

Gender: Power and Privilege

Our work today requires us to focus on the visible and invisible mechanisms of power, privilege and influence that characterize the dominant – subordinated system of cultural oppression that robs masculinity of its dignity by the overuse/misuse of male privilege and subjects women in our society to the dark shadow of an age-old patriarchal culture.

The major feature of the social status of men and women is the dominance of men in virtually every aspect of modern life. This culturally-installed male dominance can be explained in many ways and from a variety of perspectives. A strictly evolutionary approach might suggest that the gender roles have evolved over large expanses of time in a way that naturally selected men and women into the roles and social statuses they hold today. From a Judeo-Christian standpoint, one is led to believe that God created the world this way and everything is as it should be.

A brief reflection on the last few hundred years suggests that women have “come a long way” in establishing their basic worth and value in modern society. There are other informed perspectives that suggest that the male dominance in modern society is a function of culturally-installed patriarchy that not only favors men but also oppresses women in our society. However it gets explained, in the social order of things, men are the dominant group and women are the subordinated group in our society.

Patriarchy enthusiasts would point to the numerous benefits society enjoys because of male dominance and our respective gender roles. Feminist philosophers and activists are quick to point out the great suffering women have experienced over the years and the discrimination faced every day in these modern times. While extremists in both groups discount the other, the underlying facts suggest that both points of view are valid and remain in a dialectic tension with each other.

Ultimately, our work today is not necessarily to right every wrong and validate every good espoused by these polarized points of view. Our work today requires us to focus on the visible and invisible mechanisms of power, privilege, and influence that characterize the dominant–subordinated system of cultural oppression that robs masculinity of its dignity by the overuse/misuse of male privilege and subjects women in our society to the dark shadow of an age-old patriarchal culture.

On the Issue of Male Privilege

As a man, I am the recipient of a myriad of privileges that come to me simply as a function of my gender. Here is a short list of the power, privilege, and influences afforded to me because I am a man born in these modern time.

- As a student (K-12 and college), I was called upon when I raised my hand in class. This happened more frequently for me than my female classmates. Even today this privilege is still afforded to boys and young men.
- In my adolescence, it was cool for me to be thought of as attractive and involved with many girls, while girls presenting this behavior were ridiculed and shamed.
- During my high school experience, I could count on the resources, equipment and organization to play a wide range of sports, while only a select number of opportunities were available to girls.
- In my young adult experience, sexually-active men were considered “studs” (a positive hero-like status), while women exhibiting the same behavior were considered promiscuous and labeled with a variety of degrading and dehumanizing terms.
- At work, the “ultimate powers that be” are men, and the culture favors men on the issues driving the organization.
- At work I earn more than women in the same job function and receive more opportunities for advancement than my women colleagues.

- I will get a better price and be offered better terms when buying a car than a women in similar circumstances.
- When purchasing maintenance services for my car or home, I pay less for the same services.
- When applying for a job or promotion, I will be offered more pay than a woman, especially if my employer knows I have a family.
- In society in general, men are steeped in the culturally-installed patriarchy and thus act to preserve the societal norm of male dominance in government, civic leadership, religious stewardship and other major features of power and influence in our society.
- I am unlikely to be the target of sexual harassment at work, sexually motivated attacks in public or domestic violence at home. As such, my personal safety is not a daily concern for me, as it is for many women.
- I do not face social pressure to bear children, raise them and maintain the domestic affairs of a household.
- I am not expected to change my name at the time of marriage.
- I do not face a constant barrage of media pressure to change the shape of my body to match a male defined ideal, either through diet, exercise or surgery.

These are but a few of the privileges I can readily see and acknowledge, while fully understanding that there may be many more I receive unconsciously but I am nevertheless privileged by them.

Contrasting Views Between Men and Women

The power of group membership cannot be underestimated. The influences are so pervasive and often invisible that a certain kind of blind spot renders most men unable to gain a balanced view of the issues. This becomes abundantly clear in a comparison of the views of men and women on workplace-related issues. Even among young and upwardly mobile professionals, perspectives on gender suggest that the age-old man-woman disconnect is still in tact.

In a survey, Catalyst (a leading research group studying experiences of women in our society) surveyed over 1,200 professionals born between 1964 and 1975 from eight companies in the U.S. and two in Canada. The results of this survey revealed:

- Over half of the men Catalyst surveyed think advancement opportunities for white women have increased greatly compared to ten years ago. Only one-fourth of women agree.
- 37% of white men believe advancement opportunities for women of color have increased greatly over the last ten years. Only 9% of women of color agree.
- 60% of men in dual-career marriages say their career is the primary career, but women are more likely to report that neither career is primary.
- 62% of men believe that men and women are paid the same for similar work. Less than one-third of women agree.
- Almost half of women say they have to outperform men to get the same rewards. Only 11% of men agree.

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The Effects of Pay Inequity Reach Far

According to a 1999 study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research and the AFL-CIO, based on U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor statistics, women who work full time earn just 74 cents for every dollar men earn. That equals \$148 less each week, or \$7,696 a year. Women of color who work full time are paid even less, only 64 cents for every dollar men earn—\$210 less per week and \$11,440 less per year.

With a record 64 million women in the workforce, pay discrimination hurts the majority of American families. Families lose \$200 billion in income annually to the wage gap—an average loss of more than \$4,000 for each working family. In addition, wage discrimination lowers total lifetime earnings, thereby reducing women's benefits from Social Security and pension plans.

Wage Inequalities Are Not a Result of Women's Qualifications or Choices.

Wage discrimination persists despite women's increased educational attainment, greater level of experience in workforce, and decreased amount of time spent out of the workforce raising children.

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- *Experience.* Women gain only approximately 30 cents per hour for five additional years of work experience, compared to \$1.20 for white men.
- *Childcare.* Women spend more time in the workforce than ever before. Sixty-one percent of women with children under the age of 2, and 78 percent of mothers with school-age children remain in the workforce. Time spent out of the workforce is not enough to account for the persistent wage gap that women experience.

Source: American Association of University Women

Where We Go From Here

There is much work to be done to bridge the gender divide. However, given the dynamics of the relationship between dominant and subordinated groups, real and lasting change requires the thoughtful work of the dominant group. In this case, it means that the responsibility for creating lasting change in the culturally-installed patriarchy is the work of men in our society. This important work of extending privilege, power, and influence to women as a group does not require the disadvantaging of men. The work also requires men to self-assess and to address the issues of overt oppression of women (including domestic violence, workplace disparity, and other gender equity issues).

What Men Can Do

- Recognize and accept the culturally-installed bias toward male privilege, power, and influence.
- Become more aware of the group-level patterns of behavior exhibited by men acting out of their group-level identity.
- Become more aware of your own behaviors and the impact those behaviors have on the people around you.

- Be willing to act as an ally and partner to women and others seeking a balance in opportunities afforded to women in particular and to all people in general.
- Refrain from all forms of abuse and control over women.
- Extend your group-level power, privilege, and influence wherever appropriate.

Success in closing the gender gap also requires the partnership of women. This partnership requires women to assert their talent, skills and ability in the home, at work, and in the community at large. It calls on women to point out what is not working in the gender gap, which means not colluding with the patriarchy with silence and the denial that serious problems still exist and must be addressed.

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What Women Can Do

- Make a personal choice to develop your signature capabilities to the maximum degree possible without regard for culturally-installed barriers or obstacles.
- Make a personal choice to fully contribute your signature capability to family, work and community without regard for culturally installed barriers and obstacles.
- Learn to partner with dominant group allies to alleviate the negative impact of culturally-installed oppression on all groups.
- Call out and name those circumstances and instances of gender oppression as they present themselves.

Suggested Readings and Resources

Betsch Cole, Johnetta, and Guy-Sheftall, Beverly. (2003), *Gender Talk: Sexism, Power, and Politics in the African American Community*. Atlanta, GA: One World Press.

Hooks, Bell. (2000), *Feminism Is For Everybody: Passionate Politics*. South End Press.
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Johnson, Allan. (2001), *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*. Temple University Press.
Privilege Power and Difference. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Valian, Virginia. (1999), *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*. Boston: MIT Press.