

What is sexism?

Sexism originally referred to the belief in the existence of a hierarchy where men are advantaged and women are disadvantaged. Today's understanding of sexism has evolved to include:

- The belief that one sex is superior to the other
- The belief that everyone belongs to the male sex or the female sex
- Using the identities of man or woman to define ability
- Attitudes of hatred of women or men because of their gender
- Attitudes that demand or force masculinity on men and femininity on women

Sexism derives its basis during a time in which there existed a binary of sex and power, divided into the categories of men and women, respectively. Sex is an important aspect to sexism since it is in the term and makes up the base definition of sexism, which is relating to the categories of male and female (*for more information refer to the GenEq Info Sheet: Sex/Gender*). Today it has grown to include anyone who falls outside the boxes of gender and sexuality.

Does sexism still exist?

The work of many movements, including the Women's Rights Movement, have successfully diminished sexism, but sexism does still and will continue to exist as long as there exists inequality. For example, the media uses women's bodies to sell products, dehumanizing them and often times exotifies women of color. Sexism exists at both an *institutional and interpersonal level*:

Institutional Sexism: Sexism that occurs at the level of political, social and economic organizations in our society that structure and govern human behavior and interactions. Institutional sexism is harder to identify because it is so deeply ingrained in the systems of our society that it become difficult to separate sexism as something that is occurring. The lack of women in higher paid positions in the workplace is often the fault of sexism but since it occurs at an institutional level is excused to the fact that men work harder than women and thus deserve higher paying, better jobs which it is argued that women are less qualified for.

Interpersonal Sexism: Sexism that occurs at the level of daily interactions with other people. Interpersonal sexism is sexism that occurs between people and can be more easily combated because it comes in a more tangible form. This type of sexism is the type that occurs directly in front of you in conversation and interactions such as being told to "act like a lady" by your parents.

What is the difference between overt and covert sexism?

The real danger in sexism is that it can often times take shape in covert forms as opposed to overt forms. Overt sexism refers to sexism that is explicit and visible in its nature whereas covert sexism is more difficult to pinpoint and often comes in covered up forms. Such as wage difference, employment opportunities and women in academia, but covert sexism lies in things we pick up from our surroundings as we grow up and are harder to identify, explain and point out.

What does sexism look like?

It is difficult to describe all the ways that sexism can look, but here are some examples identified as covert or overt:

- Not being allowed to go out at night by your parents because you are a woman. Sexism is used to blame women for the acts of sexual violence that occur against them, implying that by going out at night alone a woman is welcoming an attack

- Assuming that a woman is less capable of lifting a 50lb box than a man. Sexism does not have to be verbal in order to be wrong. Assumptions that are made regarding sex and ability are forms of covert sexism because they occur at a mental level and are often disregarded as fact
- Sexist language often comes in covert forms. Sexist language includes the use of degrading words such as “bitch,” “whore,” and “slut” that perpetuate the notion of women as immoral by nature whereas the same language to describe men, such as “pimp” and “player,” give men power and pride
- Wage discrimination that occurs in the workplace can be covert because it is not spoken about and often times overlooked or excused by the fact that men “just work harder.” Women in the workplace earn \$0.76 for every \$1.00 that men make. There are only 10 women in the top positions in the Fortune 500 and in the Fortune 100 no women occupy the top positions (cnnmoney.com, August 2006)

Who does sexism harm? (What are the consequences of sexism?)

Sexism does not just harm women and other people who may experience it. Sexism hurts us all. Everyone is harmed by sexism in different ways. In speaking about sexism it is important to address the fact that sexism is always linked with other forms of gender and sexual oppression and discriminations that include homophobia, heterosexism and genderism. Sexism is intensified by these and other imbalances of power among people differentiated by class, age, race, sexual orientation and physical and mental ability. Sexism has been the excuse for numerous acts of violence including battering, sexual harassment and rape, especially against women. Sexism strains the lives of those who do not fit into a societal mold because it places limitations on opportunities for personal and economic growth.

What can I do about it?

- Avoid using gender specific language, like he and him, and instead use gender neutral language
- Support equal opportunities for all genders, by supporting outreach and hiring practices, and leadership that do not discriminate based on gender in any club, organization or job which you participate in
- Avoid using derogatory comments that put down any gender, especially gendered ones
- Treat everyone equally, that means not opening doors for women solely because they are women but opening doors for everyone
- Listen to those who have different gender experiences than you to better understand how sexism affects everyone, but in different ways
- Speak out against sexism and gender discrimination

Please refer to GenEq Info Sheet: Feminism for more information on what

Where can I find more information?

Women’s Programs

Gender Equity Resource Center (GenEq)
 (510) 643-5727
 202 Cesar Chavez
<http://geneq.Berkeley.edu>

Office of Student Life-Student Conduct and Judicial Affairs

For information regarding campus services and rights as a student or faculty member <http://students.berkeley.edu/osl/sja.asp>

Guerilla Girls

Fighting discrimination with facts, humor and fake fur

<http://guerillagirls.com>

