

Hi! And thanks for coming today. It's really nice to see some young, female faces. A lot of what I'm saying can be applied to other minorities, but I am specifically talking about women today. I assume that many of you are here because of one or all of the reasons that Leela mentioned. You're sick of being treated as second class citizens due to something as arbitrary as your gender.

I've been around the socialist left for about five years and the sad fact of the matter is that gender relations within the left pretty well reflect those in wider Australian society. As Marx put it, "*The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life.*" This applies to left wing political meetings. The left is dominated by old, white, male academics and their old, white, male academic discourse. So we need you. We need people with different perspectives and new ideas. And not just in a token way, we need you to be strong and vocal and to challenge the way things are.

I want to start with an exercise:

Write: *Man* *Woman*

Can you tell me all of the characteristics that you can think of that society assigns to these categories?

<u>Man</u>	<u>Woman</u>
Strong	Weak
Logical	Emphatic
Independent	Nurturing
Straightforward	Mysterious
Firm	Fickle
Handsome	Pretty
Capable	Clueless

So we're all in agreement and we're pretty clear what society expects of us.

Unfortunately, as far as I can see, most of the men of the left aspire to embody a lot of things in the man column. And if you're going in as a woman who's been trained to do the things in the women column you're going to be pretty ineffective and find yourself marginalised. Because you have to be such a tough nut to get a word in edgeways some women embrace the man column and leave the woman column behind. This, of course, doesn't challenge the dominant paradigm. My idea is that to be an effective activist and to actually influence the left away from the white, male, academic discourse you need to be a combination of both columns. So for example, you have to be strong, but you have to also be able to admit when you're wrong, and when you need help. You need to listen and learn, but there's also times when you have to speak up.

Political discussions are a very important area where these relations play out. It's something I feel passionately about because if women can't effectively engage in political discussions with men then their voices are silenced.

So one of the most unfortunate things that white, Australian, male academics are taught is that to be wrong is a sign of weakness. Women are trained more to be listeners and to synthesise others' point of view. Now, of course, men can't always be right, and women can't always make concessions, because in politics you're often dealing with issues that are too important to let go.

To avoid admitting that they're wrong I've seen a lot of bad behaviour both from old, white, male academics and others who have embraced their discourse.

- Not letting others speak. To counter this it is important to insist on a speaking list, so less confident people have a chance. It's also important not to let people interrupt you before you've finished your points.

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- Making bold assertions that aren't based on fact. Sometimes just by speaking confidently people can seem like they're correct. This is best challenged by asking for the basis of the other person's argument, and repeating this question until the basis is actually given.
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- Body language, facial expressions or laughter while you're speaking. This isn't engaging with an argument, this is bullying designed to silence others, and should be called out.
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- Physical intimidation, yelling, standing over and getting into your space. This behaviour also needs to be called out for what it is. Violence.
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- Changing topic. My experience is that you doggedly have to stay on topic until the issue is sorted. Refuse to argue side points.
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- Comments like you're getting "emotional". There's nothing wrong with emotions. You could be passionately defending an injustice, or sorrowful to think of some of the awful exploitation that goes on under capitalism. Feelings are an important and relevant part of any issue and a bigger motivating factor for most people than logic, and they should be taken seriously.

The term "identity politics". Now I'm going to go into this in more detail, because I have this accusation levelled at me at least once a meeting. Identity politics is the idea that only those experiencing a particular form of oppression can define it or fight against it. This is all it means, and nothing else. Describing something as "identity politics" is often used to suggest that minority issues aren't relevant to socialism. There's also this idea that fighting for the rights of oppressed minorities is divisive to the working class, when in fact it is the oppression itself that is divisive. Or it can be used to suggest that one's lived experience isn't relevant to a discussion on that topic.

Marxists rightly critique identity politics for a number of reasons. Identity politics suggests that people within the same oppressed group have the same interests, and if this was the case women's oppression in Australia would have ended when Julia Gillard became Prime Minister. Actually she's done very little for women's rights. Different oppressions are often very much related, for example queer issues and women's issues. Two people within an oppressed group may have very different experiences, for example a white woman being oppressed by white men and a Murri woman being oppressed by white men. And it's very important to form alliances to fight oppression.

But. Your identity is relevant to discussion, even if an academic hasn't yet written a book about it. Lived experience is an authentic basis for knowledge. Facts can be felt and not measured. It is important for women to lead the fight for women's rights, because we truly understand the issues that we're facing, and just like the working class we cannot be liberated from above, but we must liberate ourselves.

There are many benefits to embracing the best bits of both the man column and the woman column, and I think it is essential to not only being a good activist, but to being a whole human being. Similarly the white, male, academic way of knowledge can be a useful tool, but other forms of knowledge are also essential.

So thanks for your attention. We need young women in our movement challenging both capitalism and the way it reproduces itself within the movement and I look forward to getting to know you.

Before I go I'd like everyone to please take a solemn oath. Repeat after me:

"I solemnly promise that I will never clean up the men's cups after a left wing political meeting". Thank you.