

How Feminism Paved the Way for Transgenderism

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In the last decade, all across the English-speaking world, transgenderism has become something akin to established religion, embedded in institutions and enforced by the state. Like any great historical event, this gender revolution has multiple causes. One is digital technology, providing virtual worlds which transcend physical reality and online networks for spreading the Gospel. Another is academic theory: postmodernism and queer theory. I want to make the less obvious argument that transgenderism has been promoted by feminism.

Not all feminism, of course. From the start of the second wave, some radical feminists opposed the inclusion of male-to-female transsexuals under the general heading of “women.” Their argument culminated in Janice Raymond’s [Transsexual Empire](#) (1979): “All transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact.” Transsexualism, she observed, was the creation of medical men like John Money and Harry Benjamin. As the current wave of transgenderism was building at the beginning of the 21st century, a handful of radical lesbian feminists warned that it was detrimental to the material interests of women. They included [Sheila Jeffreys](#), an English political scientist then teaching at the University of Melbourne, and [Gallus Mag](#), a pseudonymous American blogger. At the time, their warnings must have seemed hysterical; they now appear remarkably prescient.

These radical feminists argued that “[trans activism is misogyny](#)” and “[a men’s rights movement](#).” They were correct about its objective consequences being bad for females, as set out by the philosopher [Kathleen Stock and the journalist Helen Joyce](#). The end of segregation by sex threatens the dignity and safety of women rather than men, because men are more violent and sexually predatory than women. Men in prison, for example, have a huge incentive to claim a female identity. In sports, the physical advantages of men are so great that their entry into women’s competitions automatically takes places from females. Women who enter men’s competitions, by contrast, are destined to lose. In the realm of sexuality, young lesbians are vulnerable to aggressive pursuit by transwomen, which activists celebrate as “[breaking the cotton ceiling](#).” There is no equivalent pressure on men, whether straight or gay.

Transgenderism also undermines the female sex in more subtle ways. In progressive communities, a growing number of young women assert that they are men or nonbinary, and that has consequences for ordinary social interactions. People become so fearful of “misgendering”—which has become a postmodern form of blasphemy—that they stop using female pronouns for women who do not display a [feminine](#) style. Long-established schools for girls can no longer refer to their pupils’ sex. Discussion of women’s bodies now requires circumlocutions like “[menstruators](#)” and “[everyone with a cervix](#).”

In my view, then, radical feminists are correct that transgenderism—in its objective consequences—harms the interests of women and girls. The fact that a policy is bad for females is not a decisive argument against it, of course. We always balance

competing interests, and one may argue that the benefits for transwomen outweigh the costs for women. My interest is not in the normative question of whose claims should prevail, but in the sociological question of who pushed these claims. In short, who has led this “men’s rights’ movement”?

Let us list the major players in Britain. Former Prime Minister [Theresa May](#) announced that “being trans is not a mental illness.” “As an ardent, passionate feminist,” [Nicola Sturgeon](#), First Minister of Scotland, wants to eliminate sex segregation. Conservative MP [Maria Miller](#) headed the Committee for Women and Equalities, a select committee of the House of Commons, which proposed reforming the Gender Recognition Act to make it easier for people to change their legal sex; she derided critics of this proposal as “women who purport to be feminists.” [Dawn Butler](#), Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities in the Labour Party, insists that “trans women are women” and arranged for them to enter the party’s all-women’s shortlists for parliamentary seats. [Ruth Hunt transformed](#) Stonewall from a charity that campaigned for homosexual rights to one devoted to transgender rights, even at the expense of lesbians. Mermaids, which advocates for the transgendering of children, is run by [Susie Green](#). [Polly Carmichael](#), director of the NHS Gender Identity Development Service, lowered the age at which puberty-blocking drugs could be administered to children who identify as trans—now disproportionately girls. Katharine Viner is chief executive of the *Guardian* newspaper which has [championed](#) the transgender cause for many years.

Virtually the entire feminist establishment has embraced transgenderism, from celebrated feminist Members of Parliament like [Jess Philips](#) (Labour Party) and [Mhairi Black](#) (Scottish National Party) to organizations like the [Fawcett Society](#), [Engender](#) (the feminist group funded by the Scottish government), the [Women’s Equality Party](#), and [Women’s Aid](#). Transgender doctrines are enforced by the burgeoning diversity-industrial complex which was created by feminists and is disproportionately staffed by women. It was a [woman](#) employed as a university Equality Projects Officer who started a petition to transfer a violent transwoman to a women’s prison; the petition was so successful that it persuaded the government to divide prisons by gender identity rather than sex. In universities, transgender doctrine is promoted by feminist academics like [Sally Hines](#) and [Alison Phipps](#). Because radical feminism has almost disappeared from universities, academic opponents of transgenderism—now labelled as “gender-critical”—are, for the most part, women whose scholarship isn’t directly linked to contemporary feminism. Kathleen Stock, for example, worked on the philosophy of aesthetics. But there are some gender-critical voices within the feminist establishment. [Joanna Cherry](#) (Scottish National Party) is one of only two Members of Parliament who publicly question transgender orthodoxy. [Karen Ingala Smith](#)’s charity NiA runs women’s shelters in the old-fashioned sense, restricted to females. Such exceptions are rare.

Male politicians on the left have echoed the mantras of transgenderism. When asked whether transwomen are women, Labour leader [Jeremy Corbyn](#) answered affirmatively, albeit without enthusiasm. He has since ignored the issue. The website [Pink News](#), run by Benjamin Cohen, aggressively promotes the transgender cause. Overall, though, powerful men have done rather less than powerful women to institutionalize gender identity.

When we look at public opinion, we find the same difference between the sexes. The 2016 [British Social Attitudes](#) survey asked whether a transwoman—defined as “a man who has gone through all or part of a process to become a woman”—could enter a women’s refuge: 55% of male respondents were “very” or “quite comfortable,” compared to 64% of females. (The difference is statistically significant, $p = .002$; $n = 974$.) Respondents conceivably envisaged an old-style transsexual who had undergone genital surgery. Fortunately, rank-and-file gender-critical feminists (led by [Helen Staniland](#)) crowd-funded a survey that asked explicitly about “a person who was born male and has male genitalia but who identifies as a woman.” Acceptance is much reduced, but the disparity remains: 11% of men would admit this person into women’s changing rooms, compared to 17% of women. (The difference is statistically significant, $p < .001$; $n = 2,074$.) Just as women are more likely to accept the claims of transgenderism, they are more likely to silence gender-critical feminists. A [YouGov](#) survey asked British students last year whether their university should allow a speech by “someone who believes that transgender women are not ‘real’ women.” Half the male students would allow such a speech, but only a quarter of the females. (The difference is statistically significant, $p < .001$; $n = 1,004$.)

The evidence is overwhelming. Transgenderism—a “men’s rights movement”—has greater support from women than from men, and its success has depended on women in power who brandish their feminist credentials. This paradox has gone unremarked by the small but growing band of gender-critical feminists. When the paradox is noted, it is explained away as the result of “female socialization”: women are socialized to be kind to men, and therefore they prioritize ostensibly vulnerable males, transwomen, over their own needs. This explanation might have some validity for ordinary women. But it cannot be plausibly applied to ambitious and successful politicians and their counterparts in charities, public services, and universities. It is also hard to reconcile with the fact that young people with a university degree are the most likely demographic to embrace transgenderism; young women with degrees are also most likely to call themselves [feminists](#). Could there be something about mainstream feminism which prepared the way for transgenderism?

The foundational premise for feminism is that every difference between males and females in attitudes and behavior is due to socialization: there are no socially relevant biological differences above the neck. Thus the same feminists who denounce male violence and sexual objectification also endorse [Cordelia Fine](#) and [Gina Rippon](#) for arguing that there are no differences between female and male brains. There are some obvious problems with the premise. Why are humans the only mammalian species where evolution did not produce sexual differences in behavior? Why are some sex differences remarkably uniform across different cultures? For example, men commit more [violence](#) than women—as feminists themselves rightly emphasize—even though the overall level of violence varies greatly from one society to another. Leaving aside the validity of this premise, though, my interest is in how this premise paved the way for transgenderism.

If you ground the justification for sex segregation (in prisons, changing rooms, and so on) on socialization rather than biology, then it is much harder to argue for the exclusion of transwomen from women’s spaces. Your argument depends crucially on the proposition that trans-identified people have been socialized into sex roles corresponding to their birth sex. Needless to say, transgender people reject this

proposition. To quote transfeminine activist [Florence Ashley](#), “We can’t be socialized into a gender we don’t have.” In some cases their claims may seem implausible, as when a man in his [seventies](#) declares himself a woman. Nevertheless, socialization can fail, as is demonstrated by the fact that gays and lesbians exist despite the inculcation of heterosexuality. The argument for socialization is further weakened by the transitioning of children at younger and younger ages. If parents raise their son as a girl from the age of [three](#), on what grounds can biology-denying feminists assert that this child is being socialized as male? If you really believe that observed behavioral differences between the sexes are due entirely to socialization, then you should readily accept the new generation of transkids in their acquired gender.

Because socialization provides only a fragile foundation for sex segregation, it was easily undermined by transgender activism. Why did this vulnerability become apparent only in the last decade or so? In the 1970s, when feminism resurged, the insistence that all differences between men and women were socially constructed was balanced by conventional opinion which then exaggerated biological differences. More importantly, society was structured so that men’s and women’s experiences differed in almost every respect. In 1970, women comprised just 19% of [undergraduates](#) at the University of Oxford, and almost all of them belonged to female-only colleges. A female Prime Minister was then hard to imagine, there having been only three female elected heads of government in the world. Differences between the sexes were reinforced by innumerable everyday rituals: men would be expected to hold open a door for a woman and to help her on with her coat. Enid Blyton’s [Famous Five](#) stories for children are riddled with sexist stereotypes, and yet the tomboy—Georgina who insisted on being called George—is portrayed fondly. She rebelled against the imposition of femininity, but did not imagine that she was not female. (Female-to-male transsexuals in this era were vanishingly rare.)

Half a century later, many of the social differences between men and women have been eradicated or at least attenuated—thanks in good measure to feminism. Gender roles are not rigidly enforced, at least for adults. ([Children’s toys](#) are more gendered than they were in the 1970s, which might be another instance of the [gender-equality paradox](#)—in more sexually egalitarian societies, men and women’s personalities and career choices differ more.) Experiences of men and women still diverge with the birth of children, of course, but this event now comes much later in life. It is telling that young women with university degrees are most likely to assert that transwomen are women; they are also the least likely to have experienced the exigencies of reproduction. The insistence that there are no biological differences in attitudes and behavior between the sexes is no longer a radical dissenting view; it is established orthodoxy. To question it might even lead you to lose your job, as we saw with [James Damore](#).

If society denies biological differences and does not rigidly enforce gender roles, then the way is cleared for transgenderism. Being a man or woman—or neither—becomes a matter of subjective feeling. Toxic masculinity is to be deplored for licensing violence and sexual predation, but transwomen should be welcomed into women’s refuges. If testosterone has no effect on the brain, then why should it affect athletic ability?

My argument, in short, is that since the 1970s feminists have been sawing off the branch on which they perched. By denying biological differences they inadvertently eroded the distinction between male and female, which now licenses a social movement that undermines the interests of women and girls. Radical feminists were relatively immune because they had a much greater appreciation of sexual differences. There are indeed similarities between radical feminism and evolutionary psychology. Both view heterosexual relationships as inherently conflictual, for example, due to divergent sexual preferences and men's ability to exercise violence.

One objection to my account is that some transgender advocates have attempted to ground subjective gender identity on a biological foundation. There is some evidence that an individual's proclivity towards masculinity or femininity has a biological basis. (The evidence that sexual orientation has a biological basis is well-established.) Prenatal exposure to androgens, for example, helps [predict](#) gendered behavior in adulthood. But this does not prove the possibility of a male having a female brain or vice versa. Consider height as an analogy. On average, men are taller than women, and this fact is primarily biological. (In poor societies the disparity will be increased if sons are favoured over daughters, because the latter will receive less nutrition and medical care.) Notwithstanding this overall difference, some individual women are taller than the average man, and their exceptional height also has some genetic basis. It would be absurd, however, to treat such a woman as having a man's height trapped in a woman's body. Recognizing the [overlap](#) of the physical and mental corollaries of sex does not obviate the binary distinction. It is telling that transgender activists have never proposed any objective physical test for gender identity: their reference to biology is, at this point, purely rhetorical.

If my argument is correct, then feminists need to rethink their premise that all observed differences in behaviour between women and men are due to socialization—that humans are blank slates. Biological differences provide a solid foundation for sex segregation—they justify the exclusion of males (however they identify) from women's refuges and prisons, and from toilets and changing areas, just as they justify the separation of sports. (Those born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that makes it difficult to classify them as male or female would still pose a challenge, but [intersex](#) people only make up ~0.02% of the population.)

If my argument is wrong, then radical and gender-critical feminists will need to provide an alternative explanation for why the feminist establishment was so vulnerable to the seductions of transgenderism—why this “men's rights movement” has ended up being aggressively promoted by women.