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**SEXISM**

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**Summary—**Sexism is the ideology and practice of patriarchy in its myriad forms. Originally, second-wave feminists characterized sexism as targeting women for prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination in virtue of their biological sex. Accordingly, they argued that all women experience a common oppression. As the feminist movement evolved, women of color and transnational feminists rejected this view of sexism, arguing that patriarchy always operates in conjunction with other systems of oppression. They characterized sexism as an inherently intersectional phenomenon that targets differentially positioned women in unique ways. On this view, there are sexisms, not a single sexism. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual Plus (LGBTQIA+) theorists have pushed the insights of intersectionality further. Sexism, they argue, targets people of all sexes and genders, including non-binary, intersex, and transgender individuals. Anyone who steps out of line is subject to patriarchal law and order, including men. Exploration into the nature of sexism thus leads to debates about gender liberation, the marginalization of historically oppressed groups, and the interests that should be centered in feminist struggles. Theorists across disciplines—including psychology, philosophy, sociology, geography, urban planning, information studies, legal theory, and others—participate in this debate when they analyze what sexism is and how it functions.

**Keywords—**Sexism, racism, misogyny, feminism, ideology, Marxism, homophobia, transphobia, intersectionality, patriarchy

This essay offers an in-depth view of sexism as a psychological, social, and political phenomenon and, in the process, highlights the resiliency of feminism as a social movement.[[1]](#endnote-1) Section 1 focuses on linguistic history: what the term “sexism” means and how it has changed over time. Section 2 analyzes the things in the world to which the label “sexism” refers, providing an overview of the multifaceted phenomenon from a social-scientific perspective. Section 3 considers an ameliorative framework for analyzing sexism. According to this framework, the best concept of sexism will be maximally useful for resisting oppression and pursuing social justice. An ameliorative perspective reveals that debates about the nature of sexism are—and always have been—highly political: driven by conflicts about the purpose of feminism as a social movement, including what feminists are fighting against, as well as whom they should be fighting for. As a triad, these three frameworks recommend conceptualizing sexism as an intersectional phenomenon that targets people of all sexes and genders, pervasively shaping social and psychological life.

1. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

One framework for understanding sexism centers linguistic history: When did the term “sexism” emerge in discourse? How has the word’s meaning changed over time, if at all?

Theorists often cite a specific origin story for the word “sexism,” drawing on the work of historian Fred Shapiro (1985).[[2]](#endnote-2) Shapiro wanted to know who coined the word “sexism.” The term was absent from early second-wave feminists’ texts, including Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (2011) and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* (2013). Women’s rights advocates in the 18th and 19th centuries didn’t use the language either (Mill 2007; Wollstonecraft 2009; Ware 2020). Shapiro consulted dictionaries, which often indicate first known usage of terms. 1970 was the earliest date listed. In that year, *Newsweek* dubbed “sexism”: “an offense to the language that we will have to learn to live with” (cited in Shapiro 1985, 7).

Digging deeper, Shapiro interviewed two early adopters of the term and was put in touch with Pauline Leet. On November 18th, 1965, Leet gave a presentation to undergrads at the then all-male Franklin and Marshall College in which she argued that excluding women from the literary canon was unjust. She put it like this:

When you argue . . . that since fewer women write good poetry this justifies their total exclusion [from the literary canon and therefore college syllabi], you are taking a position analogous to that of the racist—I call you in this case a “sexist” (cited in Shapiro 1985, 6).

Leet told Shapiro that she had used the word “sexist” because it rhymed with “racist” and immediately conveyed the idea that discriminating against women was wrong. Based on his research, Shapiro concludes that Leet invented the term.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest known usage actually occurred in 1961. In a response paper that year, psychologist Henry Garrett invoked the term when criticizing a fellow social scientist who argued that it was racist to offer biological explanations of racial disparities (Comas 1961). Garrett, a fierce segregationist, responded incredulously:

Apparently anyone who believes in genetic racial differences is a ‘racist’. I suppose by analogy that anyone who believes in genetic sex differences is a ‘sexist.’ (1961, 320).

Despite Garrett’s sarcasm, he uses the word just like radical feminists later did: a

“sexist” is someone who explains women’s “differential” social position by appeal to biology.

Both origin stories suggest a historical explanation of the term’s swift uptake. As Black Americans fought Jim Crow, “racism” became a household word in the United States. Feminists and anti-feminists alike capitalized on the linguistic power of “racism,” introducing the analogue of “sexism.” By the early 1970s, “sexism” was a popular buzzword, supplanting clunkier feminist terminology such as “male chauvinism,” “the feminine mystique,” and “sex prejudice.”

(a) *Woman-centered* *conceptions.* Conceptions of “sexism” introduced in the 1960s and 70s were woman-centered: they presupposed that women are sexism’s primary target (for analysis of whom the group ‘woman’ includes, see Haslanger 2000; Witt 2011; Butler 2015; Jenkins 2016; Mikkola 2016). The *Oxford English Dictionary*—which purports to track everyday usage—indeed still defines “sexism” as: “prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex” (OED). “Although sexism can be directed against all genders,“ explain psychologists Becker and Sibley, “. . . sexism is mostly directed against women, because women are the less powerful group compared to men in all societies around the world" (2016, 316; see also Krieger 2020). Making similar observations, philosophers emphasize that subordination is key. Sexism, they contend, consists in acts of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination that subordinate women as a class by rendering them socially inferior to men (Frye 1983, 38; Young 2011; for an analysis of subordination, see Moreau 2020, 62). Sexism is thus a cog in the machine of patriarchy, i.e., social and political systems of male supremacy.

(b) *Intersectional women-centered conceptions*. A second conception of sexism rejects the view that women simpliciter are sexism’s primary target. Advocates of this conception argue that gender always intersects with, and may even be co-constituted by, other aspects of social identity.[[3]](#endnote-3) If one is a woman, one is always a woman with a particular social class, ethnicity or race, age, and so on. Lorraine Code writes:

gender is not an enclosed category, for it is always interwoven with such other sociopolitical-historical locations as class, race, and ethnicity, to mention only a few. It is experienced differently, and it plays differently into structures of power and dominance at its diverse intersections with other specificities (1993, 20).

Advocates of intersectionality observe that sexism targets women with varying social identities differently (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015). Accordingly, they posit *sexisms*, rather than a single phenomenon of *sexism*.

Sojourner Truth’s speech 1851 speech at the Ohio Woman’s Rights Convention illustrates the motivation for an intersectional view. Against the wishes of white suffragettes, Truth took the stage to rebut the claim that women are delicate flowers who can’t do anything without the help of men. She presented herself as a counterexample:

I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? (2020, 43)

Though she leverages this point to argue that women are not inherently weak, Truth highlights something else as well. The sexisms faced by Black and white women in the Victorian era were distinctive. While upper-class white women were often placed on pedestals, Black women were treated as chattel and forced to labor just as hard as men.

Black feminists like Truth were innovators of intersectional analyses of sexism (Crenshaw 1989; for discussion see, Hill Collins 2019). In 1977, The Combahee River Collective condemned “racial-sexual oppression,” using a hyphen to convey the specificity of anti-Black sexism (2017, 18). They write:

Merely naming the pejorative stereotypes attributed to Black women (e.g. mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger), let alone cataloguing the cruel, often murderous, treatment we receive, indicates how little value has been placed upon our lives during four centuries of bondage in the Western hemisphere (18; for discussion of the specific stereotypes mentioned in this quote, see Davis 1983; Hill Collins 2000).

Racism and sexism, they argued, were inseparable in their lived experience. In 2010, Moya Bailey coined the term “misogynoir,” a portmanteau of “misogyny” and the French word for Black, to capture the unique kind of sexism experienced by Black women (2021).

As the concept of intersectionality has moved beyond its home in Black feminism, debates rage about its proper definition and appropriation (Hill Collins 2019; for an analysis of epistemic appropriation and other examples, see Davis 2018). The term was designed to identify interlocking elements of oppression, not simply to mark the complexity of social identities writ large.

(c) *Intersectional all-gender conceptions* of sexism broaden the target of sexism beyond women. Advocates of this conception note that the original meaning of sexism is “prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination *on the basis of sex*.” They argue that sexism has served to police and punish all gender deviants, including non-binary and transgender individuals (Koyama 2003; Bettcher 2007; McKinnon 2014; Stryker 2017; Dembroff 2018) as well as intersex individuals whose bodies do not fit biological categories of “male” or “female” (Karkazis 2008; Davis 2015). Queer individuals who buck heterosexual gender norms also experience prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination “on the basis of sex” (Bostock v. Clayton County 2020; Dembroff et al. 2020; Cervini 2021). Accordingly, it cannot be assumed that women qua females are sexism’s primary target. Indeed, the very idea that women are “the female sex” is arguably itself a sexist presumption that fallaciously ties gender to genitals. Advocates of this conception argue that sexism is an intersectional phenomenon that aims to keep individuals of all sexes and genders in their place.

These three conceptions of sexism share a family resemblance. Each incorporates the assumption that sexism is *prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination on the basis of sex.* Despite this overlap, advocates of these conceptions analyze “on the basis of sex” in distinct ways and, thus, understand the phenomenon of sexism differently. Additionally, competing conceptions are not always explicit about the functional role sexism plays in wider systems of oppression. Dictionary definitions tend of leave this role unstated, whereas academic theorists tend to define sexism in a way that highlights its connection to patriarchy.

2. A METAPHYSICAL FRAMEWORK

A second framework for understanding sexism asks: “What is sexism, really?” Theorists bracket questions about the word’s linguistic history, examining instead how the phenomenon of sexism manifests in the world.

2.1 SEXISM IN INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY

Psychologists often define sexism as a kind of *prejudice*, which manifests in stereotyping and discrimination. In the thinnest sense, a prejudice is a judgment that resists evidence. Miranda Fricker writes:

The idea of a prejudice is most basically that of a *pre-judgment*, where that is most naturally interpreted in an internalist vein as a judgment made or maintained without proper regard for evidence (2010, 33, her emphasis; for a similar view, see Schauer 2003, 15).

In *The Nature of Prejudice*, a 1954 text that kicked off social scientific inquiry into prejudice as a psychological phenomenon, sociologist Gordon Allport offers a thicker definition of prejudice as:

an avertive or hostile attitude towards a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group (2015, 7).

Based on this definition, sexists would appear to be misogynists who “hate women qua women . . . either universally or at least very generally” (Manne 2018, 18).

The psychological profile of sexism is more complex, however. In *The Velvet Glove*, sociologist Mary Jackman persuasively argues that positive emotions—love, admiration, and so on—reinforce oppressive social conditions along with negative ones (1996). Accordingly, she argues that traditional definitions of prejudice are too narrow. On her view, “women are nurturing” should count as a sexist prejudice, even though the belief has a positive ring and can pair with warm feelings. What is essential to sexism, according to Jackman, is not negative emotion or hostility but the way in which psychological features—including cognitive dispositions and attitudes—play a functional role in supporting patriarchy (for more how sexist prejudices promote social injustice via cognition and perception, see Fricker 2010; Pohlhaus 2011; Dotson 2012; Smith and Archer 2020).

Psychologists have long explored the twin aspects of sexism—positive and negative—identified by Jackman. “Ambivalent sexism” refers to the view, introduced by psychologists Susan Fiske and Peter Glick, that sexism comes in two flavors: hostile and benevolent (1996). Hostile sexism is characterized by negative attitudes towards women, hence embodies prejudice in the classic sense. In contrast, benevolent sexism is characterized by positive attitudes, such as that women are “pure creatures who ought to be protected, supported, and adored and whose love is necessary to make men complete” (2001, 109; see also Eagly and Mladinic 1989). Together these two forms of sexism embody patriarchal logic. Honorable and virtuous females are deemed deserving of adoration and protection, whereas the females who attempt to usurp or challenge male power deserve to be punished. The ambivalence of sexism consists in a love/hate relationship to women. Fiske and Glick suggest: “this combination of rewards and punishment may be particularly effective in maintaining gender inequality” (2001, 113; Manne 2018).

Fiske and Glick’s examples of sexist attitudes include the following:

1. “Every man ought to have a woman he loves.”
2. “People are not truly happy in life unless they are romantically involved with a member of the opposite sex.”
3. “Every women should have a man to whom she can turn for help in times of trouble.”
4. “A good woman should be set on a pedestal.”
5. “Women have a superior moral sensibility.”
6. “Women have a more refined sense of culture and taste.”
7. ”Many women get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances.”
8. “Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.”
9. “Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for ‘equality.’” (1996, 500)

While the first six statements are associated with benevolent sexism, the last three statements express hostile sexism, according to Fiske and Glick’s paradigm. A person’s level of sexism—benevolent or hostile—is determined by averaging the numerical values of self-reported agreement or disagreement with statements like the ones above, gauged on a five-point scale. An important finding has been that high levels of benevolent sexism are correlated with high levels of hostile sexism. In other words, benevolent and hostile sexism often travel together. Moreover, evidence suggests that ambivalent sexism tracks inequality: the higher a country’s level of gender inequality, the more sexist its citizens—on average—will be (Glick et al 2000).

A psychological profile of sexists begins to emerge. Sexists will tend to endorse normative, moralizing claims about gender roles. They may expect, predict, or presume that individuals will have gender-normative properties in virtue of their perceived or real sex; further, they will infuse individuals’ actions with social meaning—for example, as surprising acts of deviance or virtue, as deserving of blame or praise—relative to gendered norms. Along with this, sexists endorse negative stereotypes about women, such as the belief that women are sexually manipulative and power-hungry. Victoria McGeer observes: “folk psychology is not just an explanatory/predictive practice; it is also, in a sense, a normative practice: a practice of showing how people’s performances live up to certain norms and thereby become, in that special way, intelligible” (2007, 141; Zawidski 2013; Davidson and Kelly 2020; Haslanger 2019; Beeghly 2021). As an expression of folk psychology related to sex and gender, sexism provides an evaluative lens that shapes how people perceive the world.

Fundamental to this lens—and underlying all of the beliefs cited above— is the sex/gender binary. “The sex/gender binary” refers to the view there are exactly two biological sexes, male and female, which are opposites and entail gender roles (for critique of the view that there are only two biological sexes, see Karkazis 2008; Fausto-Sterling 2020). According to binary thinking, people assigned male at birth are—and should be—masculine and identify as “men,” whereas people assigned female at birth are—and should be—feminine and identify as “women.” Being “feminine” or “masculine” means, in part, being sexually attracted to people of the “opposite” sex. People who don’t fit the sex/gender binary are not just outliers that defy probabilistic predictions; they are perceived as “unnatural” in ways that invite—and indeed, demand—correction. Even when people are not outright sexists, they may internalize sexist attitudes in ways that linger in their psychology, creating a cascade of cognitive effects (Blair and Banaji 1996; Rudman and Kilianski 2000; Payne 2001; Kahneman 2011; Banaji and Greenwald 2016; Brownstein 2018; Beeghly and Madva 2020).

The list of beliefs that comprise benevolent sexism reveals something else as well. While sexism targets women, it also puts men in the crosshairs. Return to the claim, expressed in (6), that “women have a more refined sense of culture and taste.” This belief is superficially about women. Yet it makes an inherently comparative claim, asking participants to describe women relative to men. Each sex is put on its own “gender track” (Hosein ms). Everyone is expected to fall in line. For this reason, it’s misleading to say that sexism doesn’t target men. It absolutely does. “Men are not the enemy; they’re fellow victims,” explains novelist Jane Howard in her review of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, “They’re as much entrapped in false notions of what’s manly as women are by the compulsion to be . . . soft and sweet as the nursery” (1974).

Consider *v. Wise Bus.* (2009), a legal case involving a queer man living in Butler Pennsylvania who sued his employer for gender discrimination.[[4]](#endnote-4) Prowel explained to the court what his male co-workers were like:

[B]lue jeans, t-shirt, blue collar worker, very rough around the edges. Most of the guys there hunted. Most of the guys there fished. If they drank, they drank beer, they didn’t drink gin and tonics. Just you know, all into football, sports, all that kind of stuff, everything I wasn’t (ibid., 287).

In contrast, he wore “dressy clothes; was neat; filed his nails instead of ripping them off with a utility knife . . . walked and carried himself in an effeminate manner . . . and talked about things like art, music, interior design, and décor” (ibid.). His co-workers hurled slurs at him, gave him mocking names such as “Princess” and “Rosebud” (ibid.). He overheard a co-worker expressing hatred of him, punctuated with the conclusion: “they should shoot all the fags” (ibid.).

This was hostile sexism, made possible by benevolent sexism. A characteristic belief of benevolent sexists is that “women have a more refined sense of culture and taste.” This belief articulates what appears to be a descriptive claim about feminine sensibility. But it functions as a gender norm. How do we know? Look at people’s reactions. Prowel’s co-workers didn’t just see his carefully filed fingernails and conclude that he was a statistical outlier, different from most males. They perceived Prowel’s ‘refined’ nail hygiene to be an outrage, evidence that he was *a queer* and *a sissy*. Which illustrates two points. First, there is rarely—if ever—a clean line between the normative and descriptive elements of stereotyping. The two are almost invariably intertwined. Second, sexism threatens to cut down, discredit, and destroy, all gender deviants—and not only, or primarily, women. Men are equally targets. Even dominant men who police others, such as Prowel’s stereotypical male colleagues, would be punished were they to fall out of line.

Something else follows as well. If sexism is a mindset that enacts and enforces patriarchy, it entails transphobia and homophobia. Patriarchal norms concern gender roles, after all. They dictate that people assigned male at birth are—and should —be masculine and identify as “men,” whereas people assigned female at birth are—and should be—feminine and identify as “women.” Anyone who violates this schema is a gender traitor, including trans, non-binary, and intersex individuals. The same goes for cis-gender, queer individuals who reject compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980). Transphobia and homophobia thus fit neatly within the logic of sexism and are often described by feminists as intersectional varieties of sexism (radicalesbians 1997; Pharr 2002; Serano 2017; however, see Calhoun 2002).

Prowel’s experience also highlights, through what it does not say, the importance of intersectionality. In his testimony, race is absent, invisible. Why is that? Here’s one hypothesis based on the non-racialized nature of his tormentors’ taunts: Prowel is white. Psychologists and sociologists often study intersectional forms of sexist prejudice that might otherwise have been present in this case, revealing that, as Kathryn Bond Stockton puts it, “gender has racialization running through it, in ways that remain taboo to engage” (2021, 16). For instance, Asian men—gay and straight—are often stigmatized as insufficiently masculine, and gay men are labelled ‘rice queens’ (Han 2008; Han 2016; Zheng 2016). Black men are stereotyped as hyper-masculine and, therefore, perceived as bigger and stronger than men of other races (Sagar and Schofield 1980; Devine 1989; Bierria 2014; Curry 2016). Disabled people of all genders are perceived as mentally “slow” and as asexual (O’Toole and Bregante 1992; Santos and Santos 2017). One area of ongoing, vital research and feminist reflection concerns the ways in which sexist psychology reflects, and is co-constituted by, racism, ableism, ageism and other forms of social prejudice (for examples of intersectional research frameworks, see Hesse-Biber 2012; Salter and Adams 2013; Rosenthal 2016; Rosenthal et al. 2020; Esposito and Evans-Winters 2021).

2.2 SEXISM AND INDIVIDUAL ACTION

The dictionary definition of sexism includes three elements: “prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination on the basis of sex.” While prejudice and stereotyping are often characterized as elements of individual psychology, discrimination is most often understood in terms of interpersonal behavior.

Consider a high-profile example of sexism in a medical context. In a 2018 *Vogue* profile, tennis star Serena Williams reports nearly dying in childbirth (Haskell). After her C-section, Williams felt short of breath. Having experienced blood clots in the past, she recognized that she was having symptoms associated with a pulmonary embolism. She asked her nurse for blood thinner and a CT scan. The nurse assumed that Williams was confused, and told her so. A doctor performed an ultrasound on her legs, an inappropriate diagnostic test given Williams’ medical history. As Serena struggled to breathe, a CT scan was ordered. Clots were immediate found in her lungs. Though medical staff saved her, their initial disbelief put Williams’ life at risk. On Black Twitter, users noted the all-too-familiar story. “Black women are three to four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications,” wrote Evette Dionne aka @freeblackgirl, “The lack of trust and disdain from doctors factors into that, even when the Black woman is as powerful, famous, and wealthy as Serena Williams” (cited in Lockhart 2018). “Listen closely,” tweeted commenter Leslie Mac, “If Serena Williams with all her money, power, access & reach had her voice IGNORED-what do you think happens to poor, Black immigrant women?” (ibid.). Notice what these critics are saying. As they see it, Williams’ treatment was not due to racism or sexism alone, but to the dynamic combination of anti-Black sexism (for analysis of Black special vulnerability to epistemic injustice and abuse in intimate contexts, including medical environments, see Threadcraft 2016; Cooper Owens 2017).

As Williams’ experience shows, sexism has essential intersectional dimensions and is hugely impactful in individuals’ lives. This impact comes about, in part, because sexism causes people to act (and fail to act) in certain ways. The cascading causal effects of sexism can be “macro,” such as when William’s medical staff refused to order a CT scan, but they can also be “micro.” Micro-behaviors include how long you look at someone (if at all), how closely you pay attention to what they say, and how your feelings manifest physically in your body.

Voices and bodies are perpetually ‘leaky’ in this way, revealing more than we realize. In *The Right to Sex,* Amia Srinivasan describes a male friend who discovered that his female students “were complaining that he stared at their legs when they wore shorts or skirts to class” (2021, 140). “No one had told this graduate student,” she says,

what it might mean for him, as a man, to teach under patriarchy: that if he just let his gaze go where it ‘naturally’ went, let his conversations and interactions proceed as they ‘naturally’ might, he would likely fail to treat his women students on equal terms with his male students (ibid).

Perhaps this man considered himself a feminist. Maybe he would have insisted that he was vehemently anti-sexist. Yet his body language—beyond his conscious notice—told a different story. Raised in a world rife with gender inequality, our “habitual behavioral repertoires,” just like Srinivasan’s friend, may be shaped by sexism (Yancy 2017, 21).

So too sexist treatment may shape the behavior and attitudes of those persistently subjected to it. Think about the students whom the teacher ogled. How did they react when they perceived themselves to be under his gaze? Did they fidget in their seats, pulling down their skirts? Did they raise their voices, hoping to redirect his eyes upwards? Did they furrow their brows in frustration? “If I know that my professor sees me not (only) as a student to be taught, but (also),” writes Srinivasan, “as a body to be fucked, how self-possessed, how exuberant can I feel sitting in his classroom” (2021, 139)? Describing the cumulative harms of similar treatment over decades, writer Melissa Febos suggests that the amount of time and energy she has spent negotiating other people’s desires has been “inestimable” (2022). “I’d hated my body for years,” she says, “felt both obscured and exposed by it, and subjected it to many acts that others wanted irrespective of my desires.” She tells readers: “All I ever wanted to do was lead with myself, as I knew myself, and not with my breasts and all they connoted in the eyes of others.”

Febos’s reflections highlight a wider point about sexism, bodies, and individual behavior. “Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression,” writes Cherríe Moraga, “without naming the enemy *within and outside of us*, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place (2015, 24, my emphasis). As Moraga and others note, liberation is impossible without turning our gaze inward and recognizing the ways in which we internalize and embody sexism: in our everyday habits, how we move through the world, how we discipline our bodies through exercise and diet, how we cultivate certain looks through dress, hairstyles and ornamentation, and more.

Feminist writers as well as academic theorists often explore how sexism—intersecting with other forms of oppression—impacts them personally. In her memoir *Hunger*, Roxane Gay shares her experience being a fat Black woman in the United States. On one hand, Gay problematizes culture: in particular, beauty standards that demonize fatness and lift up white bodies as ideal. She writes:

I believe we should have broader definitions of beauty that include diverse body types . . . I know, having grown up in a culture that is generally toxic to women and constantly trying to discipline women’s bodies, that it is important to resist unreasonable standards for how my body or any body should look” (2017, 17).

On the other hand, Gay says that *she* is part of the problem. “This is what I did,” she tells readers, “This is the body I made. I am corpulent—rolls of brown flesh, arms and thighs and belly . . . The fat created a new body, one that shamed me but one that made me feel safe. I desperately needed to feel safe” (16). Gay says “safe” and what she means is that she used food as comfort and protection after she was raped as a twelve-year old: “I ate and ate and ate in the hopes that if I made myself big, my body would be safe” (21). In a similar vein, philosopher Kate Manne describes the shame she feels when her infant daughter lifts up her shirt and pokes her belly button, while hating the fact that she feels shame (2022). “I know how much my internalized fatphobia owes to oppressive patriarchal forces,” she writes, “—the forces that tells girls and women in particular to be small, meek, slight, slim, and quiet.” Yet intellectual rejection of patriarchal standards and how a person feels about, and treats, their body don’t always align.

Self-hating attitudes and behaviors are not limited to women, either. Men look in the mirror and see themselves failing. “I will weigh myself again,” writes writer Kiese Laymon in his memoir *Heavy*, “I will cry at the number that I see. I will continue to hide behind podiums, lecterns, huge camouflage, shorts, and black sweatshirts” (2019, 233). Masculine beauty ideals valorize thinness and muscularity. In one study, researchers found that over 60% of American boys manipulate their diets in the hopes of achieving a more toned, muscular physique (Eisenberg et al. 2012). Disordered eating, compulsive exercise, and the use of performance enhancing drugs are on the rise among men (Mitchison et al 2014; Lavender et al. 2017). One 2020 study notes that queer individuals are especially vulnerable, including gay men and trans women, displaying higher rates of “both clinical eating disorder and eating disorder behaviors” (Parker and Harriger).

Exploring these data, feminist theorists analyze why internalized sexism is problematic, and how, to fight back. Carol Hay has argued that individuals have a moral obligation to resist their own oppression (2011). Oppressed people, she suggests, “could opt out of [sexist] social norms by refusing to conform to conventional modes of dress or behavior” (ibid., 31). Dieting is a popular example. “If dieting is a practice that causes a great deal of harm,” writes Manne, “—in the form of pain, suffering, anxiety and sheer hunger—and rarely works to deliver the health of happiness it has long advertised, then it is a morally bad practice” (2022). On Manne’s view, individuals have a “liberatory duty” to eat when they are hungry and to divest from and condemn dieting behaviors. In a similar vein, Céline Leboeuf argues that individuals should not participate in online visual cultures—for example, on Pinterest, Instagram, and Reddit—that valorize dieting advice and exercise habits rooted in sexist ideals (2019). Moreover, she encourages women to find ways to take pleasure in their bodies and to experiment with activities that give them pleasure. Appealing to Aristotle, A.W. Eaton suggests instead that we have liberatory obligation to broaden our aesthetic tastes in ways that fight fatphobia and create new, liberating aesthetics (2016; see also Irvin 2017). Other writers have argued that people should simply stop caring so much about their bodies and invest time and energy in more valuable pursuits (Prins 2015).

Though authors differ radically in their suggestions, they aim to address the same problem. How do we, as individuals, change our lives so that we may free ourselves from sexism’s psychological and behavioral baggage?

2.3 SEXISM AS A SOCIOLOGICAL PHENOMENON

Circle back to the question: what is sexism, really? Sexism exists in the worldviews, thoughts, emotions, and actions of individuals. On the other hand, sexism is irreducible to individual psychology or behavior.

*Sexism in cultural ideology*. Start with this observation. Gendered characters, tropes, and narratives circulate widely on social media; in everyday conversations; on news websites; in music and film. One way to study sexism is to examine these representations.

Second-wave feminists tended to focus on elements of sexist ideology that (they believed) applied to all women. Chief among these was *the wife-mother ideal*. Alongside this ideal, one finds its cultural inverses: the embittered spinster; the degenerate lesbian; and the debauched, desperate divorcée. Among this cast of characters, the only happy fate was that of a heterosexual married woman. To be married, however, was to assume a subordinate role. One women’s journal in the early 1960s explains:

For the sake of every member of the family, the family needs a head. This means Father, not Mother . . . Children of both sexes need to learn, recognize, and respect the abilities and functions of each sex” (cited in Friedan 2013, 43).

In the highest echelons of legal reasoning, identical claims were repeated. In an 1872 Supreme Court decision that found women had no constitutional right to pursue a profession, Justice Bradley states:

The constitution of the family organization, which is founded in the divine ordinance, and well as in the nature of things, indicates that the domestic sphere as that which properly belongs to the domain and functions of womanhood . . . The paramount destiny and mission of woman are to fulfill the noble and benign offices of wife and mother (*Bradwell v. The State*; for further analysis, see Minow 1985).

Even elite colleges in the post-war era drilled the message into their students. Betty Friedan explains: “One famous college adopted . . . the slogan, “We are not educating women to be scholars; we are educating them to be wives and mothers” (cited in 2013, 182). “The girls themselves,” she observes, “finally got so tired of repeating this slogan in full that they abbreviated it to WAM” (ibid.).

Feminist Marxists argued that working-class women are doubly burdened by the wife-mother ideal. Angela Davis explains:

Since popular propaganda represented the vocation of *all* women as a function of their roles in the home, women compelled to work for wages came to be treated as alien visitors within the masculine world of the public economy. Having stepped outside their “natural” sphere, women were not to be treated as full-fledged workers. The price they paid involved long hours, substandard working conditions, and grossly inadequate wages. (1983, 229, her emphasis; see also Hartsock 1998; Firestone 2003).

“[S]exism,” Davis observes, “was a source of outrageous super-profits for the capitalists” (ibid.). Nor did home provide a respite from exploitation. After long hours on the job, working women returned home to perform additional labor for the family: cooking, cleaning, laundry, tending to children, and satisfying their husbands’ sexual needs. Davis notes: “Like their white working-class sisters . . . Black women have needed relief from this oppressive predicament for a long, long time” (ibid; see also hooks 2015a, 177-8).

Women of color feminists like Davis have also been at the forefront of ideology critique beyond the wife-mother ideal (Harris-Perry 2011; hooks 2015a; Noble 2018). Return to the misogynoir stereotypes decried by the Combahee River Collective: the mammy, the matriarch, the jezebel, and so forth. Each of these stereotypes targeted Black women specifically. Analyzing the mammy stereotype, Patricia Hill Collins writes:

By loving, nurturing, and caring for White children and “family” better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to White elite male power. (2000, 72-73)

Rooted in slavery, this stereotype articulates the social role that Black women are supposed to fulfill in a racist society. Collins observes: “Even though she may be well-loved and may wield considerable authority in her White family, the mammy still knows her “place” as an obedient servant” (ibid., 73; for a fictionalized exploration, see Morrison 2018). Other writers explore ideology beyond what Linda Martín Alcoff calls “the black-white binary” (2006). “[A]lthough communities of color have shared the experience of political and economic disenfranchisement,” explains Alcoff, “there are significant differences between the *causes* and *forms* of this disenfranchisement” (ibid., 252). For example, Japanese Americans in the 1940s were forced into internment camps under suspicion of treason. One finds war propaganda posters of fanged Japanese men rapaciously slinging white women over their shoulders. In film and opera, Asian women are represented as seductresses, ready to tempt “real” Americans into disloyalty. Note the sexist dimensions of these cultural images: white women’s alleged need for protection from licentious men of color and Japanese women’s “feminine” wiles. Across disciplines, theorists take up the challenge of ideology critique, exploring racist-sexist representations in popular culture—including those surrounding mixed race women (Zack 1993; Botts 2017), when and why they emerge, what the forms they take, and their relationship to group anxieties, marginalization, and exploitation.

Transnational feminists have also the connection between sexist ideology and colonialism. In the Western imaginary, colonized peoples were represented as primitive and lacking in proper morals. Evidence of “lack of morals” included the ways in which native populations practiced gender. Accordingly, colonizers targeted colonized peoples for ‘education’ and gender policing as part of the West’s civilizing mission. As the gender/sex binary was imposed, more expansive ways of practicing gender were forcefully suppressed (Williams 1986; Reddy 2005; Besnier and Alexeyeff 2014; Mirandé 2016; Oyewùmi 2016; Tuhiwai Smith 2021). In this way, sexist ideology perpetuated, and provided cover for, global capitalist exploitation and political domination (Spivak 1988). “The reach of imperialism into our heads [through sexist-racist ideology],” explains Indigenous feminist scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, “challenges those who belong to colonized communities to understand how this occurred, partly because we feel the need to decolonize our minds, to recover ourselves, to claim a space in which to develop an authentic humanity” (2021, 24; see also, Fanon 2008).

*Sexism in the law*. Patriarchy’s ideological foundations go beyond representations in popular culture and media. The law itself contains ideology justifying male supremacy. It also serves as a coercive social force, sustaining sexism in society at large.

In *Women’s Lives, Men’s Laws*, Catherine MacKinnon observes:

The law . . . was not written by women, white or Black, rich or poor. It has not been based on women’s experiences of life, everyday or otherwise. No one has represented women’s interests as women in creating it, and few have considered women’s interests as women in applying it. Unlike men . . . no women had voice or representation in constituting this state or its laws, yet we are presumed to consent to its rule. It was not written for our benefit, and it shows” (2007, 33)

Though MacKinnon adopts a woman-centered view of sexism, her observations suggest a more general point. In the United States and elsewhere, men from dominant groups generally write the law because they are the ones with political and economic power. The law thus reflects their point of view and protects their interests.

Sometimes this is obvious. In the 19th century, American feminists cited many examples of sexism in the law: women—unlike men—were denied the right to vote (and were arrested when they tried to do so), were taxed without political representation, were legally required to turn over their wages to their spouses, had no right to custody of their children if they divorced, and were subject to arrest if they ventured out of the house without male supervision after certain hours (Ware 2020, 181). Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, LGBTQIA+ activists protested heterosexist, transphobic government policies and laws, including laws that prohibited gays and lesbians from marrying. Such campaigns targeted a particularly flamboyant kind of discrimination in law and social life, whereby women and queer people were explicitly targeted for sex-based subordination (for discussion of legal reasoning in these cases, see Fiss 1976; MacKinnon 1979).

Sexism can take more subtle forms in the law as well. Consider rape law. Though rape laws (e.g., California Penal Code §261) generally do not feature gendered language, feminists have long argued that they “do not effectively deter rape . . . nor do they function to protect a woman’s interest in physical integrity” (LeGrand 1973, 919; Brownmiller 2010). Often a woman being raped, explains MacKinnon, “is too surprised or too terrified or too learned in passivity or wants to get it over with too badly or has heard too much about men who kill women who resist to fight back” (2007, 35). Since rape law requires evidence that the alleged victim withheld consent, and in the best-case scenario fought back, many women cannot get justice. “The law of rape deeply affects sexual intimacy,” argues MacKinnon, “by making forced sex legally sex, not rape, every night” (ibid., 36; see also Dworkin 1997; Alcoff 2018; Fischel 2019). One can use the notion of disparate impact, a concept enshrined in discrimination law, to understand the problem here: laws, despite being facially neutral, disproportionately harm women (for discussion of how rape law disparately impacts Black men as well, see Curry 2016).

Even antidiscrimination law appears to serve the patriarchy. In the U.S., Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has been largely interpreted to prohibit *intentional* workplace discrimination on the basis of sex, race, religion, national origin, and color. Proving intent is not easy. Linda Krieger highlights an observation from the Seventh Circuit Court:

Defendants of even minimal sophistication will neither admit discriminatory animus nor leave a paper trail demonstrating it; and because most employment decisions involve some discretion, alternative hypotheses (including that of simple mistake) will always be possible and often plausible” (cited in 1995, 1177).

The result, Krieger observes, is “an almost impossible” burden of proof for plaintiffs in disparate treatment cases (ibid., 1241). On top of that, women of color are prohibited from citing evidence that they experience sexist treatment because of *race and gender*. Plaintiffs must choose one—and only one—protected category to ground their claims of discrimination. This means Black women, for example, win their cases only if their treatment aligns with the experiences of white women or Black men (Crenshaw 1989). The message to employers is clear: the law is on your side if you discriminate. At the same time, those who prefer to paint the law in a more positive, empowering light can claim that the U.S. government “is committed . . . to dismantling caste-like hierarchies based on sex and race that have been entrenched by pervasive historical discrimination” (Yuracko 2016, 54). Antidiscrimination law thus becomes a marketing device for the U.S. legal system, assuring citizens that justice will be done, while systemically robbing them of it.

As these examples show, sexism is revealed not only in what the law says but also in its omissions—what it refuses to say, what it openly permits. In so many ways, the law gives sexism free reign. In the United States, forced sterilization is perfectly legal under federal law (*Buck v. Bell*; for history of the practice and its connection to discrimination against disabled women, see Largent 2007; for a discussion of harms to women of color and Black women specifically, see Threadcraft 2016). Likewise, in 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court revoked *Roe v. Wade* on the grounds that there is no constitutional right to privacy. The right to privacy legally justified other constitutional rights, including the right to an abortion, the right to contraception, the right to have non-heterosexual sex, and the right to gay marriage. The constitution says nothing about these rights, according to the Court’s reasoning (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*). “Even when the law does nothing,” writes MacKinnon, “—and it does nothing in so many ways—it is responsible for not working for women” (2005, 39).

*Sexism in social environments*. More than anything, sexism is a feature of social environments. MacKinnon observes:

women’s everyday life has real rules, but they are not the formal ones. They have never been legislated or abdicated. They have not had to be. They effectively prescribe what girls can be, what the community encourages and permits in a woman, what opportunities are available and hence what aspirations are developed . . . ” (2005, 34)

The “real” rules to which she refers are “social norms.” Social norms are associated with social roles. The purpose of social norms is to guide behavior, emotions, and thoughts in specific contexts, for people in particular social roles. When any group has less power in a society across a broad range of contexts, it is because social norms demand it. (For an account of how these elements fit together in “structural” analysis, see Haslanger 2017).

Consider the sex-role division of labor. “Today is housecleaning day,” writes a sixteen-year-old student in an essay quoted by de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*: “I hear the noise of the vacuum as Mama walks through the living room. I would like to run away. I swear when I grow up there will never be a housecleaning day in my house” (2011, 474). Such evidence is crucial in feminist accounts of how the division of labor subordinates women by assigning them, as bell hooks puts it, “unpaid, devalued, ‘dirty’ work” (hooks 2015c, 68; Garcia 2021). Other writers emphasize the division of labor’s negative economic effects: for example, the way in which it depresses women’s wages in the labor market and forces them into precarious, unfulfilling work (Davis 1983; Ehrenreich 2021). Yet others reveal the toll that working “a double shift” takes on women (Hochschild and Machung 2003). In *Women, Work and Families*, sociologist Angela Hattery interviews one woman who regularly works a graveyard shift and returns home to perform a full day of childcare. The woman, whom Hattery labels “Jean,” describes the routine as “stressful” for both her and her partner (cited in 2000, 61). Another woman interviewed explains the cost of working is that “I have absolutely no free time” (63). Yet another explains that working meant “everything was a compromise” and describes feeling guilty both at home and work (see also, Slaughter 2012; Hirji 2021). Scholars of human trafficking likewise document the experiences of women—often poor immigrants of color—who are forced, defrauded, or coerced into performing uncompensated domestic and sexual labor (Fukushima 2019).

In *The Sexual Harassment of Working Class Women*, Catherine MacKinnon offers similar evidence about sexual harassment. After citing a study that found 78% of harassed women were emotionally or physically impacted by their harassment, MacKinnon shares respondents’ reflections:

As I remember all the sexual abuse and negative work experiences I am left feeling sick and helpless and upset instead of angry . . . Reinforced feeling of no control—sense of doom . . . I have difficulty dropping the emotional barrier I work behind when I come home from work. My husband turns into another man . . . Kept me in a constant state of emotional agitation and frustration: I drank a lot . . . Soured the essential delight in the work . . . Stomachaches, migraines, cried every night, no appetite (1979, 47, ellipses separate different responses).

It is hard to imagine reading this testimony and concluding that sexual harassment is harmless fun, which women secretly enjoy. Moreover, through patterns of overlapping testimony, sexual harassment is revealed to be a sexist social practice, i.e., a patterned set of behaviors that disadvantage women as a class. “Typically,” MacKinnon explains, “employers, husbands, judges, and the victims themselves have understood and dismissed such incidents as trivial, isolated, “personal,” or as universal “natural” or “biological” behaviors” (ibid., 2). However, when women’s experiences are collected and analyzed together, one sees that sexual harassment is “a product of social factors” that dictate women must fulfill a subordinate—and sexualized—role vis-à-vis men, not just in their own homes but also in the workplace.

Though most feminists embrace a subordination-focused criterion for institutionalized sexism, debates ensue. Contested practices include wearing makeup (Bartky 1995), dieting (Bordo 2004; Manne 2022), professor-student dating (Srinivasan 2021), and heterosexual sex (Dworkin 1997). Debates fit a pattern. They begin when a practice or norm is labeled ‘sexist’. If a practice is sexist, women should not participate in it, and those that do are complicit in their own subordination. In response to such claims, other feminists object. No one likes paternalistic finger wagging. To make sweeping condemnations of a practice is to disrespect women who authentically choose to engage in it. People of all genders ought to be allowed to live out their gender and sexuality in a variety of ways. A playful, open attitude ought to be encouraged (Lugones 2003; Butler 2015).

Some such debates can be resolved using standpoint theory. Introduced by Marxist feminists and developed by feminist philosophers of science in the 1970s and 80s, standpoint theory begins with the observation that acts of knowing require “a view from somewhere” (Haraway 1991; Hartsock 1998; Code 2003; Wylie 2003; Harding 2004; Pohlhaus 2012). From this premise, it follows that knowledge is always socially situated, reflecting the interests and values of knowers. Standpoint theorists observe that individuals from dominant groups occupy a social standpoint that encourages vicious epistemic dispositions, including radical forms of insensitivity and ignorance.[[5]](#endnote-5) “As a defense mechanism,” writes José Medina, “those in a position of privilege are often encouraged to hide their heads in the sand like ostriches with respect to certain aspects, presuppositions, or consequences of the oppression that sustains their privilege. They need to ignore certain social realities. They need to live without having certain truths present in their minds” (2013, 35; Lugones 2003; Sullivan and Tuana 2007). In contrast, “those who are subject to structures of domination [i.e. subordinated groups] . . . may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects” (Wylie 2003, 339; Harding 2004; O’Toole 2021). Because standpoint theory privileges subordinated knowledges, it says that marginalized women should be trusted over privileged women in debates over contested practices.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Veiling, a practice prevalent in Muslim cultures, provides a case in point. Western feminists often characterize veiling as a sexist practice. From the perspective of many Muslim women, the opposite is true. Wearing a hijab or burka can be an expression of religious freedom, a way to protest Western cultural imperialism, as well as a tactic for avoiding male objectification (Ahmed 1992; Hirschmann 1997). Serene Khader argues:

In a world characterized by imperialist domination, the demand that “others” abandon their entire worldviews and adopt those of Westerners cannot be presumed innocent. Sweeping judgments about the sexist valences of the traditions of “others" end up aligning feminism with cultural domination, economic exploitation, and imperialism (2019, 98).

According to standpoint theory, Western women need to check their own biases, just as Khader suggests, and listen to Muslim women who frame the social significance veiling in terms of resistance to oppression. Though individuals are never infallible, standpoint theory begins by trusting Muslim women. It asks non-Muslim theorists who are interested in veiling practices to analyze them only from a stance of deep epistemic humility.

In *Throwing Like A Girl*, Iris Young explains another way to think about contested practices (2005). On one hand, she argues, feminists and queer theorists have an obligation to analyze social structures, i.e., the beyond-the-individual features of social reality (such as norms and practices) that cause gender-based subordination. On the other hand, feminists and queer theorists must attend to first-person embodied experience, subjectivity, and individual agency (see also Ahmed 2006). How does it feel to be a person of a certain gender, given the other nuances of one’s social identity, in particular situations? Which practices feel burdensome, and which do not? How do norms impact how one moves through the world and one’s relationships? *Individual agency* is key here. Each person must contend with the social meanings thrust upon their bodies, must negotiate the spaces in which they are expected to play a particular social role. In doing so, they exercise agency within oppressive social structures. An individual’s perspective on their own situation gives researchers a window into the meaning of practices and norms *for them*. If theorists ignore the first-person perspectives of the people about whom they theorize, Young argues, they deny their agency and, in so doing, are potentially complicit in oppression (for other theorists who make this claim, see Davis 1991; Zheng 2017; Pillow 2019; Febos 2022).

Increasingly, feminist theorists adopt environmental analyses of sexism that fulfill both of the aims sketched by Young. Examples include Kate Manne, who defines misogyny as a feature of social environments in which women are subject to patriarchal law and order (2018), and Mary Murphy et al., who argue that sexism is a feature of social environments in which women face “systematic inequalities in experience and outcomes” (2018, 68). “A view of prejudice in places,” explain Murphy et al., “requires examining values, norms, models, hierarchies, and behaviors that organizations cultivate and how these settings support biased (and unbiased) individuals” (ibid., 67; see also Stamarski and Son Hing 2015; Payne et al 2017). Theorists and practitioners in geography, architecture, city and building design have long emphasized the role that physical architecture plays in subordination (Fainstein and Servon 2005; Kogan 2007; Kern 2021; Criado Perez 2021; Berry et al. 2022; Matrix 2022). They argue that social spaces are designed and built to suit privileged group’s interests. To uncover sexism in social environments, they look to physical structures and technologies that work better for some people than others, mirroring wider group inequalities (see also Liao and Huebner 2020).[[7]](#endnote-7)

Perhaps ironically, environmental accounts of sexism tend to highlight individual agency. Within any geographical location, there will be a multitude of environmental niches, i.e., smaller social spaces. In *The Categories We Live By*, Ásta offers the following example (2018). At work in San Francisco, a person might be “one of the boys.” In a gay bar later that afternoon, they might be “a butch” and expected to buy drinks for femmes. At home with their family, they might be considered “a woman” and told to make food in the kitchen. As individuals move in and out of various spaces, different existential possibilities open up, and distinct “constraints and enablements” are placed on them. Individuals’ agency again comes into view. One cannot help but see that individuals relate to social norms in distinct ways, and the same goes for groups. Queer communities, for example, often embrace gendered practices, but subversively. When a Black trans woman puts on lashes and lipstick in her home and walks out the door, she is transgressing sexist norms and fighting sexism, even though she is embracing ‘traditional’ feminine beauty ideals. The situation is different when a woman puts on makeup to avoid being berated by her husband. Context is everything. If the same practice can be subordinating in one context and liberating in another, theorists should be cautious when making categorical claims about the subordinating nature of social practices.

Sexism could be understood as a single thing within the taxonomy I’ve described. Yet sexism takes many forms: it manifests in prejudiced psychology and behavior, cultural ideology, and social space, as well as in social practices, norms, policies, and laws. To understand sexism, and how to effectively resist it, the interplay between these elements must be analyzed. From this vantage point, sexism cannot be reduced to any one thing. For that reason, sexism is perhaps best understood as *the ideology and practice of patriarchy in its myriad forms.* Such a formulation respects intersectionality and gestures towards the multiplicity of ways in which sexism is embodied in social structures as well as individuals’ hearts, minds, and behavior.

3. AN AMELIORATIVE FRAMEWORK

A third kind of framework for analyzing sexism is defined by pragmatic questions. “On this kind of approach,” writes Sally Haslanger,

the task is not to explicate our ordinary concepts; nor is it to investigate the kinds that we may or may not be tracking with our everyday conceptual apparatus; instead, we begin by considering more fully the pragmatics of our talk employing the terms in question (2000, 33).

Thinking pragmatically means analyzing the work that “sexism” as a concept is supposed to accomplish and how it might do that work better. Because the concept of “sexism” was meant to serve as a tool for feminist liberation, the best concept—amelioratively speaking—will be the one that is most useful in achieving it.

Return to the history of feminism in Section 1. Second-wave feminists—many of whom were middle-class, white women—used woman-centered conceptions of sexism to do a variety of things: fight for women’s reproductive and legal rights; protest the unjust exclusion of women from literary, artistic, and academic canons; and condemn sexual violence against women. In one sense, “sexism” did this work well. The term was a godsend for women’s rights. Feminists used it to rally public support and fight patriarchal ideologies, laws, and practices.

Yet feminism was not working for everyone. After attending a nearly all-white, all-straight feminist theory conference, Audre Lorde accused organizers of not including Black women and lesbians in the conversation. “Why weren’t other women of Color found to participate in this conference?” she asks her audience, “Why were two phone calls to me considered a consultation? Am I the only possible source of names of Black feminists (2007, 113)”? Perhaps no one knew whom to ask, she says,

But that is the same evasion of responsibility, the same cop-out, that keeps Black women’s art out of women’s exhibitions, Black women’s work out of most feminist publications except for the occasional ‘Special Third World Women’s Issue’ and Black women’s texts off your reading lists” (ibid.).

She demanded that feminists take the differences among women seriously and stop excluding marginalized groups. “To read this [conference’s] program,” she says “is to assume that lesbian and Black women have nothing to say about existentialism, the erotic, women’s culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power" (ibid., 110).

Though Lorde doesn’t frame her critique as an indictment of the woman-centered view of sexism, she could have. According to a woman-centered definition, sexism targets *women as a class*. Lorde calls out this presumption as

false and arrogant. Sexism impacts poor women in different ways than rich women, women of color in different ways than white women, disabled women in different ways than able-bodied women, gay women in different ways than straight women, American women in different ways than South Asian women, trans women in different ways than cis-women. A woman-centered conception of sexism hides this, implying that sexism is the common oppression of all women. Thus, from an ameliorative perspective, the concept is a hindrance. What feminists need is a concept of sexism that attends to difference.

Other writers echo this plea. In “Listen up, Anglo sisters,” Elizabeth Martínez reports that white women tell Chicanas to “throw off their chains” and characterize the family as “an oppressive, patriarchal institution” (2017, 183). What they don’t realize, says Martínez, is that the family can be “a fortress in the face of genocidal forces” and “a source of strength for a people whose identity is constantly under attack” (ibid.). Martínez asks Chicana women to give feminism another chance, despite the patronizing ways in which white women speak to them. Other feminists of color underscored this message. “White female emphasis on ‘common oppression’ . . . alienated many black women,” explains bell hooks (2015a, 144). The messaging came off “as an assault, an expression of the bourgeois woman’s insensitivity and lack of concern for the lower class woman’s position in society” (ibid.). Not only did a simple woman-centered account of sexism betray insensitivity, it tainted feminist politics. Writing on the issue, Srinivasan observes: “a feminism that deals with only ‘pure’ cases of patriarchal oppression—cases that are ‘uncomplicated’ by factors of caste, race or class—will end up serving the needs of rich white or high-caste women” (2021, 17). Feminists across the globe have reiterated this critique, arguing that Western women tend to practice feminism in an imperialistic, culturally-insensitive way. (Oyewùmi 2003; Loomba & Lukose 2012; Baldwin 2013; Green 2017; Khader 2019; Zakaria 2021). Women of color feminists in the U.S. at the end of the 20th century were often aware of this issue, and they argued: to serve the needs of *all* women, the feminist movement must be intersectional, and it must adopt a notion of sexism attentive to differences between women.

In recent years, all-gender conceptions of sexism have taken the insights of intersectionality further. According to these conceptions, sexism targets people of all sexes and genders. Two distinct, ameliorative arguments converge to support the claim.

The first argument focuses on men. Men and women alike, bell hooks observes, “have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action” (2015b, xi). For this reason, “it would be naïve and wrongminded for feminist thinkers to see the movement simplistically being for women and against men” (ibid., xiii). Anyone can be an agent of the patriarchy. “To end patriarchy (another way of naming institutionalized sexism),” hooks says, “we need to be clear that we are all participants in perpetuating sexism” (ibid.). Just as crucially, sexism hurts *everyone*—men included (Benatar 2012; hooks 2016; Laymon 2019). Even dominant men, who enjoy the benefits of patriarchy, pay a high price. “Most men find it difficult to be patriarchs,” hooks writes, “Most men are disturbed by hatred and fear of women, by male violence against women, even the men who perpetuate this violence. But they fear letting go of the benefits” (2015b, xiii). She imagines a day when men “would find in feminist movements the hope of their own release from the bondage of patriarchy” (ibid.). “Imagine living in a world,” she writes,

Where we can all be who we are, a world of peace and possibility. Feminist revolution alone will not create such a world, we need to end racism, class elitism, imperialism. But it will make it possible for us to be fully self-actualized females and males able to create beloved community, to live together, realizing our dreams of freedom and justice, living the truth that we are all ‘created equal’ (ibid., xiv).

On her view, feminism is best understood as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (ibid., 1). “Come closer,” says hooks, making her case for an all-gender vision of liberation, “and you will see: feminism is for everybody” (ibid., xiv).

A second ameliorative argument for an all-gender view of sexism articulates a vision of feminism beyond binaries. Sexism is not just a dogma of female inferiority, theorists of LGBTQIA+ liberation note. Sexist ideology states that people assigned male at birth are—and should be—masculine and identify as “men,” whereas people assigned female at birth are—and should be—feminine and identify as “women.” Anyone who violates this schema is subject to patriarchal law and order, including transgender, non-binary, gender queer, gender fluid, agender, and intersex individuals. Women-centered conceptions of sexism ignore this, making sexism center on disadvantages faced by women. They also leave the binary in tact. To live up to the emancipatory aims of feminism, the argument goes, the binary itself must be challenged. An intersectional all-gender conception of sexism is the best conception for this purpose.

Examples of theorists embracing this argument are legion. In “Why Be Non-Binary,” Robin Dembroff writes:

While other feminisms question the unequal value placed on femininity and masculinity, highlighting the resulting gender inequalities, the nonbinary movement questions why we insist on these categories *at all”* (2018).

Dembroff argues that the most radical version of feminism—the version truest to its own ideals—will offer gender liberation to everyone, not just cis-gender women. Julie Greenberg likewise urges:

An important question that feminists need to address is whether gender rights are more effectively advanced by working within the binary or instead trying to dismantle our binary sex and gender system (2010, 18; see also 2012).

On her view, a feminism that works within the sex/gender binary is a feminism complicit in patriarchal oppression of intersex people. Intersex children routinely have their rights violated by invasive surgeries to make their external genitalia conform to their doctors or parents’ views about what their gender should be (Chase 1998; Kessler and McKenna 2001; Feder 2021). “We rightfully complain about gender oppression in all its social and political manifestations,” writes intersex theorist Suzanne Kessler, “but we have not seriously grappled with the fact that we afflict ourselves with bodily basis for assertions about gender” (2002, 132). In “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” Emi Koyama offers a searing critique of the binary as well (2003). Sexist ideology, Koyama argues, oppressively forces everyone into the sex/gender binary at birth, robbing us all of freedom (see also, Bettcher 2017).

If history is our guide, the most useful conception of sexism from the perspective of feminist liberation would seem to be an *intersectional all-gender conception*. “Every time a group of women previously silenced begins to speak out,” writes Koyama, referencing women of color feminists in the early 1970s and 1980s, “other feminists are challenged to rethink their idea of whom they represent and what they stand for” (2003, 244). Though this process can be painful, it “eventually benefits the movement by widening our perspectives and constituencies” (ibid).

The ameliorative framework forces a realization that wasn’t present earlier. How people *understand sexism* and how they *should* *understand sexism* are different matters. Historically, this concept has changed over time as theorists and activists contemplate the proper aims of feminism*,* how best to achieve feminist liberation in the face of persistent inequalities, and who must be part of the struggle. Activists wrestle with this question as they seek to form coalitions and contend with painful historical and ongoing exclusions and conflicts within the feminist and queer liberation movements (Oyewùmi 2003; Lorde 2007; Serano 2013; Bettcher 2014; Watson 2016; Cervini 2021; Zakaria 2021). Essential questions about the nature of sexism move to the foreground. If feminists are fighting against sexism, what exactly are they fighting against? When they say that they are working towards a beloved community in which sexism and sexist exploitation are absent, what are they hoping to achieve? Who is included in this vision, and who is left out? A related set of questions exists for social scientists and humanities-inflected scholars. What is at stake when academics pursue research that presumes an exclusionary, woman-centered view of sexism? Is it a necessary, helpful simplification or a way in which gender subordination lives on? Notice, again, what an ameliorative approach reveals. Different conceptions of sexism are tools, sometimes cudgels, in high-stakes political grappling over the future of gender liberation.

4. BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Each approach to analyzing sexism—linguistic, metaphysical, and ameliorative—discloses something crucial about sexism and the ways in which sexist phenomena have been theorized over time. While a linguistic framework illuminates conceptual history, the metaphysical framework is most conducive for studying sexism from the perspective of social scientists and scholars in the humanities. It also clarifies what feminists are fighting against when they seek to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. In contrast, an ameliorative framework is most useful for understanding how the feminist movement has grown and evolved over the last half century, as well as how analyses of sexism have inspired LGBTQIA+ social movements. This last framework highlights the stakes of language in the context of organizing, political activism, and scientific research. As a triad, they recommend conceptualizing sexism broadly as *the ideology and practice of patriarchy*. On this view, sexism—when and where it exists—targets people of all sexes and genders in ways that promote gendered subordinations (of all intersectional forms), pervasively shaping social and psychological life.

1. Drawing on (Haslanger 2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For example (Cudd and Jones 2005; 106; Savigny 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “Co-constitution” articulates one interpretation of intersectionality among other. For discussion of competing views, see (Davis 2008; Dhamoon 2010; Garry 2011; Anthias 2012; Carastathis 2014; Crenshaw 2017; Hancock 2016; Collins 2019; Madva and Gasdaglis 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Hosein (ms) offers a compelling analysis of why gender discrimination of this kind is wrongful. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. To illustrate these claims, feminists often cite examples of patriarchal knowledge production. For examples of women’s exploitation at the hands of male researchers, see (Levine et al. 1974; Rich 1980; Gold 1986; Weasel 2004; Cooper Owens 2017; Srinivasan 2020). For work documenting “hidden” androcentric biases within scientific and medical research (Spanier 1995; Fine 2011; Bluhm et al. 2012; Schulman 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For critiques of standpoint theory using its presuppositions, see (Moreton-Robinson 2013 and Silvers 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For example, Caroline Criado Perez has examined “secretive algorithms” embedded in emerging technologies (2019, 106; see also O’Neil 2017). Designed largely by men in the male-dominated tech industry, these algorithms were never intended to subordinate women. Yet they often do. Consider, says Criado Perez, a prominent online hiring platform—Gilt, which rates applicants for programming jobs based on their “social capital” in digital communities. Social capital is measured, in part, by the number of hours spent participating in specific digital communities, such as Japanese manga sites. “Women, who as we have seen perform 75% of the world’s unpaid care work,” observes Criado Perez, “may not have the spare leisure time to spend hours chatting about manga online” (105). Moreover, these virtual spaces are often highly misogynistic, and women may feel unwelcome in them (for examples of harassing practices within these communities, see O’Rourke 2014). When employers use Gilt, they put women job applicants at a disadvantage. Criado Perez warns that we have “no idea how bad the problem [of sexism in technology] actually is” because algorithms are proprietary and generally kept secret (108). The core of the problem, she notes, is the self-perpetuating nature of sexism. Even when tech firms want to be more inclusive, they are hamstrung by sexism in their hiring processes and culture.

   **Selected reading**

   **Woman-centered analyses of sexism**

   Beauvoir, S. de. (2011). *The second sex*. Vintage Books.

   Criado Perez, C. (2019). *Invisible women: Data bias in a world designed for men*. Abrams Press.

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   **Woman-centered intersectional analyses of sexism**

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   **All-gender, intersectional analyses of sexism**

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   **Web and Media Resources**

   ### [Abortion and Women’s Rights](https://www.abortionandwomensrights1970.com/film), Documentary, Catha Maslow, Jane Pincus, Mary Summers, Karen Weinstein Catha Maslow, =

   [Ahead of the Curve](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8956926/), Documentary, Jen Rainin and Rivkah Beth Medow

   [Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years, 1984-1922](http://www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com/), Documentary, Dagmar Schultz

   “[Ben Shapiro Stumped by Wet Pussy,”](https://jezebel.com/wet-pussy-stumps-ben-shapiro-1844678613) Jezebel article with video

   [Contrapoints](https://www.youtube.com/c/ContraPoints/videos), YouTube Videos, Natalie Wynn

   [“Confessions of a Bad Feminist,”](https://www.ted.com/talks/roxane_gay_confessions_of_a_bad_feminist?language=en)TED talk, Roxane Gay

   “[Drag Kings, Explained by Drag Kings](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lXshUNU65wI),” Vox Explainer Video

   [Everyday Sexism Project](https://everydaysexism.com/)

   [*Hidden Figures*](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4846340/), Film, Theodore Melfi

   [Intersex: Legal, Ethical, and Human Rights Development,](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXIxA9G2ThY) Lecture at Columbia Medical School, Katrina Karkazis

   [“Jordan Peterson, Custodian of the Patriarchy,”](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/style/jordan-peterson-12-rules-for-life.html) New York Times article, Nellie Bowles

   [“Man on the Land” Episode, *Transparent*](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4932180/), TV Series, Joey Solomon

   “[March in Boston is Latest Slutwalk Crusade](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlxpJ8Y1SRI),” YouTube Video, Associated Press

   [*Mrs. America*](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9244556/), TV Mini Series, Dahvi Waller

   [Paris Is Burning](https://www.criterion.com/films/29647-paris-is-burning), Documentary, Jenni Olsen

   “[Phylis Schlafly Debates Betty Friedan](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WncN6PWEMGo),” YouTube Video, Good Morning America Interview

   “[Revisiting This Bridge Called My Back with Cherríe Moraga and Margo Okaza](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQCGGftD5mg),” You Tube Event

   [Sandra Harding on Standpoint Theory’s History and Controversial Reception](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOAMc12PqmI), YouTube Video

   “[The Future of Disability Rights is Female](https://msmagazine.com/2018/04/12/future-disability-rights-activism-female/),” Ms. Magazine article with video of Emily Flores, Fareen Ali

   “[The Urgency of Intersectionality](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o),” TED talk, Kimberlé Crenshaw

   “[Woman Endures Cat Calling in the Street](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDoVckC6NhA),” YouTube Video, *Inside Edition*

   [*Visible Women*](https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/visible-women-with-caroline-criado-perez/id1627229311), Apple Podcast, Caroline Criado Perez

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