
SEXISM

Introduction

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“Question gender!” is one of my favorite bumper stickers for a number of reasons. First, it challenges a presupposed notion made by most of U.S. society today that gender is fixed and unchangeable. Second, it represents a fundamental entry point for understanding how sexism operates in this society. And third, it is a call to action that is direct, unapologetic, and long-ranging in its potential to free everyone from the tyranny of rote gender roles and the seemingly intractable hold sexism and patriarchy have on this society.

At first glance it may not be obvious why I would start a section about *sexism* (the systematic oppression of women on institutional, cultural, and individual levels) and *patriarchy* (the ideology of male supremacy that justifies male dominance and the subordination of women in all aspects of society) with a discussion about gender. A closer examination of sexual harassment, for example, answers this question by demonstrating how this form of sexism is connected to this society’s objectification of women, which can then be traced to this society’s view of what a woman should look, act, and essentially be like, which can then be linked to this society’s core ideas about gender. Therefore, this section’s approach of examining gender before discussing specific examples of sexism serves to expose how socially constructed gender roles are an essential root of sexism in this society.

This approach is not new, of course—twenty years of activism has thankfully moved the fields of women’s studies, queer studies, and gender studies to a more critical stance regarding gender as a core organizer for these forms of oppression. But there are still many people for whom the idea of fundamentally questioning gender is both new and suspect. The importance of interrogating gender when studying sexism becomes clear, however, when we realize how the structures of sexism in this society feed into and are nourished by the maintenance of hierarchies of power based on gender.

Leslie Feinberg, in the 1996 book *Transgender Warriors*, raises the provocative question: “Are you a guy or a girl?” I pose a similar question in the college classes I teach and receive quizzical or comedic looks as students wonder why I would ask what they perceive as a ridiculously obvious question. “Can’t you *tell*? Just look at us,” they seem to say. But what I can “tell” may or may not be their true gender identity. It is certainly what they are presenting as their gender at that moment in time, but I cannot tell whether what I see is the expression of the socially constructed gender roles they have been forced, sometimes violently, to adhere to, or if it is truly their deeply felt sense of self with respect to gender—their gender identity. In truth, one cannot know the full story about another’s gender without a little more information. Lorber and Kimmel (selections 61 and 62) clarify this point by differentiating between socially constructed *gender roles* (meaning what society says a woman and a man are supposed to be) and a person’s *gender identity*

(meaning one's self-identification of their gender irrespective of what society says). These two readings explain that mainstream U.S. notions of gender are not "real," so much as constructed and accepted roles and ways of being that are assigned to us all by the dominant power structure.

GENDER ROLES, GENDER SOCIALIZATION, AND GENDER IDENTITY

Understanding how gender supports sexism requires the explanation of a few key concepts and terms such as gender roles, gender socialization, and gender identity. *Gender roles* are the rigid categories (and there are only two) that characterize what it means to be "feminine" and "masculine" in this society. They are clearly articulated, ruthlessly enforced, and inflexible in their expression. Men do not cry, women should always look beautiful (for men), men never ask for directions, women are "natural" caretakers, men are tough, women are emotional, men are studs, women are domestic, and so on. These roles are taught to us by a process of *gender socialization* (see Harro, selection 6) whereby the messages of what it means to be a man or woman are conveyed to us by every possible socializing structure in society—our families tell us how to behave, our schools tell us what we can achieve, and our media tells us what we need to look like. And because people who identify as women make up over half of the U.S. population, this socialization begins before birth to insure the highest level of compliance from women as well as men.

There are three characteristics of gender roles that support the overarching systems of sexism, heterosexism, and transgender oppression, and the intersections between them. The first is that, although in reality these gender roles are *social constructions* (something we learn through the socialization processes in our society), we are taught to believe that masculinity and femininity are biological not social, "natural" not cultural, inherent to being a man or a woman instead of learned behaviors. One particular tool used to socialize people into this thinking is the "essentialist" argument, which asserts that these gender roles are inextricably tied to one's biological sex and are therefore real, inherent, and "natural," even though there is not a direct or causal relationship between one's biological sex and one's gender identity. But because our society shapes us into gender roles from the moment we are born (and punishes us if we do not adhere to them), it *appears* as if there is a causal relationship between biological sex and gender, implying that we are marked with gender roles from birth and they cannot be changed. As a result, the sexist dynamics inherent in these gender roles (e.g. women are naturally domestic and therefore should not work outside of the home) are also labeled as "natural" and unchangeable. And ultimately, anyone who does not fit into or who intentionally contests this rigid gender binary is therefore labeled as "unnatural" or sick and patriarchy and gender oppression remain unchallenged.

Fortunately, the work by the intersex community has disproven the assumption that biology determines gender and has thus freed us from the idea that gender is "natural" (see website for further resources). In addition, if gender roles were "natural" they would manifest similarly in societies all over the world, but a global analysis reveals a rather diverse understanding and expression of gender across societies (Nanda 2000). Similarly, if these roles were set and unchangeable they would be consistent throughout history, and yet within U.S. history alone the notion of what it means to be a man or woman has changed over time due to political, economic, and social influences. As such, what is perceived as "real" regarding gender roles is actually a manifestation of certain rules and expectations put on all of us by the macro gendered power structure.

A second core characteristic of gender roles is that *they are based on heteronormativity*, which refers to the normalizing of heterosexuality and the pathologizing of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual. In my classes I often conduct an exercise where we divide into groups and develop lists of what it means to "act like a 'man'" or "act like a 'lady.'" For the sixteen years I have been doing

this exercise, every element of what it has meant to “act like a ‘lady’” has been connected to the heterosexual male gaze. Looking pretty, acting feminine, knowing how to cook, wanting children and the like, of and by themselves, are not at all problematic, but when analyzed through a lens of gender critique it is apparent that they are consistently tied to heterosexual relationships and the need for women to appeal to heterosexual men. The connection between heterosexuality and what it means to be a real woman implies that lesbian and bisexual women are not actually women, are a threat to these gender roles for their lack of compliance, and therefore should be met with contempt and even violence. Suzanne Pharr (1988) suggests that homophobia is a weapon of sexism precisely because of the relationship between gender role conformity and what she termed “compulsory heterosexuality.” This issue is discussed in more detail by Blumenfeld (selection 78 and introduction to section 6).

A third important characteristic of gender roles is that *masculine and feminine roles are diametrically opposed, as opposites in a binary, and also hierarchically positioned, as superior or inferior*. For every characteristic that students defined as “masculine,” for example being tough and superior, they defined “feminine” as the exact opposite, weak and inferior. Looking even further, all human attributes labeled as feminine are consistently devalued in this society and used to insult or harass men, thus speaking volumes about the true status of women in this society. As evidence, the two worst things a man can be called are a “fag” (tied into the heteronormativity discussed above) and a “woman,” and the worst thing a man can do is to “throw like a girl” or “cry like a sissy.” Of course, while most people transgress gender roles on a daily basis, the existence of these roles and the rules that shape them are well known by all as demonstrated by the fact that it never takes students more than 10 minutes to generate multiple examples.

Thankfully, *gender identity* can be thought of in ways that are more flexible than gender roles. *Gender identity* arises from an inner, self-reflective location and manifests a person’s more authentic gendered self as a woman, man, or transgendered person. While gender roles exist in relation to each other within a binary, gender identity exists along a continuum and has a range of expressions. The section on transgender oppression (section 7) more thoroughly explains the concept of gender identity and its range of expressions and is a critical companion section for fully understanding sexism in this society. Gender roles and identity are experienced by others through their “expression” or “presentation.” A person’s expression or presentation of a gender role is based on the dichotomous categories of how “man” and “woman” should look, act, and feel like, whereas the expression or presentation of a person’s gender identity exists within a broader and more fluid context that more accords with the complexity of gender. To present or express one’s gender on the basis of accepted gender roles usually garners acceptance and approval from individuals and institutions. On the other hand, gender expression that does not conform to the dominant power structure’s ideals often results in disapproval, marginalization, and violence.

SEXISM AND FEMINISM

So, if gender roles are based on social constructions and not on nature, why does society create this dichotomy and respond so violently to those who do not adhere to it? The answer is quite simply that oppression itself requires binaries. It is much easier to maintain an unequal status quo when two social identity groups (within the same axis of identity) are positioned as diametrically opposed to each other (see selections 4 and 5). As such, these roles form the structural and ideological basis for the oppression of women, or *sexism*, in our society. In this reader’s companion book, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (second edition), Botkin, Jones, and Kachwaha define sexism as, “a system of advantages that serves to privilege men, subordinate women, denigrate women-identified values and practices, enforce male dominance and control, and

reinforce norms of masculinity that are dehumanizing and damaging to men" (2007, 174). Allan Johnson (selections 3 and 63) furthers advances our understanding of sexism by describing *patriarchy* as the system and ideology that supports the dominance of men and the oppression of women on all levels of society.

The bell hooks reading (selection 64) offers a different take on understanding sexism by explaining what *feminism* is. In the words of another bumper sticker, "feminism is the radical notion that women are people." Contrary to popular backlash rhetoric, feminism is not about hating men, but it does unapologetically require an end to the domination of women by men. While feminism certainly has a range of theoretical underpinnings from liberal to Marxist to environmental, a common element among them is the need to dismantle the patriarchal power structures that serve to subordinate women and transgender folks and unfairly advantage men in every aspect of society. Because of the connections noted among sexism, heterosexism, and transgender oppression, feminism also seeks an end to gender binaries and heteronormative societal structures.

With a foundation comprised of gender binaries and the exercising of patriarchal power on individual, cultural, and institutional levels, the day-to-day mechanisms used to keep sexism in place take many forms. For example, if gender roles state that women are to be "feminine" and look attractive to men, then the creation of limiting and dehumanizing notions of "ideal female beauty" for women is an effective tool for keeping women powerless, especially in the public domain. Caroline Heldman's article on body image (selection 66) aptly describes the societal impact of these fabricated images of beauty on women and how they conspire to disempower women economically, psychologically, and politically. The Chernik reading (selection 68) adds to this discussion by demonstrating the deadly effects of this imagery on women in the form of eating disorders and the illusory power that the cult of thinness (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2007) creates in this society. Other aspects of sexism such as the wage gap discussed in Aaron Bernstein's piece (selection 67), violence against women discussed in the Katz article (selection 65), reproductive freedom as seen in the Fennell piece (selection 71), or the use of language as seen in both the Morgan and Kirk and Okazawa-Rey pieces (selections 69 and 70) all represent both products of and tools to maintain sexism in our society.

HISTORY OF RESISTANCE AND MOVEMENTS FOR CHANGE

Acquiring a basic understanding of the dynamics of sexism in society begs the question of what to do about it. When teaching this to undergraduates in my classes, students will often say that sexism has been around "forever" and, even though it is wrong, they say there is nothing you can do about it. I am sure that there are a range of reasons for their thinking here, but one that warrants highlighting is the often complete lack of historical knowledge about the history of individual women's resistance to these constraints and the women's social change movements in this country. While complicated and often problematic, the history of the women's movements in the United States demonstrates powerful and effective ways to challenge both the manifestations of sexism and the foundations that give rise to it. From the first "women's rights convention" in Seneca Falls, NY, in 1848 to the presidential election of 2008, we have seen examples of women making history through their challenges to the limiting gender roles and power structures that marginalize them. At its best, this history demonstrates the need for a broad-based platform addressing women's rights, the power of consciousness-raising groups, the transformational power of claiming voice, and the necessity for cross-issue organizing. There were also a range of mistakes made along the way and in particular the first and second waves' inaccurate, simplifying assumptions concerning a single, uniform, universal woman's experience. In the first wave, although the agenda called for "women's rights," the needs of women of color, poor and

working-class women were marginalized in favor of the eventual limited agenda of suffrage. In the second wave, these same groups as well as lesbian and bisexual women, women with disabilities, and women who were not Christian were also pushed to the side in favor of the white, middle-class agenda for “equal rights.”

Because of space limitations, this section cannot discuss the many important lessons gleaned from these movements and the value of knowing this history (see section website for resources). It does, however, take these lessons seriously and highlights how we can actualize them in this current moment of fighting for women’s rights—the “third wave.” The Next Steps part of this section begins with Paul Gorski’s explanation of why, as a man, he has a personal investment in feminism and an end to sexism (selection 72). This selection illustrates the importance of men taking action to end sexism. To be clear, if sexism is to be dismantled, a key lesson learned from our history is the need to educate men about the ways that sexism and patriarchy ravage their humanity as well as the lives of the women they care about and engage them, as men, in the struggle for change. It is crucial that men as well as women acknowledge that no form of oppression can be eradicated until the advantaged group can see how their core values are compromised by the existence of that oppression.

This is followed by the work of Alice Walker (selection 73), which addresses another lesson from a long history of women’s activism—the impact of internalized oppression. Her article calls this out in simple but powerful ways, and, although it does not blame women for sexism, it does demand that women take responsibility for the internalization of negative messages and transform these debilitating ideas into sources of power. Another lesson learned from the history of the women and men working to end sexism is the need for a broad and deep agenda for change instead of assuming that what works for white, middle-class women works for all women. The inclusion of the brief statement from the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health and their position regarding health care for all is a small step in redressing this historic mistake (selection 74). The lessons of the first two waves can be reflected in the willingness of contemporary feminist activists to broaden the “women’s health” agenda so that it encompasses root causes as well as corollary manifestations of sexism in health care.

As stated above, one of the most egregious mistakes of both waves of the women’s movement was the racist lack of attention to the needs and voices of women of color. The Hurdis reading (selection 75) discusses the critical importance of including the voices of women of color in today’s third-wave feminism, while the Russo and Spatz reading (selection 76) helps white women remember not to be seduced by the apparent political expediency of white privilege and class privilege to advance their own agenda at the expense of women of color and working-class women. At the end of the section Winona LaDuke (selection 77) offers lasting insight into the overall mindset that is necessary to end the oppression of women and create social change from the ground up.

All of the readings in this section share one common element—they acknowledge the real-life complexity of addressing the oppression of women. It is vital to understand that if there is to be an effective and sustained movement to end the sexist oppression of women, it cannot be done without examining intersecting issues of racism, classism, heterosexism, and transgender oppression, to name a few. As such, to more deeply understand the issues presented in this section it is important to read selections from other sections in this book. For example, the Landesman, Bauer, Romero, and Morgenson selections (33, 35, 36, and 40) located in the classism section discuss sex trafficking, immigration, sex discrimination in the work place (whether agricultural or domestic), and burdensome debt. In the section on racism, the Chung, Fayad, Castañeda, and Smith readings (selections 16, 18, 24, and 25) highlight the role of heteropatriarchy in the maintenance of racism, the connections between sexism and racism, and ways to cross-culturally communicate about issues of race. Similarly, in the section on ableism the Colligan reading (selection 101) explains why the intersexed should not be “fixed” and is key to understanding that biological sex exists on a continuum and thus supports the deconstruction of the “essentialist”

position regarding gender. And, of course, the readings of the sections on heterosexism and transgender oppression are vital for fully understanding the overlapping complexity and mutually reinforcing structures of oppression among these three forms of oppression.

SUMMARY

In conclusion I would like to underscore that this section offers only a sampling of issues and ideas for readers to begin to understand the very complex and multifaceted issue of the oppression of women. As mentioned above, there is no single voice for “women’s issues” and therefore I strongly encourage the use of the supplemental materials from the section website to gain a more comprehensive view of sexism in the United States. References for additional books or articles, specific articles themselves (e.g. the well-known and often used, “The ‘Rape’ of Mr. Smith”), references for films and videos, links to websites and to current sources of discussion and action, and activities that can be used in the classroom or training settings to further explore sexism in U.S. society can all be found on the section website for this book.

In moving forward with this information I would like to emphasize the importance of actually using it to create change, however subtle it may be, in this society regarding the oppression of women. In an era where for the first time a woman has made a strong and convincing run for the White House, where increasing numbers of women are in professional positions of power, and women are represented in more equal numbers in college admissions, it is tempting to say that sexism is over. However, when we dig a little deeper we can see that sexism and patriarchy are both firmly intact and the need for broad-based, consistent action has never been greater. Now is the time and it will require the work of all of us to end sexism and transform our society into one in which all women feel safe and free and able to fully achieve any dream they have.

References

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