

Natalie Szarek

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“This House Believes that Cambridge University is Institutionally Sexist”

Tonight is a particularly important day for women, and not just because we’re here talking about sexism. Oct 30th is No Pay Day, a holiday very few people have heard of, but which affects the lives of millions. Because the pay gap exists at 17% for full time employees- and already at 15% for university graduates at the age of 24, women essentially work unpaid for 17% of the year, and October 30th marks the beginning of this period: from today, millions of women are essentially working for free. And why does this happen? Equal pay legislation came into effect nearly 40 years ago, but due to the persistence of informal inequalities and the failure of employers, and government, to be proactive about tackling the pay gap, we still live in a society in which women who work full time still earn on average £559 less than full-time men.

Thus, an institution, law or policy may appear to be gender neutral, but due to the way it interacts with social trends, it may end up disadvantaging one sex. This sexism is also often unintentional- a legislator, or University official, will not set out a policy with the intention of discrimination, but without a rigorous attention to gender, and the way in which practices and policies have an impact in terms of gender, we are at risk of allowing inequality to be perpetuated or exacerbated as a result of our negligence.

Much of this sexism comes from assumptions and social norms which assign certain qualities, abilities, preferences and behaviours to specific sexes. These assumptions and stereotypes- often on the instinctive, rather than the conscious, level, fail to differentiate between someone’s sex: their biological state, and the idea of gender: the social constructions around that biological fact. One can argue for years – and in fact, many of us have- about where sex stops and gender begins, but just about everyone will agree that there is a difference.

I define an organisation as institutionally sexist if it disadvantages one gender on any of three counts.

First of all, there is structural sexism, which in Cambridge is generally unintentional, but still linked to the way decisions are made in the university, and the policies it chooses to adopt.

Secondly, the informal practices and norms of the University mean that even if the structures are impeccably egalitarian, if norms and average practices do not follow the spirit of this egalitarianism, then the organisation is institutionally sexist.

The third element of institutional sexism is a failure to be proactive in ensuring that the University does not perpetuate or exacerbate sexism in its practices, whether formal or informal.

The first count of sexism which I raised was structural sexism. It's not secret at all that Cambridge is one of the most structurally convoluted and incomprehensible institutions on the planet, but for the purposes of this debate, I will define Cambridge in the most encompassing terms. This includes colleges and faculties, academics, funding system, extra-curricular activities and pastoral responsibilities which compose the University as an institution.

It doesn't pain me at all to say that there has been remarkable progress on this front: women are allowed to attend the University, although the last college to go co-ed was only 20 years ago. Women graduate with the same kind of degrees as men, although this has only been happening for the past 60 years, 28 years later than Oxford.

There are still structural ways in which the University does not allow fair access. Part time degrees are not provided on par with the typical Cambridge education, which disproportionately affects students with caring responsibilities, who are largely women. A single father would struggle to find adequate funding, childcare, scheduling flexibility, social support and accommodation as much as a single mother, but because of wider social trends, it is largely women who are most disadvantaged.

The lack of high-ranking women in the University still creates a University structure which is geared towards men. This is not an accusation of misogynist maliciousness, but it does create inequality. The presence of a woman Vice Chancellor is a huge leap forward, and we should be proud to have one of the highest ranking women in the global academic community at the helm of this University, but this does not counteract the fact that the vast majority of highest level University officials are men. Simply having a women at the top of an organisation does not ensure that the organisation will treat men and women fairly and equally. My apologies to the Vice Chancellor for this comparison but just look at Sarah Palin.

Nor does the token presence of women on a committee automatically produce gender-equal policies. We do need to assert the need for representation of women- for example, sometimes the women's officer is the only woman on a JCR committee, but what we really need is a massive improvement in how the University takes gender into account in its policies and practices. This is facilitated by having women present on a committee, just as a committee of white people would struggle to conceptualise the experiences of a black student at Cambridge, and should probably consult black students rather than basing their conclusions on assumptions, or educated guesses. But women speak in many voices, just as men do, and gender equality will not necessarily be achieved by enforcing 50-50 representation if we do not also rigorously evaluate the impact of an institution on people of different genders.

This brings me to the second element of the definition of institutional sexism: informal practices, trends, and norms. These sorts of informal sexism- largely constituted of assumptions and stereotypes based on gender, economic inequalities and social pressures, exist in our society, and indeed worldwide. So let me emphasise that an institution is not just a set of formal regulations, but it is also made up by the bodies and practices of which it is constituted. So although Cambridge carries within it a distinct set of practices and norms, it

is undeniably embedded in and influenced by greater society. Inequalities and assumptions present in wider society will be present in Cambridge, although slightly different. But this doesn't just boil down to a "society is sexist and therefore Cambridge is, too" conclusion, just as a society in which sexism is endemic does not call for the conclusion that all men are misogynist. Rather, we recognize the responsibility of institutions such as Cambridge to take the necessary steps to counter sexism within their policies and practices. Some bits need more work than others, but as long as there are significant elements of an institution which are sexist, an institution still, as a whole, classifies as institutionally sexist. So you can list as many examples as you like of instances in which Cambridge is not institutionally sexist- but this does not prove equality as long as serious examples of sexism remain.

Informal practices manifest in de facto gender inequality; the disparities between male and female academic performance is a prime example of this. There are no regulations dictating that women get five points deducted from their results- in fact, there are rigorous measures in place, such as anonymous marking, which aim to ensure that the marker does not know the sex of the student they are marking. Yet year after year, we see men receive more first class degrees than women as an overall average. This year the figure was 27% of men receiving firsts, and only 18.4 percent of women. There is no way to pretend this particular inequality doesn't exist. I've heard people trying to explain it away by arguing that because women get more 2.1s than men- which is indeed the case- it all averages out to equality. But a quick reminder for those too willing to overlook this fact: a first is a higher degree than a 2.1. Employers and higher education institutions will accept people with firsts most willingly, colleges give you more money for a first, you get to attend posh dinners with a first.

So what does this disparity say about Cambridge?

We could claim that it is simply nature taking its course: that academic disparities are rooted in biological differences.

We could say that society prepares men and women differently, so that by the time they get to Cambridge, men are better suited at certain disciplines than women.

Or, we could say that Cambridge University, through its practices, sets the stage for unequal performance.

I strongly dispute the claim of biologically rooted academic performance. Wading into the nature vs nurture debate, which I am sure Dr. Baron Cohen will discuss, I argue that academic performance- in the sciences and the arts, is massively shaped by social forces. This is not to say that there is no possibility that there may be biologically influenced elements of academic performance- it is simply stating the obvious fact that we currently have no methodology nuanced enough to disentangle social from biological factors.

Studies on biological differences, including Dr. Baron Cohen's, on infants, adolescents and adults, are inconsistent. A recent study showed a strong correlation between the degree of gender inequality in a society: politically, socially and economically, and women's performance in mathematics: the more a nation approaches gender equality, the closer

women's and men's maths scores get. So our environment influences our academic ability, and our academic choices. Only when we have eliminated every vestige of sexism in our society can we observe academic differences and explain them as biological- and then, and only then, can Dr. Baron Cohen's vision of a society in which any potential sex differences are valued as equal be realised.

However, Cambridge University is not a level playing field where natural differences play out- it is an institution embedded in an unequal society, which carries its own set of norms and values. Biology cannot explain why Cambridge University's gender gap in academics contrasts the national trend of women outperforming men at A-levels, and at nearly all other Universities.

Is it simply because Cambridge teaches at a much higher level, at which inherent ability plays out to a greater degree? A significant body of research shows this to be untrue- recent studies in the US show that women perform on par with men in the highest brackets of math tests.

Furthermore, the gender gap is not consistent: a higher percentage of women than men receive firsts in Bionatsci, but the reverse is true for biochemistry. Even more inconsistent is that women generally receive a lower percentage of firsts in MML and English, which goes against Dr Baron Cohen's claim that women are inherently better at language and communication, as well as international test results. So even using Baron Cohen's dubious framework, the theory of biological difference doesn't play out.

Dr BC writes in his book that "overall intelligence is not better in one sex or the other, but the profiles are different between the sexes" . Taking this statement to be true, we can only conclude that Cambridge University teaches, examines and rewards stereotypically "masculine" styles of learning, problem solving, and writing.

One could argue that there is nothing inherently wrong with this: for example, sprinting races measure absolute speed of running: not style, not number of strides taken, not heart rate after the sprint- simply speed. So Cambridge University can choose to measure only those aptitude and traits most commonly held by men – whether socially or biologically- as long as it forfeits all claim to being an institution which somehow judges academic achievement objectively and in a way not related to gender. If this is the case, Cambridge University is sexist. We may not say it is wrong, or evil, or bad- we could even say that it is a desirable situation for the brand of academic progress we happen to endorse. Dr. BC has said in his writing that as long as those women who happen to fit the stereotypical male criteria are not discriminated against, then this sort of discrimination through the choice of what we want to value in this institution is not problematic. But the fact exists that it does advantage one sex over the other, so it is not equal.

Obviously, I would go further and say that this is not a desirable situation- I believe that different styles of learning and thinking are essential to a truly progressive academic community. Measures of academic ability, especially in the arts, are not absolute and objective, and we cannot claim that essentially arbitrary valuations produced by informal Cambridge norms are not discriminatory. Imagine having some questions asked on a

literature exam written in Spanish, when the ability to speak Spanish is not at all relevant to the paper. Supervisors may start telling their students to learn Spanish, but the fact remains that one does not have to speak Spanish to write an excellent essay on English literature. Similarly, we have many women students being told to “write more like a man” every year, and encouraged to take on a style of discussion, writing, and learning which is not intrinsically better, and which may not suit their preferences.

The gender gap in academics is a blatant example of how informal norms and practices lead to an outcome which advantages certain gender-related traits and abilities over another. Styles of teaching may be more suited to how men, largely because of social influence, learn. Certain styles of writing will be more highly valued despite not being intrinsically better. There is no biological basis for the inequalities which persist year after year. The inequalities in arts and humanities contradict Dr BCs claims of the female superiority in language, and claims of biologically produced mathematical aptitude are not consistent with a steadily growing body of research.

And there are countless other ways in which informal trends create unequal gender outcomes. Despite the high levels of participation of women in sports, the proportion of student media coverage is miniscule. The social culture often results in outcomes which are harmful to women’s welfare. And the anecdotal evidence we have of women finding themselves disadvantaged or unsupported isn’t isolated instances of the odd conservative fellow on tweed making harmless flirtations at a flustered fresher. They do actually amount to a body of evidence which highlights that it is not simply that undesirable incidents happen- there will be bad apples and mistakes made in every institution, and this does not amount to institutional sexism- but that we do actually see a trend of colleges and faculties failing to address these issues in an appropriate way.

The presence of informal practices and inadequacies which harm all students, especially women, is also linked into the third element of institutional sexism: the failure of the University to be proactive in making sure inequality is not exacerbated by its practices- informal or formal.

The University has a responsibility to do this- we are aware, or have the tools to find out, the gender inequalities present in Cambridge. We have the ability, and therefore the responsibility, to identify these inequalities, and act to address them, as it is within our powers to do so. We cannot change all of British society, but we can change the way that gender is experienced in our society. And this isn’t an unachievable dream of the radical fringe: the responsibility of an institution to ensure fair practice is affirmed by national legislation: the Gender Duty of 2007 mandates that publicly funded organisations be proactive in ensuring that one sex is not arbitrarily disadvantaged. Institutions have a duty, ethical and legal, to counter both formal and informal sexism within their institutions. The University’s traditionalism often leads to foot-dragging when it comes to implementing policies, but Cambridge also has a tradition of pioneering thought, and it is high time to apply that to gender.

Therefore, under the Gender Duty legislation, and under this definition of institutional sexism, an institution is sexist if it fails to take reasonable steps towards minimising the manifestations of societal sexism within our institutions , and preventing Cambridge specific practices from creating inequality.

There is progress being made; hopefully this year will see University Council pass a policy which lays out the complaints procedure for students experiencing inappropriate behaviour from staff or other students; a policy which supports male and female students, but due to social trends, is more likely to apply to women. This is indeed a reason for hope, but the fact that it took several years of campaigning by CUSU to get to this point shows that Cambridge is not yet at a stage where we can be certain that gender is always taken into account.

This awareness of gender is what the national Gender Duty calls for- it requires that public institutions publish gender equality schemes and equality impact assessments. The gender equality scheme will lay out how the institution will meet equality objectives, and equality impact assessments measure the way that current practices relate to gender. Until these equality impact assessments are carried out, we will not know exactly how the supervision and exam system affect men and women students, whether pastoral provision is adequate and any other ways in which Cambridge may be unintentionally creating sexist outcomes.

There has been massive progress made, but the consistent failure of university bodies to act supportively and sensitively in dealing with student needs through being proactive in putting forth and implementing policies which lay out appropriate and adequate procedures, training and discipline amounts to institutional sexism.

So what I am calling for is the University to take its responsibility seriously, and show a commitment eliminating sexist practices. I will be very pleased if all of you agree with what I am saying and walk through the yes door, but that is not what I am here for. A student body aware of the sexism in Cambridge is only the first step to ensuring that we then make this institution, remarkable in many ways, fulfil its potential for equality. You may not agree with all of the points I've made, but if you agree with even one, then I urge you, walk out of the yes door this evening, but don't stop there. Walk into your college office, and ask them what they are doing about gender inequality. Then walk into CUSU offices, and join with the Women's Campaign in calling for the University to commit to assessing the gender impact of its practices, and acting accordingly. We are all part of this institution and we all have a responsibility to encourage it to change- find out what you can do to make it happen.

Thank you.