

My name's Shereen Benjamin. I'm a university lecturer here in Edinburgh, and long-standing feminist, socialist and trade unionist. I'm on the steering group for the [Labour Women's Declaration](#) – if you're a Labour Party member or trade unionist who hasn't yet signed, please take a look and sign if you want.

Until about 18 months ago I was ignoring as hard as I could what seemed like a tense stand-off between feminists and trans people. I didn't understand what it was about, and like lots of lefties, I've always considered myself to stand with the oppressed, never the oppressor. I wanted to be in solidarity with both women and trans people – and I didn't want to get involved in something that looked unpleasant and bad-tempered.

That changed when a friend (someone whose politics as a feminist and socialist I believe to be above reproach) was targeted, and I realised that I had to find out more, and decide what my position was. So I did my research. I read a lot, I listened a lot, and I talked a lot. And what I came to realise was this.

The challenge to women's rights isn't coming from another movement for progressive social change. I've stopped talking about the 'trans rights movement' because I think what we're facing isn't a call from activists for the rights of a vulnerable minority. What we're up against is a movement based on what I've started referring to as gender identity extremism – the extreme view that an individual's internal sense of maleness or femaleness or both or neither as articulated by that individual is the *only* relevant factor in categorising them as a man or woman or something else. There are many reasons why I no longer think of gender identity extremism as a progressive movement for social change, and I'm going to talk about three of them today.

First, a movement that comes after the rights of another protected group is not progressive. No other civil rights movement in history has sought to advance its interests at the cost of other vulnerable groups. We're up against a movement that seeks to appropriate our rights, our history and even the language we use to describe ourselves and name our oppression. When you read that it's exclusionary for women to refer to ourselves as 'women' and we have to accept our designation as 'cis women' which makes us a sub-group within our own sex class; when you're told that LGBTQ people led the campaigns against Section 28 in the 1980s (although that acronym hadn't even been heard of at the time), then our language and our history as women and as lesbian and gay people are being appropriated without our consent. Not only our rights, for instance our rights to single-sex spaces, but the way we identify and articulate those rights and measure progress towards equality is being removed. Progressive social movements don't do that.

Secondly, movements for social change are democratic, not authoritarian. They don't pronounce on what can or can't be said or thought. No civil rights movement has ever sought to rule out discussion. When as lesbians and gay men we fought to change hearts and minds as well as laws in the 70s, 80s and 90s, we actively sought discussion. We welcomed it. We went out and engaged with those who disagreed with us, and we worked to persuade them. We worked hard to produce evidence and persuasive arguments, and built consensus and change, conversation-by-conversation. But now, my fellow trade unionists tell me that I'm so dangerous and vile that I have no right to speak as a trade union member. When I tried to speak about women's rights and the threat to academic freedom on the picket line in December, my union branch said I was in breach of policy – all the more ironic when I tell you that my union is UCU, the academics' union, which should be protecting freedom of expression. And you may know that two of the contenders for the current Labour leadership signed an authoritarian pledge demanding the expulsion from the Labour Party of

supporters of Women's Place UK – a feminist group run by socialist and trade union women. A movement for progressive social change does not behave like this.

Thirdly, gender identity extremism has at its heart a divisive, individualist world view in which class interests are irrelevant, and what where counts is the individual who is master (and I use the masculine term deliberately), master of his destiny. Movements for progressive social change start from an analysis of structural oppression – like social class, or race, or females as a biological class. They identify distinct needs and interests of those groups, and seek to build alliances and solidarity between them. They don't treat humanity as an undifferentiated, formless mass of individuals, each somehow creating their own reality.

It's those of us here today who are the real movement for progressive social change. We're fighting to retain the rights our mothers and grandmothers won for us – the rights we thought until very recently were in the bag and won for good. But there's more still to do. The original demands of the 1970s women's movement haven't been met. If you haven't seen it, have look at the [Women's Place UK manifesto](#) (it's available online) which sets out what still needs to be done to enable women's equality in the economy, education, justice, healthcare and of course protection from male violence.

I want to end by paying tribute to everyone who's come here today. Some of us are seasoned activists, others are on their first ever demonstration, and everything in between. And for everyone here today, there are many others too nervous to come – too many people risk being targeted by extremists, or disciplined at work, or falling out with family, simply for saying that biology matters and women are oppressed because of our sex. It's fantastic to see this turnout, and it's brilliant to be here with everyone. All of our voices matter, all of our voices are important, and together we've got this. Thank you.