

This is what feminism looks like

“Gender critical” feminists have represented the best of feminism

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<https://thecritic.co.uk/this-is-what-feminism-looks-like/>

Somewhere in the back of a drawer, I have a Fawcett Society “This is what a feminist looks like” t-shirt. These became infamous around a decade ago for two reasons: allegations that some had been [manufactured in sweatshops](#), and the pressure placed on male politicians to “prove” themselves by wearing one. [Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband complied](#); David Cameron did not, despite being [asked five times](#) by *Elle* magazine.

Cameron was right to refuse. While the intent might have been to challenge stereotypes about feminism, the trouble was that in this case, owning the t-shirt didn’t actually prove you had been there and done that. For my own part, I think I’ve worn the t-shirt once, during which time I let down the sisterhood by parking badly at Sainsbury’s. Besides, I think my own look is quite “mumsy side of the second wave”, so I’m not sure what stereotypes I’d be demolishing anyways. If I am a feminist, it is because of what I believe.

The Women Who Wouldn’t Wheesht, **Lucy Brown and Susan Dalgety (eds), Constable, £17.79**

I’ve been thinking of this in relation to two new books, one published in May, the next to be published next month. [The Women Who Wouldn’t Wheesht](#) is a collection of women’s writing on recent feminist activism in Scotland, edited by Susan Dalgety and Lucy Hunter Blackburn, while [Sexed](#), by *Guardian* journalist Susanna Rustin, is a history of British feminism from the late eighteenth century onwards. Reading both, I found myself feeling a tremendous sense of relief. *This is what feminism looks like*. Finally, we are starting to put the activism of the past decade into its rightful context.

For now, these books may be categorised as “gender critical”, a term I personally dislike. I understand it can serve a practical purpose, but just as ‘cis’ seeks to make female people a subcategory of “women”, “gender critical” makes real feminism a subcategory of a feminism that functions on the level of t-shirt slogan only. Women, as Julie Bindel wrote in 2022’s [Feminism for Women](#), “cannot remain an afterthought in our own political project”. It has been bizarre and dismaying to witness the way in which many have characterised “gender critical” feminists — that is, feminists who believe sex is politically salient and that sex-role stereotypes are harmful — as some strange offshoot of a “normal” feminism which has never had any clear thoughts on what men and women are.

For several years, we have been asked to play along with the idea that we — the “gender critical” feminists — are in conflict with “trans inclusive” feminists (who sound much nicer — who wouldn’t rather be “inclusive” than “critical”?). But this is the wrong framing entirely. Far from being a case of feminist in-fighting, this is a case of feminists versus anti-feminists — even if the latter have donned the “feminist” garb. Feminists disagree on many issues — how best to deal

with male violence, childcare, wealth redistribution, the sex trade — but this is not the same sort of disagreement. This is not a dispute over the best strategy for minimising harm to women. It is about whether women matter at all.

When academics such as [Judith Butler](#) and [Catherine MacKinnon](#) attempt to blur the distinction between liberating women and liberating the word “female” from any association with female humans, this is not feminism. When [male rapists are imprisoned](#) with vulnerable women, and female rape survivors are [denied single-sex support](#) services, this is not feminism. When lesbians are compared [to racists](#) for not wanting to sleep with males, this is not feminism. When males claiming to be women vaunt the pleasures of being treated “[like a piece of meat](#)” or tell us “[getting fucked makes you female](#) because fucked is what a female is”, this is not feminism. When [the removal of healthy body parts](#) is considered necessary in order not to be categorised as said piece of meat, this is not feminism. When women are reduced to “[bodies with vaginas](#)” but [men remain men](#), this is not feminism.

Those standing up to all of this have been applying fundamental feminist principles. They have been brave. For so long, it has been so hard for them to get their voices heard at all that expecting to be acknowledged as the only actual feminists in the room — as opposed to the stuck-in-the-past Karens who just don’t get that “our understanding of gender has changed” — has seemed a far-off dream. I think we are much closer to it now.

Sexed, Susanna Rustin, Polity, £18.40

At the start of *Sexed*, Rustin describes “the resurgence of grassroots women’s activism in Britain” as “among the most extraordinary political developments of recent years”. Yet, she notes, “it hasn’t received the recognition it deserves from either politicians or civil society organizations that claim to support women’s rights. Instead, it has been traduced, attacked, ignored and misunderstood”. Thankfully, *Sexed* positions the work of recent years not as some embarrassing “culture wars” distraction, but as a continuation of feminist resistance to patriarchy.

Throughout the book, we are reminded that earlier feminists were not routinely applauded for their “right side of history” credentials. They, too, struggled to articulate the importance of recognising sex difference without allowing it to be used as a justification for oppression. It has never been easy to say that female people matter just as much as male people without being accused of endorsing female inferiority. Those [currently complaining that](#) “terfs reduce women to their reproductive organs” are of a piece with those who have always associated femaleness with degradation. Old-style misogynists hated feminism as a movement for female people; the new-style misogynists have made feminism palatable by disassociating it from femaleness. The underlying sentiments, I would argue, are much the same.

The Women Who Wouldn’t Wheesht provides a necessary account of activism, but also suffering. As contributors such as Jenny Lindsay [have pointed out](#), the issue is not just that the demands of trans activists are anti-feminist. It is that any woman who stands up to it will be subjected — just as outspoken women always have been — to extreme misogynist abuse. “There is no male equivalent to the dehumanising TERF”, Lindsay writes, “spat from the lips of men enjoying fragile thuggery, gifted such power by this movement to abuse, to smear, to hound. It takes a

great deal of chutzpah to call that progressive.” It is essential that this behaviour is recognised as bigotry and hate. Those leading it have not been driven by a sudden outpouring of compassion for gender-confused individuals. The mirror world framing — whereby women’s compassion for other women is positioned as hatred for the marginalised, while “progressive” men’s hatred for feminists is positioned as “protecting trans kids” — is as insulting as it is ridiculous.

As Dalgety and Hunter Blackburn note at the end of their book, the fight for women’s rights, both in Scotland and elsewhere, goes on. There has, nonetheless, been a serious shift in how this story is being told. Judith Butler’s [recent attempt](#) to conflate feminists with the far right has fallen somewhat flat. There’s a limit to how long “Donald Trump? That’s you, it is” can be taken seriously as an argument, and the new ‘feminazi’ was never a million miles away from the old.

The time to pretend that “gender critical” feminists are engaged in a debate with some other, more sophisticated type of feminist is over. Either your priority is women — and you know what a woman is — or it isn’t and you don’t. This was never about “the trans issue”. It’s about the same people feminism has always been about — the most vulnerable women and girls. Sorry, anti-feminists. Not everything is all about you.
