

30. • Tina Vasquez

IT'S TIME TO END THE LONG HISTORY OF FEMINISM FAILING TRANSGENDER WOMEN (2014)

Tina Vasquez is a writer whose work focuses on issues related to gender, sexuality, and race. She was formerly the associate editor of *Black Girl Dangerous* and has written for blogs and websites like Jezebel, Bitch Media, and Everyday Feminism. Her article "It's Time to End the Long History of Feminism Failing Transgender Women," originally published online at Bitch Media and later included in the 20th anniversary edition of *Bitch* magazine, won a 2015 Impact Award from The Media Consortium. The article analyzes the use of feminist discourse to discriminate against the trans community.

[...]

In her 2013 article "Unpacking Transphobia in Feminism" on the website The TransAdvocate, writer Emma Allen explained that radical feminists such as [Cathy] Brennan assert that trans women are a problem because they perpetuate the idea that "gender roles are biologically determined rather than socially constructed" is the antithesis of feminism. "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," Allen wrote.

Janice Raymond's 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* shaped the notion that transgender rights have no place in feminism. Max Wolf Valerio reflected on the book in his 2006 memoir *The Testosterone Files: My Hormonal and Social Transformation from Female to Male*, writing that "Raymond postulated that all transsexuals were dupes of the patriarchy, 'mutilating' their bodies in order to live out stereotyped sex roles instead of

changing those roles through a rigorously applied program of radical feminism." Other feminist writing of the 1970s also hit on the anti-transgender ideas. Mary Daly's 1978 book *Gyn/Ecology* compared the drag queen "phenomenon" to blackface and included assertions such as: "The surgeons and hormone therapists of the transsexual kingdom . . . can be said to produce feminine persons. They cannot produce women."

Drawing from that history, Brennan, fellow attorney Elizabeth Hungerford, and other modern-day feminists continue to actively question the inclusion of trans people in women's spaces. These feminists refer to themselves as "radical feminists" or "gender critical feminists." In 2008, trans women and trans advocates started referring to this group as "trans-exclusionary radical feminists" or TERFs, a term Brennan considers a slur. Cristan Williams, managing editor of The TransAdvocate and founder of Houston's Transgender Center and the Transgender Archive, asserts that TERFs should be recognized as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

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(To that end, a petition calling for the Southern Poverty Law Center to track the activities of the Gender Identity Watch website as a hate group was recently circulated and garnered nearly 7,000 signatures.)

This debate is not just feminist-theory inside baseball. Though outspoken, politically active trans-exclusionary radical feminists are relatively few in number, their influence on legislation and mainstream perceptions of transgender people is powerful and real.

For example, transgender people were able to readily obtain government-funded healthcare prior to 1980. That year, Janice Raymond wrote a report for the Reagan administration called "Technology on the Social and Ethical Aspects of Transsexual Surgery" which informed the official federal position on medical care for transgender people. The paper's conclusion reads, "The elimination of transsexualism is not best achieved by legislation prohibiting transsexual treatment and surgery, but rather by legislation that limits it and by other legislation that lessens the support given to sex-role stereotyping." In her book *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker says that the government curtailed transgender access to government social services under Reagan, "In part in response to anti-transgender feminist arguments that dovetailed with conservative politics."

[...]

The belief that transgender women are "not really women" sadly finds traction among many people—not just conservative politicians, but some mainstream feminists. However, few people use the tactics of the most outspoken trans-exclusionary activists to promote their ideas.

"TERFs do a good job of colonizing feminist discourse by framing their hate as a 'feminist critique of gender,' thereby representing the hate that follows as the feminist position. It's not," says Trans-Advocate editor Williams.

The problem is that when trans-exclusionary feminists speak, a lot of people listen. Take the Michigan Womyn's Festival for example which takes place each August and attracts performers like Le Tigre and the Indigo Girls. Since its inception in 1976, the

feminist music festival has asked that only "womyn-born-womyn" attend. In 2006, the festival's founder, Lisa Vogel, defended her stance, writing, "As feminists, we call upon the transwomen's community to help us maintain womyn-only space, including spaces created by and for womyn-born womyn."

In response to a 2013 petition opposing the festival's ongoing exclusion of trans women, Vogel continued to defend the festival's stance, writing, "The Festival, for a single precious week, is intended for womyn who at birth were deemed female, who were raised as girls, and who identify as womyn. I believe that womyn-born womyn is a lived experience that constitutes its own distinct gender identity."

This idea that "women-born-women" need space away from transgender women impacts not just music festivals, but legislation. As policies promoting the creation of gender-neutral bathrooms continue to gain traction around the country, Brennan and other trans-exclusionary feminists have devoted time to arguing that trans women are somehow dangerous to cisgender women in public restrooms. In 2011, Brennan and Elizabeth Hungerford teamed up to write a letter to the United Nations urging opposition to laws prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression. In her interview with Bustle, Brennan explained her thinking:

Our whole lives we are raised very much aware of our vulnerability as women, so I don't understand why when a man says he's a woman, all of a sudden the penis is no longer (an issue) . . . Men rape women and girls in bathrooms all the time, so it's not like women's concerns about that aren't reasonable. And these laws are broadly enough written to justify the entry of anyone into a (women-only) space.

To imply that trans women pose a threat to cisgender women in restrooms is misinformation that preys on unfounded fears. I searched for news stories in which transgender women have assaulted cisgender women in bathrooms, coming across nothing but news stories detailing the attacks on transgender women themselves.

Indeed, if anyone is in harm's way in public restrooms, it's trans people, who can face abuse or

assault no matter which restroom they choose. A 2011 survey of 6,000 transgender Americans found that more than half of the people surveyed reported experiencing harassment in public accommodations, including bathrooms, restaurants, and hotels. This is why there has been a push to make public restrooms a little safer for those who are trans, including legislation in Philadelphia that requires all new or renovated city-owned buildings to include gender-neutral bathrooms. There's also California's School Success and Opportunity Act, which mandates that transgender students must be included in school activities on the basis of their identified gender rather than their assigned sex. This extends to using bathrooms and locker rooms consistent with their gender. The Transgender Law Center heralded the law, which passed in August 2013, as a change that will save lives.

In contrast to that positive, progressive narrative around gender-neutral bathrooms, there was one story about the "dangers" of trans girls in girl's restrooms that popped up in the fall. In October, the right-wing organization Pacific Justice Institute altered press that a transgender teenager was harassing students in the girls' restroom at Florence High School in Colorado. The *Daily Mail*, Fox Nation, and at least one local TV station picked up the story, with Fox posting a short piece including the misgendering line, "When parents complained, school officials said the boy's rights as a transgender trumped their daughters' privacy rights." While some outlets referred to the minor as Jane Doe, Gender Identity Watch posted the name of the teen in question, describing her as a "male student" who "claims to be transgender."

It turns out, the story was false. The TransAdvocate's Cristan Williams quickly called the school's superintendent to inquire about the story and was told that the story was based on the complaint of one parent who was opposed to allowing the transgender student to use the girl's restroom; there were no actual reported incidents of harassment.

After this incident, the teen's mom said her daughter was struggling with harassment because of the story and was in such bad shape, the family had her on suicide watch.

It's clear from this example that trans-exclusionary feminists don't just spend their days making waves on social media—some get mainstream attention and hold successful, powerful positions. Cathy Brennan has used her skills as a lawyer to threaten legal action against a magazine that published an article critical of her. She also served as a liaison to the American Bar Association's Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity from 2008-2009. She appeared on Roseanne Barr's weekly radio program specifically to discuss her radical feminism and beliefs on female biology and gender identity. Trans-exclusionary feminists Janice Raymond and Mary Daly worked as well-respected, tenured professors. Like-minded feminist thought leader Sheila Jeffreys is still an established professor in Australia. Her forthcoming book *Gender Hurts*, from major publisher Routledge, will argue that "the ideology and practice of transgenderism" is harmful.

This approach to feminism is beyond troubling—it's downright dangerous, considering that the transgender community is one of the nation's most vulnerable. According to a 2011 study from the Anti-Violence Project, 40 percent of anti-LGBT murder victims were transgender women. A report from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey conducted by the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force and the National Center for Transgender Equality, found that transgender people faced double the rate of unemployment of the general population, with 63 percent of the transgender people surveyed reporting they experienced a serious act of discrimination that majorly affected their ability to sustain themselves. These numbers are even worse for trans people of color, especially trans women of color, the deaths of whom have been deemed a "state of emergency."

For these reasons, the concern these feminists elicit among trans women is serious. Trans blogger and womanist Monica Roberts has been blogging as TransGriot for years, discussing the intersections between race and the violence experienced by trans women of color and writing about the importance of knowing black trans history. Roberts routinely

writes about how closely white privilege is tied to radical feminists' ability to incite scorn toward a vulnerable minority and not only get away with it, but remain gainfully employed in the process.

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It has been said that feminism has failed the transgender community. It's hard to disagree. Trans women have been weathering a storm of hate and abuse in the name of feminism for decades now and for the most part, cisgender feminists have failed to speak out about it or push against it.

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... It seems the tide is turning. People in queer communities are demanding that the silencing of trans women be addressed. Cisgender feminists are speaking out about Brennan's activism. Radical feminists like Julie Bindel are distancing themselves from trans-exclusionary groups. Healthcare is becoming more accessible for trans people, including the removal of health exclusions. Workplace discrimination bills are being expanded to encompass gender identity and as discussed previously, gender-neutral bathrooms are becoming law. "Transphobic" is now in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and even Facebook now has the option to set your gender to "custom."

Though change has been far too slow and painful, trans pioneer Autumn Sandeen, who was the first to be officially recognized by the Pentagon as a transgender service member, expresses hope that transphobia is becoming less acceptable.

"Every major gay-rights organization includes trans people in their mission statements. Trans people are more public than ever before and the media is moving beyond telling transition stories. Even though we've experienced so much hate from certain feminists, the real support is coming from feminist and queer circles," Sandeen said. "Transphobia is no longer acceptable in the name of feminism, so while people like Brennan are free to express their anti-trans sentiments and meet with like-minded feminists while excluding trans women, there is now a cost for expressing those viewpoints."

[...]

Trans women have been saddled with the responsibility of taking on trans-exclusionary feminists for far too long—but it's not their issue to deal with alone. Cisgender feminists, such as myself, have to make it clear that our feminism loves and supports trans women and that we will fight against transphobia. As Williams said, it's time to expose trans-exclusionary feminists for who they really are.

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31. • Ashwini Tambe

RECKONING WITH THE SILENCES OF #METOO (2018)

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