

17 October 2020

Dear Ms Woodward and City of Sydney Councillors, The Victorian Women's Guild promotes women's rights and concerns in the State of Victoria. We are a feminist collective, with members throughout Australia.

As a feminist organisation, we are very concerned to learn that the City of Sydney is intending to evict the Feminist Legal Clinic if it does not review its affiliation with the women's sex-based rights movement.

Our members have been involved in starting women's services from the ground up, including the first women's refuge in Victoria, rape crisis services, the first shelter for victims of trafficking in Australia, women's consciousness-raising groups, and women's newsletters and zines.

We know how important it is for women's organisations to have a secure office and drop-in centre where they can do their work and welcome clients.

Generally, women's organisations, especially grassroots organisations, do not have access to the political or financial resources to afford private office rental. We need support from local councils in order to exist and provide our critical services.

This is why we are so disappointed to hear that the City of Sydney wants to impose draconian restrictions on the Feminist Legal Clinic in exchange for subsidised rent.

In your letter of 24 July 2020 to the Feminist Legal Clinic, you note that the Clinic must deliver services in a manner which is inclusive and free of discrimination, and that the City of Sydney will not support activities or entities which unnecessarily discriminate on the basis of race, religion or sex.

The Feminist Legal Clinic provides important and vital services for women. The Feminist Legal Clinic does not unnecessarily discriminate on the basis of sex; it discriminates in a necessary fashion, in order to benefit women. Surely it is women who are the intended subjects of protections from sex-based discrimination, but your letter implies that you understand we are not.

You refer to transgender persons in your letter. It is entirely opaque to the Victorian Women's Guild how providing services for the female sex could generate discrimination towards transgender members of the community. Furthermore, many transgender people of both sexes absolutely support the work and position of the Feminist Legal Clinic.

The Feminist Legal Clinic is responsible for ensuring the continued operations of the Women's Family Law Court Support Service after the Government cut funding to this service. In a country where 20% of women experience male violence, services such as this and its associated research project with the University of Sydney are vital. Your proposed eviction of the Feminist Legal Clinic would cut off needed services and research for women.

We note that you raise concerns about an article the Feminist Legal Clinic shared regarding concerns about the use of puberty blockers and early hormone treatment for children. The article, according to your letter, states that this may constitute a form of child abuse and such measures could be unsafe for children. We refer you to a case heard in the UK High Court on 7 and 8 October 2020, brought by Keira Bell and 'Mrs A'. Ms Bell is a young woman who transitioned at age 16 to living as a transman. She had a double mastectomy at age 20. She subsequently detransitioned. Mrs A has a 16-year-old autistic daughter on the waiting list to attend a child and youth gender identity clinic in London.

Ms Bell and Mrs A asked the court to decide whether a child can give informed consent to treatment which is experimental and life-altering, or if courts would be better placed to make these decisions in the best interests of children. Their lawyers have noted that children as young as 10 who attend gender dysphoria clinics are asked by the clinic to make decisions which will affect, for example, their sexual function, even though these children have no idea what sex or sexual pleasure is like. The clinic asks children to make decisions which will affect their capacity to have children in order to proceed to life-altering treatment, though what could a ten-year-old reasonably know or predict about this? Surely the City of Sydney agrees this is a concern.

In this context, we say that the Feminist Legal Clinic is sharing critical information, as much as it may uncomfortably challenge the prevailing liberal orthodoxy. Discussion, including criticism, about issues important to the rights of women and girls is necessary.

We note that JK Rowling has been subjected to the vilest attacks for explaining that her experiences of sexual and domestic violence have led her to believe in the importance of women's-only spaces (based on sex, not gender identity).

We note that women have lost their jobs for stating that only people of the female sex can be female.

We say that if the City of Sydney evicts the Feminist Legal Clinic for its work in support women, you are directly contributing to an environment where women are shamed and vilified for standing up for our sex-based rights.

We urge you not to evict the Feminist Legal Clinic but instead to continue their work supporting a group which both constitutes 51% of our population and yet nevertheless suffers oppression and marginalisation.

We ask you to respond and confirm that you will not evict the Feminist Legal Clinic.

The Victorian Women's Guild.