

Lesbians at Ground Zero

How transgenderism is conquering the lesbian body

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Get The L Out Report
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#GetTheLOut
#CottonCeilingIsRape
#LesbiansAtGroundZero

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To L. my love always.

Sisters, I salute you ! xx

Introduction

Following the emergence of high profile “transgender women” [Caitlin Jenner, Kelly Maloney, Munroe Bergdorf...], discussions about transgenderism have become a regular topic for mainstream news outlets.

This has coincided with the proposed reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004. The government’s consultation about proposed changes to the G.R.A. which ended a few months ago was proposing to introduce what has been called “sex self-id.” (for sex self-identification), aiming to simplify the process for transgender people to “legally change their gender”, potentially enabling anyone to self-identify as the gender of their choice by simply ticking a box, with no professional assessment of gender dysphoria, no social transition, medical transition or surgery being requested from the applicant.

Feminists have questioned publicly whether trans politics poses any concerns for women and girls highlighting the clash of rights existing between women and “transwomen” (Fairplay For Women, 2019, Woman’s Place UK, 2019). If men who transition can legally become women, it becomes impossible for women to maintain women’s right of access to sex-segregated spaces and services exclusively for females. (Equality Act 2010).

The same is also true for lesbians.

As social media such as Twitter is a crucial tool for spreading ideas, such public discussion has led transactivists to share the view that they are discriminated against because some lesbians refuse to date them, propagating the idea that lesbianism is “transphobic” (Dennis, 2017).

The latter statement invites the question:

What is the experience of lesbians when confronted with those ideas?

This work aims to investigate this under researched phenomenon, highlighting the impact of transactivism and trans ideology on lesbians. It has a second, crucial aim of ensuring lesbians’ voices and experiences are heard.

Positionality

An important consideration for any researcher is the position they occupy in relation to the research setting. Feminist researchers argue that we cannot suddenly ignore our own experiences, and stop being human in the name of ‘objective’ research (Stanley & Wise, 1993). McDowell (1992: 409) writes that we must recognise our own position, and include this in our research practice. As a woman, a lesbian and a feminist I have been actively involved in the debate about trans rights and women’s erasure for many years. On a personal level, I suffer from the impact the trans ideology has on women and lesbians. This will be expanded on in the methodology section.

Key definitions and language

Due to my own positionality, I reject mainstream ways of discussing gender, as well as the terminology typically used by trans and queer ideologies when referring to people who identify with the opposite “gender”. When referring to “transwomen” I will use the term males who call themselves / identify as women / transwomen. As Sheila Jeffreys, a prominent feminist, comments:

“The female pronoun [is] an honorific, a term...due to women as members of a sex caste that have survived subordination and deserve to be addressed with honour. Men who transgender cannot occupy such a position.” (2014: 9)

I will use the pronoun associated with their biological sex: “he” when referring to a transwoman. I recognise that this is controversial as gender neutral language has become an expected part of the discourse when discussing issues relating to transgenderism.

Language is never neutral. Language not only shapes people’s consciousness, it is a tool of power in a patriarchal system (Spender, 1985). In recent years, under pressure to be inclusive to men who identify as women, women have been renamed “menstruators” (Guardian, 2018), “non-men” (Beale, 2016), “uterus-bearer” (Qu’emi, 2014), “front-holders” (Human Right Campaign Foundation, 2016), “pregnant person” (Donnelly, 2017) and “chest-feeders” (De La Cretaz, 2016). Every aspect of female anatomy and women’s specific experience has been judged to be not inclusive enough, therefore “transphobic”, the current trans ideology seems to be yet another example of how “women have had the power of naming stolen from us” (Daly, 1985: 8). With the banning of sex-specific vocabulary relating to women, talking about ourselves in those terms is a forbidden act. It is a particularly urgent political act to use the vocabulary which is forbidden to us.

What is feminism if anyone can be a woman regardless of their biological sex or experience of oppression?

Outline

Drawing on key writers, this essay will outline the development of the trans ideology (in academia and in the mainstream) and how it relates to lesbians specifically. It will highlight the work of early lesbian feminists who have theorised the concepts of lesbian visibility and the conflicts with the wider gay movement (now known as LGBT), as well as the more recent work by lesbian feminists in identifying the lesbian body as a woman-only space to be conquered.

Key literature

Development of the trans ideology

Judith Butler in "Gender Trouble" is one of the influential agents in shifting the meaning of the word "woman" (2007). Obsessed about "narrative", "discourse" and "representation", to the exclusion of any other form of oppression, Butler's theory is at pains to explain that the category "woman" is irrelevant politically. Intersecting with race, class, ethnicity etc, there are so many variables it would appear no one knows what a woman is. Butler believes that "woman" is a fabricated construct, not a material reality. She remains abstract and never mentions the bodies of women. Stating that women are a category apart from men because our bodies are biologically different from men's is labelled "biological essentialism". The real meaning of biological essentialism is in fact quite different. It means enforcing behaviours onto an oppressed class of people because of biological differences, then calling that different behaviour "innate", naturalising what has been internalised and placing it out of the realm of the political.

Politically, women are a different category from men because it is in our female bodies and because of our female bodies that oppression is enforced on us by men: through rape and sexual harassment (Brownmiller, 1975), compulsory heterosexual intercourse (Dworkin, 1987, Barry, 1979), a culture of compulsory motherhood, or enforced pregnancies. Women are a different political category from men because we are born and raised with those experiences our whole lives. The way patriarchy oppresses women varies from woman to woman, depending on those factors of race, class, geography etc, but women's bodies remain central to women's oppression.

The trans ideology relies on the essentialist premise that there is such a thing as a male and a female brain and that it is possible for some people to be "born in the wrong body"¹. Those "born in the wrong body" experience what has been termed "gender dysphoria": a mismatch between the physical sex of the person and the gender that person feels him or herself to be (NHS, 2016).

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¹On the contrary, feminists and scientists argue there is no such thing as a male and female brain (Rippon, 2015, Fine, 2010) rendering the concept of transgenderism invalid.

The fact that humans are a sexually dimorphic species and human reproduction relies on the existence of females and males is denied. "Sex" is said to be "assigned at birth" (NHS, 2016), no longer understood as a material reality but a social construct, while "gender" becomes a characteristic "we are born with; (that) cannot be changed": innate and determining the real essence of a person (National Geographic 2017: 18). In the case of trans people this "gender identity" does not match the physical sex. The term "trans people" is used to describe the people seeking to live "according to their gender identity, rather than their biological sex" (NHS, 2016). "Living according to their gender identity" means "passing": being accepted seamlessly as a member of the opposite sex by society. This relies on adopting the social codes usually associated with the persons of the opposite sex (Jeffreys, 2007). Typically, men who identify as women wear clothes, accessories and make-up, and adopt associated beauty practices traditionally marketed for women; they attempt to adjust their voice tone and body language, thus mimicking sex stereotypes imposed on females. All of this is denounced by feminist theory as sexist and seeks to free women from it (Dworkin, 1974, Wolf, 1991, Jeffreys, 2007).

Trans ideology and lesbians

Sandy Stone, a male transactivist who identifies as a lesbian, wrote a counterattack on Raymond's work "The Transsexual Empire" (1995) in "The Empire Strikes Back". The arguments of his text ironically largely revolve around male sexual anatomy and sexual pleasure, what he terms "wringing the turkeys neck": the last instance of penile masturbation the night before castrative surgery is performed. He explains that the medical profession was originally responsible for the fact that "transsexuals" were performing gender in a stereotypical way, thus giving the medical profession the performance they expected so that "transsexuals" could obtain the surgery they desired (Stone, 1991). Stone laments the enforcement of binary gendered practices upon the (male) transgender community and calls for "transsexuals" to become "posttranssexual": to stop trying to "pass" as women – therefore to be "read" as male who are transsexuals. It can be argued that this shift paved the way for transsexuals to be able to reject castrative surgery - which is the norm today as **most remain genitally intact males** (Reed, 2015) - and yet still be able to call themselves "women" and "lesbians".

Stone's work is key when we fast-forward to 2012 where the term "**cotton ceiling**" started appearing on social media. Drew DeVea, transactivist and porn performer, invented the term to describe the difficulties faced by men who identify as "trans lesbians" in being accepted as a "real lesbian", finding lesbians reluctant to choose them as sexual partners (Malantino, 2016, TerflsASlur.com, 2019)².

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²The term "cotton ceiling" is copied from the term "glass ceiling". But where the glass ceiling describes the invisible barrier women face to attain a higher position in their field of work, the "cotton ceiling" refers to the knickers worn by the lesbian: the cotton of the knickers being the barrier the trans-identified males' struggle penetrate. This barrier is seen as denying his validity as a lesbian, as only a sexual experience with a lesbian would make him a "real lesbian". Lesbians are accused of using their genitals to "gatekeep womanhood", denying "trans lesbians" their "rights" to be real lesbians via by accessing lesbians sexually.

The cotton ceiling

Google search results: the “cotton ceiling”.

As lesbians argued that they did not want to have sexual relationships with people with penises, the term penis was rebranded “**girdick**” (Yardley, 2018). Julia Serano uses the terms “girly little estrogenized penis”(Serano, 2007 : 229)3. In this “logic”, the penis, in virtue of being attached to a male who identifies as female, automatically becomes a female organ. Lesbians who still refuse to consider “trans lesbians” as sexual partners are called “transphobes” and “vagina fetishists”, and figuratively lynched on social media (Cade, 2014, Scarcella, 2018).

Today LGBT organisations give their undivided support to the trans community at the expense of lesbians. The **#GetTheLOut** action and response from LGBT officials exemplifies this position clearly.

In July 2018, a group of activists (of which I am a member) organised a peaceful action at Pride in London: a small group of lesbians marched uninvited in front of the parade carrying banners⁴ and distributing leaflets (Get The L Out, 2018). It intended to promote uncompromising lesbian visibility⁵. As the backlash following the action demonstrated, lesbians who dare to publicly challenge the trans narrative are demonised by most LGBT organisations. Pride in London’s official statement has called lesbian protesters “disgusting”, “bigoted” and “transphobic”, “an issue (which) need to be stamped out” (Pride In London, 2018), thus demonising lesbians for stating lesbians have a right to sexual boundaries and to self-definition. Manchester Pride compere Tony Cooper violently criticised the #GetTheLOut action at the Manchester Pride 2018 rally, stating that **lesbian protesters** should have been **“dragged out by their saggy tits”** (Cooper, 2018, Sprocket, 2018). The choice of words is reminiscent of public lynching and witch burning. It is hateful, misogynist, ageist and incites violence against women and lesbians, groups which technically are under the protection of the law as sex and sexual orientation are protected characteristics under the Equality Act, 2010. Cooper’s intervention should have been investigated as **hate speech**. Cooper has since started a campaign in Canal Street against “TERFs” (Cooper, 2018b). Lesbians are no longer welcome in Manchester gay village unless they accept dating “trans lesbians”. This statement is nothing more than a redefinition of the word “lesbian”.

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³Terms like “lady stick” “lady’s penis” are also found to describe the genitals of males who identify as women. As some lesbians use dildos and strap-ons as part of their sexual practices, the term “built-in strap-on” or “strapless” (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2016) to refer to the penis, has also been used to highlight the supposed similarity between the real male organ and the plastic replica and the lack of consistency from lesbians in accepting one while rejecting the other.

⁴Slogans used on the banners stated:

Lesbian not queer : we are claiming our affiliation to lesbian feminism and rejected new queer definitions of womanhood and lesbianism

Lesbian = female homosexual : Lesbians are same-sex attracted, lesbians do not want to have sex with people with penises regardless of their gender identity, only females can be lesbians.

Transgenderism erases lesbians : The T in LGBT is in direct conflict with the L. If a “transwoman” can be a lesbian how can lesbians retain sexual autonomy? If the LGBT support “transwomen” they de facto deny lesbian rights to exclusive same sex orientation.

“Get The L Out” : the LGBT does not represent nor advocate for lesbians but speak against us, we need our own separate groups.

⁵ Lesbians are rarely seen or represented at Pride in London (Bart, 2018) and report feeling uncomfortable there due to the event’s male-centeredness (Glass, 2018)



Lesbian Feminism, Lesbian Visibility

In her essay "To Be and To Be Seen", Frye examines the concepts of lesbian existence and lesbian visibility (1983). Through her research of the word "lesbian" in diverse dictionaries and the revealing lack of meaning in its definition, Frye demonstrates how the word "lesbian" already had no meaning well before post-modernist ideology took over language. Frye concludes that language, created by men, leaves blank the definition of lesbian, purposely excluding lesbians from the conceptual scheme of the patriarchal world. Women are mere "stagehands" in the background of the patriarchal male-focused play, and it is inconceivable to patriarchy that women might have autonomous thoughts of our own, unrelated to men. This would disrupt the patriarchal stage where men's play is being acted out. On the contrary, a lesbian is a woman who has autonomous thought outside of the male focus, who notices and gives importance to the world of women, thus threatening patriarchal illusions of male-centeredness⁶. Today's queer definition of lesbianism: "a person who identifies as a woman and is sexually and/or romantically attracted to others who identify as women" (Bangor University, 2019) erases the meaning even further.

Lesbian-feminists have long recorded the divide between the gay rights movement and the lesbian-feminist movement. Rich has highlighted the sexism of the gay men's movement, as well as the risk of erasing the specific oppression of females by equating lesbians' experiences with those of gay men (Rich, 1977). Frye (1983b) maintained that the parallels between experiences of oppression between gay men and lesbians were at best superficial, and any alliance between them was based solely on the fact that members of both groups are labelled "deviant" for not conforming to sex stereotypes and refusing heterosexuality. Her work demonstrates that gay male culture and its political movement is inherently based on male supremacist values of the presumption of male citizen, worship of the penis, homoeroticism, woman-hating, compulsory heterosexuality and presumption of general phallic access, thus antithetic to lesbian feminist politics.

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⁶Because women can choose to become lesbians (a claim patriarchal queer theory firmly disputes arguing that sexuality is innate and cannot be chosen) the threat of contagion of lesbianism constitutes a real threat to patriarchal society as a whole, which is why lesbian erasure is orchestrated and motivated in patriarchy.

Both Harne (1996) and Jeffrey (2003) recount the shift of the gay movement from a truly radical and revolutionary movement aiming to eradicate sexism as well as homophobia, to a male-centred and misogynist movement promoting sexual objectification, drag performance (which many lesbians saw as misogyny), and pressuring lesbian groups to accept transgender males in their midst. Effectively, the gay movement became a male sexual rights movement. Assimilation within the straight world became its sole purpose, a dramatic departure from its revolutionary origins⁷. Many lesbian feminists describe the lesbian walk-out of the gay movement which led to the creation of Women's Liberation Movement (Stanley, 1982, Dixon, 1988, Jeffrey, 2003 and Brackx, 1980)⁸. Given that history, it is not surprising to see the male-centred LGBT movement supporting the rights of males who identify as lesbians at the expense of lesbians' rights to sexual boundaries and women-loving.

The #GetTheLOut action inscribes itself in a long tradition of women separating from a male-centred movements.



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⁷A key point of dissent was the shift from understanding heterosexuality as politically constructed - therefore promoting homosexuality and lesbianism as a positive political choice leading to political change - to an essentialist understanding of sexuality where gay men argued they had to be accepted by the straight world as "we can't help it (...) we are not a threat to you" (Alderson, 1988)

⁸Furthermore, it has been discussed elsewhere that terms like "queer", "gay" and "LGBT" make lesbians invisible within the neutrality of an alphabet soup and depoliticise lesbianism further. Indeed, most young lesbians do not today use the term "lesbian" to define themselves as it is not "inclusive enough and denotes hostility towards men (trans identified or not)." (Blair & Obinawne, 2018)

The lesbian body as a battleground

The consequence of systematic lesbian erasure, combined with the male centred politics of the LGBT, is a constant invasion: **invasion of lesbian spaces and invasion of the lesbian body as the ultimate women-only space**, leading to the destruction of those spaces and the consequent **destruction of lesbianism**.

Raymond's work in "The Transsexual Empire" was the first to address transgenderism critically from a lesbian feminist perspective (1995). Raymond firmly attacks the ethics of a medicalised industry profiting financially from the physical castration of members of the community who suffer from failing to fit into the rigid sex stereotype mould. She attacks the individualisation and medicalisation of what she sees as a political problem, as morally questionable, detrimental to society and anti-feminist. Her chapter "Sappho by surgery: The Transsexually constructed Lesbian-Feminist" addresses the issue of transgender males invading lesbian spaces and describes the case of Sandy Stone (discussed above).

"All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artefact, appropriating this body for themselves." (Raymond. 1995: 104)

When Raymond explained that transsexuals rape women's bodies, did she foresee that today those rapes would leave the symbolic to become an embodied reality for the lesbians who do not manage to escape the queer narrative? Despite it being written more than 20 years ago, Raymond's analysis remains as relevant as ever precisely because nowadays males who call themselves lesbians do not typically have castrative surgery (Reed, 2015).

Jeffreys (2014) and Morris (2016) describe the transgender's lobby assault on women-only spaces in. Both cite the attack on the Michigan Womyn Music Festival, a woman-only music festival held since 1976. The festival did not survive and closed down permanently in 2015, erasing decades of lesbian culture in the process.

Morris names the "trans issue" as instrumental in the way a festival like Michigan Womyn Music Festival was targeted. The rhetoric relies heavily on a mixture of misogyny and ageism as the festival's separatist stance was described as a "relic of the second wave" (Meltzer quoted in Morris 2016 : 101). Despite a statement from organiser Lisa Vogel that

"claiming one week a year as womyn-born womyn is not a contradiction to being trans-positive and trans-allies. (...) there is room for affinity groups to enjoy separate and supportive space, and also come together in broader alliances to fight prejudice that affect us all" (Vogel quoted In Morris : 103)

The festival, its attendees and the artists who performed there were all labelled "Terfs" (Trans Exclusive Radical Feminist). Artists were targeted and made to apologise for ever performing at Michfest, threats to burn the festival appeared online, leading finally to the organisers announcing the end of a festival that had lasted for 40 years and welcomed almost half of million attendees over the years.

In "Gender Hurts" Jeffreys identifies the lesbian body as **"the most intimate of women's spaces"** (2014: 180) and discusses the cotton ceiling as an assault against lesbians.

Max Robinson, a young lesbian and detransitioner offers an invaluable, powerful and disturbing insight into the queer community. Robinson names the lies and manipulation behind the concept of "cis privilege": "It was accepted fact that being born female gave you a lifelong advantage over a male who transitioned." (Robinson, 2016). Statements such as these render the oppression of females and the sexual violence perpetrated by men who transition completely invisible. Robinson started to question the trustworthiness of such a statement after several of her female friends were raped or beaten by "transwomen". Robinson also describes how she was targeted as a youngster and deceived into sending nude pictures of herself to adult men who identified as trans. Robinson describes women's inability under queer hegemony to name reality for what it is, therefore to name male violence for what it is. She shows how queer ideology disconnects women from other women, as well as from the past and present women's struggle, and the subsequent inability to place our experience of violence within the feminist political context of the continuum of male violence against women. Her work exposes the incredible social pressures faced by lesbians within the queer community; threats of ostracism from the only place women and girls like herself were ever welcomed into; the constant policing and silencing; the fear women victims experience and their inability to come forward after a rape; their exclusion from the group for daring to name a transwoman as a rapist, the incredible gaslighting women who still dare to call themselves "lesbians" face in those communities.

The extract below about K, her girlfriend who was in a "lesbian relationship" with M, a transwoman, summarises the problems faced by lesbians today:

"Calling that relationship "lesbianism" left her stranded from the framework she desperately needed in order to contextualize her experiences as a survivor of captivity. It destroyed her ability to call herself a lesbian or a woman for a long time: if lesbians like to sleep with transwomen and were repulsed by the supposed maleness of transmen, how could she be a lesbian herself? If women are what her ex-partner M was, then she, K, must be something else entirely. The language of transition lends itself readily to abusive gaslighting that disguises and distorts women's ability to name what is happening" (Robinson, 2016)

"Lesbians who see their sisters disappearing are more likely to try to erase themselves." (Robinson, 2016)

What Robinson's work shows is that the pervasiveness of transgenderism and queer theory leave young lesbians with no physical space to discuss their specific issues, no lesbian community to go to for validation and support, no books to refer to, no word to define themselves and no political framework from which to place or maintain sexual boundaries from men.

Research Outline

Aims

As a lesbian I have heard many lesbians privately discuss being targeted by transactivists for being lesbians. Those stories were hushed in confidence, suppressed, women justifiably fearing retaliation from perpetrators. This silencing means that there are very few public stories of lesbians on the “cotton ceiling”, a point often advanced by transactivists to dismiss lesbians’ dissent. The aim of this study was to give silenced lesbians an opportunity to speak anonymously about their experience when faced with men who identify as transwomen, while formally gathering the missing evidence.

The survey aimed to find whether there is a form of social pressure on lesbians to accept trans ideology within the LGBT community, and what form this may take. How does this affect their ability to meet other lesbians? Are lesbian dating sites safe for lesbians? Is this social pressure influencing lesbians’ life and their sexual life? If lesbians are pressured online, could they also be pressured offline? Are lesbians experiencing any form of sexual violence from men who call themselves lesbians? If yes what form does this sexual violence take?

Reflexivity

Before outlining how this research was carried out it is useful to pause to return to the issue of reflexivity and my own standpoint. Feminists have long understood the power of reflexivity as a way of gaining more insight into a particular topic, a desire to dismiss the alleged objectivity usually claimed by patriarchal academics, and an attempt to be honest with regard to the researcher’s point of view and experience of the subject (Stanley & Wise, 1993).

During my time as a Women’s Studies student, the discussion about transgenderism has received an increasing amount of attention in the media. As a gender critical feminist I have felt the silencing that academia, a patriarchal institution notoriously uncritical of queer theory (Biggs, 2018), implicitly exerts onto its members, staff and students alike. I remember the tension I felt when the subject was mentioned by a fellow student in the first year of my degree, the fear of it being discovered that I had thoughts the university would no doubt label “unacceptable” and “dangerous”. I had the opportunity to give a presentation on “Gender” and explained the radical feminist perspective. I was able to discuss dissenting views thanks to one brave teacher. I had the feeling all along that the Women’s Study MA was a precious haven for making this discussion possible.

As we had to face the devastating decision the university took to discontinue the Women’s Studies MA alongside the whole Life Long Learning Department, we recognised the obvious sexism of that decision, knowing it would affect the ability of future generations of women (particularly working-class mothers) to access education, bringing to an end the possibility we had to learn about our condition in the safe space of a woman-only group. The closing of the course has been an emotional and stressful journey and a struggle to keep going under the circumstances. But in the background of these events, the ideas of Judith Butler resonated, reminding me of the political significance of such events:

Do we really need women’s studies courses? And what is a woman anyway?

As a long-time activist I have battled against constant accusations of being “hateful” and “transphobic” because I am one of those who define what a woman is and because I have clear sexual boundaries which exclude men. The relentless attacks and threats have not succeeded in silencing me but have impacted my mental health. Writing about such a topic as part of my degree has been challenging: finding a supervisor prepared to work with me but also confronting my own self-censorship. We have all internalised patriarchy, we all know almost instinctively what we are allowed and not allowed to say when working within the structures of patriarchy. How would this pressure to conform influence the words I used, or affect the clarity of my analysis?

The challenge has been to confront potential attempts by the university itself to silence me or dilute my work. I was relieved that the Ethics Committee reviewing my application had approved it, allowing me to proceed with the project. Their insistence on my use of the term “transwoman” within the survey and on the importance of remaining “objective” and asking non-leading questions was problematic. In agreement with the feminist tradition, I do not consider that there is such a thing as “objectivity” or that “objectivity” is desirable, necessary or ethical in order to produce a valid piece of work (Stanley & Wise 1993). I reflect below on the response I had from a respondent about the use of the term “transwomen” within the survey, a point I wholeheartedly agree with. Overall I was grateful, though conflicted as I knew my politics were in direct confrontation with academia and yet I had no intention of toning them down. The way this work will be received will reveal how academia positions itself vis-a-vis the following questions:

Have post-modernism and queer theory irreversibly become the dogma or can they be challenged?

Are women allowed to define what a woman is?

Are dissenting points of view allowed within a university?

These questions are worthy of a thesis all on their own.

Research tools and method

The research was initially planned to be a series of interviews conducted with women who would be preselected after taking part in the questionnaire. After careful consideration a questionnaire was deemed more suitable in order to map an under-researched issue. A questionnaire enables the researcher to ask respondents a wider variety of questions in a short space of time (Sarantokos, 2012) and gives respondents the chance to complete the questionnaire in their own time (Curtis and Curtis, 2011).

The survey comprised of 30 questions about lesbians’ experience. It had sections relating to the following subjects: respondent identity, their experiences in LGBT groups and on lesbian dating sites, their experiences interacting with men who identify as transwomen as potential sexual partners. For the purpose of the survey, I used the queer terminology “transwomen” as advised by the Ethics Committee. The Ethics Committee believed that the survey should be “objective” but did not consider that the term “transwomen” is not an objective term and is far less widely accepted than they claimed, a point noted by a respondent who complained that the term was incorrect and misleading as “transwomen” are biologically male, therefore “not a subset of women”.

The survey was sent to women-only and lesbian-only groups on social media, as well as to individual lesbians in my own networks. **As such the sample does not claim to be a representative sample of the lesbian community. However, the research was to capture the points of view and stories of many, until now, silenced lesbians.**

Findings

Findings

Within a few days, 80 women had responded to the survey, far more than originally planned. This rapid engagement demonstrates a keen interest by women who are affected by such issues and the recognition that there is a lack of work and visibility in this area. Several women left private notes, thanking me for the opportunity to speak up. Lesbians were eager to share their stories. The intention was to record lesbians' experiences from the UK (48%), however the survey was also answered by women across the world⁹, highlighting that the questions raised concerns for lesbians in different parts of the western world. All age groups were represented. Due to the imposed time constraints of the research, I had to limit the number of questions relating to demographic information and also relating to the location e.g. rural/city provenance. Future research that will attempt to understand these views in more depth and detail will take more factors into considerations.

Overview of respondents

98.8% of respondents primarily defined themselves as "lesbians"¹⁰, while only two identified as "bisexual" including one as "queer". This choice of word represents a political standpoint (Blair & Obinawne, 2018). Every woman apart from the "queer" respondent defined lesbianism as "women exclusively attracted to women". The "queer" respondent was dating females, non-binary and trans people, and she alone defined lesbianism in terms of "a self-identified woman attracted to self-identified women".

The view on "transwomen"

The majority answered "no" to the following questions:

"Do you believe transwoman are women?" (NO 87.5%),

"Do you believe transwoman can be lesbians" (NO 95%)

"Would you yourself consider a transwoman as a potential sexual partner" (NO 98.8%)

Most respondents considered "transwomen", based on their biological sex, to be men. The pronouns used by respondents to refer to "transwomen" ranged between "he", "she" and "they". I will use the terminology used by respondents when quoting them to report their word accurately despite it going against the principle laid out above. I will use the term "transwomen" in quotation marks for that reason.

NOTES

⁹ United States, Germany, Canada, Ireland, France, Australia, New Zealand. Only 3 women did not specify the country they lived in.

¹⁰ Also calling themselves "dykes"(35%), "butch" (16%) or "femme"(10%), Gay woman (18%)

The following sections will discuss findings in relation to their engagement with LGBT groups, dating sites, lesbians' experiences of sexual pressure and sexual violence by transwomen.

LGBT groups

The majority of respondents reported being part of lesbian, queer or LGBT groups online (11%), offline (37%) or both (48%). 72% reported being part of strictly women-only groups (excluding "transwomen"). Women were also part of groups which are mixed – including men and women (20%), inclusive of all gender (21%), women-only but including self-identifying women (20%) and welcoming of "transwomen" (26%).

Women who were in groups that were not "women-only" reported **"feeling silenced"**, **"intimidated"**, **"unable to speak freely"**, **"uncomfortable"** with the group policy and wishing the group was for women only but **"dare not say it"**. Several reported how **"transwomen derail"** and monopolise the discussion to be solely about their issues while shutting down discussion about women's or lesbians' issues by calling it "transphobic". Group dynamics are described as **"toxic"**. Several women explain how **"transwomen are behaving just like men"**. **Lesbians constantly report being told their sexuality is "wrong" if they openly state they are solely attracted to women.**

Women reported **"threats"**, **"intimidations"** and **"abuse"**, by **"transwomen"** and allies.

Several respondents explained they understand and respect the need for "transwomen" to meet exclusively amongst themselves but cannot understand the lack of reciprocity accorded to women and lesbians by the trans community.

50% of women reported being excluded from their LGBT group(s).

The reason for their removal was made clear: questioning any aspect of the queer doctrine results in women being labelled "transphobic", resulting in a ban. Respondents were banned for sharing articles from feminists that their group disapproved of, or for stating biological facts about sex and anatomy such as: **"just females have periods"**.

Many lesbians reported being excluded if they mentioned for example:



"lesbians don't like penises or have sex with people who have or had penises".

Several respondents have left groups themselves due to intimidation or before being pushed out. Women who are still in LGBT groups have not been excluded because they report **"not being open with their views"**.

66% of respondents reported being intimidated or receiving threats in their LGBT group(s).

For questioning the trans doctrine or **just stating they were lesbians** respondents reported experiences including:

verbal abuse, death and rape threats, pressure to commit suicide, threats of physical or sexual violence, threats to kill family members, receiving "trans-woman nudes", threats of "doxing", actual online "doxing" (including exposure of their name, picture and home address), threats of exposure to employers.

While most of this intimidation happened online, many women also reported offline threats:

- **Two respondents were threatened at their place of work and one lost her job.**
- **A woman's employer was repeatedly contacted with attempts to have her dismissed,**
- **Two respondents were subjected to intimidating behaviour from "transwomen" at lesbian events,**
- **A seventy-year-old woman reported being "physically threatened and forced out" of a group by a physically intimidating "transwoman".**

A respondent observed that "the very presence of transwomen in a woman-only event is enough to silence us for fear of retaliation. There is no need to have a physical threat; their presence serves as a warning".

Several women have felt the pressure to accept transwomen as women intensifying:

"It is not enough that you simply censor and stay silent, you must actively pledge allegiance through the naming of pronouns etc..."




This pressure to shift from silent passive acceptance to active vocal embracing of trans politics may explain why some reported being pressured by other women within their groups (see chapter on "sexual pressure").

Underground Women-only spaces


Because of these experiences, women who wanted to gather exclusively with other women have had to create underground women-only groups and have to maintain a constant high level of vigilance and scrutiny to ensure the sex-segregated policy is upheld.

This is true online as well as offline: women-only gatherings still happen but must be planned in secret and are rarely advertised publicly. Women who are part of women-only groups or attend women-only gatherings reported feeling “safer to speak”, “more comfortable”, and not needing to censor themselves. They “enjoy being with like minded women” and “value the women centeredness of the group”.

The lack of women-only spaces is highlighted by many lesbians who report how much more difficult it has become for them to meet lesbians, because “trans women” are now included in most “women-only spaces”.



“Every other group in my city is either “queer” or for lesbians, bi women and trans. I don’t think there is one group exclusively for lesbians in my city of 1 million people”




“Lesbians are such an underrepresented group. I was sorely disappointed to attend ONE space that was meant for us to openly talk about our experiences of sex, love, discrimination, sexism, homophobia and other very private things specific to being a female homosexual, and for there to be a man present.”

Dating sites

48% of respondents reported visiting lesbian dating sites. Of those, 31% have been approached by “transwomen”. 12.5% have been on dates with “transwomen”, 6% of whom unknowingly. Four respondents report having had a sexual relationship with a “transwoman”: three with a “pre-op transwoman”, one with a “pre-op transwoman” and also with a “post-op transwoman”.

Two respondents were not aware that the person they were about to have a sexual relationship with was a biological male. If those “transwomen” were pre-op, we can argue that these constitute cases of rape by deception.

A respondent explained that on dating sites, half of the matches she received were from “transwomen”.



“None were making an effort to pass, one had a beard, another stated they were pre-op and had no intention to change this”.

A woman described feeling violated when she realised the person she had shared intimate messages with online was “a man”. Another respondent reported that 90% of the messages she receives come from “transwomen”. Although she stated that she has never felt coerced or intimidated, many women experience the very presence of “transwomen” as a violation.

“There are so many men that appear as “women” on dating sites. It makes me paranoid that someone I match with could be a man”.

Indirect sexual pressure

56% of the respondents reported being pressured or coerced to accept a transwoman as a sexual partner.

Much of this pressure happens online. Lesbians are routinely harassed for stating that their sexuality excludes males regardless of their “gender identity”. Most respondents reported being subjected to such rhetoric directly or indirectly, and have experienced it as a form of “psychological coercion” with the general feeling that it is “online everywhere” and “relentless”.

The responses show the wide variety of ways in which women have also been directly sexually pressured, ranging from coercion, sexual harassment and sexual assault to rape by deception and rape with physical force.

Direct sexual pressure and harassment

Often this pressure comes from members of lesbians' social circles. Two respondents reported the pressure they have come under from former girlfriends to **"include transwoman in their dating pool"**.

A respondent was targeted by a woman in an online group:



"I was told that homosexuality doesn't exist and I owed it to my trans sisters' to unlearn my 'genital confusion' so I can enjoy letting them penetrate me".

Lesbians report being told they are **"worse than rapists if they don't date transwomen"**, that not dating "transwomen" is akin to **"racism"**.

Many lesbians wrote about being questioned endlessly about their sexual preferences and whether they **"would or wouldn't potentially date a transwoman"**. A young woman reported being directly pressured to go on dates with a "transwoman" by her friends. She explained she cannot say no directly but has to keep making excuses for fear of being **"blacklisted from (her) social groups"**.

Women reported being sexually harassed directly by "transwomen".

- Being constantly sexually pressured by "transwomen" friends and acquaintances despite repeatedly saying no.
- Receiving intimidating and scary sexual pressure from "transwomen" in women's toilets.
- Receiving pressure from a "transwoman" friend to allow him to expose his surgically constructed vagina while they are alone.

Sexual assault

Many women reported unwanted sexual touching which fit the definition of sexual assault.

One recalled being pressured to kiss and touch a transwoman **against her will** in a club, another the violating experience of having a **"transwoman slapping (her) ass"** in the women's toilet of a gay club.

Sexual assault stories also happened in private settings, during sleep overs, in situations where women were vulnerable (drunk, asleep or unable to go home). In each case the "transwoman" was a friend who had taken advantage of the situation, **initiating non-consensual sexual contact, touching or masturbating in their presence.**

Domestic abuse

A woman describes her relationship with a male partner who was a transvestite.

"He insisted he was a lesbian and that I define myself as a lesbian so that he could feel validated as a 'woman'. This was before I came out as a lesbian [...] I felt that sexual intimacy was coerced from me under emotional blackmail".



Online grooming

Several young women report being groomed online while 18 or younger by "older transwomen". Two of those respondents were made to send nude pictures of themselves.

Deception

Several respondents discussed their experiences of deception while being approached by "transwomen" they assumed to be women. They reported feeling "betrayed" and "violated":

"Only once I was going to do a 3 way and one of the women was trans but passed very well and I was initially fooled till her partner told me. Fortunately there was no genital sex and they were pre-op. I freaked out afterwards!"

A respondent recalled being approached by an "androgynous looking" person for a date. After sex the person revealed being a "post-op transwoman". Shocked, the respondent remained in the relationship until she realised that she was "in a relationship with a man who acted like a man".

Queer coercion

Queer ideology combined with guilt-tripping were reported to be effective strategies to persuade women to sleep with “transwomen” against their will.

The woman above who had sex with a “post-op transwoman” stated she had “bought into the propaganda that sex doesn’t matter”.

Women in the 18-24 years old age group appear particularly vulnerable to these strategies.

Young women explained how they were pressurised to accept a “transwoman” as a sexual partner:



“I thought I would be called a transphobe or that it would be wrong of me to turn down a transwoman who wanted to exchange nude pictures”; young women feel pressured to sleep with transwomen “to prove I am not a TERF”.

The strategy works as a form of conversion therapy for lesbians.

“After I came out as a lesbian, I went on many dates/entered relationships with transwoman because the culture I was in said if I didn’t do that I was evil and should be banished from everything. I knew I wasn’t attracted to them but internalised the idea that it was because of my “transmisogyny” and that if I dated them for long enough I could start to be attracted to them. It was DIY conversion therapy.”



Rape

Many of the experiences above classify as rape although were not named as such. One of the respondents did name her experience as rape. Her story combines several problems highlighted above:

“The man I went on a date with, unknowingly, was mutual friends with people I knew, he threatened to out me as a terf and risk my job if I refused to sleep with him. I was too young to argue and had been brainwashed by queer theory so he was a “woman” even if every fibre of my being was screaming throughout so I agree to go home with him. He used physical force when changed my mind upon seeing his penis and raped me.”



Discussion & Conclusion

The evidence of this research suggests that there is huge pressure in online and offline LGBT, queer and lesbian groups to accept without question the queer ideology and mantra that “transwoman are women”.

The act of defining lesbianism as “same-sex attraction at the exclusion of people who have or had penises” is considered a form of hate speech and violently punished.

Dissenting voices are aggressively attacked, followed by an immediate ban from the group that can sometimes have consequences for women's lives and livelihoods. Lesbians are a small community of already marginalised individuals, and this exclusion sometimes means exclusion from the only social group women have. The threats on social media and offline groups act both as sexual pressure and silencing, leading to isolation and social exclusion. There is a direct link between threats in online groups and lesbian participation in real life groups or events.

Many lesbians who have been targeted have developed avoidance strategies towards LGBT in general and complain of feeling unsafe and unwelcome in the LGBT community.

Women who dare to say they will not have sex with anyone but a woman, excluding men and men who identify as transwomen, are demonised and name-called. Terms like “terf”, “transphobe”, “bigot”, “rapist”, “racist” etc are routinely used against lesbians. Women who remain silent in groups are asked relentlessly to reveal whether or not they would date a “transwoman”. This constant pressure creates a culture of terror, leading to women policing each other in order to not appear to be a “terf” to the rest of the group. This trend is intensifying as anyone not actively embracing the trans ideology is suspected of silent “terfing”.

Many lesbians reveal leading a double life where their lesbianism is toned down. Many have no social life or meet underground and explain how difficult and dangerous it has become to meet other lesbians. Lesbian dating sites are infiltrated by men who pose as lesbians (whether they identify as transwoman or not and whether they “pass” as women or not), leading many lesbians to feel unsafe at the thought of unknowingly going on a date with a man. Both in groups and dating sites, the presence of men who identify as transwomen acts as a threat, leading to self-policing and silencing.

This constant pressure is a form of psychological coercion and leads to lesbians feeling pressurised to accept men who identify as transwomen as sexual partners.

This is particularly true for younger lesbians, many of whom have only ever known queer/LGBT groups and ideology since they first came out. This constant pressure means that when faced with individual men who identified as transwomen and who were pressuring them for sex, many lesbians felt that they couldn't justify saying no to them, resulting in them having non-consensual sex under pressure.

Lesbians have been subjected to a wide variety of sexual violence by men who identify as transwomen.

While experiences of sexual violence were reported by women from every age group, the younger 18-24 age group seemed to be particularly targeted. The sexual violence experiences reported by respondents range from **coercion, online grooming, sexual harassment and assault to rape by deception or with physical force.** Perpetrators have used queer theory mixed with guilt-tripping to pressure, justify or excuse sexual violence.

Consistent with a former study showing that men who transitioned “retain a male pattern regarding criminality” including violent crime and sexual offences, that men who did not transition, (Dhejne et al, 2011 : 6) **sexual violence was committed by men who identified as transwomen in a typical male pattern of aggression, whether in public spaces: clubs, women's toilets, with unwanted sexual touching; in acquaintance rape scenario/private setting: either while lesbians were vulnerable (drunk, asleep or unable to leave), or during dates when the women withdrew consent and were then “persuaded” or forcibly raped.**

The findings are consistent with lesbian feminist thinkers who theorised that lesbians had nothing to gain by having their experiences conflated with those of gay men in a misogynistic LGBT movement, and that transactivists' invasion of lesbians' spaces could lead to the erasure of lesbians and lesbianism.

- Indeed within the LGBT movement today, young lesbians are denied the right to experience lesbianism as they are pressured to accept male bodies as female bodies.
- Older lesbians, who have led a lesbian life from a young age and experienced discrimination and violence as lesbians draw parallels between their past experiences and the way the trans ideology targets lesbians today.
- Lesbians who have had past heterosexual experiences recount how this is used against them to justify penis inclusion into their lives.

Lesbians who responded to this survey perceive the sexual pressure they experience, both as a form of rape culture and as conversion therapy, where they are pressured to accept penises in their sexual lives. Heterosexuality is forced upon lesbians under the guise of queer progressiveness.

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