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## Doing Due Diligence on Gender? A Reflection on Davina Cooper's 'Taking Responsibility for Gender'

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In her article in this collection, Davina Cooper offers a rich, timely and thought-provoking intervention into current debates around – amongst other things – how best to understand gender in a context in which it functions both as a prized component of personal identity *and* as a social classification upon which structures of power and opportunity are erected and sustained.

Her account does not seek to trivialise the significant value of gender, and its potentially fluctuating and fluid relevance and connotations, to an individual's sense of self-identification, personhood, and autonomy; nor does it question the moral and political urgency with which initiatives to recognise and respect an individual's chosen gender identity should be developed. But her discussion directs the reader to engage with additional dimensions of gender's operation, and to reflect in particular on the ramifications of gender's 'public life' as a classificatory category that, through its performance and construction, often continues to determine the parameters of meaning and possibility. This, Cooper reminds us, is a scene in which we are all implicated as actors and extras; as such, we can be seen to owe responsibilities – to ourselves and others – to expose, question, interrupt, reposition or resist those frames.

In this short response, I want to draw out and reflect further on just some of the many important contributions that Cooper makes in her article, ever mindful that I do so from my own, highly particularised perspective as a white, middle-class, well-educated, heterosexual cis woman; a wife, a mother, and a feminist scholar who at times self-consciously navigates a difficult path to render coherent these simultaneously coalescing and confronting identities. That matters not only because candid positionality is a precursor to greater experiential inclusivity, but because of the intimate and inevitable connection that is engaged between the personal and the political, both at the level of individual and collective interactions around gender and its operation.

As is ably demonstrated across this special issue, although it is not always a simple matter to do so, with contested questions remaining as to what precisely a demand for recognition entails, there is a compelling case in contemporary society for respecting personal experiences of gender identity in all their complexity. Cooper's intervention here reminds us, however, that this

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does not require us to disregard the structural dynamics and processes through which gender is constructed and often writ large within – still – predominantly patriarchal frames.

For some time, and in a variety of contexts, feminism as a social, political and critical movement has been compelled to confront the dilemma of how to harness a sense of solidarity and commonality in the face of difference. Though some scholars have opted for more strategic and pragmatic compromises, others have continued to strive to achieve a productive dialogue that engages private experiences, public representations and the institutional spaces between. I see Cooper's contribution here as pursuing that latter objective, offering an explanation as to *why* – in this and other contexts – individuals might embark on coalition building across divergence. The objective here is not to repress the multiple imbrications of gender identity in pursuit of superficial commonality, but to find mechanisms through which to take the contours of personal experience seriously, whilst responding to gendered frames that cannot be divorced from, but nonetheless have a life 'beyond', those experiences. At the heart of her proposal for how we might do that is that we should 'take responsibility' for gender as an institution. But what, then, does it mean to take responsibility for gender in such a mindful and deliberate way?

In contemporary popular culture in the UK, we are told simultaneously that 'we should all be feminists' and yet that we should embrace and celebrate the 'guilty feminist' moments in which we fail, deliberately or otherwise, to embody feminism in our every action and thought. On reading Cooper's article, this brought to mind the question of what, particularly in this contrary cultural moment, does taking responsibility for gender mean for *me*? Is it an all-encompassing commitment to live a feminist life? Should we be concerned that this may become a bore or a chore? In the closing sections of her paper, Cooper recognises that refusal always to be attentive to gender is also important. But how should we understand such refusals: as inevitable reflections of personal inconsistency and ambivalence; productive and playful interruptions; or irresponsible derelictions of duty necessitated, if not welcomed, by the practicalities of our daily lives? And what difference, if any, does the motivation make if those moments of non-attention – whether fleeting or sustained – have a comparable impact on the gendered 'scene'?

And responsibility is itself a loaded concept, of course. Is there a danger that to invoke it in relation to the public institutions of gender completes a perfect neo-liberal triumph? After all, we have seen time and again how recognition of women's vulnerabilities to victimisation, which often map onto historical and contemporary hetero-normative scripts, quickly translates into narratives of how women might be better able to take responsibility for their own behaviour

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against the background of those gendered norms (for example, by not dulling their senses by drinking alcohol, not sending flirtatious signals that might be misinterpreted, or ensuring that they communicate non-consent forcefully and unequivocally in all contexts). In recent decades, a further extension of this has occurred, with concerns about how to respond to the structural conditions in which sexual violence is normalised and trivialised often seamlessly evolving into discussions about how third party ‘bystanders’ might have better assumed responsibility for ‘calling out’ inappropriate behaviour, and being ‘active rather than passive’ interveners in the scenes within which such gendered norms are staged. Neo-liberal sleights of hand by which responsibilities are placed disproportionately upon those who are already disadvantaged, often without any serious attempt to redress the broader structural conditions that create such disadvantage, already pervade many state responses to gender-based violence. And in that context, it is important to recall that responsibility is a slippery and often duplicitous concept.

This is not to suggest in any way that Cooper is not aware of the ‘slipperiness’ of her mandate to take responsibility for gender, and of how that responsibility might be distributed and discarded. Much may depend here, of course, on how we understand the demands and dynamics of responsibility. Cooper refers to Iris Marion Young’s insistence that – in contrast to conventional understandings in which responsibility is framed by a fault model that seeks linear cause-and-effect explanations and sees attributions as a zero-sum game – it can also be understood in a ‘social connection’ frame where it connotes a shared participation with others to positively reform social institutions. This framing might temper the more individualistic impulses of neo-liberal notions of responsabilisation, and position responsibility more appropriately as a matter of capacity than culpability. Still, it seems to be crucial to stay alert to the ways in which a call to responsibility for gender within public institutions can be productively redeployed in less progressive ways where it becomes a technique of governance.

Throughout her discussion, Cooper leaves us is no doubt that there are inevitably a multiplicity of responsibilities at play in the context of contemporary gender. They include – amongst other things – a responsibility to represent faithfully one’s unique experiences, create space for others to articulate alternative accounts, challenge institutions that inhibit recognition of those experiences, subvert scenes in which gender norms are staged and performed, demand resources to realise alternative scenes, or hold institutions to account for the visions of gender they endorse. Identifying these vectors of responsibility is important, but we also need as part of that to reflect on the ways in which they map onto, intersect with, disrupt and challenge one another; and to consider the ways in which those dynamics shift – both temporally and

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contextually – across personal and political terrains. To see myself, others – near or far – and institutions as variously having a responsibility for gender can be empowering, and as Cooper illustrates can do important work in recognising the ‘overflow’ effects of gender as a public entity that risk being eclipsed by a sole focus on demands for personal recognition; but it is also a potentially weighty undertaking that can be, or could easily become, overwhelming. In that respect, Cooper’s recognition of the challenge that lies in ‘sustaining a critically attentive relationship to gender where no option or way forward seems fully satisfactory given what else is at stake’ treads a necessary line between idealism and realism, resistance and resignation.