

Screening Adult Human Female at the University of Edinburgh: A response

University of Edinburgh Staff Pride Network Committee

This response also has the support of UCU Edinburgh branch and University of Edinburgh Unison branch.

Free speech, academic freedom, freedom of expression. These are all phrases applied tactically to justify questioning the validity or the rights of people with marginalised identities. Most will be familiar with the history of scaremongering fostered by right-wing, often religious groups, designed to fuel moral panic directed at the gay community during the AIDS epidemic in the 80s and 90s which extended into legislation (including Section 28 in the UK) which limited the rights of gay people to live freely. The arguments often centred around the need to 'protect children', typically due to the conflation of queer identities with predatory behaviour towards minors. Today, we see the same tactics being levied at the trans community and it is happening here at the University of Edinburgh under the guise of academic freedom.

On the 26th of April 2023, the group Edinburgh Academics for Academic Freedom plans to screen the film 'Adult Human Female'. Their event description begins with two provocative questions:

1. Is it really harmless when men identify into the female sex?
2. Is it progressive for doctors to modify the bodies of

young people in the name of changing their 'gender'?

These questions on the surface may appear like a reasonable inquiry, when in fact they are a thinly veiled attempt to undermine the lived reality of trans people's lives. Permit me to unpack this for you, and feel free to skip this section if you've already figured it out.

The first question, by inference, is implying that it might be harmful for "men to identify into the female sex". This sets up the premise that the organisers believe that trans women, who it appears they are referring to here when they say 'men', are just men choosing to identify as women. It questions the validity of their identities and implies it might be a choice taken for potentially harmful reasons.

The second question is written in a manner that implies doctors are modifying the bodies of young people to change their gender. It centres the medical profession as the ones potentially doing harm to a vulnerable group. "Think of the children" – remember? Now, this could be the set-up for a discussion about surgeries performed to enforce binary gender on intersex children, children with diversities of sexual development, when they are too young to consent to the surgery or haven't had time to establish their own gender identity before undergoing surgery. Unfortunately, if you are familiar with the content of the film, this is not the case. What do they mean by modifying? Are they referring to puberty blockers which are reversible? Do they refer to well-established hormone therapies based on those used by cis people at many stages of their lives? Do they mean trans affirming surgeries for which the referral period is currently at least 5 years in the UK? This "think of the children" style dog-whistle does not instill much hope that the content of this event will

feature real stories from trans people who experience navigating trans affirming healthcare.

Then there's the decision to put the word gender in quotes. This implies they do not really believe gender is a real thing (and if you read their blogs on the subject you'll know this to be true). It's a consistent belief of those ascribing to the "gender-critical" movement that biological sex is immutable, binary and factual (erasing chromosomal and hormonal variation, intersex lives, and multiple non-European cultural worldviews) and that only gender is a construct. There is an abject failure to appreciate that the way we understand sex is also a human construct, something people have created language around in order to understand and label it. Furthermore, our understanding of both sex and gender, like all scientific understanding, is subject to change when given new evidence and information.

Then let's look at who is being represented on their panel. First, we have their film-makers whose expertise lies in journalism and film-making, so one might assume they will be there to discuss production of the film itself? Then we have a panel member who is staff at the University of Edinburgh that has organised a number of anti-trans events and contributed to AFAF blogs questioning trans rights, and another who is a member of a policy analysis collective who regularly writes about trans rights from a gender-critical position. Finally, we have the co-director of an organisation whose primary campaign function has been to prevent the reform of the Gender Recognition Act. So, how exactly will these two questions be treated by this panel? Every panelist appears to have the same agenda.

- There is no evidence of trans people forming part of the panel, so there will be no one to represent how trans people might experience the questions posed.

- There is also no one from the medical community, or anyone with academic expertise in human biology, available to contribute to these questions.

We are left to assume that responsibility will lie with the audience. In the face of a panel so clearly opposed to trans rights and trans people existing on their own terms, it will take a very brave person to challenge this ideology. It also begs the question of whether it is even ethical to expect a trans person to put themselves in the position of defending their existence against people so clearly opposed to it. Then there's the question of the role of allies in this situation. If you are not trans and you understand how hateful and problematic the content of this film is, what is to be achieved by arguing with the panel about it? Do you expect to change their minds? Is this the right environment to attempt to educate the rest of the audience about how problematic it is, given you will likely only have a few minutes to ask one question against the upwards of 90 minutes the film lasts plus the time the panel will have to speak? It is our contention that this is a fruitless task at best and deeply risky to someone's well-being to be forced into the position of trying to challenge this event as part of the audience. This event represents an echo-chamber of 1 specific viewpoint that is very clearly a vilification of trans people, questioning their right to exist, under the guise of academic freedom. That the event is hosted at the University of Edinburgh only adds to this veneer of credibility as it appears our esteemed institution endorses these hateful views.

We are putting efforts into supporting a peaceful protest outside the venue that will be an opportunity to take a stand against transphobia on our campus. This peaceful demonstration will take place opposite the Gordon Aikman Lecture Theatre from 5.30pm, allies welcome. Also on the 26th April, at 6.30pm HCA are hosting a talk entitled Saving Lives and the Colonial

Project of Gender at the Centre for Global Indigenous Futures by Professor Sandy O'Sullivan, a transgender/non-binary Wiradjuri (Aboriginal) person leading the Intimacies node of the Centre for Global Indigenous Futures at Macquarie University. This talk in HCA was arranged prior to the announcement of the rescheduled screening.