

Transgender controversies can lead to 'gender panic,' study finds

November 5 2013, by Mary Abowd

When New York City moved in 2006 to make it easier for transgender people to revise the gender on their birth certificates, the proposal was widely expected to pass.

But the anti-discrimination measure failed, in part because of public opposition to removing the requirement that individuals have genital surgery before claiming a different gender.

"The backlash was intense," said Kristen Schilt, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. "There was such a fervor over taking the surgery requirement out, a sense of, 'Absolutely not. There's going to be chaos.'"

Schilt calls this public reaction "gender panic," a concept that she and co-author Laurel Westbrook explore in their study, "Doing Gender, Determining Gender," published in the October issue of the journal *Gender and Society*. The authors examined mainstream news coverage of transgender-related news and [policy](#) issues, and found trends that reflect entrenched views about transgender people and broader gender issues. Like the terms "[moral panic](#)" and "sex panic," Schilt describes gender panic as a deep, cultural fear, set off in this case when the "naturalness" of a male-female gender binary is challenged. When such challenges affect public policy, Schilt said, "that's when the panic starts to get really hot."

Perceived threats to women's spaces spur panic

Since the 1960s, American society has tended to uphold values of autonomy and equality, including gender self-identity, Schilt said. Transgender people typically are accepted in "non-sexual" spaces like the workplace. But acceptance hits a wall when it comes to places reserved for [women](#). In the case of New York birth certificates, the "panic" centered on how such a policy could lead to granting access to women's bathrooms and locker rooms for individuals who identify as women but have male anatomies.

In these women-only spaces, many people regard the mere assertion of a person's gender identity as insufficient—it must be accompanied by anatomical change. "We found that what calms down the panic is having a very clear policy about who's in your bathroom," Schilt said, "and that policy relates very distinctly to genitalia." She pointed out that the world of transgender athletics elicits far less panic because the Olympics and all sports teams subscribe to the Stockholm Consensus, a rigidly detailed policy governing athletes' bodies, from hormone levels to genitalia. For example, people with male genitalia are forbidden from competing in the Olympics as women, though a man without a penis could compete in men's events.

The authors contend that gender panic is often unfounded, based not on evidence but on an imagined threat. "There's an opposition that's asking, 'But what if?'" Schilt said. Public outcry against the birth certificate case centered on the potential dangers of encountering a transgender person in a woman's bathroom—opponents invoked scenarios of sexual predators pretending to be transgender in order to violate women and children in these settings. Even without data to support them, such arguments are powerful enough to sway policy. New York City, for example, swiftly abandoned its proposal.

Trend mirrors views on violent crime

Instances of gender [panic](#) almost never centered on potential violation of male spaces, such as transgender men in male bathrooms, the study found. Westbrook, an assistant professor of sociology at Grand Valley State University, attributed the focus on women's spaces to underlying social beliefs about gender, particularly the notion that women are weak and vulnerable and men are strong and dangerous. "Women have been taught that someone is always looking to attack us," she said. "We have to be extra cautious or that attack will be successful." Men don't have that sense, she added, even though they are far more likely to be victims of violent crime.

Despite these deep-seated beliefs, there are signs of change. In August 2013, California became the first state to pass a law allowing transgender public school children to choose a sports team—or a bathroom—based on their own perception of their [gender](#). The law does not include a requirement that the children be anatomically male or female.

That could signal things to come. While previous cases caused concerns about crimes by adults, Schilt said, "It's harder to have a really negative reaction to a child."

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Provided by University of Chicago

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