

SEXISM HURTS US ALL

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It is my belief that sexism is a pattern of behavior perpetuated by society through our gender conditioning which equally dehumanizes both men and women. At one end of the pattern, women are socialized to occupy the role of victim or “target” of the oppression. At the other, men are socialized to occupy the role of perpetrator or “agent” of the oppression. I believe that neither role is freely chosen, and because both are learned, they can be unlearned.

The literature, including many articles in this Journal, has clearly documented the ways in which occupying the target role limits, degrades and physically harms women, and nothing written here is meant to dispute that. It is now clear that many women both here in South Africa and elsewhere are no longer willing to be treated in this manner, and they are committed to ending sexism.

The prevailing opinion regarding men, on the other hand, is that we have it much better, and on the surface we do. After all, we have greater independence, have more choices about work, occupy the decision-making positions, earn more money and control its use, usually have more sexual partners, and are almost always the perpetrators, not the victims of family violence. As a result, most feel threatened by the movement for change believing it will mean giving up some of these “privileges” to women.

When the lives men lead are examined closely, however, it becomes obvious that by trying to follow the roles proscribed for us by our socialization, we suffer serious physical, psychological and emotional harm. As a result, we live very pressured lives and, on average, die younger than women; we spend much our lives feeling like a failure and, because we cannot express those feelings, we often numb out with alcohol or drugs; and we rarely, if ever, have close relationships with other people, except possibly our sexual partner. In effect our gender conditioning cuts us off from much of our basic humanity. Once men are able to understand this, they will see that it is in their interest as much as women to actively work to end sexism.

CREATION & ENFORCEMENT OF GENDER ROLES

To understand how sexism hurts men, it is necessary first to look at the roles men are conditioned to fill and at the ways conformity to those roles is enforced. Data for this and other propositions throughout this article will be taken from a recent gender sensitivity workshop held for men here in South Africa.¹

Early in that workshop, the participants completed an exercise in which they answered

questions about what boys and girls are supposed to do and not do and how conformity to these rules is enforced. Among their responses for boys were that they are supposed to be:

strong and tough and hide pain; a fighter/defend self, sister and property; compete/be better than girls and other boys;² do the physical work, heavy duties; be in control, in authority positions; do well academically and pursue "manly" careers/occupations; drink alcohol and smoke; and have sex with lots of females.

What boys are not supposed to do is:

be friends with girls; cry / show our emotions; cook/do household duties; or wear women's clothing.³

Failure to follow these proscriptions results in boys being:

isolated (an outcast/no friends); labelled as weak, moffie, sissy, etc.; beaten by fathers, grandparents, other boys or teachers; laughed at by girls; and told they are a failure and feeling like one.⁴

In a follow up exercise, the men were put into pairs to talk about how they personally learned these messages. The stories they told were most revealing. For example, one man described how as a young boy he once went behind his house to cry after being scolded by his granny. He was then discovered by a younger brother who immediately began to tease him. The older boy then stopped crying and protested that in fact he had not been crying. He was much more careful about hiding his feelings in the future. Another told of how as a young boy in school he saw a teacher repeatedly touch girls in his class on the bum. Emboldened, the boy copied this behavior knowing the teacher would not object and the girl's wishes did not matter.

There also were several stories of how men learned that they would be judged by the wealth they accumulated whether it was in cows or other ostentatious possessions. One telling story was how when Zulu boys danced during celebrations, their hand movements mimicked the shape of the cows their father possessed. The bigger the bull, the wider the hands and the more cattle possessed, the more hand movements were made. There was one boy whose father had no cattle so he had to dance with his hands at his side. According to the man telling this story, that boy vowed to buy a cow a month when he grew up. In response to a question, the participant acknowledged how embarrassed that boy's father had to be when his son danced.

Few of the messages the boys received in the first exercise were a surprise. The basic commands seem to be almost universal although there are cultural variations. Also, the personal stories told in the follow up exercise were typical of young boys' experiences elsewhere. What was most significant about these exercises is that they demonstrated to the participants two key points about their early conditioning.

First, they revealed how young we are when this conditioning begins and how ingrained it becomes because it is passed on to us by our teachers and those upon whom we are dependent for our very survival. In effect, our gender roles become a primary building block in our initial

identity development, and it feels like we will not be able to function as people without them. Hence, it is so difficult for many of us to change.

Second, these exercises demonstrated how rigidly gender roles are enforced. As a result, boys have little or no choice about how to behave because if they do not conform, they are labeled as failures and are completely isolated. That is why assuming the role of oppressor is not freely chosen.⁵

CONSEQUENCES TO MEN FOR CONFORMING ⁶

From an understanding of how male gender roles are created and enforced, it is next possible to look at the consequences to men for conforming to these roles. Later in the same workshop, the participants addressed this issue first by discussing what was hard for them about having to “act like a man”. Among their responses were that they were *always expected to achieve; be the provider and assume responsibility; suppress their feelings; conceal their failures; and face death as a soldier.*⁷ The word that kept coming up was that they felt “*pressured*”, a condition which was exacerbated by their having to keep the feeling to themselves. They acknowledged that when they were upset or worried about something such as work or a family matter, they would not seek out a friend to talk about it. To do so, they felt, would be seen as a sign of weakness.

During the same exercise, the participants also listed the consequences to men for having to behave in the stereotypical way such as:

stress and other health problems which shorten their lives; depression; frustration; substance abuse; hurting ourselves or others; isolation from family, friends etc.; loss of self-esteem (if you are not a success); suppression of emotions such as compassion, cooperation, nurturance; and living beyond our means.

One of the facilitators summarized the list as demonstrating that when men feel like they are not living up to the expectations of themselves or others, they engage in one or a combination of three destructive behaviors: they either “*drop out, numb out, and/or punch out.*”

Examples of each of these behaviors were provided in the stories told during the conference and also appear regularly in the media. In an exercise about what you did after losing a competition, one man said when he was doing poorly in a long distance race; he literally dropped out in the middle, went home to be by himself, and did not enter a competition again for a very long time. A more dramatic example of “dropping out” occurred in May of last year in the United States, when Admiral Jeremy Michael Boorda, Chief of Naval Operations, committed suicide rather than face the embarrassment of explaining why he wore two medals for valor which he may not have actually earned. This example is especially instructive because by all appearances Admiral Boorda was a “winner” having achieved title, prestige, power and wealth. Yet, when it was disclosed that he may have “cheated,” albeit in a relatively minor way, he chose to end his life rather than face the shame attached to this discovery.

Besides dropping out, many men choose to “*numb out*” through the use of alcohol and drugs rather than face their feelings of inadequacy. Such behavior is most notably on the rise among unemployed and disenfranchised men who feel they have nowhere else to turn. This phenomenon is widely recognized as exemplified by a response in a discussion in a Street Law Class⁸ I co-led on gender issues for law students at the University of Natal in Durban. Thus when I asked what the students thought it would be like for a man to lose his job in mid-life through downsizing and not be able to get another one, one woman said he would likely turn into a “drunken bum.”

The third destructive behavior of “*punching out*” describes the violence men commit either against themselves, as in the case of Admiral Boorda, or more commonly against others. This behavior often accompanies the second one of numbing out since when men use alcohol to suppress their feelings, it has the additional effect of cutting them off from their connection to other human beings. They thus find it easier to strike out in violent ways. Perhaps prophetically, on the day the workshop began, the discussion topic on a prominent morning talk show on SAFM was two recent incidents in South Africa in which a husband shot his wife, children and then himself, one of the men being a police officer. Although the causes of such extreme behavior are likely to be complex, it nevertheless is likely that the factors discussed above including alcohol abuse were major contributors to the desperation felt by these perpetrators.

Articles in scholarly journals have also made the link between destructive male behavior and the feelings men have when they fail to live up to their community’s expectations for them. In one written about the massive upsurge in political and family violence in KwaZulu Natal in 1992, the author drew upon data from interviews in two different research projects which dealt with the perceptions of township people of the changing face of township society. With regard to the issue of violence, she concluded that any effort to end the violence “cannot afford to ignore its gendered dimensions.”⁹ This is so because as she puts it, “violence [both political and within the family] is one of the compensatory mechanisms whereby men have sought to reassert their masculinity in the face of crisis.”¹⁰ The specific crisis for working-class township men described in the article was, as the interviews revealed, that these men felt that their dominance over women and young men in the family was being undermined. And because apartheid and capitalism had limited their power in the wider community, this was the only arena for these men to exercise dominance.¹¹

WHAT MEN HAVE TO GAIN BY ENDING SEXISM

Having looked at the costs to men for following their conditioning, the participants at the conference then listed what men would gain by not conforming. Their responses included: *Peace of mind (enjoy a better life); ease the pressure; good example for your children; less inclined to commit crime and violence; collective decision-making; more productive at work; less tension (improved health); emotional satisfaction; possibility of having close non-sexual relationships with women, men and children; accessing different kinds of experience, e.g., child care and cooking; value things other than material objects; being able to accept help from others; better sense of self identity; and tap into all human resources including women's skills.*

The thoroughness of this list requires no further comment to make the point of how men's lives will be improved by the elimination of sexism. What is noteworthy is that it was created on day two of a gender workshop by a group of men, some of whom had previously given little thought to the question. It thus demonstrates that with guidance, men are able to quickly see that they have a lot to gain by breaking out of traditional roles.¹² Just as importantly, they recognized how such changes in their behaviour would also assist women.¹³

WHAT NEXT

At the beginning of this article, it was noted that more and more women are working to end their oppression as women, and it is my opinion that this movement is irreversible. Indeed, I believe this era will one day be described by historians as a period of change at least equal in importance to the industrial revolution of the 19th century. To me this inevitability is analogous to the situation in China after the Tieneman Square massacre when one commentator observed after being asked whether the democratic movement would ultimately succeed there: "You can never put the toothpaste back in the tube."

Although I believe sexism will eventually be eradicated, I recognize that the struggle is already causing considerable confusion, displacement and pain. An example of the type of suffering we are currently experiencing is the breakup of many families caused by the fact that men are often threatened by the new independence being assumed by their partners. Further, most signs of progress seem to be almost immediately off set by some form of backlash whether it be by the conservative right wing in the United States who use the rhetoric of "traditional family values" to advocate the return women to a passive homemaker role or by Muslim Fundamentalists who rely on religious dogma to force women to wear traditional dress and not go out in public without their husbands. Indeed, it is clear that significant change will take generations both because our gender conditioning, as explained earlier, is so central to early identity development and because it is supported by such powerful institutions as the world's great religions and the dominant economic system which profits from the exploitation of cheap female labor.¹⁴ For me personally, even though I have worked hard to change my own consciousness about gender, when I am acting outside of the roles proscribed for me as a man, sometimes I still feel unsure about who I am, and I fear being ostracized and ridiculed. Therefore, for me and other men, it is only when we can support each other on the type of journey begun by the men at the workshop in Durban that we like our female counterparts will be able to become the true human beings we were meant to be.

1. The workshop which was co-sponsored by Gender Education and Training Network (GETNET), a NGO based in Cape Town, and the Community Law Center in Durban was entitled "Integrating the Other Half: Gender Training for Men". It was held from 13 - 15 November 1996 at the Beach Hotel in Durban. The 15 male participants were from five different provinces with three from COSATU, one from NUMSA, three who work for a provincial government, one a lecturer, one a residence counselor at a University and the rest from NGOs. The author of this article was one of the facilitators and also wrote the first draft of the workshop report.

2. The role of competition on the job, in sports and elsewhere was looked at separately in the workshop because it forms so large a part of men's lives. Thus one exercise asked the participants to describe how it felt when they both won and lost competitions. When they won, they generally felt invincible although some also said they constantly feared losing future contests. When they lost, they said they felt *very bad; embarrassed; and angry*. As a result they learned to *develop lots of excuses and not to try again*. The general conclusion to the exercise was that while competition can be beneficial and fun, it mainly sets up situations from which men feel like failures, **i.e.**, no matter how successful you are, it never feels like enough. The example was given of Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft (Windows) who still ruthlessly competes in business even after acquiring a fortune worth billions of dollars.

3. It is my belief that proscriptions like this one, and the many others like it, are the beginning of homophobia in men. When I was a boy, I learned that the worst thing to be was a girl or in effect "not a man." Later, I learned that there were two ways to "not" be a man: to be female or to be gay. Thus the foundation for prejudice against homosexuals is laid long before boys know about the existence of sex or sexual orientation. When they grow older, many men act out this prejudice virulently because they fear not being seen as manly enough which could lead to them being ostracized and mistreated the way gay men are.

4. From my experience, when asked to list the ways the other gender is taught to act, both men and women are able to do so although some matters may be missed. Hence, in this workshop, the men's responses for what girls are supposed to do included:

be excessively polite; cook and fetch wood and water; serve others especially men; be faithful/chaste; accept inferiority to men; in some faiths, hide face and body; look attractive and beautify themselves e.g. dressing nicely, cosmetics, bright colours; and be submissive and obedient.

What girls are not supposed to do is:

look men straight in the eyes; disagree with a man; assert themselves; fight physically; hard physical labour; go far in school; and work for pay.

If girls do not conform to these proscriptions, they are:

beaten by family members, partners, etc.; sexually assaulted; isolated, treated like an outcast; called slut, whore, tomboy, "bitch", witch; and confined to house or room or convent.

5. As indicated in note 4, the rules for girls are basically the reciprocal of those for boys while

the consequences for not conforming are almost the same. The glue which holds stereotypical behavior in place for both genders is the fear of being ridiculed and ostracized. As a result, most girls at least initially take on a submissive role. This condition is often labeled “internalized oppression”, *i.e.*, the targets believe and act upon the lies told about them even when those lies are not being enforced from the outside. This is the same concept Steve Biko describes in terms of race when he explains the need for a new “Black consciousness.” The vast amounts of money women spend on cosmetics and the like so as to conform to the current standard of female beauty is one example of this phenomenon as it relates to gender.

6. Although much of the workshop focused on how sexism hurts men, its effect on women was very much present. On the afternoon of the first day two videos were shown which demonstrated many of the ways women are harmed including being: abused physically and emotionally by men who see them as just another possession; invisible at work and not considered for leadership positions; expected to do the housework and child care even if they work a full time job; judged almost exclusively by their physical beauty which is based on standards of unnatural thinness, youthfulness and flawlessness. At the end of the first day, two of the men in the closing check-in said they were still in too great a state of shock to comment on what they had learned.

7. It is possible to argue that from society’s standpoint the real purpose for male gender conditioning is to prepare them to be soldiers. Thus there are messages to be tough, not to show pain, and perhaps most perniciously, to suppress all feelings of compassion and connection. Were men to stay in touch with such feelings, it is likely that they could not kill other soldiers anonymously. Instead they would realize that the men they are killing have just as much right to live and that their children, if they have them, would be losing their father or their parents would be losing a son. Stories are common about soldiers who are unable to kill, especially at close range, because at that critical moment parts of their basic humanity can no longer be suppressed.

8. Street Law students fulfill their clinical law requirement at the University by teaching classes about human rights in secondary schools in the area. As part of that program, I and a female colleague helped train some of those students to lead classes on gender sensitivity.

9. Catherine Campbell, “*Learning to Kill? Masculinity, the Family and Violence in Natal*”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3, September 1992, p.614.

10. Ibid.

11. Id. At 618.

12. It was during the discussion of changing traditional roles that one of the participants raised the issue of whether these gains would apply to gay men also. It was clear several men were uneasy with the subject of homosexuality, and unfortunately there was insufficient time to deal with this issue effectively. Overcoming this prejudice is every bit as complicated and difficult as sexism and requires its own workshops to address. Of course, as discussed in note 3 above, prejudice against gay men and lesbians is linked to our gender conditioning. The discussion at

the workshop ended at the point the participant who raised the question said he saw acceptance of gays and lesbians as a human rights issue, *i.e.*, no one should be oppressed, and the group seemed willing to leave the matter at that.

13. As part of the same exercise, the participants looked at what women would gain by men changing their behavior. Those responses included:

physical safety; having an encouraging emotional environment; empowerment; enhanced work opportunities; sharing of home duties so they would not have to work so hard; more complete relationship with men; greater self reliance and self esteem; access to privileges previously reserved for men; more faithfulness and love; and greater confidence to make decisions.

14. The difficulties involved in turning into action their raised consciousness of the harmful effects of sexism appeared toward the end of the workshop when the men looked at obstacles to change and strategies to overcome those obstacles. Here the full weight of their own socialization hit home and the enormity of the struggle ahead was felt. As a result, not much in the way of specific strategies and action plans were developed. This was to be expected, however, among a group of men, most of whom were addressing this issue in depth for the first time. The participants clearly took major strides at this workshop, and they will need to continue the process begun there for the rest of their lives. Significantly, at the time this article was written, two of them had already scheduled follow up workshops for colleagues: one for leaders of support groups for perpetrators of domestic violence in Alexandra outside Johannesburg and one for COSATU shop stewards in Kwazulu Natal.