

## **PREPARATION FOR WORKSHOP SESSIONS**

Hello, again. I hope that your day has been productive so far. I've set myself an extremely ambitious goal for the next 20 minutes. During this time, I will touch on some concepts that will be new to many of us. But when I examine where we have been succeeding and not succeeding in the WSIS process as gender advocates, I must conclude that we have not informed ourselves enough about the ways in which we are affected by living in societies that do not treat every human being as equally valuable.

You may wonder what difference it makes to the WSIS process in general and PREPCOM 3 in particular. Some of the concrete ways in which this manifests are:

- our inability to get enough females to WSIS meetings, even if we had funding;
- our inability to get funding, to bring more women here;
- our lack of recognition that lobbying and advocacy strategies that work sometimes do not work other times
- the need to get or be allies
- the challenges of organizing in chaotic, unpredictable, difficult environments
- the self-consciousness of many women to express themselves in public

### **Introduction to internalized sexism**

I'd like to begin to talk about internalized sexism. We're all familiar with sexism – the systematic, institutionalized mistreatment of girls and women simply because they are female.

Most gender advocates spend long hours, and rightfully so, detailing and documenting the manifestations of sexism, examining the areas in which it is most prevalent, deciding which aspects of sexism are priorities to address, and discussing which individuals and organizations are the most blatant offenders.

But many of us either do not know about or do not have the ability to fully explore another face of sexism that I call “internalized sexism”. Internalized sexism is a form of internalized oppression. For the next few minutes, I am going to spend some time exploring in more detail what internalized sexism is, give some examples of it, and then discuss how internalized sexism can slow up progress in the WSIS process, so that we can start thinking about what we can do to minimize its effects.

## **Internalized oppression**

Internalized oppression is a set of behaviours, beliefs and attitudes that develop in the members of a group that have been systematically targeted by oppression.

Please realize that internalized oppression is the *result* of oppression, and does not exist in isolation. We do not have enough time to examine the details of the mechanism by which internalized oppression gets set up, during our formative years. For the purpose of this presentation, I will limit my focus on how internalized oppression is displayed, once it has been established.

In simple terms, internalized oppression gets established when the members of a group are targeted and the institutions of society – the courts, the educational system, the religious bodies, etc. – support that targeting. There is therefore no way in which the members of the target group can lash out.

So instead, the members of that group turn their negative emotions, thoughts and cognitions inward, towards themselves and other members of their group. In other words, they begin to internalize the misinformation about themselves, and about group members, and to act based on that misinformation.

Many people’s introduction to the discussion of internalized oppression came from Franz Fanon’s book, *Black Faces, White Masks*. In this book, Fanon describes the self disgust and dysfunctional behaviours that he observed in his

fellow Martiniquans of African heritage as a result of racism. He didn't use the term internalized oppression, but that's what he was talking about.

Internalized sexism is one of the many forms of internalized oppression.

Internalized sexism is the term that I am using to describe the misinformation that women have about themselves, and about other women, and the ways in which this misinformation is reflected in our values, our attitudes, and in particular, in our behaviour.

Internalized sexism would exist if all members of the non-target group – in this case, men – disappeared from the planet. Internalized sexism means that the external control that is exerted in the form of sexism is no longer required for women to live limited lives.

I'm sure even if you've never heard the term "internalized oppression" used, you're well acquainted with examples of it. I'll give some here, and also describe the myth or misinformation that has been internalized.

## **Examples of internalized sexism/background myth**

### **Physical**

The multi-billion beauty industry, fuelled by the way internalized sexism makes women and girls focus on their physical appearance to the extent of exposing ourselves to toxic products, general anaesthesia for cosmetic surgery, etc.

**Myth/ Misinformation:** without looking physically attractive, you as girls and women will not have a fair chance of a good life.

### **Intellectual**

The intimidation that girls and women feel when faced with math, science and technology.

**Myth/Misinformation** logic is not natural to a woman's brain.

## **Group Cohesion**

Women's groups and organizations are often poorly subscribed and faced with break-off factions and splinter groups. This is especially common when the area of action is one which in itself requires acting counter to the myths of internalized sexism - - such as politics, world change organizations, women's rights organizations. Group cohesion is also negatively affected if there is another type of internalized oppression present – women of colour, young women, and poor women.

**Myth/ Misinformation:** . women are not to be trusted, and it will not profit you to follow the agenda of other women, or participate in activities geared to women.

## **Leadership**

In addition to facing the challenges brought by sexism itself, female leaders are faced by attacks, lack of supportiveness, and heavy criticism by other women. These behaviours are obviously a result of internalized sexism.

**Myth/ Misinformation:** women are not good leaders, and when leading, do not need support.

## **Visibility**

By visibility I mean the public presentation of ourselves and our thinking, in verbal or written ways. Research has consistently shown that girls and women under-estimate their skills and knowledge, and remain silent, especially when in mixed-sex groups. One of the shocking facts is that even in classes on feminist theory and ideology, taught within universities, the men give more opinions and ask more questions than the women.

**Myth/Misinformation:** What I have to say is not important, and even if it is important, I'm not sure I'm saying it correctly, and I'm not sure I fully understand what is being discussed.

Let me take the time to remind everyone that the behaviours which I am describing and which we sometimes display as a result of internalized sexism have nothing to do with how women are. They are a result of deep, long-standing, inexcusable mistreatment of women, with few available alternatives for action.

So what are the implications of this on gender advocacy in the WSIS process? Here are a few.

**1.Lack of participation by women in discourse on policy, even when the opportunity allows for it, and the woman has competency.** Of course, this lack of participation is worsened if there is the presence of any other internalized oppression (women of colour, women from the South, women from backgrounds of economic poverty, etc)

**2.Lack of the necessary cohesion in the gender advocacy movement in the technology sector in general, and the WSIS process in particular.**

**3.Lack of support for leaders – the gender advocacy leadership is overtired, overworked, and not supported in an ideal way.** It is difficult for us women to even notice that our leaders need support. And it is difficult for leaders to ask support. In addition, when any mistake is made, there is inordinate criticism of the leader.

**4Feelings of inadequacy or avoidance when faced with unfamiliar issues or sectors.** Those of us in CSOs avoid the governmental sector, and often women in government view the private sector with caution.

## **Solutions**

I want to touch on some solutions. First of all, the picture is not bleak. I present the above not to make us lose hope. I am highly optimistic. So much has been done to counter sexism in the past few decades, that the internalized form of sexism has become easier to notice. If someone is chained up tightly, it's hard to realize they are not trying to run away.

**1/ We have made progress.** We need to understand internalized sexism, disseminate information about it, and share our thinking about it. We're doing that here.

**2/ We need to support our leadership.** We need to schedule and spend time strategizing on what our leaders need and what are some things that can be done to support them, for example, supporting them around parenting responsibilities, money spent on administrative tasks, waiting to get help for our leaders before adding on more responsibilities, rotating unpleasant tasks, etc.

**3/ We should make time for gender advocates within the process to get to know each other outside of our strict role as gender advocates.** It's time to learn about each other's lives, and to fete every achievement.

**4/ We need to gain allies** – people in the non-target group who can give support to move our agenda forward.

During your work groups, you will get a chance to think about other solutions.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to the rest of the day.