# Design and sexism: assembling a community of care

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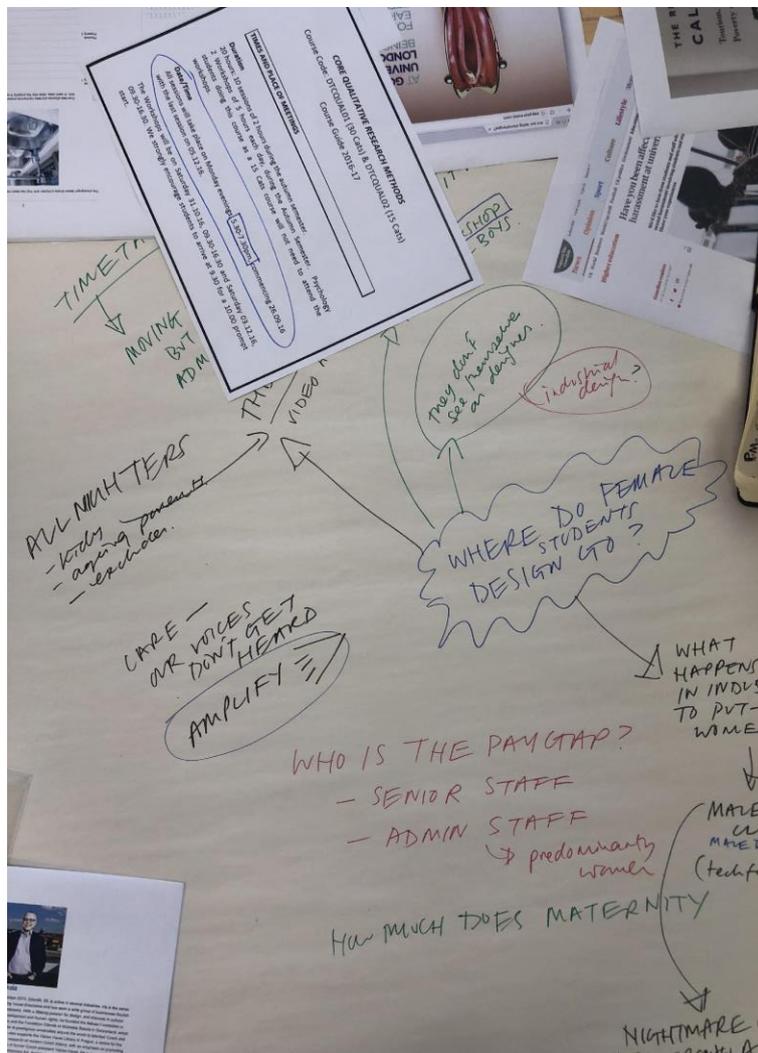* Corresponding author e-mail: s.pennington@gold.ac.uk

*Figure 1 Design and sexism: assembling a community of care*

This Conversation takes as its starting point the need to further interrogate and expose practical manifestations of sexism, and the epistemological biases and structural hierarchies that interplay in perpetuating gender inequality. Our

motivating research questions for the DRS2018 Conversation are: how does 'everyday sexism' manifest in design in the University? What are the situations, products, processes, resources, procedures, practices and languages that we can point to as examples of these deeply rooted gender scripts that can serve to highlight sexism in design? And then, how can we use design criticality, creativity and care to make change? What are the sensitivities required for treating an 'issue of concern' like sexism as a 'matter of care'? Through assembling this Conversation on the topic of sexism, we hope to gather a 'community of care' around this contentious issue of concern.

*Keywords*: design, sexism, care, intersectional feminism

# 1    Organising Provocations

Despite an ever-growing body of feminist design practitioners, researchers, educators and digital platforms (Schalk, Kristiansson & Mazé 2017), gender inequalities persist in design education (Morley 2016) and the design industries (Maher 2017). This Conversation takes as its starting point the need to further interrogate and expose practical manifestations of sexism, and the epistemological biases and structural hierarchies that interplay in perpetuating gender inequality. We ask: how can we use design criticality, creativity and care to make change?

Our motivating research questions are: how does 'everyday sexism' manifest in design in the University? What are the situations, products, processes, resources, procedures, practices, languages that we can point to as examples of these deeply rooted gender scripts that can serve to highlight sexism in design? How can we use design criticality, creativity and care to make change?

We are asking how do we care for an 'issue of concern' like sexism, both within the frame of a conference Conversation and beyond? Here, we are motivating the theory of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) of care in feminist technoscience towards design. This is an act of asking what happens when we think of the issue of sexism as a 'matter of care'? What are the ethics and sensitivities required? Then, whilst we begin with Conversations around sexism, the ambition of the activity is to pay attention to further marginalised things of design research; and here we will employ an intersectional feminist approach towards identifying further issues for care, such as gender, race, ethnicity and class. We therefore use 'care' in the sense of in need for our urgent attention and also 'care' in the sense of steering the Conversation beyond a blame culture to instead reach deeply rooted structures, which include heteronormativity, a Western hegemony and the modernist project.

# 2    A Conversation about Design and Sexism

This section outlines how the 90 minute-long session was set-up over four stages, and the ethical implications of this format; a summary of the discussion that took place and insights gathered.

## 2.1    *Set-up of the session and roles*

A discussion on everyday sexism has ethical implications for a conversational format, and we wanted to create an inclusive and supportive space. Consequently, we foregrounded a discussion on ethics, sensitivities and consent in relation to the topic, and together, participants developed a set of guidelines and rules of engagements on how to care for the session. We revisited this ethical framework at the end of the session, to ask whether ethical issues had emerged. In relation to the sensitivities at play here, we wanted to 'grow' a Conversation in order to gradually introduce participants to each other; beginning with intimate Conversations in pairs, moving to small groups and then larger groups.

Furthermore, this set-up had a focus on inclusion, to challenge hierarchies in participation and to facilitate pluralist perspectives to co-create new insights and knowledge about gender inequalities in design. Therefore the Conversation convenors were also participants of the Conversation, and all participants were acknowledged as experts.

## 2.2  Discussions and activities that took place

The Conversation had four stages over 90 minutes. First, conveyors briefly shared the research motivations for the session; including an understanding of sexism as instances where a person's gender has worked to their advantage or disadvantage, and at the same time acknowledging that sexism is not necessarily just experienced by people who self-identify as women. Then participants developed a set of guidelines for 'how to care for the session'.

Second, we began the Conversation with short, intimate discussion in pairs, offering and listening to experiences of everyday sexism. After a few minutes, this discussion was extended and replayed to another pair of participants, thus gradually growing the Conversation from intimate to public.

This was further extended through a third phase, where participants self-assembled into small groups around tables and were given a set of materials, including a reading list ('Women Write Architecture' reading list, 2017), a time-table, data around the gender pay gap in universities and the design industry, images of studio practice in fashion design and architecture, the list of trustees at a well-known design institution, and course material for Design and Technology in UK state education. These acted as a provocation to elicit concrete experiences and observations in the context of sexism and design in relation to these materials for situated and nuanced narratives. A 'cataloguing of sexism' (Ahmed, 2015), participants generate discursive and written responses to these materials, using them to talk through issues.

Fourth, and in the large group, participants were asked to pinpoint and describe points for further exploration, such as a problematic material to further investigate. This was a moment of collective decision making on what and how to care for the issue of everyday sexism; and it was captured through written means. To end the session, participants revisited the ethical guidelines and rules of engagement.

## 2.3  Insights made

During each of the four stages of the Conversation listed above, participants shared insights on the issue of sexism and generated proposals for strategies for greater gender equality. Discussions focused within the frame of this specific Conversation at DRS2018; and beyond, in our day-to-day practices; and also, more widely on the impact within the DRS community itself. As strategies for the things we might offer through this Conversation, we highlight three areas of insights: **how to care for a difficult conversation; strategies for practices in design education; and institutional change and etiquettes.**

Participants collectively established rules on **how to care for a conversation on sexism**. Initially, this included not naming or blaming, that all participants care for the documentation of the session, and to observe 'Chatham House Rules' for an inward conversation, where information disclosed during the Conversation may be reported but the source of that information may not be identified. Revisiting these rules at the end of the session, two additional rules were suggested: firstly, on the requirement for a wider range of gender represented in the Conversation; and, secondly for participants to initiate a self-reflexive question at the start, to ask "are you sexist?"

Sensitivities were raised around practices in design education and learning environments, including:

1. Unequal treatment of students: The design workshop: students were made to feel overly cautious around using machinery or equipment, and consequently lost confidence in an ability to experiment in this setting;

2. Unequal treatment of tutors: Female identifying tutors were questioned around the legitimacy of their work and the extent to which they had gained help from others, rather than their work being accepted as their own work.
3. Teaching content and methods: Life drawing – the objectification of the female form and to what extent this is embedded in art school education, such as in portfolio interview requirement; Design project briefs – gendered subject understanding resulting in projects focused on 'female' products (hair-dressing products example was cited) perceived as inferior to others product areas.

Proposals for gender equality included:

(i) *Female-only space and time:* a dedicated time in workshops for female identifying students to gain and practice skills without 'protective' tutors jumping in to help. Whilst the 'all-nighter' in design and architecture education is arguably a rite of passage bonding some students, it also excludes others, including those who care for others (such as those with children or ageing parents) and those bodies who cannot work long or late hours.

(ii) *Visual semantic training of designers*: an image of a vagina-like purse used as an illustration on website about the gender-pay gap promoted discussion on the suggested for the need for greater understanding of the reproduction of gender scripts in designed artefacts or interactions through curricula.

(iii) *Reading Lists:* The 'Women Who Write Architecture reading list' promoted discussion on citation practices, and what this approach of prioritising female architecture writers to the exclusion of male writers does or enacts. Questioning whether this example could be built upon, participants asked if there is a 'Women Who Write Design Research' reading list?

(iv) *Gender quotas for staff:* discussions about the inequality of gender in HE departments led to discussions about how quotas could help improve gender equality and career progression for female identifying staff.

(v) *Epistemologies in art/ design cultures:* the epistemological foundations of much of art and design is rooted in classical modernity thinking, as exemplified in mandatory life drawing of nude models, often female forms and visits to art galleries to see nude female forms. Proposals to expose this gendered thinking and deconstruct the canon.

(vi) *Human rights and social justice issues as inextricably linked to design practice:* an example of a t-shirt exposed the chain of cheap labour production, and probable abuse of women's rights resulting in the need to expose human rights and social justice issues as inextricably linked to design practice.

Then, to address **institutional change**, there were calls from participants for gender training – forums where students and staff could be allowed to learn and make mistakes around their understanding of gender and diversity; an initiative of a 'gender provisional license'; and, an 'incubator' for learning how to talk about these issues.

These practices could be further built upon to engage with rules and responsibilities around sexism that design institutions could adopt. Additionally, if there is a voice that is under-represented, such as in a meeting, amplification tactics can be used to highlight voices in conversation through repetition and credit, by stating "this person said", or referring back to someone's point. If someone has not been heard in a meeting, it should be acknowledged (there is an app that tracks gender balance of a meeting https://gendereq.com/). Certain 'rules' around gender balance need to be readily available to design tutors and practitioners to become standard practice, for example, a worded etiquette for conference panels such as "we won't speak unless the panel is representative"; and this could also extend to PhD or degree examiners with "we refuse to participate unless a panel is balanced".

These issues contribute to the need to reference where and how change has taken place; and, to learn from and to show management that it is possible. Such proposals can therefore raise ideas for more specific ways to forge new agendas in gender equality in design practice and education.

## 3    Critical reflections

A core issue in both the planning and the experience of this Conversation was how to engage a group discussion focused on sexism outside of a binary conception. Although an introductory reminder was given to participants to recognise a broader notion of gender outside of a binary construct, it was clear how deeply embedded the heteronormative conception on male/ female is in society. This impacted on discussions as many participants struggled to move beyond this binary, reinforcing and reproducing societal norms.

Initial reflections were shared in pairs and small groups; then, three larger group discussions took place comprising of between six-eight participants. The common theme running through each larger group was the issue of discrimination based on gender; how these instances resulted in a range of emotions from isolation to humiliation and anger; discomfort, and frustration at the lack of support in these situations. For example, the student who described inequality in the workshop; another student who was frustrated with a lack of options for who could examine her PhD; the researcher who described how she already used amplification tactics in meetings; the senior member of staff who was questioned about whether her lecture had been written by her male partner. There were also conversations about potentially misleading information, such as the pay gap data comment above. Discussions also showed how some participants did not recognise the examples of discrimination raised by others; and, so discussions also focused on how to gain recognition from colleagues in 'sexist' situations as a first step to gaining support.

Whilst these examples were dominantly located in a heteronormative paradigm of sexism, they nonetheless highlighted the myriad ways in which systems and structures in design practices and teaching contribute to sexism; and, how such inequalities were widespread from student to senior staff.

Given the relatively short time to discuss this complex topic, an abundance of ideas were proposed for how to achieve greater gender equality in future.

A future iteration of this Conversation should ask participants to complicate the sexism question by adopting a critical intersectional approach. Here, we are inspired by Kathy Davis' strategies for *Intersectionality as Critical Methodology* [2014] to complicate what may be perceived as sexism through asking 'the other' question of it, and to search for additional differences that the example highlights (such as ethnicity, gender, class).

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