Radical Voices? Inclusivity and women (and women born women) only spaces in contemporary US and UK feminism

Abstract

The recent resurgence of interest in feminism and feminist activism has been widely documented by scholars in the US, UK and around the world (Siegal, 2007; Dean, 2010; Maddison and Sawer, 2013). This has been accompanied by the publication of a plethora of popular non-academic books which have documented the various ways in which feminism is still necessary (Levy, 2005; Redfern and Aune, 2010; Baumgardner, 2013; Bates, 2014). Of central concern to contemporary feminist activism is inclusivity within the movement (Evans and Chamberlain, 2014). For many US and UK feminists this was a welcome development, one that facilitated greater engagement with a wider range of issues whilst also increasing the diversity of those willing to identify as feminist. The emphasis on inclusivity within feminist praxis has created divisions within the feminist movement, in particular concerning the role of men and the trans community. This paper explores women, and women born women, only spaces in the US and UK by: 1) setting out the historical background; 2) assessing and mapping where women and women born women only organising occurs; 3) considering how US and UK feminists view women and women born women only spaces; and 4) highlighting the importance of distinguishing between debates concerning women only and women born women only spaces.

Introduction

The recent resurgence of interest in feminism and in feminist activism has been widely observed, with a number of new groups, campaigns and activists emerging to resist gender inequality in all its forms (Dean, 2012; Reger, 2014). Whilst much of this new activism can be found online (Maddison and Sawer, 2013; Penny, 2014), traditional forms of campaigning and activism still persist. Disputes concerning feminist praxis have at times yielded personalised and bitter attacks, and nowhere has this been more evident than in the arguments concerning inclusivity, in particular the use of women and women born women only spaces. Not a new concept per se, intersectionality, the recognition of multiple and overlapping points of oppression (Crenshaw, 1993), is a central concern of contemporary feminist activism. As such, it is at the heart of many discussions surrounding women-only (WO) organising and women born women only (WbW) spaces. Adopting exclusionary

---

1 This is an early draft of a section of a book chapter.

policies for activism, which was relatively normal during the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, is, and can be, contested on a number of fronts including on the following levels: pragmatic; theoretical; generational; economic; and on the grounds of discrimination. This paper considers whether these forms of opposition are reflected in either the extent of women and women born women only organising and the views of feminist activists.

Inclusivity, couched within an intersectional framework, is central to much contemporary feminist activism (Evans and Chamberlain, 2014); as such, adopting exclusionary policies regarding men or those from the transgender community appears anachronistic to many (Baumgardner, 2012). Whilst much has been written about the role of men in feminism (Kimmel, 1998), it is only relatively recently that debates concerning trans inclusion have received widespread attention. Attitudes towards inclusivity, therefore, are central to understanding the role that WO and WbW organising plays within contemporary feminist activism. For those who are seeking to expand the feminist movement the perceived return to an essentialist view of who constitutes a feminist (female) are unhelpful at best and discriminatory at worst (Serano, 2007). This paper highlights the importance of going beyond looking at WO organising to debates concerning WbW only organising; not only because it recognises a shift in contemporary feminist debate, but also because differing attitudes towards men and transwomen tells us something more specific about feminist conceptions of inclusivity.

This paper explores WO and WbW political organising and seeks to map their use in the US and UK; furthermore, it draws upon semi-structured interviews undertaken with feminist activists to analyse attitudes towards WO and WbW spaces. The research for this paper formed part of a broader project exploring points of continuity and divergence between third wave feminist engagement with the state in the US and UK (Evans, forthcoming). The interviews were undertaken with feminist activists operating across various levels in the US and UK, including both national organisations and local groups and networks. Interviews were undertaken with a total of 73 activists across six cities: New York, Washington D.C and Portland (Oregon) and London, Bristol and Glasgow; these cities were identified as being ‘hubs’ of feminist activity and also because of their importance in terms of opportunities to engage with the legislature and other political groups (see appendix A for a copy of the interview schedule). Particular care was taken to interview a range of feminists from diverse backgrounds and ideological standpoints, in addition I interviewed several men for this project (6) and trans feminists (4).

3 Of course not all women only spaces are formally organised as such; we know that women are more likely to be involved with women’s organising and feminist activism than men. The second wave mantra of the personal is political also offers us a wider rubric of what constitutes political activism, and the informal spaces in which women meet and talk are not apolitical. For black women in particular, family gatherings and black churches have also provided safe spaces within which black women’s consciousness has been raised (Collins, 2000: 112). However, for the purposes of this paper the focus is on the formal aspects of women only organising.

4 Third wave feminism is a contested term with many different meanings; I use the term broadly to refer to post 1990s feminist activism in the US and post 2000s activism in the UK. It is a wave most frequently associated with intersectionality as a theoretical approach.
The paper firstly provides a brief overview of the historical context within which debates concerning WO and WBW spaces occur. The paper then moves on to map out where and how WO organising is occurring in the US and UK, before considering the views of the interviewees. The paper then maps out WBW only spaces and the views of the interviewees. The paper finds that whilst there are not many formal WO organisations, WO organising is still relatively common, if default if not always by design. And that there was broad support for WO spaces amongst the interviewees. Similarly, whilst trans exclusion does not operate at an organisational level, it only occurs infrequently, and had very little support amongst the interviewees.

**Historical context**

Traditionally, WO organising has emphasised the need for spaces for women to talk and mobilise in the absence of men. In the words of feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye, ‘woman-only meeting is a fundamental challenge to the structure of power...When those who control access have made you totally accessible, your first acts of control must be denying access or must have denial of access as one of its aspects’ (Frye, 1983: 103). For many active within left wing politics, there was frustration at the assumption that women were expected to be passive and to make the tea (Harne and Miller, 1996). This frustration led to calls for WO spaces. WO organising became a cornerstone of the women’s liberation movement (Crow, 2000); indeed, if the purpose of second wave feminism was to privilege the voices and experiences of women, then providing spaces for women to talk and share was vital. WO spaces, centres, conferences and cultural groups (including reading groups and theatre companies) provided women with an opportunity to unite across the different strands of the women’s liberation movement. Although WO organising occurs at both a formal and informal level; perhaps the best known second wave organised form of WO space came in the form of consciousness raising (CR) groups.

CR was central to feminist activity in the US and UK, where women would discuss preselected topics, each speaking in turn and drawing on their own personal experience (Gornick, 2000: 289). Even though the original idea for CR involved mixed groups, women quickly realised that it would be of more use to organise separately (Connell, 1987: 234). CR groups are celebrated, particularly amongst radical feminists, as the most ‘accessible introduction to the women’s movement’ (Gornick, 2000: 288). The idea of separatism as a strategy facilitated a greater understanding of the various ways in which oppression affects the individual and collective but also provided a safe space within which women could discuss those dual levels of oppression (Leathwood, 2004). Whilst for some they formed a space where dialogue could be opened up across class and racial barriers (Phoenix, 2011: 60), for others they represented little more than privileged talking shop (Naples, 2011: 184). Moreover, despite the perception of CR groups as a useful way to cut across ideological divisions and to bring together a diverse range of women, research has highlighted that the majority of those participating in the groups were white, middle to upper class women who largely identified as liberal feminists (Kravetz, 1978).

The decline in feminist activism that occurred during the 1980s, during which time much of the campaigning moved off of the streets and into the town halls and universities, meant that most CR groups eventually disbanded. Furthermore, many of the WO organisations that
operated at both the national and local level were shut down (Whittier, 1995). With the resurgence of interest in feminist activism there has been no wholesale attempt to revive the CR groups, even whilst some scholars have continued to highlight how women feel safer in WO feminist gatherings (Lewis and Sharp, 2013).

The extent to which men should be included in feminist campaigning is a well-rehearsed debate, which speaks to both the strategies the movement should pursue but also the aims and objectives of the movement (Kimmel, 1998; Schacht and Ewing, 2004; Tarrant, 2009; Kaufman and Kimmel, 2011). The desire to include men in feminism is something that has long become a key feature of popular (non-academic) feminist texts (Wolf, 1994; Redfern and Aune, 2010). Critiquing WO spaces Natasha Walter notes that they provide a ‘strong disincentive for men who might want to join in debates about equality’ (1998: 147); and that this would be a perverse outcome for feminists given that men must be encouraged to embrace the roles that women want them to undertake (149). For US writer Jennifer Baumgardner, the issue of WO spaces is also seen as anachronistic at best and harmful to feminism’s desired goals at worst (2012).

Whilst debates concerning WbW only organising are relatively recent, the logic behind excluding transwomen, put simply, is that some do not accept they are women and as such should not be able to access WO spaces (Raymond, 1979; Jeffreys, 2003). Moreover, transwomen are criticised for reinforcing gender norms through the adoption of stereotypical expressions of femininity that are harmful for feminism (Hines, 2005; Serano, 2007). However, the medical profession typically requires those wishing to transition to women to perform an exaggerated version of femininity in order to be approved for surgery (Butler, 2004: 71). The rise of interest in trans issues can be clearly linked with the turn towards queer politics, which has sought to resist the hegemonic binary of assumed links between sex, gender and sexuality (Martinucci, 2010). Within the Academy the influence of poststructuralist theorists, who have identified both sex and gender as a fluid spectrum (Butler, 1993), has led many feminist activists to reject the idea that sex is a fixed identity any more than gender is (Dicker and Piepmeir, 2003).

Whilst campaigns surrounding trans inclusion have become more high profile in the past few years the ‘womyn born woymn’ policy adopted by the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival is the historical context within which these debates occur. The annual festival, established in 1976, sought to provide an opportunity to promote women’s music and the coming together of women in a safe and feminist environment. Wider awareness of the policy came to light in the early 1990s when a transwoman was asked to leave the festival after refusing to confirm whether or not she was a transsexual; since that time the Festival has maintained its entrance policy and the founder of the Michigan festival Lisa Vogle has remained committed to the entrance policy, noting in an interview:

I feel very strongly that having a space for women, who are born women, to come together for a week, is a healthy, whole, loving space to provide for women who have that experience. To label that as transphobic is, to me, as misplaced as saying
the women-of-color tent is racist, or to say that a transsexual-only space, a gathering of folks of women who are born men is misogynist.\(^5\)

The festival constitutes one of the most high profile and contentious debates concerning trans inclusion. It has resulted in a new camp, Camp Trans, which aims to bring together not just transwomen but all transgender people and gender queer activists.\(^6\)

Unlike debates surrounding WO spaces, the decision to exclude those who identify as women stems both from the rejection of transwomen as ‘real’ women and the corollary assumption that they are still men. Thus, WbW only policies are driven first and foremost by a belief in WO spaces; it does not however, always follow that those who value the latter accept the former. Indeed, the data discussed later on in this paper demonstrates that this is not the case, with many supporters of WO rejecting WBW spaces. The debates around trans inclusion are driven fundamentally by a desire to be inclusive, whilst also recognising the fluidity of sex and gender (Serano, 2007). Moreover, many feminists are uncomfortable with the idea of excluding a particularly vulnerable group (Bates, 2014; Penny, 2014).

Opposition to WO and WBW organising has a number of different pressure points: pragmatic opposition, there are those who view expanding the movement as a necessary and vital strategy; theoretical opposition, influenced by queer theory and poststructuralism, there are many who seek to overthrow, rather than reinforce the sex/gender binary; generational opposition, with younger women who had not been involved with women only second wave organising less likely to view it as important or relevant and the assumption that younger men are more likely to want to engage with feminism; opposition based upon the assumption of discrimination through the exclusion of people based on their sex and gender; and an economic opposition, with national organisations seeking to raise funds from membership subscriptions whilst governments make cuts to women only services. Given these pressures, one might have assumed there to be a backlash against WO spaces per se, this paper demonstrates that whilst there is no strong demand from feminist activists today for WO spaces, this does not necessarily mean that they oppose them in principle. Conversely, there is little support for WbW spaces.

**Mapping out women only spaces**\(^7\)

Despite a move towards online forms of engagement; national interest groups and grassroots organisations still matter for political activism. For nationwide organisations that engage in formal activities such as lobbying and membership recruitment drives, the idea of stipulating a women only policy makes little sense. For these larger organisations it is critical to generate resources in order to support day to day activities, including the salaries of professional staff members. Hence, excluding men as potential fee-paying members makes no economic sense, nor does it help to actively try and reduce the number of supporters a group can claim. Accordingly, even if there were ideological reasons for stipulating a WO membership criteria, economic opposition would in all likelihood prevail. That said there are

---


\(^6\) See [http://camp-trans.org/about/](http://camp-trans.org/about/)

\(^7\) I have excluded religious, professional groups and sororities from this analysis.
two women only organisations in the UK and US: the Women’s Institute (WI) and Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR).

The WI constitution explicitly states that only women can be members, although they do permit men to attend conferences and training workshops. Neither the WI website nor its associated literature offer a robust defence of the importance of WO organising, rather it seeks to stress that historically the organisation was intended to be for women only; indeed they note that the constitution could be amended in order to allow men to join. Founded in 1915, the WI was established in order to ‘revitalise rural communities and encourage women to become more involved in producing food during the First World War.’ The WI is currently the largest voluntary women’s organisation in the UK and has 212,526 members. Similarly, there exists only one women only organisation in the US, DAR. In order to be eligible for membership, applicants must be able to evidence ‘direct lineal descent from a patriot of the American Revolution.’ Like the WI, the DAR is a historic institution (founded in 1890) with a sizeable membership (177,000); it is a non-profit, non-political volunteer women’s service organization whose aims include the promotion of patriotism, the preservation of American history and championing education standards. Neither the WI nor DAR self-define as feminist organisations, indeed both are relatively conservative organisations. The exclusion of men stems, therefore, not from a belief in the importance of WO organising as a means by which to empower women and overthrow the patriarchy, but rather as a means by which to reinforce appropriate roles and levels of engagement for women in public life.

Accordingly, the overwhelming majority of national women’s and feminist organisations in the US and UK are open to men, including NOW, the Feminist Majority Foundation, UK Feminista and the Fawcett Society. More specifically even those organisations which were explicitly established by and for women have an open membership policy, for instance the League of Women Voters changed its constitution in 1973 to allow men to join its chapters and the National Council for Negro Women (NCNW) also allows men to join. Whilst there are women’s caucuses within the legislatures in the US and UK, there are opportunities for men to join women’s groups within political parties, see for instance the Liberal Democrat Women and local branches of the National Federation for Republican Women. Reasons given by these various groups on their website stress the importance of inclusivity and of the important role that men can play in their organization.

Although WO groups can be found at the local level, they are rare. Moreover, in the cities that form the case study analysis for this research, these were to be found in the UK rather than in the US. In the UK I found evidence of only one group that explicitly identified as WO, the London Feminist Network (LFN). Whilst, the Bristol Fawcett Society do not have a rule against men joining, their membership is exclusively female; all members are expected to be active participants who have to demonstrate a certain level of willingness to participate in

---

8 See WI FAQs http://www.thewi.org.uk/faqs
9 See About us http://www.thewi.org.uk/about-the-wi
10 See http://www.dar.org/natsociety/faq.cfm
11 See www.lwv.org
12 See http://www.ncnw.org/e3org/becomeamember.aspx
13 See http://www.libdems.org.uk/ldw and the Austin, TX chapter http://www.nwarw.org/join-our-club.html
order to become approved as full members, so far no men have become full members. LFN are a very active group that holds regular meetings, runs a bookgroup, and is responsible for organising events such as Reclaim the Night, the Feminism in London conference and the Stop Porn Culture CR group. The London Feminist Network has a very clear statement about its membership policy on its website:

We are a women-only group because we believe it is vital that women have safe and supportive spaces where we can work together politically to campaign for our rights. We are the experts on our own lives and on what it is to be a woman, in all of our various identities, in a society where we do not have equal political representation, where we are disadvantaged and discriminated against simply because we are women. All too many of us know what it is to experience male violence, including rape, domestic violence, sexual abuse, pornography, prostitution, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and so-called ‘honour’ crimes. (‘Why Women Only?’ London Feminist Network)  

The feminists I interviewed who were involved with LFN noted the importance of regular face to face meetings for WO only, not least because with online activism there was the potential for men to join. Several interviewees cited the WO policy as a distinguishing strength of the group and one of the reasons why it has so many members (the website states that it currently has nearly 2,000 members). More specifically, younger women in their early 20s who had no previous experience of WO organising found it to be a refreshing and important way of discussing the impact of sexism at an individual, collective and societal level, as one feminist articulated: ‘I’ve never been in a woman only space before, it feels really great to know that you all share something in common and that no one is going to judge you, especially when you’re just trying to figure all this stuff out.’ For this feminist then, the opportunities afforded to her through WO organising were invaluable to the development of her feminist awareness.

I could find no evidence of WO feminist groups in either Portland or New York (despite it being the home to the pivotal New York Radical Feminists of the 1960s and 70s). Indeed, the Radical Feminist Activists of NYC states on its Meetup Page that the group welcomes ‘both women and men as well as transgender, gender queer, and all other gender identities’. One off WO events however were more prevalent. For instance the Radfem Reboot 2012 conference in Portland was billed as ‘three days of women only space and rad fem utopia’, whilst the North East Feminist Gathering in the UK sought to highlight the diversity of the women attending to discuss feminist strategy. Specific women’s and feminist groups and caucuses run WO panels at feminist conferences and discussion groups, for instance the Black feminists run a private black WO national discussion group in the

---

14 Available online http://londonfeministnetwork.org.uk/home/why-women-only
15 http://londonfeministnetwork.org.uk/
17 http://liberationcollective.wordpress.com/2012/04/22/rad-fem-reboot-2012/
18 http://www.nefeministgathering.com/
UK. WO organising can also be found in specific moments of activism. Take for instance the UK’s Aldermaston Women’s Peace Camp which campaigns against nuclear weaponry; women camp at the site on the second weekend of every month which has, since its inception in 1985 operated on a WO basis (although male visitors are allowed during the day). Or the annual Reclaim the Night (UK) and Take back the Night marches (US), some of which continue to remain WO despite regional versions of the march being opened to men (Mackay, 2014).

Views of the activists

For those who were currently involved with WO organising, or those who had been active within second wave feminism, the value of such spaces was obvious. At a recent conference in London on WO spaces, speakers frequently re-articulated the idea that bringing back WO organising was a vital part of this new surge of feminist activism. Interviewees spoke about wanting to feel safe in spaces without men present and of the empowering nature of a group of women working towards a common end:

It feels such a relief being in a woman only space talking about our experiences and working together. It would change completely if men were there (London)

Oh, I think it’s a wonderful thing having women all sharing and helping each other, nothing feels quite like it (Portland).

Many of those who I interviewed for this research, in particular those who had not been active in second wave feminism, had not been part of a WO group. Whilst many had participated in WO campaigns and events, this was not a deliberate decision; simply women tended to be more likely than men to be involved in feminist activism. This was something several interviewees flagged, articulated best by an interviewee from Bristol: ‘well sure you could have a policy saying this is women only but really what’s the need for that when men don’t turn up to get involved anyway?’ For many there was simply no need to have a WO policy because the reality was that men were less likely to participate. Therefore, despite the seeming lack of opportunities for women to organise autonomously, in reality WO organising was the norm for numerous feminists.

The absence of men, however, was something that many interviewees felt should be addressed for both pragmatic and generational reasons. Interviewees pointed to the need to expand the movement and to engage men in helping resist gender inequality in all its forms, a view echoed by the men I interviewed:

We need to make it so men feel like they want to join in we need as many people on board as possible and young men are really the key to changing things for the future (New York).

19 http://www.blackfeminists.org/meetings/
20 See http://www.aldermaston.net/camp/all
21 Women’s Spaces conference, held at Queen Mary University of London 16th May 2014
Oh, it can sometimes be a bit awkward and there are one or two women who clearly don’t think I should be there but men are affected by sexism too, not to the same extent but unless we as men change what hope is there? (London)

I think young men really do want to be involved but they don’t know how to engage. It can be a bit alienating for guys if they feel like they have to apologise for how women have been treated historically (Washington).

These interviewees associated the expansion and development of the movement to the inclusion of younger men, many of whom were judged not to hold the same views as previous generations. Although the majority of the interviewees were not in favour of excluding men in toto, nearly all of those recognised that there were specific times when it would be appropriate to have WO spaces:

Well, I can see where in certain situations it would be more appropriate for women to meet separately but that should be specific to the issue that is under discussion not just a blanket rule (London, UK)

So for this feminist the norm should be mixed organising but it was also acceptable to have WO spaces where appropriate. In particular, issues of violence, rape and body image were considered to be such sensitive topics that some felt it might put women off from opening up if men were present. Of the men I interviewed all said they respected the right of women to organise autonomously. Therefore, the interviewees whilst broadly very positive about men being involved also recognised that in certain circumstances there was a need for WO spaces.

Only a quarter of the interviewees (all women) were implacably opposed to (by design) WO spaces. Their opposition was based on the fact that it was detrimental to the feminist movement and was discriminatory. They argued that it shut down debate between the sexes and made it harder to move things forward:

I don’t know why you want to exclude men from this. I mean men are part of the problem sure but they’re also part of the solution. I wouldn’t ever be involved in anything that deliberated excluded people based on their sex or gender. (NY)

It seems a bit strange and old fashioned to insist on women only spaces, men are affected by patriarchy and so their voices and views need to be heard. I don’t know how it makes sense for us to talk about sex discrimination but then impose it when we want to. (Glasgow)

As the quotations above indicate for some it appeared to be an outmoded way of campaigning that failed to recognise the importance of ‘getting men on board’: opposition therefore being both pragmatic and theoretical.

Despite the appearance of a decline in WO organising in terms of group type, it was clear that many interviewees had experienced WO organising albeit often by default. Their experiences were positive although many were still anxious to ensure that men were not excluded. For one off events or for discussions surrounding specific issues there was broad support for the idea of WO spaces; indeed, the support for WO spaces reflected the extent
to which these can be found in contemporary feminist activism. The paper now turns to one of the most contentious issues associated with WO organising: the exclusion of those who were not born female but identify as women.

**Mapping out ‘women born women’ only**

Whilst the data highlights that WO organising can be found in one off events and has broad support from feminist activists, the more controversial aspect has been related to trans inclusion, specifically instances where groups or events have operated a female born or WbW policy. Indeed, this debate has generated much of the heat in the feminist blogosphere recently and also underpins much of the overt hostility towards radical feminism.\(^{22}\) Ostensibly the debate is dominated by trans activists and their allies on the one side and radical feminists, referred to as TERFs (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists), who argue that transgender entryism into women only spaces is harmful for feminism (Jeffreys, 2014:55); although it’s important to remember that not all radical feminists believe in WbW only spaces.

Whilst there are some fairly bitter and personalised attacks that occur online there are no trans-exclusionary groups that operate in the US or the UK; indeed LFN has several trans members. Where trans-exclusion occurs is in the organising of specific events. The Michigan Festival, discussed above, is the best known trans exclusionary event. In the UK the debate concerning trans inclusion gained prominence in 2012 with the planned Radfem conference to be held in London for ‘women born women living as women.’\(^{23}\) The conference was billed as an event to organise for women’s liberation, including workshops and keynote speeches from high profile feminists such as Gail Dines and Sheila Jeffreys. Outlining their motivation for the conference the organisers noted:

> Many of us involved in radical feminist organising feel isolated, even within the wider feminist movement. In our experience, the need for an autonomous women’s movement and the value of women-only organising are seldom recognised. Women-only spaces are either rare, non-existent or under siege. Radical feminism is often misrepresented and maligned. The trend towards post-modernism and queer theory have marginalised feminist critiques of patriarchy, and rendered lesbian feminism all but invisible. (‘Why RadFem 2012’)**\(^{24}\)**

As the above statement indicates, part of the rationale for organising the conference was (at least in part) defensive. A defence of radical feminism and a defence of lesbian feminist interest in particular. The reference to post-modernism and queer theory highlights the unease with which these approaches are viewed by some radical feminist activists. Issues that affect transwomen are elided with those advanced by gender queer activists, however

---


\(^{23}\) The official Radfem conference is no longer available online [http://www.radfem2012.com/participants.html](http://www.radfem2012.com/participants.html)

\(^{24}\) [http://gendertrender.wordpress.com/2012/05/18/radfem-2012-first-speakers-announced/](http://gendertrender.wordpress.com/2012/05/18/radfem-2012-first-speakers-announced/)
as Julia Serano has long noted, trans women are sometimes marginalised in trans activism just as lesbians can be marginalised in gay rights campaigns (Serano, 2007: 5).

The response to the conference, specifically its entrance policy, was such that it united both trans activists and men’s rights activists. In reaction to the acrimonious and high profile dispute over the entrance policy, the central London venue (Conway Hall) eventually withdrew their support for the conference which had to be hosted elsewhere. On the popular F Word blog, one writer opposed to the policy argued that to exclude trans women was particularly egregious given the specific forms of marginalisation and violence that they face:

Trans women suffer horrifying levels of violence, abuse and discrimination, fuelled not only by the fact that they are women, but by the refusal of the vast majority of the cis population to acknowledge and respect their identities. The organisers of RadFem2012 have actively chosen to align themselves with this majority, and in so doing are complicit in trans women's oppression. Radical? Feminism? I think not.25

Hence, for this feminist the fact that trans women would be excluded ultimately undermines the idea that it is a feminist event. To her mind at least, both inclusion and support for oppressed women should be central to feminist organising, by excluding trans women the organisers are effectively privileging one group of women over another much abused group of women. More recently, debates concerning Dyke Marches on both sides of the Atlantic have resulted in acrimonious debate with both radical feminists and trans activists counter-protesting against each other.26 The debates over trans inclusion are framed as being between radical feminists and the feminist ‘mainstream’; the debate between so-called TERFs and trans activists and their allies has tended to dominate much of the recent online discussions concerning the future direction of feminism. Whilst this has been both distracting and divisive for feminism at the root of the issue are fundamental questions concerning the definition of woman, inclusivity and feminist priorities. For those who have sought to organise WbW only events, there is both a degree of surprise and frustration at the way in which radical feminism is being portrayed and a reinforced commitment to defending the need for some exclusionary spaces. The use of the term ‘radical’ as synonymous with trans exclusionary feminism is also extremely unhelpful; not least because plenty of groups using the prefix ‘radical’ do not agree with the case for WbW spaces.

Views of the activists

The impact of debates surrounding RadFem in particular were far reaching, indeed during my interviews in New York, Portland and Washington feminist activists were keen to ask me about the conference and what was going on in UK feminism. Portland’s Radical Women (a socialist feminist group) had issued a statement on transphobia in response to the


organisation of the conference, something that they considered to be due to the biological determinism of radical feminism. Stating that (despite their name) unlike radical feminism, socialist feminism had always fought for transwomen’s rights:

Radical Women has fought for transpeople from the 1973 First West Coast Lesbian Conference to participating in the 2007 United ENDA movement that pushed for inclusion of transpeople in the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). Radical Women welcomes transwomen as members and defends transpeople's right to respect within the queer movement as in society at large. (Emma Allen, Unpacking Transphobia, 2012)

Opposition to WbW only spaces was conceived of as discriminatory by Radical Women and by a number of other interviewees who highlighted the irony that feminists should seek to engage in such discriminatory practices. Interviewees marshalled a range of arguments in opposition to trans exclusionary policies, including most explicitly a fluid understanding of sex and gender:

Listen, if we believe de Beauvoir that one becomes a woman then that clearly includes all people. I don’t need to know what operations or meds you take to be convinced you a woman if you tell me you’re a woman then that’s enough (Portland)

The whole point of feminism is to overthrow the gender binary, why would we want to reinforce it with trans women and say you can’t come in you’re not really a woman. It kind of undermines the whole thing (Bristol)

Unlike WO organising, the vast majority of interviewees did not think that there would be times at which it would be acceptable to exclude transwomen from whole events or groups. The opposition to separate organising was theoretical, and furthermore was reinforced by a belief that it echoed discrimination within the feminist movement that women of color had long since highlighted (Davis, 1982; hooks, 1982).

Amongst the interviewees there were only several willing to advocate WbW spaces. These views reflected much of the literature and the ideas of scholars such as Sheila Jeffreys:

I think there are certain circumstances when it is appropriate for women born women to discuss things on their own and I think transactivists should accept that. Forcing their way in to meetings of trying to get people vilified does not help their cause (London).

The problem comes when you have transactivists that essentially try and take over; they need to organise on their own and stop trying to infiltrate spaces for women. (New York)

For these feminists there was anger at the way in which both women born women policies were viewed but also at the subsequent hostility towards radical feminism. Underpinning this anger was also a sense of disappointment that so many feminists had been quick to portray radical feminists as hateful or discriminatory for wanting to have their own space.
Likewise amongst the transfeminists I interviewed there was a sense of anger that they would be considered a threat, particularly given how vulnerable many within the trans community are to outside attacks as one interviewee noted: I don’t get it, feminism is supposed to be about liberating women so why would they want to keep certain kinds of women out; thankfully the feminists I work with aren’t like that (NY). On the other hand one transwoman observed that she was happy for there to be WbW policies in place for specific events and discussions, and she was unhappy at the way in which radical feminists were being targeted: I think we in the trans community should accept that women born women do have a right to space, not for everything but for some things. We’re doing ourselves no favours in the way we attack radical feminists (London).

From the interview data it would be difficult to argue that there was much support for WbW only spaces; moreover, there was no real appetite for advocating for such spaces on a one off basis. There was a feeling that the current debates over trans inclusion was extremely harmful for feminism and led many to argue that those who sought to exclude transwomen were not real feminists. The hostility of online debates was felt to be very harmful for the overall movement and failed to recognise that priorities and linking up different forms of oppression was at the heart of much contemporary feminism.

Conclusion

For feminist scholars the (still) polarised yet intrinsically linked binary between essentialism and social construction has dominated feminist thought (Fuss, 1989). It is this tension that foreshadows debates concerning WO and WbW organising as it seeks to emphasise the importance of sex as a fixed category. The tensions within the debate are of course theoretical but they have practical implications when it comes to debates concerning inclusion. The resurgence of feminist activism has seen a reaction against the perceived exclusivity of second wave feminism (Dicker and Peipmeier, 2003; Redfern and Aune, 2010); this has led many feminists to embrace an intersectional agenda that requires a commitment to inclusivity (Evans and Chamberlain, 2014). The implications of this shift makes it harder to operate a discourse that includes within it elements of exclusivity. The shift towards online activism also makes the exclusion of certain groups much harder to achieve.

This paper has sought to explore women, and women born women, only spaces in the US and UK. It has highlighted that whilst WO spaces may appear to be in decline there are still opportunities for such activism and more broadly that it has support amongst feminist activists, even if there is not much demand for it. Despite the high profile and contentious nature of debates concerning WbW spaces, there were very few of these occurring; furthermore, there was little support for them amongst the interviewees. The support for WO spaces was based on a desire to ensure that women had safe spaces to discuss specific issues and to ensure female leadership, whilst the opposition was driven by pragmatic, economic, generational concerns and fears of discrimination. Conversely, the support for WbW spaces grew out of a rejection of the theoretical foundations of queer theory and in particular the belief that sex is not a movable category. Opposition to WbW spaces was largely theoretical but underpinned by a desire to avoid discriminatory practices. Hence, the differences between the two discussions signal overlapping yet distinct debates.
Bibliography


Dean, Joanthan. 2010. Rethinking Contemporary Feminist Politics (Basingstoke: Palgrave) 


Penny, Laurie. 2014 *Unspeakable Things: Sex, Lies and Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury)

Phoenix, Ann 2011 ‘Re-narrating Feminist Stories: Black British Women and Transatlantic Feminisms’ in Kathy Davis and Mary Evans (eds) *Transatlantic Conversations: Feminism as Travelling Theory* Farnham: Ashgate. 55-68


Schacht, Steven, P. and Ewing, Doris W. 2004. *Feminism with Men: Bridging the Gender Gap* Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield


Tarrant, Shira. 2009. *Feminism and Men* California: Seal Press


Appendix A

The data for this research was gathered as part of a broader project exploring third wave feminism and political engagement in the US and UK. The number and timing of the interviews undertaken with feminists are set out in the table below. Interviews were conducted in public spaces, such as coffee shops, or, less frequently, in the interviewee’s office.

Interview schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Number of interviews</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bristol</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>November 2012-March 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasgow</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Jan – May 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>July-August 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>June-July 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington DC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>March 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Jan 2012- March 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Semi-structured interviews were conducted which allowed for a degree of flexibility in the direction of the discussion. Interviewees were asked about intersectionality and political representation (both descriptive and substantive). Full anonymity was guaranteed to the interviewees, hence no further biographical data regarding age, sex, sexuality or ethnicity, *inter alia*, is provided here as participants (particularly from the smaller cities) might be easier to identify.