

BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour, 20 October 2021

Transcript of Interview between Emma Barnett and Raquel Rosario Sánchez

Audio (35-06 to 51-41): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0010p11>

Emma Barnett: In the last couple of weeks, you may have read about the campaign to have Professor Kathleen Stock removed from Sussex University because of her views on gender identity and biological sex. Or the fact that Professor Jo Phoenix, the Chair of Criminology Studies at Open University is planning on taking her University to Tribunal saying she's been made to feel like she's a pariah for her gender critical views by her colleagues and has faced, as she says, a 2-year campaign of harassment. Well, today Women Talk Back, a feminist society at Bristol University, is filing a legal case at County Court against Bristol Students' Union after they say they were sanctioned by the University Union for running a women-only meeting, and women-only meetings generally, an issue that came to a head last March when they refused entry at one of their events to a transwoman. Raquel Rosario Sánchez is a PhD student at Bristol University, also a feminist writer and campaigner from the Dominican Republic and is President of the group and I spoke to her just before coming on air this morning and asked her what the case is about.

Raquel Rosario Sánchez: We're suing the Bristol Students' Union because we were sanctioned for running a women-only feminist society and we cited the law at the Bristol Students' Union as a reason why we needed to be women-only. Our attendees said that they felt uncomfortable discussing very personal issues relating to the fact that they are female in the presence of people who are of the male sex. And we're talking about issues like menstruation, male violence against women, talking about sort of disability issues, all of these things that women go through as females and they wanted this space to be just for women so we can talk about it and the Bristol SU said that that was unacceptable and sanctioned us.

EB: So, you're the President of this group, Women Talk Back, and it's been affiliated to the Union, to do with the University since 2018?

RRS: Yes.

EB: And we're talking about things coming to a head last year, aren't we? There was a particular meeting. Could you take us back to that, and for the listeners of Woman's Hour, tell us what happened?

RRS: So, we had a meeting on 1st March 2020 and the meeting was called "Boundaries and Feminism." During that meeting we had an incident in which trans activist students at the University of Bristol attempted to infiltrate that meeting. Now, because of our society being female-only we told the male trans activist they were not allowed in and they themselves admitted that they knew that Women Talk Back was only for women. They thought that if they came in person that we would break our own boundaries. And we said no. We decided to uphold the principle of Women Talk Back. After that they filed a complaint against us with the Bristol Students' Union and the Students' Union sanctioned us.

EM: Let's come to what happened next in just a moment but so I'm clear on what happened at that event, how did you know that those people, as you describe them, were activists?

RRS: Because they had already targeted us at different events that we had held and we knew them from around campus because every time we held a feminist event they would come and target us.

EB: How many people are we talking about?

RRS: At the March 1st incidents there were two students.

EB: Two students. And you describe them as trans activists. Are they transwomen?

RRS: The transwoman wanted to come in.

EB: The transwoman wanted to come in. And who else were they with?

RRS: They were with a female student. And we told the female student “Of course you're welcome to come in, this is a women-only society,” but we told the male student that they couldn't come in.

EB: Or a transwoman as they identify. So why wouldn't you let a transwoman come to the meeting?

RRS: Because our attendees have repeatedly said that it is important for them to be in a female-only space so they can discuss sensitive issues relating to the fact that they're female and they said that this was ... they felt uncomfortable discussing it in a mixed-sex environment and that in order to protect their privacy, their safety and their dignity we had to be single-sex.

EB: And then you're saying that this person, along with perhaps with the other person – you tell me – went to the Union and reported the group.

RRS: Yes.

EB: And what evidence do you have that they wanted to come to the meeting to be part of the meeting, or not, in terms of what you're saying about them as activists makes it sound like you believe they were coming deliberately to disrupt your group?

RRS: They told us. They told us during the night that they knew that we were a single-sex society. They told us that they knew that we were using the single sex exemptions in the Equality Act but that they thought “well, if we showed up in person we thought that you would just allow us in” and we didn't.

EB: And was it an angry clash? Did it get violent? Just so, again, we can imagine the scene.

RRS: Well, it was a 45-minute standoff in which I, as President and some of the other women, in the group had to repeat the law over and over again just to, to sort of stress the point that there's a reason why – we're not being female-only to be hateful. We're doing it because we want to prioritise the experiences and the needs of our attendees. And also, I just want to point out, like, we welcome the fact that there are other societies on campus, almost all of the other societies on campus, are open to everyone so we encourage the fact that there

is an LGBT student society, there is another feminist society that is open to everyone, it just so happens that in ours we centre women.

EB: And you then say they went, both of them, to complain to the Union and you were sanctioned. What does that mean? Have you been able to meet as a group since?

RRS: No. We were sanctioned and we were told that we had to undergo mandatory diversity and inclusion training essentially to teach all of us that we had to be inclusive of the male sex in our female-only society. We were told that I couldn't run as President or as any leadership position for the next 2 years and that we had to modify our constitution. In our constitution we cite explicitly the Equality Act 2010 and they said that we couldn't do that so we had to change the nature of our student society.

EB: Your group let's in, as you say, women but not just student women, so women from outside the University?

RRS: Yes, because we want to make the point that ... consciousness raising, what we do is we gather together as women and we talk about all of these little experiences that we're taught are isolated incidents and when we discuss them together, we realise that they are part of a larger pattern in society and that's what consciousness raising is. So, for us it's important that women who have never received an education, who cannot afford to be students at the University of Bristol, that they feel welcome too but ...

EB: But, so the reason I also ask that is some people listening to this might be thinking, well, if it's such an important group, obviously lockdown happened and other things happened last year, but if it's such an important group and you want to be able to meet and you include women who are not part of the University, why not take it away from the University, why not have the meeting elsewhere in a, I don't know, a church hall or somewhere else?

RRS: Well, there are some perks to being a feminist student society that is affiliated with the Bristol Students' Union for example we had a space at the Multifaith Chaplaincy, and that's where we held our meetings every Sunday, if we wanted to have large events it means that we didn't have to pay venue costs – if you're not affiliated you have to pay venue costs – but by being affiliated we didn't have to pay those hundreds of pounds and we got some sort of support in that way.

EB: But you haven't been able to meet since last year.

RRS: Yes.

EB: And to clarify that point, is that because you've been sanctioned, as you say, ...

RRS: Yes.

EB: ... or because of lockdown?

RRS: Because we'd been sanctioned.

EB: Your understanding of how those sanctions would be lifted is what?

RRS: Well, we would have to comply with the demands of the Bristol Students' Union which is that we stop being female-only.

EB: And so now you're in a situation where you're taking this to Court. I've got a statement here from the Union saying: "We appreciate this is a serious and important matter, we've received a Letter Before Action from Raquel's lawyers on the 11th October, we're in the process of replying to that letter and expect to continue a dialogue over the coming months." That's from Noelle Rumball, the Co-Chair of Bristol's Students' Union Trustee Board. Why is it so important to you to take this action?

RRS: This isn't something that happened suddenly. We have spent the past 4 years trying to be in that dialogue with the Bristol Students' Union, to let them know why it is so important for our attendees and for us to centre the lives and the experiences of women and at every single stage we have faced rejection and we have faced, sort of, disapproval. So, it's not something that we decided to take lightly. We are taking this litigation because we know that the law is crystal clear on this: women are allowed to have single-sex spaces and services. But what's happening around the country is that women are frightened to use the law because we think that if we use the law then we will be labelled transphobic but then when we do use the law then we're sanctioned and that's unacceptable. Women shouldn't have to resort to raising thousands of pounds just to have the rights that they already hold being upheld.

EB: There is a difference of course though between being sanctioned, which is what you just described, and then you said before this incident last March there was already issues, disapproval – what do you mean by that?

RRS: Well, every time we tried to have a meeting, public meeting with feminist speakers, for example Julie Bindel or Pragna Patel from Southall Black Sisters, the Bristol Students' Union would make us pay for security because they admitted that there was a risk that all of our meetings were going to be targeted by trans activists. Now, the answer to that is, it the Bristol Students' Union or the University of Bristol that should create policies to contain their trans activist students, instead they made us responsible for their behaviour and we were the ones being targeted.

EB: Because we should also say, I should also say at this point, that you're taking your own case against the University, so this is not the Union. You first made a complaint back in 2018. What is that case about?

RRS: The case is about a campaign of vilification and intimidation that I have endured ever since I became a student, a PhD student at the University of Bristol ...

EB: Your PhD is in?

RRS: Gender and Violence. So, when I came to the United Kingdom, I was already a feminist writer and I was invited to an event by the feminist organisation Woman's Place UK and the second that that event was announced trans activist students at the University of Bristol thought that that was unacceptable so they became enraged by the fact that as a PhD student I was participating in feminism that they didn't agree and they started a vilification and intimidation campaign. That went on for almost 2 years. I filed a complaint because the University policies are very clear that that is not acceptable. The University selected some students and started a disciplinary process against some of them and that went on for over a year and a half. Throughout the students kept targeting me at every single event that I would go to, and what I mean by that is that trans activist students were encouraging people to like

physically assault me, to punch me, to throw eggs at me. When I was due to give evidence, they were encouraging people to yell that I was “scum, scum, scum”. So, obviously the University named that behaviour bullying, harassment and unacceptable behaviour. At that point the University's ... the trans activist bullies got legal representation and I was cross-examined by my bullies' barristers; I was also asked questions by the University's lawyers. Keep in mind, all I did was decide to chair a feminist meeting and I'm the only person who has had to answer questions about that. And then at one point the University decided to drop the disciplinary process citing security concerns by their own balaclava-clad students who would protest every single hearing and every single meeting that I attended. So, what I'm saying is: that is not acceptable. That is a climate of intimidation, vilification that has been fomented in universities.

EB: I want to go back to that in just a moment, but what was the upshot of those investigations, the University's investigations?

RRS: Nothing happened.

EB: Nothing happened at all against anyone?

RRS: No, no. Nothing. No. The only thing that happened is that I was cross-examined and I was asked questions about my feminist views but the people who were actually targeting me and encouraging people to physically assault me never had to answer questions.

EB: A spokesperson for the University of Bristol says this: “All concerns about harassment and bullying, or bullying, are taken seriously and, where appropriate, action is taken in accordance with University policies. Ms Sánchez has chosen to take legal action against the University. Given this we are unable to comment further.” When you talk about trans activists, can you give us a sense, because again, you know, each person's life or each person's campus it seems there are different things going on and people would like to understand, I'm sure, the experience of that. Are you talking about whenever you did an event or are you talking about day to day and how many people are you talking about?

RRS: Well, when the bullying and harassment started back in January 2018, it was hundreds of people and I didn't know anyone, I had just gotten to the UK. And then at every single event it would be, I don't know, it would depend on the event but it was significant, like in the dozens of people. Yeah.

EB: And are they students?

RRS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

EB: Okay. Because ...

RRS: And the University acknowledged that they were students too. And I just wanted to say, you know, there's a reason why institutions have policies against bullying, harassment and the intimidation of people and that is because that has an impact on people. It has a negative impact on people so it's not just ... it's not good enough to just say “well, we uphold free speech” or “we have these policies in place” if the policies are useless or if they refuse to use them because they are scared of their own trans activist students.

EB: What would you say the impact has been on you?

RRS: It's been significant, you know? It's been significant to the point that one of the claims in my litigation against the University of Bristol is negligence. Imagine if your workplace said that bullying, harassment and intimidation against you by your colleagues is acceptable and that it will happen with impunity. I don't go to campus. I haven't gone to campus since the University turned their entire process on me because the University has sent a very clear signal that it is okay to bully and harass me and that's dangerous. That is dangerous for academia, that is dangerous for all feminists who may want to discuss what I'm discussing. Women should not have rights in law and policy that mean nothing when institutions don't want to uphold them, when institutions are willing to throw them under the bus the second that trans activist students or staff decide to target a feminist. I think that I'm a human being, I am a woman, I'm an immigrant. It is so dehumanising to go through what I have gone through in a country where I have no family and I'm by myself. So, I don't want other students to go through what I have gone through. What we're witnessing in academia when it comes to feminists who support sex-based rights is that that line has been crossed and institutions instead of standing strong and sending a message that "no, this is not allowed," they are frightened of their own bullies. And it should not be up to individual women like myself, like Kathleen Stock, like Jo Phoenix to have to be brave and courageous to stand up for ourselves. Institutions should have policies, and they do have policies in place, that prevent things from crossing the line and they are not doing that.

EB: Raquel Rosario Sánchez, a PhD student at Bristol University and President of the feminist women's society Women Talk Back.