

The Corrosive Impact of Transgender Ideology

Joanna Williams

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Summary

In less than two decades ‘transgender’ has gone from a term representing individuals and little used outside of specialist communities, to signifying a powerful political ideology driving significant social change. At the level of the individual, this shift has occurred through the separation of gender from sex, before bringing biology back in via a brain-based sense of ‘gender-identity’. This return to biology allows for the formation of a distinct identity group, one that can stake a claim to being persecuted, and depends upon continual validation and confirmation from an external audience. All critical discussion is a threat to this public validation and it is often effectively curtailed.

However, this is only half of the story. The total number of transgender individuals remains tiny. That transgenderism has moved from niche to mainstream tells us more about the rest of society than it does about transgender individuals. People in positions of power within the realms of media, education, academia, police, social work, medicine, law, and local and national government have been prepared to coalesce behind the demands of a tiny transgender community. Previously authoritative institutions now lack confidence in their own ability to lead and look to the transgender community as a victimised group that can act as a source of moral authority. However, this, in turn, erodes sex-based rights and undermines child protection.

The expansion of transgender rights has gone hand in hand with an expansion of state and institutional (both public and private) regulation of speech and behaviour. This highlights a significant difference between today's transgender activists and the gay rights movement of a previous era. Whereas the gay rights movement was about demanding more freedom from the state for people to determine their sex lives unconstrained by the law, the transgender movement demands the opposite: it calls for recognition and protection from the state in the form of intervention to regulate the behaviour of those outside of the identity group. Whereas in the past, to be radical was to demand greater freedom from the state and institutional authority, today to be radical is to demand restrictions on free expression in the name of preventing offence.

Recommendations

1. Both the UK Government and the Scottish Parliament should announce a moratorium on all reform of the Gender Recognition Act for at least the duration of this parliament.
2. The Government should clarify the distinction between sex-based and gender-based protections as set out in the Equalities Act 2010. The Act's permission for sex-based discrimination to preserve female-only services should be reiterated.
3. The prescribing of puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones to anyone under the age of 18 should be immediately prohibited.

SUMMARY

4. No child should be permitted to 'socially transition' at school (i.e. change name, pronouns, uniform or use the changing rooms and toilets intended for members of the opposite sex) without the permission of their parents.
5. Schools should be encouraged to separate out the teaching of lesbian, gay and bi-sexual relationships from teaching about transgender as part of the Relationships and Sex Education curriculum. Teaching on transgender should not contradict the content of the science/biology curriculum.

Introduction

This report explores the social impact of changed understandings of gender and, in particular, the emergence of the idea of transgender. A new orthodoxy that gender identity is brain-based and innate, something we need to discover for ourselves and then reveal to a readily accepting world, has rapidly gained ground. This seemingly benign view has consequences for how we socialise children and organise society. It calls into question sex-protected rights and freedom of association. The existence of female-only prisons and refuges or girls' schools, clubs and sports is thrown into doubt. Yet far from engaging in a free and open discussion, transgender activists have moved to curtail debate. The consequences of this and the impact it has on the lives of women and children are detailed here.

We draw a distinction between transgenderism and transgender individuals. The term transgenderism is used to refer to an ideological movement that challenges sex-based rights and actively promotes the idea that a person's gender identity has no connection to their anatomy. This political agenda has been embraced by activists and campaigning organisations. As a movement, it has proven to be far more influential than a numerical count of transgender individuals may suggest. Transgenderism has come to be not just accepted but often promoted in key public institutions such as education, health care, social work, the police and prison service.

At the same time, not all transgender individuals support this broader ideological movement and some may refer to themselves as transsexuals in a bid to emphasise the reality of immutable sex. Nonetheless, the rise of transgenderism can be linked to an increase in the number of transgender individuals and, crucially, a change in the population most likely to identify as transgender. Where once counsellors were mainly approached by middle-aged men with a personal history of cross-dressing, today it is teenage girls who are most likely to seek advice with transitioning. Institutions that have been captured by an ideology of transgenderism are unable to defend the sex-based rights of women or to protect children who mistakenly consider changing gender as the solution to a range of personal or social problems they may be experiencing.

This report explores the reasons for the rise of transgenderism and the impact it has on the lives of women and children. It is in three parts. Chapter one considers changing attitudes towards sex and gender. It explains how we have moved, over a period of around a century, from a view that sex determines personal qualities and prescribes social roles, though to a more liberal understanding of gender as socially constructed and grounded in stereotypes that can be challenged, before returning once more to a determinism now based not on sex but on a person's innate sense of gender identity. Chapter two explores the impact of this shift in thinking upon the lives of children and women. Finally, the third chapter of this report considers how and why the ideological capture of institutions has been so successful. This report concludes with policy recommendations designed to safeguard the rights of women and children and to pause a debate that is now marked more by heat than light.

1.

Changing attitudes towards sex and gender

From sex to gender

Beliefs about sex and gender have changed over time. Throughout most of human history there has been no concept of gender: it was assumed that sex determined everything about a person. Men, considered physically strong, intelligent and stoical, were best suited to manual work or roles in the public sphere; women, meanwhile, were apparently physically weaker but more caring and nurturing, best suited to domestic roles. These perceived differences shaped legal rights and social expectations.

From the late eighteenth century onwards, thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft began to question whether women were naturally inferior to men or whether society, most notably through differences in upbringing and education, made males and females intellectually, emotionally and even physically different from one another.¹ This view was developed by Simone De Beauvoir who wrote in *The Second Sex* (1949) that, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.'² De Beauvoir's argument was not that people were born sex-less but that the meaning given to sex, in particular to being female, is created within a particular social context. People are born male or female but the values and qualities attached to being a man or a woman are determined by the dominant culture of an era.

At the time De Beauvoir was writing, the concept of 'gender' did not exist as a synonym for sex. The psychologist John Money was, in 1955, the first to use the word gender to draw a distinction between sex, or the physical and biological attributes that distinguish males and females, and the behaviour and attitudes people demonstrate. Money posited that sex bore little relationship to gender. He took particular interest in children born intersex, that is, with indeterminate genitalia, and argued that it was the child's socialisation that determined whether they grew up as a man or a woman, not whether they were born male or female. Taking this position to its logical conclusion, Money suggested that a baby born with male genitalia who underwent surgery to alter these sex characteristics and was subsequently raised as a girl, could go on to live successfully as a woman.

Indeed, Money not only proposed this as a theory but put his idea into practice with a baby boy, David Reimer, who had suffered surgical trauma to his penis.³ His parents were simply instructed to go away and raise a girl: their son, David, became their daughter, Brenda. The results of this experiment were initially recorded as successful. However, many years later, as an adult, Brenda re-transitioned to male and spoke out about the distress the experiment had caused him. He tragically committed suicide aged just 38.

Money's experiments help locate the emergence of a transgender identity within the medical profession. As Hodson suggests, 'It became possible to conceptualise "gender identity" as dislocated from biological sex when new medical technologies for the first time made it possible for doctors to change the bodies of those born with indeterminate genitals and to assign them to a sex.'⁴ In this way, 'the availability of the treatment appears to have essentially created the demand.'⁵

It was not until the 1970s that the word 'gender' began to enter mainstream vocabulary. It took off with the emergence of second wave feminism and the debate it instigated about the rigid and sharply distinct social roles expected of men and women. Gender became a useful way to distinguish between the fact of being female and the performance of womanhood shaped by social expectations. Neither De Beauvoir nor the feminists of the 1970s denied the existence of sex, nor that individuals born female became women while those born male became men. Rather, feminists such as Germaine Greer sought to challenge the assumption that being female meant conforming to an invented and socially-imposed set of (gendered) expectations.⁶ The creation of gender allowed for a critique of masculine and feminine stereotypes; it did not lead automatically to the conclusion that some people were transgender.

Gender as performance

Third wave feminism was shaped, in part, by critical theory and post-structuralism – ideas that emerged from inside universities rather than among political campaigners. The application of post-structuralist thinking to ideas about sex and gender led to the view that gendered-performance – whether a person presents and acts in a way that is perceived as masculine or feminine – serves as a signifier of their biological sex. What is being signified (sex) is no more 'true' or 'real' than the performance; both are socially constructed. The connection between sex and gender came to be seen as increasingly arbitrary. Judith Butler, writing in *Gender Trouble* (1988) argued not just that 'gender is performative,'⁷ but that there is no biological reality, no greater truth, underpinning the performance: "'being" a sex or a gender is fundamentally impossible'.⁸

For Butler, there is only performance and no 'real reality'. She criticises what she sees as the false assumption that 'there is a natural or biological female who is subsequently transformed into a socially subordinate "woman", with the consequence that "sex" is to "nature" or "the raw" as gender is to culture or "the cooked."'9 Butler argues that the biological female is 'a discursive formation that acts as a naturalized foundation for the nature/culture distinction and the strategies of domination that the distinction supports.'¹⁰

For Butler, gender is simply 'a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real,'¹¹ and in order to pass as real the performance, or impersonation, needs an audience. Gender thus becomes a 'relational term' forged in the process of interaction and with no fixed referent.¹² In other words, 'what we take to be an internal essence,' is actually 'manufactured through a sustained set of acts.'¹³ Significantly, for Butler, unlike for Greer or De Beauvoir, not only is there no 'essence,' there is also no agent that is responsible for shaping the performance: 'Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.'¹⁴ Rather than sex preceding gender, Butler argues it is our social and cultural views on gender that construct sex: 'Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature' she explains, 'gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts.'¹⁵

Today, following Butler, sex has been rejected by many radical thinkers as an outdated concept that has no more basis in material reality than gender. As a result, the performance of gender floats freely from biology: both are considered equally arbitrary. Gender can now be conceived as fluid and multiple. People are not assumed to be born

male or female but randomly assigned membership of a culturally prescribed sex category in an act of symbolic violence conducted at the moment of birth. (See, for example, Labour MP Dawn Butler's statement that babies are born without sex).¹⁶ Some people will be socialised into accepting this arbitrary category and will dutifully perform the appropriate gender. For others, the conflict will prove too much and they will be unable to comply. These people are, according to the theorists, transgender or 'gender queer'.

When the relationship between sex and gender is considered arbitrary, 'It is the perception that the base property (or properties) is present that matters ... not the actual presence of it,'¹⁷ or, in other words, it is the *perception* that someone is male or female that determines how others respond to them and the gender that is then conferred upon them, rather than their actually *being* male or female. Primary and secondary sex characteristics are significant only in the sense that their presence (or absence) creates a perception that others respond to.

Following the logic of Butler's theory, Asta argues gender precedes and constructs sex: 'the schemas of gender determine what bodies and body parts get sexed.'¹⁸ As a result, gender becomes freed from biology only for anatomy to be tied to public perception: 'To be of a certain gender, for example, is to be taken to have bodily features presumed to be evidence of a role in biological reproduction and be placed in a hierarchical power structure as a result.'¹⁹ When gender is understood to be distinct from sex, and both categories are constructed through a socially inscribed performance, then the responses and attitudes of others to that performance become all important. When there is no biology underpinning gender and there is no agent determining the performance then the performance itself,

and the interaction it compels, is all. As Asta puts it, 'If you are taken to identify with being a woman in a context, you are a woman in that context.'²⁰ This emphasis on perception goes some way towards explaining why leading figures in the transgender movement are so concerned with compelling particular language use and enshrining in law the rights of transgender women to access spaces and opportunities reserved exclusively for females.

Bringing biology back in

Most recently, there has been a shift in thinking about gender that heralds a renewed focus on biology. This is not a return to the idea that sex is inscribed in chromosomes, hormones and genitalia but a shift towards understanding gender identity, an internal sense of being male or female, as being 'hardwired into the brain at birth.'²¹ One theory is that this process of 'hardwiring' occurs through prenatal exposure to abnormal levels of sex hormones or endocrine influences linked with the developing brain's sensitivity to androgen and testosterone secretions in utero. However, there is little scientific evidence to support this proposition.

There are generally thought to be some differences between male and female brains. Subcortically, the amygdala is larger in men and has a higher density of androgen than oestrogen receptors, whereas portions of the hippocampus are larger in women, with a higher density of oestrogen than androgen receptors.²² Sex differences in brain morphology, connectivity, and function are thought to underlie sex differences in behaviour, psychopathology, and cognitive performance on certain tasks. In general, men have less trouble with visuospatial tasks, whereas women outperform men in verbal fluency tasks. Sex differences in brain activation during mental rotation exercises have also

been shown: men show predominantly parietal activation, while women additionally show more interior frontal activation.²³

It is worth noting that differences in the brain are, like height and weight, on a continuum rather than being marked by a clear distinction. This means that attempts to demarcate male and female brains rely upon averages and just as some women may be taller than some men, likewise some women may have a larger than average amygdala and some men a larger than average hippocampus. As a result, there is little consensus about either the exact nature or the significance of differences between male and female brains. Scientists have failed to establish a definitive model of a sexed brain. Stephanie Davies-Arai, founder of *Transgender Trend*, explains that:

‘Conclusions drawn from brain scans are vastly overblown. It’s not that men and women are exactly the same because there are average differences in some areas. But those average differences mean that, for example, it is only about 60% likely that someone who is good at spatial reasoning will be male – and of course an individual woman may score higher on this count than an individual man. In every aspect of life, there’s nature and nurture, boys and girls are treated differently even before they are born.’²⁴

The cognitive neuroscientist Cordelia Fine mounts a strong challenge to what she labels as the ‘neurosexism’ that portrays attributes such as intelligence, spatial awareness and empathy as differentially hardwired into male and female brains.²⁵

The desire to locate a difference between male and female brains that compels a difference in personality and behaviour was once driven by conservative thinkers in search of a naturalised explanation for gender differences. Today,

conservative thinkers are joined by those who consider themselves to be at the forefront of challenging society's views on gender. One reason for this is that the existence of a sexed brain paves the way for the view that some people can be born with a biological disjuncture between brain and body making transgender a form of intersex located within the brain.

At present, intersex is defined specifically as a condition in which chromosomal sex is inconsistent with phenotypic sex, or in which the phenotype is not classifiable as either male or female. Far from being fairly common, as transgender activists suggest, the phenomenon of intersex occurs in fewer than 2 out of every 10,000 births.²⁶ Just as an intersex person is born with mixed or indeterminate genitalia, or having mixed or indeterminate chromosomes and phenotype, so it is argued a fetus may develop with a male brain and a female body or vice versa. If this happens then, apparently, incongruence can exist between a person's internal sense of being male or female and their external anatomical sex characteristics.

The search for a sexed brain has morphed into the search for a transgender brain. Sex-typical cognitive abilities have been studied in people with gender incongruence to determine whether they show performance and activation patterns like their natal sex or gender identity. In one mental rotation study, transgender women (assigned male at birth) differed from a control groups of males in brain activation: the control men showed greater activation in the left parietal region, while untreated and hormone-treated transgender women exhibited stronger activation in the temporal-occipital regions.²⁷ One neuroimaging study showed that 'gray matter volumes of adolescents with gender dysphoria are, on a whole brain level, in line with their natal sex, but

when analyses are done in regions of interest, there is some indication for sex atypical differentiation.²⁸ A third study suggests genetic involvement in the development of gender incongruence, meaning that the brains of people with early onset gender incongruence show a gross morphology similar to their natal sex but white matter microstructure is demasculinized in transgender women (natal male) and masculinized in transgender men (natal female).²⁹

The existence of a 'transgender brain' remains highly contested. It is fundamentally premised upon the existence of a sexed brain which, as we have seen, is also contested. Even if we do accept that male and female brains differ, there is no evidence of a complete sex reversal in the brain structures of people with gender incongruence. Not only have few studies been conducted but in those that have, techniques, design and samples are very diverse making it difficult to draw firm conclusions or to replicate findings. Furthermore, the relationship between cause and effect is not straightforward: it might be the case that people who come to believe they are a different gender to their natal sex may exhibit behaviours stereotypically associated with their adopted gender which in turn shows up in neuro-imaging. To a certain extent, whatever brain scans do or do not show is of little relevance in understanding social attitudes. As Davies-Arai makes clear: 'We don't define men and women by their brains. Doing so would be essentialist and the logical conclusion is frightening: will we introduce brain tests to see who is really a boy and who is really a girl?'³⁰

The UK's Department of Health (DoH) confirms that 'there is no physical test ... for detecting gender variance that may develop into adult dysphoria.' Yet rather than concluding from this assertion that transgender is a social rather than biological condition, the Department suggests that

‘clinicians must rely on the young person’s own account.’³¹ Because “‘brain sex” is not readily apparent,’ it is argued that ‘transgender people must be believed about who they are.’³² This emphasis on belief suggests that transgender people can detect a biologically inscribed male or female essence – a skill denied to the overwhelming majority of the population.

Whatever neuro-imaging may purport to show, a female who can read a map is clearly no more a man than a male who can iron a shirt is a woman. As Davies-Arai argues, ‘It’s a political idea that we have a sense of gender identity which exists independent of both our biological sex and our gendered socialisation.’³³ Yet transgender activists continue to promote the idea that people are born with a gender; or, in other words, that humans emerge into the world with a fully formed male soul or female essence – or even a non-binary, genderless essence – that is located within our bodies or our brains. According to this way of thinking, gender is an innate sense we have of ourselves that is entirely independent of both anatomy and social expectation. As Davies-Arai explains, ‘This idea is really contentious. How can we be born with a fully-formed, intact idea of our own identity?’³⁴ The logical consequence of this view returns us to a pre-Wollstonecraft sense that biology is destiny: only now it is our gendered essence, rather than our genitalia, that determines our life course.

The shift from exploring the physical attributes of male and female brains to detecting a gendered-essence takes us from sketchy and inconsistent evidence into the terrain of pure fantasy. Gender is a socially constructed property; that is, it is dependent on human thoughts, attitudes and practices. The idea that a socially constructed concept can be biologically inscribed within the structure of the brain

and only transgender individuals themselves are able to unlock and interpret the inscriptions makes little sense. The impact of society and culture in shaping people's actions is completely overlooked. As Alice Dreger puts it, 'whether you end up living as an out gay man, a closeted gay man, or a straight transgender woman depends not only on biology, but also on cultural tolerance of various identities.'³⁵

Gender dysphoria

Despite the absence of evidence, gender theorists and transgender activists continue to promote the view that there are two quite distinct sets of biological sex characteristics: outer, anatomical characteristics and an inner sense of gender identity. For some people, inner and outer sex characteristics are aligned (these people are labelled 'cis-gendered' by transgender activists keen to challenge the idea that there is a 'normal' relationship between sex and gender) but for transgender people, inner and outer sex characteristics conflict. This conflict, present even prior to the moment of birth, may lead to a condition known as gender dysphoria, or 'the ongoing distress that arises from the incongruity of assigned sex at birth and internal experience of gender.' Gender dysphoria is listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, version 5 (DSM-5)³⁶ although this has proved controversial as activists argue that being transgender is not a mental disorder.

It is advantageous for activists to promote the idea that people are born with an internal sense of gender identity. It suggests that being transgender is not simply a choice; just as we have come to understand in relation to sexuality, transgender people are simply 'born this way'. This assertion is used to claim that transgender people have always existed and it is only now that there is greater awareness and

acceptance that they can finally can be their 'true selves'. The claim to have been 'born this way' now forms the basis for a collective identity. To be transgender is not just to make an individual claim but to stake a claim to group membership. Biology-based groupings were once rejected by a previous generation of activists who sought to distance themselves from what they considered to be reductionist perceptions of who they were and what they could become. As academic Terry Murray points out, they urged others not to define them by reference to genitalia, skin colour or group stereotypes. In contrast, 'today's transgender activists demand *recognition* of their allegedly innate difference, believing that membership in a biologically or essentially distinct group should entitle them to civil rights and legal recognition.'³⁷

Far from being a naturally occurring phenomenon that has existed across space and time, transgenderism – an ideology that promotes the view that everyone has a true gendered essence that is entirely distinct from a socially constructed sexed-body – is a recent invention. The transsexuals of yesteryear did not deny the reality of having been born male or female even as they sought to change sex, neither did cross-dressers who experimented and played with sexual conventions and stereotypes. In contrast, transgender people today are the creation of gender theory from within the academy merging with developments in surgery and psychiatry. Butler and her followers developed the idea of gender as a performance, floating free of any notion of biological sex, but it was only with advances in medicine, the capacity to change the bodies of those born with indeterminate genitals and to assign them to a sex, that this became more than an academic preoccupation.

Having been made real by medical intervention, gender dysphoria is also purportedly treated by medical

interventions that bring the body more closely in line with a person's gender identity. Such 'treatments' may include hormones to delay the onset of puberty and the development of secondary sex characteristics; cross sex hormones in order to induce masculine or feminine characteristics and, ultimately, surgery. In turn, it is claimed that the very process of transition from one gender to another, involving surgery and hormone therapy, brings about biological changes to the body and 'may alter some of the defining aspects of biological sex.'³⁸ Yet, even if reliable evidence that brain-based gender identity can differ from anatomical sex is one day found, it does not have to lead to a view that anatomy should be altered in line with the brain. It could, instead, be an argument for social change to expand what we consider to be 'normal' male and female attributes and behaviour.

Transgender children

Children have come to be at the centre of much debate around transgender issues. Brunskell-Evans argues that 'belief in the existential "transgender child" has become so universally accepted that it is now counter-intuitive to suggest that "the transgender child" is an historically invented figure.'³⁹ This, again, serves activists well. Children appear to prove the claim that transgender is a naturally-occurring and ever-present phenomenon, so much so that we forget how recently transgender children have been inserted into the popular imagination. Brunskell-Evans traces the creation of the transgender child over a period of some three decades:

'The past thirty years have been witness to the invention of two identities for the transgender child: the first is that of the unfortunate victim "born in the wrong body", i.e. whose gender self-identification requires medical diagnosis and

hormone treatment (GIRES, Mermaids); the second is that of the revolutionary adolescent who bravely sensitises the older generation, including trained clinicians, to the subtleties, complexities and politics of gender (Gendered Intelligence). These seemingly contrasting identities are still evolving and taking shape, but are increasingly synthesised into the one figure that we know today, namely “the transgender child.”⁴⁰

Transgender children may have developed over a thirty year period but their prominence in society and in the popular imagination is far more recent. It is only since 2015 that the existence of the transgender child has come to be accepted outside of specialist and activist cliques. Since this time, the existence of children who experience a mismatch between their gendered essence and their anatomy is now taken for granted by many social workers, teachers, psychiatrists and health professionals. Nonetheless, the transgender child remains a contested figure. As children’s author and special needs teacher Rachel Rooney explains:

‘Personally, I don’t think there’s such a thing as a transgender child; there’s just a child with a mind that’s not yet fully developed. I don’t believe we have an innate gender identity. I think we are products of our environment and children’s brains are not properly formed, they go through stages. So I don’t really understand how a four year old boy can have more of an understanding of gender than I do, because I do not know what it is to feel like a woman.’⁴¹

In the next chapter, we consider the impact of changed attitudes towards sex and gender upon society in general and the lived experiences of women and children in particular.

2.

The impact of transgender ideology

Statistics

We do not know precisely how many people in the UK identify as transgender. Questions about gender identity (as opposed to sex) have not appeared on the national census although this is expected to change in 2021. As Stonewall notes, no research has been done ‘that covers enough people to be statistically significant.’⁴² Most estimates put the proportion of the population who identify as transgender or gender non-binary (meaning either both or neither male or female) at between 0.5 and 1% of the population. However, as we shall see, many of these statistics are compiled by activist groups who are incentivised to promote higher figures.

Stonewall, for example, claim that:

‘The best estimate at the moment is that around 1 per cent of the population might identify as trans, including people who identify as non-binary. That would mean about 600,000 trans and non-binary people in Britain, out of a population of over 60 million.’⁴³

The UK government uses a slightly lower figure. In its consultation on reform of the Gender Recognition Act, it estimates that between 200,000 and 500,000 adults in the

UK identify as transgender.⁴⁴ In the US, it is estimated that 0.6 per cent of the population, or 1.4 million people, are transgender.⁴⁵ By means of comparison, the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities 'are more than six times larger, comprising about 3.5 percent of the population.'⁴⁶ A widely-cited study conducted by Fausto-Sterling suggests that around 1.7 per cent of people are intersex,⁴⁷ that is, they are born with indeterminate or mixed genitalia. However, as Leonard Sax points out, 'this figure includes conditions which most clinicians do not recognize as intersex, such as Klinefelter syndrome, Turner syndrome, and late-onset adrenal hyperplasia.' Sax argues:

'If the term intersex is to retain any meaning, the term should be restricted to those conditions in which chromosomal sex is inconsistent with phenotypic sex, or in which the phenotype is not classifiable as either male or female. Applying this more precise definition, the true prevalence of intersex is seen to be about 0.018%, almost 100 times lower than Fausto-Sterling's estimate of 1.7%.'⁴⁸

Estimating numbers of transgender people is complicated by the fact that only a small proportion of transgender people legally transition, that is, seek a gender recognition certificate and change the sex on their birth certificate. According to the group *Fair Play for Women*, as of June 2018, only 4,910 Gender Recognition Certificates had been granted. Three quarters of these were to male-born transgender people who were mostly above the age of fifty.⁴⁹ Among people who identify as transgender, only a tiny proportion (estimated to be 0.01%) undertakes medical interventions such as surgery or hormone therapy.⁵⁰ This means that the vast majority of transgender people are simply self-identified and retain a male or female body according to their sex.

Although the number of transgender people is small as a proportion of the overall population, the number of children, and girls in particular, identifying as transgender is increasing rapidly. There have been year-on-year increases in the number of children being referred by doctors to the NHS's Gender Identity Development Service. Between 2018 and 2019, the number of 13-year-olds referred rose by 30 per cent on the previous year, while the number of 11-year-olds was up by 28 per cent.⁵¹ The youngest patients were just three years old. Yet to be properly understood, these figures are best considered over a longer time period. The decade 2008-2018 saw a 4,400 per cent increase in the number of girls being referred for treatment. Three-quarters of all children seeking help to change their gender are now girls.⁵²

In under a decade, there has been a marked shift in the 'typical' profile of a transgender person. The psychotherapist James Caspian notes that:

'It was around 2012/13 that, along with other clinicians, I noticed that the profile of the patients we were seeing was changing. If you go back to the early 2000s research suggests that the median age of people approaching clinics wanting to transition was about 41 and they tended to be natal males wanting to transition to females. But then the age started coming down and we were seeing more people of both sexes. We noticed we were seeing a lot of younger women. They were quite a lot younger, to the point where, over a five year period, three times as many younger women were coming and asking for treatment than older men.'

'The histories they were giving were also changing. In clinical practice, The DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] tells you the person has to fulfil certain criteria in order to qualify for treatment. But we were starting to see a departure from the pattern. We were seeing

more people who seemed to be influenced by the internet, by Reddit and Tumblr, sites like that. And more people who were giving all sorts of labels to their gender identity, like 'non-binary' and 'gender queer'. Some weren't wanting to transition, they were just wanting bits of body modification to go along with their new gender identity. We were obviously noticing this and wondering what was going on.'⁵³

Children are seeking medical help with transitioning at ever younger ages. In 2019, the *Times* reported that over half of all the children seen by the Tavistock, the UK's national clinic specialising in treating children 'who experience difficulties in the development of their gender identity', are now under the age of 14.⁵⁴ The number of 13-year-olds referred for help in the past year rose by 30 per cent to 331, while the number of 11-year-olds was up by 28 per cent on the previous year. The youngest patients were just three years old. Three quarters of children who want help to change their gender are now girls – the highest proportion ever recorded.

These figures are best understood when placed within a longer time frame. As noted on *Transgender Trend*:

'In 2009/10 there were 32 girls and 40 boys referred to Tavistock GIDS. In 2011/12 the sex ratio reversed and the gap between boys and girls has continued to widen year on year ever since. The total number of referrals for 2018/19 in England alone was 624 boys and 1,740 girls. In less than a decade there has been a 1,460% increase in referrals of boys and a staggering 5,337% increase in girls.'⁵⁵

Even these figures do not expose the true extent of the increase in the number of children identifying as transgender as they show a fall in the number of 17 year-olds being referred to the Tavistock. This may be because they are now being referred directly to adult services. Even 16 year-olds

may prefer to wait for an appointment at an adult clinic where they know they will have access to hormones with fewer assessments than at the Tavistock. For these reasons, the 6% rise in referrals between 2018 and 2019 does not represent a slowing down but the continuation of a rapidly expanding social phenomenon. James Caspian urges us to keep in mind that:

‘People transition for lots of reasons. The idea that there’s one intrinsic way of being trans is wrong. The most successful outcomes were for people who had had a very long-standing sense of identifying as a member of the opposite sex.’⁵⁶

From transgender to transgenderism

Despite sudden and rapid increases, the proportion of the population who identify as transgender remains tiny. Nonetheless, transgender adults are disproportionately represented in certain professions. For example, an internal survey conducted by the BBC suggests that over 400 transgender people are employed by the corporation: in other words, transgender people are four times more likely to be employed at the BBC than found within the general population.⁵⁷ Media coverage of transgender issues is out of all proportion to the actual number of transgender people.

One reason for this disproportionate coverage is that the term ‘transgender’ not only refers to individuals with gender dysphoria but is also used to define and cohere a distinct political and social community of activists. Support for transgender people – and advocacy for transgenderism more broadly – have become political signifiers of a progressive ideological approach. With the major civil rights victories of the late twentieth century almost secure, activists look to new areas to initiate change. As a result, there is often rhetorical slippage between transgender individuals and a

broader political movement: not all who advocate on behalf of the transgender community are themselves transgender and not all transgender people identify with the broader political movement established in their name. As just one example of this political advocacy, three of the candidates in the Labour leadership contest, Lisa Nandy, Rebecca Long Bailey and Emily Thornberry, signed a pledge produced by the group Labour Campaign for Trans Rights.⁵⁸ This was controversial because the pledge called for the expulsion of party members who hold ‘bigoted, transphobic views’ such as not accepting the mantra that transgender women are women. This definition encompassed many gender critical feminists who had been long standing Labour Party activists and trade union members. Meanwhile, Debbie Hayton, a teacher and transgender woman, argued that the pledge was not about supporting trans people but about ‘the misuse of transgender rights to impose identity politics on the Labour Party.’⁵⁹

Legislation

In the UK, both sex and ‘gender reassignment’ are characteristics protected under the 2010 Equality Act. This provides legal protection against discrimination, harassment and victimisation. According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, sex can mean ‘either male or female, or a group of people like men or boys, or women or girls.’⁶⁰ The Gender Recognition Act (GRA) 2004 states that, ‘Where a full gender recognition certificate is issued to a person, the person’s gender becomes for all purposes the acquired gender (so that, if the acquired gender is the male gender, the person’s sex becomes that of a man and, if it is the female gender, the person’s sex becomes that of a woman).’⁶¹ The collocation of the words ‘male’ and ‘female’

with ‘gender’ is striking. More usually, ‘male’ and ‘female’ are associated with ‘sex’ rather than ‘gender’. This phrasing appears to confirm the latest thinking of the gender theorists that rather than sex preceding a socially constructed gender, an individual’s acquired gender becomes the sex he or she has recognised in law, meaning that gender identity now precedes sex.⁶²

Gender reassignment is defined in the 2010 Act as, ‘the process of transitioning from one gender to another.’⁶³ The emphasis on the *process* rather than the outcomes has been interpreted by activist groups as suggesting that transgender people secure legal protections at the point of self-identification rather than when they have a gender recognition certificate or have undergone surgery. This means that, in practice, protection comes to be based on gender identity rather than on having a gender recognition certificate.

However, as Davies-Arai points out:

‘There is no mention of gender identity in the GRA. It makes reference only to a very small group of transsexuals. Back when the GRA was first written, there was an expectation that this small group of transsexuals would go through medical change and that would be it. It wasn’t considered controversial.’⁶⁴

Nicola Williams, the Director of *Fair Play for Women* adds:

‘When the GRA was first discussed in the early 2000s some radical feminists sounded the alarm, but they were largely ignored and the risk was dismissed. It was sold as a simple way to improve the lives of a few thousand severely dysphoric post-operative transsexuals. Numbers considered so small that the European Court of Human Rights said that “society could reasonably be expected to tolerate it”.’

Since then things have dramatically changed. Williams continues:

‘Over the years that have gone by, trans ideology has changed, stripping away the need for surgery, stripping away even the need for a diagnosis of gender dysphoria. We are now being faced with the prospect of opening up the entire sex category to any male who says he’s female. If any man can be a woman, the word woman becomes meaningless and so do women’s rights. This is now a crisis situation that women can’t ignore or be expected to simply tolerate.’⁶⁵

James Caspian helps explain how the remit of the GRA came to be expanded: ‘The entirely well-meaning GRA 2004 was very necessary.’ He points out that ‘The Equalities Act [EA] 2010 entrenched the idea that minority groups needed extra protection. This meant that public bodies had a requirement to have policies on gender identity.’ Caspian cites Foucault’s view that if you legislate for something then you help to create it. In legislating for public bodies to take account of gender identity, the government (driven by campaigners) shone a light on the concept of gender identity:

‘The EA has exemptions for single sex spaces but it was instrumental in bringing all these issues into the public sphere in a way they hadn’t been before. At the same time, we now have mass use of the internet. Social media was on the rise so ideas were spreading instantly and to large groups of people who wouldn’t previously have had access to them.’⁶⁶

The GRA, in its initial incarnation, was heavily influenced by the demands of campaigners. Williams explains, ‘The transgender activists have been active for a very long time, many decades. They were lobbying for the Gender Recognition Act 2004 back in the 1990s. They have been pushing towards self-ID for a very long time.’⁶⁷ More

recently, and despite having expanded far beyond its original remit, the GRA has been widely criticised by transgender activists for not going far enough and for unnecessarily overcomplicating and medicalising the process of changing gender. It has also been criticised for reinforcing a 'binary norm' as people are compelled to label themselves according to one of two gender categories:

'a conformity that those who feel that they fit within both the binary gender and sex of their migratory role may find reinforcing but which those who do not feel that they fit within either category may find restrictive for essentially misrepresenting their sense of reality as a transgender person.'⁶⁸

In response to these criticisms, a consultation on reform of the Gender Recognition Act (2004) was held between July and October 2018. The key focus of the consultation was a proposal to end the requirement that applicants for a Gender Recognition Certificate must prove either that they have the medical condition of gender dysphoria or that they have lived as a member of the opposite gender for a minimum of two years. Stonewall describes this as 'a stressful, dehumanising and traumatic process for trans people to go through.'⁶⁹ Instead, the consultation suggested, gender could become a simple matter of self-identification. As Davies-Arai explains:

'Now much greater changes are being lobbied for through schools and through the NHS based entirely on the basis of self-id. Campaigners aggressively lobby for both self-id and the prescription of hormones and medical interventions for children at an earlier and earlier age.'⁷⁰

Many of the recent controversies that have appeared to pitch feminists against members of the transgender community

hinge primarily upon this issue of self-identification. It sets up a direct conflict between sex-based rights and protections and rights based upon gender identity. It paves the way for males to be able to enter female-protected spaces and access provision intended for females.

At present, as a result of a change of government, and no doubt as a consequence of how fiercely contested all debate in this area has become, the proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act (2004) have been paused. In Scotland, however, the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill is currently in the final stages of consultation. The Bill, due to pass through the Scottish Parliament, will require applicants for a gender recognition certificate to live in their acquired gender for a minimum of just three months. As *Transgender Trend* indicate in their response to the consultation, three months is a very short period of time, equivalent to only the first term at university or college, when a young person may be away from home for the first time and coping with loneliness, new freedoms and the pressure from peers to conform to current generational 'norms' of behaviour and beliefs.⁷¹ The Scottish Bill also raises the prospect of lowering the minimum age at which a person can apply for legal gender recognition from 18 to 16 – an age at which children would still be considered too young to purchase cigarettes or alcohol. A key assumption driving the Scottish proposals is that 'there is lack of evidence that including trans women in women-only services and spaces has negative impacts.'⁷² Yet there is little evidence of thorough consultation with women's groups or the concerns that women have raised being taken into account.

If gender becomes simply a question of individual identification, rights and spaces intended exclusively for females become available for self-identified women, that is,

males. This has serious consequences for how we organise society. It raises fundamental questions about women's safety and liberty. It also has consequences for the treatment of children.

Children

Changing attitudes towards sex and gender have an impact upon children. Transgenderism, as taught to children formally in the context of their education, and informally through television, social media and the broader culture touches upon the life of every child. Children are taught not to assume that a person's body provides any indication as to whether they are male or female but that their gender identity is a matter of how they feel and their body should be brought in line with their feelings. The children's author and teacher Rachel Rooney explains:

'I'm really noticing a plethora of books for children introducing the idea of gender identity at a very young age. The last one I saw was about a nonbinary guinea pig. This is just ridiculous. These are adult thoughts being put onto children. Children don't come up with this on their own. There are children, and I was one of them, who want to be a boy. I wanted to be a boy for many years but I grew out of it. So I'm seeing all these books that are teaching ideas around gender identity and I wanted to produce a book that slightly tempered that, not obviously, not in an aggressive or overly challenging way'.

Davies-Arai also reflects on changed attitudes to childhood: 'When I was a child I thought I was a boy. My role model was Just William.'⁷³ Both Rooney and Davies-Arai worried that if they were children today, they would be encouraged to think of themselves as having been born in the wrong body.

Rooney's book, *My Body Is Me*, aims to counteract this trend:

'The message of this book is meant to be a celebration of the human body as the vessel that keeps us alive in all its forms and all its variants. I wanted to promote an appreciation of one's own body. I wanted it to be life affirming and to challenge sex stereotypes and to show that the body you're in, whether that be male or female, whether you're a boy or a girl, it's for engaging in a range of behaviours and a breadth of activities and our bodies don't restrict children... you can perform in any way you like but you always come back to being yourself at the end of the day.'⁷⁴

Rooney suggests that at present, 'There's a sense of gas lighting young children.' Certainly encouraging young children to question their gender identity before they are even certain as to their sex can lead to confusion: 'the idea is coming in that if you are an effeminate boy or a very tomboyish girl then maybe you're not a boy or a girl after all.' This provides one explanation for the huge growth in the number of children seeking medical help to transition. It can make being transgender seem far more prevalent than it is in reality and it can, as Rooney points out, lead to 'setting up a dissatisfaction with themselves from a very young age.'⁷⁵ Davies-Arai argues that rather than encouraging children to feel unhappy in their own bodies, we should instead be treating body dysmorphia as a serious mental health concern like self-harm or eating disorders. Instead, she suggests, wanting to transition 'is not seen as a female adolescent mental health issue because these girls are not counted as girls but as boys.'⁷⁶

Stephanie Davies-Arai points to another risk with current teaching about gender:

‘Children are being confused about biological sex, we are leaving them with no grasp of what is real and what is just a feeling. This mainly affects girls; girls are no longer taught how to understand their own bodies. The female sex is being erased, we become reduced to “menstruators” or “uterus havers”.’

The problem with this, as Davies-Arai spells out, is that:

‘When we define “boy” and “girl” as just subjective feelings we take away all boundaries between the sexes. No boundaries are possible, everything is mixed sex: toilets, changing rooms, overnight accommodation. This is a red flag! It’s taking away girls’ rights to establish boundaries with the opposite sex, their right to say “no”.’⁷⁷

A 13 year-old girl applied for a judicial review of Oxfordshire County Council’s guidance to schools. The girl, known only as ‘Miss A,’ raised concerns with the Council’s ‘Trans Inclusion Toolkit for Schools 2019’. This guidance dictates that transgender pupils should be able to use the toilets, changing rooms and dormitories on residential trips that match their gender identity. In other words, transgender girls must have access to all previously female-only spaces meaning that girls like Miss A, young women conscious of how their bodies are changing and developing, face the prospect of stripping down to their underwear before and after every PE class alongside young men. They face dealing with the messiness and embarrassment that comes with menstruation in toilets shared with teenage boys. Overnight history trips or foreign exchanges could see girls being made to share a bedroom with boys. In May 2020 it was announced that Oxfordshire County Council would be withdrawing the guidance although it is still in use in other local authorities.

Davies-Arai points out that ‘Both sexes have a right to privacy. The rate of sexual harassment in schools is off the scale. There is a real lack of duty of care towards girls. If girls protest then they are excluded, not the boys.’⁷⁸ Yet most campaigners who, in other circumstances, are quite convinced that teenage boys pose a risk to teenage girls, have little to say when it comes to boys who have male bodies but identify as girls. Demands for better protection and safe spaces are dropped in favour of being trans inclusive. However, the need for girls to have access to single sex spaces is not simply about safety. It is also about privacy. Even if boys pose no risk at all to girls in changing rooms and toilets, girls should still have a right to privacy. In insisting that ‘trans girls are girls’, Oxfordshire County Council’s guidance for schools makes schools a riskier and less welcoming place for girls. This risks turning the clock back over a century on women’s hard won equality.

Transgender ideology has an impact upon all children but it is of particular consequence for individual children who come to see themselves as transgender. Genoveve Simmons raises concerns about changing gender being positively promoted to children:

‘I am very worried about how transgender ideology is manipulating young people. I see it as a form of grooming, there’s a disturbing glamorization and romanticisation of transitioning. The way that it is done, it’s predatory but young people don’t see it that way because they are being manipulated so hard.’⁷⁹

Author and academic Heather Brunskell-Evans offers one explanation as to why children have become the focus of transgender ideology: ‘Transgender adults are dependent upon trans children.’⁸⁰ Sarah Phillimore, a barrister and member of *Fair Cop*, argues that, ‘Individual children are

being sacrificed to wider queer theory. Campaigners think that they can usher in a new golden age where no one is held back by biology or assumptions – but this is crazy.⁸¹

As previously noted, an increasing number of children, especially girls, are coming to identify as transgender. Current orthodoxy, promoted by advocates from the transgender community, is that best practice for children who identify as transgender is ‘positive affirmation’ or, in other words, complete and uncritical acceptance that the child really is the gender they claim to be. It is argued that not affirming the child’s new gender is psychologically damaging. Brunskell-Evans describes this as ‘a postmodern turn in psychotherapy.’⁸² As a result, positive affirmation has been taken on board as the correct way to deal with transgender children by teachers, social workers, therapists and health professionals. James Caspian notes:

‘The memorandum of understanding says that affirmation is non-negotiable. As a therapist you affirm how your client feels. But this is not what the advice means. It means you are no longer allowed to probe the unconscious. And this is at a time when we are seeing younger female patients presenting with a far wider range of mental health problems. This calls into question the entire practice of psychotherapy.’⁸³

Positive affirmation has become widely accepted as best practice despite there being little evidence to support the claimed benefits of this approach. As Stephanie Davies-Arai and Susan Matthews argue in *Inventing Transgender Children and Young Adults*, ‘By allowing trans and queer activists to dictate policy, teachers are being led to support a clinically-contested, controversial and experimental ‘affirmation’ approach to gender dysphoria.’⁸⁴ One consequence of this is that concerns and questions raised by the parents of children who identify as transgender are either overlooked or, worse,

seen to run counter to the best interests of their own child. This can lead to parents being marginalised and excluded from discussions among social workers and clinicians as to the best course of intervention for their child.

Children and adolescents, in the process of growing up, frequently change their minds about who they are and the type of adult they want, one day, to become. It may be the case that some children who come to see themselves as transgender are simply experimenting or going through a phase. One danger with positive affirmation is that it risks consolidating this new identity thereby making it more difficult for the child to change their minds at a later date. Furthermore, positive affirmation rejects any questioning as to what might lie behind a child's declarations in relation to their gender identity. As Roberto D'Angelo writes:

'We do not ask what it means in the context of their particular developmental history or their current family and social context to be a man or a woman. Such questions are considered pathologising because they appear to seek out the causes and aetiology of the child's gendered experience, rather than accept it as an innate, 'true' essence.'⁸⁵

As we will come on to discuss in chapter 3, a child who comes to see him or herself as transgender may be experiencing social or emotional problems that precede concerns about their gender identity. As Davies-Arai and Matthews note, 'Increasing numbers of young people who identify as transgender have pre-existing mental health problems, past trauma or troubled backgrounds.' In one recent study, 10% had suffered past sexual abuse (Bechard et al., 2017). 35% of children referred to the Tavistock clinic exhibit moderate to severe autistic traits (Butler et al., 2018).⁸⁶ Uncritically accepting that the transgender child's problems are located in his or her body and that 'treatment' requires confirming

their self-perception leaves every other problem the child might be experiencing not just untreated but entirely unexplored. In practice, this means that the transgender child's psychological and emotional needs are sacrificed to a political and ideological stance. This is an abdication of adult responsibility towards children. As two female 'detransitioners' note, 'Wrongfully focusing on transgender identification and beginning medical transitioning does not, of course, mean your other problems cease to exist.'⁸⁷ A long-term follow up study led by Cecilia Dhejne into 'Transsexual Persons Undergoing Sex Reassignment Surgery' suggests that the risk of suicide after transition may be as much as 19 times higher than for the average population.⁸⁸

Stephanie Davies-Arai points to a further problem with positive affirmation. Telling a child that their 'correct' gender is not the one associated with their sex but the one they perceive themselves to be involves a denial of the most fundamental facts about the human body. When such children inevitably experience puberty (that is, of course, if they are not prescribed puberty blocking hormones) they are left completely unprepared for the way in which their body will change. The biological reality of their changing body provides a starkly visual indicator that what they have come to believe about their gender is little more than fantasy. As Davies-Arai notes:

'We cannot know the extent to which "affirmation" may be a contributing factor to the suicidal feelings experienced by some children as they are brought face to face with the biological reality they had been led to believe was immaterial.'⁸⁹

Positive affirmation is often simply the first step in a process known as 'social transition' whereby a child may adopt a

new name and come to be referred to using the pronouns in line with their chosen gender rather than their biological sex. They may also wear clothes and expect to use toilets and changing rooms appropriate for their new gender identity. To all intents and purposes, the child, at this point, effectively lives as a member of the opposite sex. In some instances, this can happen with the backing of teachers and social workers but without the support of the child's parents. The further a child proceeds along the path of social transition, the more difficult it becomes for them to revert to living as their original sex. To do so would involve not only personal acknowledgement that they have made a mistake but a public declaration that they are not deserving of the praise that has often been lauded upon them.

Social transition paves the way for medical interventions which, for children, can begin with hormones to stop the onset of puberty but may, for older teenagers, also include cross-sex hormones. Such hormone therapies are presented as 'life saving' for transgender children struggling to come to terms with their developing bodies yet it seems at best highly simplistic and at worst dangerous to suggest that feeling suicidal is best treated through puberty blockers rather than psychotherapy and anti-depressants. Yet puberty blockers are frequently presented to young people as a straightforward and temporary solution to the apparent 'problem' of their changing body. In a widely-viewed BBC programme aimed at children, Dr Polly Carmichael, Director of the Tavistock, talks to a teenage transgender boy, Leo. She tells Leo:

'The blocker is an injection that someone has every month which pauses the body and stops it from carrying on to grow up into a man or a woman. ... And the good thing about it is, if you stop the injections, it's like pressing a start button and

the body just carries on developing as it would if you hadn't taken the injection'.⁹⁰

The side effects of otherwise healthy adolescents taking such medication on a long term basis are simply unknown. There have been no long term trials conducted on the use of puberty-blockers in childhood. One trial was conducted on 50 children prescribed triptorelin but the full results of the trial were never fully published, leading one writer to suggest that the trial was 'a pretext to administer unlicensed drugs rather than an attempt to gain scientific knowledge.'⁹¹ The results that were released show that, 'After a year on triptorelin, children reported greater self harm; girls also experienced more behavioural and emotional problems and expressed greater dissatisfaction with their body.'⁹² Puberty blockers may cause irreparable harm to a child's developing body and have a detrimental impact on future fertility. Even the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) acknowledges that, 'we don't know the full psychological effects of the blocker or whether it alters the course of adolescent brain development.'⁹³ We do know that puberty is not intended to be 'paused' and re-started on a whim.

As a society, we forbid people below the age of 18 from purchasing cigarettes or alcohol yet we deem them capable of consenting to body altering drugs. Currently, Susan Evans, a former psychiatric nurse at the Tavistock and 'Mrs A', the mother of a 15-year-old girl with autism currently waiting for an appointment at the centre, are awaiting the outcome of a judicial review against the clinic and NHS England. They argue that as children cannot give informed consent to the intervention, puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones should be provided only on a case by case basis following a specific court order. Writing on the CrowdJustice website to

raise money for her legal case, Mrs A points out that, ‘no one (let alone my daughter) understands the risks and therefore cannot ensure informed consent is obtained.’⁹⁴ Sarah Phillimore questions why children are ‘afforded agency at a very young age, which they just don’t have. Why are adults so keen to create this army of mutilated children?’⁹⁵

Keira Bell, a 23 year-old woman who was prescribed puberty blockers at the age of 16 and testosterone at the age of 17 before going on to have her breasts removed at the age of 20, is currently taking legal action against the Tavistock Clinic. Bell argues that she should have been challenged more by medical staff over her decision to transition to a male as a teenager. Bell describes herself as a tomboy as a child who decided to transition after being exposed to information online. As she went further down the medical route, Bell claims, ‘one step led to another.’⁹⁶ Davies-Arai argues:

‘It’s horrendous that kids are getting irreversible treatments and we don’t know what the psychological impact will be on children of this generation. This is being presented to children as a youth movement but it is not a youth movement at all. It is based on queer theory and developed in the academy where it is taught to students in “gender studies”. It is the epitome of ivory tower thinking and totally divorced from material reality.’⁹⁷

Under any other circumstances, medical professionals – and, indeed, any adult in a position of responsibility – might be assumed to see not interfering with a perfectly healthy body and attempting to reconcile the child with their body as the only ethically correct stance. As Brunskell-Evans notes, ‘It’s the system that needs to change, not our bodies.’⁹⁸

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a growing number of people, most especially young women, are speaking out about

regrets they have over transitioning. James Caspian is particularly interested in researching the experiences of this group of people. He explains:

'In 2014 I was speaking to a doctor in Belgrade who does gender reassignment surgery and he told me that he'd done several reverse gender operations, men who'd had feminizing genital surgery who then wanted to go back to living as men. They were reversing their gender transition. He said he'd never had this happen before. We wanted to know why it was happening. It hadn't been researched. He now says there's been a ten-fold increase in five years for people seeking reversals.'

Caspian adds:

'I know of people of all ages and both sexes who have regretted transitioning. I know of people who have had gender reassignment surgery and then committed suicide within days. This doesn't mean there aren't people who are pleased they transitioned. It's a very complex and nuanced picture of what happens to people but one problem is that there's just not the long term follow up of patients. The research that does exist is very sparse. People who have transitioned disappear. They are just not there to take part in research. Most studies take place only immediately afterwards. Whereas people will say it's only after many years that they come to understand the impact and that it was a lot tougher than they thought it would be. The idea that you'd just affirm a young woman to go through surgery without proper counselling is just unethical.'⁹⁹

Caspian decided to research this phenomenon as part of a Masters degree at Bath Spa University, 'more and more people were saying they had been harmed and in clinical practice this is unacceptable and no one had researched into it.' While seeking participants for his proposed study, he:

‘was reading up on regretters, a cohort of women, very young, some in their mid-teens, who had had treatment, had their breasts removed, gone on to testosterone, and then regretted it. They were getting quite angry; they had published a pamphlet about their experiences. It made me really worried.’

It became clear to him that:

‘people were being harmed by this totally uncritical approach to trans – however it was being defined, a lot of young girls were being attracted to a trans identity and some of them were having medical treatment and later coming to regret it.’¹⁰⁰

Caspian suggests one reason for the increasing number of people who regret transitioning:

‘The word transgender has come to include cross dressing, transsexual, everything. This might actually lead to more people transitioning and regretting it because I’ve met crossdressers who moved into medical treatment and begun to transition and then regretted it. There are many men who cross dress who don’t think of themselves as transgender. But ideologically, politically, they now get dragged into it.’

Women

Prisons and refuges

Currently, one in 50 prisoners in the UK, that is 1,500 inmates, identifies as transgender.¹⁰¹ This is far higher than the proportion of transgender people within the general population. There are two schools of thought as to why this is the case. On one hand, it is argued that prejudice and poverty may make the survival of some transgender people dependent upon criminal activity while, at the same time, they are more likely to be criminalised and targeted by police officers. On the other hand, criminals facing sentencing may be incentivised to claim to be transgender.

Transgender prisoners can be entitled to perks such as being able to shower alone or have their own cell and they can also apply to switch between male and female jails. Additionally, taking on a new name and identity allows personal histories to be rewritten as the taboo on dead naming effectively allows the person convicted of the crime to be erased from the public record.

Labour leadership contender Lisa Nandy went so far as to argue that male child rapists who come to identify as female should be housed in a women's prison if this is their choice.¹⁰² In part, this view is driven by the mantra that 'trans women are women' but it also emerges from a belief that people do not lie about their gender identity. Allowing transgender inmates to choose between either male or female prisons is therefore presented as a compassionate move that respects the identity and protects the safety of transgender prisoners. However, reports of attacks on women carried out by transgender inmates suggest that the feelings of transgender women are being placed above the safety of females. This was made starkly apparent in the case of David Thompson, a convicted paedophile and rapist, who was jailed for life in the early 2000s. He was also on remand for grievous bodily harm, burglary, multiple rapes and other sexual offences against women. In September 2017, Thompson, now identifying as a woman called Karen White, was moved to a women's prison.¹⁰³ Once there he sexually assaulted a number of female inmates. One of Thompson's victims is now taking the government to court for its failure to protect her. Genoveve Simmons, a student, blogger and LGBT activist argues, 'Violent and abusive males can get away with anything as long as they identify as transgender. It's gross. It's blatant misogyny.'¹⁰⁴

Women's refuges exist to safeguard vulnerable women

in leaving unsafe situations and relationships. Often women seeking protection are fleeing domestic violence perpetrated by a male partner. Women's refuges have been – by definition – single sex spaces. This is strictly enforced to protect all the women in the refuge. Notoriously underfunded, women in refuges are often living in cramped conditions sharing facilities with other women and their children. The logic of self-identification would mean that males who identify as women would have every right to access women's refuges.

The argument for permitting transgender people access to domestic violence refuges hinges on the fact that, according to one study, 41 per cent of transgender people have experienced a hate crime in the past year, and more than a quarter of transgender people in a relationship have faced domestic abuse from a partner.¹⁰⁵ But these statistics cannot be taken at face value. Both hate crime and domestic abuse are defined widely and subjectively. They can encompass everything from referring to a person using the wrong pronouns to a violent physical attack. Clearly, transgender people experiencing violent abuse deserve protection. But the demand that they be accommodated in refuges intended specifically for females again suggests that the feelings of biological males be privileged over and above women who are in a vulnerable situation. Transgender women may need separate provision but they should not have an automatic entitlement to enter female only spaces.

Women's sport

The demand that transgender women should be able to compete alongside women in sports raises further issues about the potential impact on women's lives of allowing for gender self-identification and assuming that trans women

are women. Protecting women from physical harm is clearly a concern in all contact sports such as martial arts and even rugby. Transgender woman Kelly Morgan plays for a Welsh women's rugby team but members of opposing teams have expressed concern that, despite taking drugs to artificially lower his testosterone levels, Morgan's superior physical strength could inadvertently injure female opponents.¹⁰⁶

Beyond protecting the physical safety of women, the inclusion of trans women in women's sports raises issues of inherent fairness. Transgender women continue to have many biological characteristics associated with men even if they undergo surgery and take hormones. They may, on average, be taller and stronger than women and have a larger lung capacity. These biological differences can give transgender women a competitive advantage. Maxine Blythin is Kent County's first trans woman cricket player.¹⁰⁷ Blythin had a batting average of 15 when playing on the men's team, but averages 124 playing in the women's team. In 2019, transgender woman Rachel McKinnon, who now goes under the name Veronica Ivy, won the world cycling championship for the second year in a row and broke the women's world record for the 200-meter match sprint in her age category.¹⁰⁸ When McKinnon won her world championship last year, both fellow competitors and others on social media argued that it was unfair for McKinnon to compete. In response, McKinnon accused her detractors of hate speech and transphobia. She issued a press release claiming: 'Fairness in sport means inclusion and respect of every athlete's right and identity.'¹⁰⁹ Fairness, according to this definition, means that women must sacrifice places on a team, prizes, publicity and potential sponsorship deals, to men.

Martina Navratilova has spoken out against transgender women competing against women in sport,¹¹⁰ calling their

participation ‘insane’ and ‘cheating’,¹¹¹ and suggesting that men might take female hormones simply in order to win medals and make money. Subsequently, in a 2019 BBC documentary, Navratilova did speak more sympathetically about the potential for transgender athletes to be included in sporting events. In the documentary, sociologist Ellis Cashmore told Navratilova that sport will have to change in the same way other parts of society are adapting to gender fluidity: ‘I don’t think women’s sport will look the same in 10 years’ time,’ he explained, ‘I think a great many sports are going to have to come to terms with the fact they are going to have to mix sports – in other words, dissolve the binary completely and just say they’re open.’¹¹²

Former olympic swimmer Sharron Davies has also criticised the inclusion of trans women in women’s elite sports, arguing that allowing transgender athletes to enter female competitions, ‘has the potential to ruin women’s sport’ because people born male have a physical advantage over people born female.¹¹³ Davies argues that sport should be classified by sex rather than by gender. In the summer of 2019, the rapper ‘Zuby’ took part in a stunt to illustrate the physical advantages male-bodied athletes have over women and the illogicality of gender self-identification.¹¹⁴ Zuby declared himself to be a woman before proceeding to break several women’s weightlifting world records despite never having competitively trained as a weightlifter. He said: ‘It was done in a humorous way, but it made it more real: it showed the fallacies of the arguments on the other side. I have seen people saying there is no inherent biological strength difference between men and women.’ When sport becomes gender blind, women find themselves relegated to the sidelines.

All women shortlists and prizes

The Labour Party has, for some time now, operated a system of ‘all women shortlists’ in order to select new constituency MPs. In addition, the party has specially appointed women’s officers who operate at both national and constituency level to ensure women’s voices and concerns are raised. In 2018, then 20 year-old Lily Madigan became the first transgender person to be elected as women’s officer for their constituency Labour Party.¹¹⁵ Madigan went on to be elected national women’s officer for Labour Students. This prompted debate about the extent to which a person who was born male and lived out much of their childhood as a boy, can accurately represent the concerns of women. In the past, the Labour Party clearly felt a need to safeguard positions exclusively for women to ensure both women’s representation and a platform for their concerns. If these positions are now taken by transgender women then the risk is that the voices and experiences of women are undermined.

When gender is reduced to a simple matter of self-identification, all single sex spaces and provisions come to be called into question. The University of Cambridge’s Murray Edwards College has been an all-female institution since its initial founding. In 2017, the College changed its admission criteria: potential students no longer have to be female, but simply to identify as a woman at the time they submit their application.¹¹⁶ This means that men who have ‘taken steps to live in the female gender’ will be able to register as students, attend classes, live in halls and make use of all the social, sporting, dining and bathroom facilities.

Lesbians

A further group threatened by the rise of transgenderism is lesbians. By definition, lesbians are women who are

sexually attracted to other women. Campaign groups such as Stonewall have traditionally advocated for the rights of gay, lesbian and bi-sexual people. In keeping with its mission, Stonewall makes clear: ‘Adults are free to have relationships with other consenting adults, whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity.’ However, the group goes on to pitch a rhetorical question and answer:

‘Could a lesbian have a trans woman as a lesbian partner, or a gay man be with a trans man? Of course. If they fancy each other. First and foremost, we need to recognise that trans women are women, and trans men are men. After that it becomes a matter of who you are attracted to.’¹¹⁷

This sounds not just straightforward but positively liberal – everyone should be free to have a relationship with whoever they are attracted to. But it is worth exploring Stonewall’s assertions in more detail. The logic of preceding the support for personal freedoms with the statement that ‘trans women are women,’ undercuts the entire sentiment. For many lesbians, it is not a gender identity they are attracted to but a sex; specifically, the female sex. Lesbians are women who are sexually attracted to people with female rather than male anatomy – and this continues to be the case even if those male bodied people identify as women. As Sarah Ditum writes in the *New Statesman*, ‘A lesbian who refuses to consider a trans woman as a sexual partner is guilty of denying that trans woman’s gender identity. Online, such women are derided as “vagina fetishists” and transphobes.’¹¹⁸ Ditum goes on to explain why this matters:

‘Because lesbians have consistently faced everything from mockery to violence for insisting on boundaries to their sexuality. For lesbians who know the history of “corrective rape” as a weapon against gender non-conforming women –

the practical application of the old saw that all lesbians need to “fix” them is a dose of penis – this is a deeply alarming development in LGBT politics.’

By insisting that trans women are women, Stonewall erases the very meaning of the word lesbian. Genoveve Simmons tells me:

‘I’m very concerned about the direction Stonewall is going in. Organisations like Stonewall have this very blatant favouritism towards the transgender community, not transsexuals but transgenderism. They are pushing LGB people to the side. It’s very clear that when you look at the statistics and the annual reports that this is what’s going on.’¹¹⁹

In adopting this approach, Stonewall encourages the potential vilification of lesbians who refuse to open themselves up to the possibility of having a sexual relationship with a male-bodied person who identifies as a woman. In July 2018, a group of lesbians protested against what they perceived to be the erasure of their identity at the annual London Pride March.¹²⁰ One of the protesters argued: ‘A man cannot be a lesbian, a person with a penis cannot be a lesbian.’ Another accused trans people of ‘pressuring lesbians to have sex with them’. The protesters were labelled transphobic and were met with a fierce backlash from Stonewall and other LGBT campaign groups. It seems that when it comes to gender and sexuality, some identities are more worthy of defending than others.

Stonewall comes in for particular criticism because, as an organisation, it has grown to be so vast and influential. As Williams notes, ‘Stonewall are massive, they are everywhere, in every organisation and every school.’¹²¹ Rob Jessel, a founding member of Fair Cop, explores the influence

Stonewall have in the workplace: 'When organisations are looking to write a policy they go somewhere like Stonewall who offer to write the policy for them and upshot is that anyone who then talks about this this issue at work feels threatened.' He gives an example: 'On the glossary page of Stonewall's website, under transphobia, it says something like 'it is transphobic not to accept someone's gender identity' and what that means is not that you accept it by saying it but that you have to believe it. Nothing will ever be enough for these people.'¹²²

Regulation of language

Beyond women and children, transgender ideology has a broader impact in shaping the whole of society. This is particularly apparent in the regulation of language. New words have entered our vocabulary such as 'cis-gendered' to indicate that someone identifies with their natal sex. The normalisation of the word 'cis' implies that to be female and identify as a woman is no more 'natural' or 'normal' than to be female and identify as a man or with no gender at all. All are equally arbitrary. At the same time, stating the dictionary definition of the word woman has seemingly become a criminal offence. In Oxford, campaigners placed stickers with the statements: 'Woman: noun. Adult human female' and 'Women don't have penises' in various locations around the city centre. In response, Thames Valley Police announced that those responsible could be charged with a public order offence. It said: 'Officers are investigating a large number of offensive stickers that have been placed across Oxford city centre containing transphobic comments.'¹²³ The demand from the transgender lobby that we change our language has become so widely accepted it seems that even defining a woman requires police involvement. A small group of

transgender activists are able to shape, to a considerable extent, what can be spoken or written about gender today.

It is worth considering why activists place so much emphasis on controlling the words we use. Language forms a key element of social interaction and is often the means through which the performance of gender is confirmed or denied. Through speech, we recognise someone as male or female and, in so doing, confer a particular gender identity upon them through our choice of words. Butler argues that speech acts are an essential part of any performance and can, through repetition, 'accumulate the force of authority.'¹²⁴ Referring to someone as female, by this argument, 'is not to describe an objective, value free fact' but to assign them a normative role to play.¹²⁵ Their repeated assignation to this role prompts a response. As Butler puts it, 'speech itself is a bodily act with specific linguistic consequences.'¹²⁶ According to Asta, 'agents bring a new fact into being with their speech: their saying so makes it so.'¹²⁷

In this way, language or, more specifically, confirming recognition through the correct choice of vocabulary, most notably pronouns, is of vital importance to the performance of gender. As a result, recent years have seen 'pronoun badges' distributed to incoming students at some university campuses or to participants at some academic conferences. Similarly, the practice of students introducing themselves to classmates with their name and pronoun choice has become accepted practice at some universities as is the inclusion of personal pronouns in the email signatures of civil servants and council workers. In October 2019, the then leader of the Labour Party spoke at the *Pink News Awards* and began, 'My name is Jeremy Corbyn and my pronouns are he/him.'¹²⁸ Just as with the word 'cis', the aim is to normalise the idea that everyone

has a 'gender identity' and no one's gender can be assumed from their physical appearance.

The demand from transgender activists is twofold: firstly, the freedom to name themselves and the world as they decree, thereby overriding social and linguistic conventions; and secondly, that other people must obey these decrees and use language that the trans-person prescribes. Whereas the first is compatible with free expression, the second is clearly not. Dictating the language use of others not only restricts their free speech but, more significantly, in compelling speech it imposes a demand upon them that calls into question their freedom of conscience.

The right to determine the language use of others becomes significant to the transgender community as a means of compelling others to confirm the 'truth' of their identity. In this way, language is considered to construct rather than reflect reality. Again, this is an argument that has emerged from critical theory and previously found favour within strands of feminism. The Australian feminist and linguist Dale Spender (1998) highlights the problems women face expressing their experiences of the world in what she refers to as 'man made language.' Spender argues women need to 'reclaim language' in order to (re)discover their own knowledge and the truth of their own experience. More recently, this line of argument is pursued by author and feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez who argues that 'countries with gender-inflected languages, which have strong ideas of masculine and feminine present in almost every utterance, are the most unequal in terms of gender.'¹²⁹

The foundation of second wave feminism in the politics of experience led to renewed focus on the role of language, images, music, toys, fashion and entertainment to shape a specifically female consciousness and acceptance of

subservience. The patriarchal notion of women as secondary to men was thought to be written into every aspect of culture, altering the relationships between the sexes and the very identity of individual men and women. In this way, it was assumed that altering culture, and in particular language, could change the socialisation of boys and girls and lead ultimately to the end of sexual inequality. Indeed, over time, our language use has changed. As Criado-Perez points out, words like 'doctor' and 'poet' that were once used to refer only to men (with women being given the diminutive labels 'doctress' and 'poetess') are now considered gender neutral.¹³⁰ However, it is not the case that the word 'doctress' was first erased from our vocabulary and *then* more women entered the medical profession but the exact opposite; the reality that women and men are equally likely to become doctors is reflected in our language. This is not to say that language-use is unimportant but rather than words creating reality they shape our perceptions and understandings of the existing world.

Enforcing the use of particular words and phrases, as well as outlawing others, both limits and shapes what can and cannot be said and, ultimately, begins to frame our understanding. Davies-Arai notes that, 'Transgender and gender identity are very recent developments in our language.' Yet these words have rapidly come to be accepted as more politically correct alternatives for sex and transsexuals. Davies-Arai again, 'A whole new lexicon of language has been developed to fit this idea and we are told we must learn it. It redefines all human beings as subjective ideas rather than biological entities.'¹³¹

Adopting and enforcing a vocabulary sanctioned by the transgender movement serves a useful purpose in cohering group identity and asserting membership (or 'allyship') of

that community. However, as Jessel points out, 'People repeat certain words thinking this will make them safe but it won't. Nothing will ever be enough. The words will change and they will find a way to catch you out.'¹³² In this way, language is also used to demarcate a group of people considered to have transgressed the norms set out by activists. The insult TERF (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist) is used against women who raise questions or critical comment about the impact of gender self-identification upon women and children. The label legitimises abuse and even violent recriminations; fear of insult silences dissent. The word 'transphobe' plays a similar role in closing down debate. People, and especially public sector organisations and political parties, are fearful of appearing to be transphobic in the same way they would hate to be thought of as sexist or racist. This can mean that social changes that put children and women at risk are more likely to be nodded through without criticism. However, as Jessel suggests, this may have its limitations: 'The word transphobe has been thrown around so much that it has begun to lose its power.'¹³³

Of interest is why so many people in positions of authority have been ready not just to change their own language but also to police the language of others. In January 2019, Harry Miller, a former police officer, was visited at his place of work by Humberside Police following complaints about tweets he had sent satirising the idea that there are more than two genders and that it is possible for people to change sex. The police informed Miller that he had not committed a crime; his actions would be recorded as a non-crime 'hate incident'. Miller appealed against this action and took on Humberside Police in a judicial review case heard at the High Court. The court found that the force's actions were a 'disproportionate interference' with his right to freedom

of expression.¹³⁴ Jessel argues, 'The police hate crimes operational guidance is a post McPherson thing. The Police have come up with it themselves, working with groups like Stonewall, Mermaids and Gendered Intelligence, they've made up these rules.'¹³⁵

Miller is not alone in having been interviewed by the police on suspicion of having committed a 'transphobic hate incident.' Posie Parker, a campaigner for women's rights, describes herself thus: 'I am an everywoman. I'm the woman who talks too much in the post office queue.' Nonetheless, she tells me, 'I've been interviewed by the police twice.' Parker explains:

'I put up a billboard with the definition of the word woman on it but, before that, I'd had some run-ins online with a particular high profile individual. Then I got text messages from the police. I ignored them because I thought it was a joke. Eventually I phoned them back and the police officer I spoke to said he was following up a complaint from Suzie Green.' [Green is chief executive of the transgender children's charity Mermaids and whose child, Jackie is transgender.]

'The police officer was trying to be very friendly, implying he was on my side, and I said to him people Tweet about Trump all the time and Suzie Green is a public figure so surely it's fair game to comment on what she's up to. It was such a friendly chat, we were just laughing about it. But I mentioned it to some friends and they put me in touch with a solicitor. And then, four weeks later when I was called back by the police and they knew I had this solicitor, their whole manner just changed completely.'¹³⁶

Parker continues:

'Suddenly the police officer I'd spoken to previously wasn't being friendly any more. He said "If you try and leave the

country, we'll arrest you. If you're pulled over by the police, we'll arrest you. And if we don't manage to get you we'll come to your house and arrest you in front of your children. We'll put you in the cells. Then I'll come down from Yorkshire, which, as you know, will take a long time." He was implying that I'd be sitting in the cells all that time. So my solicitor came with me, we'd prepared a statement which was read out and then they asked me questions. They said things like "You do know that sex reassignment surgery doesn't include castration?" I mean, what do they think happens? But I'd prepared myself for the interview. I didn't smile. I just said, "No comment." All this was happening because of six Tweets I'd sent. We know this is going on up and down the country and people don't say anything because they think they are wrong but I knew I was right. I was hoping it would go to court. I knew I was right and it takes people like me to stand up to it. It went to the CPS and they rejected the police case against me. Suzie Green got very annoyed about this and tried to get it appealed but she didn't succeed.¹³⁷

'It turns out that the police had got hold of my contact details from Twitter. I then got interviewed under caution again because I made a video which had a picture of Suzie Green in the background. I had it framed in my office and, as a joke, I pointed to it and said, "Children's champion, Suzie Green." I said that transitioning children is abuse and that I would say this in a court of law. And that, apparently, is a threat. So those two things got me another interview. This time around, I found out that the police had dropped the charges against me from Twitter. I read about it from someone I follow. The first time they phoned me and they said "We've got some good news for you. The CPS have decided not to charge you." The police officer expected me to be grateful, but I said, "No. You've wasted my time and you've wasted taxpayers money. You should be ashamed of yourself."¹³⁸

Kate Scottow was not so lucky. Scottow was accused of persistently causing annoyance, inconvenience and anxiety to transgender woman and frequent litigant Stephanie Hayden. This included ‘deliberately misgendering’ through the use of male pronouns and referring to Hayden, on one occasion, as a ‘pig in a wig’.¹³⁹ On 1 December 2018, the police arrived at Scottow’s house and arrested her in front of her 10-year-old daughter and her 20-month-old son who was, at the time, still being breastfed.¹⁴⁰ Scottow was taken to a police cell where she was held for seven hours before being put through an hour-long interview. She was charged under section 127 of the Communications Act 2003, which makes it a criminal offence to ‘persistently’ use social media ‘for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another’.¹⁴¹ Scottow was found guilty of causing ‘annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety’ to Stephanie Hayden. She was given a conditional discharge and ordered to pay a £21 victim surcharge and £1,000 in court costs.

Transgender activists are intent on policing language as they see words as a conduit of distress. In the 1990s, the definition of violence expanded – and the corresponding group of victims increased – with the idea that language can inflict not just psychic but physical harm on people. The opening lines of the celebrated 1993 book, *Words That Wound*, explore the impact of what its authors describe as ‘assaultive speech’. They describe how words are used ‘as weapons, to ambush, terrorize, wound and degrade.’¹⁴² The impact of assaultive speech is not just psychologically damaging but physically harmful: ‘victims of vicious hate propaganda experience physiological symptoms and emotional distress ranging from fear in the gut to rapid pulse rate and difficulty in breathing, nightmares, post-traumatic stress disorder, hypertension, psychosis, and suicide.’¹⁴³

One problem with this approach is that physical violence is relativised. As Mick Hume writes in *Trigger Warning*, ‘Words can hurt but they are not physical weapons. And an argument or opinion, however aggressive or offensive it might seem, is not a physical assault.’¹⁴⁴

Today, it is widely accepted that offensive words have an emotional and psychological impact that can be more damaging – and take longer to heal – than merely physical wounds. Patricia Williams calls the blow of racist messages ‘spirit murder’ in recognition of the ‘psychic destruction’ of the victims experience.¹⁴⁵ This makes sense only when harm is experienced subjectively: if a person is hurt then a statement is, by definition, hurtful. It also assumes a fragile sense of self; not a robust individual but an ‘identity’ that is constructed through language and can, therefore, be dismantled through language. When gender is no longer considered to have any connection with actual biology, it comes to exist far more precariously, becoming real only through the medium of language. Transgender people are, then, uniquely vulnerable to the crime of ‘spirit murder’ when their identity is assumed to be invalidated by people using the wrong words. The impact of language moves from the terrain of the intellect, or the emotions, into the physical and, as this happens, the meaning and power ascribed to words becomes separated from the intended meaning of the author or speaker.

When definitions of harm stretch from physical violence to psychological distress it becomes a question of fundamental safety and security to shut down harmful words and by default harmful people. As has become apparent with the routine and quite literal policing of language in recent years, the equation of words with violence, and the moral righteousness of those outraged, leads to a belief that

ensorship is justified if it prevents potentially harmful words from being uttered. Brunskell-Evans explains:

‘There’s this idea that all discussion invalidates a transgender person’s right to exist. The masterstroke was to say we are born this way. If I don’t say that transgender people are born transgender then that’s a huge problem. The one thing you have to say is that people can’t help it.’¹⁴⁶

Stonewall have been particularly keen to promote the curtailment of all debate around transgender issues. As Jessel suggests, ‘Free speech and the ability to come to a consensus on these issues is being squashed by some very powerful forces, including organisations I used to have the utmost respect for such as Stonewall.’¹⁴⁷ Nicola Williams explores why Stonewall has taken this approach:

‘The Stonewall policy of “no debate” was an absolute masterstroke. If you get the chance to discuss this issue with people for five minutes then they can see the conflict. Stonewall can’t afford for us to have any meaningful debate because the holes in their ideology become plain for all to see. But the “no debate” stance is actually damaging for transgender people too because we’ll never resolve the conflicts if we are not allowed to even acknowledge any conflict exists. Groups like Stonewall are now the roadblock to progress. They are making this such a toxic issue by not talking about it.’¹⁴⁸

Mermaids, a group that campaigns to advance the rights of transgender children, also has a policy of not engaging in debate. Davies-Arai notes that, ‘I set up *Transgender Trend* and I was asked to appear on *Newsnight*. The whole no-platforming thing hadn’t yet started. Now certain trans activists won’t appear if they find out that I’m on.’¹⁴⁹ Closing down all debate around the impact of gender self-

identification has particularly angered campaigners for women's rights and those seeking to protect children from being encouraged to transition before they are emotionally mature enough to fully understand the consequences of such decisions. Children's author Rachel Rooney notes, 'This is the only issue I know where you cannot say what you think and I find this terrifying. There should always be a debate when it comes to children. There should never not be a debate.'¹⁵⁰

There are many ways in which people are prevented from speaking freely about their concerns. We have already looked at the role played by the police and the judiciary. Beyond this, there is a form of public shaming that comes into effect, particularly through social media. Rooney explains what happened after the publication of *My Body Is Me*:

'I expected trolls, maybe 11 idiots getting in touch, but what I was really shocked by were certain authors vilifying me on Twitter. There was a group of about 12 or 15 authors who would share or like posts that said I was nasty, horrible and bigoted. I've worked in special education for thirty-five years and this really hurt. Of course, people are free to have their own opinions and they can disagree with me. But what shocked me was that they were ascribing motives to me that just weren't true. That's what I found really hard because I didn't ascribe motives to them. I see a lot of books being published and there are some that I don't like and some I disagree with but I don't go around ascribing motives to those authors. I would never dream of saying that a particular author is a nasty person just because I don't agree with their book. I couldn't believe the nastiness from people who purport to be kind and caring. Not many people came out to support me publicly and that really hurt too.'¹⁵¹

People pay a heavy personal price for challenging the dominant view promoted by the transgender movement. Genoveve Simmons tells me that, 'In one of my university classes last year I mentioned the fact that there were only two sexes and two genders and people didn't really take that very well. My ideas were seen as controversial to say the least.' Nicola Williams says, 'I've been labelled a transphobe – I've been compared to a member of the KKK and it's really extreme stuff.' And Rob Jessel, echoing a view of many, that: 'I'd be a lot richer if I wasn't spending my time doing this but it's just so important.' One reason why intervening in this area can have a devastating impact upon people's lives and careers is, as Sarah Phillimore explains, 'The scary thing is there's not much to distinguish trolls from actual policy makers.' Opprobrium clearly has more than just emotional consequences. Posie Parker tells me:

'I only noticed I was banned from Facebook when I couldn't log on. I hadn't had any warnings or suspensions for about a year beforehand. It just disappeared. And the same on Twitter. One problem is that councils and agencies use Twitter to ask people what they think, so it's like you've lost your voice. My IP address is banned so my kids and my husband can't use Facebook either. This is appalling.'¹⁵²

Academic freedom

Nowhere is the desire to condemn certain words and ideas, and enforce the use of others, stronger than in universities. In the UK, academics who question the impact gender self-identification has upon women find they are subjected to orchestrated campaigns designed to stop them from speaking on public platforms and to have their publications rejected. Some even face calls to be removed from teaching and editorial positions. Philosophy professor Kathleen

Stock has gathered testimony from over twenty academics who have all encountered attempts to have their views silenced by students, colleagues or senior managers. One reports how students campaigned to have her fired but her employers – the university – refused to defend her. Another records having been disinvited from speaking at two conferences – including one held at and organised by her own university.¹⁵³

Many of the academics who spoke to Stock recount students complaining about them on the basis of comments that have been misunderstood or taken out of context. Rather than being able to discuss their views and the charges against them openly, they are placed under formal investigation for transphobia without any opportunity to defend themselves. One professor notes:

‘I found myself in an Orwellian world wherein my words affirming the equal rights of trans people were taken as evidence that I was transphobic because I did not simply and uncritically accept the stated claims of a particular trans person regarding the theory of gender.’

Complaints initiated by students are followed by managers or editors implementing disciplinary proceedings or withdrawing invitations and publications. Less public but perhaps more insidious is a sense of being ostracised by colleagues and career opportunities being closed down for stepping even fractionally out of line.

Heather Brunskell-Evans recalls:

‘I first got involved in these conversations back in 2015 when I was working at the University of Leicester. At that time, Bruce Jenner, as he had been known up until then, was on the front cover of *Vanity Fair* and I wrote an article about Jenner’s performance of femininity. I argued there’s nothing

intrinsic in being female that makes us want to wear high heels and corsets – just as I have done many times before – and in the spirit of Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone De Beauvoir. I wrote this about Jenner not knowing that I was falling into the biggest issue. Then, the next thing I knew, this piece was sent to the Vice Chancellor. This could happen, I discovered, because I was told that I had breached the 2010 Equality Act. So then I realised that the law could be involved and that somehow, in connection with this, I could make trans students and trans members of staff feel unsafe. This was the first time I had heard this – that I could express an idea and this could be so cataclysmic that there would be people who would be scared to come to the university. These people would never be taught by me and never meet me but yet I was being told that I could cause them trauma. There was a feeling of “watch your back, you’re going to get into trouble” but as soon as anyone tells me I can’t investigate something I immediately want to know why. It made me think, why would I get into trouble for thinking something through rationally and wanting to have a dialogue about it? If that gets me into trouble then there is something very serious going on here. That in itself was a provocation to me.¹⁵⁴

Rosa Freedman, a Professor of Law at the University of Reading, has not only experienced online abuse but also found her office door ‘covered in urine’ after speaking out against proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act. Freedman reports having been called a ‘Nazi’ and told that she ‘should be raped’. Anonymous phone calls prompted her to speak out about the intimidatory tactics she was experiencing and she now has a panic alarm fitted in her university office.¹⁵⁵ Meanwhile, at the University of Oxford, Professor Selina Todd has been provided with bodyguards to accompany her to all lectures after threats against her were circulated online.¹⁵⁶ Todd has argued that it

is biologically impossible for a person to change sex and for this she has been labelled a 'transphobe' and been subjected to complaints that it would be 'impossible' for her to teach trans students. Staff and students at the University of Kent circulated a petition ahead of Todd's scheduled guest lecture on working class history.¹⁵⁷ They demanded her invitation be rescinded claiming, 'The power dynamics of providing a platform to Selina Todd in the name of "academic free speech" means putting trans and non-binary members of our community into the position of having to defend their right to exist.'

All discussion of transgender issues, such as the best way to support transgender children or whether self-identification should be sufficient for a person to be legally accepted as a member of the opposite sex, is routinely presented as a threat by the transgender activists. They present any questioning of the broader transgender movement as challenging – and invalidating – the right of trans-people to exist. In such a context, curtailing debate and censoring free expression takes on the mantle of a crusade for justice. Yet the consequence of this crusade for justice can be to hound people out of public life. As a result, we now have a situation where 'a significant proportion of the public is not willing to state an opinion on these issues.'¹⁵⁸ Additionally, as Murray suggests, 'the demand is not merely that citizens refrain from harming or legally discriminating against others with whom they disagree. It is that they must behave as though they have positive regard or esteem for others' views or practices.'¹⁵⁹

This has significant consequences for the research that is undertaken in universities. As previously noted, the transgender movement has created a stigma around detransitioning which makes it difficult for people with

regrets about embarking upon the process of changing their gender to speak openly about their experiences. Two women who regret having transitioned note: 'The existence of detransitioners poses a threat to the one-sided story of transgender as a permanent reality being promoted by the queer community and trans positive media.'¹⁶⁰ Bath Spa University initially approved James Caspian's research into detransitioners but when he failed to recruit enough participants, and so broadened his proposal to include people who had transitioned but subsequently reverted to living as their birth sex without reversing their surgery, Bath Spa's ethics committee rejected his proposal and he could no longer continue with his research. Caspian explains: 'The university said you can't do it. They told me that politically incorrect research could incur criticism and this, in turn, could incur criticism of the university. And it is better not to upset people. That was the reason given.'¹⁶¹

The legally enforceable prohibition on speaking freely about the social impact of transgenderism extends into the terrain of freedom of conscience. Maya Forstater lost her job at a thinktank after tweeting that transgender women cannot change their biological sex. She took her employer to court for unfair dismissal but the judge ruled against her, arguing her opinions were deemed to be 'absolutist' and that Forstater's belief that sex is biological and immutable is 'incompatible with human dignity'. The judge ruled that Forstater's views did 'not have the protected characteristic of philosophical belief.' Jodie Ginsberg, the Director of Index on Censorship, said 'From what I have read of [Forstater's] writing, I cannot see that Maya has done anything wrong other than express an opinion that many feminists share – that there should be a public and open debate about the distinction between sex and gender.'¹⁶²

Threat to democracy

The (literal) policing of language and the curtailing of debate in academia and in society more widely prevents all discussion of the impact of transgender ideology and gender self-identification in particular. Restricting discussion is a conscious strategy employed with enthusiasm by transgender activists who have reached the conclusion that the more the public learn about changes to society organised at their behest, the less the public support such moves. Their preference would be for new legislation to be passed away from public scrutiny. Public debate is the driving force of democracy: without the right to disagree with each other, even in the harshest possible terms, society is neither free nor tolerant. As such, curtailing debate is not just hostile to free speech but anti-democratic too. As Rebecca Lowe, co-founder of the group Radical points out:

‘Democratic deliberation is premised on the equal right of every citizen to contribute to the self-government of their nation. And this is damaged when important topics are deemed beyond the remit of civil discussion. When voices are quashed. When “consensus” means the forced triumph of acceptable ideas, and “tolerance” is only extended to those with whom one already agrees.’¹⁶³

Transgender activists are explicit about their hostility towards democracy: ‘direct democracy may endanger transgender rights.’¹⁶⁴ For this reason, a pervasive insecurity underscores (perhaps even necessitates) increasingly authoritarian action. Writing in *The American Conservative*, Jason Morgan argues that:

‘Natural rights have yielded to state-granted ones, letters of marque issued by central government authorities that entitle the bearer to do some particular thing that others do not get to do. Genderqueers get to move around free from the

suspicion of “transphobia,” a privilege not granted to the rest of us.’¹⁶⁵

Although transgender rights are promoted in the name of tolerance, their enforcement is often extremely intolerant not just of criticism but of any degree of questioning. Morgan continues, ‘As the transgender movement comes ever more fully into its own, we find that it is not its own after all. It is the state’s, and the state is using it to erase freedom – both positive and negative – for all of us.’¹⁶⁶

Restricting all forms of discussion does not make the conflicts inherent in transgenderism: between sex-based rights and gender self-identification, between protecting children by permitting or preventing transition, disappear. Instead, it swaps calm and rational discourse for a highly charged, emotive and seemingly interminable struggle. This is of little benefit to anyone, least of all to an older generation of transsexuals who simply want the freedom to live undisturbed. Genoveve Simmons explains, ‘I wanted to give a voice to transsexuals who want to speak up and explain why transgender ideology is harming their existence, why it’s making them look bad in the eyes of society.’¹⁶⁷ Nicola Williams acknowledges:

‘So much could be resolved if we could all acknowledge that gender identity is not the same as sex. Sex needs to be clearly defined. We need to clarify this in the law. We need to make sure that organisations that use the Equality Act know what it means when there is a clash of rights and know how to enact the law properly by finding a fair balance.’¹⁶⁸

Yet this is one thing that transgender activists, with their mantra that transwomen are women, can never accept and, at present, public institutions appear firmly committed to meeting the demands of the transgender movement. In the next chapter we explore why this is the case.

3.

Ideological capture

As recently as two decades ago, transsexual people comprised a tiny proportion of the adult population and theoretical ideas around transgenderism existed primarily within obscure branches of academic queer theory. Since this time, such ideas have gained ground to the extent that they now have influence upon virtually every aspect of society. At the same time, the number of people, especially children, purporting to be transgender has increased dramatically. The transgender movement has proved to be phenomenally successful. It is vital that we understand why.

Transgenderism as a political movement

When we consider the high profile afforded to a few transgender activists, the influence of groups such as Mermaids and Gendered Intelligence, and the broader acquiescence to or promotion of transgenderism through schools, colleges and universities, the media, law, social work and the NHS, it becomes clear that the transgender rights movement has been able to wield influence far in excess of the number of transgender-identifying people. As Posie Parker says, 'The state is working for a tiny portion of hard core activists.'¹⁶⁹ In comparison to earlier campaigns for civil rights or women's liberation, the progress and success of the transgender rights movement appears

‘rapid and dramatic.’¹⁷⁰ Activists within the movement try to present success as stemming from a wholesale shift in public opinion but in reality a small number of voices yield disproportionate influence through constructing and policing a strong collective identity. As a result, ‘a relatively small collection of individuals and groups’ has come to have ‘considerable political and policy success.’¹⁷¹ Exploring why this is the case helps us understand how a niche approach to gender theory has gained ground outside of academia.

In part, this political and policy success is down to the strategies consciously adopted by key figures within the transgender movement. As Sarah Phillimore explains, ‘This has been a long term strategy. Now we’ve got the complete capture of every institution.’¹⁷² For example, deliberate efforts have been made to align campaigns for transgender rights with pre-existing gay rights groups – adding the ‘T’ to the LGB movement. Significantly, this allowed access to already established networks and funding at a time when, with the legalisation of same-sex marriage, gay rights had largely been achieved. The use of this tactic is highlighted in a report produced by international law firm Dentons along with the Thomson Reuters Foundation and the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Youth and Student Organisation. As James Kirkup writes in the *Spectator*,¹⁷³ the report, *Only Adults? Good Practices in Legal Gender Recognition for Youth* is designed to help activists instigate changes in the law that would, among other things, ‘allow children to legally change their gender, without adult approval and without needing the approval of any authorities.’¹⁷⁴

One suggestion is that campaigners should ‘intervene early in the legislative process and ideally before it has even started,’ in order to have ‘a far greater ability to shape the

government agenda.¹⁷⁵ Certainly this approach proved to be at least partially successful in terms of advocating for changes to the Gender Recognition Act 2004. Transgender activists set out the key issue, self-identification, before feminist groups became fully aware of what was at stake. As Nicola Williams explains, 'The transgender lobby got their feet under the table of all the big organisations; they've been in there, talking to all of the senior managers for years. It's not that it suddenly happened over night.'¹⁷⁶ This view is echoed by Posie Parker:

'The trans activists have been very organised. Before most of us even became aware of what was at stake they were in there. So when this became a big issue there were very uncritical people heading organisations that were just like "that's right, that's fine."

Indeed, there is a suggestion that transgender activists deliberately targeted certain women's groups with their message. Williams again expressed:

'The professional women's organisations have been exposed to over a decade of the line that "trans women are women" and that to say anything else would be discriminatory or hurtful. This began at a time when there were no other voices saying hang on a minute, there's a problem here, transwomen are male.'

One advantage for transgender activists in targetting women's groups is that one source of potential opposition was neutralised. Williams says:

'What was most shocking was finding that many of these groups, like Women's Aid or the Fawcett Society, did not want to speak about this issue. The mantra "trans women are women" had already been accepted by so many. So the very people we look towards to stand up for women were

refusing to see any difference between the two groups. When a women's organisation believes "trans women are women" this means they also fight for the right for males who identify as women to access female-only spaces. The conflict is obvious and means that trans people have two groups fighting their corner, and women are left with none.¹⁷⁷

Many of the women I spoke to were angry that by targetting women's groups, transgender activists were exploiting the specifically gendered socialisation of females that they often insist does not exist. Heather Brunskell-Evans explains, 'These parties for women's equality are themselves performing femininity, this idea that women are nice people, that we include everyone.' Davies-Arai reinforces this view, 'The worrying thing about ideas around transgender is that they are being promoted by girls who have been socialised to be nice. The whole culture reinforces the idea that girls are supposed to be nice and kind.' As Sarah Phillimore puts it: 'Women have been exploited for their niceness – but this is really chilling.'¹⁷⁸

Revealingly, a key recommendation of the Dentons' report is that activists should 'avoid excessive press coverage and exposure.'¹⁷⁹ The authors express concern, not without foundation, that the more people find out about the changes proposed by transgender campaigners, the less supportive they are. One impact of this is that legal changes are instigated without thorough debate. As Rob Jessel says:

'I think we need to be able to talk about things and I think bad laws are made when fringe voices are the only voices heard and when organisations that have been completely captured by fringe voices are allowed to get involved in making laws.'¹⁸⁰

Heather Brunskell-Evans similarly points to the legal implications of shutting down debate:

'We've lost our intellectual ability to be tolerant towards individuals and, at the same time, criticise changes in the law. It's assumed that if you criticise changes in the law then you are criticising individuals. The women's groups are the worst at this simplistic reductionism.'¹⁸¹

As we have already shown, debate on the impact of gender self-identification on women-only spaces and activities, as well as the impact of medical and educational professionals advocating a policy of positive affirmation for children identifying as transgender, is routinely curtailed by activists on the grounds that it calls into question the right of transgender people to exist. Activists clearly prefer to have social changes enforced from the top down, rather than having to go to the effort of winning people over to their ideas.

Although not stated explicitly, the Dentons' report's focus on 'youth' makes clear a strategy far more powerful than strategic collaborations, intervening in legislative processes or curtailing debate; that is: hiding an adult agenda behind concern for the plight of children. For activists in the transgender movement, the existence and increasing visibility of transgender children provides evidence for their claim that transgender people are 'born that way' and that identifying with a different gender to your anatomical sex is an intrinsic part of a person's psyche. In addition, the idea that transgender children are vulnerable but also brave and politically progressive, rubs off on their defenders. This, in turn, provides transgender adults with a layer of protection from criticism and questioning and legitimises demands being made of educators, health professionals and policy makers.

Transgender children

As James Caspian points out, two decades ago the typical person seeking to transition was a male in his early forties.

Since this time, the profile of those identifying as transgender has changed dramatically. Today, as we have previously noted, teenage girls are more likely to identify as transgender than any other group. Little is known about why more girls than boys seek help with their gender identity. It may be the case that girls struggling with their sexuality find it easier to identify as transgender rather than as a lesbian or that girls who, in the past, may have been labelled as tomboys, now come to see themselves as transgender. Rather than adults telling girls that they can dress how they like, fall in love with whoever they want and do whatever they please and still be girls, children learn that changing gender is a route to social acceptance.

In the past, a tiny proportion of the population struggled with their gender identity over several decades before gradually transitioning to live as a member of the opposite sex. Today, girls seem to reach this decision far more suddenly, a condition known as Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria (ROGD). One particular feature of ROGD is contagion. Clusters of girls from the same school or town may come to see themselves as transgender at the same time. The internet, in particular social media and YouTube, is considered to be an effective means of spreading ROGD to a generation of girls with smartphones. Davies-Arai argues:

‘We haven’t come to terms with the fact that the internet is the new public square and in the real public square we close doors to children. But that hasn’t been done online. We should have recognised this a decade ago. But in terms of material comforts and education, our children are massively privileged compared to in the past or in different countries. So it’s almost as if we are finding problems or exacerbating problems.’¹⁸²

Online, videos circulate that present changing gender as a straightforward and attractive proposition. The transgender person is held aloft as both a struggling victim of cruel world and, at the very same time, a rebel pushing at the boundaries of society.

Groups like Stonewall have been able to wield considerable influence over the content of the Relationships and Sex Education curriculum delivered to school children in England and Wales. Davies-Arai explains:

‘The Department for Education has tacked the T on to LGB without considering that they are very different things. It is fine to teach children British values. Children need to know that there are different people and we accept them. But teaching the concept of gender identity is something very different. The T is protected in law only through the GRA and the Equality Act and the group protected are defined as “Transsexuals” not “transgender”.’¹⁸³

The school curriculum, popular music, children’s fiction, films and television programmes all offer positive representations of both transgender youth and the process of transition. This creates a feedback loop: the more transgender children are discussed and positively affirmed, the more children come to see being transgender as not just socially acceptable but as a credible solution to personal struggles with identity; in turn, the more there is discussion of transgender children, and so on. Links between autism and gender dysphoria in girls have been noted¹⁸⁴ and girls with autism, as well as children who are suffering from mental health problems or are more generally struggling to make sense of their identity and their place in the world, may be particularly susceptible to this promotion of transgender.

Researchers such as James Caspian and Lisa Marchiano note that in different historical eras, different symptoms

comprise legitimate illnesses that will be taken seriously by health professionals. In the past, hysteria, anorexia and chronic fatigue syndrome have all attracted widespread public interest and been particularly endemic among young women. Marchiano points out that, as with other illnesses, gender dysphoria makes a cultural statement and gives voice to tensions inherent at this moment of our collective life.¹⁸⁵ In the process of naming, psychological problems become repositioned as physical concerns with the body. Today, the notion of being born in the wrong body and the problematising of sex and gender have become legitimate symptoms offered to young people as a means of describing and naming distress. Transitioning offers teenage girls a tangible solution to a range of psychological and emotional problems.

The legitimacy of transgenderism as a recognised condition with a specifically medical solution may help to explain the phenomenon of Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria (ROGD) among teenage girls and its spread through social media. But this throws up two further questions: what is the underlying distress that young women are experiencing and why has gender dysphoria become the legitimate expression of this distress.

James Caspian points to, 'Jung's idea of the collective unconscious that throws things up that then become acted out in different forms.' He explains, 'This is helpful for making sense of what is going on. At this moment the very idea of what it means to be a man or a woman has become the subject of a collective complex.'¹⁸⁶ In the past, not only did children grow up with a clear sense of being male or female but socially prescribed roles were rigidly attached to each sex. Female children were girls who would grow up to be women; their socialisation through family, school

and community was designed to inculcate appropriately feminine behaviour centred upon preparation for a future role as wife and mother. Boys, by the same token, were raised to be men who would, as fathers and husbands, protect and provide for their families, often through employing physical strength in manual labour. Such social expectations persisted in society long after women entered the labour market in larger numbers and more men had options other than manual work. Caspian suggests that:

‘What’s happening at the moment is a collective complex around gender. It’s been thrown up in the air and the politicisation of trans is part of how this complex is expressed. There is a post-industrial questioning of what it means to be male or female. Now men are freed from work being linked to our physicality and women don’t have to keep having babies every year and so gender roles are called into question. This is not a bad thing.’¹⁸⁷

The challenge to the gendered socialisation of children in part reflects a changed reality: heavy industry has declined so there is no longer a demand for a large supply of manual labour while better educated women find they have opportunities besides being a wife and mother. At the same time, the challenge to gendered socialisation is also political. Feminism has sought to raise the expectations of girls and tackle ‘toxic masculinity’. This has been very influential in schools with the challenge to gender stereotypes forming an intrinsic part of both the formal and hidden curriculum. Of course, there is much to be welcomed in this questioning of outdated stereotypes. It is to be celebrated that boys and girls, men and women, can be free to lead their lives in any way they choose. However, an outdated set of expectations has not been replaced by a new set of values. Instead, the

entire process of socialising a new generation has been called into question.

Adults no longer share with each other, nor have the confidence to inculcate in the next generation, a coherent set of values. Davies-Arai researched books on parenting. She tells me:

‘Parenting advice is split into two camps, the authoritarian and the child centred. The child centred model has been in the ascendant for decades and it allows for little adult authority. I saw children in schools quite anxious as a result of this kind of parenting. This model teaches that children are born with a fully formed sense of self that they need to express and the parent’s job is to facilitate this expression. This has been the environment for quite a while now, this idea that we learn more from our children than they learn from us. People say: “My child is my guide.” This may sound kind, but it is putting far too much responsibility onto children. It is not allowing children to be children; it is treating them as mini adults.’¹⁸⁸

‘We are seeing children growing up, their actions dictated entirely by their feelings. We have centred feelings above all else. We are always asking children, “How does that make you feel?” We are teaching children right from the start that their feelings are the most important thing. We’re not expecting children to still be able to behave in a particular way despite how they feel – their feelings are all that matters. We should be teaching children that they have power over their feelings, not that their feelings have power over them. We are not equipping our children for life. We are disempowering them. We don’t allow one child to win a race, for example, because it makes the losers feel sad. We defer to, and tip-toe around this generation of children, who are probably the most privileged children in the world. It is important that we listen to children but this doesn’t mean we have to agree

with everything they say. Parents are now asking children “how do you feel about being a boy or a girl?” as if it was possible to change if they don’t like being one or the other.¹⁸⁹

Rather than being socialised into new, positive models for what it means to be a man or a woman in the twenty-first century, children today are offered two competing visions. On one hand, children are sold a rigid idea of what is appropriate for boys and girls with toys and clothes segregated into pink and blue, divided between the Disney Princess and the footballer. Later, this morphs into a highly sexualised view of women and men taken from elements of pop culture and pornography. Ironically, this is perhaps in contrast to a past that offered a less commercial and more open view of childhood. Davies-Arai recalls that, ‘In the 1970s you saw many girls with short hair. Femininity wasn’t compulsory. Today, you rarely see a girl with short hair and girls are groomed to within an inch of their lives. Pornography sets the aesthetic standard.’ On the other hand, and in opposition to this, children are offered gender neutrality. Increasing numbers of schools now have gender neutral school uniforms, shops sell gender neutral children’s clothes and a few parents have made headlines for refusing to reveal the sex of their baby even to close family members. Adults are clearly in a state of some confusion regarding sex and which messages should be sent to young people about gender. It is hardly surprising that young people pick up on this confusion and some come to embody it in a quite literal form.

Transgender children, then, are not displaying signs of an innate condition but rather embodying a social phenomenon. Meanwhile, transgender activists are exploiting this vulnerable group to promote their own concerns. This flatters young people in the short term by suggesting that

they are more interesting, more diverse and more accepting than an older generation. But acquiescence to the idea of transgender children represents an abdication of adult responsibility as children are sacrificed to an ideological cause. At the same time, it also represents a conservative move. In previous eras, when gendered socialisation was far more strictly adhered to, it did not prevent a proportion of children from rebelling against such strictures, perhaps becoming tomboys or transgressing stereotypes. Yet today such children are taught that their bodies should change to be brought in line with stereotypical views of what it means to be male or female.

Identity politics

Aligning with the LGB movement, advocating for legal changes, curtailing debate, and promoting the idea of transgender children have, together, proven to be remarkably successful in bringing about the social changes transgender activists wish to see. In the US, 'The social gains made by the transgender movement have mirrored changes in its access to the policy agenda, and to related changes in public policy,'¹⁹⁰ with, for example, several states having 'adopted hate/bias crimes protections with transgender-inclusive language.'¹⁹¹ Meanwhile, in the UK, as well as the previously noted review of the Gender Recognition Act and the effective incorporation of gender identity into the Equality Act's list of protected characteristics, there has, as previously noted, been an expansion of police powers to tackle reported incidences of transgender hate crime.

Actions taken by a small number of transgender activists, no matter how shrewd or calculating, are not sufficient to explain the widespread re-shaping of social institutions and cultural conventions. Academics and medical practitioners

have played a role in framing arguments around gender and gender transition so as to lend intellectual and moral support to activists and put pressure on policy makers. Most significantly, there has been a readiness from people outside of the transgender community and in positions of authority not only to accept having their language and policies policed but to go further and play a role in affirming the gender ideology promoted by campaigners and, in the process, enforcing speech and behaviour codes. The reasons for this lie in the broader political climate, in particular the rise of identity politics and the emergence of a culture of victimhood.

At a time when mainstream political parties are becoming increasingly distanced from their traditional demographics, identity-based groups appear to provide a ready-made constituency. Heather Brunskell-Evans explains that responses to the demands of the transgender movement are not typified by traditional political alignments:

‘Politics has moved away from class politics and towards identity politics. This is not a left and right issue... Transgender typifies something much bigger going on in our culture; it is an attempt to reshape the world according to a particular ethic.’

She continues:

‘The trans movement comes from queer theory and postmodern theory and questioning the truths of binaries. In identity politics, power is located in the binary. Once you’ve shifted the heteronormative binary you then have this idea that some children are born outside of the binary; they are born trans.’

In this way, the very existence of transgender people becomes a radical political statement; they are the

embodiment of challenge to a seemingly outdated, binary, heteronormative order.

Advocating on behalf of the ‘transgender community’ allows others to be associated with this identity-driven challenge to convention. As Davies-Arai points out, ‘As a young person, you need a cause. When I was young there were lots of battles to be fought. Now it can seem as if all these battles have been won so new ones need to be found.’ Questioning sex, one of the most basic features that define us as humans, certainly opens up new battle grounds. But although this may help explain the attraction of transgenderism for a younger generation it sheds little light on why well-established institutions, such as the Conservative Party, also took transgenderism on board. Williams offers one explanation:

‘The Tory Party had opposed the advancement of gay rights in the past and some in the party saw promoting transgender rights as their way to atone. They wanted to avoid making the same mistakes again. But the rights of gay people and the rights of transgender people have become blurred, I think deliberately. The campaign for transgender people is hanging on the coat tails of society’s good will and support for the gay community. Because of the LGBT acronym people don’t go beyond that to see the differences.’

Williams makes the crucial point that: ‘Where the gay community simply asked for their own gay rights, trans activists are demanding other people’s rights: women’s rights.’¹⁹²

Victimhood culture

Advocating for and acting on behalf of the transgender community provides national and local policy makers, as well as key personnel in professions such as education, social

work, medicine and policing, with a sense of purpose which, in turn, lends legitimacy to their role. When the identity-based group takes on a victim status then action comes with the moral authority of protecting the oppressed. Defending the rights of transgender people allows policy makers and professionals to justify their authority through claims to be acting on behalf of a victimised and vulnerable group. The primary success of activists is the extent to which they have been able to define a coherent transgender community and then present its members as uniquely victimised. As David Green explains, 'Victimhood as a political status is best understood as the outcome of a political strategy by some groups aimed at gaining preferential treatment.'¹⁹³ Protecting transgender people from physical and emotional harm provides an important rationale for those in positions of power. This legitimises some of the fundamental social changes we have witnessed in recent years.

Campaigners for transgender rights often point to higher rates of mental health problems and greater incidence of suicide as evidence of the emotional and mental difficulties transgender people experience. A British mental health charity reports that LGBT people have a higher risk of experiencing suicidal feelings, self-harm, drug or alcohol misuse and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety as a result of 'high levels of daily stress due to stigma ... discrimination and transphobia.'¹⁹⁴ One problem with such statements is that combining the experiences of transgender people with a far larger LGB community makes it difficult to differentiate what may or may not be the impact of transphobia. Stonewall claim that two in five transgender young people have attempted suicide and this is used to support their claims that transphobia is widespread, that the experience of confronting transphobia induces trauma

and, as a result, mental health problems are prevalent within members of the transgender community.

Claims that transgender children are especially prone to suicidal ideation are used to enforce the approach of positive affirmation. Parents and teachers are told that not affirming the new gender identity of a child in their care could have fatal consequences. As Stephanie Davies-Arai writes, ‘Skeptical parents reluctant to approve risky and potentially irreversible medical procedures are often told “Better a live son than a dead daughter” (or vice versa).’ However, she points out that there is good reason to be skeptical about the statistics on suicide rates among transgender children:

‘Susie Green, the CEO of Mermaids and herself the mother of a trans child, claims that attendees at the Tavistock have a “48% suicide attempt risk”. According to the clinic, the true rate is less than 1%. When an NHS psychiatrist accused her on Twitter of “making stuff up”, Green wrote: “You need to f*** off. You know nothing.”’¹⁹⁵

There is little certainty and a great deal of speculation in discussion about the mental health of transgender people. The starting point for such discussions is often the assumption of widespread transphobia. Yet, just as ‘transgender’ has only relatively recently entered mainstream vocabulary, so too has ‘transphobia’. As a concept, it remains ill-defined. Norman uses research conducted with transgender people to provide both a definition of transphobia and an indication of its prevalence. She tells us: ‘Over 90% of participants had been told that trans people were not normal, over 80% had experienced silent harassment ... 50% had been sexually objectified or fetishised, 38% had experienced sexual harassment.’¹⁹⁶ Further, Norman points to a 2005 survey that found, ‘most (of the fifty-two transsexual) respondents

had experienced verbal aggression,' and that 'four out of five (79%) respondents had experienced some form of harassment in public ranging from transphobic comments to physical or sexual abuse.'¹⁹⁷

These findings raise questions. If by 'normal' we understand 'usual,' 'typical' or 'expected' (a standard dictionary definition) then being transgender is not 'normal'. This is not, of course, to pass a moral judgement. We also see that many different behaviours are grouped together in defining transphobia. Whereas 'verbal aggression' and 'physical abuse' can be recorded and witnessed by others, some may interpret silence as harassing whereas others may not. Likewise, campaigners often suggest that any and all discussion of the treatment of transgender people and the society-wide impact of accommodating to gender self-identification is inherently transphobic. In defining transphobia, we rapidly move between objective and subjective: if someone feels they have been a victim of transphobia then, by definition, they have been a victim of transphobia. Recorded statistics therefore offer little indication as to whether transphobia is on the rise or whether people are now more sensitive to it and more likely to report it.

Activists argue that the experience of living in a transphobic society is a major contributor to individual mental health problems, up to and including suicide and attempted suicide: 'One of the main reasons why transgender people have a higher risk of experiencing suicidal feelings and mental health problems may be the effect of persistent stress, linked with transphobia.'¹⁹⁸ However, what we do not know is whether transgender people are predisposed to mental health problems, that is: whether being transgender may, in itself, be a response to an underlying mental

health condition. One study suggests that: 'Transgender people assigned female were more likely to have clinically significant autistic traits compared to any other group.'¹⁹⁹ Once mental health conditions are taken into consideration, the suicide rate among transgender people is no higher than that among the general population.

It is no doubt likely that a proportion of transgender individuals encounter prejudice and harassment and that this may have a detrimental impact upon their mental health. However, broad and subjective definitions of transphobia combined with activists' readiness to use mental health and suicide statistics to further their cause can make it difficult to determine an accurate account of trans-people's experiences. One problem with the highly visible campaigning conducted by transgender activists; for example, in demanding self-identification, coverage on the school curriculum, and a prominent position within the LGB movement, is that transgender-identity becomes highly politicised. This may be to the detriment of longstanding transsexuals and transgender people who simply want to go about their daily lives.

Discussions of mental health and propensity to suicide among transgender people take on a greater significance in societies that culturally and socially valorise victims. The lived experiences of transgender people, and most especially transgender children, are assumed to encompass suffering. As we have already explored, according to current gender theory, all babies have a sex randomly assigned to them in an act of symbolic violence conducted at the moment of birth. All children then experience the brutality of socialisation into a gender role that conforms to their allocated sex. For the trans-child this brutality, and their subsequent suffering, is increased because of the struggle to reconcile

the contradiction between their innate gender identity and the sex they were assigned at birth. As adults they must confront a heteronormative society gendered along a rigid binary axis. Transwomen are forced constantly to perform womanhood. The price of success is the sexual harassment and oppression that is, according to feminists, still a feature of society. The price of failure is the existential anguish of having your true self rejected.

The personal suffering experienced by members of the transgender community takes on a more collective and powerful force in the context of victimhood culture where experience of suffering affords particular groups a morally elevated status. We are told that trans-women in particular encounter prejudice and experience trauma. Yet, at the same time, trans-women are celebrated for their suffering; for example, in 2015 Caitlyn Jenner was named *Glamour* magazine's woman of the year. Similarly, transgender children are routinely praised for bravery. As Lisa Marchiano writes, 'Numerous glowing media reports about brave trans kids and their heroically supportive families offer celebrity status to both.'²⁰⁰ The suffering transgender people are assumed to endure is used to lend authority to people in positions of power who assume a moral righteousness for their actions.

Institutions such as schools, universities and even prisons are now more likely to relate to students or inmates through a therapeutic lens that positions people as traumatised and vulnerable rather than robust individuals able to exercise autonomy over their own lives.²⁰¹ American authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt identify a range of factors that lead young people today to perceive themselves to be vulnerable, such as changes in parenting and schooling. They argue that as a result of being treated as if they are fragile by parents and teachers, young adults today are

more likely than previous generations to arrive at university believing that they are fragile. This view extends beyond the self and is projected onto others: ‘Even those who are not fragile themselves often believe that *others* are in danger and therefore need protection.’²⁰²

Two changes have occurred in parallel: people are perceived to be more fragile and susceptible to harm and, at the same time, definitions of harm have expanded considerably to encompass not just the physical but also the psychological. This means that safety is threatened not just by people or actions that may inflict physical injury but by people or actions that may cause emotional distress. Language, with its capacity to frame reality, becomes a key conduit of this emotional distress. For this reason, much of the focus for transgender campaigners is upon discussion in general, social media posts, and compelling language use such as the practice of sharing pronouns.

When these changes occur not simply at the level of the individual but at the level of society then it is possible to identify a cultural shift towards victimhood. Sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning explore the emergence of a victimhood culture in their 2018 book, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces and the New Culture Wars*. They argue that people are incentivised to identify as victims in return for recognition, support, and protection: ‘victimhood is in fact a social resource – a form of status.’ For those who are not members of a particular victim group, ‘believing certain claims of victimization is upheld as a kind of moral duty.’²⁰³ In a victimhood culture, any act that perpetuates inequality or decreases diversity becomes a cause for serious moral condemnation. Such a culture is ‘most likely to arise precisely in settings that already have relatively high degrees of equality.’²⁰⁴

Heather Brunskell-Evans says, ‘the trans movement has done an excellent job of presenting trans people as victims.’ Yet it is only in the context of a broader victimhood culture that these claims are treated with veneration. Davies-Arai points to the role of the left in particular:

‘The left have got themselves into a real bind because they support the oppressed and the disadvantaged and the trans community does face discrimination. But activists have positioned trans people as the most oppressed group of all, and they’ve pulled this off on the tail of gay rights.’

As Rob Jessel puts it, ‘These people need victimhood. It’s like their life force and they will get it and they will find a way to prove that you are a bigot no matter how pro-trans you profess yourself to be.’²⁰⁵ Within the context of a victimhood culture, being transgender allows otherwise privileged youngsters to assume a morally elevated status.

Elevating the moral status of members of particular victim groups has far reaching social consequences, many of which have been explored in this report. David Green points to broader concerns: ‘Group victimhood is not compatible with our heritage of liberal democracy in three particular ways: it is inconsistent with the moral equality that underpins liberalism; it weakens our democratic culture; and it undermines legal equality.’²⁰⁶ Transgenderism attacks liberal democracy in each of these three ways: it suggests one group is more deserving of moral and legal protections than any other social group and that this should be at the expense of the majority’s rights to freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of conscience.

Challenging new orthodoxies around gender requires us to return to the existentialism of Simone De Beauvoir and her defence of the individual able to determine for herself

how to respond to both biology and society. This opens the way to a far more radical perception of identity, one that assumes a performer and not just a performance: an agent who acts upon the world rather than being determined by the perceptions of others. To see others as 'capable of resilience in the face of disagreement' paves the way for liberal tolerance, 'which entails voicing disagreement, satire, and active engagement with opposing ideas.'²⁰⁷ This in turn suggests those in the media, education, local and national government and institutions who currently gain moral authority from their defence of vulnerable transgender individuals will need to find a new source of legitimacy gained through a democratic mandate premised on universal values rather than particular identity groups.

Conclusions

Transgender ideology, as opposed to the existence of transgender individuals, has a pernicious impact upon society more broadly and the lives of women and children in particular. It is also detrimental to transsexuals who do not wish their lifestyle to become politicised. For everyone's sake, we need to push back against transgenderism while offering support to transgender individuals.

First and foremost, there needs to be an insistence upon the right to debate all aspects of transgenderism. Discussion immediately sheds light on the conflict between sex-based rights and rights accrued according to gender-identity. The statement 'trans women are women' unhelpfully pretends no such conflict exists and erases the possibility of even discussing what women and children may lose by the advance of transgenderism.

Resolving tensions between apparently contested and competing rights is never straightforward. This is especially the case when the promotion of transgenderism has come to provide a moral justification for numerous social institutions. Undoing this institutional capture requires a far bigger challenge to the dominance of identity politics and the prevalence of a victimhood culture. In the process we can begin to interrogate changes in our collective understanding of gender roles and our approach to socialising children.

As an ideology, transgenderism pervades every area of

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our social and cultural life. But it also has an individual impact. The proposals detailed below are intended to press pause on legal changes and to limit the potential impact of transgenderism on the most vulnerable members of society until we can move forward with calm and reasoned debate.

Recommendations

1. Both the UK Government and the Scottish Parliament should announce a moratorium on all reform of the Gender Recognition Act for at least the duration of this parliament.
2. The Government should clarify the distinction between sex-based and gender-based protections as set out in the Equalities Act 2010. The Act's permission for sex-based discrimination to preserve female-only services should be reiterated.
3. The prescribing of puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones to anyone under the age of 18 should be immediately prohibited.
4. No child should be permitted to 'socially transition' at school (i.e., change name, pronouns, uniform or use the changing rooms and toilets intended for members of the opposite sex) without the permission of their parents.
5. Schools should be encouraged to separate out the teaching of lesbian, gay and bi-sexual relationships from teaching about transgender as part of the Relationships and Sex Education curriculum. Teaching on transgender should not contradict the content of the science/biology curriculum.

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In less than two decades 'transgender' has gone from a term representing individuals and little used outside of specialist communities, to signifying a powerful political ideology driving significant social change. At the level of the individual, this shift has occurred through the separation of gender from sex, before reclaiming biology through an innate sense of 'gender-identity'.

In this report, Joanna Williams argues that this return to biology allows for the formation of a distinct identity group, one that can stake a claim to being persecuted, and depends upon continual validation and confirmation from an external audience. All critical discussion is a threat to this public validation and is often effectively curtailed.

This ideology has meant that in 2019, the number of 11- and 13-year-olds referred to NHS specialist medical help with transitioning rose by 28 and 30 per cent, respectively, over the previous year. The youngest patients have been just three years old. Arrests and prosecutions have been made for 'deliberately misgendering' through the use of male pronouns. Transgender pupils have been free to use the toilets and changing rooms that match their gender identity, previously intended only for members of the opposite sex. Reports of the attacks on women in prisons carried out by transgender inmates suggest that the feelings of transgender women are being placed above the safety of females. But why has this been allowed to happen?

Joanna Williams suggests that the move of transgenderism from niche to mainstream tells us more about the rest of society than it does about transgender individuals. People in positions of power within the realms of media, education, academia, police, social work, medicine, law, and local and national government have been prepared to coalesce behind the demands of a tiny transgender community. Previously authoritative institutions now lack confidence in their own ability to lead and look to the transgender community as a victimised group that can act as a source of moral authority. However, this, in turn, has not only eroded sex-based rights but undermined crucial areas of child protection.

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