

Seeing all the suffragette colours on display tonight, convinced me it's appropriate that I start with the words of a greater, far more courageous woman than I, Emmeline Pankhurst said:

"I know that women, once convinced that they are doing what is right, that their rebellion is just, will go on, no matter what the difficulties, no matter what the dangers, so long as there is a woman alive to hold up the flag of rebellion" -

On Monday a group of audacious women, some here tonight, took up that flag. By dressing those statues with T-shirts bearing the words "woman - adult human female", they proclaimed that the female of the human species has the right to language and to definitions in law, science and society. A statement that should be uncontroversial and yet, in doing so, they attracted a barrage of righteous anger from those who wish to deny women this basic and fundamental autonomy.

For most of western history the definition of the word "woman" has been clear - if the associations uncomplimentary. Thomas Aquinas said woman was "defective and ill begotten" and Scotland's own John Knox wrote: "To promote a woman to bear rule... is repugnant to nature; ... it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice."

Who would be a woman at the height of the witch trials? Or in an age where women had no rights over property, earnings, or even their children? When they could not vote nor attend a university?

Our rights are so very new, brave women eked out small gains in the 19 century & greater ones in the 20. This is nothing in a historical context. My grandparents could recall the era before women's suffrage. But perhaps, in complacency, we had forgotten that our infant rights need to be nurtured, protected and cherished.

The word "woman" matters and women matter. If we cannot define ourselves and the oppression which women still face on the basis of our biology, we cannot fight for ourselves or our sisters. If our language is stolen, our voices are silenced. If we cannot see sex we cannot see sexism and we cannot define or defend sexuality. Classifications in the Equality Act, including sex, should enable structural inequalities to be analysed and, where necessary tackled - definitions have to be robust so data maintains integrity. But instead we see confusion - some deliberate - especially in conflation of sex with gender identity. Groups whose avowed aim is to remove sex as a protected characteristic in law advise governments, public bodies and authorities. FOIs revealed that they have given faulty advice to, among others, the police and NHS. The impact on women in changes to the law should weigh as heavy on government as the rights of any other protected group.

But in making this case and asking for debate women have been called hateful. They are vilified for objecting to dehumanising misogynistic language which reduces us to organs and bodily functions and are told that identity is the true cause of oppression, as though women through millenia chose second class status. Our existence is being redefined without scientific justification. Seismic social changes are being waved through without evidence while attempts to research or understand sociological phenomena are shut down. Ironically, in our secular age, faith not fact is being codified into policy and those who protest denounced like heretics: as John Morley said "where it is a duty to worship the sun, it is pretty sure to be a crime to examine the laws of heat." We have tried to shake off the shackles of the gender prison. Yet today, the arguments that stunted women's liberation are presented as progressive. In 2018 a children's book, Jack not Jackie, was published aimed

at four year olds which suggested that if a girl was clever, adventurous and brave then she was really a boy. Crass gendered stereotypes are celebrated rather than condemned as regressive and reductive.

Feminism should be the battle for women's rights. This does not mean that we oppose the rights of any other groups, simply that we should not be the only protected group who are constantly expected to put the demands of others before our own interests. A warped interpretation of intersectionality is invoked by some women who center feminism around personal choices. This feminism can be greedy and selfish. It validates desire above community. The antithesis of inclusive, it ignores those vulnerable women who are most of risk of exclusion or self-exclusion, abdicating responsibility for the demographic feminists are supposed to serve. Contrary to all evidence which shows that rates of assault rise in unisex facilities, some seek to jettison the single sex provisions which are supposed to ameliorate wrongs and offer protection.

It's been said many times but it still shocks: in Britain today, 2 women a week are murdered by a current or former partner, rape prosecutions are plummeting even as reported cases rise. Women still have not achieved equality of representation in politics, and in the workplace they continue to battle sexism, especially the expectations associated with pregnancy and childcare.

One third of girls have said that they have been subjected to harassment in a public place while wearing a school uniform. Cases of sexual assault in schools have doubled in recent years - estimates suggest there are 10 assaults, including one rape per day in UK schools. Children are exposed to the toxic effects of ever more brutal, misogynistic pornography and social media platforms are an especially poisonous place for girls. Yet, when LGBT youth's schools guidance was enthusiastically adopted by many Scottish councils they, the government and the children's commissioner failed to consider the evident potential for damage to girls. They did not consider girls' rights to privacy and dignity. They did not address concerns that girls sport could be eviscerated or that girls' safety would be compromised. It was left to the fabulous WGis to do the equality impact assessment which was published yesterday and laid bare the shocking safeguarding implications.

Now, I am a mother with sons and in a perfect world male violence and toxic masculinity would be eliminated I want to protect my boys too. We understand that male violence hurts men - especially those who do not conform to masculine expectations. But we do not make our sons safer by sacrificing our daughters. If any movement claims that equality can only be achieved by putting women at risk, undermining their status or driving them from the public sphere we should question their motivation especially if they reinforce that message by intimidation and the threat of violence.

There are grounds for optimism. We know from our meetings with MSPs that many are aware of these issues and have no wish to write bad law. A great number are listening and we urge women to continue to contact them with their concerns - highlighting the need to strengthen the rights of women and girls and the potential conflicts between the GRA and the Equality Act and their competing definitions of sex. Bring your personal testimony, explain your fears for children, implications for patients reviving intimate care, the potential trauma for victims of rape or domestic violence. We would also encourage you to constantly challenge any use of gender instead of sex by public bodies or councils (Murray Blackburn Mackenzie have produced a survey of how councils record this data): remind them of their public sector equality duty and of the law. Do not let self ID happen by stealth.

We do believe we can influence this debate, we were delighted with the submissions from many quarters to the committee considering the census Bill and are optimistic that they were positively received. As some of you will also be aware, the Scottish prison service have recently indicated they would review their policy which was co-written by Scottish Trans Alliance. This stated that prisoners should be housed in the estate of their self-identified gender and searched by officers in accordance with this. The upshot, of course, was that several high profile, male-bodied violent offenders were placed in women's prisons and could demand that intimate searches be carried out by female guards. The Equality and human rights impact assessment carried out at the time did not consider the implications for female prisoners or officers. We are thankful, the SPS have acknowledged need to consider the impact on women inmates.

And this, of course, is the reality of the erosion of women's rights. We are not here to quibble about toilets, although, some would rather keep the focus on this perhaps because it trivialises our concerns. We are also not here to create trouble for those who have battled crippling gender dysphoria and, yes, do need and deserve legal protections. We know that many of our trans allies have also faced abuse - often from the very people who claim to protect them. No, we are here because a policy of unregulated self ID is so replete with danger and it will cause material harm to so many. We have only to look to Canada where men use human rights tribunals to persecute women who refuse to provide intimate services or who try to shut down rape crisis centres. We are here because some seek to shut women out of this conversation while our rights are co-opted, we are here because women's boundaries are being attacked - especially those of lesbians who are told their sexuality is an exclusionary fetish and they have a duty to include males in their dating pool.

We are here because women across the globe are still abused and oppressed because of their biology. The infanticide of females, FGM, forced marriage, coercive rape, death in menstrual huts, denial of education, healthcare, reproductive or property rights are just some of the injustices women continue to face wholly and solely because of inescapable biology.

We are here because we want, need and deserve a debate. We are here because we should not need to beg for our rights. We are here because we cannot betray those who went before and certainly not those who come after: through the ages, courage still calls to courage and we cannot now deny its voice; so we must hold up that flag of rebellion, take hands and stand for women.