

Women's complicity in sexual oppression



In countries such as Canada where sexual rights are equal, women are indeed complicit in their sexual oppression.

It is so engrained in our society that many women are not even aware of when and how often they are being complicit. If women were not complicit, then women and men would truly be equal, there would be no “glass ceiling”, misogynistic behaviour wouldn't be laughed off as “typical male” behaviour and the binary gender norms would not be so blindly followed. Where does this all begin? In a country with equal legal rights to our male counterparts, why are women complicit and how did it come to be so widely engrained in our culture and way of thinking? Mothers themselves often teach their daughters how and when to be complicit. Perhaps without realizing it, women are teaching their daughters to participate in their own sexual oppression. From a young age, many girls are taught traditional “women” jobs (laundry, doing dishes, vacuuming) and encouraged to act like a “little lady”. This would involve being mindful of others, obeying, quietly listening/playing, closing her legs when she sits, etc...) Also key in paving the way of a lifetime of complicity is a mother's relationship with the child's father – if they mother herself is complicit, she is teaching her daughter to behave the same way in the future with her partners.

Whether a woman is raising a boy or a girl, by adhering to the norms and expectations placed on women she is perpetuating sexual oppression, most often subconsciously. Women can also be quite complicit in their own sexual oppression by oppressing their fellow women. One need look no further than the school cafeteria to see girls belittle, criticize and ostracize one another beginning at a young age. Even mothers are oppressive and competitive

with one another. A working mom, for example, is often looked down upon by stay at home moms (who are presumably being supported and cared for financially by their husbands).

Women in positions of power are often harder on female subordinates than they are their male counterparts. It almost seems as if they have been forced to act more “masculine” in order to be seen as worthy of holding positions of power. Hillary Clinton, for example, is a fine example of a woman in a position of power. The American public had many expectations and demands for her, first citing that she was too “masculine” of a woman (presumably because she was vying for a leadership position) and then when she did demonstrate what is deemed a more feminine act (crying) she was again criticized – by both men and women alike. Hillary was complicit in the way she catered to the demands placed on her (and some may say even more complicit by staying married to her unfaithful husband).

In first year, a female peer of mine was sexually assaulted. I hear other women doubting her story and almost placing the blame on this victim saying things such as “What was she wearing?” and “Had she been drinking?” As if to say if she was dressed provocatively, it may have been her fault. This is a disturbing example of complicity – women are complicit every time we judge another woman by her clothing choices, every time we doubt abuse victim's stories, and every time we choose to turn a blind eye to violence and abuse against other women. Women may be complicit in contributing to their own sexual oppression because they find comfort and acceptance from others in keeping with tradition and keeping with the “status quo”.

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We are taught to prescribe to society's binary gender norms. When females are raised with the notion that marrying a man who provides for her and their children is society's view of "normal", most young girls are going to strive for this. In homes, communities and in the media, the message is drilled that being normal means Dad works and Mom stays home and takes care of the kids. There is tremendous societal pressure on a young woman to get married and have children and once she has these children, being the best mother she can possibly be.

Perhaps the saddest part of this insurmountable pressure that women are under is the fact that it is largely self-created. Women are hardest on themselves and their fellow women and are often the first to criticize someone else's life, marriage, or parenting skills. This contributes to sexual oppression whether they are aware of it or not. Women are also known to pressure their fellow women into passive compliance after they have been cheated on by saying things such as "Stay for the kids' sake" or "he will change, he made a mistake."

"Whereas if a woman is the adulterer, she can be sure to be talked about behind her back by other women and called various distasteful names. Some of the most compelling examples of women's complicity can be found by taking a look at women's relationships with men. Even a young woman knows that to fault her sexuality to a man means that she is more likely to get what she wants. Some women encourage whistling and cat calls (smiling and flirting back) from misogynistic men, while others simply remain quiet. In either scenario, the woman is sending the message that this is okay to speak to women in that manner.

At home, women stay in marriages with unfaithful and abusive husbands. They either choose to lie to themselves and live in denial or lie to others to keep up a front and protect their abuser. Some women are complicit in their own abuse for financial or religious reasons, both of which complicate matters. I realize that not everyone will agree that women are complicit in their sexual oppression.

Some may say that inequality simply doesn't exist in countries with equal sexual rights. Others may say there is nothing wrong with the relationship dynamic between men and women nor the way women are viewed in our world and there is nothing to be complicit about (because nothing "wrong" is occurring). Others still may say it is the men being oppressed now instead! To that I say one need only to remember that in 2005, women made 70 cents to every dollar a man made for the same position.