

The Economist Explains How Transgenderism Hurts Feminism

In the aftermath of Donald Trump's election in 2016, Mara Keisling, head of the National Center for Transgender Equality, anticipated his hostility. She declared that trans people would fight for their rights – and that “Over the last two decades, we have made faster progress than any movement in American history”.

That's probably right. Faster than rights for blacks; faster than rights for women; faster than rights for homosexuals; way, way faster than rights for Down syndrome kids. The trans juggernaut is crushing opposition everywhere, and not just in the United States. In most Western countries, trans rights have become the new civil rights – even though the medical establishment had classified gender dysphoria as a mental illness only a few years ago.

However, as soldiers know, too rapid an advance, even with brilliant victories, weakens an army's supply line. And in this case, under increasingly close scrutiny some transgender arguments are showing signs of weakening.

One sign of this is a recent feature in *The Economist* on transgender identity, “The body of law”.

[The Economist is eager to stress its liberal credentials.](#)

This newspaper is a proud champion of gay rights. We first ran an editorial in favour of same-sex marriage in 1996. We hew to the liberal principle that people are the best judges of their own interests and should be able to act as they wish, as long as no one else is harmed. That some people regard homosexuality as sinful is irrelevant. Everyone is entitled to their beliefs, but not to stop others from exercising their own freedoms.

So far, so good. Of course *The Economist* will support our cause, a trans reader might think. What business is it of yours if I want to change my gender?

But surprisingly, after opening with some bland words of encouragement, *The Economist* expresses strong scepticism of transgenderism as an ideology, as a medical condition, and as a political movement. “The state should also resist the impulse to make trans people’s legal status a matter of personal definition, as Britain is considering. The state needs to be involved for the liberal reason that the welfare gains of self-id for trans people should be balanced against the potential harm to others.”

Earlier in the year *The Economist* hosted [a symposium on transgenderism](#) – and a number of the contributions were bitterly hostile.

Feminists argued that the movement for trans rights penalises women. For cis-women (natal females), it amounts to a colonial invasion. For decades feminists have struggled for affirmative action to help them break the glass ceiling. And then trans-women (natal males) take advantage of those gains in business or sport.

Instead of doing away with the shackles of sexual stereotypes, transgenderism locks them even tighter, feminists complain. If a cis-boy plays with dolls, he must be a potential trans-woman; if a cis-girl climbs trees, she must be a potential trans-male. As [Sarah Ditum](#) contended in the symposium:

There is a word for a situation where women talking about female bodies is considered impermissibly antisocial, where describing the consequences of sexism for women is systematically impeded, where resources for women are redistributed to male users while resources for men are left in male hands, and where “male” and “female” are rigidly associated with masculinity and femininity. That word is not

“progressive”, “liberal” or any of the other terms usually associated with trans activism. The word is misogyny. Trans rights should not come at the cost of women’s fragile gains.

And as another feminist, [Kathleen Stock, a lesbian philosopher](#), argued, the very concept of “female” is in danger of melting away under the sun of transgenderism. To be female is a particular kind of lived experience. It is not just a label which can be stuck on anyone.

The category “female” is also important for understanding the particular challenges its members face, as such. These include a heightened vulnerability to rape, sexual assault, voyeurism and exhibitionism; to sexual harassment; to domestic violence; to certain cancers; to anorexia and self-harm; and so on. If self-declared trans women are included in statistics, understanding will be hampered. A male’s self-identification into the category of “female” or “women” doesn’t automatically bring on susceptibility to these harms; nor does a female’s self-identification out of those categories lessen it. In a sexist world which often disadvantages females, as such, we need good data

[In its feature story, The Economist focuses](#) on the harms to children and to women which are possible outcomes of a laws which permit people to self-identify their gender.

For instance, the number of children who are being treated for gender dysphoria and who are being encouraged to change their gender is skyrocketing. But where is the evidence that this is the correct solution? Could it be a mental disorder? “At least 13% of [British children at a leading gender dysphoria clinic] have an autistic-spectrum disorder, compared with 1% in the population. This can lead to obsessive, rigid thinking about social categories. Around 40% are depressed.”

But parents are so anxious to help their children that they push clinicians to provide gender-affirmative treatment, moaning that they would “rather have a live daughter than a dead son”. “Advocacy groups commonly say that children asked to wait are likely to kill themselves,” notes *The Economist*. “There is little or no evidence for this.”

And it politely rubbishes a highly-publicised statement from the American Academy of Paediatrics backing gender affirmation. “The scientific papers it cites to justify its position either recommend waiting ... or refer to gay people rather than children who think they belong to the other sex. A dozen or so studies suggest that well over half of trans children later identify with their biological sex after all.”

The Economist also concludes that arguments that women will not be threatened by trans-women (natal males) do not hold water. Women fighting to keep trans-women (natal males) out of their bathrooms are right:

Society has devised rules to protect women and children from the harm caused by men. British prisons contain 20 times more men than women; their offences are more serious, their sentences longer and they are many times more likely to harm women than women are to harm other women. The #MeToo campaign has highlighted American surveys suggesting that one in five women will be raped and that less than a third of rapes and attempted rapes are reported. Only 6% lead to an arrest and only 0.6% to a custodial sentence.

Nearly all societies segregate men and women in change rooms and toilets to keep women safe. Of course, most trans-women are not violent. But as *The Economist* points out, “self-id is sure to be exploited by predators. Bitter experience from the Catholic church shows that predatory men will go to great lengths to satisfy their desires. Self-id grants natal males

access to places where women and children sleep, wash and change.”

Could gender self-identification work? Maybe. But not now. Things are moving too fast. We need more data and a deeper understanding of the issues. “In time, experience may reveal that everyone can be kept safe under self-id—and that the cost to trans people of denying it is unreasonable. Then again, the harm may turn out to be greater than transactivists expect.”

Perhaps the surprising stand taken by *The Economist* is a sign that common sense is reasserting itself. It’s about time. An ideology which has little scientific justification, which persuades by bullying and intimidation, and which may cause immense harm to a generation of young people deserves to sink beneath the waters for ever.

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