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If you see one woman, have you seen them all? Does the heavy weight of patriarchy level all differences among US women? Is it the case, as one woman put it, that “there isn’t much difference between having to say ‘Yes suh Mr. Charlie’ and ‘Yes dear’”? Does “grandmother” convey the same meaning as “abuela,” as “buba,” as “gran’ma”? Is difference a part of what we share, or is it, in fact, all that we share? As early as 1970, Toni Cade Bambara asked: “How relevant are the truths, the experiences, the findings of white women to black women? Are women after all simply women?” (Bambara 1970: 9).

Are US women bound by our similarities or divided by our differences? The only viable response is both. To address our commonalities without dealing with our differences is to misunderstand and distort that which separates as well as that which binds us as women. Patriarchal oppression is not limited to women of one race or of one particular ethnic group, women in one class, women of one age group or sexual preference, women who live in one part of the country, women of any one religion, or women with certain physical abilities or disabilities. Yet, while oppression of women knows no such limitations, we cannot, therefore, conclude that the oppression of all women is identical.

Among the things which bind women together are the assumptions about the way that women think and behave, the myths—indeed the stereotypes—about what is common to all women. For example, women will be asked nicely...
in job interviews if they type, while men will not be asked such a question. In response to certain actions, the expression is used: "Ain't that just like a woman?" Or during a heated argument between a man and a woman, as the voice of each rises and emotions run high, the woman makes a particularly good point. In a voice at the pitch of the ongoing argument, the man screams at her: "You don't have to get hysterical!"

In an interesting form of "what goes around comes around," as Malcolm X put it, there is the possibility that US women are bound together by our assumptions, attitudes toward, even stereotypes of the other gender. Folklorist Rayna Green, referring to women of the southern setting in which she grew up, says this:

Southern or not, women everywhere talk about sex. . . . In general men are more often the victims of women's jokes than not. Til for tat, we say. Usually the subject for laughter is men's boasts, failures, or inadequacies ("comeuppance for lack of upcomance," as one of my aunts would say). Poking fun at a man's sexual ego, for example, might never be possible in real social situations with the men who have power over their lives, but it is possible in a joke. (Green 1984: 23–24)

That which US women have in common must always be viewed in relation to the particularities of a group, for even when we narrow our focus to one particular group of women it is possible for differences within that group to challenge the primacy of what is shared in common. For example, what have we said and what have we failed to say when we speak of "Asian American women"? As Shirley Hune notes (1982), Asian American women as a group share a number of characteristics. Their participation in the work force is higher than that of women in any other ethnic group. Many Asian American women live life supporting others, often allowing their lives to be subsumed by the needs of the extended family. And they are subjected to stereotypes by the dominant society: the sexy but "evil dragon lady," the "neuter gender," the "passive/demure" type, and the "exotic/erotic" type.

However, there are many circumstances when these shared experiences are not sufficient to accurately describe the condition of particular Asian American women. Among Asian American women there are those who were born in the United States, fourth and fifth generation Asian American women with firsthand experience of no other land, and there are those who recently arrived in the United States. Asian American women are diverse in their heritage or country of origin: China, Japan, the Philippines, Korea, India, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, or another country in Asia. If we restrict ourselves to Asian American women of Chinese descent, are we referring to those women who are from the People's Republic of China or those from Taiwan, those from Hong Kong or those from Vietnam, those from San Francisco's Chinatown or those from Mississippi? Are we subsuming under "Asian American" those Pacific Island women from Hawaii, Samar, Guam, and other islands under U.S. control? Although the majority of Asian American women are working class—contrary to the stereotype of the "ever successful" Asians—there are poor, "middle-class," and even affluent Asian American women (Hune 1982: 1–2, 13–14).

It has become very common in the United States today to speak of "Hispanics," putting Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Dominicans, Cubans, and those from every Spanish-speaking country in the Americas into one category of people, with the women referred to as Latinas or Hispanic women. Certainly there is a language, or the heritage of a language, a general historical experience, and certain cultural traditions and practices which are shared by these women. But a great deal of harm can be done by sweeping away differences in the interest of an imposed homogeneity.

Within one group of Latinas there is, in fact, considerable variation in terms of self-defined ethnic identity, such that some women refer to themselves as Mexican Americans, others as Chicanas, others as Hispanics, and still others as Americans. Among this group of women are those who express a commitment to the traditional roles of women and others who identify with feminist ideals. Some Chicanas are monolingual—in Spanish or English—and others are bilingual. And there are a host of variations among Chicanas in terms of educational achievements, economic differences, rural or urban living conditions, and whether they trace their ancestry from women who lived in this land well before the United States forcibly took the northern half of Mexico, or more recently arrived across the border that now divides the nations called Mexico and the United States.

Women of the Midwest clearly share a number of experiences which flow from living in the U.S. heartland, but they have come from different places, and they were and are today part of various cultures.

Midwestern women are the Native American women whose ancestors were brought to the plains in the mid-nineteenth century to be settled on reservations, the black women whose forebears emigrated by the thousands from the South after Reconstruction. They are the descendants of the waves of Spanish, French, Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, Bohemian, Scottish, Welsh, British, Irish, German, and Russian immigrants who settled the plains, the few Dutch, Italians, Poles, and Yugoslavs who came with them. (Boucher 1982: 3)

There is another complexity: when we have identified a commonality among women, cutting across class, racial, ethnic, and other major lines of
difference, the particular ways that commonality is acted out and its consequences in the larger society may be quite diverse. Ostrander makes this point in terms of class:

When women stroke and soothe men, listen to them and accommodate their needs, men of every class return to the workplace with renewed energies. When women arrange men's social lives and relationships, men of every class are spared investing the time and energy required to meet their social needs. When women run the households and keep family concerns in check, men of every class are freer than women to pursue other activities, including work, outside the home. But upper-class women perform these tasks for men at the very top of the class structure. . . . Supporting their husbands as individuals, they support and uphold the very top of the class structure. In this way they distinguish themselves from women of other social classes. (Ostrander 1984: 146)

Suppose that we can accurately and exclusively identify the characteristics shared by one particular group of women. For each of the women within that group, into how many other groups does she want to, or is she forced to, fit? Or can we speak of similarities only with respect to a group such as Puerto Rican women who are forty-three years old, were born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, migrated to New York City when they were five years old, work as eighth-grade school teachers, attend a Catholic church, are heterosexual, married, with two male and two female children, and have no physical disabilities?

Then there is that unpredictable but often present quality of individuality, the idiosyncrasies of a particular person. Shirley Abbott, describing experiences of growing up in the South, contrasts her mother's attitude and behavior toward the black woman who was her maid with what was the usual stance of "southern white ladies."

I don't claim that my mother's way of managing her black maid was typical. Most white women did not help their laundresses hang the washing on the line. . . . Compulsive housewifery had some part in it. So did her upbringing. . . . There was another motive too. . . . Had she used Emma in just the right way, Mother could have become a lady. But Mother didn't want to be a lady. Something in her was against it, and she couldn't explain what frightened her, which was why she cried when my father ridiculed her. (Abbott 1983: 78-79)

Once we have narrowed our focus to one specific group of women (Armenian American women, or women over sixty-five, or Arab American women, or black women from the Caribbean, or Ashkenazi Jewish women), the oppression that group of women experiences may take different forms at different times. Today, there is no black woman in the United States who is the legal slave of a white master: "chosen" for that slave status because of her race, forced to give her labor power without compensation because of the class arrangements of the society, and subjected to the sexual whims of her male master because of her gender. But that does not mean that black women today are no longer oppressed on the basis of race, class, and gender.

There are also groups of women who experience intense gender discrimination today, but in the past had a radically different status in their society. Contrary to the popular image of female oppression as being both universal and as old as human societies, there is incontestable evidence of egalitarian societies in which men and women related in ways that did not involve male dominance and female subjugation. Eleanor Leacock is the best known of the anthropologists who have carried out the kind of detailed historical analysis which provides evidence on gender relations in precolumbian North American societies. In discussing the debate on the origins and spread of women's oppression, Leacock points out that women's oppression is a reality today in virtually every society, and while socialist societies have reduced it, they have not eliminated gender inequality. However, it does not follow that women's oppression has always existed and will always exist. What such arguments about universal female subordination do is to project onto the totality of human history the conditions of today's world. Such an argument also "affords an important ideological buttress for those in power" (Leacock 1979: 10-11).

Studies of precolumbian societies indicate considerable variety in terms of gender relations.

Women retained great autonomy in much of the pre-colonial world, and related to each other and to men through public as well as private procedures as they carried out their economic and social responsibilities and protected their rights. Female and male modalities of various kinds operated reciprocally within larger kin and community contexts before the principle of male dominance within individual families was taught by missionaries, defined by legal status, and solidified by the economic relations of colonialism. (Leacock 1979: 10-11)

Even when there is evidence of female oppression among women of diverse backgrounds, it is important to listen to the individual assessment which each woman makes of her own condition, rather than assume that a synonymous experience of female oppression exists among all women. As a case in point, Sharon Burmeister Lord, in describing what it was like to grow up "Appalachian style," speaks of the influence of female role models in shaping the conditions of her development. In Williamson, West Virginia, she grew up knowing women whose occupations were Methodist preacher, elementary school principal, county sheriff, and university professor. Within her own family, her mother works as a secretary, writes poetry and songs, and "swims faster than any boy"; her aunt started her own seed and hardware store; one
grandmother is a farmer and the other runs her own boarding house. Summarizing the effect of growing up among such women, Lord says:

When a little girl has had a chance to learn strength, survival tactics, a firm grasp of reality, and an understanding of class oppression from the women around her, it doesn't remove oppression from her life, but it does give her a fighting chance. And that's an advantage! (Lord 1979: 25)

Finally, if it is agreed that today, to some extent, all women are oppressed, to what extent can a woman, or a group of women, also act as oppressor? Small as the numbers may be, there are some affluent black women. . . . Is it not possible that among this very small group of black women there are those who, while they experience oppression because of their race, act in oppressive ways toward other women because of their class? Does the experience of this society's heterosexism make a Euro-American lesbian incapable of engaging in racist acts toward women of color? The point is very simply that privilege can and does coexist with oppression (Bullen et al, 1984: 99) and being a victim of one form of discrimination does not make one immune to victimizing someone else on a different basis . . .

REFERENCES


UNDERSTANDING AND FIGHTING SEXISM:
A Call to Men
Peter Blood, Alan Tuttle, and George Lakey

PART 1: UNDERSTANDING THE ENEMY: HOW SEXISM WORKS IN THE U.S.A.

What Is Sexism?

Sexism is much more than a problem with the language we use, our personal attitudes, or individual hurtful acts toward women. Sexism in our country is a complex mesh of practices, institutions, and ideas which have the overall effect of giving more power to men than to women. By “power” we mean the ability to influence important decisions—political decisions of government on every level, economic decisions (jobs, access to money, choice of priorities), and a wide variety of other life areas down to the most personal concerns, such as whether two people are going to make love on a given night or not. The word “patriarchy” is sometimes used to refer to the actual power structure built around men's domination of women. Two key areas where women are denied power are the area of jobs and the area of violence directed toward women.

Women have much less earning power in our labor market than men do. Reasons for this include the fact that much of women's labor is unwaged (housecleaning, childrearing, little services to please bosses or lovers); the low status and pay of most of the traditionally women's jobs that are waged (secretary, sales clerk, childcare, nursing home attendant); the non-union status of most women workers; and the discriminatory practices such as the recent Supreme Court decision allowing companies to exclude pregnancy from their medical insurance and sick leave benefits.

Women face a constant threat of physical violence and sexual aggression in our society. As men we are rarely aware of how pervasive this is or the powerful effect it has on women's outlook on themselves and the world. Actual rape or sadistic violence is the tip of the iceberg. Physical abuse of wives and...