



## Sexism

by Andrew Matzner

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In a society built on a male/female dichotomy, sexism refers to beliefs and behaviors that privilege men over women. Whether at cultural, societal, institutional, or individual levels, sexism is the mechanism that ensures that women occupy subordinate roles compared with men and that women-identified values are disparaged.

Women's inferior position in society is due to a patriarchal social system that is male-centered, and thus acts to protect male interests. Accordingly, there is an unequal distribution of wealth, income, power, respect, and other social resources throughout society between men and women. Although variables such as race, ethnicity, class, age, and sexual orientation influence the degrees of oppression that both men and women experience in society, the cultural devaluing of women cuts across such factors and affects all women.

### **How Sexism Functions**

It is important to recognize the connection between sexism and other types of oppression, such as racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism. In Western society, the youthful, able-bodied, white, middle-class, heterosexual male is the standard against which all other people are measured. Discourses supporting this conception of what is considered "normal" saturate culture, particularly the mass media. Men who do not fit this ideal of masculinity are marginalized, stigmatized, and subordinated within society.

Sexism is perpetuated and maintained through gender role socialization, as well as through the policies and practices of cultural institutions. In the family, at school, in the workplace, and through the media, people receive messages regarding what it means to be male or female. Sexist messages that privilege masculinity over femininity influence how people think about the world, feel about themselves, and behave.

Sexism works to create and maintain a social system in which gender stereotypes are taught as being grounded in nature, and are thus immutable. These stereotypes are value-laden, in that qualities associated with femininity (such as passivity and sensitivity) are devalued, while those associated with masculinity (such as assertiveness and resourcefulness) have positive connotations.

Sexism also informs the phenomenon of assigning different values to the same behavior. For example, a woman who has many sexual partners is considered to be a "slut" or "whore," and is disparaged. On the other hand, a man who has many sexual partners is called a "stud," and is viewed with respect.

### **Sexism and the GLBTQ Community**

In a sexist society, sexuality is defined in only one way: as relations between a man and a woman. By failing to conform to the culturally-accepted ideal of heterosexual masculinity, gay men are viewed as being "less than" men, and are associated with women. Since they are not "real men," gay men face culturally sanctioned hatred and hostility both on individual and institutional levels.

A similar situation exists for lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people, all of whom exist outside standards of what is considered normal and appropriate for men and women. Heterosexism and homophobia are directly related to sexism.

Some have argued that, reflecting larger society, a sexist hierarchy exists within the glbtq community itself, with white, gay male culture as the epitome. Standards of beauty, especially as represented in the gay media and in pornography, idealize and fetishize a muscular, stereotypically "masculine" body. The message is that those who do not fit this image are not sexually attractive.

The corollary to this valorization of masculinity is a denigration of femininity and women. Such attitudes are manifested in the existence of gay bars and other venues that discriminate against women. In addition, drag queens have sometimes encountered negative attitudes from gay men who have felt that their feminine expression plays into stereotypes that associate homosexuality with femininity. According to this viewpoint, the presence of drag queens in events such as pride marches is an embarrassment to the gay movement and an impediment to social acceptance.

Lesbian feminists have criticized queer theory for being biased. Despite its nominal inclusiveness, queer theory, lesbian feminists charge, privileges a white, male point of view. They argue that queer theorists and activists influenced by queer theory fail to recognize the oppression that women experience, and focus more on fighting homophobia (faced equally by gay men and lesbians) than sexism (experienced only by women).

"Camp" and "drag" have also been viewed as gay male sexist practices. For some observers, such performances of femininity, as employed by men, reinforce rather than challenge stereotypical ideas of womanhood. According to this perspective, female impersonators, characterized by affected manners and exaggerated appearance, mock and disparage women, and thus emphasize their subordinate position in society.

Finally, some lesbians have noted that while they have long performed the stereotypical female role of nurturer by caring for gay men suffering from AIDS, there has been a lack of gay men who have come forward to aid women as they face illnesses such as breast cancer or to advocate for such feminist issues as ending violence against women.

### **Sexism: At Present and In the Future**

The past forty years have seen hard-fought struggles against sexism by women's movements in the United States and abroad. Indeed, feminists have made significant gains in advancing women's rights. Some people even claim that we are living in a "post-feminist" era. Yet there has been considerable resistance every step of the way.

In fact, both because of and in spite of the work of feminists, anti-woman backlashes have occurred at all levels of society. In popular culture, as evidenced by films, television, music videos, magazines, and books, traditional male and female gender norms (particularly the hyper-sexualization of women's bodies) continue to be exalted. In the courts, legal challenges to women's right to determination over their own bodies and reproductive systems continue to be mounted. In the workforce, women continue to earn less than men for doing equal work. Women (and children) also continue to make up the majority of those living in poverty. And whether in the home or in public, violence against women (sexual or otherwise) continues to increase.

A number of writers and activists argue that because it is institutionally-embedded, the only way to end sexism and to create a non-oppressive reality is to dismantle patriarchal society itself. To accomplish such social change necessitates cooperative and coalition-building relationships between men and women

committed to social justice, and a revision of the core (sexist) values that underlie our society.

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