"Less dick jokes": Women-only comedy line-ups, audience expectations and negotiating stereotypes

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Introduction

This chapter will explore the ways in which UK women-only comedy nights and spaces can be theorized as providing an alternative experience to mainstream comedy environments for performers and audiences. The focus of this chapter can be articulated as three distinct questions. Firstly, *why* were women-only comedy events established? Secondly, *how* do women comics understand these women-only spaces as alternative or complementary to the mainstream (mixed-gendered) spaces? And lastly, *what* motivates audiences of all genders to attend women-only comedy events, and how are these events understood as alterative to mainstream comic spaces? These questions will be considered in relation to data regarding experiences of the UK comedy circuit provided by performers, promoters and audiences.

It is necessary at this introductory stage to be clear in what I mean here by the term 'women-only comedy' nights and events. This term refers to events that feature only women on stage. This does not mean that the audience are only women (as will be discussed later in this chapter), nor is this aspect of the space policed. In fact, engagement from audience members of all genders is encouraged, since part of the rationale of these events is to expose women comics to a wider audience. Vitally, within the current context (both socially and within feminist scholarship more specifically, see Phipps 2020), I must note that my use of the term 'woman' is, of course, inclusive of trans women, as are the specific events/festivals and organisations being considered here (Funny Women, Laughing Cows and the UK Women in Comedy Festival). Trans women have always been and continue to be welcomed as performers in the specific women-only contexts with which this chapter engages. In relation to my use of the term 'mainstream comedy spaces/nights' I am here referring to mixed-gendered (although male dominated) comedy nights, taking place in commercial venues where 'traditional' observational comedy continues to be prevalent (see Friedman 2014).

Existing work on women and comedy has theorized and understood women's comic material as part of wider cultural and social moments. Frances Gray, writing in the early 1990s, comments that 'the relationship of women comedians with feminism - and especially with the word 'feminist' – is not a simple one, nor can it be in an art form which is commercially based' (Gray 1992, p.147). Here Gray

highlights that overt connections with feminism, a movement widely stigmatized, could jeopardize the ability of a comedian to attract an audience and forge a sustainable career as a comic. Whilst this complex relationship is still evident, times have changed since Gray's writing in relation to conceptions of feminism, and on the current circuit many more women comics, and promoters running women-only nights, overtly position their work as feminist. This is because, as Banet-Weiser notes, in the current environment 'we are living in a moment in North America and Europe in which feminism has become, somewhat incredibly, *popular*' (Banet-Weiser 2018, p.1; original italics), and this popularity holds substantial commercial potential. Whereas once a connection to feminism would potentially alienate the majority of the prospective audience for a comedy night, this connection can now be leveraged to align women comics with much wider popular (yet often depoliticized) ideas about equality and empowerment. This can be seen as part of the way multiple (and sometimes contradictory and exclusionary) understandings of feminism exist in the current context (Phipps 2020). Joanne Gilbert (2004) explores the way that comics outside the dominant group of white, heterosexual, cis-gendered men, make use of their marginal status on the comedy stage (despite women actually being a numerical majority). She argues that 'by performing their marginality, social outcasts call attention to their subordinate status; by commodifying this performance, they ensure that the dominant culture literally pays a price for this disparity' (Gilbert 2004, P.xi). With an intersectional awareness of identity we can see that white women are more closely aligned to the majority group than Black women and women of colour in the comedy industry and benefit from that privilege. Gilbert argues that it is in fact the way that women (perhaps especially women of colour) can use their marginal or liminal status for economic gain through comedy that gives the form its revolutionary power.

Linda Mizejewski (2014) has examined the way that women comics (across live and mediated forms) are in a contemporary American context framed within a pretty/ funny binary that reflects wider social attitudes to the role of women, and their bodies. It is notable that a significant amount of this research into women comics originates or focuses on American performers and contexts. It is however the specifics of working in the UK live circuit and navigating the UK specific gendered environment that is the focus of this chapter. Research has been undertaken with a UK comedy industry focus, and examples here include the work of Double (2014; 2020), Friedman (2014) and Quirk (2018) but to date there still has been insufficient consideration within a UK context of the gendered nature of the form of comedy and the industrial conditions that perpetuate gender inequalities.

There has never been a significant study completed into audiences for women-only live comedy. Existing research into comedy audiences considers different media forms such as screen comedy e.g. the work of Chitnis et. al. (2006), Kuipers (2006) and Kalviknes Bore (2017), and often seeks to make an argument about the *functions* or *appreciation* of stand-up comedy. This chapter does not set out to achieve these goals but aims to illuminate how performers and audiences understand women-only comedy spaces and the performances that occur in these spaces. In this way the argument presented in this chapter is mostly aligned with Lockyer and Myers' (2011) investigation into audience motivations to attend live comedy and the new data will be compared to their findings.

Data collection methods

The data presented within this chapter originates from an interdisciplinary multi-method research project undertaken between 2013 and 2019. During this study I held the role of 'Researcher in Residence' at the UK Women in Comedy Festival where I undertook research from a participant-observer position. This project involved engagement with the festival for a long period of time, directly considered the gendered power dynamics of the settings in which it was conducted, and included the contribution of my labour to the venture through various forms of assistance as a volunteer (design work, flyering, stewarding etc.). In this way my approach is aligned to feminist ethnography (Skeggs 2001, Davis and Craven 2016). The research involved semi-structured life-world interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015) with women performers and promoters, textual analysis of performances, and surveys/interviews with audiences (of all genders). Data collected from each of these methods will be included in this chapter.

The methodology of the audience research, which underpins a significant part of the argument here, paralleled the approach taken by Lockyer and Myers (2011) in their study '"It's About Expecting the Unexpected": Live Stand-up Comedy from the Audience's Perspective'. Lockyer and Myers considered the motivations of audiences to attend live stand-up comedy performances and found that respect for the skill of the comedian, the unexpected nature of live performance, the intimacy and interaction afforded by the live experience and the opportunity to share this experience with others, were key motivators for comic audiences. These motivations were captured through a mixed-methods study involving an online survey (n=277) and follow-up interviews (n=11), and responses were thematically coded to identify correlations in experiences and thoughts. My decision to take the same approach was to enable comparison of the collected data with their study. However, in line with the feminist underpinning of this research the survey stage was undertaken in-

person as part of my participant-observer role. This meant that I experienced the very same performances as my participants for both survey and interview stages. As such my research was designed to attempt to delineate between motivations to attend live comedy *in general* and motivations to attend *women-only comedy specifically*.

A total of 82 comedy shows by women comedians occurred as part of the 2014 Women in Comedy Festival where my audience study occurred and in total 336 people completed the survey. Fourteen follow-up interviews were then conducted with participants, sampled to broadly reflect the characteristics of the overall cohort. Tables of participant characteristics for both the survey and interview phases are provided later on in this chapter. All of the specific quotations used within this chapter from audiences and performers were gathered in 2014 and 2015. My findings provide a snapshot of a specific moment for the UK comedy sector, and provides insight into underexplored aspects of the industry.

Where have women-only comedy nights come from and what were they set up to achieve?

In order to address the ways in which audiences and performers view women-only comedy nights as alternative, it is worth initially considering where these initiatives originated. In interviews with key promoters the 1990s were identified as a significant period for women's inclusion in comedy and so some historical background is necessary.

Following the alternative era of comedy in the UK (extensively considered by Double 2020), the 'Cool Britannia' period of the mid 1990s was defined by a rebranding of Britain as cool, modern and optimistic. As part of this rebranding the 1990s was a time when the increasing inclusion of women in politics and business was part of mainstream discourse. The Labour majority government of 1997 was formed with just over 100 female MPs and this was seen as a victory for women's inclusion in society, (even though the press at the time undermined this by regularly referring to the elected MPs as 'Blair's Babes'). It is my contention that this simultaneous inclusion and undermining of women participating in male-dominated industries was evident in live comedy's treatment of women in the period directly after the alternative comedy boom. This can be seen as what McRobbie describes as a 'double entanglement' in that 'the coexistence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life' and 'processes of liberalisation in regard to choice' exist simultaneously and create a situation where feminism is 'at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated' (McRobbie 2009, p.12). Current

processes and practices, now impacted upon by contemporary 4th wave of feminist thought, which include *and also* undermine women in comedy are still evident today in the comedy industry as my wider work explores (Tomsett forthcoming).

Two high profile organisations were created at this particular historical moment, Funny Women (established by Lynne Parker in 2002) and Laughing Cows (produced by Hazel O'Keefe since 1998). Both were founded to champion parity for women in comedy. Interventions into the live circuit during this period (late 1990s early 2000s) were seen as a way to make changes to women's participation higher up in the industry, but this particular aspect of comedy history as it related to the broadening of inclusion is not well-documented. It is often overshadowed by the 'alternative comedy movement' which in many ways simply kept some of the gendered barriers to comedy intact (perhaps, despite the political impetus of the movement and the subversive content of material, due to the way this movement was still dominated by white men).

The following comments are from personal interviews conducted as part of this project. When discussing how Laughing Cows came into being, and the attitudes on the circuit at the time, O'Keefe said:

> I started asking questions of certain promoters, you know 'Why are you not booking this person, why are you not doing that? Why do you only at the most ever have one female on the line-up?' and it was just a common response, and this was back in 1998, that promoters would not take the risk of booking more than one female. As a feminist, […] running a lesbian bar I was just thinking, 'this is ridiculous'. For me, for my market an all-female line-up would work perfectly.

Parker's experience was similar. She had been working in public relations for a group trying to establish a new comedy club in central London. When querying why they never booked any women she reflected that:

> I was told […] that was because there weren't any. And I thought well this is a bit odd because there are women out there doing stand-up, I know there are. […] I felt really passionate about this idea of doing something under the banner of Funny Women, so I decided I would do it myself. […] I spent two years nearly to get the whole thing off the ground.

In this way the late 1990s was incredibly significant in terms of the evolution of comedy in the UK, in that we see at this point significant proactive attempts to address the lack of representation for

women in comedy, through the establishment of women-only line-ups. Women audiences were, in the wider performance and theatre industries, now seen as an untapped demographic (Aston and Harris 2015). These interventions in the live comedy circuit *by and for* women occurred in the context of the first few female-led television comedies (that did not focus on a domestic environment), such as *Smack The Pony* (1999-2003) (see White 2018). The slow inclusion of women into television comedy as lead characters during the early 2000s, in a way that was not reductive, arguably drew attention to the lack of exposure for women on the live circuit, provoking women like O'Keefe and Parker into action.

Concurrent to the establishment of women-only ventures, in the early 2000s big comedy brands (such as the Comedy Store and Jongleurs) were expanding across the UK. This expansion, and their re-focus on the commercial nature of the form, resulted in the dedicated comedy venues which had been so vital in the establishment of the alternative comedy scene, slowly *becoming* the mainstream. This stripped the dedicated venues of their outsider, anti-establishment positions in favour of longer-term economic viability. The targeting of 'stag and hen' parties, and the group discounts and drinks offers, meant that a balance had shifted from a concentration on the performance, occurring on stage, back to a 'good night out' facilitated by alcohol. In many ways this refocus on comedy as a backdrop to socialising is reminiscent of the working men's club era. Alongside the comedy clubs' subsummation into a populist mainstream in the mid 2000s, a 'new alternative', or 'DIY' comedy started to emerge. Double characterises DIY comedy as 'loose, quirky, folksy, homemade, autobiographical, politically liberal and full of geeky pop culture references' (2014, p.59). This is an important point as several audience participants, who we will hear from later in this chapter, make reference to these specific comedy venues and genres of stand-up when explaining their engagement with women-only comedy nights. As will become evident in this chapter, many of the barriers to women's participation in the comedy industry, obvious to Parker and O'Keefe in the late 1990s, still exist and so the work of organisations such as Funny Women and Laughing Cows remains necessary. In the next section I will explore how these women-only comedy contexts are understood by those who perform within them.

How women comics understand women-only comedy nights as alternative

A key part of the discussions with all my performer participants was the role women-only comedy nights and events play in the wider circuit. Many performers I spoke with highlighted to me how, despite their own positive attitude to these nights, and their belief in their necessity, women-only nights were often seen by promoters and other (mostly male) comedians, as somehow less

challenging than mixed-gendered nights and thus required less skill as a performer. Comedian Kiri Pritchard-McLean highlighted that the general feeling towards women-only comedy nights, on the mainstream circuit, is overwhelmingly negative:

> I hate that […] people call them 'oh they are like the Paralympics of comedy nights', that's what they get called in the industry. Yeah like 'why do you get to gig at The Frog [and Bucket] just because you've got a fanny?', because there are plenty of places I don't get gigs because I've got a fanny'.

Here Pritchard-McLean is referencing the way Laughing Cows' nights (and some events for the Women in Comedy Festival) have historically run at the Frog and Bucket in Manchester, a club that has an element of prestige, since it has been a starting point for many of the North West's (and indeed the UKs) most successful comics (Peter Kay and Jason Manford for example). It seems that comedians who are not able to get a spot on a night in this venue are promoting the idea that women who take the opportunity to perform as part of women-only nights do not deserve their spot on the stage (using ableist language to do so). In this framing not only are these spaces being positioned as different to the mainstream but also as 'easier' in order to accommodate women perceived as lacking the necessary skill to integrate into the male-dominated mainstream, which is a highly sexist viewpoint. It is the same thought process that occurs around quotas or positive action in all industries, and across multiple aspects of identity. As Ahmed comments in relation to sexism and racism, we, in this case women in comedy, 'become the problem when we describe a problem' (Ahmed 2017, p.39). For those who see women-only comedy nights as unfairly tipping the scale in favour of women, the 'problem' is not the lack of opportunities for women in the industry or undeserved male privilege, but women's attempts to address this issue in a way that excludes men.

Even though most of my participants alluded to an awareness of the negative attitude of the wider industry (and people of all genders displaying this attitude), there was still an overwhelming sense that these nights, events and festivals were necessary to address gendered barriers to inclusion. One of the most prominent ways these ideas of necessity and difference from the mainstream comedy experiences was expressed, was in relation to not being the only woman on a comedy bill or line-up. When asking musical comedian Lara A. King about this issue she challenged my use of the term 'average comedy night', commenting that, 'When you say you're obviously used to working with men and women on an average comedy night, on an average comedy night I wouldn't be working with men and women, I'd be working with men. Because I'd be the woman'. The idea that a mainstream comedy night would (in 2015, when this conversation took place) have more than one woman on it was laughable to King. By having one woman on a bill, promoters had achieved

'diversity'. Well done them. This failure of creative industry diversity schemes, to achieve only tokenistic inclusion in a way that makes them 'seem inclusive' without undertaking wider change, has been critiqued by many in other non-comic fields (see Nwonka 2020, Saha 2018, Malik 2013, Ahmed 2012).

Comedian and activist Kate Smurthwaite also made a similar point stating that 'Like the average comedy night, people talk about one woman on the bill, but the reality is the average number of women on the bill is less than one. The average number of women on the bill is there aren't any'. This tokenistic inclusion of women, without any critical consideration by promoters as to why having more than one woman on a bill would somehow be 'risky', maintained in the period following the alternative comedy movement a position where women were expected to be grateful for being included at all. If women work in isolation (in any industry) they are not in a position to collectively challenge unequal practices without fear of repercussions for their own career. This is especially true of those who work freelance in the way stand-up comedians do. Thus, keeping women apart from each other in mainstream spaces becomes a way of ensuring inequalities continue through a lack of opportunity for collective action.

We can certainly see that slow progress has been made in this regard following the time of these conversations. Since 2013, when Bridget Christie became the third woman in the (then) 32-year history of the Edinburgh Comedy Awards to win the Best Show Prize, significant progress has been made. However, this has only been achieved due to the repeated public calling out of unethical and exclusionary booking practices. It is also worthy of note that many of the nights and festivals that now in the current 2020 context have diverse booking policies and are vocal about the need to move beyond all male line-ups, are run and compèred by women and non-binary comedians. People in positions of privilege very rarely give up power and space willingly – it has been up to those considered (sometimes falsely) to be in the minority, to do that labour (labour that is often poorly paid and unacknowledged, German 2007).

Kiri Pritchard-McLean, who also compères and runs comedy nights herself, including Suspiciously Cheap Comedy, and during the pandemic of 2020, the online comedy night Comedy at the Covid Arms, highlighted why working with other women might be important for performers. She argued that it is not just because these nights are enabling the audiences to see more funny women: the importance is also in terms of the experience of the performer too.

> We're still a novelty act, which is why I prefer it when there is a female compère, because when you come on you're just another comedian then. Especially if they are good, I mean if they're [the comic] bad they're [the audience] a bit like 'is she's going to be shit as well?'. But they would never think that with a male comic. If a male comic's shit, it's 'cause he's shit, but if a female comic is shit, it's because female comics are shit. But yeah if [you're working with] a female comic and she's good when you come on it's brilliant, it's so liberating because they are like 'oh what have you got to say?' and you're like 'oh wow this is what it's like to be a guy'! And it's a really nice feeling. Lucky fuckers.

Pritchard-McLean's point here is of particular relevance when we consider the way that stand-up comedy as a form has been defined. Double argues that 'Stand-up comedy is an individual talking to a community. A lot of it is about defining who the individual is, who the community is and how one relates to the other' (2014, p.239). This definition may well be true for white male comedians where there is no assumption that they are there representing a unified community. As white men are taken as universal subjects, they are never positioned (in comedy or indeed other aspects of cultural production) as an unvarying group. To be a male comic is to simply be 'a comic'. However, numerous women comics I engaged with as part of my research commented on the way that women are often read by audiences as there to represent a whole gender. Therefore, the way in which many of my participants discussed working in isolation as a woman in mainstream environments results in the perception that *a community* is talking to *a community*. As faulty as this thinking is, since women are not a homogenous group, there is very little room in stand-up comedy for notions of the individual or nuance without more than one woman performer on a line-up. Therefore, for performers, these women-only contexts provide a different, and, to use Prichard-McLean's term, 'liberating', space for performers when compared to mainstream comedy spaces.

In addition to the chance to work with other women, most of the performers I spoke with could easily recall sexist audience reactions in mainstream spaces. Many recalled instances of audience members telling them how great they were *for a woman*. Comedian Soula Notos, who performs mainly in The Netherlands but has also played women-only spaces in the UK, commented that:

> When I started out people came up to me and were like 'I usually don't like female comedy or comedians but I kind of liked you'. So I'm like 'Gee wiz thank you for the compliment, I think?'. Like even women said that! Like you don't like your own gender? So, you're actually saying you don't have a sense of humour yourself?

This particular experience (the 'you're good for a woman' approach) is regularly highlighted by women comedians on social media. Scottish comedians Fern Brady and Janey Godley have both

been particularly vocal about this very issue on the Twitter platform in the last few years. This argument frames the gender identity of the comic as a barrier to true (male) funniness and paints these individual women comics as an exception to the (sexist stereotypical) rule that women cannot be funny. This grudging acceptance of talent is a perennial issue that women encounter (and not limited to the comedy profession either).

In addition to general negative attitudes to comedy performed by women, several comics discussed male audiences in mainstream spaces being hostile to women taking control of the situation. Zoe Lyons argued that this kind of aggressive rejection of a woman taking control of a space happens in many arenas, and not just in comedy. She proposed that this is a common experience amongst performers.

> I think a lot of female comedians experience this, just blokes that absolutely refuse to engage with you in any way, shape or form, just almost to, to talk to would somehow make them effeminate. Or to engage or to be seen laughing at you would emasculate them in some way, shape, or form. You see these people […]. When I first walk on stage and I've had guys just crossing their arms, looking away, talking. […] Like I say there are stupid people everywhere.

I do not want to present women-only nights as some kind of uncomplicated utopia, and as Lyons identified, some people can behave stupidly everywhere. However, these nights potentially provide an alternative space where, as audiences *expect* women to be performing, women comics are less likely to experience this kind of behaviour when taking to the stage. This may also result in the rhetorical positions normally associated with stand-up comedy by women (self-deprecation for example), which are used to overcome gendered power imbalances, being less necessary in these spaces (Tomsett 2018). As all stand-up comedy performances are co-constructed by live audiences, it is the ways audiences understand women-only comedy contexts that the next section will consider.

How audiences understand women-only comedy spaces as alternative

This chapter now turns its attention to the experiences of the audiences for women-only comedy nights. The Women in Comedy Festival, established in 2013, has been delivered by a group of unpaid volunteers under the direction of the festival's director, Hazel O'Keefe (with, in more recent years, the support of co-director Jessica Toomey who also runs The Frog and Bucket). The following is a

unique snapshot of the experience of the audiences for nights that have, to date, been under-explored.

The participant characteristic data from the in-person survey can be seen in tables 1 to 6 (found at the end of the chapter). The cohort of interviewed audience members were sampled to reflect the make-up of my overall cohort (in terms of gender, sexuality and age), and participant characteristic data for interviewees can be found in table 7. Each participant was interviewed anonymously and will be referred to in this chapter by their participant number (the number assigned to their survey response as it was coded). As with Lockyer and Myers' (2011) study my survey participants overwhelmingly identified themselves as white British. Therefore, sampling of interviewees could not be done in relation to this aspect of identity.

A high number of my respondents during the survey phase, 57% in total, attended very little women-only comedy. 19% (n=64) of my respondents said that they see no women-only comedy nights a year, and 38% (n= 128) indicated 1. As one of the main purposes of the festival was to enable comedians to reach new audiences with their work, this is encouraging, as a significant number of respondents were not regular attendees of women-only line-ups. This is despite the fact that Laughing Cows, a monthly women-only comedy night, had been running in Manchester for many years by this point, and therefore local audiences had access to such nights at the time of this survey. In terms of where the survey respondents normally saw live comedy:

- 54% (n=183) normally saw live comedy in small comedy clubs.
- 46% (n=155) normally saw live comedy in small arenas/ theatres.
- 44% (n=148) normally saw live comedy in small rooms in pubs. (note that respondents were able to select multiple responses)

When asked about preferred venues for comedy (rather than where they normally saw comedy) the responses for these top three venues remained consistently in their first, second and third position. This demonstrates a clear preference for, and engagement with, small venues (which I will come on to discuss). This differs from Lockyer and Myers' findings in that their study found small arenas/ theatres to be the most popular venue, with small comedy clubs in second place, and small rooms in pubs the least visited venue. Within my study large arenas were the least visited venue for comedy, at 16% (n=53) and when asked about preferred venues to see live comedy, large arenas dropped

even further to 6% (n= 21). Clearly the women-only audience responses evidence a different attitude to arena comedy to the mainstream audience surveyed by Lockyer and Myers.

This may reflect the tastes of the particular audience for my study and the fact that I was facilitating the survey in-person at an event which took place predominantly in small venues (whereas Lockyer and Myers conducted their survey online). Women-only line-ups take place more often in small venues (at the time of the survey Laughing Cows' monthly women-only comedy nights took place in The Frog and Bucket which could be considered a small comedy club,) and female performers are disproportionately featured on bills in these venues or smaller comedy club spaces. *The State of Play Report* (2014) on comedy audiences authored by Mermiri et.al. for Ticketmaster compiled in the same year as my audience study, despite its numerous flaws in regard to its narrative about inclusion (see Tomsett, forthcoming), also provides a snapshot of what was occurring in arenas and larger venues at that time. As Lockyer (2015) notes in her solo study into arena stand-up, comedy is big business and offers huge financial rewards for those who can successfully operate in these spaces. As *The State of Play Report* only includes two women comics in its 35 pages (Miranda Hart and Sarah Millican), it is clear that women (and people of colour) were not as represented at the top of the industry (the part that is commercially successful and self-sustaining), but are represented more widely at the grassroots end. Despite progress since 2014, this tendency is still very much the case as I write in 2020. Therefore we can conclude that if the participants in my study were motivated to attend the festival to see women comics it is not a surprise that their other comedy-going experiences occur in smaller venues, where they are more likely to see women performers across the year.

That said, a majority of respondents, 65% (n=218), stated that the gender of the performer was not a factor when deciding to see live comedy *in general* (agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement). However, 279 of the respondents followed this up by completing the free text box when asked about their motivations to attend a *women-only* comedy event and 44% (n=122) of responses explicitly foregrounded gender. Comments in this section unequivocally mentioned respondents' support of women acts, a positive decision to seek out women comics and a desire to engage with a sense of humour they could connect to. So, whilst gender may not play a part when attending mainstream events, it is, somewhat unsurprisingly, a key motivator for women-only event attendance.

To elucidate this point the following are a sample of responses from women respondents to the question about why people attend women-only comedy nights:

- ‘To support women comedians. I also relate to their humour.’
- ‘I am a feminist and I like to laugh.’
- ‘Enjoy watching female comedy and socialising with other women.’
- ‘I can relate to the humour of women-only comedy.’
- ‘I love listening to and talking about women.’
- ‘Because most line-ups never have a female act. If there wasn't any women-only shows I’d never see a female performance.’
- ‘Because women are funny, but I can't see that on my TV.’

For the people responding in this way it was clear that the gender of the performer was relevant and a motivating factor to attend the festival. These responses also evidenced a wider understanding of the gendered nature of the mainstream circuit (and the concurrent issues in broadcast comedy at the time). In 2014 (prior to that years’ Women in Comedy Festival) the then BBC Director of Television, Danny Cohen, announced that the BBC would no longer have all-male panel shows (see Cook 2014), and this was alluded to in some of the follow-up interviews. If these respondents wanted to see women perform comedy, there was a perception that attending a women-only comedy night was really the only way to guarantee that experience. Notably the comments in this section of the survey also evidenced a perception that the comedy that respondents would encounter in this environment would be *qualitatively different* in some way to mainstream comedy. A further 8% (n=21) of the comments highlighted the participants’ desire to avoid certain aspects of mainstream comedy experiences. Comments on this topic (all from women respondents) included:

- ‘Less risk of sexism/ general awfulness.’
- ‘No sexist rubbish.’
- ‘Less dick jokes.’
- ‘Because I'm sick of hearing shit comedians telling shit jokes about their mums and their girlfriends’ vaginas. Oh??!! Women are nuts? Get a life you sad case! Also poo, there are more topics than poo.’
- ‘I'm a feminist and appreciate comedy that’s less likely to be sexist/ discriminatory.’
- ‘To avoid misogyny, sexism, stereotypes. Hate “cock jokes” and “blokey” sense of humour.’

- ‘I can feel intimidated and uncomfortable in a mixed setting even though the material is just as 'raunchy'. I feel safer.’
- ‘Because most comedy is male-dominated and unfortunately much of it is misogynist.’

During my follow up interviews there were also several revealing conversations that highlighted specific negative experiences of mainstream spaces as being motivating factors to attend women-only spaces. When asked what she expected from a women-only comedy night, Participant 46 commented that:

> [W]hen I was an undergrad I’d been to a few nights at the Comedy Store and stuff, and they were quite laddy […] not intimidating but laddy and it was mostly men in the audience and like girlfriends [laughs] of the men, and it was mostly men on stage. […] I kind of just thought it’d [the women-only comedy night] be different, that the vibe would be a bit different than that. […] I suppose I just thought it might be a bit more chilled.

The term ‘laddy’ here is referring to a specific kind of heterosexual masculine identity that is indicative of the behaviours and ideas perpetuated by ‘lad-culture’. Lad-culture is defined as ‘a group mentality articulated through activities such as sport and heavy alcohol consumption, and characterized by sexist and homophobic ‘banter’’ (Phipps and Young 2013, p.28). This comment by Participant 46 was echoed by Participant 71 who also articulated why she chooses to attend women-only nights in relation to her experiences of the mainstream:

> So, for example when I listen to male stand-ups the way they talk about women, it may not be sexist or derogatory per se, I think it’s the gender roles things and the stereotypes that inadvertently male stand-ups still have within their set.

What is particularly interesting in these responses is the direct mention of the Comedy Store (although it is unclear as to which of the venues that now operate under this banner the participant is referring to). Whilst the Comedy Store’s history is inherently bound up with the revolutionary politics of the alternative comedy movement (Quirk 2018), it is now being framed by comedy audience members as the mainstream. During the 1980s specialist comedy venues were positioned in opposition to dominant political thought and sexist rhetoric, found in say the working men’s clubs (the dominant comedy venue of their time). Potentially now, around 40 years later some people in comedy audiences (perhaps especially women) see these venues as very much part of the mainstream, dominated by men and to varying degrees (whether intentionally or unintentionally) perpetuating gender stereotypes and misogyny.

In addition to the framing of the kind of comedy found in these women-only environments as being 'different' to mainstream equivalents, the idea that the audiences may contribute to creating an alternative atmosphere was commented upon. Participant 309 regularly attended women-only comedy nights and stated that:

> The heckling is always less aggressive. […] And less sexual. I find a lot of when there's men the whole sort of sexual aggressiveness it disturbs me, even if it's kind of meant to be in fun. […]. It feels threatening to me.

While this participant noted that heckling can take place in any comic environment (facilitated by the lack of 4th wall) the content and tone of such interactions they felt was notably different. Thus, it is not only what happens on stage then that contributes to the positioning of these women-only spaces as alternative – the behaviour of the other audience members can contribute to this understanding too.

It is important to note, however, that these perceptions of women-only comedy spaces as less hostile and less sexist may actually themselves be based on stereotypes about women (especially those that relate to women as being inherently passive/domestic). Participant 71 described to me in detail how shocked she was that Jo Caulfield (a comic well known for her biting, acerbic wit, and who has had a lot of success in mainstream clubs) included controversial topics within her show.

> I went to see Jo Caulfield a very established comic, you know she is on Radio 4, I've seen her tour before, she does a lot of put downs of men and she talks about her husband saying he's a bit crap. But I was really distressed because she did an anal rape joke and there's this whole thing in comedy about rape jokes how in whatever context it's outrageous and there I was at this women's comedy festival and there was a female comic doing a rape joke, and I was just absolutely outraged. I would have walked out, but it was a bit obvious, so I didn't come back in the second half.

In this instance the audience member had intentionally attended a women-only space assuming that controversial rape-joke material is not included in these spaces, or that women are less likely to tackle these taboo topics. The participant mentions having seen Caulfield before and listening to their work on the radio (where obviously certain regulatory frameworks operate). From my experience of observing over 170 comic performances by women comics over the last 7 years I can confidently state that women are equally as capable of making comedy from taboo or controversial topics, swearing and aggressively dominating the performance space as their male contemporaries. There has been consideration of how rape-jokes can indeed be liberating for survivors of sexual violence and nuance is required when considering the position of the comic in relation to their

material (Proulx 2018). I am not saying that this 'liberating' approach to rape jokes is definitely the case with Caulfield, or attempting to mitigate against the offence caused; she is known for her 'risky' material. I observed the same performance as this participant and did not interpret the joke as offensive in the same way. However, what is interesting to me is the assumption that this topic has no place in a women-only comedy space. Culturally in the UK women-only spaces have predominantly been set up for survivors of trauma, violence or male oppression (refuges, consciousness raising groups of the 1970s) etc. Therefore the expectations the participant is articulating here may extend from the understanding that a women-only comedy space is an extension of more specific women-only spaces that have been established as 'safe spaces'. Lewis et al. (2015) explore the dynamics of feminist women-only spaces in relation to what women are 'safe from' and 'safe to', arguing that the former may be necessary for the latter. They argue that creating a space where women have '*safety from* routine risk of disparagement provides *safety to* express one's full personhood' (Lewis et al. 2015, p.1; original italics). We can certainly see that this dynamic is relevant to women-only comedy spaces in that performers are freed in some ways from having to assimilate into male dominated spaces which in turn may impact on their material (Tomsett 2018). But how can this framing of a 'safe-space' sit comfortably with comedy, a form that is contingent on the playing with taboos and controversy? This is especially problematic when it is easy to conflate the concept of 'safety' with 'ease', which is (as discussed above) used to belittle the work of women in these spaces? A simple equating of women-only space with the gender stereotype that women should not, or will not, do dark or taboo material or use abusive language is flawed. The way in which these nights are positioned by audiences as alternative can also be problematic then, as it potentially sets up expectations about the content of the material found in these spaces, which in reality (depending on the approach of the specific comedian) may not align with the broader conception of 'safety from' expected in women-only spaces. Women-only comedy nights are not by default safe spaces for audiences as a result of only platforming women's voices. As comedy is inherently about pushing at boundaries, making connections and cultural observations, it is to be expected that some material performed by women will touch on the darker aspects of women's shared experience (e.g. material dealing with sexual assault/ rape/ abuse/ domestic violence). It is important to enable women (in all their diversity and not as a homogenous group) to articulate their lives through comic self-representation. It is tricky, however, to ensure that audiences can make informed decisions about the comedy space they are entering when clearly 'women-only' spaces have certain (complex and pre-existing) 'safe space' connotations attached to them. Thus there exists a tension between what audiences may believe they are getting 'safety from' and the performer's 'safety to' articulate in these environments.

In direct contrast to those who stated that gender was a motivating factor to attend women-only comedy or directly mentioned it as alternative to mainstream provision, 9% of respondents to the survey (n=25, 11 men and 14 women), used the same text box to reiterate the point that the gender of the comedian is irrelevant to their choice of comedy night. Comments included the following (these specific comments were from women respondents):

- 'I don't particularly attend women only comedy nights - it would usually be because someone I like is part of the show or because of the theme - I view all comedians as equal and watch them on their own merit how funny I find them.'
- 'I don't! I don't selectively attend women-only comedy - I watch what I want and judge by the quality not the gender.'
- 'No particular reason. If I like comedy the performers gender [sic] bears no issue.'

Even though this data was collected at a festival designed to *specifically* address issues with gender inequality, it is clear that not everyone in the audience was aware of the problematic nature of 'quality judgements' and how these are inevitably informed by what audiences are exposed to (Kuipers 2006). These comments are reflective of wider attitudes to inclusion and diversity, in that they tended to foreground terms such as 'quality' or 'merit' over the gender of the performer, rather than acknowledge any racial or gendered privilege. The comments made by these audience members are therefore arguably evidence of how, in the wider social context, initiatives such as positive action to address racial or gender disparities, or quotas, are undermined (Eddo-Lodge 2017, Saha 2018, Ahmed 2012). Whilst we cannot assume this was the motivation for all the comments in this survey, acknowledgement of these attitudes provides contextual information about the society in which the data was captured.

The interview with Participant 296 evidenced by far the most conservative and stereotypical views regarding women and comedy. What is particularly interesting about this interview is that this participant, at the time of this discussion, worked for a major television broadcaster, which she referenced within our discussion. She did not intentionally attend a women-only comedy event but was simply given a flyer whilst in a bar with a friend and decided to go. When asked what she expected from a women-only comedy night, she commented:

> There's going to be a few lesbian jokes in there definitely. There's probably going to be a bit of men-hating, which there was, I think, if I can remember correctly.

Note that the phrasing here is reminiscent of stereotypes historically levelled at the feminist movement in general. When discussing the exposure of female comics on TV (which was something both the survey and the interviews covered) the youngest interview participants (numbers 247 and 250, both in their late teens) were highly aware of wider debates around representation and the media, what stood out from the interview with Participant 296 was not only their lack of awareness of these issues of inclusion despite working in the media industry, but the openly hostile attitude towards positive action.

When discussing how they had arrived at the understanding that there were numerically fewer female comedians than male comedians (which was indicated on their survey responses) they said:

> I'd say yeah there are fewer women, is that because they are less funny? I don't know, that's a question I'm asking myself. And then I try and think well actually they are [there], I mean there is always generally at least one on a show. I just I don't know, I'm not fussed by that. It just doesn't bother me that there's less women.

This participant was clearly unconcerned that women were in the minority within the content of television comedy. When I followed up by asking whether the current system was a meritocracy, and that comedians were simply booked because they were the funniest, she replied that this was 'because they are the funniest, not because they are male or female. I can't stand positive discrimination'. This attitude evidences the way people are very quick to condemn and critique approaches to ending discrimination, rather than actually condemning, or even acknowledging, the discrimination itself (Ahmed, 2012). This participant had a steadfast belief in the idea of meritocracy, and no awareness that the idea of progression or mobility within certain professions (in this case comedy as part of the creative industries) is little more than a myth (Littler 2017, Brook, O'Brien and Taylor 2020). For this participant the idea of male privilege did not exist.

The attitude displayed in this particular interview (including in answers that are not included as direct quotations here) evidence that this reductive and stereotypical understanding about women's comic abilities, which clearly stems from numerous humour related cultural stereotypes, was still very much alive and well at the time of these interviews (and in the case of this respondent, depressingly working within the television industry).

Concluding thoughts:

This chapter has explored the rationale behind the establishment of women-only comedy spaces and the contribution they make to the current UK comedy circuit from the perspective of performers

and audiences. By considering women-only comedy events and spaces not in isolation but as part of the wider UK comedy circuit we can see that they are regularly framed as 'alternative' by both audiences and performers and consistently considered experientially different to mainstream experiences. This 'alternative experience' is felt by those performing in these contexts in relation to the way they facilitate a freedom from being positioned as the 'only woman' (and thus being understood by an audience as 'only a woman'). Furthermore, audiences articulate their understandings of women-only events as distinct from mainstream spaces, both in terms of the contexts (the demographics of the audiences and their behaviours) and the 'alternative' comedy content they encounter.

This positioning as alternative is a reflection of the industrial structures of the comedy industry which can be considered, in line with German's (2007) critique of labour outside the home, as both horizontally and vertically segregated. Live comedy is vertically segregated in that women exist mainly at the lower/ grassroots end of the industry in mixed-gendered spaces (as evidenced in *The State of Play Report,* 2014), and horizontally segregated in that spaces have been created (however necessary) that separate women comics from the mainstream industry. In this way the belittling of the performances and performers that populate these gendered comic spaces is indicative of wider social attitudes that denigrate industries that employ mainly women, which mostly involve lower pay and lower social status (caring professions provide an example here). As German observes 'the more powerful and prestigious the institution in our society, the more heavily male dominated it tends to be' (German 2007, p.104). This argument remains true in that the economically profitable and high-status comedy spaces remain overwhelmingly white and male.

The understandings of women-only comedy spaces present in the interviews conducted as part of this research are consistent with the findings of Lewis et al. (2015) in that women-only spaces (especially when overtly aligned with feminism – as is the case with The Women in Comedy Festival) can enable women to feel both 'free from' attitudes and behaviours that inhibit their freedoms, and 'free to' express themselves more freely. Overwhelmingly, interview participants discussed women-only nights as still necessary. This is hardly surprising as the barriers the nights were set up to overcome still remain. Additionally, performers *and* audiences highlighted these events as an opportunity to showcase a wider range of talent rather than the (still) small number of women who are featured on mainstream TV spaces. The sexism, stereotypes and misogyny still found in mainstream male dominated clubs clearly impacts on some audiences' decisions to seek out an alternative experience. In a similar way that the alternative comedy of the 1980s was framed as a

reaction against the working men's club environment of the 1960s, for some audience members at least, women-only spaces are providing an alternative experience to the attitudes and behaviours encountered in contemporary live mainstream, and televised, comedy. Therefore, we can see that as the UK comedy circuit has evolved over the last 40 years, women's experiences of live comedy, as both performers and audiences, have continued to be inherently linked to and shaped by the gendered contexts found in the spaces of performance.

Tables of data:

Table 1: Gender identity of survey respondents

Gender identity	(n=336)
Female	72.92%
Male	24.70%
Prefer not to say	0.60%
Other	0.30%
N/R	1.49%
Total	100.00%

Table 2: Sexuality of survey respondents

Sexuality	(n=336)
Yes LGBT	39.58%
No LGBT	55.06%
Prefer not to say	2.98%
N/R	2.38%
Total	100.00%

Table 3: Age of survey respondents

Age	(n=336)
16-20years	5.95%
21-30years	27.98%
31-40years	20.54%
41-50years	28.87%
51-60years	10.71%
61-70years	2.98%
Over 70	0.60%
Prefer not to say	0.60%
N/R	1.79%
Total	100.00%

Table 4: Disability of survey respondents

Disability	(n=336)
Yes Disability	4.17%
No Disability	91.96%
Prefer not to say	2.98%
N/R	0.60%
VOID	0.30%
Total	100.00%

Table 5: Ethnicity of survey respondents

Ethnicity	(n=336)
Black British	0.89%
White British	83.33%
White Irish	2.68%
White European	4.46%
Asian British	0.30%
Indian	0.00%
Black African	0.00%
Black Caribbean	0.30%
White and Black African	0.00%
White and Black Caribbean	0.60%
White and Asian	0.00%
Chinese	0.30%
Other	3.57%
Prefer not to say	1.79%
No Response	0.89%
VOID	0.89%
Total	100.00%

Table 6: Professional area of survey respondents

Employment	(n=336)
Student	11.90%
Homemaker	1.19%
Construction	1.19%
Science	1.79%
Education	8.04%
Civil Servant	3.87%
Healthcare	12.80%
Finance	2.98%
Retail	7.74%
Arts	4.17%
Charity	5.06%
Hotel/Food	2.68%
I.T	5.95%
Legal Services	1.79%
Retired	1.79%

Unemployed	2.38%
Other	18.15%
Prefer not to say	1.49%
N/R	1.79%
VOID	3.27%
Total	100.00%

Table 7: Characteristics of sampled participants for the interview stage of audience study

Number	Age	Gender	LGBT*	Profession	Intentional attendance
309	(41-50)	Female	Yes	I.T	Yes
318	53	Female	Yes	Charity	Taken by friend
266	(21-30)	Male	Pref not to say	Finance	Taken by friend
247	18	Male	No	Student	Taken by friend
31	34	Female	Yes	Education	Taken by friend
71	(21-30)	Female	Yes	Education	Yes
201	39	Male	No	Healthcare	Yes
81	58	Female	No	Other	Yes
155	42	Female	Yes	Healthcare	Yes
250	19	Female	Yes	Student	Taken by friend
237	41	Female	No	Arts	Yes
296	30	Female	No	Media	No
295	31	Male	Yes	Media	No
46	31	Female	No	Education	Yes

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