

HOW TO SPOT TERF IDEOLOGY

Trans-exclusionary radical feminist ideology puts our feminist movement at risk, and trans and non-binary people in danger. We have compiled this quick guide on how to spot these ideas so we can make sure that our movements are safe and inclusive for everyone.

WHAT IS IT?

'TERF' stands for 'trans-exclusionary radical feminism'. Terf ideology is a specific form of transphobia, and more specifically transmisogyny, as terfs mostly target trans women and transfeminine people.

According to terf ideology, trans women are excluded from womanhood and should accordingly be excluded from women-only spaces. Womanhood is supposedly defined exclusively by "sex-based" oppression, aka oppression as a result of being what terf ideology terms "biologically female". This idea weaponises a reductive understanding of "biology" to argue that 'women' - or those assigned female at birth - all experience gendered oppression in the same way, which erases our diverse experiences of gender as it intersects with race, class, sexuality, disability, and many other structural factors.

WHY IS IT WRONG?

Terfs often dub themselves "gender critical", which on the surface of it seems very reasonable - however, the problem arises in the failure of terf ideology to be similarly "sex critical". While the gender binary is obviously a societal construction that is important to criticise and denaturalise, the same is equally true of the sex binary (the assumption that everyone can be split into two discrete biological sexes, "male" and "female") - check out our reading list for more info on this.

Terf ideology fails to recognise that women are not homogeneous, and face many different kinds of intersecting oppressions; Black 'womanhood' and white 'womanhood' are not the same, just as straight 'womanhood' and queer 'womanhood' are not the same, just as trans 'womanhood' and cis 'womanhood' are not the same. Structural misogyny is complex, and women's oppression can't be reduced to *only* specific biological or anatomical elements, although oppression based on these things is still very much a feminist issue.

WHY IS IT HARMFUL?

Trans women and transfeminine people face very serious and very real oppression; they suffer from high rates of violence, homelessness, poverty, sexual assault, and healthcare discrimination. It's crucial that women's spaces and resources are available and accessible to all women, especially those most marginalised - trans women among them. But transmisogyny often puts up barriers that make it harder for trans women to access women's shelters, survivor support, healthcare services, etc., as well as everyday spaces like bathrooms. Terf ideology is actively exacerbating this, aiming to make spaces "sex-segregated" in ways that require invasive policing of women's bodies, both cis and trans (multiple masculine/butch-presenting cis women have been targeted in bathrooms and other women's spaces by people assuming they are trans).

HOW DO WE SPOT IT?

Terf ideology uses a lot of the same phrases and tropes, which often seem innocuous on the surface but are actually being used as dogwhistles for transphobia and transmisogyny. Overall, terf ideology hides itself in feminist language, often claiming to support trans rights while actually working to undermine them.

- "Gender critical", discussed above; terfs also often dub themselves "biological women" or "adult human females", and frequently highlight biological and anatomical signifiers such as "XX" (denoting chromosomes) and parts of reproductive anatomy.
- "RadFem"; terf ideology calls itself "radical feminism" after its origins in parts of the feminist 'second wave' and its opposition to what it sees as "liberal feminist" positions of trans inclusion, although in reality there's nothing "radical" about biological essentialism.
- Certain waves of terf ideology have attempted to separate trans people out from the rest of the LGBT+ community, so you might see references to the "LGB community" or "drop the T".
- Terfs often dub trans people and their allies the "transgender lobby" or "cult of transgenderism".
- They tend to dislike the term "cis" (non-trans), and often argue that the term 'terf' itself is "hate speech", or a "misogynistic/lesbophobic slur".
- Current terf discourse places a lot of focus on trans children, perpetuating myths that children are being given surgery and hormones ("transing children is child abuse!").

- Another terf trope is painting trans women as predators who want access to women's spaces so that they can harass and sexually assault cis women.

HOW DO WE COMBAT IT?

Because of the veiled nature of terf ideology, well-intentioned feminists can be tricked into buying into terf arguments. If you notice terf beliefs arising among people in your communities, try and help them understand the contradictions inherent in these beliefs and the harm that they do (and forward them our reading list!). Terf ideology can be defeated in a fair debate - but committed terfs don't fight fair. Very often (especially online) the best thing to do is disengage. Explain to your aunt why trans women should be allowed to use women's bathrooms, but don't debate SuperRadFemXX on Twitter about the colonial nature of the sex binary - save that energy and put it towards building stronger positive, trans-inclusive feminist and activist communities.

WHAT DOES TRANS-INCLUSIVE FEMINISM LOOK LIKE?

- Centring the voices of trans women and transfeminine people
- Not making assumptions re: gender and appearance
- Taking on the labour on trans women's issues (e.g. admission to women's colleges)
- Knowing that not all women share any given biological/anatomical trait or experience
- Collectively/mutually educating one another, unlearning gendered expectations together
- Recognising that the 'sex binary' is a colonial fiction created to oppress trans, queer, and gender-non-conforming people (esp. of indigenous genders), and people of colour as a whole, as well as women
- Refusing to allow terf ideology any ground. Truly radical, materialist feminism based on intersectional class-based analysis is in *support* of transfeminism, not against it