

The Question of Cisgender Women and Trans Women: Understanding the Fracture

By Bea Groves-McDaniel, July 2026 Research Assistant: FAYE-9000

Important Note: Before I even start, I'd like to make something PERFECTLY clear. The use of the prefix 'cis' throughout this paper (as in cisgender) means simply (and ONLY) 'the opposite of trans'. No other meanings, interpretations or definitions are implied whatsoever.

There is a particular sting in being told who you are by someone who shares your gender. To be addressed as "he" by a cisgender woman, to be looked at with the flat suspicion that a woman reserves for a man she does not trust, to have the fact of one's womanhood rejected by precisely the class of people whose recognition of it ought, on any humane understanding, to be the most natural thing in the world.

This happens. It does not happen to every trans woman, on every occasion, in every relationship. But it happens often enough, and to enough of us, that it has become one of the defining textures of trans life in Britain today. It is the particular cruelty of intra-gender rejection.

It is important to say, clearly and at the outset, that the great majority of cisgender women do not do this. Most cisgender women recognise trans women as women. Many are allies, advocates, friends, colleagues, wives and partners. The argument that follows is not about cisgender women as a group. It is about a minority whose treatment of trans women 'as men' requires explanation, and whose explanations tell us something important about the society in which we all, cis and trans, have been formed.

That explanation has several layers, and they interact with each other in ways that make the phenomenon more than the sum of its parts.

The deepest layer is **patriarchal fear**. This is not a comfortable place to begin, but it would be intellectually dishonest not to. Women in a patriarchal society learn fear of men early, durably, and at some cost to their freedom of movement, their professional lives, and their mental health. The criminological data is consistent and damning: most violence against women is committed by men; most women have experienced some form of harassment, intrusion, or threat from men in public or private space. This fear is not irrational. It is a reasonable response to an unreasonable world.

Some cisgender women apply this learned fear to trans women. They see, in a trans woman's occasionally masculine frame, or voice, or mannerism, the ghost of the category that has caused them harm. They reach for the classification "male" as a way of managing a threat response that does not distinguish between different kinds of people who share certain physical characteristics. This is not the same as deliberate malice. It is, in psychological terms, a category error born of trauma. The application of a protective category to someone who does not belong in it.

The philosopher Kate Manne, in *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2018), argues that misogyny is not simply about hating women but about enforcing the property of "womanhood" on those who claim it without the correct credentials. Manne's framework helps here: trans women who are read as having failed the womanhood test (who do not pass, in the language of the "passing" discourse) may be treated as interlopers and therefore as threats. The threat is not only sexual or physical in this reading. It is epistemological: a man who claims to be a woman, on this view, is not merely a potential predator but a counterfeit, and a counterfeit of something precious.

This connects to the second major factor, which is **biological essentialism**: the belief that sex is a natural binary, fixed at birth, and that gender is simply the social expression of that binary. On this view, there are males and there are females, and the categories are exhaustively exclusive. A person who is assigned male at birth is male and remains male, regardless of their identity, their social presentation, or the medical interventions they may have undertaken. Womanhood, on this view, is a biological fact rather than a social or psychological one, and it is not available to those who do not share the correct biology.

This essentialism is not confined to those who describe themselves as feminists. It is widespread in the general population, extensively reinforced by institutional practice and cultural tradition. But it finds particular theoretical expression in a strand of radical feminist thought that has argued, most famously in Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), that the category "woman" is properly reserved for those born female, and that the inclusion of trans women constitutes an erosion of women's rights. The structural core of this argument is always biological: sex is binary, gender follows from sex, and therefore trans women are not women.

The difficulty with biological essentialism is that it requires dismissing an enormous amount of lived experience, clinical evidence, and reported inner lives as deception, delusion, or ideology. It also requires ignoring the scientific consensus (as expressed in the professional views of the American Psychological Association, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health) that gender identity is a real and clinically significant phenomenon and that trans people are **not** engaged in deception.

This is where the third factor becomes important: **misinformation**. The beliefs some cisgender women hold about trans women often go well beyond what either fear or essentialism would generate on their own. They include beliefs about the scale of trans identification among young people that are not supported by the data and beliefs about the motives of trans people — that they are engaged in a coordinated project of infiltration, that they want access to women's spaces for predatory purposes, and that they are erasing women as a class. This is generated and amplified by an ecosystem of anti-trans organisations with connections to conservative political movements.

The journalist Helen Saxbee, in *The Gender Conspiracy* (2024), documents how panic about trans people in Britain was generated, amplified, and weaponised by a small number of organisations with clear political agendas, and how that panic migrated into mainstream discourse through broadcasters, columnists, and social media platforms. The effect has been to create, among a significant minority of cisgender women, a body of false beliefs that are held with great intensity and that often override evidence, personal experience, and direct relationships. This is the signature of misinformation: not merely false belief, but false belief that is resistant to correction.

There is a further dimension worth naming. Some cisgender women who reject trans women's claim to womanhood are **themselves** in difficult positions within a patriarchal society that already denies them full recognition and autonomy. The claim that womanhood is under threat can feel like a way of asserting the value of a category that patriarchy steals from them. The motivation may be, at least in part, a displaced defence of something that feels like the last defensible boundary in a world where women's dignity is constantly eroded. This does not make the exclusion of trans women acceptable. But it makes it more comprehensible, and it demands a response that is curious rather than merely

corrective.

The fracture between cisgender women and trans women is not inevitable. It is produced, maintained by institutions, by media, by political actors with clear interests in keeping British society unstably divided, and by the accumulated weight of patriarchal conditioning on all of us, whatever our gender. It is also, and this is the crucial thing, **repairable**.

The answer to it is not to pretend that the concerns of cisgender women who hold these views do not exist, or to dismiss them as bigots without examination. Some are; much of the intellectual architecture that sustains transphobia deserves the direct criticism it receives. But understanding is **not** the same as endorsement, and the question of why cisgender women treat trans women as men is also, in the end, a question about the damage that patriarchy does to everyone it touches.

A world in which women are taught to fear men is a world in which some women will fear those they mistake for men. A world in which biology is weaponised against those who do not conform is a world in which the biology of trans women will be used against them. And a world in which misinformation is broadcast without accountability is a world in which false beliefs about trans women will flourish.

The fracture will not heal until the conditions that produce it are changed. That is a political project, a cultural project, and a personal one. It requires more than good intentions. It requires examining, in all of us, the extent to which the categories we use to sort people (and the fears and assumptions that travel with those categories) are truly our own, and the extent to which they were placed there by a world that has always found it easier to sort than to understand. **It requires, above all, the recognition that the oppression of trans women and the oppression of cisgender women by patriarchy are not competing claims on a finite pool of justice. They are the same struggle, from different angles of the same experience.**

Bibliography

Bornstein, K. (2018) *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. Updated edn. London: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Cordelia Fine, C. (2010) *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference*. London: Icon Books.

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000) *Sexing the Body: How Biologists Make the Difference*. New York: Basic Books.

Herman, J. (1992) *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*. New York: Basic Books.

Manne, K. (2018) *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Raymond, J. (1979) *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Rich, A. (1980) 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5(4), pp. 631–660.

Saxbee, H. (2024) *The Gender Conspiracy: A History of Trans Panic in Britain*. London: Bloomsbury.

Serano, J. (2007) *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Berkeley: Seal Press.

