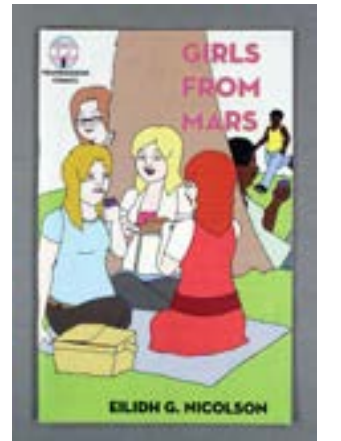
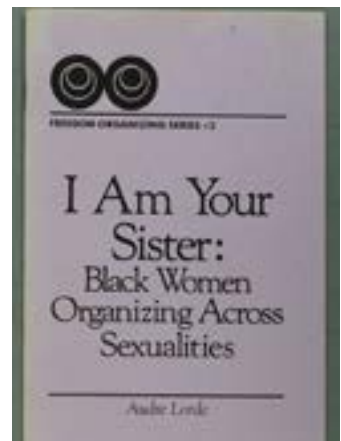
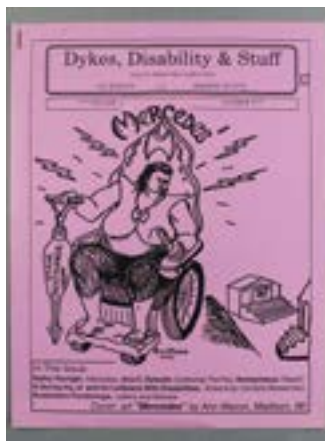
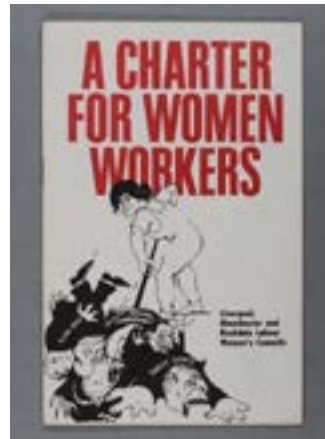
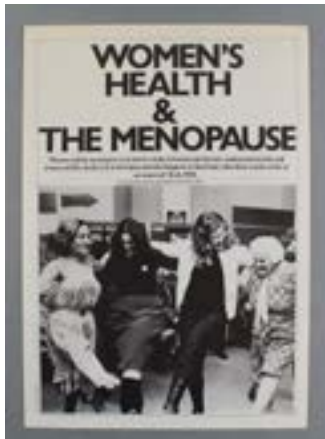


# Decoding Inequality

Analysing narratives of inequality in objects



Supported by funding from



Supporting Scotland's Museums



## Introduction

The Decoding Inequality project turns the analytical attention of our Equality in Progress project directly to Glasgow Women’s Library’s (GWL) collections and interpretation.

To date the Equality in Progress project has used theories of intersectional feminism to interrogate museums as institutions, with the aim of supporting practitioners to develop much better awareness of systems of inequality.

The Decoding Inequality project builds on this work by conducting a process of feminist interpretation or ‘decoding’ of our collection. As a result we have produced analyses of a selection of GWL’s museum and archive objects to support understanding of how issues of (in)equality (across gender, class, sexuality, disability and race) are enacted and sustained in our society.

Narratives of women’s inequality underpin GWL’s collection in its entirety, and we sought to illustrate these narratives in an accessible way. 40 objects were examined and documented through a temporary exhibition, learning programme and outreach handling resource, and an online digital collection and interpretation resource.

People who engage with the project across these mediums are supported to consider women’s historical and contemporary inequality - linking with long-term political campaigns for reform such as reproductive rights, domestic abuse, equal pay, women’s suffrage, and sexual harassment and violence.

This project brings GWL’s embedded values of equality to the development of innovative approaches to exhibition and engagement rooted in social justice expertise.

### Situating Decoding Inequality in the Feminist museum

At GWL we are aware of that we, as a cultural organisation, are situated within structural systems of power (**Diagram 1**). We take a position, and that position is not neutral. It is, that women’s inequality is the result of these systems of power - who they were established by, how they were established, and how they are maintained. Ultimately, we take responsibility for challenging and dismantling these systems.



Diagram 1. Women’s museums situated in structural systems of power

Curator Barbara Clark Smith (2010: 69) argues that one of the most fundamental questions that we must raise about our artifacts is -

*What is their role and where do they fit in a society that is profoundly gendered, that systematically discriminates against women, and that offers differential access to education and to economic, political, and cultural power?*

And she says that question does not arise from an abstract commitment to gender issues but is grounded in much of the best historical work of our generation.

We approached this project with the intention of demystifying the complexities of inequality. There are many sources of information on object interpretation within the mainstream and feminist museum sector, and in academic museum studies. We chose to focus on materials that provided a social justice and equalities-led analysis. To compliment this we referred to prior research and methods in the fields of both prejudice reduction, and gender studies under taken by GWL.

Smith says that museums need to reject the approach favoured by many curators of “letting the objects speak for themselves,” (2010: 68). Instead she says that we need active interpreters, because, without such intervention, our audiences



are apt to see what they have been taught to see and to remain blind to what they have been taught to ignore.

Museum practitioner and academic Nicole Robert importantly highlights that “the naming practices employed in museum labels reflect the uncritical assumption of authority”. This, she says, is “in contrast to the academic conventions, which require that authors provide citations for our source materials - museum exhibit texts rarely indicate from where they are getting their information” (2014: 24-33).

At it’s most simple object interpretation is about how we communicate our collections to our users. However, this communication is always from a perspective - it is never neutral. Stating our position, and our process of curation ensures transparency.

### Four Intentions

We approached the analysis of our 40 objects by first establishing our intentions:

1. Utilise the collection to increase awareness of women’s inequality to challenge attitudes at a personal and societal level.
2. Create opportunities for people to hear perspectives outside of their own experience, culture, religion, ethnic group, sexuality, disability and gender.
3. Facilitate access to, and contextual analysis of women’s inequality by producing a section of the collection that is robustly analysed and permanently embedded in the museum. As a result of this, increase delivery of learning programmes in the long term around social justice subjects.
4. Be representative and increase the visibility of people who are impacted by systems of inequality. Present a truthful narrative.

Diagram 2 shows the critical questions that people are asking about every aspect of museums in terms of their inclusion, access and representation - and here we’re really focused on the collections and interpretation aspect of the museum.

We aimed to answer these questions by demonstrating the agency of activists from marginalised identity groups.

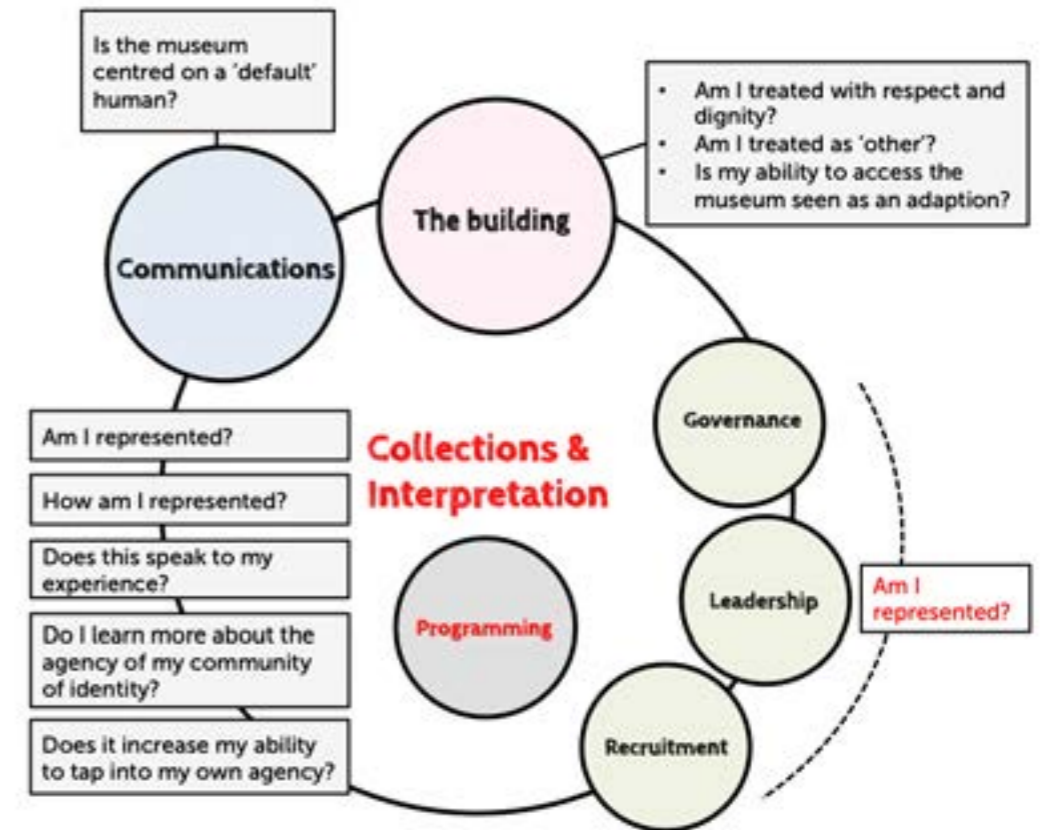


Diagram 2. Where is my Welcome? Thain-Gray 2018

### Collectively producing the exhibition

Robert emphasises that both the positioning of the curator/s and the transparency of the curatorial process impact the production of interpretation - and we would add, the *method* of interpretation. Our methods of interpretation communicate who is centred as the museum’s audience.

*Museums rarely provide viewers with a context of the exhibit formation process. Understanding who curated the materials and the knowledge system in which these curators are grounded provides valuable information to the viewer.*

Robert, 2014: 26

As a viewer, understanding the context of the presentation provides valuable information for understanding the content itself. Without this the exhibition takes on the “invisible, anonymous, disembodied voice of authority” (Harding 1987: 32). It is for this reason that feminist methodologies advocate for “self-reflexive



consciousness on the part of the researcher, or in this case, curator” (Robert 2014: 26).

### Object selection

When it comes to telling the stories of inequality, by its nature, the GWL collection is atypical. The objects were selected by a small team of staff and volunteers with the intention of reflecting the nature of inequality and how it is experienced by women across intersectional identity groups - sexuality, race, disability, class, age and gender identity. This collection partly aims to address the imbalance of representation and many of the artefacts reflect work to challenge dominant narratives and highlight inequalities, discrimination and oppression.

Many museums, archives and libraries with more mainstream institutional histories than GWL care for objects and collections, which tell stories about inequality - but the narratives of inequality are implicit rather than explicit and are contained within the means of production, histories of ownership and representation. The very existence of these collections and the way in which they shape our understanding of the world reflects the historical imbalance of power and structural inequalities. In these institutions, inequality is often articulated by the presence of certain objects and the complete absence of others - even though these narratives are rarely explored.

### Interpretation

Reading the objects in our collection through a feminist lens ensures that GWL’s offer to our audiences and visitors is rooted in a deep, analytical understanding of women’s structural inequality. Bartlett and Henderson propose that “...it is not knowledge that needs to be transmitted but experience.” (Gille cited in Bartlett and Henderson 2017: 6). They pose a series of questions including ‘What memories are emotions are triggered by these objects?’

Our intention was to gather memories, stories and emotions from people to provide interpretation that was a balance of political analysis *and* experience.

We published a contextualising blog post to make clear what we were looking for - memories, emotions or stories - and also make it as accessible as possible for people to participate. People could contact us on Twitter publicly, via DM or by email. This method of ‘crowd-sourcing’ collaborative interpretation using social



media was new for GWL.

We chose to use one form of social media, Twitter, to limit the amount of responses we received - with awareness of the limited space in the exhibition. For future rounds of crowd-sourcing we intend to use more social networks, perhaps including objects on our blog to increase responses and collaborative content.

After our contextualising blog post, we shared our call on Twitter. We used the Twitter thread functionality to add on tweets each day so that we had a long thread of each object. We hoped that this would mean if someone saw a post, they might click through to see the other objects.

### Co-creating the Decoding Inequality Exhibition

By Rachel Thain-Gray | Published 19th November, 2018

We want to include you in unlocking the personal meanings of objects in our collections.

Each day for the next 30 days we will tweet an image of an item from our stores. We will ask one simple question: **What memories, emotions or stories do you see in this item?**

Feel free to write as little or as much as you wish.

You can respond directly via twitter by replying or DMing us, or you can email us at [info@womenslibrary.org.uk](mailto:info@womenslibrary.org.uk)

Please let us know if you are happy to be identified as contributing to the exhibition, or if you would like to remain anonymous.

Each response will be included in the object description and will be exhibited as part of our **Decoding Inequality project** which **launches** on the **31st January 2019**.

The Decoding Inequality project will produce analyses of 25 objects from our collection to support understanding of how issues of inequality (across gender, class, sexuality, disability and race) are enacted and sustained in our society.



What to do if the police raid (English version), LESPOE, Lesbians and Policing Project poster, designed by Kyla Black, c. 1985

Diagram 3. Crowd-sourcing I



Diagram 4. Crowd-sourcing II

Our exhibition was recently reviewed for [The Times Literary Supplement](#) by writer Laura Waddell who lauded our approach saying, “This is democratization in action: deciding which objects are worthy of exhibition. The nature of cultural ownership - concerning canonization, significance and historical import - is itself a major theme.”



## Decoding the Objects

The objects were decoded and analysed, addressing the inequalities that each object articulates and the context in which it was produced. We approached the analysis of our 40 objects by establishing a framework of questions. These were designed to position and mine each item for its narrative of inequality.

The starting point of our awareness uses learning from Equality in Progress. This is shown in Diagram 5. This model demonstrates our proximity to power and identifies the identity groups who have the closest access to societal resources, and the factors of identity that are exacerbated or alleviated by political policies, legislation or procedures

Our own proximity depends on which group we are born into or acquire - identity is fluid, at any time in our lives we could acquire a disability or long term illness, we all age, and we could lose our citizenship or economic stability.

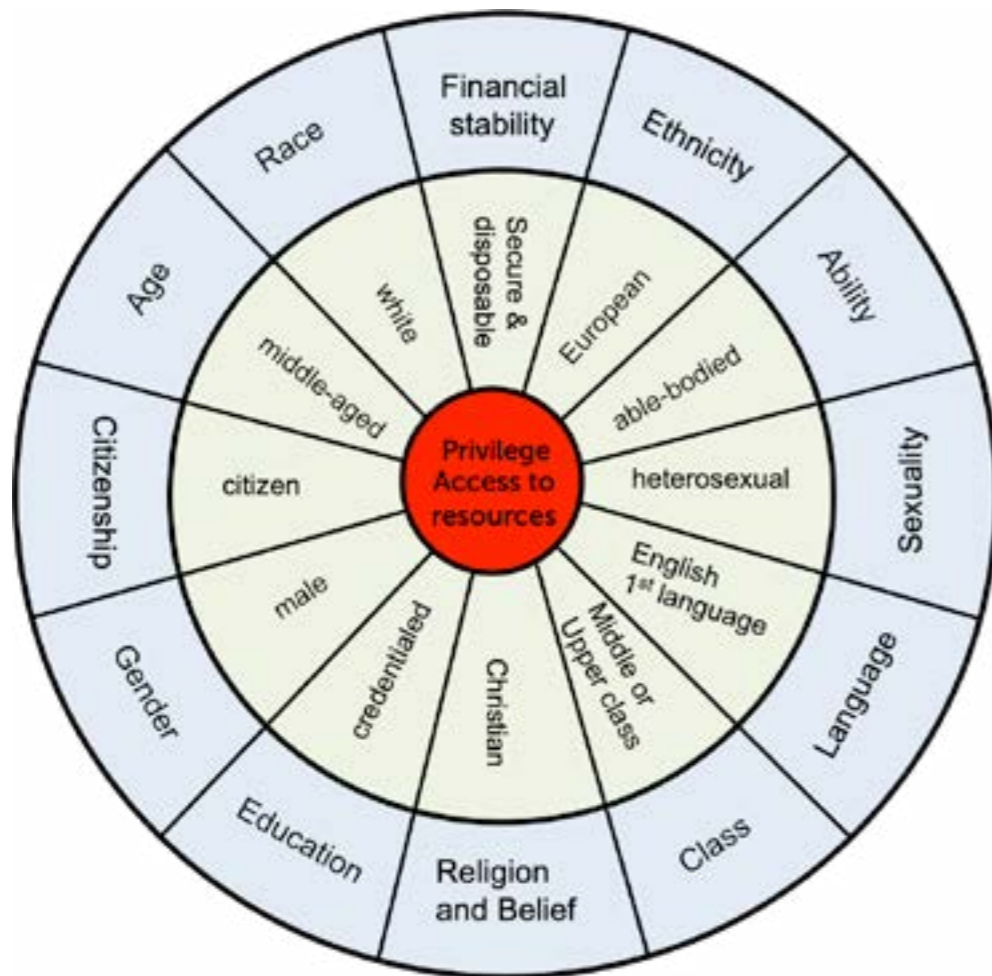


Diagram 5. Equality in Progress -Analysing Privilege, Thain-Gray 2018



We interrogated each object by asking a series of five questions.

### 1. What kind of object is this?

- An activist object (which responds to women's inequality)
- Objects of prejudice (which perform stereotyping, myth-making about or abuse of women)
- Non-activist objects (which we can read for stories of women's inequality)
- Artwork

### 2. Which identity group/s and area/s does it focus on?

The analysis in Diagram 6 comes from an intersectional feminist perspective. Intersectionality was termed by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 - enabling us to consider and address the experiences of multiple sources of oppression on the basis of class, gender, race, sexuality, disability, age and religion.

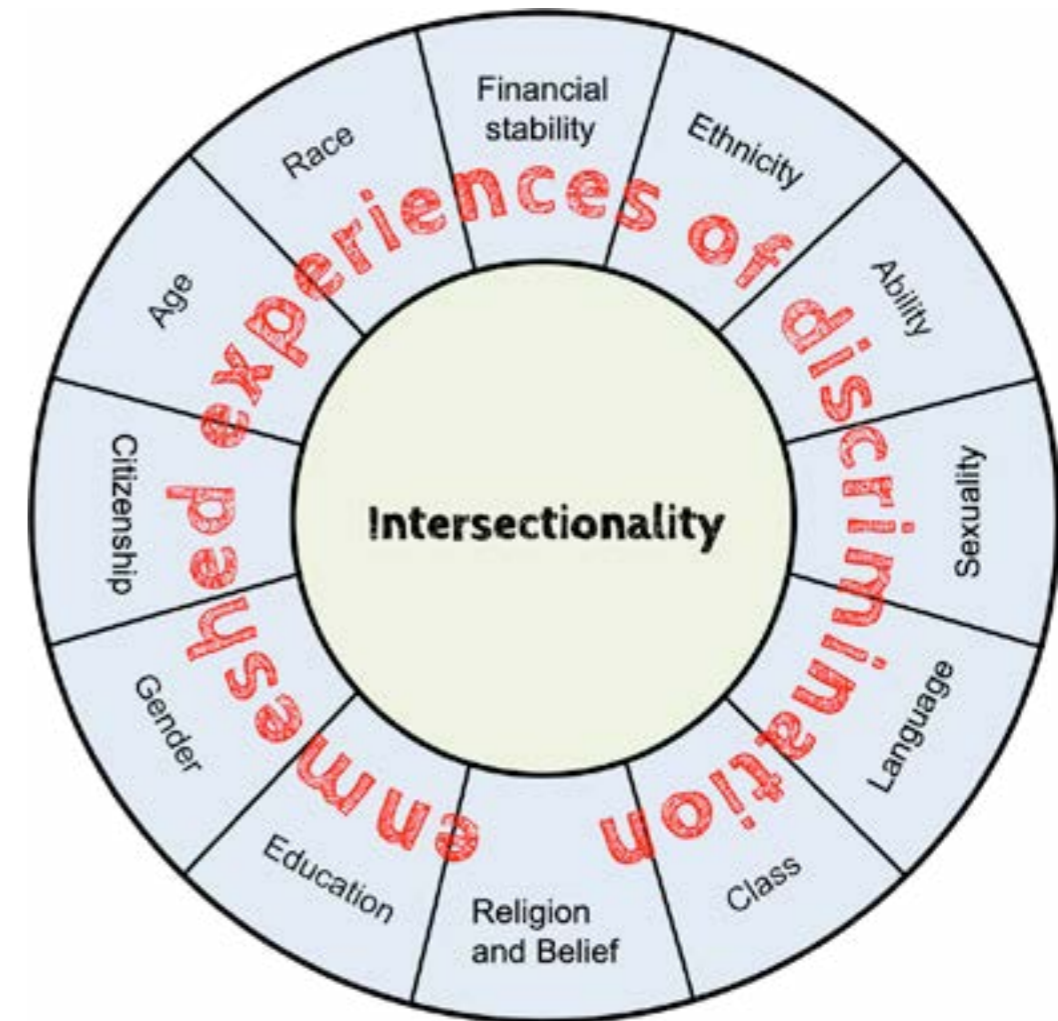


Diagram 5. Equality in Progress -Intersectionality, Thain-Gray 2018



3. With awareness of structural inequality we listed societal systems of power asking which system does the object fit into (Diagram 6)?

The theory of structural (or systemic) inequality asserts that unequal outcomes are built into our institutions based on hierarchies of gender, race (dis)ability, sexuality and religious differences. Our structures control access to resources and rights in ways that make their distribution unequal (Thain-Gray and Patrick, 2018)

These systems also include immigration or citizenship and the environment (but are not present in this developing diagram).

4. Which form of prejudice does it relate, enact or respond to (Diagram 7)?

- Homophobia
- Sexism
- Ableism
- Transphobia
- Classism
- Ageism
- Religious prejudice
- Racism

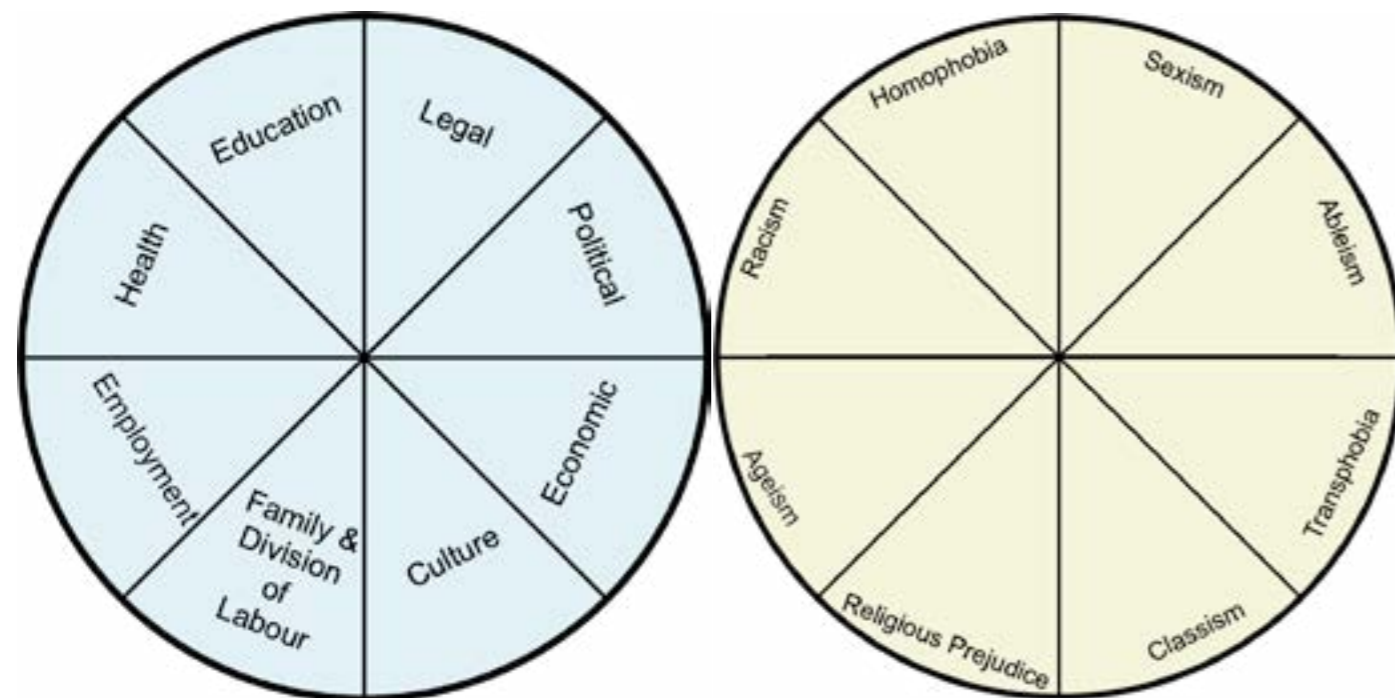


Diagram 6. Structural systems in our society

Diagram 7. Forms of prejudice



5. Which method of prejudice is used (Diagram 8)?

Allport's Scale (devised by psychologist Gordon Allport in 1954) is a visualisation of the manifestation of prejudice in a society.

This demonstrates that prejudice against marginalised people on the basis of their identity across sexuality, race, gender, religion, class, age and disability is manifest in six stages:

1. **Acts of subtle bias/ Antilocution:** when an in-group spreads negative images of an out-group
2. **Acts of prejudice:** when an in-group actively socially isolate people in the out-group
3. **Acts of discrimination:** when the out-group is discriminated against by denying them opportunities and services.
4. **Acts of violence:** when the in-group carries out violent attacks on individuals or groups and destroys out-group property.
5. **Acts of extreme violence:** When the in-group carries out the rape and murder of members of the out-group.
6. **Genocide/Femicide:** When the in-group seeks extermination or removal of the out-group.

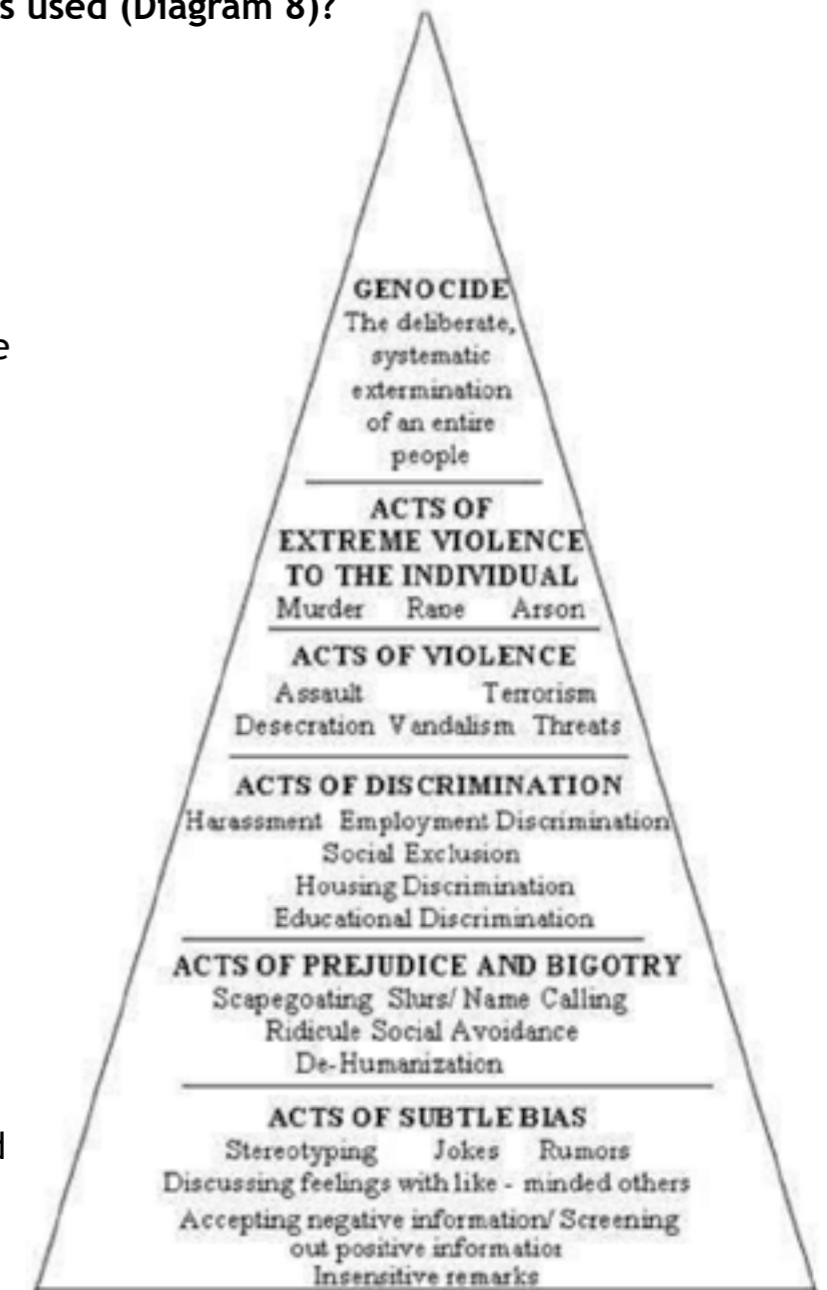
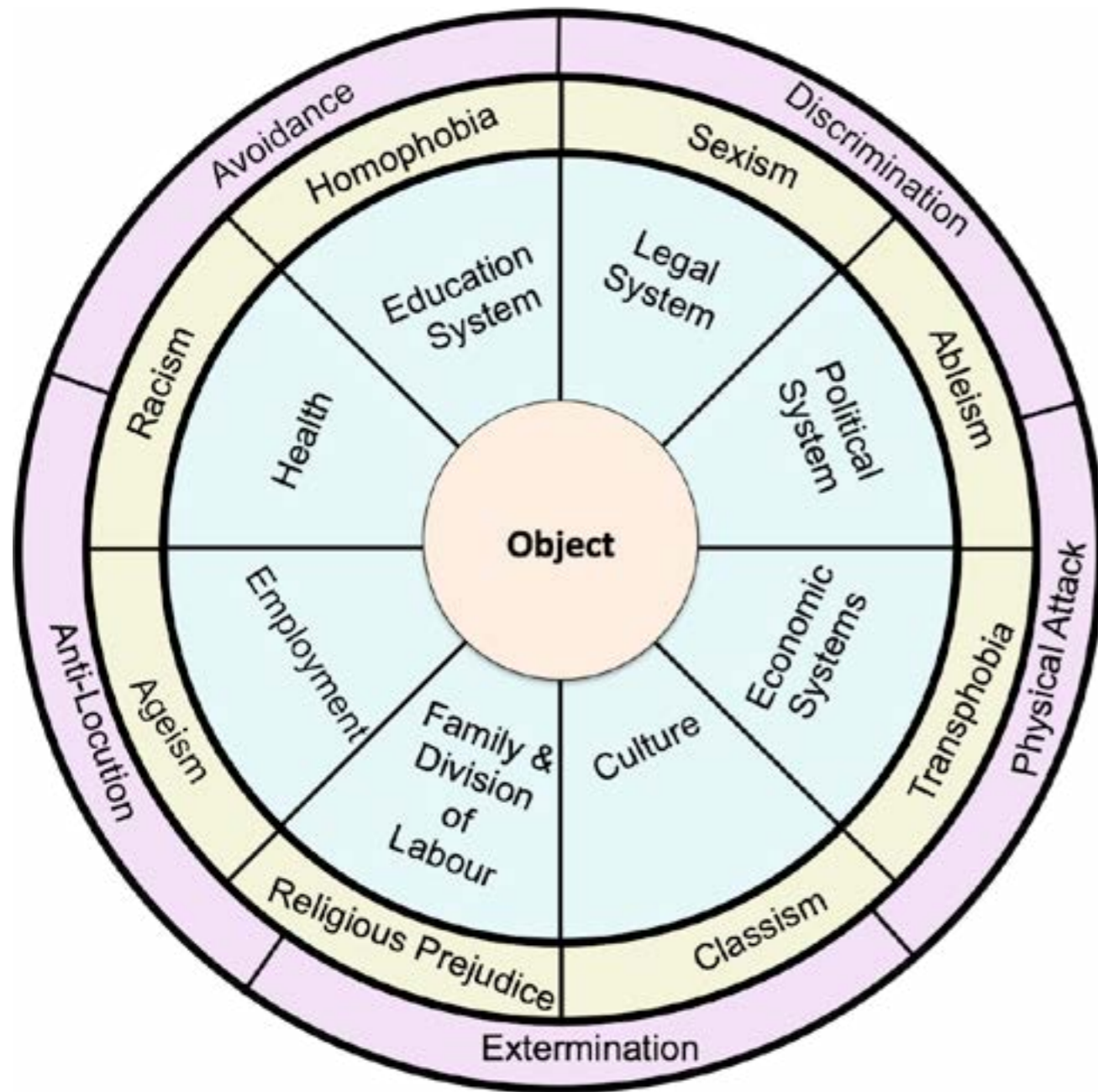


Diagram 8. Allport's Scale of Prejudice, 1954



**Diagram 9. Decoding inequality framework of critical questions**

With this framework we can centre objects in critical questioning. Further contextualising information can be gained by asking:

- In what context was the object produced?
- In what context was the object collected?
- What is the historical and contemporary theoretical context of the object?

**Five emerging themes** (The full exhibition is available [online](#))

Five themes emerged from through process of selection and decoding which are demonstrative of the systems of inequality that affect people across identity groups:

**When we are not seen, heard or recognised**

By speaking out, we expose inequalities and increase mutual understanding to fight discrimination and stigma. These activist objects articulate the multiple inequalities that women face.

**When we are not treated equally by the law and the state**

Inequality is experienced through a lack of:

- inclusion in the political process
- representation
- access to healthcare
- control over reproduction
- equal treatment in the criminal justice system

**When we do not have equal access to health care**

Women consistently report negative experiences of the health care system. Poor services, or a lack of services at all, are the result of the benevolent moral and political policing of women's bodies.

**When society assigns us roles based on aspects of our identity**

Women are presented with images and objects which reflect society's expectations of our behaviours - the roles we are expected to fulfil at home and how we are expected to look, be and behave - which obstruct our capacity to define our own identities and which reinforce and sustain inequality.

**When we lack control over how we are represented**

Women's creative practice is treated entirely differently to men's. The artefacts from GWL relate to artists who have taken control of their own creative narratives and who challenge the dominant narratives about women and art.



## References

Bartlett, A. and Henderson, M. eds. (2017) *Things That Liberate: An Australian Feminist Wunderkammer*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Clark Smith, B. (2010) *A Woman's Audience: A Case Study of Applied Feminist Theories In: Levin, A.K. Levin Gender, sexuality and museums: A Routledge reader*, Routledge.

Robert, N. (2014) Getting Intersectional in Museums, *Museums & Social Issues*, 9:1, 24-33

Thain-Gray, R. and Patrick, A. eds. (2018) *Research from a grassroots museum*. Glasgow: Glasgow Women's Library.

# Decoding Inequality

**Analysing narratives of inequality in objects**

With thanks to all who participated in the Decoding Inequality Project exhibition, learning sessions and crowd-sourcing.

Supported by funding from



Glasgow Women's Library

23 Landressy Street

Glasgow

G40 1BP

0141 550 2267

Web: [womenslibrary.org.uk](http://womenslibrary.org.uk)

Twitter: @womenslibrary #decodinginequality

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/womenslibrary](http://www.facebook.com/womenslibrary)

Editor: Rachel Thain-Gray

Published: 11 April 2019

Contributors:

Hannah Wright

Lucy Harland

Glasgow Women's Library is a Scottish Charity SC029881, regulated by the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR). Registered Company No. 178507