

Feminism and Support for the Transgender Movement in Britain

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Abstract

To what extent do feminists support the transgender movement? This visualization presents a recent British survey, which asked whether transgender women should be allowed to compete in female sports. Graphs depict how attitudes vary with feminism and age. Overall, feminists are more likely than nonfeminists to favor the rights of trans women, but this association conceals significant differences among generations. For young people, the relationship between feminism and support for transgender women is unequivocally positive. Among older people, by contrast, feminists are polarized. They are more likely than nonfeminists to strongly support trans women but also more likely to strongly oppose them. Whether this polarization is peculiar to Britain, where the transgender movement has met with particularly strong countermobilization, is a question for future research.

Keywords

transgender, feminism, public opinion

In the last decade, surveys have delineated the social bases of support for the transgender movement across the English-speaking world. Young people and women are more likely to favor the movement's claims, as are those with liberal political attitudes (Clery 2023; Kazyak et al. 2021; Norton and Herek 2013). Given that the transgender movement is championed by established feminist organizations like the National Organization for Women and by leading feminist intellectuals (Butler 2020; MacKinnon 2023), one could expect to find favorable attitudes among feminists. Nevertheless, a dissident strand of feminism opposes the transgender movement, framing it as a threat to women's rights (Jeffreys 2014; Raymond 1979). This strand of feminism has been particularly influential in Britain (Hines 2020).

The 2023 British Election Study provides new evidence on the association between feminism and attitudes to the transgender movement (Fieldhouse et al. 2023). It asked whether "Transgender women (someone who was biologically male at birth, but now identifies as a woman) *should be allowed to compete in female-sex sport*" (original italics). The domain of sports elicits less support than other domains—such as bathrooms (YouGov 2022)—and so this question provides a lower bound on support for the transgender movement. Only 4 percent of respondents strongly agreed that trans women should be allowed to compete in female sports, whereas 42 percent of respondents strongly disagreed. Feminists can be identified from the question

"How much discrimination is there for or against women?" on a scale of 0 to 10. I categorize respondents who selected 10 ("a lot of discrimination against women") as feminists. They comprise 6 percent of respondents; almost three quarters of them are women.

Multinomial logistic regression is used to predict the six responses to the transgender question, including "don't know." This method, unlike linear or ordinal logistic regression, permits testing the hypothesis that feminists are more likely to strongly support *or* more likely to strongly oppose transgender women, rather than to express more moderate opinions. The model includes age and age squared and their interactions with feminism because one would expect younger feminists to be most supportive of trans women.

Figure 1 shows how the two extreme responses—strongly agree and strongly disagree—vary with feminism and age. (The remaining four responses are given in Figure A1 in the

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Correction (May 2024): This article has been updated since initial publication to correct two minor errors and to replace Figure 1. Please see [insert DOI of correction notice] for more information.



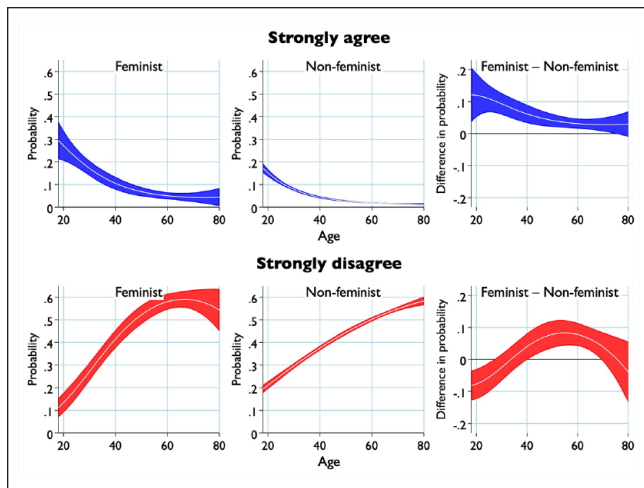


Figure 1. British attitudes to transgender women competing in female sports.

Source: British Election Study, Wave 25, 2023 (n = 29,662), weighted to be representative of the adult population.

Note: Outcome is the answer to whether “Transgender women...should be allowed to compete in female-sex sport.” This answer is predicted, using multinomial logistic regression, from age, age squared, feminism, feminism \times age, and feminism \times age squared. Indicator variable for feminism is coded from “How much discrimination is there for or against women?”, answered on an 11-point scale. Respondents who selected the maximum discrimination against women are coded 1; those who selected any other point on the scale or “don’t know” are coded 0. From this regression, the graphs depict the predicted probabilities of the extreme responses, “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree.” In each row, the left graph shows the predicted probability for feminists, and the center shows that for nonfeminists. The right graph depicts the difference between these two predicted probabilities, which is positive if feminists have a higher probability than nonfeminists. Shading indicates 95 percent confidence intervals. Before the early 30s, feminists are more likely than nonfeminists to strongly agree and less likely to strongly disagree. Beyond that age, feminists are polarized: more likely than nonfeminists to strongly agree or to strongly disagree.

Online Supplement, while Figure A2 provides cumulative probabilities.) The probability of strong agreement is shown on the top row. The left and middle graphs depict the predicted probability for feminists and nonfeminists, respectively. To facilitate comparison, the right graph delineates the difference between the probabilities for feminists and for nonfeminists. The 95 percent confidence intervals are shaded. At all ages, feminists are more likely to express strong agreement than nonfeminists. The difference is particularly pronounced for the young. At the age of 20, feminists are 12 percentage points more likely than nonfeminists to strongly support transgender women competing in female sports. The bottom row shows the probability of strong disagreement. The effect of feminism varies according to age,

as can be seen clearly on the right graph. Young feminists are less likely than their nonfeminist peers to strongly disagree. From the mid-30s, however, the pattern reverses. Feminists become more likely than nonfeminists to strongly disagree. (The reversion after the mid-70s is an artifact of fitting a quadratic curve for age and is not statistically significant.) At the age of 60, feminists are 8 percentage points more likely than nonfeminists to strongly oppose transgender women competing in female sports.

Overall, then, feminists are somewhat more likely than nonfeminists to favor the transgender movement and less likely to oppose it. But age makes a difference. In older people, feminism has a polarizing effect, associated with stronger opposition as well as stronger support. This nonmonotonic pattern is detectable only using multinomial regression on a large data set. The pattern is found only among respondents who perceive the highest levels of discrimination against women, which suggests that feminist opposition to the transgender movement comes from radical feminists (see Figure A3 in the Online Supplement). Whether this polarization preceded the recent countermobilization against the transgender movement is impossible to gauge because earlier surveys lack comparable questions on trans rights. Whether this polarization is found in other countries is a question for future research.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author Biography

Michael Biggs is associate professor of sociology at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of St. Cross College. He studied at Victoria University of Wellington and Harvard University. His research on social movements addresses two themes: the volatility of protest waves and self-inflicted suffering as protest. This research has been published in *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *Social Forces*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *European Sociological Review*, *Politics and Society*, and *Mobilization*.