

Social constructs of gender and sexuality



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Sexism- Prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex. Many people are still faced with the absence of equality solely because they are a woman. Sexism is used as a way to keep women submissive in our patriarchal driven society. The three methods that are used to ensure the predominance of submissive attitudes in women are homophobia, violence, and economics. These acts further emphasize the importance of feminism in The United States.

Sexism is enforced through traditional gender roles, or how people are perceived through the eyes of society. For example, Linda is a woman, so therefore she must dress appropriately and stay home and care for her children. People oftentimes forget that we are not born with gender as a genetic trait; it is in how one chooses to present themselves. " Gender is so much the routine ground for everyday activities that for many people, questioning its taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions is like thinking about whether the sun will come up" (Lorber 13). " West and Zimmerman's concept of ' doing gender' suggests that women and men are to continuously act out membership in their appropriate gender category. They are expected to submit to traditional gender roles and ' to do' gender in ways that are constructed by society as natural" (Murphy 210). Gender is oftentimes misinterpreted by the members of society. It is skewed in a way that is to mean gender is strictly related to sex. " Both women and men are expected to act according to traditional norms, and when they deviate from those norms, they are subject to scrutiny by other members of society" (Lorber and Farrell 210). The vast majority women would more than likely

rather avoid the negative judgment by society and remain within the realms of normative behavior.

Gender is considered to be a socially constructed status in The United States. Society tends to overlook the concept of gender because it is so ascribed into our daily lives that it takes a severe disruption to notice. Judith Lorber says, " Gender signs and signals are so ubiquitous that we usually fail to note them- unless they are missing or ambiguous" (112). Gender is looked upon as an issue of black and white, man and woman, provider and supporter. It is related to our roles of " normality" in our society. Gender tends to be stratified in that men are the privileged and women the unprivileged. To be a man is to have a crown, and to be a woman is to make it. We are conditioned at an early age that girls and boys are to look and act differently. Fathers teach their sons sports and how to be " tough", and mothers teach their daughters how to bake and act " like a lady".

According to society's standards of what is " right" and what is " wrong", many individuals whom fall under the stereotype of how lesbians/gays appear as are scrutinized on a daily basis. " An individual is subject to assessment by others on how well and appropriately one displays his or her gender category" (Lorber and Farrell 210). When picturing a heterosexual woman, what do you see? Maybe it is a slender woman, who appears fragile or weak, dresses in a feminine manner, and is maybe not as intellectual as most men? When picturing a homosexual woman, what do you see? It could be a woman with short, spiked hair that chooses to dress in clothes that are traditionally made for men; and is larger than most " straight" women? In reality, all women, regardless of their sexual orientation are the same; in <https://assignbuster.com/social-constructs-of-gender-and-sexuality/>

that, the most feminine women could prefer women and the most masculine women could prefer men. It is sad to say that women keep their sexual identity to themselves and feel forced to present them however they feel society wants them to appear.

From day one, males are conditioned to be masculine and it is the source of oppression not only for women, but to some men as well. Men are each other's biggest opponents; looking down upon one another for encompassing any aspect of femininity, stemming into homophobia. Therefore, homosexual men are frowned upon in much of the same context as lesbians.

Heterosexism prevails once again in labeling these males as "sissies" and "wimps" because they do not necessarily embody the same traditional male mentality as many heterosexual males do. Men view this as a threat because they assume that gay men are working against everything straight men have worked for, in terms of dominance and respect, in societal institutions. If any facet of weakness, or femininity, is observed they are automatically insulted and ranked lower on society's stratification status. Sociology Professor, Michael Kimmel explains how oppression starts here: men against men, weaker men against stronger women, and eventually women against women (184). Our system of patriarchy strives on power.

Homophobia is used as a means to reinforce patriarchy. "The word homophobia was unknown to me until the late 1970s, and when I first heard it, I was struck by how difficult it is to say, what an ugly word it is, equally as ugly as its meaning. Like racism and anti-Semitism, it is a word that calls up images of loss of freedom, verbal and physical violence, death" (Pharr 1).

Homophobia, as defined by Suzanne Pharr, is "the irrational fear and hatred

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of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex” (1).

Homosexual women all over the country have struggled with gaining respect and equality from many men, and in some cases, women.

Megan Murphy from the University of Albany conducted a survey on heterosexual female’s attitudes toward openly lesbian students on the same college campus (212). Her findings dictate that the majority of the subjects would exclude said lesbians because they do not want other people to get the wrong idea in regards to their own sexual preference (215). Other findings show that some of the students surveyed would only tolerate their existence, but not support it (216). Sorority and Fraternity parties on college campus are examples of gendered erotic markets, places where women and men are required to act in sexually traditional manner. These markets discriminate against homosexual women because they are expected to act in the same way as the other women present, but obviously will not due to their sexual preference.

Women have been conditioned to be homophobic towards other women from the norms set forth by society. The term lesbian oftentimes frightens heterosexual women away from being associated with feminism and women’s liberation. Being a lesbian and being a “ man-hater” are used interchangeably to describe the women whom participate in feminist activism. Both are used to identify the women’s movement and continue to give feminists everywhere a bad reputation. Sexism prevails in this aspect on the basis that many women who believe in equal rights and reform are forced by society’s view of traditional gender roles and male dominance to

stray away from the subject. Thus, they conform to said gender roles and live life by other women whom succumb to societal pressures.

A graduate student from Northern Illinois University, Wayne Wilkinson, conducted a survey of 269 self-proclaimed heterosexual females ranging from 18-20 years of age at a University in the Midwestern United States. Wayne's hypothesis was that heterosexual women's attitudes against lesbians facilitate the patriarchal system dominated by males. Further investigation leads him to confirm that of those surveyed, the conservatives tend believe in traditional gender roles in order to define what is considered natural for females and males alike (141). Those whom identify themselves as conservative generally believe in tradition and women's role within the household, whereas those who identify themselves as liberal tend to welcome change more easily. " The central focus of the rightwing attack against women's liberation is that women's equality, women's self-determination, women's control of our own bodies and lives will damage what they see as the crucial societal institution, the nuclear family" (Pharr 17). Nuclear family- a social unit composed of a father, mother, and their children.

Fearing anyone whom identifies with a sexual orientation other than heterosexuality, is a way to keep women " in line" under male power. Lesbians are then considered double victims, of both sexism and homophobia. This is due to misogyny and the patriarchal system induced by men and some heterosexual women who encourage it. Homophobia tends to mirror heterosexism. They work together to enforce the notion that everyone

must be “ straight”. Those who are not straight must face the consequences by said individuals.

Heterosexism- the belief that since person A is heterosexual, person B must be too. The display of anti-gay attitudes in societal institutions is almost synonymous with homophobia in that they both enforce assumptions that the world and all of its components must remain in a heterosexual state; in that, anything outside of the traditional nuclear family is looked down upon. The nuclear family remains a dominant example of society’s heterosexism and patriarchal structure; it signifies traditional gender roles. Any woman seen to be stepping outside of that role, whether it be providing for herself, not having children, demanding equal pay, and obtaining assertion in any situation that attempts to skew them away from what they believe in, risks being called a lesbian.

In the past, people did not know how to handle the fact that people can love others of the same sex. Suzanne Pharr explains how there have been two main theories created in attempt to “ make sense” of their way of life. “ My exploration of the sickness theory led me to understand that homosexuality is simply a matter of sexual identity, which along with heterosexual identity, is formed in ways that no one conclusively understands” (Pharr 2). Since many heterosexual individuals cannot relate to homosexual men and women on the basis of love and romantic relationships, it is viewed as taboo. “ The American Psychological Association has said that it is no more abnormal to be homosexual than it is to be left handed” (Pharr 2). “[Being homosexual] is simply that a certain percentage of the population is” (Pharr 2). Many heterosexual people, men and women, do not realize that it is not a matter

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of sickness or health. What is unhealthy is homophobia- “ that societal disease that places such negative messages, condemnation, and violence on gay men and lesbians that we have to struggle throughout our lives for self-esteem” (Pharr 2). It is simply a way they choose to live their lives, and it is unfortunate that just because it is not exactly as those whom are heterosexual, they have to be labeled with such negative connotations.

Dawn Szymanski hypothesized that internalized heterosexism would negatively correlate to feminist attitudes. “ The research and study of over 200 self-proclaimed lesbians and/or bisexual women shows that the more heterosexist attitudes a woman holds, the less likely she is to positively relate to feminism” (156). The consequences of heterosexism have been shown to cause stress, depression, and other psychological related disorders in women. Szymanski states, “ Internalized heterosexism is related to a variety of psychological difficulties, such as depression, a lack of social support and low self-esteem in lesbians and bisexual women” (146).

Homosexual men and women experience heterosexism differently; this could be due to the presence of sexism and traditional gender role socialization.

The second theory often times used to “ explain” homosexuality is The Sin Theory. This is often used by religious people backing up their beliefs through Biblical texts. It is interesting that said individuals refer to The Bible on this matter because it is impossible to prove the validity of the texts. “... the fact is that the word homosexual does not occur anywhere in the Bible. No extant text, no manuscript, neither Hebrew nor Greek, Syriac, nor Aramaic, contains the word. The terms homosexual and heterosexual were not developed in any language until the 1890’s, when for the first time the <https://assignbuster.com/social-constructs-of-gender-and-sexuality/>

awareness developed that there are people with a lifelong, constitutional orientation toward their own sex. Therefore the use of the word homosexuality by certain English Bible translators is an example of the extreme bias that endangers the human and civil rights of homosexual persons” (Mollenkott 383-4 & Pharr 3). If their higher being(s) are described as respectful, all-welcoming, and forgiving, how is it that these homosexual individuals are not treated as justly as everyone else?

The marriage laws in The United States stands as an example of how heterosexism rules much of society. Many people use the Bible to state their beliefs in what marriage truly means, and feel it is meant to be a union between a man and woman. It has been argued that because two people of the same sex cannot physically reproduce a child, it is unnatural. Gay marriage has been illegal in The U. S. for a long time; it was not until recently that a few states legalized the matter. The first six states to legalize gay and lesbian marriage were Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Iowa, Connecticut, New York, as well as The District of Columbia. It was not until the 2012 re-election of President Barack Obama that three more states were added to the list: Maine, Maryland, and Washington. Traditional gender roles and religious bias prevail once again, excluding certain individuals from enjoying the freedom that they deserve.

The second component of sexism is violence. Violence is used as a means to keep women submissive and obedient. Men use violence when they feel threatened by a woman’s actions whenever she stands up for herself or attempts to move onward with her life. Violence is used against women in both physical and emotional means. “ Work in the women’s anti-violence

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movement during almost two decades has provided significant evidence that each of these acts, including rape and incest, is an attempt to seek power over and control of another person” (Pharr 13). Women who have suffered through any violence from a male have been belittled to be viewed as something of ownership, or an object.

Resorting to name-calling and pulling on emotions can be the biggest obstacle a woman will go through, even more so than physical violence. Men who refer to women in such a way is attempting to prove that she needs him in her life, or that she will be useless without him. “ When a male abuser calls a woman a lesbian, he is not so much labeling her a woman who loves women as he is warning her that by resisting him, she is choosing to be outside society’s protection from male institutions and therefore from wide-ranging, unspecified, ever-present violence” (Pharr 15). Maybe what the abuser in this type of situation is most afraid of is losing his control over her, what he feels he has a natural right to do as a man in today’s society. As Suzanne Pharr put it, “ the concern is not affectional/sexual identity: the concern is disloyalty and the threat is violence” (15).

Many feminists agree that economics is the main effect of sexism. Pharr exerts the theory by stating, “ Men profit not only from women’s unpaid work in the home but from our underpaid work within a horizontal female segregation such as clerical works or upwardly mobile tokenism in the workplace where a few affirmative action promotions are expected to take care of all women’s economic equality needs” (10). Alongside of affirmative action is the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling is a way for supervisors to lure women in to their company, stating that there are many ways for

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advancement and pay raises, but never allow them to enjoy those benefits. The “ glass ceiling” allows the woman-worker to see the proposed benefits, but prevents them from actually obtaining them while their male counterparts reap the rewards. Women are then forced to be dependent on men for economic security, maintaining male domination and put limitations on the options women have for being self-sufficient and determined to advance in society.

Social institutions are at the core of oppression and inequality. Oppression can be accomplished through racism, sexism, classism, ageism, and even how one identifies their sexuality. Women are denied positions of power because it is considered stepping out of the gender role mentality and men, who are usually in charge of said institutions, are petrified of it.

For years women have been ranked in society based on their race, class, and age. Caucasian women go through a form of oppression, but it is different from those whom are African American and vice versa; this does not mean equality cannot be the same for all. It was not until the end of the second wave of feminism that women of all races and religions were brought in to the picture. It is unfortunate that women of every sexual orientation are still not respected by all women. We are in the midst of the third wave of feminism; it is our goal to turn this mentality of inequality for lesbians and bisexual women around.

Homophobia is used time and time again as a weapon of sexism on the basis of economics, violence, and patriarchy. Our socially stratified society continuously enables men to claim opportunities of importance and women

what is left. Any woman who turns away from the traditional gender roles created by men and upheld by society as a whole, is looked down upon and faces the risk of being abused physically and/or mentally. Heterosexual women can identify with lesbians on a personal level, but some choose not to openly do so because of the patriarchal society we live in. These acts only emphasize a man's need to be the sole provider and leave women succumbing to the pressures these males harbor them with.

Feminism is an important concept that all women in this country should endure. It gives heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual women alike a sense of community and strength that they cannot find out in the world we are faced with. Liberal feminism allows individuals to open their eyes wide enough to see past the oppression and discrimination the erotic markets create for them. If one cannot physically overthrow the system, one must learn to work within it.

Just because a woman speaks her mind does not mean that she is a radical feminist. Just because a woman stands for what she believes in does not mean she hates men. Just because a woman is successful and independent does not mean she is a threat to society. Feminism is oftentimes overlooked by many women and the mockery of many men; it is seen as abrasive and nonsensical. Homosexuality is not a mental disorder nor does it need the approval of any biblical reference. What is considered "right" in the eyes of society cannot be justified on the basis of opinion; what are justifiable are facts. It is a fact that women are capable of doing things on their own. It is a fact that women can obtain a higher degree of education than men. It is a fact that women can be happy regardless of their sexual orientation.

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Some men feel threatened any time a woman is assertive and independent. It hampers the testosterone driven society and its norms. It gives some women a reason to move forward and others a reason to move back. Sexism is used to keep women apart, keep their voices lowered and their opinions dismissed. Until women of all races, sexual preferences, classes, and religions can work together to cut the root of sexism, it will continue to grow.