

York Union Review: The decriminalisation of prostitution would be a disaster

By [Nathalie Taylor](#)

Friday 16 October 2015



The panel: Dr Catherine Hakim, Laura Lee, moderator Lisa Rumbold, Fiona Broadfoot and Julie Bindel. Image: James Hostford

The York Union's latest event, on the decriminalisation of prostitution, featured a decidedly diverse panel. Arguing against decriminalisation were former sex worker Fiona Broadfoot, and famous (and controversial) feminist writer Julie Bindel. Against the motion were Laura Lee, a campaigner for sex workers rights, and Dr Catherine Hakim, a social scientist.

No voting took place, with the focus instead being on a constructive discussion, though vestiges of a debate style persisted. Something out of the ordinary was the placement of security on the door. This was, the organisers said, in direct response to comments made on the University of York Feminist Society Facebook page promoting heckling of Ms Bindel (who has in the past made controversial remarks seen as transphobic).

“
The room could not have been more still than when Broadfoot declared “I speak for dead girls”

”
During the introductory speeches, very clear themes emerged. Bindel and Broadfoot advanced an argument for the illegality of purchasing sex acts and operation of brothels. It was heavily emphasised that prostitution was a male dominated issue, with the fault lying with their inability to control their actions and desires

An interesting switch of the traditional stance of focusing on women as victims, it allowed debate as to the

cause and potential reasons for the sex industry. Moreover, discussion of the whole industry and whether or not its prevention was possible was also on the table.

Opposing views came from Laura Lee who felt that decriminalisation of the industry would restore dignity and allow justice for those mistreated in the industry. Her emphasis on safety for sex workers was compelling. The views of Lee and Broadfoot, both of whom based their opinions on personal experience, were able to show the potentially tragic side of the industry and as such why discussions and attempts to solve these issues are essential. The room could not have been more still than when Broadfoot declared “I speak for dead girls”, nor when Lee listed the suffering of those she knew of.

In conversation with Lee after the event, she stated that the industry either made or broke people and fortunately in her case she felt the former to be true. Such differing experiences were always going to alter opinions and the outcomes these two women wished from the discussion.

“
All panellists agreed that improving safety was paramount but no concrete solution was provided

”
A more statistical approach was adopted by Dr Catherine Hakim, whose conclusions were rooted in her book *Honey Money*, as well as a recent study undertaken for the Institute for Economic Affairs. In her eyes, the purchase of sex workers was for more than the sexual acts that they perform. Beauty and other desirable traits were all part of what she described as women’s “erotic capital”.

Her opinion was that the sex industry would never disappear from the world. Male demand for sex being perpetually higher than women, the best answer would be decriminalisation. A less emotive, more clinical argument didn’t seem to fully carry the room, particularly compared to the more involved and harrowing perspectives found elsewhere.

Obvious disagreements did occur throughout the evening. This became especially apparent in the question and answer section, which followed the initial speeches. The preferred model which the panellists wished to adopt was one of high contention. Those against decriminalisation were advocates of the Nordic model, whilst the other two panellists suggested a more liberal model such as that of New Zealand (or preferred the lethal deterrents to violence provided in China). All panellists agreed that improving safety was paramount but no concrete solution was provided.

Questions from the floor fell into two categories. The educated provided an interesting platform for further discussion, such as questions on alternative sex work systems and preventing the issue from simply moving abroad. However, some questions were merely ill-informed and obviously pre-decided without listening to the panel during the discussion. To my right, Nouse’s Politics Editor was seen to wince at one best summarised as “won’t someone think of the children?”

On occasion the debate did get heated. Denigration of the uncaring attitude taken towards sex workers by police in somewhat riper language raised a few smiles. Despite the occasionally deeply intense disagreements, the consensus on protection seemed to foster a certain amount of fellow feeling between Lee and Bindel.

Less conducive to sophisticated and intellectual argument were Broadfoot’s comments about sex workers being like “pieces of meat”, not long after Lee had explicitly stated how degrading such comparisons were. Despite defending her opinion, such language being used by a fellow panellist obviously caused annoyance to Lee and a muted disapproval from the audience.

The issue of how well paid the industry is was also hotly contested. Lee referred to “savvy business women”, and Hakim advocated the short term benefits of such well-paid work to graduates.

This stood in stark contrast to Broadfoot and Bindel, who were openly disgusted by such suggestions.

Bindel even accused Hakim of “making up” her figures, and restated this in conversation following the event. Despite these moments of intense dispute and emotion, the debate remained overwhelmingly respectful, slightly to the surprise of all.

The event was well-handled by the York Union, especially in light of the potential controversy and threats. Such tact and maturity allowed for a predominantly smooth discussion on such critical issues. All sides being able to put educated and interesting views across. The fact that no solid conclusions were reached illustrates the complexity and emotive nature of the issues discussed. It would have been impossible to leave without a much clearer understanding of the issue- and of the high, human cost of inaction.



16 comments

Laura

17 Oct '15 at 12:52 pm

Comments about heckling were also made on the LGBTQ and women’s committee Facebook groups. Not just the feminist society.

[▲ Report](#)

Julie

17 Oct '15 at 10:26 pm

Yeah, one of the LGBTQ officers posted about it. As did the Women’s officers. Good thing too! It’d be pretty disappointing if they welcomed openly transphobic people to the uni with open arms? Heckling may sound a bit aggressive but it’s nothing compared to Bindel’s transphobia. If, say, a white supremacist had been asked to speak don’t you think people might kick up a fuss? It shows we have a massive way to go before people will actually take LGBTQ/women’s issues seriously.

[▲ Report](#)

Nick

18 Oct '15 at 12:00 am

Allow students to come to their own conclusions, and confront said views directly on campus if they feel the need to. Making threats so event organisers almost feel forced to cancel is stupid. Shutting down the debate is not the same as winning it.

[▲ Report](#)

Ashley

18 Oct '15 at 1:16 pm

There were no ‘threats’. I would like to emphasise that calling what we were doing ‘threatening’ is at best a complete lie.

[▲ Report](#)

Julie

19 Oct '15 at 12:15 pm

Yeah, if anyone has actually read what was posted in WomCom, the Women’s officers literally said,

“we hope that those of you attending the event will not only bear this information [Bindel’s transphobia, Islamophobia etc] in mind when listening to the debate, but actively question and call out her bigoted views whenever possible.”

Nobody was threatening anyone. If anything, it was encouraging free speech lol!

[Report](#)

Nick

19 Oct '15 at 2:05 pm

Interesting. These were the words posted on the Feminist Society page, by a certain part-time officer:

“Julie Bindel, a trans-exclusionary and sex-worker exclusionary radical feminist, will be part of a talk at the York Union this coming Thursday. I only found out about this last night and it’s probably too short notice to prepare some kind no-platforming petition (as Manchester SU did earlier in the year). As far as I can, the best course of action would be lots of us booking tickets for this event and heckling? Would others be up for this? It’s very relevant to feminism and LGBTQ liberation anyway.”

[Report](#)

Ayex

19 Oct '15 at 4:55 pm

If you watch any parliamentary debate, heckling is hardly unusual. In any case, Bindel shouldn’t expect the audience to stay silent when she is insulting, demeaning or erasing vast swathes of them.

[Report](#)

Yawn

17 Oct '15 at 1:33 pm

More compelling coverage of current events from Nouse

[Report](#)

Andrew

17 Oct '15 at 2:52 pm

Fascinating debate - well done YU for hosting it

[Report](#)

Ari

17 Oct '15 at 4:51 pm

Is door security necessary because someone posted they’re going to heckle? If a physical threat is made is one thing—but this seems unnecessary waste of Union funds. Seems a bit oversensitive on the part of Julie B. If she can’t take dissent why is she debating?

[Report](#)

Ashley

17 Oct '15 at 5:28 pm

This is a very weaselly account of the event, particularly in it’s spectacular sidestepping of Bindel’s bigotry in a half-hearted side comment. Also hilarious is your description of the posts regarding going to the event to ‘heckle’ (which was defined in the discussion as challenging Bindel on her views) as threats. I suspect that, had there not been that discussion in FemSoc/LGBTQ/WomNet then you would probably not have even discussed Bindel’s transphobia, given how easily you were willing to let that one go.

Other than those laughable elements, this is a very long, tedious article bereft of humanity and

independent thought.

[Report](#)

Steve

18 Oct '15 at 12:15 am

You presumably weren't at the event. It was a panel discussion on the decriminalisation of prostitution. There wasn't even one question from the audience about Bindel's sick views on transgender people - well done FemSoc/LGBTQ/WomNet for really putting the issue on the agenda..

[Report](#)

Ashley

18 Oct '15 at 12:20 pm

Nah, I wasn't. Probably because I suffer from chronic pain and I had been in Parliament earlier this week, so I wasn't up to standing up to a transphobe. Other than that, your comment fails to engage with anything I said, so well done!

[Report](#)

martin dufresne

20 Oct '15 at 10:14 pm

Bindel's alleged "transphobia" is a joke she cracked more than ten years ago and for which she has often apologized since. This is a red herring brought up time and again to try and discredit he radical critique of patriarchy and, specifically, the sexexploitation industry. It is sad that a comments website can be used to smear someone as we are seeing above.

[Report](#)

Marcia

21 Oct '15 at 10:19 pm

God forbid PEOPLE express OPINIONS.

"Sexploitation" is a judgemental and whorephobic term. Sex workers are our allies in the liberation movement and should be allowed to define their needs, not be talked down to.

[Report](#)

Anonymous

23 Nov '15 at 8:58 pm

Notable that no one seems to have objected to Bindel's talk about putting men "in some kind of camp" - the "right" kind of bigotry???

[Report](#)

Most Read **Discussed**

1. [What is the difference between tax evasion and tax avoidance?](#)
2. [Review: Little Mix - LM5](#)
3. [Penalty for submitting work up to an hour late halved](#)
4. [UK government in contempt of Parliament ahead of key Brexit vote](#)
5. [How to depose a Conservative leader](#)

6. [Led Astray - The Case Against Greta Van Fleet](#)

Write for Nouse Politics

[Get in touch with the editors](#)

[Join the Facebook group](#)

More in Politics

[UK government in contempt of Parliament ahead of key Brexit vote](#)

[How to depose a Conservative leader](#)

[Aufwiedersehen: Merkel plans her departure](#)

[US turnout surges in Midterms](#)

[Trans-Atlantic spats overshadow Centenary](#)

[Up to a million Muslims imprisoned by China](#)

[About Nouse](#)
[Who's Nouse](#)
[Website Credits](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Advertising](#)
[Archives](#)
[Student Discounts](#)
[Print Editions](#)
[Mini-Sites](#)
[Nouse on Twitter](#)
[Nouse on Facebook](#)
[Nouse on Google+](#)

© 1964–2018 Nouse

[Policies](#) |

