

# Humanism and Countering Everyday Sexism

## Humanist Action Kit



Humanism emphasizes the **equal** value and **equal** agency of *all* human beings.

Because a foundational idea of humanism is that human action is what creates positive change in society, it's important that all humanists—particularly men—examine attitudes and behaviors that reinforce sexist, misogynist, and patriarchal systems that disproportionately target cis women, trans women, and femmes<sup>1</sup>.

The [Feminist Humanist Alliance](#) has created this resource to encourage action against everyday acts of sexism.

### **SEXISM AND MISOGYNY: THE PATRIARCHAL WAY OF LIFE**

We live in a patriarchal society, meaning our social systems are structured in such a way that power and privilege is funneled to men through cultural norms and customs that favor men while restricting the opportunities of women. Patriarchy produces misogynistic environments where women face hostility and hatred because they're women navigating a "man's world." Sexism is a body of ideas that exists to justify these standards. Misogyny is a moral manifestation of this sexist ideology.

Misogyny and sexism work together to uphold these male-oriented social relations. Sexism supports these patriarchal systems by providing the gendered propaganda that demeans femininity and emphasizes the inferiority of cis women, trans women, and femmes. This propaganda, also designed to justify the belief in the superiority of men, argues that these arrangements "make sense."



*"Do we really live in a patriarchal society?"*

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<sup>1</sup> *Femme* here refers to genderqueer individuals who were assigned female at birth and who present or act in ways traditionally regarded within our culture as being associated with "feminine" visual presentation.

## ENDURING THE CRUSH OF EVERYDAY SEXISM

A byproduct of this longstanding patriarchal system is everyday sexism. Sexist ideas are so deeply ingrained within our institutions and dominant culture that they taint the assumptions, expectations, and narratives [we encounter every day](#) in schools, at work, through legislation, and all throughout society.

Men and many women may [remain unaware of how their way of thinking has been influenced by sexist norms](#) we all receive from the time we are born. In other words, as feminist-humanist writer and media critic Soraya Chemaly has said, [sexism shapes human knowledge](#).



*“But what about ‘reverse sexism’?”*

## RAPE CULTURE ISN'T A BUZZWORD

The connective tissue of patriarchy is male-centeredness, which produces a normalized social power dynamic that caters to [male entitlement](#). One consequence of social environments groomed to preference male desire is *rape culture*—pervasive attitudes, language, behaviors, controlling images, and other everyday phenomena that validate male sexual gratification at the expense of women.

In her book [Transforming a Rape Culture](#), Emilie Buchwald defines rape culture as the following:

“a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm . . . In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable . . . However . . . much of what we accept as inevitable is in fact the expression of values and attitudes that can change. ”

Rape culture is a [cultural phenomenon that is constructed and performed in everyday interactions](#), including rape jokes, [street harassment](#), men sending women unsolicited pictures of their penis, the [victimization and exploitation of women in advertisement](#), and groping.

Rape culture is a facet of everyday sexism that must be challenged. Since rape culture is a system that benefits men while disregarding the autonomy and humanity of women, it's imperative that men examine and divest from ideas and behaviors that reinforce this system.



*“Is it literally all men? What about all the ‘good men’?”*

## PATRIARCHY HARMS EVERYONE

“The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves. If an individual is not successful in emotionally crippling himself, he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem.” — bell hooks

Boys are conditioned to believe that the rejection of femininity, empty aggression, and suppression of emotions (aside from anger, which is encouraged) are the keys to an ideal manhood. This cultivates a toxic standard of masculinity, which is commonly referred to as *toxic masculinity*. [Toxic masculinity leads to various issues](#), including:

- Reluctance to express vulnerability.
- Inability to process emotions in a healthy way.
- Violence or the threat of violence exerted as currency to showcase control or dominance, since the dominant model of masculinity implies strength and power.
- Behavior that devalues women (living embodiments of the femininity that unhealthy forms of masculinity disparage) and resists taking accountability for behavior that harms women.
- Stigmatizing of sexual assault committed by women against men since dominant cultural narratives assert men always want sex and that they couldn't possibly be victimized by women, who are viewed as weaker and inferior to men.
- Reinforces homo-antagonism, which is connected to misogyny. Since society considers queer men to be feminine, and thus emasculating and contrary to “manliness,” the contempt of feminine traits is transferred onto those individuals.

These common traits of toxic masculinity perpetuate everyday sexism and ultimately hurts everyone, including—and in some instances, especially—men.

## THE NEED TO CALL MEN TO ACTION

Men are socialized to internalize the customs and social mores that make up our profoundly sexist and misogynistic culture. All men are implicated, even if and when they are not aware of unconscious practices that perpetuate this culture.

Similar to how white people must put in the work to dismantle systems and acceptance of white supremacy, it's important that men realize that the onus is on them to transform systems and acceptance of patriarchy. This means men must learn to better understand themselves in order to engage in a lifelong process of disrupting their complicity with everyday sexism. This also means learning to challenge everyday sexism amongst family and friends, educate their children, and support initiatives or movements seeking to end everyday sexism.

## WE MUST REMAIN VIGILANT

Whenever we approach an area of injustice that does not directly impact us, we must remain aware that our education can never be complete. Recognition and humility towards those limitations is one of the best tools to compensate for blindspots. For men, this means nurturing a willingness to engage in a *lifelong* process of unlearning sexist thinking and behavior they have been programmed to assimilate. Even if you think you “get it,” odds are there’s always room for improvement. And remember, it isn’t enough to have the right intent—[\*we can still do damage with good intentions.\*](#)

## SELF-EDUCATION CHALLENGES

Here are some resources to foster a better understanding of everyday sexism in our culture and in the world.

- ❖ Learn more about casual sexism: [7 examples](#), [17 examples](#)
- ❖ [Better understand some key issues](#)
- ❖ Learn more about [everyday sexism from the creator of the Everyday Sexism Project](#)
- ❖ Learn more about [men embracing healthier forms of masculinity](#)
- ❖ Learn more about how patriarchy permeates every sphere of our society:
  - [160+ Examples of Male Privilege in All Areas of Life](#)
  - [What Exactly Does ‘It’s A Man’s World’ Mean?](#)
  - [Cultural sexism examined by trans men](#)
  - [7 Reasons Why Patriarchy Is Bad \(and Feminism is Good\) for Men](#)
- ❖ Become educated on consent and rape culture
  - [Unlearning Rape Culture](#)
  - [Creating a Culture of Consent](#)
  - [We Need To Be Educated On Rape Culture And Consent](#)
  - [What If We Treated All Consent Like Society Treats Sexual Consent?](#)
  - [Affirmative Consent](#)
- ❖ Learn more about the intersection of male entitlement and violence against women
  - [5 ways sexual assault is really about entitlement](#)
  - [Violence against women—it's a men's issue](#)

## ACTION CHALLENGES

Confronting and reducing sexism is a lifelong process. The following are some action steps that will help foster anti-sexist values.

- ❖ [Think and act like an accomplice](#)
- ❖ [Review and internalize not only this specific content, but also the essence of the message](#)
- ❖ Work towards understanding and implementing [these steps in everyday life](#)
- ❖ Challenge male entitlement in [public spaces](#) and [at work](#)
- ❖ Watch the following documentaries by Jennifer Siebel Newsom. Take notes of what you learn. Discuss what you learned with family members and friends.
  - [Miss Representation](#)
  - [The Mask You Live In](#)

## NEW MEDIA CHALLENGES

*Get plugged into the conversation.* Consistent exposure to writers, social critics, and reporting addressing everyday forms of sexism from the perspective of women, transwomen, and femmes is integral to continuing a lifelong process of unlearning patriarchal attitudes that harm others.

Here are some critics and media outlets that subvert the [male gaze](#) and provide insight into the social and political aspects of sexism in our culture.

- ❖ [Crunk Feminist Collective](#)
- ❖ [Bitch Media](#)
- ❖ [The Feminist Wire](#)
- ❖ [Ijeoma Oluo](#)
- ❖ [The Establishment](#)
- ❖ [Feministing](#)
- ❖ [Bree Newsome](#)
- ❖ [Franchesca "Chescaleigh" Ramsey](#)



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