Sexism and Misogyny

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Oxford Dictionary (2019) offers a definitions of sexism and misogyny:

- ❖ Sexism is defined as prejudice, stereotyping or discrimination based on gender
- ❖ Misogyny is defined as the dislike, contempt for or ingrained prejudice towards women and girls

Hostile sexism is defined as overt misogynistic stereotypes and attitudes that position women as inferior to men, and used for sexual pleasure (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Lee, Fiske, & Glick, 2010). Hostile sexism contributes to victim blaming by justifying the global exploitation of women as sexual objects and also influences men's greater tolerance of sexual harassment of women (Eaton, 2019).

Examples of hostile sexism:

- ❖ Girls are not as intelligent as boys
- ❖ Women and girls belong at home, in the kitchen
- ❖ Women are inferior to men in the workplace
- ❖ Women are sex objects for the pleasure of men
- ❖ Girls do not deserve an education

Benevolent sexism is defined as sexism which appears positive or traditional but patronises women using traditional gender role stereotypes to position women as weaker, helpless and cherished or vulnerable (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This form of sexism has been found to elicit protection of traditional, gender role conforming women but hostility towards non-traditional, non-gender conforming women (Eaton, 2019).

Examples of benevolent sexism:

- ❖ Girls are naturally more nurturing and caring than boys
- ❖ Men are naturally more confident than women
- ❖ Girls love cuddly, cute things
- ❖ Men are naturally more rational and logical than women
- ❖ Girls are naturally better at tidying up than boys

Whilst overt or hostile sexism may be becoming less acceptable in the general public, more subtle messages still prevail. Researchers and campaigners have pointed to sexist messages aimed at and about women, such as those from childhood: girls wear pink, play with dolls, express their emotions and are less able in subjects such as math and science. These messages are shown to endure right through to adulthood where these messages evolve but do not change substantially, 'women like pink, flowers and feminine items, they like makeup and dressing up, they can be educated but are less able when it comes to math, science and engineering and are more likely to express their emotions than men.'

Whilst some of these messages may seem benign, they are pertinent examples of everyday assumptions about women that have their roots in sexism. The stereotyping of women is so prevalent that not only do the external sources of victim blaming rest upon them, but women and girls can also cite sexist notions when they are abused or assaulted (such as men have less control over their sexual needs, that boys cannot help themselves and women are temptresses that cause men to lose control).

Sexist and misogynistic attitudes can be held by anyone: male, female, adult or child. It is common to see children being socialised into sexism as early as reception classes in primary schools, where children might suddenly segregate themselves to only play with children of their own sex. Small children will often say that they 'don't like girls/boys' or assume that if a girl and a boy is playing together, they must be girlfriend and boyfriend. They may also hold sexist attitudes about the world and other people such as 'women can't drive a truck' or 'only boys play football'.

Obviously, small children do not suddenly develop sexist attitudes on their own. They are subject to years of daily socialisation by their parents/carers, their teachers, their peers, their communities and the media. Unfortunately, the socialisation of sexism and misogyny is deeply embedded throughout the life span and results in a multitude of beliefs, attitudes and impacts on both males and females in the world.

Where Does Sexism and Misogyny Come From?

Sexism and misogyny are supported by many systems, cultures, religions, norms, media and roles in society. Some examples of sexism and misogyny in society are:

- ❖ Magazine covers humiliating women for putting on weight
- ❖ Fashion labels advertising their clothing with images of women being beaten, strangled or raped
- ❖ Using naked female bodies to sell everything from yoghurt to perfumes
- ❖ Ignoring women and girls subjected to sexual harassment and violence in their daily lives
- ❖ Women and girls being barred from taking part in sports or activities around the world
- ❖ Girls being killed at birth or aborted due to not being male to carry on family names and genes
- ❖ Women being forced to cover their bodies, hair or skin so they do not 'tempt' men
- ❖ Women being paid less for doing the same job as a man in her workplace
- ❖ Girls being denied an education
- ❖ Women and girls being blamed for rape, sexual assaults, domestic violence and male perpetrated crimes
- ❖ Women and girls being advised not to go out alone, go to certain venues, use public transport or walk home to 'keep them safe' from harm
- ❖ Women listed as men's property and forced to perform 'wifely duties' (sexual intercourse) as part of marriage until 1996

The Media

Every day, an individual now spends more time engaging with the mass media outlets through technology than sleeping. Ofcom (2014) reported that people in Britain spend an average of 8 hours and 40 minutes per day accessing media in comparison to only sleeping for an average of 8 hours and 20 minutes per day. With individuals relying heavily on media for information about social issues, political issues, pop culture, product information and general news, it is easy to see the power that these outlets have when it comes to presenting sexist and misogynistic messages (Shaw et al., 2009).

Despite feminist groups fighting the objectification and sexualisation of women in the mass media since 1966 (Long, 2012) media outlets can be very selective when it comes to the way they present the roles of men and women. In a review examining depictions of women in the media including adverts, television programs, movies, music lyrics and music videos, magazines, sports media, video games, and internet sites (APA, 2007b) findings showed that women are frequently depicted in sexualized and objectified manners. In addition, women portrayed in the media are frequently the target of sexist comments, sexual remarks and behaviours. These commonplace portrayals of women as objects of sexual desire also cause people to make derogatory assessments of the women as being less human (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009) and as being less mentally aware (Loughnan et al. 2010).

Misogyny is common in modern media. For example, results from a content analysis of television dramas found that 42% of storylines depicted a woman "wanting" to be raped, 38% depicted a victim lying about rape, and 46% featured women "asking" to be raped (APA, 2007b).
The media also has extraordinary power over the way in which women are portrayed in general, usually leading to the hyper-sexualisation of all women in mass media outlets. Women are portrayed differently in the media depending on their ethnicity, their culture or heritage.

Studies from the late 90s showed that lesbian women are amongst the most sexualised of all women due to the way the media have exploited and targeted the male fantasy of having sex with two or more women at the same time. In addition, Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) found that the sexual exploitation of African American women in slavery has led to media stereotypes of Black women as sexual aggressors and sexual savages (Thomas et al., 2004). They also reported that Asian women were portrayed in the media as sexually submissive, childlike, and exotic (Root, 1995).

Finally, women of all ethnicities and cultures who belonged to lower social classes were portrayed as 'gross, overly sexed, untamed, crude, and deserving of sexual exploitation and aggression' (Pharr, 1988; Smith, 2008). Whilst this may result in seemingly benign popular adverts containing, for example, African women dressed like carnal, sexual animals in a jungle or chained naked in a metal cage – the media reinforces the powerful, misogynistic and racist historic white power over 'exotic' women of colour who are hyper-sexualised objects of sex to be used or tamed.

Just as the issues and identities of women must be seen as intersectional for us to truly understand their experiences, the media has learned how to manipulate these issues and identities and reduce women to sexual objects. All of these media representations of women, however diverse, reduce the woman to an object for sex, 'holes to be filled' (Long, 2012), a body to be used. Not only this, but the hyper-sexualisation of groups of women can be absorbed and accepted by the women themselves (Loughnan et al., 2013), meaning that they can buy into the popular misrepresentation of their own gender and self-worth.

Arguably, one of the most devastating effects of buying into the representation by the mass media of women as sexual objects is that women can learn that their self-worth lies within sex and being constantly sexually available and therefore judge and blame themselves using common rape myths for why they were raped or not even realise that their sexual encounter was non-consensual, forced or exploitative. Indeed, Fairchild and Rudman (2008) have shown that women who experienced sexual harassment in the street by unknown men had a variety of coping mechanisms. However, those women who responded to sexual harassment in the street passively or by blaming themselves were much more likely to self-objectify.

Violent and sexist video games in popular use such as Grand Theft Auto (GTA) have recently been shown to reduce empathy for women and girls (Gabbiadini et al. 2016). In a study that looked at GTA, that had sold over 54 million copies in August 2015 (IGN, 2016); players always act as hyper-masculine and aggressive male characters and all of the female characters in the game are prostitutes, pole dancers and victims of the male characters; females in this game are sex objects. For example, players of GTA can have sex with a prostitute but then make the decision in game play to kill her after the sex and steal their money back (Gabbiadini et al., 2016). The researchers concluded that playing video games in first-person that endorsed violent, abusive and sexist behaviours towards women increased the masculine beliefs of the male players and therefore reduced the empathy towards victims of sexual violence and increased their levels of desensitisation towards violence against women.

Religion and Cultural Norms

Religion and cultural norms also play a large part in sexism and misogyny in modern society. Whilst people often argue that one religion or faith is 'worse' or 'better' for sexism and misogyny than another, there is clear evidence that all cultures and religions contain significant sexist and misogynistic materials. Sexism appears to play a major part in Turrell & Thomas (2008) findings and provides evidence for reasoning that mirrors some of the most common rape stereotypes and victim blaming messages. They draw attention to Smith (1995), who writes that some Christians may view sexual assault and rape as an act of sex rather than an act of abuse or sexual violence. Reframing the event as an act of sex rather than an act of abuse or violence, places focus on the woman and moves the responsibility away from the perpetrator. By reframing it as an act of sex, the dress, actions and behaviour of the woman can then be called into question, leading her and others around her to believe that she must have done something to draw attention to herself (Smith (1995) as cited in Gioanovelli and Jackson, 2011).

An example of the way that teachings in Christianity can reinforce rape myths and victim blaming is provided by Turrell and Thomas (2008) who describe the story of Joseph and Potipher in which the wife of Potipher repeatedly makes sexual advances towards Joseph (a slave they had recently purchased) and when Joseph continues to decline her advances and harassment, she rips her clothing and tells people that Joseph tried to rape her. Joseph is punished by life imprisonment. This story is commonly used to teach women the consequences of 'crying rape' and is talked about in the context of the false accusations of rape made by angry women against men as revenge or punishment, which is very similar to the rape myths that women often lie about rape and that women accuse men of rape as a way to punish them.

Brownmiller (1975) discussed the consequences of rape that occurs within and outside of the city walls in the Bible. If a woman is raped outside of the city walls, she will either be forced to marry the perpetrator, or he will be killed. If however the rape occurred within the city walls, then both the woman and the perpetrator are killed. Brownmiller (1975) suggested that this was because the assumption was made that if the rape truly did happen, the woman would have been able to get help, scream for attention or fight him off and so he is killed for raping her and she is killed for not raising the alarm and stopping the assault from happening to her.

As is shown by Brownmiller's observations of the punishment of a woman who has been raped, a lot of the underlying reasoning is still present today in common victim blaming discourses, especially the familiar assumption that if a rape really did happen to a woman, she 'should' have been able to fight them off, scream for help, escape and report the rape immediately, probably with serious injuries from the fighting. These stereotypical and erroneous assumptions about the way a rape

occurs are still being used to blame women and discredit their accounts in general discussion but also in the criminal justice process.

The theme of sexism continues into Islam and the lower status of women in this religion is well-documented (e.g., King 2009). There are similarities to Christianity in the teachings about women who cause their rape by the way they look or act with more of a focus on purity and chastity. In a study of over 1500 people, Muganyizi et al. (2010) found that identifying as a Muslim woman was associated with more victim blaming than any other religion. Interestingly, there are very similar consequences to rape written in the Qur'an as in the Bible. A woman's sexual purity and faithfulness to her husband and family are very important qualities in Islam and can therefore be used to blame her for her rape.

Following this theme of violation of sexist norms and gender roles; characteristics and sexual behaviours of the woman can contravene the moral code a woman must adhere to in order to remain pure and honourable. Women and girls are killed for experiencing rape due to the dishonour and shame it brings upon the family or the potential of the rape actually being perceived as zina (sexual relations outside of marriage). Even if it is accepted that a woman was targeted and raped by another man, if that man is not her husband, she is still guilty of zina (Weaver, 2007).

In striking similarity to the consequences outside of the city walls in the Bible, the Qur'an teaches followers to 'flog the adulterer and the adulteress, each one of them, with one hundred stripes' (Franuik & Shain, 2011). Whilst this is described as adultery, rape often happens outside of marriage and when this is then reframed as zina or adultery, it often results in women being punished or killed for being raped. To evidence this issue, Franuik & Shain (2011) discuss the following example of women being punished or killed for being raped or assaulted: In 2006, a senior Muslim cleric in Australia was speaking about the rape of women who do not wear hijab, "If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside on the street, or in the garden or in the park, or in the backyard without a cover, and the cats come and eat it … whose fault is it, the cats or the uncovered meat?" (Taken from Franuik & Shain, 2011).

This very closely relates to a concept in Hinduism in which a woman is described as being so sexual and so desirable (her Shakti) that a man should not be expected to restrain his desire to have sex with her and therefore the blame is placed upon the woman for inciting or asking to be raped, should he rape or sexually assault her. In the Ramayana it states: "So soon as a woman sees a handsome man, her vulva becomes moist," (as cited in Starr 1991, pp. 64–65). This has been taken to mean that the woman becomes sexually aroused and wanting sex as soon as she sees an attractive man and underpins the rape myths that she both wanted to be raped and enjoyed being raped. These messages about overt sexual desirability of women mean that a man would not be expected to restrain himself, which again bears similarities to Islam.

Whilst it would be easy to assume that these theories about a woman's irresistible beauty seem to be contained to Islam and Hinduism, there are numerous non-religious examples of this exact line of reasoning and victim blaming all over the world – and atheists do not victim blame any less than people with religious beliefs. It would therefore be incorrect to attribute these beliefs solely to Christianity, Islam and Hinduism when the actual root of these beliefs lies in the sexism and misogyny that many different sources perpetuate.

However, one concept that is central to Hinduism and Buddhism is that those that commit sins or become victims of their desires are destined to repeat their suffering or the suffering of others through karma and rebirth (Gross, 1994). There are prominent examples of sexism and hierarchy of gender in Buddhism, such as that rebirth as a woman is caused by negative karma and punishment

for sinful behaviour in a previous life (Gross 1994), essentially positioning womanhood as an undesirable experience caused by previous sins.

Khuankaew (2007) reported that Buddhist women who are suffering in violent relationships often believe that they have brought this suffering upon themselves through negative karma and Franuik & Shain (2011) confirmed that monks also believe women's abuse is brought on themselves through karma, meaning that Buddhist women may be receiving these victim blaming messages from numerous sources at once.

Education Settings

For some children, the school environment is where they are socialised with misogynistic and sexist attitudes. This is thought to be because school systems are seen to perpetuate gender roles and expose girls to sexual harassment and assault in schools where they feel their complaints are not taken seriously and that sexual violence is a normal everyday occurrence. In 1992, Bailey wrote about the way teachers socialise girls from a very early age to be quiet, neat, calm and to recognise popularity and likeability as important characteristics whereas boys were socialised to speak out, be independent and active. Not only that, but when boys were surveyed, they ranked competence and independence higher than the girls, who ranked popularity and being well-liked as their most important characteristics at school.

Bailey (1992) argues that this is coming from the school as an environment and as a social structure. Reay (2001) found that teachers were more accepting of boys showing disruptive behaviour but labelled girls who showed assertive, disruptive behaviour in contradiction to traditionally accepted femininity, with teachers calling some of the girls 'real bitches'. Chapman (2015) gives examples in which masculinity is prized in schools and femininity is posed as a weakness, providing fertile ground for sexism and misogyny in schools – where doing anything 'like a girl' is an age-old insult and the boys bully and harass girls and weaker, less masculine boys in their groups.

Teachers have also been found to hold strong gender biases about students such as stating that boys are naturally better at maths and science subjects and girls are more emotional and defined by their relationships with the boys. Studies have shown that teachers give significantly more supportive time to male students in secondary schools, which has shown to result in girls being behind their male peers by the end of secondary schools despite being ahead of them at the end of primary school (Chapman, 2015).

In 2016, the Women and Equalities Committee published a parliamentary report entitled 'Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools', describing the issue as 'widespread' and recommending that OFSTED include the reduction of sexual harassment and sexual violence against girls as part of their inspection schedule. The report found that 5500 sexual offences were committed by school children against other school children within the school between 2012-2015 which included 600 rapes. The report also published key findings which included that 71% of school children reported hearing sexual name calling such as 'slut', 'slag', 'whore' and 'bitch' every single day and that 59% of girls aged 13-21 years old had experienced sexual harassment in their school or college environment in the last 12 months. The national report found that boys pulling down girl's trousers or lifting their skirts up was commonplace by the age of 10 years old and that sexual bullying, sexism and sexual violence (including harassment) are normal, everyday occurrences by the age of 13 years old.

In 2012, NSPCC published a qualitative report about the impact of 'sexting' on boys and girls in schools in the UK. The researchers conducted focus groups and interviews with children between 11

and 16 years old and found that the foundations of 'girls are sluts, but boys are congratulated' if they are sexually active underpinned many of the experiences of girls and boys who had taken part in the interviews. Behaviours such as asking for, collecting and taking 'bare' photos on smartphones and then sharing them without permission to 'expose' girls was commonplace. When boys as young as 12 years old were interviewed, they told interviewers that they often touched or grabbed girls as they walked past them in the school because the girls provoked them and wanted it, whilst then explaining that it wasn't like they were raping them, it was only touching them up. A 14-year-old boy explained to interviewers that girls who had self-respect would not send sexual images in the first place so they deserve to have them shared because any girl who shares pictures of herself is a 'slag'. When the researcher asked him whether that was the same for boys who shared topless pictures of their six-pack, he laughed and said that its different with girls because they should act appropriately and dress appropriately if they want to be respected by him.

How Does Sexism and Misogyny Impact Everyone?

Lots of people can make the mistake of believing that sexism and misogyny only impacts girls and women. Whilst sexism and misogyny oppresses and severely harms (and even contributes to the murder of) women and girls, there are still important impacts on boys and men which create a circular problem in which men and boys are simultaneously being impacted by misogyny and sexism whilst also displaying it towards women and girls.

Examples of how sexism and misogyny impact men and boys:

❖ Men and boys are ridiculed for displaying any emotions and/or characteristics that are perceived as 'feminine' or 'girly' and they are less likely to seek help, talk about their problems or cry in front of others due to being taught this makes them weak or feminine
  o This is argued to lead to higher rates of suicide in young men
❖ They are compared to women if they lack capability or strength 'run like a girl', 'throw like a girl', 'grow some balls', 'cry like a girl', 'weak like a little girl', 'pussy', 'bitch', 'stop being a woman'
❖ Misogyny and sexism have strong links to homophobia towards gay or bisexual men and boys due to not conforming to the gender 'norm' of having sex and being attracted to women/girls
❖ They may hold sexist or misogynistic beliefs about women and girls they care about (mothers, sisters, girlfriends, wives, daughters)
❖ They are expected to love 'masculine' activities for example, banter, fighting, contact sports, drinking and sex with women

Therefore, men and boys are also being impacted by sexism and misogyny. This means that when we are educating children or adults about sexism and misogyny, it is important to educate everyone rather than just teaching girls and women about sexism and misogyny in society.

For more information about sexism and misogyny or victim blaming, please visit www.victimfocus.org.uk or contact Jessica on jessica@victimfocus.org.uk