

Dr Helen Mott  
Bristol Fawcett

Speech given at Bristol Reclaim the Night 18 November 2011,  
Portland Square

I'm here to represent Bristol Fawcett, which campaigns for equality between women and men. I want to talk a little bit about rights, freedom and values.

Fawcett's vision is of a society where women and our rights and freedoms are equally valued and respected and where we have equal power and influence in shaping our own lives and our wider world.

When our rights and freedoms *are* equally valued, we will see an end to rape culture, and to victim blaming. It would be unimaginable that women in Bristol would be told as we were last year that we had better not go out alone after dark. It's a cause for celebration that we have excellent specialist services addressing violence against women in our city, strong advocates in the community, in the police, in public health and education, who are committed to tackling violence against women and changing the attitudes and behaviour that lead to it. But we urgently need to get to a place where everyone, not just experts and specialists, understands whose responsibility it is to prevent women being violated.

When our rights and freedoms are equally valued we won't need to march any more – but that day is not just around the corner. The cuts that are happening now, to support services for women as well as to welfare and benefits and jobs, affecting women disproportionately and the most disadvantaged women hardest of all, are being made in the context of existing inequality. They can only widen the inequality gap. Tomorrow in London, for the first time in a long time, Fawcett nationally, who are better known for lobbying, campaigning, and commissioning research, are going on the march. The theme of the march is "don't turn back time on women's equality" because we know that the effect of the cuts will be to drive countless women further into poverty and financial dependence. Women are currently losing their jobs at ten times the rate of men according to the latest Government unemployment figures. These unnecessary and unfair cuts are the manifestation of an ideological agenda that belongs in the dustbin of history and seeks to take us back to a time when women knew their unequal place. A time of male breadwinners and female homemakers, of massive inequality between the sexes, of men being expected to take decisions and women being expected to do as they were told, a time when society punished men and women for not fitting in to rigid gender roles, a time when there was no escape from abusive relationships and no support or justice for women and girls who experienced sexual and domestic abuse.

My message is, don't be mistaken about the situation we are in now. The hard-won - but limited – rights and freedoms of women today are not equal, and they are not set in stone. Our limited rights and freedoms today rest on the *idea* that equality is desirable. At least the idea that women and

men are in fact equal citizens, equal human beings, equally valuable and important, equally deserving of respect, is generally accepted now in a way that it was not in the days when the Reclaim the Night movement first began. But it is still only an idea, shared I am sure by everybody here tonight but not universally shared. In culture, in everyday life, in politics and in the way politicians conduct their business it is abundantly clear that women are still marked as second class citizens and as not quite fully authentic humans, who might be allowed from time to time to participate in culture and politics and the workplace and being out at night but just not on the same terms and in the same numbers as men, so that our rights and freedoms are still precariously conditional. And it's business as usual for the media and industries who compete against the idea of equality. They press on, relentlessly selling us macho, violent, sexually aggressive role models for men and boys against one-dimensional, hyper-sexualised, submissive role models for girls and women as if this was the natural order of things. It is not, and we want our educators and our politicians in our city to support us and join us in taking a stand and shouting back against sexism and against the powerful and damaging interests of those who seek to make their profit from sexism. Don't be part of a system that is turning back time on women's equality – be part of a movement that wants women and men to be the best that they can be. Thank you for coming tonight.