

The erasure of women by nauseating “political correctness”

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On 9 May 2023, the US Preventive Services Task Force published new [draft guidelines](#) about mammography screening. We are told that:

“These recommendations apply to cisgender women and all other persons assigned female at birth (including transgender men and nonbinary persons) age 40 years or older at average risk of breast cancer. This is because the net benefit estimates are driven by sex (i.e., female) rather than gender identity, although the studies reviewed for this recommendation generally used the term ‘women.’”

Oh, so this convoluted language means that the breast screening trials were done in women and not in men who feel they are women. Surprise, surprise.

What about the cisgender women? I am the primary author of the [Cochrane review](#) of mammography screening and there were no cisgender women in the trials. Or were there?

“Cisgender is a term that is used to describe people whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.”

Well, that’s the vast majority of us. We identify with the sex we have in our chromosomes. Why call us cisgender? How convoluted can it be? Breast screening is offered to those who have breasts, which we have always called women, not cisgender women.

On 1 November 2022, the US Preventive Services Task Force published [an article](#) in *JAMA* with this title: “Hormone therapy for the primary prevention of chronic conditions in postmenopausal persons.” In the abstract, we are told that “Menopause is defined as the cessation of a person’s menstrual cycle.” The word “woman” was not used at all in the whole article, and “women” only appeared once, in a section called “Recommendations of others” where The North American Menopause Society talked about “symptomatic women.”

On 28 October 2022, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) noted that [heavy menstrual bleeding](#) should be added to the product information as a side effect of unknown frequency of the mRNA COVID-19 vaccines. It noted that it “interferes with the person’s physical, social, emotional and material quality of life.” I see. Those experiencing heavy menstrual bleeding are not women but “people” or “persons.”

EMA furthermore noted that “mRNA COVID-19 vaccines do not cause pregnancy complications for expectant mothers and their babies, and they are as effective at reducing the risk of hospitalisation and deaths in pregnant people as they are in non-pregnant people.”

What a mess. The term “expectant mother” was used but those who are pregnant are not women but people.

It can become very complicated to be “politically correct” when the issue is pregnancy. What should we call it when women die during or after pregnancy? We have always talked about maternal mortality and we still

do. A [maternal death](#) is defined by the World Health Organization as “the death of a woman while pregnant or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy.” That’s comforting. No men will die in the maternity bed, right? But before long, I expect that the term maternity bed will be replaced by a person bed or people’s bed.

[In 2021](#), critics lambasted Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust after it told staff to use terms like “birthing parents” and “human milk” rather than referring to “mothers” and “breast milk.” Other changes included replacing the use of the term “father” with “parent,” “co-parent” or “second biological parent,” depending on the circumstances.

These follies make life more complicated for everyone, as if we hadn’t enough to worry about already, with global warming, wars, poverty, and huge income inequalities.

The apparent horror of calling a spade for a spade is a recent phenomenon, but there are a few examples from the past. In 1988, a [PubMed abstract](#) noted that “large numbers of people are reaching childbearing age” in China’s third largest city. I suppose these people were all girls, as men do not bear children in their non-existing uteruses.

Bodies with vaginas

On 25 September 2021, *The Lancet* carried this front-page message:



“Historically, the anatomy and physiology of bodies with vaginas have been neglected.”

Unsurprisingly, many women were offended by this, and Richard Horton, *Lancet*’s editor-in-chief, offered a [lame apology](#) where he emphasised that “transgender health is an important dimension of modern healthcare, but one that remains neglected. Trans people regularly face stigma, discrimination exclusion, and poor health, often experiencing difficulties accessing appropriate health care.”

Horton’s attempt of face saving is what philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer in his booklet, *The art of always being right*, calls diversion:

“If you are being worsted, you can make a diversion – that is, you can suddenly begin to talk of something else, as though it had a bearing on the matter in dispute and afforded an argument against your opponent ... it is a piece of impudence if it has nothing to do with the case, and is only brought in by way of attacking your opponent.”

Whether transgender people suffer or not has absolutely nothing to do with talking about bodies with vaginas. Many women felt dehumanised and denigrated by this terminology and [one wrote](#) that the message was unclear because female whales and cows also have vaginas, and because bodies might imply dead bodies.

She noted that humans are more than bodies with assembled body parts. “We are also minds, consciousness, memories, emotions, thoughts.” She also observed that in a tweet posted on prostate cancer only 4 days earlier, *Lancet* didn't refer to men as “bodies with penises.”

She mentioned that, “Referring to the 51% of the population that faces entrenched, systemic discrimination and violence on account of their sex, in terms of their body parts and/or bodily functions, is not progressive or inclusive. It is reductive and dehumanising. In fact, as it is only women that you describe in such terms, it is very clearly sexist ... Unfortunately, it seems from this article that the *Lancet* has been captured ideologically by the gender identity lobby, which denies the reality and indeed the social consequences and political significance, for human beings, of biological sex.”

Weird instructions to authors of scientific papers

The nauseating “politically correct” language has also crept into author instructions. The instructions for Elsevier’s prestigious journal, *Social Science & Medicine*, “advise to seek gender neutrality by using plural nouns (‘clinicians, patients/clients’) as default/wherever possible to avoid using ‘he, she,’ or ‘he/she.’ We recommend avoiding the use of descriptors that refer to personal attributes such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, disability or health condition unless they are relevant and valid.”

Elsevier mentions that “For research involving or pertaining to humans, animals or eukaryotic cells, investigators should integrate sex and gender-based analyses (SGBA) into their research design” and explains that sex generally refers to a set of biological attributes that are associated with physical and physiological features (e.g., chromosomal genotype, hormonal levels, internal and external anatomy) and that gender generally refers to socially constructed roles.

I wonder how it could be possible for a male tortoise to see itself as a female tortoise and to communicate this to the researchers so they can take it into account in their gender analyses. And how this could be accomplished for eukaryotic cells.

The deplorable role of highly vocal and intolerant transgender people

To a considerable extent, the current mess is related to the activism of a small minority of highly vocal and intolerant transgender people. The [official definition](#) of a transgender person (often abbreviated to trans person) is someone whose gender identity or gender expression does not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth.

In an [instructive blog](#), and an [11,259 word journal article](#), two female professors describe the consequences of transgender activism and hostilities. Academics who do not adhere to a particular line on gender and transgender issues have suffered intimidation by trans activists. For gender identity campaigners, simply asserting that sex exists as a meaningful category, distinct from people's self-declared “gender identity,” is deemed transphobic. Some activists claim that questioning the position that a person’s “gender identity” trumps their biological sex in legal and social contexts amounts to being “anti-trans,” and to denying trans people’s very right to exist. However, the academics who have come under attack by trans activists have not questioned the importance of guaranteeing the legal rights of trans people. But those who have advocated for trans rights without denying the biological facts based on our sex chromosomes have faced some of the worst abuses from trans-orthodox activists.

Repetition of the mantra “Trans women are women” obstructs any attempt at a nuanced discussion about the circumstances under which sex might be relevant. Nothing illustrates the absurdity in this mantra better than [a verdict in a Danish court case](#) from 24 May 2023. This is about a man who had received a

custodial sentence with imprisonment for life because he was considered very dangerous after particularly dangerous rapes of women. He was legally allowed to change his gender into a woman even though no operations were carried out. He complained that his inmates were all males and demanded to be transferred to a section for females. The court denied this for obvious reasons, arguing that biologically, this person is still a man and still presents a danger to females.

When academics disagree with a piece of research, they would normally encourage debate, critique and more research. However, in the case of transgender issues, [activists have derailed this process](#) repeatedly and used the hashtag #nodebate, claiming that debate constitutes real harm or even literal violence. This is particularly troubling given the need for research into the rapid growth in the numbers of young people presenting with gender dysphoria.

The misogynistic name-calling culture has also entered academic discourse, and it is deeply troubling to see reasoned disagreement – often motivated by a concern with rights and justice – routinely labelled as “fascist.” Part of the point of going to university is to be exposed to a range of ideas that may challenge, inspire and even unsettle, and to develop the ability to engage with, articulate, defend and criticise arguments on a range of topics. Yet, some female students in particular report being unable to speak their minds in class.

Universities must promote the foundational value of academic freedom and take appropriate disciplinary action against students and staff who engage in campaigns of harassment and must be equally vigilant against internal managerialist pressures that treat academic freedom as a “risk” to be managed.

When a vocal minority seeks to shut down academic freedom, it risks creating an impoverished intellectual environment which undermines the culture of dissent and productive disagreement that is essential to democracy. We should all show courage in the defence of these values.

On 4 November 2022, I was asked in an email to participate in a survey where I should suggest research ideas for psychiatry. I was also asked to identify myself, and there were four options: male, female, non-binary and “If none of the above options describe you, please self-describe.”

I could not resist the temptation. I used the fourth option and explained “I am a dog.”

I like dogs. They are more honest than humans. A dog does not pretend it is a cat, and I have yet to meet a male dog that thinks it is a female dog.

I wonder what the organisers of surveys will do when they report their results. Will they say that some of the respondents were dogs or tortoises, which I might use next time, as I loved the tortoises I kept when I was a child?