

TRANSADVOCATE

Rowan Atkinson makes more sense than BBC's "Woman's Hour"

By Cristan Williams

Published April 19, 2015 | Updated March 31, 2026

https://www.transadvocate.com/rowan-atkinson-makes-more-sense-than-bbcs-womans-hour_n_15148.htm

Abstract

Why TERF ideology is child abuse and how the media supports it. By Natacha This article discusses the clash of ideology and lived experience as exemplified by a recent BBC radio program in the UK. This article uses the term Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) to distinguish between the trans-supportive Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin, [...]

Article



Why TERF ideology is child abuse and how the media supports it.

By Natacha

This article discusses the clash of ideology and lived experience as exemplified by a recent BBC radio program in the UK. This article uses the term Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) to distinguish between the trans-supportive Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, The Olivia Collective or the West Coast Lesbian Conference and sex essentialist anti-trans feminism

of Janice Raymond, Sheila Jeffreys and/or the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. The feminist origins of the term TERF can be found [here](#).

Reading the transcript of the Womans' Hour programme broadcast on BBC Radio on the 9th of March I couldn't help but be reminded of Rowan Atkinson's TV advert for Barclaycard. Broadcast many years ago, when I had time to watch telly, and paying the license fee didn't mean supporting a racist political party, it consisted of Atkinson trying to buy a carpet in a Persian country. His character was under the impression that he spoke the same North African language as the merchant. In fact, it turned out that Rowan Atkinson's character had to admit that he and the merchant were "both fluent, but sadly, in different languages."

This is what struck me about the Woman's Hour attempt to set up a fight between a trans person who knows about trans children, and a Radical Feminist; they both spoke fluently but in distinctly different languages. Michelle Bridgeman expertly put the case for trans children to be given access to proper healthcare very well and Finn McKay argued that gender should not be policed in the way it is.

Michelle was talking, in essence, about relieving the suffering of trans kids and preventing suicide and self-harm. Finn wanted to change the gendered culture of our society which she maintains, is oppressive. They are actually two different things, like Rowan Atkinson and the carpet dealer's languages.

Probably the moment that summed up Finn's position was when she said this;

... if that starts from a position, from a baseline assumption about what is supposed normal and natural femininity and what is normal and natural masculinity, then that is nothing more than medicine based on stereotype and that is only gonna function to actually maintain this brutal gender regime that I think puts pressure on us all, and conveniently blame it on nature instead of blaming it on ourselves.

It is this suggestion that medical care for in this instance trans children "puts pressure on us all" which needs to be deconstructed. What sort of "pressure" is she referring to? Pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, I suspect. Her thesis appears to be that allowing trans medical care that somehow reinforces gender stereotypes and the reinforcing of those gender stereotypes somehow harms the TERF project of degendering society. The implication is that trans children should be forced to suffer in silence to avoid destabilizing this TERF project. This has been the core issue at the heart of the TERF argument against trans people's existence since its violent inception in the dark days of the early 1970s. This is not to say that there is not a residual element of this in gatekeeping psychiatry as some non-binary people in particular are discovering but as Sandy Stone pointed out in the 1990s, by and large, trans people manipulate the shrinks, not the other way round.

Unpicking this further the idea is that perhaps 1% of the population changing their gender is somehow acting to oppress the other 99% or as she describes it; supporting "this brutal gender regime". So,

- the media,
- the courts,
- the police,
- the education system,

- the professions,
- the political system,
- the economic system,
- science and technology, etc.

are of less importance than a tiny and desperately marginalized and misrepresented 1% of the population?

Suddenly the word "disproportionate" springs to mind.

Trans people exist and do no more to support what Finn describes as a "brutal gender regime" than anyone else, and probably actually do a great deal to undermine it compared to the average cis individual.

However, the section of that quotation which probably most illustrates how Finn and most trans people are actually speaking different languages is where Finn asserts, "it is nothing more than medicine based on stereotype." Of course, Michelle Bridgegman put the real case that this is about making trans children's lives more livable, and preventing harm but here, Finn appears to be engaging in the age-old TERF accusation of a kind of pro-active, panoptic medical apparatus that acts to seek out and "normalize" gender non-conforming people. A state of affairs which exists only in the imaginations of some TERFs.

There are two things wrong with this medical conspiracy theory; firstly a fair proportion of trans people are not "gender non-conforming" and there is nothing wrong with this. After all, since the overwhelming majority of cisgender people are significantly gender conforming, one would have thought that the TERF project would -- if it were to have any chance of eliminating the "brutal gender regime" attempt -- first and foremost, attempt to change the behavior of that majority. Finn may not like it but trans people have as much right to conform to the gender with which they identify, as cis people and I'm sure Finn would not want to be accused of double-standards in this instance. Secondly, it ignores the inconvenient fact that, for trans people, especially trans children, to obtain any medical treatment at all, requires an enormous struggle. Those who require any kind of medical intervention are normally required to get past a strict gatekeeping regime and obtaining any kind of surgery often feels like an intense struggle against this regime.

However, there is more and I think this is also where different languages are being spoken. Finn seems to be under the impression that being trans is about masculinity and femininity -- after all, these are central concepts in Radical Feminism -- yet in my experience of being trans and knowing a large number of other trans people, primarily it's about how one identifies on a fundamental level rather than whether one adopts particular traits which can be described as either masculine or feminine. I know some trans women who are very feminine and I know some who are not at all; I know trans men who are masculine and plenty who are not. It seems to me that for most trans people transition is primarily about identity, bodily integrity, and being recognized as their core gender identity; masculinity or femininity take second place for most and are entirely unimportant for many.

Finally, Finn seems to drag up the old, and very outdated TERF canard that trans people are essentialists.

[illegible]

The Way Forward

I have long maintained that trans children need to have access to what Laverne Cox calls “possibility models” from a very early age, to make the knowledge available to them about trans people and trans kids. Trans people should be on the school curriculum for all children from the age of 4 or 5, to ensure trans and gender non-conforming kids can get to know that there are other people like them -- that they are not alone -- and that there is nothing wrong with them so they can take control of their lives. This has been the case in California since 2011 and civilization hasn’t collapsed there.

Also, we need to go further than President Obama's expression of condemnation of Conversion Therapy. It should be made illegal to attempt to intentionally change anyone's gender identity or sexual orientation whether by going to one of these quack therapists or through unofficial coercive methods. This would mean that trying to make a trans child into a cis child or an LGB young person straight should be considered a form of child abuse whether carried out by a school, a religious organization or by a parent.

The problem is that TERFs, along with other transphobes, will try and portray the proposals contained in the above two paragraphs as representing "child abuse." This is unacceptable and in itself represents TERF child abuse by proxy.

Last but by no means least... The Behaviour of the Woman's Hour Team:

At issue here has also been the behavior of the media, in this instance the editorial team of Woman's Hour. As CN Lester eloquently explained in their blog, this is effectively about the BBC manufacturing an argument for the sake of listeners.

It has to be said however that trans people are not dancing bears; we are not performing dogs or clockwork toys you can just wind up for the entertainment of the public. Trans people are still a badly misunderstood group and the main reason for this is the way the media has still often failed to ethically tell our stories or to explain to a largely ignorant public who we are. It was clear that the Woman's Hour prommgers were woefully ignorant about trans issues. As CN said this is not merely a case of Woman's Hour failing to adhere to the standards required of it as a public service broadcast programme, but it also represented extremely unprofessional journalism with the programme-makers clearly both very ignorant of the issues around trans children and seemingly making no attempt to remedy this.

So the final question I have to pose is this: although Trans Media Watch and All About Trans have done great things, achieved a great deal in changing media attitudes in general, it seems that we may be getting to a point where some of the media are ignoring these groups. Recently there have been examples of media platforms deliberately not consulting either of these groups because they want to sensationalize a story, and usually, that sensationalized story relates to trans children. Do we need a different approach entirely (possibly a more assertive one) to deal with these type of stories and journalists? When we have "journalists" like Carole Malone proudly saying that she is "no expert" and then going on to talk about trans kids we have a problem. For too long the media have peddled "commonsense" opinions by making ignorance a virtue. It is time for this to be challenged robustly by trans people.

1. Editor's Note: A meeting that billed itself as the "New Narratives Conference" met in 2014 and represents the best-known example of trans people who have bought into the TERF's "utopian ideology." The "Conference" consisted of 7 male-identified trans women and one ex-trans person who all believed in sex essentialism and who actively discouraged trans women from attending MichFest 2014. The "conference" supports TERF sex essentialism:
 "The categories 'female' and 'male' refer to the two predominant sex types in humans. [A misconception] that is currently a mandatory tenet of trans outreach... asserts that personal identity overrides biological reality, and should be sufficient to convince other people that trans

people are not our birth sex. This is clearly untrue. It's also dangerous, both to women born female and to trans people... When we hold onto the idea that identity trumps biology, it can lead us to unrealistic expectations about how others will or should interact with us during and after transition. It can cause us to put ourselves in unsafe situations where being oblivious poses a genuine threat." In 2014 the organizer of MichFest, Lisa Vogel cited this "conference" as being an example of the "many" voices within the trans community that supports MichFest's Intention that trans women exclude themselves from the festival:

"MWMF has, since its inception in 1976, formed itself as a space for womyn-born-female as a means to resist and survive the debilitation of female subjugation; We believe that support for womyn-born-female space is not at odds with standing with and for the transgender community; We believe that the statements calling for the boycott of the MWMF neither speak for all transgender womyn nor include all of their voices, many of whom are silenced or ignored with regard to their support of the Festival's intention of womyn-born-female space, for example, the New Narratives Conference held in Portland, Oregon this Spring."

Suggested citation

Cristan Williams. "Rowan Atkinson makes more sense than BBC's "Woman's Hour"." TransAdvocate, April 19, 2015. https://www.transadvocate.com/rowan-atkinson-makes-more-sense-than-bbcs-womans-hour_n_15148.htm