

# NATIONAL WOMEN'S LIBERATION



## Consciousness-Raising Toolkit

### Welcome!

**We're so excited that you're volunteering to host a consciousness-raising (CR) session.**

In this toolkit, you will receive guidance on how to host your own CR (in-person and online), sample CR questions, an example invitation e-mail, and a list of recommended readings. We hope this toolkit and the readings will spark your ideas and allow us to expand our use of women's experiences to develop activist theory. Please email us at [nwl@womensliberation.org](mailto:nwl@womensliberation.org) with any questions you have about this toolkit or about hosting your own CR. Tell us when you're planning to host! We'll follow up afterwards to find out how things went.

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# What is Consciousness-Raising?

Consciousness-Raising (CR) has deep political organizing roots. Similar methods were used in the Chinese Revolution and in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Building on these traditions, women's liberation movement leaders in the 1960s, some of whom themselves organized in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, began holding feminist CR sessions for women.

CR is a scientific way to study our own lives as women and to use our feelings and experiences as data. We compare and contrast our experiences and draw conclusions from them. We do this to get closer to the truth about how we behave and why, to identify the root causes of the conditions that are keeping us down as women, and to figure out what we need to win more freedom for ourselves.

For more information on the origins of CR in the women's liberation movement, read "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon," by Kathie Sarachild, available in the reading list below and published by Redstockings © 1975; abridged by Random House, 1978.

Our experience in NWL and its predecessor groups has taught us that feminist consciousness-raising is still the most powerful tool we have to combat lies about women, to understand our conditions, and to develop better strategies to ourselves.

## What CR Is Not...

**CR is not about giving advice:** We don't talk about our lives in order to solicit advice on how to deal with or solve our individual problems. In CR, we're using a scientific approach to get at political causes of our conditions and to seek collective solutions. Many of us currently use individual solutions to negotiate our lives because we lack the power as a group to fundamentally change our circumstances. We're not putting individual solutions down. That's just not the aim of CR or of organizing ourselves to build power. Therefore, giving advice, if done at all, should not be done at a CR session.

**CR is not group therapy:** We don't share our experiences in order to improve ourselves or to become well-adjusted—it's the world, not us, that needs adjusting.

**CR is not about confessions:** Testifying in a CR can be revelatory, but we will not win freedom for ourselves by sharing a secret or just getting something off our chests. We need power and collective action to change the conditions of our lives.

**CR is not spreading gossip:** Early on in the women's liberation movement, some skeptics referred to CR groups as "coffee klatches" where women gossiped. CR sessions are not gossip groups and shouldn't be viewed that way. Though we are talking about our experiences, we are doing it for political, not social, purposes. Accordingly, CR participants should not casually share other participants' stories. Testimony from CR sessions should be used to develop theory or to plan action, but it should not be used to fuel a rumor mill.

# CR Planning Logistics

## Invitation

Choose self-identified women in your network whom you'd like to invite to your CR session. These can be friends, women you work with, and/or your neighbors. Choose women who you believe will be open to attending a small and informal, but serious, meeting of women to talk about their experiences. These may be women that you've already had some political conversations with, or it can be women who've shown a willingness to share some of what's going on in their lives with you. We're asking you to motivate at least 5 women to attend your CR session. In the Appendix, you'll find a sample e-mail that you may use to invite women to your session. You will also find information on hosting a CR session online there, if that would be easier for you and your invitees.

We encourage you to use a time slot during that day that is most convenient for you and your participants. We recommend that you schedule a minimum of 90 minutes for your session. This will give the group ample time to designate roles, go over rules, testify, and analyze conclusions—all things that are discussed in greater detail.

## Materials

For your CR, you'll need pens and paper for notetaking. You'll also need an audio recording device if you're going to record the session. We often record audio of testimony and conclusions in NWL CR sessions. We do this so we can re-examine the data with more accuracy when we test our theories or use it to prepare for a campaign. This is a suggested practice but is not required. If recording audio of the session, be sure to ask participants for permission to record at the start of the meeting before you begin recording. Even if participants consent to being recorded, women should be offered the option of testifying without being recorded if they're uncomfortable. Participants are encouraged not to use their full names or the names of others while testifying or during the conclusion section when recording is taking place.

Larger sheets of paper can be used during the conclusion section to allow each woman to place a conclusion on the wall or board for the group to investigate together. Again, this is one practice but is not a required. Review the Reporting Back to NWL section of this toolkit, and be prepared to record the number of participants and questions posed during your CR session.

# Day-of CR Logistics

## Designate roles

1. **Leader:** The group leader (which may be the host) explains the purpose of the meeting, explains that testimony will remain anonymous, though content of testimony, without names, may be shared with NWL as organizing data. The group leader reads the “What is Consciousness-Raising?” section (including what CR is not) of this toolkit and the “Protective Rules for CR” (see **Appendix**) to explain CR and set guidelines for the session. The leader requests volunteers or assigns the remaining roles. The leader directs the group to choose the CR question(s) for the session. The leader collects conclusions and notes at the end of the session and reports data back to NWL (see Reporting Back to NWL section).
2. **Facilitator:** The facilitator keeps the participants on topic and speaking from their own experience. For example, if a participant goes on and on about general health statistics for women in Europe or starts talking about a woman on the news who was talking about health care, the facilitator would remind her not to generalize and to speak from her own experiences. If a participant started to get off topic, the facilitator could return her to the topic by asking how her testimony relates to the CR question.
3. **Timer:** The timer keeps time for each participant and keeps the session on track. The time limit for each woman can be set by designating an amount of time for all the testimony and then dividing it by the number of women in the group. For example, a group of 6 women meeting for 90 minutes could designate 45 minutes for testimony and 30 minutes for conclusions (leaving time for introductions, choosing questions and roles, etc.). Each woman would speak for about 7 minutes during the testimony section. The timer would give the participant a warning when one minute is left on the clock. At the conclusion of the 7 minutes, the timer would let the participant know that she’s at time. If she is in the middle of a sentence, she’d be given a brief grace period (e.g., 30 seconds or so) to conclude. After each woman has testified, the timer would note that it’s time to move into conclusions and put 30 minutes on the clock for the conclusions section. Some women will testify for less than the allotted time. That’s okay. Some women will need a little more time. That’s okay, too, as long as each woman keeps close to the allotted time so that everyone can speak.
4. **Notetaker or transcriber:** At least one woman should be assigned to take notes on each woman’s testimony and to record the group’s conclusions, though you could assign more than one. If you’re recording audio of the session, then someone should be assigned to transcribe the recording after the meeting. The notetaker may read back the conclusions at the end of the session to ensure that all the conclusions have been recorded.

## Asking CR Questions

### Consciousness-Raising Questions

A best practice is to post the CR question(s) or provide a copy to each woman for the duration of the CR session. You can choose one question for the entire session. Or, you can designate time to answer a few questions. For example, you could spend the first 20 minutes of a session testifying to question 1 and 20 minutes generating conclusions for that question. Then you could spend 20 minutes testifying on question 2 and 20 minutes generating conclusions for the 2nd question. You want to make sure there's enough time to give each woman an opportunity to testify to each of the selected questions.

### Questions to Ask

The questions asked in the CR session may be to inform a future campaign or action. Your CR session will likely be one of several happening in a certain period of time. To gather the most data on a given topic, all CRs will ask similar questions. As such, a representative from NWL will provide you with sample questions on a topic to ask the group. If you have not received the sample questions, please reach out to NWL prior to your scheduled CR to get a copy of the sample questions.

## Testifying and Drawing Conclusions

During a CR session, everyone talks, or "testifies," in response to a prompt. After all women testify, the group draws conclusions from the testimonies. Participants sum up and investigate what they've all testified about.

In the conclusions section, participants identify similarities and differences in the testimonies. Participants talk about who benefits or gains from the participants' experiences? And, who suffers or loses from the participants' experiences?

It's not uncommon for participants to have different experiences or to feel differently about similar experiences. Participants shouldn't gloss over these differences. Instead, they should try to figure them out. Investigating differences makes for a more thorough examination of testimony and current conditions. To do this, women may ask not only what a woman feels but why she feels that way. What does she think influenced her?

Participants may note differences in identity or background that may have come out in the testimony. For example, a participant may note that a woman who is not a parent had one experience around health care and a woman who is a parent had a different experience. Or, the group may note, for instance, that all women who had a similar experience testified that they have health insurance through their full-time jobs, while others who had a different experience may have stated that they rely on a parent or romantic partner for health insurance. A woman may observe that her experience changed as she aged.

Participants may have theories to explain the differences or similarities in testimonies. Participants are encouraged to ask what they know from their own experience that supports the theory or that doesn't support the theory.

Conclusions may not always be definitive answers or statements. A conclusion may be that

more CR is needed on a subtopic that has come up during the testimony.

### **Reporting Back to NWL**

We'll send leaders a follow-up e-mail after your completed CR session. We'll be asking you to complete a form to report on the following information (as such, we suggest taking notes on this information in real time during the CR session):

1. How many women attended the CR session?
2. Was this a majority women of color group? (y/n)
3. Which sample CR questions did you ask (see list of CR questions above)?
4. Include a few anonymous statements recorded during the testimony section and indicate question asked.
5. What were some of your conclusions?
6. Identify one to two questions you (leader) have about how the CR went that you'd want discussed on a follow-up call with NWL.
7. Would you be willing to host again? If yes, why? If no, why?
8. Is someone in your CR group interested in hosting? If so, please provide a name and e-mail address so that we can follow up with her directly.

## Recommended Readings

In NWL, we believe that women are the experts in our lives. This is why we use CR to develop theory. CR has and will continue to develop much of the theory that we need to keep the movement alive and progressing. Our emphasis on CR does not mean that we don't believe in study. We, women in the movement, should document our theories and our history. And we should study this documentation to learn from it, to continue to test the theories against our experiences, and to keep building a movement. The readings below focus on or explain the origins or methods of CR. To access these readings, contact NWL.

1. *Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon*, by Kathie Sarachild. 1975. Article from *Feminist Revolution*, see ordering information at [www.redstockings.org](http://www.redstockings.org). Published by Redstockings © 1975; abridged by Random House, 1978.
2. *Bitch Sister Bitch* Pamphlet.

## Appendix

1. Sample Invitation e-mail
2. *Protective Rules for Consciousness-Raising*, First Literature List and Sampling of Materials, Redstockings, Fall 1969
3. Hosting a CR Session Online
4. National Women's Liberation Sign-In Sheet (optional: for women who want to be added to NWL's list serv, scan and return to [nwl@womensliberation.org](mailto:nwl@womensliberation.org)).

# Sample Invitation E-mail

Subject: Invitation to My Consciousness-Raising Session!

Hi [insert person's name],

I've decided to host a consciousness-raising meeting! I want to host because [insert your reasons (e.g., want to do something, want to get involved, you want to talk about your experiences and want other women to join you)]. The CR will be at [insert location] on [insert date] at [insert time]. I want you to participate in the CR because [explain your reason (e.g., we always talk about these issues, you have a lot of experience and good ideas, you're my best friend etc.)]

Can you make it? If you want more information about what a CR session is, here's how [National Women's Liberation](#) [add link to National Women's Liberation website] sums it up:

## **What is Feminist Consciousness-Raising?**

Consciousness-Raising (CR) is a tool that the Women's Liberation Movement adopted and adapted from the 1960's Civil Rights Movement's practice of "telling it like it is." In a CR, women answer proposed questions using examples from their personal lives.

The group draws conclusions based on that testimony to better understand the political root of problems that women face.

## **Protective Rules for Consciousness-Raising\***

\* From the Redstockings First Literature List and a Sampling of Its Materials, Fall 1969

## Hosting a CR Session Online

Not all of our sisters are available to meet in person for a CR for a number of reasons (such as not being nearby geographically, having a preference to share testimony in the comfort of their own homes, or perhaps they are caretakers who cannot leave the person(s) they are caring for unattended). To expand our ability to gather rich and diverse testimony, another option to consider is hosting a CR online. One of our members has had some success hosting, gathering testimony, and drawing conclusions in this way. If you're aware of women who may be interested in participating using an online platform, review the following steps to determine if hosting an online CR may meet your needs and those of your fellow sisters:

## Planning Logistics

### Invitation

Using social media may be beneficial for this purpose. Creating an event on Facebook detailing the logistics of the CR including date/time may be one way to notify interested participants. If your invitees are located in different time zones, it's wise to mention that in your event invite and remind them to consider their time zone prior to RSVPing and participating.

You may be able to modify the sample invitation email to inform the event invite language. Including the topic and background information on the CR session can also be done through the event post. Much of what you could share can be found in this toolkit regarding history of CR and recommended readings.

Sending reminders via social media has also proved to be helpful for this type of CR. Further indicating how the testimonies will be shared during the session will be key to add in the invite. It's been suggested that **Google Hangout** or **Facebook Messenger** may be useful tools for online CR sessions. In either case, also noting in the invitation that participants are encouraged to set aside time to be in a private location where they feel comfortable sharing with the group and that they don't have to be interrupted/move is key so that the session can go on smoothly.

As with any CR, try to gather at least five participants for the session. Planning for about 90 minutes is also a good idea.

### Materials and Modes of Communication

For video or audio chat, some may choose to utilize Google Hangout. Video or text chats can also be conducted with Facebook Messenger. It would be good to encourage participants to test the desired mode out beforehand to ensure that they're able to use it with no issue. Some suggestions to mitigate potential issues include:

- Due to the potential for technical issues, it's good to leave time scheduled to deal with any technical issues as they arise. This may mean increasing the duration of the CR session in your invitation.
- Suggest that women wear headphones with a microphone for video and audio chats.

Sometimes, voices echo back to whomever is speaking and it can be very distracting.

It's also been suggested that using a Google doc to take notes may be helpful. The main notetaker can use it during the session, and then it can be used to take notes by another participant when/if the notetaker wishes to share testimony.

## Day-of CR Logistics

**These are essentially no different than the in-person logistics. They are repeated here for ease of reading/preparation.**

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