

From Feminism to Transgenderism: Catharine MacKinnon and her Political Transition

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‘A woman is an adult human female.’—gender-critical feminists

‘Are women human?’—Catharine A. MacKinnon

As a Marxist, I was influenced by radical feminism when, as a graduate student, I read Catharine MacKinnon's book *Feminism Unmodified*. That was 30 years ago. A Japanese translation of the book was published in 1993. I happened to find it in a second-hand bookshop. The book concretely uncovers the way pornography inflicts harms on women, dominates people's way of seeing and thinking about women, makes women into sexual objects, and creates the world we live in. I still remember the shock of reading that book.

Since then, I have devoured her various books and articles, written many articles based on her theories, and translated her work into Japanese. I have learnt a great deal from her arguments. But now she has transitioned from a high-profile radical feminist to a mediocre transgenderist. The author of *Feminism Unmodified* has modified feminism by modifying the definition of women.

On 28 November 2022, a debate on 'Transgender Law and Politics' was held at Oxford University. MacKinnon gave the main speech at this event, which was carried out peacefully without any violent interruption, cancellation, or threat by activists. Its proceedings were later published in full in the journal [Signs](#). Its content is truly astonishing, and several feminists have already criticised it (for example, [Victoria Smith](#)). I attempt another criticism here. Ironically, I am able to make this criticism precisely because I learned from her.

From the very first line to the last, her speech is full of errors, lies, sophistry, distortions, leaps of logic, and misogyny. A full critique would be as long as a book. So, I will focus on just three problems.

1. Are gender-critical feminists biological essentialists?

MacKinnon's position is built on two pillars. First, gender-critical (GC) feminists are biological essentialists. Second, trans women are, politically, women. For her, the two are

inseparable. I start with the former of the two.

‘Defining women by biology’?

MacKinnon says that:

...a group of philosophers purporting feminism slide sloppily from “female sex” through “feminine gender” straight to “women” as if no move has been made, eventually reverting to the dictionary: a woman is an “adult human female.” Defining women by biology—adult is biological age, human is biological species, female is biological sex—used to be criticized as *biological essentialism*.

MacKinnon fails to recognise different levels of definition. You can define 'woman' politically, culturally, poetically, philosophically, or historically. We can do this precisely because we know the indicated object here is an adult human female, neither a child nor a human male. So doing does not reduce women to biological beings in the slightest.

Countless philosophers, both ancient and modern, both Western and Eastern, have theorised ‘what a human being is’ (a ‘thinking reed’, ‘free being’, ‘realisation of reason’, ‘labouring apes’), but whenever they have offered these definitions, they have assumed their object is a *Homo sapiens*, and not a bonobo or chimpanzee.

MacKinnon herself, in fact, uses ‘women’ and ‘female’ many times in their biological senses in her speech (even more so than in past writings), except when she consciously discusses the definition of woman. This unconscious usage shows she does not really believe in trans ideology. Beliefs that are directly contrary to facts and reality cannot be sustained in the language we unconsciously use.

For that matter, MacKinnon and most other trans advocates define 'trans women' in biological terms. They are convinced that only those who are biologically male can be 'trans women'. MacKinnon states that being biologically female is not a necessary condition for being a woman in order to include 'trans women' in the category of women. But this is as far as it can be argued without contradiction, even formally. As for ‘trans women’, she makes it a necessary condition for them to be biologically male.

‘Adult human female’

In this quote, MacKinnon scoffs at the claim that women are ‘adult human females’ as merely ‘reverting to the dictionary’. In another place, she says: ‘we do not take our politics from the dictionary.’

Indeed, we generally cannot take our politics from the dictionary, but a dictionary

definition is political enough to work against those who deny even dictionary definitions. The dictionary definition of the earth as a planet in the solar system was political enough in a world where geocentrism or the Ptolemaic theory reigned as the dominant doctrine, and where saying heliocentrism or the Copernican theory was a highly political act threatened by the death penalty. Today, to hold up the dictionary definition of a woman as an 'adult human female' is also a highly political act when it results, if not in the death penalty, then lost employment, relationships, social reputation, opportunities for publication, and personal safety.

MacKinnon once understood this: that a dictionary definition can be political. One of her books is titled *Are Women Human?* This is a question posed at the dictionary level, that nevertheless has sufficient political significance in a society where women are not treated as human beings. Is the claim 'women are human' biologically essentialist? If not, why it suddenly become biologically essentialist when the two words 'adult' and 'female' are added?

'Feminist reduction of women to female body parts'?

MacKinnon further says of GC feminists:

Those winging to the Right are thrilled by this putatively feminist reduction of women to female body parts, preferably chromosomes and reproductive apparatus, qualities chosen so that whatever is considered definitive of sex is not only physical but cannot be physically changed into.

It is not GC feminists who are reducing women to their body parts, nor is the Right 'thrilled by this putatively reduction'. It is trans activists and the Left who do these things. 'Trans women' reduce women to their long hair, red manicured nails, ample breasts, rounded buttocks, and vaginas, and then pseudo-reproduce these parts on their own bodies, calling themselves women. For them, 'woman' is a patchwork of these body parts, whereas, for GC feminists, a woman is a total existence that includes all differences and characteristics, biological and political. 'Trans women' are obsessed with female body parts not because their minds are feminine, but merely because, from men's rude eye, these visible body parts seem to represent femininity and womanhood.

And it is the trans advocates and the leftists who, through the promotion of the sex industry and the legalisation of commercial surrogacy, are thrilled by reducing women to their body parts and reproductive organs, and who, in their concern for 'trans women', are also thrilled by referring to women as 'people with wombs', 'people with vaginas',

‘menstruator’, ‘uterus-haver’. With their intellectual ingenuity, they are creating a series of new concepts to replace women. Nevertheless, MacKinnon blames GC feminists for this reduction!

‘Women are not oppressed by our bodies’?

Furthermore, MacKinnon says that:

Women are not, in fact, subordinated or oppressed by our bodies. We do not need to be liberated from our chromosomes or our ovaries.

What exactly does MacKinnon mean by ‘our bodies’? Given that she says ‘our ovaries’, we can only interpret ‘our bodies’ as referring to ‘the bodies of biological women’, but, if so, according to MacKinnon's definition, that would be biological essentialism.

The proper question is what is the concrete meaning of ‘by our bodies’. No GC feminist says that women are *naturally* subordinated or oppressed by their bodies. However, it is clearly nonsense to say that women's bodies are totally irrelevant to their oppression. If women's oppression has nothing to do with their biological physicality, why is the oppression and exploitation of women such as rape, prostitution, pornography, and surrogacy related to women's biological bodies and their physical functions? If a vagina is biologically absent in a woman and a penis absent in a man, vaginal rape is impossible, and if a woman has no reproductive function, it cannot be exploited through commercial surrogacy. In order for men to be aroused by pornography that depicts naked women in a subordinate way, women's nudity must have different biological characteristics from men's. The question is whether subordination and exploitation of women are seen as *naturally* occurring because of women's physical characteristics, or whether the subordination and exploitation are seen as *historically*, and therefore *politically* occurring on the basis of these physical characteristics. The latter position is not a biologically essentialist but a highly political argument.

The fact that women's distinct bodies are a necessary condition of their oppression does not lead to the conclusion that liberation from their bodies is women's liberation. A woman's body, including her vagina, is necessary for men to rape her, but the movement to eliminate rapes has never been a movement to eliminate vaginas. Commercial surrogacy requires women's reproductive capacities, but this does not mean that the movement to eliminate surrogacy has ever been a movement to eliminate women's fertility.

GC feminists are proud of their own female bodies. Despite their restrictiveness and

relative disadvantage in this world, they do not want to do away with them in the slightest. This physicality of women is even a source of their strength and pride, just as Blackness is a source of spiritual strength and pride for Black people. GC feminists are angry at this male-dominated society that treats them as socially inferior and unequal because of their physical peculiarities. So, they are trying to change it.

Rather than criticising the male-dominated society that discriminates against women on the basis of their physical characteristics, MacKinnon separates the two, as if their bodies had nothing to do with their oppression and discrimination. This suggests that MacKinnon subconsciously believes that recognising female bodies as physically disadvantaged relative to that of males means that we cannot resist and finally eliminate the oppression and subordination of women.

2. Is her proposition that ‘trans women are, politically, women’ valid?

The second of the two pillars of MacKinnon’s speech, ‘trans women are, politically, women’, is based on two things: first, that ‘trans women are living women's lives’, and second, that ‘trans women identify with women’. She says that:

...not only are trans women living women’s lives—often much the worst of that life—but the transgender women I know, anyway, embrace womanhood consciously, are far more woman-identified than a vast swath of the women assigned female at birth (...) whom I also know....

‘Trans women are living women's lives’?

What exactly are ‘women's lives’ here? Assuming it is not just a tautology, the ‘women’ here mean obviously biological women excluding ‘trans women’ (biological men). If so, MacKinnon’s claim appears to be that some men are living ‘women's lives’.

In fact, ‘trans women’ are not living women’s lives, but living only the imaginary ‘women's lives’ that they perceive. What on earth makes men’s lives women’s lives? Does living with longer hair, make-up, larger breasts, bras, and skirts do it? If so, then MacKinnon is reducing women to such parts and outfits. To abstract ‘women's lives’ from real women's lives and turn them into a mere get-up or how-to’s that men can also take on, means insulting and objectifying real women's lives.

Perhaps it means being sexually abused and objectified like women? But even in that case, for those who are not born women, the meanings of these abuses are not and cannot be the same as for those born women. Even if they are raped by men, the meanings and

consequences are very different from those faced by women. Apart from the possibility of pregnancy, they never experience vaginal penetration. Andrea Dworkin once said, 'There were the great, broad laws....Fuck the woman in the vagina, not in the ass, because only *she* can be fucked in the vagina.' (Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 2007, p. 197.) Other experiences of sexual abuse are not the same as women, even if these experiences have aspects similar to those of women. Both gay and straight men also being sexually abused and objectified by men does not make them people who are living 'women's lives', neither does it make them women.

Men and women don't and can't live the same lives. Not only biologically, but also politically. That is what is meant by gender hierarchy.

'Trans women are woman-identified'?

Next, we turn to the claim that the 'trans women' MacKinnon knows are 'more woman-identified' than 'a vast swath of the women' she also knows.

First, no matter how many 'trans women' she personally knows, they are likely to be around 0.0001% of all 'trans women'. It is a remarkable leap of logic to say from such a small number of individual cases that 'trans women are more woman-identified than a vast swath of women'.

Moreover, what MacKinnon actually knows is only superficial images of 'trans women'. When meeting with a high-profile radical feminist, even DV perpetrators and rapists would probably behave in a feminist way. MacKinnon thinks she understands 'trans women' by seeing the very superficial appearances that 'trans women' present to her and reading the writings of 'trans women'.

As an example, look at the case of Jan Morris, whom MacKinnon refers to in her essay as a 'trans theorist'. She cites his memoir *Conundrum* as a reference. In it, Jan Morris writes as if his wife and children all understood and naturally accepted his 'sex change'. In reality, however, it was the exact opposite. His daughter Suki Morys published an obituary when her father died (*The Sunday Times*, 10 December 2022), and wrote that she did not understand his sex change at all and became increasingly unable to as she grew older. As for his *Conundrum*, she wrote:

As I grew older, even more confusion took hold. I read *Conundrum*, Jan's memoir, which was published in 1974 and serialised in *The Sunday Times*, and the story didn't quite fit for me. Now I have read more of Jan's books, I have come to the conclusion that, other than the portrayal of place, all her [his] accounts are pretty much fantasy.

...

In *Conundrum*, Jan writes about the death of my elder sister, Virginia, who died as an infant. She [He] writes that when Virginia was in hospital, my mother and Jan lay in bed together holding hands, tears running down their faces. She [He] writes of a “great moon”, while a nightingale sings, like a voice “from the empyrean”. She [He] states that they listened until they fell asleep. “In the morning,” she [he] writes, “the child had gone.”

The reality, as my mother told me, was that my sister lay dying in hospital and Jan refused to go with my mother to visit her. At that time mothers weren’t allowed to stay the night with their children. I cannot imagine the pain my mother was going through, but I very much doubt she slept that night, and Jan’s words, then and ever after, completely failed to show any understanding of her pain.

Furthermore, Suki Morys writes of her father: ‘I never felt any femininity in her [him]’. He was just a man dressed as a woman for his daughter. Jan's views on women were extremely conservative and sexist, believing that women should marry, have children, and keep a home, and he tried to impose this on his daughter. However, even after self-identifying as a woman, he left all housework and childcare to his wife and never cooked or even cleaned his house. He never treated his children affectionately and, on the contrary, was cold towards them, especially his daughter, whom he humiliated at every opportunity, and this continued until his death.

Morris' behaviour is typically that of a sexist man. He left all the messy stuff to his wife, free-riding on her, while he went about his work as a journalist and historian and achieved a respectable reputation. He just did it in the guise of a woman (with dresses, make-up, long hair). Suki even questions whether Jan really wanted to be a woman. Becoming a ‘woman’ was merely a means of self-realisation for him. She also said: ‘Jan certainly did absolutely nothing for womankind.’ Can this really be described as identifying with women?

Identification through misogyny and pornography

‘Trans women’, especially those who can be classified as autogynephiles (they likely constitute the majority of ‘trans women’), do not identify with women, but with women’s long hair, make-up, red lips, dresses, skirts, underwear, women's breasts and smooth skin, and they also identify with what they perceive as feminine behaviour. In other words, they only identify with women’s exterior, women’s adornment, and stereotypes of women.

‘Women’, as imagined and understood by ‘trans women’, take on—to use the expression used by MacKinnon in her speech—the ‘misogynistic meanings that male

dominant societies create, project onto us, attribute to us'. The fact that the degree of their identification with these misogynic meanings is higher than that of the average woman does not bring them any closer to women. Yet, for some reason, when MacKinnon starts talking about 'trans women', she discusses them as if they were exceptionally able to transcend these misogynistic meanings, directly see and know women, and immediately access and identify with women. The gender hierarchy that should so powerfully dominate people's ways of seeing women has gone away somewhere.

One of the strongest mediators of this process of identification is the sex industry, including pornography and prostitution. This understanding is in line with MacKinnon's theory of pornography before now. The uniqueness of her theory was that men see, know, and understand women above all through pornography, therefore men's image of women is constructed by it. This applies to 'trans women's' identification with women. They have a desire for self-feminisation through watching pornography, particularly, [sissy porn](#), Japanese pornographic manga and anime (*hentai*), and through experiences buying sex. And in the process of their self-feminization, they learn 'femininity' above all from pornography and from the behaviours of women in the sex industry.

In the film *The Danish Girl* (2015) about Lily Hervé, famous for being the first man in the world to undergo a 'sex change' operation, the male protagonist has a desire to become a woman by wearing white stockings. He learnt feminine behaviours from women sexually performing in a live pornographic house. He had a wife, but he did not learn them from his wife but from women in the sex industry. The feminine behaviours of women in the sex industry are, of course, originally created and exaggerated by men's fantasies. Indeed, Lily learnt 'femininity' from women who acted out men's fantasies, and then acted them out himself to show others that he was a 'woman'. Thus, everything revolves inside the world created by pornography and the sex industry, and MacKinnon herself is now an inhabitant of this pornified world.

'Trans women are, politically, women'?

On the basis of these arguments, MacKinnon draws the conclusion that '*trans women are, politically, women.*' However, if, through a mere act of identification, a person belonging to the dominant sex class can move to the subordinate sex class, then gender hierarchy would be either powerless or non-existent. This completely contradicts her own theory.

What does the word 'politically' here mean? It is mere rhetoric and does not reflect any logical connection or rational reasoning. If it is possible to 'politically' categorise 'trans women' as women, it is also possible to categorise MacKinnon as a 'trans woman' or a

‘man’, politically. This is because, through her essay, she shows contempt for women who do not accept ‘trans women’ as women, shows no solidarity with the many women who are scared, losing medals, or being sexually abused by ‘trans women’ and trans activists, and doesn’t sympathise with girls irreversibly harmed by their transition. And she actively welcomes and embraces ‘trans women’, i.e. biological men, and is far more trans-woman-identified than ‘a vast swath of the women assigned female at birth’. Therefore, can we say that MacKinnon is, politically, a ‘trans woman’, or perhaps even just a man?

If ‘trans women’ are, only politically, women, then in bathrooms, changing rooms, sports, shelters, and prisons that are not demarcated according to political ideas, ‘trans women’ should use the facilities assigned to men. Just as there are no right-wing toilets or left-wing toilets, and just as shelters do not sort out victims based on their political views, ‘political women’ have no right to use facilities assigned to biological women or to participate in women's sports. They can only participate as ‘political women’ at liberal-feminist rallies or LGBT events.

3. Why did MacKinnon capitulate to transgenderism?

MacKinnon has thrown away her fundamental feminist position in order to include ‘trans women’ in the category of women and the female sphere. But, why did Catharine MacKinnon, who was regarded as a leading figure of radical feminism, capitulate so miserably to transgenderism? There are several reasons for this.

Bio-phobia

The first reason is her age-old bio-phobia. Although she has abandoned almost all of her past positions, there are a few that continue from her past. Foremost of these is her perennial anti-biological position. This bio-phobia has resulted in her failing to grasp the core of the male power that abuses and exploits biological functions and structures of female bodies, and to understand its new form: transgenderism.

In this respect, she clearly differs from Andrea Dworkin who has spoken with vividness and intensity about the material reality of female bodies and their colonisation by male power. As a legal scholar, MacKinnon, even when she spoke about the oppression and exploitation of women, did not speak vividly about the concreteness of female bodies, but remained somewhat abstract.

Internalised misogyny

The other is the woman-hating that she seems to have deeply internalised. Most

prominent across the breadth of her speech is her disrespect of the majority of ordinary women, and disdain for the GC feminists who stand up for their rights and dignity. When she mentions ‘trans women’ and trans theorists, it is always accompanied by praise such as ‘in new and insightful ways’, ‘brilliant literature’, ‘sheds new light on feminist politics’, ‘real courage’, ‘evocative and insightful accounts’, ‘with all respect’, whereas when referring to GC feminists, she uses repeatedly derogatory expressions such as ‘self-identified feminists’, ‘purporting feminism’, ‘feminism of female body parts’, ‘feminist transphobes’, ‘anti-trans feminists’, ‘glaring ignorance’, and so on.

The hatred of GC feminists is particularly evident in the following two statements. One is the following paragraph, which attempts to explain why ‘feminist transphobes’ exist.

It is evident that many feminist transphobes have been traumatized by women’s gender roles and stereotypes, which they did not fit physically, psychologically, or in life ambition. They had a hard time being accepted and valued as women and seem to resent the ease with which some trans women are accepted as women.

This is a truly astonishing claim, and resonates with some of the ideas that come from the ‘incel’ movement. MacKinnon is saying that GC feminists are jealous of ‘trans women’. This way of deriding feminist criticism by reducing it to female jealousy is typical of misogynists and incels. When feminists criticise pornography, they are told that ugly feminists are jealous of porn stars who are beautiful, sexual, and pampered by men. In the case of suffragettes who fought for women's voting rights, they were also said to be frustrated spinsters who were unloved by men. How could this classic misogynistic claim be repeated by MacKinnon, of all people?

Another striking example of her misogyny is the following passage in which she talks about so-called ‘TERFs’. She says:

I also don’t use the term TERF, not because those who are labelled with it are not trans-exclusive; they are. But because I see nothing radical in their feminism and am baffled by their unwillingness to recognize trans feminism as the contribution that it is, and by their willingness to engage in the transmisogyny that they do.

MacKinnon rejects the term ‘TERF’ not because trans activists use it to abuse and attack GC feminists and other women, such as ‘kill TERFs’, ‘punch TERFs’, or ‘fuck TERFs’ (these facts are not even mentioned by her), but because the feminists are not radical! This is like, when a violent man is beating his wife and shouting ‘you are bitch’, a feminist

saying, without condemning him beating her, 'I don't use the term "bitch", because I see nothing sexual in her'!

Then, is MacKinnon still a radical feminist? Unfortunately, not. But not because she is not radical. She is, in a sense. In that she adds some men to the category of women, even defends putting male rapists in women's prisons, and even promotes sex transition for children, she is so radical. But because there is nothing feminist in her transgenderism.

'Seeing oneself as part of any group with men'

One hint as to what led her to such a political transition is voiced by MacKinnon herself. She says that 'seeing oneself as part of any group with men in it has more dignity' as a reason why many women do not identify with women. In fact, this is what explains why she includes 'trans women' in the women's category. She expressed this idea in a 1991 piece.

I also sense, though, that many women... do not want to be "just women," not only because something important is left out, but also because that means being in a category with "her," the useless white woman whose first reaction when the going gets rough is to cry. I sense here that *people feel more dignity in being part of any group that includes men* than in being part of a group that includes that ultimate reduction of the notion of oppression, that instigator of lynch mobs, that ludicrous whiner, that equality coattails rider, the white woman. It seems that if the oppression that is done to you is also done to a man, you are more likely to be recognized as oppressed as opposed to inferior. Once a group is seen as putatively human, a process helped by including men in it, an oppressed man falls from a human standard. A woman is just a woman—the ontological victim—so not victimized at all. (Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'From Practice to Theory, Or What Is a White Woman Anyway?,' *Women's Lives, Men's Laws*, 2005, p. 30.)

She said this, when she was an excellent radical feminist. When she said this, she was, of course, implicitly assuming that the category of woman did not include biological men. But now she includes men in the category of women itself, and MacKinnon sees herself as part of a 'group that includes men' and feels that this makes her 'more dignified'.

Somewhere in her mind, she despises 'just women', in particular 'useless white women whose first reaction when the going gets rough is to cry', and regards them as inferior to men. That is why, when some men self-identified as women, she was happy to accept and welcome them. In her speech, MacKinnon refers to 'trans women' 'leaving masculinity

behind, drawn to and embracing womanhood for themselves'. But, in fact, she welcomed them not because they did 'leave masculinity behind' and 'embrace womanhood for themselves', but, on the contrary, because they held onto their masculinity firmly, and she thought including them in the category of women meant their masculinity would be brought to women, too. Therefore, however paradoxical it may sound, MacKinnon regarded 'trans women' as women not because they were women, but precisely because they were men.

From feminism to transgenderism

The above-mentioned points become clearer in light of MacKinnon's theory of pornography, once again. As already mentioned, many 'trans women', particularly autogynephiles, know 'women', learn 'women', and identify with 'women' through pornography. According to her, pornography is a theory and practice of sexism and misogyny. Therefore, 'trans women' learn and increasingly incarnate hatred of women in the process of their identification with 'women' and their self-feminisation. And they know that no matter how much they imitate women, no matter how much they recreate their appearance in their own bodies through hormones and surgery, they can never become women (i.e. adult human females). All of this fuels their hatred of real women. This is precisely the key unlocking the mystery of why 'trans women' and trans advocates hate and violently attack GC feminists who identify with 'adult human females.'

Viewed from this perspective, the real reason for MacKinnon's aversion to the biological becomes clearer. Her bio-phobia is not, of course, because she has some hatred of biology itself, but because she detests women's biological bodies, abhors their biological 'disadvantage', and despises their vulnerability. Her bio-phobia is a manifestation of her internalised misogyny. Here, the biological takes on a highly political significance. Herein lies the dialectic between biology and politics. In the same sense that it was once said in second-wave feminism that 'the personal is political,' the biological is political.

Andrea Dworkin once said in *Right Wing Women* that 'Feminism is hated because women are hated.' This applies to MacKinnon. She hates GC feminists because she hates adult human females. Of course, in this sexist society, everyone internalises misogyny to a greater or lesser extent. Unless we consciously resist it, we can easily be dominated by it. Trans ideology has the unique power to dismantle this resistance among even the most solid feminists. This ideology is based on 1. the strongly internalised gender norm for women that they must sympathise with the plight of poor and vulnerable men and protect them; 2. the leftist norm that minority rights must be defended unconditionally; and 3. the

feminist norm that we should stand in solidarity with more vulnerable women such as 'trans women'. These are intertwined to deftly disarm feminist resistance to the new misogyny.

And, as MacKinnon's position within academia and the mainstream world gradually rose, from a marginalised extremist to a prominent figure accepted by the UN and state agencies, her deeply internalised hatred of women, i.e. adult human females, finally overwhelmed and defeated her feminism. Thus, she became a devotee of transgenderism.

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