claim not just that we do not presently have reasons to eliminate gender but also that we will never have reasons to eliminate gender (or that we will always have reasons not to eliminate gender), will not agree with my arguments here that the chief objections to gender eliminativism can be cleared up by addressing other problems. They will instead claim that we must keep gender forever, even if we solve the problems that support delaying gender eliminativism. They will for instance argue that gender plays an important, traditional role in society, and that its elimination would lead to all sorts of ills, like a breakdown of the traditional family structure. This sort of argument is distinct from my argument because it claims that gender eliminativism would be bad if it happened now not just because it would be premature but because it would be bad no matter when it happened. If any of *these* sorts of arguments against gender eliminativism persist, then the eliminativist must have some response beyond what I adduce here. Thus my argument is not equivalent to arguments against gender eliminativism. There is disagreement between many of my opponents and me. Even if all the reasons to delay evaporated, many opponents would continue to oppose the elimination of gender.

That there would still be opponents to gender eliminativism even once reasons for delay were resolved is both bad and good for my argument. It is bad because my argument is not comprehensive. One could in principle have objections to gender eliminativism that I do not address. But no argument can be comprehensive, and I have specifically chosen to focus on objections that, when examined closely, turn out to be reasons for delay, rather than reasons for objecting to gender eliminativism. This focus also explains why it is good for my argument that these other objections are not compassed here. My goal has been to show that many objections what might on the surface think to be compelling, and which we can endorse without taking conservative views towards gender, and which might on the surface seem to entail a denial of gender eliminativism, are actually not objections against gender eliminativism, so much as objections against present gender eliminativism. There is a distinction here that matters, just like there is a distinction between someone who argues that in the future there should only be two billion people on Earth and someone who argues that we should make it the case right now that there are only two billion people on Earth. These are very different views with very different implications. A future gender eliminativist is still a gender eliminativist: they want to get rid of gender, albeit not now. A gender preservationist is not a gender eliminativist.

So there *are* differences between my views and those of my opponents. One is their differing evaluative attitudes towards the possibility of gender eliminativism. The defender welcomes it as a good thing (even if it is not *so* good that the reasons to delay it are presently outweighed), whereas the opponent opposes it as a bad thing and would continue to do so even if the reasons to delay evaporated.[[64]](#endnote-64) Another difference is their differing reasons for opposing elimination presently. The defender opposes it for the reasons adduced above. The opponent opposes it for different reasons, reasons which are not amenable to resolution in principle, nor amenable to resolution once we make progress resolving other issues. Another difference is over the possibility of gender eliminativism playing a role in some larger desirable project. The defender of eliminativism can accept that eliminativism is a crucial component of, say, a socialist revolution which entails the destruction of class distinctions, and is for this reason desirable. The opponent does not think gender eliminativism is an important component of socialism.[[65]](#endnote-65)

Thus the view defended here is neither trivial nor equivalent to the opposing view. It is not trivial because it makes specific claims about what the reasons to delay are, and thus commits itself to the view that it would be good to eliminate gender once *these* reasons were resolved.[[66]](#endnote-66) It is not equivalent to the opposing view because it holds different evaluative attitudes with respect to the value of gender elimination and gender elimination’s role in an ideal society.

There *is* a sense in which my view is equivalent to one kind of opponent. One sort of opponent might describe themselves as an anti-eliminativist, but agree with everything I say here, because their anti-eliminativist reasons are the ones I describe above. They will say that because we should not be eliminativists now, this is equivalent to *denying*, rather than accepting, eliminativism. I am happy to accept these “opponents” of eliminativism as allies. If the *only* objections to eliminativism are ones that entail its delay, rather than its denial, then I take my project to have succeeded. Whether I have succeeded by defending eliminativism, as I have described my view, or whether I have succeeded by moving its acceptance into the future, as someone might describe my view if they wish to remain an opponent, is not an important debate in this context. The important debate is between those who think eliminativism is a good goal in principle, if not one to pursue at any given moment (including perhaps right now), for the reasons adduced here, and those who think eliminativism is not a good goal at all, for reasons not discussed here. My contribution to this debate consists of lending support to those who endorse eliminativism in principle by showing that some objections to it are in fact merely reasons to delay it. The separate, unimportant debate about whether delaying eliminativism is (temporarily) denying eliminativism, as some might characterize it, or accepting eliminativism, as I have characterized it, is merely a debate about semantics.

In other words, one might have taken oneself to be an opponent of eliminativism for any of the reasons I describe above. However, by pointing out that these are reasons not for opposing eliminativism but for delaying it, I have shown that if these are one’s reasons for denying eliminativism then one is not in fact an opponent: one is a friend. One might refuse to call oneself an eliminativist even after this discussion, and continue to insist that if eliminativism should be delayed, then the correct view to hold is that of opposition to eliminativism. Eliminativism can accept these kinds of “opponents” with pleasure, because they accept the key point in the important debate, which is that eliminativism is a good goal in principle (albeit not one to pursue at the moment).

**10. Conclusion**

Gender abolitionism ‘as an ultimate goal is more convincing than as an immediate strategy’ (Connell 1987, 287).[[67]](#endnote-67) It faces many obstacles, and the argument here cannot overcome all of them. The goal has been more modest. I have argued that many of the most pressing objections to eliminativism can be addressed if we do not take it to be an immediate action plan. If my argument has succeeded, then although this does not provide a comprehensive defense of gender eliminativism, it at least increases its plausibility.[[68]](#endnote-68)

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1. Alyson Escalante refers to it as “gender nihilism” and Erik Olin Wright refers to it as “genderlessness” (Escalante 2015) (Wright 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See also Eloy LaBrada’s discussion of this topic (LaBrada 2016, 454–55). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Charlotte Witt and Julia Serano similarly have theories of gender which entail that elimination would require biological alterations (Witt 2011, 39; Serano 2013, Ch 13). Serano’s view is more complicated because she objects to the notion of viewing gender as a single sort of thing (Serano 2013, 136). But she is clear about thinking that gender eliminativism would entail denying biological reality (and for this reason she opposes it) (Serano 2013, 128–29). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Wright similarly argues that “to talk about the possibility of a genderless society is clearly not to talk about a sexless society” (Wright 2011, 405). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. On this see Anca Gheaus (Gheaus 2023) and Wright (Wright 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Some other abolitionists include (Lorber 2000; Nicholas 2014; Gilbert 2009; Risman, Lorber, and Sherwood 2012; Bussell 2021; Bey 2022). Some abolitionists are virulently anti-transgender (Jeffreys 2014). Gender eliminativism does not require endorsing trans-exclusionary feminism, gender critical feminism, or other objectionably anti-trans views. Indeed, as I understand it, gender eliminativism requires opposing trans-exclusionary views, although elaborating on this beyond what I say below is outside the scope of this article. For discussion see (Weltman manuscript). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. As noted above, a weaker version of this thesis is that our current genders are oppressive, which is the view that Haslanger defends. See also (Higgins 2005, 91–92) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. One might also think gender has *already* been eliminated because it has never existed. This is Neil Gascoigne’s view, according to which “*there were never any women*” (Gascoigne 2016, 56). This position shares some things in common with, but is also distinct from, the positions that Mikkola attributes to “gender sceptics” (Mikkola 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. I find the equality, oppression, and socialism arguments most compelling. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For an introduction to much of the work on this topic see (Mikkola 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Bettcher’s discussion of “existential self-identity” (Bettcher 2009, 110–12). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. One could deny that there is anything wrong with rendering people worse off in this way. Gheaus, for instance, argues that nobody has a right to be treated in accordance with their preferred gender identity (Gheaus 2023). Here I assume that we wish to avoid these sorts of outcomes. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Abolition might itself constitute an injustice, because it would itself constitute a misgendering, but this is a separate argument than the claim that it would worsen an existing injustice. I address this objection below. See also Bussell’s stronger claim that “upholding an account of gender that describes someone as belonging to a gender category other than what they identify [does not constitute] misgendering” (Bussell 2021, 190). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. So long as their identity relates to gender at all, we will not yet have eliminated gender. But an identity weakly related to gender is close to an identity which is not gendered at all. Eliminating something that plays a weak role in someone’s identity is less jarring than eliminating something that plays a central role. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For Haslanger and anyone else who thinks that present genders entail oppression, we cannot successfully eliminate oppression unless we also eliminate gender, so the first option cannot be fully accomplished unless we also eliminate gender. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For extensive discussion of the various arguments to this effect, and for a response, see Mikkola (Mikkola 2016), especially part I. See also La Brada and Gheaus (LaBrada 2016, 451; Gheaus 2023). A similar argument about sex is made by Holly Lawford-Smith (Lawford-Smith 2021, 1034–35). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. This is not to claim that gender and race abolitionism go together. One might defend one without defending the other. However, many do argue that both abolitions are tied to each other. See for instance (Bey 2022, 96). Gender abolitionism is also sometimes united with class abolitionism (and, sometimes, abolition of the family) by way of tying together gender abolitionism and communism (Gleeson 2017; Escalante 2018; Metcalfe 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. I also think the objection begs the question, but substantiating that claim is outside the scope of this article. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Theodore Bach briefly makes a similar pragmatic point: “our gender categories ought to help us meet our political goals, but if our political goal is gender equality, it may be more politically useful to have gender categories for which the attainment of this goal requires us to change, rather than eliminate, the groups *men* and *women.* That is, it may be difficult to motivate gender elimination to the degree to which people identify with their gender” (Bach 2012, 259). For discussion of even more deeply pragmatic arguments against reform see (Nicholas 2014, 56–58). Mikkola would likely quail at the pragmatisms discussed there, which focus on affirming the value of traditional femininity, and if those pragmatisms are too concessive, it is worth reflecting on whether Mikkola’s own pragmatism is similarly too concessive. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. It is not clear that she is right about all contexts. Even just in the decade since she wrote these words, there has been an increase in people willing to refuse to be gendered as women and men (Monro 2019). Many of these people still endorse some gender or another, and so at best this may support Haslanger’s view that we ought to eliminate women and men, rather than gender eliminativism. But it perhaps indicates a shift in the direction of more widespread rejection of gender. Finally, even granting that Mikkola is right, one might object that pragmatic concerns have no bearing on justice. For discussion of this topic see the section on utopianism below. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Note that this is *not* the same as working towards gender abolitionism itself, and thus I am not vulnerable to the objections that Nicholas Southwood and David Wiens raise against one way of understanding utopian duties (Southwood and Wiens 2022). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Indeed, practically all abolitionists endorse this approach. Few abolitionists actively argue that people are presently wrong to identify with any gender at all. Rather, abolitionists typically focus on articulating the possibilities of, and the attractive characteristics of, a genderless society. Doubtless some abolitionist or another is adversarial in their approach, but this is not a requirement of abolitionism. And of course *many* defenders of gender are quite adversarial in their approach, to the point of physically attacking people who are gender non-conforming. See e.g. (Gordon and Meyer 2007; Lubitow et al. 2017; Veldhuis et al. 2018; Wyss 2004; Bender-Baird 2016, 987). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Indeed, many of us already *do* work towards this: at least since Plato, for instance, there have been arguments that men and women are not differentially suited for various occupations (Plato 1997, 1079-85/451d-457c). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Again, this is assuming it would be pragmatically bad. If we do not grant this assumption then one objection to gender eliminativism disappears. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. The debate is related to the discussion of ideal versus non-ideal theory (Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012; Valentini 2012). Some use “utopian” as a pejorative to refer to states of affairs which are not merely very difficult (or impossible) to bring about but which are for this reason objectionable as goals. I am not using “utopian” in this sense. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. There are other objections one might have about theories that we might describe as utopian, but here I follow Estlund in understanding “utopia” as referring to an objection about how realistic a goal is (Estlund 2014, 116). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. On the utopian nature of Firestone’s view, which also requires socialism, the elimination of the family, and other reforms, see (Sargisson 1996, 164–65). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. The utopianism charge leveled by Marx and Engels includes more than just the charge that these views are unrealistic, and so it goes beyond the understanding of utopianism relevant here, but it does include the charge that these views are unrealistic. Thus although they are making a larger point, Marx and Engels do agree that utopian goals (in the sense of utopian used here) are objectionable (Marx and Engels 2018 [1848], 49). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. I thank a reviewer for this journal for suggesting I clarify the differences between these three objections. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. For related discussions see (Risman 2018, 304–17; Nicholas 2018; Nicholas and Clark 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See also (Bussell 2021, 182). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. (Cf. Hardimon 2017, 56; Ludwig 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. This is an empirical prediction. Substantiating it is beyond both the scope of this article and potentially the scope of extant social scientific research. To the extent one finds it unlikely, one will disagree with my arguments in this section. For example, one reviewer for this journal does not find the prediction plausible, at least given the minimal evidence I adduce here. Because my argument in this section is couched in terms of possibilities, rather than certainties, here at least I think we will have to be content with mooting the possibility that gender proliferation can lead to elimination, with more definite confirmation of this hypothesis awaiting some other time. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. See also (Hester 2018, 31) who discusses the process according to which “the system of gender difference [is] abolished via the proliferation of gender differences – ‘Let a hundred sexes bloom!’” [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. I do not even think Bem and Cull’s societies are ones in which gender exists, but discussion of this point is outside the scope of this paper. For details see (Bussell 2021) and (Weltman manuscript). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. I am not claiming that there are two sexes; for reasons to be skeptical of that claim, see for instance (Fausto-Sterling 2000). My claim is merely about what one might come to believe insofar as one is committed to the existence of only two sexes. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. For more discussion of the analogy between marriage eliminativism and gender eliminativism see (Bussell 2021, 186–87). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Escalante is more pessimistic: “We have heard the suggestion that non-binary identity, trans identity, and queer identity might be able to create a subversion of gender. This cannot be the case” (Escalante 2015). I think Escalante’s later, more developed view (according to which gender abolitionism and communism are intertwined) is compatible with my argument here, although I do not have the space to describe how (Escalante 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. I do not endorse Lawford-Smith’s characterization of these situations as zero-sum competition, but this is a separate point. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. There are of course many other objections one could level against Lawford-Smith’s view beyond the ones I describe below. For one effective response (which predates Lawford-Smith) see (Serano 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Lawford-Smith and those who agree with her are the exceptions who do deny this, but I take them to be outliers. This denial seems more common among British feminists than other feminists (Lewis 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. I have not found recent studies on the number of nonbinary adults in the United States. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Moreover, I think the instances that Lawford-Smith points towards in order to explain why acceptance of transgender identities can be damaging are instances where the case is under-described: we can get everything Lawford-Smith wants without having to disrespect anyone’s identity, including any transgender person’s identity. This argument is outside the scope of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Again, it is likely that most cisgender people are much stronger supporters of regressive gender norms, by orders of magnitude, but this is an empirical question. Serano often points this out (e.g. Serano 2013, 121-2). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Unsurprisingly, Lawford-Smith does not cite examples. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Or, if we should not, then we can simply accept Lawford-Smith’s argument, which otherwise does not dispute mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Thus I avoid the objections to proliferation as a route to abolition that are raised by (Risman, Myers, and Sin 2018; Lorber 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. I do for instance sympathize with the worries Bussell cites about how proliferation “fails to examine the structural consequences of gender… because it doesn’t recognize the fact that the system bifurcates and stratifies people regardless of how they identify” (Bussell 2021, 188). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. I thank a reviewer for this journal and an editor for this journal for suggesting I address this topic. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. For discussion, see the works cited in footnotes 12, 16, 19, 27, 30, and 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Or, more accurately, I will grant for the sake of the argument that we have reasons to delay. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. And the claim that it would be good to see the dentist is not trivial: it tells you what you should do once the traffic clears up, or once you get off the island, whereas if we denied the dentist claim, we would say different things about what you ought to do once you are out of traffic or off the island. The same goes for gender eliminativism. For discussion see section 9 below. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. I thank a reviewer for this journal for raising this objection. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Whether we *ought* to eliminate gender, or whether we *ought* to visit the dentist, even if we ought not to do this *right now* (because it is impossible or otherwise not a good goal), depends on (among other things) whether ought implies can. Whatever we say about whether ought implies can, we can still endorse the claim that it would be good if gender were eliminated. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. See section 1 above for discussion of arguments for gender eliminativism. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. This quote does not highlight the worry about marginalized people in particular, but Cull focuses on transgender people because they “find themselves in the most vulnerable position with respect to gender” (Cull 2019, 12). Cull acknowledges that their point about there being no good path to a genderless society applies to cisgender people too (Cull 2019, 12). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. See also (Podosky 2022). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Note here that what we would “try” is not abolition, which ought to be delayed, but rather things which might in the future help lead to abolition, like breaking down gender restrictions on jobs, gendered expectations about appearance, and perhaps the recognition of more genders. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. At least, there would not be trans people who identify as men or women. It’s quite possible that some trans men and trans women are not (and thus would not be) men and women, because all extant theories of “man” and “woman” conceptualize these notions via a reductive cisnormative framework that marginalizes certain experiences of gender. This is I think a lesson we can draw from Andler (Andler 2017). This is a much larger topic than I can cover here, so here I assume for the sake of argument that there is some extant theory of gender which works and which entails that if we got rid of gender, nobody would be a man or a woman. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Or, if it is (say, because gender is partially or entirely based on sex), an abolitionist society would prevent this process via genetic engineering. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. That Cull equivocates can be seen most clearly when we recall that they accept that their point applies to cisgender people too. Cull is thus charging the eliminativist with saying that “everyone with a gender needs to be eliminated from society.” Clearly the eliminativist does not want everyone who is not agender to jump off a cliff. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Note that this is a worry only if we take the most pessimistic attitude possible towards eliminativism, which is that it will never be something to pursue. One might certainly be less pessimistic in many ways. For instance, as noted in sections 3 and 5 above, it seems unwise to put oneself out on a limb epistemically to claim that it will always be a bad idea to eliminate gender, because it is hard to know what will happen in the future. Moreover, even that position, according to which we should suspend judgment, is still quite pessimistic. One might think we are only a few years, or a few generations, away from a time when eliminativism will be a good idea, because we are making progress towards eliminating oppression and achieving the other things we must do in order to make elimination desirable. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. I thank a reviewer for this journal and an editor for this journal for suggesting I address this objection. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. More accurately, *some* opponents oppose it as a bad thing. Other opponents are not in fact opponents: they will agree with my arguments here and change from opposing gender eliminativism to endorsing it, albeit with a delay. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Alternatively, they could agree it is a component of socialism but disagree with socialism. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. My view *would* be trivial if it claimed that *all possible* reasons to preserve gender are merely reasons to delay its elimination, and if it did not specify what these reasons were, because then we would have no way to know when my view would endorse eliminating gender and when my view would not. But my view sets out *particular* reasons for delay, and thus *particular* things we can look to in order to see whether we ought to delay or whether we can engage in elimination. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Or, somewhat more hopefully: “abolition is accepted as a destination by many, but the path towards it remains unclear. What seems apparent […] however, is that much work has already been done to develop strategies of emancipatory abolition” (Gleeson 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. For comments on this paper I thank audiences at Social Ontology 2019: the 6th Biennial ENSO Conference in Tampere Finland and at MANCEPT 2020’s “What is Gender and What Do we Want it to Be?” workshop. I also thank Sharon Berry, Kathleen Harbin, Tatyana Kostochka, Raja Rosenhagen, Kranti Saran, Dimitry Shevchenko, and Alex Watson for comments, and Anca Gheaus for extensive comments. I also thank reviewers for *Hypatia*, and reviewers and editors for this journal, for their comments. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)