

PAMELA PAUL

The Far Right and Far Left Agree on One Thing: Women Don't Count

July 3, 2022



By Pamela Paul
Opinion Columnist

Perhaps it makes sense that women — those supposedly compliant and agreeable, self-sacrificing and everything-nice creatures — were the ones to finally bring our polarized country together.

Because the far right and the far left have found the one thing they can agree on: Women don't count.

The right's position here is the better known, the movement having aggressively dedicated itself to stripping women of fundamental rights for decades. Thanks in part to two Supreme Court justices who have been credibly accused of abusive behavior toward women, *Roe v. Wade*, nearly 50 years a target, has been ruthlessly overturned.

Far more bewildering has been the fringe left jumping in with its own perhaps unintentionally but effectively misogynist agenda. There was a time when campus groups and activist organizations advocated strenuously on behalf of women. Women's rights were human rights and something to fight for. Though the Equal Rights Amendment was never ratified, legal scholars and advocacy groups spent years working to otherwise establish women as a protected class.

But today, a number of academics, uber-progressives, transgender activists, civil liberties organizations and medical organizations are working toward an opposite end: to deny women their humanity, reducing them to a mix of body parts and gender stereotypes.

As reported by my colleague Michael Powell, even the word "women" has become verboten. Previously a commonly understood term for half the world's population, the word had a specific meaning tied to genetics, biology, history, politics and culture. No longer. In its place are unwieldy terms like "pregnant people," "menstruators" and "bodies with vaginas."

Planned Parenthood, once a stalwart defender of women's rights, omits the word "women" from its home page. NARAL Pro-Choice America has used "birthing people" in lieu of "women." The American Civil Liberties Union, a longtime defender of women's rights, last month tweeted its outrage over the possible overturning of *Roe v. Wade* as a threat to several groups: "Black, Indigenous and other people of color, the L.G.B.T.Q. community, immigrants, young people."

It left out those threatened most of all: women. Talk about a bitter way to mark the 50th anniversary of Title IX.

The noble intent behind omitting the word "women" is to make room for the relatively tiny number of transgender men and people identifying as nonbinary who retain aspects of female biological function and can conceive, give birth or breastfeed. But despite a spirit of inclusion, the result has been to shove women to the side.

Women, of course, have been accommodating. They've welcomed transgender women into their organizations. They've learned that to propose any space just for biological women in situations where the presence of males can be threatening or unfair — rape crisis centers, domestic abuse shelters, competitive sports — is currently viewed by some as exclusionary. If there are other marginalized people to fight for, it's assumed women will be the ones to serve other people's agendas rather than promote their own.

But, but, but. Can you blame the sisterhood for feeling a little nervous? For wincing at the presumption of acquiescence? For worrying about the broader implications? For wondering what kind of message we are sending to young girls about feeling good in their bodies, pride in their sex and the prospects of womanhood? For essentially ceding to another backlash?

Women didn't fight this long and this hard only to be told we couldn't call ourselves women anymore. This isn't just a

semantic issue; it's also a question of moral harm, an affront to our very sense of ourselves.

It wasn't so long ago — and in some places the belief persists — that women were considered a mere rib to Adam's whole. Seeing women as their own complete entities, not just a collection of derivative parts, was an important part of the struggle for sexual equality.

But here we go again, parsing women into organs. Last year the British medical journal *The Lancet* patted itself on the back for a cover article on menstruation. Yet instead of mentioning the human beings who get to enjoy this monthly biological activity, the cover referred to “bodies with vaginas.” It's almost as if the other bits and bobs — uteruses, ovaries or even something relatively gender-neutral like brains — were inconsequential. That such things tend to be wrapped together in a human package with two X sex chromosomes is apparently unmentionable.

“What are we, chopped liver?” a woman might be tempted to joke, but in this organ-centric and largely humorless atmosphere, perhaps she would be wiser not to.

Those women who do publicly express mixed emotions or opposing views are often brutally denounced for asserting themselves. (Google the word “transgender” combined with the name Martina Navratilova, J.K. Rowling or Kathleen Stock to get a withering sense.) They risk their jobs and their personal safety. They are maligned as somehow transphobic or labeled TERFs, a pejorative that may be unfamiliar to those who don't step onto this particular Twitter battlefield. Ostensibly shorthand for “trans-exclusionary radical feminist,” which originally referred to a subgroup of the British feminist movement, “TERF” has come to denote any woman, feminist or not, who persists in believing that while transgender women should be free to live their lives with dignity and respect, they are not identical to those who were born female and who have lived their entire lives as such, with all the biological trappings, societal and cultural expectations, economic realities and safety issues that involves.

But in a world of chosen gender identities, women as a biological category don't exist. Some might even call this kind of thing erasure.

When not defining women by body parts, misogynists on both ideological poles seem determined to reduce women to rigid gender stereotypes. The formula on the right we know well: Women are maternal and domestic — the feelers and the givers and the “Don't mind mes.” The unanticipated newcomers to such retrograde typecasting are the supposed progressives on the fringe left. In accordance with a newly embraced gender theory, they now propose that girls — gay or straight — who do not self-identify as feminine are somehow not fully girls. Gender identity workbooks created by transgender advocacy groups for use in schools offer children helpful diagrams suggesting that certain styles or behaviors are “masculine” and others “feminine.”

Didn't we ditch those straitened categories in the '70s?

The women's movement and the gay rights movement, after all, tried to free the sexes from the construct of gender, with its antiquated notions of masculinity and femininity, to accept all women for who they are, whether tomboy, girly girl or butch dyke. To undo all this is to lose hard-won ground for women — and for men, too.

Those on the right who are threatened by women's equality have always fought fiercely to put women back in their place. What has been disheartening is that some on the fringe left have been equally dismissive, resorting to bullying, threats of violence, public shaming and other scare tactics when women try to reassert that right. The effect is to curtail discussion of women's issues in the public sphere.

But women are not the enemy here. Consider that in the real world, most violence against trans men and women is committed by men but, in the online world and in the academy, most of the ire at those who balk at this new gender ideology seems to be directed at women.

It's heartbreaking. And it's counterproductive.

Tolerance for one group need not mean intolerance for another. We can respect transgender women without castigating females who point out that biological women still constitute a category of their own — with their own specific needs and prerogatives.

If only women's voices were routinely welcomed and respected on these issues. But whether Trumpist or traditionalist, fringe left activist or academic ideologue, misogynists from both extremes of the political spectrum relish equally the power

to shut women up.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.