

AGEIST? SEXIST? WHO, ME?

**HOW TO START A CONSCIOUSNESS-
RAISING GROUP AROUND THE
INTERSECTION OF
AGEISM AND SEXISM**

Table of contents

1 - Preface

2 - What is consciousness-raising, and what is it for?

4 - Defining our terms

7 - Understanding how bias works

9 - Understanding intersectionality

10 - Learning from the women's movement

12 - Creating a group that runs smoothly

17 - Sample discussion starters

21 - To learn more

23 - Credits

Preface

Everyone is biased, much bias is unconscious, and we can't unlearn beliefs we're not aware of. When prejudice goes unchallenged, the way ageism has until very recently, it seems normal, "just the way things are." Ageist and sexist messages come at us from childhood on. They become part of our identity, in the form of internalized bias, unless we stop to challenge them. This process is more than a matter of personal well-being. It's a social justice and human rights issue.

Although power relations are informed by more than age and gender, this guide focuses on how the experience of being female and being a certain age intersect. Our experiences are also shaped by race and ethnicity, class, ability, sexual orientation, and other variables. As if that weren't complicated enough, the way these things interact changes as we move through life! The goal of this guide is to help you navigate this confusing terrain by providing common language and a place to start.

This guide is for people whose gender is female. Although at times it centers the experiences of cisgender women, people who are trans, intersex, and non-binary will also find it speaks to their experience. (We define these terms in the next section.)

What is consciousness-raising, and what is it for?

Consciousness-raising (CR) is a tool that uses the power of personal experience to unpack unconscious prejudices and to call for social change. Consciousness-raising helped many women develop new scripts instead of continuing to blame themselves for their second-class status—just as many still tend to blame themselves for becoming “invisible.”

In CR groups participants tell and compare their stories to concretely understand how they are oppressed and why. The process exposes “personal problems”—like being unable to get a job, feeling invisible, or being excluded—as widely shared social and political problems that we can come together and do something about.

CR groups allow participants to express thoughts and feelings they might otherwise have dismissed as unimportant, and to recognize that feelings of inadequacy are the result of discrimination. By surfacing and sharing truths, vulnerabilities and experiences, participants become more aware of how they see the world and what forces shape those perceptions.

Consciousness-raising helps us:

- Create a space to explore our own biases.
- Discover how the myths, stereotypes and shared histories each of us have internalized—often unconsciously—affect our well-being and the opportunities available to us.
- Move away from thinking either “this is only my problem” or “this isn’t my problem.”
- Acknowledge differences, and connect across them.
- Swap shame and denial for acceptance and pride.
- Acknowledge that while we can’t dismantle prejudice on our own, we can use conclusions the group arrives at as the basis for individual and collective action.

Defining our terms

This isn't easy! Language is a moving target; the last few decades have seen massive shifts in how people think about gender, identity, and privilege; and changes around aging are underway. Not everyone who presents as a woman identifies as female. This guide uses the terms "women" and/or "female" to refer to people whose gender is female. Here, we use the dictionary definitions of the following terms:

- **Ageism** is stereotyping, prejudice and/or discrimination based on age. Age bias affects everyone, but in a youth-centric culture, older people are more marginalized by it.

“We're being ageist any time we make an assumption about someone or a group of people, based on how old we think they are.”

- Ashton Applewhite, writer and activist

- **Sexism** is stereotyping, prejudice and/or discrimination based on sex or gender. Sexism affects people who don't identify or present as male.

Defining our terms, cont'd:

- **Sex** is biological. It is a label assigned at birth based on reproductive organs and chromosomes. The two most common sexes are male and female.
- **Gender** is psychological, and a social construct. It's a person's perception, understanding, and experience of themselves and roles in society. What a society considers to be gender-appropriate is based on beliefs and values—not genetics.

sex & gender

The terms **sex** and **gender** mean significantly different things. The distinction can be confusing because the words 'male' and 'female' are used in both contexts. **Cisgender** means a person's gender and sex assigned at birth are the same, but it's important to remember that bodily sex does not determine gender. The term **transgender** means a person's sex assigned at birth and their gender are different. People who are **non-binary** don't identify as a male or female. **Intersex** describes a person born with a combination of male and female biological traits. Surgery can alter physiology, but that's not what determines gender. **Gender roles** underlie expectations that women wear dresses or that "boys don't cry." These invented social conventions are often harmful. Gender is a spectrum, and rarely conforms to a male/female binary. **Gender bias** is preferential or prejudiced behavior towards one gender over others. Gender bias most often favors cisgender men over women, trans men, intersex and non-binary people.

Defining our terms, cont'd:

- **Patriarchy** is a social system in which men disproportionately hold the power and women are largely excluded from it; also referred to as male supremacy.

Patriarchy upholds what writer Susan Sontag called the “double standard of aging:” the convention that aging enhances a man but progressively destroys a woman, because visible signs of aging are held against her. The obsession with the way women look is not about beauty. It’s about obedience, and power.

- **Privilege** is a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group. Aspects of their identity may make life harder for white people, for example, but the color of their skin isn’t one of them.

Understanding how bias works

All discrimination serves a social and economic purpose: to legitimize and sustain inequality between and within groups. It's not about who we are; it's about how we see ourselves and how others perceive us. Discrimination and prejudice operate by pitting folks against each other who might otherwise join forces to challenge the status quo and build a more equitable world. Male privilege requires the subordination of women, and youth privilege depends on the marginalization of older people.

**“If you want to understand any problem in the US,
focus on who profits from it,
not who suffers from it.”**

– Amos Wilson, author and educator

Discrimination is integral to capitalism, the system we live under. Capitalism must divide people in order to exploit workers, increase profits, and maintain power relations. . The gender wage gap, for example, persists in large part because it is profitable. Systemic bias shows up in our interactions with people, in institutions, and in history and policies. Internalized sexism is the reason girls do less well on science tests in countries with strong gender bias. Women spend billions on anti-aging products and services because of internalized ageism.

Understanding how bias works, cont'd:

Women can be anti-feminist, sexist, and misogynistic—mistrusting, even despising, other women. We are so steeped in patriarchy that we don't realize the extent to which we accommodate and uphold it, nor how much it exploits and devalues us. That's why the first, hardest, and most necessary step is to examine our own attitudes towards age and gender—because we can't challenge bias until we're aware of it. That's what makes consciousness-raising so important.

Although all genders face age discrimination, it kicks in earlier and more punitively for women, who also face the cumulative effects of gender discrimination. The consequences are stark, affect every aspect of our lives, and add up over time. Women earn less than our male counterparts; are sicker, pay more for healthcare and receive less of it; are the primary victims of age discrimination at work; perform most caregiving, largely unpaid; and are consequently far more likely to age into greater inequalities, vulnerability, and poverty in late life.

This discrimination is further compounded by race and class, which is why the poorest of the poor and sickest of the sick are old women of color.

The remedy? Each of us takes what we've learned in our CR groups out into the world. The effects can be small, through changing our perceptions, or large, through collective action.

Understanding intersectionality

A term coined by feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality describes how different forms of oppression compound and shape each other. They intersect, in ways that are unique for each of us and that require us to examine where each of our identities resides on the power spectrum. A heterosexual Black woman, for example, experiences sexism differently than her white or lesbian counterparts. Over the course of their lives, people also move in and out of age privilege in different ways.

“The point of intersectional practice is to look at all these possible combinations of privilege and vulnerability, rather than just stopping with the ones that apply to us, whoever we are.”

– Rinku Sen, writer and activist

Just as different forms of oppression compound and shape each other, activism is intersectional too. When we confront any form of prejudice, we chip away at the fear and ignorance that underlie them all. A better world in which to be a woman of any age is also a better place in which to be a person of color, disabled, queer, poor, or come from someplace else—in other words, to be seen as lesser in any way. It’s all one struggle.

Learning from the women's movement

Sexism prevents half the people of the world from enjoying equal rights, and the 20th-century women's movement did much to raise awareness of it. But the major beneficiaries were middle-class, middle-aged white women, because the movement has long focused on their interests. Although oppressed in comparison to men, these white women had more time and resources to devote to activism than women who faced other forms of discrimination and had to focus on economic survival. (This is how intersectionality works.)

“Intersectionality demands that we work towards the liberation of everyone.”
– **Dr. Angel Love Miles, disability justice advocate**

Many activists for women's suffrage were overtly racist, and many supported women's right to vote as a way to offset the Black vote and bolster white supremacy. The women's movement has also been homophobic. In the 1970s, it was the failure of the women's movement to address their issues that compelled Black and queer women to invent and demand intersectional analysis and activism.

Learning from the women's movement, cont'd:

Because it focuses on women of reproductive age, the movement has also been ageist. The concept of “sisterhood” is integral to women’s rights, but sisters are close in age. The practice of dividing the history of feminism into “waves” likewise consigns us to same- rather than mixed-age cohorts, and relegates older participants to the margins.

We can all do better. The women’s movement has been racist, classist, and ageist. Achieving true women’s liberation requires that women learn to relinquish advantages; that we keep in mind the way problems play out differently for different people; and that we aim for remedies that do not come at the expense of others.

The purpose of consciousness-raising is for women to identify experiences that unite us without ignoring our differences. Categories like gender, sexual orientation, class, and ethnicity may set us apart, but they’re also important vehicles for collective identity. The only effective and lasting way to advance equality is through solidarity and collective political action. Early on for example, CR groups in Washington, D.C., held hearings about the Pill, and several groups began newspapers and magazines.

Creating a group that runs smoothly

Step 1: Decide who, when and where.

Here are some tips and best practices to consider:

- **Diversity.** The more diverse the group—across age and gender, as well as background, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.—the broader the range of personal experiences members will bring to meet-ups. Make accessibility a priority. There are advantages and disadvantages to having a space without men, or all similar ages. If you choose to have a less diverse group be sure to talk about it—out loud. What are the benefits? The downsides? Whose perspectives are missing? Discuss why this group is the right group for right now. More important than the group's composition is its commitment to honest, deep reflection, and doing the work.
- **Size.** A group of no more than ten people gives everyone a chance to speak.
- **Logistics.** A volunteer facilitator can keep the group on track and reserve time at the end of the meeting for summing up and administrivia (like choosing a discussion topic and location for the next meeting).
- **Meet regularly.** Groups usually meet at least once a month. As you meet, your group will acquire its own unique flavor. No two CR groups will be the same.

Creating a group that runs smoothly, cont'd:

Step 2: Co-create group agreements.

One of the first orders of business should be to agree on guidelines for being together. Here are some suggestions. Feel free to modify these agreements or make your own.

- **Show up, on time.** No group will work unless its members take it seriously and commit to attending. Skipping meetings or showing up late isn't conducive to intimacy and depth.
- **Each person speaks, and no one dominates the discussion.** Here are some ways to help that happen:
 - Go around the room counter-clockwise, or alphabetically if the meeting is virtual.
 - Use a timer with a one-minute warning.
 - Use a landing-airplane hand gesture to signal that it's time to wrap up.
- **Speak up and step back.** Encourage quieter members to speak up if inspired. Invite the more extroverted to explore listening first. A good rule of thumb for more privileged folks is to take a deep breath when you feel the urge to speak; someone else may need that beat to feel comfortable chiming in. It's a dance that will get easier as you all come to know each other better.
- **Speak personally and specifically from your own experiences.** Try not to generalize about others, or to talk in abstractions. Use "I" instead of "they," and "we" instead of "you." Rather than challenging someone else's experience, remember that it's true for them. Share your own story. Watch your body language and nonverbal responses, which can also convey disrespect.

Creating a group that runs smoothly, cont'd:

Step 2: Co-create group agreements, cont'd

- **Listen actively.** Pay close attention to the person who is speaking—not only to the words they're using but to the message they're trying to convey. Defer judgment. Listen to understand, not to frame your response. Give the speaker space to be, and be with the speaker in that space.
- **Avoid cross-talking.** Wait for the person who is speaking to finish. Do not interrupt. Take notes if you want to ask a clarifying question or remember a point you'd like to make. Everyone will get a chance to speak.

Pro tip: Although it might feel formal or artificial at first, it's essential that people not cross-talk or interrupt each other, even if it's out of enthusiasm. Having space to speak our full truth enables us to go deep into our experience, and enables everyone else—especially those with more privilege—to listen deeply.

- **It's OK to disagree**—respectfully. The goal is not to agree but to gain a deeper understanding. If you see things differently, it's important to say so. But do so in a respectful way, and focus on ideas.

Creating a group that runs smoothly, cont'd:

Step 2: Co-create group agreements, cont'd

- **Just listen.** We're here to raise consciousness, not to give advice.
- **Be mindful of “tone policing”** because someone shares feelings, ideas, or experiences in a frustrated, intense, or emotional way. It closes down communication.
- **Sum up.** After everyone has contributed their personal experience with a given topic, work together to find common threads and conclusions. This is when we uncover the structural forces that underlie discrimination.

Step 3: Keep things running smoothly.

If you hit snags or bumps, it's probably because you've moved away from the group agreements. Use these questions as a check-in to get back on track:

- **Is there tokenism?** Keep in mind not all women are experts on sexism and not all older people are experts on ageism. Don't expect—or invite—anyone to speak for an entire group of people.
- **Is someone taking up too much space?** Ask members to reflect on whether or not they generally feel heard in a group setting. Encourage everyone to participate.

Creating a group that runs smoothly, cont'd:

Step 3: Keep things running smoothly, cont'd

Feeling stuck or like you are going in circles? Accept open-ended discussion. Questions don't have to be resolved by the end of the meeting. Instead of trying to achieve closure on a topic, suggest that members reflect on it until you reconvene.

- **Feeling resistant or defensive?**
 - **Think about why.** Curiosity enables us to change our minds and to grow. Feeling vulnerable is an important part of consciousness-raising.
 - **Be open to correction.** Instead of reacting, take a breath. Acknowledge what you heard, and consider the impact of what you said. Later, when you have time, reflect on how you might untangle the bias that led to the correction.
 - **Sit with discomfort.** That's when we grow. Sitting with discomfort is the hardest, bravest part of culture change. Keep in mind that everyone holds ageist and sexist beliefs, and we can't challenge bias unless we're aware of it.
- **How safe does the space feel?** Confidentiality is essential. As in Las Vegas, what goes on in the room stays in the room. Take what you *learn* out into the world.

Creating a group that runs smoothly, cont'd:

Step 4: Let it grow.

Once you've been meeting for a while, your group may be ready to grow deeper or wider. Here are some ways to make that happen:

- **Seed new groups.** Other people might want to join. Keep a list. After a while, you'll have enough experience to help a new group get started. Attend the first meeting or two to make sure it gets on the right track. Before you know it, several groups will be underway, and it'll begin to feel like you belong to a movement.
- **Learn more.** See the Dig Deeper and recommended readings sections at the end of this guide.
- **Move beyond talking.** See a need in your community? Respond. Join a march, organize a protest, support a candidate, create or sign a petition, volunteer, write an op-ed, host a workshop, start a local project . . . you get the idea.

Sample discussion starters

We suggest choosing one bullet per meeting. Many of these discussion starters contain more than one question. Start by tackling them one at a time. Some questions may spur other things the group wants to discuss. Keep track of these and explore them in future meetings.

- Share a time you encountered ageism or sexism. On the playground? At the doctor's office? Family dinner? Around the water cooler?
- When did you become aware of how old you were? When did you become aware of your gender? *Follow up by discussing how the way you felt about your gender and age has changed over time.*
- What ages and gender roles do you see the most of in advertisements and on movie screens? Share some examples. Who's selling what, and to whom? What are the underlying messages?
- Look back at a time you witnessed or experienced gender or age bias. Is there something you wish you'd said or done? What might you hope to do next time?

Sample discussion-starters, cont'd:

- Who do you spend your free time with? Are they close to you in age? How about gender? *Follow up by discussing which differences seem easier to connect across, and why.*
- Which is more challenging for you to talk about, ageism or sexism? Why? *Continue the conversation by exploring why these tend to be separate conversations.*
- How do you feel when someone calls you “young lady?” Or “sweetie” or “honey?” *Discuss how age and status affect who uses these terms of address, and under what circumstances.*
- What attitudes or behaviors have you encountered that are motivated by a desire to protect or care for women/olders? What are some of the effects? *Note: prejudice can be “benevolent”—justified by people who “know what’s best for you.” Women who conform to traditional gender roles are expected to be pure, caring, obedient and delicate, and to become needy, frail and passive in later life.*
- Have you ever joked about gender expression? How about age? Think about what makes it okay—or not. What’s it like to be on the receiving end? What if you’re making fun of yourself?

Sample discussion-starters, cont'd:

- Why do women tend to be the harshest judges of changes in the way other women look—criticizing them for “letting themselves go,” for example?
- How does becoming less visible—or perhaps never having been visible in the first place—affect women? What determines whether a woman is “visible” or not, and on whose terms?
- Share a time when you said or did something to avoid encountering age and/or gender bias. (Examples could include dressing a certain way, avoiding certain people or places, passing up an opportunity, using anti-aging products.) How do these behaviors help and/or harm us?
- Do you see your gender as an advantage or a barrier to making your way in the world? How about your age? How come?

If you want to dig deeper:

- Consumer culture idealizes “successful aging”: staying active, healthy, “young-looking,” and self-reliant as we age. It also expects older people to behave in certain ways. Who does this model benefit, and whom does it disadvantage? How does your gender make it easier or harder to age “successfully?”
- Why does it seem as if women in the white-collar workforce are never the right age? First we’re “too young” to be taken seriously; then, whether or not we have kids, we’re too fertile to deserve promotion (unlike new dads, who get raises); then not fertile enough to deserve it. Why is this the case?
- For cisgender people, the experience of gender is constant. Age is different: we all move into and out of age privilege. How do these dynamics affect power relations over time?
- What does an unflinching look at our shared history reveal about the origins of sexism and ageism? In the world? Within us? Who profits and who pays?

To learn more

People will come to the group with different understandings of ageism and sexism. Encourage everyone to continue to learn more about both topics, whether on their own or together.

About ageism + sexism:

The Old Women's Project

Old Lesbians Organizing for Change

"Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" - essay by Audre Lorde

"Gendered Ageism" - trend brief by Catalyst Research

For more, visit the Old School Anti-Ageism Clearinghouse and search 'sexism'

About ageism:

Let's End Ageism - TED talk by Ashton Applewhite

Let's Dismantle Ageism - DIY workshop created by Old School

Global Campaign to Combat Ageism - World Health Organization

For hundreds more resources, visit the Old School Anti-Ageism Clearinghouse.

About sexism:

The Combahee River Collective Statement

"The Personal Is Political" - essay by Carol Hanisch

The Redstockings Manifesto

Forty of the Best Feminist Books - list compiled by Alice Nuttall

To learn more cont'd:

About intersectionality:

The Urgency of Intersectionality - TED talk by Kimberlé Crenshaw

None of Us Is Free Until All of Us Are Free - TED Talk by Yoruba Richen

"How to Do Intersectionality" - essay by Rinku Sen

This Bridge Called My Back - book edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, which includes the trailblazing "Combahee River Statement" (separate link above) and Barbara Smith's "The Truth that Never Hurts"

Intersectionality Matters - podcast hosted by Kimberlé Crenshaw

About consciousness-raising and group work:

"Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon" - essay by Kathie Sarachild

The Circle Way

Learning Circles

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With thanks to our brilliant reviewers:

- Toni Calasanti
- Anneke Campbell
- Morgan Evans
- Ninochka McTaggart
- Kara Masteller
- Barbara Tint

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Based on Who Me, Ageist? How to Start a Consciousness-Raising Group Around Age Bias, by Ashton Applewhite