

Statement on the Protection of Single-Sex Services and Spaces

We are delighted that the Bristol SU has made the decision to update their policies to confirm that single-sex services and women-only spaces, like Women Talk Back!, are lawful. In two statements, released on 13 January 2023, the Bristol SU stated:

“In accordance with, and as defined in, the Equality Act 2010, affiliated clubs and societies may lawfully offer single sex services and be constituted as single sex associations, where this is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim, in accordance with the exceptions set out in the Equality Act. WTB! could, should they wish to do so, re-apply for affiliation to the Union on that basis. In doing so, WTB! would set out in their constitution the Equality Act 2010 definition of ‘women’ being ‘a female of any age’ instead of the byelaws definition.”

Unfortunately, not all institutions are willing to create or modify their existing policies to explicitly acknowledge that it is lawful to offer single-sex services and spaces. Which is why all remaining litigation funds crowdfunded from the public in our account will be redirected to support Sarah, a survivor of male violence, who is pursuing legal action against Survivors’ Network, the Rape Crisis Centre for Sussex. Sarah is challenging the service for refusing to provide a female-only peer support group for women who experience sexual abuse. We encourage similar organisations to follow the lead of the Bristol SU and recognise that single-sex services, spaces and associations are both lawful and hold a valuable place in society.

While much of the broader debate about sex and “gender identity” can feel abstract, our experience trying to justify and maintain the female-only nature of our feminist society has been anything but. Protecting the single-sex exceptions which we rely upon to operate, in a real-world incident and faced with sudden confrontation, represented a frightening experience which has negatively impacted all of us. This is particularly true for our President Raquel Rosario Sánchez, who was tasked with upholding our right to privacy, safety and dignity in a practical setting.

We are forever grateful to the public for their words of encouragement and for making this case viable through their donations. We are equally grateful to our lawyers, solicitor Elizabeth McGlone from didlaw and barrister Spencer Keen from Old Square Chambers, for their guidance and support throughout this process. Both the public and our lawyers have been instrumental in ensuring that today, the right to single-sex services and women-only associations is upheld at the Bristol SU.

As we look forward, it is heartening to connect with feminists across the UK who are becoming organised, setting their own collectives while holding women-only meetings and public events where they can discuss issues that affect their lives. We feel optimistic that this positive resolution will encourage an environment where it is easier to breathe for women like us in academia. While we wish our time at university had been less contentious and more welcoming of feminists who defend sex-based rights, we feel proud of what we are achieving, both individually and as a collective. As claimants, we want to express that it has been the honour of a lifetime for us to contribute to the long but steadfast defence of single-sex services and spaces for women.

Women Talk Back!