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UNINTENDED EFFECTS OF TRANSGENDER ACTIVISM ON MEN'S ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

Debates over the potentially damaging effects of transgender individuals' participation in women's sports, as well as hormone treatments for "transgender children," have dominated public discussion on the merits of transgender identification. This focus however leaves out many other areas of life in which trans individuals participate. The following article explores further contexts in which trans activism may provoke a tangential but potentially positive effect on men's access to social support, participation and greater life options.

Keywords: activism, male, men, men's issues, transgender

Equalities legislation dictates that it is illegal to discriminate against social participation of individuals based on their chosen gender identity. A notable result of such legislation is the increase in the numbers of trans women participating in women's sports, a participation that redefines traditional notions of gender, and traditional sporting conventions based on them. Trans women can now be seen winning first place awards over their female-born competitors in fields such as wrestling, mixed martial arts, mountain-bike riding, track running, weightlifting, netball and more.

The displacement of sex-based categories has provoked a chorus of frustrated social commentary expressing concern that trans-inclusion ensures these individuals will unfairly dominate the podium in female sports, thus resulting in a disenfranchisement of (biological) women's opportunities to achieve status and awards on a level playing field. The material differences, say critics, that make mock of traditional competitor classes based on weight, height, strength, speed and so on, can be reliably differentiated based on a competitor's sex – and so should be.

Generally speaking, women-born women (WBW) have been vocal in their opposition to the trend, along with trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERF) and cultural feminists who have been particularly virulent in their opposition to the inclusion of male-born women in female sports – this due, they say, to women's lack of sexual safety in sports locker rooms and showers, and due also to the physiological advantages trans women possess in the sporting arena. Some critics claim trans women are still biological males who may be sexual predators in potentiality or in actuality, and that their only interest lies in traditional masculine forms of domination over female competitors.

These popular talking points, however, are far from providing a full picture of the impact of transgender activism on traditional gendered boundaries. Leaving aside debates over the wider merits of transgender ontology, I will for the remainder of this article focus on the disruptive and indeed *disintegrative* effects of transgender activism on traditional gendered privileges enjoyed by women. While it is reasonable to challenge the deleterious effects of trans activism in the sporting arena as mentioned above, or to denounce the advocating of extreme medical interventions for children thought to be trans-gendered, trans activism can otherwise prove to be of benefit to men and boys in certain contexts which I describe below.

With a few notable exceptions, social and mainstream media commentators are allied with women's frustration in the sporting context. But what about other contexts in which women have enjoyed exclusivity or privilege, such as enjoying the lion's share of public funds for medical issues such as breast cancer (over comparable male health issues); domestic violence protections and associated housing supports; exclusive political bodies tailored to addressing women's needs alone; and free 'women only' legal assistance? These, and many other social issues are where the levels of sympathy expressed over women's disenfranchisement might be less enthusiastic, and indeed less deserving.

Before we go further, we need first to reflect on where the rise in trans activism began, which takes us back to second and third wave feminists who championed the breaking down of gendered barriers which they believed to be based on oppressive and arbitrary social constructs. By removing these barriers for women, and by extension for smaller satellite minorities who might serve as mascots to the feminist cause, feminists imagined that a utopic social order would ensue characterized by unrestricted participation and so-called inclusiveness. Within this worldview, if someone presumed to exclude women or indeed any other satellite demographic such as LGBTI people or ethnic minorities from the banquet of life, then he or she was clearly a bigot.

Fast forward to the present day when the feminist dream of unlimited participation for minorities is being realized – realized not so much by the white, Anglosphere feminists who set the project in motion (and who have long enjoyed unprecedented participation), but by those very minorities who are now taking the originating feminists to task. Women of color feminists, gay, lesbian and transgender individuals are now asking their former cis white feminist saviors to sit back, shut up, and share some of the power they have long accreted to themselves.

For some feminists the newfound access and participation wielded by minorities strikes as a veritable Titanomachia, with these individuals usurping the formerly exclusive place of cis white feminist women and thus triggering the reactionary growth TERF or "gender critical feminism" to drive the now threatening, polymorphous perversity of trans individuals back into repression (Berry, 1982). Said differently, the inclusion of trans and other people in women's traditional domains of privilege tends to weaken Anglosphere feminist hegemony, and elicits a hostile response that has been referred to as *aggrieved gynocentric entitlement* (Gouws, 2018;

Wright, 2019).

In fairness, a degree of aggrievement appears reasonable in the context of sporting competitions where women-born women are being forced to compete against male-born women. In *other* domains of female exclusivity, however, the aggrievement is self-inflicted (insofar as it arises from the feminist philosophy of inclusiveness), and is also a necessary part of relinquishing hegemonic gender privileges that should be equally accessible to all people – including men and boys – in an equitable society.

Advocates for men's issues have been more ambivalent about the results of transgender activism. On the one hand they tend to agree with the unreasonableness of biological women being forced into athletic competition with trans women – and they also tend to abhor needless experimentation on children with surgeries and hormone treatments designed to make children's bodies align with perceived transgender identities. On the other hand, men's advocates may find some value in instances of trans women breaking down gynocentric barriers that they have proven impotent to breach during the last 200 years of men's advocacy (Wright, 2017). For example, attempts to exclude trans women from various activities or privileges has led to protests and sometimes legal action against women's services. Examples of exclusive female privileges include domestic violence services, emergency accommodation, elite female-only gym and exercise clubs, legal services, and so on. Moreover, some legal actions have led, often inadvertently, to women's groups being ordered to open their services to not only trans women, but also to men and boys – with the threat of de-funding or further lawsuits for failure to comply with the spirit of anti-discrimination legislation. Four examples from the current year (2021) are given below as evidence of transactivism-induced male inclusion:

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SUPPORT SERVICES BECOME GENDER NEUTRAL

Successful challenges to discriminatory services for female-born victims of domestic violence are becoming increasingly common, with unwillingness to comply with equalities legislation leading in some cases to loss of funding. These challenges are frequently launched by (or on behalf of) trans activists, and such activism has sometimes resulted in men being able to access services for the first time (Leo, 2021). Such penalties apply also to free legal services offered exclusively to female-born victims of domestic violence (Wong, 2021).

HOUSING SUPPORT SERVICES BECOME GENDER NEUTRAL

Some debate has occurred regarding the need to include trans women, and LGBT individuals, in housing supports previously enjoyed by biological women alone. These have traditionally included crisis accommodation and housing for low income and socially disadvantaged women. Discussions regarding equal access for trans women have included mention of men's need for access to these kinds of support, as evidenced in a recent court decision in Andhra Pradesh, India. In that instance it was determined that the "100% for Women" housing policy of local Government was unconstitutional because it discriminated against both transgender individuals and men. (Pathak, 2021) In such cases one wonders if men would have gained any access to women's services were not for the prior work of trans activists.

ENCOURAGING THE RECOGNITION OF "FATHER'S MILK"

As a result of activism aimed to secure parental rights and recognition of trans individuals as fully involved parents, the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine has issued guidelines that suggest employing such terms as "chestfeeding," "human milk feeding," "parent's milk," and "father's milk," to promote what it calls "gender-inclusive language," and to do so in place of the exclusionary practice of linking infant-feeding only with biological mothers. (Richardson, 2021) This discussion may seem foreign to readers unfamiliar with transgender concepts and experiences; however, the revised infant feeding guidelines break down petrified gynocentric structures that helps to render it of value to men and men's advocates: specifically, it de-genders the infamous "tender years doctrine" that has long afforded women hegemony over the childcare domain while dis-empowering men in the same sphere. (Hartenstein, 2016)

This hegemony over the childcare sphere and its alienating consequences for father involvement (particularly in the event of parental separation) has been a problem since at least the time of English barrister E. Belfort Bax who in 1896 wrote the following about the results of child-custody battles in his time:

Nevertheless, fundamental and necessary as the rule [of a father's-responsibility to his children] may be, the pro-feminist magistrates and judges of England are bent apparently on ignoring it with a light heart. They have not merely retained the old rule that the custody of infants of tender years remains with the mother until the child attains the age of seven. But they go much further than that. As a matter of course, and without considering in the least

the interests of the child, or of society at large, they hand over the custody and education of all the children to the litigant wife, whenever she establishes –an easy thing to do– a flimsy and often farcical case of technical “cruelty.” The victim husband has the privilege of maintaining the children as well as herself out of his property or earnings, and has the added consolation of knowing that they will be brought up to detest him.

Even in the extreme case where a deserting wife takes with her the children of the marriage, there is practically no redress for the husband if in narrow circumstances. The police courts will not interfere. The divorce court, as already stated, is expensive to the point of prohibition. In any case the husband has to face a tribunal already prejudiced in favour of the female, and the attendant scandal of a process will probably have no other result than to injure his children and their future prospects in life. (Bax, 1896, p.16)

While the language change gives a nod to trans men who may produce milk from biologically female breasts, it obliquely acknowledges that people other than biological women can nurture and comfort infants with milk. This should come as little surprise to a civilization that has bottle fed infants for at least 7,000 years with various kinds of animal milk (Gannon, 2019; Dunne, et.al, 2019), allowing men in both the past, and now, to fully participate in infant care. The language change thus helps to formalize inclusion of trans women, *and* biologically male fathers with recognized social value. In another sense it provides an acknowledgment of what has long been the case: fathers as actively involved in infant and child care.



Figure 1. Terracotta infant feeding bottle, Italy, 4th century B.C.¹

¹ Terracotta feeding bottle, *Wikipedia Commons*, donated by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

THE VITRUVIAN FACTOR: MALE-BORN WOMEN ENTERING, AND WINNING, BEAUTY CONTESTS

One arena not suffering from the disproportionate competitive advantages of bodily strength is beauty contests, in which trans women have recently competed with, and even bested their woman-born competitors (Staff, 2021; Gilmore, 2018; Reporter, 2013; Hall, 2010). Popular belief holds that biological women are generally more attractive than men, thus endowed with superior aesthetic qualities by the fortunes of an XX chromosome. That consensus holds that while *some* rare males fare well in a contest of good looks, males will generally fall short of the bone structure and other qualities of the female aesthetic, thus reinforcing the popular trope of Beauty and The Beast in its varied guises. The oft-lamented beauty myth (Wolf, 2013) with its expectation of female attractiveness has as its binary opposite an assumption of male unattractiveness – males as stiffs in suits, appropriately topped with a castrating crew-cut.

Male-born women entering or winning beauty contests has invited a revision of these assumptions, and perhaps a re-connection with classical images of male beauty; the marble David, Vitruvian man, the Vikings and Romans growing long hair and combing it before going into battle, the beauty of Adonis admired even by the gods. The attractiveness of male teeth and smiles, the eyes, cheeks, long hair, tanned limbs – male-born beauty sufficient to hold its own in attracting the proverbial gaze. These are the men of Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, hardy, clean, and deserving of poetry.

If beauty represents raw power (Friday, 2014), trans women are succeeding in breaking down cultural conventions and teaching us that it need not remain a hegemonic power belonging to one biological sex. Such a change in perception, however, has not come without a degree of aggrieved entitlement from women-born women, who are now seeking and enact bans on trans women entering future beauty contests (Mellor, 2015; Herron, 2019). Such are the high stakes of gendered customs, with trans activists shaking up the calcified beauty conventions we've grown accustomed to and, perhaps, leading to some benefit for men and boys in the realms of aesthetic self-perception and yes, social power too.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Terracotta_feeding_bottle_MET_DP1280.jpg

CONCLUSION

Transgender identity remains a binary perspective, with the twist of colonizing those cherished social customs that came to be associated with biological sex. The usurpation of those sexed privileges, along with women's aggrieved entitlement response to trans women's infiltration, is providing insight into social structures that society has heretofore taken for granted.

The practice of misandry, involving shaming narratives against males (Nathanson & Young, 2001), has been deployed against trans women by gender critical feminists and others claiming that trans women are simply perverted males, comparable to most other males whose goal is to domineer women's spaces with an intent of sexual subjugation. Surprisingly, trans women are proving less vulnerable to these misandric narratives in terms of being canceled, perhaps a result of the *woman* identification of trans-women which offers cultural protection because any attempts at attacking female identity would be, or rather *are*, misogynistic – essentially a cultural taboo.

In giving this brief analysis of trans activism I hope to have demonstrated that the associated shifts in language and customs are affording some unintended, small, but clearly recognizable benefits to men and boys. The degree to which trans activism might detract from or otherwise assist men's issues is yet to be fully understood, with such activism being very much in play with many consequences as yet unknown. We can however draw the preliminary conclusion that over the last century our framing of gendered customs has become increasingly captured by a gynocentric turf war between traditional women, and progressive feminist forces (Wright, 2020), with trans activism being one of the few novel forces that are actively working to disrupt it. Time will tell if the melee opens up more, and better options for men.

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