

# Forbidden Discourse: The Silencing of Feminist Criticism of “Gender”

*An open statement from 48 radical feminists from seven countries.*

*August 12, 2013 [with updated addition of signatures 9/30/13]*

We, the undersigned 1960s radical feminists and current activists, have been concerned for some time about the rise within the academy and mainstream media of “gender theory,” which avoids naming men and the system of male supremacy as the beneficiaries of women’s oppression. Our concern changed to alarm when we learned about threats and attacks, some of them physical, on individuals and organizations daring to challenge the currently fashionable concept of gender.

Recent developments: A U.S. environmental organization that also calls itself radical feminist is attacked for its political analysis of gender. Feminist conferences in the U.K., U.S. and Canada are driven from their contracted locations for asserting the right of women to organize for their liberation separately from men, including M>F (male to female) transgendered people.

Deep Green Resistance (DGR) reports<sup>1</sup> that queer activists defaced its published materials and trans activists threatened individual DGR members with arson, rape and murder. Bookstores are pressured not to carry DGR’s work and its speaking events are cancelled after protests by queer/transgender activists. At “RadFem” conferences in London<sup>2</sup>, Portland<sup>3</sup> and Toronto<sup>4</sup>, trans activists accuse scheduled speakers of hate speech and/or being transphobic because they dare to analyze gender from a feminist political perspective. Both M>F transgender people and “men’s rights” groups, operating separately but using similar language, demand to be included in the Rad Fem 2013 conference in London called to fight against women’s oppression and for liberation.

How did we slide back to the point where radical feminists have to fight for the right to hold women-only conferences and criticize conventional “gender roles”? The rise of Gender Studies may be part of the problem. Language is a wonderful human tool for thinking, understanding, cooperation and progress, so it makes sense that when people fight for freedom and justice against those who are oppressing them, the use and misuse of words—of language—becomes part of the struggle. Originally the term “gender” may have been a useful way around the communication problem that the word “sex” in English has several meanings. “Sex” refers to the reproduction of a species, as well as acts bringing about sexual pleasure AND the simply descriptive division of many plants and animals into two observable categories—the “sexes.” Using “gender” instead of “sex” allows feminists to make it clear that all kinds of social relations and differences between the sexes were unjust, not just sexual relations between the sexes. “Gender” also covers the artificial, socially-created differences between the human sexes, the overwhelming majority of which are politically, economically and culturally disadvantageous to female humans.

“Gender Studies” has displaced the grassroots women’s liberation analysis of the late 1960s and early 1970s. An early embrace of the neutral idea of “sex roles” as a major cause of women’s oppression by some segments of the women’s liberation movement has morphed into the new language—but the same neutrality—of “gender roles” and “gender oppression.” With a huge boost from the “new” academic theory coming out of those programs, heavily influenced by post-modernism, “gender identity” has overwhelmed—when not denying completely—the theory that biological women are oppressed and exploited as a class by men and by capitalists due to their reproductive capacity. Women often can no longer organize against our oppression in women-only groups without being pilloried with charges of transphobia. But, as a UK-based radical feminist “Fire in My Belly” wrote in her blog, “Radical feminists recognise that an individual’s ‘gender identity’ cannot, in a fair society, be allowed to ride roughshod over biological sex, which cannot be changed.”<sup>5</sup>

We do not view traditional sex/gender roles as natural or permanent. In fact, criticizing these “roles” is valid and necessary for women’s liberation. Radical feminist analysis and activism focus on unequal power relations between men and women under male supremacy, with real, material benefits going to the oppressor group (men) at the expense of the oppressed group (women).

The system of male supremacy comes down hard on non-conforming men and women, as movingly described online by members of the trans community. While switching gender identity may alleviate some problems on an individual level, it is not a political solution. Furthermore, a strong case can be made that it undermines a solution for all, even for the transitioning person, by embracing and reinforcing the cultural, economic and political tracking of “gender” rather than challenging it. Transitioning is a deeply *personal* issue associated with a lot of pain for many people but it is not a feminist strategy or even individual feminist stance. Transitioning, by itself, does not aid in the fight for equal power between the sexes.

There will have to be many advances in science and technology before the bodies of female humans will no longer be needed for the complicated and dangerous jobs of supplying eggs and gestating and bearing ongoing generations to carry on the work of the world. There will also, no doubt, be struggles to ensure that women are not oppressed in new ways under these new circumstances.

Not all feminists agree that ‘gender’ should be done away with, nor do we agree with one another on pornography or prostitution or a radical transformation of our economy or a number of other issues. But our movement has a history of airing serious differences in speeches and distributed position papers, not in physical attacks, threats of bodily harm and censorship of such analyses. DGR and RadFem stood up for the right to think, speak and write freely on the question of gender.

Although we may not be in total agreement with DGR’s analysis of gender, we welcome it as an important contribution to radical feminism and commend the courage it has taken to stand against the threats and attacks it brought upon them.

We defend the right of RadFem to exclude men, including M>F trans people, from their feminist meetings and to invite speakers who analyze gender from a feminist perspective. We also commend *CounterPunch* online for publishing the DGR material, which brought similar attacks for transphobia upon them, including from *Jacobin* magazine online.

We look forward to freedom *from* gender. The “freedom *for* gender” movement, whatever the intentions of its supporters, is reinforcing the culture and institutions of gender that are oppressing women. We reject the notion that this analysis is transphobic. We uphold the radical feminist principle that women are oppressed by male supremacy in both its individual and institutional forms. We continue to support the radical feminist strategy of organizing an independent power base and speaking the basic truths of our experience out of earshot of the oppressor. We hold these principles and strategies essential for advancing toward women’s liberation.

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Sources:

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/06/21/55123/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/ireland/article1248683.ece>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/06/07/the-left-hand-of-darkness/print>

<sup>4</sup> <http://radfemriseup.wordpress.com>

<sup>5</sup> [feministuk.wordpress.com/2013/06/19/radfem-2013-we-didnt-kill-any-men/](http://feministuk.wordpress.com/2013/06/19/radfem-2013-we-didnt-kill-any-men/)

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