

TRANSADVOCATE

Unpacking Transphobia in Feminism

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Abstract

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Formed in 1967, Radical Women is a socialist feminist grassroots activist organization that provides a radical voice within the feminist movement, a feminist voice within the Left, and trains women to be leaders in the movements for social and economic justice. It has branches in numerous United States cities as well as in Melbourne, Australia.



Figure 1. TERF opinion leader

By Emma Allen of Radical Women

The majority of feminists are accepting of transpeople. But entrenched bigotry crops up even within the movement for women's rights. Transphobia and other forms of discrimination alienate feminists from their natural allies in the fight for liberation. It is important to be aware of and speak out against these poisonous prejudices.

Transphobia in the feminist community

In January 2013, the New Statesman published an article by the British journalist and feminist writer Susan Moore that received criticism for gratuitously using the word transgender in a derogatory way. In "Seeing Red: The Power of Female Anger," Moore wrote, "[Women] are angry with ourselves for not being happier, not being loved properly and not having the ideal body shape -- that of a Brazilian transsexual." Instead of apologizing, Moore chose to lash out with a hate-filled defense on Twitter, stating, "People can just fuck off really. Cut their dicks off and be more feminist than me. Good for them." She went on to say, "I use the word transsexual. I use a lot of 'offensive' words. If you want to be offended it's your prerogative." The following day she tweeted, "I am not going to apologize. Get it?" To other critics she wrote, "Read my essay. It is NOT about trans anything. Are you utterly thick? Don't bother answering that."

A day later her friend and feminist writer, Julie Burchill, wrote an article in Moore's defense of the British Observer titled "Transsexuals should cut it out." The article was soon removed for being too offensive and riddled with misconceptions. She heaps on even more hate speech with such statements as: "To have your cock cut off and then plead special privileges as women -- above natural-born women, who don't know the meaning of suffering, apparently..." She manufactures a contrived class analysis against transgender people who supposedly have "many lovely big swinging PhDs" and states:

[Moore] and I are part of the minority of women of working-class origin to make it in what used to be called Fleet Street and I think this partly contributes to the standoff with the trannie... We know that everything we have, we got for ourselves. We have no family money, no safety net. And we are damned if we are going to be accused of being privileged by a bunch of bed-wetters in bad wigs.

The accusation of upper-class privilege is at odds with the reality that transgender people experience unemployment at twice the rate of the general population. Burchill's false assumption is that transgender people don't know the suffering of biologically born women ignores the fact that transpeople are especially vulnerable to violence including sexual violence.

Transphobia in the feminist community isn't new and continues to be promoted by radical feminists such as Sheila Jeffreys, Germaine Greer, and Julie Bindel who pathologize transgenderism for a variety of reasons. They characterize being transgender in various ways: as an extremely kinky sexual practice or a mental illness such as body dysmorphic disorder. Sometimes the criticism is paternalistic in claiming that transgender people are merely exploited victims of the medical industry's drive to make money with various surgical and hormonal procedures. The 1994 book *Transexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* by Janice Raymond describes being transsexual as a medical invention manufactured to create profit. Another criticism is that transgender people reinforce gender roles or expression. For example, Germaine Greer once referred to transwomen as "ghastly parodies of women" with "too much eye-shadow." Sometimes the attacks on transgender people reach conspiracy levels by those who see the phenomenon as an effort by men to turn themselves into women in order to infiltrate "women"-only spaces.

Radical feminists Lierre Keith and Derrick Jensen blend transphobia with "anti-civilization" environmentalism in *Deep Green Resistance (DGR)*. Julie Labrouste, a contact of Radical Women, was repudiated by DGR, which had been urging her to join until she mentioned she was trans-female. She shared the following email message that she received from the group:

There has been a great deal of controversy around DGR's stance on gender -- we are a radical feminist organization and as such the women in our group have requested that their women's spaces be women-only (women born women/female persons). Additionally, we believe that in general, trans*, transgenderism, and queer theory have been detrimental to the movement for women's liberation. This is fundamental to the DGR movement and informs our work against patriarchy and civilization. This is not something we are interested in debating or changing, so DGR is likely not the best fit for you.

Julie Bindel, another prominent radical feminist, promotes misconceptions by stating that "transsexualism, by its nature, promotes the idea that it is 'natural' for boys to play with guns and girls to play with Barbie doll...the idea that gender roles are biologically determined rather than socially constructed is the antithesis of feminism." She blames transgender people for promoting sexual stereotypes because male-to-female transgenders are supposedly driven to achieve an ultra-feminine ideal. She overlooks the fact that being transgender is about self-identification and that what someone actually does to transition is up to them and doesn't necessarily include hormones or surgery.

All people who identify as female must deal with scrutiny if they don't look like a size zero Victoria's Secret model. Impossible beauty standards are not a burden that transgender people invented.

Radical feminism and the anti-trans analysis

At the heart of the attacks on transgender people is the traditional radical feminist notion of biological determinism, which interprets humans and human life from a strictly biological point of view -- holding that biology is destiny. Their view that women's inferiority is based on their biology and that men are the enemy, is a reverse image of patriarchal hatred of women. The basis of radical feminism is to see men as the problem, painting women as the natural victims of men. If women are oppressed specifically because of the reproductive organs they are born with, rather than a deeper social-economic source of gender inequality, then transwomen can't be part of the club. Accepting the sisterhood of non-biological females challenges the very basis of radical feminism.

Radical feminists view women's oppression as the most important factor, expecting women of color to choose between their gender and their race. This has led to some outrageous incidents of racism.

Although radical feminists have traditionally been gender essentialists, some radical feminists have recently flipped the script to make it appear that they are the ones countering gender essentialism and that trans people are the ones reinforcing it. But while Bindel argues that transpeople reinforce biological determinism, she avoids the question that if gender is a social construct, why can't it be changed? She is merely singing the same song to a different tune in order to obscure good old-fashioned radical feminist essentialism.

Radical feminists claim that gender oppression can only be abolished by getting rid of the whole concept of gender and they view transgender people as a threat to that ideal. They contradict their desire to abolish gender when they claim that transwomen can't be true "women" because they don't know what it means to be oppressed as biological women. In reality, transwomen experience the pressures of sexism and frequently point out the stark contrast of how they are treated when the world perceives them as women.

Radical feminists mostly ignore transmen or claim, as Sheila Jeffreys does, that female-to-male transpeople are only trying to buy into male privilege. In her article "FTM Transsexualism and Grief," Jeffrey mourns that "FTM transsexualism destroys the lesbianism not just of the woman who 'transitions' but that of her female partner too." In *Unpacking Queer Politics*, Jeffreys asserts that all feminists should be lesbians or should adopt "political lesbianism" because women shouldn't sleep with their oppressors.

Socialist feminism's analysis of transgender oppression

In contrast to radical feminists, socialist feminists view the private property system as the historical and economic foundation for patriarchy and the subordination of women and sexual and gender outlaws.

It wasn't until the private property system evolved that gender roles were used against women. The *Radical Women Manifesto* refers to Frederick Engels and his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*:

Engels does not ascribe the battle between the sexes to any inherent evil in one gender, but rather to the inexorable development of technology (the forces of production) and the corresponding upheavals in culture and family formations. This method of analysis is called "historical materialism."

The Manifesto states, “The source of women’s power was in the original gender-based division of labor. But when surpluses first developed through the introduction of domestic herds of cattle it was the division of labor that gave rise to conflict and the subjugation of the female sex.” Ultimately, “Women’s role in society stems from social production not biology.”

The role capitalist society has assigned to women is directly challenged by the existence of transgender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and queer people - which is a good thing!

The Manifesto outlines Radical Women’s support for the total liberation of sexual minorities and puts forward demands for outlawing discrimination, ending police harassment and violence against LGBTQ people, reversing discriminatory immigration laws, and ending vicious media portrayals.

Radical Women has fought for transpeople from the 1973 First West Coast Lesbian Conference to participate in the 2007 United ENDA movement that pushed for inclusion of transpeople in the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). Radical Women welcomes transwomen as members and defends transpeople’s right to respect within the queer movement as in society at large.

For decades being gay or lesbian or an uppity female was considered a mental illness, yet some feminists think it’s ok to apply that pathology to transgender people. It really doesn’t matter whether being gay, lesbian, or transgender is a choice or inborn. It should be up to the individual to determine their sexual identity or gender. These self-definitions should not be assigned or institutionalized by the capitalistic patriarchal system and certainly not by so-called feminists.

Feminism = human liberation

It seems that radical feminists have their priorities out of whack. They seem to see the biggest threat coming from transpeople and allies rather than attacks on abortion, economic exploitation or domestic violence. Online debates focus on not allowing transwomen in “women’s” bathrooms as though there needs to be some sort of bathroom police on duty. These ridiculous debates detract from much more productive conversations on how to organize against sexism.

Anti-trans views ultimately come from a flawed, female-chauvinist analysis that sees sexism as the paramount issue and only weakly, if at all, takes into account how women’s oppression intersects with racism, class, ableism, homophobia and of course transphobia. The solidarity that is needed to win liberation is only possible by understanding that different forms of oppression have a common basis in the private property system and that we have a common need to replace capitalism with a system of socialist equality. Under a socialist system, people will have the freedom to express their gender and sexuality in any way they choose. This is the society Radical Women is fighting for.

Transphobia comes from a minority of women in the feminist community but unfortunately it’s a rather noisy minority. Their hatred does not have any place in our struggle. Feminism is supposed to be an ideology of transcending gender oppression and eliminating the strict binary definition of gender, not reinforcing it. Feminists should be against hatred and bigotry in all forms and respect everyone’s right to biological autonomy.

*The title of this article plays on the title of Sheila Jeffreys’ 2003 book, Unpacking Queer Politics. In this book, she claims that being transgender is a self-harm disorder and reinforces binary gender

models.

Cross-posted from Radical Women

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