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## Transgender-Exclusionary Radical Feminists: Ideology and Influence

### **Introduction**

The term Transgender-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERF) sounds intimidating. Honestly, the influence of TERFs can be intimidating. As a person who identifies as trans and nonbinary, I can see TERF ideas on social media every day and how TERFs are radicalizing others to their cause by emphasizing that their advocacy is about protecting women and downplaying how the views discriminate against trans people. I see the effects this source of hatred has on my community, so I often try to ignore it for the sake of doing more productive things and preserving my mental health. However, for this research, I decided to examine TERF ideology to understand its inner workings. Whether I like it or not, TERFs and their rhetoric hold control over how the trans community is perceived, the rights that the government thinks we deserve, and the dignity the public thinks we deserve. I decided it was important to take this opportunity to understand what TERFs are trying to communicate and the influence of their ideology, rather than just running blindly from their hate.

In this paper, I will argue that transgender exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) create transphobic rhetoric by making trans rights a family values issue. I'll be examining how TERFs frame their advocacy as protection of cisgender children and women. This includes two main points: the need to protect children from trans women who are perceived as perverted men and the need to protect children from indoctrination by trans people convincing them to become trans. These rhetorical themes influence public opinion and legislation regarding trans people,

leading to laws discriminating against trans people and creating a hostile environment for trans people.

### **What is a TERF?**

When addressing these issues, it's first important to understand what a TERF is. Viv Smythe, a cisgender ("cisgender" describes a person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth) woman is credited with coining the term TERF as an acronym for trans-exclusionary radical feminists (Smythe). She deployed the term in trans-ally blog posts in 2009 and discovered that she was being retroactively credited with the coining of the term in a 2018 article about the transphobia of British media (Smythe). Smythe explains, "I suspect I'm merely the first person who wrote it on a website that still exists [...]" (Smythe). At the time she was writing a Feminism 101 FAQ blog, which led her to write on topics of transphobia and trans-exclusion (Smythe). When she posted a blurb she was sent about the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, she received backlash because the event excluded trans women. In her apology and response, she wrote, "implicitly aligning **all** radfems with the trans-exclusionary radfem (TERF) activists, which I resent" (Smythe). She further explained TERFs' distinction from feminists, even arguing they should have a different term, though it didn't catch on, "After a bit more reading, I think the trans-exclusionary set should better be described as TES, with the S standing for separatists. A lot of the positions that are presented seem far too essentialist to be adequately described as feminist, let alone radical feminist" (Smythe).

With the label of "exclusionary" or the alternative label Smythe suggested, "separatist", it's clear TERFs want separations. Specifically, they want separations between them, as cisgender women, women who were assigned female at birth, and trans women, women who were assigned male at birth. Though the term TERF is from the 2000s, it grew out of ideology

from the 1970s when feminists felt there was a need for distinction between those feminists who support trans women and those who don't (Burns). Those feminists who don't support trans women prefer to call themselves "gender critical", which is similar to white supremacists who call themselves "race realists" (Burns). In the '70s, these gender-critical feminists threatened trans women who tried to enter their spaces with violence. Notably, in 1979, radical feminist Janice Raymond, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, wrote what became a defining work for the TERF movement, "Transsexual Empire: The Making of the Shemale" (Burns). In it, she advocated that "transsexualism" should be "morally mandating it out of existence" by government action to restrict access to gender-affirming health care (Burns). This led the Reagan administration to cut off Medicare and private health insurance coverage for transition-related care (Burns).

Recently, TERF discourse has had a resurgence. Although, according to UC Berkeley literature professor and writer Grace Lavery, TERFs are "a minority of a minority of feminists," the group has attracted a substantial amount of attention in recent years, mostly due to their presence on social media (Tiffany). According to "The Secret Internet of TERFs", "Anti-trans activists have used social media to call out specific trans women who use women's bathrooms, for instance, labeling them "predators" and "pedophiles," and promising to resist them by any means necessary—be it pepper spray or pistol" (Tiffany). They engage in behaviors common in other fringe political movements online like doxing and harassment and portraying a warped version of reality (Tiffany). GLAAD reports that these actions encourage discrimination against trans people and renewed public debate about the rights trans people should have (Tiffany).

To understand the current contexts of TERF rhetoric it's important to understand their ties with conservative politics. Organizations like the Women's Liberation Front (WoLF) have a

name that indicates that they are in favor of liberation and empowerment of women, but in reality, that's not quite the case. They've repeatedly partnered with misogynistic and anti-LGBTQ organizations like Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) to oppose trans rights in the Supreme Court. They submitted amicus briefs in 2017 opposing a trans student's lawsuit to use the bathroom which aligned with his gender identity at school and in 2019 opposing a trans woman's case that she should not be forced to follow the dress code for men at her workplace (Burns). Their brief in 2019 said of trans woman Aimee Stephens, "Simply, Aimee Stephens is a man. He wanted to wear a skirt while at work, and his 'gender identity' argument is an ideology that dictates that people who wear skirts must be women, precisely the type of sex stereotyping forbidden by *Price Waterhouse*" (Burns). WoLF also commented on the issue, "Sex is grounded in materiality, whereas 'gender identity' is simply an ideology that has no grounding in science. The redefinition of the word 'sex' to mean 'gender identity' would have myriad harmful effects on women and girls, and women and girls as a distinct category deserve civil rights protections" (Burns). Heron Greenesmith, a senior research associate with social justice think tank Political Research Associates debunks this line of logic, "Anti-trans feminists think they have science on their side. It is bananas how ascientific their rhetoric is, and yet literally they say, 'Biology isn't bigotry.' In fact, biology has been used as bigotry as long as biology has been a thing" (Burns). As made apparent by WoLF's comments, TERFs see the protection of women and children, especially girls as particularly important and try to use a fact-based approach to prove their point, even if their facts aren't accurate.

TERFs bond with the conservative base over the idea of family values. Conservatism values the traditional norms of the patriarchal heterosexual nuclear family. A study on the willingness to censor teen homosexuality in media found that censorship of queerness in media

was supported by homophobia, conservatism, and authoritarianism (Wilkinson et. al 2050). For people scoring high in right-wing authoritarianism, there is a high regard for authorities that enforce traditional values and social norms, while they support harsh restrictions on those that deviate from norms (Wilkinson et. al 2052). They also were likely to see this content as harmful to youth because it contained questionable content that would corrupt their morality and innocence (Wilkinson et. al 2052). TERF ideology overlaps with these themes of fearing transness and the moral corruption it could cause in children, therefore activating the conservative population in the issues it highlights.

## **Two Main TERF Issues**

TERFs tend to focus on two main issues in their advocacy. Their first issue of concern is the right of trans people to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity while in public places. Their problems with it revolve around the danger that trans people pose to “normal” bathroom users, specifically women and children. The second issue they discuss at length is the fear that trans adults are influencing children with trans ideology and recruiting them to become trans. With this issue as well, their concern is with the threat that trans people pose to children.

First, there is the alarm sounded by TERFs about trans people using public restrooms. In her article, “The politics of the toilet: A feminist response to the campaign to ‘degender’ a women’s space”, Sheila Jeffreys resorts to many of the main tenets of TERF ideology I’ve previously established. She refers to the campaign to degender public toilets, “This campaign originates in the demands of men who transgender to access women’s toilets” (Jeffreys 42). She equates trans women to men who want access to cisgender women in order to harass and violate them, which aligns with the ideology that “The Secret Internet of TERFs” discussed. She argues that trans women even existing in the same place as cis women is dangerous because of their

biological differences (Jeffreys 43). Then, Jeffreys tries to discredit trans women's gender. Her argument takes on a similar meaning to that argument made by WoLF that gender identity is an ideology with no grounding in science and sex was more reliable and factually sound. Jeffreys argues that a woman's gender is valid only when it is earned by her oppression and lived experience as a cisgender woman which is based on her sex, therefore, it's not valid for trans women to identify as women (Jeffreys 43). She shares horror stories of a "male-bodied" trans person allowed into a women's locker room engaging in inappropriate behavior like staring at women as they were changing, and other "male-bodied" persons "demanding women recognize them as women" while harassing and sexually assaulting women and children (Jeffreys 49). By disseminating these narratives Jeffreys perpetuates the harmful falsehoods that being trans inherently means being violent and perverted.

The second main talking point for TERFs is about the influence of trans narratives on youth. In a highly publicized opinion piece, author J. K. Rowling wrote about her concerns for the "explosion in young women wishing to transition and also about the increasing numbers who seem to be detransitioning (returning to their original sex)" who had "altered their bodies irrevocably, and taken away their fertility." (Rowling) She cites researcher Lisa Littman who considered "peer influences" and "social contagion" factors in the "unusual pattern of transgender-identification" where multiple friends in a group came to identify as trans (Rowling). Rowling creates a hypothetical that if she were born 30 years later, with the mental health challenges she faced as a teenager, "If I'd found community and sympathy online that I couldn't find in my immediate environment, I believe I could have been persuaded to turn myself into the son my father had openly said he'd have preferred" (Rowling).

Rowling's concerns about influences on young people are echoed by "Outbreak: On Transgender Teens and Psychic Epidemics" which states that a young person's coming out as trans is often after increased social media use and/or having one or more peers come out as trans (Marchiano 345). This leads the author Lisa Marchiano to also conclude that social contagion is contributing to the rising number of youth seeking treatment for dysphoria (Marchiano 345). Rowling and Marchiano are alarmed at young people making drastic changes to their bodies. However, hormones cannot even be started until a person is at least 16 years old and you have to be 18 to have gender-affirming surgeries ("Gender Affirming Hormone Therapy."). Most of what young trans children are doing is a social transition, like changing their gender expression, like the way they dress, their name, and their pronouns. Marchiano still finds fault with social transition though because it is a gateway to social transition and leads children to be conditioned to believe they are the opposite sex, meaning the gender they identify as (Marchiano 357). Marchiano also spotlights cases of detransitioners (people who transitioned and then transitioned back to the gender they were assigned at birth) to create the impression that identifying as trans is a trend that every person who falls victim to will later regret and end up traumatized by their choices (351).

### **The Influence of TERF Ideology**

TERF's ideas of transness are displayed through their discourse around trans people using public restrooms and the effect of accessibility to trans narratives on youth. These ideas have been disseminated online through social media and the messages make their way into politics because of their ties to conservative values. Now I'll be examining how the TERF perspective affects the overall public discourse and the experience of trans people.

For the matter of bathrooms, TERF's dangerous stereotyping and antagonizing of trans women contributed to legislation discriminating against trans people. For example, Florida passed an ordinance in 2008 prohibiting discrimination on the basis of "gender identity and gender expression" in employment and public accommodations like public restrooms and locker rooms (Schilt and Westbrook 26). This big step forward in addressing discrimination toward trans people was soon met with a ballot initiative to overturn the law. Opponents to the bill were conflating sexual deviants, imagined as deviant men, with trans women, who they also pictured as men, which is a main connection made by TERFs (Schilt and Westbrook 27). In "Bathroom Battlegrounds and Penis Panics", it's stated, "Opponents' focus on bathrooms centers on fears of sexual impropriety that could be introduced by allowing the "wrong bodies"—or, to be more precise, penises—into spaces deemed as "for women only." Gender panics, thus, could easily be relabeled "penis panics"" (Schilt and Westbrook 27).

A similar situation happened in North Carolina in 2016. It started in 2014 when the city council in Houston passed the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) which prohibited discrimination against people based on sexual orientation and gender identity in workplaces, housing, and public accommodations (Lopez). This resulted in backlash from conservatives which mirrored TERF rhetoric, as they argued that men would disguise themselves as trans women and sexually assault women. North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory continued to stir this fear as he made comments expressing concern about "deviant actions by individuals taking improper advantage of bad policy" (Lopez). This led him to introduce House Bill 2 (HB2) in 2016 to ban all local nondiscrimination ordinances that address sexual orientation and gender identity, therefore prohibiting trans people from using the bathroom or locker room that aligns with their gender identity (Lopez).

As for the issue of exposure to transness influencing youth, TERFs have sounded the alarm and caused concern among parents and politicians. In “Framing Controversial Identity Issues in Schools: The Case of HB2, Bathroom Equity, and Transgender Students”, Wayne Journell advocates that in the wake of the passing and later repealing of HB2 in North Carolina, teachers should be able to engage their students in conversation about the issue as something that affects them and their peers. He explains,

“Based on current evidence, then, it appears that allowing transgender individuals to use the bathroom that corresponds to their gender identity is the only rational position on this issue. If incidences of bathroom-based sexual assaults increase in the wake of policies similar to the Charlotte ordinance, then one might treat this issue as open using the epistemic criterion. However, as it currently stands, teachers adopting the epistemic criterion would frame transgender bathroom rights as a settled issue and steer their students toward the rational position that laws like HB2 are discriminatory” (Journell 345-346).

However, these types of discourse are prevented from happening when conversations about gender identity and sexual orientation are altogether prohibited. This is the goal of “Don’t Say Gay” legislation. This type of legislation dates back to when Tennessee was the first to introduce it in the 2005 legislative session, and there are still attempts to pass similar legislation today (Barbeauld 138). A 2012 version that passed the Tennessee House Education subcommittee stated, “no public elementary school or middle school shall provide any instruction or material that discusses sexual orientation other than heterosexuality” (Barbeauld 138). According to its sponsor, Missouri’s version of the bill is meant to “protect the moral values that are most important to Missouri families” (Barbeauld 139). In these

statements, the TERFs' motivation to protect children's morality from undue influences is evident, as supporters insist the gay agenda poses a threat, and that they should have control over their children's education (Barbeauld 141). There's a clear desire to keep LGBTQ+ topics and education away from children so that they will not know about those identities and become part of a community that conservatives view as immoral, which follows closely with TERF's argument that children's access to information about transness is causing them to identify as trans when they otherwise wouldn't feel that way.

## Conclusion

TERF rhetoric has existed since the 1970s when certain radical feminists became known for not supporting trans women as they threatened transwomen who tried to enter their spaces with violence (Burns). TERFs experienced a resurgence as social media spread their ideology far and wide (Tiffany). The two main issues that they circulate opinions about are trans people's use of bathrooms and how access to information about transness influences children's identities. In their discourse, they posit that trans women's identities are illegitimate because they were not born women, that trans people are perverts seeking to assault cis people in restrooms, and that access to information about transness causes youth to make the traumatic mistake of identifying as trans.

These ideas are disseminated, largely through social media where much of TERF discussion takes place and become part of a larger public discussion. TERF ideas become part of the public conscience, causing people to fear trans people as perverts trying to corrupt their children's morals. This leads to legislation like HB2 in North Carolina and "Don't Say Gay" legislation across the country. Thus, TERFs stir up transphobia and help

create an environment that is hostile toward trans people and poises the government to take away trans people's rights.

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