



Anti-LGBTQ group Heritage Foundation has hosted four anti-trans panels so far in 2019

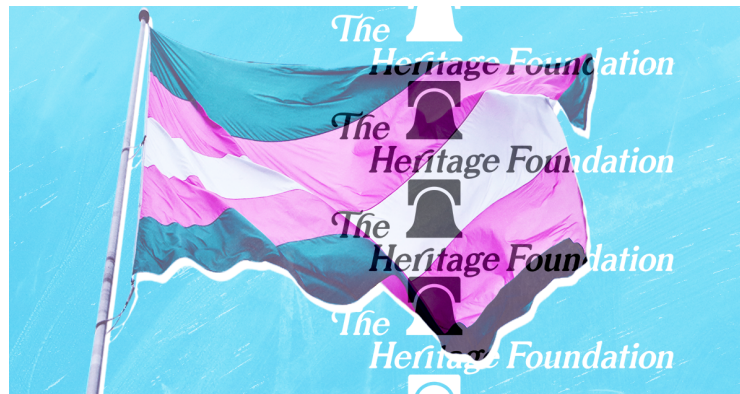
Panelists included “trans-exclusionary radical feminists” and anti-trans medical professionals who pushed flawed research and advocated for conversion therapy

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Melissa Joskow / Media Matters

The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank that has railed against LGBTQ equality for decades, hosted its fourth anti-transgender panel of the year on April 8. Each of the four panels focused on a different aspect of trans equality, such as comprehensive nondiscrimination measures, affirming medical care for transgender youth, trans inclusion in international policy, and trans participation in athletics. The panels also featured biased anti-trans figures – whom Heritage characterized as subject experts – who pushed right-wing narratives about transgender people.

Heritage’s surge in anti-transgender events and its increased attempts to shape public discourse about trans rights come at a strategic time as Congress considers expanding federal civil rights laws to include critical protections for trans folks. The Equality Act, introduced on March 13, would add “gender identity” and “sexual orientation” to existing nondiscrimination protections in “employment, housing, public accommodations,” and other areas. The measure was quickly met with opposition and fearmongering from extreme anti-LGBTQ groups and right-wing media. Heritage’s panels echoed many of the anti-trans talking points pushed by these groups and outlets.

Heritage hosted a panel of TERFs to advocate against the Equality Act

On January 28, the vehemently anti-LGBTQ activist Ryan T. Anderson hosted so-called “trans-exclusionary radical feminists” (TERFs) and self-proclaimed liberals in a panel focused on railing against the inclusion of

gender identity in the Equality Act. TERFs refer to themselves as “gender-critical” or “radical feminists”; they generally do not associate themselves with the term TERFs, but they are anti-trans activists who have historically opposed trans-inclusive measures and denied trans identities.

One of the panelists, adjunct lecturer at the University of California, San Francisco Hacs Horvath, says he formerly identified as transgender. During the panel, he encouraged the audience to misgender trans folks – an act that is considered harassment and that can stigmatize trans people, lower their self-esteem, and erase and invalidate their identities.

Another panelist, Julia Beck, appeared on Fox’s *Tucker Carlson Tonight* after participating in the Heritage panel and pushed the same anti-trans points about the Equality Act. Beck was removed from Baltimore’s LGBTQ Commission in 2018 after other members became aware of her anti-trans animus.

The two other panelists, Kara Dansky and Jennifer Chavez, are board members of the TERF organization Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF), which has supported the clients of extreme anti-LGBTQ group Alliance Defending Freedom in an ongoing court case that seeks to dismantle a trans-inclusive policy at a Pennsylvania high school.

Heritage hosted a side event at the UN Commission on the Status of Women against including “gender identity” in international resolutions

On March 20, Heritage co-hosted another anti-trans panel: a “side event” with the Permanent Observer Mission to the Holy See at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The U.N. CSW is “the principal global intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women.” During the panel, participants claimed that “gender ideology” – a “theory drummed up by hard-right religious activists, who present it as a gay- and feminist-led movement out to upend the traditional family and the natural order of society” – is a threat to women’s rights around the world.

One panelist, Dr. Monique Robles, who brought a veneer of credibility to the panel as a medical doctor who focuses on pediatric care, pushed the unvalidated hypothesis of rapid-onset gender dysphoria (ROGD). The theory posits that trans teens are coming out as such due to “social contagion,” and a study promoting the concept was reevaluated and corrected following complaints about its research and methodology. The correction noted that the study only “serves to develop hypotheses” and that the concept has not been validated. Robles also seemingly praised the discredited and harmful practice of conversion therapy, remarking:

A better treatment option would be to address the underlying mental health issues and concerns that are likely leading to these children in adolescence to identify as transgender or gender diverse. There are therapists who are taking on the role as compassionate companions and are spending time with

their patients and their parents working through histories, experiences, and addressing the whole of the individual. In this form of therapy, the body, mind, and soul can be brought together in a unified manner in which they were created.

Panelist Emilie Kao, director of Heritage's Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Religion & Civil Society, argued that including "gender identity" in international policy and in U.N. resolutions is a threat to the progress of women's equality. She said, "If the word 'woman' can be redefined to mean everyone, then it will change or even erase the true meaning of woman in international human rights law, in economic development efforts, and in efforts to increase access to social protection systems." Framing transgender rights as at odds with women's rights is a tactic conservatives have increasingly employed that also mirrors talking points from TERFs.

Heritage's Anderson continued that trend, also claiming trans rights are detriments to women's equality, safety, and privacy. Another panelist, Mary Rice Hasson, a fellow at the Catholic Women's Forum, echoed these sentiments and claimed that affirming trans identities has a "dehumanizing effect on women, where women are no longer acknowledged as persons" and that "the result is that real women are being displaced."

Heritage hosted a panel advocating against affirming the gender identities of transgender youth

On March 28, Anderson hosted a third anti-trans panel, titled "The Medical Harms of Hormonal and Surgical Interventions for Gender Dysphoric Children," featuring medical professionals who used flawed research to fearmonger about and attack trans-affirming medical care. These claims are in direct opposition to the positions of leading medical associations such as the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Psychiatric Association, which "agree that gender-affirming care are the most effective treatment for gender dysphoria," according to CNN.

During the panel, "ex-trans" activist Walt Heyer, a darling of anti-LGBTQ groups and right-wing media, railed against affirming trans identities, calling it "child abuse," "destructive," and "damaging." He also encouraged the use of conversion therapy for transgender people.

Other panelists included Dr. Michael K. Laidlaw, a vocal anti-trans advocate who has also been featured in right-wing outlets, and a mother of a trans child who wished to remain anonymous, who they called "Elaine." Elaine is also a member of a new anti-trans advocacy group for parents of trans children called The Kelsey Coalition. During the panel, Elaine criticized laws that protect LGBTQ youth from conversion therapy, and Laidlaw advocated against the use of puberty blockers, calling them "a chemical conversion therapy." Puberty blockers "are medicines that prevent puberty from happening" in order to help transgender youths' bodies "better reflect who [they] are." Studies have shown that they are effective and safe and recommend their use on transgender youth who decide to use them with the help of medical providers.

Heritage hosted a panel advocating against including transgender athletes in gender-segregated sports

For its fourth anti-trans panel in 2019, Heritage co-hosted an event on April 8 with anti-LGBTQ group Concerned Women For America, which seeks to “bring Biblical principles into all levels of public policy.” The panel advocated against allowing trans athletes to compete in gender-segregated sports that align with their gender identity. Heritage’s Kao hosted the panel, opening by reciting a quote that the Equality Act would be “the end of women’s sports.”

The panel began with a video featuring panelist Bianca Stanescu’s daughter, a student athlete who lost a track meet that made headlines when two trans athletes earned top prizes. Right-wing media, including Fox News’ Laura Ingraham and Tucker Carlson, have touted this story as a reason to not allow transgender athletes to compete in gender-segregated sports. *Media Matters’* Parker Molloy previously wrote about how figures like Carlson regularly seize on local stories like this to fuel the identity politics-driven culture war, and Heritage has similarly focused on this rare incident (transgender athletes are not dominating sports on a wide scale) to justify widespread discrimination.

Another panelist, *National Review’s* Madeleine Kearns, repeatedly misgendered trans athletes and showed pictures of trans athletes before and after affirming medical care to fearmonger about their physical abilities. There is ongoing debate on the standards for trans inclusion in athletics, much of which is led by the International Olympic Committee. In 2016, the IOC updated guidelines on transgender athletes, leaving “no restriction for a trans man ... to compete against men” and removing “the need for women to undergo gender-reassignment surgery to compete.” IOC has several restrictions for transgender women to compete in the Olympics, including demonstrating a certain level of testosterone for at least one year, and it is continuing to fund research into this area. As *Outsports* noted, “Despite the guidelines, no publicly out trans athlete has competed in the Olympics. Ever.” This stands in contrast to right-wing claims that trans athletes are dominating their field due to competitive advantages.

A third panelist, Jennifer S. Bryson, is the founder of a sports advocacy organization called Let All Play that argues against pride jerseys celebrating LGBTQ Pride Month on sports teams. Bryson criticized the pride jerseys issued by the U.S. Soccer Federation and said requiring players to wear the jerseys was “a form of coerced speech requiring players to wear a political symbol.” She went on to call transgender people “a threat to soccer itself for girls and women,” adding that “the U.S. Soccer Federation should not require players to wear a symbol of a movement that is trying to harm soccer.”

Additionally, Concerned Women for America’s Doreen Denny announced during the panel that the organization has partnered with TERF group WoLF to lobby against the Equality Act even though they “disagree on many things.” Denny also misgendered trans athletes during the panel and at one point corrected herself to intentionally misgender a female athlete after using the correct pronoun the first time, saying, “She has taken — he, excuse me.”

The four 2019 panels represent an alarming spike in Heritage's anti-trans advocacy

Heritage's panels are just one aspect of its work against trans equality. Heritage's Anderson organized an anti-trans conference reportedly attended by 250 attendees at the Franciscan University of Steubenville from April 4 to 5. The conference was called "Transgender Moment: A Natural Law Response to Gender Ideology," and it focused on so-called "corruption and flawed science driving an increase in gender 'transitioning' and 'reassignments'" and compared transgender equality to the dystopian novel *1984*.

Additionally, Heritage's Monica Burke penned an April 10 anti-trans op-ed for the *Chicago Tribune*, and the group's work this year has been consistently picked up and parroted by several right-wing and evangelical media outlets. And though mainstream and queer outlets have written about Heritage's January 28 TERF panel, the right-wing has dominated coverage of the rest of the anti-trans panels.

Despite its record, Heritage somehow enjoys some mainstream credibility. Earlier this month, Google disbanded its Artificial Intelligence ethics board after "little over a week" because it selected Heritage President Kay Coles James as one of its board members. Google employees and others protested her inclusion because of her and Heritage's positions against trans equality.

Though the Heritage Foundation's practice of hosting anti-trans advocates and pushing anti-trans narratives is not new, the frequency and breadth of its events this year are alarming. Heritage's attempt to shape public discourse on the Equality Act and the transgender community is another example of the right's attempt to position trans rights as counter to those of women and to fracture the LGBTQ movement by excluding trans folks from it. Such groups deploy a similar "divide and conquer" strategy to create a false dichotomy between people of faith and LGBTQ rights, despite the fact that most faith groups support LGBTQ inclusion.