

# Trans-Exclusionary, Transnational: Gender-Critical Feminism and the Overstatement of Harm in the UK and Germany



**REDESCRIPTIONS**

*Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*

**SPECIAL ISSUE  
RESEARCH**

**EDEN HILLS** 

**HUP** HELSINKI  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

## ABSTRACT

Anti-trans, gender-critical (GC) feminist attitudes have recently been mainstreamed in UK political discourse as a reaction to calls to simplify the process of legal gender recognition from 2015 onwards. Since 2021, the public profile of a similarly reactionary GC movement has grown in Germany, coinciding with the current centre-left coalition government's various trans-positive legal interventions. This environment creates a compelling opportunity to explore meaningful convergences of GC rhetoric in each national context through transnational comparison.

This article primarily examines the work of prominent GC author Kathleen Stock, whose unique academic reputation and background in philosophy have granted her particular influence within the UK GC movement. Analysing Stock's work within the context of UK and German GC discourse demonstrates that GC argumentation represents a biologicistic turn within feminist thought, itself viewed as a return to 'realism'. Exchanging this rhetoric transnationally strengthens and exaggerates pre-existing narratives about the potential harm to women that may result from measures for trans-inclusion.

## CORRESPONDING

### AUTHOR:

**Eden Hills**

University of Leeds, UK

[ehillsres@outlook.com](mailto:ehillsres@outlook.com)

## KEYWORDS:

Gender-critical; Transphobia;  
Transnationalism;  
Feminism; Transfeminist;  
Transfeminism

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Hills, Eden. 2025. "Trans-Exclusionary, Transnational: Gender-Critical Feminism and the Overstatement of Harm in the UK and Germany." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 28(1): 6–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.441>

Through an examination of this transnational exchange, the intention of this paper is to critique GC argumentation and examine how the potential harms of trans-liberatory policies become overstated. This critique will be mediated through a transfeminist understanding of sex and gender wherein the mutual dependency of women's and trans liberation is emphasised. As anti-trans movements have developed outsized media and political influence, and GC rhetoric has had a devastating impact on the democratic uptake and implementation of trans-inclusive policies, particularly in the UK, this work has become increasingly vital.

## INTRODUCTION

In the realm of UK public (political) debate, trans people are doubly mischaracterised as bleeding-heart liberals, fragile in the face of life's harsh realities, whilst simultaneously representing a grave and imminent danger to women, to feminism or to the fabric of reality itself. Public discussion of measures intended to liberate trans people from personal struggle is often accompanied by intense public (political) backlash, commonly exercised through what has self-consciously been termed 'gender-critical' thought – a relabelling of trans-exclusionary radical feminism, or TERFism. Gender-critical feminism represents an ideological opposition to the structural recognition and liberation of gender-variant people, particularly those desiring proximity to womanhood or femaleness. Advanced as a purportedly 'feminist' intervention, the gender-critical cause has found mainstream uptake within UK media discourse, resulting in widespread adoption of the view that the expansion of trans liberation and women's liberation are mutually incompatible aims, and, further, that activists for trans liberation and feminists are mutually exclusive groups. In pursuit of privileging cisgender forms of living, the UK's gender-critical project invests itself in transnational networks and alliances to restrict legal, medical and social support of trans people on a wider scale. The exchange of gender-critical rhetoric and argumentation between national contexts is crucial in expanding the influence of their anti-trans project. In Germany, a comparatively small gender-critical contingent has developed outside of mainstream feminist circles in response to the centre-left coalition government's tabling of so-called 'self-ID' legislation, which simplifies the process of changing one's legal gender. In this article, I challenge the assumption of incompatibility between women's and trans liberation through a feminist critique of gender-critical argumentation and further demonstrate the transnational influence of UK gender-critical language and rhetoric in the German national context.

In deploying the term gender-critical, this article primarily refers to the contemporary feminists who have identified themselves with the label and who define membership of the putatively binary categories male and female based on a biologicistic interpretation of sex, understood to be immutable. The profile of the gender-critical movement has grown in tandem with the publication of various prominent gender-critical texts – for example, Helen Joyce's *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality* (2021) and Julie Bindel's *Feminism for Women* (2021) in the UK, along with Alice Schwarzer and Chantal Louis's *Transsexualität* in Germany (2022). As Shon Faye illustrated in *The Transgender Issue*, the movement has also benefitted from almost daily coverage in popular news

outlets such as *The Times* (2021, 6). Several online alternative news outlets, such as *Unherd* and *Spiked!*, also produce a consistent supply of gender-critical opinion articles from contributors across the British commentariat. This article, however, centres its analysis on the work of philosopher and author Kathleen Stock – one of the most prominent and recognisable figures of the British gender-critical project. Since the announcement of the UK's public consultation on gender self-identification in 2015, Stock has been publicly critical of proposals for simplifying the process of changing one's legal gender and of campaigns for trans liberation in general. She has written extensively in both academic and public settings in support of gender-critical feminism's biologicistic turn and has, according to Zanghellini, 'developed the fullest gender-critical case against trans inclusion' (2020, 2). Following the publication of Zanghellini's article critiquing the philosophical basis of Stock's work in 2020, Stock released her book *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* – first in English in 2021, then subsequently in German in 2022. This book represents the culmination and refinement of arguments made by Stock against trans inclusion throughout her career, and, as such, will be the main subject of analysis within this article. Stock's training and reputation as an academic philosopher, while not centred on feminist or gender studies, grant her theoretical contributions noteworthy influence and uptake by other gender-critical feminists – for example, her earlier academic focus on the philosophy of fiction can appear to grant credibility to her personal theorising of trans identity as a 'legal fiction' (Stock 2021a, 179–211). The transnational reach Stock's book has obtained through its 2022 German translation is also relevant to this article, allowing for a transnational analysis of how the comparatively small German gender-critical movement responds to strategies employed by 'the best in gender-critical feminism' (Zanghellini 2020, 2).

When countering trans-liberatory practices, the central argumentative strategy deployed within gender-critical literature is a biologicistic turn towards sex categories: it claims that, in allowing for recognition and support for trans people, particularly in medical contexts, 'biological sex' is being uncritically erased as a classificatory tool. Sally Hines, a sociologist and scholar of gender studies, has noted a through-line from Western second-wave feminist thought on (social) gender as a conceptually separate classification from (biological) sex to the contemporary gender-critical assumption that sex arrives from biology as an immutable, essential characteristic (2020, 699). As Hines argues, the trans-exclusionary expression of this thought, perhaps typified by Janice Raymond's essentialist approach in *The Transsexual Empire* in 1979, is not new (2025, 3). However, various movements for women's liberation have challenged, from a non-essentialist standpoint, the assumption that societal subjugation of women was a result of innate, sexual inferiority; decolonial feminists have demonstrated that, before the export of the 'modern [colonial] gender system', which sees 'male' and 'female' as separate, binary, hierarchical classifications, many non-Western societies conceived of sex and gender entirely differently (Lugones 2008). Feminist philosophers such as Wittig (1982) and Butler (1990) have posited that sex, as well as gender, is socially constructed. While this social constructionist view of gender and sex lends itself to transfeminist frameworks within queer theory (Koyama 2003), gender-critical thought often positions such notions as the cause of harm to women, or, indeed, a garden path putatively leading to ignorance of biological sexual differences and to the active erasure of women. From my own standpoint as a researcher of trans and feminist studies across the UK and Germany, it appears most productive to recentre this discourse on the material lives (and bodies) of trans people and to de-escalate

conflict surrounding trans inclusion. In the following, I discuss the overstatement of harm within gender-critical thought, demonstrating how trans-liberatory measures come to be perceived as harmful to women. This grounds a theoretical analysis of power dynamics in gender-critical thought that allow for the escalation of the perception of normative conflict between two factions to the abuse of one faction by another. In doing so, I follow author and activist Sarah Schulman's theoretical work on abuse and conflict resolution (2016). Finally, given her position as a leader in UK gender-critical thought and the 2022 German-language publication of *Material Girls*, I discuss the effect of Stock's overstatement of harm when gender-critical argumentation is amplified transnationally in the UK and Germany. Based on an analysis of academic philosopher Petra Gehring's German-language review of *Material Girls*, I demonstrate that UK gender-critical discourse is held up as an important source of experience and knowledge for German gender-critical movement-building.

## THE OVERSTATEMENT OF HARM IN GENDER-CRITICAL THOUGHT

In Stock's *Material Girls*, trans activists and activism promoting trans liberation are consistently framed as dangerous, ignorant and abusive. Through consistent references to 'the mysterious thing known as "gender"', which 'gripped public consciousness, strongly influencing UK and international institutions, [ . . . ] causing protests and even violence' (2021a, 1), Stock constructs a perceived wave of dangerous uncritical trans activists, rejecting the consensus views of medical practitioners regarding hormones and surgeries (2021a, 4) and dogmatically accepting a 'seriously questionable' (2021a, vii) theory with potentially detrimental consequences for (cisgender) women and girls. Stock constructs an enemy – one whose protests following her book's publication she describes as 'a campaign of harassment' (Stock 2021a, viii). The image and language of abuse here is difficult to shake, and so we should examine the effect of constructing the abusive image of activists for trans liberation. To what extent is the abuser/victim narrative present here important to Stock's stated aim of providing an intellectual 'fight' against gender identity theory (Stock 2021a, 9–10) and, most importantly, whose reality does this configuration of abuser and victim reflect?

Narratives of abuse are discussed at all levels, from the intimate to the institutional, in Sarah Schulman's 2016 book *Conflict Is Not Abuse*, which addresses a noticeable tendency across this discursive continuum to conflate the experience of *normative conflict* with *abuse*. When one individual or group refuses to 'change [their] stories to integrate other people's known *reasons* and illuminate their unknown ones', normative conflicts become impasses (Schulman 2016, 20, *emphasis in original*). However, through an escalation from *normative conflict* to *abuse*, 'the mere fact of the other person's difference is misrepresented as an assault', which then 'justifies our cruelty and relinquishes our responsibility to engage' (Schulman 2016, 21). Put another way, the overstatement of harm feeds into a discursive escalation of conflict to abuse, engendering an impasse in the dialogue around trans liberation. In this section, I demonstrate how Stock overstates the harm caused by the deemphasising of sex as a classificatory tool in order to undermine proposals for trans liberation.

In the context of Stock's *Material Girls*, the escalation of the conflict between gender-critical feminists and activists for trans liberation is enacted primarily through the overstatement of harm towards women, specifically cis women. We see this most

plainly through Stock's writing about the (theoretical) negative repercussions of sex no longer being discussed in medical contexts:

'There is no harm in naming sex in medical contexts; more importantly, there is harm in not doing so. For one thing, children will stop learning about it, and this will cause them confusion, both in the present and later on. Equally, if you make it culturally taboo for doctors to talk about sex, they won't be as quick to see its relevance in disease, pain management and drug administration' (2021a, 82).

The first potential harm raised here concerns the education of children on biological sexual differences. Ignoring for a moment the fact that no supporting evidence is provided to corroborate the claim that not naming sex in medical contexts confuses children, I will attend to the fact that it is difficult to ascertain what relevance medical contexts have to do with children's education in the first place. The Department for Education's (DfE) compulsory relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum in England expressly includes the discussion of 'physical and emotional changes' (DfE 2019, 35) to the adolescent body at the primary school level, expanding further to encompass 'the main changes which take place in males and females and the implications for emotional and physical health' in secondary school (DfE 2019, 38). The intent is to enable pupils to 'develop the language they use to talk about their bodies' and 'understand where normal variations in emotions and physical complaints end and health and wellbeing issues begin' (DfE 2019, 35). In this regard, an approach that chooses not to name or delineate pubertal expectations along the lines of one particular understanding of sex could improve pupils' understandings of their particular bodily situations, whether cis or trans. This echoes the so-called 'curb cut effect' (Johnson and Fox 2003, 9) – an observation drawn from disability studies that adjustments made for disabled people, such as dropped curbs on roads, often lead to improved accessibility for the wider population. In RSE, this approach may involve choosing not to name maleness or femaleness as normative pubertal pathways, but instead to focus on anatomical descriptions of bodily processes, body parts, hormonal profiles and mechanisms of human puberty. Such an approach would allow all pupils to understand how pubertal bodies function and further relate such to their own experiences, providing the language needed to discuss their own bodies. The acknowledgement of trans pathways through puberty could also be incorporated into this approach, thereby desegregating transness and cisness as radically different human typologies and instead presenting transness as simply one possibility on a spectrum of expressions. This would necessarily expand resources for and content within RSE curricula, echoing similar calls for improvement by various organisations (NSPCC 2022; Stonewall 2017) and further presenting an opportunity to improve pupils' understanding of human biology. Thus, Stock's brief comment about 'causing confusion' should be understood as intended to associate the deemphasising of sex with harm to children.

Stock's second claim relates to an earlier discussion about sexual dimorphism and its relation to patterns of disease:

'In childhood, girls are more susceptible than boys to neural tube defects, scoliosis and congenital dislocation of the hip. Boys are more susceptible to asthma, autism, stuttering and pyloric stenosis. Later in life, females have greater susceptibility to multiple sclerosis, while males who get it have

worse disease progression. More males than females have cardiovascular disease in their lifetimes, but females get it at a higher rate after menopause. [. . .] In short, sex can affect disease susceptibility, progression and outcomes' ([Stock 2021a, 79–80](#)).

Here, too, there are a number of complications to the straightforward conclusion Stock presents that sex impacts disease susceptibility. First, gendered social expectations heavily impact diagnostic processes and criteria. As reported by the UK's National Autistic Society, 'because of stereotyped ideas about what autism looks like and who can be autistic, many autistic women and girls struggle to get a diagnosis, receive a diagnosis late in life or are misdiagnosed with conditions other than autism' ([2023](#)). UCLA Health also asserts that young women are often 'more motivated than males to fit in and be social' ([2023](#)) to comply with comparatively restrictive social norms for women. This encourages women with autism to mask symptoms, leading to a reduced likelihood of diagnosis. Social norms are thus implicated in the lower proportion of women diagnosed with autism, complicating Stock's assumption that boys are innately more susceptible to the condition.

In addition, Stock's simplistic presentation of the binary categories 'male' and 'female' (and indeed, 'boys' and 'girls') discourages reflection on any real complications to this model. For example, a transgender person's biology is often more complex than a simple male/female binary can describe (e.g. a transgender woman/man on hormone replacement therapy with endocrinologically female/male hormone patterns). While an earlier chapter of *Material Girls* discusses complications to understandings of sex, here, all complexity is lost. These distinctions are important though, as research suggests that, despite sex chromosomes being responsible for the fact that more girls than boys experience neural tube defects, scoliosis and congenital dislocation of the hip ([Ober, Loisel and Gilad 2008](#)), it is differing sex steroid hormone patterns that result in sexually dimorphic risk profiles of cardiovascular disease ([Choi and McLaughlin 2007](#)). These sex steroid hormone patterns can be altered through transgender hormone-replacement therapy to lie within the ranges statistically associated with their cisgender equivalents. While it would be fruitful to discuss the risks of cardiovascular disease in the transgender population here, current studies on the topic are limited, and no consensus has been formed ([Connelly and Delles 2021](#)). Some studies have demonstrated increased risks of cardiovascular disease in transgender people more generally, though the current accepted explanation for this is 'minority stress theory', i.e. that discriminatory social systems lead to high stress levels in minority populations, resulting in higher rates of stress-related disease ([Streed Jr et al. 2021, 138](#)). Even here then, Stock's evidence for the intrinsic biological 'reality' of sex is interwoven with social systems of gender. Trans people seeking medical transition complicate the stable gender-critical model of binary sexual dimorphism by existing outside of it; to simply reduce, for example, a trans woman with endocrinologically female hormone patterns and female-presenting secondary sex characteristics to 'biologically male' obscures the complex reality of sex, rather than illuminating it.

Julia Serano, a prominent American transfeminist scholar with an extensive background in developmental biology, identifies that the reduction of sex differences down to putatively uncomplicated characteristics (as is present in Stock's work) constitutes essentialist thinking, in that asserting that our hypothetical trans woman is 'biologically male' relies on the presumption that 'each sex category has an underlying "essence" that makes them what they are' ([2017, 2](#)). This becomes clearer in Stock's analysis of sex and sexual orientation, wherein she declares that the arrangement of

a cisgender woman dating a passing and ‘post-surgery’ trans woman being called a lesbian relationship ‘stretches existing concepts [of sexuality] to their limits’ (2021a, 94). In Stock’s opinion, since the trans woman’s body is ‘actually male, no matter what it looks like’ (2021a, 94), there is a valid case to be made that this relationship should not be called ‘lesbian’ at all, despite the many biological factors that differentiate her body from that of a normative cis male, simply because these features are non-endogenous. This assumes that the term lesbian is commonly employed as a biological category, as opposed to a social one. In practice, however, trans lesbians have always been part of lesbian communities, organisations and movements: according to the UK LGBT charity *Just Like Us*, 96% of lesbians are supportive of trans people – more than any other demographic (2023). Far from stretching ‘existing concepts [of sexuality] to their limits’, most existing conceptualisations of the term lesbian appear to already include trans women. In any case, Stock’s arguments that ‘natural’ sex classification should only account for endogenous features are arbitrary. As demonstrated earlier, medical transition can change a person’s biological sexual make-up in most ways beyond one’s genotype, and it is difficult to justify why, using Stock’s terminology, a ‘gorgeous’, ‘feminine’ (2021a, 94) trans woman’s differing risks of encountering some genetic diseases impacts her wife’s identity as a lesbian.

Interestingly, Stock’s suggestion that trans people’s non-normative biologies expose limits and weaknesses in the language we use to describe concepts of sexuality is shared by Serano, though, for her, the problem is the labels ‘male’ and ‘female’ themselves:

‘While the terms “male” and “female” have some utility, we should not view them as strictly dichotomous or mutually exclusive. Rather, “female” and “male” are best thought of as umbrella terms that describe groupings of people (or animals) who generally share many of the same traits, albeit with considerable variability and some exceptions’ (Serano 2017).

In this model, space is made for complications of biology, either endogenous or exogenous; for the existence of sexual typologies between and outside of the normative sexual binary; and for epigenetic changes that result in movement across sexual categories. These categories are ‘multifaceted, variable and somewhat malleable’ (Serano 2017). This less-rigid definition of sex does not erase the importance of sex, as this importance is often what causes many trans people to seek gender-affirmative care in the first place: medical transition is not sought through ignoring the impact of biological sex but rather by navigating its complex effects. Instead, through this meaningful redefinition, the concrete and immutable nature of sex is disrupted in search of the mechanisms lying behind the simplistic labels ‘male’ and ‘female’. In short, it is essentialist beliefs about sex that are challenged, not the existence of biological sexual dimorphism itself. Thus, it is critical to recognise that gender-critical feminism, in line with Stock’s assertions, is constructing a form of pseudo-biology through appeals to the putative simplicity of sexed biology that is at odds with the understandings of experts in the field, such as Serano.

## CONFLICT, ABUSE AND POWER DYNAMICS IN GENDER-CRITICAL THOUGHT

In discussing Stock’s use of this ‘sex matters’ trope, I have demonstrated that the harms predicted to result from deemphasising sex in some medical contexts are

overstated or misrepresented. In many of Stock's own examples of areas where sex is being 'erased', it continues to be referenced due to concerns about potential ambiguities in communication. Any alternative understandings provided fail to account for trans people's biologies complicating dimorphic understandings of sex; simplistically labelling us male or female ignores complexities in the disease risk-profiles she herself uses as the foundation of her argument for the importance of sex. This combines with the oppositional language used throughout the book to position trans activists not as individuals and groups seeking systemic change to foster the liberation of trans people but instead as a nebulous destructive force attempting to overthrow the category 'woman' as a meaningful classification, uncritically undoing decades of feminist intervention, thus invoking a reactionary response in readers. Working from a statement by the gender-critical former Chief Executive of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (an UK abortion provider), Ann Furedi, Stock claims that 'some healthcare providers are under pressure to remove references to women from their communications' (2021a, 83). Stock bolsters this oppositional configuration of gender-critical feminists and trans activists through uncritical reporting of Furedi's words:

'Trans activists seem to want an abortion-care environment that takes all reference to women out of the frame. They want literature rewritten so as not to refer to women, they want us to not describe BPAS as a women's healthcare service, or abortion as an issue that relates to women's rights and reproductive freedom' (2021a, 83).

A more individualised approach, perhaps accounting for the differing needs of trans men and cis women in abortion care environments by using the language of individual body parts and hormonal profiles, could improve informational accuracy for all users, including for cis women with non-normative reproductive anatomies. However, suggestions for changes in communication that would limit gendered references are misrepresented as active attempts to erase women – to 'rewrite literature' in a way that threatens women's access to abortion-care services. The reduction of the parties involved simply to 'us' versus 'them', particularly in the structure 'they want us to', constructs an image of resistance on the side of the gender-critical project against those trans activist aggressors. This resistance is portrayed as heroic in nature: Furedi explains that, '[i]t is tempting to not make it an issue and comply' (2021a, 83), with the term 'comply' used as if calls for trans liberation are forms of top-down oppression. This narrative also serves to represent calls for trans-inclusive language as an all-or-nothing situation, whereby the use of gendered terms is either completely eliminated or remains entirely. Strategies that could only *limit* the use of gendered language deemed unnecessary, or where specific language concerning a patient's individual biology is more accurate, which could improve experiences across the board as differences in biological make-up even among cis women could be accounted for, are unthinkable. Since activism for trans liberation is depicted as a powerful 'lobby' (Stock 2021b), thus supplanting the public perception of the few available trans-specific support organisations with 'the image of a powerful, dangerous and controversial organisation' (Bailey and MacKenzie 2023, 1), the situation has become abstracted into an issue of ideologies, and thus compromises like this are not possible.

I argue that constructing the power dynamic between trans activists and gender-critical feminists in this way is a necessary facet of framing trans activism as abusive. Quoting Catherine Hodes, Schulman explains that 'differentiating between power

struggle and power over [. . .] is the difference between conflict and abuse. Abuse is power over and conflict is [a] power struggle' (2016, 58). Both Furedi and Stock argue that activists for trans liberation exercise power over gender-critical women, and over women in general, by creating an environment where any reference to biological 'reality' puts speakers at risk of accusations of transphobia. This putatively leads to confusion and ambiguity in communications between healthcare providers and women of lower socio-economic or education status. Trans liberation is thus painted as a project endorsed by and for those members of society whose personal socio-economic situations allow for a level of social mobility: 'disregard for the interests of people of lower socio-economic status or education is not unusual within modern trans activism' (Stock 2021a, 83). This is a particularly unfair assessment of trans liberation movements, given that what little data we have concerning poverty and trans status points to a positive correlation between these factors: trans charity and advocacy organisation Gendered Intelligence states that, in 2018, '60% of trans people [in the UK] earned less than £20,000' (Living Wage Foundation 2022). Painting trans-inclusive approaches as an upper-class frivolity turns trans activism into an abstract project, specifically one that wields socio-economic privilege against oppressed women, while the gender-critical movement's unwillingness to integrate the unique needs of trans people into their feminist viewpoint is positioned as righteous resistance. However, it is important to contextualise that, since disagreements between gender-critical feminists and activists for trans liberation often play out in the field of journalism and popular media, the loudest voices on both sides are often those with increased resources and access to a public platform (i.e. authors and employed journalists). Framing this socio-economic issue as one that is unique to those arguing in favour of trans liberation encourages readers to disengage with the opposing side; thus, any call to seek alternatives of understanding and solutions that advance (public) safety and autonomy for all is rejected. The conflict need not be resolved as it is no longer simply conflict, but abuse, specifically by trans activists (and by extension, trans people) of gender-critical feminists. The fact that trans people destabilise the fixed categories of sex/gender on which their feminism is based need not be reckoned with at all. The gender-critical world view persists unaltered, and the status quo remains untouched.

Serano describes in *Whipping Girl* the phenomenon of 'gender anxiety' – that is, the negative response expressed when encountering an individual who undermines the convictions/beliefs one has about gender and sexuality. When these beliefs are so firmly held that one is convinced they are more valid than those of others, Serano describes this as 'gender entitlement' (2007, 89–90). Gender-entitled beliefs produce gender anxiety in various contexts; however, gender-critical feminists hold the gender-entitled belief that one's anatomy inescapably restricts one's identity. Their resistance to changing these beliefs, and therefore the transphobia they exhibit, is based on gender anxiety. It is fear that the very real issues affecting women will be ignored if the oppressive binary structure of sex is problematised. However, this demonstrates a misunderstanding of how social identities intersect. Schulman examines the socio-political expression of this individual anxiety and fear in addressing the label 'gay'. She notes the transition of 'gay' from 'a severely oppressed, once broad category of people to the more recent phenomenon of select sexual minority sectors getting access to the state's punishment apparatus, often based in whiteness, citizenship, normalised family roles and HIV negativity' (2016, 18). Newly acquired protections for gay people can encourage those groups whose identity is not subjugated along other axes of oppression (for example, by being a person of colour, lacking citizenship

or being HIV-positive) to ‘identify with the supremacy of the state’ (Schulman 2016, 18). The improved (though not entirely equal) situation of these select gay people allows them, as ‘formerly subordinated’ and ‘traumatised groups’, to move from the position of oppressed to oppressor (Schulman 2016, 18). It is not difficult to imagine how this thread of analysis may apply to the category ‘woman’, wherein the modern perception of acceptable, intelligible womanhood is based in the category’s intersections with whiteness, citizenship and, among others, cisgender status. The trajectory from oppressed to oppressor through these intersections can result in select women identifying with the power of the state (the oppressor). When this transition goes unacknowledged, and groups or individuals fail to recognise the position of privilege afforded to them, this ‘leads to the newly acquired power to punish rather than to the self-transformation necessary to resolve conflict and produce justice’ (Schulman 2016, 18). The fact that gender-critical feminism excludes trans people from its definitions of womanhood and manhood constructs both entities as a weapon of exclusion as opposed to neutral categories or, in the case of womanhood, a label defining its members as oppressed on the basis of their membership.

This acknowledgement of internal power relations within the category ‘woman’ demonstrates powerful connections between gender-critical feminists’ defence of dimorphic gender models and investment in whiteness. In *When White Women Cry*, Mamta Motwani Accapadi discusses the tension that arises when race and gender intersect, assigning the white woman a ‘dual oppressor/oppressed identity’ in that, while she is a member of an oppressed group based on gender, she experiences privilege based on race (2007, 208). Quoting Phyllis Marynick Palmer, she states that, for white women, ‘their privilege is based on accepting the image of goodness, which is powerlessness’ (1983, 159), based on historical perceptions of white women as the foundation of purity and virtue. It is also true that perceptions of the cis woman as ‘natural’ lead to similar associations with purity and, by contrast, of trans women as unnatural; for evidence of this, we need only recall Stock’s delineation of sex through endogenous and non-endogenous characteristics. As Accapadi states, ‘powerlessness informs the nature of White womanhood’ and ‘White privilege throughout history positions a White woman’s reality as the universal norm of womanhood’ (2007, 209); thus, powerlessness becomes a necessary facet of womanhood unless the category of ‘woman’ is destabilised and intersections with race and cisgender status can be critically examined. The inability, within gender-critical feminism, to visualise ‘woman’ as having the power to oppress on the basis of her womanhood, results in the tendency to construct threats to this stable model as the exercising of power over women.

This is not to say that whiteness is a prerequisite characteristic for the holding of gender-critical feminist beliefs. Rather, the intersection between whiteness and womanhood allows for the instantiation of what Collins labels a ‘hegemonic femininity’: a performance of womanhood which accesses relative privilege through axes of domination beyond gender, like race, class and age (2004). These various axes form a ‘matrix of domination’ on which those ‘dual oppressor/oppressed identities’ can be described as ‘intermediate positions’. As noted by Hamilton et al., most intelligible locations in this matrix ‘are intermediate in this way, but the primarily privileged locations of those who can at least partially instantiate hegemonic femininities are particularly consequential’ (2019, 326). Hamilton et al. offer the conceptual ‘femininity premium’ to describe ‘the wide array of personal benefits that flow to women who can approximate culturally valued performances of femininity that are...

raced, classed and [hetero]sexualised' (2019, 334). Cisgender women too occupy the advantaged side of the cis/trans binary and are thus eligible for femininity premiums in the form of protection; just as 'the purity and respectability associated with white womanhood is to be defended' (2019, 327), so too is the purity and respectability of cis womanhood to be defended, specifically by positioning trans women as a sexual threat. The perception that the cis woman occupies a position of biological purity necessarily rendering her powerless allows her to claim victimhood when this perceived biological purity is made unstable by the expansion of the category 'woman' to include trans women. We see this premium of protection in the British news media discourse around trans women and bathrooms; individual gender-critical women leverage their investment in hegemonic femininity (conferred upon them by nature of their cisgender status) to achieve outsized representation in national media discourse. The 'concerns' of gender-critical women are granted a national platform, as evidenced by the consistent output of gender-critical opinion articles by the UK news media, while transgender women disputing the validity of these concerns can be written off as ignorant of *real* women's perspectives.

## TRANSNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

While gender-critical depictions of biological sex as reality and trans activism as an abusive threat are central to Stock's work (and critical to the British gender-critical project more generally), they also have important transnational implications. Significantly, the critical reception of the German-language version of *Material Girls*, published in April 2022, presents a unique opportunity for analysis. In the months following the book's publication, several German-speaking national news media outlets published reviews. Academic philosopher Petra Gehring's review in *Die Zeit*, a centrist-liberal weekly national newspaper of record, emphasises the banality of Stock's interventions: 'The book is not a scandalous text' – 'Das Buch ist kein Skandaltext' (2022). Gehring reiterates that Stock defers to a sense of realism, an appeal to the importance of biological sex, necessary for combatting the perceived dogmatic uptake of identity politics within English academia. This poses the question, how are gender-critical arguments developed in the UK received transnationally? What follows is an analysis of Gehring's review of *Material Girls*, demonstrating the development and proliferation of UK gender-critical argumentation transnationally. Through this closer analysis, I will explore how the transnational aspect of this argumentation is itself used to escalate a conflict between trans people and gender-critical feminists.

Gehring's review concerns itself primarily with Stock's work on theoretical models of gender, focussing particularly on the categorisation of trans women. She reiterates a number of Stock's conclusions, beginning with her rejection of gender as a solely 'felt' characteristic. Gehring concedes that an individual's gender/sex is changeable, but altering gender/sex by 'identifying' as another gender is labelled a fiction (2022). Instead, she encourages the disentangling of what it means to have felt ('*gefühlt*') identification with a gender and to have become ('*geworden*') a gender since 'the weight of the experience of gender socialisation makes a woman a woman' – '*das Gewicht einer durchlebten Geschlechtersozialisation macht sehr wohl aus einer Frau eine Frau*' (Gehring 2022). In this way, she cautions against Stock's rejection of the possibility that sex categories could be socially constructed – they are, to Stock, pre-discursive (2021a, 60–71) – by claiming that one's gender is defined by one's socialisation into

the gendered classifications of man or woman. Stock's engagement in *Material Girls* with the notion that sex categories may be socially constructed does not go beyond brief references to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex* (1990) and Monique Wittig's *The Category of Sex* (1982). Gehring concedes that Stock's readings of these texts are 'not the strongest' but defends this by arguing that they relate more to the popular reception of identity-political ideas in the UK than the theories themselves (2022). This is perhaps an acknowledgement that, since both Stock and Gehring's own academic training is not rooted in Feminist Studies, space should be made for theoretical developments in the field during the three intervening decades since those texts' respective publications. Butler, for example, has continued working on queer feminist theory throughout that period, publishing their latest work *Who's Afraid of Gender* in 2024. In the book, Butler argues that the assumption that 'gender theory relies on wrongheaded texts authored by false [...] authorities' prevents gender-critical feminists from critically engaging with contemporary works in this academic area (2024, 20). Stock's (and consequently, Gehring's) refusal to critically approach the lively and evolving work of academics exploring social constructionist theories of sex can be viewed as the result of this assumption in practice.

Crucially though, Gehring's final position on this matter is that, despite having transitioned, trans women do not become women as a result of their 'gendered socialisation' (2022), instead becoming part of another non-binary sexed category, echoing Stock's conclusion that trans women 'are not women in the same sense in which "adult human females" are women' (2021a, 175). To rationalise her designation of trans women as part of a separate third sex category, as opposed to simply an intersectional sub-category of 'women', Gehring leans on Stock's assertion that it would be problematic to allow trans women, especially those she labels 'still physically male' – '*physisch noch männlich*' (2022) – into women's prisons or shelters. This implies that trans women retain some form of male privilege or power whether they choose to medically transition or not. The question here is, of course, how is this privilege/power conferred to trans women? And how does it manifest? Trans people in Germany and the UK experience statistically higher risks of violence, discrimination and harassment than any other gender/sexual minority group (Bayrakdar and King 2021, 163–164). According to a US study, both transgender men and women experience violent and sexual victimisation at between four and five times the rates of their cisgender counterparts (Flores et al. 2021, 729). Further, the UK's Living Wage Foundation reports that trans people, particularly trans women, struggle to access traditional forms of employment and are thus overrepresented in sex work (Living Wage Foundation 2022). A total 5.9% of trans people in German-speaking countries reported being engaged in sex work in 2020 (TransCare Hamburg 2020). A 2015 report also found that trans women were twice as likely as trans men to have participated in sex work (Fitzgerald et al. 2015), heavily suggesting that the systemic misogyny pushing socio-economically disadvantaged cis women into the sex trade extends to trans women. Serano coined the term 'transmisogyny' to describe such multiplicative instances of misogyny and transphobia (2007, 15), though this too is only part of a wider matrix of systemic subjugation: the same 2015 report highlights that the percentage of black trans people who have participated in sex work is almost four times higher than the percentage of trans people overall who have done so (Fitzgerald, Patterson and Hickey 2015). This all combines to paint an image not of privilege and power retained by trans women by nature of their socialisation or biology but of social disadvantage as a result of transmisogynistic power differentials.

Assertions that trans women retain male power and privilege fails to account for the intersectional factors of oppression which lead to trans women being, more often than not, on the receiving end of cis male violence (among other misogynistic forms of systemic subjugation), rather than acting as violent agents of patriarchal oppression themselves.

It is important to also acknowledge the political context of Gehring's comments and of contemporary German gender-critical interventions more widely. Proposed laws simplifying the process of changing one's legal gender in Germany, voted down once before in 2021, were tabled again in June 2022 in the form of the *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* (self-ID law) following the election of the *Ampelkoalition* – the coalition of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the Free Democratic Party and Alliance 90/The Greens. In response, German feminist authors opposed to trans inclusion, such as Alice Schwarzer, have made arguments similar to Stock's about the potential harms it may bring. [Schwarzer's 2022](#) book *Transsexualität*, co-authored by Chantal Louis, explicitly references the English context wherein the conservative government ruled out the adoption of self-ID legislation, following intervention from 'protesting feminists' – '*protestierende Feministinnen*' ([2022, 18](#)). Schwarzer makes explicit that this provides the German gender-critical project with 'hope that the danger will be recognised in this country too' – '*Hoffnung, dass auch hierzulande die Gefahr noch rechtzeitig erkannt wird*' (2020, 19). In this same way, when Gehring warns of a climate shift towards 'identity politics' in English academia or argues that 'physically male' trans women pose a wide-reaching threat to cis women in prisons and shelters ([2022](#)), she not only reiterates the same potential harms as Stock to a German-speaking audience but also suggests the possibility of these same harms moving transnationally into Germany. Such a description of the English context imagines the gender-critical project as a defensive line against the advancement of an ideology that is 'apparently widespread' – '*offenbar weitverbreitet*' ([Gehring 2022](#)) – at English universities. Gehring's review, and particularly her recommendation that Stock's book is necessary reading for all ([2022](#)), represents a warning against the same occurring in Germany. Thus, UK gender-critical discourse is made to matter within the German context as a source of crucial knowledge and experience, allowing German gender-critical feminists to learn from perceived mistakes made in the UK. That the perceived danger of trans liberation in both national contexts is overstated goes unrecognised.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, within discourse surrounding trans liberation, the gender-critical feminist movement depicts activists for trans liberation as necessarily wielding power over feminist women. This allows gender-critical feminists to position themselves as victimised by the expansion and potential destabilisation of sex categories, which they believe are (and should remain) both dimorphic and derived from biology. These beliefs are 'gender-entitled' in that they are assumed to be more 'real' than the conceptions many trans people have about sex and gender, and thus the gender-critical claim to victimhood is an expression of what Serano would label 'gender anxiety'. From this position, gender-critical feminists (including Stock) overstate the harm caused by transfeminist policies that deemphasise biological sex in various contexts. Engaging with such policies and the potential these may have to improve outcomes for all in, for example, medical and educational contexts is rendered unthinkable as a result of

the portrayal of the trans liberation movement as abusive and threatening to women. De-escalating this dynamic back to the realm of normative conflict by opposing the framing of power dynamics between cis women and trans people as necessarily a case of ‘power over’ is crucial to allow for the exploration of transfeminist approaches that could provide an inclusive path forward.

The ‘power over’ framing, however, passes transnationally as a result of its simplistic terms. Upon reception within the German gender-critical movement, an image is formed of conflict in the UK between trans-inclusive theories of gender, associated with ‘fiction’, and gender-critical feminism, associated with ‘reality’. The result is the perception that, in the English context, this is a conflict in which ‘reality’ has been lost. At a time when the German *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* was still under consideration, there was potential for the gender-critical project to halt, hinder or otherwise limit the scope of these measures in the name of protecting women. As a result, German feminists deployed arguments from the UK’s gender-critical project, reproducing and elaborating potential harms to (cisgender) women that were already overstated in the English-language context. As the UK gender-critical project achieves success in its goal of rejecting trans liberation on the basis of perceived threats to (cisgender) women, it should be recognised that these strategies are likely to see further uptake by anti-trans movements in other national contexts.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Eden Hills  [orcid.org/0009-0005-1620-0714](https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1620-0714)  
 University of Leeds, UK

## REFERENCES

- Accapadi, Mamta M. 2007. “When White Women Cry: How White Women’s Tears Oppress Women of Color.” *College Student Affairs Journal* 26 (no. 2): 208–215.
- Bailey, Aimee, and Jai Mackenzie. 2023. “Support Group or Transgender Lobby? Representing Mermaids in the British Press.” *Critical Discourse Studies*: 1–19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2023.2291136>
- Bayrakdar, Sait, and Andrew King. 2021. “LGBT Discrimination, Harassment and Violence in Germany, Portugal and the UK: A Quantitative Comparative approach.” *Current Sociology* 71 (no. 1): 152–172. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921211039271>
- Bindel, Julie. 2021. *Feminism for Women: The Real Route to Liberation*. UK: Constable.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. 2007 Edition. New York & London: Routledge Classics.
- Butler, Judith. 2024. *Who’s Afraid of Gender*. Great Britain: Allen Lane.
- Choi, Brian G., and Mary A. McLaughlin. 2007. “Why Men’s Hearts Break: Cardiovascular Effects of Sex Steroids.” *Endocrinology and Metabolism Clinics of North America*. 36 (no. 2): 365–377. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecl.2007.03.011>
- Collins, Patricia H. 2004. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.

- Connelly, Paul J., and Christian Delles. 2021. "Cardiovascular Disease in Transgender People: Recent Research and Emerging Evidence." *Cardiovascular Research* 117 (no. 14): 174–176. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/cvr/cvab288>
- Department for Education. 2019. "Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education." Accessed March 12, 2024. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1090195/Relationships\\_Education\\_RSE\\_and\\_Health\\_Education.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1090195/Relationships_Education_RSE_and_Health_Education.pdf).
- Faye, Shon. 2021. *The Transgender Issue*. London: Allen Lane.
- Fitzgerald, Erin, Sarah Elspeth Patterson, Darby Hickey, Cherno Biko, and Harper Jean Tobin. 2015. "Meaningful Work: Transgender Experiences in the Sex." Accessed March 14, 2024. [https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/Meaningful%20Work-Full%20Report\\_FINAL\\_3.pdf](https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/Meaningful%20Work-Full%20Report_FINAL_3.pdf).
- Flores, Andrew R., Lynn Langton, Ilan H. Meyer, Andrew R. Herman, Jody L. Herman, and Taylor N. T. Brown. 2021. "Gender Identity Disparities in Criminal Victimization: National Crime Victimization Survey, 2017–2018." *American Journal of Public Health* 111 (no. 4): 726–729. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.306099>
- Gehring, Petra. 2022. "Kathleen Stocks 'Material Girls': Das gefühlte Geschlecht." Accessed March 14, 2024. <https://www.zeit.de/2022/15/kathleen-stock-material-girls-geschlecht-transgender>.
- Hamilton, Laura T., Elizabeth A. Armstrong, J. Lotus Seeley, and Elizabeth M. Armstrong. 2019. "Hegemonic Femininities and Intersectional Domination." *Sociological Theory* 37 (no. 4): 315–341. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275119888248>
- Hines, Sally. 2020. "Sex Wars and (Trans) Gender Panics: Identity and Body Politics in Contemporary UK Feminism." *The Sociological Review* 68 (no. 4): 699–717. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120934684>
- Hines, Sally. 2025. "Hands Towards the Right: UK Gender-Critical Feminism and Right-Wing Coalitions." *Journal of Gender Studies*: 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2025.2468805>
- Johnson, Donna M., and Judith A. Fox. 2003. "Creating Curb Cuts in the Classroom: Adapting Universal Design Principles to Education." In *Curriculum Transformation and Disability: Implementing Universal Design in Higher Education*, edited by Jeanne L. Higbee, 7–21. Minnesota: University of Minnesota.
- Joyce, Helen. 2021. *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality*. London: Oneworld Publications.
- Just Like Us. 2023. "Trans Day of Visibility: Majority of Anti-Trans Adults Don't Know a Trans Person in Real Life." Accessed March 14, 2023. <https://www.justlikeus.org/blog/2023/03/31/trans-day-of-visibility-ally-lesbian/>.
- Koyama, Emi. 2003. "Transfeminist manifesto." In *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, edited by Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, 244–260. Northeastern University Press.
- Laqueur, Thomas. 1990. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Living Wage Foundation. 2022. "'It's a Fundamental Issue of Social Justice.'" Accessed March 14, 2023. <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/news/its-fundamental-issue-social-justice-gendered-intelligence-low-pay-precarity-and-good-work>.
- Lugones, Maria. 2008. "The Coloniality of Gender." *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise*. 2 (no. 2): 1–17. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-38273-3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-38273-3_2)
- National Autistic Society. 2023. "Autistic women and girls." Accessed March 14, 2024. <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism/autistic-women-and-girls>.

- NSPCC. 2022. "Half of Secondary School Teachers don't Feel Confident Delivering Sex and Relationships Education." Accessed September 5, 2023. <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2022/teachers-sex-relationships-education/>.
- Ober, Carole, Dagan A. Loisel, and Yoav Gilad. 2008. "Sex-Specific Genetic Architecture of Human Disease." *Nature Reviews Genetics* 9: 911–922. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrg2415>
- Palmer, Phyllis M. 1983. "White Women/Black Women: The Dualism of Female Identity and Experience in the United States." *Feminist Studies* 9 (no. 1): 151–170. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177688>
- Raymond, Janice G. 1979. *The Transsexual Empire*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Schulman, Sarah. 2016. *Conflict is Not Abuse – Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Schwarzer, Alice, and Louis, Chantal. 2022. *Transsexualität: Was Ist eine Frau? Was Ist ein Mann?* Cologne: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch.
- Serano, Julia. 2007. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Berkeley: Seal Press.
- Serano, Julia. 2017. "Transgender People and 'Biological Sex' Myths." Accessed March 14, 2024. <https://juliaserano.medium.com/transgender-people-and-biological-sex-myths-c2a9bcd4f4a>.
- Stock, Kathleen. 2021a. *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism*. Great Britain: Fleet.
- Stock, Kathleen. 2021b. *It Wasn't Just the Students Spreading Lies and Hounding Me... It Was Many of My [...]*. Accessed March 10, 2025. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10172813/amp/KATHLEEN-STOCK-reveals-really-like-vilified-beliefs.html>.
- Stonewall. 2017. "School Report." Accessed March 12, 2023. <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/school-report-2017>.
- Streed Jr, Carl G., Lauren B. Beach, Billy A. Caceres, Nadia L. Dowshen, Kerrie L. Moreau, Monica Mukherjee, Tonia Poteat, Asa Radix, Sari L. Reisner, and Vineeta Singh. 2021. "Assessing and Addressing Cardiovascular Health in People Who Are Transgender and Gender Diverse." *Circulation* 144 (no. 6): 136–148. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1161/CIR.0000000000001003>
- TransCare Hamburg. 2020. "The Impact of COVID-19 on Transgender Health in German-Speaking Countries." Accessed March 14, 2024. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220217081111/https://transcarecovid-19.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ger.pdf>.
- UCLA Health. 2023. "Understanding Undiagnosed Autism in Adult Females." Accessed April 18, 2025. <https://www.uclahealth.org/news/article/understanding-undiagnosed-autism-adult-females>.
- Wittig, Monique. 1982. "The Category of Sex." *Feminist Issues* 2: 63–68. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02685553>
- Zanghellini, Aleardo. 2020. "Philosophical Problems with the Gender-Critical Feminist Argument Against Trans Inclusion." *SAGE Open* 10 (no. 2): 1–14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020927029>

Hills

*Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*

DOI: 10.33134/rds.441

**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Hills, Eden. 2025.

"Trans-Exclusionary, Transnational: Gender-Critical Feminism and the Overstatement of Harm in the UK and Germany." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 28(1): 6–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.441>

**Submitted:** 27 March 2024**Accepted:** 20 May 2025**Published:** 03 July 2025**COPYRIGHT:**

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

*Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.