Charlotte (event organiser) invited me to speak for a couple of minutes about my experiences as a woman in academia. First, I want to say that for the first 20 years of my career, I was never supervised or line-managed by a woman nor worked anywhere where there was a woman in the line above me. Thatcher did not count because I was working in the US and did not return to the UK until she had demit office. There was no causal relationship between the two events, but it was a happy coincidence. It was not until 2007 that I found myself in an institution headed by a woman. The Principal’s Office, which had been stubbornly male since - well most of 600 years - is now gender balanced. That’s progress.

I want to read to you a passage from a book I read some years ago. I was 18, about to go to University and I was lonely. Marilyn French was writing about "inconsolable loneliness". She wrote:

"you could go up to a stranger on the street and say, 'I am inconsolably lonely,' and he might take you home with him and introduce you to his family and ask you to stay for dinner. But that wouldn't help. Because loneliness is not a longing for company, it is a longing for kind. And kind means people who can see you who you are, and that means they have enough intelligence and sensitivity and patience to do that."

What she is saying here is that mere human company isn't enough - it's a feeling of belonging that sustains us. To experience belonging does not require assimilation or the need to change who you are. I was really excited by this idea... I have always been an optimist and when I read this I believed at University I would find my kind.

In an academic environment, more than any other I could think of, I would find people with intelligence... and amongst these educated people, patience and sensitivity should not be rare commodities. So for me it followed that here, in academia, we could all expect to find a good deal of "kind" - kindred.
But there was more: French goes on... "It also means they can accept you, because we don't see what we can’t accept, we blot it out, we jam it hastily in one stereotypic box or another. We don’t want to look at something that might shake up the mental order we’ve so carefully erected. I have respect for this desire to keep one’s psyche unviolated. Habit is a good thing for the human race."

Amongst academics, we should also expect to find people whose job it is to question received wisdom, challenge the orthodox, etc... The very people most unlikely to avoid having their psyche violated... and most unlikely to embrace differences, diversity and new ideas - views not previously encountered.

I cannot say that I have always experienced this ideal - not from everyone. However, whatever our gender or ethnic or any other social-construct identification, it is something that we should expect of all academics, whether you haven’t received much wisdom yet or whether you are battle-weary from the challenging.

But another great thing about academia is that by time you are at university - in academia - we are not merely acquiring information and learning stuff, but we start thinking differently about things we thought we knew.

What’s this got to do with being a woman specifically? It is self-evident that one’s experience shapes one’s brain - I said that already. People with different experiences will perceive and react to things in different ways. It follows then that I have a different views because I have grown up in this particular body - and I appreciate the enormous good fortune of having experienced things that I would not have otherwise experienced. But above all of this, I have always felt that I belong here... and when occasionally someone has implied that I do not, I have been able to show them that I do belong... every bit as much as they do.

Do I want the academy to be gender blind? Or colour blind? Or blind to any other difference? Blindness is the antipathy to our pursuit here. I want to see the challenges to my psyche. I value academia because it is not blind. A diverse academy is a better one and this is what we need to work towards.