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# **‘Safe spaces’: experiences of feminist women-only space**

**Ruth Lewis, Elizabeth A Sharp, Jenni Remnant and Rhiannon Redpath**

## **Abstract**

The gendered nature of safety has been explored empirically and theoretically as awareness has grown of the pervasive challenges to women’s safety. Notions of ‘safe space’ are frequently invoked in wider feminist environments (particularly, recently, in relation to debates about trans people’s access to women’s spaces), but are relatively neglected in academia. Indeed, despite a body of scholarship which looks at questions of gender, safety and space, relatively little attention has been paid to exploring the *meaning* of ‘safety’ for women and, particularly, the meaning and experience of spaces they consider to be ‘safe.’ Drawing on focus group data with 30 women who attended a two-day, women-only feminist gathering in the UK, this paper analyses experiences of what they describe as ‘safe space’ to explore the significance and meaning of ‘safety’ in their lives. Using their accounts, we distinguish between *safe from* and *safe to*, demonstrating that once women are *safe from* harassment, abuse and misogyny, they feel *safe to* be cognitively, intellectually and emotionally expressive. We argue that this sense of being ‘safe to’ denotes fundamental aspects of civic engagement, personhood and freedom.

## **Key words**

feminism, women, safety, space, women-only, activism

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## Introduction

Safety as a gendered concept has been debated by scholars from a range of disciplines, as awareness has grown of the pervasive challenges to women's safety. Together with activists, scholars have revealed the lack of safe spaces for women<sup>i</sup> at home, at work and in public spaces, including the virtual world. The idea of 'safe space', which has been a hotly-contested theme in feminist politics (The Roestone Collective, 2014), has been reignited in recent discussions in and outside academia about the rights of trans male-to-female people to access spaces designated as 'women-only' (Browne, 2009, Westbrook and Schilt, 2009). In the midst of a global revival of feminist scholarship and activity, calls for some spaces to be 'for women only' have met hostility in some quarters. They have also met astonishment that such spaces are 'still' needed, the underlying assumption being that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have progressed to a state of equality. Shelley Budgeon (2011:21) refers to this assumption of equality, which belies the reality of enduring violence, abuse, objectification and oppression of women globally: 'The formal currency granted to gender equality as an ideal is often popularly assumed, almost as a form of "common sense", to constitute evidence of its actual existence.' In discussions about the perceived need, or otherwise, for women-only space, such spaces are often referred to as 'safe' (by those who support them), but, despite a body of scholarship which looks at questions of gender, safety and space, relatively little attention has been paid to explorations of the *meaning* of 'safety' for women. This paper addresses this gap in scholarship by exploring women's experiences of safety in women-only space. This analysis is offered not to suggest that *every* women-only space is experienced as safe – intuitively, this is not the case – but to highlight the aspects of women-only space that reveal how safety is experienced. Through analysis of qualitative focus group data, we distinguish between safety *from* and safety *to*, and argue that safety *from* routine risk and disparagement provides safety *to* express one's full personhood.

## Women and Safety

Since initial exposure of the extent of women's victimisation by men at home, at work and in public spaces (Brownmiller, 2005, Dobash and Dobash, 1979, MacKinnon, 1987, Stanko, 1985)

scholars have revealed the significance of fear in women's lives. Feminist scholars across disciplines such as sociology, criminology and geography, have asserted that cultural messages and experiences of violence, abuse and harassment are profoundly significant for women, shaping their daily negotiations through physical environments, social relationships and domestic arenas. Pain introduced the idea that space itself is gendered through the construction of fear in women's lives and argued that 'women's perceptions of risk ... the actual risks they are exposed to and ... their behavioural responses have implications for their equal participation in society' (1991:415). It is not only direct encounters (or anticipation of encounters) with perpetrators of abuse or harassment that can instil fear; Rosewarne's (2007) examination of sexist outdoor advertising demonstrates how such images sexualise and 'masculinise' public space by repeating the key elements of the 'pin-up', and portraying women as "bodies" rather than "somebodies" (Hall and Crum, 1994: 335 cited in, Rosewarne, 2007). This points to the cultural manifestations of daily life which signify the gendered and heterosexualised nature of many spaces (see, for example, the special issue edited by (Baydar, 2012). We think of this as the 'wallpaper' of sexism; the backdrop which becomes unremarkable because of its routine familiarity. Like wallpaper that one sees everyday, the gendering of space becomes the norm and, because it is so normalised, becomes unremarkable. Scholarship such as that discussed here has revealed that women's socialisation, as well as their experiences of harassment and objectification, construct girlhood and womanhood as fearful states whereby most women are routinely vigilant, consciously or unconsciously.

Evidence of women's high rates of fear led some (Bennett, 1990, and Hough and Mayhew, 1983 cited in Pain (2001) to interpret it as 'irrational', referring to the paradox between women's heightened fear of public spaces yet greater risk of violence in private spaces, as well as their heightened fear in relation to actual victimisation. While this interpretation has been shown as wanting (Pain, 2001, Stanko, 1988, Smith, 1997) a new paradox is emerging whereby some eschew the notion that women - despite differences of, for example, class, ethnicity, location and sexuality - share fear, risks and experiences of violence by men. The development of this paradox is no doubt partly a result of the critique that some feminist work essentialises gender. In response to such criticism, a discourse has emerged which guards against essentialising women's fear and victimisation and against a feminist politics grounded in women's victimisation by men. This development is reflected in material realities too; research about young women reveals how, even when victimised, they resist 'the dreaded victim status' (Baker, 2008:59), treading instead 'an extremely fine line between not being victims, exercising their agency and choice and remaining

“feminine” (Rich, 2005:505). Alison Phipps highlights how ‘rape myths’ are reinforced and reconceptualised in this contemporary neo-liberal discourse of the autonomous, rational, self-determining subject:

Neoliberal ideas about personal responsibility and neoconservative anti-victim rhetoric commingle with postmodern critiques of ‘victim’ subjectivity as a form of governance, to create a politics in which victimhood is either a state of laziness or dependence or a sign of psychological under-development (2014:38).

Perhaps this is the real paradox about women, safety and violence; contemporary discourses discourage women from acknowledging the consistently high rates of victimisation of women as a group, and encourage them instead to see victimisation as a failure of personal responsibility. Is the contemporary paradox the failure to see men’s violence, abuse and harassment of women as routine and widespread, despite lived experiences of it as such?

Interactions in the virtual world also reveal the gendered nature of space and restriction of women’s freedoms (Halder and Jaishankar, 2009). Both women and men are the targets of ‘trolling’ and abuse online. However recent high-profile examples of abuse in the UK (eg towards Caroline Perez-Ciarado, a journalist and activist, and Stella Creasy MP who campaigned to have women represented on sterling banknotes and were subjected to a sustained harassment online, including death and rape threats; Professor Mary Beard, Professor of Classics who, after appearing on a popular debating TV programme, was subjected to considerable abuse via Twitter, including sexually aggressive comments and threats – see Beard (2013 27 January)) reveal the distinctive ways in which women who speak out in public settings come to be abused *as women* (Jane, 2014). This abuse included threats to rape and kill, use of misogynist language, and sexualised comments about women’s appearance. Strikingly, these women were not espousing radical politics<sup>ii</sup>; it was simply their appearance and voice – in oral or written communication - in the public realm that attracted such vitriol (Beard, 2014).

Other research reveals the gendered nature of interactions in public and political spaces. For example (Karpowitz et al., 2012) examine ‘the volume of voice and the patterns of silence’ and find that ‘women speak substantially less than men in most mixed-gender combinations. Further, speech is a crucial form of participation that substantially shapes perceptions of authority’ (2012:534-5). Speech, or what sociologists might call ‘voice’, is not only a vehicle to authority; it

is also a vital aspect of human civic engagement. As Habermas (1984) suggests, ‘the possibility of dialogue between presumptive equals is the basis of public and political life’ (cited in Salter, 2012 :26). His idea of ‘the public’ space, is of an arena in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. This concept has been usefully critiqued by Fraser (1990) amongst others, who notes that

discursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere was governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality. These functioned informally to marginalize women and members of the plebeian classes and to prevent them from participating as peers. (Fraser 1990: 63)

How do we explain women’s subdued voice and how does it relate to women’s experiences of safe spaces? Salter (2012) notes that ‘the power to dismiss, trivialise or silence the perspective of another is ... a specific dimension of masculine privilege that has an important role to play in the perpetuation of gendered inequality’ (2012:3). In the face of this ‘invalidation’ (Salter, 2012) of women’s voice women learn that self-silencing is a normative response. Swim et al. (2010) explore ‘self-silencing’ (proposed by Jack and Dill (1992) to understand women’s experiences of depression) in response to sexism. They note that, through processes of socialisation and direct experience of cultures in which women’s voices are unexpected and unwelcome, women are taught that their voice carries less authority and less validity than men’s, and some women respond by self-silencing. Of course, women’s responses are not uniform and can be influenced by their status (see, for example, Morris (2007) for a discussion of African American girls’ expressions of assertiveness and how teachers dampen it, as well as campaigns such as hollaback, an international crowd-sourced initiative aiming to expose and end street harassment (<http://www.ihollaback.org/>)).

The scope to engage in dialogue and interaction with others is, we argue, core to citizenship and personhood. This consideration of the fundamental importance of interaction - not simply speaking but also being heard and recognised - takes us into philosophical territory of what it means to be fully human, to be an agentic citizen engaging in civic life, as well as in personal relationships and interactions. Fraser, arguing for a ‘bifocal’ feminist politics which incorporates the politics of redistribution with the politics of recognition, argues for recognition of women ‘as

full partners in social interaction. Misrecognition ... means social subordination in the sense of being preventing from participating as a peer in social life' (Fraser, 2013:168 italics in original).

Experiencing public, private and virtual spaces as 'unsafe' combined with being (self) silenced may be conceptualised as constituting threats to 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991, developed from Laing) which Dupuis and Thorns (1998) describe as a sense of confidence and trust in the world, a security of being. Giddens emphasises the importance of the private realm for developing a sense of ontological security but scholarship about women's greater risk of violence, abuse, and control in the home than in public, unsettles such notions. Nonetheless the concept of 'ontological security' has some value for our consideration of women's experiences of safe spaces.

Scholars of ethnicity, nationalism, and belonging have explored the impact on 'ontological security' of 'banal racism', that is, 'the mundane, even routine forms of harassment experienced by migrants' (Noble, 2005: 111). For example, Skey (2010:719) points to 'the crucial link between recognition and belonging and the unequal relations of power that exist in the attribution and acceptance of identity claims.' Examining migrants' experiences of abuse and harassment in Australia, Noble (2005:117) points to the significant impacts of threats to 'ontological security' which 'serve to disenfranchise them from full participation in Australian civic life.' Drawing on this scholarship, we might use this concept to analyse women's experiences of a culture in which objectification, degradation and silencing of women constitute the 'wallpaper' of many spaces. Such experiences may threaten women's 'ontological security', their security of being in contemporary cultural spaces as diverse as schools, nightclubs, town centre, workplaces, virtual spaces, political arenas and homes.

Research about the gendered nature of space, routine abuse and harassment, and the use of public and virtual space to 'police' behaviours reveals women's negotiations with safety. While this work has been valuable in identifying what women are not 'safe *from*' and revealing the impacts on their engagements as citizens, the question of 'safe *to*' has been relatively neglected. If women were safe *from* routine harassment, abuse, and resulting fear, what would they be safe *to* do? How do they experience that 'safety *to*'? What is it about spaces that makes them 'safe'? In this paper we use qualitative data from women's experiences of women-only space to explore these questions. Women's accounts reveal their experiences of an environment where it is 'safe *to*' –

safe to engage in dialogue, to debate, disagree, challenge, learn; safe to express, to emote; safe to develop one's consciousness, to demonstrate one's creative talent, to fulfil one's potential. This conceptualisation of safety reveals its fundamental importance to ideas of freedom; it is only when we are 'safe from' that we can be free.

## **Methods and Analytical Approach**

This paper analyses data from a study of experiences of women-only space, specifically, the "North East Feminist Gathering" (NEFG12) held in Newcastle, in the North East of England. Over a weekend in October 2012, the NEFG offered a series of workshops, panels, creative and social spaces. It was advertised as 'for women by women' and was targeted at 'feminist, pro-feminist and femi-curious women of the region', including transgendered women (text from website: <http://www.nefeministgathering.com/the-programme.php> retrieved on 21 December 2013). The event aimed to provide space for women to 'learn practical skills to enable activism, practice activism, develop a feminist network' (handout from NEFG2013). It was created by a diverse group of women; voluntary and public sector workers, students, unemployed women, academics, community activists and small business-owners; disabled and non-disabled women; lesbian, bisexual and straight women and women of different ethnicities.

Three of the authors of this paper were involved in organising the NEFG12. All four of us engaged in the NEFG12 primarily as individuals in the community rather than as researchers. In as much as one ever drops entirely one's researcher identity and practices, we did not see ourselves as researchers as we helped organise NEFG12 or when we participated in the weekend. It was only after the Gathering, as we reflected individually and with others about what it meant to women and why it seemed to have been such a powerful experience, that we identified the scope for a post-hoc research project. This meant that we were not 'intimate insiders' (Taylor, 2011) during the event we researched, but the pre-existing relationships between researchers and some participants meant we *were* intimate insiders when we came to conduct the research a month or two afterwards. As Massaro (2014) notes, this required a break from the feminist tradition of reducing boundaries between researcher and researched; instead we engaged in 'boundary-

making'. We endeavoured to create boundaries during this process, for example, by refraining from expressing during the focus groups our views or experiences. In the environment of mutual respect and openness which the NEFG generated, we felt conscious that we were 'holding back' in focus groups and subsequent conversations which referred to the focus group discussions. But, given that those participants with whom we had pre-existing relationships were familiar with some of our opinions and views, it seemed important to reduce as much as possible the scope for our views to influence the discussions that were generating research data.

Boundaries were also created when we asserted our roles as researchers rather than as focus groups participants. For example, on a couple of occasions, while preparing to start the focus groups, participants chatted to some of researchers as if we were also attending as participants; the researcher reminded the participant our role on this occasion was as researcher, thereby drawing a distinction between us. The ethical demands of maintaining confidentiality in the context of intersecting relationships and roles created boundaries. We stringently maintained confidentiality by not referring to participants' focus group disclosures outside of the groups, and by not revealing inadvertently who had or had not chosen to take part in the research, even when participants themselves were speaking freely about the contributions made and the identity of the contributors. In fairly close-knit, local communities of activists, researchers inevitably encounter challenges such as these as they navigate their roles, relationships and ethical responsibilities.

Data were gathered from six focus groups. All attendees of the NEFG 2012 who had provided working email addresses (n=95 out of 115 attendees) were invited to participate; 30 (32%) responded positively. Mindful that focus groups work best when there are shared experiences and demographic characteristics (Morgan, 1997), we tried to match age groups and levels of support for women-only space by asking about these in our initial communication. Two groups included one woman who was involved in organising the NEFG and one group was comprised entirely of NEFG organisers, who were also younger women. To include the views of women who chose *not* to attend the NEFG 2012, we also contacted a local feminist group which we knew had discussed the NEFG on their Facebook page but from which few members had attended. We conducted a specific focus group for the three women from this network who chose to take part.

Of the 28 focus group participants who provided information (2 of the 30 participants did not), 27 defined themselves as 'white' and one as 'mixed white'. This relatively homogenous group reflects the ethnic composition of NEFG2012 participants; the North East region is one of the least ethnically diverse in the UK with 95% of the population declaring itself to be white in the 2011 Census<sup>iii</sup>. The history of feminist politics in the UK and beyond reveals tensions around Black and white women's engagement. This feature of the sample group raises the study's limitation in terms of addressing the views and experiences of Black and minority ethnic women, a topic to which we return in the Discussion. Women's ages ranged from 19 to 70 years. Three women defined themselves as disabled. Women self-defined as heterosexual (14), lesbian (6), bisexual (4), queer (1) while three chose not to answer or categorise themselves. Participants were not asked to categorise their social class status, but, judging from self-descriptions and references to their biographies, came from a mixture of working and middle class backgrounds. Work situations ranged from unemployed, retired or student, to working full or part time in education, health, creative industries, professions or the voluntary sector.

Each focus groups lasted 90-120 minutes and had three to seven participants, and a facilitator and observer from the research team. Focus groups explored women's expectations of the NEFG, experiences of it as a women-only space, and of other women-only space. The concepts of 'safety' and 'safe space' were spontaneously raised by participants and explored in each focus groups. Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research team read the transcripts and listened to the audio recordings separately and then discussed impressions, interpretations and inferences. During several 'analytical retreats', which we also audio-recorded, we discussed our approaches to the data and our analysis of it. Influenced by Mason's 'facet methodology', we conceived of our data as a cut gemstone with many facets which 'refract and intensify light, taking up the background, and creating flashes of depth and colour as well as patches of shadow' (2011:75) and honed in on data germane to safety. We found this approach encouraged us to use our 'skill, inventiveness, creativity, insight and imagination' (2011:77) as researchers, rather than adopting a more rigid, mechanistic approach which chops up the data to fit it into a series of codes. In the following sections we explore facets of safety.

### **Women's Experiences of 'Safe Space'**

In the following sections we present analysis of qualitative data about the concept of safety in experiences of women-only space. First, we present accounts of what women wish to be safe *from*; here, threats of sexual violence and harassment loom large. Women also referred to forms of dialogue which are antagonistic or disparaging of the intrinsically personal nature of feminist politics. In the second section, we present their accounts of how a safe space made them feel ‘safe *to*’ engage and participate more meaningfully than in other spaces. Here we explore the scope for safe space to enable women to engage, debate and interact – aspects which are considered fundamental to full civic engagement. We explore features of space that can make it ‘safe’ and argue that their accounts demonstrate fear and threats to safety limit personhood, while ‘safe’ environments enable freedom.

### ***Safe from Misogyny***

Participants’ accounts revealed ubiquitous risks of harassment and assault, particularly of a sexual nature, which impact their sense of safety. Their accounts reflect routine negotiations of safety and risk, energy expended to negotiate unsafe spaces, and contrasting experiences of a ‘freeing’ environment:

Moira<sup>iv</sup>: I was thinking about that kind of energy that takes women all the time to deal with that low-level and high-level shit that we get – and it could be just a look ... it could be a stare, it could worse than that – something about being in an environment that is physically and psychologically safe, I can just relax and I can just, you know, my head can work – I am not having to look over my shoulder... We all accommodate various levels of hostility at various times in this society as women. It takes a lot of energy.

Moira captured the insidious small and large threats permeating mainstream environments. Being physically unsafe was a strong thread amongst younger women but, it is important to point out that, even in a feminist, women-only space they were ambivalent about raising it. Rachel was particularly eloquent in the focus group but became hesitant and self-censoring when raising the issue of sexual assault, perhaps indicating that to mention it is to be a “killjoy” (Ahmed, 2010). Her faltering speech is worth reproducing in full to demonstrate her reluctance to raise this ‘sinister topic’:

Rachel: the Saturday night Open Mary<sup>v</sup> when the music was on and people were dancing, it struck me *how* different that was because I hadn't anticipated that. But I would have it in the back of my mind when I'm out, not always even conscious, but I definitely have it, of like, just like a flash in a second, like, I mean, rape basically, just for a second. Be safe, how are you getting home? And if someone's behind you I always think like, you know, and also I always, I don't know, this might sound strange but I feel the need to dance in like a sexualised way or something, that's quite the norm. And I was just having a really good time and kind of being really silly and dancing and then it kind of occurred to me that like I don't usually feel like that and that was something that I thought *markedly* was a fact of it being women's only space was, is, you know, without wanting to introduce a really sinister topic to the evening, is that I don't think there was any part of me that even subconsciously thought, like, sexual assault. Which, you know, I'm lucky that's never happened to me but like most women I live with the awareness it's something that *could* happen to me and I didn't feel like that there.

Experiencing an environment where the risk of men's violence is removed can throw into sharp relief one's (unconscious) self-protection strategies. As they physically experienced being in space they considered to be safe, women were struck by the awareness of its meaning and implications. Several younger women talked about suddenly realising at the social event that they did not need to take their drink with them to the toilet, a common strategy to avoid getting 'spiked'. Unlike older generations, today's young women are exposed to safety messages and actual or vicarious experiences of 'being spiked' with drugs so that men can sexually assault them (Brooks, 2014). While the discourses and realities about safety may change over time, the resulting behaviours become 'normalised' as part of women's negotiation of personal safety in cultures where misogyny proliferates to such an extent that it is astonishing to encounter spaces where such negotiation is not necessary.

Even when engaged in feminist activism, women who claim a space for themselves may experience the very abuse and hatred they seek to resist. Women from a local feminist group, who did not attend NEFG12 partly because of the barrage of criticism of women-only space by men in their group, reported previous responses to organising a feminist anti-violence event:

Serena: This goes back to the whole debate in our college when they made some sort of threats, like they were going to rape us and whatever ...I mean this guy wasn't to do with [the feminist group], they started apparently – it is hearsay or whatever- on their private men's-only Facebook group posted stuff about... Can I say stuff that's explicit?

Facilitator: yeah

Serena: That, shove their dick in our mouths, it would shut us up and we would stop talking about feminist stuff basically.

Convictions of perpetrators of *written* abuse (for an example from the UK, see R v John Raymond Nimmo and Isabella Kate Sorley, Sentencing remarks of Chief Magistrate (2014 23 January) challenge the idea that written communication is more innocuous than verbal interpersonal dialogue. Indeed, visual misogyny - the ubiquitous objectification of women's bodies in popular culture and marketing (Rosewarne, 2005) - can be seen as the backdrop or 'wallpaper' of 'everyday sexism' (Bates, 2014), a reminder of the ubiquitous threat to ontological security. The following extract suggests the wallpaper of everyday sexism is also a part of popular TV culture:

Lynn: I think even just like walking down the street you see adverts and it's like [pauses] you know what I mean like, general women being used to sell absolutely anything. There was nothing like that in [NEFG] that irritated me. I thought it was just such a safe space. I remember getting back on the Sunday night and my partner and his housemate had Southpark on and I just, I kind of stood there for two minutes and I said 'I'm going into the bedroom.' And I sat there and cried just cos there is nothing I can do about that.

Lynn seems to be articulating her visceral sense of the contrast between women-only space and space where mainstream culture dominates, including in the private realm of her own home. While the first is described as safe because it is free of the 'irritating' objectification and commodification of women, the latter, both on the streets and in her home, makes her despair. In both public and domestic arenas, dominant cultures objectify women and compromise their safety. These pervasive manifestations of oppressive cultures highlight the limitations of Giddens' focus on the private realm as a source of ontological security.

Unsafe spaces are also comprised of environments where women may be exposed to ‘triggers’ of victimisation. The term ‘trigger’ has emerged recently to refer to experiences which evoke difficult memories, particularly of violence and abuse. On feminist social media it is now commonplace to preface comments about violence and abuse with a ‘trigger warning’, suggesting that, as well as providing a forum for abuse and hatred, new social media have also facilitated awareness of the potentially profound consequences of violence and abuse. For some women, simply being in the company of men can trigger memories of abuse:

Susan: I kind of went there [NEFG12] thinking, having expectations that it would feel safe ...I think this is kind of a terrible thing to say but I think one reason I find women-only spaces, like, comfortable and safe is because as a child I suffered quite a lot of violence ...life-threatening violence threatened ...from a man. ...I think that, um, it kind of sounds stupid but I think on some unconscious level, cos of what happened when I was really young, there's always a bit more discomfort when there's men there.

Again, we see the reluctance, even in a feminist, women-only, ‘safe space’, to articulate experiences of abuse. Susan hesitates to name her experience of violence from a man, self-censors and disparages what she wants to communicate (‘terrible things to say’; ‘it kind of sounds stupid’). Perhaps her reluctance reveals a discomfort about universalising from her experience of one man; or a reluctance to be interpreted as ‘essentialist’; or a tension between naming a ubiquitous experience and ‘disclosing’ a personal trauma. Whatever the reason, her expectation is that a feminist women-only space will provide safety. Women’s responses to such triggers depend, in part, on the environment they are in. A ‘safe’ environment challenges the disavowal of victimisation (discussed by Baker, 2008, Phipps, 2014) and leaves women safe to choose whether to ‘disclose’ their victimisation.

Lynn: I think one thing that I found with organising [an event about violence against women] ...I was like, I kind of can't look like a victim ...I never mentioned anything, like I was asked and I flat-out lied that I hadn't been assaulted but in that space [NEFG12] I think it was kind of okay for me to admit it almost. I didn't feel it was something I had to hide in that space. Although the sad part of it is I felt that I didn't have to hide it because I knew I wouldn't have been the only one in that space that had been in my position.

‘Disclosure’ is another term that has common currency in feminism. We notice that the word is frequently used without reference to *what* is being disclosed, as if it is taken for granted that the disclosure is of violence and abuse. This seems to speak to both the prevalence and the symbolic significance of violence against women for some feminists, a significance which has been claimed and disputed as a grounds for feminist politics. The widespread experience of victimisation is pertinent to the politics of women-only space; any gathering of women is likely to include survivors of violence. A defining feature of safe space is the ‘acceptance’ of this personal nature of feminist politics<sup>vi</sup>:

Linda: It was kind of just an acceptance, yeah, this shit happens in women’s lives and there was no need to, you know, it wasn’t kind of an issue that needed to be debated or battled or whatever, it was just an acceptance from everybody that, ‘yeah this shit happens’ and you were able to talk about it and just be, just sharing that ...whereas if men had been there, there would have been that having to defend why it was an issue, blah blah. ...If men had been present, I really don’t think some of that conversation would have happened.

Linda alludes to a particular kind of destructive dialogue that happens in some spaces whereby views are met with conflictual challenge rather than recognition, as we discuss in the following section. This section has explored the dimensions of unsafe spaces for this sample of women. Their accounts reveal that unsafe spaces can be in public (for example, sexist advertising), at home (for example mainstream culture, or violence from a known man), or virtual (for example, on social media). These spaces are unsafe because of actual, anticipated, or vicarious threats or ‘triggers’ of men’s violence, harassment or objectification. In the following section, we analyse women’s accounts of what happens when these risks to safety, to ontological security, are removed, what they become safe *to* do, feel or be. ‘Safe space’ enables a different way of being, untrammelled by self-censorship, vigilance and defensiveness. It provides scope to explore one’s full humanity through thinking, speaking, listening, learning and being part of a community.

### ***Safe to be Fully Human***

Safety from routine abuse, degradation and marginalisation creates conditions for women to be fully human. Safe spaces were described as providing a kind of freedom to ‘be yourself’, to speak and be heard, to learn and develop cognitively, to be emotionally expressive. Safety was invoked

in terms of cognitive freedom or, as Pat put it, 'intellectual safety', typified by dialogue and debate.

Women frequently referred to safe space as enabling dialogue and debate which enabled learning and understanding. In this view, such debate requires listening, sharing and respecting; 'Just speaking out and expressing' (Linda). This creates 'an environment where you can still debate and still have differences in terms of your viewpoints about things but where it's not a personal attack in any way' (Heidi). This kind of constructive, respectful dialogue, where 'nobody's going to put you down' (Carol) creates a safe space to engage, learn and develop.

Cleo: Safety for me is not feeling scared to say what I feel called to say ...knowing that I am going to be listened to and respect[ed], and I felt that at the Gathering.

Responding to a question about why women described the space as safe, Clare made a direct connection between fear and this kind of cognitive safety:

Yes. I wonder whether it's because we live with a level of - I just used the word anxiety but actually the word is fear, isn't it? A level of fear of either expressing ourselves or speaking out, or voicing our real opinions on something.... And consequently we're looking for a situation where we can put down that fear and express ourselves freely, you know, have some space where it's okay to say what you really think, so long as other people are prepared to listen or, and so long as you're prepared to listen to other people as well who may or may not disagree with you, may or may not agree with you. It doesn't, it's not about everybody agreeing or disagreeing or, it's not about everybody having the same opinion, it's about being able to listen and share in a way that somehow in mixed company always ends up in a more combative scenario, you know somebody's got to be right and somebody's got to be wrong.

Contrary to notions of 'safe space' as 'being calm and cuddly and let's hug each other' (Emma), several participants described it as an arena for engaging in constructive disagreements. Others went further, to welcome the intrinsically challenging nature of women's engagements:

Emma: I don't, for me it's *not* about being safe. From *my* experiences of women's spaces often they can be more challenging in different ways. And it's something that

I welcome because I do feel that in women's spaces there is something about respect, so it doesn't actually matter that you're being challenged. ...So it might mean that I go away with things that I really need to think carefully about but I see that as a real positive that I get from women's spaces.

Safe space, then, far from suppressing conflict, can facilitate respectful exploration of conflict. In such an environment, the conflicting ideas can be more fully, deeply explored, leading to a richer level of engagement, understanding and self-development. That sense of safety is explicitly not about agreement, but about constructive respectful engagements:

Karen: For me, safety is not having to be responding to men, it is the safety to explore ideas further because anytime on Facebook I mention anything feminist you are back to the same base, crap argument that you've had 50 times and every man who challenges you thinks he is the first one and they get really pissed off if you don't respond to them. And for me that safe environment of being with women is, we want to do the PhD level talking here and it's safe to do it and I know that I can fully express and some women in the room might find difficulty with some of what I am saying but we can have a safe exchange about that ...So that safety is just push your debate and enrich each other in that kind of safe way.<sup>vii</sup>

These views challenge some scholarship that suggests that 'fear' and lack of safety may be conducive to learning (Stengel, 2010). While we agree that learning or consciousness-raising necessarily require an 'unsettling' of previously-held attitudes, beliefs and values, we note that our respondents defined 'unsafe' spaces as *limiting* rather than expanding their intellectual development. By contrast a sense of safety 'was really, like, it sort of freed you up to do, thinking about other things, not be worrying, you know whether you're safe' (Nicola).

Environments where 'trashing' or 'trolling' is common, such as on social media, are not conducive to constructive, rich debates and shared learning. By contrast, safe spaces are distinguished by shared values, a sense of solidarity and an absence of misogyny, where high ethical standards can be expected.

Sophie: I always thought, for me, a women-only space means a safe space. ...I feel like the ethics and principles around feminism is so high that I would have expected that whoever came along would have a very similar philosophy to me and [I] wouldn't expect any kind of abuse or dodgy play or [we] would have dealt with it en

masse [laughs] basically, so I had every confidence, thinking about it, that, yeah, that it would probably be a safe space.

For some, this sense of solidarity instilled confidence they would be defended and supported if they did encounter oppressive behaviour. For example, Rachel compared her experiences of university, where middle class students dominate and effectively silence her, to NEFG12 where ‘ I also thought if someone had said something bad, I thought everyone would have been on my side.’ Comments about feeling ‘backed-up’ at the Gathering, where there was some diversity across identities, indicate solidarity is achievable and valuable. However, this Gathering was less diverse in terms of ethnicity and, as challenges to ideas of solidarity have emerged particularly in relation to ethnicity (Carby, 1982, hooks, 1982), we return to this issue in the Discussion.

In safe environments where one does not fear personal attacks or malign challenges, the confidence to participate can blossom:

Karen: I am really bored of seeing how women respond around men and how differently they respond and, for me, a space that is women-only exhibits women’s potential. You really see how different it is and the longer you spend in the environment, the better it gets and I would like to think that it is a safe environment for us to explore ourselves as women in different ways and to practise being that confident. And I would hope that those spaces equip women with more confidence for later on for mixed environments but, to me, it is about seeing women be how they can be.

In safe spaces then, ‘women be how they can be’. They explore their potential, alternative ways of being, discovering who they are when their vigilance and defences are relaxed. Safety can mean having confidence to perform or to explore skills and talents. Making oneself visible in this way, taking up space and being on show is, inevitably, exposing. Several women referred to the idea of safety in relation to the social event at which women spontaneously performed dances, songs, poems, jokes and short stories. They mentioned the ‘freedom’ (Alison) and the ‘appreciative audience [so they] didn’t feel inhibited in any way’ (Clare), noting that if men had been there, ‘Women wouldn’t have done it, they wouldn’t have wanted to make themselves vulnerable and expose themselves in that kind of way’ (Maria).

‘Safe to’ also relates to safety to experience and express emotions. This ‘emotional safety’ was indicated in comments about being able to ‘be yourself’, and be emotionally expressive. For example, at a workshop about experiences of childbirth, Steph reported that

there was one woman who ... she just talked about a really emotional experience and then pretty much everybody in the room was crying... And I just thought, I think it was the most moving experience I've had.

In drawing on ideas about ‘emotional safety’, notions about freedom and personhood were invoked. Women talked about how, in this safe space, ‘It felt really open and honest, you could just be yourself’ (Linda). For some, freedom to ‘be yourself’ meant loosening heteronormative expectations and limitations:

Nicola: It was really, like it sort of freed you up to do, thinking about other things, not be worrying, you know whether you’re safe ...for those of us that are straight, it was a release from being on the meat market sort of thing because that's what it's like being a woman in public. It's like being born female sort of enters you into this competition that you can never leave. Are you going to be picked? And are you attractive? Are you attractive *enough*? And do you stay attractive? And you know, are you portraying in the right way? Are you dressing right, you know? Are you pretty and [a] slag or pretty but posh? [Laughter] I try really hard not to have this stuff but I have and I didn't have any of that in that space.

Several of these extracts refer to the idea that safety enables one *to be*. They suggest that a lack of authenticity, a degree of self-censorship and restraint feature in environments deemed unsafe. By contrast, safe spaces allow one ‘to be onself’. Safe spaces enable articulation of views, expression of one’s creativity and emotions, release from (hetero)normative assumptions and expectations. A consequence is a more advanced level of debate that can unsettle previously held views and generate learning and self-development in community with others. Feminist ‘safe’ spaces can provide both cognitive and emotional safety. In these environments, constructive, challenging, knowledagable interaction can flow, along with debate and disagreement. Emotional safety fostered by a supportive atmosphere enables free expression, where confidence can flourish and women can explore their potential and the ‘euphoric joy’ (Authors) of being fully human.

## Discussion

Scholarship about women and safety has explored the nature, experiences and impact of *threats* to women's safety (i.e., safe from); relatively little has explored what safety enables women to *do* or *to be* (i.e., safe to). Our analysis reveals that, in the conditions of safety provided by a feminist women-only space, women experienced cognitive and emotional freedom that enabled exploration of their potential as human beings. Scholarship about violence illuminates its restrictions on women's capacity to be fully human; Stark (2007:218) highlights how 'coercive control' by a male partner 'erode[s] a woman's personhood' while Schechter (1982:317) argues that '[t]he fear of violence robs women of possibilities, self-confidence and self-esteem. In this sense, violence is more than a physical assault; it is an attack on women's dignity and freedom.' In addition women's personhood may be compromised by experiences of routine risks to their ontological security in conditions of patriarchal control where their identity as a member of a group ('women'; 'survivors') or as an individual who speaks out, is at constant risk of being devalued. Some respond by self-silencing or self-censoring; their development as human beings (through intellectual, creative, emotional expression) and their civic engagement are thwarted. The experience of women-only space provides 'time out' to identify the routine nature of such fears, risks, experiences and responses. In a feminist women-only space, being safe from these constraints, being free to think and to speak out enabled women to 'discover' themselves, their views and opinions. Freedom to speak and to debate in a supportive yet challenging environment was in marked contrast to the destructive mainstream environments where women's claims are often overlooked, demeaned, and/or ridiculed. Cognitive and emotional expression became an important part of feeling fully human.

However, lest we overplay the importance of speech in correcting social and political inequalities, we acknowledge the power of public discourse to shape speech. Examining public discourse around 'honour'-related crime in Sweden, Carabine (2013:6) 'draw[s] attention to the problematic side of speech and the underlying assumption that speaking up leads to liberation... Speech can be formed by regulatory, hegemonic discourses whereby making your voice heard partly mirrors the hegemonic ideals.' Speech *sui generis* is not emancipation; hegemonic discourses construct and co-opt speech (Phipps, 2014) as well as challenges to those hegemonies. In relation to this

research, the hegemony is composed of patriarchal forces which dismiss women's attempts at speech as 'irrelevant', 'personal', 'subjective' or 'particular'. By contrast, feminist women-only environments can provide a counter-cultural space to challenge such hegemonic discourses.

Speech can also be co-opted by claims to 'speak for'. Scholarship exploring intersecting systems of oppression challenges this tendency in white women's feminism (Collins, 1999, Mohanty, 1988) and, given the low representation of BME women in our sample group, we do not claim the analysis here is relevant to all women. Moreover, this research raises certain questions: do feminists of diverse ethnicities share views and experiences of feminist women-only space? If solidarity, support and some common ground are vital for women-only space to provide safety, does anticipation of 'banal racism' and political disputes limit the scope for diverse women to share safe space? How can women-only spaces incorporate intersecting identities and challenge intersecting systems of oppression? Our data suggest solidarity across differences *is* possible, albeit in temporary conditions; research about the scope for solidarities and commonalities across intersections would challenge the divisive tendencies of 'the depoliticizing and atomizing logic of late capitalism and neoliberalism' (Phipps, 2014:67).

This exploration of the meaning of safety – incorporating safe *from* and safe *to* – contributes to debates about education. While the gender studies classroom is often portrayed as 'safe space', some scholars challenge this in relation to women of colour (hooks, 1994, Kishimoto and Mwangi, 2009). Stengel (2010), focusing on teaching for gay, lesbian and bisexual students, challenges the claim that 'safe spaces' in education are progressive or constructive, arguing that some intellectual danger is a necessary component of education. Similarly, do Mar Pereira (2012) borrows from Boler (1999) the notion of 'pedagogy of discomfort', to argue 'it can generate a *critical engagement with the world and one's position within it*, potentially leading to *individual and social change*' (do Mar Pereira, 2012 :131. Italics in original). Undoubtedly, the process of reflecting on, challenging and developing one's world view can be unsettling and upsetting but ultimately productive. We argue that these feelings are not comparable to feelings of *fear*, as expressed by women in this research. To cast these fearful experiences as a productive, desirable state would misrepresent them. Rather women's experiences of this fear are more likely to be of the 'flight or fight' variety, more visceral, instinctive, profoundly disturbing experiences which paralyse and limit scope to express one's personhood. We suggest that we pay attention to the

nuances represented in the distinctions ‘safe from’/‘safe to’ and ‘safety’/‘fear’ to better understand experiences and meaning of safety and its absence.

However, we are also mindful of the limitations of the concept of safety. Contemporary discourses about women, men, violence and abuse draw heavily on ideas of safety and focus implicitly on ‘safe from’. For example criminal justice discourses which aim to make places and people safe from violence also draw on notions of women’s inherent ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’. Set against the more liberational aims of ‘freedom’ as expressed by the women in this research, such discourses are revealed as limited and unambitious in their scope. Safety is one aspect of freedom, a necessary requirement for full personhood, but hardly an end in itself.

This research also points to the importance of ‘recognition’ in women’s achievement of full personhood. Experiences of threats to their ontological safety – through risks to physical safety, being misrecognised, or having one’s views devalued as ‘irrelevant’ – restrict their freedom to be fully human. By contrast the feminist women-only space enabled mutual recognition, despite differences. The sense of being worthy of respect or esteem, expressed through and enabling civic interactions, along with freedom from violence and abuse, are foundational to being fully human, for engaging as agentic civic beings. Moreover, experiencing an absence – of misogyny, sexism - can throw into sharp relief its features and impacts, thereby intensifying the recognition of oppressive practices as pervasive, powerful and normalised.

While our research teases out the distinction between ‘safe from’ and ‘safe to’, it also raises an important question: is ‘safe to’ predicated on ‘safe from’? The circumstances of this experience of ‘safe space’ suggest that temporary release from routine threats to one’s safety, can enable full personhood to flourish. However, while participants in this research reflected positively on space characterised by an absence of men, we do not wish to reify the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ or to indicate that man=danger and woman=safety. Indeed, participants reported negative experiences of other women-only spaces (such as mothers’ groups and school sports teams). This indicates the importance of considering the specific conditions and process of creating spaces (The Roestone Collective, 2014) that are experienced as ‘safe’; we argue safety was facilitated by feminist practices such as active listening, respectful and affirming exchanges, and honesty (Authors, forthcoming). It was these conditions that created the ontological safety essential to the

expression and embodiment of full personhood. This analysis points to the need for further exploration of the (gendered) context, meaning and experience of safety, particularly in its relation to the capacity for personhood and civic engagement.

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<sup>i</sup> In this paper we use the term 'women', now a hotly contested concept that, in some debates, is qualified by the term 'cis', to distinguish between those women designated women at birth who feel 'at home' in that gender and those whose preferred gender does not match their designated gender. The paper does not address trans women's experiences of space or the politics of trans inclusion in 'women-only' activities, both of which are important areas for exploration of ideas of gendered experiences of safety. Data for this article stem from a 'women-only' event which was trans-inclusive; trans women were invited to participate in the subsequent research but none participated. Other research shows that trans women articulate different concerns and experiences of safety (see, for example

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Cavanagh, 2010) and explores how the ‘trans’ identification challenges the categories of male/female, men/women (see, for example, Browne et al, 2010; Lim and Brown, 2009 and Hines, 2007)

ii Despite the mild aims of ‘women on banknotes’ campaign (in comparison to, for example, campaigns for equal pay or to ‘reclaim the streets’), responses to it suggest online abusers do grasp the importance of the symbolic representation of women and the challenge it poses to the contemporary gender order.

iii Available at <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-ethnicity.html>

iv Participants’ names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

v The ‘Open Mary’ was the evening social event, the NEFG version of an Open Mic, so-called as ‘there were no Mikes in the room’.

vi During the planning of the NEFG, the organising group returned to this theme repeatedly. Women who wanted the NEFG to be open to men argued that women-only space was necessary only for discussions about specific topics, typically, sexual violence, gynaecological issues and pregnancy, all topics related to women’s *bodies*. Others argued that feelings about experiences of violence and abuse do not emerge only in discussions about bodies but influence and intersect with wider debates about oppression, equality, femininity, masculinity and feminism. They argued that seemingly innocuous things – a particular smell, piece of music, type of clothing, turn of phrase – may act as triggers. Rather than being confined to bodily matters, experiences of violence and abuse can pervade all aspects of survivors’ lives. The process of articulating this argument was painful for some survivors, who may not have been ready to ‘disclose’ their experiences but whose experiences gave them an insight into victimisation that they felt was pertinent to the debate about women-only spaces.

vii It was clear Karen referred to ‘PhD’ not in the formal academic sense but as a metaphor for intelligent debate amongst well-informed people.