

The False Equivalence of Femcel and Incel: Political Lesbianism Rebranded?

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Abstract

The ‘femcel’ archetype of the self-identified involuntarily celibate woman has gained traction in digital spaces yet remains underexplored within feminist legal and political thought. In analysing this emerging figure, this paper advances two primary conclusions.

First, it argues that equating femcels with incels is a false equivalence. While femcelism articulates discontent with sexual and relational exclusion, it does not typically translate into violence against men. By contrast, incel ideology has repeatedly escalated into lethal misogyny, epitomised by the so-called ‘king of the incels’, mass murderer Elliot Rodger. To conflate the two, therefore, obscures the deadly consequences of incel discourse while mischaracterising the politics of femcel identity.

Second, and flowing from this crucial divergence, the paper examines whether femcel discourse can be reread as a contemporary iteration of Sheila Jeffreys’ political lesbianism that called for the conscious rejection of heterosexual intimacy as a strategy of resistance to patriarchal domination. While femcels are typically characterised by an absence of choice that diverges from Jeffrey’s ideology, both political lesbianism and femcel discourse foreground women’s alienation from heteronormative sexuality under patriarchy. By situating femcel discourse within a broader feminist genealogy, including the 4B movement in South Korea, this paper examines whether femcel rhetoric might constitute a politics of refusal rather than a resignation under neoliberal fatalism. In doing so, the femcel emerges as a potentially subversive figure that unsettles dominant norms around gender, power and sexuality that cannot be subsumed under the lethal logic of its incel namesake.

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