

WOMEN'S SPACES WORKSHOP

FILIA CONFERENCE 19th October 2019

Wendy Davis, Director of Rooms of our Own, welcomed everyone to the workshop and said how wonderful it was to be at FILIA and what a boost everyone was getting after so much gloom and doom.

PANEL

VIVIENNE HAYES



Vivienne is CEO of Women's Resource Centre and has worked for over 30 years in the women's sector. She was awarded an MBE for services to women, won a national diversity award for gender role model, is an ex commissioner of the Women's National Commission and was one of 3 founding trustees of Rosa.

Vivienne sadly could not attend in person due to a family issue, but this is what she would have said.

I want to remind us all that our women's sector was built upon human love for each other, born of the rage we held and still hold for the rampant & systemic violation of our rights. We continue to rise up and resist. We still have much to do.....We may not be easily able to shift the minds of those embedded with and colluding with the patriarchal white supremacist systems, but we can get ourselves into good shape, reflect upon our collective responses and go further. Herstory shows us clearly that women's rights improve through women only independent and collective action, so that must be our focus, and indeed is completely within our power to achieve.

It does require us to reflect on where we are within continuums of power, and it does require us to critique ourselves and each other. We will not achieve rights for ALL women if we fail to dismantle some of the persistent oppressive structures operating within our own movement. Observing the demise of led by and for black women's organisations, often at the hands of so called sister organisations and simultaneously the attempts to silence black women is something we need to talk about and change. In an environment that has been acknowledged as increasingly hostile for black & minoritised communities then white women who believe in women's liberation need to pay some serious attention to our own behaviour and do better. A good way to start is to adopt a similar framework for analysing and resisting sexism, understanding race as a another oppressive structure with a dominant class-white people. If we can begin by accepting the same understanding that as men are part of an elite class . So are white people including white women.

Principles we say we expect for women need to be actually including black women too. For our sector it means black women leading organisations, it means black women only spaces, it means the right and support of our movement to resources, money to run organisations, seats at the table, seats at the head of the table, it means listening and believing, it means demonstrating our human love for each other.

We will only mobilise a successful movement on a foundation of human love for each other as women, so that our rage is our strength to resist, not our power over each other. We will only achieve our rights together and save our life changing specialist women only provision together.

As June Jordan said “we are the ones we have been waiting for” It is within our hands sisters..... Courage & Love

And a shameless plug to please support @whywomen Tampon Tax campaign

LINDA BELLOS



A campaigner within and without the establishment for decades. Co-organised WAVAW, Black Feminist and Black Lesbian Conferences in early 1980s. Was leader of Lambeth Council 1986-88 and was then Director of an Equalities Company until 2015.

Linda spoke about the importance of knowing our history and understanding the roots of all the different types of oppression and their inter-connections. On spaces, Linda stressed that they must be accessible and welcoming in every sense of the term to ALL women; disabled, parents, girls etc. Linda spoke about the use of “black” as a political term encompassing all non-white races. She stressed that when we talk about women’s spaces they should be for women and not “include” others. Linda spoke about the ongoing issue of toilet provision and the long-standing problem of women always having to queue. She said that women are paying and contributing the same as men and have a right to equal services and provision.

KAREN INGALA-SMITH



Karen is CEO of NIA, an East London charity providing services for women, girls and children who have been subjected to sexual and domestic violence, including prostitution. Karen has also been recording and commemorating UK women killed by men since 2012 in a campaign called Counting Dead Women.

Karen has kindly provided the powerpoint. Karen stressed the importance for women of being away from the male gaze, the male judgement, the male presence in a physical and emotional space that is just for them.

NADIA BAKSH



Nadia has worked in the women's sector for more than 14 years, specialising in women and political participation and VAWG issues. Nadia was Chair of Waltham Forest Women's Network for many years and has continued to campaign for its activities to be held in women only spaces.

Nadia spoke about her experiences working for the London Black Women's Project and the vital importance for minority ethnic young women who have survived gender violence having safe, women-only spaces. Nadia spoke about how so many women are excluded from services and opportunities if spaces are not women-only. This may be for religious or cultural reasons. It may be because of the abuse they have experienced at the hands of men. It may be because they only feel able to share conversations in a safe women-only space. Nadia also spoke about the joy women felt at WFWN events when they could dance, take off their hijabs and really be themselves.

WENDY DAVIS



Wendy has worked in a range of jobs relating to the built environment and equalities issues, her last post being director of Women's Design Service. Wendy has been active in numerous women's campaigns and is currently trying to build a Women's Centre on a new model

Wendy spoke about how "women's spaces" used to be marginal spaces, the rooms in clubs and pubs where "ladies" might be allowed in on occasion, or the "ladies" carriages on trains. Then during the 1960s and 70s we started fighting for our own spaces. There were many women's centres offering the opportunity to support each other, campaign together, grow feminist theory from our experiences. Then from Thatcher onwards moves towards commissioning, outsourcing, privatisation, cuts and the combining of all "equalities" issues under one umbrella saw more and more women's organisations folding and buildings being lost. Rooms of our Own was set up to create a new model where we would own our own buildings and they could never be taken away from us again.

POINTS MADE IN THE DISCUSSION

- All groups who share an experience or issue must be allowed to meet separately. (eg people born with a disability might wish to meet separately from people who have developed a disability later in life)
- Women must be allowed to meet separately, as must lesbian women, disabled women, women from specific cultural backgrounds, older women, etc etc
- Children's Centre in East London cited.... Many women only "allowed" to come by their menfolk because it is women only
- Ever since the demise of the GLC provision for the voluntary and community sector and in particular women has declined
- Lots of wonderful small specialist expert women's organisations have had their work taken over by large generic charities who do not understand the need for women only spaces.
- There was a lesbian building in the 1990s in Australia. Sadly once they became "inclusive" it all fell apart. Must make it clear when speaking about biological women. Susan Hawthorne "In Defence of Separatism"
- There is a lot of pressure to combine services and not to offer the specialist services that are needed; women only, different ethnic groups, etc
- Women only spaces "feel" quite different from mixed spaces.
- We need to think about "trans widows". People who embrace trans are excluding their wives, partners, daughters etc
- We have seen so much abuse and violence against anyone questioning trans demands. Need women only spaces to debate current trans ideology in safety. People are being silenced.
- It was suggested that women who are retired have less to fear in terms of employment security and are more able to speak out
- Refuges provide safe spaces for women to share experiences and support each other
- Anyone suggesting they set up a women's centre is immediately targeted by "what about the menz". Similarly with International Women's Day where men say it's not fair, although the other 364 days belong to them.
- The view that men can become women has captured policy at the highest level.
- People are so ashamed about the UK's record on lesbian and gay issues. The Trans issue has been presented as a similar concern and all caring people have rallied to support it. Closer analysis reveals that this is a regressive and not a progressive movement.
- We need to revive our understanding that "the personal IS the political". If women are experiencing issues that is a political matter
- Trans beliefs have been incorporated incredibly quickly at the highest levels in all our institutions.
- Within CCG staff are expected to wear rainbow lanyards, to conform to required pronouns etc although off the record most are opposed. Suggestion that should write collectively and resign collectively.
- We need to realise; men's power, men's money, men's entitlement. Porn and prostitution result from these
- Lesbians have rarely had similar power to gay men

- Greenham moved from women-led to women-only for a reason.
- Greenham mobilised women's creativity. Greenham WAS inclusive. Mobilised ALL women's voices including those that are often silenced if not women only.
- Hampstead ponds. Women lose out again
- We need to tackle isolation, loneliness
- We need to tackle racism and discriminatory language
- We need to tackle FGM
- Query about using the law and finding sympathetic lawyers. Question as to Rights of Women's position?
- Waltham Forest Women's Network find it extremely difficult to find suitable places to meet. Used to get Council and school buildings at peppercorn levels but now all focused on raising money. Pubs are not acceptable; alcohol, noise often inaccessible
- Legislation now insists that public bodies charge market rents to the VCS whereas in the past they gave space at reasonable cost to organisations meeting community needs
- Suggestion of setting up a Women's Lottery
- The legal situation was queried. Apparently every women's space in Brighton is now open to self ID. The law doesn't have enough teeth
- Linda Bellos offered her services for free for anyone wanting to fight these issues under civil law provisions. Authorities don't know what they don't know
- The co-operative model Solid Fund was recommended. People pay £1 a week. Could set up a body to take legal cases.
- Rooms of our Own has set up a BenCom. This means can legally issue community shares so that a building can be owned by the women who use it
- We should support existing women's spaces such as the Women's Holiday Centre.
- We need to provide for girls as well. They are under huge pressure with gender neutral toilets in schools, porn culture, social media etc. Young people are having drugs and surgery because they do not conform to gender stereotypes.