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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Hands towards the right: UK gender-critical feminism and right-wing coalitions

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the link between UK gender-critical feminism and the right-wing political ideas and organizations that constitute as 'anti-gender'. The paper first reflects on the origins of anti-trans feminism, paying particular attention to the decades between the 1970s and 1990s in the UK. Next, it addresses the re-emergence of UK trans-exclusionary politics over the past decade through gender-critical movements. Here, I consider the ways in which feminist writers and activists have mobilized against campaigns by trans people and aligned feminist communities for the de-pathologization of trans health care and against proposals to reform law and policy around gender recognition in the UK. The third section of the paper explores how, in recent years, gender-critical thinking has gained prominence within the UK's political and media establishments. At this juncture, I call critical attention to the ways in which gender-critical thinking has become embedded in UK parliamentary politics. The final section of the paper addresses the alliances that have been drawn between a minority strand of UK feminism, far-right movements and sympathizers, Christian fundamentalism, and populist conservative media.

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Tufton Street, a 17th Century Road in Westminster, London, sits outside of Westminster Abbey. Its notoriety, though, lies more with its housing of numerous right-wing lobbying groups and think-tanks than with its Georgian architecture. No 55 Tufton Street has come to public attention as the home of the free market think tank 'The Institute of Economic Affairs' whose catastrophic policies were adopted by the UK ex-Prime Minister Liz Truss, ultimately leading to the crashing of the UK economy in 2022 and Truss gaining record for the shortest serving British Prime Minister. No 55 is also the home of a range of other right-wing organizations, such as 'UK020', an anti-climate change policy lobby group that has been compared to the American 'Tea Party Organisation'; the free-market economy pressure group the 'TaxPayers Alliance'; and the 'New Culture Forum', a think tank that seeks to move cultural debates away from what it describes as the 'liberal establishment'. As Sam Bright says in his *New York Times* piece 'For the past decade or more, Tufton Street has been the primary command center for libertarian lobbying groups, a free-market ideological workshop cloistered quietly in the heart of power' (Bright, 2002).

No 55 Tufton Street is also the home of groups that organize against the rights of trans people. Amongst the projects supported by the religious education charity 'Civitas', for example, is the

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'Freedom, Democracy and Victimhood Project', whose director Joanne Williams' book *The Corrosive Impact of Transgender Ideology* (2020) warns against the mainstreaming of 'transgenderism' wherein:

People in positions of power within the realms of media, education, academia, police, social work, medicine, law, and local and national government have been prepared to coalesce behind the demands of a tiny transgender community. Previously authoritative institutions now lack confidence in their own ability to lead and look to the transgender community as a victimised group that can act as a source of moral authority. [...] this, in turn, has not only eroded sex-based rights but undermined crucial areas of child protection (Williams, 2002).

Running through Williams' quotation are the motifs that structure trans-exclusionary ideology: institutional capture, disproportionate demands, claims to victimhood, the dismantling of sex-based rights, and child abuse. As this paper will explore, each of these charges are levelled at trans organizations and, indeed, at trans people themselves, by gender-critical movements.

Another resident at 55 Tufton Street Charity is the 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Alliance' (LGBA). Formed in 2019 to organize against the trans-inclusive agenda of the leading LGBT Charity 'Stonewall', As reflected in its name, the LGBA seeks to bracket off issues pertaining to lesbian, gay and bisexual communities from those of trans people: 'LGB Without the T' as the gender-critical slogan goes. Yet, over the five years since its founding, the LGBA has had very little to say about homophobia; giving weight to the arguments from the UK umbrella group of LGBT organizations 'Consortium' that the LGB Alliance was formed to 'promote transphobic activity rather than pro-LGB activities' (Gentleman, 2022).

It is no coincidence that the organizations discussed here have made their homes at 55 Tufton Street. The links that have been formed between UK gender-critical organizations and those that lobby from the political right are key to the trajectory of gender-critical feminism as it has moved beyond its inception within a strand of radical feminism to embed itself within a nexus of far-right mobilization across the UK, Europe and the US. It is these links and the ways in which they operate that this paper addresses.

There is an expanding body of work from across the social sciences that considers the rise of anti-gender movements, which, over the last two decades, has mobilized across the globe against gender equality. Jenny Andrine Madsen Evang writes that the spectre of 'gender' has come to function as a 'symbolic glue' that allows a wide array of contradictory impulses to be united against an imagined enemy: 'anti-gender sentiments are where Richard Dawkins and Pope Francis can shake hands' (Evang 2022: 366). Various arguing against gender equality (most notably reproductive rights) and LGBT recognition (most notably in sex education), the anti-gender movement has mobilized across governments, civil society and religious groups to form national and transnational alliances. As the historian Andre Peto suggests, 'The anti-gender movement is not merely another offshoot of centuries-old-anti-feminism but is a fundamentally new phenomenon that was launched for the sake of establishing a nationalist neo-conservative response' (in Walton, for CNN). This paper seeks to contribute to this literature in exploring the shaking of such hands within the context of the UK. Moreover, the paper aims to bring a focus on trans rights to the literature on anti-gender movements. Thus, anti-trans organization, the paper will argue, has emerged as a central theme in wider anti-gender mobilization across the globe and is particularly evident in the UK. To these ends, the paper offers a reflection of anti-trans feminist campaigning in the UK and considers the national and transnational alliances made by UK gender-critical feminist groups in organizing against trans rights and recognition.

First, the paper reflects on the origins of anti-trans feminism, paying particular attention to the decades between the 1970s and 1990s in the UK. Next, it addresses the re-emergence of UK trans-exclusionary politics over the past decade through gender-critical ideology and political mobilization. Here, I consider the ways in which feminist writers and activists have mobilized against campaigns by trans people and aligned feminist communities for the de-pathologization of trans health care and against proposals to reform law and policy around gender recognition in the UK. The third section of the paper explores how, in recent years, gender-critical thinking has gained

prominence within the UK's political and media establishments. At this juncture, I call attention to the ways in which gender-critical thinking has become embedded in UK parliamentary politics. The final section of the paper addresses the alliances that have been drawn between a minority strand of UK feminism, far-right movements and sympathizers, Christian fundamentalism and populist conservative media.

The paper positions gender-critical thinking and activism as a deeply conservative force that, despite its origins within a branch of radical feminism, has a profoundly misogynist agenda that stands opposed to the rights of women. It locates gender-critical ideology as a key force within a current conservative pushback against the rights of women and minoritized sexual groups within the anti-gender movement across Europe and the US. In conclusion, the paper argues that posing a challenge to the gender-critical movement is one of the most urgent feminist issues of recent times.

Trans exclusionary radical feminism: a brief history

There is nothing new about feminist thinking that has sought to exclude trans women from the category 'woman'. Trans scholars have, since the 1990s, written widely about feminist perspectives that, through the tying of gender to a rigid notion of sex, exclude trans people (Cromwell, 1999; Feinberg, 1996; Halberstam, 1998; Koyama, 2003; Rubin, 1996; Serano, 2007, 2013; Stryker & Whittle, 2006). I too have written at length about the relationship between feminism and trans (Hines, 2005, 2007, 2013, 2019, 2020). While it is not the aim of this paper to provide an extensive overview of this work, an exploration of the return of anti-trans writing and activism in its current guise of gender-criticality requires a level of contextualization. This section will briefly summarize the arguments within strands of feminist work that have sought to deny trans women the subject position of woman – and thus the right to partake in feminism – and those that have refuted these claims by mapping out the intersections of feminism and trans. It is the latter perspectives that provide the theoretical framework of this paper, and, from this standpoint, the paper urges feminist communities to resist the divisiveness of gender-criticality.

The trans exclusionary strand of second-wave radical feminist thought was, most notably, proffered by Janice Raymond in her 1980 book *The Transsexual Empire*. Gender, according to Raymond, serves as an expression of biological sex. Furthermore, the immutability of 'sex', she argues, leads to the impossibility of moving along either a sexed or a gendered binary – one is either male or female, woman or man. The inter-locking of sex and gender served a political purpose rather than a mode of scientific or sociological enquiry. Gender transition, from this perspective, is untenable, enabling Raymond to read trans women as always biologically male. The (mis)use of biology as a means of denying trans women the subject position of women was later reflected in the work of other feminist writers such as Germaine Greer (1994) and Sheila Jeffreys (1997).

While the relationship between the categories of sex and gender – and of sexuality – were persistent questions within feminist theorizing of the 1980s and 1990s (see, Hines, 2020; Richardson et al., 2020), the essentialism of Raymond, Greer and Jeffreys was an outlier position within feminist scholarship. The work of trans scholars and activists such as Sandy Stone (1991) and Riddell et al. (1996) is important in providing social movement context to an insistence on biological rigidity. Stone (1991) documents how Raymond's work emerged from debates at the time about the presence of trans women in women's cultural spaces. Working as a sound engineer in the women's music collective 'Olivia Records' in 1970s California, Stone found herself targeted by a group of feminists who objected to her employment. The criticism mirrors the current trans-exclusionary feminist denouncement of self-identity, criticizing Olivia for employing a 'man' in a 'women-only' collective. The denial of gendered identity and experience, in order to exclude trans women from the category of woman is a constant ploy within trans exclusionary feminism; occurring in the US in the 1990s in relation to trans women at Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and, as the paper will later examine, re-emerging as a stratagem within contemporary gender-critical movements in the UK.

The exclusion of trans women from the category woman' was widely critiqued by other feminist scholars who, throughout the 1990s, developed critiques of a biologically constrictive model of gender. This paper too is positioned within a conceptual framework in which gender and sex are fluidly positioned. Though a detailed review of feminist work that adapted a pluralist and constructionist analysis to gender is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to briefly think back to scholarship that provided a route towards this framework and thus influences the positioning of the paper.

As a minority of feminists proffered an essentialist reading of the relationship between sex and gender, many other feminist scholars provided important challenges that sought to collapse the sex/gender binary, with Judith Butler (1990), in particular, drawing attention to the constructed nature of both gender and sex. Trans feminist scholarship went on to enable important critiques of the sex/gender binary from a non-Western perspective. In this way, writers such as Emi Koyama (2003), Claudia Sofia Garriga-López (2016) and Marquis Bey (2022) call attention to the importance of moving beyond Western feminism's cis-normativity – that is, the perspective that takes a non-trans woman's experience as the default experience. Evang's mapping of anti-gender movements onto colonial thought is important here. Anti-gender language around victimization, Evang argues, mirrors that of colonialism whereby Europeans emerge as ultimate saviours and the most vulnerable of victims (Evang, 2022). Evang's exploration of the role of victimhood in anti-gender movements acutely illustrates the politics around 'single-sex' spaces whereby, as later sections of the paper will explore, cis women are portrayed as vulnerable citizens in waiting. Casting cis women as potential victims subsequently enables gender-critical feminists to mobilize as the saviours of womanhood.

A renewed politics of trans-exclusionary feminism

Refuting the identity of trans women as women has, as the above discussion indicated, a long, though marginal, history within the second and third waves of feminism in the UK and the US. In recent years, however, this rhetoric has diversified in form. This section will first contextualize the mainstreaming of the contemporary strain of feminist trans-exclusionary thought that has been re-branded as gender-critical thinking. It will then draw on material from content analysis of gender-critical movements, including speeches, newspaper and blog publications, reports and essays, in order to explore its current forms and practices.

In 2018, the UK Conservative Government began a consultation on reforming the 2004 Gender Recognition Act (GRA). The GRA had been important in enabling trans people to change their birth certificates and to marry in their affirmed gender. Though the Act was significant in representing the first gender recognition law in the world that did not require sterilization (Hines, 2013; Honkasalo, 2016), the process of gender recognition remained bureaucratically complex and overly tied to pathologizing medical processes (see Pearce, 2018). Trans health groups had long argued that a process of self-identification was needed to de-centre the role of psychiatry and to simplify routes to recognition in order to bring the UK system in line with the process of many countries across Europe and, indeed, the globe. In response to such calls for change, the UK Conservative Government opened a process of consultation. Embedding self-identification in law was not only sought by trans people themselves but favoured by medical bodies such as the British Medical Association who argued that 'the lack of legislative recognition of transgender and nonbinary identities is a major contributing factor to the marginalisation of transgender and nonbinary people and it is an urgent health and human rights issue' (British Medical Association, 2020). The GRA reform was also backed by the UK's largest LGBTQ Charity 'Stonewall', who campaigned for a legal process of self-identification.

Proposals to change the GRA received intensive media attention and resulted in a hostile response from small, though vocal, groups of feminists who lobbied against reform, the first of which, 'Woman's Place UK' (WPUK), formed in 2017 ahead of consultation. Echoing the arguments of earlier trans-exclusionary feminists, WPUK claimed that gender was determined by biological sex,

whose immutability rendered 'changing sex' impossible. Moreover, it argued that self-identification would be nefariously used by cisgender men to access women's spaces. As such, self-identification was seen to pose a risk to cis women's safety. Many of the newly formed gender-critical feminist campaign groups submitted written evidence to the consultation, including the UK 'Women's Human Rights Campaign' (WHRC) founded by Sheila Jeffreys, whose submission called for the 'elimination of transgenderism' through the ending of the National Health Service (NHS) provision of trans health care and all legal gender recognition (Clarke & Moore, 2021). The consultation found that 70% of respondents, including those from women's organisations, to be in favour of GRA reform (Montgomerie, 2020). This was further reflected in a YouGov poll that showed that the majority of the British public (especially women) support gender recognition reform' (Montgomerie, 2020). Ultimately, the Government did not favour the level of reform that would have allowed for trans and non-binary people to be able to gain recognition through a faster and less intrusive process. This has not, however, curbed the activity of the organizations who initiationally formed to campaign against self-identification. Rather, their focus has broadened from opposition to self-identification to include arguments against the presence of trans women in gendered spaces such as toilets, prisons, hospital wards and refuges.

Emerging at this juncture, the term 'gender-critical feminism' provided the political and philosophical scaffold for a renewed trans-exclusionary movement. In 2020, the political philosopher Holly Lawford-Smith posted a YouTube video and blog post in which she defined gender-critical feminism as 'the *revival* of radical feminism' (Lawford-Smith, 2020, *italics in original*). She continued:

As more women gathered together under the label 'gender-critical' they discovered (or were pointed toward) continuities with the earlier radical feminist theory, and this in turn made the connection stronger as people began revisiting that work. Gender-critical feminists and radical feminists have the same project, in the sense of being committed to the idea of women as a sex caste, and sex oppression as a distinct and important axis of oppression (Lawford-Smith, 2020).

What makes this claim problematic is that most 'earlier radical feminist theory' (Lawford-Smith, 2020) did not concern itself with trans. Moreover, it was Marxist feminists, not radical feminists, who theorized women as a class, though certainly not 'caste'. What is evident here, then, is a retrospective rewriting of feminist history - a revisionism of theory and of activism.

The conceptual fixing of 'woman' to what is perceived as the immutability of biological sex in order to gatekeep its categorical boundaries, thus segued into a social movement that campaigned against what it believed to be the fallacy of 'gender' per se. The philosophical matter of sex became sex matters - as illustrated in the moniker of the gender-critical Charity 'Sex Matters'. Criticality here, then, is in the challenge to the mainstay of feminist thought that, since the 1960s, has offered 'gender' as a means of thinking through the social and cultural manifestations of the categories 'man' and 'woman'. As Butler writes:

To ask questions about gender, that is, how society is organized according to gender, and with what consequences for understanding bodies, lived experience, intimate association, and pleasure, is to engage in a form of open inquiry and investigation, opposing the dogmatic social positions that seek to stop and reverse emancipatory change (Butler, 2021).

The irony of claiming criticality to challenge the critical foundations of authoritative feminist thought and activism is acute.

Distinctive motifs run through gender-critical narratives to serve as discursive mechanisms to organize against trans rights. Central is the misnomer of gender or gender identity 'ideology'. It is salient that the concept of 'gender ideology' was developed by Catholic theologians who argued against feminist demands around reproduction rights, as, Agnieszka Graff suggests, it is a 'great name for all that conservative Catholics despise' (Graff, 2016, p. 268). In a UK context, the term was adopted by feminist groups who formed to campaign against the proposed reform of the GRA. Yet, despite its frequent use, the term 'gender ideology' is used so nebulously that its precise definition is impossible to locate. It sits alongside 'transgender ideology' to proffer an obscure critique of the

process of gender transition; its proponents insisting that sex is fixed and thus gender transition is rendered impossible. The terms gender and transgender ideology go together with a hazy and ahistorical criticism of queer theory and/or postmodernism, terms that are misunderstood as recently developed terms within gender studies (Hines, 2020). This is combined with a rebuttal of what are judged as the politics of 'woke', a confused appropriation of a term that is severed from its radical roots in black social movements in order to ridicule and rally against attempts to foster inclusion, diversity and respect.

Further interlocking terms are 'gender lobby' and 'gender capture', which suggest that the ideologies of gender and/or of transgender have become embedded in the discourses and policies of public institutions, especially universities and particularly through equality and diversity initiatives. Such 'capture', it is believed, is responsible for censoring or silencing gender-critical voices. In turn, this fuels the frequent calls for 'free speech' from gender-critical campaigners that have underscored a number of employment tribunals where claimants have, to differing degrees of success, declared discrimination based on their gender-critical beliefs. Paradoxically, claims of censorship become tools for censorship as threat of litigation is used to stifle challenges to gender-critical thinking. While the philosophical language of gender-critical movements is unformulated, its areas of substantive focus are explicit.

At the heart of gender-critical thought is the notion of 'sex-based rights' and demands for their enforcement are central to the work of gender-critical organizations. Such calls, however, are built on imaginary foundations since sex-based rights do not exist in UK law as the Equality Act (2010) confers 'protections' rather than 'rights'. There is, then, no protected category of sex in the Equality Act, although exceptions in the Act do offer the protection of same-sex services if deemed proportional. Though there are exceptions in the Act, then, their delineation is made clear: 'They are exceptions because they do not arise in the course of the mundane, or in the course of most recruitment. The word "exception" here simply means that you cannot separate by sex "except" where you can – it does not denote that you must have an "exceptionally impressive" reason for doing so' (Legal Feminist, 2021). Importantly, these exceptions cannot be enacted in the 'mundane' spaces of public toilets, changing rooms or hospital wards. The aim of gender-critical movements to protect or reaffirm sex-based rights is, then, erroneous from the offset since these rights are non-existent. More accurately, the aim of gender-critical movements is to bring an amendment to the Equality Act that defines sex as a fixed biological characteristic.

The claiming of 'biological sex' to permit or deny access to public space is astutely framed by Aleardo Zanghellini as 'the errors of practical reason' (Zanghellini, 2020). Such errors have had unforeseen effects wherein cis women have experienced challenges brought by gender-critical actors to their gender in public spaces. What is an overly zealous and unworkable gender campaigning agenda consequently works against the rights and safety of women as a group (see Bagagli et al., 2012). The impact on trans women is even more significant. As Alex/Rose Cocker states, 'trans people across the UK have been understandably fearful' (Cocker, 2023).

In her post as an Equality Minister for the previous UK Conservative Government, Kemi Badenoch urged the 'Equality and Human Rights Commission' (EHRC) to centre biological sex as the marker of sex-based rights. Rather than the 'institutional capture' of 'gender ideology', we see here a reverse operation. As Phoenix Andrews writes:

[...] research by Trans Safety Network has revealed that there are a handful of powerful people, mostly connected to each other and influential organisations, who are having a very real impact on independent schools, policy relating to LGBTQ+ young people and government activity around trans rights. It is not lobbying by various groups, but rather the very real institutional capture of supposedly independent bodies such as the EHRC with which we should be concerned (Andrews, 2023).

The gender-critical influence on the EHRC, which is a non-governmental and purportedly independent organization, was evident in the appointment of Kishwer Falkner in 2020, who prioritized cutting back on trans rights when taking up the role of Chair. Speaking anonymously to the 'Trans

Safety Network', an EHRC employer refuted the independence of the Commission stating that 'while the EHRC is presented as an independent watchdog, the political appointment system means they're open to institutional capture if ministers have themselves been "captured" on a particular issue' (cited in Andrews, 2023). Moreover, 'staff were made aware via second-hand threats that funding would be cut if they didn't toe the government line' (cited in Andrews, 2023).

The impetus of the gender-critical foregrounding of 'sex-based rights' is fuelled by claims that trans people are not who they believe or present themselves to be. They are enacting gender fraud or deception, it is claimed, in order to not only erode women's rights but to enact material harms on women. 'Self-id', as it is erroneously termed, will bring further possibilities of harm to women. Despite lack of evidence that cisgender women have been negatively affected in any of the 30 countries whose gender recognition laws rest on self-identification, gender-critical movements persist with this defamatory talking-point in ever more sensationalist ways.

The notion of 'harm' is applied to a particularly hyperbolic effect in relation to children and young people. 'Gender identity ideology' is consequently positioned not only as an attack on women's rights but on those of children, and from this premise, gender-critical campaigners wage war on young trans people's health care provision. At the time of writing, trans health care in the UK is facing a crisis following gender-critical activism and media generated moral panic, the most notable example emerging from the Cass Review (2024). Headed by Dr Hilary Cass, a consultant paediatrician and former President of the 'Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health', the Review was commissioned in 2020 by NHS England to make recommendations on the services provided to gender-diverse children and young people. One of the key findings of the review, calls into question the prescription of hormones to pause puberty or enable gender-affirmative bodily change. Investigations by trans health organizations and campaigning groups raise serious questions about both the methodology of the literature considered in the review and the influence of gender-critical ideology on its recommendations. The 'Professional Association for Transgender Health Aotearia' (PATHA), for example, argues that the review goes against the 'consensus of major medical bodies around the world [...]'. Moreover, Cass' review failed to include research by trans experts, rejecting studies that showed the positive outcomes of gender-affirming care. As Jamie Wareham writes, 'It excluded nearly all gender-affirming care studies submitted to it. 98% of studies submitted that showed gender-affirming care and hormones helped transgender people were excluded for not having "lack of blinding" or "control groups"' (Wareham, 2024). Yet blind trials are wholly unsuitable for studies addressing hormone treatments for trans people. As Wareham argues, 'it would have required people to be forced to transition' (Wareham, 2024). Additionally, this would have denied medical care in some instances since blind trials involve giving a control group placebo medication. Investigations by trans health organizations have also brought to light significant issues regarding the report's review board: 'a number of people involved in the review and the advisory group previously advocated for bans on gender affirming care in the United States and have promoted non-affirming "gender exploratory therapy", which is considered a conversion practice'. As Wareham writes, conversion therapy is 'a pseudo-scientific practice condemned as a form of torture by international groups' (Wareham, 2024). The timeline of the announcement of the Cass review in 2020 and its publication in 2024 is pertinent, indicating the influence of gender-critical ideology and campaigning on UK policy.

Rather than connecting the incremental rise in young people seeking support from gender clinics to an increased visibility and broader acceptance of gender diversity in contemporary society, and as indicative of a demographic shift that aligns with an increase in young people identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (see the 2021 UK Census), gender-critical campaigners have long-talked of the detrimental influence of gender identity ideology on children. Here, it is the 'child' not the young person who is evoked. Journalist Janice Turner thus writes in *The Times* that a 'cult of gender identity is harming children' (Turner, 2019) and that sex-positive education is harming children (Turner, 2022). Mirroring the homophobic discourse that underpinned Section 28 of the UK Local Government Act in 1988 (a law that prohibited the 'promotion' of homosexuality in schools), gender-

critical movements target inclusive education initiatives. The trope of childhood innocence is thus invoked to lay claims that inclusive gender and sex education lead to the psychological harming of children and to what is hyperbolically represented as practices of bodily mutilation and processes of child abuse. Such extravagant depictions are vividly illustrated in recent protests around drag.

In recent years, drag has become not only a focus of gender-critical movements, but of far-right organization in the UK, the US, Germany and Sweden. Of particular focus are reading events by drag artists for children. Originating in the US, 'Drag Queen Story Hour' (DQSH) has been held in public libraries in various cities in the UK since 2002. Writing for the anti-racism and anti-fascism advocacy group 'Hope Not Hate', Patrik Hermansson (2023) addresses how, during the summer of 2020, these popular family events became a key campaigning issue of the UK far-right group 'Patriotic Alliance' (PA). The *Guardian* journalist Tim Jonze has written that it was two years after taking his child to an early DQSH event that was ' [...] right up her street – glitter, stories, wigs [...] ' he became aware of the protests:

The protesters who turn up seem to skew towards the conspiracist right. Piers Corbyn [a former Conservative politician and anti-vaccine activist] was present at an event in Brighton, chanting: 'Your parents were straight', standing next to a placard that read "End the corruption of childhood innocence (Jonze, 2022).

Jonze's narrative points again to the ways in which the Conservative Government, the far right and gender-critical movements coalesced around trans and queer issues in the UK in recent years, a course of events that the paper will now move on to map.

Political and cultural mainstreaming of gender-critical ideology

Alliances between gender-critical feminists and the UK Conservative Party were crystalised at the 2021 Conservative Conference. Writing for the Alliance for Workers Liberty, activist Ben Tausz states:

In a Conservative Party 2021 conference fringe event, senior editor of *UnHerd* Ed West stated that anti-trans pushback was made possible 'by using gender-critical feminists as human shields, because there's no Conservative who will go out there and use the Conservative argument against this. We have to use other progressives to fight it'. Fair Play for Women and the LGB Alliance were also hosted by the conference (Tausz, 2022).

The significance here lies not only in the linking of gender-critical feminists with Conservative Party activism but in the way that trans issues were seized upon as a political rallying point by those to the right of the Conservative Party. Important is the involvement of *UnHerd*, a conservative online publication, which has a number of gender-critical feminist journalists as contributing writers. Over the coming years, the alliances between the UK Conservative Party and gender-critical feminism intensified. Despite the UK facing economic recession, a cost-of-living crisis and increasing levels of income disparity, one of the most discussed issues at the 2023 Conservative Party Conference was trans rights with six cabinet ministers dedicating their conference address to trans issues. This was not, perhaps, surprising, given that the then Conservative Party deputy Chair, now reform MP, Lee Anderson had recently discussed the difficulties of electoral campaigning post-Brexit. The Government needed, he stated, a novel issue to excite potential Tory voters. Conservatives, he suggested, should campaign on issues of 'woke' and 'woke culture'. The work of Shon Faye (2021) and Ruth Wodak (2021) is pertinent here in charting the increasingly populist tendencies of the UK Government. Trans communities have therefore found themselves propelled into a so-called 'culture war', fuelled to distract voters from the economic costs of political crisis and mismanagement.

Suella Braverman, the then Home Secretary, was eager to follow Anderson's prompt using her Conference speech to decry 'gender ideology' and 'woke culture'. Reflecting the central themes within gender-critical thinking discussed above, Braverman spoke of the dangers of 'men' in women's changing rooms and prisons. Meanwhile, Steve Barclay, the Health Secretary, proposed changing the constitution of the National Health Service to 'recognise the importance of different biological needs and protect the rights of women' (Fischer, 2023). Barclay's particular impetus was to

stop trans women being cared for on women's hospital wards. Conservatives, he stated to an applauding audience, 'know what a woman is' (Fischer, 2023). The then Science Secretary Michelle Donelan also spoke to Conference about issues pertaining to sex and gender, talking of 'the slow creep of wokism' and announcing a review into the use of 'gender' rather than 'sex' in scientific research. The foregrounding of gender-critical thinking and campaigning issues at the Conservative Party conference followed closely from unprecedented Government intervention in Scottish law-making, which stopped Scotland's Gender Reform Bill, which would have made it simpler to gain gender recognition, from receiving royal assent and becoming law.

Gender-critical ideas have thus become a wedge issue within British politics, taking centre-stage in a war on 'woke'. In this sense, 'gender' is positioned as excess – an extreme of the liberalization of identity politics. Again, there is little that is new here. Rather, we have the replication of conservative rhetoric on 'political correctness' from the UK of the 1980s when social movements around anti-racism and, ironically, anti-sexism were denounced as manifestations of the 'Loony Left' by conservative politicians and popular media. Such reflections also bring to light the mirroring of the language used currently to attack trans people and their allies with that used against gay men in the 1980s, in particular that of the paedophile: 'paedo', 'nonce' or 'groomer' in the nomenclature of the old homophobia and the new transphobia. In the 1980s, homophobia effected legal change in relation to education, wherein Clause 28 of the Local Government Act in 1988 prohibited the 'promotion of homosexuality' in schools. Today, gender-critical feminists and conservatives challenge gender-inclusive educational initiatives. A salient difference, however, is that while feminist movements were, in the 1980s, the ones on the receiving end of conservative vitriol, they are now active, and often leading, contributors.

Key to these social and political developments has been the role of the UK news media in amplifying the gender-critical ideology. The Conservative Government consultation on reforming the GRA led to what Jane Fae of the charity 'Trans Media Watch' has called a 'surge of intolerant media coverage'. Fae continues, 'I cannot think of a single aspect of trans – from sport to ability to live in public, to access to medical treatment – that has not come under scrutiny and attack' (Fae, 2021). Academic research substantiates Fae's reflection. Content analysis of the British press by Paul Baker shows that in the year 2018–2019, more than 6,000 articles were published that portrayed trans people as 'unreasonable and aggressive' (Baker, 2014). In the decade that has followed Baker's study, press coverage of trans issues has further intensified. In her study of the UK media representation of trans issues, Gina Gwenffrewi cites statistics from the 'Independent Press Standards Association' (IPSO) that evidences the expedient rise of news articles on trans: "During the second half of [the 2010s]... the number of stories reached an average of 176 per month, a rise of 414% and an indication of the dramatic emergence of transgender-related stories in our press' (Gwenffrewi, 2021, p. 3). The UK media is thus complicit in a moral panic that has cut across political divides. This is not only an issue pertinent to popular media. Camila Soledad Montiel-McCann's research into coverage of trans identity in UK broadsheets speaks of 'otherness and dehumanisation' in the press' portrayal of trans people. This is achieved, Montiel-McCann argues, through:

[...] backgrounding the voices of trans people and instead foreground the voices of transphobic so-called 'feminists', denaturalising transgender womanhood, and positioning trans agency as a threat to the rights of cisgender women and the public as a whole. [...] Consequently, the wider public does not see trans identity as authorised, meaning that discrimination is not challenged because trans people are simply not seen as fully human (Montiel McCann, 2023, p. 2974).

Two significant factors are at play in the relentless negative portrayal of trans communities in the British media. First is the failure of the press and wider media to commission trans writers and, moreover, to create an environment in which they would feel willing to participate (Jacques, 2021, Lester, 2017). As Gwenffrewi suggests, this leads to a media that lacks the specialized knowledge and expertise to address the complexities of policy and law around gender and sex. Rather, 'those who

shape the narrative about trans people are not trans themselves, but instead those who through their ignorance contribute to their marginalisation' (Gwenffrewi, 2021, p. 12). Second is the affiliation of many leading journalists in the UK with the gender-critical movement. The conservatism of those who, to borrow Fishman's term (1980), 'manufacture' the news has long been documented. What has been made less apparent are the gender-critical leanings of many journalists and cultural commentators in the UK. Together, these factors have fuelled a moral panic around trans that both influences and is often amplified by government and policy bodies. Such has been the intensity of negative media coverage in the UK that international organizations such as the 'Council of Europe' and 'ILGA-Europe' have stated that the media has demonized the UK's trans community (Armitage, 2022).

The central themes running through gender-critical ideology as discussed above function as framing devices that position trans exclusionary politics as 'common sense', thus politically neutralizing their language and intentions. As I move on to discuss, this is further evident in media and politics that coalesce on the far-right.

Joining forces with the far-right

The 'Global Alliance for Transgender Equality' (GATE) has labelled the UK as a 'global hotspot' for anti-trans political organizations, stating that the UK is 'home to one of the most coordinated and well-known anti-gender mobilizations in the world' (GATE, 2022), see also Lambie, S. (2024).

Over the last five years, the links between gender-critical movements and the far-right have become increasingly perceptible. Anders Ravik Jupskås and Beau Segers from the 'Center for Research on Extremism' at the University of Oslo define right-wing extremism as a specific ideology characterized by 'anti-democratic opposition towards equality' (Jupskås & Segers, 2020). I thus identify gender-critical thinking as an extremist ideology that is mobilized to fight against the equality of trans people. From this juncture, I propose that gender-critical thinking be examined within the broader context of the rise of anti-gender movements across the globe.

Within anti-gender movements, 'gender' has emerged as an all-encompassing term that collapses the politics of gender-equality, reproductive rights, sex education, violence against women and the rights of lesbians, gay men, bisexual and trans people. Moreover, 'gender' has become the lens through which different factions of the far-right unite. Graff and Korolczuk (2021) explore such processes across a range of geographical contexts, including the femonationalism of France whereby feminism is invoked by the right to oppose Islamic dress codes (and thus Islam itself), attacks on the discipline of gender studies in Sweden, homophobia in Eastern Europe, nationalist campaigns against immigration in Germany, France and the Netherlands, and right-wing Catholic anti-abortion campaigns in Poland and Italy. Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) also address the increase of anti-gender movements across Europe. Their work links current campaigns against gender theory to religious politics and policies such as those advocated by the Roman Catholic Church. Anti-gender movements, they suggest, coalesce around a range of rights-based issues including 'opposition to progressive gender equality is manifested in challenges to marriage equality, abortion, reproductive technologies, gender mainstreaming, sex education, sexual liberalism, transgender rights, antidiscrimination policies and even to the notion of gender itself' (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

As Anja Hennig (2018) notes in relation to anti-gender coalitions, 'movements that are mobilising against gender-sensitive policy reforms, in Europe and beyond, despite their different patterns of conflict, all speak a similar language of threat and danger' (Hennig, 2018, p. 195). Such a shared language enables, Hennig suggests, '(discursive) coalitions across national borders between the conservative Christian and political right-wing populist milieux' (Hennig, 2018, p. 195). Within anti-gender movements, Hennig's argues, 'political genderphobia implies the defense of a naturalist gender order against gender as social category and against gender equality, with the inherent liberal-democratic value that gender places on diversity' (Hennig, 2018, p. 196). This transfers seamlessly to the naturalism of a sex/gender binary within critical thought. In both instances, the substance of phobia enables alliances between conservative, far-right, Christian and gender-critical

actors whereby a politics of fear (Wodak, 2021) is strategically utilized to roll back anti-discrimination policies and cultures of equality, diversity and inclusion. As Philip Ayoub and Kristina Stoecki's write, 'national "politics", "identities", or "traditions" are now increasingly intertwined with transnationally circulating ideas about traditional values and the family that come to play a corresponding role in many states' (2024, p. 11)

Writing for the 'Institute of Race Relations', Sophia Siddiqui traces the links between far-right movements across Europe and the attack on trans rights, drawing attention to anti-trans equality law campaigns in Spain and attacks on the rights of trans rights in Hungary and Poland, arguing:

What should be of concern to those advocating for a strong civil rights framework that protects all minorities from discrimination, is how 'gender-critical' feminists play into the hands of far-right street forces and extreme-right electoral parties which would like to abolish anti-discrimination protections altogether (Siddiqui, 2021).

The content analysis of gender-critical movement discourse in the UK, on which this paper draws, indicates that Siddiqui's note of caution needs to be taken further. For gender-critical feminists do not merely play into the hands of the far-right, they directly converge. In this way, the UK 'Trans Safety Network' identifies substantive areas of crossover between gender-critical feminist movements and those of the far right, with transphobia providing a 'mainstreaming funnel' (Clarke & Moore, 2021). A stark example here are the links between one of the UK's leading gender-critical activist Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull and both British and US far-right organizations. Keen-Minshull, more widely known as Posie Parker, was identified in the 2023 report by the UK anti-racist advocacy group 'Hope Not Hate' as a key British figure within far-right agitation. Though Keen-Minshull has distanced herself from feminism, she is, nevertheless, a key player in gender-critical feminism. Moreover, she has, as Hope Not Hate' states, increasingly found support from the far-right:

In January, she was praised by an activist of Anne Marie Water's now-defunct For Britain party, and, in September, a rally hosted by [Parker] in Brighton was live-streamed by Hearts of Oak, a group founded by Tommy Robinson. Fellow extremists from the Independent Nationalist Network, and those from militant anti-vax group Alpha Team Assemble also attended. (Hope Not Hate, Hermansson, 2023)

The links between anti-trans rights campaigners and the far-right and Christian fundamentalists go beyond the UK, with particular crossover with US anti-abortion, pro-family, and anti-vax campaigns and anti-trans activism. Brynn Tannehill (2021) traces the link between US anti-trans groups and the far-right to 2014 when Trump spoke of his plan to run for Presidency. This was when, Tannehill suggests, a strategic decision was made by the Christian Right to focus on trans rights:

[...] Right-wing leaders later openly discussed this strategic shift at the Christian Right's 2017 Values Voter Summit, attended by then-president Trump. Leaders talked about driving a wedge – 'divide and conquer' – between trans rights advocates and the rest of the progressive, liberal, feminist and LGBT movements. They advised their conservative supporters to lift talking points from, sow fear among, and seek alliances with, feminists [...] They were successful - the Christian Right found its partners in the transphobic feminist movement (Tannehill, 2021).

One of the most innocuous partnerships was between the Christian Right and the US radical feminist organization 'Women's Liberation Front' (WoLF), which employed Keen-Minshull as a Special Advisor. It is important to note that Keen-Minshull is not an outlier. WoLF have also worked with UK gender-critical campaigners Julia Long and Linda Bellos. Moreover, in 2021, advised by the Christian Right anti-LGBT rights organization 'United Families International', WoLF submitted evidence to the UN Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity denouncing trans health care policy. Other signatories included the Canadian gender-critical website founded by Meghan Murphy, US writer and activist Janice Raymond, whose infamous book *The Transsexual Empire* in 1979 articulated an initial trans-exclusionary feminist perspective, UK medical philosopher and founder and member of the gender-critical organizations 'Transgender Trend' and the 'Women's Rights Campaign' (WHRC) Heather Brunsell-Evans, and the UK gender-critical group

'Object', which, founded in 2003 as an anti-porn campaign group, now campaigns against the inclusion of trans women in 'women's' spaces.

Another signatory to the UN declaration was the organization 'Hands Across the Aisle Coalition' (HATAC). Founded in 2017 in the US with the goal of bringing feminists and conservative Christian organizations together to oppose 'gender identity ideology', HATAC has worked with the US conservative and Republican think tank 'The Heritage Foundation', a group known as one of the most influential public policy organizations in US politics. In recent years, they also have worked with UK anti-trans rights organizations 'Transgender Trend', founded by Stephanie Davies Arai, and the 'LGB Alliance' (LGBA). Further connections, both discursive and material, between UK gender-critical movements and the far-right are documented by the 'Trans Safety Network' (2021), including writer Helen Joyce's endorsement of Jennifer Bilek, a US intellectual known for both her anti-trans activism and antisemitic theorizing whose work has been explicitly used by US neo-Nazi groups and the organization 'Partners for Ethical Care' in campaigning against trans health care. Butler's argument that anti-gender movements are not just reactionary, they are '[...] typical of fascist movements that twist rationality to suit hyper-nationalist aims' (Butler, 2021) echoes strongly here. TEvident here is not only the increasing mobilization and geographical reach of anti-trans rights activism but the increasing inclusion of gender-critical feminist thinking by the far-right. In turn, gender-critical feminism has joined forces with the far-right.

This section of the paper has charted the alliances between gender-critical movements and the far-right, addressing how alliances are visible across and between actors at national and international levels. While some of the organizations, such as 'Object', or individuals, such as Brunsell-Evans, have roots in earlier feminist campaigns, notably around anti-porn and anti-sex work, other organizations, such as HATAC, and individuals, such as Keen-Minshull, emerged solely to profess gender conservative views. Actors with seemingly opposing ideological frameworks, including radical feminism, gender conservatism, religious conservatism and far-right doctrines, have thus united against gender-affirming medical care and trans inclusion. Reflecting on anti-gender campaigns across Europe, Paternotte suggests that '[...] different actors – who do not necessarily pursue the same goals and sometimes even oppose each other – have seized this political object and inserted it in their own struggles and strategies. Therefore, anti-gender campaigns can be different things at the same time, in the same or in a different location' (Paternotte, 2023, p. 95). Paternotte's description is eminently applicable to the ways in which the trans exclusionary discourse – and its policy campaigns – has led to what I have previously termed an 'unholy alliance' (Hines, 2022), or as Sonia Correa's (2018) apt metaphor suggests 'a hydra', 'a monster with multiple heads' (Paternotte, 2023, p. 95). As Paternotte notes, the 'absence of internal coherence as a discourse is actually a strength: it taps into different fears and anxieties in specific contexts and various actors can shape it in different ways to fit into distinct political projects' (Paternotte, 2023, p. 95).

There are, however, some gender-critical feminists who have spoken out about the move to the right within their movement and it is important to note that a number of gender-critical feminists have histories of activism within the political left. Sarah Lamb (2024) has offered an important analysis of the political divergence in gender-critical movements and, from this, argues that, '[W]hile some gender-critical groups align openly with the far-right, other prominent advocates hold left-wing or liberal positions, including left feminists and lesbians' (2024, p. 504). As Clarie Thurlow suggests in her exploration of the differences in the political histories of gender-critical feminists, those on the left tend to articulate their stance as 'pro women' rather than as 'anti-trans' (Thurlow, 2022).

The extent of the far-right ideology of gender-critical supporters became apparent during the summer of 2024 in the UK when organized far-right groups protested outside mosques, hotels housing asylum seekers and on the streets of many towns and cities. The 2024 riots illustrate Ayoubi and Stoeckl's argument that 'These networks are often developed around other sets of issues (e.g. migration), despite having increasingly shifted focus to fold in gender,

sexuality, and gender identity as tools – rallying cries – for moral conservatism’ (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024, p. 11).

A gender-critical account on the social media platform X emerged to express concern. In an open letter posted on their new account, ‘GCs Anti-Far Right’ stated, ‘We, the undersigned, are deeply disturbed that populist messages particularly targeting Muslims have gained traction among significant numbers of social media accounts associated with the gender-critical movement’ (2024). There is, then, opposition to the alliances between the far-right and gender-critical organizations from within its movement that lends support to Lamble’s point that ‘Challenging gender-critical politics in Britain requires a reckoning with its cross-political nature’ (Lamble, 2024, p. 504). Lamble thus cautions ‘against a simple conflation of gender-critical feminism with right-wing politics and neo-fascism’ (Lamble, 2024, p. 504). In drawing out the alliances between gender-critical movements and those of the far-right in this paper, I take Lamble’s argument on board. Yet, though some gender-critical actors position themselves against the most flagrant elements of the right, the ideology of gender-critical thinking is, I suggest, at deeply conservative at its core. In seeking to maintain gender binary systems and modes of power, gender-critical ideology is both conservative in and of itself. Consequently, it is extremely attractive to those who are firmly of the right and the far-right. While some gender-critical actors may, then, oppose the right and the far-right, they are, nevertheless, reproducing ideology, which appeals to, and is reproduced by the members of these forces. There is then a reciprocal nature to the political alignment between gender critical feminism and the right. It is, then, to my mind, impossible to divorce gender-critical thinking from gender and sexual conservatism.

Conclusion

From an inclusive feminist perspective that approaches the categories of sex and gender as socially and culturally contingent categories that are subject to flux, this paper has drawn on material collected through content analysis to examine the rise of UK gender-critical feminist movements since their inception in opposition to Conservative Government proposals to reform the Gender Recognition Act in 2018. It has addressed the connections these movements have made with the conservative right and far-right and religious conservatism at national and international levels. Additionally, the paper has examined the rhetorical drivers that fuel the gender-critical ideology – those of harm, victimhood and childhood innocence – and mapped the ways in which this discourse has been adopted by at institutional and policy levels.

Essentialist feminist analysis that negates the diversity and mutability of sex to link womanhood to a particular type of woman has, as the paper has indicated, a long history. At various historical points, women of colour, working-class women, disabled women, lesbians, and sex workers have been excluded from a model of woman that constructs woman – and thus feminism – in the image of a white, middle-class, able-bodied heterosexual subject. As the first part of the paper addressed, exclusion of trans women from the category woman is also unoriginal. What is more recent, however, is the denouncement of ‘gender’ and, moreover, the positioning of gender diversity as a contemporary harm. From a gender-critical perspective, not only is ‘gender’ counter to women’s safety, well-being, and rights, it is a contemporary affliction that has detrimentally worked its way into public institutions and culture. Gender itself becomes wholly associated with trans. As such, the decades of feminist work on gender as social, cultural, and historical systems that are embedded across a host of public and private spheres – indeed, throughout the very fabric of society – to disadvantage women is ignored. As Butler writes, within gender-critical perspectives:

[...] gender comes to stand for, or is linked with, all kinds of imagined ‘infiltrations’ of the national body – migrants, imports, the disruption of local economics through the effects of globalization. Thus ‘gender’ becomes a phantom, sometimes specified as the ‘devil’ itself, a pure force of destruction threatening God’s creation [...]. Such a phantasm of destructive power can only be subdued through desperate appeals to nationalism, anti-

intellectualism, censorship, expulsion, and more strongly fortified borders. One reason, then, we need gender studies more than ever is to make sense of this reactionary movement (Butler, 2021).

In 2020, a YouGov poll presented a list of 16 issues and asked the UK public to rate them in relation to the level of concern. 'Trans people' was the issue that was rated last. Yet, as this paper has explored, issues relating to trans people – and particularly trans women, trans youth, and trans health care – have continued to occupy an alarming and disproportionate level of focus, which has had significant effect. The 'United Nations Human Rights' Report *Gender Equality and Gender Backlash* (2020) suggested that governments, religious organizations and civil society groups have joined forces to develop shared strategic goals. UK gender-critical groups have informed and worked alongside these bodies to roll back women's reproductive rights; the rights of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people; and those of trans people at international levels. Right-wing populism and far-right agitation have been key, and again, gender-critical movements have bolstered and actively engaged with these forces.

Over the past decade, the gender-critical movement has had a profoundly detrimental effect on trans people in the UK at psychological and material levels. Trans health care is under attack, and inclusive education is challenged. Trans people and their allies are defamed and are subject to online and offline harassment. Violence against trans people has risen year-on-year, with the *Trans Murder Monitoring Report* citing 320 deaths of trans people between October and September 2023, the majority of whom were black trans women and/or sex workers and under the age of 25 years old (Trans Murder Monitoring Project, 2023). UK teenager Brianna Ghey was one of the victims, brutally murdered in a crime that the sentencing judge linked it to transphobia. Many more trans women and men, and non-binary people, have been harassed and violently attacked. Some of these are reported and registered as crimes, many others are and do not. Such figures give weight to what writer Paris Lees has called an 'epidemic of violence against trans people' (Lees, 2018). Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen of the 'National Centre for Transgender Equality' is unequivocal: 'it is no coincidence that we are seeing anti-trans violence rise at the same time as we're seeing anti-trans legislation rise' (cited in Neus, 2023). Furthermore, statistics of suicide amongst trans people are stark, with the mental health charity for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people 'Pace' reporting that 52% of young trans people have attempted suicide (cited in Strudwick, 2014). We are, then, in the midst of a frenzied moral panic and a deeply damaging transphobic political climate wherein what Aleardo Zanghellini (2020) fittingly terms 'paranoid structuralism' is killing.

Despite increasing scientific evidence of malleability of sex (see Ainsworth, 2018), gender-critical feminists continue to insist on the rigidity of binary sexed and gendered categories, instigating ever-new means of patrolling and policing sex and gender. This essentialism not only provides the fuel for gender-critical ideology but also offers the substance for trans-exclusionary law and policy. There are, of course, many more people who disagree than concur with the gender-critical feminist ideology, and heterosexual cis women, alongside LGB people, are particularly supportive of the rights of trans people (Stonewall, 2023). Indeed, gender-critical feminism constitutes a fraction of the UK's feminist community, and there exists a broad and vocal challenge to gender-critical movements in the UK. Contesting the gender-critical movement at both theoretical and political levels is, I suggest, a feminist issue of the highest imperative.

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