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Proposition: Transwomen are women

First Prize:

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The argument for the Proposition:

Like any minority group that finds itself caught in the crosshairs of a media storm, trans women have faced a barrage of antagonism in recent years. For the most part, this has manifested itself in the form of challenges to the legitimacy of their status as 'real' women. The objective of this essay is to establish the validity of the proposition that 'transwomen are women,' by delving into the intricacies of their long history living as such, challenging the primary objections to self-determination, as well as demonstrating how categorising a trans woman's gender identity as incorrect or 'false' is significantly out of line with democratic values.

It is a widespread misconception that the distinction between biological sex and gender is a 'new' concept, or contrary to what was 'collectively believed' in the past. Indeed, the narrative that gender identity is a modern phenomenon is a common calling card in many a gender-critical commentator's arsenal. Take, for example, Matt Walsh's satirical sketch 'The Victim Hierarchy' ([2023](#)), in which he mockingly places trans people at the pinnacle of an imaginary pyramid of oppression, or Douglas Murray's claims that this is a 'new morality' which 'demands that we pretend not to know about things we all knew until yesterday' (Anderson, [2023](#), 2:45). In portraying gender identity as a fleeting trend concocted by 'chronically-online' millennials upholding culture of 'competitive victimhood,' the ability of trans women to identify legally and socially as women, without being subject to constant challenge, is significantly undermined.

Yet however pervasive this idea of the 'modern cultural phenomenon' may be, it is ultimately misleading. Even beyond the musings of Bentley as early as [1945](#) (p. 228) that gender is simply 'the socialised obverse of sex,' there have existed numerous cultures that observed biological males whose gender identity did not correspond to their sex. These include the kathoey, trans women who are ubiquitous and celebrated in Thai culture, as well as the hijras of India who, though politically recognised as a third gender, take female names, adopt female traits and 'periodically demand to be counted as females in the census' (Nanda, [1999](#), p.17). There also exists a growing conversation surrounding the 'two-spirit' people of the Americas, particularly amidst ongoing national debate in the US regarding the legacy

of European colonialism. Following centuries of Christian European cultural hegemony, which saw what Anya Montiel describes as disregard of ‘any gender variation amongst Native people,’ (Alfonseca, [2018](#)), it is plausible to suggest that modern Western views surrounding trans women are a direct result of the suppression of non-Western, non-Christian schools of thought. This begs the question not of whether gender identity is a modern philosophy, but rather whether the gender binary, and thus the categorical rejection of trans women as women, is a product of European dominance.

Colonialism and racial supremacy arguably play significant roles in public attitudes towards the legitimacy of trans women’s gender identities. In supporting the proposition that trans women are women, it is crucial to understand the unique cultural biases that contribute to the belief that trans women should not be, for lack of a better term, ‘allowed to be’ women.

A recurrent claim in gender-critical debate is that permitting trans women to align legally and socially with their gender identity poses a direct threat to the safety and privacy of biological females. This concern is reflected in contemporary media discourse concerning trans women’s right to enter women’s bathrooms and changing rooms, as well as various reports of outrage over the possibility of trans women being permitted to work or stay in women’s refuges. One letter to the Times describes the matter of authorising self-identification as ‘a perverts’ paradise’. The people who suffer will be women and children’ (Hughe, [2018](#)). Another demands we ‘not remove safe spaces from women and girls on the whim of a cult’ (Anonymous, [2018](#)). Such statements create the impression that the danger trans women present to cis women is immanent and ever-present, despite a distinct lack of data reflecting this (a topic I will explore later on). McNamarah ([2023](#)) aptly refers to arguments of this nature as ‘cis-women-protectionism’ or ‘CWP’: a line of reasoning which operates on the presumption that biological women are in particular need of protection from nefarious outside groups. This protection is usually offered as a means to ‘guard’ women’s virtue, and the ‘out-groups’ in question have, historically, been minorities.

There are an undeniably large number of parallels to be drawn between the denial of trans women’s right to live as women and the historic appeal to ‘protect’ white women from the “‘threats” posed by non-white groups’ (McNamarah, 2023, p.

856). Though the well-documented portrayal of black people as 'savage,' predatory or sexually threatening will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the history of American segregation, the resemblance this rhetoric bears to modern day justifications for the denial of trans women's identities is striking.

In 1950, US Senator Jesse Helms and his team created an anti-desegregation advertisement which read, 'White people, wake up before it is too late... Do you want Negroes working beside you, your wife, and your daughters, in your mills and factories?' (McEwan, [2008](#)). Some sixty-six years later, presidential candidate Ted Cruz released a campaign ad reading, 'Should a grown man pretending to be a woman be allowed to use the women's restroom? The same restroom used by your daughter? Your wife? It's not appropriate. It's not safe.' ([2016](#)). The two statements are so similar that they could almost be grafted on top of one another. Cruz's choice use of the word 'grown' in particular smacks of multiple other anti-black CWP arguments, including President Eisenhower's expression of sympathy in 1953 for white southerners who hoped their daughter's wouldn't have to sit beside a 'big black buck' at school (Irons, [2022](#), p.178). In the cases of both African Americans and trans women, size descriptors are regularly used in CWP arguments as a means to suggest hypermasculinity, thus increasing the perceived threat level.

However, in keeping with pro-segregation CWP arguments, those used to condone the denial of trans women's right to self-determination are largely unfounded. Though the bathroom question remains front and centre, the fact that trans women have been using the women's facilities since long before their identities became a hot-button often falls to the wayside. As does the reality that, in the UK and US, the law has never mandated the exclusion of non-females from women's bathrooms beyond a few specific circumstances. Moreover, there is a stark lack of evidence to suggest that the self-identification of trans women as women has ever increased the likelihood of cisgender women facing assault or harassment.

On the topic of perceived threats, it is worth noting that despite the portrayal of the issue by multiple gender-critical media outlets, the UK's Office for National Statistics [2020](#) summary of the nature of violent crime in England and Wales indicates that women are far less likely to be victims of violence than men, with 2% of men having experienced violent crime, compared to just 1.3% of women. The US National Criminal Victimization Survey in [2021](#) yielded similar results. Therefore, it is

reasonable to argue that the centring of cis-women's safety in the ongoing conversation surrounding trans women is not only disproportionate but actively misleading. Nevertheless, just as the image of the 'savage' hindered the acceptance of people of colour as fully human in the West, the image of the 'predator' continues to obstruct the acceptance of trans women as wholly women.

So far, this essay has examined instances of respect for the gender identity of trans women beyond the Western sphere and delved into the underlying reasons for the frequent dismissal of gender identity today. The focus will now shift to the argument that, within the context of democratic countries (where much of the debate is centred), the exclusion of trans women from the social and legal categorisation of women leads to legislation that is fundamentally undemocratic.

Even if the distinction between biological sex and gender remains confined to academic discourse in the West, the rejection of trans women as women appears hypocritical when parallel identities are not only recognised but leveraged by those opposing the inclusion of trans women. For example, people who claim to be 'white' or 'black' are rarely requested to 'prove it.' This is because racial identity, despite being entirely separate from biological factors, is a form of identity that modern Western societies permit on the widely accepted premise that allowing individuals to align with a racial group can enhance community cohesion, quality of life and sense of self, without causing harm to others. While racial tensions do exist in the Western world, these do not often arise from the existence of the identity marker itself. It seems inconsistent, then, that despite the acknowledged benefits of allowing people to subscribe to arbitrary racial groups, trans women are not given the same consideration regarding their gender. This discrepancy becomes even more puzzling when considering emerging studies which observe a 'shift away from a male-typical brain anatomy towards a female-typical one' (Kurth et al., [2022](#)) in the brains of trans women, suggesting a possible neuroanatomical basis for a female gender identity. Although it is broadly accepted that more research is needed to determine the exact differences between male and female brains, such findings indicate that gender identity has a scientific grounding in a way that other widely accepted identity groups cannot claim.

Identity politics aside, more often than not, the denial of trans women's gender identity proves harmful to a demographic already grappling with significant health

and wellbeing risks. According to a [2019](#) (p. 7) United Nations report, the inability to live as one's self-identified gender is 'likely to be a source of distress, exacerbating other forms of ill health.' The damaging effects of these conditions are so profound that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has declared 'abusive requirements as a precondition of recognition' to be 'in violation of international human rights standards' ([2015](#), pp. 20-21). Considering the detriment to the individuals in question, there appears to be no justifiable reason to deny trans women the same rights of freedom of expression that their compatriots enjoy.

The arguments presented above establish that although the existence of trans women living and being socially accepted as women is not a new phenomenon, the nature of the debate surrounding their right to self-determination in the West is decidedly singular. A culture of sensationalist media, which often conflates trans women's identities with the broad and disparaging term 'woke culture,' has arguably ignited controversies where none previously existed. Nonetheless, considering the extensively documented history of trans women across various cultures and the lack of substantial evidence that their self-determination poses a significant threat to others, it can be concluded that in a society that values individual liberty, recognising and respecting that trans women are women is an imperative.

The argument against the Proposition:

The proposition 'transwomen are women' is a slogan pervasive in the modern West, having become the mantra of various activist groups that assert an individual's gender can be altered at will. In this essay, I will contend that this is not the case. My arguments will not focus on the previously-substantiated physiological differences between transwomen and women, but rather on the ethical and moral issues raised by the practical implementation of the proposition, as well as proposing alternative explanations for the rise in male-to-female transsexualism.

In examining the proposition, the question of transwomen's right to self-identify must first be extricated from the aims of other movements with which it has been conflated. This is a complex endeavour given that, over time, demands for transwomen's inclusion under the definition of 'women' have become entwined not only with the issues of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals, but also with racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter. The latter can be observed in the curious emergence of Black *Trans* Lives Matter marches following the initial movement in the US and UK. Statements such as 'until black trans lives matter, absolutely everywhere, black lives broadly won't really matter anywhere' (Ollerenshaw & Baggs, [2020](#)) tend to draw non-existent parallels between objectives that are widely accepted as rational (i.e. putting an end to racially motivated police brutality or the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships) and those widely deemed irrational (the legitimisation of gender identity), thus clouding the debate.

It is worth noting that arguments calling for the recognition of transwomen as women have often relied on the appropriation of various other minority experiences. An example of this is the frequent reference to intersex individuals – who constitute an estimated 0.018% percent of the world's population and whose circumstances are therefore exceptionally unique – as a tool to diminish the significance of biological sex. This can also be observed in the amalgamation of so-called 'third-gender cultures' to argue for a historical acceptance of transwomen as equivalent to women in certain societies. Media discussions surrounding these cultures often use US-centric LGBT language in an attempt to superimpose non-western narratives onto the contemporary discourse surrounding the trans movement. The outcomes,

more often than not, are historically revisionist. Moreover, evidence suggests the concept of a 'third gender' in other cultures often relies on the 'explicit devaluation of women' (Holmes, [2004](#), p. 1). This is arguably comparable to what can be observed in much of the West today, where sex-based rights and gender-identity-based interests are increasingly in conflict.

Language can often be found on the surface of this debate. Terms such as 'womyn' or 'womxn' are often adopted by organisations and university groups that view the word 'women' as potentially exclusive of those who were not 'born female.' There have also emerged several neologisms in reference to the female anatomy: these include the National Institutes of Health's [supplementation](#) of 'breastfeeding' with 'chestfeeding' or 'bodyfeeding,' Healthcare Improvement Scotland's ([2021](#)) preference for 'birthing people' over 'mother' and, as published in a [glossary](#) by Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust, 'bonus hole' or 'front hole' as alternatives to 'vagina.' Critics often highlight the dehumanising nature of reducing womanhood to various body parts, as well as the erasure of women's role in reproduction and parenting these expressions seem to perpetuate. Similar accusations of language policing have followed the widespread introduction of 'cisgender' or 'cis' as a descriptor for biological females, which reportedly denotes women who 'align with their sex assigned at birth.' The term is often used regardless of the subject's consent, which has raised questions of a linguistic double standard considering some 44% of millennials believe 'misgendering' a person ought to be a crime (Bickerton, [2023](#)). Consequently, it appears modifications to the language surrounding womanhood prioritise the comfort and inclusion of biological males whilst simultaneously disparaging biological women. This supports Bindell's ([2023](#)) assertion that 'the quest to be inclusive of trans-identified men is to *exclude* women.'

Women as a whole are not the only group threatened by the legitimisation of gender identity; logically, if there exists no true definition of 'woman' beyond those who wish to be one, the concept of what it means to be homosexual female is radically shifted. Increasingly, lesbian online influencers are accused of discrimination for stating their disinterest in dating transwomen, or for suggesting that sexual orientation is 'not a preference.' Curlew ([2018](#)) rebuffs this statement by claiming that sexual orientation can 'prove to be lightly malleable if we try to dig into the foundations of how those oppressive structures influence the ways we see and understand the world.' This not only implies pre-existing LGB identities are shaped

by deeply-ingrained bigotry, but that lesbian individuals are morally obligated to adapt their own identities in order to accommodate transwomen's perception of their own gender, despite their own status as a historically marginalised group.

Such intense pressure to redefine the terms on which other vulnerable categories of people conduct themselves is seldom exerted by other groups when exercising their freedom of expression. This indicates that, regardless of the push to attach transwomen's plight to that of others, it remains a singular case and must be treated as such.

Undoubtedly, considering transwomen to be women presents distinct ethical problems. Though the issue of women and biological males sharing bathrooms is worthy of discussion, it has been debated ad nauseam and often at the expense of more pressing concerns: namely, a loss of social mobility for women.

As a result of a distinct societal push for inclusivity, there have been several high-profile instances of women being denied potentially life-changing opportunities which were instead offered to transwomen. Sporting competitions are among the most well-known examples of this. Former-collegiate swimmer Riley Gaines was denied a trophy at the NCAA's award ceremony for the women's 200-metre freestyle after tying with transwoman athlete Lia Thomas. Reportedly, the trophy was given to Thomas so that he could be photographed with it for various publications, whilst Gaines was told hers would be 'coming in the mail' (Glasspiegel, [2022](#)). This suggests not only that women who are made to compete with biological males face a distinct physical disadvantage, but that their successes are inherently less important, even in the context of competitions purporting to be for female athletes.

Sports accolades are not the only prize women stand to lose if transwomen are to be considered their legal and social equivalent. Increasingly, transwomen are being selected to represent women's products and services. In 2023, Nike hired transwoman TikTok star Dylan Mulvaney to model and promote their line of women's sports attire, which included sports bras designed to support breasts – a physical feature Mulvaney does not have as a biological male. This partnership was deemed particularly insulting to women considering Nike's previous ambassador, ten-time Olympic medallist Allyson Felix ([2019](#)), saw a 70% reduction in her pay after becoming pregnant, and has since gone on record stating the brand refused to contractually agree she wouldn't be 'punished' if she didn't perform at her 'best in the

months surrounding childbirth.’ Similar cases in the UK have seen transwomen Steph Richards and Munroe Bergdorf appointed respectively as the CEO and ‘UK champion’ of women’s charities. The former now heads Endometriosis South Coast, a charity aiming to support those suffering from an often-stigmatised gynaecological issue that exclusively affects women and the latter has become the face of UN Women UK, which [declares](#) itself ‘dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women.’

The above examples reflect Smith’s (2023) assertion that, increasingly, ‘men’s idea of what women are trumps [their] own embodied realities.’ In the centring of transwomen’s voices in conversations concerning women, the voices of biological women are often cast to the wayside as a result. Even if all parties come to agree that anyone who ‘feels’ they are a woman is one, the fact remains that when certain types of ‘women’ have a distinctly different physiology than the rest, data collection on women’s health and wellbeing could well become skewed, resulting in potentially-harmful misunderstandings, and those chosen to represent and uplift women’s opinions in various organisations may prove to have zero first-hand experience of the unique and sensitive challenges other they experience. Not to mention the fact that allowing self-identification causes the pool of candidates for women-specific scholarships, prizes, and access schemes to grow incalculably larger, further limiting the potential for biological women to obtain opportunities they may already struggle to. In this way, suggesting that being a transwoman is tantamount to being a woman conceivably perpetuates a ‘new model’ of misogyny in its repeated suppression women’s concerns, commandeering of women’s opportunities, and appropriation of female-centric issues under the guise of inclusion.

Glaring as the moral issues presented by the proposition may be, perhaps the most straight-forward case against the notion that ‘transwomen are women’ is the existence of other, more plausible explanations.

A few theories have been proposed to account for the uptick in male-to-female identifying individuals in the West. Though autogynephilia is often an uncomfortable topic, especially given the historic push to conflate LGB identities with fetishes, it would be remiss to exclude it from the conversation. Considering the definition of autogynephilia as the male propensity to be aroused at the thought of himself as a woman, it is conceivable to speculate there may exist some instances of

crossover between men who experience the paraphilia and those who identify as transwomen. This is supported by a [1989](#) (pp. 619-620) study by Blanchard, which found that within a sample of 212 transwomen, the majority of those who identified as heterosexual, bisexual, and asexual had a history of autogynephilia. Though autogynephilia itself is relatively harmless to others, it would be highly inaccurate to equate the psychological condition to legitimate womanhood.

More pressingly, there have been multiple studies that find transgenderism to be especially prevalent in individuals on the autistic spectrum. A [2020](#) study conducted by Warrier et al. finds autistic individuals three to six times more likely to experience gender dysphoria than their non-autistic counterparts. These figures, combined with significant pressure from organisations such as Mermaids and Stonewall to implement teaching surrounding trans identities in schools, suggests that undiagnosed autistic children are particular risk of being led to believe a fundamental falsehood: that any feelings of being ‘different to their peers’ as a result of their condition are actually a side effect of their ‘being born in the wrong body.’

Though the UK’s National Autistic Society [recognises](#) there is ‘some evidence to show a link between gender dysphoria and autism,’ it fails to question whether this might be the result of a vulnerable, often-stigmatised group being enticed to align with a community that they believe will offer them acceptance, recognition, and ‘explanations’ they may have previously lacked. This is entirely deserving of compassion should it be the case, but again, identifying as a woman due to various factors influenced by a neurological condition does not equate to the physical reality of being a woman. Refusing to entertain the possibility of alternate explanations for transsexualism has the potential to lead to inaccuracies, and could have long-term negative implications for the individual in question should an underlying condition be left undiagnosed or ignored in favour of pursuing a ‘new gender identity.’

In conclusion, the proposition ‘transwomen are women’ not only comes at the immense expense of biological women, but ignores the principle of parsimony in favour of accommodating the current cultural narrative in the West. Often this is to the detriment of the trans individual themselves, who may also be considered vulnerable due to preexisting factors. Given that the proposition fundamentally hinges on redacting the rights of others to exercise free speech and expression, thus undermining several legislations in place to protect disempowered groups within

society, it must be concluded that it is entirely impracticable in reality and, therefore, cannot be so.

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