

Why Women's Officers?

The case for women's
representation in Cambridge
colleges

INTRODUCTION

Cambridge is fortunate in that the culture of Women's Officer is basically well entrenched in the ethos of our students' unions. Almost all the Colleges have both JCR and MCR officers, and CUSU is one of the few universities to have a sabbatical Women's Officer who runs the Women's Union (until 2001, known as the Women's Campaign). Even so, one of the most frustrating things about the position is the ease with which you can spend more time defending your job than actually doing it, whether because of a lack of support from your committee or antagonism in your College in general.

This guide is designed for Women's Officers to help them in their work. It looks at the job of the college Women's Officer which can be one of the hardest on the student union executive. The first section details the legal implications of the Women's Officer position, since it is restricted to women only to stand and to vote. The second section is on winning the arguments for the existence of the position, since unfortunately the Women's Officer post is one that often comes under attack. There is also some information about dealing with threats to the post. Its aim is to leave you feeling confident and well-informed to defend the post should you need to and to develop your own ideas about how to build on and promote the role.

My hope is that College Women's Officers should **always** feel that they can ask for the ideas and assistance of the CUSU full - time Women's Officer; please don't hesitate to contact me at any point on whatever issue to do with your role!

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THE LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Is it problematic that only women can stand
and only women can vote?

This information has been taken from the NUS

"The Sex Discrimination Act 1975 only outlaws discrimination in certain fields, namely employment (ss6-21), education (ss22-28), and the provision of goods, facilities and services, and management of premises (ss29-35).

It might at first appear that students' union activities might come under the sections relating to education. s22 provides that it is unlawful for certain specified persons/bodies, in educational establishments to discriminate against people on the grounds of their sex in certain ways. However, the specified persons/bodies as far as further and higher education colleges are concerned, are simply the governing bodies of those institutions: there is no obligation on students' unions under this section. Although, the parts of the Sex Discrimination Act that relate to employment do not relate to students' union officers, it is worth noting that there are exceptions to this part of the act. If there is a 'genuine occupational qualification' for the job in question then it is legal to discriminate on the grounds of sex. One situation where this applies is where:

'the holder of the job provides individuals with personal services promoting their welfare or education, or similar personal services, and those services can most effectively be provided by a (woman)' (s7(2)(e).

The important point here is that there should be an element of one to one, although Women's Officers are not employees so it does not directly apply to us anyway. Many of the services that the Women's Officer provides will be for women only. The part to the act that refers to services is not applicable to student unions because they are usually classed as charities.

s43 of the Act provides that where a charitable instrument contains a provision for conferring benefits on members of one sex only (disregarding any benefits to members of the other sex which are exceptional or relatively insignificant), anything done under that provision will not be unlawful under the Act.

Therefore, as long as the whole Women's Officer set-up is properly explained in the constitution, the providing of services to women will be something done to give effect to provisions in the constitution. Note that s43 can be applied also to other parts of the act so that the opportunity to stand for election as a Women's Officer, and the right to vote in an election for a Women's Officer, are benefits which, if they are properly covered in the constitution, will fall under the s43 exemption as provisions made under a charitable instrument.

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With regard to the Education Act 1994, concern has been expressed about the implications of s22(2)(d) which states:

appointment to major union offices should be by election in a secret ballot in which all members are entitled to vote

The term 'major office' is not defined in the Act. Since the term 'sabbatical' is also used in the act, it can be argued that sabbaticals and major offices are not necessarily the same thing. At CUSU, the 'major officers' are defined as the trustees and these consist of the sabbaticals apart from the Women's Officer. Since no definition has yet been given to the phrase 'major' or 'minor' posts, it is down to you and your committee how you define it. Since all the posts on college students' unions are part time, you could define the President and Treasurer as major posts and the rest as minor for the purposes of the constitution. **These definitions should be for technical reasons only.** For example, you should not lose your vote on the committee as this is such a crucial part of your job in terms of representation (see below). The definition of major and minor posts is therefore pragmatic. The Education Act does not threaten your job but it threatens the women only vote. This should be protected, if necessary, by defining the Women's Officer pragmatically as a minor post in the constitution along with other members of the committee so that it cannot be used against the Women's Officer post in future.



WINNING THE ARGUMENTS

While the post of Women's Officer is well established in most colleges, women's officers still have to deal with a whole barrage of questions about why the post exists, why only women can stand and vote for it, why not a men's and women's welfare officer or an Equal Opportunities Officer etc etc ad nauseam.

Some questioning is from those who genuinely want to understand, others are simply being antagonistic. Whatever the reason, it is important to be familiar with the arguments. Endless patience is certainly one of the qualities required for the job - and while it can certainly be tiresome and undermining, clarifying why the post exists and going through the arguments is part of being a Women's Officer and being on the Women's Exec. - if people knew about the inequalities that exist and had thought through the issues carefully, your post might genuinely be redundant! At the same time, some people will never listen to your arguments and have fun winding you up. It is important for your own sanity that you know when to stop. You should not feel 'on call' twenty-four hours a day to explain your role. Many of the questions below are really variations on a common theme - i.e. why have a women's officer, and arguments about the post being sexist, or about men standing or voting can often be most quickly answered by clarifying question one.

• Why have a Women's Officer?

Representation - The Women's Officer's job is not just to 'do things'. It is also about representation. Student union executives are often male-dominated, and most college authorities' committees certainly are. It is therefore important that women's voices are heard directly through someone that they have elected to represent them. This is why there is a women-only vote.

Changing things - The Women's Union was created to make changes. This being the case, we are in the awkward position whereby the more we change things the harder it may become to justify our jobs. Of course, the eventual aim of a Women's Campaign is to make itself redundant however, there are many aspects of Cambridge life that the Women's Union needs to address that do not give us handy statistics to throw back at people when they question the need for us. Whilst Women's Academic Under-achievement exists and there are no central childcare facilities, it is easy initially to point to these things. It is harder to say that there is an atmosphere in Cambridge where if people are sexually harassed they do not feel that they can report it, or that there is a high prevalence of eating disorders in Cambridge. Much of the work that we do is to address these issues, and they may be subjective.

However, the Women's Officer post is easier to justify in Oxbridge than any other university in the country. With 700 years of all male history behind it, Cambridge is an institution set up by men for men, and this has left an important legacy that still shapes student experiences of Cambridge today.

"An institution which has been exclusively male for many centuries...is not necessarily transformed by the arrival of a handful of women students. In some cases it is now roughly twenty years since the first women were admitted. But even that is a relatively short time. The number of female Fellows in many previously all male Colleges remains small. In certain Colleges some feel excluded from what they perceive as a male dominated club-like environment. In many colleges the continued use of the word 'bachelor' to denote resident Fellows or in the titles of clubs or societies may tend to perpetuate the notion that women have not achieved full equality in our society."

Interim Report from the Senior Tutors' Sub-Committee on Women Students and the Classification of Examination Results.

Girton was founded in 1869 and Newnham in 1871 but women were still not awarded degrees until 1948, amidst much protest. Colleges started to go mixed in 1972. When Magdalene went mixed in 1987, many of their male population went into mourning, parading coffins through their college and wearing black armbands. In thirty years it is true that much has changed, and that women are alive and kicking in most areas of University life. The last couple of years have seen the number of women admitted to undergraduate degrees rise to above 50%, but only because we have three all female colleges and the number of graduate women is much lower, and then falls at each stage. This is particularly important considering Women's Officers' role in representing women on the student union executive and to male dominated college committees.

Women's Academic Under-achievement has challenged the complacency which many feel and the JCAP report challenges those who claim we have nothing left to fight for. Acknowledged by the University as one of the most significant challenges it has to face, Women's Academic Under-achievement has raised questions about marking criteria, the effect of different assessment methods, admissions and the academic ethos fostered by supervisions. Senior Tutors claim that 'college ethos' may also be a significant factor and this highlights the reasons behind some of our other campaigns. Women are woefully under represented in senior posts; Junior Research Fellowships, the first stepping stone to becoming a fellow, are predominantly made up of men, an anomaly to the rest of the country.

Sexual harassment, issues of student safety that affect women in particularly pernicious ways, inequalities in sporting status, eating disorders, lack of childcare facilities that still primarily affect women, the lack of Senior women and the difficulty graduate women find in gaining Junior Research Fellowships are all issues that the Women's Union works on. Pictures of dead white men from the past dominate our college halls, but it remains that Cambridge still suffers from an acute case of PMS – it is largely Pale, Male and Stale. It is still the case that if you look outside the student body at a college level, the women you see are more likely to be bedders and administrative staff and the men fellows.

Yet the arguments for the post of Women's Officer also extend beyond Cambridge to women's experiences in the workplace and the home. This is already hinted at during the milkround season where companies are increasingly organising women-only presentations in recognition of the dearth of female applicants. In the workplace women are concentrated in poor status, low-paid part-time work. Even if you think that most Cambridge women will not go into these types of jobs, then they may still be constrained by the familiar 'glass ceiling'. At home evidence suggests that women are still responsible for the majority of housework and childcare and violence against women is still one of

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the most under-reported and most common crimes. All this not to mention women's fear of walking the streets at night, difficulty in accessing the right to an abortion, representations of women in the media that still value what we look like more than what we do....

- Within three years of graduation, women can expect to earn 15% less than a man who graduates with the same degree.
- In 2004 only 7% of senior police officers and 9% of national newspaper editors were women. 75% of women worked in the five lowest paid job sectors.
- 167 women are raped daily. It is estimated that only 1 in 5 rapes is reported.
- In England nearly 24% of women have to pay for private abortions, because abortion provision often remains a post code lottery.
- 88% of women believe that they'll earn the same as a man with the same qualifications. In reality the pay gap remains at 17%.
- In the civil service, 70% of clerks, 77% of catering workers, 76% of clerical assistants and 8% of senior civil servants are women.
- 92% of women do not feel safe outside at night. 16% of women experience stalking and 1/4 suffer from domestic violence.
- Britain has the lowest level of publicly funded childcare for under 3s in the European Union and life remains very difficult for student parents in Cambridge.

Given all this, the post of Women's Officer has been created to begin to redress the balance - to represent women on what have often been male-dominated students' union committees, on what are certainly male-dominated college committees, to raise the profile of issues of particular concern to women, ensure women's perspectives and voices are heard from open meeting to governing body and to campaign for change. Importantly, the Women's Officer also provides an opportunity for women to meet up in the rare thing that is non-male dominated space in Cambridge.

● **Why can only women stand?**

To start with what may seem blatantly obvious to many - but sadly not to all! The post of women's officer is fundamentally about representing women and working on issues of particular concern to women. An important principle of feminism has always been about women making decisions in their own right, and on their own terms, and while men must be involved they must take their lead from us. The question of why women only should stand is often symptomatic of a lack of understanding about gender inequalities. That we as women have spent perhaps 18 years of our life facing sexism in subtle and less subtle ways means that we do share something in common: discrimination. While men have an important role to play and should certainly be involved in our work, and while many men may be aware of the issues discussed above - and this is obviously something we want to encourage, they do not ultimately experience these issues first hand, and do not face discrimination or under-representation in the way that women do.

● **Isn't it sexist? / Why don't we have a Men's Officer?**

Again, this question suggests that the person has yet to understand issues at stake. This may certainly put the ball in their court. However, perhaps more productive is to outline again that it is women who face discrimination and under representation both in Cambridge and beyond (it is always worth quoting some statistics to back you up). The post is then about redressing a 700 year (and beyond) imbalance and is positive action to redress inequalities that won't just disappear with time. The post of women's officer is not much to ask in the face of such inequalities and is not part of a systematic process of discrimination against men as a group. The Women's Officer is often campaigning for things men already have. The sexism that women face is part of the system and exists at every level of our lives. The post of Women's Officer is to redress this imbalance, to overcome the sexism that already exists. The Women's Union came first, and in recognition of the importance of these issues, the posts of Women's Officers were created. Therefore, the posts must be seen as part of the Women's Union. If men have a unfair experience in Cambridge because they are men then there would exist a Men's Campaign. If these issues raised through this were thought to be serious then Men's Officers would be created.

● **Why can only women vote?**

The Women's Officer is there to represent women in college, and it is therefore logical that they should be the ones to decide who is to be their representative. If men vote for the post, a situation could be created whereby a woman may be elected to the post on the basis of a largely male electorate, while the candidate the majority of women voted for loses! This is particularly problematic when

many colleges men are still numerically in the majority, not to mention the fact that what men look for in a Women's Officer may not be the same as what women would want!

In trying to justify an open vote for Women's Officers, it has been argued that most men wouldn't vote anyway because they don't think that they should. However, this means that all the 'right-on' men don't vote and all the not-so-right-on men do. Clearly, this could cause further problems. In Cambridge particularly, the women only vote is important because we are the minority in many colleges.

● **Why don't we just have Women's Welfare?**

The argument that there should be separate men's and women's welfare officers rather than a women's officer is also a fairly common, often a suggestion proposed in the light of the 'sexism' of the women's officer post. However, while the women's officer may well find that a large part of her role is connected to women's welfare issues such as safety and self-defence, eating disorders or other welfare advice, **the post is also, vitally, a political one.** As the arguments set out above suggest, the Women's Officer is also there to represent women in a male-dominated environment, and to campaign for change on issues like the difference in men's and women's Tripos results and sexual harassment. It is not then a case of men and women just having different 'welfare needs', but one of discrimination/under-representation that affect women in particularly pernicious ways. While the Women's Officer may then work closely with her Welfare Officer, the latter is there for both men and women. Another part of the Women's Officer's job is to make sure that the whole of the executive is working on women's issues as well as men's. This has not been the case in the past and without the constant reminder of the Women's Officer would not be the case in the future. It is no good to argue that the things the Women's Officer works on should be fragmented into Women's Welfare and Academic Affairs Officers for instance. After all, the whole issue of Women's Academic Under-achievement was highlighted by the Women's Campaign and would not have become "one of

the major issues in teaching at all levels in this University" had the Women's Campaign not publicised it. The Women's Officer is there not only to work on issues but also to be making sure that other officers are working on them and that pertinent issues are raised.

● Why have women-only space?

While many of events you hold at a college level, and indeed, many events run by the CUSU Women's Union, are open to men and women alike, you may well want to hold some events in the year just for women. While the idea of 'women-

only space' is controversial amongst many men and women, there is still often very good reason for holding women only events. There are the obvious examples - where talk on sensitive issues such as sexual health or eating disorders may require a solely female group if people are to feel able to talk, but there are also occasions where just providing women with an opportunity to meet up and have fun together (women's squash or video night etc) is important. After all, Cambridge is home to numerous rowdy male drinking societies and sporting clubs, which often take up more space and are far more obnoxious than any female equivalent. Moreover, there is still plenty of evidence that in mixed groups, men often dominate the discussion and prevent some women from speaking out. Because of the sheer numbers in Cambridge, some women may often find themselves in a male dominated atmosphere. Some occasions when you want to organise events that are women only may simply be to give people a break from this.

None of this means that it isn't vital to get men involved in what you are doing on a college level, just that it is important that you feel justified in organising things for women only (after all, they are the ones that elect you!) when you feel this would be appropriate. Women have always organised autonomously, but we are only called sexist when we do it for Women's Rights rather than for coffee mornings or bingo!

● Why not Equal Opportunities?

This is perhaps one of the more thorny debates to tackle from the range of questions Women's Officers encounter. In justifying the post of women's officer, you don't want to put yourself in the position where you are asserting a hierarchy of oppressions, where women are perched comfortably on the top of the pile, above the need to raise awareness about racism, homophobia or issues about disability. **The point to assert here is that those truly concerned with the whole range of equal opportunities issues should be after positive change** – and the push towards equal opportunities can often lead to a single person, dealing with all equal opportunities issues, when they know little about the particular issues involved. On college student union executives, there is little need to minimise costs or streamline efficiency, but there is a need for maximum representation, and a single equal opps officer is not able to do that. As a white woman I do not feel that I could legitimately represent the needs of black men, because whilst I can read about the issues affecting them, I do not

experience those things on a daily level. Nor do women's officers have the time to represent men, as sadly there is more than enough for a women's officer to do when she deals only with women's representation. You might also find that the Equal Opps role was filled by a man, and even by a white, heterosexual male in colleges that have men's officers.

The danger of equal opportunities is that it becomes a 'one size fits all' approach and all minority groups are thus treated as homogenous, and not with the diversity that they actually represent. Some colleges say that there isn't room on the exec for separate officers, but those same colleges often have a magazine editor or catering rep on the exec with full voting rights, but no person to represent the colleges autonomous groups. If colleges want their students to be represented, then the issue of exec size will not be an important one.

Motions to remove the post and other threats

If any of these questions about the post are put in motion form and taken to an Open Meeting - don't panic! Having people's questions and uncertainties about the post out in the open so they can be challenged is more productive than them secretly thinking it. Make sure you feel confident about the reasons for the post and ways to win the arguments - it will be hard to convince others of the importance of the post if you yourself have doubts! Do contact the CUSU Women's Officer if you would like to discuss the motion with her - it is her job to go through the arguments with you if you feel unsure, and she will be more than happy to come along to the Open Meeting and speak (although you may have to check the regulations governing guest/external speakers). Sound out the other members of your committee to see where your support lies. Talk to the members separately and challenge their presuppositions on a one to one basis, where it is harder to trot out received ideas and easier to provoke people to think for themselves. You may even find you can win people round! It might also help to talk through the motion at Women's Council or at the next Women's Officer meeting if you have the chance - you may be able to get other women's officer to come along to the meeting to give you moral support!

For the meeting itself, make sure you have allies there who are prepared to speak so you don't have to answer all the points yourself. Encourage other members of the committee to back you up - ideally men and women! Most of all, have the courage of your convictions - many of these kind of motions can be defeated by just stating the arguments clearly and effectively (with a few statistics to back you up), as often there are people who are just unclear about why the post exists, rather than completely against it. If the Senior Tutors think there is a need for Women's Officers (see p7) then this gives you authoritative backing.

While the above questions may seem daunting - especially when you get onto nitty gritty issues of representation - i.e. women's officer voting on motions not gender specific, or how they can represent all women in college, there are obvious retorts - e.g., does the president, welfare officer, treasurer etc consult all members of the college before voting? It is important too, not just to feel that you have to be the one on the defensive. After all, while people accuse the post / your vote of being anti-democratic, you do wonder whether they are similarly distressed that the major decisions about the college are taken by governing bodies with one or two women fellows present at best, or getting up and shouting about the dearth of women MPs in this country. Similarly, when men are arguing about the post it may be worth pointing out that it would be nice if they showed similar outrage about women's academic under-achievement or the paucity of women professors.

No doubt arguments are difficult and tiresome, you may start to even question the post yourself. But standing up in the face of inequalities/injustices is never easy, and negative stereotypes often surround groups campaigning for change. Just by making your voice heard on these issues you are making a real difference and women studying in the university now will appreciate it, as will the vast numbers of women who study here long after we have moved on.

