

Does YUSU need a men's representative?

By [Kate Marshall](#)

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Keele University have a women's representative. "They work to ensure that the needs of students who define as a woman are represented," states their website. Like other universities and the NUS itself, women's reps and officers vital, to defend the needs of self-defining women in the face of the sexism structured into our society. This is not up for debate. What is, however, is Keele University's other gender rep position: the men's rep.

The men's rep job description is identical to the women's rep, but for self-defining men. However, their role must be fundamentally different. While discrimination against women is systematic and embedded, sexism against men is a far smaller problem. In principle, of course, prejudice against any gender is wrong, but in practice it is undeniable that, simply put, women have it worse.

However, that is not to say the position is worthless. The issue of high suicide rates and mental health stigma is a particular point of concern for men, alongside problems such as lad culture and rape culture. Having someone to campaign against these issues is definitely worthwhile, and allows women's reps - who have, after all, more to do for gender equality - to concentrate on women.

However, all of the above concerns are created by the same culture and causes. High suicide rates and mental health stigma stem from a belief that expressing emotions, discussing them and needing help with them is 'feminine', and for a man to be feminine is bad. Both lad culture and rape culture are, broadly speaking, caused by the dehumanisation of women and entitlement to their bodies. These, and most other prejudices that men face, actually originate in misogyny, and it is vital that a men's rep recognises that.

Keele University is clear: their men's rep position is there to compliment and support the women's rep, not to work in opposition. The problems faced by women, though they rightly have priority, do not detract from those faced by men. Similarly, there are huge problems faced specifically by men who are members of other minority groups, such as black men, and an intersectionalist approach to those issues is vital. So the officer could do a lot of good - but he should not have the same status as a women's rep, and should never take precedence over her.

It is understandable that women are wary. Movements such as Men's Rights Activism and 'meninism', while both ostensibly grounded in the same reasoning as a men's representative, have largely turned into an opposing and violent force against women's liberation. A product of privilege is the idea that your concerns are central, and that you are entitled to speak over others; championing men only is dangerous because of this. I can only hope that candidates will be carefully screened.

Ultimately, though, a men's rep there to 'ensure that the needs of students who define as a men are represented', is unnecessary. Women are underrepresented in student and national politics. Last year I counted, and only six of the 21 Russell Group student union Presidents identified as female. Our own

university had not a single candidate this year, just one of nine last year, and, in the YUSU Debates, we have seen the harassment female candidates face. Men's voices are already being heard; it is still women's that need championing.

If Keele will insist on having a men's representative, they are welcome to. But if their motive is gender representation, I would ask that they have a non-binary representative as well, at the very least to fight against the erasure they are currently perpetuating.



4 comments

Please stop beating democracy. It's already hurting.

1 Apr '15 at 5:57 pm

Good lord, where do I even begin? First of all, allow me to do something that any good journalist would have done and provide some factual context for this article:

(1) Every college at York elects a men's representative in the form of a male welfare officer; there is already an understanding at York that when it comes to welfare, a voice to represent the interests of the male student body is important. At the union-level, we have a welfare officer whose remit is gender-blind.

(2) Keele had a debate on the worth of the men's representative petition at KeeleSU's 2014 Annual General Meeting. After proposals to abolish the position were raised, a motion was overwhelmingly carried requiring the KeeleSU to either retain the position of men's rep, or abolish both positions to amalgamate them into the single position of Gender Equality Representative.

Having said that, I'm really just appalled at the author's attack on the democratic principles that underpin and legitimise the existence of student unions. To your credit you at least recognise the potentially positive role that a men's representative can play both in women's liberation, and in improving male-oriented welfare services and campaigns, which is good. I am sure our hard-working male welfare representatives will be heartened.

What disturbs me is your assertion that the male representative "should not have the same status as a women's rep, and should never take precedence over her". They absolutely should have the same status. They are both directly elected representatives of the student body; they have a mandate to represent their constituencies, and a duty to realise that mandate to the best of their ability. It is a basic principle of representative democracy that all representatives should be entitled to fair and equitable opportunities to speak for the people they represent - if they aren't, then their constituents are being discriminated against. If you have a men's representative and a women's representative, whilst on some issues it will of course be completely reasonable for their colleagues to give weight to the views of one above the other, they should certainly have the same status.

And I am sure you will no doubt protest that that's somehow sexist (even though I struggle to see how advocating for equality is sexist), that it's patriarchal, but the reality is affording representatives equal status is a protective measure - not a harmful one. If we allow those basic principles of democracy to be compromised, then how do we ensure that women will always be represented, or LGBT people, or BAME, or the international students? What if one day a union decides "we should downgrade the status of the women's officer, we feel like X or Z deserves a bigger say in things these days"? Having those democratic principles enshrined in the constitutional fabric of our democracy, having them as fundamentals to the process that we all must simply accept, protects all sides from being pushed out of the process. Any healthy democracy must protect all people against the tyranny of the majority; that applies to student unions, too.

On the point of MRAs or meninists being elected - well whilst I share your distaste for these movements, so what? The burden in a democratic system is on the rest of us to prove these people wrong and keep

them out of office. We don't say 'you kind of suck, so we've decided you don't get to do anything'. The BNP had a very good chance of winning a seat in Barking in 2010. We didn't tell the good people of Barking that we were abolishing their MP, did we? No – other candidates ran and made the case against Nick Griffin (and bloody convincingly as well), and the BNP were routed. But Nick Griffin was entitled as a British citizen to seek office, just as you or I are as union members. If we had a men's representative and someone who subscribed to the MRA or meninist perspective sought election to the office, then it'd be up to the opposition to those positions to go out there and fight for the alternative. Even if no one else ran, we still have mechanisms in place to reject unopposed candidates (voting RON).

You also say that "I can only hope that candidates will be carefully screened" at Keele. What a terrifying thought – we ALL have the right to run for election to our union as members; that is a vital right in a democracy. We cannot screen candidates by political opinion; we cannot say 'you can only run for office if you agree with us'. Some governments you wouldn't like very much are very fond of doing that – Iran spring to mind, where would be candidates (especially women) are pre-screened quite severely. We don't and mustn't have a rule saying that only self-identified feminists can run for women's officer; we absolutely cannot screen similarly for the men's officer. Anyone is entitled to put forward their platform and stand for election it; we let the voters decide who is too ridiculous or dangerous for office. That's how democracy works. Political considerations must never usurp democratic principles.

You've written things that I agree with you on before but on this your views are appalling anti-democratic; they are an attack on the very values that have made the pursuit of equality possible. And do you know what's brilliant? Nouse has printed them. Nouse lets you advance this view for all of York to consider. It's funny how you so eagerly and readily take advantage of your rights but you would deny the same opportunities to your opposition. I've got to say that before reading this, I saw no need for a men's representative at the union level. After reading it, I'm more convinced that if you oppose it so much, maybe it might be a good way to shore up our democracy.

[▲ Report](#)

Kate Marshall

2 Apr '15 at 9:34 pm

A male welfare officer is fundamentally different to a men's rep. As I made clear, women's reps are needed because we live in a patriarchy. Creating a men's rep implies that they face equal problems.

It is not enough for an office to be gender-blind, because that ignores the particular difficulty faced by people because of their genders. Ignoring differences between genders on a matter of principle is totally unhelpful, and also has the convenient benefit of ignoring gender-based oppression entirely. A Gender Equality Representative has the same problem. Women need to be enabled to liberate themselves. Take a look at arguments against the 'colourblind' viewpoint for analogous elucidation on that point.

If KeeleSU want a men's rep, they can by all means have a men's rep. I acknowledged that they're doing it right. But my reasoning for prioritising the women's rep is clearly outlined. She has bigger battles to fight.

"It is a basic principle of representative democracy that all representatives should be entitled to fair and equitable opportunities to speak for the people they represent" – as I pointed out, men are already represented everywhere else. If politics had any kind of representative gender balance already, your point might have had some weight. The tyranny of the majority is the exact reason we currently need the women's rep but not the men's rep.

On an issue-by-issue basis, of course members of one gender are more informed, but on gender liberation generally, women need it more. Is it not, therefore, discrimination against men, to not give them an equal gender liberation platform.

You bring up the idea of comparing women's reps to LGBT and BME reps. You conflate this with comparing women's and men's reps, which is entirely different. Playing oppressions off against each other is wrong. Comparing oppressed and non-oppressed groups is not. Re-envisage your argument in favour of a white students' rep or a straight rep.

At no point did I advocate banning anyone from running, nor dismantling the men's rep office because of a bad candidate, which is what your BNP analogy implies.

Sorry you seem to think Nouse is promoting my views, but you are in the opinion section.

 Report

I thought we talked about beating democracy.

3 Apr '15 at 11:41 am

At the college level we lack women's officers - indeed, we lack liberation officers in general. But we do have welfare officers that represent liberation groups and represent their constituents within liberation committees. The welfare system at the college level feeds into the liberation system at the union-level; they do not neatly separate out. These officers are directly involved in and play a significant role in providing welfare services. More to the point, they do not exist solely for liberation purposes - our Women's Officer is clearly defined in the bye-laws as having responsibility also to represent the female student body, and to assist Women's Committee in organising both liberation events and service provision. It is a multi-faceted role and to imply anything otherwise does not give proper credit to the work of the office-holders. Representation is not the same as liberation - all groups require representation; not all require liberation.

You are also constantly trying to shift the terms of the debate rather than engaging with the criticism I have of your position. Your defence against the creation of a men's representative is all well and good, but it was not the creation of a men's representative I argued for, though I expressed sympathy toward the end. My point was there if a men's representative were to exist then it must exist on certain conditions; that it must be equally representative as a matter of principle. You believe democratic principles must bend to your political considerations, no matter how noble they are - I believe that our democratic principles must stand above all considerations to make sure they are above reproach and manipulation.

That means that IF and where and men's representatives exist, their representative functions must be equally respected. A men's representative does not have to fulfil a liberation role in the same way, but would provide a service provision and representative role. In that sense, they must be afforded equal status by the constitution and bye-laws simply by virtue of the fact that student body has determined they should exist; if they are not, again, how do we stop our liberation officers from being downgraded in the future on their representative measures? You can say all you want to "because liberation is important" - but if liberation is important, then clearly not everyone agrees with you! That means that we must have protective measures in place in our constitutional fabric - but for those measures to work, they must be in place for everyone. Thus if a union has made the determination it will have a men's representative, it must treat that representative equitably and fairly on par with other representatives. If it does not, then we leave ourselves open to a situation later down the line where other groups that really do need the dedicated representation might similarly come under attack, but will have no recourse to constitutional or legal precedent to defend their position.

This was my point when I "compared" women's reps to LGBT or BAME; that such a system leaves all liberation groups vulnerable to assault if, God forbid, popular opinion ever shifted against their existence. There was no attempt to "play oppressions off against each other" (what on Earth does that even mean?). Your very own beliefs confirm the need for higher standards in our democracy than political opinions allow. If men's representation is so overwhelming, then surely there is the potential for it to threaten the existence of the women's officer if opinion were ever to move

profoundly against the institution's existence – in which case all of the arguments in the world for liberation are probably not going to get us very far in saving the position. What might, however, is an appeal to a higher constitutional principle – the notion that representation of sectional interests in service provision and liberation is a vital and vibrant part of our democracy. We have thus far decided at this union that a men's representative is not required, but if we were, the same principles and defences would have to apply. Your comparison to straight or white reps is blatantly nonsensical and an attempt to shift the debate, rather than engage with it, to make it sound like I am out of touch with your readers; by your own admission – even if we see them as being rooted in misogyny – there are issues that impact men in our society. There are not particularly issues that impact straight people or white people in a comparable way, both groups constitute a significantly larger numerical majority rendering the need for sectional representation on its own merits moot, and the ludicrousness of having such positions is self-apparent. Their existence would not stand up to a legal test for defending minority interests – a men's representative might, however, for some of the reasons you yourself outlined.

As for banning candidates for running – well, then the burden is now on you to tell us what you mean by saying candidates should “carefully screened”. You have failed to do so in your first defence which, given how offended you seem by the notion, seems to suggest to me you did very much mean that and now realise how unworkable an idea it is. You clearly did not mean to imply “screened” by the voters, because your very fear is that the voters will not pick the right candidate – so either you believe that they should be screened out, or that the student union itself should be involved in campaigning against them. If you do not mean this, then perhaps you should be rather clearer in your articles in future, because the only way I can possibly interpret “screening” candidates is to determine selectively who is eligible to seek office on the basis of political opinion. You certainly were concerned that bad candidates would undermine the legitimacy of a men's representative and the rationale for its existence – you described some movements as an “opposing and violent force” whose representation might be “dangerous”, and it was for this reason you wanted candidates to be “screened”. That does not sound like a vote of confidence in either the electorate or the democratic process to me.

On your concluding point, I said printed, not promoted – and you have missed the point entirely. Even opinion pieces are still ‘printed’ by the consent of the editor. The point is that Nouse have let you write a comment piece, that they have allowed you to expound your views on their pages, which represents an exercise of your rights as a participant in our democracy. That rights comes from the same set of rights that you seemed in your article rather less keen on others having.

Do not shift the terms of the debate and try to reconstruct my argument as though it is desperately pushing for the existence of a men's representative; to do so merely reaffirms in my mind that you have difficulty defending your position in a serious and rigorous fashion.

[▲ Report](#)

Kate Marshall

3 Apr '15 at 3:02 pm

You answer your own question. You acknowledge that while the women's rep must champion liberation as well as offering services, a men's rep need only do the latter. Both roles, I agree, should have equal support in the provision of services. The difference that I highlighted and continue to highlight is the liberation issue, which you acknowledged. This extra dimension to the women's rep role is why it needs greater support and precedence on par with BME and LGBTQ reps.

I have still at no point said that KeeleSU should abolish the position. They have democratically elected for it, and that's fine by me, and the role is doing good as far as I can see. I disagree with some of their decisions, such as the lack of a non-binary rep, but I am absolutely not contesting their right to make them.

I am having trouble seeing your point as to how criticising a rep of a non-oppressed group on the grounds that they represent a non-oppressed group could threaten the reps of oppressed groups.

Thank you for explaining to me what I meant when I wrote my own article. I am sorry that you misunderstood what I meant by hoping for careful screening. I hereby acknowledge that I am a human being who makes mistakes.

Nouse published my opinion piece. If you have a problem with them doing so, take it up with them. You talk about 'rights' - I have no 'right' to have my opinion printed. I have the right to freely express my opinions by my own means and not be prosecuted for them. Those who are or support men's reps have the same right. What I am disagreeing with is the student union placing their voice on an equal level to women's reps.

[Report](#)

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