

# UNDERSTANDING AND TRANSFORMING DIVISIONS AROUND GENDER, SEXUALITY AND/OR ABORTION

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Beyond  
Opposition



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# SUMMARY

*Polarisation is a key issue of our time, and is increasingly focused on gender, sexuality and/or abortion, areas where rights have advanced for some in the 21st century. Beyond Opposition is a project that seeks to develop understandings about the experiences of these divisions, and experiment in living together where we cannot change everyone's mind.*

Exploring the experiences of those opposed to or concerned about social and legal changes to gender, sexuality and/or abortion, 161 interviews were held with people living in Ireland, Canada and Great Britain. The interviews found that:

- Those who are opposed to or concerned about socio-legal changes to gender, sexuality and/or abortion are not all the same, and are not all rightwing
- Everyday lives can be affected by holding these positions, particularly at work and home
- Some participants were very careful about where they went and what they said regarding their positions on gender, sexuality and/or abortion
- Participants said that they found support and developed their activism because of their experiences, including confrontations
- Negative experiences can embolden and entrench positions that oppose socio-legal changes on gender, sexuality and/or abortion

Bringing people together across divisions around gender, sexuality and/or abortion, three discussion groups (n. 39) and three creative artist-led workshops (n. 35 using visual art, sound and theatre) were carefully created in Dublin, Vancouver and Glasgow. These events brought people together to imagine new worlds in which to live and create across division, without changing minds or debating the issues. The discussion groups and artist-led workshops found that:

- It is possible to bring some, but not all, people together in workshops that include those who disagree with you on gender, sexuality and/or abortion
- There is a desire to engage beyond division and polarisation around gender, sexuality and/or abortion
- The ideal worlds we want to live in are sometimes incompatible with diverging positions on gender, sexuality and/or abortion
- Art can be used in ways that work across division in gender, sexuality and/or abortion
- Through curating research via the imperfectutopias.eu virtual exhibition, the project seeks to spark conversations and experiences beyond reporting on findings

# INTRODUCTION

*Polarisation is a defining issue of our time, threatening democratic foundations and civil societies. A key aspect of contemporary polarisations is position on abortion, same sex marriage, trans inclusions and, more broadly, 21st century legal and social changes to gender, sexuality and/or abortion. While these issues are widely debated from different angles, there is a lack of engagement with the ordinary lives of people directly affected by debates and discussions, and, perhaps more crucially, a dearth of responses to polarisation and division themselves.*

THE BEYOND OPPOSITION RESEARCH RESPONDED TO THESE CHALLENGES IN TWO WAYS:

1. It sought to listen to the experiences of everyday spaces (work, home, public space) for those who are opposed to or concerned about socio-legal changes in Ireland, Canada and Great Britain, thereby creating new understandings of the lives of those whose positions were once dominant legally and socially, but are shifting in the 21st Century. This gives unique insights into gender, sexuality and/or abortion that adds to existing and ongoing research on LGBTQIA+ lives, reproductive justice and experiences of legislative equalities and social change.

2. It brought people from different positions around gender, sexuality and/or abortion together to consider: **How do we live together, now and in the future, knowing that we may fundamentally disagree on gender, sexuality, and/or abortion?** During discussion groups and creative workshops, Beyond Opposition explored the possibilities of bringing people together across different positions and perspectives.<sup>3</sup> The purpose was not to 'find middle ground', debate the issues or make others agree with 'us' by changing their minds, but to consider working across division.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Positions" is a term we use in order to name points of view, identities, opinions, attitudes and experiences specifically related to gender, sexuality and/or abortion. This term helps us to speak across different positions, and does not always capture how people see themselves. To protect participants' privacy, we do not disclose individual demographic information, though participants were given the option to be named. After each quote the participant's name and location are listed, followed by a summary of their position in relation to gender, sexuality and/or abortion which, when feasible, use the participants' own words in quotation marks. <sup>2</sup> Interviews were undertaken with 161 people across Canada, UK and Ireland between 2020-2022. Participants were recruited through groups and organisations, direct contact and Facebook advertising. They were promised a respectful engagement to understand their experiences, with a focus on everyday spaces. This ethos is followed in all writing from the project and is detailed at [www.beyondopposition.org](http://www.beyondopposition.org). <sup>3</sup> These in-person events were very carefully handled. Three research weekends took place, one each in Dublin, Vancouver and Glasgow. They brought people together across multiple positions related to gender, sexuality and/or abortion: 39 in facilitated group discussions and 35 in artist-led workshops. Those who had participated in interviews were invited to take part, and our own networks and social media adverts were used to ask people to participate. Each person who expressed an interest in taking part received an email, and then a set number of planned phone calls to talk through the research guidelines and explore their specific position on the issues, so that every activity would include people with a diversity of positions.

**EXPERIENCING** SOCIO-  
LEGAL **CHANGE** IN **GENDER,**  
**SEXUALITY** AND/OR  
**ABORTION**

# THOSE WHO ARE OPPOSED TO OR CONCERNED ABOUT SOCIO-LEGAL CHANGES TO GENDER, SEXUALITY AND/OR ABORTION ARE NOT ALL THE SAME, AND ARE NOT ALL RIGHTWING

The data clearly identified significant differences amongst those who were included in this research. This included differences in political stances, as well as differences between them in relation to gender, sexuality and/or abortion. However, most spoke of being ‘lumped in’ with others they would not agree with in order to create them as ‘hateful’ and ‘Nazis’, and many saw this ‘lumping’ as having a negative impact on their lives.

Across the data, participants from Canada, Great Britain and Ireland evidenced how they did not fit ‘easy’ categories. Whilst some participants did align with the left/right, pro/anti divides that can dominate representations of divisions around sexuality and gender, most did not. As is well recognised in LGBTQIA+ and pro-choice communities, politics and groupings, there are also divisions, fractions and differences between those who hold positions or have concerns about socio-legal changes to gender, sexuality and/or abortion. Some pro-life participants told us how they supported same sex marriage, immigration and climate justice. They argued that the pro-life movement’s public face and alliances they saw within this grouping were different from their own positions on these areas.

A very common trend among many gender critical participants was emphasising their progressive, left wing, feminist and/or activist credentials. Gender critical participants often spoke of moving from progressive backgrounds and alliances to positions where they were considered illiberal. When they formed and expressed their positions in relation to sex and gender, they felt that they were then classed as bigoted, rightwing and excluded by communities they had previously worked for and within.

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**I’m basically politically homeless because, in spite of the fact that I have the economic views of the radical left, I tie the rest of my social justice convictions into my anti-abortion view.**

(INT038CAN, Canada, “pro-life left”)

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**Am I not as progressive as I think I am?**

(INT066CAN, Canada, “human rights are human rights and human rights come first”)

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This extended to presumptions that they had political support and high levels of funding, which participants involved in activism challenged. They told us their work was funded by crowdfunding, that they worked with small or non-existent budgets and that many of them did the work themselves.

The 'lumping' together of people in order to dismiss people creates a good/evil binary. Repeatedly, participants described being called hateful, and often 'Nazis', regardless of their stances, positions and activisms, whether or not they related to gender, sexuality and/or abortion. This assumption that participants are all the same and that they all adhere to extreme 'Nazi' views is inaccurate. Moreover, it can have a negative effect on people's lives and how they are treated on a daily basis.

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**There is this idea that [gender critical people are] super right wing. Someone's posted, "there has to be a link between this group and the far right faction. And they must be getting funding. You have to follow the money." And we're all kind of laughing because we're all over the political spectrum where we're all using our own money for the resources.**

(INT018CAN, Canada, "gender critical")

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**Why this is so toxic and has started to spill out into my day to day life is that we are all just lumped under one umbrella of hate.**

(INT008GBR, Great Britain, "gender critical")

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# EVERYDAY LIVES CAN BE AFFECTED BY HOLDING THESE POSITIONS, PARTICULARLY AT WORK AND HOME

There were various effects on people's lives that participants attributed to their stances on gender, sexuality and/or abortion. These effects ranged from having no recognisable personal impact, to significantly affecting employment, careers and home lives.

Some of those who are opposed to or concerned about socio-legal changes to gender, sexuality and/or abortion found that they were not affected by their positions on abortion, trans issues and/or same-sex marriage. For some participants it was a problem for other people who held positions that they empathised with.

Socio-legal changes around sexuality and gender have effects on some people's experiences of work. Participants experienced encountering positions that they felt opposed theirs through corporate inclusion work practices and policies, which they found uncomfortable and, at times, challenged.

Participants spoke extensively about feeling that their employment would be under threat if they were to speak out about their positions on sexuality and gender. Some said they had lost jobs and promotions directly or indirectly when their views became known about abortion/same-sex marriage, and/or trans inclusions/gender recognition.

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**I have a different experience of this than women. It hasn't affected me much, but I've seen it affect other people.**

(INT034GBR, Great Britain, "gender critical")

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**I had to resign from teaching because under the curriculum, I knew I wouldn't be able to say [my views] and live with myself afterwards.**

(Sipepelo, INT013GBR, Great Britain, "We're all created male or female." "We should preserve our bodies for marriage")

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Inclusion policies also informed their choices as to where they worked and chose not to work. Participants felt protected by employers who worked on the issues, such as pro-life organisations. Conversely, participants who worked in, or saw potential careers in other roles, spoke of avoiding opportunities and jobs such as teachers or youth workers, as they believed these roles would not allow them to express opinions or engage with people in ways that they wished to. This included volunteering roles. They chose to end careers, and quit their jobs because of corporate inclusions and/or to avoid disciplinary procedures and/or job losses.

For some, homes were places of ease where family was supportive of their positions and shared them. In these homes, things that they avoided saying in public or at work were not only spoken, they were valued.

Even where positions were not shared, homes could allow conversations across differences, including difficult conversations, to happen in 'safe' spaces where friendships and family relationships were not threatened. Other participants spoke of those who lived lives they disagreed with or held positions that challenged theirs as not being welcome in their homes.

Families and children had distanced themselves from some participants, because of their positions.

Activists and those who were involved in high profile court cases and events had their addresses shared and threats made to their homes and families. This resulted in some leaving their homes out of fear.

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**At work for gay pride, like in June - the whole month is devoted to that history. It annoys me because, "OK, I get it." I don't like people trying to program me.**

(Tammy, INT048CAN, Canada, "I'm not a pro-gay person, but I'm just a pro-person person")

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**[Home is] where I'd feel that my opinions are valued.**

(INT028IRL, Ireland, "pro-life", "[almost all] gay and transgender people and all this, have more rights than a normal Joe Soap like me")

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**I would not have been comfortable having a transgender person at my home for dinner. I don't think we would have gay people at dinner. I can't see the intimate relationship of having dinner with them. You've gotta have things that you agree on.**

(INT001CAN, Canada, "in a pro-life Catholic Christian bubble")

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**I was so scared that I took an Airbnb and moved up there for three weeks with my kids. I don't even want to say publicly where I live now.**

(Venice, INT020GBR, Great Britain, "gender critical")

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# **SOME PARTICIPANTS WERE VERY CAREFUL ABOUT WHERE THEY WENT AND WHAT THEY SAID REGARDING THEIR POSITIONS ON GENDER, SEXUALITY AND/OR ABORTION**

**Being 'lumped' together and labelled as hateful, along with everyday experiences at work or in public spaces, elicited various reactions from participants. A key response was that participants navigated situations and places to avoid conflict and repercussions that they envisaged happening, such as losing their jobs.**

There was a feeling of fear for many participants about being public about their positions. Some participants were extremely fearful and cautious. They chose not to go to certain shops or certain parts of the city and avoided events such as Pride.

Some participants were extremely cautious about making their positions public (including on social media). Participants' key fears pertained to being named or associated with their positions and their lives being changed negatively if they expressed their opinions on gender, sexuality and/or abortion. The threats that they saw included physical and verbal aggression, online 'pile ons' and other forms of public vilification.

Being cautious and careful also played a role in private spaces. Participants were not only worried about physical threats in public and negative effects in employment, but were also concerned about losses of friendships and family connections.

The fears for family and friendships meant that participants would avoid speaking about their views and engaging in debates, as well as avoiding events and social/family engagements if they felt this was possible. Avoiding conflicts within families and between family members also meant that some kept away from certain discussions to reduce family discord.

People were careful about what they said, whom they said it to and where. This was prominent in relation to work, where they feared that they would lose their livelihoods and the negative ramifications this would have for their lives. Some participants did not share their positions with their employers,

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**With friends and family you have to be a little bit more careful, because you don't want to stir up bad feeling, particularly when you don't know somebody's views.**

(Jacinta, INT001IRL, Ireland, "pro-life activist")

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**I'm anti-abortion. You keep your head down. Like, I'm self-employed, I can't be going around shouting about this in the pub. I depend on the milk of human kindness from people.**

(INT039IRL, Ireland, "pro-life")

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**At work, I can't risk my livelihood. I find myself having to bite my tongue.**

(INT037CAN, Canada, "gender critical feminist")

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co-workers or clients; they avoided conversations that they felt would reflect negatively on them.

Participants worried about employers and colleagues making connections between them and their positions. They carefully navigated their work lives and professional reputations to avoid any negative consequences to their employment.

# **PARTICIPANTS SAID THAT THEY FOUND SUPPORT AND DEVELOPED THEIR ACTIVISMS BECAUSE OF THEIR EXPERIENCES, INCLUDING CONFRONTATIONS**

**Participants sought out support and created organisations and groups of like minded people. There was a cohort in our data whose views and activism developed because of the confrontations and experiences that they had. This included activists who told us of significant wins they had made in their activist roles, beyond their own cases/experiences.**

Those who were fearful often found support with those who shared their positions. They found ways to make these known so their identities were not made public. This included communicating verbally rather than in writing, and using anonymous social media accounts. Participants joined and created private groups where individuals were vetted, the information about the groups only being shared with trusted people.

Some participants found support at work, choosing jobs and careers on the basis of where their positions and work life could co-exist. They chose employment where their positions were not only supported, but also valued.

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**I can't say too much about the vetting process. It's along the lines of asking specific questions about your views on things and speaking with audio to make sure that you're actually a woman and they look at your social media to make sure that you're not just on a whim decided to infiltrate.**

(INT005GBR, Great Britain, "gender critical")

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**I work for a pro-life organization. Your team become your family. I love them because they've stood with me for so long. It's a place of safety. Every single person that actually feels, "I really want to do this".**

(Aisling, INT011GBR, Great Britain, "pro-life")

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Participants, whether they were careful about being linked to their positions or open about them, spoke of the extensive and varied forms of activism that they undertook. Actions and activities varied by participant, issue and context, but across the data included: campaigning in public places, on social media or through letter writing; organising protests/marches for broader visibilities; seeking media coverage; setting up and/or working for key organisations (e.g. pro-life/Christian/Gender Critical); policy networking and lobbying; engaging in consultations on legislation; supporting organisations and individuals financially; and volunteering both publicly and privately. Those who organised events spoke of their events being cancelled, protested and, at times, experiencing violence during the confrontations.

Participants who were activists told us that their activism often directly followed, relied on and built on their experiences. This included being “lumped under an umbrella of hate” and experiences of job losses and threats to families. For those who saw themselves as new to this form of activism, they told us of the successes they were having—in 2021-2022—particularly around trans inclusion policies in Great Britain.

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**I've never been in modern politics at all, it's only when it landed at my door. We're [organisation he set up in response to experience of police/courts] getting a lot of wins now.**

**(Harry, INT004GBR, Great Britain, organiser of a group who challenge “gender identity” in the public sector)**

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# NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES CAN EMBOLDEN AND ENTRENCH POSITIONS THAT OPPOSE SOCIO-LEGAL CHANGES ON GENDER, SEXUALITY AND/OR ABORTION

**Despite their at times negative experiences, many participants were steadfast in their positions. In fact, for some, experiences of confrontation helped create, embolden, and solidify their positions.**

Participants demonstrated that their negative experiences had influenced their positions. These participants at times shifted their views to become more staunch or, because of what happened in their everyday spaces, they started investigating areas that they would have otherwise dismissed. They spoke of encounters reiterating the importance of their positions because of the confrontations they experienced.

Participants who were active in seeking legal and social change could be emboldened in their positions on gender, sexuality and/or abortion when they were confronted. Those who organised events and had experienced counter-protests at their events said these experiences had both solidified their positions and increased the reach of their message.

Although some participants did experience difficulties in their lives because of their positions, this did not dissuade them from holding these positions. This was the case even when, as can be seen throughout this report, they were careful about where they expressed them. Indeed, for those in our data, their views were emboldened and solidified through feeling like they had to be hidden, as well as through confrontation.

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**I was like, “I’m pro-life, I guess”, and [this girl] slapped me in the face. It made me realize kind of why I have to keep the fight going on. It spurred in me a kind of dogged determination and stubbornness because these people are trying to convince me that I’m a terrible person. So [in trying] to silence me, she only made me louder.**

(Gavin, INT002IRL, Ireland, “pro-life”)

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**[Event she organised] very much changed my position on the subject. It made me less in the middle. When it became so personal and scary, I just came to the conclusion that I think that [long pause] that transgenderism is wrong. It didn’t really get big until it was cancelled. If they just let it go ahead with no publicity, it would just be another little local meeting. It was the fact that there was violence there, it made it kind of go international.**

(Venice, INT020GBR, Great Britain, “gender critical”)

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**COMING  
TOGETHER <sup>TO</sup> IMAGINE  
NEW WORLDS**

# **IT IS POSSIBLE TO BRING SOME, BUT NOT ALL, PEOPLE TOGETHER IN WORKSHOPS THAT INCLUDE THOSE WHO DISAGREE WITH YOU ON GENDER, SEXUALITY AND/OR ABORTION**

**The workshops brought people together who disagreed with each other on gender, sexuality and/or abortion. Some potential participants who expressed interest during recruitment named a suspicion or concern around the project's ethos of respectfully investigating divisions. Participation guidelines meant that not everyone would come into the room. However, these guidelines made the research possible and ethical, and allowed others to take part. Designing the discussion groups and arts-based workshops in compliance with these guidelines shaped what happened.**

The Beyond Opposition workshops show that bringing people together across the polarisations of gender, sexuality and/or abortion is possible. Each of our research activities included a carefully selected group of people with a range of different, sometimes conflicting or overlapping positions related to the research topics.

Not everyone who engaged with us throughout our recruitment supported the ethos of the project. Various people holding a range of different positions did not take part, and some told us they could not work in a research activity asking them to work with people holding opposing positions on divisive issues that are important to them. Others were also uncomfortable with the setup of the workshops but decided to take part anyway.

To hold an ethical and effective research space, it was necessary to establish clear guidelines for behaviour throughout the activities. Agreement to adhere to these guidelines was a requirement for participation.

These guidelines, however, also meant that not everyone would participate. People cited their objections—particularly about the guideline that everybody should be referred to using the terms that they used for themselves—as a reason not to participate.

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**I have decided to withdraw from the research project. This is because I think the research is biased. When we spoke you asked me whether I would be prepared to use people's preferred pronouns. At the time I said that I would be happy with that. On reflection, I would not be comfortable using preferred pronouns.**

**(Great Britain, recruitment withdrawal email, "gender critical")**

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In other cases, people withdrew because of fears that they might face repercussions from others in the room. They worried, as was the case in the interviews, about possible impacts on their employment, and/or (verbal and physical) attacks if they were to come into contact with people who disagree with them.

These withdrawals based on the participation guidelines meant that certain voices are not in these research findings. For participants who were in the room, their efforts to follow the guidelines meant that, at times, they were cautious about what they said about themselves and their positions.

## Guidelines

### 1. Focus

- Agree not to debate the issues
- Agree to let facilitators redirect the discussion to focus on research questions

### 2. Confidentiality

- Agree not to repeat anything that is said in the room outside of the room, even informally

### 3. Respect

- Agree to use the terms that people use to describe themselves, such as preferred pronouns and terms like pro-life, gender critical etc.

### 4. Self-care

- Agree to be mindful of yourself if you find the discussion uncomfortable or upsetting.
- Take breaks and leave if you need to



All comic art by Tim Fish, [timfishworks.com](http://timfishworks.com)



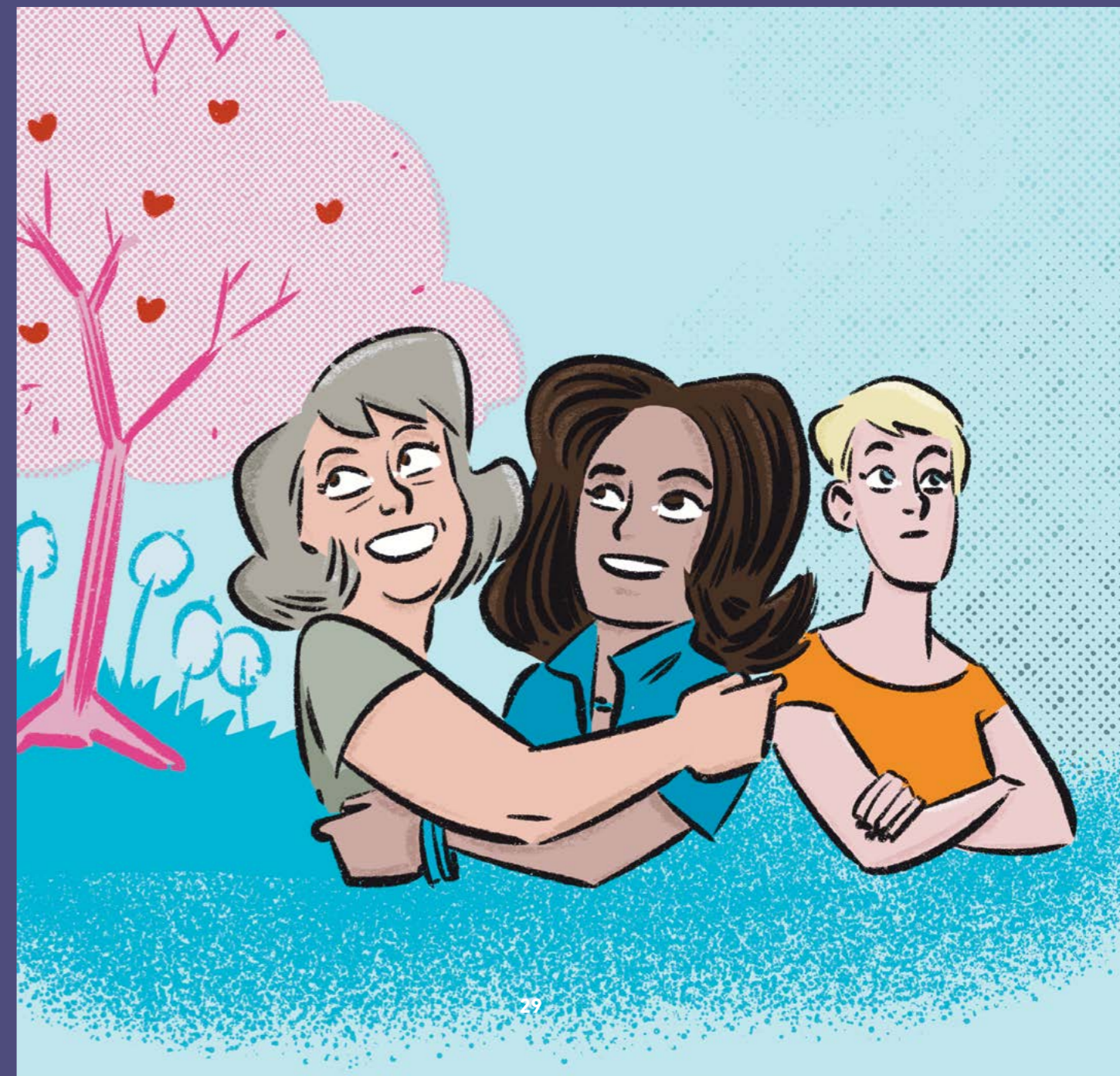
# THERE IS A DESIRE TO ENGAGE BEYOND DIVISION AND POLARISATION AROUND GENDER, SEXUALITY AND/OR ABORTION

Participants were interested in the workshops as they offered them spaces to encounter others in ways that they feel unable to do in everyday spaces. The majority of those who took part were confident or especially curious about their own responses and engagements with their 'opponents'. Participants came into the project with different hopes for how they might be able to carry its ideas into their personal and professional lives.

Core to the Beyond Opposition workshops and discussion groups was the principle that no one should attempt to change another person's mind, and furthermore, that the issues were not to be debated. For the time of the activities, it was to be assumed that those in the room would keep their positions and would not be persuaded to change their minds. Those who took part in the workshops had various reasons for seeing value in the aims of the research activities.

**We have all these divided opinions. So how do we mesh everybody together that we can get along as a community and allow everybody to be who they are?**

(Aden, WPC018CAN, Canada, recruitment call, "non-binary" "trans" and "pro-abortion and pro-choice")



Some participants told us they wanted to be involved because they are frustrated with how polarised debates around gender, sexuality and/or abortion are creating 'sides' that make it difficult to interact across disagreements. They felt there wasn't the opportunity to have meaningful discussions in everyday life, either because they do not come into contact with people on 'other sides' to them, or because when they do, they avoid conflict and/or negative repercussions that such discussions might lead to.

Participants saw the workshops as an opportunity to explore the possibilities of what interactions across division could be like if we accept that we might never agree.

As well as desiring new ways of interacting across division, participants expressed further desires to find new spaces for encounters between people across divided positions. They saw the workshops as offering a way to consider these potential spaces.

There was curiosity in how participants would find sharing space with people who differed and perhaps opposed them, in a safe and managed environment. There was an 'openness' to meeting people who were very different from them, and an enthusiasm about the opportunity to engage in encounters that might be personally challenging, surprising, or satisfying. The nervousness about potential negative encounters for those who took part was balanced with a belief that participation was worthwhile.

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**It's actually what attracted me to the research in that it's not necessarily a debate on "I want to convince you", but rather, "we agree to disagree, but how do we live together?"**

(Francisca, WPC028GBR, Great Britain, recruitment call, "a middle ground" [between "trans people" and "women"])

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**If I understand your research correctly, you're on to something huge, that is much needed. But it's not going to be easy.**

(WPC008IRL, Ireland, recruitment call, "queer" and participated in Irish referendums on marriage equality and abortion)

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# THE IDEAL WORLDS WE WANT TO LIVE IN ARE INCOMPATIBLE WITH DIVERGING POSITIONS ON GENDER, SEXUALITY AND/OR ABORTION

Participants in the workshops do not want the current polarised landscape to continue; they want a new way of encountering others who they disagree with on gender, sexuality and/or abortion. Finding a middle ground will not work, as participants do not want to compromise on their positions in order to share space. This took our participants to an impasse, in which they recognised and named their incompatible desires for the future.

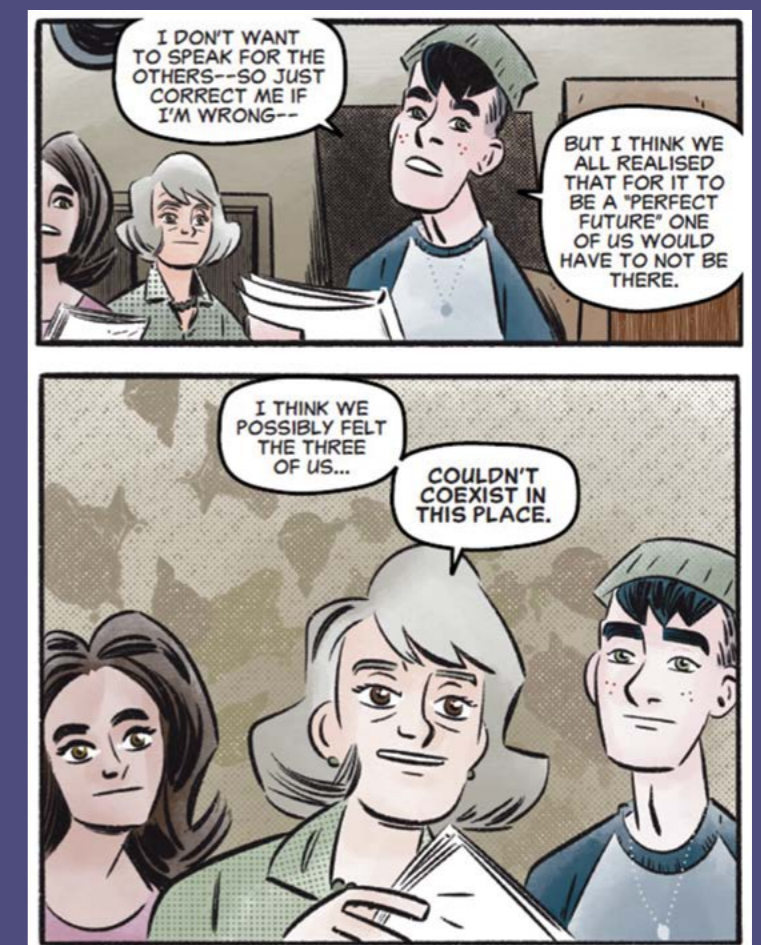
Across the workshops, participants were prompted to consider the place(s) where they live, or might live, with people that want different gender/sexuality/abortion realities. Participants reflected on their everyday experiences of living with differences in multicultural and diverse communities, where they believe they coexist well with people they disagree with.

However, when participants specifically focussed on living within divisions surrounding gender, sexuality and/or abortion, the task of imagining the spaces they desired was challenging. They tried ideas of 'agreeing to disagree'. Yet, there were no easy solutions around what that space would look like, what would be in it, and what the rules would be.

In their art, some participants showed us a 'middle ground' could not work as utopia because it meant making compromises that they could not agree on. They wanted to keep their positions, which were important to them. They also recognised that their positions impacted upon one another. They looked for ways of sharing space that allowed them to be true to their positions without imposing them on others.

**What I don't get about that, is that it is supposed to be somewhere that doesn't exist and it's in the future—but I live in that place!**

(Siobhan, WPC015GBR, Glasgow, theatre workshop, "queer" and "feminist")



Cartoon showing Francisca, Carol and George in the Glasgow workshop tell the room that they have reached an impasse as they cannot coexist in each other's perfect futures

Participants struggled to imagine a space where they could reconcile or put aside their disagreements to live with/within division. In the theatre-based workshop in Glasgow, this took participants to an 'impasse' after the incompatibility of the differences was named by them. They decided to stay with their positions, declaring this imagined space as both 'imperfect' and 'perfectly awful'.

Participants reacted differently to the impasse: some viewed it as unfortunate, and as a failure of the group to not be able to imagine a space where they could coexist, whereas others found it to be cathartic and a more honest response to the prompt. There was a desire from participants to 'quit pretending' that there can be a shared future together if we cannot change each other's minds. In recognising that those whose minds are not changed are not going to go away, the group did not reach any resolution on how to move forward. This lack of resolution is where the project ended and highlights the pressing need for more ways of considering the divisions that polarise us around gender, sexuality and/or abortion.

**Siobhan: I don't want to be arguing that somebody shouldn't exist, or the other way around.**  
**Francisca: Yeah same.**

(Glasgow, theatre workshop, Siobhan, WPC015GBR: "queer" and "feminist", Francisca, WPC028GBR: "a middle ground" [between "trans people" and "women"])



# ART CAN BE USED IN WAYS THAT WORK ACROSS DIVISION IN GENDER, SEXUALITY AND/OR ABORTION

**Discussions across opposition were hard for some participants. The arts-based workshops (visual art, music, drama) allowed for a different engagement with divisions across gender, sexuality and/or abortion. Not all participants enjoyed the art but it was possible to communicate in other ways while making art together.**

Participants would often avoid discussing gender, sexuality and/or abortion directly. Some would discuss other topical issues or choose to explore the issues they knew they agreed on. In the discussion groups, some participants said they found it hard to say where they stood within a group of people with conflicting positions, and one group did not share their positions on gender, sexuality and/or abortion.

Some participants said that they were able to work together when there was an artistic exercise. By providing participants with new mediums in visual art, music and drama to express themselves, some participants were able to find ways to interact that allowed them to open up and be more honest around the research prompts.

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**When I'm talking with people who I share political spaces with, it's really easy for me and it's difficult to remember when I'm in this space around people who are very different and we're not speaking openly.**

(George, WPC002GBR, Glasgow, theatre workshop, "old fashioned leftwinger", "passionately believe in women's rights, trans rights")

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**I was a little bit guarded yesterday in the discussion group. I couldn't quite say how I felt. And today I'm a little bit like a coiled spring, and it was really cathartic to do [the theatre workshop].**

(Carol, WPC022GBR, Glasgow, theatre workshop, "bisexual", "in a same sex marriage", and "slightly uneasy" around some areas of abortion and trans rights)

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Not all participants appreciated the process of working in unfamiliar ways. For some, communicating through discussion and language was preferable, and they were uncomfortable with more abstract forms such as art and sound.

Across the workshops, working together to make art was often shaped by how participants held and shared their positions. By moving away from only verbal discussion towards touch, sound and other ways of communicating, engaging through and about divisions became possible.

Art activities also allowed people to move away from conversations about gender, sexuality and/or abortion, and instead to focus on what they were creating. This allowed some to hone in on areas that they had in common and pursue the joint purpose of getting a task done together.

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**Can I just declare straight away, I haven't any idea what we're doing. I haven't the faintest idea how I'm supposed to make this [visual art] with other people. (Terry, WPC015IRL, Dublin, visual arts workshop,**

**"there are more than two genders" "[more] than two sexualities", "Abortion. I do not like it. However, I live in a democracy"**

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**[on group art depicting an ideal world] We've got some longer shapes up here and shorter spaces here, where the colours are a little bit more jarring, so it's that move from a place of safety to a place where you might encounter difference.**

**Ella, WPC024IRL, Dublin, visual arts workshop, "[people with] gender critical views ...assume that they're going to be ostracised"**

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*Visual art imagining ideal worlds, created by participants during Dublin workshop*

# THROUGH CURATING RESEARCH VIA A VIRTUAL EXHIBITION, THE PROJECT SEEKS TO SPARK CONVERSATIONS AND EXPERIENCES BEYOND REPORTING ON FINDINGS

Our workshop findings offer starting points for further exploration. We created a virtual exhibition that presents some outputs from the workshops as an invitation for viewers to reflect on the same questions as posed in the workshops: to imagine shared utopias. The exhibition builds into considering how we might imagine worlds from within the impasse.

<https://imperfectutopias.eu/>

To extend the experience of the Beyond Opposition artist-led workshops and our research questions to more people, we designed a virtual exhibition. This exhibition aims to continue the different kinds of creative explorations that started in the workshops. It doesn't present what happened in the workshops as findings; instead, it invites visitors to form their own responses to the questions asked in this research.

In the workshops, the process of how participants created art was as important as the outputs that came from it. The exhibition uses almost

the same questions and prompts but adapts them for an online interaction. The aim is to invite visitors to imagine futures where those you disagree with do not disappear. The exhibition, Imperfect Utopias, uses different types of art including video; photographs; sound; text and pictures that tell a story. Visitors are immersed in sounds, images and text that use the research questions and methods explored through the artist-led workshops. It is a different experience to the in-person workshops, though it is inspired by them.



An image from the Glasgow exhibition page inviting viewers to consider how they would react to people they disagree with still being present in their utopian future

# CONCLUSION



**The Beyond Opposition project understands divisions related to gender, sexuality and/or abortion as having multiple impacts on people across society. Divisions themselves shape the ways in which we think about these subjects, and what is possible for us to do. The research shows that alongside the existing and necessary research, activism and practice, there is an appetite for other ways of considering conflicts created in and through gender, sexuality and/or abortion. Considering these things, Imperfect Utopias invites the viewer to think in new ways—not to let go of their own positions, but to bring them together with multiple others.**

Find out more about the research at [www.beyondopposition.org](http://www.beyondopposition.org),

and visit the exhibition at <https://imperfectutopias.eu/>



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PROJECT NAME: Beyond Opposition: Opposing Sexual and Gender Rights, Transforming Everyday Spaces

For more information, visit [beyondopposition.org](https://beyondopposition.org)

