



DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

Open Forum – Strange bedfellows: Anti-trans feminists,
VOX supporters and biologist academics

Lucas R. Platero

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos

lucas.platero@urjc.es

DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 10, Issue 2

<https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.89997>

Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281

Content is licensed under a Creative Commons BY

DiGeSt is hosted by Ghent University Website: <https://www.digest.ugent.be/>

Strange bedfellows: Anti-trans feminists, VOX supporters and biologicist academics

In 2015 and 2016, Professor Esther Mayoko Arjonilla and I wrote two articles that demonstrated the absence of major conflicts between feminist and trans movements in Spain. We explained that since the democratic transition of the 1970s, Spanish feminism had been strongly committed to the sexual and reproductive rights of ‘women’, an inclusive category. This also applied to lesbians, though not without some internal struggles to claim that space (Pineda 2008). We hypothesized that lesbian feminist groups had been the necessary allies for the inclusion of trans women, often based on factors like personal friendship ties, and their leadership in addressing sexual rights (Platero & Arjonilla, 2015). Another key element was the overlap between the two movements in the feminist critique of the pathologization of women, in consonance with critiques of the psychopathologization of trans women.

Dating back to 1993, programme of the national feminist conference organized by the group Coordinadora Feminista included debates on the rights of trans women that introduced their realities from within feminism.¹ Coordinadora Feminista’s leaders have emphasized how the feminist movement opened up as it learned about the circumstances surrounding trans. During a subsequent national conference held in Córdoba in 2000, the transfeminist activists Laura Bugalho and Kim Pérez extended these discussions on what it means to be a woman and how their experiences as trans women were also part of a feminist struggle that had begun during the 1993 conference. Indeed, at the 2009 feminist conference held again in Granada, this was a central topic of discussion, and a call was made to support a transfeminism that challenged gender and sexuality binaries, stressing the importance of intersectionality and postcolonial criticism. Here was the evolution of a trans-inclusive feminist movement associated with the sexual rights of women, but we were oblivious to what was to come.

In fact, only three years later, a current of anti-trans feminism broke out in Spain, a trend that we had underestimated and that was outside the social mainstream debate. The anti-trans currents – so-called trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF) – arose forcefully in Spain in 2018. As observed by activist Sam Fernández, until that time, the term TERF was almost unknown (2024, forthcoming).

Why did the TERF movement appear in Spain in 2018?

Several triggers converge in this respect. One is related to the status of anti-trans feminists with important positions in or ties to the Socialist Party (PSOE), but who remained outside the Ministry of Equality, led by Podemos Party member Irene Montero between 2020 and 2023. Well-known feminists from the time of the democratic transition have flaunted their anti-trans activism, alongside female academics associated with second-wave feminism, feminists from the left-wing Izquierda Unida Party² with a Marxist feminist tradition, and new activists attracted by these figures and their clear political agenda. Many are familiar faces from their participation in the 2015 international ‘We are not Vessels’ campaign against gestational surrogacy and the international platform ‘Stop Surrogacy Now’, which also took a stance against prostitution.

Compared to grassroots feminist movements, TERFs comprise a smaller group, but their social and political status have made them highly influential and the object of media attention (Platero, 2020; Romero Bachiller, 2020). In fact, TERFs have become specialists in using far right-wing media tactics that are highly viral on social media. A specific foundational event for Spanish TERFs was their social media reaction to a 2018 speech given by transfeminist activist and scholar Sam Fernández that called for the expansion of feminism, asserting that “we need to risk the political subject of feminism [...] not to carry

¹ During the conference programme, the trans activists Kim Pérez and Mónica delivered a presentation on ‘Transsexuality’, while the feminist psychologist Cristina Garaizabal gave a lecture entitled, ‘My name is Pepe; I feel like a María’.

² The United Left Party expelled Lía Falcón for her anti-trans activism in 2018.

on securing women's bodies as a biological entity". The short videoclip went viral,³ with thousands of views and tweets not only discussing the relevant topic, but also opening the door to a backlash on the inclusion of trans women in the Spanish feminist movement (Willem et al., 2022).

These anti-trans feminists would break the consensus about the struggle for sexual rights in Spain that is strongly associated with LGTBI+ social movements and groups that have advocated for laws at the state and autonomous community level, and achieved an array of cultural changes regarding the social acceptance of these rights. The high visibility of LGTBI+ activists, artists, politicians and intellectuals in Spain is now being interrupted by the problematization of trans rights, questions about the existence of LGTBI+ or transgender children, the erasure of cis women, criticisms of the participation of trans women in sports and more.

Sam Fernández has highlighted six key landmarks in the evolution of the TERF trend in Spain (Fernández, 2024 forthcoming): 1) the dissemination of the PSOE's case against the 4/2003 LGTBI+ law,⁴ led by government Vice President Carmen Calvo (PSOE, 2020); 2) the 2021 Rosario de Acuña Feminist School meeting that brought important Socialist leaders and academics outside the coalition government's Ministry of Equality together; 3) the split in the 2020 International Women's Day demonstration in Madrid into one general meeting and one meeting limited to TERFs; 4) the creation of the Alliance against the Erasure of Women, a 'feminist alliance for the rights of women based on gender'⁵; 5) the 2023 conference against the 'trans law', organized by the Conservative Party, where feminist Amelia Varcárcel was the keynote speaker; and 6) the Platform for Catalonia, which challenges Catalonia's innovative, award-winning trans health care.

However, despite their profile, TERFs are only one of the anti-trans political actors in Spain, and they have made some important alliances, most notably with the far right and anti-trans psychologists in the academy.

The far-right VOX party

In 2018, a far-right political party, VOX, won seats in the parliament of Andalusia for the first time, soon to be followed by seats in the Spanish parliament in 2020. VOX is known for flaunting their opposition to gender ideology and support for the dismantling of feminist, LGTBI+ and other leftist 'lobbies' (Olivas Osuna & Rama, 2021). The party has also played an important role in drawing attention to trans individuals, using messages so similar to those promoted by anti-trans feminists that they are often indistinguishable.

As Marta Cabezas has observed (2022), gender plays a crucial role in VOX's strategies and agenda-setting. The party has mobilized gender in their campaigns, which draw on a nationalistic myth and militaristic masculinity, an opposition to gender violence policies and a delegitimization of feminism as an enemy of the Spanish nation – combined with a reappropriation of feminism when needed to defend feminists on the political right from the 'evil' trans women who want to erase them and their rights.

VOX has used social media, the Internet and apps, like WhatsApp and Telegram, to spread messages against feminist advances and the 2023 LGTBI+ law and to disseminate fake news and repeat the anti-trans slogans promoted by anti-trans feminists (Barrio et al, 2021, p. 245). The party has important links to the ultra-Catholic organization HazteOír ('Make Yourself Heard'), founded in 2001 and granted official charity status in 2021 by the People's Party government (later revoked by the PSOE-Podemos government) (Cabezas,

³ <https://twitter.com/PODEMOS/status/1051077505652846594>

⁴ On 28 February 2023, the Spanish Parliament passed the new LGBTI+ rights law (commonly referred to as the 'New Trans Law', since what was meant to be two different bills on LGBTI+ and trans rights were combined into one during the final political negotiations) (Jefatura del Estado/Spanish Government, 2023).

⁵ See <https://contraelborradodelasmujeres.org>

2022). HazteOir became recognized in 2017 when it launched a bus campaign, touring Spanish cities with the anti-trans message: 'Boys have penises. Girls have vaginas'.

In 2013, HazteOir merged with the international ultraconservative group, CitizenGo, spreading their transphobic messages to a wider international audience (Cornejo-Valle & Pichardo, 2017). CitizenGo is famous for promoting campaigns worldwide for 'freedom, family and liberty' and for organizing online petitions, mobilizing conservatives to take part in protests and engage at the local and national level (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, p. 45). As Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk have demonstrated, their strategies consist not only of building transnational networks, but also choosing targets that use the local culture with a larger goal in mind (2022, p.45). For analysts like Jesús Bastante (2018), VOX cannot be understood without the decisive support of HazteOir, and many sources have identified secret ultraconservative organizations like El Yunque as a source of financing for both VOX and HazteOir (Urban, 2023; Ramsey & Provost, 2019). Member of the European Parliament Miguel Urbán (2023) has written that the Wikileaks leaks in August 2021 brought to light the fact that HazteOir and CitizenGo were fronts for El Yunque while it provided funding for VOX, helping the party to win at the polls.

Why is VOX repeating anti-trans feminist discourses? Do they produce the same messages, aimed at the same people? Anti-gender narratives are useful in Spain because they differentiate one conservative party from another on the political spectrum and from anti-trans groups, something that VOX has done quite successfully. Nonetheless, the far right does not need to be part of the social debate against trans rights as long as the TERFs are doing the job of criticizing not only trans individuals and the 2023 LGTBI+ law,⁶ but also former Minister of Equality Irene Montero and what she represented: specific feminist ideals, such as introducing women's consent into legislation governing violence against women, defending trans-inclusive feminism and a new abortion law, amongst others (Montagut et al., 2023). However, VOX is part of the social debate against trans people both offline and online, and the party is capable of capitalizing on defending anti-trans feminists. In 2021, VOX leader Santiago Abascal wrote about the threat posed by the LGTBI+ draft law for women and children:

'If this disgraceful bill goes ahead, any citizen (also any rapist or abuser) will be able to choose their legal gender, without any relation to their biological gender [...]. It is no wonder that most feminist leaders, including many Socialists, have demonstrated against this outrage. Of all the leftist government laws, this one will be the most rejected by the historical representatives of the feminist movement.'

(Abascal, 2021)

Studies led by La Intersección (2023) have shown that although TERFs and the far right employ quite similar slogans on social media in Spain, they target different audiences. Both have highly connected supporters, who are extremely active online despite their low numbers, and they also exchange a notable number of retweets. However, while TERFs are claiming their space for a feminist hegemony by establishing an anti-sex rights agenda, the VOX campaign is part of a broader agenda beyond feminism and trans rights.

Academics turning back to biology

Disciplines like psychology, psychiatry and education are taking a conservative turn that mirrors the anti-trans ideals professed by TERFs that defend sex as an innate biological

⁶ Amongst other provisions, this law offers self-determination to trans individuals, which means that they do not require a medical diagnosis to change their name and gender on documents (beginning at the age of 14). It also bans practices like the genital mutilation of intersex people and conversion therapies, in addition to offering parental recognition for non-birthing parents and access to assisted reproduction for lesbian and bisexual women.

marker, challenging the possibility of gender self-determination (a trans claim that was thoroughly debated in Spain between 2017 and 2023, when the LGTBI+ law was passed). Using their academic legitimation and the support of conservative Spanish publishing houses like Deusto, the top publisher of anti-trans books, these academics join TERFs and VOX supporters in denouncing the imposition of the queer ideology, the erasure of women and the silencing of ‘true’ feminism (López-Saéz et al., 2023; Willem et al., 2022). As López Sáez et al. (2023) observed, these academics use activist-like jargon to successfully introduce the idea that a scientific debate on trans rights is required, challenging affirmative psychology, international guidelines and the academic consensus on the need to research LGTBI+ lives and experiences (Coleman et al., 2022).

These academics wield arguments about negative and irreversible consequences for children, along with other commonplaces: freedom of expression, the realness of biology, the inability of trans children to know their gender, the manipulation of the trans movement in society, the contagiousness of transgenderism, the risks of ‘rapid-onset gender dysphoria’, the high number of detransitions and so forth (López Moya, 2023; Erratsi et al, 2023; Errasti & Pérez, 2022; Carrasco et al., 2022; Esteve & Alsedo, 2022; Shrier, 2021).

These arguments are not new, but now they come from a source that is more difficult to ignore. These academics have made visible alliances, not only with relevant TERF academics,⁷ but with large international companies such as Grupo Planeta, which owns over 100 publishing houses including Deusto, a variety of media outlets and more than 20 private universities. In the words of well-known feminist academic Amelia Varcárcel during a speech on 25 March 2021,⁸ by reifying sex and asking that the concept of gender be allowed to lapse, these academics are paving the way to return to essentialist narratives about men and women that feminism worked hard to leave behind (Alabao, 2022).

I argue that these three anti-trans forces – TERFs, VOX, biologicist academics – can only be understood as strange bedfellows, since they do not always operate according to a coordinated plan, although their actions shift the mainstream debate. Indeed, as an anti-trans movement, they are fragmented, lacking a clear and common structure or leadership. Nonetheless, these anti-trans stakeholders are endangering the hard-fought rights of LGTBI+ people. They have also enabled the spread of hate speech against LGTBI+ individuals and trans women in particular, heretofore unknown in Spain, destroying a consensus about the acceptance of these rights. Lastly, the feminist movement is showing cracks, with the legitimization of the possibility of being an anti-trans feminist, something unthinkable ten years ago.

However, Spain’s trans-inclusive feminism continues to grow bigger and stronger, with more nuanced and articulated narratives about the shared and different spaces that trans and feminist movements need. The concept of intersectionality is increasingly present in Spanish feminism, along with important critiques from a variety of groups, including the Afro-Spanish and migrant communities, Roma feminists and women with disabilities.

Despite the many similarities between the arguments made by these three social actors – TERFs, VOX and biologicist academics – when it comes to analysing and being able to counter these discourses, we would be well advised to understand the motivations, characteristics and positions of each one. In this respect, there is a need to continue to research and provide evidence of the effects of each of these narratives and supposed alliances, not only regarding trans individuals, but feminist movements as well.

⁷ For example, declared anti-trans feminist Amelia Varcárcel wrote the foreword to ‘*Nadie nace en un cuerpo equivocado*’, when she was Spanish state advisor and a full professor at the UNED (Europa Press, 2022).

⁸<https://twitter.com/laurelyeye/status/1507138735690772482?s=20&t=sM7sya6OOXGazuP2XIvbOw>

References

- Abascal, S. (2021). “La Ley Trans, una amenaza para mujeres y niños”. *Vox*. <https://www.voxespana.es/actualidad/la-ley-trans-una-amenaza-para-mujeres-y-ninos-20210702-2/6/2021>
- Alabao, N. (2022, April 4). “Dejar descansar el género o abandonar la categoría mujer”. *CTXT*. <https://ctxt.es/es/20220401/Firmas/39315/feminismo-Nuria-Alabao-amelia-valcarcel-personas-trans-LGTBIQ-.htm>
- Barrio, A., Alonso S., de Oger, S. & Field, B. N. (2021). “VOX Spain: The Organisational Challenges of a New Radical Right Party”. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 240-251.
- Bastante, J. (2018, December 7). Las conexiones de Vox con HazteOír, los 'kikos' y una docena de obispos españoles. *Eldiario.es*
- Cabezas, M. (2022). Silencing Feminism? Gender and the Rise of the Nationalist Far Right in Spain. *Signs, Journal of women in Culture and Society*, 47(2), 319-345.
- Carrasco, S., Hidalgo Urtiaga, A., Muñoz de Lacalle, A., & Pibernat Vila, M. (2022). *La Coeducación Secuestrada: Crítica Feminista a la Penetración de las Ideas Transgeneristas en la Educación*. Octaedro.
- Coleman, E., Radix, A., Bouman, W., Brown, G., De Vries, A., Deutsch, M., Ettner, R., Fraser, L., Goodman, M., Green, J., et al. (2022). Standards of Care for the Health of Trans and Gender Diverse People. *International Journal of Trans Health*, 23 (Suppl. 1), S1–S259.
- Cornejo-Valle, M., & Pichardo J. I. (2017). La “ideología de género” frente a los derechos sexuales y reproductivos. El escenario español. *Cadernos Pagu* (50). <https://doi.org/10.1590/18094449201700500009>
- Esteve, V. & Quico A. (2022, November 17). “Consejo de Psicología de España: “Antes Teníamos Cuatro Consultas de Cambio de Sexo al Año En Cada Unidad. Hoy Hay Días de Cuatro o Cinco””. *El Mundo*. <https://www.elmundo.es/papel/historias/2022/11/17/6374e6a3fc6c8360278b45a1.html>
- Errasti, J., Pérez Á. M., & de Arquer, N. (2023). *Mamá, soy trans: Una guía para familias de adolescentes con conflictos de género*. Deusto.
- Errasti, J., & Pérez, M. (2022). *Nadie Nace en un Cuerpo Equivocado*. Deusto.
- Europa Press. (2022, December 14). “La filósofa socialista Amelia Valcárcel clausurará las jornadas del PP en el Congreso contra la Ley Trans del Gobierno”. <https://www.europapress.es/sociedad/noticia-filosofa-socialista-amelia-valcarcel-clausurara-jornadas-pp-congreso-contra-ley-trans-gobierno-20221214134355.html>
- Fernández Garrido, Sam (forthcoming). “TERF (Feminismo Radical Transexcluyente)”. In L. Alegre & E. Pérez Sedeño (Eds.), *Enciclopedia crítica de género*. (pp. page number-page number). Arpa.
- Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2022). *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (1st Edition). Routledge.
- Jefatura del Estado. (2023, March 1). *Legislación consolidada: Ley 4/2023, de 28 de febrero, para la igualdad real y efectiva de las personas trans y para la garantía de los derechos de las personas LGTBI*. Agencia Estatal Boletín Oficial Del Estado. <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2023-5366>
- La Intersección (2022, October 4). “Análisis de narrativas trans en Twitter: el odio está muy coordinado, pero no es mayoría”. *La intersección*. <https://lainterseccion.net/narrativas/analisis-de-narrativas-trans-en-twitter-el-odio-esta-muy-coordinado-pero-no-es-mayoria/>
- López Moya, C. (2023). *La secta: El activismo trans y cómo nos manipulan*. Deusto.
- López-Sáez, M. Á., Angulo-Brunet, A., Platero, L. R. , Bochicchio, V., & Lecuona, O. (2023). Attitudes Towards Trans Men and Women in Spain: An Adaptation of the ATTMW Scale. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. Global Health Section*, 20(3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20031872>

- Montagut, M., Willem, C., & Carrillo, N. (2023). Influencers y desorden informativo alrededor de la 'ley trans'. In A. Carratalà, M. Iranzo y G. López (Eds.), *De la desinformación a la conspiración. Política y comunicación ante un escenario mediático híbrido*. (pp. 255-275). Valencia: Tirant Humanidades.
- Olivas Osuna, J.J., & Rama, J. (2021). COVID-19: A Political Virus? VOX's Populist Discourse in Times of Crisis. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.678526>
- Pineda, E. (2008), "Mi pequeña historia sobre el lesbianismo organizado en el movimiento feminista de nuestro país". In R. L. Platero (Ed.), *Lesbianas. Discursos y representaciones, Barcelona* (pp. 31-59). Editorial Melusina.
- Platero, L. R. & Ortega-Arjonilla, E. (2016). Building Coalitions: The Interconnections between Feminism and Trans* Activism in Spain. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 20(1), 46-64.
- Platero, L. (2020). "Conocer nuestras genealogías". In A. Mayor et al. (Eds.) *Transfeminismo o barbarie* (pp. 27-50). Kaótica Libros.
- PSOE (2020). *Argumentos contra las teorías que niegan la realidad de las mujeres*. Madrid.
- Ramsey, A., & Provost, C. (2019, April 25). "Revealed: The Trump-Linked 'Super PAC' Working behind the Scenes to Drive Europe's Voters to the Far Right." *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-the-trump-linked-super-pac-working-behind-the-scenes-to-drive-europes-voters-to-the-far-right/>
- Romero Bachiller, C. (2020). "¿Quién teme al feminismo?" In Editor(s) (Eds.), *VVAA, Transfeminismo o barbarie* (pp. 15-38). Madrid: Kaótica Libros.
- Shrier, A.I (2021). *Un daño irreversible "La locura transgénero que seduce a nuestras hijas"*. Deusto.
- Urban, M. (2023, February 12). "Vox y el Yunque: un camino de ida y vuelta entre México y España". *La Jornada*.
- Willem, C., Lucas, P., & Tortajada I. (2022). "Trans-Exclusionary Discourses on Social Media in Spain." In T. Krijnen, P. G. Nixon, M. Ravenscroft & C. M. Scarcelli (Eds.), *Intimacies and Identities on Social Media* (pp.185-200). Routledge.