

## WHAT IS A WOMAN?

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By Michelle Goldberg

On May 24th, a few dozen people gathered in a conference room at the Central Library, a century-old Georgian Revival building in downtown Portland, Oregon, for an event called Radfems Respond. The conference had been convened by a group that wanted to defend two positions that have made radical feminism anathema to much of the left. First, the organizers hoped to refute charges that the desire to ban prostitution implies hostility toward prostitutes. Then they were going to try to explain why, at a time when transgender rights are ascendant, radical feminists insist on regarding transgender women as men, who should not be allowed to use women's facilities, such as public rest rooms, or to participate in events organized exclusively for women.



*As transgender rights gain acceptance, radical-feminist views have been shunned.*

Illustration by Alex Williamson.

The dispute began more than forty years ago, at the height of the second-wave feminist movement. In one early skirmish, in 1973, the West Coast Lesbian Conference, in Los Angeles, furiously split over a scheduled performance by the folksinger Beth Elliott, who is what was then called a transsexual. Robin Morgan, the keynote speaker, said:

I will not call a male “she”; thirty-two years of suffering in this androcentric society, and of surviving, have earned me the title “woman”; one walk down the street by a male transvestite, five minutes of his being hassled (which he may enjoy), and then he dares, he *dares* to think he understands our pain? No, in our mothers’ names and in our own, we must not call him sister.

Such views are shared by few feminists now, but they still have a foothold among some self-described radical feminists, who have found themselves in an acrimonious battle with trans people and their allies. Trans women say that they are women because they feel female—that, as some put it, they have women’s brains in men’s bodies. Radical feminists reject the notion of a “female brain.”

They believe that if women think and act differently from men it's because society forces them to, requiring them to be sexually attractive, nurturing, and deferential. In the words of Lierre Keith, a speaker at Radfems Respond, femininity is "ritualized submission."

In this view, gender is less an identity than a caste position. Anyone born a man retains male privilege in society; even if he chooses to live as a woman—and accept a correspondingly subordinate social position—the fact that he has a choice means that he can never understand what being a woman is really like. By extension, when trans women demand to be accepted as women they are simply exercising another form of male entitlement. All this enrages trans women and their allies, who point to the discrimination that trans people endure; although radical feminism is far from achieving all its goals, women have won far more formal equality than trans people have. In most states, it's legal to fire someone for being transgender, and transgender people can't serve in the military. A recent survey by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force found overwhelming levels of anti-trans violence and persecution. Forty-one per cent of respondents said that they had attempted suicide.

Yet, at the same time, the trans-rights movement is growing in power and cachet: a recent *Time* cover featuring the actress Laverne Cox was headlined "THE TRANSGENDER TIPPING POINT." The very word "transgender," which first came into wide use in the nineteen-nineties, encompasses far more people than the term "transsexual" did. It includes not just the small number of people who seek gender-reassignment surgery—according to frequently cited estimates, about one in thirty thousand men and one in a hundred thousand women—but also those who take hormones, or who simply identify with the opposite gender, or, in some cases, with both or with neither. (According to the National Center survey, most trans women have taken female hormones, but only about a quarter of them have had genital surgery.) The elasticity of the term "transgender" has forced a rethinking of what sex and gender mean; at least in progressive circles, what's determinative isn't people's chromosomes or their genitals or the way that they were brought up but how they see themselves.

Having rejected this supposition, radical feminists now find themselves in a position that few would have imagined when the conflict began: shunned as reactionaries on the wrong side of a sexual-rights issue. It is, to them, a baffling political inversion.

**R**adfems Respond was originally to have taken place across town from the library, at a Quaker meeting house, but trans activists had launched a petition on Change.org demanding that the event be cancelled. They said that, in hosting it, the Quakers would alienate trans people and "be complicit in the violence against them." The Quakers, citing concerns in their community, revoked the agreement.

It wasn't the first time that such an event had lost a scheduled venue. The Radfem 2012 conference was to be held in London, at Conway Hall, which bills itself as "a hub for free speech and independent thought." But trans

activists objected both to Radfem's women-only policy—which was widely understood to exclude trans women—and to the participation of Sheila Jeffreys, a professor of political science at the University of Melbourne. Jeffreys was scheduled to speak on prostitution, but she is a longtime critic of the transgender movement, and Conway Hall officials decided that they could not allow speakers who “conflict with our ethos, principles, and culture.” Ultimately, the event was held at a still secret location; organizers escorted delegates to it from a nearby meeting place. Radfem 2013 also had to switch locations, as did a gathering in Toronto last year, called Radfems Rise Up.

In response, thirty-seven radical feminists, including major figures from the second wave, such as Ti-Grace Atkinson, Kathie Sarachild, and Michele Wallace, signed a statement titled “Forbidden Discourse: The Silencing of Feminist Criticism of ‘Gender,’ ” which described their “alarm” at “threats and attacks, some of them physical, on individuals and organizations daring to challenge the currently fashionable concept of gender.” With all this in mind, the Radfems Respond organizers had arranged the library space as a backup, but then a post on Portland Indymedia announced:

We questioned the library administration about allowing a hate group who promotes discrimination and their response is that they cannot kick them out because of freedom of speech. So we also exercise our right to free speech in public space this Saturday to drive the TERFS and Radfems out of OUR library and OUR Portland!

(TERF stands for “trans-exclusionary radical feminist.” The term can be useful for making a distinction with radical feminists who do not share the same position, but those at whom it is directed consider it a slur.)

Abusive posts proliferated on Twitter and, especially, Tumblr. One read, “/kill/terfs 2K14.” Another suggested, “how about ‘slowly and horrendously murder terfs in saw-like torture machines and contraptions’ 2K14.” A young blogger holding a knife posted a selfie with the caption “Fetch me a terf.” Such threats have become so common that radical-feminist Web sites have taken to cataloguing them. “It’s aggrieved entitlement,” Lierre Keith told me. “They are so angry that we will not see them as women.” Keith is a writer and an activist who runs a small permaculture farm in Northern California. She is forty-nine, with cropped pewter hair and a uniform of black T-shirts and jeans. Three years ago, she co-founded the ecofeminist group Deep Green Resistance, which has some two hundred members and links the oppression of women to the pillaging of the planet.

D.G.R. is defiantly militant, refusing to condemn the use of violence in the service of goals it considers just. In radical circles, though, what makes the group truly controversial is its stance on gender. As members see it, a person born with male privilege can no more shed it through surgery than a white person can claim an African-American identity simply by darkening his or her skin. Before D.G.R. held its first conference, in 2011, in Wisconsin, the group informed a person in the process of a male-to-female transition that she

couldn't stay in the women's quarters. "We said, That's fine if you want to come, but, no, you're not going to have access to the women's sleeping spaces and the women's bathrooms," Keith told me.

Last February, Keith was to be a keynote speaker at the Public Interest Environmental Law Conference, at the University of Oregon, in Eugene, but the student government voted to condemn her, and more than a thousand people signed a petition demanding that the address be cancelled. Amid threats of violence, six policemen escorted Keith to the lectern, though, in the end, the protest proved peaceful: some audience members walked out and held a rally, leaving her to speak to a half-empty room.

Keith had an easier time at Radfems Respond, where she spoke on the differences between radicalism and liberalism. Two gender-bending punk kids who looked as if they might be there to protest left during the long opening session, on prostitution. A men's-rights activist showed up—he later posted mocking clips from a video that he had secretly made—but said nothing during the sessions. Several trans women arrived and sat at the back, but, in fact, they were there to express solidarity, having decided that the attacks on radical feminists were both out of control and misguided. One of them, a thin, forty-year-old blonde from the Bay Area, who blogs under the name Snowflake Especial, noted that all the violence against trans women that she's aware of was committed by men. "Why aren't we dealing with them?" she asked.

Despite that surprising show of support, most of the speakers felt embattled. Heath Atom Russell gave the closing talk. A stocky woman, with curly turquoise hair and a bluish stubble shadow on her cheeks, she wore a T-shirt that read "I Survived Testosterone Poisoning." At twenty-five, she is a "detransitioner," a person who once identified as transgender but no longer does. (Expert estimates of the number of transitioners who abandon their new gender range from fewer than one per cent to as many as five per cent.)

Russell, a lesbian who grew up in a conservative Baptist family in Southern California, began transitioning to male as a student at Humboldt State University, and was embraced by gender-rights groups on campus. She started taking hormones and changed her name. Then, in her senior year, she discovered "Unpacking Queer Politics" (2003), by Sheila Jeffreys, which critiques female-to-male transsexualism as capitulation to misogyny.

At first, the book infuriated Russell, but she couldn't let go of the questions that it raised about her own identity. She had been having heart palpitations, which made her uneasy about the hormones she was taking. Nor did she ever fully believe herself to be male. At one point during her transition, she hooked up with a middle-aged trans woman. Russell knew that she was supposed to think of herself as a man with a woman, but, she said, "It didn't feel right, and I was scared." Eventually, she proclaimed herself a woman again, and a radical feminist, though it meant being ostracized by many of her friends. She is now engaged to a woman; someone keyed the word "dyke" on her fiancée's car.

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Russell appears in Sheila Jeffreys's new book, "Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism." Jeffreys, who is sixty-six, has short silver hair and a weathered face. She has taught at the University of Melbourne for twenty-three years, but she grew up in London, and has been described as the Andrea Dworkin of the U.K. She has written nine previous books, all of which focus on the sexual subjugation of women, whether through rape, incest, pornography, prostitution, or Western beauty norms. Like Dworkin, she is viewed as a heroine by a cadre of like-minded admirers and as a zealot by others. In 2005, in an admiring feature in the *Guardian*, Julie Bindel wrote, "Jeffreys sees sexuality as the basis of the oppression of women by men, in much the same way as Marx saw capitalism as the scourge of the working class. This unwavering belief has made her many enemies. Postmodern theorist Judith Halberstam once said, 'If Sheila Jeffreys did not exist, Camille Paglia would have had to invent her.'"

In eight brisk chapters (half of them written with Jeffreys's former Ph.D. student Lorene Gottschalk), "Gender Hurts" offers Jeffreys's first full-length treatment of transgenderism. Ordinarily, Jeffreys told me, she would launch the publication of a new book with an event at the university, but this time campus security warned against it. She has also taken her name off her office door. She gave a talk in London this month, but it was invitation-only.

In the book, Jeffreys calls detransitioners like Russell "survivors," and cites them as evidence that transgenderism isn't immutable and thus doesn't warrant radical medical intervention. (She considers gender-reassignment surgery a form of mutilation.) "The phenomenon of regret undermines the idea that there exists a particular kind of person who is genuinely and essentially transgender and can be identified accurately by psychiatrists," she writes. "It is radically destabilising to the transgender project." She cites as further evidence the case of Bradley Cooper, who, in 2011, at the age of seventeen, became Britain's youngest gender-reassignment patient, then publicly regretted his transition the next year and returned to living as a boy. Jeffreys is especially alarmed by doctors in Europe, Australia, and the United States who treat transgender children with puberty-delaying drugs, which prevent them from developing unwanted secondary sex characteristics and can result in sterilization.

Throughout the book, Jeffreys insists on using male pronouns to refer to trans women and female ones to refer to trans men. "Use by men of feminine pronouns conceals the masculine privilege bestowed upon them by virtue of having been placed in and brought up in the male sex caste," she writes. To her critics, the book becomes particularly hateful when she tries to account for the reality of trans people. Explaining female-to-male transition is fairly easy for her (and for other radical feminists): women seek to become men in order to raise their status in a sexist system. Heath Atom Russell, for example, is quoted as attributing her former desire to become a man to the absence of a "proud woman loving culture."

But, if that's true, why would men demote themselves to womanhood? For reasons of sexual fetishism, Jeffreys says. She substantiates her argument with

the highly controversial theories of Ray Blanchard, a retired professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto, and the related work of J. Michael Bailey, a psychology professor at Northwestern University. Contrary to widespread belief, Blanchard says, the majority of trans women in the West start off not as effeminate gay men but as straight or bisexual men, and they are initially motivated by erotic compulsion rather than by any conceived female identity. “The core is, it’s really exciting for guys to imagine themselves with female breasts, or female breasts and a vulva,” he told me. To describe the syndrome, Blanchard coined the term “autogynephilia,” meaning sexual arousal at the thought of oneself as female.

Blanchard is far from a radical feminist. He believes that gender-reassignment surgery can relieve psychological suffering; he has even counselled people who undergo it. He also accepts the commonly held view that male brains differ from female brains in ways that affect behavior. Nevertheless, Jeffrey believes that the work of Blanchard and Bailey shows that when trans women ask to be accepted as women they’re seeking to have an erotic fixation indulged.

The last time a feminist of any standing published an attack on transgenderism as caustic as “Gender Hurts” was in 1979, when Janice Raymond produced “The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male.” Raymond was a lesbian ex-nun who became a doctoral student of the radical-feminist theologian Mary Daly, at Boston College. Inspired by the women’s-health movement, Raymond framed much of “The Transsexual Empire” as a critique of a patriarchal medical and psychiatric establishment. Still, the book was frequently febrile, particularly with regard to lesbian trans women. “All transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves,” Raymond wrote. “However, the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist violates women’s sexuality and spirit.”

It’s a measure of how much perceptions have changed in the past thirty-five years that “The Transsexual Empire” received a respectful, even admiring hearing in the mainstream media, unlike “Gender Hurts,” which has been largely ignored there. Reviewing “The Transsexual Empire” in the *Times*, the psychiatrist Thomas Szasz called it “flawless.” Raymond, he wrote, “has rightly seized on transsexualism as an emblem of modern society’s unremitting—though increasingly concealed—antifeminism.”

One of the women Raymond wrote about was Sandy Stone, a performance artist and academic who this fall will teach digital arts and new media at the University of California, Santa Cruz. When Raymond’s book was published, Stone was a recording engineer at Olivia Records, a women’s-music collective in Los Angeles. In the late sixties, after graduating from college, and while still living as a man, she had bluffed her way into a job at New York’s famed Record Plant recording studio, where she worked with Jimi Hendrix and the Velvet Underground. (For a time, she slept in the studio basement, on a pile of Hendrix’s capes.) She moved to the West Coast and transitioned in 1974. Olivia approached her soon afterward; experienced female recording engineers were hard to find.

Stone became a member of the collective the next year and moved into a communal house that it rented, where she was the only trans woman among a dozen or so other lesbians. According to “The Transsexual Empire,” her presence was a major source of controversy in lesbian-feminist circles, but Stone insists that it was Raymond who created the dissension. “When the book came out, we were deluged with hate mail,” Stone says. “Up to that point, we were pretty much happy campers, making our music and doing our political work.”

Stone received death threats, but ultimately it was the threat of a boycott that drove her out of the collective. She eventually earned a doctorate in philosophy at Santa Cruz. In 1987, Stone wrote an essay, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” which is widely seen as the founding text of transgender studies. It’s still taught around the world; a second French edition is about to be published, and Stone has received a request to allow a Catalan translation.

The last time that Janice Raymond wrote on transgender issues was in 1994, for a new introduction to “The Transsexual Empire.” Since then, she has focussed on sex trafficking, and last August a Norwegian government agency invited her to Oslo to speak on a panel about prostitution legislation. When she arrived, however, an official informed her that she had been disinvited; a letter to the editor of a major Norwegian newspaper had accused her of transphobia. Raymond says that similar things have “happened much more frequently within the last couple of years.”

**T**he most dramatic change in the perception of transgenderism can be seen in academia. Particularly at liberal-arts colleges, students are now routinely asked which gender pronoun they would prefer to be addressed by: choices might include “ze,” “ou,” “hir,” “they,” or even “it.” A decade ago, no university offered a student health plan that covered gender-reassignment surgery. Today, dozens do, including Harvard, Brown, Duke, Yale, Stanford, and the schools in the University of California system.

There are young transgender-critical radical feminists, like Heath Atom Russell and Rachel Ivey, aged twenty-four, who was one of the organizers of Radfems Respond, but they are the first to admit that they’re a minority. “If I were to say in a typical women’s-studies class today, ‘Female people are oppressed on the basis of reproduction,’ I would get called out,” Ivey says. Other students, she adds, would ask, “What about women who are male?”

That might be an exaggeration, but only a slight one. The members of the board of the New York Abortion Access Fund, an all-volunteer group that helps to pay for abortions for those who can’t afford them, are mostly young women; Alison Turkos, the group’s co-chair, is twenty-six. In May, they voted unanimously to stop using the word “women” when talking about people who get pregnant, so as not to exclude trans men. “We recognize that people who identify as men can become pregnant and seek abortions,” the group’s new Statement of Values says.

A Change.org petition asks NARAL and Planned Parenthood to adopt similarly

gender-inclusive language. It specifically criticizes the hashtag #StandWithTexasWomen, which ricocheted around Twitter during State Senator Wendy Davis's filibuster against an anti-abortion bill in her state, and the phrase "Trust Women," which was the slogan of George Tiller, the doctor and abortion provider who was murdered in Wichita in 2009.

To some younger activists, it seems obvious that anyone who objects to such changes is simply clinging to the privilege inherent in being cisgender, a word popularized in the nineteen-nineties to mean any person who is not transgender. Alison Turkos has heard complaints that the new language obscures the fact that cisgender women overwhelmingly bear the brunt of the current political attacks on reproductive rights. She replies, "It may not feel comfortable, but it's important to create a space for more people who are often denied space and visibility."

Older feminists who have not yet adopted this way of thinking can find themselves experiencing ideological whiplash. Sara St. Martin Lynne, a forty-year-old filmmaker and video producer from Oakland, told me, "When you come from a liberation, leftist background, you want to be on the right side of history," and the debate "kind of puts you through your paces." Last year, she was asked to resign from the board of Bay Area Girls Rock Camp, a nonprofit that "empowers girls through music," because of her involvement with the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which bills itself as an event for "womyn-born womyn" only.

Michfest, as it's called, takes place every August, on six hundred and fifty acres of land in the woods east of Lake Michigan. Lisa Vogel founded it in 1976, when she was a nineteen-year-old Central Michigan University student, and she still runs it. The music, Vogel says, is only part of what makes Michfest important. Each year, several thousand women set up camp there and find themselves, for a week, living in a matriarchy. Meals are cooked in kitchen tents and eaten communally. There are workshops and classes. Some women don extravagant costumes; others wear nothing at all. There is free child care and a team to assist disabled women who ordinarily cannot go camping. Vogel describes the governing ethos as "How would a town look if we actually got to decide what was important?"

She told me, "There's something that I experience on the land when I walk at night without a flashlight in the woods and recognize that for that moment I feel completely safe. And there's nowhere else I can do that." She continued, "If, tomorrow, we said everyone is welcome, I'm sure it would still be a really cool event, but that piece that allows women to let down their guard and feel that really deep sense of personal liberation would be different, and that's what we're about."

To transgender activists, Vogel's stance is laden with offensive assumptions: that trans women are different in an essential way from other women, and that they're dangerous. "The trope of trans women" constituting "a threat to women's spaces has been tossed around forever," Julia Serano told me. To her, it's akin to straight people refusing to share a locker room with gays or lesbians. Serano,

forty-six, is a biologist by training who now spends most of her time writing and speaking on transgender issues and feminism; last year, she lectured at schools including Brown, Stanford, Smith, and Cornell. (Sheila Jeffreys attacks her in “Gender Hurts,” using autobiographical details from Serano’s first book, “Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity” (2007), to paint her as an autogynophile who seeks to “reinvent ‘feminism’ to fit his erotic interests.”)

In the summer of 2003, Serano joined about a hundred people at Camp Trans, a protest camp near the Michfest site, which has run intermittently since 1994. Serano said that relations with Michfest attendees were often unexpectedly cordial. A few years ago, though, Vogel says, some protesters committed acts of vandalism—stealing electrical cables, cutting water pipes, keying cars in the parking lot, and spray-painting a six-foot penis, and the words “Real Women Have Dicks,” on the side of the main kitchen tent.

Since then, as with the case of Olivia Records, the demonstrations have been supplanted by a boycott campaign. Last year, the Indigo Girls, longtime regulars at Michfest, announced that they wouldn’t appear again until the event became trans-inclusive. This year, the scheduled headliners, Hunter Valentine, pulled out for the same reason. Performers who do appear face protests and boycotts of their own; the funk singer Shelley Nicole says that her band, blaKbüshe, was dropped from a show in Brooklyn because it is playing at Michfest next month.

Before Sara St. Martin Lynne was asked to leave the Bay Area Girls Rock Camp board, she hadn’t identified closely with radical feminism. Yet, as the campaign against Michfest—and against radical feminism as a whole—has grown, she’s come to feel strongly about keeping the event “womyn-born-womyn.” She said, “This moment where we’re losing the ability to say the word ‘woman’ or to acknowledge the fact that being born female has lived consequences and meaning is kind of intense to me.”

One of the trans women who showed up at the Radfems Respond conference, a thirty-five-year-old software engineer from California, with a tiny nose stud and long brown hair, agrees. She understands why trans women are hurt by their exclusion from Michfest and other female-only events and facilities, saying, “It’s not really wanting to invade space. It’s a deep-seated wanting to belong.” But, she adds, “if you’re identifying with women, shouldn’t you be empathizing with women?”

Sandy Stone shares this view—up to a point. Of the radical feminists’ position, she says, “It’s my personal belief, from speaking to some of these people at length, that it comes from having been subject to serious trauma at the hands of some man, or multiple men.” She adds, “You have to respect that. That’s their experience of the world.” But the pain of radical feminists, she insists, can’t trump trans rights. “If it were a perfect world, we would find ways to reach out and find ways of mutual healing,” she says. But, as it is, “I am going to have to say, It’s your place to stay out of spaces where transgender male-to-female people go. It’s not our job to avoid you.” ♦