

# Statement from Staff Pride Network regarding the protest against planned screening of Adult Human Female

TLDR:

We co-organised a protest with Cabaret Against The Hate Speech to take place when the screening of Adult Human Female was due to place. Our protest demonstrated support for trans rights at the University of Edinburgh in a peaceful and non-confrontational manner. We published a blog detailing all the reasons the film is anti-trans and why it does not represent a suitable opportunity for respectful debate or discussion: <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/staffpridenetwork/2023/04/14/is-screening-adult-human-female-an-opportunity-for-respectful-debate-and-discussion/>

Another group chose to peacefully protest the screening by sitting in front of the doors to the venue. While they were not affiliated with our protest we support their right to protest peacefully as they see fit. It is our understanding that the screening was cancelled because there was no way to safely access the building. We are not privy to the specifics of that decision making process. We continued with our peaceful, non-confrontational demonstration which created a supportive environment to show that many staff and students at the University of Edinburgh are supportive of trans rights.

More detail if you're interested:

We are aware that our protest about the screening of a this

anti-trans film has attracted widespread media attention. This comes with an alarming amount of misinformation, which this blog will address. Some of our members are now receiving direct messages of hateful abuse which have undoubtedly been fuelled by the heavily-biased media coverage.

The headline of one major news outlet refers to the screening of a "gender film". This headline is designed to attract the attention of the majority of the readership who are concerned about a so-called 'attack on gender' by LGBTQ communities, which is in fact being staged by the "gender critical" movement, who made this film. The film is not about gender. It disregards gender entirely in favour of making a baseless argument that only sex at birth is real. Such a doctrine is harmful for cis and trans people alike. Gender is real, that is why trans people exist.

Members of the University of Edinburgh Staff Pride Network, and students, UCU and UNISON members, staged a peaceful protest across the pavement from the lecture theatre, which was led by Cabaret Against The Hate Speech. We did not obstruct entry to the venue. We sang songs, we created an atmosphere of positivity and love in the face of the oppression of the most vulnerable of our community. Our policy was clear throughout: do not directly engage with anyone there to watch the film or support the screening. Although unfortunately we were directly harassed by persons who were there for the film screening.

As the screening was open to the public those present included an MSP, members of the Scottish Family Party (who are publicly anti-women's rights, anti-LGBT rights, anti-abortion to name but a few) as well as the woman who flashed the public gallery

in the Scottish Parliament during the final gender recognition reform bill debate. The same woman attempted to confront our protesters while our co-chair was giving a speech.

The University of Edinburgh staunchly upholds the values of "Freedom of expression". Nevertheless, there is currently an atmosphere in which staff at the university are intimidated for voicing opposition to the platforming of misleading propaganda, with false accusations of "obstructing academic freedom/freedom of expression" being directed at us. Note: Academic freedom and freedom of expression are not the same thing.

A direct-action group barricaded the entrance to the university building. And while the Staff Pride Network had no role in this, we respect their freedom to protest in any way they wish. We recognise these protesters were asserting their belief that de-platforming hate-speech is a necessary and effective counter to the spread of misinformation.

We are also within our own rights to appeal to the university about how freedom of expression policies should be applied in an equitable and inclusive way. That is why no university member of staff would stage a protest that would frustrate any process of academic freedom. That the mainstream news outlets accuse us of attempting to block academic freedom is paramount to obfuscation. The debate about academic freedom is a straw man argument designed to distract the casual observer from what is really happening.

We believe that film is not academic, because of its biased

and low-quality coverage of the subject matter. To call it such is an embarrassing slight on the academic standards that we uphold. The film fully disregards the dignity and respect of trans people and covertly advocates for the removal of their current legal rights and protections, as stipulated in both university policy and law.

We did not stop an 80 year old woman from seeing her film. The film is freely available online and has been for over a year. The screening of it on university campus is simply a power-flex by the creators. This is yet another example of the perpetrators playing the victim.

The lived experience of trans people is not a debate.

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**How about we stop attacking trans people and address the REAL inequalities in the system?**

-anonymous queer, cisgender woman

The co-option of feminism as mechanism for attacking trans rights makes me sick. I do not recognise the questioning of gender identity as a valid form of academic praxis that is without harm. I don't want to operate in an academia that

condones academic methods that are rooted in colonialism and oppression of others. I thought we were trying to de-colonise our institutions, move away from out-dated modes of thinking and foster scholars to become qualified critical thinkers capable of contributing to wider society in a way that makes our world a better place? Perhaps that is naïve and idealistic, but it's the future I choose and a future I will continue to advocate for.

Women are a historically oppressed and marginalised group and the structural mechanisms that enable our oppression are widespread. These 'academics' and anti-trans activist organisations masquerading as 'women's rights' organisations, have invested time and money trying to address what they see as a structural mechanism for women's oppression – the rights our country (and others) afford to transgender people. This blog unpacked very clearly the arguments that proponents of gender-critical ideology cite as reasons we should restrict the rights of trans people. The rationale anti-trans people impose is that by restricting trans rights we will in turn protect the rights of women (by which they mean cisgender women, not trans women, of course). This is despite countless evidence that shows if you enable trans people to have equal rights it does not have negative consequences for cisgender women. Their arguments that laws might be exploited by predatory men might be a valid question were the emphasis of the argument placed on how we understand and then prevent predatory behaviour by those men, as well as supporting survivors of said behaviour. Instead, they labour the misapprehension that predatory men are somehow equivalent to trans women. Their refusals to engage with real evidence, or the misappropriation of existing evidence, and their reliance on false equivalences make it impossible to have reasonable conversations with these gender critical believers, let alone have a proper academic discussion.

The existence of trans women and their presence in women's spaces is not a threat to me. However, after years of campaigning for trans equality and trans rights, I can't help but feel threatened by the presence of gender-critical people. That sick feeling in my stomach is a sign of discomfort. It's the warning sign that my trans friends and colleagues are at risk of being attacked for simply being themselves. If I feel this fear as a cisgender woman, how do my trans friends and colleagues feel? I remind myself that with any significant cultural change you are going to come up against those that hate what you're trying to do (usually because they also hate the people you're trying to advocate for), and they will rationalise their resistance as not hateful but reasonable because their rights matter too. These same arguments have applied by white supremacists against the civil rights movement, by various flavours of anti-gay activist in numerous countries past and present and by men's rights activists rallying against legislation to support equality for women, to name but a few. Admittedly some are upfront with their hate, some are a little more covert, but it doesn't take much to recognise the shared tactics: the spreading of misinformation, the accusations of cult status on the marginalised group they're attacking and the fear-mongering about the danger to women & children.

I wish these people would consider redirecting their time and money into addressing the very real problems faced by women in the UK today. Maybe they could get angry about our sexist benefits system that penalises women with more than 2 children, and isolates those in abusive relationships as being dependent on their partner/spouse? Or how about our broken criminal justice system that is structurally failing survivors of sexual violence who are disproportionately women? Or maybe in our own institutions where the pay gap still needs

addressing, particularly in senior positions? I want us to build a culture of mutual respect that is currently impossible when our trans colleagues and students are forced to justify their existence and defend their right to access spaces on a daily basis. These anti-trans activists keep accusing us of trying to silence them (despite their very vocal mouthpiece on a university platformed blog, and numerous events where their views go unchallenged), that we are refusing to come together but fundamentally why would someone willingly choose to engage with their oppressor? I'm not going to advocate for that. I will continue to advocate for equal rights for trans people because I know it does not threaten my autonomy as a cisgender woman. I know with greater equality there comes less oppression due to gender stereotypes. Including trans women in my understanding of womanhood only serves to expand what it means to be a woman. I will not be restricted to my biology and my capacity to reproduce – that's exactly what the patriarchy wants.

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## **Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression Working Group**

Academics have recently received an email from the Provost with regards to the setting up of a new Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression Working Group. Our colleague, Lauren Hall-Lew, sent the letter below in response to the announcement. It is an excellent, and necessary, response – and reflects what, we think, should be the Staff Pride Network's position and role with regards to this matter. I am therefore forwarding it along, especially if it is useful in any conversations you may have within and beyond the institution.

Thanks to Edinburgh Race Equality Network (EREN) for sharing Lauren's letter.

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Dear Professor Graham,

Thank you in advance for taking the time to read this email. Do feel free to forward it to any party who might find it useful or, at least, relevant.

As the Professor of Sociolinguistics at this university, I want to take a moment to alert you and your team to some distress that your announcement has caused amongst the university's staff, and to explain some of the reasons for this distress, from my professional point of view.

The short of it is that "Academic Freedom" and "Freedom of Expression" have taken on multiple and often conflicting meanings in recent years, particularly in the academic context, such that they now connote particular political stances that are further associated with the mental and physical harm of certain minority groups. As much as I personally wish that "Academic Freedom" and "Freedom of Expression" truly only entailed the sentiments expressed in your announcement, the linguistic facts point to the impossibility of this wish. Lexicographers who enter new words into the dictionary don't make up definitions; they describe the definitions that best encompass how a word is actually used. It is in that spirit that I write you this email.

Academic research on the use of the term "free speech" in

academic and legal contexts goes back at to at least 2018. In 2017, the following web publication made the observation that is the foundation of this research:

- Zine, Jasmin. (2017). Transphobia, Islamophobia and the free speech alibi. *The Conversation*.

In this post, Zine observes that the phrase “free speech” was at the forefront of debates in Canada and the United States about *“University classes regarding the use of gender-neutral pronouns and in the framing of the House of Commons Motion 103 combating Islamophobia. These may seem like disparate concerns, but they are in fact related in the way the so-called ‘alt-right’ uses free speech as a rhetorical prop in their campaigns of ideological intimidation.”*

In 2018 we see the following academic article that articulates the issue in a more in-depth way:

- Sultana, Farhana. (2018). The false equivalence of academic freedom and free speech: Defending academic integrity in the age of white supremacy, colonial nostalgia, and anti-intellectualism. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 17(2), 228-257.

While this paper is also set in the North American context, Sultana’s abstract succinctly summarizes the phenomenon that many of us here at the University of Edinburgh are also concerned about:

*At a time when there are concerted efforts to decolonize academia, there is a concurrent rise of colonial nostalgia and white supremacy among some academics, who are supported by and end up lending support to the escalating far-right movements globally, which misuse notions of free speech and academic freedom to further their agendas and attack higher*

*education.*

Without acknowledgement of this phenomenon in the announcement you sent, there will inevitably be readers of the announcement who have reason to worry about what the working group means for their intellectual and personal safety. While this may seem at odds with the very meaning of “Academic Freedom” and “Freedom of Expression”, that is exactly the linguistic point: the way that terms are actually used says more about what they mean than what we imagine terms to mean.

This is especially the case when this particular (mis)use of terms spans years and continents. Sultana writes,

*In recent years, free speech has been co-opted by far-right groups in liberal democracies such as the US, Canada, UK and Europe to promote hate speech whereby hate speech and calls to violence are being promoted, whether directly or covertly, under the guise of free speech. This is generally known as the ‘weaponization of free speech’ whereby the far-right uses the rhetoric of free speech to attack people and promote hate speech (Scott 2018; Picazo 2017).*

And, further,

*However, inciting violence, calling for harm/harassment, or active discrimination of people or groups violates the rights of others to enact their lives and is actually not protected under free speech.*

It is in the spirit of this last quote that my colleagues and I are concerned about the formation and framing of this working group. Will hate speech be tolerated? The point is sometimes subtle, as fellow academics do not typically directly or actively “incite violence”. However, it is the alignment of free speech discourses with other actors (on Twitter, for example, through “likes”) that makes many of us feel unsafe and threatened. It needn’t be “hate speech” to have this effect, because what language connotes (or “indexes”, in my field of study) is just as meaningful and powerful as what it denotes directly.

For what it’s worth, there are at least two recent books from a legal perspective based in the US context that are relevant to this conversation:

- Smolla, Rodney A. (2020). *Confessions of a Free Speech Lawyer: Charlottesville and the Politics of Hate*. Cornell University Press.
- Baron, Dennis. (2023). *You Can’t Always Say What You Want: The Paradox of Free Speech*. Cambridge University Press.

And I highly recommend this paper (if you are going to read any paper) that is specifically about the contemporary academic context:

- Herbert, J. M. (2023). Academic free speech or right-wing grievance? *Digital Discovery*. Advance online article.

However, I will conclude this email with an academic reference based in the UK context, with a specific discussion about how

“free speech” is being used across universities in the UK:

- Leigh, Darcy. (2022). The settler coloniality of free speech. *International Political Sociology*, 16(3): 1-18.

Leigh writes:

*A small number of university professors have become central to free-speech struggles on university campuses. Unlike some overt fascists, these professors claim mainstream legitimacy in that they hold positions in prestigious institutions, publish peer-reviewed scholarship with established publishers, and denounce the far right. Yet, they are regularly opposed by student, left-wing, and antifascist protestors, who see them as producing scholarship that affirms core facts of far right ideology and/or is regularly used by the far right. In response, these public intellectuals pronounce free speech as under threat from ‘coddled,’ ‘oversensitive,’ ‘snowflake,’ and censorious students and universities (Leaker 2018). They then double-down on their calls for greater freedom of speech, often drawing directly on Locke and Mill and, I argue here, ultimately reproducing Locke’s and Mill’s commitments to colonialism.*

I do not quote this paper to make any claims or accusations about other members of the University of Edinburgh staff. Indeed, the point is one about the term “free speech,” not about any individual actor. I have no doubt that many or most of the people involved in the creation of this working group have only the best of intentions. However, whether we like it or not, in the contemporary academic context, the terms used to describe the working group you propose are not neutral. Not in the least. And the University cannot proceed as if they are.

Thank you again for your time and consideration. I appreciate that you are busy, and I do not require a response, but I am also happy to discuss this issue further, if you so wish.

All best wishes,

Professor Lauren Hall-Lew (she/her)  
Personal Chair of Sociolinguistics

The University of Edinburgh

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## **Gate-keeping women's spaces doesn't protect women.**

-anonymous bisexual cisgender woman

You may think from the discourse that there are at least 2.5 billion trans people, but the fact is in absolute terms there are far more women who look like me accessing women's spaces than there are trans people who exist in total. The consequence of setting up gate-keeping around women's spaces being for "biological women" is not sexual predators with male pattern baldness being kept out of women's spaces, but the constant questioning of the right of women who look like me to be there.

I get harrassed constantly for the fact that I have short hair and a low centre of gravity. I last had "oi, are you a boy or a girl" shouted at me last week. Depending on the situation, I either ignore it or reply, "why does it matter?" which they always find very confusing. A woman in a group I was running at work said, "why are you wearing men's shoes?" and I said, "I'm not, they're my shoes and I'm a woman". She did not comment further.

When I booked a bed in a women's dorm room and fell asleep after arrival, I woke up to a pair of anxious eyes asking me in Spanish if I was a girl. I said, "I'm sorry"? in English, and she immediately relaxed (presumably because she heard my voice) and acted like she hadn't said anything.

The last time a conference had a designated women's space, I popped in there to have a sensory break and was followed by a woman who told me that "excuse me, this is a woman's space". And I said, "yes, I know", attempted to read my book, but had to put up with her flustering and trying to apologise because "I thought... \*gestures at my t-shirt and slacks\*". I actually left the room because she was being so weird at me and SHE FOLLOWED ME to try to apologise again. Her comfort, not mine.

The last time I had someone challenge my right to use a women's toilet, I was going into a single cubicle in a pub and the male shift manager shouted at me from the bar, pursued me across the room, knocked on the door until I unlocked and opened it and then said, "wrong toilet, I'm afraid". I replied, "I'm afraid not", and shut the door in his face. He then had to serve me a drink five minutes later. I carry a

radar key for this reason.

Now, this is the reality of my life, and the one concession I was willing to make to deal with it was getting my ears pierced, which for some reason people find reassuring. My internal image of myself does not have pierced ears but I can't see or feel them so I don't care. But the fact that I had to do it should be a matter of shame for every feminist who whines on about the abolition of gender while proclaiming they can always tell. You cannot. You are, in fact, quite incompetent at telling.

In the ten years since I cut off my long hair for the final time (which in itself had been a concession to this problem), the volume of incidents has dropped significantly. Many people will initially misgender me, then quickly say, "oops" and then gender me correctly without having the emotional breakdown they used to, which is fine. The feminist battle to challenge gender stereotypes has been working, and the effort to create inclusive spaces has been bearing fruit. The attempts of awful people (and you are awful) to turn the clock back and start demanding proof of biological womanhood isn't going to result in chromosome checks as a condition of entry to their lesbian book group. Such groups just won't have a sustainable membership because LGBT people all know perfectly well what transphobic dogwhistles look like and we will boycott them into oblivion. The broader cultural impact of such moral panics will be cis men and women who do not adhere to stereotypical gender presentation being given odd looks and treated with suspicion on entering the room. And there are millions, M.I.L.L.I.O.N.S., more of us than there are trans people.

Now, I regard every gender policing person I have embarrassed the hell out of as one more person who is going to think twice before challenging a trans person who will be more upset with having their gender questioned than I am. But it is really annoying, and it is a burden I would rather not live with. If you think that “clarifying” the Equality Act will somehow further the cause, you are quite wrong, and you and your children will suffer the consequences of your own actions. Attacks on trans women are attacks ON WOMEN, and your inability to see this is your hubris.

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## **Celebrating Diversity: Showcasing the LGBTQ+ Photo Bank at the University of Edinburgh**

The University of Edinburgh has always been committed to promoting diversity and inclusion. Back in 2018, a special photo shoot led by Gina Gwenffrewi was organised to create a collection of images representing the LGBTQ+ community within our university, including trans and non-binary individuals. These images deserve greater publicity and can be viewed at the LGBTQ+ Students and Staff Image Gallery (Password: edinburghgallery).

This photo bank captures various aspects of staff and student life, highlighting how LGBTQ+ individuals contribute

significantly to the university community. As Kat Deuchars, a fellow staff member, remarked, “they demonstrate how LGBTQ+ people look just like straight cis people.”

We are currently working on an exciting new project to update these images and feature the inclusive Progress Pride Rainbow Lanyards. If you’re interested in helping with this project, please contact us at [staffpridenetwork@ed.ac.uk](mailto:staffpridenetwork@ed.ac.uk).

We value your feedback on the existing images and how they can be improved. Please share your thoughts with us to help us create better representations of our diverse community and secure funding for more photos. [Provide a link for feedback here]

Thank you for supporting our efforts to foster a more inclusive environment at the University of Edinburgh.







**Note:** The images included in the blog post are just a few examples and can be downloaded full size from the gallery mentioned above, featuring a mix of close-ups, group photos, and various activities that demonstrate the diversity and contributions of the LGBTQ+ community within the university, including trans and non-binary individuals.

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## **Is screening “Adult Human Female” an opportunity for respectful debate and discussion?**

*By a trans member of staff at the University of Edinburgh who has chosen to remain anonymous*

In December 2022 the University of Edinburgh cancelled a planned screening of “Adult Human Female”, a film that has received criticism for its one-sided and inflammatory depiction of trans people, after protests that the event would

“contribute to an unsafe and unwelcoming environment on campus” for the trans community lead to a judgement by the University that “safety could no longer be guaranteed for all present”. This decision was met with calls of censorship by the filmmakers and their allies, and the University has now agreed to reschedule the screening for the 26<sup>th</sup> April, to be followed by a panel discussion. The University has argued that this film should be screened in the interests of academic freedom, freedom of expression and “facilitating an environment where staff and students feel that they are able to discuss challenging topics”. However, I argue that this film is not of sufficient academic standard to merit a showing on University campus, nor would a screening encourage “respectful debate and discussion”. If the University goes ahead with this event as planned, it would implicitly endorse unacademic and biased perspectives, thereby failing to uphold its own legal obligations “to ensure the health, safety and welfare of all employees whilst at work”, and failing to properly apply law and the University’s own Dignity and Respect Policy.

In order to explore this topic with nuance we must first examine the relevant context. There has been a 400% increase in journalistic coverage of transgender issues in recent years, with noticeable trends of oversimplification of the facts and concepts underpinning the debate, and inaccurate reporting around statistics and the law. A critical discourse study of representation of trans people in the British press carried out in 2019 by Paul Baker, Professor of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University, concluded that:

*[While] on the surface there appear to have been improvements [...] there are large swathes of the press which write about these topics in order to be critical of trans people and many articles which consequently paint trans people as*

*unreasonable and aggressive. The picture suggests that the conservative press and most of the tabloids have shifted from an openly hostile and ridiculing stance on trans people towards a carefully worded but still very negative stance.*

Such “carefully worded” negative coverage exemplifies tacit (or “dog whistle”) transphobia, defined as “actions designed to harm or take away trans people’s human rights [...] even when not expressed in explicitly transphobic language”.

Moreover, further critical discourse studies have corroborated Baker’s findings, adding that their research had revealed linguistic patterns among journalistic coverage of trans issues which undermine point eight of the National Union of Journalists code of conduct, that a journalist should produce “no material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person’s age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation”, noting that “negative representations of transgender identities are offered to the readers, which contribute to the reinforcement of hate and transphobia” and linking the evolution of this coverage to rising rates of transphobic hate crimes (a 500% increase in Scotland between 2011/12 and 2021/2).

This anti-trans movement has been led by well-funded lobby groups who use recognised techniques of cognitive radicalisation to push its agenda under the cover of “reasonable concerns” and “free speech”. The main arguments of this movement, often self-titled “gender critical”, hinge on rejecting the concept of gender as a whole, asserting that biological sex is binary and immutable, positing trans people

and their allies as delusional, and that any education on the topics of gender is ideological dogma. These assertions reject a wealth of academic research and oversimplify complex topics such as biological sex (biologists have been arguing that biological sex is not binary since the 1960s, and there is already a plethora of academic writing on how sex is a social construct). They also rely on outdated notions that transgender identities are a mental illness. Much has already been said about the flaws in trans-exclusionary logic. Suffice it to say the basic cognitive dissonance at the root of this movement renders debate extremely difficult; by rejecting the concept of gender identity, the entire academic field of gender studies is also rejected along with upwards of 60 years of research and analysis. The movement has received criticism for citing sources which have been roundly debunked for their methodological flaws and bias. It relies heavily on anecdotal evidence and lived experience, while rejecting the same from trans individuals and allies. For these reasons it is nigh impossible to have a productive conversation in good faith with "gender critical" activists, as has been documented myriad times.

Now that the stage has been set, let us turn our attention to "Adult Human Female". The film's main thesis, that trans rights threaten women's rights, relies on the same assertions mentioned above: that gender does not exist, that biological sex is binary and unchangeable, and that at best trans people are deluded, at worst they are using trans identity to act with criminal intent. The film bases its entire argument on the idea that the trans rights movement is eroding women's rights, right down to the definition of the word "woman", hence the film's title. Ignoring the fact that the philosophical thesis of "Adult Human Female" as the only definition of "woman" has itself already been thoroughly dissected and disproven, the name of the film itself is a

well-known dog whistle, (a seemingly innocuous phrase designed to communicate hidden meanings to those “in the know” and to stoke outrage when criticised by those aware of its true significance): it directly references a publicity campaign by prominent anti-trans activist Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull, AKA Posie Parker which was roundly condemned as transphobic. Keen-Minshull has spoken openly about how she believes transition is “preposterous” and that single-sex toilets should be policed by “men with guns.” She has engaged in public harassment of trans women, and has been linked to alt-right/neo-Nazi groups.

This film repeats Keen-Minshull’s (provably false) rhetoric that trans people are a threat to women and children, equating transfeminine people to male predators masquerading as women to get access to women’s spaces, and trans-inclusive education as “grooming”, a refrain recycled from Anita Bryant’s 1977 campaign to stoke moral panic against homosexuality in the name of protecting children and the family.

“Adult Human Female” focuses in particular on the prison system, competitive sports and public toilets. It paints trans women being placed in women’s prisons as a threat to the other inmates, with no acknowledgement of the extreme threat, both of psychological harm and physical violence, that trans people face if placed in a prison that does not correspond to their gender. Furthermore, the film does not acknowledge the abuse already inherent in prison systems, as perpetrated by both inmates and staff regardless of gender, nor does it seek to address this issue in any way beyond scapegoating trans inmates, who themselves are disproportionately the victims of sexual violence in prisons, as reported by Just Detention International:

*One study of California prisoners found that 59 percent of transgender women housed in men's prisons had been sexually abused while incarcerated, as compared to 4 percent of non-transgender inmates in men's prisons. [...] Once targeted for abuse, the majority of transgender survivors are subjected to repeated sexual assaults.*

Turning its attention to competitive sports, "Adult Human Female" once again uses selective sources, this time to make the outdated and biologically inaccurate argument that "biological men" are innately stronger and faster than "biological women", thus positioning trans women at an advantage if allowed to compete in women's sports. This assertion not only perpetuates the misogynistic stereotype that women are biologically weak and need to be protected, it is also based on oversimplified and inadequate science:

*Currently, there is no direct or consistent research suggesting transgender female individuals (or male individuals) have an athletic advantage at any stage of their transition (e.g. cross-sex hormones, gender-confirming surgery) and, therefore, competitive sport policies that place restrictions on transgender people need to be considered and potentially revised.*

Policies that are based on similar pseudo-scientific theories have been shown to perpetuate racism as well as transphobia, finding that "testosterone regulations disproportionately affect women of colour from the global south." According to Dr Vanessa Heggie, Historian of Science & Medicine, "the problem with sex testing for sports is that none of the 'kinds' of sex correlate perfectly with sporting ability, so any test will exclude competitors with no physical advantage." Many factors besides biological sex can give athletes an "unfair

advantage", from socio-economic background to height, but we do not currently separate most sports by either of these categories. Indeed "Adult Human Female" altogether ignores the very real possibility that women's sports exist as a separate category in part to prevent women from competing against men in order to protect the fragile male ego from the risk of female victory. The film promotes the idea that trans athletes are trying to "cheat the system", perpetuating the transmisogynistic idea that trans women are simply men trying to use the guise of womanhood to get an unfair advantage. Such demonising ideology not only adds to the hostile discourse surrounding trans people, but in this case contributes to an atmosphere of stigma, discrimination, and even gender-based violence keeping trans people out of sport, access to which is considered a human right by the International Olympic Committee among other organisations. It also contributes to misogyny more widely: "'Gender critical' feminists are constructing and mobilising very particular, contested versions of biological 'facts' that are also lending support to the politics of anti-feminist organisations."

The film once again turns to recycled bigotry and fearmongering in its assertions about the threat of allowing trans people access to the public bathrooms or changing rooms that align with their gender. Transfeminine are now painted with the same demonising brush once used for lesbians and bisexual women, implying that their presence in women's bathrooms or changing rooms is inherently predatory. Not only has this been disproven, it also contradicts evidence suggesting that queer people of all genders and sexualities are often targeted with harassment or assault in these spaces based not on their biological sex, but entirely on their queerness. Queerphobic attacks like this are motivated by the very rhetoric of fear and disgust this film espouses against trans people. Furthermore, this rhetoric also negatively

affects anyone who does not conform to rigid ideas of gender, and threatens freedom of expression for all. After all, the only ways to ensure that people are using the “right” bathroom are either by policing the way people dress and present themselves to more rigidly adhere to binaristic ideas of gender, or by performing invasive and degrading checks. Once again, the film plays into the misogynistic trope of women as weak and needing to be protected, an idea that has fuelled systemic violence for centuries and contributed to the oppression and victimisation of the black, gay, and now trans communities. It fosters a culture that puts trans people in danger not only of attack, but of the psychological and physical health consequences of avoiding using public bathrooms when needed for fear of reprisal. Myriad research by academics, healthcare professionals and sexual assault and domestic violence organisations has shown that best practice with regard to public bathrooms and changing rooms is to be trans-inclusive, or even to de-gender these spaces altogether and provide private cubicles. All of this research is absent from the film, the better to maintain its transphobic agenda.

The film obsesses over the imagined intrinsically predatory nature of transfeminine people to the point where it somehow ignores the existence of transmasculine people altogether. Unless, that is, it can set these people up as yet more victims of a “gender ideology” which indoctrinates young “girls” and persuades them to make irreversible changes to their bodies that they will undoubtedly come to regret. This not only further emphasises the film’s fundamentally misogynistic theme of innate female victimhood, removing all agency from these people in the name of “protecting” them, it also misrepresents the process of transition and statistics on detransition. Puberty blockers, a temporary and reversible medical intervention postponing puberty allowing adolescents more time to discover their gender, are associated with vastly

reduced rates of suicidality among trans people. The referral period for gender affirmation surgery for trans people is at least 5 years in the UK, contradicting the sensationalist notion that children are being rushed into irreversible medical intervention. Rates of regret among those who have had gender affirmation surgery is incredibly low, lower than the average rate of regret following commonplace but serious surgeries unrelated to gender affirmation, despite the former's much higher level of scrutiny. Detransition rates commonly cited by anti-trans activists come from studies that have since been debunked for their serious methodological flaws. Furthermore, studies show that the majority of those few who do detransition cite external factors, such as societal discrimination and unsupportive family, and that:

*A care environment that welcomes and normalizes authentic expression of gender identity, affirms surgical goals without judgement, and de-stigmatizes the role of mental health in the surgical process are foundational to mitigating the occurrence of any form of regret.*

Contrary to scientific findings, "Adult Human Female" asserts that gender diverse education and gender affirmation brainwashes children into making serious and irreversible medical decisions. This editorial decision at best infantilises transmasculine people of any age, at worst repeats the tired and offensive rhetoric of gender diversity as mental illness, thus contributing to the kind of hostile environment that contributes to the very transition regret they claim to deplore.

As evidenced by these points alone, "Adult Human Female" was made with no academic rigour and no respect for the trans community, and a screening will not result in a "respectful

debate and discussion". It advocates for the banning of trans people from single-sex spaces, in direct opposition to current anti-discrimination law, and disregards the advice of the World Health Organization by proclaiming the prejudiced view that trans people are mentally ill.

And then we have the panel members. All of them are contributors to the film and represent the same opinions I have debunked above. The panel will be comprised of the filmmakers, Dr Deirdre O'Neill and Professor Mike Wayne, a self-identified "gender critical" member of staff, Dr Shereen Benjamin, Lisa Mackenzie from the "gender-critical" policy analysis collective Murray Blackburn Mackenzie, and Susan Smith, the co-director of For Women Scotland, an organisation that has repeatedly spread fearmongering misinformation about transgender identities and related legislation. For example, For Women Scotland stated with no supporting evidence that "every country" with self-ID laws have had these laws abused by "predatory males and other criminals and fraudsters" (although no evidence of such abuse appears to exist, according to Victor Madrigal-Borloz, the U.N. independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity). It also claimed that the GRC reform will provide trans people with additional protections in conflict with the Equalities Act (2010), where in reality it will only make the process of obtaining a GRC easier and less demeaning for trans people, and will not affect their protections which are already in place under the Equalities Act (2010). This biased nature of the panel undermines the claim that there will be space for respectful debate at this event.

It seems clear to me that the purpose of this film and this event is to promote misinformation and discrimination against trans identities, encouraging transphobic hatred in a

concerted effort to undermine and overthrow the human rights of trans people, as set out in the European Convention on Human Rights, the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010. The anti-trans lobby would have us believe that the refusal to platform their baseless fearmongering constitutes censorship, and that trans rights activists are some kind of internationally organised elite cabal. If that sounds like familiar rhetoric it's because the ostensibly liberal "gender critical" movement has attracted the attention of alt-right fascist groups who are now influencing the movement in turn. The fear of an imaginary well-organised, well-funded global movement for trans rights is ironic, considering that between 2009 and 2018 Europe received USD\$707.2 million in "anti-gender funding" with money coming in large part from fundamentalist religious organisations from Europe and the United States and "influence factories" and "laundromats" run by Russian Orthodox oligarchs. The sinister undercurrent of dark money, right wing organisations, radical figures and extreme ideology within the anti-trans movement is explored more in this award-winning limited series podcast.

The University's argument that hosting this screening promotes "freedom of expression" not only undercuts its reputation for academic rigour and impartiality, it also fundamentally misunderstands this right as it is laid out in Article 10: Freedom of Expression of the Equality and Human Rights Commission: "Article 10 protects your right to hold your own opinions and to express them freely without government interference". Nowhere in Article 10 is it stated that freedom of expression includes the indiscriminate right to a platform, nor the use of a University venue to disseminate one's views. Refusing to host a screening of this film would not constitute "government interference". It would not prevent the film's supporters from holding or discussing their views, nor would it prevent anyone interested from seeing the film, which is

freely accessible on Vimeo and Youtube. Cancelling this event would simply be the decision of an academic institution not to endorse a blatantly unacademic film and a biased panel event. As Article 10 also states:

*Public authorities may restrict this right if they can show that their action is lawful, necessary and proportionate in order to [...] protect the rights and reputations of other people. [...] An authority may be allowed to restrict your freedom of expression if, for example, you express views that encourage racial or religious hatred.*

Evidence shows that anti-trans stigma “limits opportunities and access to resources in a number of critical domains (e.g., employment, healthcare), persistently affecting the physical and mental health of transgender people.” And there is already legal precedent for deplatforming views that encourage discrimination. Hosting, and thereby endorsing, a one-sided event promoting anti-trans stigma constitutes a failure to provide the University’s Public Sector Equality Duties as laid out in section 149 of the Equality Act (2010):

1. *A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to—*
  1. *eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act*

Moreover I submit that this film and panel event both constitute harassment as per section 26 of the Equality Act (2010): “unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic [gender reassignment]” that has the effect of “violating [the] dignity” of and “creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment” for trans staff and students. I also believe that

hosting a screening of this film would be in breach of the University's Dignity and Respect Policy:

*Expectations of the University as an employer and provider of education will be to ensure that:*

- *It fosters a **positive culture for working and studying** which permits freedom of thought and expression **within a framework of mutual respect.***
- *It treats staff and students with openness, respect and **dignity** at all times.*
- *Complaints of harassment, bullying or discrimination are **treated seriously** and with discretion.*
- *Staff and students **feel safe and are listened to** when raising concerns about behaviour.*

The only way the University could provide objective justification for going ahead with this event would be if it were to also show an equivalent film showing the counterarguments to "Adult Human Female" and provide an unbiased panel. However even then we must consider the issue of weighting. When equal platforms are offered to both sides of a debate, especially by a respected academic institution, these two sides are positioned as equally weighted, regardless of the result of the debate or the quality of scientific and academic evidence supporting either side. Political commentator John Oliver has illustrated this issue with regard to the climate change debate. The university has an important gatekeeper role here. Offering "Adult Human Female" as one side of an argument bestows upon it more academic merit than it deserves, much as offering a platform for climate change deniers skews the legitimacy of an otherwise valid debate.

In platforming the views of people who seek to spread misinformation and further persecute a marginalised group, the

University of Edinburgh is in dereliction of its duties to prevent discrimination and the spread of misinformation, to protect the trans community, and to provide a safe and healthy environment for work and study for a disadvantaged and underrepresented community. According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission's guidance on gender reassignment discrimination: "Indirect discrimination [...] happens when an organisation has a particular policy or way of working that puts people with the protected characteristic of gender reassignment at a disadvantage." A policy of "academic freedom" is all well and good when it does not directly disadvantage a protected group. Consider how it would look for the University to host an event in the interests of "academic freedom" about the (non-existent) dangers that homosexuals pose to children, and you will better understand why this event is discriminatory. I would argue that the University has objective justification for cancelling the event in the form of "taking positive action to remove discrimination" at the University. Sharon Cowan and Sean Morris put it best in their journal article "Should 'Gender Critical' Views about Trans People Be Protected as Philosophical Beliefs in the Workplace? Lessons for the Future from *Forstater, Mackereth and Higgs*":

*In advocating for freedom of speech, it might be tempting to turn to the state as an entity which should remain neutral, ensuring that groups with opposing beliefs tolerate one another. But legislation such as the EqA [Equality Act (2010)] does not adopt a neutral position, nor should it. The purpose of such legislation is to advance equality by making discrimination unlawful, protecting those vulnerable to less favourable treatment because of a protected characteristic.*

As a trans member of staff and a graduate of the University of Edinburgh I have borne witness to the changing attitude towards trans people within the University over the past few years. Before the heightened profile of our community in the

news, there was ignorance, yes, but overall an atmosphere of respect, safety and dignity for the trans community here. Now, the University pays lip service to this community, even as intolerant rhetoric is protected and sanctioned in the name of freedom of thought and expression, despite the fact that such rhetoric contributes to an increasingly hostile environment for trans staff and students. I include below some examples of this increasing hostility:

- Gardner-Hall, Daisy. "The Backlash to Pronoun Badges Shows Transphobia Is Alive and Well at Edinburgh." *The Edinburgh Tab*, 30 Aug. 2018. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
- Fleming, Amelia. "Transphobic stickers found on Edinburgh campus, saying 'women's sex based rights are not for penises'" *The Edinburgh Tab*, 4 Oct. 2018. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
- Miller, Sophia. "More transphobic stickers have been found outside the Edinburgh Uni library" *The Edinburgh Tab*, 22 Oct. 2018. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
- Edinburgh University Students' Association. "Take a Stand against Transphobia on Our Campus (November 2018)." *Edinburgh University Students' Association*, Nov. 2018. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
- Mitchell, Hilary. "Entire Edinburgh University LGBT committee quit in dramatic protest against 'anti trans' Julie Bindel talk" *Edinburgh Live*, 6 Jun. 2019. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
- Butcher, Sophie. "More transphobic stickers have been found on Edinburgh Uni campus" *The Edinburgh Tab*, 27 Nov. 2020. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
- Kucuk, Ece. "Transphobic stickers found on West Nicholson Street before International Women's Day" *The Student*, 8 Mar. 2021. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
- Meehan, Anna. "Transphobic stickers have been spotted again on Edinburgh University campus" *The Edinburgh Tab*, 9 Mar. 2021. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
- Butcher, Sophie. "EUSA trustee says trans women are

- 'lying' and 'delusional' in set of 'transphobic' tweets" *The Edinburgh Tab*, 16 Sep. 2021. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
- Butcher, Sophie. "Trans Edi student finds 'transphobic' slogans spray-painted on the path near Main Lib" *The Edinburgh Tab*, 17 Jan. 2022. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
  - Jackson, Lucy. "Liberation Officers start petition as university 'fails in its duty of care' towards transgender students and staff" *The Student*, 11 May. 2022. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
  - Farr, Jacob. "Edinburgh University accused of 'not being a safe space' for trans community" *Edinburgh Live*, 1 Jun. 2022. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
  - Lewis, Ollie. "Edinburgh Uni invests millions in company that donates to anti-LGBT+ American Republicans" *The Edinburgh Tab*, 13 Jun. 2022. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
  - Ring, Ellie. "Edinburgh LGBTQ+ officer claims university hosted 'highly transphobic' seminar" *The Edinburgh Tab*, 16 Jun. 2022. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
  - Buttars, Grant. "Statement on Edinburgh AFAF Film Screening." *UCU Edinburgh*, UCU Edinburgh, 12 Dec. 2022. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.
  - Jackson, Lucy. "BREAKING: University bans Trans and Non-Binary Liberation Officer from protesting on campus" *The Student*, 27 Feb. 2023. Accessed 6 Apr. 2023.

The University spends what little time it dedicates to trans issues on virtue signalling. All actual work to make this community feel supported and respected falls upon the Staff Pride Network and PrideSoc, who do all they can within a framework that protects bigotry couched in academic terms and condemns proportionate upset from the objects of that bigotry as aggression or delusion. My trans colleagues and I have advocated for extensive and mandatory trans-inclusive sensitivity and unconscious bias training, but the University will not make room in its budget for the appropriate resources

beyond optional training and toolkits that must be sought out and a short "Diversity in the Workplace" training course which was already out-of-date when I took it as a new member of staff.

And now we are expected to engage in "respectful debate" about our innate criminality and right to autonomy at an event that spectacularly fails the University's Public Sector Equality Duties to "foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it" with a panel made up exclusively of people who fundamentally do not believe in our existence, our lived experience, our very sanity. These people made a film about us without our input, and with absolutely no respect for our dignity and rights, nor the science that supports affirmation, nor our right to self-determination. They appear averse to "respectful debate" on good faith terms, they will not have their minds changed, and they simply seek to indoctrinate others with their pseudoscientific, fear-based vitriolic hatred. Most people affected by the content of this film will not feel safe in such an environment, meaning that the film's inaccuracies will likely go unchallenged, and transphobia will gain yet another foothold on our campus. "Adult Human Female" contributes to an environment of intolerance, hostility and violence and it would be an act of extreme negligence for the University to host, and thereby legitimise, such a baseless, fearmongering piece of propaganda. To quote philosopher Karl Popper:

*If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. [...] We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. We should claim that any movement preaching intolerance places itself outside the law*

*and we should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal, in the same way as we should consider incitement to murder, or to kidnapping, or to the revival of the slave trade, as criminal.*

I urge the University to spend some time reflecting on its duties of academic rigour, bipartisanship, and the prevention of discrimination, as well as its understanding of the right to freedom of expression. I advise it to seek to find a more sensible interpretation of Article 10, one which does not apportion extra rights and protections to hate groups, nor encourage and platform such rhetoric that would impinge upon the rights to safety, autonomy and education of one of its most vulnerable communities.

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Accessed 12 Apr. 2023.

“Equality Act 2010.” *Scottish Trans*, 16 Feb. 2021,  
<https://www.scottishtrans.org/trans-equality/equality-act-2010/>.  
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# 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.

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# **International Asexuality Day 2023**

Today is International Asexuality Day. To our asexual members we wish you a Happy International Asexuality Day and to the rest of our members today is a day to learn, to share knowledge, and to be the best allies you can be to our asexual friends. Feel free to raise awareness with our asexual flag Staff Pride Network logo design (credit to Gill Kidd, SPN graphic design volunteer).

<https://internationalasexualityday.org/en/>

<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/about-us/news/six-ways-be-ally-asexual-people>