



Gender: the right to choose

By Janine Booth

1. Gender oppression and trans oppression

The transgender experience

Some people are uncomfortable with the sex they are born and brought up as. For some, this discomfort becomes so unbearable that they feel the need to change from the female they were observed as being at birth into a man; from the male they were observed as being at birth into a woman; or from either into neither.

They then enact this change and transition to their chosen – to them, their authentic – gender, changing name, appearance, hormonal make-up, sometimes bodily features.

There are various terms used to describe this process and the identities which people adopt, under an umbrella term of “trans”.

The roots of this may be social or physiological, but whatever their origin, the distress and the consequent need to change are real. For some, these feelings start at a very early age: many trans people report having always felt they were born into and subsequently trapped in the wrong body.

Oppression

Our society is hostile to trans people. Common attitudes see trans people as deviant freaks, as objects of ridicule. Trans people face rejection, bullying, violence and even murder. A 2017 study revealed that two in five trans people had experienced a hate crime or incident because of their gender identity in the previous year [Stonewall]. In the same year, advocates tracked at least 28 deaths of transgender people in the USA due to fatal violence, the most ever recorded [www.hrc.org].

These experiences – dysphoria, discrimination, assault, fear – result in shockingly high rates of self-harm and suicide. UK studies in 2015 showed that nearly half (48%) of trans people under 26 said they had attempted suicide, while 59 per cent said they had at least considered doing so [Stonewall].

Whether they die through homicide, suicide or other causes, the life expectancy of a black trans woman in the USA is just thirty-five years.

Our basic duty

We have a basic duty of solidarity with oppressed trans people. We strongly oppose discrimination against trans people, champion their rights, defend them from violence and abuse, and demand full support for people struggling with dysphoria and/or changing their gender identity. We oppose attempts to stigmatisate, insult or reject trans people.



Acceptance

The central right that trans people want is to be accepted in their chosen gender. Transitioning is difficult. But for the individuals concerned, it is worth it, because at least they are now living as the person they are.

If society or individuals then say that these people are not who they say they are, that they are not women or men or neither, then the one thing that means the most to them is denied. The gender they have struggled so hard to reject and leave behind is pinned back on them. To do this is nasty and unempathetic.

The argument that a person's sex is a biological reality that cannot change may sound logical, but it comes up against the reality that trans people exist. Trans-hostile attitudes usually insist that changing, for example from a man into a woman, is not possible. They insist that the science of biological sex trumps the significance of people's feelings about their gender. However, this does not stand up to scientific scrutiny. Firstly, science is increasingly recognising biological sex as more complex than previously thought (including male and female chromosomes, hormones, external genitals and internal reproductive organs and glands, which in an individual usually align with each other but in some individuals may not). Secondly, some aspects of biological sex can be changed, for example the balance of male and female hormones in the body. And thirdly, feelings of gender

identity are real: they are socio-psychological orientations; although they are analysed differently from physical characteristics, they are scientifically relevant.

Trans women are women. Trans men are men. Non-binary people are non-binary.

Challenging gender construction

Society constructs gender. Based on the small physical differences between men and women, it constructs a raft of personal characteristics that men and women are “supposed” to have: men are tough, women are emotional; men strong, women weak; boys play with guns, girls with dolls; male is blue, female is pink; men drive trains, women cut hair; men are sexually attracted to women, women are sexually attracted to men.

Such a heavily-gendered society pressures people to think that if they do not fit the characteristics that their sex is supposed to have, then they are not a genuine member of that sex. But if a girl likes football, it does not mean that she is “really” a boy. If a boy prefers wearing dresses to trousers, it does not mean that he is “really” a girl. They may just be a girl who likes football and a boy who likes wearing dresses. We do not automatically see gender dysphoria in people who do not conform to gender stereotypes, nor encourage people to conclude that about themselves.

We oppose the gendering of people – the allocation of personal traits according to biological sex. We want to see more campaigning against gender stereotypes, and an effective battle against the capitalist system that underpins them.

We want to see an end to gender construction; for it to be superseded by full freedom for people to be who we are. It may well be that in a society without imposed gender, fewer people will feel uncomfortable in their body and want to transition. But we live in a highly gendered society, that is not going to change overnight, and trans people exist and need rights now. And we cannot know for sure that even in such a gender-free society, there will not still be people who want to change from female to male or vice versa.

Detransitioning

Some people “detransition”: they undo the transition process and return to their original sex.

Some do so because of the unbearable hostility they experience as a trans person; or because bigoted anti-trans views convince them that what they have done is wrong. Others detransition because they have concluded that their tastes and personalities are at odds not with their body or biological sex but with society's expectations of someone of their sex. For example, some are gay men who transitioned because they thought that if they fancy men, they must really be a woman, but later detransition when they accept that it is OK to be a gay man.

However, it is important not to generalise or weaponise the experience of the small number of people who detransition. Their experience is significant, but it does not undermine the rights of people who do transition and who remain in their chosen gender identity. Detransitioning reflects both anti-trans bigotry and social construction of gender: it is evidence for our fight against both.

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Summary

The following motion was passed at Workers' Liberty's National Committee on 7 April 2018 as a summary of the position laid out in this article.

1. We support transgender rights and express our solidarity with trans people. We oppose prejudice, hostility and discrimination against trans people, and advocate support and compassion towards them.
2. We accept people in the gender they identify as (including non-binary identities).
3. We reject the assertion that it is impossible for a man to become a woman, or vice versa, and support scientific inquiry, which is increasingly backing up this view.
4. We recognise and criticise the social construction of gender, and work to eliminate the inequalities associated with it.
5. We recognise the flaws in current gender recognition law and support proposed changes to it, including self-declaration of gender. We have considered, but are not convinced by, arguments that these changes threaten women's spaces or legal protection from sex discrimination.
6. We support the established labour movement practice of including trans women in women's structures and on all-women shortlists, on the basis of self-identification.
7. We advocate that these issues be discussed in a rational and empathetic way and are addressed through such debate rather than through bureaucratic moves, censorship, no-platforming and violence related to this issue. We avoid, and ask others to avoid, terms that are inflammatory and/or inaccurate.
8. We analyse women's oppression as taking advantage of women's biological sex rather than being rooted in it. We believe women's oppression to be linked to the biology of women in general rather than of each individual woman.
9. We criticise and will further examine the role that identity politics and privilege theory are playing in these discussions.
10. We assert that trans rights and women's rights need not be in conflict. We contend that there has been a failure of solidarity on this issue, and that centring class politics will enable us to unite against women's, gender and all oppression.

We agree on these key points but continue to discuss them and also to debate differences on various issues and nuances in a comradely way.



Gender-critical vs trans rights?

Sometimes, the current argument about trans issues looks like a battle between whether we oppose gender construction or we support trans rights.

On the contrary, it is possible – and it is the genuinely socialist and humanitarian position – to do both.

Some feminists are concerned that trans people are embracing gender norms by suggesting that if a person is not comfortable in their gendered role then they must change sex. But even if a few trans advocates appear to suggest this, most do not: they have thought about gender stereotyping and decided that their situation is more than this, that they need to transition. They are fighting for the right to live their lives free from discrimination and violence.

We can work for an end to gender and women's oppression without denying solidarity to oppressed trans people. As socialist feminists, we aim for a society in which no-one is restricted by gender roles. We support all people's right to control their own body. Women's rights and trans rights need not be in conflict with each other.

There are several groups of people – between us encompassing the big majority of humanity – who are persecuted for not conforming to ascribed gender roles: men and women who want to work in non-traditional jobs or wear non-traditional clothes; trans and non-binary people; “feminine” men; non-trans women; and more. We face a shared source of oppression.

If we all march together to fight gender oppression, we will be so much stronger.

2. Changing the law

Amending the GRA

In January 2016, the House of Commons Women's and Equalities Committee produced a report on Transgender Equality which highlighted the outdatedness of the 2004 Gender Recognition Act (GRA). In July 2017, the government announced a consultation on specific proposals to amend the GRA.

We welcome the move to reform the legal process of gender recognition in the UK. In a situation where minimal legal change can dramatically reduce the suffering of a section of people at no cost to others, we support it.

The current process

The 2004 Gender Recognition Act enabled over-18s to be legally recognised as members of the sex appropriate to their gender identity if they could show that they suffered from gender dysphoria (distress caused by the mismatching of gender identity to sex and gender recorded at birth). A Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) allows people to acquire a new birth certificate with the switched sex/gender indicated.

People seeking a GRC must present evidence to a Gender Recognition Panel, supply (paid-for) references from two medical experts and pay a means-tested fee of £140. They need to have transitioned two years before a certificate is issued. Spouses have an effective veto over the certificate. Obtaining a GRC can take more than five years. There is no requirement for sex reassignment surgery to have taken place, but the process is lengthy, pathologising, intrusive, costly and distressing.

Self-declaration

Proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act are likely to remove the need for a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria. Transgender people will be able to change the gender on their birth certificates by self-declaration.

This removes the requirement on trans people to go through the torturous process described above. It also accommodates the rights of those trans people who do not believe that they have body dysphoria in a medical sense.

Trans people are already allowed to change their gender on forms of identification other than birth certificates. The sex/gender marked in UK passports can be changed with a letter from a GP confirming that the gender change is likely to be permanent, the evidence for which comes solely from the patient. Passport changes can be used to change other forms of identification. Changing birth certificates brings them into line with other documents and is important for ensuring certain things such as confidentiality (birth certificates are public records).

Arguments against self-declaration

There are several arguments against self-declaration, but none are sufficient to convince us to oppose it.

There is an argument that changing a birth certificate is essentially falsification: that even if a person has since transitioned, they were the sex recorded on their birth certificate when they were born, and that cannot be changed retrospectively. However, many trans people argue that the sex recorded on their birth certificate was mistaken and needs correcting: that the decision to record that sex at birth was based solely on observation of external genitalia, and that other factors had come to light since that render that record inaccurate.

Some argue that people may make false statements. But others reply that the fact that false statements constitute a criminal offence is ample protection against this. In any case, it is not reasonable to deny a right to thousands of genuine trans people because of a hypothetical fear that a few people may lie (any more than it would be reasonable to deny workers the right to self-certify the first seven days of sickness on the basis that some people may lie).

Given that the change in the law costs very little, some argue that the government is trying to get maximum credit while continuing to make cuts. This is quite possible, but is not in itself a valid objection to the changes.

Others argue that it would be better to thoroughly de-gender the law. There is a strong argument for removing the recording of sex from official documentation altogether. There seems little logic to recording sex on birth certificates when no other personal characteristics are recorded on them. However, an argument for more thoroughgoing changes is not in itself an argument against the changes that are currently on the table.

Further, there is an argument that the proposed changes will dangerously escalate how trans-identifying children and adolescents access services. However, we do not see how the changes would do this, and we respect the professionalism of the services provided to trans youth.

Other countries have already introduced self-declaration, and none of the fears expressed about it have been realised. For example, in the two years since Ireland made this change, it has issued 240 certificates and no abuses have been reported.

Protected characteristics

Currently, “gender reassignment” is a “protected characteristic” under law i.e. something which is unlawful to use as a basis for discrimination. There is a proposal to change this to “gender identity”.

The difference appears to be that “gender reassignment” is a process whereas “gender identity” is a person's self-declared gender. So the change would remove the need for people to prove the process they have gone through in order to assert their legal rights.

Some feminists assert that this protection will contradict the protected characteristic of “sex” and will end the concept of “sex discrimination” as an unlawful act. But there is no proposal to abolish “sex” as a protected characteristic, and the planned change does not affect the legal protections of non-trans people against sex discrimination. If, for example, a trans woman is subjected to sex discrimination as a woman (rather than specifically as a trans woman), why should she not be facilitated to challenge this legally? If she does, it does not reduce non-trans women's ability to legally challenge sex discrimination.

Threat to women's spaces

Some people are concerned that self-declaration may undermine the integrity of women-only spaces.

There are no plans to stop the legal exemption for the provision of single-sex services. The particular concern is that transgender women may gain access, either as employees or as service users, to women-only services in sensitive areas such as domestic and sexual violence, and that this will undermine the quality and safety of these services for non-trans women.

We demand a significant expansion of resources and services for all who need them. This includes services for women, and for specific groups of women e.g. victims/survivors of rape or abuse; trans women; young women; ethnic minority women, etc.

Many women-only services or spaces do not demand birth certificates before access and so can already be accessed by trans women. Many women's refuges welcome all women who have been abused, trans or not. Trans women can experience violence as women, not just as trans people. If a trans



woman is trying to escape a violent relationship, why should she not be accepted into a women's refuge? Of course, services such as refuges will have procedures to avoid employing anyone who presents a threat to women service users, and to prevent any service user presenting a threat to others. Should a man simply pose as a woman in order to gain access, this can be prevented. The fear of this happening is not grounds for a general barrier to self-declared trans women accessing services.

If the GRA changes are made, there will still be provision under existing law (the 2010 Equality Act) for a service or a job to be restricted to non-trans women only, if there are genuine reasons to do so.

In those places where the sex recorded on a birth certificate matters – prisons, interactions with employers or the state — trans women are at a disproportionate risk of violence and discrimination. Under current law, transgender convicts can be placed in prisons of the sex they have rejected eg. trans women placed in male prison. Partly as a result of this, in the fourteen months to November 2016, four trans women died in UK prisons.

If we oppose self-declaration and insist that people are sent to the prison according to their legal gender under the current system, then trans men without a GRC will be admitted to women's prisons. So there is as much danger of men being admitted to women's prisons under the present law as under the proposed changes. It is interesting to note that many criticisms of the GRA changes (and of trans rights more generally) disproportionately discuss trans women, sometimes not mentioning or considering trans men at all.

What about the integrity of women's sports?

Gender Recognition Certificates do not affect sports. The authorities which administer sport have their own procedures for determining whether a person qualifies to compete in men's or women's sports events.

The integrity of women's sports, and how sports could be reorganised to reflect gender diversity, are both issues for debate, but they are not affected by the proposed changes to the GRA.

3. How our movement organises

Established practice

In our experience and knowledge, Labour and trade union women's conferences and committees have always operated on the basis of self-identification and many trans women have been involved in them.

We are not aware of any significant problems with or objections to this, perhaps until the recent furore.

We support this practice and along with others, will resist attempts to exclude trans women from labour movement women's spaces.

Moreover, groups such as the lesbian/gay/bisexual and disabled people's movements have always accepted people

on the basis of self-definition: any imaginable alternative would be unacceptably intrusive or medicalised. We are not aware of any incidents where this has been a significant problem. If there have been, then they are rare and isolated, and there has been no general problem with self-declaration.

All-women shortlists

We support the Labour Party's all-women shortlists being open to all women, including self-declared trans women. We remind readers that these are shortlists: there is no obligation to vote for a particular woman included on one.

The only alternative would be to require a birth or gender recognition certificate, which would require trans women to have gone through the lengthy, expensive and degrading process of obtaining a GRC. Some women fear that allowing self-declared trans women onto all-women shortlists will allow men to disingenuously declare themselves women to get on the shortlist. On balance, the risk of this (let alone of such a man going on to be selected from the shortlist) is far less than the risk of excluding some women on the basis of not allowing self-declaration.

There are measures that the Labour Party could take to prevent abuse of all-women shortlists.

4. Less heat, more light

Why is this issue so polarised?

Many people are shocked at how ferocious the conflict has become around this issue.

The level of aggression is preventing many people from expressing their views or asking questions, for fear of denunciation or worse.

It is hard to know exactly why this level of hostility has developed, but we can suggest a few factors. The issue of gender transition goes to the heart of people's sense of self, for women and for trans people. If you have gone through the trauma of dysphoria and transition, then being told that you are not who you say you are is likely to make you angry. On the other "side", if you imagine that men are pretending to be women in order to invade women's spaces and threaten women's safety, then this is also likely to make you angry. Moreover, social media, with its tendency to abbreviate arguments and facilitate trolling, has simultaneously provided a platform for these discussions and worked against rationality in the way they proceed.

This argument is taking place in a culture, including on the left, which has prioritised personal scrutiny and denunciation over rational debate, and which often uses the legitimate desire for "unity" as a pretext under which to stifle debate.

The importance of rational debate

We will only make progress on these issues if we debate them openly, honestly and with respect. This requires compassion for the real oppression that people suffer, a firm stance against bigotry, and a willingness to ask and answer questions and to reconsider your views.

Alongside the "headline" arguments – such as "for or against the GRA amendments?" or "can men become women?" or "for or against trans women on all-women

shortlists?" – there are many nuances and issues to discuss. Within Workers' Liberty, while we agree on the headline issues, the importance of debate and opposition to violence and bans, we have varying views on some issues and continue to discuss these.

There are not simply two opposing, homogenous "sides" to the debate on trans rights. Not every pro-trans activist agrees with all the arguments or all the tactics of all other pro-trans activists. Some people who are concerned about the GRA amendments are generally supportive of trans rights; others deny the possibility of a woman becoming a man or vice versa. Some of these debates are also taking place within the trans community.

Rational debate includes allowing people to ask questions which more confident or knowledgeable people may find obvious, ignorant or even offensive. If we welcome people offering their views for scrutiny or challenge, then we can collectively develop our understanding and policies. And people are more likely to change their minds if they receive a reasonable response rather than a flat denunciation.

Rational debate also means that where you disagree with someone's view, you attack the views not the person. In football, a tackle is only lawful if you play the ball not the opposing player: it would be helpful to apply a similar rule in political debate.

We believe that while the issues around amendments to the Gender Recognition Act, and around gender transition more broadly, must be open to calm and rational debate, an individual's gender identity is their own decision.

What is "transphobia"?

Transphobia means literally, an irrational fear of trans people; and more generally, hostility or prejudice towards trans people. Transphobia is very prevalent, oppressive and unpleasant. It is divisive: our class and our movement are weakened by prejudice within our ranks. We strongly and actively oppose it.

However, there has been a tendency for some people to minimise or dismiss any concerns about the GRA amendments or about aspects of some trans politics as transphobic.

Wanting to discuss the GRA amendments is not transphobic. Opposing them is not necessarily transphobic. Objecting to the tactics of some trans activists is not necessarily transphobic. A person of whatever gender who does not want to have sex with a trans woman with a penis (or a trans man without one) is not being transphobic: everyone has the right to their own preference of sexual partners.

However, views that deny that people are the gender that they determine for themselves deny people the right to escape their distress. This may be based on an irrational fear of gender transition, or a narrow misunderstanding of science, or it may be fearless hostility to trans people. Whichever, it denies trans people their realities and their rights. Unfortunately, behind some (repeat, some) "gender-critical" views lies some aggressive and toxic hostility to trans people.

"No platform for transphobes"?

There have been incidents where pro-trans activists have sought to have meetings of those they consider anti-trans closed down, or to disrupt them. We oppose this.

We support and defend free speech, including — perhaps especially — the freedom to speak views with which we strongly disagree. ("Free speech" does not mean much unless it includes people you disagree with!) The only, exceptional circumstance in which we would support shutting down meetings are meetings of fascists, who are organising to physically attack our class and our communities. A meeting of feminists, however trans-hostile they seem to some, is not such a circumstance.

It is legitimate for trans activists and supporters to protest at events that appear transphobic. But the aim of such a protest is legitimately to express disagreement and challenge the ideas being promoted, not to shut it down or drown it out. And certainly not to threaten or carry out violence.

Censorship is wrong and counterproductive. It does not answer anyone's questions or persuade anyone to rethink anti-trans views. Instead, it feeds the impression that trans-hostile people, rather than trans people, are the real victims of oppression.

Bad behaviour from both sides?

A small minority of pro-trans activists have made some very unpleasant, threatening and anti-woman posts on social media and have allegedly behaved violently towards some trans-critical feminists. There have also been many obnoxious, insulting and accusatory comments directed at trans people and their allies, including from self-declared feminists.

Where this has happened, it is totally unacceptable. It is also unacceptable to pretend that the actions of a few on either side represent everyone who shares some of their views. Opposition to debate from (a minority on) one side does not justify abusive bile from the other side.

We are confident that most people want to have a rational discussion. Perhaps at the moment they are a silent majority, because people fear being metaphorically shot down when they express a view, whatever that view is.

Unhelpful terms?

There are several terms being used in exchanges about gender transition which are unhelpful and best avoided. While sections of two oppressed groups are engaged in a conflict of views, generating rather more heat than light, avoiding inflammatory language will help to encourage more rational exchanges.

The term “TERF” began as a descriptive acronym for Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist. However, it has come to be widely used in an unreasonable, inaccurate and accusatory way – for example, the hashtag #KillAllTerfs, or attaching the label to women who consider themselves to be socialist feminists not radical feminists.

We are discussing the growing use of the term “cis”. There is a political and explanatory value in the term “trans”, but for some of us, the political or explanatory value of the term cis is less clear, we question the need to have a qualifying term put in front of the word “woman”, and we are concerned that it is often used in the context of accusations of “cis privilege”. Others of us, though, do not see the word “cis” as necessarily problematic, seeing it is simply a descriptor.

Calling trans women “trans-identified males” (“TIMs”) or “men in skirts” goes beyond reasonable discussion of gender politics or proposed legislation and crosses a line into denying people’s right to be who they are. (And the latter is also ignorant: there are plenty of men who like wearing skirts and are content to be men; trans women are different from this.) These terms do not even express opposition to a person’s politics – they are a nasty attack on their sense of self.

Calling trans activists and allies “MRAs” (Men’s Rights Activists) is based on the claim that they are advocating the right of men to pose as women, rather than the right of trans women to become who they really are. It ignores, once again, the rights of trans men. And it equates pro-trans activists with a group – actual MRAs – who virulently oppose feminism and its demands. It is deeply insulting and inaccurate.

Political debate not bureaucratic responses

Some women Labour Party members are crowdfunding to take legal action to force the Party to bar trans women without GRCs from all-women shortlists. We disagree with their aim, but we also disapprove of their method. It is in the interest of the democratic health of the labour movement that it resolves its internal disagreements through debate and democracy. Inviting the state and its class-biased judicial processes into the Labour Party undermines that.

Meanwhile, some other Labour Party members – reacting against attempts to exclude trans women from Labour’s women’s structures – have circulated a petition calling on Labour to expel those who support this exclusion. We also oppose this: it is a bureaucratic response to a political issue.

We would like to see Labour move away from its culture of expelling people based solely on the view they take on disagreements within the range of left-wing politics.

5. Theories of oppression

Biological essentialism

Biological sex and socially-constructed gender are different. We do not conflate them.

We reject the idea that the biological differences between men and women explain the gendered characteristics that society allocates to them or the oppression of women. We reject “biological essentialism”, the view that sees men as a sex category or class who are inherently more violent.

Much hostility towards trans women is based on the belief



that they are unchangeably male, and – in the biological-essentialist view – therefore inherently violent and threatening to women. (Trans men are generally excluded from this analysis, or implicitly accused of changing gender in order to escape oppression or gain power.) We reject this.

Socialism and the roots of women’s oppression

As socialist-feminists, we see the roots of women’s oppression as being in the development of class society and private property, with women’s role in reproduction used to ensure inheritance of private property. Women’s oppression takes advantage of women’s biological sex rather than being rooted in it.

We do not accept the assertion that the root of women’s oppression lies in her biology, nor that this is the longstanding underpinning of socialist theory.

Modern socialist feminism has analysed women’s oppression as rooted in a combination of class and socially-constructed gender roles built on biological differences. Society divided and allocated labour according to biological sex: women bore and raised children, and did certain kinds of waged labour, justified on certain assumed innate capacities (gender ideology). This division of labour is embedded in class-based (currently, capitalist) social production and benefits capitalists.

Socialist theory does not rest on biological reductionism. Woman’s subjugation is facilitated by her biological functions, but this is not the same as saying that it is rooted in them.

Individual women who do not have the capacity to reproduce (because they are young, or old, or infertile for whatever other reason) are still oppressed as women. So to the extent to which women’s oppression is based on biology, it is on the biology of women in general rather than of each individual woman. When employers pay women less than men, or when predatory men harass women, they do not usually check first whether the woman is fertile or not, or whether she was registered as a baby boy or a baby girl.

Women are oppressed, and that oppression is linked to biology. But the complex systems of that oppression do not require a woman to be child-bearing, or to have the complete set of biological female characteristics, to be oppressed as a woman.

The limitations of identity politics and privilege theory

There appears to be a clash of different identity politics in the current “trans wars”: women versus men, and trans versus non-trans.

Different people mean different things by the term “identity politics”. Too often, people pin the term as a dismissive insult on those who want the labour movement to do better in addressing specific oppression. Here, we use it to mean the development of political views based on the interests and/or perspectives of people who identify with a certain social group, sometimes in opposition to those who do not.

The idea that men and women have fixed gender hierarchies, are locked into a “battle of the sexes” and that male privilege is all-powerful, is a form of identity politics: one where men, rather than capitalism, are the main enemy. This approach refuses to see trans women as “real women” due to their male biological histories.

There is also an unhelpful form of identity politics from some trans activists. Advocating that feminists not campaign for abortion rights because to do so excludes trans women, or that images of specifically female body parts (e.g. pussy hats) should not be displayed on marches, is unreasonable. However, the prevalence of such arguments is often exaggerated or headlined by those trying to caricature the pro-trans movement as uniformly contrary.

Trans-hostile feminists usually claim that trans women had “male privilege” before they transitioned and sometimes that they still have it. Many trans activists would reply that trans women never had male privilege because they were never male; they were mistakenly labelled as such. Trans-hostile feminists also claim that trans women were “socialised as men”, while trans activists would counter that this socialisation went against their authentic natures and so is no more accurate or relevant than pointing out that gay people were socialised as straight. On the other hand, some trans activists describe non-trans people as having “cis privilege”, while others will counter that although non-trans people have not had the distressing experience of dysphoria, transition and associated prejudice, the absence of a particular trauma is not enough to qualify as privilege.

The fact that these opposing arguments can be made within the same analytical framework of “privilege” suggests that this framework is not particularly helpful in understanding the politics of gender transition.

6. Solidarity against oppression

Threats, violence and no-platforming of feminists are unacceptable.

Some things that some trans activists say are unreasonable. The hostility involved may be an expression of anger and frustration but it is also a failure of solidarity.

But we have to face reality: that some people cannot bear living in the sex they were recorded as being born into. They can only find comfort in themselves if they change. Such people endure serious and severe oppression and deserve our solidarity. Denying their right to be who they are is reactionary and cruel. This too is a failure of solidarity.

That this issue has become some polarised and aggressive is largely a result of the left’s long retreat from class politics. This has led to the relegation of solidarity in favour of individual identity and the excessive personalisation of political debate.

Putting class back at the centre of left politics, we can see the importance of working-class unity and therefore of the acceptance of working-class people in all our diversity and variety, including gender diversity.

And we can unite against women’s oppression, gender oppression, and all oppression.

Thirty Five

The life expectancy of a Black trans woman in the USA is just 35. This is a villanelle about that shocking statistic.

Black boys grown women fighting to survive
In freedom’s land are some folks not allowed
To live beyond the age of thirty-five?

Dysphoria and prejudice connive
From gender manacles to funeral shroud
Black boys grown women fighting to survive

Must humans hide or lie to stay alive?
Does Pride now mean our sisters must be proud
Of living past the age of thirty-five?

What torment, hatred, bigotry will drive
Her own hand, or her killer’s, baying crowd
Black boys grown women fighting to survive

Conformity proves lethal and deprives
Its deviants whose rights are disavowed
Of life beyond the age of thirty-five

So make the change, the equal dream revive
Go tell the world the truth and say it loud
Black boys grown women fighting to survive
To live beyond the age of thirty-five