

Challenging Everyday Sexism

Men Against Gender Injustice Collective (MAGIC) workshop, May 26, 2019, Brisbane

Workshop notes by Dr Michael Flood

Workshop blurb

Everyday sexism is a serious problem. Sexist jokes and comments, intrusive and harassing treatment, and other behaviours are a near-daily experience for many women. They cause direct harm, and they contribute to wider gender inequalities. Everyday sexism is routine, invisible, and often excused or ignored.

So, how can we challenge everyday sexism? What can you say when your uncle makes a sexist joke at the Christmas dinner? What can you do when your workmate comments on a passing woman's appearance? How can you respond when your mum says that women need to be more careful to avoid rape? What can you do when some guy on the train is making a young women uncomfortable?

This workshop explores practical strategies for responding to everyday sexism. We will:

- Share our stories of when responding or intervening has worked well and when it hasn't;
- Learn about the range of ways to take action;
- Explore common challenges and dilemmas: what to say, how our responses may differ depending on the people and the situation; when to call someone out and when to call them in; etc.

The workshop will be facilitated by MAGIC member Michael Flood.

Pre-reading:

You will be provided with a list of resources and readings on challenging everyday sexism during the workshop. If you would like to do some pre-reading before the workshop, then one useful short piece is Khan's "[6 Ways to Respond to Sexist Microaggressions in Everyday Conversations](#)".

Welcome and Introduction

Introduction to everyday sexism

Sexism, defined

Let's start with the issue of how to define sexism.

Gender-neutral, non-feminist definitions

If you go to a dictionary, you typically find definitions of sexism in terms of 'prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination based on a person's sex or gender'. This, however, is a weak and non-feminist definition of sexism.

Some definitions are more feminist, recognising that sexism is most often directed towards women and girls, and that it is tied to systems of oppression that disadvantage women and privilege men.

More feminist definitions

More feminist definitions of 'sexism' emphasise that sexism refers to *prejudice + power*. 'Sexism' does not refer merely to any kind of stereotyping or prejudice tied to sex or gender. Instead, sexism refers to attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate the gender inequalities that privilege men and disadvantage women and/or that reinforce narrow patriarchal roles for men and women.

This has various implications. For example, women can't be sexist towards men. Women *can* use hold gender stereotypes about men, can hold prejudices about them, but this is not sexism as it is not tied to institutional power over men. In other words, women can hold gender-based prejudices against men, but cannot be sexist towards men. (This is the argument at least at <https://finallyfeminism101.wordpress.com/2007/10/19/sexism-definition/>.)

On the other hand, women can be sexist themselves. Women can and do *internalise* sexism. This is an example of internalised oppression, in which members of oppressed or marginalised groups take on oppressive views of their own group or affirm negative stereotypes of themselves and others.

More points on sexism

Sexism may include attitudes, behaviours, institutions, and societies

The terms 'sexist' and 'sexism' have been used for a wide variety of phenomena: attitudes, beliefs, and social norms; behaviours; patterns of interaction; institutions and structures; and entire societies. The term 'sexist' sometimes is used to refer to any phenomena associated with patriarchal gender inequalities. (I've got no particular position on this.)

Sexist attitudes may be hostile or benevolent

Traditional academic definitions of sexism have emphasised two components:

- hostility towards women, involving e.g. hostile affect and negative stereotypes, and
- the endorsement of traditional gender roles which limit women's behaviour and give them less power and status than men.

But work in the late 1990s shifted this, emphasising that sexism involves both negative *and* positive evaluations of women. I.e., sexism is ambivalent, involving both subjectively hostile *and* benevolent attitudes towards women (Glick and Fiske 1997).

- *Hostile sexism*: justifies male power and traditional gender roles through negative / derogatory characterisations of women
- *Benevolent sexism*: involves kinder, gentler justifications of male power and traditional gender roles. Is subjectively positive (Glick and Fiske 1997).

Benevolent sexism

Benevolent sexism involves “paternalism, complementary gender differentiation and heterosexual intimacy” (Becker and Sibley 2016). It appears charming and flattering.

- Paternalism: women should be protected and provided for by men.
- Complementary gender differentiation: women as “the better sex”
- Heterosexual intimacy: an idealization of women as romantic partners, e.g. as essential for true happiness in life (Becker and Sibley 2016).

Hostile and benevolent sexism in practice

Hostile and benevolent sexism are strongly correlated. They are complementary, both supporting the patriarchal system. But they typically target different subtypes of women:

- Hostile sexism is directed largely at women who do not conform to traditional gender roles. E.g., feminists, career women, and ‘promiscuous’ women.
- Benevolent sexism typically is directed to women in traditional feminine roles (Becker and Sibley 2016).

Also: Traditional / old-fashioned sexism and Modern Sexism

‘Old-fashioned’ sexism involves clear statements of women’s inferiority to men. On the other hand, Modern Sexism or Neosexism comprise “a denial of discrimination against women and resentment of complaints about sexism and efforts to assist women” (Becker and Sibley 2016).

Modern Sexism has three components: “1) the denial of continued discrimination against women [...] 2) negative reactions to complaints about inequality [...] and 3) resistance to efforts addressing sexism” (Becker and Sibley 2016).

Everyday sexism

We are focused today on ‘everyday’ sexism – on everyday forms of talk, behaviour, and interaction which are sexist, that is, that reinforce patriarchal gender inequalities and patriarchal gender roles.

Here are some key points on everyday sexism.

Everyday sexism is common.

Sexist jokes and comments, intrusive and harassing treatment, and other behaviours are a near-daily experience for many women.

- Take place in everyday talk and conversation, informal interactions, etc.

Common forms of everyday sexism in the workplace

A recent report by Male Champions of Change (2017) provides a series of examples of everyday sexism in the workplace:

- Insults that masquerade as jokes

- “You won’t want to work on that machine... you might break a fingernail!”
- “Make sure you wear your low-cut top to meet with that client!”
- Devaluing women’s views or voices
 - Many women experience:
 - men interrupting or talking over them
 - men explaining things to them as if they have no prior skills or knowledge, when they do
 - their views not being listened to or supported until re-stated by a man
- Role stereotyping
 - Assumptions are made about suitability for roles and tasks on the basis of gender.
- Preoccupation with physical appearance over competence
 - Comments about body shape, size, physical characteristics or dress over skill and competence
- Assumptions that caring and careers don’t mix
 - Women are subjected to comments that infer poor parenting for prioritising work equally with family
 - Women are questioned about their commitment to work because they work flexibly..
 - Women are expected to explain why they don’t have children.
- Unwarranted gender labelling
 - Women are often described as being too bossy or not assertive enough – or the flip side – too ‘emotional’ or ‘nice’.
 - Men can be told they are too soft and not competitive enough (Male Champions of Change 2017).

Everyday sexism is routine and pervasive.

Sexism is not done by a few aberrant individuals, but routine and pervasive (Beagan 2001).

There is a dominant understanding that sexism “only lingers on in the attitudes and actions of a few aberrant individuals” (Beagan 2001). Instead, men and women typically verbalise tolerance (or equality) while accepting and participating in routinised practices which perpetuate men’s privilege.

Dynamics of sexism or heterosexism etc. are not necessarily about “a set of hostile practices *intended* to exclude, discriminate or harm” (Beagan 2001). They are often about taken-for-granted practices through which members of subordinated groups learn that don’t quite fit in. And structure their choices and aspirations, leading to self-elimination, e.g. from more powerful or prestigious paths.

Other terms: Gender [sexist] microaggressions

Another useful concept is ‘gender microaggressions’. Gender microaggressions are “intentional

or unintentional actions or behaviors that exclude, demean, insult, oppress, or otherwise express hostility or indifference toward women” (Basford, Offermann et al. 2014).

Note that this concept continues to address more blatant expressions of sexism and not just subtle ones.

Gender microaggressions involve behaviours from subtle to overt: from microinvalidations, to microinsults, to microassaults:

- *Microinvalidations*: actions that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiences of women;
- *Microinsults*: actions that convey insensitivity, are rude, or directly demean a person’s gender;
- *Microassaults*: deliberate acts intended to hurt, oppress, or discriminate (Basford, Offermann et al. 2014).

Everyday sexism is often often unseen, ignored, and excused.

Everyday sexism often is unseen and taken-for-granted.

There are typical excuses e.g. for workplace sexism:

- It’s just a joke.
- It’s not personal.
- You’re too sensitive. Toughen up
- He’s always been like that. He’s a good bloke.
- Enough of the PC crap.
- Etc. (Male Champions of Change 2017)

Deflecting and minimising have impacts:

- Minimises the seriousness of the behaviour and the effect it has
- Places responsibility on victim to accept / handle / ignore it
- Gives consent to what is said and done – that it is ok
- Lends support to the transgressor and leaves the victim to deal with it alone
- Becomes an accepted part of workplace culture (Male Champions of Change 2017).

Everyday sexism cause direct harm.

Everyday sexism is a serious problem. Such behaviours cause direct harm for the victims, and they contribute to wider gender inequalities.

Everyday sexism contribute to wider, systemic gender inequalities.

Gender inequalities are maintained in part through micro-level interactions: everyday practices of inclusion and exclusion (Beagan 2001).

Hierarchies of social inequality are perpetuated in part through everyday, micro level, interactional processes. Subtle sexism – hostile humour, isolation, diminishing, devaluation and

discouragement – cumulatively exclude women, making them less confident and productive. They produce micro inequities, which are powerful because of their repetition and aggregate burden (Beagan 2001). Over time, these make significant barriers to performance, productivity, and advancement.

Men are less aware of sexism than women.

In order for men to confront sexism, they must first recognise it. But men have greater trouble identifying sexism than women. Men are particularly unlikely to recognise sexism when it's more subtle, e.g. paternalistic behaviours like men 'protecting' women (Becker and Swim 2011).

In addition, men overestimate our peers' sexism. So men who oppose sexism go along with sexist behaviours because they think they're in the minority. And men who show sexism continue to do so because they believe falsely that they are in the majority.

Challenging everyday sexism

There is a long history of practical efforts to challenge everyday sexism. I have collected resources on this below. And indeed, I first ran a workshop on 'everyday anti-sexism' in 1990 at the Sydney Men's Festival, then writing this up for what was then the print magazine *XI*.

Sharing success stories

What are your success stories of successfully challenging everyday sexism?

Some common types of action

The following identifies some common types of action we can take. It begins with the strategies outlined in *Men Speak Up* (Flood, 2011), and adds to and refines these using further sources.

- *Ask for an explanation. Inquire.*
 - Ask the speaker to elaborate. "Say more." "Can you elaborate?" "What makes you believe that?" "What is it about this that concerns you most?" (Kenney) "Where have you heard that?" (Khan, 2015)
 - Ask "What are you doing?" or "What are you saying?", to invite critical reflection and change.
 - "Do you think there are other opinions about that?" "How might someone disagree with that?" (Khan, 2015)
- *Paraphrase / Reflect.*
 - Restate in your own words, to show understanding and reduce defensiveness. Reflect both content and feeling (Kenney).
- *Reframe.*
 - Create a different way to look at the situation. "What would happen if..." "Could there be another way to look at this..." (Kenney)
- *Present another way of viewing the situation.*
 - "That's not always right." "That could also mean..." (Khan, 2015).
- *Question the assumption.*
 - Challenge the logic of the statement. No one deserves to be raped, beaten or

stalked. No one asks for it. No one likes it. No one sets out to “make it happen to them” (Eigenberg and Peters 2011).

- “That’s not my experience, and it’s not the experience of many other people.” (Khan, 2015).
- “I’ve heard / experienced the opposite.” “Some people would tell you...” “I’m not sure that reflects my experiences...” “I have felt differently when...” (Khan, 2015).
- *Make your concern plain.*
 - Say “That’s sexist and I don’t think it’s funny,” or, “I think those words are really hurtful,” or refrain from laughing when you’re expected to (Flood, 2011).
- *Express your disagreement.*
 - “That’s not right.”
 - “I am not interested in having this conversation right now, but it’s important for you to know that I am not okay with what you just said.”(Khan, 2015)
- *Explain why you disagree.*
 - “Messages like that often come from culture and society, and do not always reflect what is actually happening for people.
 - “I identify as ____, and that has not been my experience. I have experienced...
 - “have studied and talked to people who identify as ____, and my understanding is that that is not their experience. They have experienced...
 - “I have read and learned about that, and what you are saying is not only untrue, but it is also harmful. Comments like that contribute to...” (Khan, 2015)
- *Provide information.*
 - Provide the person with *information*. Highlight the facts and debunk the myths.
- *Personalise the violence or injustice. Bring it home.*
 - Make the harms associated with violence more real by personalising them. Bring it home by asking, “What if that was your sister / daughter / mother?” Ask them if they would feel differently if it were their mother, sister, friend, girlfriend, etc. that they were saying things about. Say, “I hope no one ever talks about you like that.” (Virginia Tech 2010).
 - Describe the experiences of people you know or people you’ve read about and could know. “A good friend of mine was raped. It’s a terrible experience – no woman ever deserves to be raped or wants to be raped” (Flood, 2011).
- *Use impact and “I” statements.*
 - Communicate impact: feeling upset, offended, etc. (Kenney)
 - Can use “I” statements. These involve three elements: state your feelings, name the behavior, and state how you want the person to respond. “I feel __ when you __. Please don’t do that anymore.” (Virginia Tech 2010).

- *State principles and values.*
 - E.g., remind him that she has feelings and rights.
 - Sometimes a simple statement like, “Just like your mum or your sister, she has the right to be treated with respect” is a reminder that we are all human beings with the right to live free of abuse (Be The Hero 2009).
- *Convey your feelings and principles.*
 - Show emotion and passion. Show that you’re deeply affected by what was said or done: it makes you sad, angry, etc. (Flood, 2011).
 - Tell them that these types of statements make you uncomfortable and ask them not to say these things around you (Flood, 2011).
- *Use humour.*
 - Sometimes you can make a serious point with humour. For example, you can playfully question sexist and derogatory remarks. Humour can make the situation less tense.
 - Do this carefully so the man does not feel publicly mocked while at the same time he understands you are making a serious point (Be The Hero 2009).
- *Remind him of his ‘best self’.*
 - You can encourage individual’s ‘best sides’, e.g. by saying, “Come on, you are better than that” (Be The Hero 2009).
- *Use your friendship.*
 - You may reframe the intervention as caring and non-critical, for example by saying, “Hey John... as your friend I’ve gotta tell you that getting a girl drunk to have sex with her isn’t cool, and could get you in a lot of trouble. Don’t do it.” (Virginia Tech 2010)
- *Invite group pressure.*
 - Often you will not be the only one who feels uncomfortable if someone is being disrespectful or abusive. It can help to say in front of everyone something like, “I don’t feel good about this. Does anyone else feel uncomfortable too?” (Be The Hero 2009)
- *Change or redirect the conversation*
 - Change the topic.
 - “Let’s talk about...” “Did you hear about...”

Relationships and contexts

The kinds of challenges we can offer depend on the relationships between us and the context.

ASK: How might things be different when it’s a family member who had made the sexist comment, at a family gathering?

Personal and power relationships

The personal and power relationships in play also make a difference. “Is it a group of patched up gang members? Or your boss? Or just some random doosh canoe trying to impress his bros?” (Bell Murphy, pers. comm., May 25 2019)

Families

In a family context, some further strategies are useful.

- Honour the past
 - “I remember when we were kids, Mum went out of her way to make sure we embraced differences. I’m not sure when or why that changed for you, but it hasn’t changed for me.” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015: 12)
- Change the present
 - “I know that when we were growing up we used to... But as an adult, I believe in respect for others.” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015: 12)
- Appealing to shared values
 - “Our family has always stood for fairness, and the comments you’re making are not fair.” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015: 10)
- Appeal to parental values
 - “Dad, when I was growing up, you taught me to treat others the way I wanted to be treated. And I just don’t think that term is very nice.” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015: 16-17)
- Appeal to family ties
 - “I value our relationship / closeness, and these remarks are putting a lot of distance between us.” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015: 12)
- Set limits.
 - “I won’t allow bigoted ‘jokes’ to be told in my home.” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015: 15)
- Reach out
 - Are there others who can deliver that message? (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015: 12)

Six steps to speaking up against everyday bigotry

The Southern Poverty Law Center guide identifies six key steps:

- Be ready
 - Think of yourself as the one who will speak up. Promise yourself not to remain silent (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015: 77).
- Identify the behaviour.
 - But avoid labelling, name-calling, or use of loaded terms.
 - Describe the behaviour; don’t label the person (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2015: 78). E.g., “What I hear you saying is that all Aboriginal people are lazy”. Vs

simply calling them racist.

- Appeal to principles
 - Call on their higher principles. “I’ve always thought of you as a fair-minded person, so it shocks me when...”
- Set limits
 - Draw a line. Your presence, workspace, etc.
- Find an ally / Be an ally
- Be vigilant

Wider reflections

Now for some wider reflections on challenging everyday sexism.

Bad comebacks

Comebacks or responses to sexism can be good or bad. Some bad ones:

- don’t work
- buy into other oppressions
 - Appeals to ageism. To homophobia. To ableism (insane, retarded).
- are sexist or otherwise morally objectionable
 - Threats of violence.
- or are derailing (Geek Feminism Wiki, n.d.)

Call-out culture

There are debates over ‘call-out culture’. This refers to the public naming of instances or patterns of oppressive behaviour and language use by others (Ahmad, 2015). This has been seen as a valuable form of social activism. A public holding to account. As based in expressions of solidarity and love (Wikipedia entry, accessed June 5, 2019).

However, call-out culture also has been criticised:

- Call outs can be performative rather than educational. Where the act of calling out is seen as an end in itself. A public performance, where people demonstrate the purity of their politics (Ahmad, 2015).
- Passing judgement on someone’s entire being. Rendering them an outsider. Banishing and disposing of people, rather than engaging with them as people with complicated stories and histories (Ahmad, 2015).
- Vigilante justice / mob justice. Denunciations, with no path to redemption (Wikipedia).
- Problem of reducing people to their dominant identities. To agents of privilege. As representatives of the systems from which they benefit (Ahmad, 2015).
 - For men, behaviour and being gets reduced to structural position – i.e. when behaviour does not fit feminist ideal, individual men are seen as all that is wrong with oppression (Rosenberg 2012).

- There is a mild totalitarian current in progressive communities, to do with policing the boundaries of who is *in* and who is *out*. Often through the use of appropriate language and terminology. But this changes all the time. (And mastering it can go along with being oppressive.) (Ahmad, 2015).
- Groupthink. Hostility to dissenting opinions. Discussion is impossible. (Wikipedia, on ‘outrage culture’)
- Punishments and penalties which are not calibrated to the severity of the alleged offense (Wikipedia).
- Focus on questions of individual prejudice rather than structural issues

One alternative is ‘calling in’, that is, speaking privately with an individual. However, calling out people is valuable:

“sometimes the only way we can address harmful behaviours is by publicly naming them, in particular when there is a power imbalance between the people involved and speaking privately cannot rectify the situation.” (Ahmad, 2017)

END

Resources and materials

Handouts:

- Kenney, Greta, Interrupting microaggressions. URL: <https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/gretakenney-interrupting-microaggressions.pdf>
- White Ribbon Australia (2016). Responding to challenging statements. Sydney: White Ribbon Australia. URL: https://www.whiteribbon.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/WR_RespondingToChallengingFactSheet.pdf
- White Ribbon Australia (2016). Challenging your friend’s behaviour. Sydney: White Ribbon Australia. URL: https://www.whiteribbon.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/WR_ChallengingFriendsFactSheet.pdf

Communications campaigns:

- [Doing Nothing Does Harm](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/doingnothingdoesharm/home) (Our Watch campaign, 2019). URL: <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/doingnothingdoesharm/home>
- [Respect women: Call it out](https://respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/campaigns/respect-women-call-it-out) (Victorian Government campaign, January 2019). URL: <https://respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/campaigns/respect-women-call-it-out>

Further materials:

- What men can do to stop sexism and violence against women: XY collection: <http://xyonline.net/content/what-men-can-do-stop-sexism-and-male-violence>
- Flood, Michael. (2011). *Men Speak Up: A toolkit for action in men’s daily lives*. Sydney: White Ribbon Prevention Research Series, No. 4. https://www.whiteribbon.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Men_speak_up_Flood_2011-1.pdf
- Bystander intervention: an XY collection: <https://xyonline.net/content/bystander-intervention-xy-collection>

- The Line, Quiz: [Would you call out a mate?](https://www.theline.org.au/how-would-you-call-out-a-mate-the-quiz). URL: <https://www.theline.org.au/how-would-you-call-out-a-mate-the-quiz>
- Khan, 6 Ways to Respond to Sexist Microaggressions in Everyday Conversations 2015. <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/responses-to-sexist-microaggressions/>
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- Southern Poverty Law Center (2015). *Speak Up - Responding to Everyday Bigotry*. https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/d6_legacy_files/downloads/publication/splcspeak_up_handbook_0.pdf
- [The Everyday Sexism Project - Australia](https://everydaysexism.com/country/au). URL: <https://everydaysexism.com/country/au>
- Bates, Laura. (2014). *Everyday Sexism*. New York: Thomas Dunne.
- Geek Feminism Wikis on “[Good sexism comebacks](https://geekfeminism.wikia.org/wiki/Good_sexism_comebacks)“ and “[Bad sexism comebacks](https://geekfeminism.wikia.org/wiki/Bad_sexism_comebacks)“. URL: https://geekfeminism.wikia.org/wiki/Good_sexism_comebacks

Call-out culture:

- Ahmad, A Note on Call-Out Culture, March 2, 2015. URL: <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/a-note-on-call-out-culture>
- Ahmad, When calling out makes sense, Aug 29 2017. URL: <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/when-calling-out-makes-sense>

Hostile and benevolent sexism: research and research summaries

- Becker, in full text here: <http://www.xyonline.net/content/articles-mentioned-michaels-tweets>
- Tannenbaum, The Problem When Sexism Just Sounds So Darn Friendly 2013: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/psysociety/benevolent-sexism/>

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- Calder-Dawe, O. and N. Gavey (2016). “Making sense of everyday sexism: Young people and the gendered contours of sexism.” *Women's Studies International Forum* 55: 1-9.
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attitudes toward women.” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21(1): 119-135.

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Phipps, A., J. Ringrose, E. Renold and C. Jackson (2017). “Rape culture, lad culture and everyday sexism: researching, conceptualizing and politicizing new mediations of gender and sexual violence.” *Journal of Gender Studies*: 1-8.

Rosenberg, I. (2012). *“A Lifetime of Activism”: doing feminist men’s work from a social justice paradigm*. Masters, University of British Columbia.