

WOMEN SPEAK OUT

*Discussing & documenting feminism across
the UK*

2010 – 2011

including

LONDON

BIRMINGHAM

NOTTINGHAM

MANCHESTER

CAMBRIDGE

BRISTOL



WHAT IS WOMEN SPEAK OUT?

Women Speak Out is a UK-based feminist discussion project.

It was inspired by *Girldrive*, a book documenting a road trip its two female authors undertook across the US to get young women's thoughts on feminism. Reading it prompted the question: 'What would a UK *Girldrive* look like?'

We wanted to meet up with women in this country to ask what was on their minds, amidst a resurgence of feminism and significant upheavals in the wider political and economic landscape. It was also a way of creating feminist conversations beyond blogs and Facebook, and to highlight feminist activity outside London.

We therefore began to hold informal round table discussions with women in cities across the country to find out: What most concerns you? Is 'now' a good time to be a woman? What does feminism mean to you? so we could map the voices and views of feminists at this politically significant time.

This booklet follows our journey, with accounts of the discussions we had in each city. From calling out the increase in lap-dancing clubs in Birmingham, to protecting women-only services in Nottingham, to protesting violence against women in Manchester, we found women

keen to talk about and tackle a variety of issues. A common concern throughout though was gender stereotyping; how pervasive it still is and its impact on expectations of women and the choices available to them.

We spoke to students and single mums; grassroots activists and community and voluntary sector workers; young burgeoning feminists and women who had been active in feminism's 1970s/80s heyday. They all embraced feminism, although attached different meanings to it.

This was something we welcomed. Our discussions were not about telling women what to think, but were more like a form of consciousness-raising, where we got a group of women together to share their experiences, listen and learn from each other, and work out what we think about things.

We not only hope this booklet will give you some insight into the current nature of feminism, but that it will also inspire you to carry out similar conversations in your own cities and stimulate further thinking and action around feminism, something more important than ever in these economic and politically turbulent times. See p. 23 for details on how to get involved. It would be great to hear from you!

*Jessica & Michelle
Women Speak Out
January 2011*

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Women Speak Out on...

One question we asked the women we spoke to was: what issues most concern you? To give you a glimpse into the sorts of things on the minds of the women we met in each city, here is a selection of the responses we got.

It concerns me when I hear the younger women I work with constantly talking about dieting and what they look like. There's this pressure to be perfect. It's getting worse. *(Valerie, Nottingham)*

There are many women who do not do things through fear. It makes you unequal if you won't leave the house. If you're too frightened to go into a restaurant or a hotel alone then you can't always participate in the working world. The media is always talking about women being attacked, and women won't feel safe until the media stop telling them to be afraid. *(Anne, London)*

I think women's refuges could be at risk from the government's spending cuts. I hear rumors of cuts, including my own job, but no one is sitting down and talking about how we could make the cuts we need to make and still protect the most vulnerable. I'm worried that an open debate about the impact of the cuts is not happening and it's not going to happen until it's too late. *(Melanie, Nottingham)*

I think it is a good time to be a woman, particularly in the West. But some things seem to have gone backward, particularly in terms of how women perceive themselves, and what about the sexualisation of young girls? *(Clare, Cambridge)*

There's a lot of violence against women. It hasn't gone away. I worked in a women's refuge and I don't think police attitudes have changed that much. *(Louise, Manchester)*

There's this myth of empowerment surrounding the commodification of sex now. We have more rights in law, but women are sold as sex objects more. *(Tessa, Bristol)*

What issue or issues most concern you?

Women Speak Out in... **LONDON**

Our first discussion was held at the Royal Festival Hall Café on London's South Bank on a typically rainy May Bank Holiday weekend. We were joined by Sally, Anne and Christine. As this was our first event, we weren't sure what to expect, but we got a good discussion going in our group of women.

Women's inequality in education and employment was one of our main topics of conversation...

Sally: "A woman wanting to become an MP or a lawyer or a man wanting to be a nurse or teacher has to jump over a psychological fence and make a decision to step out of the ordinary. Politics needs to be made more accessible. How many people are going to choose a career where they're away from home four nights a week? How many mothers or fathers want that?"

Anne: "In trade unions, there's an attitude of the 'boys looking after the boys' and workers' rights are fought on the assumption that people work full-time, but a lot of women work part-time hours. Also, women are less able than men to attend

Sally: "A woman wanting to become an MP or a lawyer or a man wanting to be a nurse or teacher has to jump over a psychological fence and make a decision to step out of the ordinary."

union meetings to make their views heard."

Christine: "I'm not so worried about men taking on traditional female roles in the workplace – they can handle it. Even in female-dominated professions, men still hold the higher positions."

Anne recalled her school days, when girls "had to fight to be taught physics and chemistry." It wasn't until later on she discovered her aptitude for the 'hard sciences' and undertook a chemistry and physics degree. But it was noted that even though more women are studying science and engineering today, they are not always going into careers in these areas. Anne said: "Women still need to push to enter certain male-dominated areas. I eventually went into teaching. My other options were nursing and secretarial work and teaching at least offered me some autonomy."

We also spent time discussing the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes and how they are enforced from childhood. As a writer of children's books, Sally is conscious of how she portrays gender: "Gender governs how people think. If you're writing a story about a boy who plays football then it's simple – he just goes to the park for a kick-about with his friends. But if you're writing a story about a girl who plays football then you also have to think about how it fits in with society. Who does she play with? Where does she play? What do other characters in the story think about it?"

Sally also thought feminism had more to do in successfully challenging gender stereotypes. "Feminism has made it acceptable for women to be engineers and play with boys' toys. But something that is

Anne: "Women still need to push to enter certain male-dominated areas. I eventually went into teaching. My other options were nursing and secretarial work and teaching at least offered me some autonomy."

feminised isn't valued, it's seen as inferior. I think feminism maintains women as 'other' by doing this. There's nothing wrong with buying a sewing machine for your young niece – but we should also give them to boys."

So is now a good time to be a woman, we wondered?

Sally: "Now is not a good time to be a member of any minority – although there have been far worse times." Christine: "It isn't a good time to be a woman, but opportunities are shrinking for everybody, considering the recession." Anne: "I feel I'm in a minority. I don't see myself being represented as a woman; for example, look at the government. It's important we have women represented across the board."

Local groups & organisations:

London Feminist Network:
<http://londonfeministnetwork.org.uk/>

The Women's Library:
<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/thewomenslibrary/>

Women Speak Out in... **BIRMINGHAM**

A couple of weeks after our London discussion, we were in Birmingham, tucked up in a corner of the city's Central Library, talking to Katie and Rachael, members of the local feminist group, Birmingham Feminists.

Known as the 'lap dancing capital of Europe', the prominent objectification of women along Birmingham's streets was of particular concern to these two young activist women.

Rachael: "The location of lap dancing clubs in Birmingham is far more prominent than in say, Manchester. Here they're right along the high street, along Broad Street (the main nightclub

Katie: "I have personal issues with porn which are separate from my feminism. When a woman says she finds being a lap dancer 'empowering', I don't think I could say that, because the men watching wouldn't see me as empowered."

area), and there's a lot of them. It's possible to put lap-dancing clubs out of town or in less obvious places. While I'm not endorsing Spearmint Rhino, they have a more discreet club than the many clubs on Broad Street."

Katie: "I'm not really saying that lap-dancing should be behind closed doors, but I do think you shouldn't be bombarded by it, so you can think clearly..."

The problem isn't just with lap dancing clubs on the night time streets of Birmingham – a lot of nightclubs and bars in the city also promote the sexual humiliation and objectification of women.

Katie: "Other bars start doing similar nights, like Ann Summers themes. One of the sports pubs' student nights had a game where they plied female students with free alcohol, got them to stand on a table, blindfolded them, put a bin-liner over them and asked them to take their clothes off under the bin bag. It was only when the blindfold was taken off that the women realised the bin-liner was clear, and that everyone in the pub had been watching them strip.

"Even at the alternative music clubs, things have got worse in the last few years, with women

encouraged to appear as sex objects, but somehow this is seen as alright, because they also have tattoos and piercings, it's seen as 'alternative'."

Our discussion also took in politics, with Katie saying she was "disappointed by the outcome of the General Election." We also touched on the differences between men and women. Rachael: "It bothers me when I hear that 'men and women are the same'. Men and women are different. Physically we are different – our brains are wired differently. But that's not an excuse for men to be more aggressive just because they're physically bigger, nor for women to be passive because they're smaller."

Local groups & organisations:





Birmingham Feminists:
<http://bhamfems.wordpress.com>

Women's Networking Hub: Facebook search 'Women's Networking Hub'

Poll

We ran a couple of polls on our blog to get women's views on a few other topics. Here are the results from the first one we did, when we asked...

Are men and women different?

-  1. Yes, the differences are fundamental and innate. (35%)
-  2. No, we're all just human. (11%)
-  3. There are differences, but they arise from nurture rather than nature. (35%)
-  4. While there may be statistical differences, they're quite insignificant. (19%)
5. Other. (0%)

Women Speak Out in... **NOTTINGHAM**

We had a brilliant turn out at our next discussion, held at Nottingham Women's Centre in July.

Women from the city's extensive network of women's support services and groups came along to share their views including Melanie from Nottingham Community & Voluntary Service who is coordinating a network of local women's organisations; Debbie, Emma, Lisa and Valerie from SHINE, a floating support service for women escaping domestic violence; Elly, Ursula, Shirley, Karen, Sally and Angela from Framework Supported Housing, an accommodation project for women 16 years and over; Anne from the City Council's Community Equality Forum and Annette, Chief Executive of Nottingham Women's Centre.

At the forefront of these women's minds was the impact of government spending cuts on the vital services they contribute to.

Melanie: "I'm angry about the fact that women are going to bear the brunt of the fallout from the financial mess we're in and it

worries me that we have a government with few female MPs to speak out for us. The same locally – who's speaking up for women? Women are underrepresented at the higher levels of local decision-making, for example in the city council and the PCT."

Karen: "Women will be disproportionately hurt by the cuts. The jobs women do are the ones that are most likely to be cut, the caring jobs, nurses."

Valerie: "I'm concerned that the cuts will not only affect women financially, but will cost lives. There has been a lot of funding put into domestic violence services for women over the past few years, but now vital services such as witness support are in danger of being cut."

Anne: "One thing that has changed for the better over the past three decades has been the increase in awareness of issues such as domestic violence, child abuse and child sexual abuse. We have a lot of good support

Teodora: "Political theory is all about dead white males. Women have to try twice as hard to do something new."

services for women in Nottingham."

Teodora and Eva, PhD students at the University of Nottingham and members of its Women's Network also joined us. They were most concerned with women's experiences in academia, feeling old boys' networks were still very much alive. They also noted how feminism is largely absent from teaching, in terms of what is taught and how it's taught, which they hope to explore in the Feminism and Teaching Symposium they are organising to take place in April 2011.

Teodora: "Political theory is all about dead white males. Women have to try twice as hard to do something new. If a man comes up with a new approach then it's edgy, but if a woman does the same then no one wants to do it."

We also welcomed Trisha and Angie, who were keen to join in the opportunity to voice their views in the company of other women. Trisha: "I feel much better in my own skin as an older woman. I felt more bombarded by the external world when I was younger. It's a shame I couldn't have felt more comfortable in myself when I was younger."

Angie: "Boys need to be educated to respect each other

and other people. I hear young boys talking, and am dismayed at the sexist attitudes they pick up."

Other issues weighing on the minds of Nottingham's women included women's history, "There is currently an exhibition on in Nottingham of famous people from the city, and despite being curated by a woman, there are only three women in the exhibition" (Anne), and relationships, "The old double standards are still there" said Teodora. Eva added: "My male friends are quite blasé about the number of women they've slept with, but women who admit the number of men they've slept with are treated differently."

Moving on to careers, Valerie explained about her daughter going to a college open evening to find out more about business studies, but there was a general expectation by two of the male members of staff she approached that she'd want to do hair and beauty.

Valerie: "Why is it assumed that I should do the housework, just 'cos I've got a vagina?"

Elly: "Discrimination doesn't have to be blatant. Look at the trainers and the teachers – what are they doing? Are they giving girls the message that they shouldn't be there?" Teodora: "A lot of women leave university and take jobs they are overqualified for. Out of my friends, the male graduates have jobs in their fields, whilst a lot of women are working as waitresses or are unemployed."

There was a lively exchange of views when we got on to the subject of gender roles in the home...

Valerie: "Even though I go out to work, I also still have to keep the house clean and look after the kids because I'm a woman. I really think marriage can be like slavery. Why is it assumed that I should do the housework, just 'cos I've got a vagina?"

Melanie: "Women are expected to do a double job."

Valerie: "We perpetrate this – if a bloke is doing the washing up then I'd come in and go 'oh, he's doing the dishes for you'. Angie: "It's that 'for you' bit that's the problem."

Clearly, there are still lots of ways in which women's situation and position in society needs to

improve. At one point, Melanie asked: "What power do we have to change things?"

Shirley: "A lot of women don't have a voice, they don't have a lot of confidence. After a while, you can start to think, 'I can't be bothered', and you just continue to moan to your work colleagues. You can try and get women in positions of power on your side, but a lot of them have to be like men."

Elly: "Just speaking to other women about things can have a positive effect because a woman can then leave feeling empowered. It can have a trickle down effect." Sally: "Change has to start in school. Lots of kids don't have role models."

Shirley: "We're the converted. How do you reach out to others?"

Local groups & organisations:

Nottingham Women's Centre:
<http://www.nottinghamwomenscentre.com>

University of Nottingham Women's Network:
<http://www.womensnetwork.org.uk>

Women Speak Out on... gender stereotyping

One concern shared by the women we spoke to in each city was the impact of sexist gender stereotyping on women AND men. It was felt our society still designates a blue corner for boys and a pink corner for girls. Here's some of what the women we met had to say on the issue...

Divisions between the sexes are still there – look at the Argos catalogue, with sections for boys and girls. *(Joan, Manchester)*

It starts early on – people go, 'oh, he's a proper little boy' before a child can talk, even before it's born! Everything is pink for girls. There's even a pink 'princess bible' story book for girls, with a blue 'mighty warriors' book for boys. The tagline for the girl's book is:

'all little girls want to be a princess and give their heart to their hero'. And this carries into adulthood, where phones are divided into normal phones and then there are phones for girls which are pink. *(Hannah, Peterborough)*

Children want to conform. My son doesn't like football, and he had a hard time until he discovered he liked rugby. The word 'gay' is used as an insult and it reinforces the negativity. Children use that word before they know what it means, they say 'it's so gay'. *(Sally, Nottingham)*

I heard someone speak recently about the different way men and women look at job adverts. Men tend to see what they can do and think that they can learn the rest, but women tend to focus on the criteria they don't meet. It really resonated with me and I think that's perhaps one of the things that holds us back. *(Melanie, Nottingham)*

There's so much pseudo-science. If a child shows engineering ability, is it because they were born a boy or because they were given a certain toy? *(Isabel, Bristol)*

Most of my friends find that men either don't like clever women, or make a big deal out of it – saying things like 'this is Rachael, she's really intelligent'. *(Rachael, Birmingham)*

Sometimes you want to escape from being a woman, or being a black person, or being anything. *(Christine, London)*

Is gender stereotyping the biggest obstacle to women's freedom and equality?

Women Speak Out in... **MANCHESTER**

After a bit of a break, we took a trip up north in September to Manchester to get women's views there. We held our discussion at The Pankhurst Centre, former home of the suffrage campaigners and now a community centre for women's groups, and were joined by a variety of women, leading to another lively and interesting discussion.

Sam and Louise, members of Manchester Feminist Network, were enthusiastic about the increasing tide of feminist activism which has emerged in the city in recent years. Louise: "There has been a resurgence of feminism in Manchester. Manchester Feminist Network get about 20 women to each meeting. There's also The Riveters (the University of Manchester's women's group), who hold an annual Reclaim the Night march here."

Louise and Sam were also keen to fill us in on Million Women Rise Manchester, a women-only march they were involved in organising to be held in the city in October calling for an end to violence against women. Louise was positive about the impact

such demonstrations can have: "I think marches such as Million Women Rise do have an effect, even just in bringing lots of different women together. I've met a lot of women through working on the campaign, and it allows you to forge connections with one another, and gives individual women the opportunity to support one another."

Violence against women was one of our main topics of conversation, although our participants felt differently about the extent to which this has been successfully tackled over the years. Beverley, a single mum, remembered, "The police didn't do anything when I was experiencing domestic violence 20 years ago," and Joan, who was active in feminism whilst living in Sheffield in the '70s and is now a member of Manchester Women's Design Group, thought police attitudes had improved over the years. Although Louise still thought there was a way to go: "I worked in a women's refuge and I don't think police attitudes have changed that much. I've called 999 for other women and the police don't come, or if they do, they listen to the perpetrator. They're not trained properly."

Sam and Louise also thought there was a lot of work to do in

shifting more general attitudes towards violence against women.

Sam: "Sexual violence is becoming the norm." Louise: "Someone told me that her daughter was raped, and she was very matter of fact about it, as if it was an everyday thing and her daughter had to expect it because she wore short skirts..."

So what can we do about it, we asked? Louise thought schools had a vital role to play: "Sex education in schools promotes safe sex, but it also needs to send messages about exploitation and being wary of older men."

There were other issues our group of women was keen to talk about too. Representations of women in the media cropped up, with Lorraine, an arts and media graduate, pointing out how there's still more attention paid to a female television presenter's looks than her skills and experience compared to her male colleagues. And just like our discussions in previous cities, the sexual objectification of young women was also mentioned. Joan: "I saw a programme where some school boys were asked to look at some images of women's breasts and pick which they preferred. They picked the perfect ones. It's what boys

expect, and girls see pictures of perfect breasts and think that's what they have to be like."

For Caroline, who works at a hostel for young homeless people, the lack of specialist services for young homeless women with alcohol problems was of most concern, adding: "There's a lot of support available for young men but no equivalent for women, and yet it's needed."

Issues around gender stereotyping in education and the home were also raised and how they limit women's opportunities and freedom. For example, Louise mentioned how she was good at maths and physics at school but was never encouraged to take them further.

And then when it comes to housework... Sam: "When I was married, I always used to come home and make a drink for my husband, make the tea, wash up.

Louise: "Someone told me that her daughter was raped, and she was very matter of fact about it, as if it was an everyday thing and her daughter had to expect it because she wore short skirts..."

It was only when I was ill my husband would offer to do the washing up, and then only because I was ill, not because it was his dishes that needed washing! If he did do something, then for weeks afterwards he'd say, 'but I washed up for you' as if it was a big thing." Louise: "For a lot of my friends housework is uneven. Men don't do the ironing."

Rebecca, who works with women exiting prostitution, also joined us. We listened as she shared her own experiences of working in a brothel and gave her views on the 'sex-positive' brand of feminism she felt was currently dominating, particularly in Manchester: "To make out that sex work is cosy and fine is basically to say that you don't care that people die. People say they're against slavery, trafficking, genocide, but won't come out against prostitution. But if you're against slavery, you should be against prostitution. Prostituted women are dying all the time. I don't believe in giving up on it, on the women exiting prostitution."

Louise: "We have to believe prostitution can end. What is it saying about humanity if we say we can't end it?"

Caroline asked: "A lot of young women in care are groomed into prostitution. What would making prostitution legal do?" to which Rebecca replied: "Prostitution is practically legal now anyway. If it's legal then the police leave it all to the sex trade and that makes it more dangerous for the women working in it. Anything goes. The sex industry has lots of money and it will always find loopholes, regardless of whether prostitution is legal or not."

Sam: "And yet the media say that these women are empowered."

Rebecca: "They think they are empowered. At the time, they think they are happy hookers. But I don't know anyone who has exited the sex trade who is pro-prostitution."

Local groups & organisations:

Manchester Feminist Network:
<http://manchesterfeministnetwork.wordpress.com>

Manchester Women's Design Group:
<http://womensdesign.blogspot.com>

The Pankhurst Centre:
<http://www.thepankhurstcentre.org.uk>

Women Speak Out on... feminism

A new surge of feminism has emerged across the UK in recent years, and we were keen to find out more from women active in their cities. Here, our participants explain in positive terms what feminism means to them, but also address ways in which it could become more effective and relevant to women...

Feminism gives women heart. *(Joan, Manchester)*

A lot of feminism is quite elitist, especially that which comes out of the UK and USA. 'Great feminist books' don't cover the day-to-day matters, job cuts, a living wage, access to welfare, disability benefits. Feminism doesn't care about all women. A lot of the women I work with, exiting prostitution, don't want to speak out, don't want anything to do with feminism.
(Rebecca, Manchester)

Feminism has become irrelevant to young women. We need to make feminism relevant to younger women and dispel the stereotypes. Not about being political, or hating men, but about being equal.
(Karen, Nottingham)

Yes, I'm a feminist. I'm a Me feminist, and I take bits from other feminisms. *(Katie, Birmingham)*

Feminism to me is about equality between men and women.
(Louise, Manchester)

Feminism should be about confidence and feeling comfortable.
(Anne, London)

Feminism has affected how I think about things and see the world.
(Hannah, Peterborough)

Feminism's drive for women to climb the career ladder hasn't made jobs such as childcare go away – someone still needs to do them. But why does feminism value the masculine? To increase the value of something, don't get women to do something, get men to do it. *(Sally, London)*

I think the word 'feminism' itself can be off-putting, and if we changed the word, more people would get on board, as they agree with the idea of equality, they just don't like the word 'feminism'. *(Steph, Bristol)*

What does feminism mean to you?

Women Speak Out in... **CAMBRIDGE**

A month later we stopped off in Cambridge and settled down for a chat with Clare, a second-year English student at Cambridge University and member of Cambridge Feminist Society, and Hannah, a feminist blogger and activist from nearby Peterborough.

Feminism appears to be alive and well in Cambridge; in addition to the Feminist Society, there's also the Cambridge University Student Union Women's Campaign, and both groups were involved in organising the Reclaim the Night marches which have taken place in the city for the past two years. Clare said feminism "is needed" in Cambridge and as soon as our conversation began with Clare's thoughts on women in academia, we could see why...

"There are male fellows who won't supervise female students. They don't think they should be there. The university doesn't address the issue because these fellows tend to be older, prestigious academics, and rather than refusing to supervise women out right, they're just not given women to supervise because it's known they don't

want to. The women's campaign has tried to tackle it, but because it's the older fellows with the most prestige, it's difficult to get anything done about it.

"And I do think that academia is unequal in other ways. For example, in English, more men than women get Firsts, despite the fact that there are more women than men on the course."

Both Clare and Hannah identify as feminists. For Clare, it was her male A-Level English teacher who got her thinking about feminism: "He was talking about critical perspectives, and asked how many of us (in the class) called ourselves feminists. No one put their hand up, and he said: 'that's a shame, because I think that any rational person should be a feminist'. And it stuck in my mind. Before that, I

Hannah: "My in-laws believe in headship – that the man is the head of the household. My sister-in-law's wedding vows included vows about recognising that her place was in submission, while her husband's vows were about loving leadership."

was an 'I'm not a feminist, but...' feminist, but after that I felt I should call myself a feminist."

Hannah started identifying as a feminist at university, "seeing all the sexist culture on campus and the attitudes of some male students. Now, as I've got older, issues of employment and finance concern me, I also got married and am a Christian, and feminism has affected this too."

We were keen to get Hannah's views on Christianity and feminism, considering how feminism is largely critical of patriarchal religions and the roles they carve out for women.

Hannah: "There can definitely be a conflict between religion and feminism and I went through a period of disillusionment with the Church and how it fits women into boxes. My in-laws believe in headship – that the man is the head of the household. My sister-in-law's wedding vows included vows about recognising that her place was in submission, while her husband's vows were about loving leadership. Many churches have a problem with the place of women. People do save their first kiss for marriage, but there's no basis for that in the bible, it's just been made up."

However, Hannah has been able to reconcile her Christianity with her feminism: "My beliefs were reconciled by finding a supportive church, where women are in leadership positions, and not just running the Sunday school and serving tea and coffee."

Clare also brought up men's involvement in feminism, an issue she and other female members of her feminist group had to confront when more men than women turned up to their first meeting. Clare said whilst this was a good thing, "it was also difficult, because sometimes I thought they were dominating the conversation. It's barely perceptible, but because of the way we've been brought up, men have a slight edge in discussion and women tend to defer to them."

Negative stereotypes and assumptions about feminism was another thing we discussed.

Clare: "At the university Freshers' Fayre, a lot of people would walk by the Feminist Society stand and giggle. One male student stopped to ask what we did, clearly expecting extreme anti-man behaviour. When I explained, about the Reclaim the Night march we did, and how we want to tackle things such as

violence against women and making the streets safer, he replied, 'well, that's just common sense isn't it?'"

Hannah: "Most of my friends see feminism as a silly thing, something to make fun of, but they agree with the views."

Hannah lives in Peterborough, which she described as a city with a lot of social problems, and yet there's a dearth of feminist activism. So to meet other feminists, she tends to go to a lot of events that take place out of town. Though, we wondered whether it's perhaps in places such as Peterborough, where women may feel more isolated, that feminism should have more of a presence, and not just in the bigger, better-connected cities such as Manchester or London.

Local groups & organisations:






Cambridge Feminist Society: Facebook search 'Cambridge Feminist Society'

Cambridge University Student Union Women's Campaign:
<http://www.womens.cusu.cam.ac.uk>

Cambridge Women's Resources Centre:
<http://www.cwrc.co.uk>

Another poll...

Is feminism necessarily and inextricably linked with left-wing political ideologies?

-  1. Feminism is part of a wider left-wing social and political identity. (38%)
-  2. If some one identifies as a feminist then they are making a political judgment, but it doesn't necessarily follow that they must take left- or right-wing positions on the economy or foreign policy. (31%)
-  3. Someone can be a feminist without having opinions on political issues. (15%)
-  4. Many feminists come from a libertarian tradition focusing on freedom and choice, and so may actively identify as politically right-wing. (8%)
-  5. Other. (8%)

Women Speak Out in...

BRISTOL

Our final discussion (for now!) took place in Bristol, where we held a workshop at the Bristol University Feminism Conference. The conference was organised by the university's Feminist Society, just one of many feminist groups that have formed on campuses across the country in the last couple of years.

And in our workshop we got a good glimpse into this increasing engagement with feminism happening amongst students, with our participants – Abbey, Alessandra, Isabel, Laura, Shruti, Steph, Tessa, and our first male participant, Luke - all keen to share their thoughts and questions on feminism and what it means to be a woman today.

We began by asking: Is 'now' a good time to be a woman? Our group of students generally thought it was, however when it comes to representations of women in the media, and how they are commonly portrayed as sex objects, they felt progress had stalled and was starting to head backwards.

Laura: "More and more women see themselves through the male gaze. Women are portrayed by

many as a commodity." Shruti: "So many women knowingly or unknowingly subscribe to the idea that they're different from men and that there's a particular way to be a woman." Tessa mentioned lap dancing as an example of the type of thing sold to women as 'empowering', which she doesn't think it is. She added: "And whilst things like prostitution and porn have always been around, they're now more accessible, especially to young women."

Though they were also aware that trying to tackle these things throws up further issues. Laura asked: "What about the women who produce porn and who enjoy appearing in it?" Some recent campaigns to curb the accessibility of soft porn, such as lad mags, have focused on the need to cover them up or get them out of high street newsagents altogether. Isabel though, is against censorship and doesn't think we can ban porn, but does think we need to raise discussions around its availability and influence, and that men have a role to play in this.

We then wanted to know at one point our participants realised sexism still exists. Abbey shared her experience: "I was 10 or 11 years old. I have two younger brothers and I was always

expected to help out with the housework whilst my brothers weren't, but I was always told that was because I was older than them. However, when they got older they still weren't doing it, and when I pointed this out to my mum she said, 'there's some things in life you just have to accept'."

We then turned to the topic of feminism, and the tendency for people to attach negative meanings to it.

Both Tessa and Luke had had recent encounters with people who had shown either hostility or bemusement at mention of the word. Tessa: "At the Freshers' Fayre, one male student came up to the Feminist Society stall and said what we do is 'disgusting'. Yet once we'd explained what we were about, he signed up!"

We wondered if it was just the word 'feminism' itself that puts people off, and therefore whether coining a new term would encourage more people to embrace a politics focused on improving women's position in society. Steph was optimistic about this possibility, saying that when she explains what feminism is about to people who aren't sure, they agree with feminism's aims, even if they are initially put off by its label.

However, Isabel thought it was the idea of women's equality itself which made people negative towards feminism and therefore changing the word wouldn't work as, "they'd attach the same connotations to it."

Shruti: "There seems to be this closed-mindedness in feminism around political labels, but I think we should be listening to women with different political beliefs to our own."

Then we delved into an interesting discussion about feminism's relationship to broader political ideologies, e.g. left-wing and right-wing politics. Feminism is most commonly associated with a left-wing politics, which traditionally calls for a radical restructuring of society in order to bring about social and economic change, and therefore is seen to be in opposition to more right-wing politics, which tend to advocate individualism and making changes within the current social structure. But is there a case for feminists to engage with those on the right and embrace some of its ideas?

Shruti seemed to think so: “I identify as left-wing, but listening to Judith Orr speak earlier (left-wing feminist academic), I didn’t like how she talked about ‘Tory feminists’ and not wanting anything to do with them. There seems to be this closed-mindedness in feminism around political labels, but I think we should be listening to women with different political beliefs to our own.” However, the general feeling seemed to be that for feminism to achieve its aims, radical social change was needed.

There was then some exchange of views on what we mean by radical and liberal feminisms, and left- and right-wing politics. Alessandra wanted to know: “What is radical feminism?” Shruti explained that ‘radical’ means to get to the “root of the problem”, to which Alessandra responded: “But aren’t all feminisms trying to get to the root in different ways?”

Local groups & organisations:

Bristol Feminist Network:
<http://www.bristolfeministnetwork.com>

Bristol University Feminist Society:
<http://bristolfeminists.wordpress.com>

Women Speak Out on... change

Our discussions showed there’s still plenty to be done before all women can enjoy full freedom and equality. And feminism is an important tool for achieving this. Here are some ideas from our participants on how we can change things...

It’s the little things that will change attitudes. We need to get talking to each other, other women, and just keep going. We have to believe we can change things, that we can make a difference *(Louise, Manchester)*

Women-only spaces are really important, so women have a space where they are free to just be and don’t have to worry about being stared at by men. *(Karen, Nottingham)*

I don’t think legislative change is enough, there needs to be a radical re-structuring of society for women to achieve equality. *(Shruti, Bristol)*

We need to start having conversations with men too, it’s okay talking amongst ourselves, but feminism can also help men become better people. *(Teodora, Nottingham)*

What do you think we can do to change things for women?

HOLD YOUR OWN WOMEN SPEAK OUT DISCUSSION

Would you like to take part in a Women Speak Out-style discussion in your town? Do you want the voices and activities of feminists in your city to be a part of Women Speak Out?

Then get in touch because we don't want to stop here!

We want women across the country (particularly in Scotland, Wales & Northern Ireland!) to set up discussions in their own cities and then tell us about it so we can include them on our blog, which we've been using to document the discussions we've been having as we've gone along.

This is an opportunity for existing feminist and other women's groups to be included in Women Speak Out's documentation of women's views across the country.

But we'd also like to hear from individual women keen to seek out and get together for a chat with like-minded women in their area, and do some locally-based consciousness-raising - which can be fun and inspiring in itself! We can help out with setting up and promoting your discussion, and if you'd like us to join you, then let us know.

This way we can continue to build a comprehensive picture of feminism and the issues affecting women in the UK today, and hopefully inspire further discussion and activism.

Please visit our blog for further details: <http://womenspeakoutuk.wordpress.com>

We look forward to hearing from you and receiving more reports of feminist discussions across the country!

THANK YOU

We would like to thank the following women for their help in setting up and spreading the word about our discussions.

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Anette Taylor (Nottingham
Women's Centre)

... and a big thanks to all the women who took the time to join in our discussions and share their thoughts and experiences with us. We hope you found taking part to be as fun and interesting as we did!

Women Speak Out was created and is being led by...

Jessica lives in London and has recently completed an MSc in Politics, writing a dissertation on women and the Conservative Party. She is involved in Women's History Month.

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Michelle lives in Leicester and works as an admin assistant in local government, though her heart lies with writing, feminism, and rock 'n' roll.

Michelle's writing can be found at: <http://strikingherownchord.wordpress.com>.

Visit our blog at <http://womenspeakoutuk.wordpress.com> or join us on Facebook by searching for Women Speak Out UK.

Please feel free to leave your comments, questions and ideas.