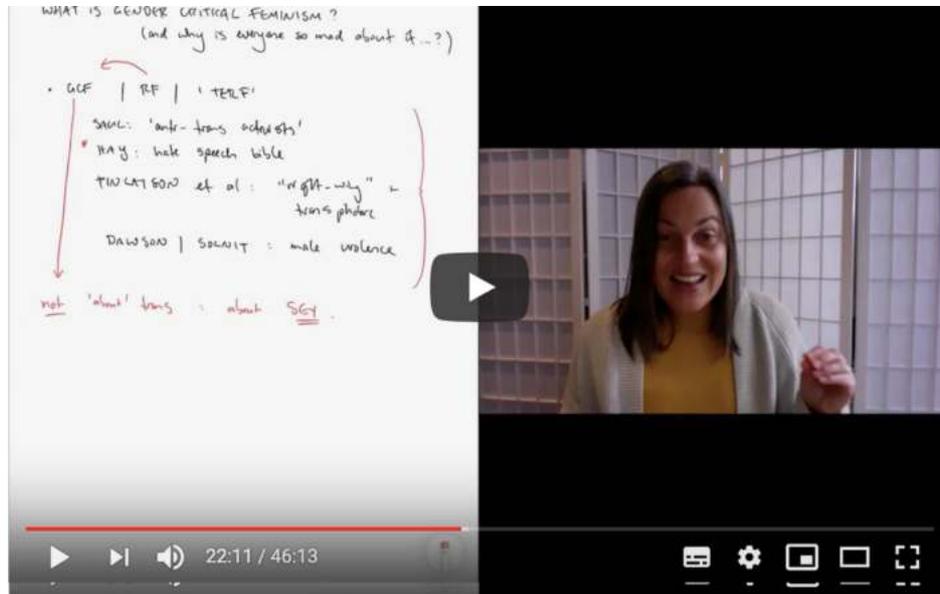


# What is Gender Critical Feminism (and why is everyone so mad about it)?



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**Abstract.** Gender critical feminists are described in popular media outlets as 'anti-trans activists', focused on 'exclud[ing] trans women from the ranks of women', because they are obsessed with 'phantom', 'imaginary', or 'statistically tiny' incidences of violence perpetrated by this minority group against women (Saul 2020; Hay 2019; Dawson 2020; Solnit 2020; Finlayson, Jenkins, & Worsdale 2018). But gender critical feminism is not *about* transwomen, and this popular mischaracterisation centres men in the narrative of a movement created by women, for women, and about women. In this talk I introduce gender critical feminism, explain its roots in the radical feminism of the second wave, and answer some of the most common objections against it.

If you've heard of gender critical feminism at all, then it might be from one of the popular media outlets that describes it in the context of opposition to trans rights, specifically legal reforms making legal sex a matter of self-identification. 'Gender critical feminist' as a label, is generally used interchangeably with 'radical feminist', and women holding this feminist position are often referred to disparagingly as 'TERFs', which has now kind of become a word of its own, but used to stand for 'Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists', and they are also disparagingly referred to as 'SWERFs', which stands for 'sex-worker exclusionary radical feminists'. TERFs and SWERFs are feminist bad guys. If you formed your view of gender critical feminism by reading media sources like *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Time*, or *The Conversation*, here's some of what you might find:

- Philosopher Jennifer Saul, writing in *The Conversation* in March this year, characterised 'TERFs' as 'anti-trans activists', and characterised us as being 'committed to worsening the situation of some of the most marginalized women'. She says 'we certainly shouldn't take either the radicalism or the feminism for granted'.
- Philosopher Carol Hay wrote in *The New York Times* last year about who counts as a woman and how 'TERFs' get this wrong, with the subtitle 'the attempt to exclude trans women from the

ranks of women reinforces the dangerous idea that there is a right way to be female'. She wrote that gender critical feminists are inspired by Janice Raymond's 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire*, and commented 'for the record, many of us who are critics of TERFs consider Raymond's book to be hate speech'.

- Philosophers Katharine Jenkins, Rosie Worsdale, and Lorna Finlayson wrote in a post for *Verso Books* in 2018 that gender critical feminist arguments against moving to a policy of self-identification for legal sex are 'right-wing and transphobic', because of our 'at times almost obsessive spot-lighting of the statistically tiny incidence of violence by trans women against cis women', which they think is like people on the racist right drawing attention to crimes by Muslim men against white women; and because gender critical feminists have worried that 'an inclusive and compassionate system will merely be exploited by those who are not the intended beneficiaries', which they think is like people on the right worrying about 'benefits scroungers' or 'bogus asylum seekers'.
- In the last couple of months, articles have appeared in *Time* and *The Guardian* against 'TERFs' or feminists with 'the wrong' views about trans, denying that there is even this 'tiny incidence' of violence. Juno Dawson claimed in *Time* that male violence comes from *cisgender* men, Rebecca Solnit claimed in *The Guardian* the male violence comes from *straight, cisgender men*. Dawson calls it a 'phantom risk', Solnit calls it 'imaginary maybe presumably it-could-theoretically-happen violence', and chides feminists for 'coming up with lurid "what ifs"'.
- Finally, although not an example from the popular media, I thought it was worth mentioning, that in an hour's time a talk will begin in your country, at Stanford University, titled 'The TERF Industrial Complex: Transphobia, Feminism, and Race', which promises to discuss the 'outsize influence TERFs wield in the media'.

According to these sources, then, gender critical feminism / radical feminism / TERF-ism is 'about' trans, specifically about making transwomen worse off, excluding transwomen, and being transphobic, by either imagining violence that isn't there or focusing obsessively on violence that is, but that there isn't very much of.

*If* this had been a reasonable characterisation of gender critical feminism then it might be clear why everyone was so mad about it. Picking out a discriminated-against minority (namely transwomen), deliberately setting out to make them worse-off, and excluding them from something they have a rightful claim to be included in on the basis of spurious hypotheticals about violence that demonise the minority group on the basis of 'a few bad apples' all sounds like pretty miserable behaviour. But all of these characterisations are *political*. They are public interventions in a heated political debate at a time when multiple countries around the world are debating relaxing the laws about gender recognition (in the UK) and sex (in Australia and New Zealand), and also changing policies around inclusion in sex-segregated spaces, like women's prisons and women's sports. They caricature gender critical feminism in order to put people off it and so ensure more support for the campaigns for legal changes. Charity requires, I think, not believing that any of these authors actually believe that this is what gender critical feminism really is. (Or *at least* that is true for the philosophers among them).

Gender critical feminism is *not* 'about' trans. It is *about* sex. But *because* it is about sex, it clashes with gender identity ideology, which is at the heart of trans activism. Because it clashes with trans activism, it is catapulted into the spotlight. There are very few people on the left today who will openly disagree with the demands of a group that is widely characterised as being 'the most oppressed'. Gender critical feminists do this *twice over*, in that they are in disagreement with both trans activists *and* sex worker activists. Because they see sex as central, they campaign against changes to legal sex/gender recognition that make it a matter of subjective identification rather than material fact; and because they see prostitution as the institutionalisation of one of the most pernicious sex stereotypes, namely that women are *for* sex with men, they campaign against policies that legalise or decriminalise prostitution. In insisting on the importance of sex, and centring women in theory and activism, they also violate

feminine gender norms, which have historically expected women's labour to be done in the service of men, not themselves.

Gender critical feminism is continuous with radical feminism, so we need to start there. Radical feminism is a theory and movement that started in the United States in 1967 with women like Ti-Grace Atkinson, Shulamith Firestone, and groups like New York Radical Women (est. 1967), Redstockings (est. 1969), New York Radical Feminists (est. 1969), and The Feminists (est. 1968). The Feminists, for example, split from the National Organization for Women (NOW) claiming that it was not radical enough. (In saying this, focusing on the American women, there were also prominent Australian, British, and French radical feminists, and it's not entirely clear how the cross-fermentation of ideas worked – but the earliest essays do seem to be exclusively by the Americans).

Here's Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch* (1970) describing The Feminists:

'It was not long before intelligent members of NOW realized that their aims were too limited and their tactics too genteel. One of the more interesting women to emerge in the movement is Ti-Grace Atkinson, a leader of the most radical and elite women's group, The Feminists – A Political Organization to Annihilate Sex Roles. This is a closed group of propaganda-makers who are trying to develop the notion of a leaderless society in which the convention of Love ('the response of the victim to the rapist'), the proprietary relationship of marriage, and even uterine pregnancy will no longer prevail. Their pronouncements are characteristically gnomic and rigorous; to the average confused female they must seem terrifying. They have characterised men as the enemy, and, as long as men continue to enact their roles as misconceived and perpetuated by themselves and women, they are undoubtedly right.'

Prior feminist theory had been trying to theorise women's situation *through* existing theory. Many of the first wave feminists, for example, oriented themselves around classical liberalism, and argued for women's empowerment through education and the vote *as* equality according to liberal values. Some of the second wave feminists were committed socialists and tried to fit feminism into Marxism. But neither of these went far enough. The problem with liberal feminism was that 'equality with men on men's terms' was thought to be under-ambitious. Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) made this point with a metaphor of a stage, saying that men had written the play, made the props and costumes, cast all the roles, and were directing the play, so that even if women were on the stage, and even if they fought for equal opportunity in getting the better roles, for liberation the whole stage needed to be dismantled and something genuinely co-constructed put back in its place. And the problem with socialist feminism was that it ultimately subsumed sex to class as the fundamental axis of oppression.

Women wanted a theory and movement in which *sex* took centre stage. Hence, the invention of radical feminism: a theory *by* women *for* women *about* women (understood as a sex caste—I'll try to say 'caste' rather than 'class' to avoid confusion with Marxism). Ti-Grace Atkinson—an analytic philosopher and arguably the first radical feminist—proclaimed in 1969 'women are a political class characterised by a sexual function' (1974, p. 52). Shulamith Firestone in 1970 declared 'sex class is so deep as to be invisible' (1970, p. 3). Later, Catharine MacKinnon would take a further step from sex to sexuality, writing in 1982 'sexuality is to feminism what work is to [M]arxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away' (1982, p. 515).

This radical feminist isolation of and assertion of the importance of sex is crucially important. The radical feminists pushed sex forward as a major axis of oppression just like class and just like race. They showed that sex caste could be theorised independently of either, even if it could *also* be theorised together with either or both. This made it possible to consider the structure of each of race, sex, and class as major systems of oppression, and draw on both similarities and differences for mutual illumination. It made it possible to ask about the *origins* of sex oppression: was it always the case? If not, when did it start, and how, and why? It made it possible to ask about the *mechanisms* by which sex oppression had been sustained throughout history, and through which it may still be sustained today. It made it possible to ask *who* or *what* is 'the oppressor'. And once we understand the origins and the mechanisms, we are then in a better position to understand how to challenge and ultimately dismantle

that system, and achieve women's liberation (which, as mentioned already, is not necessarily the same thing as sex equality).

Radical feminists, during the second wave, worked on all of these projects. Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) and Riane Eisler in *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987) focused on the historical origins of sex oppression. Lerner, for example, pieced together a case based on archeological evidence and argued that patriarchy began around 3,100 BCE – so about 5,000 years ago. She argued that women were the first slaves, and created the template for future relations of domination/subordination. Andrea Dworkin gave women as a caste a history, or 'herstory' as they said at the time, outlining atrocities against women such as the thousand-year period of footbinding of women in China; the Dark Ages burning at the stake of an estimated 9 million women accused of witchcraft; women's death and disease from illegal abortions; and she also identified propaganda about women's inferiority, such as that built into the fairy tales taught to children. (Arguably, this makes it possible to claim historical injustice against women as a caste).

Multiple institutions were identified as helping to achieve the oppression of women, including marriage, the family, sexual intercourse, love, religion, rape, and prostitution. Different radical feminists focused their work on one or more of these institutions, trying to gain a better understanding of how they functioned. For example, Susan Brownmiller wrote about rape; Shulamith Firestone wrote about love and the family, Ti-Grace Atkinson wrote about love and sexual intercourse; Kate Millet wrote about sexual intercourse; Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin wrote about prostitution; and there were many more radical feminists writing about these topics in various combinations. Some, like Marilyn Frye and Ti-Grace Atkinson wrote more broadly about concepts like oppression and how it works in the case of women. MacKinnon in particular advanced a more general theory, mentioned already, that men's control of women's sexuality was what united the many different harms against women and explained women's oppression—including rape, pornography, prostitution, lesbianism, sexual harassment, abortion, contraception, and incest.

There was fairly widespread agreement at the time on the following cluster of views: sex division was the 'difference' at the basis of women's oppression; women's oppression consisted in women being pressed into the service of men, whether this was primarily sexual or more broadly about personal service, sexual service, and ego/emotional service; women's oppression ran extremely deep, with many women having fully internalised men's views of women, and exacerbated by the fact that women were 'disseminated' among men, unlike pretty much any other minority group in relation to its oppressor; that men were the oppressor (either because men were directly implicated, or because they maintained the institutions that worked to oppress women); that heterosexual love and sexual intercourse were deeply compromised in light of sex hierarchy; and that prostitution was institutionalised rape.

There was also a broad range of solutions, and some of these were highly experimental, aimed at 'doing things differently' outside of male power structures. The radical feminists invented separatism (women living independently of men and avoiding contact with men), and political lesbianism (which depending who you read either just means separatism, giving one's full energies to women; or means unlearning heterosexist conditioning to the point of being open to relationships with women); they revived women's spirituality from pagan times, focused on celebrating women's supposed difference and emphasising closeness to nature; they developed 'difference feminism', which focused on articulating and revaluing women's supposed differences from men; they engaged in linguistic activism / conceptual engineering by reclaiming terms of abuse and inventing new concepts; they introduced the methodology of consciousness-raising, where women would come together to talk, to begin realising the shape of their oppression, to work through the experience of living in male-dominated societies, and start questioning male power structures; they advocated for the end of 'sex roles'—some of them by advocating for the end of 'sex' marking altogether, but others not; and they established services for women like domestic violence and rape shelters.

I said that gender critical feminism is continuous with radical feminism because I think gender critical feminism is the *revival* of radical feminism. I think it didn't start out intending to be that; women were just reacting against what they saw as unsatisfactory mainstream feminist takes on issues like prostitution,

pornography, surrogacy, sexual and beauty objectification, gender identity ideology, and more – but as more women gathered together under the label ‘gender critical’ they discovered (or were pointed toward) continuities with the earlier radical feminist theory, and this in turn made the connection stronger as people began revisiting that work. Gender critical feminists and radical feminists have *the same project*, in the sense of being committed to the idea of women as a sex caste, and sex oppression as a distinct and important axis of oppression. Unlike at least some of the radical feminists, gender critical feminists don’t make claim to sex oppression being *the fundamental* axis of oppression, they tend to be more pluralistic about there being multiple independent and sometimes interacting axes of oppression. They do both reject the idea that some other axis, like class or race, fundamentally explains sex oppression though.

Let me pause here to explain a little more about the significance of sex to radical and gender critical feminists. Of course it’s not *sex itself* that is a problem, but rather what has been done with sex. Sex was always a ‘difference’ that distinguished two types of humans, perhaps most obviously in the fact of female humans being the ones who got pregnant and gave birth. But it is thought that in hunter/gatherer times, the two sexes worked in partnership, or equality, and that this *shifted* around the time the agriculture was first invented to a model of domination, in which the sexes were unequal and males dominated. Male domination was further entrenched by a) monotheistic religion and b) ancient Greek philosophy, both presenting powerful cultural myths about women’s inferiority. We can ‘name’ implications of sex oppression that are closer to and more distant from sex, but are still ultimately explained as the social, economic, legal, and political *implications* of this shift to domination on the basis of sex difference. For example, women are still subject to pregnancy and breastfeeding discrimination in the workplace, and that is a fact very close to sex. MacKinnon’s concern with sexuality was like this – it named a cluster of harms directly relating to women’s sex and sexual use.

But then for an implication that is a little further away, consider the fact that when Apple built its health tracker app, it didn’t include period tracking. This is still a fact about sex, but it’s more about the current politics – that women are underrepresented among tech developers, which made it possible for this fact of life for most women to be ‘invisible’ to the developers. Or what about how women’s heart attacks or women’s autism have different symptoms or signs than in men, and so have long gone undiagnosed. (These examples are all from Caroline Criado Perez’s recent book, *Invisible Women*). Heart attacks and autism aren’t closely related to a woman’s role in reproduction, but the fact that they are underdiagnosed is part of a causal trajectory that stems from the ‘default male’ in medicine, and that in turn stems from a long history of male domination. And then there’s the norms of femininity, which are imposed upon female people, and end up explaining things like why women are not as involved in sports as men are, or why we do not see as many women in politics as we do men. These are all things that make *being female* politically significant. It’s the femaleness that puts one in the caste, but it’s the *caste hierarchy* – and the content of being in the subordinate position in it – that matters normatively and politically.

Gender critical feminists are gender abolitionists, which means, committed to getting rid of this sex caste hierarchy, and achieving the liberation of those subordinated by it, namely females. None, that I have found, deny that this hierarchy could create impacts on other groups, but they think that unless those groups are female, they would not be more than allies. (One of Shulamith Firestone’s earliest published essays, for example, was about how the main lesson women in the second wave needed to learn from the first wave was to stop accepting the claim that everything else was *more important* than the women’s movement, to put themselves first and only make alliances for mutual benefit after that). There are lots of radical feminist projects that have not generally been continued by gender critical feminists (separatism, characterizing men as ‘the enemy’, and practising witchcraft are three good examples), but these were not so much a part of the theory as experimental solutions some of which didn’t prove particularly effective. Some women today call themselves ‘radical feminists’ and ‘gender critical feminists’ interchangeably. Most who use only the latter—as far as I was able to find out before I got thrown off Twitter—do so to avoid gatekeeping by the original second wavers who tend to police their specific versions of it.

Perhaps a natural question at this point would be, why care so much about sex *now*? Even if everything the radical feminists said was right, and women were the first slaves, and there has been a 5,000 year history of women's oppression based in forcing women into the service of men, and even if this has included atrocities against women, and even if it's only fairly recently that this has started to change and women actually got the vote, and were allowed an education, and started entering the professions, and got a voice in writing history, and didn't become their husband's property upon marrying him, and could get custody of their children, and had somewhere to go when they faced domestic violence or rape, you know... *isn't that over now?* So do we really need a theory and movement based on sex oppression *today*? And I think there are two responses to this. The first is, if you think about racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups that have faced persecution in history, we generally still name those groups and think it is perfectly permissible for those groups to have people involved in theory and activism on their basis—even if only to remember what we are capable of as humans and to try to avoid history repeating. So if you have the impulse to ask why there needs to be a women's movement centered on sex when witch-burning is in the past, I would encourage you to ask yourself whether you think this is the case for any other groups whose atrocities are in the past.

Secondly, and more importantly, as we know from thinking about other groups, historical atrocities can have lasting structural impacts; it's impossible to undo thousands of years of history and a way of thinking in fifty years of legal reforms; and there is still plenty of sex-based violence, and sex-based discrimination, to go around, so that even if we entirely ignored the history of women's oppression, we would still be justified in having a theory and a political movement. This consists in things like FGM, the practice of child brides, sex-selective abortions, the denial of education to girls in poorer countries, the trafficking of girls and women into sexual slavery, coerced and exploitative participation in prostitution or pornography, domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, incest, sexual harassment in the workplace, the widespread sexual objectification of women which arguably feeds into many of these other practices, pregnancy and breastfeeding discrimination in the workplace, and women's underrepresentation in politics, and in leadership positions across nearly all industries. CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) was explicitly developed as a human rights instrument in the acknowledgement that existing human rights law had not been sufficient in protecting women and girls.

This helps to make clear that gender critical feminism is *not* a single-issue movement. It is not 'about' trans, it is *about* sex, specifically about being female, and what that means socially, politically, legally, and economically, in societies emerging from histories of male dominance. Having sex as the caste criterion makes membership and constituency straightforward: the members of the caste are all the female people; the theory has these people as its subject, and the liberation movement has these people as its constituency. We think it makes sense to reclaim the so-called 'gender terms', giving 'woman' back to the female people who are actually subject to this caste hierarchy, giving 'feminism' back to their theory, and giving 'the women's movement' back to their politics.

Given everything I have said so far, hopefully the need and justification for theory and movement that names the female sex caste and the oppression of its members is clear. That theory is radical feminism, and its latest incarnation, gender critical feminism.

In the second part of the talk, I'll focus on objections to radical / gender critical feminism, some of which will make clearer the *why is everyone so mad about it* part of the talk title.

- *It is essentialist – it naturalises women's inferiority* [discussed in Stoljar]

Some feminists have worried that if there's any necessary condition on membership in the category 'woman' then this will function to naturalise women's subordination. For example, if we say 'to be a woman is to be feminine', then we risk making it look like women are feminine in a way that is innate/hard-wired / fixed and unchanging. And this closes down women's possibilities, and justifies men's expectations that women *be* feminine, for example, be warm and nurturing; and their policing women on the basis of their failing to be (because this is 'against nature').

But there are two mistakes here. First, the mistake MacKinnon identifies in *Feminism Unmodified*, when she says:

‘Because male power has created in reality the world to which feminist insights, when they are accurate, refer, many of our statements will capture that reality... what a woman “is” is what you have *made* woman “be”.... If male power makes the world as it “is”, theorising this reality requires capturing it in order to subject it to critique, hence to change...’ (MacKinnon 1987, p. 59).

Even if we chose traits like ‘warm’ and ‘nurturing’ as our necessary condition for membership in the category ‘woman’, this *still* wouldn’t be essentialist in the sense of naturalising women’s inferiority, because we’re naming a way that male power has *shaped* women. And we’re doing this in order to criticize and dismantle that shaping – which is the *opposite* of naturalising it in order to leave it in place.

Second, this objection that having a necessary condition on membership in the category ‘woman’ naturalises her inferiority is even less plausible when made specifically against the necessary condition *being female*. This doesn’t even name a way that male power has made her, it rather names *who has been made some way by male power*. You can ‘naturalise’ femaleness all you like, because it’s natural. But nothing follows from it. As Tomas Bogardus said in his paper last year arguing against the sex/gender distinction, if your problem is with biological determinism – the idea that certain things *follow from* being female, like being ‘unfit for politics’, then let’s argue against that directly.

- *It is essentialist – it denies difference / diversity* [discussed in Stoljar]

Hay asks in *The New York Times* piece, ‘what set of core experiences... make someone who was assigned female at birth a “real” woman. Is it menstruation or childbirth? Nope – lots of women don’t experience those, either by fate or by choice. What about being subject to sexual violence and harassment? Trans women face as much if not more sexual violence than cis women. How about simply a lifetime of unwanted objectifying male sexual attention? There are plenty of women who don’t meet the standards of superficial sexual attractiveness who do not get such attention, and some of them even long for it. And surely we don’t want to go back to the days of defining women by their hormones or even their chromosomes – if for no other reason than we’d leave out the estimated 1.7% of women who are intersex’.

Okay, so the core of this objection is that women are all quite different from each other and don’t seem to have anything in common, at least not universally. So having a necessary condition on category membership will end up denying difference/diversity. Before I address that, though, let me do some quick debunking/explaining of a few things in that passage. First, the statistic for intersex is way off; it’s not 1.7%, it’s between 0.37%—Carrie Hull’s figure—and 0.015%—Alex Byrne’s figure. Second, the locution, ‘assigned female at birth’, has been appropriated from people with differences of sexual development or ‘intersex’ conditions, for cases where this is genuinely an ‘assignment’ which can later turn out to be incorrect; it is used by trans activists for everyone, even though in more than 99% of cases, as we have seen, sex is accurately observed, not ‘assigned’. Finally, Hay claims that transwomen are subject to as much if not more sexual violence than cis women. This is true, at least in Australia, but misleading. There is sexual violence against trans people *and* there is sexual violence against females, and these intersect in the predictable way. It is *female trans people* who are subject to the most sexual violence – in a 2018 study, 61.8% of female trans respondents (which means, trans men and nonbinary females) answered ‘yes’ to the question ‘have you ever been forced or frightened into doing something sexually that you did not want to do?’ Female nonbinary people were most at risk, then trans men, then male nonbinary people, then transwomen. There are also confounds for the fact that transwomen are overrepresented in prostitution, which is an industry full of sexual violence.

Back to the main objection. This is an objection to *any* feminism which has a commitment to commonality among women, whether in experience or in biology or in something else. As Natalie Stoljar put it in 1995, ‘the diversity argument is important because it raises the issue of whether women

constitute a genuine class and hence whether feminism can operate as a political movement on behalf of a unified group of women' (p. 262). Of the candidates she mentioned, hormones and chromosomes are biological facts, menstruation and childbirth are biological processes, and violence and harassment and unwanted objectifying male sexual attention are social experiences. It's true that none of these are universal in the sense of being *actually had/experienced by every single female person*, and so if the necessary condition on category membership was *in fact having them* then we'd end up denying some difference by leaving some people out.

But these seem like problems in the rigidity of how the necessary condition is being articulated and applied, not in having one at all. We know more about differences of sexual development now, so if we want to articulate 'sex' in a way that captures all the ways of being biologically female, we can do so – it will just mean having a disjunctive list of chromosome combinations rather than just 'XX'. If we want to talk about biological processes, we can talk in terms of potential or capacity – you can have the capacity to become pregnant, and be discriminated against by employers because they're suspicious you'll make use of it, even if you never will. And we can articulate an 'all going well' understanding for cases where medical conditions get in the way of that capacity. We don't usually give up whole useful categories because there are small numbers of outliers. If we want to talk about experiences, we can talk about statistical likelihood of having them, and we can talk about the experience of domination involved in living in fear of them.

And finally, it seems that 'denying difference' is sometimes just being used as a euphemism for 'denying men'. If the necessary condition is being female, and this gives us a politically useful and important category that means women *do* constitute a genuine class and feminism *can* operate as a political movement on behalf of a unified group of women, then it seems to me *no objection at all* to say, 'but it excludes some males who want to be included'. Let's bite that bullet: not everyone can be included in everything they want to be included in.

- *It isn't intersectional*

Since the first wave, black feminists have argued that we should theorise multiple systems of oppression together: for Anna Julia Cooper in 1892 it was 'race, class, gender, and region'; later, in the second wave, for the Combahee River Collective and for Frances Beal and Deborah King, it was race, sex, class, and sexuality; for the early bell hooks and for Kimberle Crenshaw it was race and sex (for the later hooks it was race, sex, and class). Later, absorbed into mainstream feminism, it would become all systems of domination. This may seem like an objection to gender critical feminism in that intersectional approaches are all about *multiple* systems while gender critical feminism is all about *sex*, just one system.

I think there's a lot of confusion in how intersectionality is talked about, and have separate work on this that I don't have time to fully explain here, so I'll just say that intersectionality poses an objection to gender critical feminism *only* insofar as it insists that we may *only ever* theorise multiple systems of oppression together, and never alone. That would also apply to race, or class, or sexuality. None of the black feminists, that I have been able to find, actually say this. The only person who gets close to saying anything like this is a white feminist [lowercase, as in, descriptively not pejoratively], and I point this out in order to note that this was not coming from a position of being 'multiply-oppressed' (that person is Elizabeth Spelman). But making such a strong claim wouldn't just be bad for all the people 'only' oppressed by one system, like middle-class gay white men, middle-class straight white women, middle-class straight black men, and so on. It would also be bad for all the people oppressed by multiple systems whose oppression is sometimes a result of only one. For example, Shirley Chisholm, the first woman and first African American to run for President of the United States, famously said that she faced much more discrimination during her time in politics because of her sex than because of her race. So if that is an implausible reading of intersectionality, then there is no objection to gender critical feminism.

- *It fails to defer to the knowledge claims of the marginalised*

It has become a sort of dictate of contemporary progressive politics that we defer to the testimony of those in marginalised positions, about their experiences. As Nancy Hartsock put it in 1983, ‘there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible’ (1983, p. 285). This idea has had some really good effects, including for feminism, e.g. in the #believewomen campaign which insists that women don’t generally lie about rape and sexual assault.

This constitutes an objection to gender critical feminism insofar as transwomen make situated knowledge claims, e.g. about *being women* or *being female*, and gender critical feminists *do not defer* to their testimony. They say, no, you are not, or more usually, no, that is not what ‘female’ means. Similarly, some sex workers say they want legalisation or criminalisation of prostitution, or that they like prostitution or are empowered by it, and often gender critical feminists *do not defer* to their testimony. Gender critical feminists privilege empirical analysis of sex-based harms, and historical evidence about the basis of women’s oppression, over testimony. The testimony of men is not a sufficient grounds for them to concede their understanding of women as a sex caste or the political importance of sex. And the testimony of sex workers is not a sufficient ground for them to disregard the empirical evidence about the harms to women of prostitution existing as an industry. (Not least because of the radical feminist commitment to the idea that sex oppression runs especially deep, which makes straightforward claims about a women’s ‘choice’, or straightforward acceptance of her interpretation of her experience, impossible).

But deference has never been about all claims made by a marginalised person, and it has never been ‘despite all available evidence’. The #believewomen campaign is underwritten by the fact that women hardly ever lie about sexual assault. People can testify to their experience, but the *experience* of ‘identifying as a woman’ doesn’t change your sex, and the *experience* of working in prostitution doesn’t change the prevalence of violence in the industry or harm to women done by the industry’s existence. Furthermore, women themselves are a marginalised group making some specific claims about their experience, so this can result in a kind of deference standoff: *even if* transwomen say they experience being women and that in virtue of being so-called ‘cis’, women should defer on this point; *women* can say they experience being female, and in virtue of being male, transwomen should defer on this point. This is generally overlooked, because the fact that sex is an independent axis of oppression is often overlooked, in favour of new and overly-complicated understandings of what oppression there actually is in the vicinity of sex/gender.

- *It names difference which prevents equality*

Finally, there has been an influential strand of feminism running right through since the first wave that takes a humanist approach, wanting a world of humans rather than a world of men and women, and so sees the naming and acknowledging of difference between men and women as part of the problem. This is an objection to gender critical feminism because gender critical feminism is adamant about sex difference, and the way it matters. That doesn’t involve any commitment to it mattering *necessarily* (it could have been that patriarchy did not develop), and does not involve any commitment to it continuing to matter (most gender critical feminists hope for a future in which it will not matter, or will nearly not matter). But they think it matters now, and that there will be neither equality *nor* liberation without acknowledging the differences and finding ways to accommodate them better. This is also a lesson that some of the second wavers learned *after* a period of being committed to ‘sameness’ feminism – reportedly this was a difference between the early and the late Betty Friedan. MacKinnon argued influentially against sameness feminism that it just accepted a male default, because when we think about the perfect sexless human he is inevitably male, and so we just end up accepting the male standard. She is ‘the same’, the same *as what?* As him, of course. Women *now* face pregnancy and breastfeeding discrimination in the workplace, for example, so there’s not much chance of achieving sex equality in work without acknowledging this crucial difference between men and women, and working out policies and flexible work arrangements and other kinds of supports to make work *work* for women.

### **Links:**

Dawson: <https://time.com/5865581/transphobia-terf-harm/>

Dembroff: <https://philpapers.org/rec/DEMETN>  
Finlayson, Jenkins & Worsdale: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4090-i-m-not-transphobic-but-a-feminist-case-against-the-feminist-case-against-trans-inclusivity>  
Hay: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/01/opinion/trans-women-feminism.html>  
Lewis: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/opinion/terf-trans-women-britain.html>  
Moreau: <https://overland.org.au/2019/05/what-is-gender-critical-anyway-on-essentialism-and-transphobia/comment-page-1/>  
Reilly-Cooper: <https://aeon.co/essays/the-idea-that-gender-is-a-spectrum-is-a-new-gender-prison>  
Saul: <https://theconversation.com/why-the-words-we-use-matter-when-describing-anti-trans-activists-130990>  
Solnit: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/10/trans-rights-feminist-letter-rebecca-solnit>