

OPINION | CATHY YOUNG

The feminist transgender debate — and its blind spots



E! VIA AP

Caitlyn Jenner in the first official trailer her documentary series, “I Am Cait.”

By Cathy Young | JUNE 12, 2015

The recent unveiling of Caitlyn (formerly Bruce) Jenner has put transgender issues in the spotlight — but also reignited an often bitter debate among feminists. In [a New York Times op-ed](#), journalist Elinor Burkett expressed support for Jenner’s transition but voiced concern that transgenderism may be promoting sex stereotypes and erasing

female identity. While Burkett's dissent has resonated with many, others accuse her of bigotry and of promoting a narrow, exclusionary version of feminism. In fact, both sides in this debate have valid issues — and major blind spots.

For instance: while Burkett (like many feminists) goes too far in treating any talk of male/female brain difference as heresy, she's right that transgender advocacy can lapse into stereotyping that would be blasted as sexist in other contexts. Last year, a mother's Facebook post celebrating her 19-year-old child's female-to-male transition wowed the progressive Internet despite a heavy dose of boys-versus-girls cliché: “[W]e thought he was a girl, who just happened to like bugs, tattoos, flames, skulls, snakes, lizards, etc., etc.” Four years ago, there was no outcry when Chaz (formerly Chastity) Bono told The New York Times that, post-transition, he could barely tolerate his girlfriend's endless female chatter.

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No less troubling is the fanatical speech policing that seeks to erase all linkage between the concept of “woman” and biological femaleness. As Burkett notes, abortion-rights groups have been pressured to banish “woman” from their vocabulary because it excludes pregnant “uterus owners” who identify as men. Last year, film director Joss Whedon was Twitter-mobbed over a “transphobic” humorous tweet that listed lack of male genitalia among requirements for a strong female lead.

This smacks of Orwellian reality-rewriting. One can support civil rights for trans folk who have not had genital surgery without contorting the language to include every exception to the norm. If the pro-choice #StandWithTexasWomen is “cissexist” (favoring “cisgender” people whose identity matches their birth sex), then it's also “ableist” because “stand” excludes wheelchair-using abortion-rights supporters.

Some activists would eliminate any references to female or male anatomy, arguing that if you identify as female, your body is female no matter the parts. Ultimately, this “logic” devours itself: if “male” and “female” are meaningless terms, so is “transgender.”

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The consequences go beyond semantics. Should female spaces be open to those who are female-identified but male-bodied, even where privacy is at issue?

Unfortunately, many feminist critiques of transgenderism go far beyond sensible questions and slide into bigotry. The 1979 book "The Transsexual Empire" by University of Massachusetts-Amherst professor Janice Raymond (now retired) attacked male-to-female transsexuals as a patriarchal vanguard out to "colonize" womanhood. Modern antitrans radical feminists such as blogger Cathy Brennan depict transwomen as men intent on raping lesbians.

Even Burkett, a sane and thoughtful critic, bases much of her argument on assumptions about transwomen's past "male privilege." Yet, while downplaying innate sex differences, she needlessly polarizes male and female experience. Many women don't feel unsafe walking outside at night (one of her examples); many men do. Someone perceived as an effeminate male is almost certainly at higher risk of violence than a woman.

Antitrans bias in feminist ranks is real. But we should be careful not to brand any dissent from transgender dogma as bias (is it “bigotry” to believe pre-2015 Bruce Jenner was a man with gender dysphoria, not a woman “passing” as a man?). And we should consider how much of feminist “cissexism” is driven by antimale sexism, with transwomen seen as tainted by maleness.

It is another reason to strive for an equality movement that champions both women and men, including those who are transgender. Equality should not preclude debate about gender differences or gender identity. But all debate should start with the premise that all humans, regardless of sex, have equal dignity.

Cathy Young is a columnist at Newsday and RealClearPolitics.com. Follow her on Twitter [@CathyYoung63](#).

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