

## [Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 4: TERF Wars

This episode contains language that might not be suitable for children.

So for someone who's never heard the term turf, trans-exclusionary radical feminist, what is a turf?

Where does that term come from and what does it describe?

Yeah, I'm not sure you're getting quite how offensive a term is to many people.

Think about it like the word queer, which some people are very happy to self-describe as.

And for other people, it's the term that, you know, someone with a skinhead shouted at them before trying to beat them up outside a nightclub.

And that's how a lot of women feel about turf, you know.

Some feel that they've reclaimed it, others feel that this is a word that they associate with people who want to slit their throat.

So it's one that I would handle with tongs, as it were.

It stands for trans-exclusionary radical feminist.

And it kind of doesn't mean any of those things anymore.

I'm often called a turf, even though I've written in print that I think trans women are women.

It doesn't matter, though.

It just means this is a bad woman.

You don't need to know any more about her.

I mean, turf is basically witch.

I had been becoming increasingly concerned about the way in which women were being shut down.

Women who I felt had some very valid concerns.

I was starting to see activists behaving in a very aggressive way outside feminist meetings.

Like what were they doing?

They were banging and kicking on windows.

Very threatening.

They were masked.

I'm looking at an assault now on freedom of speech, freedom of thought, even freedom of association.

Chapter 4, Turf Wars.

Growing up, what did you understand feminism to be?

Who were the feminists that you looked up to and what did you see them fighting for?

I was very feminist in my late teens, early 20s.

And I was reading books that even then were a little outdated.

People like Kate Millich, Jermaine Greer, Simone de Beauvoir, obviously, who was dead by the time I came to her book.

I would describe myself now and probably then too as an idealist, definitely, but never really an ideologue.

I was and always have been passionately concerned about the plight of girls and women, not only in the West, but further afield.

JK Rowling was born in 1965 and that means that she lives her youth through a particularly vibrant time for the UK feminist movement.

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In 1971, the first women's refuge opened in Britain, in Chiswick, in West London. And that was the first time that women who had been beaten up by their partners had somewhere to go.

They had somewhere to leave.

You're saying there weren't places like that until 1971?

Yeah, the first one was founded by a woman called Erin Pizzi.

Very shortly after we started, women began to come and to talk about the fact they were battered at home by their husbands and they seemed to be able to get no help from the social services, from the police, or from their solicitors.

And her stories about that first refuge are a heart-breaking, you know, women walking in covered with bruises, covered in cigarette burns.

Nobody seemed to be doing anything constructive to help, they just seemed to be sending these women back to the men who beat them and some back to be killed.

In 1971, when Rowling would have just been a young girl heading off to primary school, the world was seeing the development of something that women in my generation grew up largely taking for granted, a place to go when you've been the victim of what we now call domestic violence.

He came home one day and he cut me right across to you with a carving knife.

I had to wait until he collapsed and fell asleep, you know, before I could go to the hospital.

The things that people were going through in private behind closed doors during that time are now quite horrifying to reflect on.

He strangled me once and all I could remember in the end was all this blood, thick, slimy blood all coming out of my mouth.

I was on the line between life and death.

And it was part of a wider movement that decade about the idea that you weren't just talking about what police used to euphemistically called wife beating, which was usually done in response to nagging and was therefore just a domestic.

All of that language got swept away and people instead began to talk about domestic violence and that the idea that this was a crime and that was something that caused real harm and needed to be prosecuted.

The shelter not only gave women a safe refuge, but it also raised awareness of how often these things were happening.

And that paved the way for real changes in law enforcement and social services.

This is the founder of that first shelter, Erin Pizzi, speaking in 2014.

And the other problem also, unless she had a family to go to who would protect her, there was no money because as soon as she tried to go to get some kind of security money from social security, but your husband in those days mostly, your husband wants you back.

So therefore you're not entitled to anything.

Protecting women from both partner violence and the poverty that could befall them if they tried to leave their husbands became a primary focus of British feminism throughout Rowling's youth.

So that was a big theme of the 70s and 80s, as was reclaimed the night.

Police are investigating the discovery of a woman's body on a playing field in the

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Chapletown district of Leeds.

The woman who hasn't yet been identified was found by a milkman on his early delivery round.

So in 1977 you had reclaimed the night, which was a response to the Yorkshire Ripper, who was a serial killer of women.

The Yorkshire Ripper.

Like his Victorian predecessor, Jack the Ripper, he mutilated his women victims.

Sutcliffe murdered 13 women across Yorkshire and the north west of England between 1975 and 1980.

He was also convicted of the attempted murder of seven other women.

And this provoked an enormous feminist backlash, and the backlash really to the idea that women weren't safe in public spaces, you know, that women were living under this constant threat of male violence and intimidation, and that sparked marches all across the UK in the world.

It is magical for men, they hunt down random victims, find in the dark solace, sanction and sanctuary.

We will have to take back the night.

It's very much a feature of the culture in which I grew up, that women, by virtue of their biology, are subjected to specific harms, specific pressures, and require certain protections. And that that is inextricably linked with our biology, and we cannot fight for our rights without naming and accurately describing what makes us different from men.

Rowling says that this was all foundational to her understanding of why feminism was necessary. Because for generations, the reality of male violence and predation was a fact that had been ignored, downplayed, and even excused, until feminists fought for it to be recognized and remedied in as many ways as possible.

My feminism must remain grounded in the sex class and the oppressions my sex class suffer. That's the basis for our oppression, that's my understanding of why certain things have happened to me.

And of course, we now know that Rowling herself needed these protections and services in her own life.

And while watching these women fight for their rights, Rowling says she also watched as they were constantly vilified for it.

British feminism faced all the same attacks that American feminism did, that it was being carried out by ultra-leftists, by overgrown student protesters, by people who were probably lesbians or not normal women in some other sense.

Feminists were hugely disparaged across the mainstream.

They were ugly, they didn't shave their armpits, they were aggressive, they were butch.

And I suppose I see real parallels with now, with the slur that is turf.

All the same tropes about a woman not behaving the way a woman is supposed to behave.

You know, all of the cliches.

Which brings us to today.

We'll be right back.

This podcast is supported by Moink Box.

Before I moved to a tiny farming community nearly a decade ago, I didn't really have

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a sense of where my food came from or how it was raised.

Now I do, because I subscribe to Moink Box.

Yes, that's Moo plus Oink.

I know a lot of family farmers, and Moink is a meat subscription box company on a mission to fight for the family farm.

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Moink delivers grass-fed and grass-finished beef and lamb, pastured pork and chicken, and sustainable, wild-caught Alaskan salmon straight to your door.

As a working mom with an infant, a preschooler, and a full-time job, I will do anything to save time, energy, and brain space, and Moink is a hack I'd recommend to anyone.

If you want to support this podcast and American farmers, just visit [moinkbox.com](https://moinkbox.com) slash witch trials right now and get free filet mignon in every order for a year, but only for a limited time.

Spelled M-O-I-N-K, that's [moinkbox.com](https://moinkbox.com) slash witch trials.

I have been obsessed with mail since I was a little girl.

It always seemed so magical, these letters and packages from faraway friends and family just appearing at my house.

Postal workers would take the letters I scrolled and whisk them away to my globetrotting grandmother.

And that childhood fixation is still going strong.

Don't get me wrong, I love the ease of digital communication too, but there will always be something special about real mail.

And what's great now is that there's a tool that makes it super easy to ship letters and packages all over.

Stamps.com lets you print your own postage and shipping labels right from your home or office, and it's ready to go in minutes, no complicated setup or equipment required.

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Over the past couple of decades, the fight for LGBT rights has experienced many landmark victories.

Hugging, kissing, and toasting in the streets.

Notably, the legalization of same-sex marriage in both the U.K. and the U.S.

An historic milestone for gay couples in England and Wales.

Just one of many same-sex unions today, proudly under the banner of love, but now also under

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the protection of the U.S. Constitution.

Today we can say, in no uncertain terms, that we've made our union a little more perfect.

Even legal restrictions were dropped on same-sex couples' ability to adopt children.

And a record number of LGBT candidates have been elected in races across the U.S.

80 percent of Fortune 500 companies protect their transgender employees.

Most major cities protect their transgender residents.

Starting today, transgender individuals may openly join the U.S. military.

And in just the last decade, trans rights and acceptance in particular have come into the spotlight.

Culturally, with the visibility of trans celebrities like Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner, but also through a series of big institutional wins, from the dropping of restrictions on military service to the Bostock decision from the U.S. Supreme Court.

Supreme Court has ruled that LGBT Americans are protected by the anti-discrimination laws of this country.

Such in 2020, ruled that trans citizens have equal protection under the law and cannot be discriminated against in areas like housing and the workplace.

This is a major civil rights opinion in the Supreme Court.

And yet...

Overnight, protesters taking their battle cry for transgender rights directly to the White House.

J-Mon Trump, protect the trans students.

There's also been a backlash to some of these gains, whether it's from President Trump, who overturned Obama-era protections for trans health care and military service, or populist leaders across the world, figures like Victor Orban in Hungary, who are stoking attacks on the very legitimacy of LGBT identities altogether.

But that was not the fight that JK Rowling would eventually step into.

I think the hardest thing for outsiders to understand is that there are two different arguments going on.

One is the traditional conservative right argument, which is anti-LGBT.

So someone like Victor Orban in Hungary doesn't think people should be allowed to transition and wants to take away that right from them, which is part of a broader idea that LGBT identities are decadent and post-modern and are going to sort of sap the vital life force out of the country.

That is one criticism of modern LGBT politics.

The other one is a criticism from the left, in which it says, sometimes male people and female people have different interests, no matter how the male people identify, and we need to work out those conflicts in policy and law.

Recently, a conflict has been growing within the political left.

Among many of the very same people who have long fought for and cheered on, these recent gains in LGBT rights.

A conflict about whether sometimes the fight for trans rights is ever at odds with the hard one gains of the women's rights movement.

That is very different from saying someone's a pervert or a degenerate, right?

It says you are perfectly free to live your life.

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This is a perfectly valid identity to adopt.

However, there might be times when it comes into conflict with other identities.

Take for example, women's sports.

Former swimmer Leah Thomas is breaking barriers and records.

Leah Thomas to the wall first, and that is a new Ivy League meeting record.

Recently, a swimmer at the University of Pennsylvania, who competed on the men's team as a freshman,

sophomore, and junior, transitioned and began competing on the women's team.

Leah Thomas dominated this weekend's women's swimming Ivy League championships.

Not only winning major championships, but also breaking women's swimming records.

Thomas is eligible to compete under NCAA rules, which require transgender athletes to complete at least one year of testosterone suppression treatments.

This prompted many to come out and argue that it's unfair for someone who went through male puberty to join the women's team.

Because they argued, the athletic advantages that come with male puberty cannot be fully erased with hormone therapy.

You're never going to be able to remove male physical advantage.

Not all of it.

You may be able to remove a third of it, or you may even be able to remove a heart.

This included Olympic athletes like Sharon Davies, Michael Phelps.

I believe that we all should feel comfortable with who we are in our own skin, but I think sports should all be played at an even playing field.

And Caitlyn Jenner.

It is just not fair.

And also, feminist.

The heart of all of this, there really are just two issues that people feel strongly about.

Fairness in sports, on one hand, and the importance of acceptance and inclusion on the other.

Many of these feminists point out that they have fought hard and are still fighting for funding and resources for women's sports.

And they see a real conflict in interest here that needs to be addressed.

But some trans athletes, like Thomas, ask, how is this situation all that different from the fact that there are real physical variations between all individuals?

I'm not a medical expert, but there's a lot of variation among cis female athletes.

Quick note, the term cis refers to people who are not transgender.

There's cis women who are very tall and very muscular and have more testosterone than another cis woman, and should that then also disqualify them?

And many trans advocates say that attempts to prohibit trans women and girls from playing women's sports is a form of bigotry.

And this conflict becomes both more complicated and more contentious when it's not women's sports at issue, but women's spaces.

Things like women's bathrooms, locker rooms, domestic violence shelters, and even prisons.

In recent years, that tension has become much more urgent, especially for some feminists in the UK because of a proposed legal change that's often referred to as self-ID.

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Well, campaigners are worried about potential changes to the Gender Recognition Act, which would allow men and women to choose their own gender arguing it could enable predatory men to abuse women in single-sex spaces.

The legal suggestion that it was going to be made much easier to change your legal gender was what made this not just an abstract discussion among feminists and queer theorists, but a matter of quite urgent public policy in Britain.

We say no to self-identification, we say no to males and women's prisons.

For years in the UK, if a trans person wanted to be fully recognized by the government as their preferred gender, they needed to go through a medical evaluation and receive a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, which essentially is an intense discomfort that people can feel if their gender identity does not match their body.

But this proposed change would allow people to alter their legal sex or gender based largely on, as the name suggests, their self-declared gender identity without any medical requirements or diagnosis at all.

It was a change some trans people wanted, in part because they felt that the need for a diagnosis was stigmatizing.

The arguments came about the idea that as it stands, the procedure involves gatekeeping. You need to prove to doctors that you're trans, which is exactly what the trans activists hated about it, the idea that someone else gets the final stamp on your very personal identity.

But the feminist argument was that some level of gatekeeping was necessary in order to safeguard single sex spaces.

In other words, the removal of that need for a medical diagnosis, the elimination of that gatekeeping, concerned some feminists, especially those shaped by movements like Take Back the Night.

They worried that predatory males would find some way to take advantage of these looser actions, to harm women and girls.

They were concerned that in a good faith effort to make things easier for trans people, the government was aggravating risks to women.

I've been watching this.

I've been interested in it, and I did a lot of reading around it.

And as this public debate grew, one of those concerned feminists was J.K. Rowling.

So I was already aware that the activism was arguing for this kind of self-identification, therefore an entirely male-bodied male, can by self-declaration become, in inverted commas, a woman, conceptually as it were.

He's now conceptually a woman.

And I was troubled by that activism because after a long life dealing with certain issues, whether as a donor or an activist myself or from being a woman, I think I have a very realistic view, not a scaremongering view, on what may happen when you loosen boundaries around single-sex spaces for women and girls.

So that troubled me.

Have you thought through what this could mean for women and girls?

I can already hear the screams of outrage.

You are saying that trans people are all predators.

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Of course I am not any more that I'm saying I'm a happily married straight woman.

I know perfectly well all men aren't predators.

I know that.

I have good men in my life who are among my favorite people.

But I'm also aware that 98% to 99% of sexual offenses are caused by those born with penises.

The problem is male violence.

All a predator wants is access.

And to open the doors of changing rooms, rape centers, domestic violence centers, to open the doors to any male who says I'm a woman and I have the right to be here, it will constitute a risk to women and girls.

Now that actually has very little to do with trans people and a lot to do with what we know are the risks from men to women.

But this is the flash point.

The activists who would argue against me, I've seen them say, but these are now women.

And I say, well, here is where what a woman is becomes hugely important.

And I also ask myself a question I think is such a useful and basic question to ask yourself if you want to ascertain whether you're being intellectually honest.

What proof would I need to see to change my opinion?

And so I asked myself that question.

Okay.

So I thought, well, it's being claimed that nobody has ever abused dressing as the opposite sex and no trans woman has ever presented a physical threat to a woman in an intimate space.

Obviously, if I go looking and there is literally no evidence that's ever happened, well then clearly my fears are baseless.

So I went and looked and it's with no pleasure that I say that there was very clear evidence that that had happened.

Our top story tonight, a transgender prisoner sexually attacked inmates in a female jail.

So there's a famous case in England of a trans woman called Karen White, who was convicted of sexual offences and sent to women's prison and then sexually assaulted two women.

The court heard how she used her transgender persona to put herself in contact with vulnerable women.

She'd ended up in the female Newhall Prisoner Wakefield on remand after a number of sexual offences, including rape.

Tonight questions about how someone who'd raped women and who claimed to be transgender ended up in a female jail before undergoing any proper gender reassignment and was able to abuse fellow inmates.

That happened and it was quite a big moment, I think for UK feminism, for all these people who'd been told that this would never happen to finally have evidence that in fact it had happened.

Can you articulate where those on the opposing side of this debate are coming from?

Like what is the steel man good faith way to understand the argument that says if your gender identity is female, then medical transition or not, you should be housed in a women's prison.



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There is a completely reasonable argument, which is that trans women are particularly at risk of sexual violence in male prisons.

And that is a fact.

There are lots of groups who are vulnerable, particularly in male prisons.

Male prisons are in any case a really horrible place to be.

The conditions are horrible, you know, they're violent, tense places to be.

And you know, America where there's much greater rates of incarceration, those problems are amplified.

So I do think there is a completely reasonable point to say, if you are a trans woman who has been convicted of a nonviolent crime, is it going to be a huge risk to your safety to be put in an immense prison?

Yes, it is.

And the conclusion that Britain has come to really is that people with a gender recognition certificate, that is people who have legally fully transitioned, the presumption should be that they should be in the female estate.

And then for everybody else, it's an individual case conference.

But with the presumption that if you're convicted of a violent or sexual crime, you cannot be safely held in the women's prison estate.

Now that's not what's happened in America at all.

And the ACLU, the great liberal organization, have been fighting on behalf of trans women, some of whom have been convicted of violent offenses, to stay in the women's estate.

And that is very alarming to me.

The ACLU has also been fighting on behalf of trans people when it comes to bathroom access. And there's a similar argument playing out there.

Investments are concerned when they hear of assaults by trans women or males who pose as trans women in public bathrooms.

There's one well-publicized example that involves an attack on a 10-year-old girl in Scotland. It's rare, but it does happen.

There are extensively documented cases of it.

However, we should be really careful that we shouldn't play into a moral panic narrative that says that people are going to transition just to predate on people.

The thing I would say is that predators exploit any loophole that they can.

And that is something that we should always be alert to.

When you're doing safeguarding, you can't have a kind of rosy view of humanity.

You have to look at what the worst that could happen is.

So I think while maintaining that it is rare, I think you have to acknowledge that it happens.

Because assaults in bathrooms are so rare, trans people often find it galling and humiliating when decision-makers try to force them to use the bathroom of their sex at birth.

It's just routine, like everyone goes to the restroom, everyone gets out.

It's nothing, it's not a big deal.

Many trans people report that they avoid public bathrooms as it is, out of fear of being called out or even attacked.

And this makes it difficult for them to just be in public, at a concert or a stadium, but even more importantly, at work or at school.

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And advocates ask, when the risk to others is low, why impose interventions that could make this tough situation any harder?

It's just going to the bathroom.

You go do your business, then you wash your hands and then you leave, it's just simple.

And when people make a big deal about it, it just kind of gets blown out of proportion.

In an increasingly polarized world, gender issues have become the front line, and it can be hard to know where to start, how to express an opinion, if it's even okay to voice one.

Yet as the chasm between opposing views increases, it's vulnerable children who've fallen into the abyss.

And finally, the issue that's brought this once obscure debate into the center of culture is the medical transition of young people.

Child transition, and that's particularly acute because the composition of the group of people trying to transition as children has changed, and it has grown enormously.

Now, in recent years, there's been a huge increase in the number of children reporting gender dysphoria.

You know, we're talking about a difference in Britain between a couple of hundred people a year, two thousands a year in the last decade or so.

The clinics here and in London see 3,000% more patients than they did 10 years ago.

Among girls, referrals are up more than 5,000%.

Across the Western world, there has been a sharp rise in the number of minors who are seeking to transition, especially among young females.

And in just the US, the number of clinics that help young people transition has grown from zero to more than 100 in just the past 15 years.

There's no question this service is helping children who feel distressed in their own bodies, with a full impact of children making decisions about their gender at such young ages may not truly be clear until much later in their lives.

5,000 children were referred to the clinic last year, and that's a 20-fold increase on the number a decade ago.

That's huge, isn't it?

Yeah.

So that means you've got...

There's definitely something going on there, and whether or not those people are getting the right treatment is a big question, when the treatments are themselves so new is a very fraught question indeed.

One controversy related to child transition is a treatment often referred to as puberty blockers.

Now, these drugs are not new.

For decades, they've been used to treat a condition where a child begins puberty early, sometimes as young as age six or seven.

Blockers halt that development, and then a child can resume the process years later, alongside their peers.

That's a very different use case than the modern way of using them for trans children, which is to block puberty in your natal sex and then go straight on to cross sex hormones

from the other sex.

Young people with gender dysphoria tend to be extremely distressed by their changing bodies.

So gender clinicians began using these drugs off-label to halt their puberty, and then later might introduce cross sex hormones.

So for example, a female would grow facial hair, or a male would develop breast tissue.

I've been concerned for some time that there are providers who are not following the standards of care, which historically have invoked the need for an individualized comprehensive biopsychosocial evaluation prior to the initiation of medicines.

This is Dr. Erica Anderson, a psychologist who has worked extensively with transgender youth and who is herself a transgender woman.

She's also a former board member of WPATH, the World Professional Association for Transgender Health.

As Dr. Anderson told me, WPATH recommends that before prescribing interventions like puberty blockers, clinicians should methodically evaluate a young person, that they should take time with a minor and their parents to investigate any underlying conditions and make sure that this is the right treatment for each individual.

But puberty blockers have become a flash point, in part because some clinicians do not appear to be following those guidelines.

So what I've seen in the USA, and this has been reported elsewhere, is that there are some young people who are going to providers and obtaining puberty blockers and hormones, but not having a full mental health evaluation, and I think that's sloppy and bad practice.

Over the past decade, it has become increasingly common for parents and doctors to adopt an approach where they affirm a child when they say they're trans.

But Dr. Anderson says that some well-meaning clinics and doctors have gone further than that, and that in their attempts to support gender non-conforming kids, they have stopped asking important questions, and often too quickly accept a child's self-assessment.

Some trans advocates argue that that's exactly what clinics should be doing, as this popular TikTok video explains.

Dr. Anderson says that, especially when dealing with kids, you need to ensure that you're diagnosing them correctly, just as you would with any other medical condition.

But in addition, child and adolescent brains are still developing, so rushing a young person into gender transition without a full evaluation of other co-occurring conditions is bad practice.

And this, to me, flies in the face of the history of medicine, clinical medicine, and clinical psychology, which the hallmark of which is an individualized evaluation before you provide treatment.

This concern on my part is further accentuated by the phenomenon we've also seen in the last few years, which is a flood of young people going to gender clinics expressing gender variance way out of proportion to what we've ever seen before, and in numbers that are not entirely understandable.

Dr. Anderson and other clinicians still believe there are benefits to using puberty blockers for some kids with gender dysphoria, but they are also urging caution, especially to doctors who offer these treatments based largely on a young person's request for them.

And that's partly because these treatments, puberty blockers followed by hormone therapy,

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can lead to infertility, and for young males whose puberty is blocked in its early stages, a high likelihood of never experiencing an orgasm.

She says that doctors need to ensure that these treatments are being provided just to those who need them, and that they aren't misdiagnosing patients.

Ruby began identifying as male at 13 years old.

Now 21, she'd been planning to have surgery to remove her breasts, but in May she made the decision to come off testosterone and detransition to identify as female, her sex at birth.

Stories about young people who regret their decision to transition have been well publicized in recent years.

They often say that as children, they weren't capable of consenting to treatments with lifelong consequences that they couldn't truly comprehend.

Others say they wish clinicians had spent more time looking into their other mental health issues before recommending medical transition.

One of these young women spoke with Sky News.

Ruby now feels her eating disorder was more of a factor than she first realized in her gender dysphoria.

One of the therapists that I spoke to brought that up, they didn't think that it was linked.

Do you?

I think so, yes, because they're both kind of based in how I feel about my body, so I've seen similarities between the two.

There's currently no data for how many in the trans community detransition, and to talk about it can be viewed as transphobic.

Young people like Ruby say more discussion is needed, as well as more options for people with gender dysphoria.

Accounts like these have served as confirmation for those concerned that young people are not getting the support they need.

At the same time, they've been a source of deep frustration to many trans advocates who say that regret is rare and that we should trust kids to know that they are who they say they are rather than putting them through months or years-long evaluations.

What complicates all of this is that the protocols for youth gender care are so new.

The current president of WPATH, Dr. Marcy Bowers, cites a figure that about 80% of the research on youth gender medicine has been done in just the last 10 years, and though there are currently no authoritative long-term studies about the phenomenon of detransition nor about the overall effectiveness of some of these treatments in minors, Finland, Sweden, and the UK are all currently re-evaluating their youth gender treatments and calling for more resources, more studies, and tighter protocols to be put in place.

I'm pleasant as adolescence is.

I mean, I hated adolescence.

I do not romanticize adolescence.

I think it's a dreadful time.

I remember times of pure joy when I was with my friends and I remember fun, but if you ask me, do you want to go back to being 13 tomorrow and live it all again, I would say absolutely bloody not.

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I want to say exactly where I am, but I do think that it is a necessary part of our development. Rowling told me that watching this sharp rise in youth transition, especially the rise among young females, started to feel like a particularly feminist concern and something that resonated with her from her own childhood.

I grew up in what I would say was quite a misogynistic household.

Like all young girls, I grew up with certain standards of beauty and ideals of femininity.

I felt I didn't fit into either of those groups.

I didn't feel particularly feminine and I certainly didn't feel that I looked the way

I was supposed to look.

I looked very androgynous at 11 and 12.

I had short hair and I can certainly remember in adolescence feeling acutely anxious.

I think this is so common.

In fact, I think I know more women who have felt it than not.

I felt very, very anxious about my changing body because you become aware it's attracting scrutiny that you don't welcome.

I can remember the comments about your body, the difficulty of dealing with periods, period shaming particularly from boys at school, this sort of squeamish fascination that young men have with female bodies that is a mixture of disgust and desire.

It's very difficult to cope with that.

I question my sexuality.

I'm thinking, well, I can tell my friends are pretty, does that mean I'm gay?

Which I think is very common.

I grew up to be a straight woman, but I've never forgotten that feeling of anxiety around my body.

So is it your position that it's too big of a decision essentially for a child to make, to transition and experience these long-term consequences that they can't yet comprehend? Personally, I don't believe even a 14-year-old can truly understand what the loss of their fertility is.

At 14, if you'd said to me, do you want children?

I'd have said, no, I don't want to.

But it has been the most joyful, wonderful thing in my life.

That doesn't mean I think everyone should have kids.

It doesn't mean I think to be a woman you need to have kids.

I'm talking very personally, for me, my children have been an unmatched joy, and I wouldn't change a thing.

And I couldn't have comprehended that at 14.

I would have had no idea what I was giving up.

And yet, as I sat with Rowling and listened to her views about youth transition, it was clear that they aren't black and white.

My feeling is, and it's a feeling that was strongly expressed in the Potter books, that as many diverse life experiences as possible should be explored and expressed.

And having felt like an outsider in several different ways in my life, I have a real feeling for the underdog.

And I have a real feeling for people who feel they don't fit.

## [Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 4: TERF Wars

And I see that hugely in the particularly among younger trans people.

I can understand that feeling only too well.

But seeing this recent surge in numbers seemed like something worth questioning soberly.

Gender dysphoria exists.

It causes massive distress.

I know it's real.

And I know there will be, I believe, a minority of people for whom this will be a solution.

But in the numbers we're currently seeing, particularly of young people coming forward,

I find cause for doubt and cause for concern.

So I did what I always tend to do when in that situation, so I read a ton of books.

That is my instinct.

Rowling said that she went out and bought some of the big bestselling memoirs by trans authors.

Out of this gender identity movement, so Jacob Tobias, Sissy, Andrea Long-Chu, brilliant writer, females, gender games, the trouble with men.

She read essays.

Is gender fluid, Dr. Sally?

And academic literature from influential thinkers like Judith Butler.

And I'm reading countless blogs and articles.

You're trying to have your views challenged.

Completely.

Because I really want to understand what is the thinking through personal experience, but also the philosophy, the ideology.

I'm looking at this and I'm thinking, am I missing something?

We'll be right back.

Hi, my name is Joshua Hirsch and as COO of the Free Press, I know firsthand just how difficult it can be to manage the operations of a fast growing business and how important it is for a business to have visibility into and control over its financials, especially in this economic climate.

And that's why I'd love to tell you about NetSuite.

NetSuite by Oracle is the number one cloud financial system to power your growth and is trusted by over 33,000 companies to gain visibility and control of their financials, inventory, HR, planning, budgeting, and more.

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93% of surveyed businesses cited increased visibility and control after upgrading to NetSuite.

So, on behalf of the Free Press, I have to say, if you run a business and need a best in class financial system, we strongly recommend NetSuite.

So go to [netsuite.com](https://netsuite.com) slash witch trials right now.

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That's [netsuite.com](https://netsuite.com) slash witch trials.

## [Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 4: TERF Wars

Hi there, listener.

My name is Nellie Bowles.

I'm a writer for the Free Press.

Every Friday, I publish a column I call TGIF, where I run down the big and small news stories of the week while cracking jokes at my own and others' expense, mostly my own.

Anyways, it's fun, but it's also informative and, dare I say, occasionally provocative.

At the Free Press, we publish investigative stories, provocative opinion pieces, and podcasts like this one.

The goal, or at least my goal, is to surprise our readers and to follow my curiosity.

If you're curious, if you're interested, come on, you're interested, right?

Come check us out and become a subscriber today at VFP.com.

Over the months and years that Rowling was immersing herself in queer theory and memoirs of different trans thinkers, this conflict between some feminists and trans activists continued to escalate.

The debate's due to start in an hour, and suddenly protesters come in wearing masks.

We're putting on a event tonight.

We've got all these young people in bandanas trying to force their way in.

They've got faces covered, they're actually being aggressive and violent.

She pushed me when she got in.

I'm not she, you fucking gun!

I prayed all the way!

In the past few years, as the feminists have tried to organize meetings and debates to discuss everything from women's sports, to self-id, to the proper treatment of gender dysphoria in kids, they've been met with protesters trying to shut them down.

As a trans activist protesting outside a feminist meeting, they're shouting turf.

It stands for trans exclusionary radical feminists.

Across the country clashes are erupting between the two groups.

These activists say that trans women are women, full stop.

And to them, to engage in a debate at all, is to engage in transphobic hate speech.

And then we come to the famous two-word slogan, the stock phrase, no debate, no debate, no debate.

We hear it all the time.

That alarms me.

Really alarms me.

I can't think of a purer instance of authoritarianism than no debate.

In fact, that is the attitude of the fundamentalist.

You may not challenge my ideas.

That makes you evil.

I am righteous.

I don't have to explain my righteousness.

And I am entitled, therefore, to bully you, to harass you, to silence you, to take away your livelihood, all the way up to attacking you.

I've had things thrown at me.

I've been accused of things I have never done or said.

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People seem to have no concern about evidence or even about libel.

Many of the feminists labeled as turfs have been attacked and received death threats, along with accusations that, despite what they say, they are actually Nazis and fascists.

There have been physical assaults of women called Maria McLaughlin.

She was at Speaker's Corner in London, which is an infamous site for freedom of speech.

It's where people can go and say whatever they like, pretty much.

And she went there to a feminist meeting and she was physically assaulted by a trans woman called Tara Wolf, who was convicted of assault, who had said online, before going to that meeting, I want to fuck up some turfs.

When I cover this subject, I often say that afterwards I need to relax by covering something uncontroversial, like Israel-Palestine or abortion, right?

It's extremely fraught.

This is Michelle Goldberg, reporter and columnist at The New York Times.

And one reason it's extremely fraught is that you have two groups of people who feel legitimately feel extremely embattled.

You wrote about this conflict in The New Yorker in 2014 in an article called What is a Woman?

And even back then, you talked about how intense the threats and intimidation tactics were towards feminists who were voicing these views.

You quote some of the online threats in the article, which said things like, kill turfs 2014.

How about slowly and horrendously murder turfs in saw-like torture machines and contraptions?

A young blogger holding a knife posted a selfie with a caption, fetch me a turf.

Such threats, you write, have become so common that radical feminist websites have taken to cataloging them.

Yeah.

I mean, I think that those quotes that you just read, I don't think those people are representative of the trans rights movement.

But nevertheless, there's a lot of feminists who feel like aggrieved at people kind of constantly saying, if you don't recognize me as a woman, I'm going to rape you.

They feel like there is this very vicious online dialogue in which a really brute sort of misogyny is dressed up in progressive clothes.

And so to add insult to injury, you're not even supposed to complain about it within feminist spaces.

It should be possible to have a discussion where there are a range of different people who could enter into a dialogue about this.

These feminists believe that their views are not only inside the bounds of respectable discourse, but also that the accusations that they are violent transphobes feels less like a sincere criticism and more like an attempt to smear them so that no one will listen to them.

I mean, what we're seeing in the world is more and more people shutting down free speech. You're censoring ideas, you're shutting down controversy, and in a democratic society, that's how we come to a better understanding of each other.

And beyond just online insults, this approach from activists has had real-life consequences.

Women expressing these views have lost their jobs in publishing, in academia, in journalism,



and the arts.

Women athletes have been dropped by advertisers, authors dropped from book deals. For voicing her concerns, Dr. Erica Anderson, a trans woman who's helped dozens of kids medically transition, has been labeled a turf and disinvited from public events.

Michelle, from your reporting on this over the years, what is the best way to understand the side of the protesters in this conflict?

The people who are calling to silence these debates, where are they coming from, and what do they feel is at stake in all of this?

Well, look, what's at stake for a lot of people is just the ability to live their lives with any sort of dignity and security.

And again, I want to emphasize, and I hope this makes it into the podcast, that that is why I think the temperature of this is so high.

Because especially in the United States, trans people are so embattled.

You have these sweeping oppressive laws.

3,919 anti-transgender bills have been introduced in state legislatures this year alone.

Sewing the state of Alabama after the governor's making their way through Ohio's legislation.

Arkansas, passing a bill, blocking gender-affirming care for trans...

Activists are calling the move an attack on the LGBTQ community.

Despite the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that protects transgender Americans from discrimination, and despite President Biden overturning the Trump-era policies against trans health care and military service, there have been hundreds of proposed or recently passed laws that have sought to limit trans people's access to bathrooms, their participation in girls and women's sports, and to restrict medical transition for minors.

And some of the laws come with severe penalties.

Last week, Alabama became the third state in the nation to pass and measure restricting gender-affirming care for transgender and non-binary youth.

But it's the first state to actually impose criminal penalties.

The law would make providing that care a felony, punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

Additionally, online, just as there are some trans advocates who send violent and harassing threats toward the people they call TERFs, there are also many others, often coming from the right and the alt-right, who send violent and harassing threats towards trans activists and their allies.

Some based on accusations that any attempt to teach kids about trans identities is actually a smokescreen for a desire to sexually exploit young children.

And in this climate, many activists feel that feminists calling for open dialogue and good-faith debate are really just opening them up to greater harm.

I think that what is so painful for them is that they feel like these issues of daily survival are being treated as secondary to culture war flashpoints, you know, around these kind of relatively few handful of cases involving women's sports, these few cases where there's really hard calls about things like prisons or domestic violence shelters and people that I've spoken to feel that the intense focus on these issues is itself kind of undermining them, right, that like they feel so under siege and when people are really scared and they're really under siege, then they don't want to have a kind of searching, probing conversation about the legitimacy of their identity for kind of obvious reasons.

## [Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 4: TERF Wars

Yeah, and they don't want to hear debates about, you know, nuanced issues when they feel like they're fighting for basic rights.

Right.

I mean, I think you'll often hear people say, you know, I'm not going to debate my basic humanity.

And part of the difficulty is that there are indeed certain issues which we have sort of decided somewhat collectively with some sort of consensus are beyond the realm of debate. And I think that part of what is so difficult about this issue is that there are certain people who think that this kind of consensus can be imposed maybe as opposed to evolve organically.

And so they're sort of desperately trying to shore it up in the hopes, I think, that if they can, they will enjoy the same sort of assumed protection as other groups whose rights we've decided are not up for public conversation.

I think the problem is that we don't actually have a consensus about what gender means or what makes someone a boy or girl or woman or man.

And so you still have to talk these things out and have these conversations.

And I think there are plenty of trans people who believe that, but the people who are policing the discourse have maybe outside visibility.

Okay.

So let's go back to 2016, 2017.

You obviously are a very public person.

You are not shy in general about speaking your mind, and it seems like you've had really strong views about what you were reading.

And you had done a ton of reading and research and thinking, did you want to join the public conversation at the time?

Did I want to join the public conversation?

Yes.

Why did I want to join it?

Because I was watching women being shut down.

And it was as though there was no woman perfect enough to say her piece.

If she's a regular woman with no particular platform, she's a bigot.

That's that.

You're a bigot.

If she's an informed woman who is working in a sphere where this will really have an impact, and for example, I saw a prison governor speaking out, this is not okay.

These are already traumatized women.

Huge abuse hurled at a shut up.

You don't really understand what you know about being a trans woman.

It seemed there was always a way to shut down women's voices.

People are terrified, terrified of speaking up.

So I really was starting to feel this moral obligation.

I knew what was coming, but I thought other people, there are people who probably, if I'm honest, probably could speak and don't want to speak.

They're not going to lose their livelihoods, but there are a ton of women who are being

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forced not to speak because they literally won't make rent.

So I actually wanted to join the conversation and speak up earlier than I did.

And I was not held back, I'm not saying that I couldn't have done it anyway, but there were people close to me who were begging me not to do it.

I think out of concern of what that would mean, they'd watched what had happened to other public figures, and there was certainly a feeling of this is not a wise thing to do, don't do it.

So I'm living in this state, once again, actually, I'm living in what I feel is a duplicitous state.

I have this massive concern, I'm watching women being shut down and bullied, their employers being targeted by a movement that I see as authoritarian, illiberal.

I'm hugely concerned about young people, often the kind of young people who found a refuge in my books.

So there's a feeling of empathy there because I was one of those young people myself.

And I absolutely can say that I was living in a state of real tension, similar to when I'm planning to leave my ex-husband, because although I am not physically in danger, I am lying by a mission, I should speak up.

I feel the right thing here is to try and force this conversation, because on behalf of people I'm seeing shut down, who do not have my, I mean, let's face it, insulation, right, from...

It is insulation.

It is that privileged white woman, absolutely.

I am protected in ways I never dreamt I would be protected.

Of course, I'm also exposed to threats that other people sometimes aren't exposed to, but it's more than that.

Whatever happens, if everyone decides you are an evil witch, we will never buy your books again.

I can feed my family.

They will know I'm fine.

My world doesn't crash.

My kids don't go hungry.

I once lived that life.

That was the potential of making a bad financial decision and spending £2 too much one week.

So I reached a point of high tension, and I have to say something.

You're saying you felt obligated.

Yeah, there did come a point where I felt obligated because I felt I'm being contacted by women.

By the way, these women aren't even the same to me, do it, do it, you do it, you do it.

No one's trying to coerce me into it.

It's just that I'm having these conversations and the climate of fear was scaring me more than speaking out.

What are we letting happen here?

This is insane that there's this much fear around a woman arguing that she has the right to describe her life and her body in any way she chooses.

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This is insanely regressive.

But also, I did reach a point where I thought I can't keep living with myself if I don't say something.

So it was personal as well.

I have to speak.

I just have to.

Believe you me, I did not feel any sense of joy in that.

I didn't think, yippee, I can't wait for this.

This is going to be amazing.

I really thought this is going to be horrible, but I've got to do it.

I cannot let myself in the mirror if I don't do it.

So I did.

More to come next time.

You've been listening to the Witch Trials of JK Rowling, produced by Andy Mills, Matthew Bull, and me, Megan Phelps-Troper, and brought to you by the Free Press.

Our sincere thanks to you for listening, and we would love to listen to you too.

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