



## Talking Man to Man About Sexism

I have met many men over the years, more all the time, who feel motivated to be good allies to women in their liberation. What follows is a guide for men to understanding some of the key dynamics in men's oppression of women, and how men can best join the fight to overturn it.

Some of what I've written here will undoubtedly be hard to hear. You may at times feel angry toward me or defensive; or feel pained for what women experience; or feel guilty or depressed; or feel that I'm minimizing how hard things can be for men (although I never do); or feel that I am in some way against you or against men in general (although I'm not).

Observe these feelings as they go by, release them if you can (in the PLN sense of "release"), and keep on reading. Your ability to build effective alliances with women will be increased if you hang in there with this process; the women who've commented on drafts of this article have told me that I'm discussing things that they wish badly for men to grasp.

I am not talking about what men *are*; I am discussing how men *think* and *act* with respect to women. I don't believe that any of these problems is inherent in men, and I believe that men are, at some level, eager to be find a way out of colluding with this system. But we can't get out if we aren't willing to look squarely at what we're in.

Men's guilt doesn't do anything about ending sexism. In some ways it actually makes it worse, as it puts pressure on women to take care of us about how bad we feel about being men. However, the effort to avoid feeling guilty at all costs gets in the way even more than guilt itself does. If we decide to go through a process of confronting how hurtful men have been to women, and become aware of our own collusion, we're going to experience some guilt; it's a natural reaction. And guilt feelings are just feelings, the same as any others; avoiding them will only interfere with our ability to think clearly. The solution is to feel and discharge the myriad feelings that come up when women tell the truth.



Intellectualizing also gets in the way. Avoid splitting hairs, quibbling with particular points, or overanalyzing. These are ways to disconnect ourselves emotionally. Keep breathing and try to absorb the big picture.

Finally, we don't want a man to have the last word on how sexism works. So please follow up your reading of this article by reading feminist women writers and listening to what the females in your life are expressing about their experience.

## WHAT IS SEXISM?

**Sexism** is a massive system for the exploitation of women. This exploitation takes economic, physical, and emotional forms.

*Economic exploitation* means that women do the greater part of the World's labor but receive a tiny portion of the world's resources. The UN estimates that women do over 70% of the world's labor yet own less than 8% of the wealth. This exploitation is on a spectrum, ranging from outright slavery on one end to low wages and minimal opportunities for advancement on the other. In the United States, the vast majority of the poor are women and children, and the percentage is increasing.

*The exploitation of women's bodies* includes, in particular, sexual exploitation and childbearing exploitation. *Sexual exploitation* means that women are used as objects for men's sexual pleasure, with little regard for their own humanity, wishes, or desires. *The exploitation of women's reproductive capabilities* means both requiring women to carry children when they don't want to, and prohibiting them from having children when they do want to. Prostitution and pornography are examples of ways in which economic exploitation and the exploitation of women's bodies come together.

Finally, *emotional exploitation* of women means using women to nurture men and children emotionally, while men return only a tiny portion of that love, support, and listening. Women pour so much into the people they love.



Because women do not consent easily to these kinds of exploitation, a huge apparatus of male violence against women is required in order to keep the system in place. (No oppressed group bows to oppression without being terrorized.) This violence includes rape, battering, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, pornography, and the confinement of women to jails and mental institutions.

The scale of this violence is something that men find difficult to grasp, so it is important to gather together the whole picture.

*Rape:* In the U.S., at least one woman in four will be raped at some point in her lifetime.

*Battering:* About 20% of heterosexual women report that violence on the part of their intimate partners is a recurring problem.

*Sexual abuse:* One in four girls is sexually abused by her 18th birthday.

*Imprisonment:* Over 90% of the women at the Massachusetts women's prison in Framingham are formerly battered, and most are imprisoned for acts related to their efforts to survive or escape the battering situation (such as forging checks for groceries). Several are imprisoned for long sentences for killing their batterers in order to save their own lives.

*Confinement to institutions:* The population of mental institutions has typically been over 60% female; women have been defined as crazy by the male dominated mental health system for failing to conform to male norms, or for becoming "hysterical" in the face of rape, battering, or sexual abuse.

*Pornography:* Hustler, a mainstream pornographic magazine that enjoys particular popularity on college campuses, portrays women being beaten, electrocuted, raped, mutilated, and put through meat grinders, and shows them getting sexual pleasure from such experiences. Real live women are raped, tortured, and murdered in the process of production of pornography.

The term "the war between the sexes" is mistaken; we're talking about a war on women.



Women are in no sense passive victims of this system. In fact, it is a testament to the courage and tirelessness of women's resistance to male domination that it takes so much violence to keep women down. Women have carried out periodic revolutionary uprisings throughout the 5,000 year history of male domination, one of which began in the late 1960's. Individual women fight every day to reclaim their rights.

A tremendous cultural apparatus also makes the exploitation of women possible. Women's accomplishments vanish from historical, scientific, literary, and artistic texts. Men speak for women who are standing right next to them. Maleness is the norm. Images of women in media portray them as inept, irrational, backbiting, and weak, or show them as humiliated, half-naked objects for men's use. Imagine existing in an environment where you rarely saw images of yourself other than these.

With all of the above in mind, we need to make the crucial distinction between *sexism* and *sex-role stereotyping*. Sex-role stereotyping is when girls are put in shiny black shoes and told not to get dirty, while boys are told to be tough and not to cry. Raw deal for both sides, right? Well, yes; but these restrictive roles represent only the barest beginning of what women are subjected to by sexism.

Oppression at its base is not about negative or limiting attitudes or stereotypes; these are merely the surface. In its true ugliness, oppression is about the *power to control and exploit*. This power is backed up by the key institutions of the society; corporations, government, courts, police, the educational system, and cultural messages. Anyone can be prejudiced; but to *oppress* you have to have the social power behind you.

Communication between men and women often gets stuck in this precise confusion. Women attempt to describe what gender oppression has meant in their lives, only to have the men who are listening respond by saying how hard things have been for them as men; the effect is to gloss over what the woman is trying to express, pushing it to the side.

## **CONTROLLING WOMEN'S ANGER**

Men are sometimes willing to hear a little about sexism from a woman, as long as she expresses herself in a nice calm tone, explains things very "rationally" and logically, and



doesn't make us feel uncomfortable. In other words, she can talk about sexism as long as she does it on our terms. Women who don't cooperate with these restrictions get labeled "too angry," "man-hating bitch," and other disparaging names.

But why on earth shouldn't women be enraged at men? And why is it their responsibility to be nice to us about it?

The underlying issues here are threefold:

- 1) However progressive we may be, we have reservoirs of sexist conditioning that tell us that it isn't appropriate for women to be really angry – that is, angry the way men get angry. We're still not prepared to grant women that right.
- 2) We have not yet done the work of imagination that is required to begin to grasp what a woman's experience is. If we had to go through even one day of what women typically live with from men, we would find ourselves feeling a wild fury. Why should we expect women's reaction to be any different than ours would be?
- 3) We are afraid on some level of the liberating power of women's anger. The anger and outrage of the oppressed, when it is channeled towards resisting oppression, moves mountains.

For example, when women say, "Men don't respect our opinions," or "Men don't pay attention to childcare," we get all offended and insist that they say "*some* men." But men are not just a collection of individuals; we are a social entity. When women talk about "men," they are talking about men as a social force. Let women tell the truth about what has happened to them and stop interfering.

Here is one of the most important points for allies to understand: women have every right to express resentment toward men as a group, but men have no right to express resentment toward women as a group. This ethic may appear on the surface to be a double standard, but it isn't at all. No one has a right to speak negatively about a group *that their group is keeping down*. That's the difference. Liberals (and conservatives) often make the mistake of thinking that being treated equally means being treated the same, but it doesn't; two treat two people equally often requires treating them quite



differently. (Imagine, for example, if everyone in a family were given exactly the same amount of food, regardless of their actual sizes and metabolisms.)

Give this point some careful thought and your alliances will be strengthened.

*(Note: A man of course has the right to be angry at an individual woman, but even then he needs to take a look at how that anger is likely to have been intensified by sexism, and he needs to give up the habit of using his anger to intimidate.)*

## **CONTROLLING CONVERSATIONS AND DECISION-MAKING**

I see sexism at its most persistent and relentless in male styles of conversing and arguing with women. Our tones of voice get impatient and condescending. We become know-it-alls. We laugh at women's opinions, or we let out amused, superior smiles. We interrupt, we talk too long, we shake our heads and roll our eyes, we jump in too quickly, leaving inadequate pauses for others to participate. We "correct" women's memories of events, giving them our more "accurate" memories. We get loud. We find so many ways to get our disrespect across.

When I challenge men about their conversational politics, they often counter with, "That's just my style, I argue like that with everybody." This is tantamount to saying, "Well, I intimidate men too." How does that make you any less intimidating to women?

## **EXCUSES**

Men's excuses for sexist behavior require some careful analysis.

The most common excuses are in one way or another related to men's feelings, as in "I behaved that way because I was so upset." But feelings are not the cause of oppressive behavior; oppressive attitudes are. We are perfectly capable of behaving differently toward women *if we truly believe we have a responsibility to do so.*



In fact, the way in which people behave when they're upset tends to be one of the best windows into their underlying attitudes.

Let's look at some specific examples of blaming behavior on feelings:

"I was too angry."

Men are socialized to feel entitled to use *enforcement* when they feel that a woman is not behaving acceptably. Our anger, even when we're furious, doesn't make us behave oppressively; the source of oppressive behavior is actually our belief in our right to enforce.

"I was abused as a child."

In that case, you should be *less* willing to participate in the oppression of others, because you know what it's like. Having been abused is no excuse.

"I get really insecure."

Our jealous *feelings* can come from insecurity, but our possessive *behavior* comes from having a "you belong to me" attitude. Don't confuse feelings with behavior. You're welcome to feel whatever you feel, but if you're using your jealousy to restrict a woman's freedom, that's possessive behavior.

"You took it the wrong way. You're too sensitive."

This excuse is just a way to avoid dealing with what we did. It's not a woman's job to somehow know what we intended. We're responsible for the *effects* of our actions, not just our intentions. "You're too sensitive" is a constant weapon of oppression in all its forms; it's a technique to shut people up, plain and simple. Consider that line off-limits for good.

"You weren't listening to me, so I was just trying to make you listen."

First of all, she's not obligated to listen to you. Secondly, men often define women as "not listening" when what we really mean is "continuing to disagree with me even



though I'm obviously right." She has a right to her own opinion no matter what. (And much of the time when we're so sure we're right, we're simply wrong.)

Give up making excuses for sexist behavior. Instead listen to the feedback, think about it carefully, make an apology where you owe one, and figure out how to be a better ally next time.

## **BACKLASH: THE MEN'S MOVEMENT**

I recommend that every man read *Backlash* by Susan Faludi. With ample documentation, Faludi shows the consciousness and strategy that goes into maintaining male domination. Sexism is no accident. The book is also gripping; I found it hard to put down.

The "men's movement," has been, to a great extent, one of these efforts to strike back against women. Leaders of this movement are fond of claiming that feminism has turned men into "wimps," and blames male difficulties on our mothers who have supposedly controlled and smothered us instead of allowing us "to become men."

(But rather than being fired up against our mothers, men should be encouraged to go back and get to know our mothers as people, reforging a bond that sexism works hard to sever. We need to learn about our mothers' lives and experiences. In the process, we regain a crucial pieces of ourselves.)

Furthermore, the men's movement perpetuates the belief that men are inherently different from women, with needs to feel strong, competent, independent, and warrior-like that women don't have and can't understand. In reality, women have all these same needs.

The men's movement communicates the idea that men need to get away from women in order to develop their identities. Imagine a similar argument being made that, for example, white people who grew up in mixed neighborhoods are struggling because



they have not gotten to become “fully white,” and in order to move past the debilitating experience of integration they need to go to “whites only” weekends.

Some men do indeed lose self-confidence around outspoken women. But what we need to ask these men is:

*1) Why are powerful women so threatening to you?*

*2) Why do you only see two ways to relate to women, either as one who dominates or as one who kowtows? In other words, why is a respectful, equal, mutually challenging way of relating to women out of the question?*

## **MEN AS VICTIMS**

It’s okay for men to talk about what’s hard about being male, if we bring it up on our own time. But these feelings have no place as a response when women are trying to talk about oppression. Oppressive systems emphasize the feelings, needs, and experiences of members of the dominant groups; we are not contradicting oppression if we continue that emphasis. Picture a stockbroker going down to the soup line and telling the starving people about the burdens of being rich. Members of an exploited group should not be expected to provide a supportive ear for whining about how hard it is to be in the privileged position.

## **“BUT I HAVE RENOUNCED SEXISM”**

Men sometimes declare that, since they feel that they don’t participate in sexism, they shouldn’t have to hear about it. But it is impossible to be male in this society, be you rich or poor, gay or straight, male-identified or female-identified, and not have unfair power over women. We can work very hard to reduce that power, but aspects of our oppressiveness are structural and thus are unavoidable until sexism itself ceases to exist. If I pass a woman who is alone on a quiet street at night, she has to consider the danger I might represent to her; thus my simple presence there steals from her some of her



sense of safety and enjoyment of life. If I'm in a conflict with a woman, people around us are often going to take my opinions more seriously than hers, and that strengthens my position. I'm compensated better than a woman for doing the same work, and I receive favoritism in hiring and promotion decisions; these benefits are beyond my immediate control.

I also receive subtler benefits from sexism. Because of men's tendency to treat women contemptuously, I come out looking great just for acting half-way decent. The fact that so many men batter women increases the power that non-battering men have in their relationships, whether they like it or not.

In other words, I'm a participant in sexism and earn privileges from it even though I strongly object to the oppression of women. And thus I have the responsibility to see to it that my efforts to end sexism outweigh my contributions, even my unwitting ones. And that's a serious undertaking.

Besides, there's arrogance in a man who declares that he isn't sexist. How has he become such an expert on women's oppression that he can be sure he's not falling into it at all? It isn't surprising to me that the men who make these kinds of claims almost always turn out to be people whose sexism is obvious to me.

## **MEN'S EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS**

The various concepts I've been covering lead me to two proposals for men's work. One is that every event or publication that is focused on men's issues should include a substantial portion devoted to discussions of overcoming the oppression of women. Otherwise we'll be headed back down the road to self-centeredness and collusion with sexism.

Secondly, no event or publication should exclude women's participation; women should be welcomed to attend men's workshops and write for men's journals and blogs. Women's participation keeps us honest and helps keep us on course.



Holding men-only events is not parallel to all-women's gatherings; it's parallel, rather, to holding all-white gatherings, which we of course would resoundingly condemn.

## **BUILDING ALLIANCES**

Unity between men and women in liberation struggles is a challenge. Sexism, like all forms of oppression, is divisive. The quality of our alliances with women is going to be up to us; women will trust us to the extent that we earn their trust. Every time they work with us, women will be wondering, "Are our concerns going to be gradually pushed aside? Is our leadership going to be undermined? Are our working relationships going to be sexualized? Are we going to feel silent and invisible?" Women have good reason to worry, because these dynamics unfold in almost every mixed-gender organizations, no matter how conscious the men appear to be.

Women pay other prices to have men along as allies; we insist that they temper their outrage, we expect that they should be grateful to us, we demand that they listen to us whine. If we step outside of these habits, and above all stop sexualizing working relationships, we'll find ourselves gradually less and less on trial.

The quality of our listening will be the other key determinant; our defensiveness is one of the biggest obstacles to effective alliances.

## **"DIVISIVENESS"**

Women who speak bluntly about sexism, or who demand opportunities to gather without men present, get accused of "divisiveness." These women are not causing divisions. They are, rather, refusing to ignore the divisions that sexism has created, refusing to continue the charade of unity. When women get opportunities for separateness, the possibility for true unity actually *increases*. Why? Because women gain the centeredness and solidarity to operate from their own reality instead of from



pretense. They then come back to their relationships with men able to insist on redefining them, instead of having to accept them on men's terms.

This same principle holds across all lines of oppression: genuine unity is only possible as we learn to better understand and respect the different experiences of the oppressed, their different cultures, and their different relationships to social power.

## **COMING TO TERMS WITH SEXISM**

Learning about the full extent of sexism can be overwhelming. Some men become defensive and refuse to think about it further. Others equate sexism with sex-role stereotyping and focus on fighting "sexism" as a way to benefit men by freeing them from sex-role limitations. Many others are willing to take a more direct look at the oppression of women, but end up feeling paralyzed by guilt and the fear of doing something wrong. They start to idolize women the way some whites idolize tribal people; idolatry is not respect. Still another group of men become vocal proponents of women's rights, but are unwilling to examine their own complicity, and thus their personal and political conduct doesn't progress.

There is a challenging tension in what we have to accomplish to be effective allies. On the one hand, we need to quit the "men's team." That choice helps us not feel criticized when women say "men do such and such," because we've switched sides. At the same time we need to not dissociate ourselves so completely from men that we start to consider ourselves above reproach.

As I explained earlier, it doesn't work for men to give up sexism because that's what's good for men; we have to do it because we care about the women in our lives, and about women all over the world, and we don't want them to have to live in these conditions. But at the same time it *does* improve the quality of our own lives, because stepping out of oppressive conditioning increases our connectedness to the human race; and to feel connected is what we're all most deeply desiring. Giving up male privilege is hard, but when you look back you find that nothing of any real value has been lost. The damage that oppression does is very real; but the benefits, as real as they



are in one sense, are in another sense a complete illusion, because no one finds a satisfying life by behaving oppressively.

Some white people happily say, "My heart lies with people of color in interracial struggles," and some wealthy or upper-middle class people say, "I'm really behind the poor in the class struggle." But it's less common to hear a man say, "I side with women in the gender struggle." I think this contrast comes partly from the fact that white people tend to lead lives largely separate from people of color, and rich and poor are usually kept well apart, but the lives of men and women are constantly intertwined. This means that to switch sides, a man has to do more than just take political stands; he has to examine personal ways of operating, and this is a more unpleasant process. The rewards, however, are great as well.

### **Dealing With Our Own Rage at Men**

Each man has an internal reservoir of anger *at men*, an important subject that never gets discussed. Buried under the oppressive attitudes we've been taught, we have a heart that hates sexism and what it has done to girls and women we love. Uncovering this outrage is a great help to us, drawing us away from the idea that feminism is a movement against men rather than a movement against oppression.

At the same time, those feelings can create inner conflict. Is it possible for me to simultaneously be outraged about sexism and aware of my own complicity in it? Does this mean that I hate myself? "Yes" to the first question, "no" to the second. Forgive yourself for the past (but don't demand that women forgive you), demand of yourself absolutely to do better in the future, and channel your resentment in the direction of the patriarchal system that produced this mess. Don't hate men, but hate their sexist actions with all your heart.

### **WOMEN'S RESISTANCE**

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Being a good ally also means learning about how women have resisted and fought back against sexism, not just how they have been its victims. Every oppressed group fights back in courageous, creative, and tireless ways, and these acts of resistance are carried out in the face of tremendous retaliation.

It's important for us to be able to hold these two views of women simultaneously, seeing how badly women have been harmed but also how inspiring and brave they have been in their efforts, over thousands of years, to recover their rights. Women want us to get how bad certain aspects of their experience have been, but they don't want us to feel sorry for them, and they don't want us to see them as collections of injuries. Make sure that each day you are noticing women's strengths, their intelligence, their courage, and their creativity. Notice how well they have survived against the odds. They don't need us to rescue them; they need us to join their cause as allies and support their leadership.

## **WHAT CAN MEN DO?**

There are countless actions that men can take to contribute to the dismantling of sexism. Here are some of the key moves I would like you to make:

### *Treat Women With Respect*

Respect is different from patronizing. Women do not want us to kiss up to them, placate them, or abandon our own opinions and beliefs. They are not interested in having us tip-toeing around asking, "Oops, did I do something sexist?" Our guilt just becomes another burden on women. There is no substitute for equality, love, and listening. When you agree or disagree, learn to express your opinions in a way that respects women's intelligence and validates their perspective. Give up the male compulsion to win and be right. You will indeed agree with women more and more, not because you're "letting them win," but because you're actually hearing and reflecting on what they're saying.

Above all, talk to women less and listen more.



Respect is communicated most profoundly through concrete behaviors. The loudest indicators of your level of respect is doing your share of all childcare, housecleaning, shopping, laundry, cooking, dishwashing, birth control, communicating with relatives, planning the social calendar, buying gifts, and on and on. A disturbing proportion of men claim to be Mr. Evolved while continuing to exploit women's labor, *which is the central piece of what sexism is all about.*

And emotional caretaking is *work*. Show respect through the emotional giving you do, the proportion of time you spend listening, the supportive comments you make, the appreciation you express, your thoughtfulness.

### *Support Women's Leadership*

Listen to women, and support them, regarding the specific issue and challenges that come up in their efforts to take leadership. Encourage woman to believe in themselves and in their abilities as leaders. *Take care of children* so that women can attend meetings and events, and contribute in other logistical ways so that women have time for their leadership efforts. Support women's leadership even when it is in conflict with your own.

### *Educate Ourselves*

At the end of this article you'll find a bibliography of the books that I've found most valuable. Your best source for learning, though, is the women in your life and the feminist political events in your area. Listen, listen, listen. Education about heterosexism is also essential, because it is a crucial weapon of sexism. The oppression of lesbians helps keep all women down, and the oppression of gay men helps to intimidate men into participating in sexism and toxic masculinity. (See Suzanne Pharr's book in the bibliography.)

### *Give Up Pornography and Prostitutes*

Pornography is deadly to women and children. People are killed in the production of pornography, sometimes by "accident" (torture that got out of hand), and sometimes on purpose for the effect (the famous "snuff films"). Women and children are enslaved, producing pornography against their will. Other women work in pornography out of



economic need, so they're participating is "voluntarily" in the same way that a worker who's dying of exposure to asbestos at his or her factory job is doing so "voluntarily."

Pornography spreads degrading and hateful images of women. It teaches that women enjoy being used and are sexually excited by violence. It erases women and children as people. It is, along with rape and battering, the most powerful communicator of contempt and hatred toward women that is endemic to our society.

Do not give the pornography industry a penny of your money. Do not rent pornographic videos or visit pornographic websites, don't purchase pornographic movie options in hotels. Every cent you spend goes to support a massive anti-woman industry (\$10 billion per year).

Looking at pornography leaves you feeling bad anyhow, if you really pay attention to what's going on inside you. If you need support to give it up, get counseling on it or participate in a group for men who are giving up pornography. (One may exist in your area; if not, form one. See the Rus Funk book in the bibliography.)

Prostitution follows a similar pattern to pornography, and in fact there is considerable overlap in the participants. Most prostitutes are slaves to pimps, and even those who are not are there out of economic need. Don't support the industry. If your excuse is, "my money is helping a woman to survive," go spend it at a woman-owned business or contribute it to an organization working for economic justice for women.

### *Call Other Men Out*

We need to take responsibility for interrupting the anti-woman behavior of other men. That work should not keep falling all on women's shoulders. We also can sometimes get men to listen when they aren't willing to hear it from a woman.

Refuse to allow women to be talked about in a degrading way in your presence. Don't allow woman-hating (and gay-hating) words like "bitch", "whore", "pussy", or "cunt" to be used without strongly challenging the person doing so. (And it doesn't matter if they are being used against a man; women are still being degraded in the process.) Refuse to do any bonding with men that is based in making fun of women, feeling superior to



them, or using degrading language about them. Don't laugh when sexist jokes are told, point out that the joke is sexist, and ask that it not be told again. When someone says, "This joke is sexist, but...", immediately interrupt and say, "Then please don't tell it."

Challenging men does not always have to be awkward and tension-producing; there are sometimes humorous ways to point out someone's negative attitudes. As long as you don't make light of the oppression, a light touch can sometimes succeed in getting a message through that wouldn't have been heard otherwise.

### *Recognize Men's Stake in Ending Sexism*

The outstanding benefit to men (and to everyone) of overcoming sexism is that the world desperately needs women's leadership. The whole world is in a deeply precarious position. Unless we head in a radically different direction quickly, we will destroy human life on the planet and take countless other life forms with us. Men's leadership is not getting us out of this mess.

We become more effective activists as we increase our understanding of the interconnection between the different forms of oppression.

We benefit from centuries of women's wisdom when we stop silencing women. We get back the richness of women's political organizing abilities, women's art, women's knowledge about health and natural healing, women's appreciation of nature and spirituality.

## **EXPLORING OUR OWN EXPERIENCES AS TARGETS OF OPPRESSION**

One powerful way for men to gain insight into women's experience of oppression is to do explore our *as children*. Children are among the most heavily oppressed members of society. When we were children, we faced treatment from adults that is in many ways similar to what women face from men, such as:

- \* *we were considered less than fully human, just because of being children*
- \* *we were ridiculed and controlled by adults, who used their power over us*



- \* *we were in physical danger from adult violence (including "spanking")*
- \* *most of us were sexually mistreated by adults (usually, though not necessarily, by males) at some point during childhood, or had our boundaries invaded in other ways*
- \* *our opinions, our loves, and our outrage carried little or no weight*
- \* *we were not permitted to express anger at adults*
- \* *we were subjected to degrading images of children in media and in conversation*

As we uncover these experiences of adultist oppression, we become able to move beyond the strictly intellectual to an intuitive understanding of sexism, and our desire to stop participating in oppression deepens.

Many men have also experienced oppression as people of color, poor and working class people, LGBT, people with disabilities, and on down the line. Exploring these experiences is not an excuse to mistreat women, and any time we fall into saying, "Well, I know what it's like for you, because I've experienced oppression also," we are making a mistake. But our healing work *can* help us gain insight to deepen our alliances with women.

Notice that I'm saying that men experience oppression as part of *other* groups we belong to, including the fact that we all went through childhood. We do not experience oppression *as men*. There are things that are hard about being a man, but the concept of oppression loses its power for liberation if we start to apply it to all hard experiences. It will become especially meaningless if we apply it to groups that are in the privileged position, which is to say to groups that are actively keeping other groups down. *The single most devastating aspect of oppression is being taught that you are inferior, and then having that inferiority enforced.* Society does not teach us, through laws, images, religious texts, early cultural training, and so forth, that we're inferior *as men*. Quite the opposite, in fact, we get messages constantly, and from the tenderest of ages, that our maleness makes us superior.

I also believe that the proof is in the pudding. I have seen so many men respond to learning about sexism by going off and doing emotional work on the hardships of being male, and I've never seen it result in improvements in how they support women in their lives.



One other area of emotional work that I have seen be helpful (besides exploring our own experiences of true oppression) is to process painful childhood memories of times when women or girls we cared about were being harmed. Herein lies a bitter but important irony: One of the reasons why we take part in sexism is, paradoxically, as a way to numb the pain we have about what it does to women, and to numb our guilt about not being able to make it stop. Processing and discharging that pain help increase our determination to not participate in keeping women down.

See, then, what you can remember about the sexism faced by your mothers, your sisters, your playmates, and other females when you were a kid. And through that channel, *get in touch with your own bitterness about the oppression of women*. There is power in that outrage that will help take action in the world.

Finally, unearth memories of times you were pressured to participate in mistreating or talking badly about females, or were ridiculed for refusing to go along. Boys are intimidated into taking part in hurting or disrespecting girls, and that residue of emotional injury needs to be healed.

## **MEN AND SELF-ESTEEM**

None of us thought up sexism. If we'd had our way as young children, we would have unhesitatingly erased gender oppression and all other divisions. Children hate prejudice, hate separations, hate anything that is unfair; we were no different. So we don't need to feel ashamed now to be men. But we do need to accept the responsibility that being male brings us. It's as if someone lit a stick of dynamite and put it in your hands; you can complain all you want that you never wanted that stick of dynamite in the first place, but the reality is you've got it now. The decisions you make about what to do with it are going to have a big impact.

Despite my outrage, I feel powerful love and compassion towards men. But I don't confuse men's pain with our behavior. Not only is our pain not the cause of our participation in sexism, it is to a great degree *the result of* that participation. So when we allow a man to continue acting sexist, when we let him use his feelings as an excuse,



when we support his anti-woman attitudes, we're not only abandoning women, we're abandoning that man.

## **CULTIVATING OUTRAGE**

The realities of sexism should make us furious. I'll just pick one: Roughly *two-thousand* women are killed per year in the U.S. by their current or former partners, and over two hundred children are killed by men during those homicides of women.

How can we let this hatred continue? Are women simply expendable beings? The killings are the product of *possession* and *ownership*, of men seeing women as things that belong to them. Women are not things. They were not put on this earth to do things for us, to meet our needs. We do not have the right to insist that they get out of our way. We do not have the right to go fishing or go to our secret lover while women raise our children. We do not have the right to take their children away from them after divorce. We do not have the right to examine their conduct when they are raped, or battered, or killed. We do not have the right to dismiss the perpetrators of these acts as "crazy," when their actions are the predictable outcome of a society that exploits women and holds them in contempt, and when we play a role in making it possible for them to do what they do.

If I sound enraged, just imagine how women must feel.

Get on the right side of these questions and start making your voice heard. We want you along in the struggle.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

These are some of the books that have had the greatest influence on my thinking:

\* *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* by bell hooks

\* *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* by Suzanne Pharr

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- \* *Backlash* by Susan Faludi
- \* *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua
- \* *For Her Own Good* by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English
- \* *Women Respond to the Men's Movement: A Feminist Collection* edited by Kay Hagan
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