

BOOK REVIEW

Holly Lawford-Smith
GENDER-CRITICAL FEMINISM
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Holly Lawford-Smith is a political philosopher with a particular interest in feminism. In her book, “Gender-Critical Feminism”, she offers a comprehensive examination of the gender-critical feminist perspective which prioritizes biological sex over gender identity. Her central goal is the abolition of the norms of femininity and to provide a theory of feminism that unapologetically advocates for the liberation of female people (60). In the introduction of the book, Lawford-Smith lays out the reasons for writing the book as well as the questions she wants to answer. She expressed concern that women’s issues have taken a secondary position, which she argues have diluted the focus on women’s issues by expanding the scope of feminism to include concerns beyond the direct oppression of women that is primarily based on sex. In her opinion, this was particularly evident during the observance of International Women’s Day as articulated by the International Women’s Day Melbourne Collective whose events are inclusive, welcoming cis and trans women, non-binary, and gender-diverse individuals from various backgrounds (2-3). Her objective is for feminism to reclaim its roots and act as a movement initiated by women for women, instead of turning into a movement that encompasses other global justice concerns. Throughout the book, the author critically examines the prevailing tenets of socially dominant feminism and attempts to validate her perspective by claiming that women are adult human females, thereby establishing the criteria for what qualifies as a woman and what does not.

The book includes ten chapters that are divided into two parts (chapters 2-6 form the first part, while chapters 7-9 constitute the second part). In the first part, Lawford-Smith aims to explain what gender-critical feminism is, while in the second part, she discusses the feasibility of gender-critical

feminism and its relationship with liberalism. The book starts with the introduction (chapter 1) and concludes with “A Gender-Critical Manifesto” (chapter 10).

After outlining the motivation for writing the book in the introduction, chapter 2, titled “Gender-Critical Feminism’s Radical Roots”, explains that gender-critical feminism originates from radical feminism, a movement associated with second-wave feminism, which began in the late 1960s. Following an examination of key figures in second-wave radical feminism alongside influential intellectuals like Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and Gerda Lerner to establish the historical context of the movement, she describes the sustaining mechanisms of female oppression, understood as oppression based on sex differences, and various solutions that are offered.

In chapter 3, titled “Gender-Critical Feminism”, Lawford-Smith outlines the foundations of gender-critical feminist theory. Central to this perspective is the view that biological sex plays a pivotal role. In this chapter, the author argues that biological sex is both a standard scientific term and a key factor in understanding women’s oppression. She asserts that it is integral to the concept of gender, as it shapes the social meanings attributed to it (47). Additionally, she maintains that recognizing relevant differences between men and women, such as physical distinctions, is crucial for protecting women in contexts like the workplace and sports (48).

In chapter 4, titled “The Sex Industry”, she critiques prostitution as exploitative and argues that it reinforces the notion that women’s primary purpose is to fulfill men’s sexual desires. She explores the reasons why most women engage in sex work, questions what and who can be bought or sold, and examines possible policy models. Ultimately, she advocates for the Nordic model, which criminalizes buyers and facilitators of prostitution while decriminalizing prostituted persons. She argues that this approach protects women from trafficking and exploitation by targeting the demand for prostitution within the sex industry.

In chapter 5, titled “Trans/Gender”, the author critiques gender identity approaches to defining what it means to be a woman, which suggest that being of a particular gender involves self-identification rather than biological factors. Gender-critical feminism, by contrast, grounds the concept of womanhood in biological sex and understands feminism as a movement focused on addressing the oppression of females. As such, gender-critical feminists reject identity-based approaches to sex, as these remove the essential reference to biological sex when defining

womanhood. In this chapter, the author also addresses the question of whether gender-critical feminism is “trans-exclusive”. She argues that gender-critical feminism is not “anti-trans”. Instead, she frames it as a movement centered on the liberation of females, which includes groups such as trans men and female nonbinary individuals (115). In chapter 6, Lawford-Smith continues explaining why she thinks that gender-critical feminism is unjustifiably vilified, focusing on the fundamental moral disagreement and political propaganda from various feminist and progressive circles.

In the second part of the book, Lawford-Smith poses the so-called “hard questions”, since it addresses complex and controversial matters for gender-critical feminism. Among these she includes questions such as whether gender-critical feminism is intersectional, whether it is feasible, and whether it is liberal. In chapter 7, she argues against the idea that feminism should be intersectional, although acknowledging the interplay between gender and other forms of discrimination like race, socioeconomic status, physical and mental ability, etc. (145). In chapter 8, she discusses the feasibility of the gender-critical feminist movement, where she generally endorses government intervention, especially in contexts where she thinks women’s rights and protections are threatened, including sports, workplace discrimination, and violence (174). Chapter 9 discusses liberalism and its roots in the works of John Locke and John Stuart Mill, and the chapter focuses on highlighting the similarities and differences between the gender-critical feminist movement and liberal ideology.

In the final, chapter 10, titled “A Gender-Critical Manifesto”, she summarizes her claims, emphasizing the importance of ending of male violence against women, protecting women’s health and bodily autonomy, and supporting women’s freedom of thought and their access to and full participation in public life.

One of the advantages of this book is the precise articulation of the author’s views. She was able to distinguish gender-critical feminism from other forms of feminism while attempting to find common ground with other feminists without deviating from its original claims. Moreover, the book offers connections to a wide range of philosophical fields, including epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, ethics, and political philosophy, making it potentially relevant to philosophers with diverse interests.

However, as might be expected, while Lawford-Smith highlights specific challenges faced by women and many of her calls to end oppression against women are well-founded, the book also presents several controversial

claims. The book faced petitions and protests before its publication, as the author's views can be interpreted as aligning with those often labelled as TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist), which are frequently associated with transphobia (118).¹ These issues seem to stem from one of the central claims of the book that grounds feminism in the idea of biological sex differences between men and women. This framing of feminist theory raises important questions: can gender-critical feminism effectively address the contemporary challenges affecting women, as well as the diverse conceptualizations of womanhood across disciplines and social practices? To what extent does this approach engage with broader concerns about inclusivity and intersectionality within contemporary feminist theory, while recognizing that issues affecting women as women may also intersect with broader social issues impacting other groups?

There is also room for disagreement on issues in the book that have provoked less controversy, such as those related to prostitution. While it is widely acknowledged that significantly more women and even children than men are coerced into sex work, and such coercion is undeniably morally wrong, one might still question why an informed and consenting adult woman cannot freely offer sexual services and require the state to regulate such transactions. After all, despite the Nordic model's decriminalization of sex workers, it remains associated with well-known problems linked to criminalizing aspects of prostitution. These issues include pushing sex work underground, which can exacerbate stigma, discourage sex workers from seeking help, limit access to healthcare, and reduce the reporting of violence.

In conclusion, I think that the book is thought-provoking and invites further discussion across several philosophical and ethical fields of inquiry, including their intersection with biology and the social sciences. While many progressive voices view it as controversial, it must be acknowledged that achieving universal agreement on complex issues is virtually impossible. Disagreement is inevitable, and fostering open dialogue is essential in an open society. For this reason, and despite the controversies surrounding it, I would recommend this book to anyone interested in exploring the different strands of contemporary feminist theory, as well as the challenges it faces and aims to resolve.

¹ For media coverage of the controversy surrounding the publication of the book, along with commentaries provided by philosophers, see the following posts on *Daily Nous*: "OUP Responds to Letter Regarding *Gender-Critical Feminism*" and "OUP's Decision to Publish Gender-Critical Book Raises Concerns of Scholars and OUP Employees".

