

WEEK 27: Equity ('Reverse' Sexism)

April 27, 2022

This week's question to consider:

Sexism is upholding the patriarchy, and generally, it works in favour of men to the disadvantage of women and gender non-conforming people. That said, is there such a thing as sexism that works in the other direction? Is there such a thing as... reverse sexism?

Pro tip: No. Nope. There isn't, no, impossible. There is no such thing as "reverse" sexism. The oppressed cannot oppress the oppressor. When you look at the full picture, the context of all people involved in a situation, it is undeniable.

In the last month or so, I have had some version of this conversation several times:

Inquisitive Human: If someone is discriminated against based on their gender, that's sexism, right?

Me: Yes. That's... yes, that's a definition.

IH: Ok. So, if the someone who is discriminated against because they're a man, that's sexism, yes?

Me: Hmm. No.

IH: Wait, isn't that the definition?

Me: Yes.

IH: So... if I follow that definition, isn't discriminating against the man sexism?

Me: Nope.

IH: You seem awfully certain about this.

Me: Yep.

IH: But... Okay, I do not understand. Can you explain why?

I get their point of view, of course. I do understand the confusion. It's confusing when looking at a situation with the goal to meet a definition. Thing is, that definition does not consider the full context of the world we live in. Maybe we need to revise the definition to add a bit of context.

This is the thing: we cannot look at only one side in this kind of situation. We have to put it in context of the whole, for everyone involved. It's a little like looking at it as a measure of degrees of horribleness. A little bit horrible, or annoying, versus violently horrible, or causing harm.

Allow me to illustrate, with an example.

Jamey Heath: What makes you qualified to speak about [masculinity]?

Liz Plank:

The same thing that makes you qualified to have a conversation about whiteness. That you, as a black man, understand whiteness far more than I understand it, or Justin [a white man] can understand it.

And it's not to say that it's your labour or your work, but you actually can teach us way more about it, because you have had to deal with it every single minute.

When you're the oppressed group? You know everything about the oppressor. You know things that they don't even know about themselves.

Excerpted from The Man Enough Podcast

Say we have a situation in a mental health facility wherein a supervisor tells their caseworker employee, a man, that he can't work with a specific client, who is a teenage girl. The teenage girl's parent has requested that not-a-man-please work with that girl. At face value, and with no additional information, perhaps we wonder why. Isn't this discriminatory against the man?

Well, no. This is not discrimination against the man. Here's why:

The supervisor is protecting the teenage girl. That girl lives in a world designed to protect men's interests and facilitates situations in which she is most vulnerable. The girl is the vulnerable person in the exchange. She is the one seeking help (or someone is seeking help on her behalf), and she is the one whose comfort level is most important in an interaction between mental health services professional, and child seeking help.

You've got to look at the power dynamics involved. They are not on an even playing field.

They are *especially* not at the same level considering their ages, genders, and experiences.

What is actually happening here is that there are other authority figures (the supervisor, the child's parent) who are advocating for her protection. The man is not being reprimanded. He is not being disadvantaged in his work. There is no pay cut. He has not been *victimized* in any way. The people surrounding this situation are all trying to protect this vulnerable girl from further harm. Putting that man's feelings above that child's sense of safety and security is not a matter of "fighting reverse sexism." It would be further perpetuating sexism. Blocking his ability to work with her is an attempt to right a wrong, and to re-establish trust between a teenager and the authority figures in her life.

Also, why does this fictional man want to especially work with that teenage girl so much? Or is it that whole demographic? Either way... a bit sus* of you to insist, my guy. Ahem.

In many of the situations where we would wonder about whether "reverse" discrimination is a problem, we are similarly not considering the entire situation. There is no situation where sexism is perpetuated against a man, because men are set up to be the ones with the power in most interactions. That is the state of our world. It is built for men. The crash-test dummies are all based on male bodies. Drugs are tested on (usually white) men. Studies are conducted with sample sizes consisting of (usually white) men. Until someone notices it, the settings for the building's air conditioning (if you work in a building with air conditioning, which, lol, ha ha, this is not teachers in NB) is set to a cooler temperature based on the comfort level of men who wear suits, and generally run warmer than others. T-shirts sold in the "men's section" are made of thicker, sturdier cotton, than t-shirts in the "women's section" of the department store. Nonbinary people can choose, but also, it's annoying that these things are divided across gender lines. It gets increasingly annoying when shopping for kids' clothes, which like to advertise gender stereotypes, and offer less material and never enough pockets for girl clothing. The deck is stacked in favour of the masculine gender in this world.

This isn't to say that a man cannot have a problem. There can be prejudice or discrimination, of course there can. But calling it "reverse" sexism diminishes the impact of sexism on the lives of all people who aren't men. Those who reframe the conversation to center the experience of men above all other points of view are missing a cross section of perspectives, and this acts as a way of further perpetuating sexism.

Similarly, there is no such thing as "reverse" racism. There is racism, a larger system designed to oppress racialized people, upholding whiteness as a standard to reach or aim for, and then, there is garden-variety garbage behaviour. These aren't the same thing, and it dilutes the impact of systemic problems to attempt to bring the notion of the "reverse" system of oppression.

The whole point is that there exists a system of oppression here. We are trying to highlight it. In asking "why there is no straight parade" or "reverse sexism is a problem here", the existing structure is not acknowledged.

Individual acts of crumminess are not tantamount to systems of oppression that include policies, laws, systems of governance, and physical structures.

Recommended Resources:

[Wikipedia Entry for "Reverse Sexism"](#) (accessed 19 April 2022)

Lilly Singh TEd Talk (March 2022) [19:56] | ["A Seat at the Table" Isn't the Solution for Gender Equity](#)

Note, this next resource is intended for adult audiences

Oppressed Majority (*Majorité Opprimée*), a short film by Eleonore Pourriat [10:59] | ***Trigger Warning:*** Depiction of Sexual Violence. *On what seems to be just another ordinary day, a man is exposed to sexism and sexual violence in a society ruled by women.* [Link to the film with English Subtitles on YouTube](#)

Smashing the patriarchy as if it's a cooked potato and we are aiming for a liquid consistency, (Hulk Smash),

Your friendly neighbourhood Anti-Racism & Equity Coach
Therese Trofimenecoff (*she/they*)

** sus = slang/shorted version of the word "suspicious," a turn of phrase which the kids use these days, or maybe it's on its way out, I do not know, but I have used it and I stand by it.*