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Protecting children in ‘gender critical’ rhetoric and strategy: Regulating childhood for cisgender outcomes

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Abstract

While academic works on the ‘gender critical’ movement have generally focused on its advocacy and claims regarding womanhood and adult women, the movement also heavily targets children. This article contributes a case study of ‘gender critical’ activism around children in the United Kingdom, which is strongly committed to the belief that children cannot be ‘genuinely’ trans. Building on the argument that anti-trans movements seek to undermine the institutions that allow for trans people’s social existence as trans people, it demonstrates that ‘gender critical’ groups seek to intervene in the institutions that regulate childhood in order to inhibit trans children’s ability to both understand themselves and exist socially *as* trans children. This requires interventions targeting education, specifically for the removal of trans-inclusive guidance and teaching resources. However, it also requires interventions into the family and the recruitment of parents as ‘gender coaches’ best placed to encourage desistance.

Keywords

Gender critical, TERF, Childhood, Trans children, Education, Moral panic

Introduction

Academic works addressing anti-trans feminist movements have generally focused on the claims these movements make about adult women and the nature of womanhood (see for example Hines, 2019; Pearce, Erikainen, & Vincent, 2020; Phipps, 2020; Williams, 2020). Yet research by trans activist groups has revealed the extent to which these movements target children – including by encouraging the use of conversion ‘therapy’ on trans children (Leveille, 2022a). These trends are international: multiple groups exist worldwide promoting ‘gender exploratory therapy’, a label for a form of conversion therapy targeting trans adolescents and young adults, with some success in influencing legal discussions and clinical guidance across multiple regions (Leveille, 2022b). This article contributes a case study of anti-trans activism focusing on children in the United Kingdom. I follow Leah Owen in arguing that while anti-trans projects rarely agitate for the genocidal elimination of trans people, they aim to damage ‘the social, legal, and institutional infrastructure that trans people depend upon to exist as trans people’ (2022: 7). This article demonstrates that in the UK, this has been achieved by mobilising a moral panic around threats to children, targeting educational institutions and the family in particular.

The UK is an important case as it is a setting in which anti-trans *feminism* – as opposed to other anti-trans formations – has become highly embedded in public discourse. Although the moniker ‘TERF’ (‘trans-exclusionary radical feminist’) is often applied to this variant of anti-trans activism, in practice the UK movement consists of an assemblage of radical feminists and liberal feminists (particularly those working in the media and academia) acting in alliance with conservatives and others with little prior connection to feminist activism or thought. Members of this movement usually define themselves as ‘gender critical’ and this is the terminology I use in this article. However, following Sara Ahmed I reproduce this term in scare quotes throughout, because ‘most of the most critical work on sex and gender [...] is happening in the very spaces [...] many “gender critical” feminists oppose’ (Ahmed, 2021). ‘Gender critical’ groups claim to stand in opposition to ‘trans ideology’ or ‘gender ideology’. This appears to align them with cross-national ‘anti-gender’ campaigns against women’s rights and LGBTQ+ activism and advocacy, which also claim ‘gender ideology’ as their target. Importantly, the ‘gender critical’ movement avows a feminist heritage and feminist aims, whereas anti-gender movements accuse feminism itself of being ‘gender ideology’ (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). However, both movements share a claim that ‘gender ideology’ harms, indoctrinates and sexualises children.

Most groups within the ‘gender critical’ movement style themselves primarily as advocates for the rights of (adult) women. However, a significant and influential minority – including the groups Transgender Trend, Safe Schools Alliance, Bayswater Support Group and Our Duty – focus their activism on children, parents and schools, giving them a distinct identity among the broader movement. While these groups do not often use the word ‘feminist’ in the cornerstone (e.g. ‘About us’) sections of their websites, they profess a core concern for gender equality and are very much embedded within the wider ‘gender critical feminist’ movement; indeed, their memberships overlap hugely. For example, the founder and director of Transgender Trend, Stephanie Davies-Arai, is described as ‘an experienced speaker on [...] feminism’ on the group’s website (Transgender Trend, undated a), and is a regular speaker at and contributor to the events and publications of primarily adult-women-focused groups such as Woman’s Place UK, FiLiA, OBJECT and ReSisters.

This article demonstrates that at the heart of ‘gender critical’ activism concerning children lies the belief that trans identity in children is always false: the result of a dangerous ideology and of contagion taking place in schools. Further, it demonstrates how focusing on children opens up new strategies for the movement. Between them, these groups develop channels for effecting change – through lobbying and legal actions targeting schools, local government, government, and other institutions – as well as for recruitment, particularly of parents, into the movement. The article begins by discussing how images of the innocent or

threatened child have been mobilised historically to regulate childhood in practice, identifying education and educational resources as particular targets of campaigns to ‘protect the child’. Next, it elaborates on the UK context and the research methods. The findings are divided into two sections, according to the two major types of strategy identified. The first of these demonstrates how the groups lobby individual schools and local educational authorities with the aim of curtailing children’s ability to express a trans identity at school and restrict *all* children’s access to information on trans identity. The second explores how the groups attempt to recruit parents, not only as proxy lobbyists but also as agents of gender discipline within the home with the ability to discourage children’s trans identification. The article closes by further exploring the ‘impossibility’ of trans children for the ‘gender critical’ movement, arguing that for the movement trans identities are inherently sexual, so measures must be taken to defend children from a dangerous adult sexuality.

Regulating childhood

The author Shon Faye describes the current climate of media and public debate regarding trans youth in the UK as one of moral panic:

‘just when greater inclusion, full commitment to anti-bullying practices and more robust safeguarding is needed, there emerges a false political narrative of trans children being disruptive to their peers, being extended privileged treatment, and carrying a risk of social contagion, converting other children to their “gender ideology”.’ (Faye, 2021: 36)

As Faye observes, this conforms to sociological accounts of moral panic: a narrative has emerged in which a group of ‘folk devils’ is widely and disproportionately blamed and scapegoated for social problems (2021: 36). It is common for moral panics to centre on young people. The education of children and adolescents is often a flash point: Kerry Robinson has argued that moral panics are mobilised in order to reinforce the regulation of education and children’s access to information, particularly access to information about LGBTQ+ identities (2012). This is done in the name of protecting the child’s innocence and preventing their corruption by access to sexual knowledge (2012: 264-5). Moral panics have, accordingly, often targeted educational resources deemed to supply ‘inappropriate’ knowledge to children.

Innocence is also pivotal to the oppressive ‘reproductive futurism’ described in Lee Edelman’s infamous polemic *No Future*, which according to Edelman demands that the needs and desires of those in the present be subordinated to an imagined collective future, symbolised by the image of the Child. Edelman describes a crusade against gay civil rights in which are evoked images of:

‘the Child who might witness lewd or inappropriately intimate behavior; the Child who might find information about dangerous “lifestyles” on the Internet; the Child who might choose a provocative book from the shelves of the public library.’ (2004: 19-21)

While many elements of Edelman’s argument have been controversial, this passage’s depiction of how moral panics draw on images of childhood innocence and vulnerability resonates broadly. Scholars across LGBTQ+ and queer studies, for example, have drawn attention to how innocence and vulnerability are weaponised against queerness and in defence of children’s assumed (proto)heterosexuality (e.g. Robinson, 2008; Dyer, 2017). Rhetorics of childhood innocence have been used to heavily restrict children’s access to information on LGBTQ+ identities. Section 28 of the UK’s 1988 Local Government Act – which prohibited the ‘promotion of homosexuality’ by local authorities and had a deeply chilling effect on schools’ willingness to provide resources on sexuality and gender identity – is but one example (Moran, 2001). This article argues that such images are similarly

weaponised in the present trans panic in defence of children's assumed cis-ness. However, as Robinson reminds us, protection of children's putative innocence is not all that is at stake in the regulation of childhood; this regulation also aims to maintain 'the established order of adult-child relations of power' (2012: 260). Moral panics aim to reassert adults' power to control the knowledge available to children and to define what is acceptable or age-appropriate knowledge.

As previously stated, scholarship on the 'gender critical' movement has mainly focused on its arguments regarding adult womanhood. This article argues, however, that it is precisely due to education's role in constituting and regulating childhood that it has become a target of anti-trans activism. Education is an obvious target for those seeking to prevent LGBTQ+ children's existence both *as* LGBTQ+ children *and as* future LGBTQ+ adults: 'the strict regulation of children's access/inaccessibility to sexual knowledge is a critical component in the process of heteronormalizing their early educational experiences in order to actively produce the heteronormative adult citizen subject' (Robinson, 2012: 271). This article demonstrates the ways in which the 'gender critical' movement attempts to produce cisgender children through the regulation of education and family life, and how it has mobilised moral panic around the image of the threatened child (my use of the word 'child' here is deliberate – 'gender critical' rhetoric rarely differentiates between children and adolescents) in service of this goal. The following section describes the key players in the child-focused section of the movement and how their materials were collected and analysed.

The context of the UK and choices in data collection

The 'gender critical' movement has had a significant impact on state institutions and public policy on trans issues in the UK. Most famously, the backlash it generated towards a proposed reform of the Gender Recognition Act – which would have removed some of the bureaucracy involved in updating the gender marker on one's birth certificate – resulted in meaningful reform being halted. 'Gender critical' viewpoints have entered the mainstream to such an extent that the current Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, has proposed to review the Equality Act 'to make it clear that sex means biological sex rather than gender' (Turner, 2022), a move intended to remove trans people's right to access men-only or women-only facilities such as public toilets and changing rooms according to their own sense of their gender.

Attacks on children's ability to access gender-affirming care are also prevalent in the UK, and an obvious example of efforts to prevent trans children's existence *as* trans children. A key incident was the detransitioner Keira Bell's 2020 High Court case against the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust, which operated the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS), the UK's only (at the time) youth gender identity service. Bell sought to prevent puberty blockers, a key element of gender-affirming healthcare for adolescents, from being prescribed to under-18s, arguing that minors could not meaningfully consent to the treatment. Transgender Trend was invited to submit evidence to the case, in which it argued that young people were being 'indoctrinat[ed]' into believing in trans identities (Transgender Trend, 2021a). The High Court ruled that under-16s would be unlikely to be capable of consenting to take puberty blockers, accepting the claimants' contentious argument that a causal link existed between this treatment and the later use of cross-sex hormones in adulthood, therefore consent to the former must entail consent to the latter. The ruling was overturned in September 2021 following a successful appeal by the Tavistock, but the initial decision had lasting impacts on healthcare for trans youth: patients claim that even after the judgment had been reversed, barely any young people were granted access to puberty blockers for months, causing waiting lists to swell even further (Moscatello, 2022).

While national coverage of groups such as Transgender Trend has often focused on their public statements and lobbying regarding healthcare, in particular on trans children's access to puberty blockers, targeting education is a core part of their strategy. The four key UK child-focused groups can be divided into two types. Transgender Trend and Safe Schools Alliance both self-define as organisations of parents and professionals concerned about the

impact of trans ‘ideology’ on children (Transgender Trend, undated a; Safe Schools Alliance, undated a). They are both focused on lobbying and are outward-facing, seeking to effect change in a range of social and political institutions, but particularly within educational sites. Bayswater Support Group and Our Duty, on the other hand, are more inward-focused, functioning as support groups for parents concerned about their own children’s trans identities. These four groups are enabled by the UK press to construct a narrative of out-of-control transitions and children under threat (e.g. McDermott, 2019; Clarence-Smith, 2022; Wooller, 2022; Dixon, 2022; Hennessey, 2022).

From the websites of these groups, I collected materials produced between November 2015, when the Transgender Trend’s website was created, and October 2022. The materials included cornerstone pages on the groups’ websites (such as ‘About us’ or ‘FAQ’ pages), materials used for campaigning (including resource packs and factsheets for distribution, consultation responses, open letters and template letters for sending to various officials), and blog posts setting out the groups’ core missions & policy (often tagged as ‘policy’) and reporting on outcomes of campaigns. Due to their high volume, I did not collect other blog posts or other resources hosted on the websites. The excluded materials consisted of commentaries; links to or replications of articles and videos posted elsewhere; links to and discussions of the work of other groups; comment pieces; and monthly newsletters.

Table 1: Documents analysed

| Type of document | # |
|---------------------|-----------|
| Cornerstone webpage | 14 |
| Campaign materials | 36 |
| Blog posts | 14 |
| Total | 64 |

I conducted a frame analysis of the materials. Frame analysis assumes that social movement actors are ‘signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers’ (Benford and Snow, 2000: 613) and seeks to identify the ‘frames’ – sets of meanings and beliefs – that movement actors use to make sense of their actions and mobilise others. My analysis drew on Carol Bacchi’s ‘What’s the problem (represented to be)?’ approach, which seeks to understand frames in terms of the core ‘problems’ actors seek to solve and the underlying premises in this representation of the ‘problem’ (1999). The process of reviewing the documents also revealed the strategies employed by the groups and their targets. This was supplemented by searches for newspaper articles on Nexis using the groups’ names as keywords. The articles discovered this way were solely used to identify further campaigns around, for example, relationships and sex education (RSE) materials and did not undergo frame analysis but were rather used to further develop my account of the groups’ strategies.

My analysis identified three central and interrelated ‘problems’ the ‘gender critical’ movement seeks to address: trans identity as ‘ideology’ or false belief; trans identity as contagion; and the ‘normalisation’ of harm to children. I also identified further frames that are common to ‘gender critical’ activism more broadly (such as ‘sex-based rights’ and the threat to these posed by the ‘trans lobby’). As the aim of this article is to assess activism concerning childhood specifically, these have been excluded from the discussion. My analysis also identified the two core strategies employed by the movement: targeting education and its governance (for example by lobbying local authorities to withdraw educational materials), and recruitment of parents as lobbyists and household gender coaches.

Targeting education and its governance

As this section shows, ‘gender critical’ groups act to address what they see as a ‘contagion’ of trans identity in schools, in the process agitating for the removal of pro-trans educational resources. In their materials, pro-trans resources are portrayed as promoting ‘gender ideology’ or ‘trans ideology’. These are left without a precise definition the materials but can be taken to encompass the following beliefs: that a person can have a gender identity different to their assigned sex; that this identity should be acknowledged and respected; that gender transition can be a positive choice; and that children can be trans and might benefit from elements of social and medical transition. The materials present knowledge of trans lives and identities as dangerous, corrupting and contagious for children, and schools as core sites in which this contagion spreads. The fear of contagion is a feature shared with other moral panics around education, which often centre on the fear that children will imitate what they read about or are told about (Patton, 1995; Irvine, 2000; Petley, 2019; Robinson, 2012). The theory of ‘Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria’ (ROGD) formalises the fear of contagion. ROGD theory emerged in a study by Lisa Littman published in the journal *PLoS ONE* in 2018 (Littman, 2018), which claimed that many adolescents, especially those assigned female at birth, ‘become’ trans, or mistakenly come to believe that they are trans, via a process of social contagion. This contagion results from exposure to other ‘trans-identifying’ youth, particularly within schools, or trans internet communities – places difficult for parents to reach. Serious concerns were subsequently raised about the study’s methodology (see for example Restar, 2020; Ashley, 2020), resulting in the article being reviewed by the journal less than two weeks after publication and a correction being issued. Nonetheless, the theory is heavily promoted in ‘gender critical’ materials and cited as a reason not to allow children to socially transition at school (e.g. Davies-Arai, undated a: 46; Transgender Trend, undated c: 3).

ROGD’s narrative of social contagion in schools is highly intertwined with attacks on healthcare for trans youth in the UK and elsewhere. ROGD theory in fact tells a story about the relationship between education and healthcare. Attacks on GIDS often cited the figure of an ‘over 4000%’ increase in referrals to the service between 2009 and 2019, with a particular focus on the numbers of children assigned female at birth presenting to the service¹. Their narrative was one of out-of-control transitions, enabled by complacent doctors but often originating in schools and particularly in interactions with classmates. *Bell v Tavistock* shows that ‘gender critical’ interventions into the regulation of healthcare cannot be extricated from interventions into the regulation of education. Rather, moral panics concerning education underscore such efforts to intervene in healthcare. Transgender Trend’s evidence submission to *Bell* – a case ostensibly to adjudicate on a medical treatment for trans youth – concerned ‘the unique cultural environment in which this generation is growing up, including the indoctrination of young people, both online and in schools, into a belief in “gender identity”’ (Transgender Trend, 2021a). In this narrative, it is educational ‘indoctrination’ that causes children and adolescents to present to gender clinics, so a two-pronged strategy is required in response which targets both educational and healthcare institutions.

To ward off contagion, the ‘gender critical’ movement thus aims to discourage or prevent schools from allowing trans students to socially transition without parents’ consent (for example by changing the name and pronouns used for them in the classroom), as well as to discourage or prevent their use of trans-inclusive educational materials and resources. One way of doing this is via direct approaches to schools. A core mission of Transgender Trend is the production and circulation of dense ‘resource packs’ to schools consisting, for example, of a guide to ‘Supporting gender diverse and trans-identified students’ (Davies-Arai, undated a) as well as lengthy critiques of existing guides to trans inclusion in schools (e.g. Transgender Trend, undated b; Transgender Trend, undated c); the ‘gender critical’

¹ The use of a percentage to express this increase obscures the fact that the overall number of referrals are still extremely low (NHS Tavistock and Portman, undated).

movement thus aims to supplant trans-inclusive resources with its own materials. ‘Gender critical’ groups have also co-ordinated campaigns against local authorities’ use of schools guidance on trans inclusion. Key targets have been a toolkit on trans inclusion produced jointly between Brighton & Hove City Council and the youth LGBTQ+ support group Allsorts (Brighton & Hove City Council and Allsorts Youth Project, 2018) and another linked to the Young Transgender Centre of Excellence at the Leicester LGBT Centre (Trans Toolkit for Schools, 2017) that has been used by local councils around the country.

The groups present resources – generally produced by or in collaboration with trans and LGBTQ+ organisations – that offer factual depictions of the medical and social elements of transition (such as stating that hormone therapy might be offered to young trans people) as normalising harm, for example:

‘The [sex education website] Scarleteen [...] has an article “The Lowdown on Low Dose Testosterone”, which suggests one reason a young person might opt for a low dose of testosterone includes “not identifying as a transgender man”. This is normalising the use of medical treatment that can have permanent and severe side-effects.’ (Safe Schools Alliance, 2020, p. 17)

Or:

‘All these organisations promote the use of untested drugs on children that will have lifelong consequences for them ... the act has now been “normalized” by a supposed “expert” group for gender non-conforming children.’ (Transgender Trend, undated c, p.7)

As in other moral panics, the underlying fear is that ‘if you provide children with information they will actively engage in that behaviour’ (Robinson, 2012: 269). A further key claim is that trans-inclusive educational materials promote gender stereotypes and insist that all gender-non-conforming children are ‘born in the wrong body’ and are to be labelled as trans based on their personality, behaviours, and clothing and toy preferences (e.g. Transgender Trend, undated a)². The materials often profess an especial concern that children who might ‘become gay or lesbian as adults’ are being wrongly convinced that they are trans (Davies-Arai, undated a: 11). Trans inclusion materials are therefore held to represent a danger to children.

Interestingly, these campaigns encompass not only trans inclusion guidance but RSE resources more broadly (e.g. Davies-Arai, undated b; Safe Schools Alliance, 2020). The continuity with other moral panics centred on education and children’s access to ‘inappropriate knowledge’ is further revealed in the campaigns: a Transgender Trend resource pack on ‘inclusive RSE’ rails against the ‘normalisation of extreme and niche sexual practices’ (Davies-Arai, undated b, p. 5), which it claims is:

‘reflected in the common themes of some recent RSE resources. This includes an emphasis on pleasure and “sex positivity,” encouragement to accept and experiment with extreme sexual practices, normalisation of anal sex, encouragement of surgical body modification and presentation of “sex work” as a normal job choice.’ (Davies-Arai, undated b, pp. 5-6)

Girls are depicted as most under threat:

² Educational materials produced by trans and LGBTQ+ organisations generally state clearly that gender non-conformity is not synonymous with being trans, and differentiate between gender identity and gender roles or stereotypes (Brighton & Hove City Council and Allsorts Youth Project, 2018; Trans Toolkit for Schools, 2017).

‘This kind of content serves to increase the pressure on girls that they should accept anything and give up their boundaries, or risk being seen as a prude or a bigot.’ (Davies-Arai, undated b, p.6)

An overview of the offending resources suggests that they offer factual descriptions and definitions rather than ‘encouragement’ of particular activities (Respect Yourself, undated; Proud Trust, undated; PSHE Association, undated). ‘Gender critical’ opposition, however, draws heavily on the image of the child, especially the girl child, as innocent yet vulnerable to dangerous adult knowledges. This imagery animates opposition to both RSE resources and the teaching of trans knowledges and identities; indeed at times the two issues are merged:

‘Some of the RSE material we have reviewed which is based on gender identity and queer theory reinforces the message of pornography through catering to a dominant male sexuality, increasing the pressures and masking the risks for girls.’ (Davies-Arai, undated b, p. 8)

These campaigns have had real-world implications for the availability of resources. In 2020, Oxfordshire County Council withdrew its trans inclusion guidance for schools following a legal challenge backed by Safe Schools Alliance (Somerville, 2020). Safe Schools Alliance’s website claims that a raft of local councils have since withdrawn their trans inclusion guidance in light of their campaigns: ‘Barnsley, Birmingham, Ceredigion, Denbighshire, Derbyshire, Doncaster, Essex, Flintshire, Hertfordshire, Kent, Leicester, Merthyr Tydfil, Oxfordshire, Shropshire, Somerset, Warwickshire and Wrexham [...] as of 14/07/20’ (Safe Schools Alliance, undated b). Similar fates have befallen RSE resources, such as the Respect Yourself website, which contained information about sex aimed at teenagers and young adults, including a ‘sextionary’ (a glossary of sexual terms). The website was hosted by the Warwickshire County Council local authority until it was suspended in 2019 and placed under review – where it remained until being formally scrapped in 2022 – following both pressure from religious organisations and a petition by Safe Schools Alliance and the anti-pornography group Click Off which claimed the materials ‘normalised pornography’ (Coventry Telegraph, 2019; Oliver, 2022).

Recruiting parents

Recruitment of parents is also a key part of ‘gender critical’ strategy. This section shows that ‘gender critical’ groups attempt to recruit parents for different purposes: as proxy lobbyists in their campaigns, but also as agents of household gender discipline who are hoped to be able to encourage desistance from trans identification. Child-focused groups thus seek to intervene in family life as well as in the educational environment. Across both initiatives – recruiting parents as lobbyists and as gender coaches – the groups attempt to leverage parenthood and parental concern for children as a route into the movement. This is well in line with other moral panics, in which concerned parents are often leveraged in order to influence institutional or policy agendas (see for example Potter and Potter, 2001; Zajdow, 2008).

While Transgender Trend provides some limited guidance for parents on how to approach their children’s schools with concerns (Transgender Trend, 2021b), recruiting parents as lobbyists is chiefly the domain of the Safe Schools Alliance. The resources produced by this group are primarily aimed at parents. These consist of a set of short and digestible ‘factsheets’ (as opposed to the dense ‘resource packs’ produced by Transgender Trend for schools) aimed at inspiring parental concern over what their children are being taught: most of the factsheets focus on educational resources on both trans inclusion and RSE more generally produced by LGBTQ+ and children’s charities (Safe Schools Alliance, undated c). The factsheets generally describe these educational resources as ‘extreme’, ‘ideological’, and ‘raising safeguarding concerns’, including those produced by long-

established child protection charities such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Barnardo's (e.g. Safe Schools Alliance, undated d; 2021a; 2021b).

Alongside provoking anxieties over what their children are being taught, the resources also instruct parents in how to become lobbyists themselves. A factsheet titled 'How to complain to your child's school' walks parents through the process of making informal and formal complaints and suggests taking legal action or going to the press if a complaint is not resolved, indicating that Safe Schools Alliance would be willing to assist in such a case (Safe Schools Alliance, 2021c). Another factsheet informs parents of how to use Freedom of Information requests to gain access to educational materials used by schools (Safe Schools Alliance, 2022a). Elsewhere, the Safe Schools Alliance website provides guidance for parents to write to their local education authority to encourage them to withdraw trans inclusion guidance (Safe Schools Alliance, undated b), and to write to MPs (Safe Schools Alliance, undated e). One page provides 14 different letter templates for lobbying schools, local authorities and politicians on trans inclusion guidance and provision of single-sex facilities in schools (Safe Schools Alliance, undated f).

Safe Schools Alliance seems to chiefly aim to recruit parents for participation in outward-facing activities: that is, lobbying various institutions to roll back or halt programmes of trans inclusion. Other organisations, however, move the focal point away from institutions such as schools and local government and into the home: instructing parents on how to discourage trans identification in their children. Bayswater Support Group and Our Duty do so by operating as peer support groups, targeting parents who are sceptical of their child's trans identity. Bayswater Support Group describes itself as 'wary of medical solutions to gender dysphoria' (Bayswater Support Group, undated a). Our Duty – perhaps the most extreme of the groups discussed in this article – goes further, stating that 'medical transition is harmful [...] there really is no such thing as a transgender child' (Our Duty, undated a) and 'a child who believes they are transgender knows, deep down, that they are not' (Our Duty, undated b).

These groups do engage in some lobbying: in 2020, Our Duty called for access to gender-affirming care to be banned for under-25s (Our Duty, 2020), further demonstrating the movement's interest in stretching who counts as a 'child'. By early 2021, however, the group was lobbying the Government to suspend access to medical transition, which it described as 'opposite sex imitation', for *all* ages (Our Duty, 2021). Nonetheless, lobbying is not these groups' main focus. Rather, they function as forums for networking trans-critical parents with likeminded parents, and provide instruction to help such parents encourage their child to desist from identifying as trans. Their websites make it clear that their aim is to address what they believe to be the root causes of trans identity in order to encourage the child to desist:

What problems does it solve for a child to want to reinvent themselves as a member of the opposite sex? How can we address the root problems so that they don't undergo unnecessary and experimental medical treatments? (Bayswater Support Group, undated b)

And

Detransition cannot be coerced. However, it is possible to create an environment which improves the conditions for it to occur:

- Keep a good relationship
- Ensure everyone understands both reality and the ideology
- Identify, and fix or manage the underlying cause(s)

- Help change society (Our Duty, undated b)

Our Duty describes a trans identity as a false belief that a child has acquired ‘because they were vulnerable to it’ due to factors including trauma, mental illness, autism, and ‘repressed homosexuality’ (undated b). In this narrative, children are incapable of self-knowledge and require a parental authority to guide them back to reality. This is accentuated by the failure to differentiate clearly between children and adolescents; minors of any age become infantilised in this narrative. Any claimed trans identity therefore cannot result from self-knowledge but rather must result from the pernicious influence of adults, in particular that of trans ‘lobby groups’ on the educational environment. ‘They [children] are not doing this to themselves – it is being done to them’ (Our Duty, undated b).

While children’s trans identity is never viewed as genuine, and the groups make hay of supposedly high ‘desistance’ rates³, they nevertheless express a fear that children might be locked into a trans identity if the wrong actions are taken. Bayswater Support Group, for example, asks parents to consider whether allowing their child to undertake elements of social gender transition (such as by changing their name, pronouns or appearance) might ‘foreclose [their] child’s thinking about sex and gender roles’ (undated c). To prevent trans identity becoming fixed, both groups stress the necessity of parents acting as gender coaches to their child and avoiding affirming the child’s gender identity (see for example Bayswater Support Group, undated c; Our Duty, undated c). Suggested strategies include monitoring or restricting the child’s access to the internet and to LGBTQ+ support groups, enforcing ‘boundaries’ around social transition or resisting the child’s ‘demands’ (Our Duty, undated c) to be referred to by a different name or pronouns, introducing the child to critiques of trans identity as well as of gender-affirming medical treatments and surgeries, and delaying taking action to address gender dysphoria in the hope that it will resolve itself: ‘for example, “let’s get you through your driving test first”’ (Our Duty, undated c). These parental actions are promoted as necessary to encourage desistance and ensure a cisgender future for the child.

Discussion: The impossibility of the trans child?

Owen (2022) argues that anti-trans projects target the institutions and infrastructure that allow trans people’s existence *as* trans people. This article has shown how expansive this strategy can be. In targeting trans inclusion guidelines for schools, the ‘gender critical’ movement inhibits institutional arrangements that would allow for the trans child’s social existence as a trans child by, for example, allowing the child to socially transition and be recognised in their gender identity at school. The movement has successfully targeted information and educational resources that might enable a trans child to come to understand *themselves* in the present as a trans child; ‘trans child’ is not held to be an identity that children can legitimately claim for themselves.

There are instructional parallels here with the treatment of the ‘gay child’ or ‘queer child’ in child development discourses. As Kathryn Bond Stockton has noted, in these discourses children are simultaneously believed to be devoid of sexuality and presumed to have a ‘straight destination’ (2009: 6). For Stockton, the queer child:

‘has not been able to present itself according to the category “gay” or “homosexual”—categories culturally deemed too adult, since they are sexual, though we do presume every child to be straight.’ (2009: 6)

A gay adult may retrospectively come to understand themselves as having been a ‘gay child’, but children cannot understand themselves in this way. The gay child, in these discourses, is an impossibility, because the child ‘is not allowed to be sexual’ (2009: 7). In the same way

³ See Temple Newhook, et al. (2018) and Winters (2019) for discussions of the claim that eventual desistance from trans identification is the norm for children and adolescents who come out as trans.

that children may not be allowed to understand themselves as gay or queer, the ‘gender critical’ movement seeks to establish that children cannot rightly understand themselves as trans, and to prevent them from doing so in practice.

At first glance this refusal is not about children’s sexuality. ‘Gender critical’ figures often even claim to be acting in defence of LGB children (although this is frequently formulated in terms of children who will ‘become gay’ *in future* – gay identities presumably still being ‘too adult’ even if for ‘gender critical’ groups, children may not necessarily have a ‘straight destination’). Nonetheless, in the data trans identities become linked to sexuality in materials that simultaneously target trans-inclusive and sex-positive RSE materials. This is most explicit in materials that tie ‘gender identity and queer theory’ to pornography and characterise all these things as catering to ‘male sexuality’.

The links between ‘gender critical’ and anti-porn feminisms are worth unpacking in order to contextualise these claims. The groups analysed here are embedded within a broader movement that often locates porn at the heart of male dominance. Their rhetoric around pornography and ‘dominant male sexuality’ draws on the ideas of feminist anti-porn thinkers and movements, which have conceptualised porn and sexual violence as at the heart of all gender inequality and oppression; in this view porn provides the ‘script’ for men’s sexual and social dominance (see for example Dworkin, 1988; MacKinnon, 1993). In the UK, this strain of feminist activism is kept alive by feminist groups such as OBJECT. Anti-porn and ‘gender critical’ feminisms are not necessarily aligned, as a recent article by the prominent US feminist legal scholar and anti-porn campaigner Catharine MacKinnon makes very clear (2023). Nonetheless, in the UK there is a clear crossover in practice between the two movements: OBJECT, for example, is now heavily involved in campaigns against ‘gender ideology’. Porn is central to the broader ‘gender critical’ imaginary and many instances of the movement diagnoses transfeminine identity as entirely or almost entirely resulting from porn use. Trans women, in this telling, become ‘pornsick males’ acting out a fetish in public.

While this narrative is (perhaps for strategic reasons) not presented explicitly in the more sanitised materials aimed at schools and parents analysed in this article, it is nonetheless hovering at their edges. A theory of trans identity popular in ‘gender critical’ circles is that of ‘autogynephilia’, or ‘AGP’, developed by the psychologist Ray Blanchard. AGP theory posits that many trans women – specifically those who are attracted to women – transition because they are sexually aroused by imagining themselves as women (for a thorough critique of Blanchard’s theory, see Serano, 2020). This theory has influenced many ‘gender critical’ campaigners, including, for example, the academic and lesbian feminist Sheila Jeffreys who has described the trans movement as a ‘men’s sexual rights movement’ and ‘transgenderism’ as a fetish or ‘sexual perversion’ normalised by pornography (Jeffreys, 2020). (Further underscoring the connections between UK anti-trans and anti-porn feminisms, Jeffreys is also associated with the anti-porn group Click Off.)

Child-focused ‘gender critical’ groups rarely talk explicitly about adult trans people in their materials, although one Transgender Trend resource does state that ‘AGP’ is ‘the most common reason for men to transition later in life’ (Transgender Trend, undated e). The social media posts of these groups and their key personnel, however, do not hide their belief that trans women are ‘AGP’ fetishists (e.g. Safe Schools Alliance, 2022; Davies-Arai, 2022; Jordan, undated); ‘AGP’ clearly forms a core part of their constellation of beliefs surrounding sexuality and trans identity. This context sheds light on why the groups’ materials tie together gender identity and pornography in the way that they do: for much of the ‘gender critical’ movement, trans identity *is* pornography. It also illuminates the particular focus on girls in many of the materials: the girl child is most threatened by pornography and by the ‘male’ sexuality trans identity is held to represent.

This all helps explain the impossibility of the trans child in ‘gender critical’ belief. We see in ‘gender critical’ discourse a stark contrast between trans identity in adults and children. Trans adults (specifically, trans women) are defined by their sexuality (including conjectured use of pornography) and absence of innocence. Children (in particular girl

children) are on the other hand defined by innocence and absence of sexuality – and therefore, it is implied, incapable of transness, which is sexual. Protecting children from trans identity means protecting the child, figured as innocent, from a dangerous, adult, pornified and ‘male’ sexuality.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the ‘gender critical’ movement has mobilised a moral panic surrounding transgender young people. My analysis found that ‘gender critical’ activism around childhood portrays trans identity as a pernicious ideology or false belief to which children are vulnerable. This false belief, for the movement, is contagious, and this contagion is primarily spread within schools, helped along by trans-inclusive schools guidance and teaching materials that ‘normalise’ the harmful false belief in trans identity. Consequently, action must be taken to defend children in schools and in the family. This article has, accordingly, identified the strategies employed to fight the trans ‘contagion’. These strategies require the movement to target schools, as sites of contagion, and seek the removal of trans-inclusive policies and resources that might further the contagion. Crucially, however, to regulate the institutions that might otherwise enable trans existence, the movement must also extend its reach into the family, and not simply into public institutions such as schools. Accordingly, ‘gender critical’ actors seek to recruit parents as household gender coaches, whom they encourage to resist their child’s ‘demands’ for both social transition and for access to gender-affirming care. This dual approach means that trans children’s social existence is precluded both at school and within the context of the family.

‘Gender critical’ actors have framed themselves as defenders of vulnerable children, and are typically enabled to do so in press and public discourse around trans youth. Yet ‘gender critical’ activism itself may risk harming children. Trans youth experience higher-than-average levels of bullying and are more likely to be absent from school (Day et al, 2018). Research suggests, however, that the use of trans-inclusive schools resources is associated with decreased absenteeism and lower levels of victimisation of trans youth (Greytak et al., 2013). The removal of such resources and support in educational settings – the outcome of several campaigns by ‘gender critical’ groups – thus risks exposing trans children to harm. Similarly, while trans children experience high rates of depression and anxiety, having parents who support their trans identity is associated with better mental health and wellbeing outcomes – especially if they are allowed and supported to socially transition (Simons et al, 2013; Olson et al, 2016). In recruiting parents of trans children and encouraging them not to support their child’s transition, and in insisting that schools must out trans children to their trans-hostile parents, ‘gender critical’ activism further exposes children to harm.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest

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