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By Harry Jivenmukta

# WHAT IS SEXISM?

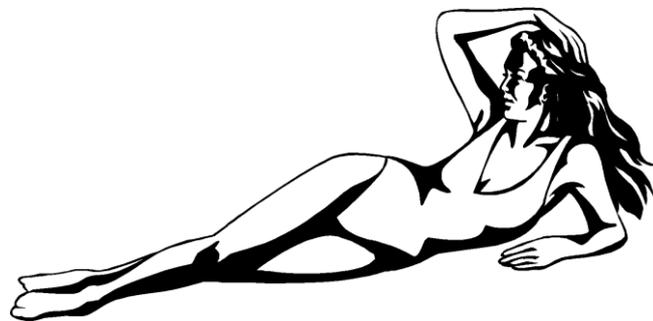
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Sexism is not only to do with the relationship that one man has with one woman but instead it is mainly to do with who has the right to decide how people should live. People who believe in equal opportunities argue that men and women should have equal say in how they live. Women should have the same right to decide about their life as men do. In reality this often means that women need to have equal access to power both in government and local decision-making. At work it means that women should be able to apply to do any job that a man can do and earn the same amount of money for doing that job.

Government has always been run by men and all the important decision making processes are controlled by men. In the UK in the 1997 general election almost 120 women were elected as MPs. This is a record. But even so there are a total of 650 seats in the British Parliament. Women are still under represented in all areas of decision-making in the UK. On the other hand there are now more women working in the UK than there are men. Even so women do not earn the same amount of money as men do, (presently women in the UK earn about 75-80% of the average male salary).

There have been some small changes in the UK in the last twenty years which means that there is less sexism today than there used to be. Some people argue that there needs to be much more change if women are to gain parity with men.



One of the greatest struggles women have is to do with how they are portrayed. It is easy to see from the two pictures how women can be represented.

## Exercise

1. What is sexism?
2. How do you think women have changed in terms of their expectations of what they want to get out of life in the last 50 years or so?

In the UK women's suffrage was first advocated by Mary Wollstonecraft in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The first woman suffrage committee was formed in Manchester in 1865, and in 1867 presented to Parliament a petition, which demanded the vote for women and contained about 1550 signatures. The Reform Bill of 1867 contained no provision for female suffrage, but meanwhile in the 1870s suffrage organizations submitted to Parliament petitions containing a total of almost three million signatures.

Every major suffrage bill brought before Parliament was defeated. This was mainly because neither of the leading politicians of the day, William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli, dared to face Queen Victoria's opposition to the women's movement. In 1869, however, Parliament did grant women taxpayers the right to vote in local elections; women became eligible to sit on county and city councils.

Out of frustration at the lack of government action a segment of the women's suffrage movement became more militant under the leadership of Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel. After the return to power of the Liberal Party in 1906, the succeeding years saw the defeat of seven suffrage bills in Parliament. Many suffragists became involved in increasingly violent actions as time went on. These women militants were sent to prison and continued their protests there by engaging in hunger strikes. Meanwhile, public support of the women's suffrage movement grew, and public demonstrations, exhibitions, and processions were organized in support of women's right to vote. When World War I began, the suffrage organizations shifted their energies to aiding the war effort, and their effectiveness did much to win the public wholeheartedly to the suffragist cause. The need for the enfranchisement of women was finally recognized by most members of Parliament from all three major parties, and the resulting Representation of the People Act was passed by the House of Commons in June 1917 and by the House of Lords in February 1918. Under this act, all women aged 30 or over received the complete franchise. An act to enable women to sit in the House of Commons was enacted shortly afterward. In 1928 the voting age for women was lowered to 21 to place women voters on an equal footing with male voters.

Today, the voting age for all eligible British citizens is 18.

## Exercise

1. What does suffrage mean?
2. Trace the history of voting practice and participation in the UK.
3. Find out and write biographies for:
  - z Mary Wollstonecraft,
  - z Emily Pankhurst,
  - z Christabel Pankhurst.

The feminist movement is a social movement that seeks equal rights for women, giving them equal status with men and freedom to decide their own careers and life patterns.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in England in 1792, challenged the idea that women exist only to please men and proposed that women receive the same opportunities as men in education, work, and politics. In the late 19th century a few women began to work in the professions but there were still distinct limits on women's participation in the workplace, as well as a set of prevailing opinions that tended to confine women to their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers.

The economic conditions underlying women's inferior status were changing:

- z as women had fewer children,
- z as household appliances freed them from many of the labour-intensive chores formerly associated with housekeeping,
- z as growth of the service sector in the Western world's economies in the decades following World War II helped create new types of jobs that could be done as well by women as by men.

All these factors made growing numbers of women aware that society's traditional notions of them had failed to change as rapidly as women's actual living conditions had.

A milestone in the rise of modern feminism was Simone de Beauvoir's book *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949; *The Second Sex*), which became a worldwide best-seller and raised feminist consciousness by appealing to the idea that liberation for women was liberation for men too. Some women attacked the conditioning of women to accept passive roles and depend on male dominance. Organizations were set up to overturn laws and practices that enforced the inferior status of women by discrimination in such matters as property rights, employment and pay issues, and management of earnings and in matters related to sex and child-bearing (i.e., contraception and abortion).

More broadly, the growing feminist movement sought to change society's prevailing stereotypes of women as relatively weak, passive, and dependent individuals who are less rational and more emotional than men. Feminism sought to achieve greater freedom for women to work and to remain economically and psychologically independent of men if they chose. Feminists criticized society's prevailing emphasis on women as objects of sexual desire and sought to broaden both women's self-awareness and their opportunities to the point of equality with men. Another of feminism's aims was to advance women's participation in political decision-making and all areas of public life.

## Exercise

1. What is feminism?
2. Find out and compare the development of feminism in the USA and the UK.



One of the main ways in which women have been controlled in the past has been by men defining what beauty is. Sometimes women think that they are defining their own vision of beauty but often it is to fulfil and satisfy and be attractive to men. In the late nineteenth century about 100 million Chinese women had feet which were bound tightly. Small feet were a sign of wealth and prosperity in China, but strangely enough men never had their feet bound. We may think that this kind of thing is unacceptable and it does not happen today, but in Asia and Africa almost 100 million girls are circumcised. This happens so that the girls cannot have sex until it is felt that it is appropriate for them to do so.

We might be shocked by this kind of thing, but to a lesser extent Western women suffer all kinds of hardship in the name of fashion and beauty. It is common for Western women to starve themselves on crash diets, or to undergo surgery to change their features. The media paints pictures of the ideal woman who is slim and beautiful. Most women cannot fulfil the image which is portrayed mainly because the image is just an image and not actual fact. There is the evidence that girls as young as 11 and 12 are going on diets, which could damage them because at that age they need to eat well in order to grow properly.

Fashion and beauty are often seen by some feminists as very clever tools to control girls and women. In a very careful way, by appealing to emotions, girls and women are encouraged to be soft and compliant. It is true that both men and women are caught in the media trap and they both try to meet an illusory image of the perfect man or woman. But women spend much more time on this activity and spend much more money. It seems that it is more important for a woman to fulfil a particular image. Some people think that even the image of girl power is just another media gimmick. Feminists think that girls and women should define their own idea of beauty and worth in order to be free.

## Exercise

1. What do you think beauty is?
2. How are girls and women encouraged to look and behave in a certain way?
3. Are boys or men as concerned about the way they look as girls and women are? Why?

Is God male or female? This is a very important question because many societies justify behaviour because it is written in some religious text. For hundreds of years religion has been used to define the role of women as inferior. Most religious prophets have been men, and men have dominated when it comes to defining right and wrong. Therefore it is not surprising that they should say that God is male.

Some religions like Judaism and Islam have laws written in their religious texts which are still followed today. In Christianity, you only have to remember that it was Eve who tempted Adam. There are many examples in religious texts which always lay the blame for wrongdoing and deceit on women. Because people feel that religious texts have been passed down by God they think they are applicable as much today as they were in the past.



Often religion is used to implement laws which otherwise would look wrong. In some Muslim countries women are not allowed to drive a car and must keep their faces covered in public. They are not allowed to involve themselves in politics or attend public meetings. In some extreme cases girls are not allowed to attend school or to receive any form of education except religious education. In the Catholic Church women are not allowed to become priests, or use contraceptives.

Feminists argue that God must be female because creation is like birth. It is always the female of the species who creates the new life and it is ridiculous to think of God as male. Other people think that God is not male or female and that religion should not control women or men. They think that if God created man and woman then everyone should be equal and treated with respect.

## Exercise

1. How does your religion see the role of women?
2. Compare this with other religions.
3. Why do you think most prophets and religious leaders are men?

Women's struggle for equality started in the USA and spread to Europe. One way to find out how the changing role of women affects them in the long run is to study what is going on in the USA. It must be remembered that what goes on in one country does not necessarily happen elsewhere.

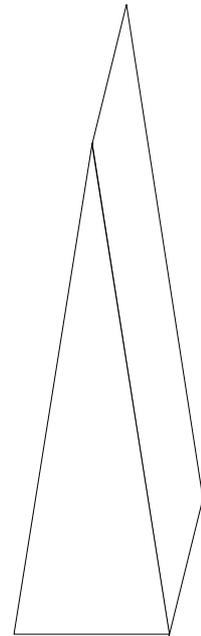
In America, women have become very career oriented and like the UK the number of women succeeding in career terms increased dramatically. But only a few women have reached the very top in America which is not surprising. By definition only a few can get to the top, be they women or men. Career achievement can be seen like a pyramid. There are bound to be more people near the bottom and fewer and fewer near the top. Everyone cannot be a manager or an executive.

Many women sacrificed their chance of getting married and having children in their twenties in order to follow careers. The evidence from America shows that there is a mid 30s crisis occurring in women who having made sacrifices find that they have not reached the top in their career; a feeling of failure on the career front, being stuck halfway up the career pyramid. The other women who went down the traditional family and children path are by their own measurement largely successful because they managed to get married and

have a family and home. Admittedly, their ambitions might not have been too grand but they have achieved their aims. The mid 30s crisis is worsened by the feeling among the women that they have not fulfilled their biological needs and their biological clock, (to have children), is ticking on.

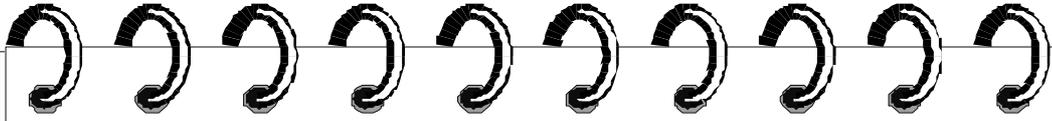
Many of these types of women suffer from increased stress and depression. The prospect of having children in their 30s and 40s would have been ideal if they had reached their career goals. But now, they are caught in the middle, not having arrived either in the career sense or in the family and children sense.

For the few who do achieve, however, the rewards are great, and for the women starting out on careers their role models are these visible successful women.



### Exercise

1. How ambitious should women be in their career aspirations?
2. Do women have more to lose if they fail to reach their career goals?
3. Why do some women have such high aspirations? Is it their choice or do they feel that they must prove something?



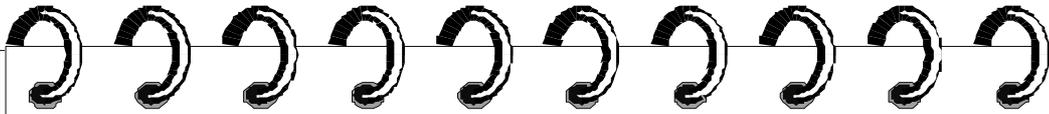
*What jobs can women do? Well, I know that I'm going to be unpopular but I think that there are some jobs which women cannot do and should not do whilst there are others which I think women would be good at.*

*For example there are some physical jobs which women are really not fit enough to do. It is not something to be ashamed of because I know some men would not choose to do certain jobs because they require too much physical effort. And, let's face it, women are not as physically strong as men. But if a woman chose to do one of these jobs she would not only be putting her own health at risk but risking other people because she would not be able to pull her weight. Some women just want to prove that they can do it and do not think about the consequences. If the woman got a very physical job and she could not keep it for long not only is she messing her employer around but she is also depriving someone else of a job. It is like someone doing 100 situps for a bet and then not being able to walk upright for days.*

*There are other jobs which are unsuitable for women like the armed forces. Women can join the Army but should not be allowed to fight on the front line. Women are naturally not as aggressive as men. Women are more caring than men and perhaps a better job for them would be in a caring profession like nursing. It is not a question of being sexist but realistic.*

## Exercise

1. It is true that women are generally not as physically strong as men? Does this mean that there are some jobs that women cannot do?
2. Make a list of jobs you think a woman cannot do, or which you think most women would not choose.
3. Are women really more caring than men? Is this just a stereotype?



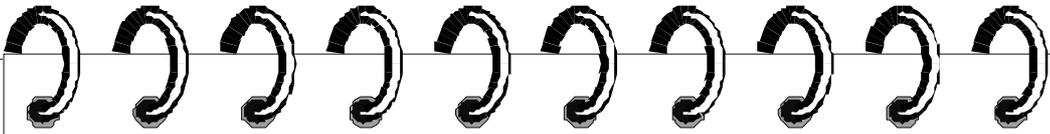
*Today 52 percent of the workforce is made up of women. For the first time more women are working than men and this causes problems. Traditionally men have been the bread winners and women have stayed at home to bring up the family. Whether this arrangement was good or bad it was simple because everyone knew where they stood. Many of the problems today are caused because women have confused the relationship. Men are still quite clear about what they want to do and how they want to do it but women are rocking the boat.*

*It is women and not men who are redefining relationships. Whilst there is a need for more equality it must be remembered that a relationship between two people has to be based on a compromise. Men are able to do more physical work, women are more capable of bringing up and looking after children. Women should not look at domestic work as being inferior to working outside. Traditional roles of women were wrong because they did not recognise the quality of work which women were doing but it is the perception and not the work which was wrong.*

*Someone has to bring up the children and someone has to take the main responsibility for earning money. If there are no children involved then there is no problem. Life is not a race. It is not a question of how much a woman can do but a question of how a relationship can continue with everyone sharing the responsibilities in the best possible way.*

## Exercise

1. Do you agree that in a relationship both partners should do the things which they are best at?
2. Are women always the best at home making and childcare?
3. Are men more suited to working outside the home than women? Why?
4. Is domestic work and childcare valuable work? Why has it become a 'big deal' in the battle for equality?



*It is the right of every woman to choose what sort of life she wants to live. This includes the right to choose a career, to choose what sort of family life she wants, to choose whether she wants children or not, and if she does, when she wants to have them.*

*Equality is not about words but about action. There is no point in talking about it because life is there to be lived. A woman needs to be positive and to make decisions without feeling guilty about what other people might think or whether it will make other people happy.*

*In terms of a career it is important to decide for yourself and to pursue whichever career suits you. It is not a matter of doing something which other people want you to do or for you to do something which women traditionally do. There is no reason why you cannot be a doctor or an engineer or a deep sea diver.*

*As far as relationships are concerned the idea that a woman should be married and happily settled down is very old fashioned. There is no reason why you cannot have a career or why you cannot have a partner who is equally responsible for bringing up children as a woman is. There is no need to be married when you can live together. In fact it is probably better to live together at least for the first few years so that you can be sure that the relationship will work before you commit yourself legally.*

*If a woman wants children then that's okay but if she doesn't she should not feel any less of a woman. In any case there are too many children in the world already.*

*In short, what I am trying to say is that women do not need to worry about any of the old traditional attitudes or roles but live as they want to because there are no limits except the limits you put on yourself.*

### Exercise

1. Is it possible for a woman to have both a career and a job, and do both well?
2. What does old fashioned mean? Are all traditional things old fashioned?

*It is impossible to have everything. The problem that women have today is that they want everything. They want a career, a happy family life, children, money and anything else they can get their hands-on. But life is not like that. You can only do certain things well, you cannot do everything and expect to do it equally well. Women need to choose, they should decide: either a career or a family. It might sound old fashioned but some things do not depend on fashion, they are common sense.*

*If you do too much you simply do everything badly. That is why you must choose. If you want a family and you want to have children then you should expect that you will not have a career. Looking after children is a full time job, and looking after a house and home is not easy. If you want a career then you would not have the time to look after children properly. I know what you are going to say next. You can get someone else to look after your children. But that is not the same as looking after your own children yourself. That is why there is so much trouble with young people today. People do not understand that children know when their parents are too busy to care for them. You cannot blame children if they turn out bad. You have to blame the parents, especially the mother, because it has always been the mother's job to instil moral values.*

*Sometimes it might seem that men have it easier, and they do. In the past men were the bread winners and women stayed at home. In that relationship at least both people knew who was supposed to do what. But today women are doing some of the work that men did but men are not doing any of the work which was traditionally done by women. So men are still doing what they used to do but women are doing twice as much. Who is to blame? Women are to blame because they want to do everything.*

### Exercise

1. Are career women irresponsible?
2. Is the real choice for women **either** a family **or** a career?
3. Is there such a thing as women's work and men's work? Should men share the burden with their partners, or should women only 'bite off as much as they can chew'?
4. What is a new man?

