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TERFs Are Feminists. That’s the Problem

By Marti Abernathey

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Abstract

Calling TERFs "not real feminists" feels good, but it lets feminism off the hook. From a 1984 Indianapolis council chamber packed with church buses to Sophie Lewis's Enemy Feminisms, Marti Abernathey argues TERFs are feminists, bad ones, and feminism has to own them to fight them.

Article



TERFs are feminists, and pretending they aren’t is how feminism gets out of cleaning up its own house.

I’ve been saying this in the trans movement for twenty years, and every few years the same comforting little myth comes back around. This week it showed up in my feed as a video telling me trans-exclusionary radical feminists aren’t really radical, and aren’t really feminists, because nothing radical or feminist

could ever uphold patriarchy.

I wish that were true. I grew up watching it not be true.

Indianapolis, 1984

I was a teenager in Indianapolis when Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin brought their anti-pornography ordinance to town. They'd shopped it around the country. Minneapolis passed it and the mayor vetoed it. Indianapolis is where it passed, and it passed because of who signed up to carry it.

The councilwoman who sponsored it, Beulah Coughenour, wasn't a women's-rights crusader. She was a conservative Republican and an ally of the religious right. Mayor Bill Hudnut was a former Presbyterian minister. Sheila Kennedy, who was local counsel for the booksellers who sued, described the night of the vote: busloads of people from fundamentalist churches packed the council chambers. She called the alliance between the councilwoman and the two "radical feminists" surreal.

Here's the part that matters. According to Kennedy, there was no support from local feminists. None. The "feminist" law had church buses behind it, not women's groups. Only three people were allowed to speak against it. Council members with doubts voted yes anyway so the crowd wouldn't think they were "for pornography." The courts struck it down, and the Supreme Court let that ruling stand.

So when someone tells me feminism and the religious right are natural enemies, I think about those church buses. A wing of feminism invited them. And TERFs are inviting them back: WoLF, a "radical feminist" group, as Rani Baker reported, took a $15,000 grant from Alliance Defending Freedom, a religious-right legal group.

No True Feminist

The video I'm responding to gets one big thing right. There is nothing feminist about defining a woman as a person who can give birth. Feminists spent decades fighting "biology is destiny." That's the best line in it, and I agree with it completely.

But then it does the thing. TERFs aren't radical. TERFs aren't feminist. They're "feminism-appropriating reactionary transphobes," outsiders who wandered in wearing our clothes.

That's a no-true-Scotsman, and it's a comfortable one. If they were never feminists, feminism never has to answer for them. Nothing to examine, nothing to fix. Just point at the door.

The irony is that the word TERF was coined to do the opposite. Viv Smythe came up with it in 2008 to separate trans-inclusive radical feminists from the trans-exclusionary ones, a way to name a faction inside radical feminism so you could argue with it. It was a tool for criticizing from within. Turning it into an excommunication throws away the reason it exists.

And the history doesn't back up the eviction notice. Janice Raymond's The Transsexual Empire came out of feminist scholarship. Michfest ran its policy for decades inside feminist space. Sophie Lewis, in Enemy Feminisms, traces modern TERFism straight back to the 1970s anti-porn wing of radical feminism, the same wing that was filling council chambers in my hometown. TERFs didn't sneak in. They grew out of it.

Self-Soothing

Another creator said it better than I've heard it said in a while: calling TERFs not-real-feminists is self-soothing. It severs the relationship of responsibility. If they're not in our movement, we don't have to deal with them.

We already know how to hold two things at once. We call Susan B. Anthony a feminist, even though she opposed the Fifteenth Amendment with openly racist arguments. We call Betty Friedan a feminist, even though she called lesbians the "lavender menace." We don't strip them of the label. We just don't sit with it.

Libertarian feminism is awful. It's still feminism. White feminism, girlboss feminism, carceral feminism: bad at feminism, still feminism. TERFs are bad radical feminists. They're still feminists.

Part of why we keep doing this, and I'll dig into it in the next post, is that feminism has become an identity instead of a critical lens.

Two Radical Feminisms

The thing I've had to come to terms with is how bell hooks and Angela Davis can be radical, and feminist, and look nothing like the TERFs.

The answer is that they don't share a root. Capital-R Radical Feminism, the Dworkin-MacKinnon-Raymond school, says sex is the first and primary oppression and women are a "sex class." Build womanhood on shared biology and shared suffering, and trans women look like intruders. hooks and Davis came out of Black feminism and Marxism, and a lot of their work was a rebuttal to that school. hooks took apart the idea of a universal sisterhood of victims, because race and class shape what womanhood even is. Pull that out and TERF logic has nothing to stand on.

That's not a fight between real feminists and fake ones. It's a fault line inside feminism that's been there since Black feminists told white radical feminists their universal woman was white and middle class. TERFs are the descendants of the side that didn't listen.

And for what it's worth, even the founders don't fit the script. Dworkin supported trans people's access to surgery in Woman Hating. MacKinnon has taught discrimination against trans people as sex discrimination since 1977, and in 2023 she published A Feminist Defense of Transgender Sex Equality Rights. Today's TERFs claim them as patron saints and skip those pages.

Narrative Over Truth

What does criticizing them from inside actually look like? A third video I watched does it well. It lays out the pattern: every attack they launch is framed as self-defense. Losing a speaking slot becomes "violence." Being told no becomes persecution. And to hear them tell it, they never did anything.

It's never about the truth. It's about building the narrative. Even the cases they hold up as proof get trimmed to fit, with the messy parts cut out so they come out as pure victims. Meanwhile, the side with the protest signs is up against the side with the governments, the court rulings and the newspaper columns.

You can only call that out if you’re willing to say it’s coming from your own movement.

Clean House

Lewis draws the line in a useful place. A comrade who’s drifted, you argue with. Once they’re organizing (taking Alliance Defending Freedom money, filling council chambers), it’s enmity. And you fight everyone at that barricade “regardless of whether they are a feminist.” Not because they’ll change. Most won’t. The point is refusing to let them use feminism as cover, and refusing to let the rest of us off the hook.

That’s what I’m going to keep doing. Not pretending feminism is flawless. Not pretending the church buses in Indianapolis came out of nowhere. Naming them as ours, and fighting them as ours.

You don’t fix a house by pretending the rot is in the neighbor’s place. You clean house.

Next up: why we keep evicting them instead of cleaning house, in “Feminism Is a Lens, Not a Badge.”

Featured image adapted from a photo by Pexels on Pixabay

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