

Atheists, mostly male, show sexist side

by [Kimberly Winston](#) in the [October 18, 2011](#) issue

Rebecca Watson meant it as a funny story, almost an aside. In a video blog, the popular skeptic blogger recalled a man following her into an empty elevator and inviting her up to his room after she spoke about feminism at a European atheist conference last June.

Watson told of rebuffing the advance with a bit of a laugh. Her blog and other atheist/skeptic blogs were soon flooded with comments. Many women told of receiving unwanted sexual advances at freethinker gatherings. Some men, meanwhile, ridiculed Watson as overly sensitive or worse—or threatened her with rape, mutilation and murder.

"I thought it was a safe space," Watson said of the freethought community. "The biggest lesson I have learned over the years is that it is not a safe space and we have a lot of growing to do."

Before she knew it, Watson, 30, was subsumed by what everyone now calls "Elevatorgate." And when best-selling atheist author Richard Dawkins chimed in, the incident went nuclear.

"Stop whining, will you," Dawkins wrote in one of three comments on Pharyngula, a popular freethinker blog, contrasting her experience with that of a fictional Muslim woman who had been beaten by her husband and genitally mutilated. "For goodness' sake grow up, or at least grow a thicker skin."

Now, months after "Elevatorgate" erupted, freethinkers are assessing its meaning. Many acknowledge that

they have a "woman problem"—men outnumber women at atheist gatherings, both at the podium and in the audiences.

Yet many, including Watson, say Elevatorgate is less a calamity and more an opportunity to welcome women and other minorities into a community that's long been dominated by white men. "The majority of e-mails I have gotten have been from men who said, 'I had no idea what women in this community went through, and thank you for opening my eyes,'" Watson said. "There has actually been a net benefit coming out of this that I think has made everything worthwhile."

No one is suggesting that the freethought community is more sexist than other segments of society—after all, the most famous American atheist, the late Madalyn Murray O'Hair, was a woman.

Nonetheless, the incident has struck a chord, perhaps because atheists and other skeptics pride themselves on reason and logic—intellectual exercises that theoretically lead to convictions about equality. The problem, they agree, is long-standing. Women veterans of the movement recall meetings in the 1970s where 80 percent of attendees were men.

"I think the essential problem that women have in the movement is that they are greatly outnumbered," said Susan Jacoby, author of *Freethinkers*. "When you talk about women atheists, there is less of a pool than men. Women are more religious than men, therefore there are fewer women active in this movement than there are men."

But that is slowly changing. The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey found a 60-40 percent breakdown among men and women who say they have no religion. Yet women make up 52 percent of the broader population.

Annie Laurie Gaylor, copresident of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, notes that while men might fill their gatherings, women often lead freethought

organizations. She has directed FFRF's local chapters to use more women—at least 50 percent—in their billboard and bus banner ads. "We want to be proactive and make sure there is diversity," she said. "The movement is big enough now."

That aim is reflected in a new "Women in Secularism" conference announced in August by the Center for Inquiry. The conference, billed as the first of its kind, will be held in May in Washington, D.C., and will feature an all-female lineup.

"A lot of us think it is long overdue," said Melody Hensley, executive director of the center's Washington office and organizer of the event, which will include Jacoby, Watson and Gaylor. "If you have women leaders, you are going to have more women. So this conference is a step forward to attract more women to the cause." —RNS