

## Safe spaces for women do not discriminate against men

Philosophers and artists find the criticism of Saskia's sect unjustified (there was an art experiment in which writer Saskia De Coster started a 'cult' only for women, and there has been a lot of angry reactions on that). An exclusive women's group does not lead to polarization or exclusion, it has valuable and legitimate goals.

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In recent days there has been a lot of commotion about *The Cult of Saskia*, a playful thought experiment by writer Saskia De Coster. In a column in *De Morgen*, she established that cult leaders are always men, and she announced that she would start a women's cult. Last week she put her words into action in a digital performance, with contributions from Anja Meulenbelt, Munganyende Hélène Christelle, Bambi Ceuppens, Martha Claeys and Stella Bergsma (DS January 20). Philosophy teacher Jeff Spiessens reacted dismayed in this newspaper (DS January 25).

Opponents of exclusive spaces usually cite four arguments. First, they believe that exclusivity for women would discriminate against men. This is often followed by the statement that a men's group would be out of the question, why is an exclusive women's group possible then? Such an argument assumes that exclusivity for women is the exact mirror of exclusivity for men. That is not true. Discrimination against women is structurally and historically embedded and has no male counterpart. As long as women are disproportionately discriminated against, exclusive spaces for them are not a form of discrimination against men.

In addition, men have had the exclusive right to economic, political and cultural spaces for centuries and there are still an awful lot of domains that are (almost) exclusively male (for example, in the US in 2018 there were more men called John CEO than there were women CEO). If this exclusivity is a daily occurrence, why is there so much fuss about De Coster's idea to found a women's cult?

### **Femicide**

A second argument against exclusive female spots is that women would be wallowing in the role of victim, while they should prove that they are equal by simply participating with men. That argument is also easy to counter. It is not about individual victimization, but about structural discrimination: women are more often victims of violence and sexual harassment, murder of female partners and ex-partners is so common that we have the word *femicide* for it, women are more suffering from beauty ideals and are paid less for the same work. Not every woman

experiences this nuisance in the same way, but women as a social category do systematically draw the short straw. You are not less proving your equality by recognizing that.

Another argument states that there is a loss of quality when you exclude half of humanity; men. Strange that we have never heard a similar argument in centuries past. Of course diversity benefits the general quality. For example, a study showed that peace treaties are 35 percent more likely to last if there are women in the consultations, not because they are so peaceful, but because it defends a broader arsenal of themes and interests. The idea of exclusive women's spaces is not at odds with this, because men are not "pushed out". The spaces are needed to complement groups that are now predominantly male: a literary canon, a professorship corps, a board of directors and a parliament. That is also what the author collective *Fix this* has in mind: supplementing the literary history, school books and canon with women (DSL 16 January).

### **Identity Politics**

Finally, it is often argued that women engage in identity politics by creating exclusive spaces. The term identity politics was coined in 1977 by The Combahee River Collective, an activist group of black feminists. In doing so, they wanted to combat discrimination and oppression against black women. Authors such as Francis Fukuyama, Steven Pinker, Sid Lukkassen and Jonathan Haidt now call identity politics a bad development. The inability of those academics to question their own identities has given identity politics a bad name. Exclusivity would emphasize categories and thus foster the polarization we just want to get rid of - the rhetoric of man vs. woman who also quotes Spiessens in his reader's letter.

But the category "woman" does not arise from the creation of exclusive spaces, it already exists in society. On the basis of that category, inequality was created and maintained. Identity politics is based on this less-than-ideal reality. If you then say that a woman should not strategically claim and use that category, you deprive her of the opportunity to organize and to challenge structural injustice.

The Indian sociologist Gayatri Spivak calls this strategic essentialism: grasping what is imposed on you to improve your own situation, even if you do not necessarily agree with that categorization. Whoever missed it: women are first in line to simply become "all human".

An exclusive space for women has valuable and legitimate goals: it creates a safe space in which women do not censor or ignore themselves. In a safe space you can share an experience without having to defend why you experience reality that way every time. That saves a lot of mental and emotional energy. We can use that energy to think about alternative worlds with less oppression. And we are happy to share that knowledge with anyone who wants to hear it. Men don't have to be afraid. Only those who, locked in their own right and refuse to leave their White House, have something to fear.