



WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

ISSUE 34 SUMMER 2025 £3

A SOCIALIST FEMINIST MAGAZINE BY WORKERS' LIBERTY

Women's Fightback is a socialist feminist magazine produced by Workers' Liberty.

We stand for trans-inclusive, sex-positive, class struggle feminism. We organise in our workplaces and trade unions, and in the student movement and Labour Party for socialist feminist politics.

If you would like to organise with us, or contribute to *Women's Fightback*, please write to us at:
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IN THIS ISSUE

The blunt truth is that things aren't getting better. Austerity continues in the UK and women are at the sharp end of it. The Supreme Court ruling on the definition of sex, and more substantively its interpretation in the hands of state and corporate institutions, is a major setback for the ability of trans people to live with dignity. The police have been instructed to seize the phones and search the homes of women who have late-term miscarriages, so that they might be prosecuted under a law from 1861. The manosphere is turning young men into activist misogynists.

But the future is yet to be written. In this issue, we bring you news of these developments but we also set out what must be done – and what feminists, socialists, trade unionists, and trans rights activists are already doing – to push back. The battle lines run through our culture as well as our politics. So we also bring you reviews of a new stage play looking at Section 28, recipes from an incarcerated Iranian feminist, and much more.

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PATHWAYS TO POVERTY

WOMEN AND WELFARE CUTS

EDITORIAL

In March, Work and Pensions Secretary Liz Kendall announced 'Pathways to Work', claiming that it would help more disabled people into jobs. It might be more accurately named 'Pathways to Poverty'.

The proposals include restricting eligibility for Personal Independence Payment (PIP)

• London, 26 March 2025.

to those who score at least 4 points in at least one section of the assessment. 370,000 current PIP recipients are expected to lose entitlement to the daily living component from November 2026.

People who lose PIP also stand to lose blue parking badges, disabled persons' railcards and other concessions.

The government also proposes to abolish the Work Capability Assessment (WCA), which has long been criticised by disability campaigners. However, this would mean that fewer people qualify for the health element of Universal Credit, which would only be payable to people eligible for PIP. The health element is to be frozen, costing eligible claimants £47 per week.

The government also plans to raise the minimum age for claiming PIP from 16 to 18, and to disallow people under 22 years of age from claiming the health element of Universal Credit.

While Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves has claimed that she is "absolutely certain" that the benefits cuts will not push people further into hardship, the government's own assessment estimates that the cuts will drive around 250,000 people, including fifty thousand children, into relative poverty.

IMPACT ON WOMEN

Women make up the majority of disabled people and of unpaid carers for disabled people.

The Women's Budget Group (WBG) points out that "women are more likely to rely on social security and receive more of their individual and household income from

the social security system than men." The WBG describes women as "the shock absorbers of poverty", in that women are more likely to take responsibility for family budgeting and to deny themselves food, heating and clothing in order to provide for children and other members of their household.

When disabled people lose entitlement to PIP, their unpaid carer – more often than not, a woman – may well lose her carer's allowance because it is tied to their dependant's PIP or the health element of Universal Credit. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) assessed the potential impact of the government's plans and estimated that 150,000 unpaid carers will lose their carer benefits by 2029/30. Most will be women.

Where young, disabled adults lose benefits, it will often be their mothers (or other female relatives) who have to help them deal with the consequences.

Further, taking benefits away from disabled women may make it harder for them to escape domestic abuse. Disabled women are almost twice as likely as non-disabled women to experience economic abuse, and are four times as likely to have a partner or ex-partner try to stop them accessing benefits.

HELPING PEOPLE INTO WORK?

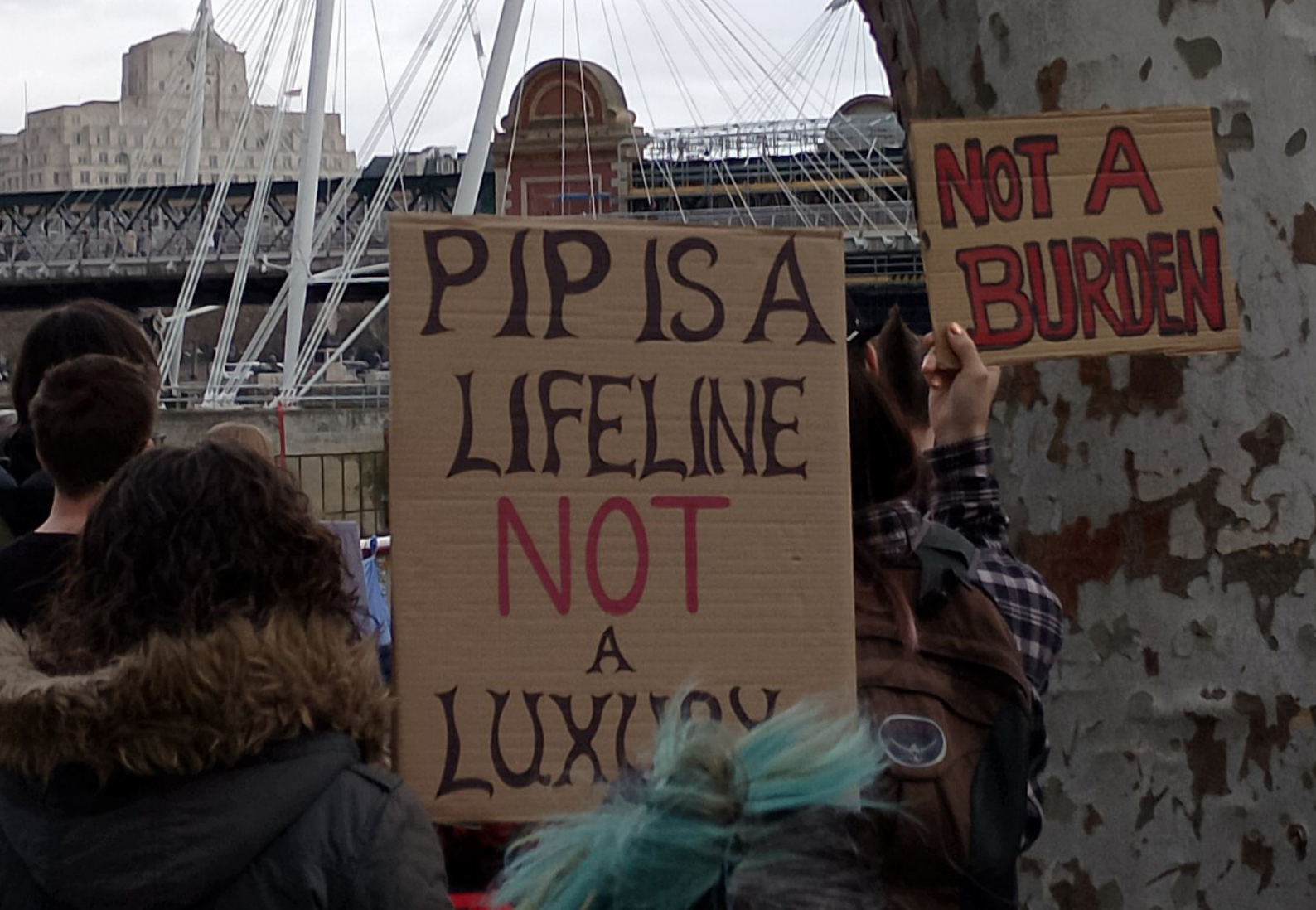
The government's announcement included £1.5 billion extra funding to "help people into work". This may help some people, but it is a very small carrot next to the big stick of the benefit cuts.

Moreover, the changes would force many people out of work. PIP is not an unemployment benefit. Its purported intention is to help meet the additional costs of disablement. Many people who receive PIP are in work, and the benefit helps them with travelling, therapies, help at home, or other services that enable them to stay in work. Without PIP, they may have to leave their job.

The Women's Budget Group says that losing PIP "could be the final straw, pushing women out of the labour market and ... reducing women's employment rate".

The most effective way for the government to help people into work is to create public sector jobs and make them accessible. The law currently places little obligation on employers to recruit and accommodate disabled workers.





• London, 26 March 2025.

NEED TO SAVE MONEY? TAX THE RICH!

The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimates that the benefit cuts will save £3.4bn in 2029/30 – rather less than the £5bn claimed by government ministers, and not much more than the £2.2bn extra that the government is to spend on the military. It is a fraction of the £13.8bn that the Tax Justice Network estimates is lost to UK public funds through corporate tax avoidance.

The best way to save money is to take it from those who have too much of it. Tax the super-rich and big business! For a Labour government to instead raid the small incomes of the worst off is deplorable.

WOMEN AND WELFARE

The establishment of the 'welfare state' – a term which at its broadest encompasses state education, healthcare and other public services as well as benefits – has played an important role for working-class women.

It took from women some of the burden of caring work which society expects them

to carry out (without pay) – caring for the sick, looking after and educating children, providing support to disabled people. Cutting welfare provision pushes these responsibilities back onto women.

THE LATEST IN A LINE OF ATTACKS

The Labour government has been in office for less than a year, but this is not its first attack on welfare benefits, especially on women's welfare benefits.

Shortly after its election win, the government decided to retain the Tories' rule limiting Universal Credit and Tax Credit support to only two children per household.

It then announced that Winter Fuel Payments would be means-tested, which will mean that 90% of recipients will no longer receive the payments. The majority of recipients are once again women.

In December, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman ruled that the government should pay compensation to women born in the 1950s who were negatively impacted by changes to the

State Pension Age – the so-called 'WASPI women' (Women Against State Pension Inequality). Labour swiftly ruled out any compensation, and whipped MPs in order to deny it.

These attacks follow fourteen years of Tory-Lib Dem and Tory governments kicking disabled people. The Women's Budget Group found that government measures from 2010 onwards cost disabled women an average of £4,000 a year by 2028, causing an 11% fall in their living standards.

DRIVING TO THE RIGHT

Keir Starmer's Labour appears obsessed with tacking to the right to appease popular prejudices. It has swallowed the reactionary and inaccurate narrative about "workshy benefit scroungers". It is not the first Labour government to do so. The New Labour governments of the late 1990s and early 2000s ran an organised PR campaign against "cheats" and "fraudsters", and drastically increased the use of benefit sanctions.

But if Reeves, Starmer and Kendall thought these measures would win them

votes from anti-wokers and *Daily Mail* readers, they have misjudged the public mood.

Instead, working-class people attacked and betrayed by Labour are turning away. Some are looking to Reform UK, even though its general election manifesto last year contained serious threats to benefits and to disabled people's rights. Anger over Labour's attacks on working-class people helped to drive Reform's surge in May's local elections.

FIGHTING BACK

The benefit cuts announcement has prompted the biggest rebellion yet against the Labour government.

Campaigners organised protests in locations all around the country at short notice, and plan further actions. Dozens of Labour MPs have spoken out against the cuts, some declaring their firm intention to vote against. Labour party branches and constituencies have passed resolutions against the cuts. Many trade unions have stated their opposition.

KEEP ON CAMPAIGNING

Campaigning is set to continue. The government's consultation runs until the end of June, and public mobilisation alongside strong submissions could influence the outcome.

However, the changes to PIP eligibility are not part of the consultation, so the government could bring a vote on these to parliament at any point.

It is important that we maximise the number of MPs – particularly Labour MPs – who vote against the cuts. When seven Labour MPs rebelled last summer against the two-child benefit cap, Starmer suspended them. If significantly more vote against these cuts, he will not be able to suspend them all.

Labour members can have an impact on what their party does. While Labour is happy to mobilise its membership as a stage army in elections, the party has lost a lot of members, and many of those who remain are demoralised. If you don't want to defend awful government policies on the doorstep, then openly challenge those policies. Pass resolutions, raise the issue within Labour women's branches, women's conference and national conference.

Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) and other disabled people's organisations are holding campaigning actions, and other



• London, 26 March 2025. See p5 for a comment on "welfare not warfare."

campaigns have sprung up in response to the government's attacks – some mostly online, others organising local protest actions.

UNIONS HAVE THE POWER

While many unions have issued statements opposing the cuts, they have not necessarily done more than that. Some rank-and-file union activists and branches have organised protests, lobbying MPs, briefings for members, and more.

Nationally, unions could do more. Union representatives on the Labour party's National Executive Committee said little when the NEC discussed the issue, leaving it to constituency and disabled members' representatives to articulate opposition. If the unions flexed their muscles within Labour, they could force a retreat.

Whether affiliated to Labour or not, trade

unions have a direct interest in fighting these cuts. With over half a million PIP recipients in employment, it is vital for unions to fight the benefit cuts as a core part of defending workers. This should not be treated as an 'external' issue and the subject of statements, but as a fundamental concern around which the union actively organises.

FIGHT TO WIN

Keep up the action and we can beat the government back on this attack – and make it harder for Starmer to launch further attacks.

Workers' Liberty produce a weekly newspaper with socialist news, analysis and debate.

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ON THE SLOGAN WELFARE NOT WARFARE

Workers' Liberty has argued against the use of the slogan 'Welfare not Warfare' on demonstrations against recent disability cuts by the Labour government. The slogan has gained considerable traction. We think it misunderstands the problem.

As socialists, we are against warfare – war is a natural consequence of the capitalist system, and capitalist war harms the working class internationally. We also advocate a massive expansion of the welfare state to provide for those who need it, including a significant expansion of disability benefits.

However, some who are currently promoting the slogan 'welfare not warfare' mean something quite specific by it: abandon Ukraine.

We oppose a generalised increase in British government defence spending. We also support the British government arming Ukraine, a country that has been invaded by its former imperial power, and is desperately in need of arms to defend its right to self-determination.

The money needed to plug the holes in the welfare state is much greater than overseas military spending.

There is a better solution: tax the rich! A moderate wealth tax could raise many times more than the £18 billion sent to Ukraine to date. Don't accept Starmer and Reeves' logic, and don't abandon Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the war (and before it), Workers' Liberty has been active in trade unions, political campaigns and the Labour Party to organise direct solidarity with Ukrainian socialists and trade unionists. We are affiliated to the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, and have organised events and speaker tours with Ukrainian socialists in Britain, and sent multiple delegations to Ukraine.

Tax the rich! Solidarity with Ukraine!



DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS: A SHORT HISTORY OF GETTING LESS AND NEEDING MORE

CUTS

George Wheeler is a social worker and UNISON workplace rep.

The Labour Party trundled fairly easily to victory in the July 2024 election. The Conservative Party was a spent force and their vote share haemorrhaged to Reform UK. Keir Starmer stepped over its shuddering corpse into a landslide in Parliament.

Labour won on a promise of "no return

to austerity", but within the first days of the new government, it became clear that the country would not even see the meagre reforms promised during the election. Instead, talk of cuts came thick and fast. Doing the rounds on breakfast news programmes, ministers toed the line, saying the public finances are "much worse than we could have ever imagined", "there's a £22 billion black hole" and "we have to make tough financial decisions".

The Winter fuel allowance was gone in



• Anti-cuts protest, London, 20 June 2015.

the first month of the new government. The two-child benefit cap has been maintained. MPs are now privately briefing that its removal is off the table altogether – and the overall cap on benefits has also been maintained. The government has demanded a 15% cut in civil service running costs.

Labour's cuts to disability benefits, which we cover in detail in the editorial of this issue, are perhaps the most morally outrageous policy of the new government. They are a direct attack on the poor, and on a substantial part of the population; a third of British households include at least one disabled person.

Inflation is falling slightly, but less and more slowly than the government had hoped. Rent and mortgages are continuing to outstrip any growth in wages. Many families have yet to recover from the financial effects of the pandemic. Further cuts to benefits will, according to the government's own figures, drive a quarter of million people into poverty, and deepen the poverty of households already struggling.

SERVICES AT BREAKING POINT

Cuts have a dual effect – they cause harm in the short term, but also store up problems for the future. The cuts to PIP

are unlikely to “save” nearly as much as the Government claims. At the same time, a report from the anti-poverty charity Trussell Trust estimates that the current wave of cuts will cost the government an extra £13.7bn. People who fall into poverty, or deeper into it, require more services and cost the state more.

But these services are under immense strain and in many cases on the brink of total collapse. The small increase in funding in 2025-6 will not touch the sides. Many councils still face cuts, and some are on the brink of bankruptcy.

Councils are caught between low funding and a duty to spend more on key areas such as child social care (up by 36% per person since 2010-11) and homelessness (where spending has more than doubled). Lambeth Council has announced £99 million in cuts by 2030, including to libraries, children's centres (previously rated the best in the country) and serious youth violence/child criminal exploitation services. Tower Hamlets council has attempted to axe its independent domestic violence advocates (see p7).

The National Education Union (NEU) said that the extra money for schools would help but not “stem the crisis in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities” and would leave mainstream schools “in a very difficult situation”. In the October budget, the NHS got the equivalent of a piece of damp blue roll over a gaping wound, enough funding to allow the repair backlog and staff shortages to ease slightly, but not enough for any real improvement.

How did we get here? Starmer recently said, following the announcement of his cuts to PIP, that “part of the problem we've got with our public services is what was done to them a decade or so ago”. On that, at least, he was correct – but he plans to continue much of that legacy.

CUTS COST MONEY

Everywhere you look, social problems today have been caused or exacerbated by austerity over the last 15 years.

Austerity defined the economic programme of the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments. Between 2010 and 2020, those governments cut welfare by approximately a quarter; local government funding from central government by 60%; spending per pupil by approximately £5000; and teaching grants to universities by 80%. NHS funding was not cut in real terms, but it did not keep up with increased demand.

The immediate effects of austerity are well documented. People were driven into poverty, having had their benefits slashed; local government made cuts to youth services, early intervention and children's centres; schools lost support staff, classroom sizes ballooned, and the curriculum narrowed to focus on “core” subjects. In the NHS, waiting lists grew, staff shortages increased, wards became overcrowded, all while infrastructure crumbled.

But cuts also store up social problems for the future.

In children's social care, the underfunding of early intervention services and of children's centres has contributed to an ever-growing number of child protection investigations. Growing inequality means that families only interact with the state when they are in crisis, rather than when a crisis can be averted through prevention. Even then, an increasing number of child protection investigations are ending without children being given support. Resource shortages push the threshold for social care involvement higher. Even when that threshold is met, cuts have meant that there are fewer services doing more work, which increases the likelihood of a family's issues not being adequately addressed, creating a cycle of harm.

LATE INTERVENTION

At the other end of the system, this “late intervention” has meant that there are more children in care – up from 64,460 in 2010 to 83,603 in 2024, an increase of nearly 30%. More of these children are being placed in residential care rather than foster care, and more outside of their local area.

The issue of serious youth violence across the UK is similar. Services which once helped to build community amongst young people and intervened earlier if there were signs of exploitation have all but vanished, and the steady rise of youth violence is a consequence of that.

Across the board, public bodies are paying more for services, which would once have been in-house but are now run privately or in the charity sector. These services were cut, bringing down costs in the short-term but creating a system in which vast sums of public money pay for extortionate private providers and agency workers.

The number of placements for children in care costing £10,000 or more per week has risen drastically, according to a Local Government Association survey. There

were 120 of these placements in 2018/19, rising to 1,510 in 2022/23, while the proportion of councils with at least one of these placements has increased from 23% to 91% over the same period. The highest cost placement was £63,000 a week.

This increase is caused in part by a shortage in placements. The shortage stems from a lack of investment and recruitment, coupled with increased numbers of children in care, creating high demand and allowing providers to ramp up costs, often for subpar provision.

WRONG TO BUY

Going further back, Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme, ostensibly a massive scale cut to councils, obliterated social housing in the UK. That housing stock has never been replaced and, coupled with the complete failure of successive governments to build adequate numbers of houses, this has catalysed the housing crisis. Reduced council stock has pushed more people into the private rented sector, while poverty has increased demand for council housing. To cover the shortfall, councils are placing people, including families, into temporary accommodation. Around 1 in 20 children are now living in temporary accommodation in London.

Housing benefit, now part of Universal Credit, is tied to the Local Housing Allowance rate for your area. Across the country this has not kept up with rent, and councils are left to cover the gap. This means a massive transfer of public

wealth directly into the pockets of private landlords and hotel bosses.

Councils spent £2.29 billion on temporary accommodation between April 2023 and March 2024 – an increase of just under a third on the previous year. Figures have not yet been published for 2024-5, but spending on temporary accommodation has continued to skyrocket, putting councils on the brink of collapse.

Families spend years in limbo often in overcrowded, poor-quality living conditions, impacting physical health and mental wellbeing. It can disrupt education and isolate individuals from support networks, increasing reliance on services and compounding crises in other areas of the system.

TAX THE RICH

Starmer inherited a bad economy, but continuing cuts will only store up further problems. The situation demands not only the restoration of funding to 2010 levels to redress the issues caused by cuts, but a significant expansion of spending. As socialists, we reject the idea that there is a finite pot of money, with the only option being to divvy it up and share it out differently. Our societies are wealthier than ever – since Covid, Britain's millionaires and billionaires have increased their wealth immensely. The answer to all of this is simple: tax the rich to rebuild our public services. There is plenty of money to go around and it cannot wait any longer.

SAVING OUR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES

Justine Canada

In February 2025, Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs), organised by the United Voices of the World (UVW) union, ran a campaign against redundancies at the charity Solace Women's Aid in Tower Hamlets.

Solace is commissioned by Tower Hamlets Council to provide support for survivors of domestic violence. Budgetary issues were down to financial mismanagement. It had hired permanent staff despite fixed-term funding from the local authority from a pandemic grant. So while the Council was technically right to say that it had not cut funding to Solace, the two organisations passed blame from one to another, leaving workers and survivors in the dust.

After campaigns and threats of indefinite strike action, the Council stepped in to call on Solace to keep on their staff. But will the Council put their money where their mouth is? It's still unclear.

UVW's campaign was a lesson in the power of unions to affect change. Public sector unions can learn from anti-cuts campaigns like this one. The degradation of welfare, housing and other services hit women disproportionately.

At the large and lively rally outside Tower Hamlets Town Hall, many spoke out about the need for these services. Local MP Apsana Begum spoke about using the services when she was suffering domestic abuse from her ex-husband. She also spoke about the Labour's disgraceful handling of her case. Begum remains suspended from the Parliamentary Labour Party after voting to scrap the two child benefit cap in July 2024. Activist and author Aviah Day gave the politically sharpest speech, reflecting her time as an IDVA. She concluded that while we need to transform these services, we must start by fighting for the ones we have.

• London, 26 March 2025.





• London, 19 April 2025.

EDITORIAL

AFTER THE SUPREME COURT: THE FIGHT FOR TRANS RIGHTS

The Supreme Court ruling on the interpretation of the 2010 Equality Act has been claimed as a victory for transphobic campaigns and the "movement" around them. It is a worrying period for trans people, who are seeing a vicious backlash both in public opinion and at all levels of political life. Socialists must stand in solidarity with trans people and fight the current backlash.

This decision is not a new legal definition of "women" for general purposes, despite most media coverage saying it is. It is a verdict on the use of words in one particular law. The ruling made clear that it was not establishing a legal definition of "woman", and that the Equality Act still explicitly prohibits discrimination against trans people.

However, while the ruling makes no official change to the legality of denying trans people access to spaces like toilets,

changing rooms and specific health and care services, it gives licence to institutions that want to interpret it to exclude trans people. Equality and Human Rights Commission chair Kishwer Falkner said on the radio shortly after the ruling that it should be interpreted as preventing trans women from using women's toilets and changing rooms, and that trans people should instead advocate for "third spaces".

EHRC

On 25 April, the Equality and Human Rights Commission published an "interim update on the practical implications of the UK Supreme Court judgement". This is not, as it has widely been reported, "guidance" on the ruling. That will come later: a full document will be provided to the government by the end of June, but only after a public consultation and dependent on approval by ministers.

The "interim update", however, gives us a good idea of what the EHRC plans. It focuses heavily on workplaces providing single-sex toilets (toilets were not discussed in the Supreme Court judgement, nor in the relevant section of the Equality Act). The EHRC explicitly recommends that trans people are excluded from toilets that match their current gender. In certain cases, they also state that a trans person could be denied access to toilets matching their sex assigned at birth, instead insisting that they must use "third spaces" – mixed-gender toilets.

Pressure on the EHRC has already forced them to extend the consultation period from 2 weeks to 6. We can, and must, go further.

There are immediate practical obstacles to implementing the guidance. Law firm Lewis Silkin points out that "whilst the guidance acknowledges that trans people should not be put in a position where there are no facilities for them to use, it provides no guidance at all on how employers are expected to ensure that given the limitation of some current facilities". Many workplaces have little space or money to build new toilets. How they are supposed to implement this recommendation without illegally discriminating against trans people is not clear.

Another legal challenge could come from existing Equality Act protections against forcibly "outing" queer people. If a trans woman (for example) has been in a workplace for several years without disclosing to any colleagues that she is trans, being forced to use the men's toilets would, in practice and likely in a court of law, be seen as her employer forcing her to out herself to her colleagues. A legal challenge on the grounds of the Human Rights Act's right to privacy could, if necessary, could go all the way to the European Court of Human Rights, which has a history of siding with trans people in similar cases.

The EHRC has wildly exaggerated the meaning of the Supreme Court decision, which directly referred only to whether trans women with GRCs should be counted in women's quotas on official committees in Scotland, and which the judges claimed (wrongly) would "not cause disadvantage to trans people with or without a GRC". This EHRC overreach should come as no surprise.

Kishwer Falkner, current head of the EHRC, was put in her position by then Women

and Equalities Minister Liz Truss in 2021 amid a "culture war" backlash against trans people led by the Tories. Truss openly boasted of Falkner "driving [her] agenda forward". Falkner's leadership has seen large numbers of queer staff at the EHRC quit citing a hostile environment, direct links being made with transphobic organisations like the LGB Alliance, and reports of a transphobic leadership heavily influencing the organisation's policy with no democratic oversight, deriding staff who complain as "woke".

If the EHRC guidance matches the "interim update", it will be unenforceable and deliberately vindictive against the trans community. It will also lead to an increase in harassment in public life of anyone deemed to look "unusual".

We must call, first and foremost through the unions, for employers not to comply with the guidance, and to take on the ensuing legal battle. This must be paired with a broader campaign to change legislation to enshrine self-identification in law, as well as recognising non-binary genders and intersex people, vastly expanding trans healthcare, and removing the ban on puberty blockers for trans kids.

LABOUR

Figures in and around the Labour Party have exacerbated the situation.

Keir Starmer has said that the ruling "brings clarity", and indicated he now thinks he was wrong when previously he said "trans women are women". Education Secretary Bridget Philipson has made similar statements. Transphobic former Labour MP Rosie Duffield has called for Starmer to apologise to her over her "gender-critical" views, and an official government spokesperson said that the government "had always supported the protection of single-sex spaces based on biological sex" and that the ruling brought "clarity and confidence."

The opposite is likely true. Individual companies, sporting bodies and various other institutions may now feel encouraged or emboldened to discriminate against trans people in providing services, and many will be pressured by anti-trans organisations to change their policies.

We must argue that the public and institutional policies developed over recent decades allowing trans people access to services and facilities they need should not be removed as a result of this ruling. Indeed, in the

majority of cases they should be vastly improved. Conservative leaderships and managements will feel encouraged to bring in discriminatory policy, claiming wrongly that they have to do that to be "in line with the law".

The British Transport Police have already announced new interim policy that strip-searches in custody will be carried out "according to biological sex" (i.e. that male officers will strip-search trans women arrestees). We must fight to make sure policies like this, which have no grounding in the Supreme Court judgement, are not the outcome. Not all institutions will follow suit. Lloyds Bank, of all people, has said it will "remain committed to inclusivity".

LOOKING AHEAD

This Supreme Court ruling will not do anything to "protect women". It will stoke an attack on the trans community by the right and transphobic political campaigners, all for the sake of restating rights that already existed.

But the labour movement's fight should not be to reverse this individual court decision. We want a direct change to legislation. Self-identification must be enshrined in law (including the legal recognition of non-binary genders). The law should also prohibit any discrimination against someone on the basis of their gender, not biological sex. Conversion therapy of any kind must be banned, with no exceptions.

Transphobes will try and apply this ruling as widely as possible around the country to agitate against trans people (or, in practice, people who look atypical of their gender) accessing toilets, changing rooms and shelters, and use it as a springboard for further legal and political attacks on trans rights.

We have to take the fight to them everywhere we can: local Labour Parties, trade union branches, campaigns and demonstrations. Socialists, trade unionists and activists in support of queer rights up and down the country have to respond with their own demands: legislate to explicitly defend trans people and enshrine self-identification; repeal the recent ban on puberty blockers for trans kids and restrictions on gender-affirming healthcare; tax the rich to save the NHS and massively expand and reform trans healthcare.



THE UNIONS

THE FIGHT IN THE UNIONS

A fight is underway in the trade union movement over trans rights. It matters because what position unions take following the Supreme Court ruling is not an academic debate. Trans workers face a humiliating and degrading work environment if they are forced to, for instance, use only toilets of their birth sex. Unions have the power to stop this, and will be a cornerstone of the campaign for new and better equalities laws.

In the immediate aftermath of the ruling, union leaderships took wildly differing approaches. Clearly, the proximity of some trade union bureaucracies to the Labour leadership is negatively affecting their willingness to advocate for trans rights, just as it denudes their industrial militancy. UNISON reacted by removing its guidance for trans and non-binary workers from its website. RCN's statement pointedly failed to oppose the judgement. Other unions, like UCU, BMA, ASLEF, BFAWU, FBU and Equity, came out swinging to back trans rights,



• London, 19 April 2025.

and the RMT, despite being otherwise quiet, backed protests in the immediate aftermath.

As *Women's Fightback* goes to press, it is union conference season, and many trade unions will be undergoing vigorous internal debate on the issue. FBU conference took place in Blackpool between 20-23 May. In a close vote, it passed an emergency motion entitled "No LGB without the T", which declared "unwavering solidarity with our trans siblings". Opposition centred on the motion's contention that the Supreme Court ruling was "driven by far-right ideologies." Some delegations opposed the motion on the basis that they weren't prepared to go back to their members and argue for its position, knowing that there is a growing number of Reform voters at their stations. While this wording isn't perfect, it is right to say that the far right and the transphobic backlash are intimately intertwined, and in the end a majority of delegates agreed.

Delegates at PCS conference, which took place in the same week in Brighton, had a different experience. The PCS leadership secured legal advice from Thompsons Solicitors in advance of the conference, stating that the union would be in legal jeopardy if it committed to allowing trans

women to participate in women's spaces in the union, or to use their preferred facilities. Even more bizarrely, they argued that a motion was problematic simply for resolving that the union "reject biological essentialism and reductionism" – because being a biological essentialist could be a protected characteristic.

When Martin Cavanagh, PCS's president, used this advice to rule out of order motions backing trans rights, delegates fought back, and voted repeatedly not to open the conference. The stand-off went on for hours, until some delegates (including the Socialist Party) were persuaded to let the conference begin.

The RMT's annual conference in late June will be an interesting moment. Working with other LGBT+ activists in the union, Workers' Liberty supporters have managed to get two emergency motions submitted. One sets out in black and white that "trans men are men, and trans women are women" and commits the union to campaign for employers to "support the right to use gendered facilities (e.g., toilets, locker rooms) which match gender identities." The other is a sharp intervention against the British Transport Police's announcement that trans people would now be searched by an officer of their birth sex.

In many unions, the position of the organised socialist left matters. Workers' Liberty is strongly in favour of trans rights and, alongside RS21, we played a central role in organising the 20,000-strong protest in London in response to the Supreme Court ruling. The Socialist Workers party (SWP) has also been energetic, setting up Trade Unionists for Trans Rights. We have criticisms of how they are running the new coalition, but its existence is a good thing. Most other groups (Socialist Party, Socialist Alternative, and the Revolutionary Communist Party) with roots in the Trotskyist tradition also have a pro-trans rights position, which they pursue with varying degrees of vigour.

The big exception is Counterfire, which split from the SWP in 2010. John Rees, a leading light, went so far as to write an excruciatingly bad essay entitled 'Marx's ontology: a clarification', in an attempt to rationalise the group's support for the Supreme Court ruling. Luckily, they have very little influence in the unions. A much bigger problem is the position of the Communist Party of Britain (or Morning Star). It has openly welcomed the Supreme Court ruling as a "materialist outcome". This will have a negative effect on the internal politics of many unions where the CP has influence in the bureaucracy, including PCS and RMT.

At the time of writing, a number of key unions – including Unite, Unison and the GMB – are yet to hold their conferences. What happens there, and at TUC congress in September, is important. Just as important as the formal position of the unions is the rank and file organisation to support trans rights in the workplace. Ultimately, we will need a political solution and new legislation. On both fronts, we need to make our unions fight.

ORGANISE WITH US

Workers' Liberty members organise in our workplaces and trade unions for socialist politics and trans-inclusive, class struggle feminism. Inside Workers' Liberty, we have industrial "fractions", corresponding to the industries in which we work, so that we can coordinate, discuss and plan our interventions, and support each other in local efforts. Our industrial fractions include: education, rail, healthcare, fire and rescue, local government and the civil service. To organise with us, write to: office@workersliberty.org.



HISTORY

• Roberta Cowell in Paris in 1954.

WE FIGHT AGAIN: A BRIEF HISTORY OF TRANS RIGHTS IN BRITAIN

Oisín Campbell

The Supreme Court's ruling on the legal definition of womanhood has shaken many people in the trans community and our allies. It feels like the very first domino to fall in a rolling back of civil rights in the UK. The Supreme Court gave its opinion without allowing a single trans person in the room, despite retired judge Victoria McCloud asking permission to testify. It seems absurd, given the number of BBC interviews which have included a "gender-critical" voice for balance, only for trans women to be excluded from a legal case

that directly affects them. It's almost as if it was never about balance at all.

Like most trans people, I was devastated when I heard the news of the Supreme Court's decision. I was at my brother's wedding, a small but beautiful queer event. It was such a happy day, suddenly mixed with this fear for the future. I remembered my teen years of being excluded from bathrooms. I stopped bringing water bottles to school, I became chronically dehydrated, and for nearly a decade I had several urinary tract infections and at least one kidney

infection per year. As a trans person who can be read as both trans feminine and trans masculine, I know that there are no gendered bathrooms I am going to "pass" enough to be safe in now. But beyond the worry for my friends and myself, and the memories of unhappy teenage years riddled with insecurity, I felt like I had heard this before.

COLONIAL ROOTS

The UK has never been particularly kind to people who do not fit the gender binary. Many countries and cultures have recognised a gender spectrum or acknowledge the existence of "third genders". For example, India, many Native American tribes, the indigenous people of Australia, and the Māori of Aotearoa all have established concepts of diverse gender identities. Many were forcefully stamped out by British colonialism. The UK is directly responsible for a lack of trans acceptance globally.

The history of trans people within the United Kingdom itself is hidden. Trans people were unable to live openly. An amendment to the Criminal Law Act in 1885 made all acts of "gross indecency" – from homosexuality to crossdressing – illegal. The vagueness of "gross

indecentcy" reminds me of the loosely defined interim update issued by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in response to this ruling. It states that in "some circumstances", trans women are not allowed to use the men's bathroom either. This opens the guidance up to be wilfully stretched and applied to almost any transgender person existing in public.

EARLY GENDER RECOGNITION

Most of our knowledge of trans and gender nonconforming people from history comes from instances where they were either outed and prosecuted under these laws, or only recognised after death. We had little evidence of trans people living openly until Michael Dillon became the first British man to medically transition, taking testosterone and having bottom surgery in the 1940s, and Roberta Cowell became the first British woman to undergo vaginoplasty in 1951.

While there was some general interest in the novelty of their experiences, trans people still existed in a legal grey area. Roberta Cowell got herself diagnosed as intersex in order to have her birth certificate changed, and there were no definitive laws against having documents changed. A National Archives article written by Vicky Iglikowski-Broad notes the guidance given by the Ministry of National Insurance during the 1950s: "It is a matter of vital importance to them that they should be able to take up a job and live the life of the sex of their choice." This was how model and actress April Ashley was able to obtain her new birth certificate.

Ashley met her husband Arthur Corbett in 1960. In 1961, a friend of hers sold details of her transition to the newspaper *The Sunday People*, publicly outing her. The scandal cost Ashley both her work and safety. Ashley married Corbett in 1963 – him fully aware of her identity as a trans woman. Yet when their marriage ended, he decided to weaponise this against her in their divorce proceedings. The judge ruled in Corbett's favour, declaring that their marriage had not been legal as Ashley was a man in the eyes of the law, despite her reissued birth certificate that she obtained legally. This act of public humiliation set the tone for future legislation on trans people, closing the legal loopholes that once offered us some protection.

SLOW LEGAL PROGRESS

From that ruling in 1970 until the Gender Recognition Act in 2004, there was no legal way for trans people to change their sex. It was only in 2002 with *Edwin vs United Kingdom* that the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the UK had violated trans people's rights to privacy, and that it owed trans people new birth certificates in order to prevent these violations. It was this ruling that led to the Gender Recognition Act in 2004, not any kind of benevolence on behalf of the UK government.

It is with regards to this right to privacy that the Good Law Project argues the UK is violating its own human rights laws. Former judge Victoria McCloud, previously mentioned, is taking a case back to the European Court of Human Rights.

We have seen this before.

JUDGES DON'T GET IT

I don't want to speak about our history to frighten other trans people, or to be pessimistic, but simply to use our past to try to understand what's next. The British government – and the British courts – have never been friends to trans liberation.

The youngest member of the Supreme Court was born four years before the decriminalisation of homosexuality; 11 out of 12 studied at Oxford or Cambridge; all were practising law during the time of Section 28. I bring this up not to admonish an older generation, but to question what experiences or understanding they have of trans identity, especially considering they consulted none of us, and yet delivered a ruling that the British Medical Association has deemed 'scientifically illiterate'.

I want to stress how much this ruling does not help women either. Still, the most dangerous place for a woman in the UK continues to be her own home. The person who is the most dangerous to a woman in the UK remains her own partner. The Met Police has been found to be institutionally racist, sexist and homophobic. The percentage of rape cases that end in a charge, let alone a conviction, is 2.6%. It has not and never has been trans women who have threatened cis women's lives and safety. As with the case of Arthur Corbett and April Ashley, trans people had existed with reissued birth certificates without issue – until a cis person decided it was a problem. Trans women have been using women's bathrooms for decades, and it was only until a cis person decided it was a problem that we started talking about it.

FIGHT AGAIN

My final word is to the trans people who are frightened by this, and are worried about their lives: you are loved. You are not the problem, you have never been the problem. You are not wrong, you are not mutilated, you are not lost. You are exactly who you are meant to be, exactly the way you are supposed to be. The world is better with you in it. Trans people have always existed and always will. We are not going anywhere. Find your community, find your people, and fight to stay. You must continue to live. At the very least, to experience the joy of outliving these people.

We fought it before, we will fight it again.

• April Ashley shortly after the annulment of her marriage to Arthur Corbett.



AFTER THE ACT - AND THE NEW SECTION 28

After the Act, showing at London's Royal Court Theatre from 21 May to 14 June 2025, tells the story of Section 28, and the teachers, pupils and activists who lived through it.

Kelly Rogers spoke to writer and director **Billy Barrett** and writer and actor **Ellice Stevens**.

The play opens with Section 28 of the Local Government Act, 1988, projected onto a screen:

A local authority shall not—

(a)
intentionally promote homosexuality
or publish material with the intention of
promoting homosexuality;

(b)
promote the teaching in any maintained
school of the acceptability of
homosexuality as a **pretended family**
relationship.

Introduced in 1988 under Margaret Thatcher, Section 28 ushered in an era of censorship in schools and isolation for LGBT youth. The introduction of the clause drew widespread protest from LGBT activists and their allies, as well as (most) trade unions and socialists. The law was repealed in Scotland in 2000 by the new Scottish parliament, and in the rest of the UK in 2003.

POLITICAL THEATRE

Ellice and Billy have been working as a team for more than ten years, since they were both students at the University of Warwick. Together, they set up Breach Theatre Company. "The work from the beginning was always quite political," Billy says, "and always interested in reexamining historical stories."

In 2018, they made *It's True, It's True*, a restaging of a seventeenth century trial, in which Agostino Tassi, the pope's favourite artist, was accused of raping his student, 17-year-old Artemisia Gentileschi. The seven-month trial – during which Gentileschi was tortured with thumb screws – was widely publicised at the time. Gentileschi went on to become an internationally renowned artist. Her painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612-13) depicts a biblical story in which a Jewish woman beheads an Assyrian general, and has been widely interpreted as visual revenge for her rape.

"At the time we made *It's True, It's True*, it was very much speaking to the Me Too movement and moment," Billy says, "I think that's become our calling card. The idea of taking a historical event – one that sheds light on the current political moment – and playing with documentary theatre techniques, like verbatim theatre, reconstruction, and multiple or contested accounts of an event."

It's the mixing of these techniques into a musical genre that makes *After the Act* so unique. They wrote the show with Frew, who is also the show's musical director and composer. As Ellice explains, "we had all worked together on *Joan of Leeds*, a show about a true story which only exists in the margin of a document from a medieval church. It talks about this nun who faked her own death to 'follow the way of carnal lust'. We're an all-queer team, and we wrote this sort of Christmas show about the runaway nun that examined queer shame and queer identity and queer joy. We wanted to redevelop the show for another theatre, but we realised that no one was really biting."

"It was Billy's idea to take the process we



• *After the Act*.

had developed as a three, and move into making a piece of theatre about Section 28."

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

"We wanted to find some emotional through-lines," Billy says. "Students, teachers, activists – people who were either impacted by Section 28 or fighting against it. People the audience could really root for."

Ellice and Billy conducted around 30 interviews of people they found, mostly through an open call-out on social media. "You look at the arguments being made in a very public forum," says Ellice, "and they were the most outlandish, ridiculous, offensive things about queer people. We wanted to examine that public narrative and then look at the private lives of those being talked about. We spoke to a lot of students who had very different stories to each other, but had this common thread of feeling lonely and being misunderstood and not being able to say anything. Teachers were in the closet and couldn't intervene in gay bullying. There were a lot of people who couldn't speak out."

In one scene, a former student tells the story of being taught *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by Tennessee Williams:



many different people and doesn't follow its own satisfying narrative arc. But it felt fulfilling to piece the knowledge together and tell a *larger* narrative about the political forces as opposed to honing in on a fictionalised story."

Some moments, lifted directly out of the archive of Parliamentary proceedings, are shocking. In one, Conservative MP Jill Knight speaks about "little children" being "perverted, diverted or converted from normal family life to a lifestyle which is desperately dangerous for society and extremely dangerous for them." In another, MP Elaine Kellet-Bowman defends an arson attack on the offices of Capital Gay newspaper:

I am quite prepared to affirm that it is quite right that there should be an intolerance of evil.

One scene takes us to a series of demonstrations in Haringey, north London, where increasingly hysterical mobs of parents are protesting Jenny Lives With Eric and Martin, a book about a family with same-sex parents:

People burned this book, you know, on the steps of town halls and in public almost like a kind of ritual burning or something.

The scenes feel eerily prescient. Recent years have seen a marked ramping up of transphobia, and its adoption by the political mainstream. Whether it's the far right protesting drag queens reading to children in public libraries, or the government issuing guidance instructing teachers to inform parents when students are looking to socially transition at school, trans and gender non-conforming people are being treated as a threat.

As a result, public opinion is turning against trans rights. According to YouGov, in 2018 there was net agreement that trans women are women and trans men are men, with 43% agreeing and 32% disagreeing in both cases. In subsequent polls the percentage of people supporting these statements has diminished. While a majority still believe that someone should be able to socially identify as a different gender, the gap is narrowing. Opposition to people being able to legally transition is rising sharply, and a majority (55%) now believe that allowing trans women to use spaces reserved for women "poses a genuine risk of harm." Attitudes are shifting across the board, including amongst 18-24 year olds and women, the most permissive groups.

'The teacher made this sort of quiet, lovely sort of, like, little impassioned speech. And she said, 'I dunno if any of you know, at the moment, but there's this thing going through Parliament called Clause 28, and I'll be perfectly honest with you. If it gets through, if it happens, then we probably won't be able to teach this fucking play.'

And she's waving it in her hand. And she's like, 'because the whole thing about this is, and I'm going to tell you now, because next year I might not be able to tell people. Tennessee Williams was gay and he's writing about his gay experience.'

In another, a teacher recounts going to a gay bar on a Saturday night in Liverpool with her girlfriend. At the bar, she's sees one of her students:

I spent the rest of the weekend thinking that when I turned up on Monday morning to school, that would be it, I would've lost my job.

She tells us about the student approaching her during a PE lesson and telling her that she thinks she might be gay:

Instead of putting my arm around her and saying, 'you know what, it'll be okay, and don't worry about it', I said, 'I don't want to talk about it. You're not gay. Don't be so ridiculous. Imagine how ashamed your mum and dad would be if they found out that you were gay. We must never talk about this again'

I just felt completely and utterly exposed and terrified to have had that conversation that she clearly needed to have. It would've been career-ending for me.

THE NEW SECTION 28

These interviews make Section 28 real and raw, but the backbone of the show is archive material. It uses the Hansard archive – the verbatim record of parliamentary debates – alongside public speeches and protest footage.

"We were interested, from almost a kind of journalistic perspective, in trying to piece together the narrative – or narratives – of Section 28," Billy explains. "What is the story of Section 28 *itself*? So not 'let's do a play set in a classroom and make up characters', but 'let's look at the legislation head on'. That was often challenging and didn't always feel like it was going to work, because it involved so



• Section 28 march, London, 1988.

It's a symmetry that Ellice and Billy had in mind when they were first writing the play three years ago. "That was sort of the idea behind it, really," Billy says. "It was 20 years since the repeal of Section 28, but we also wanted to make that parallel. That felt really key. There was always a question for us about how explicit to be, because at that time things felt slightly less heated than they do now. The question was how much do you let the audience do to make those connections and how much do you spell it out? I think we found a good balance."

LIGHT RELIEF

"We make sure that we use humour in our shows," Ellice says. "We don't want to just tell – or hit people over the heads with something. We're not afraid to take a side, and have a message, but we do want people to enjoy learning that information, rather than just lecturing them."

I remember my mum saying to my dad, "What do gay men... do?"
And my dad said,
"They put it up each other's bums, love."
And my mum kind of went –
"Ooooooh!"
Like that. And I thought "Oooh" at the same time. So the first time I heard

about AIDS was also the first time I heard about gay sex.

"So, how do they –? You know what, I'm gonna go put the kettle on."

This light relief serves an important purpose. "We're looking at things from the past that shed new perspectives on the current moment," Ellice says. "Often those things feel very emotional, and very heavy, and very scary. Like, since we last did the show, the way things have escalated in conversations about trans people and trans rights – it's heavy. If you go so heavy with something, you can also go really light, and that makes it safe for the people in the room."

For both Ellice and Billy, the changing political situation has led them to reflect on the play. "It would be really hard to make this show now," Billy says. "We would have struggled to find that lightness. It doesn't feel funny anymore. We talk about going to the archive and reading all this awful rhetoric around gay people and AIDs and it is so shocking that some of it is kind of funny. It's funny because it's so ridiculous. But if we were starting that process now, I think we would struggle to have the distance and the playfulness."

BETRAYAL

One thing that *After the Act* drives home is the about-turn that Labour have taken on LGBT rights. Throughout, it is Labour MPs and Labour Councils trying to hold back the tide of homophobia. Fast forward to 2025 and Wes Streeting is steadfastly stripping back trans healthcare and Keir Starmer has declared that he no longer believes trans women are women.

"Labour is trying to appease and pander to a far right view, and they're never going to outdo Reform or the Tories," says Billy. "They're just paving the way for those people to come into power. It's a complete betrayal of those moments when Labour was on the right side of history. And it's a sign that we can't trust them on anything. It's trans rights now, it'll be gay rights next – reproductive rights, women's rights."

"When we first did the show the Tories were in power," adds Ellice, "and the parallel fitted the situation quite neatly. Now it still feels like it's calling out the same attacks, but it's a different party."

For Billy, one of the benefits of verbatim theatre is that it can help navigate the complexities of a shifting political landscape. "What we're doing in the

show is staging these moments when, for example, Graham Stringer, leader of Manchester Council, gave this rousing speech. What we're not doing is fictionalising those people or heroising them. Those moments for me are frozen in time and are made complicated – and interesting – by the fact that Labour has a less than admirable track record."

AN EXPERIMENT

A major selling point of *After the Act* is the fact that it's a musical. One review describes it as "Punchy and entertaining... Full of righteous anger and euphoric 80s synths."

Billy says, "We had this strategic idea in mind about a form that is very popular (a musical) and a subject that is a tricky sell (a verbatim show about a piece of legislation). We were interested in where that would take us – in how we could make a bigger show that reaches more people."

It's an experiment that has proven to be successful, illustrated by the fact that Ellice, Billy and Frew's names now stand in neon lights across the front of the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square.

Ellice recalls their final show in Liverpool

last year, when *After the Act* was on tour: "We went out to a bar, and a hen party came up to me and were like: 'we saw your show!' And I was like: 'That's great!' I don't think we've ever had a hen party at one of our shows before. I mean, they were pissed, but we had a conversation about the play and it was amazing.

"It has made the show accessible to lots of audiences who just wouldn't come and see one of our shows normally, even on the same subject matter, I think. This show has given way to some of the most interesting conversations in the bar – a lot of people who hadn't made the connection with the situation now or hadn't really spoken or thought about Section 28 since growing up queer."

RESIST

After the Act gives a real flavour of what it was like to be there, fighting Section 28. One young protestor attends a march in Manchester, in the immediate aftermath of the clause being voted through, dodging TV cameras to avoid being outed on the 6 o'clock news, before heading to a student dorm to find someone to have sex with. Activists storm the BBC studio. Lesbians abseil into the House of Lords. And you're left with an overwhelming pride in the people who resisted.

The situation has changed since Ellice and Billy wrote the play, but the message is more urgent than ever. It's no longer gay people that are believed to be perverting our kids, but drag queens. It's not AIDS that we should be frightened of, but men masquerading as women in our public toilets. As the public discourse gets increasingly hysterical – and dangerous – it's our turn to take to the streets.

No one piece of legislation and no government is going to force us to go back into the closet!

Because who the hell's gonna get a closet big enough for all of us?

FOLLOW US

Follow us on Instagram for socialist feminist news and commentary and to stay up to date with our political activity.

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 [womens.fightback](https://www.instagram.com/womens.fightback)
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• Section 28 march, Manchester, 1988.





WHY WE MARCHED

REPORT

• Echo Fortune, Anti-Capitalist Resistance

The Supreme Court decision to gut liberal protections for trans folk, and especially trans women, landed while I was on holiday with my girlfriend, celebrating her birthday. We are trans women and grasped the horror immediately, so I joined in organising and arranged to be available (between two all-night raves) on the day. (At one point I was messaging at a rave.) The results were momentous. I have never seen such a turn out for us, at some counts 25,000 people. I recall moving backwards through the protest as it marched, unable to find its end. Union support and the work of other socialists, within and outside of my own organisation is critical to victory. We need solidarity, now more than ever. Our priority should be retaining radical demands to shift the terrain from an erosion of liberties to the abolition of all gendered oppression. As Rosa Luxemburg said: "Only by demanding from bourgeois society all that it is capable of granting have we succeeded here and there in obtaining a small part."

On Wednesday 16 April, the Supreme Court ruled that the meaning of sex under the Equalities Act 2010 means biological sex. The ruling is a serious setback for trans rights, and places the UK behind almost everywhere else in western Europe on gender recognition.

The Saturday after the ruling, 19 April, tens of thousands of people gathered in Parliament Square in protest. Workers' Liberty activists were central to bringing together a coalition that organised the protest, which included rs21, ACR, Workers' Power, and trans rights and labour movement groups such as Pride in Labour, Labour For Trans Rights, TransAction and Trans Action for Housing Justice. It was also sponsored by the RMT, CWU, UCU, Equity, UTAU and a number of local and regional sections of unions.

We asked some of those who backed the demonstration to share their thoughts.

• George Wheeler, Lambeth UNISON

The labour movement and the LGBT movement in the UK have a long history organising in support for one another, dating back to the miners' strike. The demonstration on the April bank holiday forged another link in that chain: the labour movement stands with our trans siblings and comrades.

Lambeth UNISON called the demo in the days after the Supreme Court's decision because we believe the right of all people to live free of oppression is fundamental. As we were doing this, the UNISON general secretary was scrambling to make a cowardly statement, the union's trans ally training was pulled, and some LGBT pages were taken down from the website, ostensibly for fear of legal repercussions.

But unions aren't their general secretaries, or their bureaucracies. The rank and file of UNISON are steadfast in their support

of the trans community. UNISON's 2025 Women's Conference agreed, near unanimously, a motion – "unite for more rights" – which stated: "trans women are women and trans men are men", "women's rights are not diminished by trans people having more rights", and that "when we unite and organise together, we can often win more rights for all." That is the basis on which our union must proceed.

We are in worrying times. The far right are rising globally. Christian fundamentalist money is flooding into the UK from the US, sponsoring hate against trans people and reproductive rights, as well as Reform and other far right projects. The struggles for the rights of LGBT people, workers, migrants, disabled people and people of colour are inextricably linked. We cannot expect the police to defend us from the far right, nor should we look to the state to ban or proscribe them. We must build the strength of our movement to fight these battles head on.

Our unions also need to fight the battle of ideas. We need political-educational material, making the case for union policies on migrants' rights and LGBT+ equality, which reps and activists can use in workplaces. We cannot duck or sideline so-called "culture war" issues, such as immigration or trans rights, in order to defeat the far right.

The labour movement must defend members who defy the EHRC guidance and should put union money towards existing legal challenges. Especially if they are Labour-linked like UNISON is, unions must campaign for a direct change to the Equality Act to enshrine self-identification in law, as well as prohibiting any discrimination against someone on the basis of their gender.

More widely, we must advocate for a new kind of society, based on common ownership, democracy, and equality.

• Lotta, rs21

Saturday's protest was record-breaking and shows the strength the trans movement can build, especially when coming together with the workers' movement, with feminists, and with Palestine activists who have in many ways laid the groundwork for the return of big street demonstrations (building on the BLM movement before it). The EHRC, an institution created to work for equality, has instead become a right-wing tool of repression of both the Palestine movement and trans people, so seeing the widespread chants of "one struggle, one fight: Palestine, trans rights" on the day was inspiring. People know who their enemies and their allies are, and now we have proved that there is a mass movement ready to fight this attack on our lives and freedoms.

The priorities of the trans movement now need to be building alliances with these movements (the workers', feminist, and Palestine movements) through joint actions. Many on the right don't understand what these movements have in common, but for those of us on the streets, solidarity is almost an instinct. We can shift the conversation by proving the right wrong, and showing there is more that unites us than divides us.



LOST BOYS

MANOSPHERE

After telling his publisher that someone needed to write a book "about these toxic men on the internet", **James Bloodworth** spent five years researching the manosphere. The result, *Lost Boys: A Personal Journey Through the Manosphere*, was published on 5 June by Atlantic Books.

Annie Lawson-Foley spoke to James for *Women's Fightback*.

Bloodworth introduces us to the manosphere through his personal experience with pickup artistry. He started visiting online pickup artist forums as a young adult in 2005 and attended a pickup bootcamp, in total spending six

months in the subculture's orbit.

Perhaps because of this personal experience, Bloodworth has a slightly more forgiving approach to it than I – or perhaps any woman – would have. The book opens with a dictionary definition of the manosphere: "a loosely affiliated network of masculinist websites, blogs and online forums". Unlike the definition of the manosphere I'm accustomed to, it doesn't define the manosphere as united by misogyny and opposition to feminism.

I asked him what "masculinist" means in this context: "Not quite a male supremacist necessarily, but... like the male version of feminism basically. Men who are constantly trying to assert men's

interests or talk about men's issues. The broader definition would be from a male centric angle. I wouldn't want to say male supremacist because I feel that's too sweeping, like not everyone... in the book was a complete male supremacist."

He stresses that there is no single reason for joining the manosphere and that he met many men who "dabbled in it, thought 'this is interesting', and a few weeks later thought 'these guys are weird and I don't want it.'" While this broader definition of the manosphere allows room for these dabblers, it must be stated that feminism is a liberatory theory, and that "masculinism" – ostensibly a watered down male supremacy – is not.

If Bloodworth has any issue with the dictionary definition, it's the focus on online spaces. He conducted research for the book not by monitoring online forums but on the ground, attending conferences and courses and spending time with manosphere gurus and disciples. For Bloodworth, the idea of a neat online/offline distinction is archaic: "There are online forums but then that stuff obviously manifests in real life if you have interactions with people... people are radicalised, often online, but it doesn't mean it stays online."

ABSENT WOMEN

Women – or really, the manipulation and domination of them – are the central focus of all the groups Bloodworth studied. He says "in some ways their lives revolve around women – even Men Going Their Own Way [a male separatist community], their focal point is as a reaction to women." However, there is a conspicuous lack of women around the pickup artists who spend so much time ostensibly trying to attract them.

Are the "artists" he spent time with ever successful in their endeavours? Were there ever any women around to speak to? Aside from one woman on a Red Pill Conference panel, "in those spaces there weren't many women. Sometimes someone would bring a girlfriend or pickup to a pickup artist event, but kind of like a trophy to parade around in front of the other men."

Lost Boys reveals how manosphere gurus encourage men to use social media to create the image of a high value lifestyle to attract, in theory, women, but actually the attention of other (high status) men. Women are used as status symbols to garner audiences. Michael Sartain, an influencer whose Instagram bio boasts

that he helps “everyday men build social circles of incredible women and elite men” through his Men of Action mentoring course, told Bloodworth that views of his podcast increase when he invites models on. They are not there as valued guests. The audience “tune in for boobies or to see a woman be berated by the men, both things they like equally as much.”

For the men Bloodworth spoke to, women were useful either as status symbols or servants: “there aren’t actually a lot of women in their lives as fellow human beings – friends, occasionally one or two – but it’s more that women are objects, your gratification, or servant types or helpers.” Bloodworth spent time with a cohort of Men of Action students in Las Vegas. On arriving at their shared house one morning, he found a young woman cleaning the pool – she had spent the night and the roommates agreed to ask any woman who visited to help with chores, to “train” her.

SEX

The manosphere ideology merges market economics, social Darwinism and evolutionary psychology to interpret the sexual revolution of the 1960s as having imbalanced the sexual marketplace. Women now wield power over men. The belief in the 80/20 rule is common: that eighty percent of women will sleep with 20% of men, leaving the majority of men cast aside as “surplus” in a post-monogamy world.

I was intrigued as to whether the men Bloodworth spoke to expressed any desire for sex for the sake of pleasure, or romantic connection. Again, there was a gradient of experiences: “At least initially, a lot of guys were just really socially awkward and when asked their goal, it was to get a girlfriend. The more someone stayed in it, the more salesy and robotic they’d become and the more it seemed like the validation they were getting wasn’t from the women but from the crowd of men they’d high five afterwards.”

Once again, women are objects of status, but, Bloodworth adds, “both those things can be true – for some, there is a power trip and they see women as objects, while also enjoying the fact they were sleeping with attractive women.” For him, it exposes one of the manosphere’s many contradictions – “someone hating women but also spending all their time to be the women’s ideal.” He references Jane Ward’s concept of the misogyny paradox: “a simultaneous desire for and hatred of women – all wrapped together into one dysfunctional sexual orientation.”

This paradox in the manosphere is a crystallisation of broader patriarchal attitudes: “There isn’t this clear demarcation between this really progressive, egalitarian society and these communities. It’s an amplified version of certain trends in society.” Bloodworth argues this is especially evident when examining the context of the mid-2000s pickup artist scene. Articles criticising

pickup artists “were coming out at the same time other newspapers were running upskirt photos of celebrities, or pictures of women falling out of clubs... and then people in the same paper would say ‘look at all these creepy pick up guys.’”

MAKING THE MANOSPHERE

Many men and boys will have periods in their lives where they feel lonely, undesirable and awkward. Not all of them, however, will be sucked in by the manosphere. I asked him what the difference was between these two groups. Bloodworth points out that our perception is skewed. You only hear about the bad cases, not the men who spend a few months on forums and then move on. It’s harder to know their motives.

He did observe that dysfunctional family backgrounds were common, citing Anthony Johnson as a case study. Johnson founded the 21 Convention, the self-proclaimed “Woodstock of the manosphere”, and grew up with an abusive, alcoholic father. Yet he preaches that “men should be dominant and society lacks dominant males.” This seemed to be a shared experience: “I did meet a lot of people in the scene who had some kind of dysfunctional family life, like an overly domineering mother or father, that was probably the most common one.”

Many others, Bloodworth says, became involved in the manosphere because they had poor social skills. Forums seemed

• Manosphere influencers Jordan Peterson and Charlie Kirk.



the only place to go for advice: "Even now if you want to do that, it's just a weird thing, how are you supposed to do that?... How do you improve your social skills, are these things fixed? Is it just that you're good looking or you're not? You're charismatic or you're not?" Many didn't have family or friends who would give them honest advice, that their clothes didn't fit right, that they needed to brush their teeth. "That's the appeal of these places, same with the old pickup spaces, they're spaces where men feel for the first time they can talk openly about this stuff without being shamed."

But these courses aren't free – the one Bloodworth attended cost £2000. Something has to happen between feeling insecure and forking out large sums for advice, or diving headfirst into extreme misogyny. These personal insecurities stem from wider sociopolitical trends in the last decade. In particular, Bloodworth argues that the manosphere exploits the gap between working people's worsening economic reality, and the idea presented by corporations that we live in a more inclusive world. In "the 2010s there were all these big corporations coming out with this pseudo progressive stuff, like Lockheed Martin with a pride flag." At the same time as this performative inclusivity "you have this economic system, especially in America, where you're encouraged to be dominant and be on top and be hustling and exploiting people. There was that kind of cognitive dissonance I think that turned people off progressive politics, at least liberal politics."

The manosphere, he argues, is more honest about the reality of capitalism. "To be the ideal neoliberal subject you need to encapsulate certain things, you need to have certain traits. And when Jordan Peterson came along and just said that, people were like 'woah, this guy's telling the truth, finally!'"

To say Peterson *et al.* are honest about capitalism is only half right. Wealth is generated by exploiting workers, but Andrew Tate is not the first person to think that. Perhaps, for these men, it is the first time they've heard it. The atomisation of life both increases general insecurity and makes it harder to build a political immunity to the manosphere's rhetoric: "It's just some individual on their phone in an Uber, or on a Deliveroo bike and the algorithm caters stuff directly to them and you go down these silos of information." Young people living with their parents for longer, and spending less time socialising

outside due to shrinking disposable income, also means they have fewer opportunities to meet new people. In some ways, Bloodworth says, the manosphere is an "indictment of the dearth of social life".

The pickup artist movement failed to produce a generation of Casanovas, but it did develop a group of men who were highly skilled in marketing and restrained by few ethical concerns. "The whole marketing, sales thing is the sense that 'you're being led astray by the mainstream but I'm your saviour and your guide.'" In this way, the story of the manosphere is similar to that of modern populist movements: "Nigel Farage is massive on TikTok, he's very charismatic. I mean that in the sense that he communicates very well, even though you hate the stuff he's saying." Again, our defences are weakened: "You're not in a job with a union rep where even on a really rudimentary level you get some political education."

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Throughout our conversation, Bloodworth emphasises that the pickup artist spaces of the mid-2000s were, at least in part, constructive spaces where men could go for "completely unvarnished advice" and help to socialise, albeit sometimes in a "toxic way". In the 2010s, against a backdrop of recession and rising populism, the manosphere grew into a much angrier, more bitter community.

Bloodworth argues the manosphere can be tackled by addressing these underlying social issues: "In the economic sphere, things that could help would be socialist, social democratic reforms, making it easier for people to have their own places to live, more public spaces... Less atomisation, generally." He also suggests bans on children's social media or smartphone access to reduce the manosphere's potential audience. "There's a watershed on TV for a reason, because actually when you're a kid or a teenager, you can't necessarily discern what's good for you, or what's true or what's not... I don't think tech corporations, these entrepreneurs, should be the ones to socialise kids."

Finally, access to good political – and general – education is crucial to develop strong critical thinking skills and guard from the cynicism the manosphere preys on.



PINK- PILLED

REVIEW

Dominika Szarek reviews *Pink-pilled: Women and the Far-Right*, by Lois Shearing. MUP, 2025.

Reading the first two chapters of *Pink-pilled* by Lois Shearing was a striking experience. The book investigates the role that women play in far-right movements, not just as docile homemakers, but as mobilisers, propagandists, and ideological gatekeepers. One quote stood out early on:

Women aren't just passive baby makers and housewives within these groups – they're also recruitment tools and powerful propagandists... adding a veneer of legitimacy and respectability.



• Million MAGA March, 14 January 2020.

This framing opens up a conversation often overlooked in both political discourse and feminist thought: that women act as conscious agents within the far right.

The historical implications of this point reminded me of my university studies on the Austro-Hungarian Empire, particularly the figure of Karl Lueger, the mayor of Vienna. While Lueger modernised the city, he also stoked populist antisemitism – a strategy later adopted by Hitler. What stood out was his reliance on female supporters. He referred to his female base, the Christian Women's League, as "Amazons" – one of the most organised factions behind his success, despite his opposition to women's suffrage.

Today's far-right largely recruit and propagandise online. Instagram, which in many countries has a majority female user base, is one such space. There, far-right women craft videos featuring soft lighting and carefully composed scenes. Their content rejects feminist ideals in favour of "traditional" femininity: financial dependence on men, devotion to motherhood, and a return to submissive gender roles.

Shearing details how women in far-right movements perform essential, yet often invisible, labour. They coordinate logistics, organise protests, and produce propaganda. "Women for America First", for instance, played a key behind-the-scenes role in the 6 January Capitol riot, securing permits and mobilising participants.

Shearing also highlights how white femininity operates as both a shield and a weapon. Figures like Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni exemplify how far-right women can project political moderation through their gender, even as their rhetoric and policies fuel exclusion and violence. Their perceived innocence softens public scrutiny, allowing them to enact or legitimise harm while maintaining social credibility.

Why are women drawn to this kind of ideology in the first place? Shearing argues that capitalism has failed to deliver on the promise of women's liberation. Women are expected to work full-time while also shouldering the majority of domestic and caregiving duties. Even highly educated women face burnout, limited choices, and emotional exhaustion.

Liberal feminism, Shearing contends, has contributed to this disillusionment. By framing empowerment as individual achievement and consumer success, it has glossed over systemic failures – like cuts to childcare and housing support. In contrast, the so-called "tradwife" fantasy offers women a seductive illusion of order, simplicity, and purpose in an otherwise chaotic world.

But this fantasy is not universal. It is steeped in whiteness. The "tradwife" narrative, promoted by influencers like Girl Defined, largely excludes women of colour. White women are cast as protectors of the white nation – prioritising racial identity over gender solidarity. *Pink-pilled* argues that in a fragmented, late-capitalist society, many white women choose to align with whiteness as a form of power, rather than pursue collective liberation as women.

The book is especially relevant in today's political climate – particularly following the UK Supreme Court's decision to define women solely on biological sex. The ruling was not only applauded by the far right but also by some self-described feminists in the "gender critical" movement, who celebrate a view of womanhood grounded in biological determinism. These gender-critical feminists argue that oppression is rooted in anatomy, and therefore claim that trans women cannot be classified as women. Shearing reveals how this ideology has flourished in spaces like the UK-based parenting forum Mumsnet, which began as a resource for mothers but evolved into a hotbed of exclusionary feminism.

Such forums and their offshoots – including some Reddit subforums cloaked in "women's liberation" rhetoric – often ignore material issues like housing insecurity or medical misogyny. Instead, they focus obsessively on reinforcing gender essentialism and promoting a narrative that trans people pose a threat to "real" womanhood. This version of womanhood is often defined by whiteness, heterosexuality, and middle- or upper-class respectability.

Shearing shows how digitised dating and so-called "hook-up culture" have left many women feeling emotionally unfulfilled and alienated. Feminism is accused of promoting not just the right to casual sex, but the expectation that women should desire nothing more. These grievances, Shearing argues, are not entirely baseless – and many feminist thinkers are now grappling with the

limitations of the sexual revolution and what empowerment really means.

One of the most troubling revelations in *Pink-pilled* is that many women now active in far-right propaganda once identified as liberals or feminists. Some cite mental health struggles or a sense of betrayal – arguing that feminism left them angrier or more depressed. These narratives complicate the story. Dismissing these women outright, especially from the left, reflects an internalised misogyny; a refusal to take women's emotional and intellectual labour seriously if it doesn't align with "acceptable" politics.

In this sense, *Pink-pilled* is not just a critique of far-right extremism. It's a wake-up call to feminist and progressive movements alike. Shearing shows how seemingly fringe online spaces can mainstream exclusionary ideologies under the guise of feminist concern. Ignoring women's roles in these movements – because they're less visible or less violent – only reinforces harmful myths about gender and political agency.

Ultimately, *Pink-pilled* urges us to confront uncomfortable truths: that women can and do uphold harmful ideologies, that not all grievances fueling these movements are baseless, and that feminist language is increasingly being co-opted to advance reactionary goals. If we are serious about building an inclusive, anti-capitalist, and transformative feminist movement, we must grapple with these dynamics rather than dismiss them out of discomfort or disdain. Shearing's work is a vital step toward reclaiming feminism from the forces that seek to weaponise it.

We can laugh at tradwives or try to deplatform far-right influencers, but they will re-emerge – often rebranded, algorithmically amplified, and more marketable than before. *Pink-pilled* makes clear that far-right content isn't just a byproduct of being online; it is baked into the structure of the internet itself. Social media platforms and their profit-driven algorithms thrive on outrage, polarisation, and engagement – creating fertile ground for this ideology to flourish. In exposing this, Shearing reminds us that any meaningful resistance must also be a critique of the systems – economic, technological, and ideological – that allow far-right feminism to take root and spread.



SEX WARS: WHY WE STAND FOR SEX POSITIVE FEMINISM

SEX POSITIVITY

Ruth Cashman

The strapline for *Women's Fightback* says we stand for sex positive, trans-inclusive, class struggle feminism. For many readers, class struggle and trans-inclusivity will speak for themselves. But what is "sex-positive" feminism and why do we stand by it, despite a growing move away from it among many Gen Z and "fourth wave" feminists?

Sex positive feminism emphasises sexual freedom and a refusal to shame women for their sexuality as a key part of liberation. It stands against stigmatising sexuality and consensual practices with sexual partners, including BDSM, kink, masturbation, casual sex and pornography. While not a homogenous school, it is associated with decriminalisation of sex work, acceptance of different sexualities and gender identities, rejecting traditional gender roles, empowering people through

sex education, a permissive approach to pornography, and reproductive freedoms.

SEX WARS

In the 1960s, sex and violence emerged as a key subject of debate between feminists. This controversy became known as the feminist sex wars. There were broadly two sides: anti-sex/anti-porn feminists and sex positive feminists.

Sex positive feminists rejected the moralising anti-sex politics categorised by some of the most famous feminist academics and activists of the period, from Andrea Dworkin to Catharine MacKinnon.

Andrea Dworkin told us: "Prostitution in and of itself is an abuse of a woman's body."

Robyn Morgan wrote: "Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice."



• Slutwalk, Chicago, 2013.

The Furies, a separatist collective based in New York in the early 1970s, argued not only to cut off ties to men but also to straight women who “still benefit from heterosexuality, receive its privileges and security”.

Catharine MacKinnon advised us to stop viewing sexual desire as ‘an innate primary natural prepolitical unconditioned drive divided along the biological gender line’ and recognise that sex with men is inherently violent; that it contained “hostility and contempt, or arousal of master to slave, together with awe and vulnerability, or arousal of slave to master.”

Even if you give up heterosexual sex, she argued, sex is “so gender marked that it carries dominance and submission with it, no matter the gender of its participants”. If we experienced pleasure from sex under these conditions, it was a sign of how sick we’d become.

This was a feminism with no space for the complexities of human experience and sexuality. Moreover, in its campaigns there was considerable overlap between the feminist moralism around heterosexualism and the anti-sex attitudes of the reactionary religious right. Both opposed

porn and trans rights. Both supported the policing of gender and censorship. Sex positivity stood against this.

SEX-NEGATIVE?

It has become more common in recent years to see Gen Z feminists turn away from sex-positivity. There are good and bad reasons for this.

We live in a less prudish, less sexist society than the 1970s. The term “slut-shaming” is used casually in national newspapers, and casual sex is shown routinely without judgement in the media. Oscars 2025 winner and “Anora” actor Mikey Madison thanked and honoured sex workers in her acceptance speech. When Hermione from Harry Potter is the face of OMGYes, the female pleasure app, you can see why stigmatisation of sex is the least of Gen Z’s worries.

Though much of the language of sex positive feminism has flourished, there is little existing women’s movement in Britain. There are few feminist activist conferences, magazines and demonstrations. Feminist content does very well online, but social media is hardly a medium for nuanced discussion.

There is good sex and bad sex and horribly abusive life-wrecking sex. Are we positive about all of them? No, but sex-positivity never meant supporting the porn industry or claiming that sex work was an expression of emancipation.

But in the absence of a women’s movement, and at a low point of class struggle, the sex positivity of mass culture was always going to be a less curious, more liberal version. Capitalism drives to commodify.

FREE SEX FROM SHAME

It is illustrative that when I asked people for the best new writer for and against sex positive feminism, Amia Srinivasan topped both lists with her book *The Right to Sex*. Srinivasan accepts many of the tenets of sex positivity but demands further exploration.

On sex work:

Third and fourth-wave feminists are right to say, for example, that sex work is work, and can be better work than the menial labour undertaken by most women. And they are right to say that what sex workers need are legal and material protections, safety and security, not rescue or rehabilitation.

But to understand what sort of work sex work is – just what physical and psychological acts are being bought and sold, and why it is overwhelmingly women who do it, and overwhelmingly men who pay for it – surely we have to say something about the political formation of male desire.

Sex work is work. To declare it otherwise risks shutting sex workers out of the limited legal protections and potentially powerful collective organisation of trade unions.

No socialist should think workers make absolutely free choices about how they work. There is a lot to say about the gendered nature of work outside of sex – nursing, caring, cleaning. All workers make apparently “free” choices in a stacked system where the buying and selling of labour is done in an exploitative, unfair relation. Work is also gendered, racialised and affected by immigration status.

We should not accept the moralistic idea that women somehow lose some part of themselves by having their bodily boundaries assailed, or that people should feel ashamed of their naked bodies being looked at. We also stand against a politics that looks to combine the interests of workers and bosses in the sex industry. Sex work, like all work, will be shaped by the values of the society it takes place in, and the struggles of workers in it.

We want to free sex from shame, stigma and coercion. Part of that is accepting that sexual fantasy and consensual sexual activity can involve things which look distasteful to us.

NONE OF MY BUSINESS

There has been much written in feminist press, including ours, about the rise of choking and anal sex. Much of this analysis assumes this is a result of increased consumption of porn. It often does not make any distinction between people who practice these in consensual pleasurable encounters and those who don’t consent. Why? Is it that people believe nobody enjoys these activities? Surely, there is ample evidence that some people do.

Any sex act without consent is abusive. But it is nonsensical to argue that sex acts should be shunned or outlawed because we imagine that they might take place non-consensually. Is the argument being put forward by anti-porn feminists not that people don’t like these sex acts but

that they shouldn't like these sex acts? Or more specifically, that women shouldn't?

Women and LGBT+ people have long been conditioned to be afraid and ashamed of our sexual desires. It is not the job of feminism to chime in. As Srinivasan notes: "A feminism that trades too freely in notions of self-deception is a feminism that risks dominating the subjects it wants to liberate."

Porn is probably responsible, at least in part, for the growth in these desires. But the counter intuitive message of our sexual politics is that one's sexual fantasies are not to be judged by others. If you can find someone who will smash your face in a birthday cake or tie you up, and you both (or all) consent and like it, it's none of my business.

That does not mean they are beyond broader political critique. Our sexual fantasies are not innate. They're shaped by all sorts of factors, some of them problematic. A multi-million pound industry having greater pull over the kind of sex we have will likely mean we are having worse sex. Living in a racist, sexist, violent society will (and does) have an effect on what we desire.

So we should question ourselves a little more. If you can't imagine that straight women could enjoy anal sex without being brainwashed by "big dick", it might be worth interrogating whether you are harbouring some unspoken homophobia.

If you can only get off to videos of actors pretending to be step-son and step-mum, maybe some more variety would do you good. It matters that dating apps reflect and reinforce racial biases.

FORWARD, NOT BACK

The shrinking of our sexual imaginations and homogenising of our sexual taste are best combated by being more sex positive. Young people need to learn more about pleasure and the variety of sex through sex education, so that their education does not come solely from porn. We need to be able to speak about sex: what we want and what we don't.

There is a degree of narcissism to sex. Sexual enjoyment is also about wanting to feel sexy. This is exacerbated by the fact that our culture is driven by giant corporations promoting a very narrow idea of what's sexy. The effect of this wider culture does not just affect how we see others but also how we see ourselves.

In our real-world sexual relationships, we need to foreground kindness and care for each other. We need a politics in all areas of life that resists seeing others as means rather than ends. To be sex positive is not enough – but we must go forward, not backward. The alternative is to return to a more conservative, more moralistic and more dangerous time.



WORKERS FOR DECRIM

Rosa is a member of the Sex Workers Union, a branch of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union, and organiser with Decrim Now.

She spoke to **Kelly Rogers**, a member of the Fire Brigades Union.

Rosa has been a sex worker for almost ten years. In that time, she has worked in several different settings, always as a "full service" worker, which means working as an escort or prostitute. Her work has included both "high-end" and "survival" escorting, lower-rate work (such as taking bookings off internet sites like Backpage), working for an agency, and brothel work.

The decision to join a union was a natural one. "I've always been a socialist, always



• London, 4 July 2018.



• London, 8 March 2019.

been an anticapitalist, and I've always done some kind of political organising, whether that's anti-cuts stuff, LGBT stuff, or housing stuff. So when I first started doing sex work I very quickly met people who were organising and decided to join in and learn from them."

CRIMINALISED

"Every challenge that I've faced as a sex worker," Rosa says, "has been because of criminalisation or a knock-on effect from criminalisation."

"In the UK it is legal to sell and buy sex. Someone can send me a message, I can go meet them at a hotel, we can have sex, he can give me the money, and nobody has broken the law. But if I was soliciting on the street, I would be vulnerable to arrest."

The law is strict. It is an offence for a person to loiter or solicit in a public place persistently "for the purpose of offering their services as a prostitute." "Persistent", in this case, means twice in a period of three months, and the penalty for offending is a fine and/or a "prostitute's caution".

A prostitute's caution is not like a normal

police caution: you don't have to admit guilt, there is no right of appeal, and it stays on your record for life, or until you turn 100. "It makes it really difficult to find other employment," Rosa says, "and so you're trapped selling sex."

The report *Proceed Without Caution*, published last year by the English Collective of Prostitutes, includes the real-life experiences of sex workers subjected to these cautions. One woman reported:

The police wait outside my house to catch me when I leave. It doesn't matter how I'm dressed, who I'm with, where I'm going – they say I'm loitering. When they stop me, they jeer at me, and make jokes at my expense, often sexually explicit jokes. When they arrest me, I'm strip searched, and they sometimes leave the door open so the male officers can see in. All this is to humiliate me.

"The soliciting law", Rosa says, "means that if sex workers are on the street, they might spread out so that they are not drawing attention to themselves. But obviously the safest thing to be is together, so you can share information about potentially dangerous clients and look after each other. Sex workers are much more vulnerable when they're on their own."

Sex workers are also prevented from working together via brothel-keeping laws. In UK law, a brothel is defined as a place where more than one person uses the premises for the purposes of prostitution, either simultaneously or one at the time. The maximum sentence for "managing, acting or assisting in the management of a brothel" is seven years. "If I'm working with another person for safety", says Rosa, "we can both be accused of brothel-keeping each other."

"Brothels are a reality. There are loads of brothels in the UK and loads of people who manage sex workers. Making it illegal doesn't mean it doesn't happen, it just makes it difficult for those workers to organise because they're worried about drawing attention to their workplace and losing it, losing their income, and losing the income of their colleagues."

VIOLENCE

A 2024 guidance document by the UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls stated that "by giving police powers to... target sex workers, criminalisation models facilitate systemic violence and undermine the sex workers' health and safety." The threat of

prosecution prevents sex workers from reporting rape and other violence. Street workers are forced to work in isolated and unfamiliar areas. Women who work together see safety measures dismantled. You can't work near other sex workers in better lit areas, establish a pool of regular, vetted clients, or acquire safe and comfortable work premises if you are repeatedly forced to close down and move on.

Migrant sex workers face even greater danger. In 2016, the Met Police raided several massage parlours in London. Despite telling the media that they were "bringing to justice those who seek to profit from the exploitation of vulnerable people," none of the 24 arrests made were for trafficking offences. 13 people were deported. The following year, Wiltshire police raided a flat in Swindon, promising that they would "make sure that any cases of human exploitation are prioritised... and the victims removed to safety." Three women were deported. In 2019, a Brazilian woman was entrapped by police posing as a client in a brothel raid. She had been working with a friend for safety. She was arrested and then incarcerated in Yarl's Wood detention centre.

The current Labour government has escalated the number of deportations, a brutal policy that will see more sex workers, and other vulnerable migrant workers, caught in the crosshairs.

It is self-evident that those who are best placed to know who is being trafficked, and who is facilitating trafficking, are sex workers themselves. But criminalisation prevents people – including those who have been trafficked and escaped – from making a report to the police.

FIGHTING BACK

The Sex Workers Union has racked up some significant wins. Strippers aren't criminalised in the same way as other sex workers, but it's rare for strip clubs to be organised, and conditions are often poor, with workers having to pay extortionate fees to work. Rosa tells me: "We've been able to win worker status in a lot of clubs. Which means that strippers are considered limb (b) workers, rather than strictly self-employed, and have the right to minimum wage, holiday pay, sick pay. When we've made those challenges, our members have received good payouts."

Sex workers face widespread financial discrimination. A lot of banks will state in their terms and conditions that those using their services are prohibited from

running "adult businesses", and sex workers are being de-banked as a result. "We've won cases as a union," Rosa reports, "including against one of the big banks during lockdown." The union also met with the Financial Conduct Authority. "They recently brought out new guidelines, advising banks not to discriminate against people who were sex workers. That's because they consulted with the Sex Workers' Union." It's a victory that will benefit sex workers in a very real way. Closing down someone's bank account only results in driving them deeper into poverty – hardly a strategy for bringing people into the mainstream economy.

The union is currently working towards a strike against one of the main platforms, used by members doing a wide range of work, from camming and selling content to full service work. "Over the last year or so, they have been raising prices," Rosa says. "You pay for different elements of advertising. If you want to boost your profile, if you want to display your number, etc., you have to pay for these features. In some cases they've doubled the prices and they keep changing the rules."

For Rosa, the fight for sex workers' rights is closely aligned with other liberation struggles. "The Supreme Court ruling on what a woman is, the rise of the far right, anti-abortion rhetoric, the criminalisation of women's bodies and the ways we use our bodies to survive capitalism – these are all connected.

"There are so many parallels between decriminalisation of sex work and the decriminalisation of abortion. People might have complicated feelings about abortion, they might think it's morally wrong to get an abortion, but the bottom line is that it's not going anywhere and if you make it illegal, you make it dangerous."

SEX-AMBIVALENCE

For Rosa, her decision to continue doing sex work is a matter-of-fact one. "There's no perfect way to sell your labour. We're always making compromises no matter what job we choose. I think the thing that makes sex work worth it for me, is how much time to rest that I have. I'm not working that many hours to be able to pay my rent and my bills. So I really appreciate having time to rest my body, to build community with other sex workers, and to do other types of activism. I think working for myself suits me very well."

Often, the proponents of criminalising the buying or selling of sex will point to



• Members of the Sex Workers Union join an RMT picket line.

exploitation and violence in the industry, and call for women to be rescued from these conditions. "They will say that sex workers are too emotionally damaged to know what's good for them," Rosa says, "and that they know what is best for us and our bodies. I think that's a huge insult to any woman who has faced any kind of abuse. Where does it end? Are women who have experienced violence not able to make decisions about their own reproductive health or about access to abortion?"

In response to stigmatisation, some sex workers have highlighted that they do, in fact, enjoy their work. But this approach, dubbed by some as the "happy hooker myth", is contentious. In their 2018 book *Revolting Prostitutes*, Juno Mac and Molly Smith write: "we are anxious about sex. For us as women, sex can be as much a site of trauma – or uneasy compromise – as a site of joy or intimacy. Feminist

conversations about sex work are often seen as arguments between those who are 'sex positive' and those who are 'sex negative'... Instead, we assert the right for all women to be 'sex-ambivalent'."

The point is that, when deciding what we do next, it doesn't especially matter whether someone enjoys sex work, as some undoubtedly do, or whether their work is immiserating and dangerous. Those that do experience sexual or personal gratification at work are likely to be those who already have a considerable amount of control over their working conditions. The task is to win those conditions for the rest. For Rosa, and for the Sex Workers' Union, the route to doing so is clear: winning decriminalisation, expanding sex workers' rights, and collective action.

But the widespread preoccupation with the sexual dimension of sex work does

speak to a wider issue. The two ideas – that sex work is uniquely degrading and that sex is intrinsically special – are two sides of the same coin, and they rebound on women. For many, “meaningless” sex is a joyful part of their lives, but it is women that face the harshest criticism for promiscuity, and who are seen to have lost a part of their essential selves if they have lots of sexual partners or sex that is “too casual”. It is telling that male sex workers, who face many of the same risks and dangers as their female counterparts, are rarely included in the discourse around sex work.

A core feminist demand is the right to choose. But our choices are curtailed by the conditions in which we live: from the judgments made by our peers, to whether we can afford to feed ourselves and our families, to the criminalisation of our work. Expanding sex workers' rights not only means sex workers can be safer and happier in their work, it will also mean that they are more able to leave the industry, if they wish to do so.

SEX WORKERS ARE EVERYWHERE

In *Revolting Prostitutes*, Mac and Smith write:

Sex workers are everywhere. We are your neighbours. We brush past you on the street. Our kids go to the same schools as yours. We're behind you at the self-service checkout, with baby food and a bottle of Pinot Grigio. People who sell sex are in your staff cafeteria, your political party, your after-school club committee, your doctor's waiting room, your place of worship.

Talking to Rosa, it's also clear that sex workers have been, and will continue to be, on your picket lines. For the Sex Workers' Union solidarity is key, and they practice what they preach. They ask that the same solidarity be extended to them: “We want other trade unions to be in community with us. Open up a channel of communication between the Sex Workers' Union and your union, so that we can share our campaigns and work together.”

Several unions already support the decriminalisation of sex work, including: ASLEF, CWU, GMB, RCN, UNISON Northern Ireland – and the Bakers' Union.

Get involved in the Workers for Decrim campaign today:
www.decrimnow.org.uk/workers4decrim/

THE WEIGHT OF WORDS

Jesse Eden Freeman is a fierce and unapologetic spoken word artist known for her raw vulnerability and unfiltered social commentary, blending biting humour, political fire, and deeply personal storytelling.

Jesse founded Poetry Scum in 2019: a celebration of working-class, marginalised and activist creatives in Nottingham. Most recently, Jesse joined forces with JP and producer Rat to form the band Lef' Debris. Their first EP 'Thick Cu*ts' is available on Bandcamp.

[@jessense.rebelpoet](https://twitter.com/jessense.rebelpoet)

They say words are cheap
But have you felt their cost?
The price of every promise
Made in marble halls
Every handshake
Sealed with a smirk
While the streets
Bleed out in silence

Policy becomes poetry
When spun just right
Lines etched in ink
Crafted to cradle the masses
Soft syllables for hard truths
That never quite make it
Past the page

We are the echoes
Of speeches long forgotten
Their promises buried
Beneath the rubble
Of what could have been
We are the hands raised in protest
The fists clenched tight
Holding on to the last shreds of hope
While the powerful barter it away

Do you see it?
The way the rich man's pen
Writes destinies
For those who can't afford the ink?
The way borders
Are drawn with rulers
Not hearts
Not minds
Not the hands
Of those forced to cross them?

They tell us to wait
Change is coming
But patience is a privilege
For those whose lives aren't dangling
On the edge of the next decision
What does someday mean
To the mother working three jobs
To the child sleeping on the floor
To the refugee
Clinging to the remnants of a dream?

There is a heartbeat in the streets
A rhythm that rises
Despite the weight of injustice
Despite the hands
Trying to choke it silent
Every chant, every march
Every voice lifted against the tide
Is a verse in the song
Of a world that refuses to stay broken

Maybe they don't hear us yet
The ones in their towers
Of glass and gold
But glass shatters
And gold melts
We are the fire
The breath of change
The storm that won't be ignored

So let them write their speeches
Their carefully curated lines
We will write in action
We will write in blood
In sweat, in tears
We will write a story they cannot erase
A truth they cannot deny

Because this is not just politics
This is life
This is humanity
This is the weight of words
Turned into something real...

MISCARRIAGE? STILL BIRTH?

NOW THE POLICE WILL SEARCH YOUR PHONE

The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) has introduced new guidance aimed at investigating and criminalising women.

Under guidance on "child death investigations" released in May 2025, in cases of unexplained pregnancy loss after 24 weeks, police will be encouraged to search the phones and homes of grieving mothers for any evidence that they might have induced a miscarriage or stillbirth.

Evidence of criminal intent could be established by raking through someone's home and finding abortion pills. Chillingly, it could also include private messages to family and friends, internet searches, and data from menstrual cycle tracking apps.

In a statement, Dr Ranee Thakar, President of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, said that the guidance was "truly shocking to read". He added: "Women in these circumstances have a right to compassionate care and to have their dignity and privacy respected, not to have their homes, phones, computers and health apps searched, or be arrested and interrogated."

The law under which women are prosecuted – the Offences Against The Person Act – dates from 1861. So, apparently, do the attitudes of the police who enforce it. There has been an alarming rise in recent years in the number of women facing conviction, and even jail time, under this law. To an extent, the new NPCC guidance is a formalisation of already-existing practices.

On 8 May, Nicola Packer was cleared of illegally terminating a pregnancy after a protracted investigation and trial. Having been prescribed mifepristone and misoprostol in a remote consultation, she took the abortion pills at home in November 2020. She delivered a foetus, estimated to be approximately 26 weeks

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

in gestation, which she took with her to hospital when seeking treatment. Arrested from her hospital bed, she was later charged with "unlawfully administering to herself a poison or other noxious thing" with the "intent to procure a miscarriage". The case took almost half a decade to conclude. Packer's private life was picked over by prosecutors and reported in the national press, and she could have faced jail.

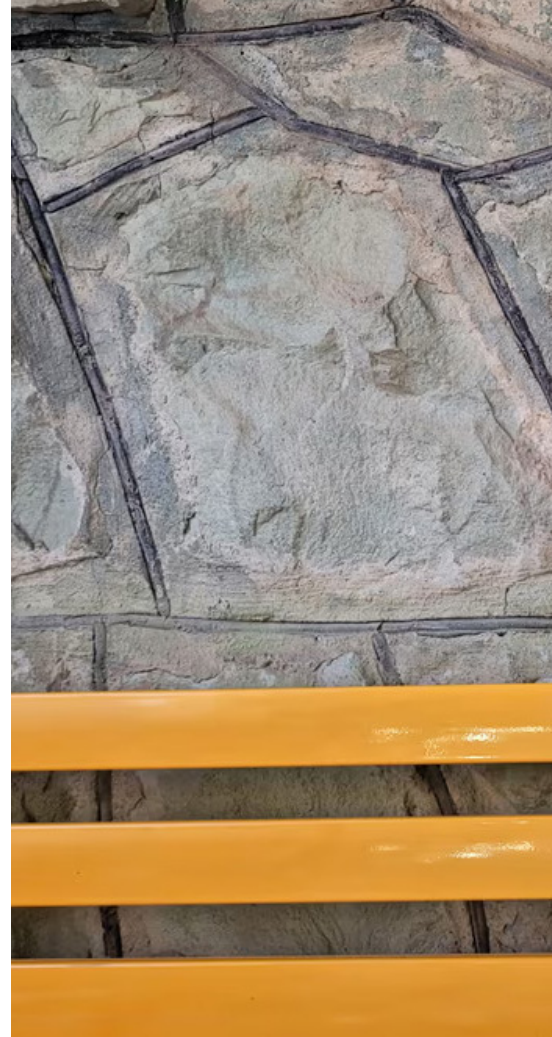
The British Pregnancy Advisory Service commented: "In recent years, we have seen record numbers of women investigated for suspected illegal abortions. Women are being arrested straight from the hospital ward, their homes searched, and their children taken away. This cannot continue."

There is a renewed push, backed by more than 50 Labour MPs, to liberalise abortion law. Sadly, it will be debated as an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill. This means that it will be packaged up with the banning of face coverings on protests, criminalising the possession of flares on protests, and the creation of a new criminal offence relating to the climbing of war memorials.

If the amendment passes into law, it will be a significant step forward for reproductive rights – but it has its limitations. It seeks to remove criminal penalties for women who end their own pregnancies, thereby eliminating the threat of investigation, arrest, prosecution, or imprisonment. It does not propose to change the abortion time limit; nor the grounds on which abortions are provided; nor the requirement for two doctors' signatures; nor the legal restrictions on telemedicine. It will also remain the case that anybody, including a medical professional, who assists a woman in obtaining an abortion outside the law would be open to prosecution.

The only way to achieve reproductive justice is the full decriminalisation of abortion, and for abortion to be considered a healthcare procedure, and treated as such. In *Workers' Liberty* we stand for abortion as early as possible, as late as necessary.

To organise with us, write to:
womensfightback@workersliberty.org



IRAN

THE EVIN PRISON BAKERS' CLUB

Will Roberts reviews *The Evin Prison Bakers' Club: Surviving Iran's Most Notorious Prisons in 16 Recipes*, by Sepideh Gholian, trans. Hessam Ashrafi. Oneworld Publications, 2025.

This moment will stand as an emblem of empathy for and between the women who have been violated. Together, with faces burned by acid and bodies bruised by the lashes of belts, they'll swarm out and over the wall to run, hold one another's hands and sing: 'Feminism taught me this.'



• Sepideh Gholian.

She may be a totemic figure for the Iranian opposition, an agitator amongst striking workers in a key industry in Iran, and one of the bravest individuals in a generation of brave Iranian activists. But it is a little unfair for the rest of us to discover that Sepideh Gholian is also a brilliant writer.

Her new book has been smuggled part-by-part from Evin Prison in Tehran, in which she is currently held as a political prisoner. Her sentence was due to end before this review came out, but as we go to press there is no word of her release.

SEPIDEH GHOLIAN

Gholian is no stranger to prison. She was first arrested in 2018, one of more than a dozen activists, trade unionists and organisers connected to the Haft Tappeh Sugar Factory strike. She was given a month-long sentence, then had another month of freedom before being arrested again, this time after a state television channel aired a video of her confessing to being a “communist” insurgent trying to overthrow the government with Western backing. She insisted that investigators had beaten her, and that she’d been made to record a false confession.

In July 2020, she was sentenced to five

years in prison for “propaganda” and “disturbing the public mind”. The social and industrial ferment that Gholian had been part of back in 2018 was now reaching a feverish peak. The murder of Jina Amini in September 2022 sparked a wave of protest unlike anything Iran had seen so far in the 21st century. The Woman, Life, Freedom movement had begun, and Gholian was a fervent supporter.

She was released partway through her sentence on medical grounds in March 2023. Not wanting to waste time, she immediately recorded a video of a ‘solo protest’ before going home. Hair uncovered and holding a bunch of flowers, she called for the downfall of the Iranian regime, and cried, “Khamenei, you tyrant, we’re going to put you in a grave!”. She was rearrested before the day was out.

Gholian has now turned 30 while serving her third prison sentence for political activism.

PRISON DIARY

Gholian’s first book of prison memoirs, *Tilapia Sucks the Blood of Hur al-Azim*, was published online by *IranWire* in 2020. It is a ‘traditional’ set of prison diaries,

documenting the horrific experiences that she and her fellow inmates endured. Many prisoners’ whereabouts and cases are only known about beyond the prison walls because Gholian has written about them.

The Evin Prison Bakers’ Club is a genuinely original attempt to do something different with the ‘prison diary’ form. Rather than stick to the details of prison life (though there is no shortage of detail in here), Gholian has constructed a prison recipe book. Each chapter is devoted to a different woman who, like the author, has been forced into the repetitive cruelty of life in Iranian prison. These are then punctuated with a dessert recipe that Gholian has picked out, either to match the woman’s personality or to lift her spirits. The result is a slightly bewildering reading experience at first, but proves engaging and touching in a way that feels truly new.

MODERN IRANIAN REPRESSION

The book has no end of stories that detail the absurd cruelty of the Iranian regime, and the theocratic, patriarchal society that it oversees. A pregnant young woman is terrified of anyone finding out about her foetus, because if word gets out, her father will kill her mother and her brother will kill her sister. Under Islamic penal law, a murder victim’s next of kin is entitled to retribution, but can also pardon the murderer, meaning father and brother would be free to get one another off the hook. The same woman is terrified of morning sickness while in her cell, because “the sound of vomiting is forbidden”. We learn many of the prisoners’ real names. Some are familiar, like dual British-Iranian citizen Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who met Gholian in prison before being released in March 2022. Some are less well known, but deserve more attention. Take Elham Barmaki, who was imprisoned on charges of espionage and served fourteen months in solitary confinement (the UN considers any period longer than 15 days “torture”).

Some of the stories detailed in the book are heart-wrenching. A long section detailing an illicit abortion is one of the most enduring memories after reading, and serves as a painfully relevant case study on the importance of fighting for reproductive freedoms. I would be impressed if anyone managed to finish this book without crying. I certainly didn’t.

COOKING

It would be a crime to review a recipe book without talking about the recipes. The very

fact of their existence is a feat in itself. In her introduction, Gholian declares that she's not much of a baker. Given her other talents, it's hard to believe her. Based on the couple I've made so far, the recipes are delicious.

Knowing that each dish was tested in literal prison conditions makes you feel oddly close to the people discussed, who must also have noticed the smell of saffron and rosewater filling the room, or stood waiting for the mixture to cook. It would be easy to read the book and ignore the recipes; I encourage you not to do so. They aren't just optional extras, they're part of the story.

You mustn't boil your saffron when making saffron cookies, because imprisoned academic Zahra Zehtabchi said you mustn't. You must play folk music from the region of Bushehr when making finger-twist halva, and Iranian rap music when making madeleines for defiant feminist journalist Marzieh Amiri. Gholian wants you to taste what these women taste, and to share it with the people you love. It would be rude not to.

Workers' Liberty has campaigned in solidarity with the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, and with Iranian workers and activists more broadly, for many years. We have run a campaign calling for Sepideh Gholian's release, and we have written extensively on the wave of protests since 2022 that have spread to key industrial sectors like the oil industry, where strikes could topple the already crumbling national economy.

The only way out of the current nightmare is for the Iranian working class to build a serious movement against the clerical regime. Imprisoned for her courageous fight alongside the working-class movement, Sepideh Gholian has created a powerful testament to the ongoing dissident life endured under impossibly hard conditions.

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TRUMP

• Sudanese refugees in Chad, January 2025.

SUDANESE WOMEN AND THE CRISIS OF INDIFFERENCE

Dominika Szarek

The civil war in Sudan has claimed over 150,000 lives. It was described by the United Nations as the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with around 12 million people—many of them women and children—displaced.

Sudan's history is fraught with conflict, fuelled by ethnic tensions and its colonial past. Until 1956, Sudan was jointly governed by the British and Egyptian governments under a condominium arrangement, with northern and southern Sudan administered as separate colonies. When the two regions merged under pressure from the northern elite, southern leaders were largely excluded from the process.

During decolonisation, the British administration favoured the northern elite, granting them most of the political power as Sudan transitioned to independence in 1956. This imbalance led to two civil wars between North and South Sudan, ultimately resulting in the independence of South Sudan in 2011.

STAGGERING BRUTALITY

In recent years, South Sudan has garnered attention for its own civil conflict, which ended in 2020. Meanwhile, Sudan itself descended into further turmoil. In 2018, protests erupted against Omar Bashir's authoritarian regime, marked by widespread state-sponsored violence, the war in Darfur, and acts of genocide. The conflict in Darfur alone led to 300,000 deaths and 2.7 million people displaced.

Bashir's regime also earned him the distinction of being one of the first heads of state charged by the International Criminal Court for war crimes.

Protesters demanded democracy, better economic conditions, and an end to Bashir's deadly rule, leading to one of the largest protests in Sudan's history. In 2019, a coup led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamed Dagalo removed Bashir from power. However, this was far from a victory for many of those who had protested, as they viewed the new leadership as complicit in Bashir's violent rule. Tensions between al-Burhan and Dagalo eventually escalated, plunging Sudan into another civil war that officially began in 2023.

The UN Secretary General described the situation in Sudan as a catastrophe of "staggering scale and brutality." Trump makes matters worse. Unfortunately, Donald Trump's presidency in America has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis.

Trump froze all foreign assistance aid and dismantled the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). This had an immediate impact, forcing the closure of 300 soup kitchens run by Emergency Response Rooms. While the Trump administration claimed that life-saving aid was exempt from cuts, internal restructuring at USAID led to the dismissal of employees responsible for managing payments. The workforce, once approximately 10,000 strong, is to be reduced to just 15 positions.

This drastic downsizing has caused chaos within the organisation, affecting the delivery of 'life-saving' aid that Sudan desperately needed. According to statistics, 25 million people – more than half the population – are starving. What the news often fails to highlight is the gendered impact of this crisis.

WOMEN HIT WORST

Women make up more than half of the 12 million displaced people. They face extreme food insecurity, as under existing social norms they often eat last and least after distributing food to family members. It's not only food provision that has become inadequate since Trump's policy on USAID. It is also impacting Sudanese refugees fleeing to Chad in schools and centres. Aboutengue refugee camp was once one of the very few safe havens for refugees. Around 45,000 refugees used it. It served as a refuge for women fleeing the violence. 2024 saw the acceleration

of the demand for sexual violence programmes.

HIAS, a refugee advocacy NGO operating in Aboutengue camp, had spent time working in the refugee community so that at-risk women could approach it with issues of domestic and gender-based violence, as well as in the aftermath of disasters for emergency help and funding. But the camp abruptly closed down in January.

A NIGHTMARE FOR WOMEN

The situation in Sudan has been a nightmare for women, and the abrupt withdrawal of foreign aid is, sadly, no surprise. Trump's rollback of foreign assistance is simply another sign of the United States' waning influence—a role that, while deeply flawed, occasionally provided a fragile layer of protection. Yet even that protection existed within a capitalist framework that upheld white supremacy and failed to foster genuine cross-border solidarity or humanitarianism.

American aid was never a sustainable or just solution to Sudan's ongoing crisis. Trump's victory is merely another symptom of the broader failure of the neoliberal order to deliver prosperity. These failures can be blamed on foreign aid or, more insidiously, on women.

Women in war-torn countries are often overlooked – not only by right-wing governments but also by liberal feminists who remain complicit through silence or selective advocacy. After all, class and race shape the boundaries of mainstream feminism, which too often centres white, middle-class women while ignoring those who do not fit that mould.

The voices of Sudanese women must be amplified before they are lost in the echo chambers of the UN, NGOs, and Western media cycles. What is urgently needed is not charity, but radical, cross-border solidarity and decisive action to restore foreign aid—alongside a feminism that is inclusive, anti-imperialist, and firmly rooted in justice. Only through this collective commitment can we hope to end this deadly conflict and support those most affected by its brutality.

NIGERIA

THE CULT OF PATRIARCHY (AND HOW TO RESIST IT)

Amara Ochefu

"The Nigerian Senate operates like a cult", Natasha Akpoti-Udughan told the BBC. A cult that manifests the entrenched patriarchal norms of Nigerian society - a cult that we must stop.

Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan's election campaign was fraught from the start. She faced threats of violence, actual violence and, after the ballots were counted, the Nigerian electoral courts had to intervene to prevent her seat from being stolen. She spent six months battling for her seat at the table, and her difficulties did not end once she took her place in the green and white national assembly building.

In July 2024, Akpoti-Uduaghan, who sits in the Senate for the centre-right People Democratic Party, stood in defence of a fellow female senator, Ireti Kinigbe, whose point was dismissed on the Senate floor. In response, Senate president, Godswill Akpabio, chastised her, remarking, "We are not a nightclub". This was a jab at Akpoti-Uduaghan's age: she is 45, younger than many of her senate counterparts.

Facing public outcry, Godswill Akpabio was forced to apologise. But Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan continued to face petty bullying, such as her motions being struck down without reason and her seat being changed without notice. In February 2025, Akpoti-Uduaghan publicly alleged ongoing sexual harassment by the Senate president. She claims that during a visit to his residence, Godswill Akpabio remarked, "I'm going to create time for us to come spend quality moments here. You will enjoy it". According to Senator Nataha, he also made several other comments about her body in the presence of other senators.

Nigerian feminists rallied, gathering outside the National Assembly to decry Godswill Akpabio and support Akpoti-Uduaghan as

she began to petition for an investigation. However, instead of beginning an investigation, the petition was outright laughed at on the Senate floor. A month later, the Senate struck down the petition: no investigation was to be held. And, as if to rub salt in the wound, Akpoti-Uduaghan was suspended for six months for 'unruly and disruptive' behaviour in the senate. She is currently serving out her suspension without pay.

This is an infuriating series of events which should resonate with feminists globally. How can you navigate a political sphere (or workplace) that has descended into a boys' club? Godswill Akpabio attempted to silence one of only four female senators in the Nigerian Senate (yes, you can count them on one hand). In a socially conservative country like Nigeria, the petty comments, disregard for women's opinions, and overt sexual harassment send a clear message to women both inside and outside the national assembly building: leadership positions are for men and men alone.

The number of female senators in Nigeria has dropped from seven in 2019 to four in 2023; that is four out of 108 senators. Nigeria has one of the lowest representations of women in government in Africa, in a country where 12.3% of girls are married before their 15th birthday, and twelve women died from gender-based violence in the first two months of 2025 alone. If the highest women in power cannot get justice, what hope is there for the average Nigerian woman?

But now it seems Godswill Akpabio's plans have backfired. In late April, Akpoti-Uduaghan penned a scathing and sarcastic letter to the Senate President. Refusing to be silenced, she "apologises" for "mistakenly believing that her seat in the senate was earned through elections, not erections". She calls out his entitlement, ego and vindictive behaviour and promises her "eternal resistance" going forward. Despite her suspension, Senator Natasha has rejected attempts to shame and dismiss her. Her fearlessness is even more admirable when we note that, due to the terms of her suspension, she is without a security detail and is in fear for her safety.

Her actions are in contrast to one of her fellow female senators. Ireti Kingibe, who Akpoti-Uduaghan defended in the debating chamber in 2024, went on to publicly undermine Akpoti-Uduaghan several days after she made her allegation against Goodwill Akpabio. Speaking to Arise TV, Kingibe said, "The three of us have not been sexually harassed. That's

not to say if Senator Natasha can prove that she has been. That is fine. We will support her..." Meanwhile, the Senate president is believed solely based on his word and his position of power. Kingibe's response to her colleagues' allegations is a case study in how patriarchal institutions permeate misogyny. Women can be pitted against each other. Kingibe previously mentioned that most of her time in the Senate is spent lobbying. It seems she is under the impression that maintaining her connections to the boys' club is the only way to pass laws.

The pre-colonial positions of Nigerian women were different. Nigerian women have played a role as political disruptors, community builders and defiers of patriarchal and colonial rule. In December 1929, during the so-called Aba Women's Riots, Udo Udoma, along with hundreds of other market women, were protesting colonial taxes when colonial soldiers began to fire on them. Udo Udoma did not back down, instead, she confronted an officer, snatched his gun and broke it over her knee. Udoma and the market women's resistance to colonial exploitation forced the British to cancel their taxes and restructure the local governments.

Elizabeth Olowu defied thousands of years of patriarchal superstition when she became the first woman bronze caster in Nigeria. Her works were imbued with a feminist perspective, and she often depicted scenes challenging societal norms that marginalised women.

It might sometimes seem easier to follow patriarchal logic and play by the boy's club rules. But tending to egos only feeds into cycles that actively harm women's rights. We must not fall for the trap of turning against each other. Like Senator Akpoti-Uduaghan, we can throw out the rulebook.

READ WITH US

Workers' Liberty hosts monthly socialist feminist book clubs in London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Sheffield, Leicester and online. All welcome!

Find out more:
womensfightback.org
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REVIEW

WOMEN WITHOUT KIDS

Haylee Lunt reviews *Women Without Kids* by Ruby Warrington. Orion, 2023.

We read and discussed *Women Without Kids* in our London socialist feminist book club in February.

Not knowing anything about *Women Without Kids* by Ruby Warrington before it was selected for our book club in London, I had no particular expectations. What I found in this book was the writer's own unravelling of her decision not to have children.

The reader is encouraged to examine their own relationship with "the question". Warrington's book prompts an internal deliberation; clarifying, refining and cultivating what, for me, will be a journey



• Natasha Akpoti-Udughan.

of continual re-evaluation. I'm the same age my mum was when she had me, so comments regarding my own (assumed) inevitable descent into motherhood are now heard in not-so-hushed whispers.

I've spent a long time anxiously awaiting the time when the "maybe one day" answer would warrant a more immediate response. That might have been quelled by reading this book at a younger age. Like the hard-won battle of learning about our cycles and fertility, we should also share knowledge about our choice to become parents. This book equips the reader with an arsenal of information to explore it.

This was an excellent read for our book club. We each had points of contention around areas of this book, such as its unusual format that swaps between memoir, self-help and academic research. Having a forum to discuss these matters in a group of about fifteen women, all of whom had, so far, chosen not to have children, was a therapeutic, educational and enriching experience. People in their early twenties to their fifties, of different ethnicities and backgrounds, discussing our richly tapestried choices not to have children. Some of us were dealing with cultural pressures to become mothers, others had chosen to lead their lives in servitude of their own joy instead of children, and others discussed how being child-free empowered them to be a greater

support to other mothers around them. They say it takes a village to raise a child, so why must we all feel this pressure to have children?

One of Warrington's central theses is around the concept of 'pronatalism' – the theory that, as a patriarchal society, we are biased toward childbearing as default, not as a choice. This can be seen everywhere: from the stark assumption that women (not men?) will have children, through to its eerie pervasiveness from our cradles, throughout our lives. A girl's first toy is a baby doll.

Women are dehumanised, primed as vessels for reproduction, with all other aspirations being secondary. We can see the real-world consequences of pronatalism as Trump, now in his second term, introduces measures to encourage more women to have children while decimating the right to abortion. Declining birth rates could be addressed by increasing social care, encouraging immigration and decreasing the wealth gap. But rolling back women's rights is deemed a more reasonable solution. Warrington's book asks us to re-examine this outdated social order in favour of pursuing a hopeful new world where women are unburdened by motherhood and can shape a better, more equitable Society.

Despite a powerful emancipatory message,

the book's undertone is that motherhood is a purely oppressive force, and that women who become parents are surrendering their ability to create positive change in the world. Warrington discusses how, as some of the first generations not effectively forced to have children, we are facing a revolution led by women who are free to change the world. But motherhood doesn't have to be at odds with this. When discussing the ethics of bringing children into an increasingly inhospitable world with my own mother, she said she believes that we are shaping future changemakers. This is from a working-class, single mother who campaigned against nuclear power throughout my childhood, and whose belief in a better world I carry.

A lack of support for parents makes a model of radical parenthood much harder. Though the pressure to become mothers is an undeniable fact, perhaps a more prescient question is: how can we successfully pressure leaders to create the conditions that will allow mothers and childfree women to become equal participants in our fight for emancipation?

The book also discusses how, by not having children, generational trauma reaches the end of the line. Though this is a completely valid choice for some, it is a defeatist point of view. A more nuanced approach could have dealt with women's right to choose: one way or the other.

On a final note, I would personally love to stop seeing abortion stories that are treated as akin to heading out for a grocery shop. It is needless to say that all women should have the right to abortion and that shattering taboos around them is crucial. But for the many who have had traumatic abortion experiences, this prevalent narrative is reductive.

Though not without its flaws, Ruby Warrington's *Women Without Kids* offers an important contribution at a particular moment in history, in which women have a newfound right to choose whether to become mothers.

If nothing else, the dialogue with others that this book will start is perhaps its most valuable contribution. Talking about the contents of this book with a community of diverse women was healing, provocative, and gave greater substance and integrity to my own choice. The conversation was important, radical and gave me hope for the future of women's liberation.

ELLA KEIDAR RELEASED FROM PRISON

For the last issue of *Women's Fightback* (#33) we interviewed Ella Keidar, an 18-year-old transgender military refuser in Israel, and activist with the refuser network Mesarvot.

In May, Keidar was released from military service after two months in prison. "I received an exemption from the army. My incarceration was difficult. For most of it, I was locked alone in a cell for 21 hours a day, almost fully isolated from the other prisoners," she said.

"Under international law, solitary confinement is considered torture and prohibited, but we all know how much the army cares about international law. My imprisonment wasn't easy, but I passed it thanks to the support of my family, my friends, the lawyers who aided me, the Mesarvot Network, my comrades in the Communist Youth, and everyone who wrote me a letter from the outside. "Now, I am free and I will continue – and we will continue – to struggle against

apartheid, the genocide in Gaza, and for a safe and free future for us all."

While she was in prison, Keidar said: "Before the war, there was something very symbolic about refusal. We refuse to serve a regime that does this and that, and we do it publicly. After the war started, it became much simpler: there is a genocide happening in Gaza, and you don't enlist in an army that's committing genocide. Everything feels both more urgent and more hopeless at the same time, but politically, it's much clearer and requires less deliberation. It's very obvious what the right thing to do in the face of genocide is: to refuse."

Since Netanyahu ended the ceasefire in March, there has been a sharp rise in the number of people refusing to serve. While official numbers are a closely guarded secret, the Defence Minister Israel Katz was told in mid-March that the attendance rate had dropped to 80% from around 120% immediately after October 7. Israel's national broadcaster, Kan, reported that the figure was closer to 60%. Other estimates go even lower. What is clear is that the Israeli military is facing its largest mass refusal in decades.

Standing Together, a grassroots movement mobilising Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel, is one of a number of organisations calling for military refusal via their "Refuse War" campaign. A former IDF colonel, who

spoke at a Standing Together protest on 24 April, said: "No-one is off the hook. If you are sent to do wrong, you're still responsible, even if it's an order. A pilot sent to bomb a 10-story building because a logistics officer from Hamas lives with his family on the seventh floor should say, 'No, I won't do it. I won't take part in war crimes. The responsibility is on me, because I'm not just following orders.'

"An intelligence officer asked to approve a target that will hurt dozens of civilians because an AI programme says the suspect once stood near someone maybe tied to Hamas, she should say no. A soldier ordered to shoot at medical workers and then bury them should say, 'No, I won't shoot. This is on me, because I am not a tool for wrongdoing.' A soldier in the West Bank entering a village where settlers are attacking Palestinians whose commanders tell her to arrest the Palestinians, not the settlers, should say no."

While we can assume that the majority of those defying enlistment orders are people who have grown demoralised, alongside them there is a growing minority of reservists who refuse on ethical grounds. Few take the route of Ella Keidar, and publicly state their opposition to the occupation as grounds for their refusal, but those that do are doing vital work: building a political movement for Palestinian liberation and equality in Israel.



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