



Are You Challenging Sexism and Male Supremacy?

by Paul Kivel

THERE HAVE BEEN MANY FORMS of patriarchal societies over the ages. Currently in the U.S., patriarchy takes the form of sexism and male supremacy. By that I mean that we currently live within the pervasive, systematic, everyday system of exploitation, marginalization, objectification and violence directed towards girls and women (sexism), and the pervasive, systematic, everyday system of benefits, power, prestige, inclusion, and privileges afforded to men (male supremacy). Of course, our ruling class and power elite also use capitalism, racism, heterosexism, and other forms of exploitation and violence to maintain their power.

I am not going to document the massive economic exploitation of women's paid and unpaid work, the objectification and exploitation of women's bodies, the systematic discrimination women face in wages, benefits, housing, health care, transportation, political representation, and other essential areas of life. These forms of exploitation, objectification, and violence, compounded by race, class, religion, immigration status, sexual orientation, and disability, are massively documented and visible to anyone who has an open mind. A few examples should suffice.

Women make, on average, approximately three-fourths of what men make a lifetime. (White women make somewhat more than three-quarters, and women of color make a lot less). That means that if a man makes \$40,000 and a woman makes \$30,000 a year she will end up with hundreds of thousands of dollars less than he will. The higher the income level the more dramatic the difference.

Women, on average, perform one entire hour more a day of unpaid housework, childcare, and care of others than men do, every day of the year.

Men will sexually assault one out of every four women over a lifetime and at least 3-4 million men a year batter their partners. In addition, men will sexually harass 50-80% of women who work (most women) and almost every woman experiences fear and



harassment on the street at some time in her life. This is a form of control and systematic terrorism of the entire female population but child sexual assault, domestic violence, elder abuse, sexual assault and sexual harassment are still seen as women's issues and are rarely on social justice agendas.

Visible, public images of women being raped, assaulted, demeaned and abused are everywhere as unavoidable, hate-filled, and constant reminders to women that they are vulnerable to violence from men, and constant messages to boys and men (through advertising, videogames, movies, TV, pornography and prostitution) that they have the right to use women for their sexual gratification.

Political issues, natural events, and everyday life are not commonly analyzed through a gender lens. Therefore the impact on women of various groups is not visible, does not guide our analysis and perpetuates the entire system of exploitation. For example, three-quarters to four-fifths of the people killed by the '04 Tsunami were women of color. The majority of those left behind in New Orleans were poor women of color. The impact of environmental exploitation, degradation, and dumping falls substantially on women, particularly on women of color. Etc.

As a man, and of course as a white, able-bodied, straight man of financial security, my life floats on a sea of invisible labor performed by women, primarily women of color in this country and around the world.

- My clothes are made primarily by women of color under exploitive circumstances.
- My food is grown, harvested, processed, and often cooked primarily by women of color under exploitive circumstances.
- My children have been cared for primarily by women child care workers, teachers, recreation program workers, and babysitters who make much less than me for their work.
- Sick or infirm members of my family have been cared for by women in hospitals, nursing homes, hospices and other care facilities.
- The tedious work of organizing, providing food for, staffing, publicizing and cleaning up after most of the



shows, family celebrations, concerts, meetings, and public events I attend is been done primarily by women.

- Almost all of the electronics goods I use, including cell phones, computers, TVs, DVDs, cameras, and microwave ovens are made by women of color under exploitive circumstances.

It is political that this is not widely acknowledged and talked about. It is political that when issues of sexism and male supremacy are raised they are usually denied or minimized. It is political that women are commonly thought to have achieved great success in our society and that we have eliminated most barriers to gender equity. It is political that we (particularly men) don't use a gender lens all day, everyday, to see and understand the world.

I want to offer some simple suggestions for putting these issues on a social justice agenda.

Use a gender lens—as well as economic, racial and other lens—all of the time. Constantly ask yourself “What is the difference that gender makes in this situation?”

Always ask, “**Where are the women**—why aren't they in leadership?” “**Where are the other women**—which groups of women are not at the table?”

Women constitute over half the population. Notice and respond when they do not have representation, leadership, and power.

Interpersonal violence is a social justice issue. Unless each of us and our communities address and heal from the interpersonal violence that tears our lives apart we will not be able to work together, nor to foster the full, creative participation of vast numbers of people, nor will we be able to meet their needs for safety, healing, liberation, and justice.

Make sure that women's contributions are recognized and honored. Notice and draw attention to the unpaid and unrecognized work that women do to support our daily lives, to sustain those in need, and to make things happen.

Interrupt male cultures of power that operate to exclude, marginalize, or disempower women. Notice how men resist accepting responsibility for male privilege and male supremacy and speak out.



Become more knowledgeable about women's cultures, women histories, women's contributions, and women's lives.

Look to progressive women and women's organizations for leadership.

Strategize about who you can organize with to address issues of sexism and male supremacy.

Identify where you have work to do to **build and sustain intimate, family, and community relationships built on complete respect, consent, and mutuality.**

Identify your next steps in challenging sexism and male supremacy.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.