

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I) National Council session notes for WIs – October 2021

1. Welcome

This session is about equality, diversity and inclusion (ED&I) within the WI.

This work is underpinned by the NFWI ED&I Policy that was launched in March 2021 and our vision statements (inclusive, bold and inspiring, growing and relevant, and flexible).

This session should not only inform you about our inclusion work, but inspire you and make you think about how you are already inclusive, what you want to work on, and what ideas you could bring to your WI.

2. What do these terms mean for the WI?

Equality is the state of being equal, especially in status, rights and opportunity. Equality is not simply treating everyone the same, but making adjustments so that everyone has equal opportunity. Practically, this means ensuring all women have an equal opportunity to join the WI and participate as a member.

Diversity is understanding that each woman is unique and recognising our individual differences. For the WI, this means celebrating the diversity of our members, recognising differences and embracing these differences to inspire, educate, campaign and support local causes.

Inclusion is a basic right and its objective should be to embrace everyone regardless of individual differences. For the WI, this means creating a welcoming and friendly environment where every member is included.

3. Making the WI a place for all women

This includes...

- women with disabilities
- women with no religion
- women experiencing poverty
- women who are carers
- widowed women
- women with children
- working women
- retired women
- students
- religious women
- women of all races
- wealthy women

- and so on

4. How do we make the WI a place for all women?

- Look at our current members. How do we support them to make sure they remain part of the WI?
- Look at all the different women who could be members. How do we attract them?
- Look at how accessible and attractive membership is to new members. Do potential members know how to join and understand what they would get from their membership?
- Identify barriers to membership and remove these where possible. For example, meeting times or locations.

5. How do we make the WI a place for all women? (continued)

- Think about the imagery we use and our public perception and challenge this. Do we look like a place for all women?
- Review internal processes and seeing whether these can be improved. For example the timings and format of committee meetings.
- Always think about what you want members to get from your WI, and what members want/need.
- Overall we need to be flexible, adaptable, open to change and open to conversations.

6. Why do we need this policy?

- Support our current and future members.
- Explain what the WI stands for.
- Be clear about our organisational and legal position.
- Identify and address unacceptable behaviour with change and education.

7. Member experiences

“I felt excluded because of my hearing; I have a cochlea implant that helps me hear electronically.”

“I suggested we hold a Pride picnic but a member said Pride doesn’t apply to our WI as we don’t ‘have any members like that’.”

“I spoke to the WI secretary on the phone a few times before I went to my first meeting and she was friendly and chatty. But when I got to the meeting and the secretary realised I was Black, her engagement with me changed considerably.”

8. The importance of ED&I

Those member experiences do not put our ethos into practice. This is why this area of work is so important and must be embedded into everything we do.

We have to explain to all members what is expected of them and we hope to help the WI become more inclusive and representative by doing this.

When a member joins the WI they agree to our organisational policies. We therefore have to be very clear with members who do not agree with these that it is their decision whether they wish to be a member.

Having a conversation with a member about the use of a term, or why we do a certain thing, is very different to a member who disagrees with our policy and actively shows this disagreement within her WI. This is not about telling members what to think, it is about being clear what the WI's position is.

9. The protected characteristics

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion and belief
- sex (the WI lawfully restricts membership to women only)
- sexual orientation

10. The protected characteristics

Members must not be treated differently, less favourably or excluded because of these characteristics. Any such treatment may be discrimination under the Equality Act 2010.

For more information about the types of discrimination, including examples, please see the NFWI Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Glossary of Terms.

11. Transgender members

Transgender women are welcome to join the WI and to participate in any WI activities in the same way as any other woman, and this has been the WI's policy for a long time.

When talking about transgender people, it is important to understand the difference between sex and gender.

12. Transgender members (continued)

Sex is assigned to a person at birth on the basis of their sex characteristics (genitalia) e.g. male or female.

Gender is often expressed in terms of masculinity and femininity, is largely culturally determined, and is assumed from the sex assigned at birth.

Gender identity is a person's sense of their own gender, whether male, female or something else, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth.

Culturally, it is expected that a person's gender identity is aligned with their sex assigned at birth.

13. Transgender members (continued)

For example, it is expected that a person who is assigned male at birth because of their sex will consider themselves a boy and then a man.

However, this isn't the case for everyone. Sex does not always determine gender identity. People who feel that the sex and gender, assigned to them at birth does not match or sit comfortably with their own sense of gender may describe themselves as transgender, or use a similar term.

14. Transgender members (continued)

"Transgender woman" is a term used to describe someone who is assigned male at birth but whose gender identity is female. The woman may not even use the term trans to identify herself, as she is a woman and the trans aspect of her identity may be in the past for her.

Being a transgender woman is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. This includes the permanent decision to live as a woman and there is no legal requirement to have had gender reassignment surgery or other medical intervention.

15. Transgender members (continued)

The WI does not ask members to prove their sex when they join the WI and it is not necessary or acceptable to request a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) from any member.

16. Non-binary members

Non-binary is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity doesn't sit comfortably within the binary categories of "female" or "male".

Gender is often expressed in terms of masculinity or femininity but it is important to think of a gender as a spectrum.

Non-binary people may feel both male and female, something in between, or not either. They may have a gender identity that changes over time or they may not relate to gender at all.

17. Non-binary members (continued)

Non-binary people often use gender neutral pronouns such as they/theirs and it is therefore important to find out how a non-binary person wishes to be addressed.

So what does this mean for the WI? A person who was assigned female at birth but who identifies as non-binary is able to join the WI. This is because they fall within our women only exemption as they were assigned female at birth.

18. Race includes...

- skin colour e.g. Black, White
- nationality e.g. French, British, American
- ethnic origin e.g. Chinese, British, African, Caribbean
- national origin e.g. someone may originally come from Poland, Australia, Spain

19. Racism

Racism can take many forms such as racist behaviour/language or the creation of rules that result in harmful treatment of people based on their race.

Race discrimination does not need to be deliberate; it is possible for someone to discriminate against someone else without realising it or meaning to do so.

Racism is prevalent in our society, and in the charity sector and we have to take action against racism by having very clear policies including comprehensive complaints processes, providing education where necessary and encouraging our members to speak out against racism. We have to ensure that all members understand what racism is and how to report it.

We are an organisation centred on equality, and whilst racism prevails there is no equality in our society.

20. Inclusive language

We should speak to others how we would like to be spoken to ourselves. This means using language that makes each other feel safe, respected and valued. Language should not exclude or offend others.

If you don't know how to address someone, the most important thing is that the person concerned should be asked about how they would like to be addressed and what language/terminology they would prefer is used when describing them. It is

better to say something that you believe is friendly and open than to not say anything and potentially ignore a person or their needs.

If you accidentally describe a person in a way they don't like or are uncomfortable with, if you are welcoming and friendly we hope they will be able to tell you this. If you listen to this, take their comments on board and adjust your language then this is great. This is how we learn.

21. Challenge unconscious bias

Unconscious bias is where social stereotypes about certain groups of people unconsciously affect decisions, behaviours and thoughts.

There are many different types of bias and they can be about a person's age, authority/position, confidence, ethnicity, gender, looks, name, physical ability, race, religion, sexual orientation etc.

These biases can negatively impact us all, as well as the WI membership experience and individual members' wellbeing.

22. Challenge unconscious bias (continued)

Imagine you are at a local fair at which your WI has a stand. You are trying to recruit new members and are mingling in the crowds and handing out leaflets about becoming a member. Think about who you would approach and give a leaflet to. Do they look like you? Are they a similar age? Do they have the same skin colour?

23. Challenge unconscious bias (continued)

These biases give us a sort of tunnel vision; they limit who we speak to, who we approach, who we learn from, who we resonate with. Ultimately it puts people into incorrect 'categories' and doesn't allow the chance for friendships to form.

It is therefore important that you try to recognise these biases and actively challenge them. This will make sure our decision processes are fair and the wellbeing of all of our members is always put first.

We know this is not a simple task, but a complex one that asks people to change the way they think. But we have to talk about these biases, and provide ways and encouragement to step back and challenge them.

24. Campaigns

Members champion ED&I with our national campaigns. For example, you will know we have a longstanding campaign on mental health, and we know that Black women do not receive equal treatment for mental health needs compared to White women.

Similarly we know from our cervical screening campaign that screening services are often not accessible to people with disabilities due to issues with GP surgery buildings being inaccessible, or due to lack of the right equipment.

This comes back to us being a place for all women and thinking about women's different experiences in all areas of our work including campaigns.

25. Member experiences

“I am an American transgender woman and I was inspired by your inclusion of our version of womanhood as womanhood is so very complex. Is there an American version of WI? If not can I become a member?”

“I had never shared with my WI that I was married to a woman. When my WI held a Pride picnic I was so proud and my wife came along too. I felt supported and included.”

26. What can you do?

- Try and make sure your WI membership reflects the communities in which you operate.
- Embed ED&I in everything you do and share how you do this with each other.
- Get in touch with your federation or the NFWI if you need anything.

27. The power to make change

You as individual members, collectively as WIs and as part of the whole WI have the power to make a huge difference in this area.

Not only are you WI members but you are employees, volunteers, retirees, partners, friends, godparents, daughters, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents.

ED&I affects all of us in one way or another, and we have the power to create meaningful change. So let's call out unacceptable behaviour, speak up for those who can't, and embody what the WI stands for: equality, friendship and being a place for all women.

28. Conclusion and contact information

If you have any other thoughts on how we work on ED&I across the organisation, or any questions, please let the NFWI Membership and Engagement Team know by emailing membership@nfwl.org.uk or calling 0207 371 9300.

For more information check out the section on ED&I on My WI:
<https://mywi.thewi.org.uk/essential-information/equality-diversity-inclusion>