

Carceral Diagonalism: The Punitive Safety Politics Linking Left and Right Transnational Anti-Gender Mobilizations

Since the mid-2010s, a surge in organized anti-transgender politics has emerged at national and international levels, both within “anti-gender” movements on the right and some strands of feminism on the left.¹ The global movement against “gender ideology”—initially led by the Vatican in the mid-1990s and subsequently taken up by a range of religious, conservative, and nationalist groups—has long targeted feminism and LGBT+ rights in general, with same-sex marriage, adoption, and sex education as key issues.² However, opposition to transgender rights, including access to gendered spaces such as toilets, hospitals, shelters, prisons, and sports, as well as young people’s access to trans-affirming education and health care, now feature more prominently as key issues on the anti-gender agenda (Butler 2024).

Similarly, while disputes about transgender identity within Anglo/Euro-pean feminist and lesbian politics have been present since the 1970s, anti-trans feminism has remained a relatively fringe position and, until recently, was not well organized. Following recent efforts to introduce or update trans equality laws and policies in various jurisdictions, there has been a major increase in trans-exclusionary feminist and lesbian campaigning in countries around the world (e.g., Yamada 2022; Cabral Grinspan et al. 2023; Kim 2024). While various scholars have sought to map the relationship between trans-exclusionary feminism and the wider anti-gender movement (e.g., Tudor 2021, 2023; Bassi and LaFleur 2022; Lamble 2024), the complex dynamics of alliances

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¹ See Paternotte and Kuhar (2018), Pearce et al. (2020), Corrêa et al. (2023), and Amery and Mondon (2025).

² See Corrêa (2018), Corredor (2019), Graff et al. (2019), and Ojeda et al. (2024).

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between the two—particularly the interplay between left-wing and right-wing strands of anti-trans organizing—remains relatively underexplored.

This article argues that carceral safety claims—namely political assertions that see the safety of one group as contingent on the punishment and unsafety of others—have been central to the rapid escalation of organized anti-trans politics across feminist and anti-gender mobilizations. By claiming that trans rights threaten the safety of non-trans women and children, anti-gender campaigners have successfully appealed to cross-political constituencies by reframing attacks on trans rights as protective measures for women. Such claims appeal to both the masculine chivalry politics of right-wing conservatives and the equality concerns of left-wing feminists. Despite some direct coalitions between both camps, these strands most often retain overlapping yet distinct strategies that align in the target of trans rights but not in their core political motivations. Such modes of “political diagonalism” (Callison and Slobodian 2021), or what I conceptualize in this case as “carceral diagonalism,” have been successfully mobilized to stoke anti-trans sentiment across left, right, and centrist constituencies.

These trends are particularly acute in Britain, where safety claims have been central to the recent blocking and rollback of trans rights. However, tactics of carceral diagonalism appear to be gaining ground in other contexts, with UK-based anti-trans feminists actively forging global links and building new collaborations under the guise of protecting women from harm. Drawing from examples at national and international levels, this article traces how carceral diagonalism has contributed to the acceleration of anti-trans politics across the political spectrum. It suggests that resisting these anti-gender escalations requires grappling with the carceral politics that underpin them and a need to build stronger transnational anti-carceral solidarity frameworks.

The escalation of anti-trans politics in Britain

Britain has recently gained notoriety as a global hot spot for anti-trans politics and “gender-critical” feminism (GATE 2022).³ Although the United Kingdom previously sought to position itself as an international leader on LGBT+ rights—including through strategies that extend its colonial legacies (Hartworn et al. 2008; Rao 2020; Balani 2023)—such efforts increasingly have

³ “Gender-critical feminism” is now commonly used in Britain to denote trans-exclusionary politics, but it is misleading, as it implies that trans-inclusive feminists do not themselves critique gender. For an analysis of the similarities and differences between “anti-gender” and “gender-critical” politics, see Lamble (2024); for a genealogy of the term “gender-critical,” see Thurlow (2022).

been eclipsed by a growing reputation for trans-hostile politics. This newer trend has been characterized by an upsurge of efforts to block or roll back transgender rights, restrict trans people's access to gender-affirming health care and education, shift public opinion, and escalate a trans-hostile environment (Madrigal-Borloz 2023).

Anti-trans policies, politics, and culture are certainly not new in Britain, and debates about trans rights within feminist and women's spaces are longstanding (Faye 2021). However, it wasn't until the mid-2010s that a well-organized and more virulent form of trans-hostile politics emerged—largely in response to proposals to reform the UK's 2004 Gender Recognition Act (Pearce et al. 2020; Whittle and Simkiss 2020). The proposed reforms sought to remove medical and bureaucratic barriers for obtaining legal recognition of a change of gender and instead enable statutory self-declarations of gender identification. Yet unlike opposition to trans rights in most other global contexts, which is typically driven by conservative, religious, and far-right groups, in Britain the anti-trans backlash was initially led by a small but influential group of feminist and lesbian campaigners, including those on the left (Lamble 2024).

Campaigns opposing gender-recognition reform in Britain were initially pitched as concerns about fairness and equality, via claims of a conflict between women's rights and trans rights—a frame that was widely echoed in mainstream media (e.g., *The Guardian* 2018). Presented as a zero-sum game, where gains for one group result in losses for the other, the debates were characterized by competing interpretations of the meaning and significance of “sex” versus “gender” categories—and their application in equality law and policy (Hines 2020; Pearce et al. 2020). For example, gender-critical feminists argue that the use of “gender identity” rather than “biological sex” erodes the meaning of “woman” and “lesbian” and hampers efforts to collect accurate data on equality measures (Collier and Cowan 2022; Amery 2024). However, as the debates wore on, gender-critical campaigners began to escalate the rhetoric from equality, fairness, and rights to a more specific frame of safety, danger, and threat.

Portraying trans rights in general, and gender self-identification in particular, as a risk to women's safety became a key campaign strategy. For example, the gender-critical organization Fair Play for Women, first established in 2017 to address concerns about trans inclusion in women's sports, widened its focus to crime, justice, and safety. During the public consultations on gender-recognition reform, Fair Play for Women released a series of emotionally charged campaign videos, exploiting concerns about violence against women to oppose gender self-ID. Drawing on alarmist language and imagery, and using dramatic accounts of sexual and domestic abuse, the videos claimed that

proposed reforms would allow men, including convicted rapists, to enter women-only spaces and violate traumatized women (Fair Play for Women 2018a, 2018b).

Associating trans rights with danger became a central framing device that opponents of Gender Recognition Act reform used in media interviews, press releases, and lobbying tactics. In March 2020, for example, during Scotland's public consultation on gender recognition reform, two gender-critical groups, the LGB Alliance and For Women Scotland, jointly ran a full-page ad in *The Scotsman* newspaper, with the headline: "Self-ID Gives Predators the Green Light." The ad claimed that proposed gender reforms in Scotland would allow violent men to access women-only spaces and harm women and girls. The language was designed to invoke fear: "We know that every predator typically abuses hundreds of times. So this change to the law will harm thousands of women" (Turnbull-Dugarte and McMillan 2023, 635). Gender-critical commentators referred to the legislation as a "sexual predators charter," suggesting that self-ID would sacrifice women's rights to violent men (Tudor 2021, 242). The framing of trans rights as a safety threat was widely taken up in the mainstream British press, bolstered by media and political elites invested in ramping up culture war disputes (Turnbull-Dugarte and McMillan 2023; for a comparable US example, see Schilt and Westbrook 2015).

Gender-critical campaigners began generating "evidence" of safety risks via formal reports, submissions to Parliament, and "fact sheets." This included misleading claims that trans prisoners were disproportionately likely to be sex offenders, that trans women have so-called male-pattern criminality, and that rape statistics were being distorted because high numbers of trans women were committing rape (Sharpe 2020b; Collier and Cowan 2022, 756, 768–69; Lamble 2025, 144–45). These claims were inaccurate but were given legitimacy when repeated by celebrities, media commentators, politicians, and academics (Lamble 2025).

The trans danger frame was further boosted by emotional appeals linking women's experiences of gender violence to concerns about trans rights (Tudor 2019; Sharpe 2020a; Turnbull-Dugarte and McMillan 2023). This affective register tapped into legitimate concerns about gender-based violence but channeled them toward trans-hostile positions in ways that amplified long-standing feminist articulations of white victimhood (Phipps 2021; Hemmings 2022; see also Thurlow 2024). Perhaps most famously, in June 2020, author J. K. Rowling published a blog post explaining why she opposes gender self-identification. Prominent in her rationale is her disclosure that she is a survivor of domestic and sexual violence. While the perpetrators of her abuse were cisgender men, Rowling implicitly projects the source of her suffering onto

trans people and explicitly accuses trans activists of “offering cover to predators” (Gwenffrewi 2022). Readers are invited to channel their empathy for Rowling’s experience of gender violence into sympathy for her gender critical position (Serisier 2020). This strategy was highly effective: many gender-critical campaigners describe being initially supportive of trans rights but then changing their minds when alerted to alleged safety concerns (e.g., Phillimore and Peters 2022).

The trans danger narrative was not limited to social and news media but was reflected in government policy decisions. Safety concerns, for example, were central to the blocking of the Gender Recognition Act Reform (Scotland) Bill, which would have enabled statutory gender self-identification. Although the Scottish Parliament voted to support the bill by a majority of 86 to 39, the UK Government vetoed it in an unprecedented constitutional move. Concerns about safety for women and girls, and potential for fraudulent applications by “malicious actors,” were cited as key reasons for blocking the bill (UK Government Equalities Office 2023).

The safety frame proved highly effective, as it appealed to a range of left, liberal, and right-wing constituencies. Despite divergent views, all could agree that women and children need protection from sex offenders. By repeatedly associating trans people, particularly trans women, with sexual risk, regressive arguments opposing trans rights were transformed into more palatable cross-partisan safeguarding concerns. Opposition to gender recognition reform has since expanded to organized efforts to roll back existing trans and gender-based rights. For example, religious evangelicals and gender-critical feminists have both called for the repeal of the existing Gender Recognition Act 2004, the removal of all references to “gender identity” in equality law and policy, and the replacement of “gender” categories with “sex-based” criteria (Christian Institute 2016; UK Government and Parliament 2023; Women’s Declaration International UK 2024). These calls have been explicitly justified on safeguarding grounds. The repeated suturing of concerns about violence with anti-trans positions, particularly when accompanied by widespread misinformation, has worked to cement associations of transness and sexual risk and to escalate opposition to trans rights (Lamble 2025). In turn, outspoken supporters of trans rights—including feminists—have found themselves accused of being complicit in harm to women (Hemmings 2022).

The carceral diagonalism of gender-critical/anti-gender politics

British gender-critical campaigning arguably reflects a growing trend of political diagonalism, where new lobbying convergences defy conventional left-right allegiances (Callison and Slobodian 2021). Naomi Klein (2023, 100–104)

has highlighted the significance of political diagonalism in understanding the growth of conspiracy theories post-COVID-19. She examines the convergence of left and right strands within anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, noting anti-vaxxer protests composed of hippie, health-conscious eco warriors on the left alongside gun-toting, QAnon Trump supporters on the right. Importantly, these alliances do not simply absorb left- or liberal-leaning individuals into right-wing factions but instead make strategic use of divergent positions to boost campaigning. The role of leftists and liberals is not to renounce their values and endorse a hard-right worldview but to use their specific political location to emphasize the urgency of the cause as necessitating new alliances (Klein 2023, 102). By mobilizing support from across the political spectrum rather than limiting it to particular factions, such movements claim greater legitimacy and reach wider audiences. Within logics of diagonalism, what unites the left and right is less their common goals and more their shared enemies (Callison and Slobodian 2021).

Such political diagonalism is observable across various gender-critical and anti-gender formations in Britain and internationally. Conspiracy theories on trans issues regularly circulate on social media, and the widespread transmission of misinformation has drawn in anti-trans sympathizers across the political spectrum (Billard 2023; Lamble 2025). Such conspiracies include blatantly outlandish assertions—claims that big pharma is funding the “trans lobby,” that pornography is causing people to become transgender, and that gender theory is a cover for pedophilia (Gill-Peterson 2021; Butler 2024; Reed 2024)—but also more tempered claims where decontextualized statistics and misleading statements associating transness with risk are presented as facts. As Sara Ahmed (2021) has argued, such claims generate high impact in part because they invoke the affective state of outrage to acquire momentum. Such “outrage econom[ies]” are particularly heightened when questions of sexual violence are invoked and when white women’s victimhood is at stake (Phipps 2020, 82).

The pull toward diagonalism among gender-critical feminists appears to emerge in part from disillusionment on the left. A common refrain is that such feminists feel abandoned by left-wing political parties, trade unions, media, and women’s organizations (e.g., Ditum 2020; Dansky quoted in Greenesmith 2020). Many describe feeling politically homeless as a result of their position on trans issues and use this to explain why they have turned to right-wing platforms or formed unconventional alliances (e.g., Fitzsimons 2019; Pedersen 2020). Others express grief at the loss of women’s and lesbian spaces and seek a renewed sense of belonging (Thurlow 2024). In feeling alienated from the mainstream left, gender-critical feminists have forged a

sense of community and identity through their perceived marginalized status while simultaneously claiming to represent a majority “commonsense” view.

Anti-trans political diagonalism is also enabled by the flexible use of the concept of “gender”—which rarely has a fixed or universally agreed-upon meaning among opponents. Instead, the concept functions as an empty signifier, allowing different groups to attribute their own meanings, despite widely varying positions. This flexibility enables the formation of political alliances among groups with starkly different ideological frameworks (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017, 259; Corrêa et al. 2023). It means that gender-critical feminists and right-wing groups need not directly collaborate (although some willingly do). Instead, both can build on, echo, and appropriate each other’s rhetoric while still maintaining distinct political goals, in ways that reflect what Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korulczuk describe as “opportunistic synergy” (2022, 7, 12; see also Morgan 2023a; Córdoba Vivas 2024).

Arguably, however, the strongest synergy point among gender-critical supporters across the left and right has been the appeal to carceral safety logics. Such logics assume that the safety and freedom of one group (cis women and children) is contingent on the control, punishment, and unsafety of others (trans people). Through what I conceptualize as *carceral diagonalism*, both gender-critical feminists on the left and conservative anti-gender advocates on the right assert that women and children are endangered by trans rights and must be protected from harm via punitive and exclusionary measures. Such strategies seek to ban trans women from women-only spaces and services and restrict trans access to health care, education, and legal rights. The diverse constellation of figures supporting these measures includes left, liberal, and right-wing feminists (ranging from trade union feminists in the Labour Party to “power feminist” women in the Conservative Party) but also anti-feminist, anti-gender advocates, such as Christian evangelicals, anti-woke culture war adversaries, Conservative populist politicians, and far-right neofacists (Morgan 2023b; Waylen 2024; Amery and Mondon 2025).

While each of these groups invokes shared claims of trans danger, they do so from very different positions. Conservatives and religious evangelicals seek to protect “vulnerable” women by upholding traditional gender norms, advocating for “sex complementarity” (i.e., distinct roles and identities for men and women) and reasserting the role of men in protecting women and children from dangerous others. For conservatives, protecting women by enforcing gender segregation is necessary for upholding heteropatriarchal norms. By contrast, gender-critical feminists seek to protect women on equality grounds, defending a narrow vision of women-only spaces and services by claiming to

safeguard women's "sex-based rights" (a legally inaccurate but politically expedient concept).⁴ Both left and right strands of gender-critical politics converge in carceral strategies to protect women (whether on chivalrous or equality grounds), including increased policing of the categories man and woman; heightened surveillance and regulation of trans and gender-nonconforming people in public spaces; and the demonization, expulsion, and punishment of gendered "imposters."

I argue that the political diagonalism that sutures left and right strands of the anti-gender movement is specifically carceral because the vision of safety driving it is underpinned by punitive logics and assumptions. Such carceral logics include: (1) political investments in a simple binary between innocent victims and dangerous others; (2) the framing of harm as primarily an external threat to be contained and kept out; (3) a focus on individual or group-based risk rather than structural and systemic conditions of violence; (4) a vision of safety that seeks protection through surveillance, punishment, and exclusion; and (5) appeals to criminal law remedies that position the carceral state as the protector from harm. These logics are infused with highly classed and racialized notions of danger, safety, risk, and victimization, which are themselves underpinned by logics of deserving/undeserving to demarcate which groups of people warrant protection versus punishment (Gilmore 2017). Because carceral safety approaches are already normalized within a range of political positions, including carceral feminism, neoliberal law-and-order agendas, and conservative retributive politics (Gottschalk 2006; Bernstein 2012; Whalley and Hackett 2017), they readily serve as cross-political suture points within anti-gender mobilizations—especially when invoked via trans danger discourses (see also Alexander 2023).

I suggest that carceral diagonalism is a distinctive strand of political diagonalism where punitive safety logics are strategically mobilized to forge new political alliances across left and right. Invocations of shared danger—often expressed in the form of sexual threat—are used to generate alarm about a given political issue and trigger urgent demands for punitive action. The figure of the dangerous sex offender, who is equally despised across the left and right, serves as an ideal common enemy linking otherwise divergent political constituencies. Associating marginalized groups with sexual offending

⁴ Sex-based rights per se do not exist in UK equality law. Equality laws in the United Kingdom operate by prohibiting discrimination against people with protected characteristics (such as sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, disability)—not by granting special rights to those with such characteristics. However, as a gender-critical rhetorical strategy, "sex-based rights" have functioned as what legal scholar Sandra Duffy (2021) calls "a fiction with the pretence of legality."

has long served as a key tactic of othering, but in political diagonalism it functions to align otherwise incompatible political positions. Moreover, because the sex offender figure is seen as fundamentally monstrous and irredeemable (Ilea 2018), demands for action are inevitably carceral; both the left and right call for greater vigilance and safeguarding in the form of increased surveillance, containment, punishment, and the expulsion of bodies and identities deemed risky. These demands in turn shift broader political norms toward ever more authoritarian and draconian measures, while legitimizing them as “common-sense” responses to harm.

These patterns of carceral diagonalism echo older cross-political alliances, such as Christian and feminist coalitions in campaigns against pornography and sex work, where punitive logics have also been central to left-right convergences. As Elizabeth Bernstein has argued, international campaigns against sex work via the frame of sex trafficking were shaped by carceral political shifts among divergent political camps, namely “the feminist shift from a focus on bad men inside the home to bad men outside the home, and the shift of a new generation of evangelical Christians from a focus on sexually improper women . . . to a focus on sexually dangerous men” (2010, 66). These shifts reframe the problem of sexual harm not as rooted in wider socioeconomic and political conditions (such as poverty, patriarchy, labor exploitation, war, and border policing) but as located in the bodies of dangerous outsiders who need to be identified, caught, and punished. These same logics recur in gender-critical organizing, where campaigners have extended the category of the dangerous man to the figure of the dangerous trans woman, who is presumed to pose a heightened risk because of her supposed potential to deceive others about the “truth” of her biological sex and her association with sexual perversion (Bettcher 2007; Sharpe 2018).

While these strategies partially replicate previous efforts to block LGBT+ rights by portraying gay men as pedophiles, lesbians as unfit mothers, and queers as corrupting of minors, they differ from tactics that play out primarily as moral disputes. Framing anti-trans campaigns as driven by safety rather than moral concerns adds a greater sheen of legitimacy through a unifying emphasis on violence prevention and a heightened sense of urgency over imminent physical danger. This shift in emphasis arguably has greater potency because the older specter of the moral degenerate is now more contested and less rhetorically powerful than the newer figure of the sex offender, who is more universally reviled (Gottschalk 2015; Fischel 2016; Lambie 2023). Whereas moral panics around threats to “traditional family values” are firmly coded as the domain of the right, “women’s safety” has a more flexible, cross-political appeal that can be simultaneously coded as conservative and progressive.

Carceral appeals to women's safety also function diagonally via tactics of femonationalism, which play out in transnational border control politics, efforts to strengthen neoliberal security states, and feminist endorsements of imperial war projects (Mesok 2016; Farris 2017; Grewal 2017). Safety threats to women are seen as threats to the nation, and investments in national security are shored up by protecting vulnerable women against foreign dangers—whether they be “backwards” immigrants, “threatening” racialized men, or “sexually predatory” trans women (Sager and Mulinari 2018; Thompson 2022; Amery and Mondon 2025). As Alyosxa Tudor has argued, “The recurring topos of externalizing sexual violence and ascribing it to the pervert other is shared in transphobic, Islamophobic, migrantist, and racist debates. It is the idea that sexual violence takes place somewhere else and will be invited in through migration and weak border controls—and trans/gender studies, LGBT rights, and legislation” (2021, 244). This suturing of racialized, gendered tropes of danger and victimhood to the buttressing of nationhood and security not only projects sexual risk onto the bodies of foreign “others” but obscures the prevalence of sexual violence within the normative structures of gender, family, home, and nation (Tudor 2021, 244).

Protecting women from potential trans sex predators has become a rallying point around which conservatives, liberals, and leftists can converge and the means through which wider public support for trans rights can be fractured and weakened. Gender-critical assertions that trans rights have “gone too far” and thereby threaten the existing gendered social order, combined with associations of trans rights with sexual danger—become catalysts that not only erode public support for trans rights but galvanize people into anti-trans action (Amery and Mondon 2025, 688; Tudor 2026). Concerns about violence against women are routinely invoked to explain why gender-critical advocates shifted from more neutral or tolerant views to explicitly trans-hostile positions (Phillimore and Peters 2022; Turnbull-Dugarte and McMillan 2023; Amery and Mondon 2025, 687).

Significantly, left and right anti-gender politics are linked by a shared frame of safety but do not fully merge into a unified narrative. Instead, trans-hostile politics advance “through a mix of liberal and illiberal articulations . . . [grounded in] the othering of trans people, and couched in pseudo-populist discourse” (Amery and Mondon 2025, 691–92). This mix of positions matters, particularly as the liberal variants are often what enable reactionary arguments to enter mainstream political discourse (Gill-Peterson 2021; Amery and Mondon 2025, 692). As such, it is crucial to understand how safety claims function in distinct yet overlapping ways across liberal and reactionary constituencies.

Amplified by carceral diagonalism, these safety narratives have had measurable political impact. Following decades of growing support for LGBT+

rights in Britain, recent opinion polls show a sharp decline in public support for trans rights. The British Social Attitudes Survey reported a 34-point drop in support for changing sex on birth certificates (58 percent in 2016 to 24 percent in 2023) and an 18-point drop in those expressing no prejudice toward trans people (82 percent in 2016 to 64 percent in 2022; Clery 2023; Montagu and Maplethorpe 2024; see also Smith 2025). These reversals have occurred even while broader views on family, sexuality, and abortion continue to liberalize. Hostile media and gender-critical campaigning—particularly using safety frames—appear central to these shifts. Notably, it matters who deploys these claims. In their study on the impact of safety narratives on support for trans rights, Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte and Fraser McMillan (2023, 635) found that when concerns for women’s safety were invoked by feminists, they had greater influence on women’s opinions than when the same concerns were expressed by conservatives. Here, carceral diagonalism is at work; preserving differential positions rather than merging them into a singular politic becomes highly beneficial for influencing different constituencies and expanding political reach.

Carceral diagonalism in transnational anti-gender politics

Carceral diagonalism within organized anti-trans politics is not limited to Britain but is increasingly visible across other jurisdictions. In Italy, for example, trans-exclusionary feminists are not major players in the anti-gender movement, which is primarily right wing and Catholic, but such feminists have nevertheless amplified anti-gender politics by expanding its base to left-wing and secular supporters (Gusmeroli 2024). In the United States, cross-political alliances have also helped drive a rapid increase in anti-trans legislation proposals. While 19 anti-trans bills were proposed in 2015, the number rose to 66 in 2020, skyrocketing to 589 in 2023, and reaching 1,011 bills across 49 states by 2025 (*Trans Legislation Tracker* 2025). Initially driven by conservative and religious groups, these US campaigns are increasingly supported by a small but influential group of gender-critical feminists (e.g., Greenesmith 2020, WoLF 2024). Similar observations have been made about trans-exclusionary feminists in Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, Mexico, Nigeria, South Korea, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey—where feminists are drawing new supporters to the anti-trans cause.⁵

While the specific character of left-wing feminist alliances with conservative anti-gender politics varies by context, a common thread has emerged of

⁵ See Alm and Engebretsen (2020), Willem et al. (2022), Fassin (2023), House (2023), Radoman (2023), Kim (2024), and Ojeda et al. (2024).

escalating concerns through alarmist claims around women and children's safety. In Spain, for example, trans-exclusionary feminists and far-right campaigners converged in opposing new trans equality legislation via concerns about violence against women and deployments of the trans rapist figure (Willem et al. 2022; Platero 2023). Such concerns are underpinned by carceral logics that suggest that women's safety is best secured through punitive and exclusionary measures. Similar narratives of sexual danger have been invoked in protests against trans rights in Australia, Canada, and Sweden, where some left-wing feminists and lesbians have joined predominantly right-wing and in some cases far-right mobilizations.⁶ Although these alliances may appear isolated, such incidents need to be understood, as Tomás Ojeda, Billy Holzberg, and Aiko Holvikivi argue of the broader transnational anti-gender movement, as "interrelated events that are in dialogue with one another" (2024, 2).

In some cases, these growing transnational anti-trans alliances have been directly amplified by gender-critical feminists in Britain, who have actively exported their tactics to other jurisdictions. British gender-critical groups have set up international chapters and forged global links to share strategies and resources across contexts. The UK anti-trans group LGB Alliance, for example, formed in 2019 to advocate for the separation of lesbian, gay, and bisexual organizing from trans issues, has chapters in sixteen countries around the world (LGB Alliance 2023). Gender-critical feminists from Britain have also intervened in trans rights legal cases abroad and have contributed to campaigns against trans equality legislation internationally.⁷

Most notably, the gender-critical organization Women's Declaration International, which originated in the United Kingdom, has actively built transnational alliances against "gender ideology." In 2019, Women's Declaration International launched its Declaration on Women's Sex-Based Rights, a statement that opposes legal protections based on gender identity in relation to health, political participation, violence support services, sports, and education. The declaration has been translated into 21 languages and signed by 500+ organizations in 160 countries (Chen 2025). Women's Declaration International claims forty active chapters across Europe, the Americas, Asia, Australia, and Africa (Cabral Grinspan et al. 2023). The declaration has been described by trans advocates as a call for "the abolition of trans people's civil rights" (Duffy 2021; Moore 2021), and researchers have identified the

⁶ See, e.g., *CBC News* (2023), *Feminist Left Australia* (2023), Kelly and Rachwani (2023), *LGB Alliance Australia* (2023), and Karlberg et al. (2025, 10).

⁷ See, e.g., *Tickle v Giggles for Girls Pty Ltd* (No 2) [2024] FCA 960, Federal Court of Australia.

Women's Declaration International as "one of the key players of anti-trans feminism at a global scale" (Cabral Grinspan et al. 2023, 3).

The international impact of the Women's Declaration International has been observed in newly organized trans-hostile feminist groups in various countries. Jieun Kim (2024) has noted its role, and the influence of British gender-critical feminism, in the expansion of trans-exclusionary feminist politics in South Korea. Though contestations over queer politics within Korean feminism had been simmering for years, these issues became more prominent in the late 2010s via online forums and university-based organizing, which drew heavily from Anglophone and European feminist disputes over trans rights. While Korean trans-exclusionary feminists presented trans rights as a dangerous foreign import (a common assertion from anti-gender campaigns more broadly), they simultaneously adopted gender-critical rhetoric from the United Kingdom and Europe, albeit adapting the frame to reflect a specifically Korean vision of feminism (Kim 2024, 201, 217). This strand of gender-critical feminism, though distinct from right-wing, anti-trans politics, nonetheless dovetails with global right-wing anti-gender campaigns (Kim 2024, 201).

The wider transnational traveling of British gender-critical discourse has been well documented. Hidenobu Yamada (2022) and Yo-Ling Chen (2025) describe the spread of British and Anglophone gender-critical discourses in the backlash against trans equality initiatives in Japan and Taiwan, respectively. Elizabeth Engebretsen (2022, 196–97, 200) likewise traces the social media influence of British gender-critical feminists—including the LGB Alliance and the Women's Declaration International—in the expansion of anti-trans politics in Norway, especially among feminists, lesbians, and gays. While biological essentialist arguments were most prominent, carceral safety claims also featured significantly in anti-trans rationales (Engebretsen 2022, 200–201). In Mexico, Siobhan Guerrero McManus and Julianna Stone Neuhouser (2023, 119) note a similar crossover of political rhetoric from the United Kingdom, attributing a rise in transphobic feminism to the influence of gender-critical feminists from the United Kingdom and Spain.

British gender-critical tactics and slogans have been directly replicated in various jurisdictions. At the Paris Gay Pride Parade in 2021, a group of radical lesbian feminists calling themselves *Résistance Lesbienne* took over the front of the pride march carrying signs that read "Lesbians don't have penises" and "Lesbians need feminism, not mutilating transitions." The action was inspired by the UK gender-critical group *Get the L Out*, which had taken an almost identical action in 2018 at London Pride, calling for lesbians to separate from the wider queer and trans community (Tudor 2019; Hines 2020, 33). In their online manifesto, *Résistance Lesbienne* invoked similar claims

and drew on the language of sexual violence, suggesting that consensual lesbian sex between cis and trans women constituted “rape culture against lesbians” (Provitola 2022, 388). A similar strategy was used by trans-exclusionary feminists in South Korea, who disrupted an online queer festival in 2020 by chanting “Get the L Out” (Kim 2024, 21–22).

While such examples do not mean that gender-critical feminism originates in Britain or is simply emanating from the United Kingdom to the rest of the world—as such frames can obscure context-specific conditions that give rise to different anti-gender formations globally (Ojeda et al. 2024; see also Madhok 2021)—it is nonetheless important to identify connections between the carceral cross-political alliances of anti-gender politics in Britain and other jurisdictions. This includes attending to the ways in which the global circulation of feminist thought occurs in complex and uneven ways, with Global North feminist discourses around gender, womanhood, and trans identity often obscuring the voices of Global South feminists (Camminga 2020).

Britain’s role must also be situated within a broader transnational sharing of political strategies and resources. A 2021 report by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) found that global funding for anti-rights movements—mainly from a small group of wealthy donors—had surged by 50 percent since 2012, with anti-gender movements receiving more than triple the funding as LGBT+ movements between 2013 and 2017 (Dolker 2021). This has occurred within a wider context, where governments around the world are cutting funding for civil society organizations, including those focused on LGBT+ rights (UN Women 2024). US-based Christian groups that are funding anti-LGBT+ and anti-abortion campaigns at home are also channeling funds to support the anti-gender movement abroad (Hughson 2021). Anti-gender funding from the United States to Europe has increased significantly in recent years, and the establishment of UK branches of US-based anti-gender organizations such as the Alliance Defending Freedom and Turning Point has also bolstered transnational collaborations (Archer and Provost 2020; Datta 2021).

The influence of carceral feminism within international human rights frameworks (Engle 2018) marks another vulnerability to cross-political anti-gender politics. While many international bodies, such as United Nations Women, are explicitly supportive of trans rights (United Nations 2024; UN Women 2024), advocacy groups that endorse carceral responses to gender-based violence may be susceptible to anti-trans arguments when framed as safeguarding measures for women. For example, in 2022 the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, Reem Alsalem, raised public objections to Scotland’s Gender Recognition Act Reforms on safeguarding grounds. She warned against potential abuse “by sexual predators and other

perpetrators of violence,” invoking familiar carceral safety claims (Alsalem 2022). In response, 13 international women’s and LGBT+ organizations issued a joint letter of concern (AWID et al. 2022; see also SRI 2023). When Alsalem reasserted her position, 550 international groups signed a further letter expressing “alarm” that she “has weaponized ‘protection of women’s rights’ to advocate for positions that misrepresent and regress from international norms and standards” (AWID 2023). While feminists in the international human rights arena remain broadly trans inclusive, there are growing efforts by some gender-critical feminists to shift this—using carceral safety framings as a key strategy.

Overall, organized anti-trans alliances across left and right appear to be growing at the transnational level and are extending the broader anti-gender movement to new political constituencies. These trends may be traced in part to British and other gender-critical feminists actively exporting their model elsewhere and building cross-jurisdictional alliances, but they also reflect the broader ascendancy of carceral safety politics that have enabled these tactics to resonate across left and right. Carceral diagonalism has served as a key vehicle for building cross-political anti-trans alliances and amplifying transnational anti-gender initiatives with significant political, legal, and policy implications.

Global resistance to carceral diagonalism

Responding to the growth of anti-gender politics globally, feminist organizers, activists, and scholars have called for greater transnational solidarity and renewed collective resistance to anti-trans politics (Essig et al. 2024; Hemmings and Madhok 2024; Ojeda et al. 2024). Adding to these calls, this article suggests that part of that work requires confronting the carceral politics that are contributing to the escalation and proliferation of anti-trans alliances. While some scholars have discussed the weaponization of fear and victimhood in wider culture war disputes (Chouliaraki 2021; Wodak 2021; Butler 2024), less work has considered how such affective claims are amplified through carcerality. Likewise, grassroots counter-strategies often focus on defending wrongly targeted groups but do not necessarily challenge the underlying carceral frame that implicitly suggests there is a “correct” target that warrants punishment. This can inadvertently replicate a deserving/underserving dynamic, where some groups are deemed worthy of protection and others are rendered disposable. Without confronting deep-seated beliefs that carceral strategies are a necessary antidote to violence, the “dangerous other” frame will simply shift from one target to another.

Indeed, the problem of carceral diagonalism is visible across a range of transnational feminist political struggles. We see the routine weaponization

of carceral safety claims across the left and right in anti-migrant politics, in justifications for military occupation and genocide, and in rationales for expanding border, police, and security powers. It is not a coincidence that feminists who hold anti-gender views often overlap with explicitly pro-carceral positions, including those who endorse carceral responses to sex work, trafficking, and sexual exploitation (Tudisco 2023). Conversely, some of the strongest resistance to anti-trans politics comes from intersectional anti-carceral feminists (e.g., Davis et al. 2022).

Confronting the carceral drivers of anti-trans politics also means grappling with the complexities of fears that are mobilized to build reactionary cross-political alliances. Given the pervasiveness of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly by cis men against (trans and non-trans) women, lesbians, and gender-nonconforming people, wider concerns about safety are not unfounded. It is crucial to understand that the misdirection of these fears toward anti-trans and anti-gender positions serves as a distraction from the actual problem and therefore necessitates strategic confrontation (Lamble 2026). Addressing those fears requires different visions and practices of safety, ones that refuse carceral logics, attend to structural causes of violence, and do not allow one group's safety to be sacrificed for that of another (e.g., GenerationFive 2017; Creative Interventions 2018; Lamble 2026).

Conclusion

In tracing the recent escalation of transnational organized anti-trans politics, this article has mapped out the ways that carceral safety logics have facilitated convergences across left and right. I have argued that the concept of carceral diagonalism can help explain not only what makes such unlikely alliances possible but also what makes them politically potent. Carceral diagonalism aids in understanding how and why left-wing and feminist strands of gender-critical politics remain distinct from, yet complicit with, right-wing anti-gender politics (Siddiqui 2021; Tudor 2023). It helps make sense, for example, of how prominent left-wing feminists in the United Kingdom who otherwise oppose US Republican politics can endorse Donald Trump's 2025 executive order "Defending Women from Gender Ideology" (Woods 2025). Carceral diagonalism can also explain how major rights-stripping initiatives, like the 2025 UK Supreme Court ruling that overturned sex discrimination protections for trans people, not only become possible but are celebrated by both feminists on the left and conservatives on the right. With this conceptualization, I make explicit the ways that cross-political appeals to carceral safety logics do not prevent violence but rather increase harm against marginalized groups.

As with all attempts to conceptually grasp complex discursive shifts, the notion of carceral diagonalism is not without limits. Using the diagonalism frame may overplay distinctions between left and right, particularly when the meanings of left and right are changing under regimes of neoliberalism and rising neofascism. It may overstate the seeming newness of particular alliances that have longer histories and trajectories (Lewis and Seresin 2022). Diagonalism may underplay differences in the role and impact of left versus right strands, particularly when unequal synergies result in overall shifts to the right. Finally, if contextual differences are not carefully considered, carceral diagonalism may oversimplify how complex factors play out distinctly across local, national, and transnational levels.

Nevertheless, carceral diagonalism highlights the particular role that punitive safety politics play in escalating political shifts rightward, adding greater specificity to broader analytic frames such as moral panics or psychosocial accounts of the fears driving rising fascism (Butler 2024; Amery and Mondon 2025; Duffy 2025). There are many examples of feminist, liberal, and left-wing complicities with conservative anti-gender mobilizations that are feeding rising forms of right-wing reactionary politics (Tudor 2026). It is not insignificant, for example, that A Woman's Place UK, one of the few gender-critical organizations in Britain that espoused an explicitly left-wing feminist trade union perspective, formally ceased campaigning in 2024. A Woman's Place UK declared that its original demands against gender self-ID had been achieved, and although further campaigning was needed, decided that other organizations were better placed to pursue that work. Notably A Woman's Place UK cautioned against ceding ground to right-wing tendencies, warning that "tolerance of—even support for—the far right in parts of the 'gender critical' movement is an enormous danger for women" (2024). Yet in practice, the closure of A Woman's Place UK has meant that other more centrist and right-wing groups are already filling the space it previously occupied, moving the overall gender-critical landscape further rightward. Moreover, ending their work could be seen as a sign that they were unable to sustain the fantasy that their position was solely based on the "good cause" of women's safety. This assertion allowed them to view their stance as distinct from right-wing anti-trans mobilizations—which overlap with anti-feminism—and as instead politically compatible with leftist politics.

These wider trends raise pressing questions around what kinds of strategies are likely to be most effective in challenging anti-gender escalations transnationally and whether tactics to combat far-right strands are similar or different from those needed to confront left feminist ones. There are also questions around the role that anti-carceral visions of safety might play in generating more effective counter-strategies across different contexts (Lamble

2026). Ultimately, these questions require renewed grappling with longer-standing debates around resistance to imperial and carceral feminisms and the meaning and practice of transnational feminist solidarities.

*School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Birkbeck, University of London*

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