

# **Feminism will be trans- inclusive or it will not be: Why do two cis-hetero woman educators support transfeminism?**

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## **Abstract**

As two cis-hetero woman feminist educators, we provide an educator's perspective on trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) discourses. We begin by discussing the heterosexual matrix and the gender violence that it produces in schools as well as other socializing institutions. The socially constructed sexual binary constrains identity production to adhere to the heteronormative, at the same time excluding those who transgress this normativity. We continue by reviewing how schools are particularly significant spaces for these early social interactions, but the social discourses enacted in educational contexts mirror those of broader society. We then critically analyse some of the increasingly belligerent popular discourses promoted by TERF groups since the 1970s, appropriating feminist discourses to produce arguments that contradict basic premises of feminism. We trace possibilities for a collaborative response by reinforcing alliances between transfeminism and other feminist movements. Finally, as teacher-educators, we highlight among these a critical (queer) pedagogy that incorporates trans\* experience as part of a broader feminist educational agenda: to contribute to the creation of a more equitable society based on critical reflections on the gender normative. Such a pedagogy not only rejects trans-exclusionary discourses that serve to reinforce hierarchies and promote violence, but embraces trans\* experience as a productive educational resource for understanding human diversity. Human experience that challenges the sexual binary can help educators to critically question the heteronormative and to broaden our understandings; in the words of Eric Rofes, drawing upon 'status queer' to 'rethink our efforts and our role in either maintaining or radically transforming the status quo'.

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## Heteronormativity and gender violence

With second wave feminism, sexuality was no longer a personal matter; it was recognized as a political issue. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, published in France in 1949 and translated into English in 1953, was particularly influential. The celebrated phrase 'One is not born woman, one becomes one' (de Beauvoir, 1949/1987, p. 13) calls into question the immutability of gender, with important consequences for feminism: since both femininity and masculinity are constructed, so too is the inequality and inferiority of women in a patriarchal society. De Beauvoir does away with the anatomical basis for subordination: man being the norm and woman 'the Other' lacking in identity and seeking recognition via the (male) norm (Lameiras et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, as Judith Butler (1990) reminds us, de Beauvoir's 'becoming' a woman still leaves room to believe that there is something given and natural that pre-exists us (sex), as well as something cultural and constructed that constitutes men and women as hierarchically different (gender). The category of 'woman', presented as natural, immanent and pre-discursive, perpetuates problematic dualities – mind–body, nature–nurture. Nearly a half-century later, Butler takes de Beauvoir's ground-breaking declaration one step further, in recognizing that sex is also discursively constructed – one of the most significant and lucid premises of Queer Theory.

Butler does not simply destroy the body, as some have erroneously interpreted (Femenías, 2000), but rather situates corporeal reality in its sociocultural context and observes that it is impossible to access the body without drawing upon our available cultural meanings, since the observer is immersed in language and culture (Butler, 1993). In fact, this philosophical premise can be clearly illustrated by reviewing human biology, specifically the bodies of intersex people. Their anatomy is catalogued as double, ambiguous, erroneous, inconclusive, or incomplete, because it does not fit neatly into the culturally-constructed male–female binary (Nieto, 2003). Their very corporeal existence subverts the cultural proposition, viewed by many as scientific, that there are two and only two 'natural' sexes. Feminist biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) points out that the sex of a body is actually much more complex than that captured by fixed categories, existing as more of a continuum of differences. Science, then, supports Butler's theoretical analysis: the ways in which we *interpret* (male and female) sex are determined more by our cultural concepts of gender than by actual biological reality.

As a victim of so-called corrective genital surgery, intersex activist Cheryl Chase (1998) also argues that these medical practices produce what practitioners claim to simply observe. It is this often-denied cultural rather than essential nature of sex that constitutes the heterosexual or heteronormative matrix (Butler, 1990). Heteronormativity is firmly rooted in the unquestioned assumption of the 'natural' existence of two exclusive, opposed, hierarchical and complementarily heterosexual sexes (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Subjects are either excluded from intelligibility or expected to adjust to the parameters of this structure, some of whom are compelled to use what Fausto-Sterling (2000,

p. 8) refers to as the ‘surgical shoehorn’. Despite the efforts of Chase and other intersex activists, unnecessary surgical interventions continue to be carried out to ‘normalize’ infants born with non-binary physiology (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

None of us are exempt from what Butler refers to as gender performativity (1990, 1993), adapting to (or not) the gestures and behaviours considered socially appropriate for the sex we are assigned at birth – for sex is normative, rather than simply descriptive. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler demonstrates how sexuality also interacts with the supposedly binary constructs of sex and gender, so that expressions of masculinity and femininity are guided by notions of hegemonic heterosexuality. Thus, certain identities are constructed as natural in contrast to transgressive or unintelligible configurations of sex, gender and sexuality that, exceeding the homonormative, are susceptible to gender violence, both personal and institutional. Zengin’s review of Turkish physically invasive gendered institutional practices (on gay men and towards trans women) suggests that ‘state control and regulation can be invested in particular forms of violent touch that are imbued with culturally specific morals; values; norms; and relations about gender, sex, and sexuality’ (2016a, p. 232).

On the one hand, gender, understood as a performance, consists of a series of reiterative acts which, constrained by a rigidly regulatory framework, accumulate and congeal over time to appear substantial and essential. Yet at the same time, this same performative process provides the possibility for failed reiteration, which can lead to change, resistance and subversion. In this way, the very freedom of the subject who is called upon to repeat and reinforce the gender normative, can open fissures that may eventually lead to a destabilization of power (Butler, 1990). The imperative to reproduce the norm is accompanied by another crucial mechanism of control – exclusion. We exercise exclusion throughout our lives: through self-exclusion of the aspects of our ‘I’ that fail to cohere with gender norms and/or our own self-concept, and through rejection of others who subvert these norms.

In this way, through repetition and exclusion, the full range of human reality is framed within the limits of heteronormativity, establishing two distinct, complementary and hierarchical models of intelligible gender: man/masculine/heterosexual and woman/female/heterosexual. Beyond the margins of this hegemony we find the unintelligible realities, which include intersex (which exceed the sexual binary), trans\*<sup>1</sup> (which threatens the coherence between the corporeal body and experienced gender), and homo/bi/lesbian/pan/a- sexualities (which challenge obligatory heterosexuality).

The heteronormative not only essentializes sexual and gender difference by calling for constant repetition of the norms, but also supports gender inequality through mechanisms of exclusion and violence toward those who transgress these norms. Gender, sex and sexuality work together to produce a homophobic, transphobic and sexist society. Women, who occupy a subordinate position in the hierarchy, are subjected to gender violence and discrimination, as are those with intersecting (Burgos, 2007) or unintelligible (Butler, 1990, 1993) experiences. Intersex and trans\* people are among those positioned at the outside of the margins. In García López’s (2017, p. 146, our translation) historical account of societal responses to intersexuality, he concludes that ‘The body that is punished (burnt at the stake, for example) eventually became the body policed and regulated by various institutions.’ Platero Méndez’s analysis of the murder of trans\* man

Roberto Gonzalez Onrubia concludes that the loss of humanity he suffered for his sexual unintelligibility was the first step toward his violent death: 'It was this binary social norm that generated a profound alterity, a division between an "Us" that belongs to the cisgender majority and an "Other" – the subject who stands out for his distance from and rupture of the sex assigned at birth' (2016, p. 232, our translation).

In sum, heteronormativity is built on sexism, homophobia and transphobia (Sharma, 2009) in ways that render it impossible to overthrow gender-related violence, without taking into account these three pillars that uphold it. In other words, gender violence should be understood as going beyond the violence suffered by (cis) women. This is especially relevant in schools, which we consider to be spaces of especially intense social interactions at early ages where children and young people are learning about themselves and others, and therefore drawing upon dominant social understandings to define themselves and others as legitimate and intelligible (or not).

### **Schools as heteronormative spaces**

Schools, as institutions of socialization, are places where social inequalities are reproduced and the Other is constructed as unintelligible (and therefore less human). From the moment we are assigned sex at birth, primary socialization agencies such as the school and the family respond with different expectations and treatment, based on this crucial social assignment. In this sense, the school serves to consolidate and legitimate identity categories that are positioned within the heterosexual matrix, and exclude those that exceed these limits (Carrera Fernández et al., 2011). Schools in particular serve to hierarchically differentiate gender into two distinct categories, provide gender normative behaviour models, promote a normative template for homosexual relationships, and exclude as beyond the limits of intelligibility experience that does not conform to these models.

These strategies are largely unconscious and form part of what is defined as the hidden curriculum – subtle practices that we take for granted and which are, therefore, difficult to define and uncover. These may include silences – simply not mentioning certain realities (such as 'uncomfortable' truths about historical or current figures that challenged the gender binary). This hidden curriculum also includes active representations that reinforce certain erroneous or incomplete knowledge – such as the simplification of biological reality in sex education classes. The ways in which teachers interact with children can also transmit a gender-normative curriculum – by transmitting different expectations based on perceived gender, or by intervening in some kinds of bullying incidents, but not others. Teachers may fill knowledge gaps, left by inadequate professional training, with their own misconceptions about gender diversity fuelled by the 'broader climate of misunderstanding and fear' (Bartholomaeus et al., 2016, p. 6). Backlash conservative activism has targeted educational practice aimed at addressing the hidden gender curriculum, as evidenced by recent protests in the UK ('The LGBT teaching row explained', 2019) and in Spain (Jones, 2020).

Perhaps the most troubling and insidious aspect of the hidden curriculum of gender in schools is that socially produced heteronormativity is presented as irrefutable truths that the school simply describes and transmits. Schooling is strongly attracted to simple

truths and stable identities, leaving out messy complexities, which include well-established non-binary scientific understandings:

A different reading of the data to that usually presented in school textbooks – but one more in line with the scientific evidence about the working of sex hormones – is that femaleness and maleness lie on a continuum. Such a model of the consequences of the actions of the sex hormones became common among endocrinologists in the 1940s. (Reiss, 2016, p. 203)

Beyond the curriculum, school is also a place where peer interactions reinforce heteronormative understandings in the daily practices of socialization. In practices of heteronormative control, a normative self is performed by producing and penalizing a non-normative Other (Carrera Fernández et al., 2011). In this way, violence toward those who do not conform to gender norms becomes a strategy for gaining peer status. Such heteronormative social interactions are not necessarily violent or exclusive; young people's friendship and bonding practices, as well as those deployed by teachers to establish rapport with their students, reinforce normative gender and sexuality (Krebbekx, 2018).

As teacher-educators, we are particularly concerned with how social discourses such as heteronormativity, cisgenderism and sexism are deployed in educational settings. Normalization and exclusion are two sides of the same coin, and schools contribute to the creation of social inequalities as they help to shape insider and outsider identities. Schools are never neutral; as agents of socialization, they may be sites for social reproduction or social transformation (Freire, 2004). Unless educators make a conscious effort to critique them, schools unquestioningly accept and therefore reproduce the oppressive discourses that circulate in broader society. As we will argue throughout the following sections, trans-exclusionary discourses not only oppress adult people who identify as trans\*, but they also constrain children and young people who are learning how to *do* gender. As cisgender feminist educators, we see transfeminism as an emancipatory project that resonates with our own feminist agenda and supports a transformative pedagogy.

## Trans-exclusionary feminism? The Others of the Other

Given our current understandings of gender, it would seem logical that the oppressed would join hands in defence against oppression, but this is not necessarily the case. Trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) discourses are produced by simplifying and twisting basic feminist premises and deploying a language not so very far removed from that of the extreme right (Williams, 2014). In fact, some consider TERF to be a hate group disguised as feminism (Allen, 2013). Nevertheless, this relatively recently coined term provides a name for a phenomenon that dates back to second wave feminism. Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979) is particularly paradigmatic of this early trend, while others such as Sheila Jeffreys and Germaine Greer have added their voices to the rejection of trans\* in the name of feminism.

In this section we critically explore the basic arguments characterizing TERF ideology: (1) transsexuality reproduces gender roles and contributes to the domination of women, requiring the abolition of gender and transsexuality; (2) support for transsexuality

constitutes part of a state conspiracy against women, feminism, and lesbianism; (3) trans\* women are men attempting to forcibly steal female and lesbian identities; (4) trans\* men are women who betray their fellow women, as well as feminism and lesbianism; (5) trans\*inclusive feminists are not really feminists; and (6) there are valid models of womanhood and lesbianism that should be imposed, ranging from the rejection to the reproduction of traditional femininity. We draw on insights from transfeminist and queer understandings in order to respond to these TERF arguments.

### *Gender, and therefore ‘transsexuality’, must be abolished*

Raymond (1979) and Jeffreys (throughout her work, and especially in *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* [2014]), both present gender as a conservative ideology that provides the pillar of women’s subordination – a caste system created by men, a patriarchal construction designed to ensnare women so that men can exploit and abuse them. Transsexuality/transgenderism, they claim, is based on the reproduction of gender stereotypes and, by logical extension, gender itself. Therefore, they call for the abolition of gender, the elimination of the existence of trans\* and its threat to women and feminism (Jeffreys, 2014; Raymond, 1979).

As gender educators, we consider the TERF reading of trans\* as a phenomenon that reproduces gender roles to be a biased and partial understanding of broader and more complex realities. As human beings we are all complicit in ‘doing gender’ – processes that are not exclusive to trans\* individuals. At the same time, these processes include gender transgressions as well as reproductions, which contribute to resistance and subversion (Burgos, 2007; Butler, 1993, 2004). Indeed, these transgressions of gender norms are especially pronounced in the case of trans\* people, who open new possibilities for embodying gender, flexibilizing and disrupting conventional understandings (Butler, 2014). As Stone points out in ‘The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto’ (1992) – a direct response to Raymond’s *Transsexual Empire* – rather than divide women, transsexuals multiply binary gender discourses. Drawing upon Donna Haraway (1992), Stone (1992, p. 168) argues that transsexual people should be viewed as ‘the promises of monsters’, that is, as physical entities in a state of continual transformation that exceed the margins of culturally intelligible representations. Like Stone, we view the monstrous as a metaphor for productive unintelligibility.

TERF proponents, in their focused crusade to abolish gender, deny trans\* realities, establishing a customized version of what they consider to be ‘nature’ which neither contemplates the desire to *be* man or woman, nor admits the possibility that, in some cases, one may wish to satisfy this desire through the use of hormonal or surgical techniques (Raymond, 1979). Sex, which is crucial, is clearly distinguished from gender, which is irrelevant (Raymond 1979, p. 20):

The male-to-female transsexual is a ‘fantastic woman’, the incarnation of a male fantasy of feeling like a woman trapped in a man’s body, the fantasy rendered flesh by a further male medical fantasy of surgically fashioning a male body into a female one. These fantasies are based in the male imagination, not in any female reality. It is this female reality that the



surgically-constructed woman does not possess, not because women innately carry some essence of femininity but because these men have not had to live in a female body with all the history that entails. It is that history that is basic to female reality, and yes, history is based to a certain extent on female biology.

This distinction between sex and gender is problematic, if we consider that it is not possible to understand the body without the language of culture, that is, that sex has always been gender (Butler, 1993; Chase, 1998; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). The sexual binary is cultural rather than essential, a reality that is quite literally embodied by intersex people. The TERF premise that gender is a social construction coincides with the transfeminist perspective, but their belief that this somehow denies materiality effectively erases trans\* experience (Butler, 2014). As social justice educators, we support McQueen's (2016) argument that only through recognizing these experiences can we identify and comprehend, and ultimately overcome, oppression. As Butler points out (2004, 2014), it is just as necessary to defend people's right to access the gender they claim for themselves as it is to support those who reject gender altogether, since it is ethically reprehensible to deny individual agency in definition and recognition of the self.

TERF discourses not only exercise symbolic violence in silencing trans people through arguments to abolish gender, but they also direct verbal violence toward specific trans\* individuals, by defending acts of misgendering and refusing to use people's own established pronouns. These acts are explained by invoking an immutable 'biological' sex (that assigned at birth) (Greer, 1999; Jeffreys, 2014; Raymond, 1979), thus reinforcing the notion of an essentialized sexual binary. This approach to naming trans\* people contradicts important feminist premises (Minou, 2010). Feminism defends for women that sex is not the destiny of their gender, that gender is a social construct that can and should be challenged, and that self-determination of their own bodies is not negotiable. At the same time, TERF proponents, co-opting feminist spaces, make exactly the opposite claims for trans\* people: that sex is the inevitable destiny of their gender, that their gender is irrevocably rooted in this (culturally recognized) biological configuration, and that they cannot exercise agency over the development and expression of their corporeal reality.

In the same way that TERF proponents argue that trans\* people are bad for women and feminism, they extend this argument to include the theories and social movements that include them. Defining feminism as the political movement based on the experience of women who were born women and raised under the female sex caste system (Jeffreys, 2014), they see queer theory and politics as removed from women's experiences of oppression that silence and intimidate them – recognizing trans\* people's experiences would relegate gender to performance and a form of individual expression (Daly, 1978; Raymond, 1979).

This negation, rejection, and violence toward trans\* people can only lead to one possible solution to the problem of transsexualism – its elimination. As Raymond argues (1979, p. 180), 'nonsexist counselling is another direction for change that should be explored. The kind of counselling to "pass" successfully as masculine or feminine that now reigns in gender identity clinics only reinforces the problem of transsexualism.' This

‘nonsexist counselling’ means following the example of those feminists, lesbians and homosexuals who, despite experiencing the oppression of gender roles, did not resort to transsexualism (Jeffreys, 2014; Raymond, 1979) – a solution that erroneously reduces gender to a question of personal choice (McQueen, 2016).

***‘Transsexuality’ is part of a state conspiracy against women, feminism and lesbianism***

Like her predecessor Raymond (1979), Jeffreys considers transsexuality to be not only the individual reproduction of gender roles, but also a conspiracy or ‘state project’ that violates human rights: ‘I have to say, so called progressive and left people are not recognizing the human rights violations of transgenderism or how crazy the legislation is’ (2006, p. 15). She also views gender reassignment surgery as the response of the ‘transsexual empire’ to be harmful to not just transsexuals themselves but also, in a broader sense, to feminism (1993, 2003, 2014).

However, Jeffreys reserves her most hostile rejection for the UK Gender Recognition Act (2004), which allows trans\* people to certify their experienced gender without necessarily submitting to hormone treatment or surgical intervention (Jeffreys, 2008, 2011). She compares the British government’s support for a process by which trans\* individuals may change their birth certificate to the Iranian government’s legalization of genital sex reassignment surgery, which she sees as a government-sponsored technique to eliminate homosexuality and reproduce gender norms that subordinate women (Jeffreys, 2008, 2011). Another voice of the TERF movement, Julie Bindel (2009) argues that sex reassignment surgery is nothing more than a modern version of the aversion therapies used to convert LGB people into heterosexuals. In 2017, the UK government consulted on reforming the GRA, potentially eliminating the required diagnosis of gender dysphoria. Self-defined ‘gender-critical’ feminist groups resisted on the basis of similar claims that cast gender recognition as a threat to cis women’s rights (Sharpe, 2020).

As for trans\* children, Jeffreys (2012, 2014) considers practices such as hormonal blocking therapy to delay the onset of puberty to be a social engineering project designed to force children to conform to rigid gender categories. She compares such therapies to early 20th century eugenics campaigns – the forced sterilization of delinquents as well as the poor, homosexuals and the Roma. Nevertheless, as Honkasalo (2020) points out, the logic of eugenics continues to be applied directly to trans\* people by state regulations that limit full gender recognition rights based on demonstrable infertility. In an astonishing denial of historical and continuing injustice, Jeffreys accuses trans\* children themselves of perpetuating sexist social engineering practices, conveniently and negligently ignoring the suffering of these children and their right to self-determination and recognition (Moore, 2015). Cathy Brennan and Elizabeth Hungerford (2011), other TERF proponents, have gone so far as to prepare a written response to the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women’s *Call for Communications: Human Rights Violations Affecting the Status of Women*, arguing that the gender identity of trans\* individuals should not be recognized or protected as a way to improve women’s lives.



### *Trans\* women are men who steal female and lesbian identities*

Trans\* women are especially targeted by TERF activists, who deny their existence as women and as lesbians (in the case of trans women who love women). They are therefore accused of forcibly co-opting feminine identities (Greer, 1999; Jeffreys, 2003, 2014). Raymond (1979, p. 183) argues that 'Transsexuals are not women. They are deviant males', and goes on to further characterize the trans woman as an inevitably flawed imposter:

[I]t is precisely because the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist is a man, and not a woman encumbered by the scars of patriarchy that are unique to a woman's personal and social history that he can play our parts so convincingly and apparently better than we can play them ourselves. . . . What is also typically masculine in the case of the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist is the appropriation of women's minds, convictions of feminism, and sexuality. (Raymond, 1979, p. 103)

Along similar lines, Bindel (2004) proposes that trans\* women, whom she describes as 'men in dresses', cannot claim the rights and public protection afforded to women, because they are not and never will be women. Greer (BBC, 2015) deploys a similar argument when she claims that, like herself, many cisgender women think that trans women (whom she calls male to female transgender people) do not look, sound, or act like women.

To explain the existence of trans\* women, Jeffreys (2014) draws upon the controversial work of Blanchard (2005), who distinguishes between transsexual women – actually submissive gay men who want to sleep with other homosexual men – and those she defines as autogynephilic (see Serano, this collection) – those who experience sexual excitement over the image of themselves as women, or who might even enjoy masochistic satisfaction upon losing the social status of their male caste. Such notions have been strongly rejected by trans\* women themselves (Serano, 2007) as well as professionals who work with them (Moser, 2010). Adopting a perspective similar to that of her contemporaries Raymond and Jeffreys, Germaine Greer (BBC, 2015) appeared on *BBC Newsnight* to make light of Caitlyn Jenner's transition, arguing that she had undergone sexual reassignment surgery to capture some of the limelight enjoyed by the other women in her family (the Kardashians). In *The Whole Woman* (1999), she attacks governments that recognize as women individuals she refers to as men who believe themselves to be women and who have gone to the trouble of self-castration to prove it. In such recognition, she accuses the state of viewing women not just as the other sex, but as a non-sex or as defective men. Intersex people are also prone to TERF rejection, as evident in Greer's commentary on the South African Olympic athlete Caster Semenya, who was submitted to sex verification testing and later cleared for competition in women's events in 2010:

Supposing that the verdict of the sex police is that Semenya is mentally female and physically male, what would it mean for other women athletes if she was allowed to compete with such an unfair biological advantage? People who don't ovulate or menstruate will probably always physically outperform people who do. But then, doesn't all competitive sport canonise and glamorise the exploitation of genetic advantage? Who said life was fair? (Greer, 2009, p. 1)

### *Trans\* men are women who betray their fellow women, as well as feminism and lesbianism*

While TERF criticism is more strongly directed toward trans\* women than trans\* men, these men have also been cast as ‘traitors’ whose actions prove harmful to women, to feminism and to lesbian politics. They are described as a very minor phenomenon, numerically speaking, who nevertheless contribute to supporting a false claim that women (those assigned as such at birth) constitute part of the transsexual phenomenon (Raymond, 1979). They are presented as women who attempt to acquire male privilege on an individual level, and in so doing betray feminism by joining the caste of men (Jeffreys, 2014). The rejection of trans\* men is also based on their pernicious effects on lesbian politics, because by changing their bodies and/or presenting themselves as men they replace lesbians, which supposedly may lead to the disappearance of lesbianism. Jeffreys (2014, p. 121) exemplifies this argument: ‘Although there are some apparent benefits for individual women who transgender, the harms are considerable, in terms of not only their physical longterm health, but also what it does to their partners, to lesbian communities and to feminism.’

### *Trans\*inclusive feminists are not really feminists*

From the TERF perspective, it is not enough simply to denounce trans\* women and men. It is also necessary to convince feminists and lesbians to take up these same discourses of denial and rejection and to denounce those feminists who do not follow these exclusionary principles. The argument is that feminists who accept a ‘man’s’ transition when ‘his’ wife, children and mother are subjected to an ‘under-recognised form of psychological violence towards women’ are betraying not only the affected women, but also feminism itself (Jeffreys, 2014, p. 99). The same line of reasoning also insists that real feminists and lesbians, unlike trans\*inclusive feminists such as Burgos (2007), Butler (1990, 1993), Elliot (2010) and Overall (2012), should join together in opposing the normalization of trans\* men, in order to avoid the damage these ‘women’ inflict on themselves and in feminist and lesbian politics (Jeffreys, 2014).

### *Valid models of womanhood and lesbianism should be imposed*

TERF politics attempt to patrol the frontiers of cis identity as well as those of so-called true lesbian identity, using strategies that mirror those deployed by the patriarchy in establishing and protecting normative heterosexuality. In ‘Bisexual Politics’ (1999) Jeffreys denounces bisexuality for reaffirming the heterosexual imperative that women should love men, therefore undermining lesbian feminism. Jeffreys sees bisexuality as a strategy for concealing gay and lesbian identities in order to maintain heterosexual privilege, while at the same time enjoying the pleasures and benefits of homosexuality and lesbianism.

These stances defending ‘true’ sexual identities and orientations are complemented by the imposition of ambivalent models of femininity. Some of these reject the reproduction of feminine stereotypes, while others seem to take the opposite approach. Jeffreys (2000, 2005) infantilizes, discredits and devalues women who modify their bodies in a range of

different ways: those who apply makeup, wear high heels, or have tattoos. Women who undergo plastic surgery are seen as duped by men and the patriarchy, passively adopting the culture of male dominance, in the same way that transsexual men and women undergo reassignment surgery because they are supposedly compelled by the patriarchy to do so. She also argues that these and similar body modification practices are more common among groups with lower sociocultural status, such as women, lesbians, gay men, and people who have suffered sexual abuse (Jeffreys, 2000). Greer (2008) expresses a quite different view, although equally sexist and authoritarian, when she mockingly described the dress that Michelle Obama wore to the electoral ball in 2008 as a 'butcher's apron' and a 'travesty', while also criticizing Obama's daughters' attire as not 'girly' enough. Similar unfortunate comments were directed at the Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard in 2012, whose style of dress Greer also found wanting, and went so far as to criticize her 'big arse' (Groer, 2012). TERF proponents set out a series of strict guidelines for feminism, lesbianism and womanhood that serve to limit the freedom of cis women, but are especially intended to police the identity and corporality of trans\* people (Butler, 2014). These subjects are transformed into a homogeneous entity (Stone, 1992) and victimized, silenced and annihilated; at the same time they are cast as perpetrators and aggressors. Moore's reaction to Jeffreys' *Gender Hurts* might easily be applied to TERF arguments in general. She argues, '*Gender Hurts* feels like a sustained assault. Jeffreys simply does not regard us as fully human. To read her book as a trans woman is to stand in a wash of hate and to struggle to stay on your feet' (Moore, 2015, p. 767). Jeffreys' and other TERF voices invalidate trans\* experience and promote a conspiracy theory around trans-being that justifies dehumanization and violence toward trans\* people.

## **An educator's perspective on TERF discourses**

As educators, we are committed to broadening understandings, promoting empathy and providing dialogic alternatives to violence – all goals that are impeded by TERF perspectives that render invisible the social injustices perpetrated by a heteronormative patriarchy.

TERF proponents deny the existence of cisgender privilege, described by Serano (2007) as the advantages enjoyed by women and men who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. They also fail to recognize transphobia suffered by trans\* people, arguing that men who transition don't lose their male privileges (see Camminga, this collection), but continue to exercise their authority over women in various social contexts (Jeffreys, 2014). Such a systematic denial of the violence enacted toward the trans\* community in general, and trans\* women in particular, is inconsistent with demonstrated social realities in public and private spheres (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014; Grant et al., 2011; Kann et al., 2016). A comprehensive gender equality education cannot simply ignore the impact of this violence because their victims do not fit preconceived notions of who counts as a 'real' woman.

In their rejection of both trans\* men and women, TERF arguments fail to consider that most of these people have felt, lived, or been socialized in their acquired gender since an early age (McQueen, 2016), so that it is not only cis women who have been subjected to and moulded by a patriarchy that considers them 'the Other' (Serano 2007).

Furthermore, what it means to ‘be socialized’ varies hugely, and expectations of masculinity and maleness can be sources of stigma and vulnerability for those individuals assigned male at birth who ‘fail’. It follows as well that for either case, regardless of the nature and origins of the sense of self, we have a moral imperative as equality educators to recognize the diversity of trajectories through which people become sexual beings, and to support their right to self-determination (Butler, 2014).

TERF perspectives fail to grasp an important implication of the patriarchy: in order to effectively respond to the violence it generates, it is necessary to recognize the shared oppression of women and all people who transgress the heteronormative matrix (Sharma, 2009) – that is, adopt a transfeminist perspective. These forms of patriarchal oppression make up two sides of the same coin, so that any conceptual basis that attempts to address one while ignoring the other is doomed to fail. As Sharpe (2020) points out, TERF arguments construct a false incompatibility between trans\* and cis women’s rights. We find these struggles to be profoundly interrelated and essential to a comprehensive gender education.

## **A call for transfeminist alliance**

Trans\* activism has traditionally been relegated to the practically silent ‘T’ tacked on to the end of initials meant to designate a collective movement to secure rights of sexual minorities. According to Susan Stryker (2008), some of these movements have been accused of homonormativity (Duggan, 2002), a term that emerged in US-based activist circles in the 1990s to describe (1) gay and lesbian people who saw trans\* issues as irrelevant to their cause and viewed gender-normativity as a path to securing social privilege, (2) lesbians who developed subcultural norms based on biological determinism, and (3) anyone who constructs trans\* as a different category of people altogether – either as a distinct (other) gender or a fetishized sexual orientation not related to gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight: ‘from the outset of the post-World War II gay rights movement, transgender practices and identities marked communal boundaries between the normative and the transgressive’ (Stryker, 2008, p. 151). Such attempts to distance trans\* activists from the political agenda, therefore, have not been limited to TERF proponents.

Yet like sexual dissidence movements, feminism is complex and multi-voiced, and cannot be defined exclusively by a particular ideology promoted as universal by a few devoted sectarian followers, no more than it can be reduced to the concerns of particular (White, Western) women. Sophie Lewis (2019) points out that such dialogues across diversity have formed the basis for more inclusive feminisms in America, where indigenous and Black feminists have raised productive debates on how gender interacts with other marginalizing factors such as race and social class.

According to Lucas Platero Méndez and Esther Ortega-Arjonilla (2016), trans experiences have formed a more integral part of Spanish feminism, with trans\* women participating in key nationwide feminist conferences beginning in 1993. In contrast with the narrative of conflict and exclusion more typical of Anglo-European contexts, the concerns of trans\* activists were represented in the development of a shared agenda through public debate and compromise. Based on their own experiences as well as interviews with women involved in these early movements, we identify several reasons for this

history of collaboration: (1) in Spain's particular political context,<sup>2</sup> emerging trans\* activists were excluded from the fledgling homosexual rights movement in the 1980s, which aimed for normativity in the face of the concurrent AIDS scare; (2) the trans\* movement was largely led by women; (3) the prominence of lesbians in mainstream feminism facilitated the participation of trans\* women; and (4) existing personal relationships among members of both groups helped these women understand each other's experiences. While these negotiations have not been, and never will be, without their points of contention, Spanish feminism has acquired a more nuanced and characteristic nature as a result, 'Transfeminism led to Spanish feminism in general becoming more queer, more decolonial, and intersectional' (Platero & Ortega-Arjonilla, 2016, p. 54).

In more recent years, however, TERF discourses have proliferated in Spain. In a conference on *Feminist Politics: Liberties and Identities* celebrated in July 2019 (Gijón), feminist academics, politicians, journalists and writers gathered to engage in debates that generated some troubling transphobic statements. Some of these included misgendering and attacks on transfeminism that provoked indignant responses via the Twitter hashtag #HastaElCoñoDeTransfobia ('Up to my cunt with transphobia'). On the political plane, Lidia Falcón, leader of the Feminist Party of Spain, has recently come out in opposition to trans\* rights legislation: the controversy ignited by her transphobic discourse resulted in the party's exclusion from Spain's United Left coalition party ('United Left Leadership', 2020). In an unprecedented shifting of alliances, some feminist discourse is aligning with that of the radical right, with allegations of 'gender ideology' and the 'gay lobby' (see Pearce et al., this collection). At the same time, a long history of productive collaboration between trans\* and cis feminist activists is being undermined by the emergence of transphobic sectors within Spanish feminism.

Asli Zengin, who defines herself as a Turkish cisgender feminist activist and trans ally, finds an unfortunate point of commonality between cis women's and trans women's experiences – the constant threat of violence. This violence is rooted in sexist expectations of the perpetrators and the systematic sexism that allows the state to reduce the punishment in both cases due to pleas of undue provocation. Perpetrators of the murder of cis women may claim, for example, that the victim flirted with another man or failed to perform expected sexual (or other) duties. Those who kill trans women often cry deception and claim they were enraged by the prospect of what they considered homosexual relations, clearly a threat to their self-concept of hegemonic masculinity. According to Zengin (2016b), the lives of women and trans\* people are considered less valuable in a patriarchal society, a shared suffering that results in a shared claim to feminism. In the face of this shared oppression, we argue that forging alliances is a far more effective political strategy than fomenting divisions and creating false debates about who 'really' gets to be considered a woman, and therefore share in feminist movements.

## **Toward transfeminism as part of queer (critical) educational practice**

As cis women educators, we heed Zengin's call for cis women and trans\* activists to unite to achieve common feminist goals. We see a particular relevance for this collaboration in the institution of schooling, where reducing gender violence of all kinds

through quality education must be a priority. In critical pedagogy, education is seen as a vehicle for social justice, and thus a potential ally of (trans)feminist activism. Paulo Freire, in his well-known work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1986), defended a literacy of the people in which we become aware of our own reality, a raising of consciousness that goes beyond simply learning to read text – we learn to read the world we inhabit. Questioning assumed truths and dialogue with others are principal pedagogical tools for critical understanding: we shift from being passive spectators to actively participating in our world.

Queer educational practice (Britzman, 1995) situates this Freirean approach within a more specific approach to queer pedagogy – reading the world beyond rigid binary and hierarchical concepts of intelligible sex–gender–sexuality that underpin violence toward and exclusion of experiences existing beyond the margins of coherence (Butler, 1993). A critical (queer) pedagogy directly confronts heteronormativity by revealing the discourses (about sex, gender and sexuality) that support it. Such educational practice draws upon feminist and trans\* understandings to operationalize transfeminism as an educational tool.

What can transfeminism contribute to this queer pedagogical project? By challenging an unscientific and oppressive gender regime, trans\* experiences expose the fragility of the heteronormative. This gender regime is supported by trans-exclusionary discourses that must be dismantled, and transfeminism is an important tool for such a paradigm change. A critical queer pedagogy informed by transfeminism might include the following elements:

1. Understand the range of human diversity – prioritizing human experience and scientific understandings over social constructions
2. Recognize the synergies between cis women's and trans\* oppressions, and how these affect all those who transgress normative sex–gender–sexuality
3. Identify the conscious and unconscious ways in which cisgenderism and sexism, along with obligatory heterosexuality, form part of a hidden school curriculum
4. Design pedagogies that invite children and young people to critically reflect on oppressive social constructions of sex, gender and sexuality

Critically interrogating the normative provides a basis for valuing the other possibilities and positionings inherent in human diversity. This may include a cisgender heterosexual woman who fails/refuses to meet the patriarchal expectations imposed upon her (for dress, for submission. . .), or it may include a trans\* person whose physicality and/or history threaten to weaken boundaries between the very categories that uphold the patriarchy. A trans-inclusive feminism would support schools in providing the kind of education that we all need; trans-exclusionary voices within feminist circles only serve to divide us and support a heteronormative and oppressive status quo.

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## Notes

1. We follow the Spanish tradition of using the term trans\*, with the asterisk to remind us that this notion includes a spectrum of identities and experiences that challenge gender normativity (Platero Méndez, 2014). In referencing the work of others, we tend to use their terms (such as transgender or transsexual), as these encode their understandings.
2. The Franco dictatorship, which ended in 1975, delayed the progress of interest-group activism that contested the conservative Catholic regime.

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