

## Researchers are wounded in academia's gender wars

**The toxic dispute over the rights of transgender people and how freely these matters should be discussed remains academia's most divisive issue. Laura Favaro explains what she learned from speaking to both sides**

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"Are *you* not terrified? Everybody is going to hate you." This response was not unusual as I interviewed those caught up in the so-called gender wars that have divided Western academia so deeply in recent years.

Warnings that the field was risky for an early career researcher to investigate came from scholars on all sides – from "gender-critical" feminists, who described being vilified and ostracised for stating that sex is binary and immutable, to those who saw that position as callous bigotry, or, moreover, "a genocidal project" (including journal editors thus endorsing censorship). Certain doors in academia may quietly close if I went further; invitations to speak would disappear and online abuse would follow, they warned.

"There's just such a toxic climate around this subject," I was repeatedly told. A mid-career sociologist added: "There is conflict, and bullying, but no debate happening."

But the topic seemed too important to ignore. In recent times, it has moved from Twitter (where it now trends almost daily) to the centre-stage of politics; would Liz Truss have been elected as the new Conservative Party leader by Tory MPs and party members [without her consistent opposition to gender self-identification](#)? Nowhere is the debate more febrile, however, than academia. It has ended friendships, research collaborations and [even academic careers](#).

One recent case in point is the accusation that University and College Union general secretary Jo Grady presided over a "gender ID witch-hunt". *The Times* [obtained minutes of a meeting](#) she attended that sought to gather information about alleged "transphobes and prominent gender-critical activists" working in university diversity departments.

More than two years ago, I set out to find whether the warnings about entering this domain were justified, or, as others suggest, spurious claims made by those keen to spark a phoney "culture war". It led me to interview 50 gender studies academics across many disciplines, including sociology, psychology and education, most of whom worked at English universities, to learn about their views and experiences of the dispute.

Having approached the topic with an open mind, however, my discussions left me in no doubt that a culture of discrimination, silencing and fear has taken hold across universities in England, and many countries beyond.

All of my interviewees self-defined as feminist, with 14 of those approached holding views now described as "gender critical". For them, there is a clear difference between "sex", which refers to biological categories that are binary and immutable, and "gender", which describes the roles, behaviours and attributes that a given culture deems appropriate for people by virtue of their sex. Recognising this difference is

important because, as well as constraining both sexes, gender serves to justify the subordination of females. This group of academics also noted that their perspective was, until recently, largely shared across feminism, as well as within many academic disciplines.

It was clear that the “gender-critical” feminist academics I interviewed had faced negative repercussions for years for expressing their view (now protected in the UK under the Equality Act 2010 following [last year’s tribunal ruling](#) that a thinktank researcher, Maya Forstater, had been unlawfully dismissed for tweeting that women could not change their biological sex). Among other experiences, my interviewees described complaints to and by management, attempts to shut down events, no platforming, disinvitations, intimidation, smears and losing career progression opportunities, including being blocked from jobs.

Others spoke about being physically removed from events, alongside receiving torrents of abuse online that even included incitements to murder. One criminology scholar said her experience was “a continuum of hell”, while a law scholar claimed “the impact has been huge [and] is going to last a long time”. Aware of these potential consequences, and citing feelings of fear, isolation and despair, others had decided to “hide in the shadows”.

Those in the earlier stages of their careers said that “it would just be too terrifying” to make their views public due to the threat of being “ostracised...because so much within academia depends on personal connections”, while more experienced colleagues alluded to “self-preservation”. Feared by all was the “horrible backlash” online; one sociologist worried about death and rape threats seen elsewhere stated: “I have children – I’m frightened.”

From these scholars’ perspective, the supporters of what is often called “trans-inclusive feminism” held near-total control in academia, deciding what was discussed in departments or included in scholarly journals.

But did trans-inclusive feminists see themselves as holding this powerful position? I spoke to 20 such academics to understand their heterogeneous, often ambiguous and contradictory constellation of ideas and to explore whether they recognised the accusations of unfair “gatekeeping” made against them.

For some, “sex” is a construct of oppressive systems, notably Western colonialism. Others argue it is a biological spectrum that can – at least in part – change. For others still, it is both a social fiction and a biological reality. “Gender” is likewise understood in different ways: as socially or discursively constructed (performative model); as an inseparable combination of biological, psychological and social elements (biopsychosocial model); or, to a much lesser extent, as innate subjectivity, evoking notions of sexed brains (psychobiologist model). At times, “gender” is used as a synonym for “gender identity”, usually understood as an internal sense of self as a woman, a man, both, neither or something else, such as “non-binary” – which, among other possibilities, can be “plural” (“like having two or more alter egos or personas”) or “fluid” (changing “over years, months, or the course of the day”), as explained in the 2019 book [Gender: A Graphic Guide](#).

Despite its conceptual diversity, *genderism* coheres around the push for gender (identity) to replace sex in most – if not all – contexts. Unlike feminism, its political subject is not female people but rather all those subjected to gender oppression – a

concept that is redefined to emphasise lack of choice and affirmation relating to gender identity.

For many, the urgency of recognising this societal injustice could not be overstated. “Trans-exclusionary radical feminists” (Terfs), as they frequently labelled them, are part of nothing less than a “colonial [and] ultimately an eliminationist project” against people who identify as transgender or non-binary, some believe, as explained by Alison Phipps in her 2020 book [Me, not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism](#). On the issue of “no platforming”, some interviewees ridiculed the idea that gender-critical feminists were victims of it, echoing influential writers such as Sara Ahmed, [who in 2015 discredited claims by feminists](#) about silencing at universities being “a mechanism of power”, even while conceding that she was “aiming to eliminate the positions that aim to eliminate people”.

Others, however, openly embraced the “no debate” position on the basis that gender-critical feminism is “hate speech” or even “rhetorical violence [that] actually does have real-world aims”, equivalent to movements such as fascism and eugenics. One interviewee who identified as a trans woman described the current situation in academia as “a political battle over an institutional space”, clarifying that: “My political bottom line is – I don’t concede to people who are interested in the eradication of me and everyone like me in the world because I consider that a genocidal project.”

This view, together with the belief that “cis women have more power than trans people”, led genderist academics to refrain from forthrightly denouncing some transgender activists’ aggressive tactics towards feminists. These include threats and ideations of extreme violence, which, as well as being pervasive on social media, appear to be increasingly condoned at universities. For example, last year, a London School of Economics postgraduate student conference paper described a scene in which feminists critical of genderism “scream for mercy”. [The paper](#) then described the potential threat: “I hold a knife to your throat and spit my transness into your ear”, concluding: “Are you scared? I sure fucking hope so.”

When discussing this horrific anti-feminism, some interviewees, including those working on violence against women, would nonetheless still equivocate. As one sociologist put it: “My priority are the people who are being harmed by this debate, who I perceive to be trans people.” “These gender-critical feminists – they are intellectualising [sex and gender], and I think it’s harmful,” she added.

When asked to describe their arguments, however, she responded: “I don’t know if what I understand or what I think are the issues, are the issues, I’ll be honest with you – I stay out of their way.” This remarkable coupling of condemnation and ignorance regarding gender-critical feminism was fairly common among genderist academics. Many readily admitted that they limit their academic engagements, including their reading, to their “echo chambers and bubbles” where, as one journal editor noted, “we all share basically the same perspectives”.

Many genderist academics struggled, or were discomfited, when asked to provide their *own* definitions of sex, gender and (particularly) gender identity, despite their research and teaching revolving around these very topics. Some acknowledged lack of sufficient reflection, while others explained this peculiar situation by citing concerns over “perpetuating harms” with their words to people who identify as transgender. For others still, the concern related to “sounding Terfy”, or was a reaction to the fact that “there is very little openness to debating certain subjects which are difficult other than being framed as transphobic”.

A number of genderist academics recognised that “more nuanced, more honest, self-aware conversations [should] take place” – although strictly among genderists only and in private spaces, since, in public, “you’ve got to be for your team and toe the party line”, one education scholar explained.

Another leading scholar lamented how “the ability to openly debate thorny, complex, contested things has diminished in recent years” – but still admitted she would not publish a gender-critical feminist paper in the journal she serves as an editor.

Gatekeeping was also suggested in the responses by another 11 interviewees who held principal editorship roles at feminist, gender and sexuality studies journals. All confirmed that genderist perspectives dominate these publications, in the sense that “on the editorial board, none of us would describe ourselves as in the gender critical camp”. Editors additionally pointed to the preferred perspective of authors, readers and publishing houses. For some, it was a matter of scholarly values, with gender-critical feminism described as “wrong-headed”, “outdated” or “completely delegitimised”. Others, however, acknowledged that: “the objection is a political one”.

Censoring efforts were not limited to journals. Genderist academics reported personally imposing bans from academic networks and events, along with language policing of colleagues as well as students. “If students write ‘female’ in their essay, I’ll cross it out”, a sociologist told me, because “what matters is gender [identity]”.

Where does this leave those “in the middle”? I spoke with a further 16 academics whose views were unknown to me, and over half positioned themselves as not straightforwardly or uniquely supportive of one “camp” (as did a few I initially categorised as genderists). “Middle” interviewees tended to decry the fact that “anybody in the middle just has no space to speak”. They also emphasised a desire for less hostile interactions and a “more nuanced debate”. When asked for further details, however, they were principally critical of genderism. Its academic supporters were accused of “virtue signalling”, “performative wokeness”, “bandwagon-hopping”, “tribalism” and “censorious politics of virtuousness”.

These academics, who identified as left-wing feminists, repeatedly denounced what were perceived as aggressive, dogmatic and even authoritarian inclinations. One psychologist mentioned similarities to “authoritarian regimes that like to police the thoughts and speech of their citizens”, and another participant decided to step down from her role as co-editor at a journal, citing similar concerns.

“This is the only time I’ve experienced something like this,” said one “middle” interviewee, affirming a widely held view that “we don’t have these conversations because we are all so afraid.” Some explained that “secret” or “private” conversations were the only forum where these conversations could be held, but even these “don’t feel like a safe space to speak up. And that’s [among] gender scholars.” Repeatedly, interviewees claimed to refrain from publicly expressing their views because of fears over accusations of transphobia, or of being “framed as a gender-critical feminist”.

Many of these “I’m-not-gender-critical-but-s” listed concerns about genderism, including the “affirmative” medical approach to children identifying as transgender, the loss of single-sex spaces and the impact of removing sex as a category in data collection in favour of gender. They acknowledged having relevant expertise to offer in these areas but were “too scared” to do so. “Are there things that I could write? Yes. Do I think that they could make a difference, that they could offer something? Yes. Will I write about it? No. Which tells you all you need to know about the current situation,” said a

sociologist. “If I am scared to write about this...then I have no doubt that people who might be more easily classified as Terfs would feel afraid to speak, censored,” she added.

One middle-ground psychology scholar was close to stopping her gender-related research because “you see what happens to other people”, while a feminist cultural studies academic told me: “I’m seriously contemplating whether I tell my head of department that I no longer want to teach my [gender-related] course.”

Both academics explained that they “just don’t feel safe”, with the second adding: “I don’t have extreme views at all. It’s fairly middle-ground to say that it is a complex debate and there are multiple facets to it, and in the scholarly setting we have to be able to explore these.” She also told me that “it feels so alienating because academia should be about discussing and exchanging ideas, and it’s not. It’s not in our context”. Palpably upset, she went on: “It’s also incredibly anxiety-provoking because I don’t want to lose my job and I don’t want to put my kids at risk – I know they could be put at risk.”

As well as self-censoring, “middle” participants are contributing to the silencing of others in academia. Some had dissuaded students from gender-critical feminist projects, or refrained from inviting speakers with such views, which one late-career sociologist justified on the grounds that “it would cause too much trouble, [and] I’ve been cowed by that violence.”

Of course I fear harms to my career and more for instigating, as interviewees repeatedly put it, “difficult conversations” – not least as an immigrant early career scholar with a family to support. But, at the same time, why would I want to work in academia if I cannot do academic work? Much more terrifying than being hated is being gagged.

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