

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS



PROJECT REPORT
MAY 2020



Belfast
City Council

Introduction

The idea for this project came about in the summer of 2019. In recent years WRDA has used BCC capacity building funding to promote general access to political decision making for women and to build their skills and confidence in campaigning and lobbying. This project will take this work further by focusing on endemic sexist attitudes and behaviours which act as barriers to women's full participation in their communities.

The vision for this programme was to pilot a project that tackles sexual harassment and sexism as barriers to women's participation in community development and public life. It will provide awareness-raising on what constitutes sexual harassment and build capacity to act collectively to stamp out sexism in Belfast.

This approach allowed us to apply the lessons of our earlier work as well as to use public data that shows that a sexist climate dissuades young women from entering public life or speaking up about issues that affect them. The problem is exacerbated for more marginalised women, including LGBT women, BAME women and those who are either younger or older, and so we specifically targeted these demographics so that they could provide insights and the project would have authentic voices.

Our thesis was that we cannot solve these problems by telling women to toughen up and to take sexist abuse or sexual harassment on the chin as the price of public life; we solve them by tackling the root causes. Misogyny is at the root of all of these behaviours, and we must call it what it is, strive to understand it, and address it everywhere it exists.

The programme design

In this programme we proposed to work with 4 groups of women covering the demographics most vulnerable to these attacks; LGBT women, BAME and migrant women, young women and older women. We worked with them to identify sexist behaviour and sexual harassment, and workshopped ways in which it can be tackled in a series of three sessions per group.

The plan was to bring the groups together at the end of the project with the goal of building their capacity to address and remedy the barriers they face collectively. At the conclusion of the project we were planning to produce an agreed toolkit that can be used as a guide to identifying and tackling the problem of sexual harassment and sexist attitudes in public life.

Unfortunately, this project was unfinished due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The final event had been scheduled to take place on 21st March 2020 and we were forced to cancel that meeting, leaving the project unfinished, as a result this update will consist of everything up to the final event and one workshop with NI Youth Forum that was also cancelled due to COVID-19.

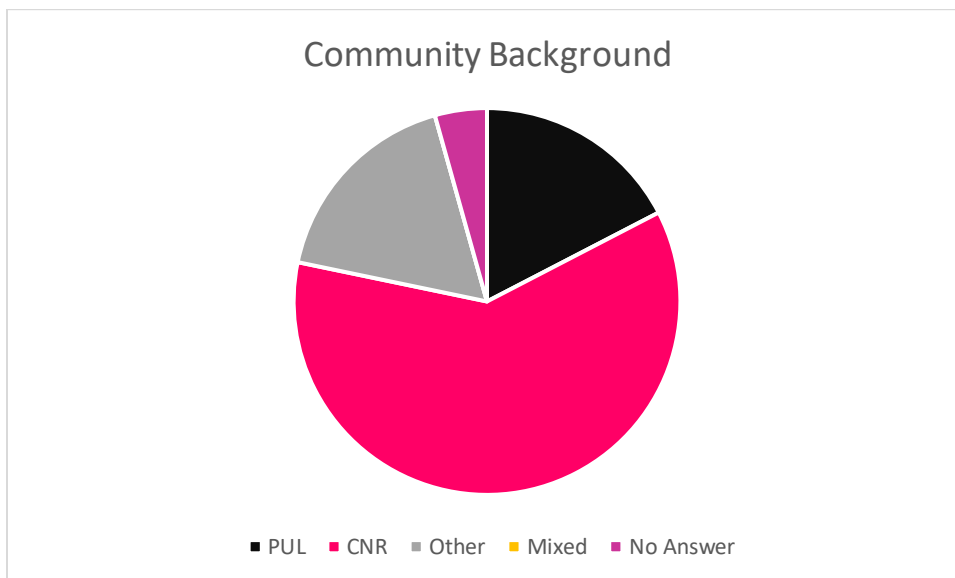
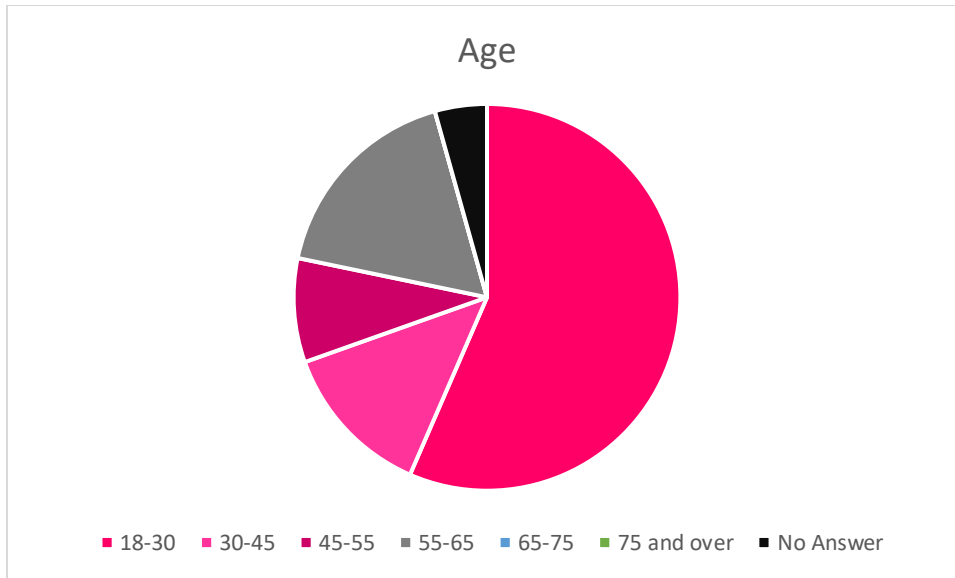
The toolkit in this report is based on the insights and suggestions offered in the individual workshops, because the groups did not have the opportunity to share these insights with each other and develop new perspectives from that experience.

Recruitment

Recruitment for this project began in the summer of 2019. The goal was to recruit 4 groups representing 4 groups of women who tend to be more marginalised in society and who may have particular insights and experiences with regards to the impact of sexist attitudes and sexual harassment on their demographic. These 4 groups were;

- older women – represented by Mornington Community Project Women's Group
- younger women – represented by Northern Ireland Youth Forum
- LBT women – represented by Here NI
- BAME women – represented by Bomoko NI

The 4 groups we worked with were recruited over this period but due to scheduling issues some did not begin work until December 2019, while the first workshop with Bomoko NI took place in August 2019.

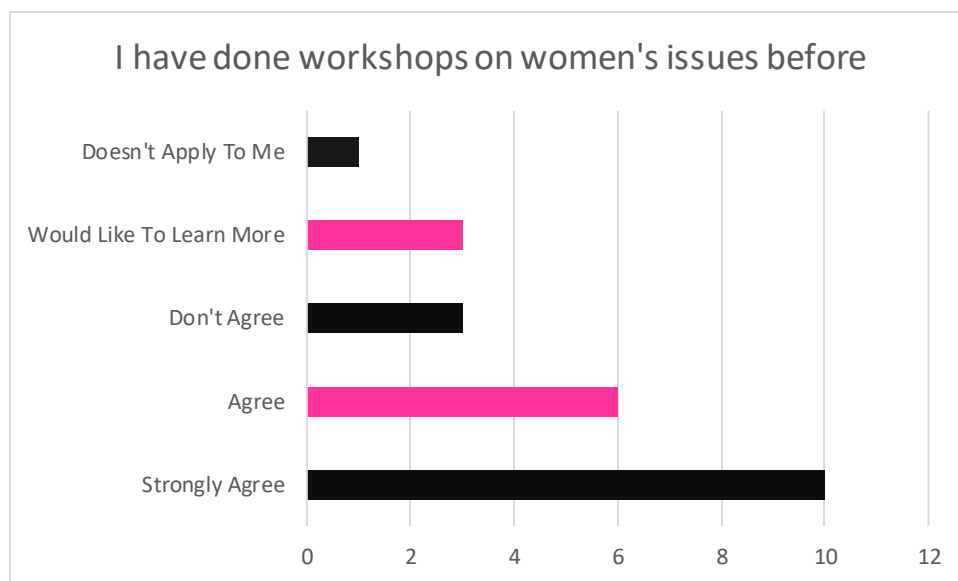


The largest of these groups was NI Youth Forum who were eager participants and very au fait with the current debates around sexism, #MeToo and women's participation, with the smallest being Here NI who consistently had a lower turnout and sometimes seemed reluctant to offer an opinion. Having worked closely with the worker at Here NI who runs multiple workshops and events at Here, her impression was that the women mostly preferred to avoid anything that could be seen as "politics" preferring instead to focus on "softer" topics and to do family-based activities. This in itself

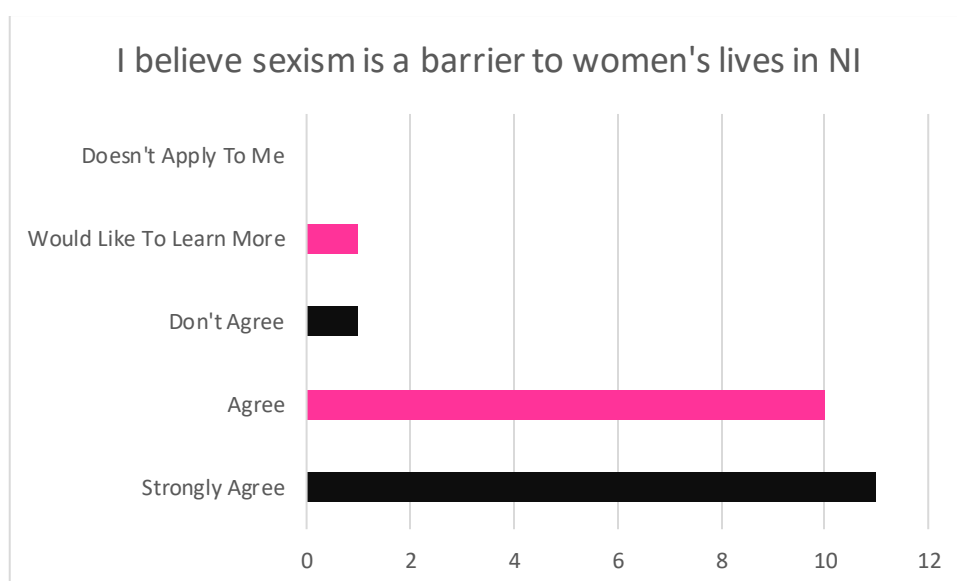
is indicative of the way that these women feel uncomfortable in this kind of environment and even with those who did attend there was a reluctance to centre themselves or their own experience, reiterating always that they were not the only marginalised or excluded group, that others had it worse, and similar sentiments. There is potentially more work to be done in this regard, and over a longer period, as this kind of perspective makes it difficult for participants to take part even in initial discussions.

What the monitoring data shows us

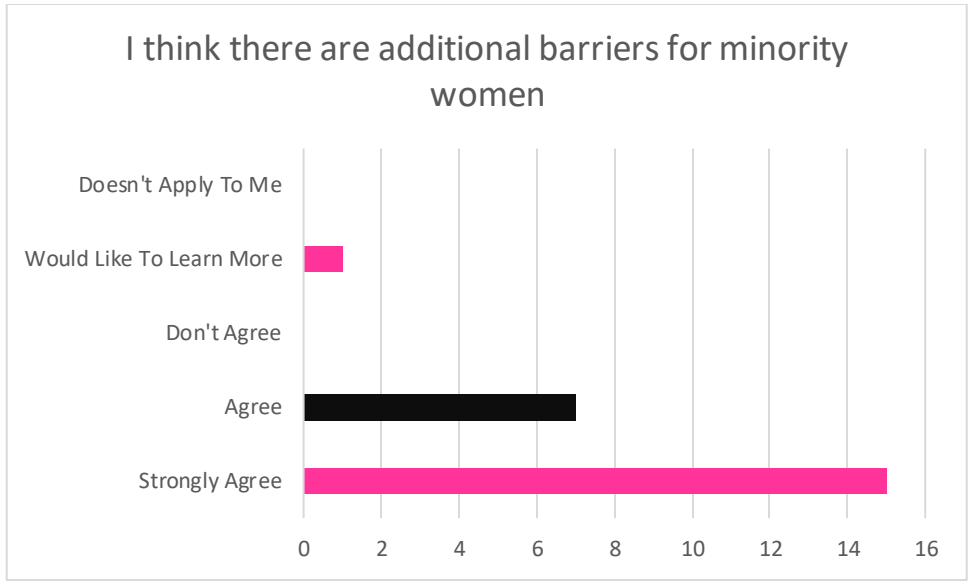
The graphs below show only the outcomes of the initial baseline monitoring, we did not have an opportunity to collect data from the participants at the end of the project, so we cannot compare the two – but there are some useful insights from this alone.



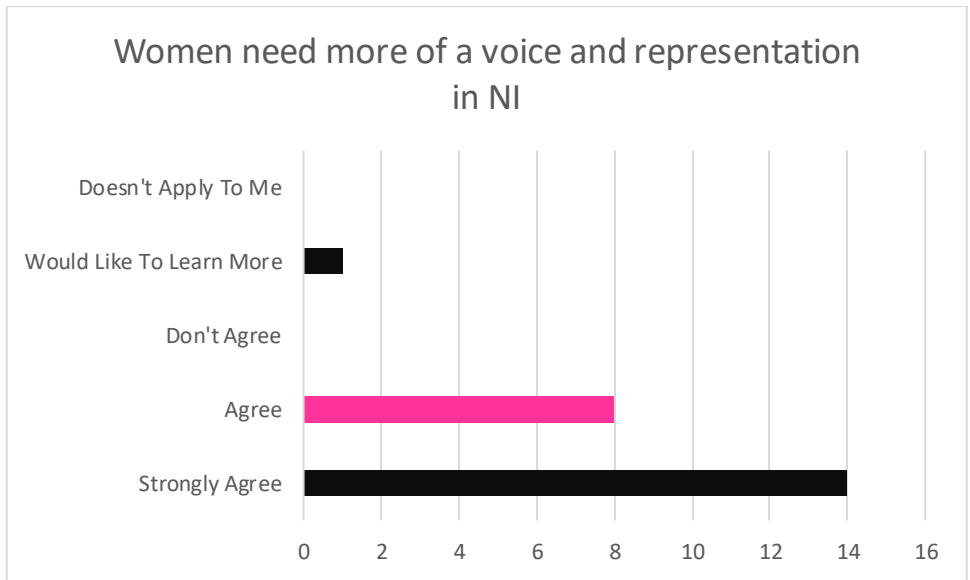
30% of participants indicated they had not taken part in a workshop on women’s issues before.



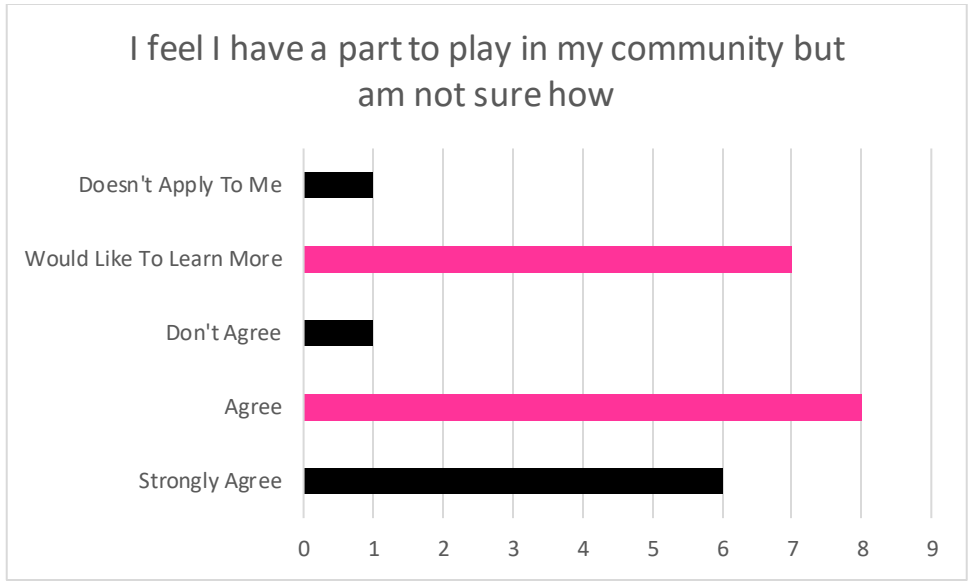
91% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that sexism is a barrier to women’s lives in NI .



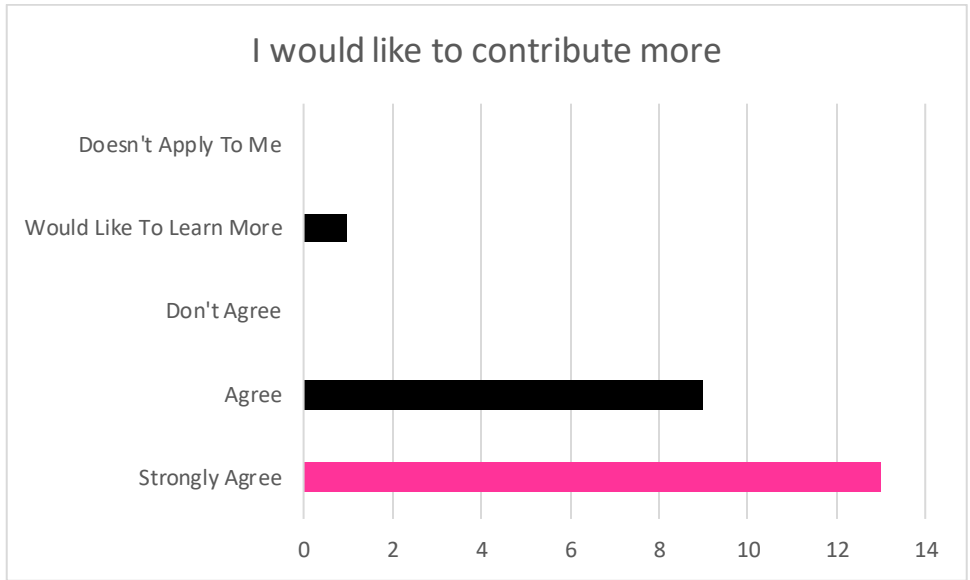
96% of participants strongly agreed or agreed that minority women face additional barriers.



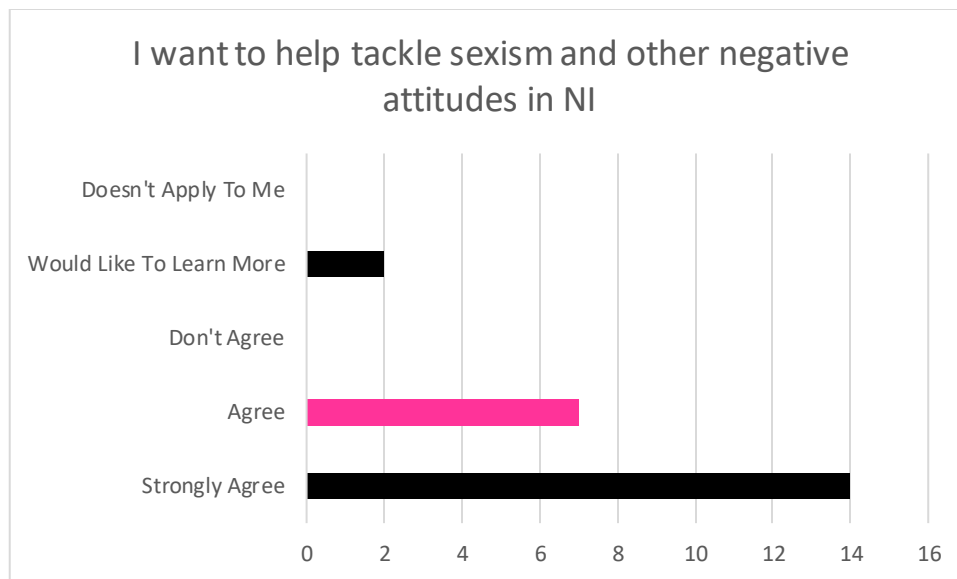
96% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that women need more of a voice and representation in NI.



60% of participants wanted to play a part in their communities but were not sure how. This demonstrates the need for a programme empowering women to reach their potential.



96% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that they would like to contribute more.



91% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that they wanted to help tackle sexism and other negative attitudes in NI.

The workshops

Initial workshops were focused on gathering impressions, allowing the women to voice their concerns and priorities, and, after laying out the goals of the project, allowing ourselves to be guided by the priorities of the group in question and to structure the following workshops based on what each group needed.

For example, it was immediately clear that the group of younger women were largely aware of the discussions that had grown out of the #MeToo movement and very aware of the barriers that women face when entering public life, with many raising current news stories and unfolding debates spontaneously. On the other hand, the older group of women were less aware of these contemporary discussions and so we moved more slowly on some of these. Conversely, it was intuitively clear to the older women that motherhood and domestic duties would pose a barrier for women in public life in a way that was less obvious to the younger women. The BAME women's group were keen to draw comparisons with the barriers they faced in their various countries of origin, where they often faced sexism in their professional life, and their experience here in Northern Ireland, where sexism was often mixed with racism, Islamophobia or pressure to be the "good migrant". As discussed above, it was occasionally difficult for the LBT women to open up, reluctant to list their issues as priorities, although over time this became easier.

Based off these initial discussions, we proceeded with the second workshop, where we explored the origins of sexist attitudes, and what caused them to carry through generations, how and if they have evolved or are evolving, and what impact they still have on women. We found again that there was a variation in experiences, with younger women tending to see it as a problem that had adapted to new environments but never disappeared, while older women tended to see it as a situation vastly improved from previous generations.

This was complicated however when we began to talk about the various ways that sexist behaviour can manifest and how that can impact on women's self-esteem and willingness to put herself out

into the world, and we had some very emotional conversations with the older women in particular about the damage done to their self-esteem and sense of self-worth by dismissive, sexist and derogatory treatment over the course of decades.

With the BAME group this conversation led to a discussion on how they have experienced racist attitudes that combine with sexist attitudes to lead to them feeling particularly marginalised. There was also some discussion on cultural norms that differ in ways that lead to them feeling less welcome or less a part of NI society, and struggling to fit in even with women who want to get to know them.

Part of the discussion with Here NI focused on the experience of transphobia that one participant faced, and how this changed with a move from a rural town to the city, similarly another participant recalled experiencing a lot of homophobia within her own family and the estate she grew up in, and how she struggled to come out – or even to make peace with herself - for a long time as a result. What was clear from these discussions was that nobody had escaped the influence of sexism in their lives, and that many were finding ways to navigate it daily.

In the 3rd session the plan was that we would discuss ways in which these kinds of attitudes can be tackled. Only 3 of the 4 groups had this session, the group of younger women with NI Youth Forum could not, with their final event cancelled due to their premises being closed for a deep clean shortly before the lockdown.

In this session we began by posing the question "do you feel optimistic for future generations of women & girls?" We then asked for suggestions as to how to make it better and workshopped the beginning of the toolkit.

Most groups, unguided, focused on education, although most had differing ideas as to how best to approach this education. While schools and colleges were seen as useful avenues, with proper, comprehensive and inclusive sex & relationships education and actively anti-racist and pro-LGBT education suggested, all groups agreed that this would not be enough.

The older women were interested in the idea of encouraging learning of this sort in the community, particularly for those who did not pursue formal education. The BAME group were especially keen to focus on youth, even suggesting that inclusive and tolerant education could be incorporated into parenting classes as so many positive attitudes taught in schools are contradicted in the home unless the approach is thorough.

One participant in the Here NI group noted that the "rope is too slack for men and too tight for women"; there is less leeway, less understanding and less freedom, and the weight of expectations is immense. This includes the requirement to marry and have children.

All agreed that positive, normalised exposure to people from diverse backgrounds helps with understanding and acceptance, but when discussing sexism it is clear that we need more than exposure, we need something more far-reaching, more thorough and likely to penetrate attitudes learned from birth. The younger women had expressed an interest in talking about gender stereotypes and how to dismantle them, but we have not had an opportunity to have this final session with them.

The goal of the final session was to share the suggestions made in the 3rd workshop, and to bring all 4 groups together to workshop a toolkit. We were already well on the way with members of the various groups inspired to do reading and thinking in their own time to try to come up with

suggestions. It is a pity that this did not go ahead and perhaps there will be an opportunity to do this at a future date.

Conclusion

It is difficult to draw decisive conclusions from a programme that did not finish. However, our work did highlight a few essential lessons.

The women's sector and the LGBT sector could benefit from working more closely together, even more so than at present, to develop trusting relationships and see more women from that part of the community involved in the women's sector. Similarly, the BAME group had so many useful insights that we may not have heard without pre-existing relationships. This part of the programme was very successful; we did hear from a diverse range of voices.

There is much that we can learn from each other and this should be central to our approach in future.

Women are aware that they face sexism, they know many of the ways that it impacts on them, and with some exploration they recognise even more ways that it effects their lives. They want to tackle this, but often they feel powerless to do so. The conclusions seem to be beyond their power to influence. This is of course part of the problem; women have comparatively little influence in the ways that could make a difference; for example in changing education policies.

It is within our power to begin to tackle this issue, but it is a society-wide problem and needs a robust, committed, society-wide approach. We need more women at the table to make it possible for more to join them.

The Toolkit

Due to circumstances around COVID-19 that forced cancellation of the final event, where the 4 groups were due to meet and share their suggestions and workshop new ideas, this is a work in progress, based on what we had gathered before the premature ending of this project.

Naming the Issue

- It is vital that the issue is named for that it is; we must not shy from calling sexism by its name, the same applies to racism, homophobia, transphobia and more
- The issue should always be kept on the agenda, too often we pretend it's no longer current or has been left in the past

Intersectionality

- This must also be an intersectional approach; when something is both racist and sexist, we must name it as such
- This requires co-operation between marginalised groups and an approach that encourages and facilitates listening and understanding

Education

- Education is a vital part of the work we need to do to dismantle sexism and other forms of prejudice
- Education happens in multiple sites and we must consider all of them
- Schools should work to dismantle gendered stereotypes as much as possible in the classroom setting. They are shown to hold girls back in their academic development and both girls and boys back in their emotional development
- Part of this must include fully comprehensive, LGBT inclusive, sex and relationships education. It must begin from a young age and be age appropriate
- Parents want the best for their children but may not be aware that the stereotypes that they may accidentally perpetuate in the home – the home is also a site of education and perhaps the most important of all
- Parents should be offered multi-culturally focused education as part of a suite of parenting classes to help them to bring their children up in a home that rejects stereotypes and breaks down the harms that these attitudes can do
- Education also happens in the community – the more open and accepting our environment the more open our minds
- Listening and learning is a vital form of education – people accept what they can see and understand
- All of this needs to be backed up with a serious crack down on bullying including racist, transphobic and homophobic bullying and casual sexism as well as sexual harassment in schools

Visibility

- We should never underestimate the importance of visibility – it is vital that people can see themselves reflected in public life, whoever they are

- Being exposed to difference is also important for those who are not marginalised, it is a learning experience
- Visibility can also mean shining a light on the “private sphere”. It must no longer be acceptable to oppress women within the home and shield it from public eyes.
- If “women’s work” was valued properly, it would improve the way society sees women

Media and Social Media

- We must begin to tackle the way the media talks about women, and other minoritized groups
- An efficient way to reject “clickbait” headlines and mark them as untrustworthy is important
- We must hold media outlets responsible when they speak of powerful women in dismissive or sexist ways, or when reporting on instances of misogyny, racism, homophobia and so on and failing to capture the nature of the harm
- Social media companies and anonymous accounts allow people to attack women for speaking up, we need strict enforcement of standards
- Websites that co-ordinate attacks on minorities need to be tackled
- We must be mindful of the growth of a backlash, including the far right, threatening to push back all progress

ENDS

Compiled by Elaine Crory for WRDA, May 2020