



HOW TO SPOT TERF IDEOLOGY



Cambridge SU Women's
Campaign

2021-22

INTRO

Trans liberation is part of feminism. Fighting for autonomy and freedom must be a fight for everyone, and there should be no room for transphobia or TERFs in feminist organising. We are committed to not only a trans inclusive but a trans liberatory feminism. This guide helps people understand what TERFs are and what makes “TERF-ism” a distinct subcategory of transphobia, how to spot TERF ideology, how to deal with it, and how to make spaces trans inclusive.



WHAT IS A TERF?



“TERF” stands for “Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist”. TERF ideology is a specific form of transphobia. The primary TERF assertion is that trans women are not women, and accordingly have no place in women’s spaces. TERFs define misogyny as sex-based oppression, which results from being “biologically female” (a term they define flexibly, but can often be taken to mean people who are assigned female at birth).

This is reductive and works on a narrow definition of what constitutes “biological” sex. TERFs claim all women, on the basis of biology, experience the same kinds of oppression. This completely glosses over the way that gender and sex are both systems of power that interact with other systems of power and oppression, such as racism, ableism, and colonialism.

Women are not a homogenous group, and some people who experience misogyny are not women. Oppression can occur on the basis of physiological characteristics (e.g. limiting access to abortions) and fighting that oppression is feminist work, but there are many other manifestations of misogyny and oppression that are essential to feminist liberation.

SPOTTING TERFS IN THE FIELD

Most TERFs don't call themselves TERFs. Terminology evolves over time, so while the following common terms are signs to look out for, it is more worthwhile to examine what the underlying ideology of a claim is. The core characteristics of TERFs are a conservative, binary, essentialist conception of sex as the be-all-end-all, and a deep hatred for trans women, couched in the language of feminism and feminist theory. Most trans people reading anything indicated as feminist work will keep an eye out for this way of thinking because we have to; as an ally it is worth learning to do the same and looking at your own writing with a critical eye

SIGNS OF A TERF

- TERFs often self-refer as "gender critical" or "adult human female"
- They refer to believing in "sex-based rights", "LGB rights", and "protecting women and girls"
- They refer to trans people as "TRAs" (Trans Rights Activists), "the trans lobby", "the trans debate", and to trans women as "TIMs" (Trans Identified Males)
- They typically dislike the term cis(gender), and may say "I don't have a gender identity" or "I don't have pronouns"
- TERFs will refer to issue of trans people in bathrooms or changing rooms as being about "predators" and co-opt the language of sexual violence to refer to trans people existing in public spaces
- Their narratives represent transmasculine people as confused, redeemable, and often as children and teenagers "corrupted" by the "trans lobby", and transfeminine people as predatory, aggressive, and the ones doing the corrupting

TALKING TO TERFS

TALKING TO TERFS ONLINE

The key advice is don't. Arguing with a stranger on Twitter won't change their mind. If it's someone you know and you want to engage, the best approach is to privately message (and if possible, call them and follow the advice in the next section). People are often defensive and conscious of how they appear when confronted publicly on social media, or in a comments section.

Arguing with TERFs online means that you'll be bringing transphobia into the timeline of your trans friends and followers, who won't want to see that. Some particularly committed TERFs may even start harassing trans people you know if you've interacted publicly recently.





TALKING TO TERFS IN-PERSON

It is worth talking to someone you know (maybe a friend or a family member), as the unique danger of TERF rhetoric is that it is styled to sound like feminism. It also is increasingly normalised in the British media, so TERF talking points might be the first thing someone's ever really heard about trans people. People often get pulled in by one particular topic, so the best time to have a conversation is early.

The first thing is to try and figure out where they got it from. Did they hear it from a friend, or read a news article? If they've read something, and it's the first thing they've heard about trans people or the first time they've taken an interest, it may be relatively easy to inform them about where they're going wrong, and why what they're backing is harmful. If they've heard it from someone they trust and care about, consider how you frame the argument to avoid it becoming about personal relationships, which may make them defensive.

Like a lot of reactionary ideology, there comes a point where the particular argument becomes unimportant. It won't be helpful to unpick the false assumptions if someone is committed to the underlying ideology itself. In this situation, if you still want to have the discussion, it's best to talk through what the endpoint of their ideology is - either they will commit to it, in which case there's not much to be done besides reducing the harm they can do to others, or they will consider what their views imply and perhaps become open to being dissuaded. If the person has strong feminist commitments, it may also be worth bringing up that TERFs (particularly the famous ones who figurehead the movement) spend a lot of time working with the far-right.

MEANINGFUL TRANS INCLUSION

The language of TERF ideology is ever changing, always with the aim of sounding reasonable. If your approach to spotting and fighting TERFs is purely based on words and optics, then you're vulnerable to being taken onboard by a new dogwhistle or talking point. It's not enough to disavow TERFs in words alone and say "Trans Rights are Human Rights" or "Trans Women are Women".

The only way to prevent yourself falling prey to TERF talking points is to develop a critical understanding of concepts like sex and gender and the systems of power and oppression that underly them. TERF ideology incorrectly analyses and obscures these relations, and the best defense is to have a better explanation.

Trans liberation is a feminist fight and transfeminism is feminism we should all be doing. More than inclusion we should be aiming for liberation. That said, here are some things you can do to go beyond just making statements and support trans people in your feminist work:

- Create spaces in which someone's presence isn't questioned, or required to be explained, based on their appearance, and that trans people are comfortable coming to
- Trans liberation is an essential part of feminism, and in the current climate any feminist organisation doing valuable work will have trans liberation and transfeminism integral to what they are doing
- Ensure trans people lead discussion and action on issues that affect them
- Encourage people to unlearn the gender and sex binary and teach themselves why it is reductive and harmful (see the reading list)
- Engage in and support the struggles of all marginalized people. Many feminist spaces that are hostile to trans people are also racist and ableist. Feminist work needs to be anti-racist and accessible

READING LIST

CN: transmisogyny and transphobia, colonialism, misogyny, and queerphobia

QUICK, ESSENTIAL READING

- The Transfeminist Manifesto - Emi Koyama
<https://eminism.org/readings/pdf-rdg/tfmanifesto.pdf>
- Debunking "Trans Women are not Women" Arguments - Julia Serano
<https://medium.com/@juliaserano/debunking-trans-women-are-not-women-arguments-85fd5ab0e19c>
- Why Sex Isn't Binary - Darren Incorvaia
<http://www.scientistafoundation.com/lifestyle-blog/why-sex-isnt-binary>
- Cambridge SU LGBT+ - The Trans Inclusion Guide
<https://www.cambridgesu.co.uk/resources/guides/transinclusionguide/>

FURTHER READING

- TERF Wars: An introduction - Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen, and Ben Vincent
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0038026120934713>
- Disregard and Danger: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the voices of trans (and cis) African feminists - B Camminga (University access)
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0038026120934695>
- [CN: discussions of trauma] Hot Allostatic Load - Porpentine
<https://thenewinquiry.com/hot-allostatic-load/>
- Against Performativity - AJ
<https://www.ebb-magazine.com/essays/against-performativity>

- The Gender Ternary: Understanding Transmisogyny - Lisa Milbank
<https://radtransfem.wordpress.com/2011/12/12/genderternary-transmisogyny/>
- [CN: t-slur] Towards an Insurrectionary Transfeminism - Anonymous
<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anonymous-towards-an-insurrectionary-transfeminism.pdf>

LONG READS

- Trans In The UK: What The Hell Are We Going To Do? - Harry Josephine Giles
<https://harryjosiegiles.medium.com/trans-in-the-uk-what-the-hell-are-we-going-to-do-73fef741cef6>
- On Women as a Class: Materialist Feminism and Mass Struggle - Alyson Escalante
<https://medium.com/@alysonescalante/on-women-as-a-class-materialist-feminism-and-mass-struggle-42a228bde888>
- Heterosexualism and the Modern/Colonial Gender System - Maria Lugones
<https://nycstandswithstandingrock.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/lugones-2007.pdf>
- B. Binaohan - decolonizing transgender 101
<https://publishbiyuti.org/blog/2014/06/decolonizing-transgender-101/>
- Whipping Girl - Julia Serano
- Stone Butch Blues - Leslie Feinberg
- Transgender Marxism - Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke
- Trans: A Memoir - Juliet Jacques
- The Transgender Issue - Shon Faye