



Sexism consists of behaviors, practices, and words that imply, explicitly or implicitly, that a group is inferior based on their sex or gender.¹ Seemingly “minor” comments and attitudes create a social climate where people are devalued by others and even, potentially, themselves. The impacts of sexism result in psychological, social, physical, and economic harm which disproportionately impacts women. While gender roles and expectations impact everyone regardless of their sex or gender, the system of patriarchy results directly in sexism being used to put down people who do not identify as men.

When systemic sexism is upheld at the societal and community level, we see the impact within our relationships and ourselves. Accordingly, because patriarchy supports a system where women and girls are viewed as less valuable, gender-based violence will continue to be normalized.

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GLOSSARY:

Sex: “Refers to a person’s biological status and is typically categorized as male, female, or intersex (i.e., atypical combinations of features that usually distinguish male from female). There are a number of indicators of biological sex, including sex chromosomes, gonads, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia.”²

Gender Identity: “A person’s deeply-felt, inherent sense of being a boy, a man, or male; a girl, a woman, or female; or an alternative gender (e.g., genderqueer, gender nonconforming, gender neutral) that may or may not correspond to a person’s sex assigned at birth or to a person’s primary or secondary sex characteristics. Since gender identity is internal, a person’s gender identity is not necessarily visible to others.”³

Patriarchy: “Patriarchy is about the social relations of power between men and women, women and women, and men and men. It is a system for maintaining class, gender, racial, and heterosexual privilege and the status quo of power – relying both on crude forms of oppression, like violence; and subtle ones, like laws; to perpetuate inequality. Patriarchal beliefs of male, heterosexual dominance and the devaluation of girls and women lie at the root of gender-based violence. Patriarchy is a structural force that influences power relations, whether they are abusive or not.”⁴

HISTORICAL SEXISM

Throughout history, women have struggled to be viewed as worthy of agency and rights rather than property. While laws have changed, oppressive attitudes remain. Beginning in the middle ages, under “common law,” the concept of coverture was created to maintain ownership of women by men. Starting at birth, a female child was “covered” by her father and later by her husband upon marriage. Women’s access to their wages, land, and even children was not protected. They were not considered legal guardians of their children until the mid- to late- 1800s. In addition to lack of legal autonomy, husbands were legally entitled to their wives bodies. As a result, marital rape was legal. These practices continued until 1993 when marital rape became illegal nationwide. Nevertheless, there are still differences in punishment for marital versus non-marital rape, which vary by state. Virginia amended the rape statute in 2002 to eliminate the marital rape exception.

MEDIA

We continue to see entitlement to women’s bodies in people’s behaviors today. Gender roles upheld through media, bias, and sexist attitudes place individuals into boxes based on their socially-expected behaviors. For instance, children’s media perpetuates gender stereotypes by associating masculinity with strength and heroism while femininity is associated with beauty and knowledge.^{5,6} Similarly, female video game characters are more likely to be sexualized and wear less clothing than male video game characters who are portrayed as more aggressive.⁷

The encouragement for young women and girls to increase their sexual appeal contributes to myths about survivors of rape. The focus on what an individual was wearing and how their clothing choices may have contributed to events is influenced by media focus on portraying women as sexual objects.⁸ Additionally, media aimed at young girls often encourages unhealthy relationships and disregards consent.⁵ These messages are engendered by the adult responses to young girls. It is frequently taught that if a boy is mean to a girl, his behavior means he likes her. These attitudes and beliefs create lasting relationship effects well into adulthood.

MEDICAL CONTROL

Gender bias continues to show up in the differing rates of diagnosis and treatment by clinicians. Frequently, pain and discomfort in women are ignored and dismissed leading to misdiagnosis or lack of a diagnosis. A common example of this bias is seen in the education around heart attack symptoms. Women frequently report different heart attack symptoms than men, but only the male experience is included in education about symptoms.⁹

Much of women’s health and response to medical treatment continue to be understudied. Most studies on prevention and treatment of disease come from laboratories that study male cells and conduct trials with men.¹⁰

The medical field’s control and dismissal of women often has lasting physical and mental health effects. It also contributes to the societal view that women are not supposed to be believed or respected, even when it comes to their own bodies. Prolonging accurate diagnosis prevents proper treatment, increases self-doubt, and adds costs due to continual seeking of treatment.¹¹



GLOSSARY continued:

Intimate Partner Violence: “Intimate partner violence includes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive tactics) by a current or former intimate partner (i.e., spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, dating partner, or ongoing sexual partner).”¹²

Sexual Violence/Sexual Assault – “A sexual act that is committed or attempted by another person without freely given consent of the victim or against someone who is unable to consent or refuse. It includes: forced or alcohol/ drug facilitated penetration of a victim; forced or alcohol/drug facilitated incidents in which the victim was made to penetrate a perpetrator or someone else; nonphysically pressured unwanted penetration; intentional sexual touching; or non-contact acts of a sexual nature. Sexual violence can also occur when a perpetrator forces or coerces a victim to engage in sexual acts with a third party.”¹³

- **Gender-Based Violence in Youth:** Youth who experienced abuse of any kind in childhood are more likely to commit violence against others through bullying, teen dating violence, and sexual violence.²⁶ This is particularly true for young boys who were victims in early childhood. They are also at risk for further violence. Youth who suffered abuse in early childhood are more likely to experience teen dating violence and intimate partner violence later in life.²⁷ Boys who witnessed their mothers being abused at home are ten times more likely to abuse a later partner, while girls who witness abuse at home are more than six times as likely to be abused by a partner later in life.²⁸

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic experiences during childhood, such as experiencing violence and abuse or witnessing violence, that impact children’s sense of stability and safety. ACEs are connected to chronic health problems and mental illness in adulthood. Certain groups are at a greater risk for experiencing ACEs, including women and people of color who are more likely to experience four or more instances of ACEs before the age of 18.²⁹ The fear of gender-based violence, compounded with systemic inequality, can cause women to live in a constant state of red alert. Living within this continuous state typically drives them to lead a life of hypervigilance. This toxic stress increases wear and tear on the body—the sustained release of stress hormones can lead to multiple health issues including high blood pressure, high glucose levels and a weakened heart and circulatory system.³⁰

GENDER & ECONOMICS

Women in the United States are 35 percent more likely than men to be poor, with single mothers facing the highest risk.¹⁴ Women make up nearly two-thirds of minimum-wage workers in the United States. More than 70 percent of low-wage workers get no paid sick days. This disproportionately affects women who, in addition to their own sick-leave needs, often have to miss work when their children are ill. Forty percent of all households with children under the age of 18 include mothers who are either the sole or primary source of income.¹⁵ Finally, the median earnings of full-time female workers are still just 77 percent of the median earnings of their male counterparts. Multiple factors contribute to women’s inequitable poverty rates including the gender wage gap, segregation into lowerpaying work, inadequate social safety nets, lack of affordable health care, family care-taking responsibilities, costs and burdens of pregnancy, violence, and abuse.¹⁶

SEXISM & FAMILY VIOLENCE

- **Intimate Partner Violence:** Nationally, one in four women and one in nine men experience intimate partner physical violence, sexual violence by intimate partner, or stalking in their lifetime.¹⁷ Other relationships of victims are also impacted, including 84% of survivors reporting increased problems at work and school. Economic abuse occurs in over 90% of domestic violence cases and threatens an individual’s selfsufficiency through control of financial resources.^{18,19} In 2015, it was estimated that the total cost of domestic violence within the United States is \$8.9 billion annually with \$6.3 billion attributed to medical services.²⁰
- **Sexual Violence:** One in 6 women and 1 in 33 men in the United States have been raped in their lifetime.²¹ In 2019, a quarter of reports of violent victimization to Virginia police involved a sexual assault offense.²² The long-term effects of sexual violence include posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and even suicide. One-third of women who have been raped contemplate suicide.²³ Due to increase in stress, those who have been sexually assaulted are more likely to develop issues with substance use.²⁴ In addition to the individual effects, it has been estimated that the lifetime cost of a sexual assault is \$122,461 per survivor.²⁵

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