When Women Stop Listening to Women

There is a divide growing within women's communities, one that reaches into friendships, organizations, and gathering places that have taken decades to build. The subject is transgender women, the meaning of womanhood, and the future of female-only spaces.

It is a conversation that has become extraordinarily difficult to have. Emotions rise quickly. Words are scrutinized. Friendships fracture. People who have stood together through years of struggle suddenly find themselves on opposite sides of a question neither considers trivial.

At its heart is a deceptively simple question: What is a woman?

For some, the answer is clear. Transgender women are women. Gender identity is fundamental to who we are, and recognizing that identity is a matter of dignity and equality.

For others, womanhood is inseparable from biological sex and the experiences of being born and growing up female. They may fully respect transgender women as transgender women, support their safety and civil rights, and welcome them into their lives, without believing that gender identity changes biological sex.

These understandings are profoundly different. Yet the women holding them may share far more than they disagree about.

How did we reach a point where disagreement about one issue can seemingly erase a lifetime of shared values?

Must Respect Require Agreement?

There is a question beneath this conflict that deserves far more attention.

Does respecting someone's identity require us to share their understanding of that identity?

We encounter this distinction in religion, philosophy, culture, and countless other aspects of life. We can respect someone's deeply held convictions without sharing them. We can recognize the importance of those convictions to another person's life without surrendering our own.

We can respect how someone understands themselves, how they choose to live, and the meaning their identity carries, while holding a different philosophical understanding of sex and gender.

And we can do so without cruelty, ridicule, or denying anyone's humanity.

Of course, the distinction becomes more complicated when beliefs have practical consequences. Access to intimate spaces, legal protections, privacy, and safety cannot always be resolved by simply agreeing to disagree.

But surely we can distinguish between asking someone to behave respectfully and demanding that they adopt a particular belief.

The freedom to hold our own convictions and the responsibility to treat others with dignity are not mutually exclusive.

Perhaps genuine acceptance begins not when everyone agrees, but when we recognize that another person can hold a profoundly different understanding of the world without becoming our enemy.

Holding Two Truths

Life often asks us to hold two truths that seem to contradict one another.

Our minds resist this. We prefer clear answers, firm boundaries, and the reassurance of knowing who is right and who is wrong. Ambiguity makes us uncomfortable.

Yet much of life unfolds in that uncomfortable space between competing truths.

We can acknowledge that transgender people experience substantially higher rates of suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts than the general population. We can acknowledge their experiences of discrimination, harassment, and violence, and recognize the enormous emotional toll of living in a society where their identity may be questioned or rejected.

These are serious realities. They deserve compassion, attention, and meaningful efforts to reduce harm.

And at the same time, we can acknowledge that women have legitimate concerns about privacy, sexual violence, and safety in single-sex spaces.

Recognizing one vulnerability does not erase another.

A transgender woman may fear being harassed or assaulted if required to use a men's changing room. A woman who has survived sexual violence may experience profound distress at undressing in a communal space shared with someone who has male anatomy.

The experiences are different. The needs may conflict. But neither fear becomes imaginary simply because the other exists.

Compassion is not a limited resource. Extending it to one person does not require withdrawing it from another.

The challenge is not to decide whose vulnerability deserves recognition, but to find ways of protecting people when their needs collide.

A woman's desire for privacy is not automatically prejudice. A transgender woman's desire for inclusion is not automatically a threat. And neither person's dignity should require the other person's silence.

Why Female-Only Spaces Matter

For generations, women fought to create spaces of their own.

Places where they could gather without being watched or interrupted, where they could speak freely, undress, sleep, recover from violence, and find refuge from the expectations and sometimes the dangers of a male-dominated world.

For lesbians, these spaces carried an additional significance. Women's dances, music festivals, retreats, bookstores, and gatherings offered something often missing from the wider world: the freedom to be ourselves without explanation or apology.

They were more than physical locations. They were places where defenses could fall away, where women discovered friendship, desire, solidarity, and sometimes an entirely new understanding of their lives.

For some women, the boundaries of these spaces remain profoundly important.

Others believe including transgender women is consistent with the original purpose of these gatherings: offering sanctuary, belonging, and freedom from discrimination.

Both perspectives deserve examination.

The disagreement becomes particularly difficult when personal experiences of sexual misconduct enter the conversation.

At an all-women's camping retreat, a woman reported that a transgender attendee repeatedly came outside her tent at night and masturbated. According to her account, when she approached the organizers, she was told she must be mistaken and that nothing could be done.

Another woman described an incident involving sexual misconduct in a women's restroom at a community facility.

In Vancouver, a young woman entered a public restroom after a transgender woman who had reportedly been watching her followed her inside. According to the family's account, the individual adjusted her clothing in a way that exposed male genitalia as the young woman emerged.

Other women describe feeling watched while undressing in communal changing rooms.

These are personal accounts, not independently verified findings. They cannot establish how frequently such incidents occur or tell us anything about transgender women as a population.

But they raise an important question about how institutions respond when women report violations of privacy or safety.

Were their concerns heard? Was the behavior investigated? Were appropriate boundaries enforced?

Women have spent generations fighting against an old pattern of dismissal.

You misunderstood. You're exaggerating. You're making trouble. You must be mistaken.

We should be wary of reproducing that pattern, whoever is accused.

There are also documented criminal cases involving assaults in women's changing facilities.

On October 1, 2026, two women were allegedly sexually assaulted inside the women's locker room at a Planet Fitness in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

According to prosecutors, Laquan Holland, a man with a previous conviction for child rape, attacked a woman in the locker room. When a female employee attempted to intervene, she was also allegedly sexually assaulted.

Holland was arrested and charged with multiple offenses, including assault with intent to commit rape, kidnapping, and indecent assault and battery. He pleaded not guilty.

The reporting does not establish that Holland identified as transgender or that a gender-identity policy allowed him to enter the locker room.

The case does, however, illustrate the vulnerability women can experience in places where they undress and shower, and the importance of effective security measures and rapid intervention.

It also raises the broader question of how facilities should manage access and protect privacy without treating an entire population as suspect.

Equally, we must distinguish between misconduct and mere presence. A transgender woman using a restroom, changing her clothes, or attending a women's gathering is not committing an offense simply by being there.

Deliberate exposure, sexual intimidation, voyeurism, and harassment are different matters. They deserve a serious response regardless of the identity of the person responsible.

Where Rights and Boundaries Collide

Two legal cases illustrate how difficult these questions become when they move beyond philosophical disagreement.

In British Columbia, transgender woman Jessica Yaniv brought human rights complaints against female estheticians who declined requests for waxing services, including intimate waxing of male genitalia.

The women argued that they did not offer those services, lacked the necessary training, or were unwilling to perform them.

In 2019, the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal dismissed the complaints, finding that the providers had not unlawfully discriminated in refusing services they did not offer or were not equipped to perform. The tribunal also found that some complaints had been pursued for improper purposes.

The case raises a question about where an individual's right to equal treatment meets another person's right to bodily autonomy and professional boundaries.

In Washington State, a women-only Korean spa faced a different legal challenge.

Olympus Spa offered communal nude bathing and body treatments in facilities historically reserved for female patrons. After refusing admission to a transgender woman who had not undergone genital surgery, the spa faced enforcement under Washington's existing protections against gender-identity discrimination.

A federal appeals court ruled against the spa's constitutional challenge in 2025. The spa subsequently petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court.

From one perspective, the issue is discrimination against a transgender woman seeking access to services available to other women.

From another, it raises questions about the privacy expectations of female patrons and workers in settings where communal nudity is integral to the experience.

These cases are not identical. The first involves the consent and professional boundaries of individual service providers. The second involves access to a public accommodation.

But both force us to confront a difficult question.

What happens when one person's understanding of equality conflicts with another person's understanding of bodily privacy and consent?

Recognizing the legitimacy of that question does not require deciding in advance how every conflict should be resolved.

Women's Prisons: When Safety Cannot Be Optional

Perhaps nowhere are these questions more consequential than in prisons.

Unlike women attending a retreat or visiting a gym, incarcerated women cannot simply leave an uncomfortable or dangerous environment. Their safety depends upon the judgment, policies, and actions of correctional authorities.

Recent lawsuits involving transgender prisoners raise troubling questions about what happens when women report harassment or sexual assault and say their complaints have been ignored.

In April 2026, Katie Mountain filed a federal lawsuit against Maine prison officials and transgender prisoner Andrea Balcer.

Mountain alleged that Balcer had sexually harassed and assaulted her, forcibly kissed her, threatened rape, and repeatedly intimidated her while they were housed at the Maine Correctional Center.

Three additional women subsequently joined the litigation, bringing further allegations of harassment, threats, and sexual misconduct.

These are allegations before the courts, not established findings of guilt. But they raise serious questions about individual risk assessment, housing decisions, and the responsibility of prison officials to protect the women in their custody.

A separate case in Washington State resulted in a significant jury verdict in November 2026.

Former prisoner Mozzy Clark alleged that she had been repeatedly sexually harassed and assaulted by a transgender cellmate at the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor.

She said prison officials ignored or dismissed her complaints.

A federal jury awarded Clark $150,000 for violations of her constitutional rights. Separate negligence claims against the Washington Department of Corrections remained pending.

The case is significant because the jury found a violation of Clark's rights. It does not, by itself, establish what policies should govern every transgender prisoner's placement.

Official British prison records provide additional context.

Between 2016 and 2019, 97 sexual assaults were recorded in women's prisons in England and Wales. Seven involved a transgender prisoner, and in six incidents a transgender prisoner was identified as the assailant or suspected assailant.

Those figures establish that sexual misconduct involving transgender prisoners has occurred. They do not establish the relative risk posed by transgender prisoners generally, nor do they provide sufficient information to draw conclusions about transgender women outside prison.

There is another truth to hold alongside these cases.

Transgender women housed in men's prisons have also experienced serious sexual victimization. Their safety matters, too.

The question is not simply whether transgender prisoners should be housed according to biological sex or gender identity. It is how correctional authorities can evaluate individual histories, vulnerabilities, and risks without treating anyone's safety as expendable.

Being transgender does not make someone dangerous. Nor does it make someone incapable of being dangerous.

And when an institution has responsibility for people who cannot leave, neither identity nor ideology can substitute for careful judgment.

Safety, Evidence, and the Limits of Statistics

The transgender community is not monolithic. Neither is the lesbian community.

Transgender women have different histories, personalities, values, and experiences. Their beliefs about sex, gender, feminism, and female-only spaces are not necessarily identical.

As in every population, individuals can behave with kindness, cruelty, generosity, or violence.

The behavior of individual offenders cannot establish that transgender women generally present a threat.

What does the broader evidence tell us?

A 2018 Massachusetts study examined police-reported incidents in restrooms, changing rooms, and locker rooms. Researchers found no statistically significant relationship

between transgender-inclusive public accommodation laws and reported safety or privacy violations.

That finding is important. It also has limitations.

Police reports do not capture every incident, especially harassment or sexual misconduct that is never reported. Nor did the study consistently identify the gender identity of those involved.

Meanwhile, studies of transgender people's experiences frequently rely on surveys.

A California analysis of the 2022 U.S. Transgender Survey found that 17 percent of respondents reported some form of restroom-related harassment or violence during the previous year.

The most frequently reported experience was being questioned about whether they belonged in a particular restroom. Approximately one percent reported physical violence or unwanted sexual contact in a public restroom.

These experiences deserve attention, but verbal harassment, denial of access, physical assault, and sexual assault are different experiences. They should not be treated as interchangeable.

Nor do these survey findings establish how frequently transgender women are physically assaulted specifically in men's restrooms.

There is nothing inherently wrong with personal testimony or survey research. Women know all too well how much sexual violence goes unreported.

But we should examine evidence consistently.

We cannot dismiss one woman's experience because she did not file a police report while accepting another person's account without question. Nor should we reverse that standard.

The absence of a police report does not prove that nothing happened. And an individual account, however disturbing, does not establish how widespread a problem may be.

If safety is genuinely our concern, we need evidence that helps us understand risk, not simply evidence that supports what we already believe.

When Inclusion Begins to Feel Like Coercion

There is another aspect of this conflict that is rarely discussed without anger.

Some women feel they are being asked to do more than respect transgender women. They feel pressured to accept a particular understanding of womanhood as unquestionable truth.

They describe being told what language they must use, how they must understand their own sex, and which boundaries they are permitted to maintain.

For women who have spent their lives resisting male authority, these experiences can feel painfully familiar.

Some describe that feeling as male entitlement, the expectation that women's objections should give way to someone else's demands.

Others see this interpretation very differently. They understand transgender women's advocacy for recognition as the struggle of a marginalized group seeking equality, not an attempt to exercise power over women.

Both experiences deserve consideration, but perceptions of entitlement do not establish anyone's motives, nor do the actions of confrontational activists represent an entire community.

There is a difference between describing how demands are experienced and establishing what motivates the people making them.

Perhaps the deeper issue is our growing difficulty distinguishing between respectful treatment and ideological agreement.

A person may sincerely believe that recognition of her gender identity is central to her dignity. Another may sincerely believe that biological sex remains central to her understanding of womanhood.

Neither belief simply disappears because the other person feels hurt by it.

The challenge is determining what respectful behavior requires when those beliefs conflict.

Different Spaces, Different Needs

Perhaps one reason this debate remains so entrenched is that we talk about female-only spaces as though they were all the same.

A public restroom with enclosed stalls offers a different degree of privacy from a communal shower.

A changing room at a Pilates studio is different from a women's music festival.

A domestic violence shelter presents different needs from a public library restroom.

A women's prison raises questions of safety, supervision, vulnerability, and the consequences of confinement.

Might different spaces require different solutions?

Could more private changing facilities, individual shower stalls, clearly enforced conduct rules, and better procedures for reporting misconduct reduce conflict?

Are there circumstances where sex-based boundaries should be preserved? If so, what would make those boundaries justified, and how would transgender women's safety and dignity be protected?

Who should participate in making those decisions?

And how can organizations hear women who are uncomfortable speaking publicly without allowing the loudest voices on either side to determine the outcome?

These are questions that cannot be settled by slogans.

They require difficult conversations about competing needs, practical consequences, and the limits of any single solution.

When Communities Become Afraid to Speak

Perhaps the most painful consequence of this conflict is what it is doing to relationships.

Women who have marched together, organized together, loved together, and built communities of mutual support sometimes find themselves unable to discuss a subject that matters deeply to them.

Some fear being labeled hateful for questioning gender-identity policies. Others fear that expressing their identity or asking to be included will lead to rejection by the very communities where they hoped to find belonging.

And so conversations stop.

Silence may prevent an argument, but it rarely creates understanding. Instead, people retreat into circles where their beliefs are reinforced and uncomfortable questions are kept outside.

We become increasingly certain of what we believe and increasingly suspicious of those who believe differently.

Yet understanding does not require surrender.

We can listen to a woman explain why sex-based spaces are important to her without assuming that she hates transgender people.

We can listen to a transgender woman describe the pain of exclusion without assuming that she wants to dominate or silence other women.

We can acknowledge experiences of harassment and violence without making an entire community responsible for individual misconduct.

And we can recognize that some conflicts involve genuine competing needs that goodwill alone cannot resolve.

There is a difference between listening to understand and listening to prepare a rebuttal.

Perhaps we should begin asking more questions.

What experiences have shaped your understanding of womanhood?

What does safety mean to you?

What are you afraid of losing?

What do you wish people on the other side understood about your life?

And is there anything in another person's experience that might cause you to reconsider one of your assumptions?

The point of these questions is not to manufacture agreement. It is to recover our curiosity about one another.

Life will continue to ask us to hold truths that seem to pull in opposite directions. We will not always be able to reconcile them neatly.

But recognizing another person's vulnerability does not require dismissing our own. Respecting another person's convictions does not require surrendering ours.

Perhaps the measure of a community is not how comfortably its members agree, but how carefully they treat one another when agreement becomes impossible.

Can we recognize the importance of another person's beliefs without demanding that they abandon them, or surrendering our own?

And might that be where the conversation begins again?