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Understanding Feminism

Oppression

Ours is a world permeated by sexism. In virtually every sphere of life, women's interests are systematically subordinated to those of men; and yet, these arrangements are so extensive, so familiar, and so entrenched in our habits of thought that it is possible not to notice them at all. Such all-encompassing exploitation is harmful to women. It is unjust and unacceptable.

Because this discrimination is embedded in the fabric of our culture, special attention must be focused on the details of the many distinctive aspects of women's social, economic, political, and personal positions in society; it is necessary to illuminate the oppression inherent in the specific arrangements of women's diverse lives. "Feminism" is the name given to the various theories that help reveal the multiple, gender-specific patterns of harm that constitute women's oppression. It is also the term used to characterize the complex, diverse political movement to eliminate all such forms of oppression.

Marilyn Frye (1983) has defined oppression as an interlocking series of restrictions and barriers that reduce the options available to people on the basis of their membership in a group. Oppression is often insidious, because the individual practices that make up the system of barriers may look innocent when examined on their own; their role as restraints may be easily obscured. As Frye notes, however, when the various oppressive practices are seen as an interwoven set of institutionalized norms, the pattern of restriction becomes clear.[1]

The most obvious systems of oppression are those maintained by the power of the state through the use of armed force: for example, South Africa's enforcement of apartheid. But other systems of oppres-

sion, including sexism, are so well established that they have been internalized by both those who suffer under them and those who benefit from them; they remain invisible to many of the people most directly involved. Many women have learned to accept as natural the socially determined obstacles that they confront and do not perceive such obstacles as restrictive. Feminist consciousness-raising is the process of learning to recognize the barriers of oppression, so that we can begin to challenge and dismantle them.

Although the statistics that document women's oppression are familiar, they bear repeating because some people continue to doubt that women are (still) systematically discriminated against; others, thinking of particular women who do not seem to be oppressed or do not feel oppressed, are inclined to underestimate the seriousness of the problem. I therefore offer a summary of some of the overwhelming evidence that women as a class are oppressed.

In the economic sphere women in North America earn two-thirds of what men earn; they are concentrated in job ghettos, usually in the service sector, where they have access to few benefits and have less job security than do men. Few women hold positions that reflect any degree of authority or political power, and most are in jobs that have no real opportunities for advancement or seniority. Those women who do work in traditionally male professions, such as university teaching, medicine, or engineering, or who hold influential positions in the business world or in politics tend to be concentrated in the lower-paid end of the spectrum for their respective careers. Most are still excluded from the senior positions of their professions by stereotypical attitudes and male-defined norms. For example, working mothers in these fields are hampered in their opportunities for success by expectations that serious professionals should be free to travel frequently, devote more than sixty hours a week to their jobs, and be available for important meetings that may be scheduled during breakfast or evening hours. Less-privileged women who work in factories, hospitals, shops, domestic service, or restaurants often have no control over the shifts they are required to take. In all categories of employment, women are generally treated as the reserve labor pool—the last-hired, first-fired cohort of inexpensive labor to be added to and withdrawn from the labor force according to the economic conditions of the marketplace (Connelly 1978; Phillips and Phillips 1983).

Moreover, women and their children constitute the majority of the

poor in the developed world; experts in the field of poverty studies now speak of "the feminization of poverty." Joni Seager and Ann Olson (1986) report: "In the USA, 78 per cent of all people living in poverty are women or children under 18 years old. Statistics from all over the world tell the same story: no matter how poverty is measured, the poor population is largely and increasingly comprised of women and their dependent children" (Seager and Olson 1986, 28). Lenore Weitzman's important study shows the economic vulnerability of women and children in the face of marital breakdown: in the first year after divorce, the average standard of living for men rises 42 percent, whereas for women (and their children) it falls by 73 percent (Weitzman 1985). Furthermore, female poverty is not restricted to young families. Although the financial status of the elderly in the West has improved in recent years, those seniors who are poor are overwhelmingly female.

In many countries of the developing world, women are prevented from owning property or determining what crops should be planted, even though they do most of the labor of working the land. In a Report to the UN Commission on the Status of Women, former Secretary General Kurt Waldheim (a man not inclined to feminist hyperbole) summed up conditions worldwide: "While women represent half the global population and one-third of the [paid] labor force, they receive only one-tenth of the world income and own less than one percent of world property. They also are responsible for two-thirds of all the working hours" (quoted in Morgan 1984, 1). Other UN statistics indicate that approximately 500 million people suffered from hunger and malnutrition in the early 1980s; women and children under five years old are the groups most seriously affected by famine (Morgan 1984). In light of the discriminatory levels of pay, inadequate job protection, and minimal social supports available to working women, it is not hard to see how so many women become trapped in cycles of poverty.

In addition to the economic disadvantages women experience, significant gender injustice exists in the sphere of interpersonal relationships. Even though most women now work outside the home, they are still considered responsible for the demands of household management and child-rearing; such expectations create a double workday for the majority of women. Relatively few have access to affordable, reliable child care; professional child-welfare experts, such as

doctors, psychologists, and educators, endorse the conventional social wisdom about the importance of good mothering to healthy child development and thereby foster a perpetual sense of guilt in mothers: mothers are criticized if they work outside the home (for not spending enough time with their children and for not finding good child care while at work) and if they choose to stay at home (for failing to provide adequately for their children and for setting the wrong sort of role model). Here, as elsewhere, the double bind is the common condition of women; no option is available to them that will not provoke criticism and guilt (including the option of having no children).[2]

The traditional sexual division of labor makes women responsible not only for the perpetual grind of meeting daily needs—shopping, cooking, cleaning, tending the sick, organizing, and, in the developing world, collecting and transporting water, fuel, and food—but also for the emotional support of family members and workplace colleagues. Women's customary roles in the bedroom, the kitchen, the hospital, the classroom, and the boardroom require them to be sensitive to others' emotional states and to provide comfort and understanding when things get rough. Women are not usually thanked for their nurturing, because it is accepted as natural to them and therefore not recognized as work. They are, however, blamed and often punished if they fail to deliver.

Moreover, a pervasive pattern of violence and sexual dominance by men over women is, for the most part, tolerated by the various male-controlled legal institutions. On both an individual and a collective basis, men exercise physical and sexual dominance over women. In the United States reports indicate that approximately 93 percent of women experience some degree of sexual harassment or assault, 44 percent of women are subjected to rape or attempted rape, 43 percent of girls experience sexual abuse (and in 16 percent of the cases the abuse is from male family members), at least 30 percent of women are subject to systematic battering in their homes, and up to 70 percent of married women are beaten at some time in their married lives (MacKinnon 1987; Morgan 1984). And this is not a uniquely American problem: a major Canadian study on sexual offenses against children discovered that at some point in their lives, about half of all women have been victims of unwanted sexual acts and about four in five of these incidents first happened to the victims when they were children or adolescents (Badgley et al. 1984, 175). In

reports on the state of women's conditions, collected from seventy countries in the early 1980s, Robin Morgan found that nearly every contributor cited the widespread acceptance of woman-beating as a problem in her country (Morgan 1984). Meanwhile, the enormous international profit in pornography reinforces the sexualization of dominance of and violence against women (MacKinnon 1987).

Closely connected with male control of women's sexual lives is men's control over women's reproductive lives. Despite widely diverse social and political systems, powerful men in all nations use their institutional authority in the church, the courts, medical societies, and legislatures to set the rules that limit the control women can have over their own reproduction. In the West male-dominated institutions restrict women's abilities to prevent or terminate pregnancies unless the women are members of a minority race or are poor or mentally disabled, in which cases they are vulnerable to being coerced into sterilization; either way, women are denied the chance to make their own decisions about reproduction. In China women are limited in the number of children they are allowed to produce; in India in 1980 a woman died of septic abortion every ten minutes, and 50 percent of the women who see pregnancies through to term are so malnourished that they gain no weight in their third trimesters (Morgan 1984). The average Soviet woman has six to eight abortions (some have as many as twenty), because contraceptives are virtually unobtainable, whereas in Peru, 10 to 15 percent of women in prison are there for having had illegal abortions (Morgan 1984). Two-thirds of the women in the world have no access to contraceptive information or devices (Morgan 1984).

The subordination of women is a well-entrenched cultural arrangement, which continues to be supported by many of the principal institutions and values of modern society. The major organized religions reinforce male privilege and perpetuate male dominance by treating its exercise as a matter of accustomed norms. In her survey of the concerns expressed by feminists around the world, Morgan found that almost every contributor stressed that the organized religion of her state, be it Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism, was repressive to women (Morgan 1984). Within the Judeo-Christian tradition of Western culture, patriarchal structures are promoted as the product of divine will, and spiritual feelings are linked to a duty of submission to one's place in the hierarchy.

Moreover, political and economic ideologies offer further support

for the continued subordination of women. In the West capitalist economic and political values uphold a worldview that conceives of humanity as made up of egoistic, competitive beings who are perpetually involved in "natural" power struggles against one another; dominance over others is taken as the measure of individual success rather than as a moral problem in need of rectifying. Women's unpaid role in the reproduction of labor is accepted as an essential element of the system. The state capitalism of the USSR, the People's Republic of China, and Cuba, however, offers no more emancipatory vision of interpersonal interactions. There, too, hierarchical structures support a view of dominance over others as the measure of personal power and success. Developing countries, for their part, are preoccupied with efforts to heal the wounds of their colonial past. They often give priority to revolutionary plans that promise stability and economic viability; frequently, armed struggle among competing forces pushes concern for women's interests to some future agenda.

Women worldwide are excluded from positions of power in a multitude of ways. They may be denied education: although the world's illiteracy rate is dropping, the rate of illiteracy for women, already representing two-thirds of the total, is growing (Morgan 1984). Those women able to pursue an education find that the material they are required to master is thoroughly male-oriented. The academic disciplines of our universities, in theory places for innovative thought, are mired in values that have been developed from a masculine perspective to promote male interests. The insights and interests of women are so effectively repressed that a feminist consciousness may be required to identify the masculine bias of most subjects and to see the role of this body of knowledge in the perpetuation of the sex-gender system.[3] Feminists see that the study of "man" in our academic texts is usually restricted to the study of the dominant male class; they note how, even in abstract areas such as philosophy, women are associated with whatever is defined as negative (the irrational, the chaotic, the partial, and the amoral), whereas men are associated with whatever is valued in the field.[4] The scientific values of our age promote disinterested, rational, human control over the forces around us, but they fail to acknowledge that our understanding of science and the organization of scientific institutions rest on an implicit commitment to the value of dominance.[5] Yet feminist critiques of these important and powerful institutions are usually labeled as biased and distorting, and