

Editorial

The Uphill Battle of Unpopular Ideas

David Benatar

Philosophy Department, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

Submitted: 20 August 2022, accepted: 1 October 2022, published: 31 October 2022

Abstract: This is an opinion piece about the struggle of controversial ideas to be heard. It is occasioned by the rejection, by a dozen publications, of another opinion piece. The rejected article appears as an appendix at the end. In what precedes it, I discuss why it is much more difficult for controversial ideas to receive a platform.

Keywords: controversial ideas; epistemic injustice; heterodoxy; sex discrimination

How to cite: Benatar, D. The Uphill Battle of Unpopular Ideas. *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 2022, 2(2), 1; doi:[10.35995/jci02020001](https://doi.org/10.35995/jci02020001).

©2022 Copyright by the author. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license.



This is a short article about an even shorter opinion piece that follows it in Appendix A. That latter piece expresses a simple, well-founded idea that struggles to be heard – the idea that equality of the sexes must cut both ways, by removing wrongful discrimination not only against women, but also against men. The specific example I discuss is the responsibility to defend one’s country, historically borne overwhelmingly by men. Although it applies more generally, I raised it in an essay written in the topical context of Ukraine’s defensive war against Vladimir Putin’s Russia.¹

That essay was submitted to a dozen periodicals between early March and mid-May 2022. (In the interests of full disclosure, the first two submissions were of a longer version.) None of these periodicals was interested in publishing it. These periodicals were a mix of newspapers, magazines, and online publications. They ranged not only in prominence, but also in political orientation.

Prominent publications with large readerships typically receive vastly more submissions than they are able to publish. They must be highly selective. For this reason, rejection by any one newspaper, or even a few prominent newspapers, cannot, by itself,

¹ More recently, the issue of male-only conscription has become more acute than it previously was on the other side of this war. While Russia has long had a male-only draft, the scale of Russian conscription and its implications have become much greater. Now, many more Russian males, and only males, are being drafted into fighting an immoral war that many of them do not want to fight. They, but not Russian females, are faced with the choice of fleeing the country, being imprisoned for a lengthy period, and joining a war in which they will kill or be killed (or kill and then be killed). All of those options are significant burdens – ones which Russian females do not have to bear.

be taken as evidence of resistance to giving an idea a hearing. It is possible that such resistance *is* part of the explanation, but we cannot assume that it is.

However, when an article expressing an uncommon and unpopular view cannot find a home in any of a dozen publications, including many that have less competition for space, it is not unreasonable to become suspicious. This is especially so when dominant views are endlessly repeated in one form or another in those and other publications.

Suspicious are also bolstered in those few cases in which a reason is given for rejecting the piece and the reason is either unconvincing or revealing. For example, one editor responded that they had “decided for the time being at least to keep everything Ukraine-related in house.” Another said that “we have many already accepted submissions on Ukraine and would, therefore, have to pass this one.” While my paper is, in a sense, about Ukraine, it is also about something much broader, of which Ukraine was but a topical example.

An editor at another publication replied that the “argument is fine and I’d be happy to revisit it in the future, but I’m not sure I want to drag the gender wars into our coverage of the Ukraine conflict for the time being.” The openness to airing the argument later is welcome, but is it really “dragging the gender wars” into coverage of the Ukraine conflict to note – and argue against – the “gendered” distribution of military responsibilities? May these discussions happen only in the abstract and not with reference to live (and life-threatening) cases? Does talking about the gendered contours of sexual harassment amount to “dragging the gender wars” into coverage of any one of the innumerable #MeToo cases in recent years?

Unorthodox views are, of course, less likely to be aired than orthodox ones. Part of the reason for that is self-censorship. There are often personal costs to expressing such views. However, even when somebody holding an unorthodox view is willing to express it, they will inevitably encounter more difficulty in finding a credible outlet willing to publish it.

This is not always sinister. Some unorthodox views are unorthodox because they are without foundation. Fantastical conspiracy theories and other crackpot ideas fall into this category. The problem is that whether an unorthodox idea is crazy or merely unpopular will almost certainly be a matter of controversy. Those who hold an unpopular view typically do not think it is detached from reality, even when it is. While some of those who reject an unpopular idea may recognize it to be worthy of consideration, there is a temptation among many others who hold orthodox views to dismiss deviant views as mad even when they are not.

Even when unpopular views are given a hearing, they are typically expected to meet a higher burden of proof. Again, this is not entirely unreasonable. If a view is likely to be rejected, it is more important to anticipate the objections that will be raised, and to respond to them. That said, a short opinion piece cannot be expected to engage all possible objections, and this should not prevent it from being aired at all in op-ed form.² By contrast, orthodox ideas tend to get a free pass. They are so widely held that considering good objections to them is generally not thought to be necessary.

Thus, there are some views that do not get a hearing or are less likely to get a hearing, not because they are unsupported, but rather because of ideological fashions. Sadly, even misguided ideological fashions tend to last – to our collective detriment – much

² I have argued at much greater length against sex discrimination in conscription in *The Second Sexism: Discrimination Against Men and Boys*. Malden MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2012.

longer than sartorial and tonsorial ones do. To switch metaphors, bad ideas can have a very long shelf life.

One reason for this is that orthodoxies have a self-propelling feature. The more widely accepted ideas are, the more they are repeated uncritically, and without exposure to external criticism. They seep into the epistemic groundwater.

Regarding epistemic matters, many of those who identify themselves as progressives speak about “epistemic injustice” – the injustice that occurs when certain people, typically women and darker skinned people, are accorded less standing or authority as knowers or transmitters of knowledge. This is a profound and important concept.

The problem is that progressives have missed a key, but obvious, dimension to epistemic injustice. The more somebody is actually the victim of epistemic injustice, the less likely and less widely they are to be recognized as such. Indeed, the absence of that recognition is precisely what feeds the epistemic injustice. Not only are you not taken as seriously as you should be, but it is not widely recognized that this is the case.

The corollary is that the more widespread the recognition of a particular manifestation of epistemic injustice is, the less likely it is that the purported victim actually is a victim. This is not a logical point but rather a psychological one. It is logically possible for X, Y, and Z to recognize that W is the victim of epistemic injustice while continuing to take W less seriously than W should be taken. Psychologically, however, those who regard W as a victim of epistemic injustice are more likely not to inflict that injustice themselves, either because they are sensitive to the potential problem or because they compensate (and not infrequently *overcompensate*) for it.

One upshot of this is that while those espousing orthodox views are likely to be given more credence, even when the orthodox views are flawed, those expressing unpopular but well-founded views are likely to be given less credence than they should be given. That is a stark form of epistemic injustice – and one typically not recognized by those who are concerned about epistemic injustice.

Even mentioning this comes at a risk. This is because there are orthodox views about who the victims of epistemic injustice are – and they do not include those who hold unorthodox views (for example, about epistemic injustice). Everybody can agree that it is unseemly to claim epistemic injustice when it does not exist. However, the difference between orthodox and unorthodox views about when this applies is that the orthodox views are, by definition, dominant. The point of this observation is not to elicit sympathy, but to articulate the ironies and paradoxes.

There are no formulae for overcoming such problems. Surmounting them, which can only be done incrementally, depends on editors and other gatekeepers of ideas taking cognizance of the prevailing biases, and being more open to well-defended, unusual views. Rather than enabling people to express one, already dominant, view for the nth time, some weight should be attached to airing alternative views, assuming, of course, that they are well argued.

Appendix A. Equal Rights but also Equal Responsibilities: Lessons from Ukraine

Millions of Ukrainians have understandably fled from their country in the face of the invading Russian forces. Others have remained and are fighting valiantly in defence of Ukraine.

Who has left and who has stayed is not entirely a matter of choice. Men, age 18 to 60, have, with few exceptions, been barred from leaving the country. They are required to remain and defend the country. Those who have managed to dodge the draft by fleeing

the country have been ostracised by others, including women who themselves have left the country.³

In some ways, that is unremarkable. Men have been bearing the burden of military service for almost all of human history. On the other hand, this is 2022 and, in many countries, women have the same rights as men. They are enfranchised and hold public office, attend university (often in greater numbers than men), and are doctors, lawyers, and accountants.

This, many say, is not enough. They complain that there are disproportionately few women in privileged positions, such as in legislatures and the higher ranks of business and academia. By contrast, it is very rare to hear complaints that there are disproportionately many men in undesirable positions, including combat.

Whereas, in many countries, women have been permitted to join the military and even to enter combat, they are still rarely conscripted and almost never forced into combat. We hear surprisingly little criticism of this from those who purport to be interested in equality of the sexes. Why?

One possible answer is that there are average differences between the sexes, such as greater upper-body strength, which make men more suitable for combat. If that is so, then the discrimination against men may be said to be justified.

However, those who offer this argument would have to explain why sex differences would not justify some forms of discrimination against women. Why, for example, would it not justify excluding from combat those women who want to fight? By contrast, if we acknowledge that some women have the capacity to perform combat roles, why should we not conscript those people, whether they are male or female, who have the necessary capacities?

This is especially relevant in the Ukrainian case, where men in their 50s are being treated as more suitable for combat than women in their 20s. Even if young men, on average, are more suited to combat than women of the same age, many ageing men, with their failing eyesight, weakening backs, expanding bellies, and deteriorating cardiovascular systems, will be less suitable than younger women.

If using a person's sex (and underweighting their age) as a proxy for those capacities, is not a justification for excluding willing and able women from combat, it is not a justification for including unwilling and unable men. Where two people are both able but unwilling, it is sex discrimination to compel only the man but not the woman.

One possible objection, at least in the Ukrainian case, is that somebody must accompany children to safety and that women are better suited to that. Why might women be better suited?

One possible explanation is social: women are socialized as child-carers and for this reason make better carers. Those who wish to advance this rationale must recognize that it could, as it often has been, also be used to justify discrimination against women in other contexts. If they are not willing to countenance that implication, they should resist it in the current case.

Another possible explanation is biological. Only women can breastfeed nursing infants. The problem with this explanation is that it would apply only to breastfeeding mothers. Many younger women are not mothers. Breastfeeding does not explain why those younger women should be allowed to leave while older men are not. A ban on departure could make exceptions for breastfeeding mothers and, in the case of older

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/10/world/asia/ukraine-draft-dodgers.html>.

children, for one parent – of either sex. Which parent it is, could be determined by each family (even though that would likely result in many more men than women staying).

Another biological explanation that would apply to currently nulliparous women is that many more women than men are necessary to repopulate. Thus, male lives are more expendable. That argument, like earlier ones, is also dangerous for those opposing discrimination *against* women. This is because it cuts both ways. For example, it can be used to bar women from combat and other dangerous activities even when they wish to undertake them.

Perhaps the last refuge of those wishing to justify the practice of a blunt, sex-based bar on leaving Ukraine, is to appeal to some perceived practical problem with implementing a less discriminatory policy. While any such purported problem would have to be engaged on its merits (or demerits), it suffices here to say that sex discrimination is easy. If we must expend the effort, as we should, to avoid sex discrimination against women, we must do the same when the victims of sex discrimination are men.