

Inquiry Focus: Treatment of trans-women within feminism**Inquiry Questions:**

- What are the influential perspectives, ideologies, values and beliefs that impact the treatment of trans women in relation to feminism?
- What actions have been taken in response to the views, attitudes, beliefs and values produced from these different perspectives/ideologies?
- What are the implications these findings on the exclusion of trans women from feminism on the overall understanding of gender identity in society? (*in another place/on another issue/on different groups*).

Background information:

The debate about the position of transwomen in feminism is complex and often heated. Some feminists, believe that trans rights are a crucial part of feminism. They argue that fighting against transphobia is essential for achieving gender equality and that transwomen should be fully included in feminist movements. However, there is another group known as gender-critical feminists or trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). They believe that womanhood is based on biological sex and argue that transwomen, who were assigned male at birth, do not share the same experiences as cisgender women. This group often opposes the inclusion of transwomen in women's spaces and feminist activities

This debate has led to significant tension within feminist circles. Supporters of trans inclusion emphasize the importance of intersectionality, which considers how different aspects of identity, such as gender, race, and sexuality, intersect and impact one's experiences. They argue that excluding transwomen from feminism ignores the diversity of women's experiences and perpetuates discrimination.

Possible Sources:

- Wikipedia - *Feminist views on transgender topics*. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia:
from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_views_on_transgender_topic
- Dawson, J. (2020, July 10). *Trans women are women. It's time to move past harmful debate*. Time, from <https://time.com/5865581/transphobia-terf-harm/>
- Romano, A. (2020, June 10). *J.K. Rowling's latest controversy and the polarization of the Harry Potter fandom*. Vox, from <https://www.vox.com/culture/21285396/jk-rowling-transphobic-backlash-harry-potter>
- Dockterman, E. (2021, March 31). *Raquel Willis on her open letter to protect trans women*. Time, from <https://time.com/5950855/raquel-willis-trans-women-discrimination-interview/>

Perspective and Viewpoint #1

One perspective that can be seen on the treatment of transgender women within feminism in society highlights a social justice and progressive perspective, one that supports trans women and any transgender individuals in any modern movements and issues. This falls into the category of 'intersectional feminism', which argue that feminism should be inclusive

of all women, if the movement is to address the diverse form of oppression that face women around the world. People who share this perspective generally value equality, inclusiveness and working to educate and help others to understand the difference between facts and misinformation when it comes to the relation between gender identity, gender expression, biological sex and sexual orientation.

The exclusion of trans women from feminism is one of many challenges faced in relation to transwomen within feminism. A group in particular which displays this perspective is Gender Minorities Aotearoa. This group operates as a part of the kaupapa Māori public health framework Te Pae Māhutonga and the Ottawa Charter (1986) in New Zealand. And they believe in the inclusion and equality for all transgender individuals across all cultures and backgrounds, in particular, the support of transgender women as a part of feminism. *“Trans women’s rights are women’s rights - and women’s rights are human rights,”* this demonstrates the group’s belief that transgender issues are intertwined with feminist issues. Gender Minorities Aotearoa holds this point of view of personal freedom and understanding due to personal and interpersonal experiences. The organisation itself is run by transgender individuals and advocates strongly for their own rights and the rights of others. Their shared beliefs of equality and acceptance have been shaped due to experiences of discrimination and hate on the basis of gender identity. In terms of their point of view on the exclusion of trans women’s exclusion from feminism, their values push them to take a proud stance of support, LGBTQIA+ education and awareness in the NZ community.

Perspective and Viewpoint #2

An opposing perspective that can be seen on the issue of exclusion of trans women from feminism can be seen among TERFs - Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists. TERFs is an umbrella term for any feminists who purposely reject the rights of transgender women when advocating for women’s rights. This highlights a conservative perspective within feminism, founded on the conservative approach to gender. TERFs include a wide range of people, however, their shared point of view can come down to what defines a women’s experience in terms of feminism - *‘who constitutes as a woman, what constitutes as feminist interests and how can transgender politics intersect with feminist politics?’*

This point of view on the exclusion of trans women from feminism is based on the conservative belief that sex is biologically determined and that women are those born with reproductive anatomy. They emphasise that cisgender women have unique experiences, such as menstruation and pregnancy and it is these experiences that has contributed to the inequalities faced by women in society. One trans-exclusionary feminist states; *“broadly speaking, our analysis is that women’s lives are shaped by their physical difference from males as well as the cultural meanings derived from these.”* This demonstrates trans-exclusionary feminists’ emphasis on the physical body, valuing the differences between man and woman and acknowledging the historical roots of feminism within the patriarchy. They do not accept the concept of ‘gender identity’ and they see it as something that is tied to traditional gender roles. *Understanding sexual difference to be an important facet of human experience, we seek a form of equality that recognises it. We do not accept the newer concept of gender identity - the feeling of being male or female - as a substitute.”.*

Compare and Contrast

Both the examples of a progressive/intersectional feminist perspective as well as a more conservative perspective on the exclusion of trans women from feminism have certain similarities, that mainly being the core value of rights for minorities – specifically women. They acknowledging that the patriarchy has led women to be in a disadvantaged position in society and that more needs to be more to progress women’s rights and that by doing this, society as a whole will improve. Both groups are similar in that they are active advocates for

awareness and change.

However, while they fundamentally agree on the overall goals of feminism, their viewpoints differ regarding who can be included and identified as a 'feminist'. The difference hangs on a few key ideas. Firstly, that TERFs fundamentally believe that including transwomen into the feminist space counters the goals of feminism overall as they do not have the same experiences of cisgendered women. Whereas, more progressive perspectives, such as the group Gender Minorities Aotearoa, remain different in that they value breaking into a more inclusive society and that as transwomen are a group oppressed by the patriarchy, they have a place within the movement.

Another key aspect where they vary is in their views on biological gender and sexuality. TERFS believe that sex is biologically determined and that being a woman is tied to biological characteristics. They view trans-women as men. Whereas the progressive perspective has a more inclusive view on gender and sexual identity and that transwomen are 'women'.

Actions and Responses:

Action/Response 1:

An action which was taken in response to a progressive/intersectional perspective can be seen in online education and support, particularly from prominent, influential feminist activists. One such activist by the name of Raqual Willis, along with GLAAD, published an open letter for which more than 465 activists - plus celebrities and organisations - came together to sign this letter in support of trans women and girls.

This was a response encouraged by the heavily widespread number of bills in the United States restricting the rights of transgender youth. Most notably were the bills preventing transgender girls from competing in women's sports, however, other bills also hindered trans youth's access to gender-affirming healthcare. Which can result in significantly negative effects on individuals' mental health. This open letter was published on March 31st, 2021, which is the day to celebrate Transgender Visibility and strongly advocates for any feminists in business, entertainment, media, advocacy, politics and social justice to publicly "*join the conversation*" and be direct in expressing support for transgender and non-binary individuals. This letter addresses inequalities for trans youth and trans-exclusionary feminist views as well. "*We believe that honouring the diversity of women's experience is a strength, not a detriment to the feminist cause.*" This letter is a platform used to directly explain that every individual is deserving of the same freedom, opportunities and access, whether a transgender woman or a cisgender woman. That respect should be given for every person's right to their own bodily autonomy. In response to TERFs in particular, the letter states "*their vitriol is, in fact, not feminist at all. True feminists do not wish to limit any woman's identity or freedom to be fully herself. [...]. Our feminism must be unapologetically expansive so that we can leave the door open for future generations*". This action is influenced by the progressive perspective, as its primary aim is for inclusion, evolving society, understanding and equality, all important aspects of a progressive ideology. This idea of supporting others to allow for more and better inclusion is a key aspect of this perspective which has pushed for this response to take place.

Actions/Response 2:

One action which was taken in relation to the exclusion of transgender women from feminism can be seen in a very widespread 'essay' from famous *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling in 2020. Rowling is widely regarded as a TERF, a trans-exclusionary feminist, due to her active promotion of views which exclude transgender women from feminism and the crucial rights that feminism advocates for. This essay was largely written and published in

support of other trans-exclusionary feminists, and to bring awareness to the view point that trans activism can lead to the *“erosion of women’s and girls’ rights.”* This essay addresses the Maya Forstater case, Rowling actively choosing to omit the fact that Forstater wanted her belief that gender identity does not exist to be protected, and instead chose to describe this as *“her belief that sex is determined by biology is protected in law.”* Rowling’s work promotes that the inclusion of transgender women in feminism is a push towards *‘eroding’* the legal definition of sex, instead replacing this with gender. It also briefly addresses her concerns that trans activism can have a negative affect on child welfare and safety, but does not go into detail. The statements; *“some say they decided to transition after realising they were same-sex attracted,”* as well as; *“nobody, the activists insisted, could be persuaded into being trans,”* actively promote the belief that transitioning is a choice. Rowling also gives a platform to Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria, which is not a condition recognised by any governing medical bodies. *“I’ve read all the arguments about femaleness not residing in the sexed body, and the assertions that biological women don’t have common experiences, and I find them, too, deeply misogynistic and regressive. It’s also clear that one of the objectives of denying the importance of sex is to erode what some seem to see as the cruelly segregationist idea of women having their own biological realities.”* This statement is clearly influenced by the conservative view determining a woman by body parts. Emphasising the physical differences between man and woman a key part of Rowling’s feminism that she wished to further promote using her platform and fame. Influenced by ideas and beliefs of exclusion and fearful ‘what-if’ scenarios, she concluded, with regards to male violence that ; *“so I want trans women to be safe. At the same time, I do not want to make girls and women less safe. When you throw open the doors of bathrooms and changing rooms to any man who believes or feels he’s a woman – and, as I’ve said, gender confirmation certificates may now be granted without any need for surgery or hormones – then you open the door to all men who wish to come inside.”* In doing, J.K. Rowling’s response actively promotes and fuels the exclusion of transgender women from feminism.



Considering the implications of the findings in contexts outside the inquiry:

#1

The debate around the role of transwomen within the movement of feminism reflects a wider issue that has consistently been part the feminist debate – who is included and who is excluded? Early feminist movements, particularly during the suffrage era. Within the United States, African American women were often excluded from mainstream suffrage organizations and events. As such, two different advocacy groups forms, one who supported the suffrage rights for all US citizens formed the “American Woman Suffrage Association”, while those who wanted those rights for white people only founded the “National Women Suffrage Association”. Regardless, black women were often excluded from being involved in the cause – leading them to form the National Association of Colour Women. Even after women were granted the vote through the 19th Amendment being passed in 1920, African American women in the south faced racial discrimination and were discouraged from voting through intimidation and fear. Native American women were not considered US citizens until 1924. While in New Zealand there wasn’t an open debate about

the rights of Māori women to get the vote, it's recognised that the suffrage movement was led predominantly by Pākehā, with only a small handful of Māori women signing the petition that went to parliament in 1893.

Within the second-wave feminist movement, lesbians were frequently excluded. The term "lavender menace" was coined by Betty Friedan – a prominent figure in the National Organisation for Women (NOW) who believe that lesbians were a threat to the feminist movement and would distract from its goals. In response to this perceived exclusion, a group of lesbian feminists, including members of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and NOW, formed the group Radicalesbians and staged the "Lavender Menace" protest at the Second Congress to Unite Women. The protesters, wearing purple T-shirts (purple being a colour associated with lesbians) and carrying signs, disrupted the conference and demanded that the feminist movement address the needs and concerns of lesbians. The Lavender Menace highlighted the intersectionality of gender and sexual orientation, demonstrating that the fight for equality must include the needs and experiences of all marginalized group.

This highlights that the exclusion of groups within the feminist movement has been a long-standing issue. However, through active protest and 'calling out' exclusionary behaviour and as society at large becomes more inclusive over times, groups that were historically left out, become included. Based on the above two examples, one could assume that in the decades to come the inclusion of transwomen into feminism will no longer be met with such hostility.

#2

The position of transwomen within society, doesn't only affect them in response to where they fit within the feminist movement. It is also central to other debates – such as their role in sporting competition.

Similarly, the debate falls along similar lines, with those subscribing to the conservative view on gender arguing for biological essentialism – stating that the biological differences between males and females, such as muscle mass and bone density, create unfair advantages in sports. They believe that allowing transgender women (assigned male at birth) to compete in women's sports undermines fairness. Whereas those who subscribe to a more progressive view on transgender inclusion, believing in human rights and equality argue transgender individuals should have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else, including the right to participate in sports according to their gender identity. This debate continues to play out. In March 2023 In March 2023, World Athletics decided to exclude transgender women who have gone through male puberty from female events. The organization's president, Lord Coe, stated that this action was taken to "protect the female category in our sport. However, just over a year later in October 2024, the Sport & Rights Alliance, along with other organizations, issued a statement affirming that the inclusion of trans, gender diverse, and intersex persons in sports is a human right. They called for inclusive approaches to ensure safe and equitable participation for all individuals, regardless of gender identity.

Evaluation - Process:

I do not believe that I found an effective balance between primary and secondary sources, only one out seven of my analysed resources were primary sources. This may have resulted in a heavy reliance on second-hand information, which is likely to have been altered to better fit the narrative the article would be explaining. While I do believe I was successful in finding

articles and sources from various perspectives on the issue of trans exclusion from feminism, these were almost all secondary sources (i.e. Time Magazine and the Guardian) with little first-hand information being used to balance this. Finding interviews with specific individuals who align with both perspectives may have been valuable in giving my report more balance.

The article from Vox described J.K. Rowling's infamous essay, as well as her original copy of this essay and the sources from GLAAD and Time which described Raquel Willis' open letter in support of transgender girls and women were my most valuable sources. These were helpful in my understanding of the exclusion of trans women from feminism, as they not only displayed obvious progressive and conservative ideologies, actions taken in response to these perspectives, but also gave me a clear picture of the larger implications of these perspectives and actions, allowing me to answer Question 3 with more, clear understanding.

A difficulty I faced when gathering information from the range of sources I found was excluding my own, personal perspective. I very strongly align with the progressive ideology on the exclusion of trans women from feminism and it was quite hard to ignore this when analysing the information from sources which highlighted the conservative perspective. I have a clear bias and so, I believe even in my report, I struggled to write impassively towards the information presented from the conservative ideology. As this was a highly emotive topic, finding sources that weren't heavily influenced by personal viewpoint, or the bent of the publications (i.e. Vox is generally left leaning) was at times challenging.

Evaluation – Findings:

Sufficiency

I believe in terms of question 1, I was able to find very sufficient information as there was an overload of information available on the web for perspectives on the exclusion of trans women from feminism. As noted, most of this information is opinion-based, it made finding different similar and contrasting perspectives easier. However, this did mean I was lacking in sufficient factual backing for these perspectives. Exploring more academic articles, looking at the issue from an academic framework could have been a way to balance this. In terms of question 2, I believe I could have found further information as I only link a couple of articles for each of my two actions described. The particular action of the open letter took a while to find, and I found it hard to gather sufficient information about the implications of this letter. However, I do think I was able to find an impactful second action, J.K. Rowling's, which had clear implications and sufficient information on this particular response to the conservative ideology.

Inclusiveness:

I believe I was able to comprehensively explain the views seen by TERFs. As noted, this was challenging as it opposed my personal views – but I deliberately source to find direct quotes from people who subscribe to this belief (i.e. JK Rowling, and other trans-exclusionary feminists) to ensure their views on this issue were accurately captured and hopefully not subjected to my interpretation.

Significance:

One issue raised in my findings was the infamous *Harry Potter* author's essay. J.K. Rowling's essay fuelled other severely negative beliefs, due to her preaching that gender dysphoric teens will 'grow out of it'. From my personal standpoint this further perpetuates the narrative that gender dysphoric teenagers and being transgender is a choice. One perspective explained Rowling's essay to be "*misleading and damaging to the trans community*." This author does take the time to describe that while Rowling's words are 'misinformed and made up of half-truths', but it is produced in such a way that it sounds intelligible and believable. Due to her fame and ability to easily spread a message, her words

are being used by lawmakers in the U.S. to justify even more anti-trans laws. By misgendering someone and felt stigma can possess severe negative effects on an individual's mental health. For example, 60% of transgender individuals report mental health issues compared to 37% of cisgender individuals. So, even while JK Rowling's comments were meant to be within the context of feminist 'debate', her popularity and fame have wider implications for society, as her message to exclude transpeople from feminism is used to exclude and discrimination them from society at large.

The student provided basic footnoting throughout and a reference list at the end. These have been removed for brevity.