

Free speech at Oxford: Do women have the right to meet to discuss legislation?

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A meeting was held on 25 April 2018 to discuss proposed changes to the law on gender recognition. The proposed legislation will eliminate sex-segregated spaces and activities, from women's refuges to competitive sports. In a democracy, people have the right to meet to discuss—and indeed oppose—legislative changes. This should be incontrovertible. I am appalled that a small number of students at Oxford used extreme measures to stop this meeting from being held.



Background

The meeting was organized by [Woman's Place UK](#). This organization was formed after a meeting in London in September 2017 was targeted for harassment and a 60-year-old woman (Maria MacLachlin) was physically [attacked](#) by two males; one (Tara Wolf, who identifies as a woman) has just been [convicted](#) of battery.



Woman's Place has five demands:

- *Respectful and evidence-based discussion about the impact of the proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act to be allowed to take place and for women's voices to be heard.*
- *The principle of women-only spaces to be upheld—and where necessary extended.*
- *A review of how the exemptions in the Equality Act which allow or single sex services or requirements that only a woman can apply for a job (such as in a domestic violence refuge) are being applied in practice.*
- *Government to consult with women's organisations on how self-declaration would impact on women-only services and spaces.*
- *Government to consult on how self-declaration will impact upon data gathering—such as crime, employment, pay and health statistics—and monitoring of sex-based discrimination such as the gender pay gap.*

Woman's Place welcomes anyone who supports its demands, regardless of sex or gender identity. Its events are attended by transwomen like [Debbie Hayton](#) and Kristina Harrison, along with people who identify themselves as transsexual males like [Miranda Yardley](#) and Hope Lye. Debbie Hayton was one of the speakers at the Woman's Place meeting in Birmingham (on 15 March 2018).

Meetings organized by Woman's Place UK are subjected to harassment and intimidation by transgender activists (many of whom are not actually transgender). Their slogan is #nodebate. Transgender activists lie about the organization in order to persuade the venue to cancel the booking; this stratagem was successful in Cardiff in April; the Mercure hotel hastily cancelled the booking on account of 'bigotry', but then had to issue an [apology](#) to Woman's Place. If the venue does not cancel, then [activists](#) will 'show their fury with the venue by giving them a 1 star review on Facebook' (as happened after the meeting in Edinburgh, 14 February 2018). During the meeting, protesters will gather outside the venue and shout to intimidate women entering. After a London meeting, a woman had her glasses snatched (currently under investigation by the police—the culprit is apparently an Oxford graduate). Women who are seen to attend the meetings may be targeted subsequently.

Transgender activists [mobbed](#) a trade unionist (Paula Lamont) on a picket line in London—ironically on International Woman’s Day—and she had to be escorted to safety by police.



The event at Oxford

When transactivists learned the venue of the meeting in Oxford—the Quaker Meeting House—they bombarded the office with telephone calls, ludicrously calling Woman’s Place a ‘hate group’. This campaign was [supported](#) by the Oxford SU Women’s Campaign and the Oxford University LGBTQ+ Society. To the great credit of the Quakers, they honoured the booking.

Before the meeting began, at least fifty protesters gathered outside the door, screaming at the top of their voices. Attendees therefore had to push through this crowd in order to access the meeting. One Oxford MPhil student came disguised with hat, scarf, and sunglasses, in case she was recognized by the protesters. A mother who came with her baby in a pushchair was called a paedophile and was photographed, despite pleading with the protesters not to take photographs of her daughter; she was in tears. (I was checking tickets at the door, and so witnessed this at first hand.)

Protesters continued to scream outside for two hours after the meeting had convened. This was clearly an attempt to cause such disruption that venues in the future will not be willing to host such events. After the Woman’s Place meeting began, there was meeting scheduled for survivors of sexual assault in the same building. When the protesters were requested to allow the survivors to enter unimpeded, they refused.



Reflections

After the meeting a transwoman who founded [Trans Oxford](#) (Amada Dee) took to [twitter](#) to condemn ‘the shameful campaign of #bullying and #intimidation organised by the students and #transactivists outside of the #QuakerHouse. ... I think @Womans_Place_UK do invite everyone as long as they have something to #contribute to the #debate. I know a number of #transsexuals who attended and spoke at their #events (and were immediately branded as apostates by the #transcommunity).’ This demonstrates yet again that transgender activists cannot claim to speak for the entire community of transgender people, whose political views are as diverse as any other demographic group.

Perversely, the violence and intimidation inflicted by transgender activists is then used to portray themselves as victims. Woman’s Place cannot announce their meetings in advance because the venue will be harassed, and so transgender activists portray it as a secretive organization. Dr Clara Barker, a transwoman at the University of Oxford, refused to attend the meeting despite having a personal invitation from one of the speakers, Dr Nic Williams. Barker [cited](#) safety fears: ‘A number of events involving people who oppose trans-rights have ended up with physical violence.’ Of course the only violence at such events has been inflicted by transgender activists on women.

Campaigns of harassment and intimidation have become staple [tools](#) of transgender activism in the last fifteen years. The campaign waged against a professor at Northwestern University (Michael Bailey) was documented in detail by Alice [Dreger](#) in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*—her article extends for more than fifty pages—and then she was in turn subjected to harassment, described in her book *Galileo’s Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, and the Search for Justice in Science* (2015). A recent example was the sustained campaign against an elderly

lesbian couple who run a vegetarian [restaurant](#) in Connecticut, because one of them referred approvingly to woman-only spaces. Online threats of violence against 'TERFs' (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists—essentially any woman who hesitates to treat a bepenised male as a woman) [proliferate](#). The example below is from a student at the University of Surrey:



Feminists have never attempted to harass or intimidate transgender activists who wish to change the law. To my knowledge, it has never been the case that people who want to uphold the legal status quo and to oppose proposed legislation have been delegitimized as a hate group. In 1908, the Woman's Social and Political Union could advertise meetings in advance and hold them without security measures. But Woman's Place UK cannot in 2018.



I have entered this debate not because I am a feminist but because freedom of speech is one of the highest values of a democratic society, and the basic foundation of university life. Transgender activism poses a grave threat to freedom of speech. I think of the young MPhil student who had to disguise herself to attend this meeting because she feared the reaction of fellow students. This is the generation that we have educated.