



Intersecting perspectives: a critical thematic analysis of the feminist and trans debate in Colombia from a human rights lens

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I have labored carefully, not to mock, lament, or execrate
human actions, but to understand them

– **Baruch Spinoza**

Abstract

The debate around the inclusion of trans people within feminism and society in general has been gaining public attention over recent years, especially in the Colombian context with two established yet conflicting positions: trans and radical feminist movements.

The discussion is characterized by its polarization, aggressivity, lack of understanding and challenges in establishing constructive dialogues, which has resulted in a fracture with personal and collective consequences for both the trans and women's human rights agenda. This research critically examines the impact of the trans debate in Colombia through a human rights lens by deciphering the arguments, positions, and impacts of the debate through qualitative interviews with 14 activists belonging to the two key groups, three experts on the topic, and the critical analysis of secondary sources.

A thematic analysis of the interviews combined with examining the context of feminist theory, queer theory and transgender theory, demonstrates that there are both theoretical and practical grounds for the debate, which touches upon domains ranging from academia to public and societal matters including public and private spaces, legislation, and the health system. While the core of the convoluted debate consists of contrasting views on recognizing the gender identities of transgender people and the profound ideological differences between the feminist and transactivist movements, the research also demonstrates that there are convergence points between the two movements, such as efforts for strengthening abortion rights and the fight against violence.

The study concludes that fully resolving the trans debate is highly unlikely, however, it outlines strategies based on solidarity that can help the two movements to move forward in harmony in the future.

Keywords: trans debate, transgender, feminism, inclusion, radical feminist movements, solidarity.

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Abbreviations and concepts

Cisgender (Cis)	Refers to a person who does not identify as trans, meaning a person whose gender identity matches the sex assigned to them at birth.
Coming out	The procedure for exposing a person's identity as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex individual.
Conversion therapy	Any sustained attempt to change a person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression on the grounds that such behavior is indicative of a mental disorder that needs to be treated.
Depathologisation	Acknowledging that having a particular sexual orientation or gender is not a disease. Dephatalogization enables access to trans-specific healthcare for anyone, without a mental health evaluation or diagnosis.
Gender – affirming surgery/ Gender Reassignment Surgery (GRS)	Medical procedures carried out as part of healthcare related to transition.
Gender expression	The way a person presents their gender identity to others through their clothing, voice, and the mannerisms. Gender expression could match or not match the gender given at birth.
Gender non-conforming	Used to describe gender expressions other than male or female.
Gender-self-determination	A principle that stipulates that public authorities should treat a person in line with their voluntarily expressed gender identity.
Gender Critical Feminism (GCF)	A branch of feminism that rejects the idea of gender identity and views transgender people as belonging to the sex they were assigned at birth. It views sex as a binary and immutable biological characteristic.
Heteronormativity	Refers to the body of ideas and actions that define and support heterosexuality as the norm by considering gender to be an unquestionable, absolute binary.
Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)	Alludes to hormone treatment, which may be used in conjunction with intersex-specific medical care or as part of medical care for people going through a transition.
Intersex	Intersex people are those who do not meet the traditional definitions of male and female in terms of their sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, hormonal structure and/or levels, or chromosomal patterns.

LGBTI	Acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex.
Non-binary	Refers to gender identities other than female or male
Queer	Refers to people who fall outside of the gender and sexuality “norms”, previously used as a derogatory term to refer to LGBTI people in the English language. It also can refer to queer theory.
TERF	Abbreviation for Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism
Trans	A broad term that includes people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differ from the sex or gender to which they were born
Transition	The process by which a trans person adopts on a long-term basis the physical and external characteristics that are consistent with their gender identity rather than those associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.
Transphobia	Fear of aversion of those who do not fit into the pre-existing gender stereotypes about their birth gender.

1 Introduction

1.1 Problem description

“A feminist such as myself refuses to accept the idea that a penis is a female body part”, wrote British feminist author Julie Bindel in 2018 for the online magazine *Quillete*. Rather than an isolated opinion, Bindel’s statement exemplifies a highly publicized and long-standing conflict around trans inclusion within feminism that initially gained attention in 1979 with the publication of the famous Janice Raymond’s Book: “The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male” (Lokot, 2021). Raymond’s ideas, which included rejecting trans women as “genuine women” and labeling them as violators and perpetrators of women’s spaces, bodies, and identities, were a reflection of political debates that were taking place within the radical feminism movement in the U.S. These continue to have repercussions today and are related to the emergence of a movement called the trans-exclusionary feminist movement. However, around the same time another section of feminism started advocating for the inclusion of trans people. In 1992, Sandy Stone wrote the essay “The Empire Strikes Back: Posttranssexual Manifesto” which has been viewed as a response to Raymond because it confronts the binary understanding of gender and stresses the importance of including transgender people as the subjects of their own story. These inclusive views evolved into a position that has been called trans-inclusive feminism, asserting that the liberation of trans women is intertwined with the liberation of all women (Bettcher, 2017).

As might be expected, the ideological differences between the two groups have sparked a dispute with ramifications that go far beyond the confines of academic discourse, touching domains ranging from political issues such as legislation to day-to-day concerns like the use of bathrooms by transgender people, their participation in sports, and their general access to “women’s spaces”. The discussion, which in this research will be designated as the “trans debate”, has become increasingly polarized in recent years, moving towards a stage of confrontation where “if you are not with us, you are against us,” including sincere threats from both sides and creating a toxic environment (Bettcher, 2017; Thurlow, 2022)

. The focal point of the debate centers on the rights of transgender people, who account for less than 1% of the world's population and face high levels of discrimination and violence, making them one of the most vulnerable minorities on the planet. Transgender rights have gained significant international attention in recent years, but the lack of reliable data on transgender populations and how their rights are protected is still a challenge (Dicklitch-Nelson and Rahman, 2022). In addition, the debate has raised questions about the role of feminism in relation to trans people, as the former movement has historically defended women's rights and worked for a more egalitarian society for all.

The debate has recently entered Colombia's cultural and public spheres, especially within activism of two main protagonist groups: trans activists and radical feminists (Volcánicas, 2022). Some examples are the graffiti that have started appearing in university bathrooms saying things like "Even if you wear a skirt or leggings, no penises are allowed in the women's bathroom", or the division of the feminist movement's march between those who support trans women and those who do not (Santos Mariz and Granados Soler, 2021). Human rights organizations have voiced their concerns about how the ideological and political rupture within feminism over the inclusion of trans people benefits religious and political fundamentalist groups, who have used their influence to advocate against the rights of women and LGBT people in Colombia. Social media networks have functioned as enablers where the discussions between the different postures have taken place in an aggressive and violent way, leaving no space for dialogue and negotiations.

1.2 Objective and research questions

In light of the foregoing, this research seeks to explain and critically analyze the impact of the "trans debate" in Colombia from a human rights lens. This study aims to be the first attempt to understand what is behind the various postures, acknowledging that social issues are complex. This is meant to serve as a step forward in establishing future dialogues that can aid in improving the pressing human rights issues affecting the access of women and transgender people to their basic needs. Research questions arising from this are:

1. What are the different arguments used in the trans debate by radical feminists and trans activists?

2. What are the theoretical and practical issues discussed?
3. What are the general consequences of this debate and how do they impact the lives of transgender people and radical feminist activists?
4. What risks do these discourses pose for human rights?
5. What are the preconditions to establish bridges of solidarity between transgender activists and radical feminist activists?

This study aims to add to the limited body of qualitative research on transgender issues by including trans women's and men's voices as essential protagonists, who normally are segregated from the dialogues and discussions around the trans debate (Serano, 2007). Through the literature review, it became evident there is a lack of studies that include multiple perspectives of the debate, indicating there is a need for more academic research on the subject, especially in the context of Colombia. This issue is especially relevant for human rights due to the rights involved, such as the right to bodily autonomy and integrity, the right to identity, and sexual and reproductive rights (Dicklitch-Nelson and Rahman, 2022). Furthermore, the debate implies there is a conflict within the human rights movement involving activists with diametrical political positions, and thus this research seeks to serve as input for the future advancement of women's and the trans human rights agenda.

1.3 Delimitations

Considering the objective of this study is to analyze various perspectives of the trans debate to create a dialogue between them and, hence, understanding its impact, this research will not focus on one specific group, but on the arguments of the debate itself. Constituting a complex and diverse debate that impacts both the individual and collective level, the perspectives of the 14 people interviewed, together with the 3 experts who were also part of the study, give an overview of the arguments, concepts, and positions within the conflict, but cannot cover every possible angle. This research will concentrate on trans people and their rights, even though it acknowledged the wider spectrum of experiences of gender non-conforming and non-binary individuals transcending the category of "trans". In addition, this study does not review all the literature on the different positions of the trans debate but focuses on those that follow the stated objective: to understand the arguments of the debate and possible ways to build solidarity between the two groups.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The structure of this thesis is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter introduces the topic to be discussed, offering a sense of a timeline, geographical focus and the scope of the study. The second chapter delves into the current situation of the debate, in addition to providing the context for the place of study. Based on the importance of previous studies as inspiration and input for this thesis, Chapter 3 is dedicated to the literature review. Before entering into the analysis of the empirical data, Chapter 4 lays the theoretical foundations on which the analysis of the empirical data will be based. Chapter 5 describes the methodology used in the research project, characterizing the process from the collection of the sample to its respective analysis. Finally, chapters 6 and 7 present the results of the data analysis and discusses their contrast with the research questions posed at the beginning of this thesis. Finally, Chapter 8 covers the conclusions of the study, the recommendations, and some inspiration for future insightful studies within this topic

2 Background

“Mom, now I am transgender – The new social infection” says a sign carried by a group of women in the streets of Madrid, Spain in October 2022. Other women are holding signs that read “Let's stop the trans craziness” and “Against the erasure of women” behind them. These images circulating on the internet belong to the manifestations that took place in the Mediterranean country against the “Trans law”, which entered into effect on March 2nd of 2023, and which permits those over the age of 16 to change their sex on official documents without the need for supporting medical documentation. The approval of the law occurred after six years of parliamentary process, despite disagreements between the right and left and even within Spain's largest liberal party, the Socialist Party (Bubola and Bautista, 2023). While some feminists expressed their displeasure on the streets and in social media, citing the alleged risks it might pose to women and the feminism movement, others, including transgender activists and those in the LGBT movement, celebrated the decision as a victory for their human rights that will improve their quality of life, and dubbed it "a historic day for transgender people" (Euronews, 2023). UN agencies, as well as the Council of Europe for Human Rights, congratulated Spain, which becomes one of the few nations to make it simpler to access gender self-determination.

Similar proposals have divided public opinion in other places. Last December in 2022, the British government blocked a bill in Scotland that sought to make it easier for transgender people to change their legal gender, obtaining a gender recognition certificate, without the need for a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria. The decision reignites the long-running discussion of trans rights in the UK, which many authors have referred to as a "TERF¹ island" (Masih, 2023). LGBT and feminist organizations referred to the blockage as a “shameless attack on trans’s rights” in which trans people’s lives were used as a “political football” declaring: “the UK Government does not feel trans people are worthy of respect in our society; instead, they are a threat to contain” (Perry, 2023). Other feminist organizations, aligned to trans-exclusive and gender-critical viewpoints, have been protesting the law, calling it a “destroyer of women’s rights”, urging people to “save out single women spaces” in alleged risk for the presence of trans people and outright denying their existence by asserting that “I do not have a gender identity” (BBC News, 2023).

¹ Abbreviation for Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist

But Europe is not the only region where this is taking place. Anti-trans bills are proliferating throughout the United States – 367 at the time of writing this text – making it difficult to keep track of them. The number of trans-related bills introduced in the U.S. increased from 19 in 2018 to 155 in 2022, with the majority of them aiming to limit the lives of trans people, particularly trans youth (Branigin and Kirkpatrick, 2022). Some seek to ban gender-affirming care for transgender youth or target transgender adults in prison, others aim to avoid transgender girls and women from playing on women's sports teams or want to prevent transgender people from using bathrooms and locker rooms consistent with their gender identity. Videos of hearings held in various states have proliferated on social media, where parents have voiced concerns about transmedicalization, while transgender activists have argued in favor of it, and young people have testified about transitioning and detransitioning.

The situation has taken on a worrying tone. Within the proposed laws, there are attempts to ban drag events, including Pride celebrations, some make it more difficult for trans people to access mental health care, and there is even a bill that would allow people to sue others if they are called "transphobic". As in many other cases throughout history, opposing bills have also appeared: Oregon will for instance join Washington, Hawaii, and Colorado in fully covering care for gender-affirming people. The Minnesota House Judiciary and Civil Law Committee are the first to pass a bill to prevent out-of-state laws from interfering with the practice of gender-affirming healthcare (Freedom for all Americans, 2023). And new bills keep appearing every day. Christian organizations and “anti-trans feminism”² which has become more prevalent since the Trump administration, appear to agree on a need for anti-trans bills to protect women and children (Grant *et al.*, 2022)

Beyond particular legislative movements, the rift within feminism regarding trans people and their rights has been visible in public spaces. In 2017, the largest protest in U.S. history, as part of the Women’s March movement, faced exclusion allegations by many trans women and non-binary people who felt left out by the presence of the “pink pussy hats” symbology in reference to women’s genitalia (Olson and Lechner, 2022). In 2018, some of the Women’s March organizers in Vancouver, Canada came under fire for allegedly discriminating against transgender women and endorsing an exclusive version of feminism. In Spain, since 2022 for the first time in history, the Women’s Day March was divided into two, one in support of the

² An alternative concept for trans-exclusionary feminism or gender critical feminism

Trans law, therefore, the inclusion of transgender women, and one against it, opposed to what they called the “erasure of women”. On the other hand, in 2019 Verona saw a large march against transphobia, dubbed Verona a "transfeminism city," while the 13th World Congress of Families was taking place and spreading "anti-gender" thoughts. Since 2004, San Francisco created the “Trans march” in support of trans communities and as an opportunity to express their specific concerns and the march has been adopted in many cities such as California and Bogotá, frequently backed by a fraction of the feminist movement.

Culture has also served as a setting for the “trans debate”. “No one is born in the wrong body”, “The transgenderism scam: Memoirs of a detransition”, “An irreversible damage: The transgender madness that seduces our daughters” and other titles have begun to appear in libraries all over the world. One of the most contentious voices in the discussion of the “gender-critical posture” is actually J.K. Rowling, the well-known author of the Harry Potter series. "If sex isn't real, the lived reality of women globally is erased", she wrote on Twitter following “I know and love trans people but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn't hate to speak the truth” (Rowling, 2020). Other well-known feminist writers who serve as role models for feminism across many cultures, such as Chimamanda Adichie, Alda Facio Marcela Lagarde, and Lidia Falcon, have openly voiced their opposition to trans women identifying as women and their concerns about the status of trans women in feminism. Others, like Claudia Sofa Garriga-López (2016) have argued for the value of trans studies and trans activism to feminism and the dangers that the anti-trans discourse poses to an already vulnerable community. Many have remained silent in what has become more than a dispute, a battlefield where the risk of being overruled, or harassed in real and virtual life is high, no matter which side you choose.

2.1 The context of Colombia

Like many other Latin American countries, Colombia has been recognized for having progressive norms that protect the rights of LGBTI, including transgender individuals, due in large part to progressive measures adopted by the Colombian Constitutional Court. The legal recognition of gender in Colombia has been part of the judicial apparatus since June 4, 2015, through a decree that allows the change of sex in identity documents for those over 18 years of age with the simple declaration through the will of the person. The court studied many cases to

conclude that the right to identity implies that the sex that appears in the civil registry corresponds to the person's identity. Through its decisions, the Court has also acknowledged the right of transgender people to self-determination. For instance, it has ruled in favor of trans people whose right to an education was violated because they wanted to attend school as the gender identity with which they identify. In other cases, it has defended the right to healthcare of transgender people whose medical providers had refused to perform gender-affirming surgery, or the right to non-discrimination by classifying gender identity as a special category of protection (Aquellarre Trans *et al.*, 2016).

At the time of the adoption of these policies, there was no rejection by the feminist movement. However, similar bills seeking to protect LGBTI individuals have backlash from conservative parties. In May 2022, a bill aiming to prohibit conversion therapies for LGBTI people was presented in the National Congress, where conservative parties alleged a conflict of interests as the congressman who introduced it was openly gay and an activist for LGBTI rights. A few months later, the Ethical Commission of Congress prohibited presenting the bill (Gomez, 2022). In 2016, the concept of "gender ideology" appeared in public opinion sponsored by conservative parties to reject policies aimed at preventing discrimination against LGBT people, developed specifically after the suicide of a boy heavily bullied by his school for being homosexual. The concept has also been used repeatedly to reject the gender component of the Colombian peace process agreement and during political elections. These incidents are only few of many that show Colombia's open conservatism in regards to the acceptance of sexual diversity and gender identity (Posada Gómez, 2019). This is significant given that a "trans bill", which has been in the works for five years, is anticipated to be presented to Congress this year. The bill aims to combine the mechanisms and resources necessary to protect the rights of transsexual people, including the ability to determine their own gender identity, access to healthcare, education, and employment, as well as the safety of children and adolescents. Opposition voices have already begun to appear (Munevar, 2023)

The situation of transgender people in the country is still difficult, despite the protections pointed out above. Colombia is third on the list of nations with the most reported murders of transgender people in 2021, according to Trans Murder Monitoring, with 28 murders (Trans Murder Monitoring, 2021). Local organizations have denounced that the principal victims are transgender migrant women and that the majority of these crimes have been committed with extreme cruelty in public places, often by stabbing their breasts and buttocks (Palomino, 2022).

This goes along with a high level of violence against the trans community, many times exercised by public forces, who were continuously reported to behave violently, especially towards transgender sex workers during the pandemic. The latter is merely the tip of the iceberg of structural violence, which results in trans people being denied access to education, employment, and healthcare because of their gender identity (Moreno Hernández, 2021). The consequence is a position of social and economic disadvantage compared to other population groups that confine them to places of high segregation and marginalization.

According to Andrea Parra, Colombian feminist researcher and activist³, the rights of transgender people and in general the LGBT community have been hardly supported by the feminist movement in Colombian history. However, during the last few years, the discourse has shifted due to the proliferation of what we will denominate as the “trans debate”. As in the international sphere, there are at least two distinct sides to the debate: feminists who support the inclusion of transgender people within feminism and those who criticize it, claiming that transgender women should not be recognized as women. The arguments are also similar to those that are being discussed globally: some, relying on biological arguments, asserting that the subject of feminism is a woman by birth and argue that to consider the opposite would imply erasing women, while others see feminism as a movement that fights against all oppression and in which all those who seek equality can participate.

However, the “trans debate” in Colombia has some specific characteristics. First, it has developed especially through social media, public forums, and, more recently, public spaces. On the social media platform Twitter, for instance, discussions on the subject have been moderated by prominent national public figures like the Colombian author Carolina Sanin. Investigations on this behalf have categorized the discussion in this social network as violent, aggressive, toxic, polarized, and, in summary, a “deaf dialogue” that does not allow for a point of negotiation (Santos Mariz and Granados Soler, 2021). At the same time, graffiti has begun to appear in public universities denying transgender women access to women's restrooms: “even if they wear skirts or leggings, penises are not allowed in the women’s restroom” reads one of the signs that got attention in social in May 2020. Another illustration of the growing disparity is the Women's Day March. In Bogotá, the Colombian capital, trans activists have expressed fear to participate, trans leaders commonly claim to be excluded from the march

³ Interview conducted for this research on February 23, 2022

planning and the March has been divided into two: one led by transgender organizations and the other by the traditional feminism movement.

The "trans debate" is a hot topic on the political, legal, and social agenda around the world, and the discourse of human rights is once again being disputed by what appears to be two different groups. The scope of the debate is unknown, as well as its effects, especially if the debate signifies a fracture in the feminist movement or is a discussion like other political discussions that the movement has experienced in the past. In summary, the last word has not yet been said on this topic, yet the issue has a clear characteristic in its broad variety of arguments and positions. Furthermore, the effects of the debate on reality are becoming more evident every day and thus coalitional cooperation in the human rights and social justice movement is especially urgent at the time of this writing. In the next section, we will trace the roots of the academic texts, before listening to the voices of activists in Colombia who have experienced the trans debate firsthand and in their communities.

3 Literature review

3.1 What is trans?

To start the literature review, it is important to go back to how transgender people are viewed in academic texts and how that relates to womanhood. In 1972, Money and Ehrhardt define transsexualism as “psychically, the condition of people who have the conviction that they belong to the opposite sex and are driven by a compulsion to have the body, appearance, and social status of the opposite sex” (Yudkin, 1978, p. 101). Five years later, the philosopher Marcia Yudkin refers to a transexual as a "victim of confusion" in the *Feminist Studies* journal, the first scholarly publication in women's studies:

Victims of our society are taking sex and sex role as the center of one's private and public identity, victims of society's insistence that one's personality, desires, likes and dislikes, outward appearance, and so on, be at one with one's biological and social identity (Yudkin, 1978).

In her analysis of “women” and “gender identity” as concepts, Yudkin asserts that the latter is culturally contingent and flexible. Transgender people, in this sense, are people who, due to the traditional gender roles, are unable to express their masculinity or femininity and must resort to a "desperate solution" or "emergency measure" by changing their gender. Here, transsexualism is presented as a condition that only exists as a result of socially acceptable sex roles. Instead of "transsexualism," the term "transgenderism" first appeared in 1979 to describe people who wanted to change their gender but not their genitalia.

Yudkin addresses the issue of transgender people's acceptance in society and the "women's world" in his early writings. She poses questions like "How are we to decide?" in reference to how the feminism movement should address the issue of trans people in feminism and "Ought we take their word for it?" in reference to whether or not transsexual people's gender identities should be recognized by the fact that they identified as such. From a philosophical standpoint, Yunkin considers what it means to be a woman before reflecting on whether or not transgender people should participate in sports. As we mentioned in the

introduction, this is a hot topic in the current "trans debate", which means these issues have been debated in academia for at least 45 years.

3.2 Trans-exclusive and inclusive movements

The trans debate has a broad history in academia. We will analyze in deep the different ideological positions around it in the theoretical and analytical chapters of this thesis, however, in this section, we will discuss the different authors who contributed to the debate and some of their ideas. After reading articles on the transgender issue in feminism, a few trends became apparent: the majority of research is theoretical discussions coming from fields like philosophy; the arguments for and against transgenderism are very similar in the history of research; and, finally, it is unmistakably a contentious issue also in academia.

Raymond (1979) and Greer (1999) are known as the proponents of the so-called gender critical feminism/trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF). For them, sex is binary and immutable, and gender abolition should be a long-term goal of society and the feminist movement. They refuse to accept trans women and opposed their presence in female spaces. Transgender people were portrayed in Raymond's book "The Transsexual Empire" as patriarchal weapons used against women and the real female body. The famous book "The Whole Woman" by Greer, on the other hand, accused transsexuals, particularly women's transsexuals, of imitating women without respecting what she considered to be "biological womanhood," which she claimed is what makes women susceptible to patriarchal oppression. These biological beliefs remain the cornerstone of contemporary gender-critical feminism. Despite the relatively high levels of productivity of trans-exclusionary radical feminist scholars, they have remained outside the realm of contemporary feminist theory, refusing to engage in a conversation with modern transfeminism research production and instead insisting that the biological concept of "femaleness" is essential to feminism and that trans bodies pose a threat to that concept (Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020).

By the late 1990's, postmodern and queer feminism emerged, with the publication of Judith Butler's work in 1993 and the beginning of trans studies as a field of research around the same time. Butler questioned the sex/gender binary, arguing that sex, as well as gender, is not binary, but a fiction and a fantasy that is socially constructed. Her ideas have been adopted by modern transgender activism which does not deny sex, but questions how sex is established through medical, legal, and political frameworks and changes over time, influencing social life.

The term “transfeminism” was coined in 1992 by activists Emi Koyama and Diana Courant, and it was developed through Emi Koyama’s “Transfeminism manifesto” in 2003, where she describes it as an open movement led by and for trans women who see their liberation as being connected to the liberation of all women. Later scholars added that the movement relies on the intersectionality that questions not only binary gender norms but the idea of femininity as inferior to maleness and the position of women considering their class, race, sexuality, ability, and other aspects such as their identity and experiences. Transfeminism argues that to try to address any one form of oppression or exploitation in isolation will not result in a clear understanding of the patriarchal system because they are all “intimately related and reinforce each other”, thus it concludes that “trans activism must be at its core a feminist movement” (Archer Mann and Patterson, 2015).

Other viewpoints have also been discussed in academia as alternatives to the dualism of transfeminism and exclusionary ideologies. Prior to Raymond’s work, authors Kessler and McKenna (1985) first discussed transsexualism from a curiosity perspective analyzing the performance of gender as something we are all doing. MacDonald (1998) pointed out that many feminist writers had overlooked trans phenomena due to their apparent rarity and association with medical literature, and who highlighted the possibility that trans experiences could help us understand what it means to be a gendered person (Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020). Pilgrim (2018) outlines two additional opposing viewpoints: traditional religious conservatives who assert that sex is a naturally occurring essential binary and characterize transgenderism as dysphoria, a mental disorder, or a profoundly confused state of being; and trans and non-trans people who do not oppose gender identity itself but are concerned about the medicalization of trans youth.

Most of the recent studies regarding the trans-inclusive and trans-exclusive movements are descriptive and theoretical analyses. According to Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent (2020), the “trans debate”, or what they call “TERF wars”, is a series of complex ideological battles within feminism where neutrality and the truth are in dispute, in a context where the political sphere is polarized and there is a high level of misinformation and fake news. Using discourse analysis, Pearce et al. conclude that the “gender critical feminists” arguments go against decades of feminist theory on the status of “femininity” and “womanhood” from an ontological and epistemic perspective. Thurlow (2022a) does an extensive historical description of the

TERF movement in the UK, to come out with different distinctions of anti-trans ideas that are useful for this research: trans-unaware, as people who are uninformed about this issue; trans-antagonistic, a position that actively promotes anti-trans agendas; and trans-suspicious, indicating people who recognize the existence of transgender people but challenge trans perspectives and politics.

3.3 The reasons for the clash

Most of the texts do not concentrate on analyzing the reason behind the trans debate, but to argue and reflect on the validity of the arguments used from one side or the other. However, some have tried to discern what is really at the center of the discussion. Pan (2022) in order to forge coalitions based on what she calls “feminist radical solidarity” conducted semi-structured interviews in the post-Yugoslav space with nine activists from East-European countries to inquire about trans-inclusion in feminism. Pan discovered through her interviews that there is a funding dispute where LGBT organizations are accused of stealing funding from feminist organizations, demonstrating that the "TERF tensions" may be rooted in a "conflict among NGOs and funding policies". Pan (2022) also identified through the interviews that many cis women feel a “lack of recognition” for their contributions to feminism, due to what they feel is a new trend of new identities:

Another important point of the conflict is the feeling of seeking merits: to recognize how much older activists did for lesbians, and for women all these years. Then trans and queer tore those achievements down in a few years, and suddenly made their activism seem reductant and too exclusionary (p.9).

Pilgrim (2018), on the other side, argues that the problem is around the definition of sex: “It is about whether sex, not just gender is socially constructed, and whether trans-activism challenges or reinforces gender stereotyping and conforming under patriarchy”. Other authors, like Barker (2017), point out how the moral panic surrounding trans existence in the UK media was tied to holding them responsible for maintaining the gender system. On the other hand, gender-critical and TERF feminists, according to Ezra Simon (2021), are the ones promoting harmful structures, such as a racial and colonial order that marginalizes and discriminates against transgender people based on naturalistic arguments.

3.4 How to overcome the clash?

How can we get past the "trans debate's" contrasting ideologies? What can the academic world tell us about it? Are there any similarities between them? In this section, we'll concentrate on previous research that seeks to bridge the gap between the different positions by building common ground to move forward from.

In what Olson and Lechner (2022) refer to as a "journey into controversy," they discovered that various positions within the trans debate might share a commitment to bodily integrity and autonomy. They go on to compare the exercise of the right to an abortion for cis women to the exercise of trans people's bodies and gender identities since the central issue is the freedom to control our own bodies. Heyes (2003) discovered parallels between transsexual biographies, where trans people challenge what is pre-established for them—in their case, their sex assigned at birth—and lesbian cisgender women's "coming out" stories, where lesbian cisgender women recognize that sexual orientation is malleable and choose to go against the establishment.

Many authors agree on the need to find common understanding between the different positions in the trans debate to fight against injustice:

We are facing a strong political Zeitgeist, that we need to join in solidarity
(Heyes, 2003, p. 1117)

The issue is not who is or is not really whatever, but who can be counted on when they come for any of us: the solid ground is not identity, but loyalty and solidarity
(Scheman, 2011, p. 152-53)

All this inspires the development of this research and gives us clues on which elements are important to take into consideration during the analysis. One interesting question that arises from the literature review is why the trans debate is getting so much attention nowadays. Social media has appeared as a key element in many previous studies in this sense (Hines, 2019), (Olson and Lechner, 2022; Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020). It has been largely studied how social media plays a central role in the modern development of social movements, especially those composed by activists and minority groups (Hines, 2019). In the case of

transgender communities, academics have dubbed social media as a crucial glue to unite trans people, get around geographic barriers, and even provide a new space for "self-determination".

Other explanations for the attention given to the trans debate include the increasing visibility of trans movements and the communities' recent gains in legal rights, which have stoked opposition, as is the case with many other social movements. Bettcher (2017) asserts that the early 1970s and the 1990s, when the modern queer and trans movements first appeared in the United States, saw a similar backlash against the transgender community. She contends, however, that despite the appearance that anti-transgender rhetoric is affecting public opinion, there is still a strong and steadily increasing level of support for trans lives. Other scholars believe that the trans debate is simply a normal process within the feminist struggles. Olson and Lechner (2022) discuss "controversies within feminism as a necessary part of our struggle for inclusion" and say that instead of letting them divide us, we should "educate ourselves" about the perspectives we might have missed in our analysis. For Heyes (2003), this debate comes in a crucial moment in which ethics meets politics, which means that "feminism should not only be prepared to organize change but to change itself".

4 Theoretical approach

The question around the inclusion of transgender people into feminism has a broad theoretical basis. Numerous feminist theorists have shared their perspectives on issues like gender identity, who is the subject of feminism, the dualism between sex and gender, femininity, and masculinity, as well as other issues raised by the trans debate. These perspectives range from traditional feminist theories to queer and transgender theories. I will examine some of their key ideas in this section that will aid in the analysis of the empirical data gathered for this thesis project, theories that are frequently cited by the various sides of the debate, and what we need to comprehend in order to facilitate a clearer path into the future.

4.1 Introduction to feminist theories

Feminist theories arose to understand the conditions of subordination, exclusion, and marginalization of women in different social and cultural contexts. As may be expected, feminist theory as a field is diverse and in constant evolution. Back in the 1970s, it was possible to distinguish between the “Marxist”, “radical” or “liberal” tendencies in feminist theories, however, as time has passed, theories have changed and evolved, frequently encountering contradictions and shifting perspectives due to the self-reflection and critical thinking of feminist scholars. It is common to think that feminist theory was born in Western countries and then spread to the rest of the world. However, as Rodríguez Aguilera (2018) states, rather than something born in the North and exported to the South, feminist theories are made of dialogical and parallel conversations that do not belong to a specific date and place, and it has multiple contradictions and complexities. Thus, the hegemonic perspective of feminists from the US, Britain, and Australia, which tried to synthesize women's subordination as a whole phenomenon, has been challenged by specific theories influenced by a diversity of women, not only in academia but also from grassroots organizations, that attempt to explain women's struggles from a more specific lens. All of this highlighted the fact that women are not a monolithic group and that it is crucial to take into account individual differences when formulating theories about their experiences (Stevi and Jackie, 1998).

The latter is precisely a core concern of the so-called “feminisms of the South”, that in the Latin American region has around 500 years of history. This feminist current aims to

decolonize feminism moving from the idea of white, upper-class women living in urban spaces as the only subject of feminism, to a view that includes women with other life experiences, which is ultimately the reality of many women in the global south (Chang and Rodriguez, 2021). This inclusion is based on an “intersectionality perspective” derived from black feminism, which takes into account the intersection between gender, class, and race as oppressions that are intimately connected. Intersectionality was first introduced by black feminists in the U.S. who argued that the subject of women could not be universalized because black women in particular faced oppression not only for their gender but for the color of their skin. Similarly, the idea of a common enemy known as patriarchy personified in men becomes more complex, due to the fact that many black women felt more connected to their black men partners, with whom they shared class and race struggles, than for instance white women (Hooks, 2015).

4.2 Sex and gender

Since its inception, gender has been one of the central themes of feminist theory, with the category being critically examined and rethought. The concept of gender appeared in feminist theory in the 1970s, however, since the famous phrase by Simone de Beauvoir “one is not born a woman but becomes one” in the 1940s, the idea that women are made, rather than born was present. In the traditional understanding, sex refers to different biological characteristics such as chromosomes, hormonal makeup, and external organs, so in principle, there would be two sexes: female and male, however, there are individuals who do not display this typical combination, such as intersex people. Thus, some authors have suggested the existence of about five sexes, which would vary depending on which of the previously named characteristics are considered. Gender, on the other side, was defined as the norms and roles people should follow depending on their sexual characteristics. The distinction between sex and gender was made by authors like (Oahley, 1972), who defined sex as the anatomical differences between maleness and femaleness and gender as the social, cultural, and psychological characteristics that are assigned to masculinity and femininity throughout our lives (Stevi and Jackie, 1998).

The concept of gender was used to explain the asymmetrical differences between women and men, understood as a result of socially constructed gender roles, behaviors, and expressions that influence people and create a hierarchy in society. Authors such as Acker (1990) explain

how these gender attributes operate as oppressive mechanisms for example, in the workplace, where the gender order reproduces successful managers or executives as male (Gedro and Mizzi, 2014). What to do with gender has become a debate within the feminist movement. Some scholars argue for gender abolitionism to eliminate the social construct of gender altogether, due to the oppressive gender roles and societal expectations it generates. This stance typically acknowledges the value of diversity and identities while viewing gender as a hindrance to human freedom. Some philosophers, on the other side, such as Haslanger (2000) argue against the complete abolition of all genders saying that giving meaning to the body can be justified. Others think feminism should eradicate unjustified gender norms and lessen the negative effects that these norms have. And finally, others suggest the creation of non-hierarchical genders, rather than doing away with the existing binary (Gheaus, 2023).

In this situation, transgender people are frequently viewed from various angles, and their struggles are often justified or disregarded based on gender. For some people, as we will see in the empirical analysis of this thesis, transgender individuals reinforce oppressive gender roles, by following them in their exercise of transitioning, for others, however, their very existence subverts the gender binary and redefines what is meant by gender. Others contend that genders like "non-binary" or "queer" are better understood as the absence of gender identities rather than as gender identities themselves. It is crucial to emphasize that gender identities have also been seen as being extremely important for a person's mental health. In particular, if we are talking about a transgender person, the non-recognition of someone's gender identity can cause a great deal of harm.

4.3 Queer Theory

In the 90s, several movements and approaches were born such as the third wave of feminism, queer activism, and academic disciplines like post-structural feminism and queer theory. These movements and methodologies challenged all rigid identities and binary thinking while celebrating diversity and being more pluralistic.

One of the foundational texts of queer theory is *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* by Judith Butler. Butler (1999) contends that fundamental identity categories that categorize people as either normal or abnormal should be called into question.

For instance, it is accepted that men behave in a masculine manner and women in a feminine manner when it comes to gender identity, but why is this accepted? Butler believes that gender is performative rather than something that is pre-established: the fact that masculine behavior is natural for men is due to everybody's actions; in other words, gendered people acting in particular ways is what gives rise to gender as a real concept. Additionally, Butler argues that there is no inherent link between gender and sex, so the construction of "men" does not necessarily pertain only to male bodies, or "women" would apply only to female bodies. Therefore, even if we assume that sex is binary and stable, this does not entail that genders must also continue to be two. On the other hand, Butler claims that when we separate gender from sex, gender becomes a "free-floating artifice with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one" (Butler, 1999).

Butler's theory also addresses one of the central questions of the trans debate, which is who is the subject of feminism. Butler believes that assuming women to be a single, unchanging subject of feminism from a seamless perspective leads to rejections because it implies that women can share a common identity. According to Butler, gender is constantly reconstructed by a variety of repetitive and regulatory acts that operate outside the self, which also means it changes depending on the historical moment, the context, and the intersection of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and region. This runs counter to how gender is typically understood (Gedro and Mizzi, 2014). In conclusion, the intersections of culture and politics that give rise to and support the category of "women" cannot be separated from what we define as that term. Women then have multiple meanings, and as we will see in the analysis of the empirical findings of this thesis, it has turned into a scene of conflict.

4.4 Transgender theory

Feminist theory and queer theory are the roots of transgender theory, while at the same time, they are particularly challenged by transgenderism. On one side, the essentialist view of gender, adopted by many feminist theories, perceives femaleness as the biological performance of the female body, such as pregnancy and childbirth, thus seeing transgender women not as "real women" and transgender men as "betrayers of their oppressed identities". On the other side, there is queer theory which, despite its advances in the understanding of gender identity

and oppression, is viewed by many transgenders as insufficient because of its purely social constructivism assumptions about gender identity, its ethnocentric approach, and the disregard for the lived experiences of transgender and transexual people (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010) (Roan, 2001). Transgender theory then goes further than the previous two theoretical lines.

Roan (2001) is presumed to be the initiator of the transgender theory, describing gender as fluid and calling for consideration of gender as affected by cross-cultural and time-passing dynamics. The transgender theory emerged as a specific approach to encompass the experiences of transgender people, incorporating ideas of gender identity as a fluid embodied, socially constructed, and self-constructed phenomenon (Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010). The concept behind this theory is simple: trans individuals are whom they say they are, they exist, they are visible, and they are experts on their own bodies and experiences. The ownership of identity is placed on the individual who can identify as they wish, knowing that identifiers can change or transform over time (Breux and Thyer, 2021). In this approach, the voices and life experiences of trans and gender-diverse people are prioritized over the understanding of cisgender professionals, and gender experiences are considered as fluid and dynamic, going further than the gender heteronormative binary. Above all, the guiding principle of transgender theory relies on one's own understanding of identity, and its goal is to comprehend how those identities are connected to oppression.

Serano (2007) is one of the authors who questioned the misalignment of transgender and gender-diverse identities with feminist theory and developed multiple perspectives for a transgender theory. In her book, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, she argues that social constructivism is not enough to explain gender expressions and identities. Serano asserts that because different gender expressions frequently emerge at a young age, even before any form of social constructionism takes hold, internal factors ought to be recognized as a core element influencing gender expression in addition to social factors. She refers to this as "subconscious sex" and describes it as a kind of gender self-understanding that occasionally differs from your assigned and socialized gender, which explains why some gender expressions just feel right. These "exceptional gender expressions" are not a consequence of genetics but of an "intrinsic inclination model" explained by Serano as the normal variation of the human species.

Feminist theories, as well as their analysis around gender and sex, are broad and diverse. After briefly going through the general concepts and the perspectives of some feminist currents, I will focus on the following concepts to analyze the empirical data: gender, gender roles, sex, sexuality, womanhood, and gender identity.

5 Methodology

5.1 Research methods

In order to answer the research questions, this project used a qualitative methodology approach. Qualitative methods have been largely used in social science research and are characterized by their openness, adaptability, and flexibility (Köhler, Smith and Bhakoo, 2022). Additionally, they help the reader “see the world through the researcher's eyes” bringing them closer to the subject of the study and introducing them to their thoughts and experiences (Bansal and Corley, 2011). In the context of human rights research, qualitative methods are crucial in order to comprehend the impact of human rights ideas by examining local policies, concepts, and practices. All of the above suits the aim of this research as it seeks to understand what is behind the “trans debate” in Colombia, by listening to the voices and ideas of the protagonists (Andreassen, Sano and McInerney-Lankford, 2017).

As we learned from the literature review, previous studies on the “trans debate” topic mainly relied on secondary analysis, critical and feminist discourse analysis, and other digital methodologies, with an emphasis on academic and theoretical arguments. Thus, it is crucial to shift the emphasis from academic analysis to in-depth investigations that illustrate the practical effects of the debate in real life, especially in recent years. The latter is also consistent with this project's goals because it may be possible to find common ground with other opposing viewpoints by incorporating real-world examples into the discussion (Awkward-Rich, 2017). To reach this aim, this research will be a combination of semi-structured interviews and secondary sources that will be critically analyzed together with the empirical data in the results and discussion chapter.

5.2 Data collection

The data collection method for this research will be primary data extracted from semi-structured interviews. This style of interview gives participants a full voice and fosters an open dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee in order to better understand interpretations, experiences, and social life specialties (Zhang, Chang and Du, 2021). Semi-structured interviews contain a series of open-ended questions that are enriched by the

discussion. This method was chosen for two main reasons. First, this type of interview allows the exploration of the perception of activists involved in the trans debate representing a complex and sensitive issue, while providing important insights and possible answers to the research questions of this project. Second, it enabled us to learn about very different people's perspectives on particular issues, which will later be helpful to identify similarities and differences during the data analysis process. Given the open-ended nature of the interviews, the interviewer's job is to motivate participants to share particular experiences and steer the conversation toward a particular subject.

The results of this project are based on 14 semi-structured interviews with Colombian activists divided into two groups:

The first group either recognized themselves or were thinking along the lines of the gender-critical stance on the “trans debate”. This group was composed of 7 women between 22 and 37 years old, originally from cities in Colombia such as Bogota and *Popayán*. Their occupations range from college students to attorneys, independent contractors, artists, yoga instructors, etc. Six of them identify as radical feminists, and four out of the seven are affiliated with either physical or online radical feminist groups.

The second group was composed of four women who identify as transgender women, two men who identify as transgender men, and one woman who identified as a “diverse woman⁴”, for a total of seven people. They work as communicators, human rights specialists, artists, chefs, etc. Notably, 5 of the 7 interviewees have held or are currently holding paid positions that involve the defense of LGBT, transgender, or women's rights. The members of this group are from the Colombian cities of Bogota, *Chocó*, and *Popayán*. They all identify as activists, and their viewpoints can be connected to those considered to be a part of the transactivist movement in the “trans debate”. However, not all of them identify as trans feminists or feminists; as we will see in the next chapter, each interviewee has a different perspective on feminism.

⁴ “Diverse women” is a concept that refers normally to LGBT women. However, it could also refer to racial, ethnicity, class, or nationality diversity. The person who expressed this idea is a black trans woman, therefore probably she was referring to herself as both black and trans woman.

The terms “transfeminism”, “trans-inclusive feminism”, “trans-exclusive feminism”, “TERF”, and “gender-critical feminists” were not included in the questions or taken for granted even when the positions of the participants are taken into account in the selection of the sample, as one of the interesting aspects of the research was to identify the groups categorization in the “trans debate” spectrum. Knowing that concepts can have a high political burden, in this case, this research will respect the term that the interviewees use to designate themselves. Likewise, the term "trans" will be used in general to refer to individuals whose gender identification and expression diverge from cultural norms based on the sex they were assigned at birth (Dicklitch-Nelson and Rahman, 2022).

The sample group was selected under the principle of diversity and adequacy. Meaning that the sample size was carefully chosen to reflect the diversity of the participants in terms of race, age, location (rural/urban), socioeconomic status, etc., with a sample size building up an insightful reflection of the phenomenon under investigation. The race, occupation, and socioeconomic backgrounds of the interviewees were taken into consideration due to the diversity of the Colombian population and the high levels of inequality. Along with the 14 interviews, this research also interviewed three women’s experts who have experience working with the trans debate in the Latin American context to contribute to the analysis. The interviews were conducted in Spanish the native language of the interviewees, enabling the uninhibited and accurate expression of their perspectives, own translations were made for the sections included in the analysis.

Finally, the sampling was made in a “structure” and “purpose” approach. Structure, since the same number of activists were interviewed from each side to avoid misrepresentation, and by “purpose” because the participants were chosen based on their knowledge of the topic, recognizing in advance that their views will be relevant to the research. This indicates that they were chosen based on their experiences, perspectives, and expertise rather than whether they were demographically representative of the larger population (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). The selection was made through the revision of the researcher’s own list of relevant contacts, as well as her use of social media platforms like *Instagram*, *Twitter* and the *Whatsapp* group “Activismos 2.0” which is made up of various activists and where the “trans debate” is one of the main topics of discussion. Names used in the data analysis are false to protect the identity of the interviewees.

5.3 Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was the research methodology used to process the data (TCA). This entails a method that allows for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meanings within the qualitative data (Clarke and Braun, 2017). TCA is particularly helpful for examining the points of view of various research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and yielding unexpected insights (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). This approach is appropriate for this project because it helps to identify various viewpoints under the "trans debate" theme and find potential common threads.

One of the main characteristics of TCA is its flexibility, in TCA the research question is not completely fixed and can evolve through coding and theme development, which suits this case where there are a few research questions that may be iterated during the research process. Furthermore, TCA is typically used in exploratory research where, as in this case, understanding the phenomenon is one of the key objectives.

Before the TCA analysis, the interviews were divided into specific topics related to the research questions and background of each interviewee. These subjects were chosen based on both empirical observations of participant opinions and prior research. With the participants' permission, interviews were recorded on audio, transcribed, and translated into English. Written notes were also taken during the process of the interviews, and then organized for analysis (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The analysis was then carried out in 6 stages, according to Nowell *et al.* (2017):

1. Building familiarity with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Providing general conclusions

5.4 Ethical considerations

Qualitative research raises ethical issues due to many factors such as the relatively unstructured characteristic of qualitative data, the fact that the data collection usually takes place in a “natural” setting, rather than a specific setup made for the research purposes, and that the process of obtaining data involves a direct relationship with people. The latter is especially true in the case of semi-structured interviews (Carpenter, 2018). As Kvale explains, “the human interaction inquiry affects interviews and informants”, raising ethical and moral issues as a result of delving deeply into people's private lives or worlds and then placing that in the public space (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2005).

Accordingly, measures were taken to guarantee ethical procedures during the semi-structured interviews. The participants received an informed consent form and a list of the subjects to be covered during the interview before it began. The project's goal, the people in charge of it, the significance of their contribution, what participation entails, and information about the storage of personal data were all covered in the informed consent. The consent form makes it clear that participation is entirely optional and that it may be withdrawn at any point during the course of the study. Interviewees were guided through the form before the interview began in case there were any questions, they were informed that they were not required to answer any questions they do not want to, and it was clear that they could terminate the interview at any time.

Confidentiality was especially important for this research due to how divisive the “trans debate” has become on social media and the struggles many activists have faced when trying to voice their opinions in public. Anonymity was preserved, however, it was asked to the participants if identity markers, such as age, race, and occupation, could be included as a way to identify them and understand the position from which they were expressing their opinion. In general, considerations of how this data might affect participants were carefully reviewed during the process of data interpretation and reporting.

6 Results

The interview results will be presented in the following section and examined considering the theory outlined in this thesis' theoretical chapter. In section 1, we will give an overview of the two main positions within the trans debate. In section 2, we will analyze the theoretical arguments in the debate, then moving into section 3 to cover the practical arguments. In section 4, we will discuss the impacts and effects of the debate, to finally end up highlighting the possible commonalities between the two positions.

6.1 Who are the main actors?

This research project started with the assumption that there are two polarized, diametrically opposed sides to the trans debate: Gender Critical Feminists (GCF) and transgender activists. We confirm this polarization during the interview process, but it was also demonstrated that each group is heterogeneous in itself, and they hold a variety of positions that occasionally cause these poles to move apart or toward one another, as we will see in the following analysis.

6.1.1. Transactivists and transfeminism

The term "trans activism" is used to describe the fight for transgender rights in Colombia. The trans women and men interviewed highlight the sense of community, the origins of trans activism with social mobilization, and fieldwork with trans communities in various regions of Colombia. They see trans activism as a special and safe domain to fight for their rights, confronting the cisgender and heteropatriarchal system. All the transactivists interviewed recognize themselves as trans-rights defenders and five of six are directly involved with a trans-rights governmental or non-governmental organization. The reason for joining the movement is to improve their communities' living conditions, aiming to prevent others from suffering what they have suffered for having a trans identity. *Ana*, a 28 years-old transwoman activist, sees activism as an obligatory path for trans people, due to their life experiences and difficulties. In Colombia, trans activism operates independently, but sometimes in alliance with the LGBTI movement, and is led mainly by trans women. The latter has resulted in trans men starting their own movement within trans activism dedicated to dealing with issues relating to

trans masculinity, yet the movement is still new and disconnected, but has been growing rapidly in recent years. Participants also acknowledged that trans activism is characterized by contradictions and conflicting opinions due to the blending of various identities and other populations, such as non-binary and intersex people, who also view trans activism as a safe space.

6.1.2. Gender Critical Feminists (GCFs) or Radical Feminists?

Even though the participants' opinions during the interviews were in line with the GCF movement and two of them openly identified as such, they instead tended to subscribe their views to what they named "Radical feminism" (RF). According to them, the radical feminist movement has gained ground recently both locally and internationally in part due to the growing involvement of young women. What previously consisted of lone individuals sharing their opinions on social media has now developed into grassroots organizations that begin developing initiatives both locally and through social media networks. Three of the group's seven members developed social media networks to share their political views, and one of them is a member of an established organization in her city. Communication between the organizations mainly flows through apps such as *Whatsapp* and *Telegram* where they exchange information and support one's other actions. Their primary motivation for founding these organizations is to educate people on radical feminism and its main four pillars of abolition (gender, prostitution, pornography, and surrogacy), a journey in which they have found comfort by encountering other radical women with similar opinions. Curiously, three of the fourteen participants claimed their positions were aligned with the trans activism movement, before shifting to the radical feminism movement.

6.2 Theoretical arguments

6.2.1. What is feminism? What are feminists aiming for?

Participants from the two groups view feminism from very different angles in terms of its goals and definition. From the radical feminists' perspective, feminism is a political endeavour that targets the root causes of women's oppression, making them visible and combating all forms of violence that are closely related to the way in which patriarchy uses and

appropriates the biological condition of women. For them, asserting and making women's biology visible is not transphobia; rather, it is a way of highlighting the foundation of structural inequality. Since its establishment in the '60s and 70's, radical feminism has emphasized women's bodies and women-only spaces as a form of resistance against male violence and institutions (Mackay, 2015). Women on this side thus rejected the need for transfeminism and insisted that feminism and transgenderism be kept separate. *Julia*, a domestic violence survivor, and radical feminist activist explained: *"It is like saying that in the anti-racist struggle, white people are included, but no, they are not included, they are not the political subject, even when they can contribute to achieving black people's rights"*.

Transgender activists view feminism as a plural and diverse movement, that fights against all forms of social oppression in a patriarchal, heteronormative, and cisgender system. In line with black feminism, postmodernism, and queer theory, they push for the inclusion of an intersectionality approach to analyse women's oppression, posing a challenge to a restricted definition of "woman". The reflections of trans people around feminism have consolidated in a new wave called transfeminism, which sees transgender people's experiences as essential to the liberation of all women, and calls for building "politics of resistance and alliance" . Some of the interviewees consider themselves as transfeminists, however, *Simón*, a trans man, believes transfeminism in Colombia has been a movement just for transwomen, thus concealing trans masculinities. Others do not recognize themselves as feminists or transfeminists due to the discrimination or lack of belonging they have experienced when they tried to participate in the movement, even though they recognized agreeing with most of the feminist's postulates. The interviewees did not insist on wanting to be included in feminism at all costs; instead, they criticized it for being exclusive of their identities and claimed that asking for "inclusion" sounds like "permission" they should not have been to be asking from cisgender people.

6.2.2. The heart of the debate: gender and sex

Perhaps one of the core issues in the trans debate is the distinction between gender and sex. For the RFs, sex is determined by biology, it is a material reality we, as human beings, are "born with and which divides us into female and male. Women experience certain bodily functions that are specific to their sex, including menstruation, and childbirth. Sex is also the basis of women's subordination. Types of violence such as breast ironing, genital mutilation forced abortions, etc. are exercised against women because of their sex, not because of gender:

I can't go down the street and tell a guy who is going to do something to me, "I'm a man" because he's going to laugh at my face, because what does that guy care about my identity? The truth is that I'm in danger because I have this specific sex.

Aida, a law student and radical feminist activist.

Gender for RFs is a sociocultural structure that hierarchizes the sexes into an oppressor and an oppressed class. This definition goes in line with Acker (1990), Oahley (1972), and Lerner (1920, p. 238), the latter describing gender as "the cultural definition of behavior that is considered appropriate for sexes in a given society in a given time. Gender is a system of cultural roles. It is a disguise, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance". Lecuona (2018), a well-known radical feminist author, explains that this system of roles is present in behaviors, clothing, temperaments, abilities, and interests that are assigned as female decreed and less societal value.

Trans activists agreed that gender is a social construct. However, they mentioned that all human beings, including women, are part of the sex/gender system, and that gender becomes a category used for individuals to categorize themselves, outside of the binary of female (women) and masculine (men). *Nikki*, a trans woman university professor, defines gender as an axis, an element that defines how much dignity you have as a human being and that creates hierarchies in a society where cisgender men are the ones who are in a privileged position, and women, transgender activists, and non-binary people, among others, are at the bottom of the pyramid. This is similar to what Butler (1999) defines as gender norms which are seen as normal because people in power imposed them.

So, if the two positions could have an agreement on the definition of gender, what is the reason for the debate? Part of it seems to stem from the question of what to do with gender, as RFs advocate for the abolishing of gender as an artifice that can and must change for women to be free. In contrast, opinions are divided on the transgender side. Some of the participants believe gender abolition is impossible or could be eliminated at some point, but that aiming for abolition right now would entail attacking "a condition that makes other diversities possible". For RFs, trans individuals not only may not share their interest in abolishing gender, but they reinforce it by transitioning using femininity or masculinity features. *Nikki* refuses this notion by stating:

Trans people may be gender-affirming, but we're also gender-defiant. Because yes, I'm here with makeup and painted nails, but if I didn't defy gender, I wouldn't be looked at sometimes with disgust on the street, with fear, and I wouldn't be constantly insulted on social media.

Instead of abolishing gender, a more interesting solution for *Nikki* would be “transforming gender relations to build a more equitable world”, which Gheaus (2023) supports when promoting the creation of non-hierarchical genders. Participants from the trans group insist that aiming for the abolition of gender and claiming the existence and respect of trans people can coexist.

Abolishing gender is not to go and attack people for how they construct their identity, but to abolish the structures of subordination that make women and men have to fulfill certain roles in society.

Ana, 28 years-old transwoman activist.

In Judith Butler's words: “We do not have to agree upon the “origins” of that sense of self to agree that it is ethically obligatory to support and recognize sexed and gendered modes of being that are crucial to a person's well-being” (Butler, 2015, p.12).

6.2.3. Gender identity, does it really exist?

The Colombian Constitutional Court has recognized the right to gender identity as the freedom for an individual to identify however they choose as autonomous beings with their own authority and obvious dominion over their freedom: “The person is the only owner of his own being” (T-443-20 Corte Constitucional de Colombia, (2020)). During the interviews, transgender activists assert their legal right to gender identity and defined it as a practical expression of the self, its history, and its conscious reality. Many factors contribute to a person's gender identity, including their own construction, social pressures, biological or genetic factors, etc.

However, being able to recognize themselves, does not necessarily mean they choose it: *“If you ask me, I didn't choose to be a trans woman, I simply arrived at a moment in my life,*

specifically the pandemic (...) in which this identification as a man became unsustainable” Nikki, a trans woman university professor. Serano (2007, p.104) narrates her experience similar to Nikki’s: *“I honestly had no idea what it would be like for me to live as female. The only thing I knew for sure was that pretending to be male was slowly killing me”*. She explains how having a dissonance between the subconscious and conscious or physical sex, as trans people experience, causes mental tension and stress, and trying to push these feelings away just makes them stronger.

Contrary to this, RFs reject gender identity as a fundamental human right and instead see it as a manifestation of gender stereotypes, a “personality” that people should be free to express but not impose on others, and an outcome of capitalism and individualism, in which identity becomes a haven for “fitting in” society. Having a word like “cisgender” to identify non-trans women is considered for them an “insult”, not only because it reinforces gender but because it forces women to label themselves when most of them do not recognize as such. The “imposition” of the word “cisgender” is also understood as a manifestation of misogyny, as a system that prevents women from making their own decisions and forces them to submit to the desires of others.

For transgender people, the lack of recognition of gender identity has an effect on their physiological and social well-being (Jones, 2020), furthermore it is also cited as a major obstacle to establishing rapport with radical feminists and society at large: *“Without the recognition of who I am, without the respect of who I am, we can do nothing”* says Ana, 28 years-old transwoman activist. Trans activists explained that people often fail to recognize them because they mistakenly believe that only transgender people experience gender identity when everybody has a gender identity. Serano (2007) supports this by stating that cis people negate or ignore their subconscious sex because they are never forced to question it or make a difference between it and their physical sex.

6.2.4. The category of women

Feminism's long-lasting debate on the definition of a woman is also a key issue in the transgender discussion. RFs believe that being a woman means to have been born a woman, therefore, transgender women are not women, because they are biologically male, and transmen are women, because they are biologically female, even when they have a different gender

identity. Interestingly, they do not deny the existence of transgender people or the fact that they have rights that should be respected, but they denied that being a woman could be a sentiment and wish the world could transcend the gender spectrum. Questioning the definition of “woman” is considered to be misogynistic:

Why do we have to debate what it means to be a woman when no one debates what it means to be a man or whether or not being a man is associated with having a penis?

Aída, law student and radical feminist activist

Transgender women, on the other hand, identify as women and assert their position within the concept. In their analysis, saying that just biological women can be women is coming from white, privileged, and middle-class feminism, which has denied other diversities in the past, as was the case of black women, for instance, who were treated as inferior by white women. Just the fact that there are transgender men who are biologically women who do not recognize themselves as women already proves that the word “women” does not depend exclusively on one’s genitalia. The debate over “womanhood” is not new, it was first brought to light by Sojourner Truth (1851), a U.S. black women's rights activist, who questioned the power dynamics within the category of women and the way that slave women were not regarded as real women due to their race. For transgender activists, studying the category of women requires taking an intersectionality approach, in which gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation are examined as interconnected oppressions. Trans women construct themselves as women based on their own life narratives rather than biological criteria. However, further than wanting to be considered as women, they seek to be respected by society.

We realize that our dispute goes far beyond a word, moreover, if you want you can keep the word, we invent another one, you want to call us aliens, cyborgs, whatever you want, keep the word if that is the problem.

Ana, 28 years-old trans woman activist

6.3 Practical arguments

6.3.1. Our spaces, ¿whose?

A common argument from the RFs position is that transgender people take over and appropriate women's spaces, which is currently a problem but has the potential to get worse as trans people become more and more integrated into society. Women have historically fought to make room for themselves in a world mostly dominated by men, fighting inequality in different scenarios such as politics, the labor market, sports, etc., and now, as described by RFs, a group of men could suddenly identify as women overnight and take away female spaces and positions of power.

This phenomenon is explained as being unfavorable for women since they lose political representation as a result of being treated on par with a minority group—such as trans people—rather than as half of the world's population, and unfavorable for transgender people as well because their unique needs would be disregarded in favor of the general needs of women. It is interesting that trans men understood as biologically women, do not seem to be a threat in this sense. On the other side, trans activists contend that trans people do not need permission to occupy spaces in society, precisely the mere fact that others are willing to deny them access exemplifies the discrimination and violence they have to face, as a result of the societal “cishnormativity”. Cishnormativity was defined by Bauer *et al.* (2009) as the societal assumption that all people are cissexual, “that those assigned male at birth always grow up to be men and those assigned female at birth always grow up to be women” (Köllen and Rumens, 2022, p. 704). Cishnormativity marginalizes trans people's existence, by fostering the idea that they are gender “abnormal”, and “othered” from what is viewed as normal, leading to rejection, hostility, violence, and aversions toward trans people.

i) Activism

The notion of "taking our spaces" is evident in activism. Participants from both groups discuss how feminist protests and other forms of activism in cities like Popayán and Bogota have evolved into contesting spaces. RFs asserted that "queer" and trans groups had verbally abused them, calling them "transphobic," "classist," and "human females". Many trans activists reported verbal abuse and said they had decided not to participate in feminist parades in order to avoid conflict. RFs disapproved of trans women's involvement in feminist activism:

You won't find women or even men who have nothing to do with the trans issue, saying they want to be part of trans activism because it is not our struggle, so why would they ask for a space in feminism? They have their own spaces.

Gloria, 37-years-old radical feminist activist

Trans activists question how a movement that claims to fight for equality, excludes them, but agree with the fact that they have their own spaces where they feel free. An example of the latter is the “Yo Marcho Trans” parade, which takes place every July to advocate for trans people’s rights in Bogota and was developed due to the disagreements between the trans collective and feminist organizations, on the one hand, and this collective with the LGBTI march, on the other. This march has been labeled as "a sign of the latent division between cis women and trans women" in Colombia (Arboleda-Mutis, 2019)

Next, we will dive deeper into two core issues of contentment within the trans debate in practice: health and legislation.

6.3.2. Health

Both groups’ participants recognized that experiencing “gender dissonance”⁵ or “gender euphoria”⁶ is a painful experience that requires medical attention. As an alternative to depathologizing trans identities in the medical community, some transgender activists prefer to use the term gender euphoria, which is defined as a range of positive emotions like comfort, confidence, certainty, satisfaction, and joy in response to receiving confirmation of one's gender or body (Austin, Papciak and Lovins, 2022). Disagreement arises when discussing ways to deal with this. Trans activists believe hormone replacement and gender reassignment surgeries are not only a way to experience mental relief and peace of mind, but a dimension of the right to health for transgender persons, which has been recognized by the Constitutional Court of Colombia, stating that in specific cases the gender-affirming health procedures have to be covered by the public national health system to guarantee not only trans people rights to

⁵ “Gender dissonance” is described by (Serano, 2007) as a “kind of emotional pain or sadness that grows more intense over time sometimes reaching a point where it can become debilitating” (p.50).

⁶ “Gender euphoria” is the opposite of gender dysphoria, described as feeling “right” in your gender by (Arguilla, 2023)

health but their right to sexual identity and freedom in developing their own personality. *Ana*, a 28 years-old transwoman activist understands it like this:

I have these breasts for society to validate me, and yet it does not validate me, trans people who decide to have procedures are surely in an ambivalent situation, between victims of the system and at the same time an empowering issue.

Radical feminists view gender-affirming treatments and procedures (mainly hormonization and surgeries) as an unnecessary risk to women's health and as a way for gender reassignment clinics and pharmaceutical companies to profit at the expense of trans people in a capitalist system that only values identities and genders as a way to increase consumerism. While trans activists share the concern that there is no specific medical protocol in Colombia for treating transgender people, which frequently leads to misdiagnosis and malpractice, they question why transgender people should be held responsible for the lack of professionalism on the part of medical professionals.

6.3.3. Law

"We can disagree, but there cannot be two laws at once; while this legislative debate is ongoing, there will also be a debate of opinions" Carolina, artist, and radical feminist. Legislation is another core point of contention in the trans debate. Gender identity laws have become popular in many nations around the world, including Spain and the United States, as we explained in the background section of this thesis. In Colombia, the proposal of a trans law which is to be introduced this year promises disputes between the two positions of the transgender debate. RFs consider a trans law in Colombia, and in general gender identity laws in the world, as a pushback and a threat to women's rights. A trans law in Colombia will make it easier for people to change their gender, which is for RFs an exemplification of the eraser of the subject "women" since everybody could easily access rights that are exclusively made for women's needs, such as the lowest pension age in the Colombian context. Aída, a law student and radical feminist activist claimed that:

Since the transgender law was announced, many men have stated that they will change their gender in order to work less if becoming women only requires signing a line. This is becoming a trend without consideration for the repercussions.

According to transgender activists, the law has been developed over the course of about five years with the help of international cooperation. It aims to strengthen the protection of transgender rights by, among other things, criminalizing acts of discrimination against transgender people. They emphasize their concern about the law's potential backlash considering, for example, the approval of the “trans law” in Spain which, as explained in the background of this thesis, was protested against by radical feminists in the streets labeling it as “misogynist”.

6.4 Impact

6.4.1. Emotional impact

The participants agree that the trans debate has in recent years become a hot topic in the field of human rights, causing friction within the feminist movement. They characterize it as an "intense discussion" that turns combative and has negative effects both individually and collectively. This is primarily because of the repercussions they encounter when publicly expressing their opinions on social media or in person. Both groups' participants claimed to have been victims of harassment and death threats in person and through social media, which has led to feelings of sadness, depression, and anxiety, combined with increasing self-censorship. RFs are afraid of others' reactions to their thoughts, especially friends, and possible employers, in fact, they claim to have lost a lot of friends in their journey as radical feminists. On the other side, isolation is also a big issue. Simon, a trans man activist, said he dropped off university and some public spaces for the intensity of the trans-hateful attacks against his identity, which means violating his right to freedom of movement⁷.

6.4.2. How groups see each other

The interviews showed that the trans debate has caused not only ideological but also physical distance between the two groups. Only one out of seven participants from the RFs side have had a close relationship with a transgender person, and most of them would not be

⁷ Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights “Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state”

interested or would feel “uncomfortable” to meet one. Many claimed to have been attacked by trans people online using the term “TERF” as an insult and one of the participants reported having been a victim of sexual harassment by a transgender woman. Many trans activists have attempted to have conversations with radical feminists but have been unsuccessful. Despite this, they view radical feminists as “violent”, “heartless” and “rude”. They claimed that members of this group had insulted them in public settings. It was also clear from each group's reflections that stereotypes about the other group are not always accurate. For instance, RFs perceived trans people as having a deep dissatisfaction with their bodies, but Simon claimed that this was actually the complete opposite because, following his transition, he is now in an ideal position with his "trans body" and he loves it. Similar to how trans activists demonize RFs as trans-haters, radical feminists reject violence against trans people and raise issues such as why trans women should only be relegated to prostitution or hairdressing as examples of the extreme inequality that minorities must endure due to the stigmatization and lack of job opportunities characteristic of the Colombian context. Participants in both groups express the desire for some sort of convergence between the two at some point: *“I wish they could get it out of their minds that we are trans-exclusionary who want to deny their rights”*, Gloria, historian and radical feminist activist, and even moving on to connect through other topics: *“this is not the only topic I can talk to a person about, we could find something we both enjoy, such as soccer and build up from there*, Carla, biology professor trans woman activist.

6.4.3. What they have in common

Up until this point, we have emphasized the key elements of the trans debate in Colombia. However, like in every debate, the participants also identified some shared positions on which they would consider cooperating:

i) Violence

In 2022, 619 women were victims of femicide in Colombia, according to the *Observatorio de Femicidios de Colombia*, and other 47,771 women were victims of violence in their houses (Vanegas, 2023). In terms of violence against transgender people, Colombia is considered to be the country with third most homicides of trans people in Latin America, after Brazil and Mexico, with the main victims being trans migrant women (Palomino, 2022). Participants identified violence as one of the areas where the transactivist and radical feminist

agendas converge, pointing to men as the primary perpetrators. Both groups are violated in the public and private spheres, even when the violence is not the same and cannot be classified as more or less severe. Due to their gender expression, trans men and women are subjected to violence. Trans women are particularly punished and hated thus having identity features like breasts or genitalia destroyed. This hatred of what women stand for may be related to the hatred of women that motivates men to rape, beat, harass, and physically harm women and girls all over the world.

ii) A common enemy

The participants agree that both transgender people and women have a common enemy which is the patriarchy. Sultana (2011) defines patriarchy as a system of structural practices that uphold male dominance in both public and private spheres. This dominance is primarily understood as an ability to oppress, subordinate, and exploit women, but it has also been linked to a heteronormative system where lesbian women, transgender people, and other diversities are at a disadvantage in comparison to the norm in power: upper and middle-class, white, and privileged men. Serano (2007, p. 13) explained it like this:

Both feminists and trans activists were interested in challenging gender-based oppression in society, although these groups tended to frame the matter in different ways (the former in terms of patriarchy and the latter in terms of “the gender binary”).

iii) Fight for the right to abortion

The right to abortion is the point of convergence most frequently mentioned by the participants in the trans debate, which brought together both movements during the process of legalization of abortion in Colombia and on specific dates such as International Safe Abortion Day on September 28. In the pro-abortion agenda, trans masculinities have insisted on the necessity of recognizing them as beings who could also experience abortion and referred to as such: trans masculinities and non-binary persons with the capacity to conceive. RFs recognized trans men as “*biologically women*”, and therefore subjects of all the needs women face because of their reproductive and sexual systems, however, they have labeled the use of expressions such as “menstruating people” or “birth giver”, as unnecessary and a way of erasing the

category “women”. Trans men expressed how even when they are included in the debate of abortion, they would like to have equal voices as women, and that the contributions of trans-masculinities are heard. Fernández Romero (2021, p. 127) explained saying:

Trans activists have framed abortion rights within a wider agenda for bodily autonomy which includes sexual and reproductive justice, the right to self-determine one’s gender, and the right to gender-affirming procedures, all within a de-pathologization framework.

iv) What they care about:

Even though, as previously stated, some of the participants believe that feminism and transgenderism have very different political agendas, many of the struggles that both women and trans people face are said to be similar. As *Sara*, a black trans woman activist, put it: "*We can work together respecting the different positions on issues like health and reproductive rights, the right to peace, the right to the workplace, and the right to an education. These are struggles where both populations face discrimination*". The participants from both groups concur that it is urgent to advocate for the right to a life in dignity and this includes opportunities out of prostitution and hairdressing for trans women. The two groups are, however, still divided over whether that is a feminism-related issue or not.

7 Discussion

In the following section, I will thoroughly discuss and interpret the results considering the questions raised at the beginning of this thesis.

7.1 Explaining the trans debate in Colombia

This research started by describing that there is a trans-exclusionary and a trans-inclusionary movement in Colombia. However, the interviews revealed that none of these terms are used for the groups to describe themselves, or each other. None of the radical feminists consider themselves “trans-exclusionary”, and the majority do not view their position as Gender Critical Feminists, but as radical feminists, with the inclusion of trans people representing just one of the issues they discuss as part of their work. On the other side, trans activists advocate for trans-inclusion without calling themselves transfeminists or trans-inclusive feminists, but as part of the trans activism movement and the trans-masculinity movement. The trans debate likewise only represents one theme of trans activism, which advocates protecting trans people from violence and increasing their participation in society. Trans people and radical feminists encounter the trans debate due to their work as activists and through their personal stories. *Carolina*, an artist and radical feminist referred to this saying: “Someone just started calling me TERF (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist), and I had to Google it to understand what TERF meant”. Therefore, more than social movements, this study demonstrates that trans-inclusion and trans-exclusion in Colombia are political positions adopted not only by feminists but by other members of society.

These political positions are constructed on the basis of theoretical and practical arguments. The theoretical debate explained in the results section seems unsolvable; radical feminists defend gender as a social construct we must abolish, whereas trans activists advocate that the category needs to be recognized. This not only translates into political differences within feminism but a deep debate around societal inclusion which is reflected in the practical arguments. More than a space in feminism, trans activists want a space in society where people recognize their gender identities; they ask for a space in feminism, as they ask for a space in activism, in the health system, in legislation, as well as in bathrooms, sports competitions, and even in prisons. For radical feminists, these spaces belong to biological women, as Hayton (2020) resumes by saying: “The word woman is already taken”, and they propose to include

trans people but through having separate spaces, such as the trans activism movement, where issues of trans people could be better addressed. However, even when trans activists recognize their specific needs and unique experiences they oppose a society based on “cisgenderism” as the normality and “transgenderism” as abnormal, where they need to ask for permission to occupy spaces that they are entitled to occupy.

This inclusion debate has multiple implications, especially in the Colombian context. On one side, the fact that women have had to fight for having a voice and equal participation in society due to the patriarchal system, especially in an unequal society like in Colombia, could explain why radical women fear that their spaces could be taken away or are at risk. On the other side, radical feminist voices in this study who deny the inclusion of trans women in womanhood ended up joining other exclusionary movements in society such as anti-gender groups or religious groups, that already advocate against trans people’s rights. Furthermore, being the “outsider” in a country with high levels of exclusion and violence towards minorities and diversity such as Colombia, has proved to have a negative impact on trans people’s lives and could promote further exclusion (The Trevor Project, 2021). The demand for recognition of trans women as women, and trans men as men, is not only because they recognize themselves as such, but because being part of the group represents more security than being apart from it.

The above raises many questions for the future, including what is the role of feminism in relation to transgender rights: Is feminism going to become a movement that advocates against the rights of others, when its main political aim has been the defense of rights? In the next section, we will evaluate in depth the implications of this debate for human rights.

7.2 What are the risks to human rights?

The trans debate in Colombia entails individual and collective human rights implications. Both trans feminists and radical activists’ rights have been impacted due to the trans debate: the right to freedom from violence⁸ considering the aggressions both groups have experienced,

⁸ Article 2 - Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. Defined as “Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated within the community at large”.

the right to education⁹ in the case of the trans man who stopped university to avoid aggressions, and the right to freedom of speech¹⁰ due to the censorship that radical feminist claimed to have been victims of for expressing their opinions. However, these impacts must be analyzed in contrast. In radical feminists' understanding, trans people are limiting the exercise of their freedom of speech, when they are just "saying the truth". However, saying that trans women are not women is considered by trans people as "hate speech", and therefore a type of discrimination. Hines (2019) assures that freedom of speech is constantly evoked by Critical Radical Feminists when someone challenges their reductive view of women from a biological perspective and their restrictive understanding of sex and gender. This discussion reminds us how rights are not absolute, but span the extent that does not interfere with the rights and freedoms of others (Sivanandan, 2006).

Therefore, the debate implies a tension between two human rights agendas: women's rights and transgender rights. For many radical feminists, women's rights are based on the biological conditions of women, such as with sexual and reproductive rights, and made for their special necessities in a patriarchal society, such as with the right to freedom from gender-based violence. Hence, erasing the category of women, or putting it into question would undermine the guarantee of these rights, which Kiri Tunks, a radical feminist expressed accordingly: "If you can't define what a woman is, how can you defend women's rights?" (Hayton, 2020). The recognition of trans women as women would mean for radical feminists that "biological men" can have access to rights that were specifically created for the disadvantaged position that women have in society. Rights are seen in this perspective as finite resources that both groups need to fight for, implying that the guarantee of one group's rights will undermine the rights of the other. However, as Romana Ammaturo (2020) argues, if we understand womanhood from an intersectionality perspective, instead of restricted biological features, as radical feminists do, a wider diversity of women, including trans women will be under the remit of women's rights. In fact, trans activists declare that many of the rights protecting cisgender women are

⁹Article 13 and 14 – International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Defined as a key right that should be exercised "without discrimination of any kind as to race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status".

¹⁰ Article 19 – Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Defined as: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers"

also needed for trans individuals, for instance trans men having a female body, should have a voice in issues such as abortion, motherhood, and menstrual equity¹¹.

The trans debate implies a paradox, where a movement such as feminism, which normally would advocate for women's rights, and in general the human rights of people, advocates against the rights of a population, in this case, transgender rights. For instance, the right to gender identity that is recognized by the Colombian Constitutional Court¹², the Yogyakarta Principles¹³, and the European Court of Human Rights¹⁴ is not recognized by some radical feminists as a right. This lack of recognition is, according to Andrea Parra, based on social panic, i.e. "things that could happen if the right is recognized in the future", but not on data or real facts. From the other perspective, radical feminism highlights the profound differences in the two human rights agendas, for instance considering the right to work. Transfeminism typically advocates for the right to work as sex workers, due to the fear of the consequences that abolition might have with risking the only source of income of many trans women. In contrast, radical feminists do not recognize sex work as a right but as a violation of women's rights and therefore advocate for its abolition.

The question is now what consequences the debate may entail for the protection of human rights. Colombia, unlike other countries with active trans debates such as the UK and Spain, already legally recognizes gender identity which protects the rights of self-determination for transgender people before the debate became a hot topic in public opinion. This means that as Monica Roa¹⁵, Colombian feminist activist and lawyer explains, it is unlikely that the debate has the legal impact of bringing down the protection for trans people that are already in place. However, as we saw in the results section, a trans bill that seeks to converge the mechanisms and tools to guarantee the rights of trans people through one law in Colombia is expected to receive criticism both from the radical feminist movement, religious and right-wing groups. Exploring ways to minimize those consequences are discussed in the next section.

¹¹ Menstrual justice is defined as equitable and full access to menstrual hygiene products and the right to reproductive health education

¹² Sentencia T-443/20 – Colombian Constitutional Court

¹³ The Yogyakarta Principles are principles and state obligations on the application of International Human Rights Law In Relation to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristic.

¹⁴ Cases *Rees v. the United Kingdom*, *Cossey v. the United Kingdom* and subsequent – European Court of Human Rights

¹⁵ Interview conducted for this research on February 23, 2022

7.3 The five stones to build bridges of solidarity

One of the aims of this research project was to understand how to build solidarity bridges between transgender activists and radical feminist activists, considering that the debate has created a fracture preventing them from working together. Solidarity is understood not as the absence of misunderstandings but as a principle of mutual support between individuals and organizations fighting for justice (Sweetman, 2013). The first step in this direction is recognizing that the objective should not be to solve the trans debate. There are crucial points of disagreement between both positions, which does not necessarily mean that one of them should be eliminated. However, rather than overcoming these opposing points, it is possible to work around them: “Everybody can sit down with people they do not agree with to work towards solutions to common problems” (Ross, 2019, p.20).

The first stone to build solidarity bridges is thus respect. For trans activists, without the recognition of their existence, it is not possible to establish dialogues, many radical activists acknowledge that trans people exist, but are especially against the imposition of their understanding of identity to the society as a whole. A middle ground could be to recognize the identity of trans people but avoid calling women cisgender when they are not comfortable with the concept. The second stone is empathy. To build empathy in social justice movements, Ross (2019) proposed to escape the “cancelation culture”, in which people who have different opinions are rapidly judged and punished by “canceling them” in social media and real life. One such example of the trans debate cancelation culture is assuming that every comment regarding transgenderism equals transphobia, although they can involve reasonable questions. Nikki, a trans professor, reflects on that: *“I feel we use the term transphobia very easily and I don’t think everything is transphobia, that everything is hate, I also think that there is a lot of misinformation”*.

That leads to the third stone which is confronting misinformation, generalizations, and assumptions about the other position. The trans debate is full of assumptions and generalizations that widen the gap between the two positions without being based on facts. For instance, the generalization that all trans individuals are rapists because there have been cases of rape involving trans individuals in the past. The fourth stone is to focus on what both positions have in common. The human rights agenda of both groups have four points of

congruity: abortion, the elimination of violence, the fight for the guarantee of basic needs, and a common aggressor in males. Likewise, even when their understanding of human rights differs, there are rights that cut across both. For instance, both groups fight for their right to bodily autonomy and integrity, cisgender women and trans men to exercise their right to abortion, and trans women and men to exercise their right to decide over their bodies on gender-affirmation therapy.

The fifth stone is to recognize important issues outside of the debate that both groups need to face. Participants from both groups agree that the trans debate is consuming time and energy that they would otherwise be investing in fighting the system that oppressed them. Furthermore, the fracture that the debate is causing is hindering the potential of building new alliances. What if we change the narrative and consider what radical feminism can learn from transfeminism, instead of seeing it as a threat? Feminism has in the past evolved and adapted to the changes of their context, and perhaps as Serano (2007, p.42) proposes: “It is no longer enough for feminism to fight solely for the rights of those born female. That strategy has furthered the prospects of many women over the years, but now it bumps against a glass ceiling that is part of its own making”.

8 Conclusions

This study explored the trans debate in Colombia with the objective of understanding the different positions and arguments, and glimpse possible ways for the women's and trans human rights agenda to move forward in harmony. Through consequently consolidating empirical data from 14 semi-structured interviews and a critical review of academic articles, the trans debate was comprehensively characterized, creating understanding for the challenges it poses to human rights and to activism.

This research showed that there are two main actors in the debate in Colombia: trans activists and radical feminist activists. Participants in both groups are diverse, especially in the trans activists' groups, composed of trans women and trans men who recognize themselves as transfeminists, members of the trans-masculinity movement, activists of the transgender movement, etc. Radical feminist activists are comparatively more homogenous, a few of them identifying themselves as Gender Critical Feminists (GCF) but none as Trans-Exclusionary Feminists. Both can be characterized as social movements with members, broadcasting channels, alliances, a political agenda, and impact on their target groups. The main topics of discussion include not only transgender people's inclusion in feminism but also their integration into society and the acceptance of their identities. The dispute has not only caused a fracture in the feminist movement, but it has also caused a rift in society because it touches on issues that affect every aspect of society, including law, sports, public restrooms, and even the jail system. Therefore, the conversation is happening on social media platforms as well as academic institutions and activist spaces.

The theoretical root of the debate is based on different understandings within categories such as sex, gender, gender identity, femininity, masculinity, being a woman, where there are some points of convergence between the two positions. Also, practical arguments lead us to understand that beyond an academic fight, there are questions about the place of trans people in society and the guarantee that the state should or should not provide for the protection of their rights. Both approaches raise questions: Are we going to inspect someone's genitalia before they use the restroom? Do female athletes in female sports have to undergo a test to see whether their hormones provide them an advantage? How are we going to guarantee the sexual and reproductive rights of trans men? Finally, the debate proved to have a negative impact on

the participants, not only causing depression, anxiety, and feelings of rejection but also separating them physically, leaving little room for the two sides to reconcile in real life.

There are, however, areas of agreement, including the fight for abortion rights, support for the abolition of all types of violence, the struggle to satisfy fundamental needs of both populations, and a common aggressor: males. The debate proved to be relevant and an issue that is on Colombia's human rights agenda, but both groups agreed that there are more pressing issues the groups should concentrate on. It seems that the aim should thus not be “to solve” the trans debate but to continue understanding it and find ways to work around it. Even when they have profound disagreements, trans communities, and cisgender women are both fighting against systems that oppress, marginalize, and exploit them. Therefore, it is not only beneficial but also necessary to create a dialogue in order to achieve the equality society should seek for. The future consequently calls for increased “self-criticality” and “self-reflection” within feminist activism, and essentially in all the human rights movements, as we need to be able to talk, reflect, and even admit when we are wrong.

9 Further research

Further research on this topic could focus on three main things: legislation, the relationship between the trans debate and the LGBT movement, and further research on the inclusion of trans people in society. Legislation has a significant impact on the enjoyment of rights by women and transgender people, so it would be interesting to analyse the anti-trans bills in the U.S, the trans law in Spain, the Gender Recognition Act in the UK, as well as a, future trans laws in Colombia, including a comparative analysis. This research focuses especially on the relationship between the trans debate and feminism, but there is also a close tie with the LGBTI movement that could bring new ideas of collaboration. Finally, since there is a lack of research and data in general related to the situation of transgender people in Latin America, it would be interesting to investigate the inclusion of trans people in general as well as to study strategies of resistance from transgender activists.

10 Recommendations

The following suggestions are directed at women's, LGBTI, and transgender organizations for improving collaborations:

10.1 Recommendations for amicable interactions:

1. When engaging in a discussion about the trans debate, adopt a “calling in” culture rather than “calling out”. Bring context, empathy, and dialogue to the table and offer a fresh viewpoint on the facts while treating people with respect and love.
2. Recognize that the trans debate is not a battle zone. The existence of differences does not require the eradication of the other; rather, both can coexist.
3. Do not refer to transgender people with incorrect pronouns or radical feminists with offensive terms, such as TERF (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist). Everybody should have the freedom to be identified however they choose, and naming someone is a good way to strike up a conversation.
4. Be careful not to minimize or generalize negatively the opposing viewpoint. This study showed that just because you disagree with one person, it doesn't mean you can generalize that experience to the entire population. Do not personalize your oppression.
5. Keep in mind that social justice movements like feminism and trans activism shouldn't function as a court of law or a moral jury made up of clicks and likes deciding who gets to voice their opinions and who doesn't. Movements for social justice aim to eradicate oppression.

10.2 Recommendations for deeper collaboration:

1. Create campaigns that focus on the experiences of trans people to combat ignorance and lack of empathy.

2. Avoid getting caught up in controversies and concentrate on the subjects that both groups have in common. Although it is important to have theoretical and political discussions, they do not need to be part of every conversation.
3. People, especially activists, experience things through their traumas, as Ross (2019) argues. It's important to consider which aspect of oneself is brought into activism and what might be more a part of a personal healing process.
4. Encourage “self-critic” and “self-reflective” behaviour within your organization. It is okay to recognize your flaws and acknowledge that as part of a system, we could also contribute to inequality, violence, and discrimination of other populations.
5. Social movements cannot prosper on their own. The experiences of transgender people can be extremely valuable for feminism; it's important to be receptive to their stories and adopt what we can from them.

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Appendix 1

Semi-structured interview guide

The following are some of the topics to be covered during the interview. They will be prioritized according to the interviewee and the flow of the conversation. This is only a guide, other topics may be included or excluded depending on the case.

NEST OF THOUGHT:

- The feminist struggle in Colombia (personal and collective perspective).
- Subject? Subjects of feminism
- What is it to be a woman?
- Sex and gender system
- Femininity and masculinity
- Gender identity
- Activism/Feminism
- Cisnormativity
- Feminist theories

PRACTICAL EFFECTS:

- Women's safe spaces
- Trans people and feminism:
 - a. Inclusion/Exclusion
 - b. Recognition
 - c. Ideologies
 - d. Shared or divergent struggles
 - e. Impact
 - f. Geographic dimension
 - g. Relationship with anti-gender/anti-rights groups.
- Culture of cancellation
- Human rights situation of trans people

FUTURE:

- Trans Law in Colombia
- Among the different positions in the debate, do we have anything in common?