

Beyond the genitalia: What is a hu-WO-man?

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Review of: *What Is a Woman?* (2022, documentary), presented by Matt Walsh, directed by Justin Folk, and produced by The Daily Wire.

What Is a Woman? is an American documentary presented by Matt Walsh, an American conservative political commentator and author, directed by Justin Folk and produced by The Daily Wire, an American conservative news and media platform. Released in June 2022, coinciding with the Pride Month, in this documentary Walsh goes into a journey across the US to find ‘an’ answer to what Walsh describes to be a ‘simple’ question: ‘*What is a Woman?*’ The question is posed to elicit views on whether transwomen are ‘real’ women. In this documentary, Walsh asks the title question to a range of people, including a sex-reassignment surgeon, therapists, politicians, psychiatrists, various people on the streets, a paediatrician, activists, a gender and sexuality professor, the Maasai people and teachers. Centring around gender and transgender issues, the documentary touches upon issues related to gender dysphoria, misgendering and gender pronouns, phalloplasty and vaginoplasty as well as controversial issues such as transwomen in sports, puberty blockers, sex-reassignment in children and the use of female toilets and locker rooms by transwomen.

The documentary starts with Walsh being at his children’s birthday party, raising concerns about the impact of ‘conflicting’ messages regarding sex and gender on his children’s gender and identity. The documentary sets off by displaying different clips that seek to answer the question, ‘what is a woman?’, by reiterating differences between boys and girls in sex organs (vagina vs penis), their physical structures (curved vs muscular) and the way they dress (feminine vs masculine), followed by Walsh’s questions about ‘nature’ and ‘reality’. From this introduction, it became clear that the documentary puts forward an essentialist view of gender, conflating gender identity with biological ‘reality’ rooted in the binary division between male and female sexes.

Moving from one interview to another, Walsh maintains that no one could give him ‘an’ answer, rather than ‘the’ answer he expects, to such a ‘simple’ question. Although throughout the

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documentary one answer was repeatedly offered, over and over, from different groups of people and professionals: 'A woman is someone who self-identifies as a woman'. This definition was dismissed by Walsh as it does not render gender to be a synonym of sex, which is the narrative that the documentary seeks to convey. Pressing the 'only men have penises' argument became more evident in how the documentary concluded. At the end of the documentary, Walsh returns home after his long journey and poses the same question to his wife, who answers 'a woman is an adult "female," who needs her husband's strength to open this jar'. A definition that Walsh receives with a grin indicative of satisfaction and approval.

Throughout its 1 hour 35 minutes length, the documentary's content and storyline are sketched to incite hatred against transgender people. The way the interviews were conducted, the implicit condescending attitude, the way the questions, probes and interruptions are posed, predominantly to professional proponents of transgender people, clearly reflect a dark sarcasm ridiculing the trans community. In some instances, such treatment from Walsh forced some of the interviewees to stop the interview. Even the visuals used (e.g. the post-it notes and banners on background walls), the 'selective inclusion' that centres particular experiences and views while decentering others, and the manipulative way in which interviews' content are staged, palpably maintains a transphobic thread in presenting what so called 'facts' that merely extend 'the' one 'reality', as absolute and universal, perpetuating the viewpoints of the documentary's right-wing producers.

Framing the argument against trans, and transwomen in particular, the exclusionary terminology, the alienating language, the objectification and the 'othering' labels used in the documentary to describe trans people are disturbing. While the documentary postulates the critics of transgender as 'bigots' or 'dinosaurs', it refers to transgender and gender nonconforming individuals as a 'fashion', 'madness', people who are 'not rooted in one's reality and in science', 'delusional', 'active imaginers' and that they are 'not sure who they are', 'mentally ill', 'lost', 'confused' and 'are not able to distinguish between "fantasy" and "reality."' Even more troubling is that while the documentary accuses transgender allies and trans online community as a form of 'social contagion' to the society, it extends a damaging narrative of some media platforms that seeks to frame transgender people as 'evil' individuals who represent a 'threat' to the safety and privacy of girls and women. In particular, the documentary plot enforces the view that trans individuals are 'sex offenders', 'sex predators' invading female's toilets and locker rooms, who are dominantly winning in female's sports with an 'unfair' advantage. Such a depiction and transphobic narrative are dehumanising and contributes to delegitimising transgender and gender nonconforming people's lives and experiences.

It is apparent that the documentary emphasises and upholds a rigid ideological reasoning that assumes cisnormativity; an assumption and expectation that all people are and should be, by default, cisgender (Sumerau et al., 2016), which obviously privileges cisgender individuals' experiences while disadvantaging others whose gender identity does not fit the binary. Instead of shedding light on the media's symbolic annihilation of the trans community (Abdellatif et al., 2021), the silencing, discrimination, harassment and violence that transgender and gender nonconforming people experience (see Schilt and Lagos, 2017), or offering a safe inclusionary space for the trans community for their stories to be told, voices to heard and included, the documentary explicitly states that transgender and gender nonconforming individuals should be denied access to existence, let alone defining their own reality or choosing their own pronouns. Such flawed ideological assumptions and toxic logic that seeks to devalue 'othered' bodies' experiences and erase trans and nonconforming people's basic human right to live is harmful to the experiences of sexual and gender minorities within organisations and have implications on organisational equity, diversity and inclusion policies. In respecting one's bodily and identity choice as a fundamental right to life, organisations should be equipped to accept and embrace, rather than penalise, forms of gender

‘difference’ to subvert the macro and micro-aggression, silencing and marginalisation. For this to be done, illuminating the lived experiences of othered bodies should be prioritised.

In ending my review of this documentary, I wonder how such content that incites hatred towards minority groups may contribute to the organisation of transgender, ‘othered’ bodies and marginalised identities’ experiences within organisations? More importantly, this documentary brings forth questions about knowledge and knowledge production. From a feminist approach to knowledge, I iterate Olesen’s (2011) questions ‘Whose knowledge? Where and how obtained, by whom, from whom, and for what purpose?’ (p. 317). So, if you are still wondering, ‘*What Is a Woman?*’ A woman is an adult human being, a living creature with a beating heart, who beyond their genitalia, have the agency to choose the life they want to live on their own terms and conditions; no human should be denied access to their basic right of living a ‘liveable’ life. Inspired by O’Shea’s (2018) autoethnographic text in their *This Girl’s Life*, I end this review by asking: how may we collectively organise to make trans people’s live liveable?

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