



WOMEN

AND

FAITH

A SNAPSHOT OF VIEWS

**NEAR
NEIGHBOURS**
BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

brap

FOUR QUESTIONS

WE LOOK AT IN THIS REPORT...

ARE RELIGIONS INHERENTLY SEXIST?

What's the difference between religion and interpretation, religion and institutions, and religion and culture?

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE A WOMAN OF FAITH?

We'll explore how faith spaces become masculine spaces and how women maintain their identity within them.

WHY ARE SOME MANY FAITH LEADERS STILL MEN?

Is this an area where some religions are inherently sexist? We discuss the gender bias that holds women back.

HOW DO WOMEN OF FAITH RESPOND?

We look at four strategies women adopt in the face of sexism: fight, move, accept, disengage.

PREFACE

by Jess Foster, Near Neighbours

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28.

Human beings have known for a long time how to divide themselves, how to build barriers between people, how to embed inequality. Yet many of our faiths teach us that human beings are equal, free to participate, loved by the God who created them.

For the last year I have been running leadership programmes for women engaged in their faith communities and through that programme I have met fantastic, capable and active women with bags of leadership skills who are struggling to have their voice

heard by faith institutions or cannot find the space within their traditions to fulfil their potential. In the last seven years, as an interfaith worker, I have been concerned that women who are leaders locally do not find a space on the regional or national stage. It is not an issue for one particular religion or grouping – it seems to affect nearly every tradition. And in every religion, I am sure, there are examples of good practice, of men and women working together for equality, of love and justice lived faithfully and of mutual flourishing that transcends perceived divisions.

While this research focuses on gender, I am aware of the intersectionality of privilege and discrimination. My experience of being a woman and the impact of that on my work, my life and my ministry is not the same as anyone else's. Black women face a double jeopardy, gay women in the faith arena face particular struggles. The list could go on. Perhaps the way to stop 'othering' groups of people is to realise that we are all 'other' to one another. I am 'other' to those I am closest to – my children are another generation, my husband another gender, some of my closest friends are from another faith and ethnicity. Being 'other' does not stop trusting relationships forming, acknowledging the differences does not negate what we have in common. Putting people in boxes and dismissing them depletes us all.

In this report, you will hear the voices of Black Christian women, White Christian women, and Muslim women who are struggling to keep the faith in institutions that have not always welcomed their contribution or spoken to their experience. Many of them talk about keeping the faith despite the institutions that are meant to develop and shape their followers. My hope is that this report begins a discussion which includes both women and men. And hopefully that conversation will begin to form faith communities which set people free to flourish and bloom as I firmly believe God intended.

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CONTEXT

Faith can be a great source of strength. It can provide purpose and meaning, both to the lives of the individual and also to the lives of others.

In 2018, Near Neighbours and brap collaborated on a short, exploratory piece of work to understand more about the role of women in faith communities and, in particular, whether women feel their faith offers them equal opportunities to participate in the religious life of their community. Key to this research was a commitment to relaying women's perspectives on their faith in their own words, as these views often go unheard.

The aim of this research was to produce a short, anonymised report that will hopefully prompt a discussion within and between all faith communities. No faith group is without challenges on this agenda, so it's important we grasp the opportunity for cross-community collaboration and learning.

It is not the intention of this work to be critical of faith. But the conversations we had show the importance of faith to many women, and how their contributions can often be marginalised or denied because of the attitudes of their faith communities. We would like to thank all those who participated in this work and those who supported it. We felt very privileged to be engaged in such open, honest, and – at times – painful conversations.

WHAT WE DID

In January and February 2018, brap held three focus groups with women from different faith backgrounds. Each focus group targeted the following people:

- Anglicans (most of eight participants in this focus group were members of the Church of England)
- Muslims from a variety of denominations and schools (nine participants)
- followers of various Pentecostal and non-denominational movements (seven participants)

No attempt was made to be representative of the range of different religions in Birmingham or, indeed, the different denominations within the city's faith communities. Instead, focus groups were relaxed, semi-structured conversations, held with the aim of getting a snapshot of women's experiences. In particular, the focus groups explored:

- how women within different faiths experience their role within their faith community
- the principles of their belief system in relation to gender equality
- whether the practice of the faith promotes equity between men and women
- the pros and cons of being a woman of faith

Participants represented a range of different ethnic backgrounds. All participants in the first focus groups were White; participants in the second focus group were predominantly South Asian; and participants in the final focus group came from Black African, Black Caribbean, and multiple heritage backgrounds.

ARE RELIGIONS INHERENTLY SEXIST?

We'll look at...

- religion and interpretation
- religion and institutions
- religion and culture

Participants were unanimous in saying that their faiths were not inherently sexist. To explain the sexism and misogyny they had faced, some participants made a distinction between their religious texts and traditional interpretations and translations of them:

I'm not sure there are 'unhelpful' verses about women in the Quran, but there are 'unhelpful' translations. For example, there's a verse that says "one has authority over the other" and 'the one' has come to be understood as man. Obviously, feminist readings of the Quran would suggest a gender-neutral translation.

Focus group two

Gender bias within faith is still an unfamiliar issue for a lot of people, and it's taking some time for custom and practice to change. Usually with issues like this, participants said, the inspiration and desire for change would come from a variety of sources: people will reread scripture, discover new ideas, debate fresh interpretations, and engage in a discussion within and beyond the congregation. But all this requires argument, and gender bias continues in faith, some participants claimed, because people are unwilling to discuss sexism. This is partly because it's an uncomfortable discussion to have and partly because many people simply aren't interested in exploring the topic more. In either case, the normal process of a faith being reshaped is falling a bit flat in relation to gender equality. 'Normally, if we have a big issue to consider we turn to the scriptures,' one participant explained, 'but, by not talking about [equality] we get stuck in tradition'.

But this doesn't mean people aren't fighting for change. Many women are refreshing and reconsidering many religious concepts – including historically entrenched ideas about God's gender. As one participant put it: 'God is a He in our readings and teachings but I never refer to him as a He.' But there is a flip side to this: constantly challenging gendered language and norms is wearing. Constantly having arguments with faith leaders and co-religionists is exhausting:

I'm in a church that tries to divert the traditional message, and put for instance, Mother of God in there...but doing this can sometimes seem like an effort all of the time, I always hope that we could just put our energy into other things.

Focus group one

And:

You always have to be subversive which can be fun, but you just want to be normal sometimes and not have people say 'oh, that's you and your feminism again', it's really tiring.

Focus group one

I'M NOT SURE THERE ARE 'UNHELPFUL' VERSES ABOUT WOMEN IN THE QURAN, BUT THERE ARE 'UNHELPFUL' TRANSLATIONS. THERE'S A VERSE THAT SAYS 'ONE HAS AUTHORITY OVER THE OTHER'. 'THE ONE' HAS COME TO BE UNDERSTOOD AS MAN. OBVIOUSLY, FEMINIST READINGS OF THE QURAN WOULD SUGGEST A GENDER-NEUTRAL TRANSLATION.



Related to this point, many women make a distinction between their religions and the particular church or mosque they worship at. This quote from a Christian typifies this attitude: 'I have something on my mirror, which my friend bought me. It says "Jesus is not the church, and the church is not Jesus. Thank God"'. In making this distinction, participants often wanted to emphasize that faith institutions are experienced as (unnecessarily) male spaces, which is the result of the specific historical context in which they developed (see the next section for more details about this).

Other women – particularly those from Asian backgrounds – made a distinction between faith and cultural practices. The way many religions are practised in Birmingham, it was claimed, are the result of patterns of migration into the city. For example:

A lot of what we think is religion is cultural and because of the way immigration has happened, our view of Islam has been formed by the way it is practised in Pakistan and Bangladesh

Focus group two

Some participants claimed that as second- and third-generation migrants become more integrated, many 'religious' practices – such as those suggesting women have a responsibility to serve their husbands or do the lion's share of the cooking and cleaning – will come increasingly under attack:

I remember once my brother came in and said, 'mum, you do realise that Islamically you don't have to do the cooking and the cleaning?' Mum fought back and said that Islamically, that was the role of a woman! But when we got married, we made sure that our partners knew...whatever I earn is my money; you have no right over it. And if I'm going to cook and clean, you're going to help me.

Focus group two

WHAT'S IT LIKE BEING A WOMAN IN A FAITH SPACE?

We'll look at how faith spaces become masculine spaces and the effect this has on women's sense of identity.

Most participants agreed that traditional faith spaces (such as churches and mosques) are masculine spaces. This masculinity is manifested in a number of small, almost trivial ways. For example, some participants talked about the gendered language that is still common in a lot of worship:

We were singing a song that explicitly said, “I am your Son” and I just couldn't sing it... I explained that I couldn't sing it but the men just didn't get it at all

Focus group one

Similarly, women talked about how it is assumed they will perform certain tasks, such as cleaning or helping those with mobility issues: 'We have a podium on a platform, and you need to go up these stairs and some women need help going up and down, and the men just sit there and it's always the women who help. The men shouldn't be told to help. It's not a woman or man job, it's about sharing'.

The idea that there are roles for particular genders even seeps into acts of worship:

Worship teams in Pentecostal churches are female dominated. And when I've spoken to men and said why don't you want to be on the worship team, they say they see it as 'a woman role'. Even my five-year old boy who can sing says he's not going to sing because only girls sing. These are some of the things that are picked up in our churches.

Focus group three

In addition to these visible manifestations of sexist and gender biased attitudes, participants also discussed how faith spaces are places where women are generally silenced. In one or two extreme cases, this silencing is literal:

I have read the Quran out loud I've been told maybe you shouldn't have done that. So if I'm not even allowed to speak an Arabic verse which is the word of God what does that say about my own voice and my own ideas, and being able to voice those in the community?

Focus group two

WE WERE SINGING A SONG THAT EXPLICITLY SAID, 'I AM YOUR SON' AND I JUST COULDN'T SING IT... I EXPLAINED THAT I COULDN'T SING IT BUT THE MEN JUST DIDN'T GET IT AT ALL



But as this speaker also implies, many times the silencing of women is also more subtle. On some occasions, it simply amounts to ignoring their ideas; on others it amounts to dismissing their concerns and ambitions. For example, one participant talked about how she wanted to engage and support prisoners, but was continually fobbed off by others in her church who didn't take the time to understand her unique and innovative approach: 'I wanted to do prison ministry and people said, "speak to so and so: they're already doing that", but I wanted to do different things to them. So I realised that my ministry is outside the walls of the church'.

The way gender issues are ignored by bishops, pastors, vicars, and imams was also highlighted as an example of how women are silenced and ignored. For example, an Anglican participant talked about the fact that 'there are strong female characters in the Bible' but due to 'the way things are spoken about, we don't hear about them'. Other participants also mentioned scriptural verses, parables, and *hadith* which support female empowerment but which rarely, if ever, make it into sermons.

In fact, this historical/theological erasing of women is one of the subtlest *and* most powerful ways in which faith spaces establish their masculinity. Participants talked about how they were aware that their institution was historically one in which women were marginalised and men empowered:

The traditional space now, it's too masculine... the way space is set up... The people who have been in before and used the robes are men and I really feel that. Having to try to hold onto my identity as a women makes me realise that I've stepped into a masculine space.

Focus group one

This idea of being able to maintain a sense of identity whilst being in a faith space was a common concern, particularly for Anglicans. As one participant put it: 'I only ever noticed that actually I am uncomfortable about my sexuality and identity as

a woman when I entered the church and became a Christian'. But of course, gender identity is multifaceted. Just as many women struggle to forge an identity within their faith space, many others claimed the way their faith community differentiated between sexes expressed their own views of womanhood. For example, this Muslim participant recognised that men and women are treated differently when worshipping, but justified this based on her conception of what it is 'appropriate' for a woman to do:

The only place I see a distinction is in who can lead the prayers. [And segregation in worship?] Yes, but that's useful. It is more comfortable to be in your own gender space. And I can see why it's more important for a man to lead the prayer than a woman. Because the way the prayers are you held, you have to prostrate, bow down, so it's more appropriate for a man to do it than a woman – that's how I feel.

Focus group two

WHY ARE FAITH LEADERS STILL MAINLY MEN?

We'll discuss how:

- attributes like leadership and assertiveness are still seen as masculine qualities
- many men are still reluctant to involve women in decision making
- women aren't encouraged to become leaders

Most participants came from religions where women have a right to access leadership positions within the faith's institutions. However, many participants pointed out that, in practice, there are still many barriers to women doing so. In some cases, where people are appointed to particular positions, men are chosen because they are still seen as exhibiting traditionally 'masculine' qualities such as leadership and assertiveness (even when it doesn't seem they do):

Because the ones at the top are mainly bishops, it will be difficult for women to rise up and above a certain level. The higher echelons of work are given to men even if they have no clue or idea of what they are doing, they are still being put in those positions.

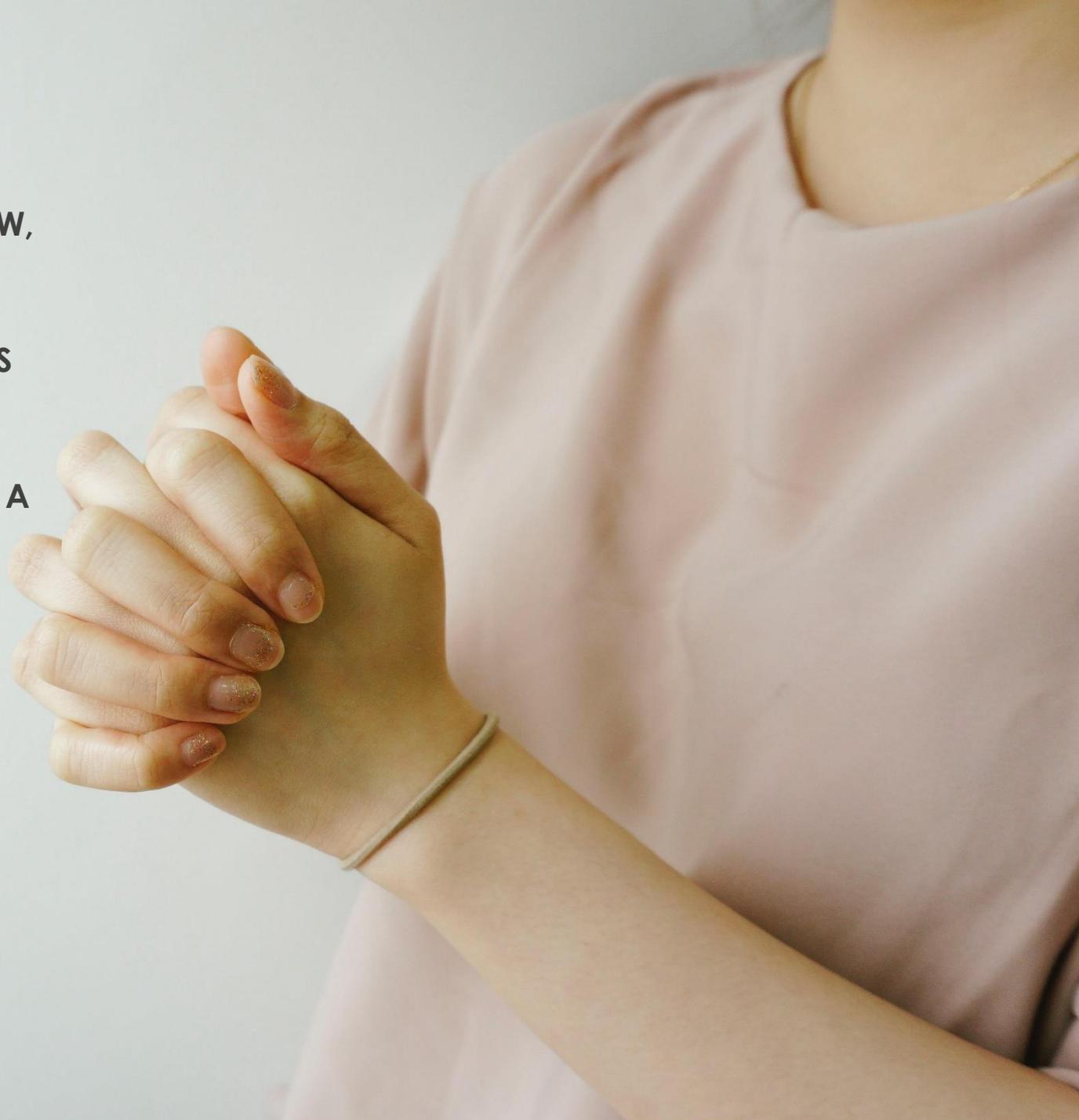
Focus group three

Many participants said the idea of women in leadership positions was still new and that it was taking some people a little time to get used to this new norm. It is clear, though, that this is still a hot topic: one participant recalled how many people had left her church after her vicar has merely expressed support for the idea of women in leadership positions.

In addition to people being appointed to roles, some participants also discussed how they felt some men simply did not want to open the space to women's involvement in the running of their faith institution. This was more common in the second and third focus groups (with Muslim and Pentecostal/non-denominational women respectively). As one participant put it: 'when there have been discussions in the mosque about what to do I have put both hands up a million times and been ignored. Look at some of the largest mosques in Birmingham: they don't have any women on their boards and committees. It's because they have very old-fashioned views'.

Coupled with this, some participants said they were less likely than men to be encouraged to go for positions of leadership within the community. This was particularly the case in those faiths where people are thought to have a calling or a gift for particular positions within their institution:

**THE TRADITIONAL SPACE NOW,
IT'S TOO MASCULINE. THE
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WOMEN MAKES ME REALISE
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MASCULINE SPACE.**



I try to see something in others and bring it out. It took me a long time to see something in myself, because no one saw anything in me so I thought I'd best go looking myself! So I always try and talk to people in church and say, 'What would you like to do here?' and then I try and help them do that, whether it's being an usher or something more.

Focus group three

A common theme throughout the discussions was that the sexism inherent in wider society constantly creeps into the religious space. This means men have a head start when it comes to being considered for leadership positions: 'Men are automatically in leadership but women have to get there somehow... We are normally the extension of the domestic sphere...but men are in the world and the ones making the decisions there'.

Of course, not everyone had had negative experiences. One Muslim participant discussed how attitudes towards women were changing within her congregation:

In our community, young people are putting themselves up to be part of the organisation [of mosque functions, etc]. It's the older generation that felt 'we don't want to part'. But if you go up there and say, 'I want to be part of this' none of the men would say you can't.

Focus group two

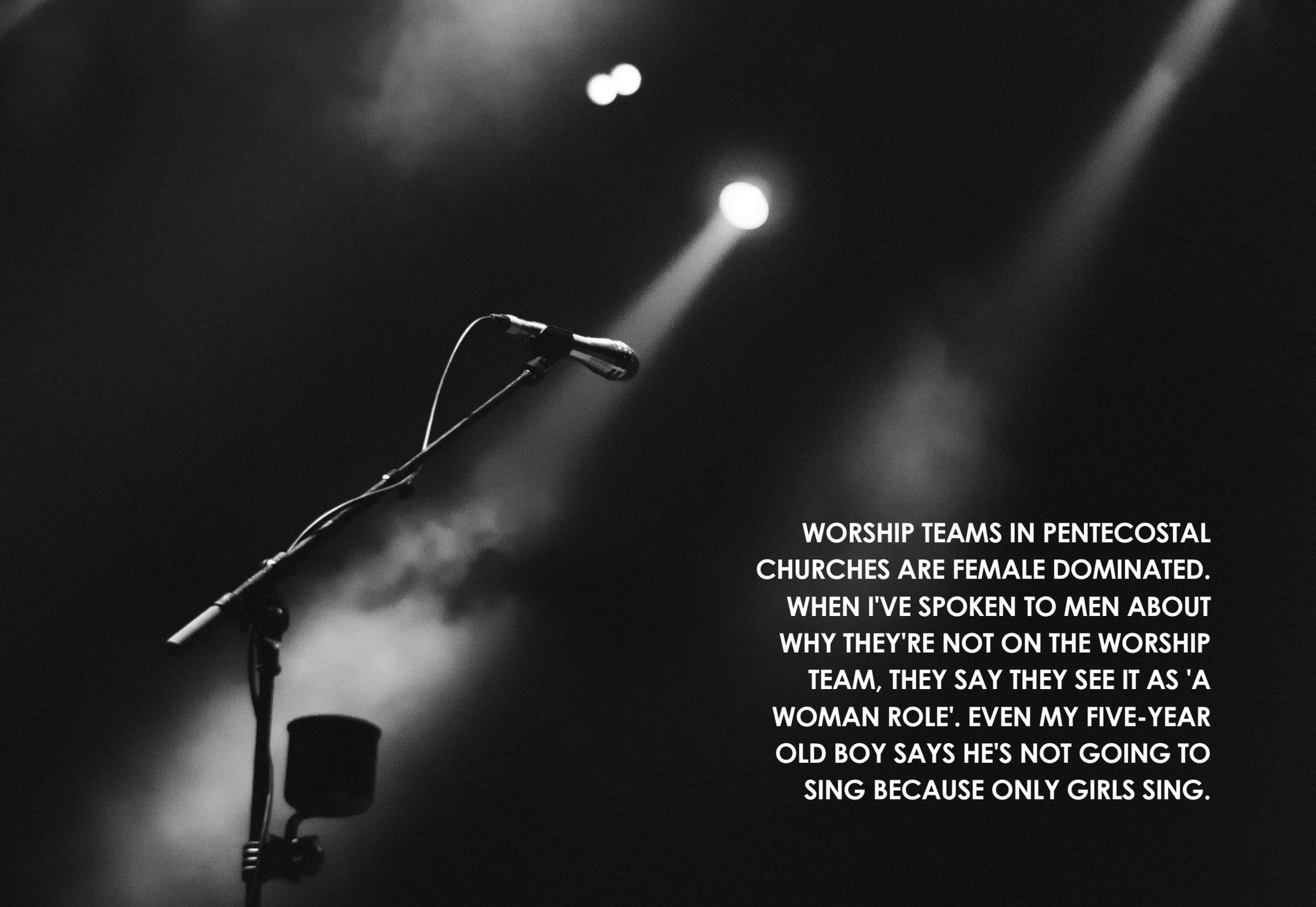
HOW DO WOMEN OF FAITH RESPOND?

We look at four strategies women adopt in the face of sexism: fight, move, accept, disengage

Faced with this constant drip of explicit and low-level sexism, how do women of faith keep their sanity? Four clear approaches emerged from the discussions.

The first approach has already been discussed: fight. Many women are championing gender equality in their faith communities by identifying and promoting feminist interpretations of scripture, challenging gender-biased language, and taking up leadership positions (and encouraging others to do so) despite the barriers put in their way. The downside to this has also been discussed: it's exhausting and not actually how most women want to spend their time.

The second approach, adopted by some women, is to leave their church or mosque and join a more open and progressive institution. Many participants had examples of women who had done this: it is particularly common for women frustrated at not being able to achieve leadership positions they deserve ('a relative of mine was a Bishop and she grew up in the Black

A black and white photograph of a stage. In the foreground, a microphone is mounted on a stand, angled towards the right. The background is dark, with several bright spotlights creating beams of light and lens flares. The overall atmosphere is dramatic and focused on the stage.

**WORSHIP TEAMS IN PENTECOSTAL
CHURCHES ARE FEMALE DOMINATED.
WHEN I'VE SPOKEN TO MEN ABOUT
WHY THEY'RE NOT ON THE WORSHIP
TEAM, THEY SAY THEY SEE IT AS 'A
WOMAN ROLE'. EVEN MY FIVE-YEAR
OLD BOY SAYS HE'S NOT GOING TO
SING BECAUSE ONLY GIRLS SING.**

Pentecostal Church but never conformed,' one participants recalled. 'She didn't think out of the box - there was no box'). Similarly, some participants – after not receiving moral or practical support – have responded by establishing projects outside the auspices of their church or mosque:

In my own church setting I am not given the responsibility that would allow me to do what God wants me to do. So a lot of what I do now is out in the community. I do chaplaincy work, I do a lot of work with Salvation Army, I am out there in the community. So I have not taken myself out of the church, but the ministry I carry is outside of the church. I still have the same faith but I have just changed my focus.

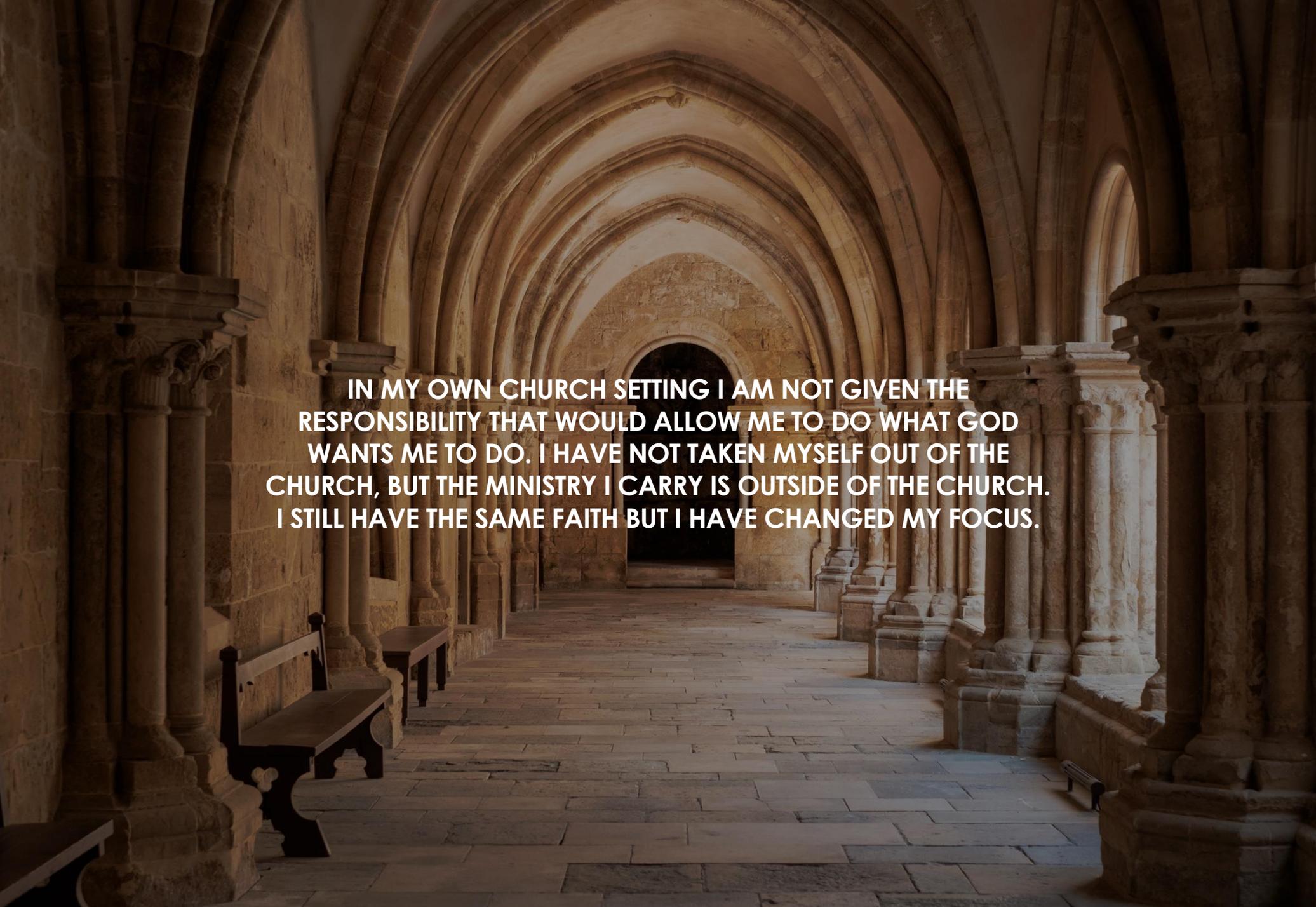
Focus group three

The third approach is to accept the inequality inherent within the practice of the faith. This was particularly common amongst Pentecostal and non-denominational Christians, many of whom felt that God has a purpose or mission for their lives and didn't allow things to happen without good reason.

The final approach exhibited by some participants was a passivity or refusal to engage with the 'politics' of faith groups. People in this category talked about how they saw – and experienced – inequality and discrimination, but had reached the conclusion that there is little they or anyone else can do about it. Other participants in this category simply felt that this was not a fight for them. As one woman put it: 'I don't challenge discrimination: I don't feel I need to challenge it right now. There are other generations coming up behind me'. This final approach nevertheless differs from the third inasmuch as woman in this category are (deeply) unhappy with the inequality they see and have not been able to spiritually reconcile themselves to it.

REFLECTIONS

In a report like this it's probably not appropriate to offer conclusions. The point is not for us to neatly summarise what was said, but for you to use some of the extensive quotations in this report as a springboard for discussion in your place of worship. In that spirit, then, here are some questions and challenges for us all to consider...

A photograph of a long, arched stone corridor in a church. The corridor is lined with wooden benches on the left and stone columns on the right. The arches are made of stone and lead to a dark doorway at the end. The lighting is warm and dramatic, highlighting the texture of the stone.

**IN MY OWN CHURCH SETTING I AM NOT GIVEN THE
RESPONSIBILITY THAT WOULD ALLOW ME TO DO WHAT GOD
WANTS ME TO DO. I HAVE NOT TAKEN MYSELF OUT OF THE
CHURCH, BUT THE MINISTRY I CARRY IS OUTSIDE OF THE CHURCH.
I STILL HAVE THE SAME FAITH BUT I HAVE CHANGED MY FOCUS.**

When people give examples of equality within faith spaces, they tend to cite one-off trailblazers – a Black woman bishop, for example, or a Muslim woman who forced herself onto the committee of a mosque. But the hierarchy in most religions are still mostly male: these women are the exception rather than the rule. While they act as an inspiration to others, is there a danger that they are used as examples of everything being ok within faith communities?

Many women react to being excluded from official positions by helping in unofficial capacities (supporting newcomers to their institution or faith, for example, or mentoring younger people). How can people in positions of authority in churches and mosques be supported to recognise these qualities and include women in leadership positions?

Some participants (particularly Pentecostal and non-denominational Christians) expressed a fatalistic attitude towards sexism in the church, claiming that everything happens for a reason. Can theological beliefs make people accepting of discrimination?

There was some suggestion that many in the Church of England think gender equality has been achieved since women can be consecrated as bishops. Hopefully, the testimony of Anglicans in this report makes it clear that the Church could do more. Given it is the state religion, what should we expect of the Church of England in terms of equality? How can it, as an institution, be motivated to do more on this issue?

It's clear that we need to draw a distinction between culture and religion. Indeed, many women are challenging cultural practices based on a revised, feminist understanding of their faith. But is this distinction more ingrained in some communities than others? Would it help to talk about the way particular ethnic communities practise their faith?

Some women react to the discrimination they see and experience by just not engaging with their mosque or church. They turn up, but don't engage fully with the organisation's social life. Many spoke quite emotionally about how they don't turn to their priest, bishop, or imam for spiritual advice. In light of this, religious institutions have to ask themselves, 'do we really value the experience people have or are we satisfied with just getting bodies through the door?' And if a woman has disengaged from the life of her faith institution, what can her mosque or church do to bring her back?

Christian participants were more vocal about the lack of women leaders in the church than Muslim participants were about the lack of women leaders in mosques.¹ Is this a widespread phenomenon and does it resonate with your experience? If it's true, what are the causes? Comments by some participants suggest there may be generational or cultural factors in play. Comments by Christian participants suggest the fact that women leaders are possible in Christianity makes their lack more keenly felt (that is, their potential presence brings into relief their actual absence).

¹ The first woman to lead a mixed congregation in Islamic prayer occurred in the UK in 2008. The Inclusive Mosque in London has had women lead prayers regularly since 2012. However, the idea of women imams does not have a great deal of currency in Islam at the moment.

Religious beliefs can be comforting. In a world where there is change, distress, and turmoil they can offer the means by which we can make sense of the world and who we are within it. But in carrying the best of our hopes for humanity, they also carry some of the baggage which have held many back. We hope that this report is the beginning of a discussion and debate that all genders take heed of. Because we can't continue to put more value on what men think and do – the role of women is just as important.

brap is transforming the way we think and do equality. We support organisations, communities, and cities with meaningful approaches to learning, change, research, and engagement. We are a partner and friend to anyone who believes in the rights and potential of all human beings.

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making equality work for **everyone**

The Arch, Unit F1, First Floor, 48-52 Floodgate Street, Birmingham, B5 5SL

Email: brap@brap.org.uk | Telephone: 0121 272 8450

www.brap.org.uk | Twitter: @braphumanrights | Facebook: brap.human.rights

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