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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Conservatives find unlikely ally in fighting transgender rights: Radical feminists

By **Samantha Schmidt**

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She introduced herself to a room full of conservative lawmakers as a bisexual woman, a longtime political progressive and the leader of a radical feminist organization.

Listening to Natasha Chart through a Skype call were more than a dozen South Dakota state representatives, most of them Republican, considering a bill to criminalize medical treatments for transgender children.

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"Doctors shouldn't help kids take out their sadness and anger on the only bodies we can ever have," she said in her testimony to South Dakota's House State Affairs Committee on Jan. 22. "Please vote yes to forbid the sterilization of these young people."

The Women's Liberation Front is part of a long-running strain of feminism that rejects the existence of transgender identity. These fringe activists argue that advancements in transgender rights will come at the expense of women's rights and threaten the safety and sanctity of women-only spaces. They say women are defined not by their gender identity, but by their biology and by having "survived girlhood."

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Mainstream progressives have long shunned the organization, calling it a discriminatory, right-wing group disguised as feminist. But the Women's Liberation Front, also known as WoLF, has found an increasingly influential platform by teaming up with conservatives who disagree with their support of abortion rights and the "reproductive sovereignty" of women.

WoLF's leaders have become frequent guests on "Tucker Carlson Tonight" and at Heritage Foundation events. The group received a $15,000 grant from the Alliance Defending Freedom to help fund a legal fight against the Obama administration over transgender bathroom policies. It also filed an amicus brief in one of the most consequential Supreme Court cases of the year, arguing that sex-based discrimination protections in the workplace should not apply to transgender people.

Now, WoLF is even helping shape legislation in places like South Dakota, which last month became the first state to advance a wave of state bills nationwide banning medical interventions for transgender youth. Kara Dansky, a WoLF board member from the District, plans to travel to South Dakota on Monday to testify in favor of the bill in a Senate committee hearing.

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Emboldened by the Trump administration and a conservative majority on the Supreme Court, Republican politicians across the country have made transgender issues, particularly those affecting transgender children, a key target for 2020. And Chart and other radical feminists are helping to bolster their message, creating the perception of bipartisan support in a polarizing social debate.

Ria Tabacco Mar, director of the Women's Rights Project at the American Civil Liberties Union, called the partnership a "false alliance" that seeks to divide the LGBTQ community, as well as progressives.

"That's what's driving their influence — the false claiming of a feminist mantle and attaching that label to anti-transgender positions," Tabacco Mar said. "This is not a principle of crossing party lines. This is a principle of exclusion."

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But the members of WoLF, many of whom are lesbian, claim they are the victims of exclusion and "cancel culture." They say they've been kicked off Twitter, excommunicated from social circles and fired from jobs for expressing their views on gender identity.

In December, J.K. Rowling drew widespread outrage for tweeting in support of one such employee, a British researcher who claimed she was fired for her anti-trans social media posts, or as Rowling put it, for "stating that sex is real." Within hours, one of the trending topics on Twitter was "JK Rowling is a TERF," a commonly used acronym for "trans-exclusionary radical feminist."

Last weekend, the tensions between the TERFs and transgender advocates erupted at the Seattle Public Library as hundreds of women converged for a WoLF-organized event, "Fighting the New Misogyny: A Feminist Critique of Gender Identity." More than 2,400 people signed a petition demanding that the library cancel the event, urging it not to use a "public venue to spread hate against transgender people." But the library cited its commitment to intellectual freedom, even when it disagrees with the views of an organization.

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On Saturday night, as hundreds of people packed the auditorium, about as many protesters stood outside, waving trans pride flags and shouting "TERFs go home!"

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"If you don't fight for ALL women," one sign read, "you fight for no women."

A new platform for a decades-old message

The fight between radical feminists and transgender rights advocates began decades ago, amid the second-wave feminism of the 1970s.

Mary Daly, a self-described "radical lesbian feminist" who taught at Boston College, argued that transgender women aren't women, because "no male can assume female chromosomes and life history/experience." Her student, Janice Raymond, wrote the 1979 book "The Transsexual Empire," pushing the belief that transgender women reinforce outdated gender stereotypes and pose a threat to gender equality.

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WoLF supports abortion rights and combating violence against women. But the group's recent work has overwhelmingly focused on fighting against the growing transgender rights movement.

"Gender identity is literally threatening to erase women and girls as a meaningful category … in language and in law," said Dansky, one of the group's most vocal leaders. "We view that as an emergency."

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Rejected by mainstream feminists, the group has increasingly found a home with conservative organizations. And what's unusual is WoLF's "willingness not just to sort of flirt with the right, but to full-on coalition," said Nancy Whittier, a Smith College professor who specializes in gender and social movements.

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WoLF began aligning itself with conservative groups in 2016, after the Obama administration released its "Dear Colleague" letter providing guidance for Title IX protections for transgender students in schools. WoLF filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Justice Department, and later an amicus brief to the Supreme Court opposing a Virginia student's right to use bathrooms that matched his gender identity.

Dansky appeared on Fox News and in a video on the website for the Family Policy Alliance arguing that the transgender bathroom policy would be harmful for girls and women. "How wrong does something have to be for a Christian pro-family organization and a self-described radical-feminist group to oppose it together at the Supreme Court?" the Family Policy Alliance website stated

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WoLF's name also appears alongside conservative Christian groups in a "Parent Resource Guide" about "Responding to the Transgender Issue," which has circulated among conservative parent groups across the country, even in increasingly liberal places such as Virginia's Loudoun County.

Last year, Dansky joined Rep. Vicky Hartzler (R-Mo.) at a news conference to oppose the Equality Act, which would add sexual orientation and gender identity as a protected class to federal civil rights law. In October, WoLF helped organize a rally outside the Supreme Court in opposition to the case of transgender funeral director Aimee Stephens.

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And that same month, Chart spoke at a Heritage Foundation event in Washington, attended by state Rep. Fred Deutsch, the conservative South Dakota legislator who sponsored the bill restricting transgender medical treatments for youth.

Deutsch reached out to Chart, WoLF's board chair, on Twitter, she said. He later

asked both Chart and Dansky to testify in support of his bill in a House committee hearing. And when the bill faced a vote on the full House floor a week later, Deutsch invoked Dansky, referring to her as a "lifelong Democrat and former ACLU lawyer" who "came to testify for a Republican."

The bill passed the House, 46 to 23. A flurry of other state bills focused on trans youth have emerged across the country, and WoLF is already in talks with some of their sponsors.

'Cancelled Women'

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WoLF claims about 700 members nationwide, a group that Dansky said has grown steadily in recent years. Many of them communicate via a Gab server called "Spinster," which has become an outlet for anti-trans feminists who have been kicked off other social media platforms or who want to keep their views hidden from their employers.

Several women who identified as members of WoLF declined to give their full names to The Post, citing fears of harassment or other repercussions in their social lives or workplaces.

Until about a month ago, Dansky worked as a general counsel on the District of Columbia's Sentencing Commission. While the commission's director confirmed that she voluntarily resigned, Dansky said she felt the pressure to do so from critics who reached out to her boss to condemn her views on gender identity. Ultimately, Dansky said, the role became "untenable" given her role with WoLF.

Another WoLF member, a 29-year-old who provided only her first name, Karen, works as a software engineer in Seattle and served as the lead organizer of the Seattle library event.

She said she started digging into radical feminist writings after she was shut down by a circle of mostly queer friends when she asked them critical questions about gender identity. "Being told that I was just hateful for even asking these fairly straightforward questions really kind of pushed me to actually question this even further," she said.

The group decries what it sees as the "cancel culture" of the political left. It's even become part of the group's brand. A recent event hosted by WoLF in New York was titled "An Evening With Cancelled Women." The original location for the gathering, the New York Public Library, ultimately rejected the booking, forcing them to find a different meeting place. "That's right. They cancelled us," Chart wrote in a statement on WoLF's website.

Heron Greenesmith, a senior research analyst with the social justice think tank Political Research Associates, who tracks the group, argues this "positioning of martyrdom and silencing" is also a strategy to underscore the group's image as a beleaguered faction of the left, "despite the fact that they're being platformed by the largest, most-funded legal organizations in the world."

In reality, LGBTQ advocates say, transgender people — particularly transgender women of color — continue to be among the most marginalized communities in America. At least 26 transgender or gender-nonconforming people were killed last year, according to the Human Rights Campaign. The American Medical Association

has called the pattern of violence an "epidemic."

But at the Seattle Public Library event last weekend, the leaders of WoLF again portrayed themselves as the targets of attacks from the progressive movement.

"We expected authoritarianism from the right. We weren't prepared for it from the left," said Lierre Keith, one of WoLF's founding members and a speaker on the event's panel. "The most basic facts of biology are now considered a hate crime, which means the reality of women's lives are back to being unspeakable."

As the program began, a group of 10 ticket holders seated in the back — some of them transgender women — chanted "trans rights are human rights."

When library staff asked them to leave, eight of them agreed. But two refused to move. Other women stood to face them, crossing their arms. As the protesters continued to chant, it energized the crowd.

"Let women speak!" they shouted. "Let women speak!"

Officers arrested two of the protesters for trespassing, according to Seattle police.

"Don't take him to a woman's prison," one woman shouted, assuming the protester was transgender. "He's a man."

As the police officers escorted the protesters out of the building, the crowd burst into cheers, and the event continued.

Correction: Because of incorrect information provided by WoLF, an earlier version of this story included an incorrect figure for the group's membership. It is 700, not 300. The story has been revised.

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