Beyond Opposition
Summary of Findings from March 2020-October 2020

Beyond Opposition is a research project engaging with those who are opposed to/concerned about sexual and sex/gender rights and equalities, and those who are broadly supportive of them. We are currently collecting data through a questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire is open to everyone, while the interviews are specifically seeking to speak to those who are opposed to, or concerned about, sexual and sex/gender rights and equalities. This summary offers some early insights into what we are finding and provides a general overview of how we are using participant data.

Early Project Highlights

Differences between those who are opposed to / concerned about sexual and gender equalities

One of our key findings so far is the differences between those who, in our study, indicate they are 'opposed to, or concerned about, sexual and gender rights and equalities'.

This means that overarching terms or broad social or political categories such as "left" and "right", may fail to grasp the ways in which people are opposed to, or concerned about, a wide range of sexual and sex/gender issues.

Some participants who support certain issues (for example, abortion or same sex marriage) do not support, or are concerned about other issues such as trans rights. This can mean that they do not see themselves as similar to those who are pro-life or believe a women's place is in the home. As one participant stated:

> "It's beyond opposition - that's a good name for your project. I've always been pro-choice and pro-LGBT but now that I've experienced the radical activism that's behind the trans rights social justice movement, it's truly scary. … This is the most intimate topic possible and governments are using deceptive new 'rights' laws to destroy and dismantle the natural family as a social institution."

In both interviews and questionnaire responses, it is clear that not all use the same language or have the same understanding of key terms. This extends to how the project is read, including some regarding the study as misusing and / or conflating the terms "sex" and "gender". The term "gender" has been a specific sticking point for some participants. For example, the use of the term "gender equality" has been seen as not mirroring participants' readings of sex and gender equality laws in the UK.

Friendships and Social Polarisation

Existing research suggests we live in increasingly polarised spaces, where people tend to build or maintain relationships only with those who agree. So far, though, our research indicates that relationships across differences are not always as straightforward as this. In particular, maintaining friendships and family relationships with those who disagree is not always straightforward. People described a range of experiences associated with this issue.

Some people told us they could not be friends with people who they disagreed with

> "I don't want to be friends with people who think my sexuality is in any way wrong or deserving of less than equal rights. Same re: my trans loved ones."

> "I haven't had any friends with different views on these issues. I would find it difficult to maintain a relationship with someone who held opposite views on them."

Friendships and Social Polarisation

"I try to accept and learn more about others' points of view, or start discussions. I figure it is important to be accepting of all viewpoints, even if I disagree."

Others said that it was not a problem to have friends with different views

"I have several Christian friends who have more conservative views than I do, and my partner has more conservative views than I do as well."

"I wouldn't distance from someone just because they had different views from mine. I would discuss and try to persuade, or at least explain my position."

"I have had arguments with family and friends over my viewpoints, which has resulted in fractured relationships. To maintain the relationship(s), I have to keep my mouth shut on my views even as they spout off voraciously on theirs on a constant basis. … I do find myself distancing from these relationships, however, and not associating with them either at all or very minimally."

"If someone believes you are a bigot, a hateful person, or someone who disapproves of their lifestyle, it is difficult to maintain the relationship even if you have sought to be friendly and respectful."

Whilst others still had less straightforward experiences, expressing loss of friendships and fear of speaking about certain topics

"I did have friends who disagreed with me but they stopped contacting me … when they found out about my views."

"When any dissent is expressed, the inevitable "homophobic, transphobic" labels come trotting out. I just choose to keep my mouth shut unless I know it is safe to do so."

Though some people told us they could not be friends with people who they disagreed with, others said that it was not a problem to have friends with different views. The range of responses about friendships shows that we cannot make assumptions or generalisations about relationships and social ties or divisions. Discussions of 'social polarisation' need to be considered in ways that understand how and where friendships are made, how they are maintained, and when they might be dissolved.

Threats of violence and harassment leading to avoiding places and conversations

In interviews and in questionnaire responses, participants who are opposed to, or concerned about sexual and gender rights have shared their experiences of receiving threats of violence and harassment, exclusion, and fear of exclusion. One participant wrote:

"I have been threatened and harassed at my work-place, including defamatory posters being displayed in public toilets with my photo on them, abusive emails and intimidating messages about me shared in online forums."

To deal with threats and fear of exclusion or violence, people said that they will avoid certain spaces, or they might avoid discussions of particular issues in different spaces. While some people said there were neighbourhoods or events they avoided (family events, union meetings, and colleges, for example), others suggested that they would just refrain from certain conversations in particular places. For example, one participant said:

"I don't avoid anywhere because of my views. I just avoid discussing them in certain domains."

Coronavirus, Lockdown and Isolation

Some people found that coronavirus restrictions made it more difficult to distance themselves from those they disagreed with. But others noted that they now have distanced themselves from those who disagree.

Some people noted that coronavirus restrictions meant they now had 'nothing to do' with those who do not hold similar views. However, other people described how coronavirus restrictions meant they were placed in more regular contact with those with whom they disagree, and whose views affected them:

> *"[We] are in more regular contact - which has meant I've been in greater contact with their views, even just as expressed in an offhand way. This has felt difficult and there have been one or two times when I've chosen to remove myself from the conversation as a result."*

There may also have been some changes in people's activism and relationships due to coronavirus restrictions. Some participants expressed feeling more motivated to engage in activism around sexual and sex/gender rights because they had more time to read around issues and connect with like-minded others online.

About the research

The project asks two key questions,

1. **What are people's experiences of everyday life when they are opposed to/concerned about legislation and cultural changes** around same sex marriage, abortion, gender self-identification and other sexual and gender equalities?
2. How can we **address the divisions** that are emerging when individuals occupy different standpoints on sexual and gender rights?

The researchers undertaking this research have in the past, and outside of this project continue to, work on various aspects of sexual and sex/gender rights and equalities issues. However, this research project seeks to make space for something else; that is, to work with, and engage across, the differences that divide in these areas.

Methods

The project to date is has focused on question 1. 285 respondents have taken a questionnaire and we have undertaken 18 interviews in Ireland/UK/Canada. The questionnaire includes questions both for those opposed to sexual and gender equalities and for those who are supportive of it. Those who are opposed are asked about their everyday experiences (question 1) and their friendships with those who hold different views (question 2), whilst those who are supportive are asked about their friendship and relationships with those who hold different views (question 2).