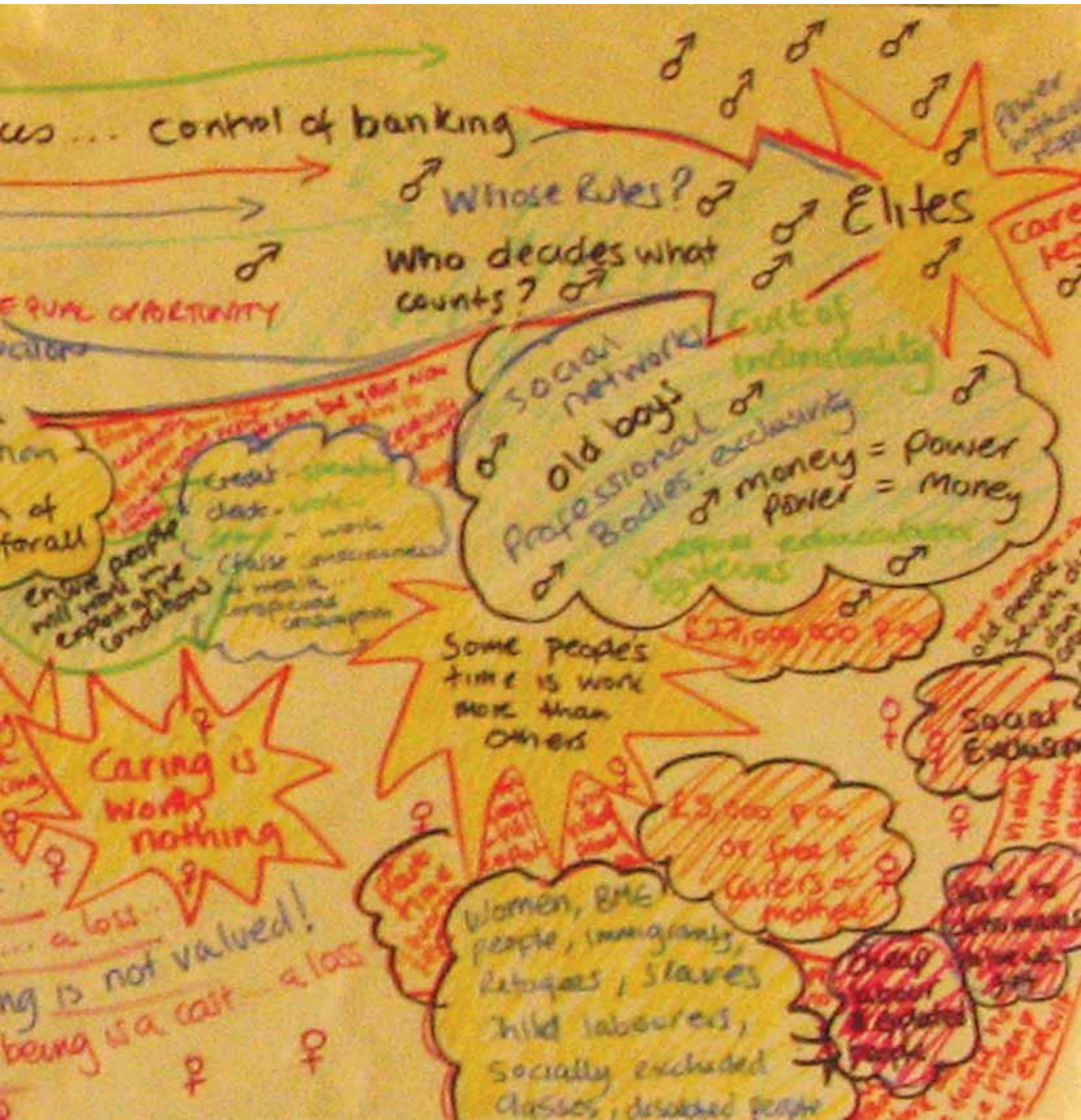


# Women Thinking Equality:

## The Summing Up



This report is dedicated to Ingrid McClements (1948 - 2008)  
a truly inspirational woman.

We are indebted to the many women who contributed to the discussions throughout the life of the WTE experience. Some of the stalwarts are listed below but many others dipped in and out of the process and their input has been invaluable. **Thanks to each and every one of you!**

Linda Anderson	Jackie Gemmell	Angela O'Hagan
Sarah Browne	Dee Gildea	Siobahn O'Neill
Shirley Cusack	Carolyn Johnston	Rachel Pateman
Jean Cuthbert	Christine Lowden	Susan Pettie
Sue England	Ingrid McClements	Shaheen Safdar
Marion Flett	Elspeth Molony	Ruth Forsythe

**Thanks to Ceri Mollard of Creative Inks for pulling together all our thinking and making it readable**

# Foreward

Between May 2008 and March 2009 Engender facilitated the coming together of a group women to reflect on equalities from a gendered perspective.... Women Thinking Equality.

Each came with their own experience of living, and some working, with inequality whether that be age, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion or belief... and for most a mixture of some of the above.

Each month, led by a different discussant, they reflected on equalities through their gendered lenses and explored the relationships between the different forms of systemic discrimination.

Every discussion was taped and transcribed [by yet another determined woman] and then summarised for the group to reflect on, correct and feed into.

Meanwhile at Engender another group of Inspiring Women were meeting, these women were Engender members who come together to reflect on the world from time to time from a feminist perspective, who decided to join the process and reflect on the summaries produced and add some...

The resulting learning has been huge for everyone involved and this set of brief papers cannot claim to do justice the energy and commitment invested. But in an effort to share some of the learning and capture the essence of Women Thinking Equality and Inspiring Women, here they are ....

**Niki Kandirikirira**

Engender Executive Director

The Women Thinking Equalities papers cover:

**Age**

**Disability**

**Feminist Economics**

**Race**

**Religion or Belief**

**Sexual Orientation**

**Transgender**



## What's the problem that we have been looking at?

This paper represents the culmination of all our thinking over the life of the Women Thinking Equality project. When it came to our final two summing up 'Weave' sessions in March 2009 and we asked ourselves what all of the equalities strands (isms) had in common. Our response was, 'the Market economy' i.e. the fact that in national and international policy and relationships human beings are valued purely in terms of their value and cost to the market, as producers, consumers and resources to be utilised and exploited. Other human assets and contributions do not count, or are considered a cost, a loss.

The systemic discrimination that exists in our society against specific groups, namely women, BME people, people with disabilities, LGB and T people and certain religious based identities, arises because of the system of capitalism that governs how we live and how we value and understand value in our lives and societies. The market economy of capitalism is a greed system that is focussed on profit through production, consumption and credit. The value base of the market economy is profit, so the more money that you make the more that you deserve and the more status that you have. The value of profit is not tied to any kind of moral or ethical code – effectively you can do what you like as long as it makes enough profit; prostitution, war, drug trafficking, child labour and environmentally destructive practices for example are all allowed overtly and covertly in the marketplace. The media presents the market economy as though it's a given and maintains the idea that making a profit in life is what matters and what we should be striving for. People who strive for profit (especially those who are the most successful i.e. make the most money) are lauded by the media, their opinions are heard in the news, we dedicate magazines to following the personal lives of rich and famous people (Paris Hilton for example is literally famous for being

rich), we make films that see people 'coming good' by leaving behind their old unprofitable lives and becoming rich, we privilege the accents on our radios and televisions that belong to people who have money, and we understand politics and current affairs primarily through the actions, reactions and opinions of the people in charge and the 'man on the street' is understood to be a lesser opinion; a sideline to the opinions that really matter.

The market economy and the economic model that we use to measure success as a society are underpinned by the myth of rational economic man and the idea that capitalism is the logical economic system of a stable and fair society. It is also asserted that how we measure economics in our society is objective, encompasses everything that should be measured and is free of discrimination and bias. To maintain the illusion of logic, objectivity and fairness in the marketplace and to remain in control those in power need control over resources. This includes natural resources such as land, oil, and water, but also intellectual resources such as the education system, history and the media, and human resources, which means control over the actions and perceptions of other less powerful human beings. It is this need to control other human beings that creates the discrimination 'isms' that are widespread in our society. The marketplace needs people that it can easily and systematically exploit for profit (such as BME people and women); those that it can't systematically exploit it writes off as useless (older people and people with disabilities for example).

## How is control attained, maintained and sustained in this system?

Education is a key to how privilege and power are passed on through the generations of the privileged and it is through education that the mechanisms for control over the less powerful and



the discriminated against are first employed. The huge disparities in the education system (state vs. private schools as well and the vast differences between state schools in different areas) mean an unequal system of education that creates and maintains the inequalities and discrimination that sustain the capitalist system. Private schools (and even state schools in the 'right areas') create the élites who control our society, and the rest of the education system creates the middle classes and the ever-increasing underclass of people who are sent to schools so under-funded, under-staffed and poorly managed as to be ineffective, or who are deemed to be uneducable. Disparities in education leads to professional exclusivity typified by things like the Old Boys Networks, the various Royal Colleges, exclusive professional associations and clubs, and through inheritance, jobs and status the élites are given continued power over our resources (natural, intellectual and human), opportunities, choice of services, leisure activities and even our access to and dominant understanding of all of the above. Importantly the ruling élite are not afforded responsibility for how these various resources are shared and controlled (systemic discrimination, exploitation, over and under privilege...) because the myth of rationality in our economic system is so strong that the bias and discriminations that underpin it are widely understood to be 'just how it works' because it has always been this way. This idea is supported by the self-sustaining nature of systemic privilege and discrimination, which means the same groups remain in power and the same people are exploited and scapegoated by an unfair system. Certain groups are therefore to blame for their low status in society and the ruling élite rule because they were meant to do so.

The system for which the élites are the custodians (of marketplace capitalism) requires that people get involved in the well-ordered lifecycle of production, consumption and credit. The goal of education is therefore paid employment and the hierarchy of education across society ensures that the élites maintain their place in society and that the

marketplace is fed a steady stream of exploitable people to fulfil the tasks and roles with the least status and pay, and the unpaid (and therefore 'valueless') work of the social reproductive economy. Your contribution counts in this system of value if you earn, spend money, pay taxes and access credit. If you don't, can't or won't produce, consume, pay taxes and access credit you do not count because you are only seen to take from the system. In short this system demands that your life goes through the marketplace in order to be valued because the only indicators of worth that we have look at productivity, taxation and spending. Because the majority of the work that is undertaken in the social reproductive system is done within families and therefore for free it does not pass through the marketplace and is not counted and therefore has no worth. The parts of the social reproductive system that do pass through the marketplace (paid childcare, professional nursing and caring for example) are poorly paid and mainly undertaken by sections of society who fall within the discriminatory isms. When the market economy and the social reproductive economy cross through things like paid maternity leave or when people access the benefits system to help to pay for the care of sick, old or disabled people, these nominal payments are understood to be a cost and therefore a loss to the market. Using this model it means that human care and human wellbeing do not have a value and therefore do not count (both literally and figuratively) because they are a cost and a loss to the system. The value base of our economic system means that the wellbeing of members of our society and the caring that needs to be undertaken to ensure the mental and physical wellbeing and security of its members means nothing. Even the caring that is articulated through the state through the welfare system and services provided by the third sector is seen as a loss to the 'real' economy, and both the people and the caring that is undertaken in this way are understood to be worthless and are not counted as contributing to our economic system.

The system is tied to discriminatory and increasingly anachronistic assumptions about how society and



people within society function. So for example it assumes an able-bodied, heterosexual male breadwinner is supporting a 'cereal box family' despite women having been present as workers in the marketplace since the Second World War. The gender binary that it assumes also pushes out LGB and T people from the mainstream and creates discriminatory discourse around gender and sexual orientation. The economic system is based upon an assumed male career model and the assumption that women will undertake the unpaid caring that needs to be done and work in the low paid jobs. This is reflected in the inflexibility of workplaces in terms of both their physical locations and in terms of the practices of working hours. This inflexibility means that men find it difficult to take on social reproductive responsibilities and the flexibility that it is consequently assumed that women want (in actual fact need if these responsibilities fall on their shoulders) makes them a less sure and therefore worthy investment. The reduction in worth that happens to women signals to men that it would not be wise to negotiate flexible working in terms of career progression.

The pull of market capitalism seems to transcend the (in some cases enormous) costs that such a system creates for many sections of society. The system that binds both women and men, rich and poor, discriminated against and not discriminated against is articulated through a life focussed on production, consumption and credit, or more specifically the dependence on the system that credit creates. People who are unable to access well paid work or work at all are extended credit that allows them to buy the goods that allude to (financial) success—we have a society that dreams now and pays later using exploitative and exorbitant credit arrangements. Accessing credit means that people have to work to pay it back (and paradoxically the less money that you earn the more that you are charged to access credit) so they become economically dependent on the system and it is easier to economically exploit people who are dependent upon the need to work. The willingness to accept credit is garnered by

the creation, expectation and desire for specific lifestyles exemplified by the procurement of certain goods and services (houses, holidays, jewellery, designer clothes, cars, cleaners...). The creation of desire and the fulfilment through access to credit creates an illusion of equal (financial) opportunity for all, when this is obviously not the case because some people's time is worth more than others (a nurse vs. an investment banker for example) and the time of specific groups is worth more than others (men vs. women, white vs. BME, etc). Indeed much of women's time is calculated to be worth nothing. The importance of credit in keeping the rich rich and the poor poor by maintaining discrimination, and the fragility of the illusion of wealth that a credit based economic system creates is becoming painfully clear to everyone in the current economic crisis.

Part of the success of capitalism when the majority of people would arguably fare better in a different kind of system of work and reward, stems from the fact that children are indoctrinated into its 'values' from birth. Children are told that gifts are given to children who behave well and we show them how much we care about them by buying them things. We also tell them that they can show us how much they love us by buying us gifts and even create specific opportunities for this to happen – Mother's Day, Father's Day, Easter, Christmas, Hanukah and Eid for example. Our education system, media, families, peers, musicians, political systems, understanding of history, etc all echo the message that success can be measured through earnings so comprehensively and to the extent that the idea that success can only be measured by success in the marketplace is no less strong for groups who are discriminated against than those who are privileged by the system. So women and BME people for example become entrepreneurs to go around the system that tries to limit their financial success. Although this is understandable and even admirable on an individual basis it is problematic because it does not challenge the inherent and systemic discrimination in the system and buys into the cult of individuality. This leads to stereotypical



assumptions such as Asians being good shopkeepers and entrepreneurs instead of acknowledging this is due to the lack of wider opportunity to be present in other areas of the economy. It supports the idea that there is nothing wrong with the system because a small number of women, BME people, people with disabilities, older people, younger people, people who are Muslim, LGB and T people who work for themselves do okay. But more importantly it supports the discriminations that underpin our economic system by conveying the message that it is more important to be individually financially successful than it is to come together as a group to challenge systemic discrimination. The reach of market capitalism and its ability to encroach upon and subvert possible areas of challenge is seen across society – the increasing commodification of caring and the social enterprise model which has begun to pull the work of the social reproductive economy into the marketplace being two pertinent current examples.

## What does all this mean and what does it mean for equalities work?

Equalities work needs to start addressing the problems that are tied to the fact that market capitalism requires that we only measure and value and understand our lives, the lives of others and the lives of specific identity groups in society through the discriminatory lens of money and the market economy. This means that there has to be strong and cohesive arguments put forward that call for a shift in focus that means that we start measuring and valuing work (both paid and unpaid) in terms of its ability to sustain human wellbeing, instead of remaining preoccupied with the attainment of money and closing our eyes as a society to the inherent discriminations that underpin market capitalism. In terms of addressing the system so that this aim becomes a possibility the following areas of consideration could be used to start exploring the issues:

- Would putting care into the market make a positive difference to the lives of those providing the caring and those being cared for?
- What are the implications if all people who find themselves discriminated against in the market place because of their identity go around the market (and its discriminations) by starting their own businesses?
- Is there a way to create flexibility in our workplaces that ensures flexicurity - that is, makes it safe for people to choose flexible working?
- Would market regulation through the creation of minimum and maximum wages make a substantial change to the discriminations articulated through the unfair market distribution of wealth?
- Would the above changes redistribute wealth or would you have to do this through amendments to the way that the system of tax works?

In order to shift the focus of how we measure and understand the value of our lives we need to begin exploring the idea that fairness and equality might be achieved if we measured and valued our lives and the lives of others in our society in the time contributed to sustaining individual and community wellbeing, rather than the subjective monetary value attributed to tasks that we currently use to measure. This would mean that what you are doing and the time that it takes would be measured against contribution to human and environmental wellbeing and not the subjective value of what you are doing, determined through the utilisation of particular skill sets and jobs valued by the market which are bound to privilege and discrimination. This would allow paid work and unpaid work to be measured and put into the context of time and contribution to our sustainable future and not the monetary value that has been attributed. Of the average 112 waking hours of the week only around 40 are spent in paid employment even for those who work full time, but if this figure included the amount of time that is



spent undertaking the tasks essential to the social reproductive economy a more comprehensive and fairer picture of who is doing what to sustain all aspects of our society could be acknowledged. A system of measurement that allowed for a greater acknowledgement of all the work that is undertaken in our society would allow the currently hidden work and the people who undertake it to be valued, and eventually could help to redistribute the pockets of wealth and privilege that are held by élite groups across all sections and groups in society.

If we measured our success and progress as a society in this way we would begin to value our lives in terms of human wellbeing in relationship with self-esteem, other individuals, communities and the environment. This in effect means a shift from measuring money earned and spent to measuring aspects of life such as self-esteem, freedom to be safe and at peace, equality, equity, wellbeing, happiness, care, sustaining work, interdependent relationships between people and the environment, all unpaid contributions, participation and contributions to culture and communities, which all add up to an individual's contributions to personal and social wellbeing. This system of value and measurement would allow for the recognition of our multiple selves and all of the contributions that we make in our lives and we would not only be noticed by the system when we are contributing to tax revenues through paid work. This would stop those who do not undertake paid work for whatever reasons and those whose self-worth is not measured through the job that they are paid to do to gain recognition and maintain self-esteem in our society. It would also loosen the grip that systemic discriminations have on the outcomes and wellbeing of vast swathes of our population because the system's ability to exploit them would be diminished and so systemic discrimination would be revealed for the tool of capitalist exploitation that it is.

## How could this be achieved?

Such a seismic shift in how we understand and value both ourselves and others would require every individual to take full responsibility for themselves, the society in which they live and the planet that we inhabit, and be educated to reflect these important responsibilities. This would require that the concept of education be disentangled from the current preoccupation with formal schooling and the attainment of academic qualifications. By refocusing our understanding of education to encompass the teaching of social understanding and responsibilities, we would begin to question and ultimately widen our measurements and indicators of what constitutes a successful member of society. Presently a successful child does well academically at school and undertakes qualifications that allow them to take on the élite roles in society when they become adults. Successful adults are those that earn the most money (and this is exemplified by the fact that you can be considered a successful criminal if you commit the right crimes and earn enough money). In a society that values individual, social and environmental responsibility success would be measured by an individual's ability to:

- Politically empower others to articulate their views and participate fully in society
- Change situations for the better for individuals, groups and the environment
- Empower themselves
- Value all of the multiple roles that they undertake as part of a family, community and global society
- Value all forms of intelligence in themselves and in others

A society that valued and measured in such a way would be based upon the premise that how we use people and share resources needs to be respectful to everyone, not exploitative and sustainable.

To do this there would have to be widespread recognition that the problems of our society are





generated by the negative impact that the vast disparities in wealth and privilege create. Currently we are ruled as a society by 'power over' and not 'power with' in regard to resources, choices, opportunity and access and ultimately the quality of life that an individual is able to enjoy. This system is true globally and relates to the control of all assets valued by all societies – so cattle, diamonds and oil for example are all (mis)managed and (mis)appropriated in the same way. By recognising and challenging this and trying to change political discourse globally to empower individuals to take responsibility for themselves, the societies and environments that they live in, the commonly perceived perpetrators of society's ills (BME people, immigrants, teenage gangs, single mothers, the unemployed, those who live in council housing, prostitutes, low level drug dealers, corrupt leaders in other countries, etc) would be revealed as the disaffected, disempowered results of an unfair system of greed and over-privilege maintained and orchestrated by the ruling élites. The power without responsibility that the current system allows its rulers to enjoy, and which leads to entitlement, self-interest and the internalised assumptions of worth that allow privileged groups in society to discriminate, discount and exploit specific groups in society, would be taken away and individual responsibility and a more rounded value base would take its place.

## What will stop the new reality from happening?

The enduring and systemic nature of discrimination indicates that the system and those at the top of the system (and those who are comfortable in the position that the system affords them) will use any means available to them to stay in power and maintain the status quo. Any work that fundamentally challenges discrimination and therefore the power afforded to the ruling élites will face overt and covert challenges articulated through

the full strength and breadth of the current ruling system.

The current system of electoral party politics exemplifies the importance of systemic discriminations to the continuation of the power of the ruling élites. Party politics are archaic and steeped in exclusive practice that drives women, LGB and T people, BME people, and people with disabilities into single-issue identity politics, because it is easier to control people if they are divided into groups of 'other' that are at odds with one another as opposed to trying to control a cohesive society that is at odds with an unfair system. Party politics feeds the fear of difference, which allows systemic discrimination and exploitation to continue to exist. Paradoxically it is also true to say that many people who belong to discriminated against identity groups are equally against the idea of moving towards a politic and society that looks beyond limiting identity groups. Those individuals, who are politically aware and active around issues of discrimination, often have a strong sense of their identity developed from being 'other' in 'our' society. There is a consequent fear that if one's identity is taken away (even if it is based in part upon stereotypical and discriminatory ideas) an important part of what makes you 'you' will be lost, which translates into an unwillingness to move away from identity politics and its inherent biases and discriminations.

The inherent biases and discriminations of identity politics is illustrated by the fact that when working in identity issues, the State approaches this work as though it is managing conflict instead of trying to rebalance society to fully encompass the wide variety of identities that exist, and to redistribute the privileges that are created by everyone's work (in families, communities and workplaces) so that they are not concentrated on a very small section of our population. The language that is used to describe the problems of discrimination and potential solutions is tied up with ideas of burden and the notion that discriminated against identity groups that are 'different' to the rest of society are a cost.



There is also concern from the different identity groups that equalities-wide processes could become bland, and by trying to acknowledge too much in terms of the different groups of people who are discriminated against and the breadth of behaviours that constitute discrimination, could end up becoming meaningless and ineffective.

The fact that we are undertaking equalities work in a market economy means that it is frequently assumed that money is the answer to the problem of discrimination, and not the recognition and acceptance of different identities in our society. It is assumed that inclusion of discriminated groups into the market economy will generate wealth that will 'trickle down'; that people that work hard can climb the hierarchy and be more 'successful', but this theory does not take into account that the stereotypes and prejudices of worth attributed to different identity groups are used to exploit them through low paid or free labour and in doing so works to prevent true marketplace equality.

The focus on identity groups (equality strands) rather than equal human value means that work to address inequality encourages competition into and between the equalities strands and the idea that those working in equalities must 'win' the money to tackle discrimination by competing against others working in the same area, or even more divisively by competing against those working in other equalities areas. This is clearly not beneficial to the overall aim of promoting equality of treatment and access to society amongst all discriminated against groups. In the public sector the idea that there is an equalities budget pot rather than equality proofed budgets flows contrary to the concept of equality.

## What do we do to change it?

- We work with everyone – me, you and the world, to really make change happen
- Challenge the dominance of the male model standard working week
- Demonstrate the élites' inefficiency as human beings and our loss of confidence in them as leaders
- Change the culture of our organisations to prevent more crises like the current economic situation. Organisations that had a primary focus upon their own sustainability and the welfare of the people that are employed there would create a very different marketplace to the one that currently exists
- Acknowledge and value all contributions to sustaining life and human wellbeing not just those that pertain to paid work and measure all that people contribute to this end
- Use things like CEDAW (which gave the UK a damning report) to measure a government's progress and success instead of GDP and other market-based measurements
- Make it clear that those working in equalities are engaging power holders in an equality process that is underpinned by a human rights agenda, and the idea that equalities work is about minoritised groups asking and competing with one another for favours is unacceptable and part of the system that sustains systemic inequalities

## What strategies do we suggest?

- We need to teach our citizens from childhood to understand and appreciate the variety of identities that exist in our society and create a way of living that is measured by its ability to promote and sustain human wellbeing instead of the current narrow focus on measuring marketplace activity
- People should be given knowledge of their rights and their responsibilities to themselves and to others and how to use them from an early age
- We need to educate our society about the importance of human wellbeing and the politics of personal and organisational responsibility that human wellbeing requires to flourish for all in our society



- We need to value the time contributed to the care needed to ensure a flourishing productive sustainable society that ensures human and environmental wellbeing for everybody
- As a society we need to prioritise working together to express ourselves and share our experiences in order to foster a society that appreciates difference
- There needs to be a challenge to the notion of entitlement in our society, both individual entitlement and systemic entitlement, which work to maintain the status quo and deny access to opportunity to specific sections of our society and certain individuals
- Thought needs to be given to how we can restructure our political and governmental structures both locally and nationally to enable full participation from all sections and groups in society, ensuring choice and autonomy of action
- Education, the media, and even how we speak to one another needs to change so that we stop understanding ourselves and each other through the language and structures of difference and otherness
- Institutions and the various powerful bodies in our society need to be held to account against human wellbeing values and indicators. What would the world look like if politicians were held to account for our wellbeing and not the country's GDP? As this accountability takes effect organisations and institutions need to be measured for the progress towards fairness and justice through instruments such as pay audits by equality.
- The introduction of class actions and legislation that supports its use and functions should be sought, this would allow us to challenge discrimination and exploitation without individuals having to go up against the system at great financial and emotional cost
- Human and environmental exploitation should be exposed for the crime against humanity that it

is, and those who perpetrate such acts (be they powerful individuals or organisations) should be held accountable

- There needs to be an exploration of the capabilities of IT to create new ways for people to find representation in currently top heavy power structures

### **If we do not do this we fear:**

Our systems of national measurement will continue to ignore and therefore devalue the work that is undertaken in the social reproductive economy that creates human wellbeing, and this work (and its outcome) will continue to be seen as without value. Human wellbeing will continue to suffer through systemic discrimination and exploitation as a consequence. The result and therefore the indicators of the continued negation of human wellbeing are:

- Mental ill health and suicide
- Violence, especially male violence against women (and everyone else)
- Abuse of power—the continuation of the idea that power means power over and not power with
- Poverty, systemic poverty, discriminatory pay gaps, a continuation of the growing disparities of wealth in our society
- Exploitation of individuals, identity groups, society and the environment
- Cultural and environmental degradations (war and civil disputes and the continuing pollution of our world)



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