

## Abstract

Despite an ever-growing body of feminist design practitioners, researchers, educators and digital platforms, gender inequalities persist in design education and the design industries. 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 DRS Conversation 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? 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.

## Design and sexism: assembling a community of care.

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

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## 2. Context of Conversation Topic

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?

Certainly, the conversation around gender inequality is in the public consciousness; where campaigns and projects such as the *Global Women's Strike* (Alcoff. et al, 2018) and *The Everyday Sexism Project* ([www.everydaysexism.com](http://www.everydaysexism.com)) expose how sexist practices operate across different groups in society; with the calling out of gender disparity in the workplace of many professional sectors including the wider design field (Design Council UK, 2015). From Cheryl Buckley's analysis of patriarchal frameworks on women in design (1986) to recent calls to 'depatriarchise design' (<https://depatriarchisedesign.wordpress.com/>), we suggest that the conversation on issues of sexism in design need urgent attention and care. This conversation attempts to address these longstanding concerns through an open dialogue to make sexist practices and thinking more transparent. However, as Sara Ahmed argues, this is not easy to do, as "sexism is remarkably difficult to pin down. And that too is one of the reasons to focus on sexism: because so much of what we experience as sexism is dismissed as just what we experience" (Ahmed 2015, p. 5). And so Ahmed argues, we might begin with cataloguing our own experiences.

Through assembling this conversation on the topic of sexism, we hope to gather a 'community of care' (Tronto, 2015) around this contentious issue of concern (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), and to establish how certain 'norms' may be shifted through practices of caring-with (Askins and Blazek, 2017).

### 3. Conversation research question

Our motivating research questions for the DRS Conversation 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 (ibid 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.

### 4. Set-up of your session

A discussion on 'everyday sexism' has ethical implications for a conversational format, and

we aim to create an inclusive and supportive space. We will foreground a discussion on ethics, sensitivities and consent in relation to the topic, and participants will agree on a set of ethical guidelines and rules of engagements to follow. We will revisit this discussion at the end of the session. This set-up seeks to 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' are also participants of the conversation, and all participants are acknowledged as experts.

The conversation will have four stages over 2 hours: **First**, convenors and participants will share the motivations for the conversation, and participants will be invited to agree on ethical guidelines and rules of engagement. **Second**, participants will self-assemble into small groups. Each group will be given a set of materials, such as a time-table, a reading list, and a brief. These act 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. Participants will generate discursive responses; we view these responses as the 'cataloguing of sexism' [Ahmed, 2015]. The responses will take the form of a series of postcards that can be cross-referenced and organised to forefront different challenges and potential new scripts. **Third**, still in groups, participants will be asked to pinpoint and describe points for further exploration, such as a problematic material to further investigate [Davis, 2014]. We see this moment as a collective decision making on what and how to care for; it will be captured through written means. **Fourth**, in the large group, participants will share points for discussion and reflect, and revisit the ethical guidelines and rules of engagement.

## 5. Type of space and equipment required

We will require a large space with seating and several large tables so participants can be seated in a circle with no distinction between audience and convenors. After introductions and outlines of the session, small break-out groups will work together.

## 6. Dissemination strategy

We would then like this conversation to highlight the 'blind spots' (Davis, 2014) and 'neglected things' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) to be cared for in relation to gender and design. Therefore, we view the issues raised as starting points for a set of written 'community-led' briefs around how to care for sexism. A designed PDF will be produced to capture the conversation and 'briefs'. This will be shared with the Conversation participants after the session, and we will encourage further discussion and support around them.

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#### About the Convenors:

**Tanveer Ahmed** is an AHRC PhD candidate at The Open University and a visiting lecturer at The Royal College of Art. Tanveer's research aims are to devise anti-racist, anti-capitalist and culturally progressive fashion design agendas.

**Sarah Pennington** is an AHRC PhD candidate at Goldsmiths, University of London, and a lecturer in design at Goldsmiths and The Royal College of Art. Her current research seeks to align a feminist ethos of care in relation to design research practices.

**Mathilda Tham** is a feminist, activist and metadesigner and her work is focused on paradigmatic change through facilitating transdisciplinary processes of co-creation. She is Professor of Design, Linnaeus University, Sweden, and metadesign researcher, Goldsmiths, University of London.

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