

Exploring Male Oppression from a Family-Systems Perspective

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Abstract

This article explores sexual inequality and oppression from a family-systems perspective. This perspective was adopted to encourage a more balanced and less prejudiced examination of these issues and to avoid the usual and limiting villain-victim conceptualization. The ideas in this article were originally prepared for a conference on the equality of men and women that was designed to help both sexes better understand each other's perspective. The article draws parallels between adolescent sex role development and the current evolutionary stage of our society. It offers examples of how both men and women are oppressed, albeit differently, and how the oppression of one sex directly results in the oppression of the other sex. The implications of achieving equality for both world peace and individual intrapsychic unity are outlined.

Résumé

Cet article étudie l'inégalité sexuelle et l'oppression masculine d'après la perspective des systèmes familiaux. Cette perspective a été adoptée pour inciter à l'examen plus équilibré et moins préjudiciable de ces questions et éviter la dialectique de l'agresseur et de la victime. Les idées de cet article sont extraites de la préparation d'une conférence sur l'égalité de l'homme et de la femme qui avait été conçue pour aider les deux sexes à mieux se comprendre l'un l'autre. L'article établit un parallèle entre le développement de l'identité sexuelle chez l'adolescent et la phase d'évolution courante de notre société. Il présente des exemples l'oppression chez l'homme aussi bien que chez la femme, bien que présentant des symptômes différents et explique comment l'oppression d'un sexe entraîne l'oppression du sexe opposé. Cet article souligne les conséquences que l'accomplissement de l'égalité aurait pour la paix mondiale et l'unité intrapsychique individuelle.

Resumen

Este escrito sondea la desigualdad sexual y la opresión masculina con perspectiva del sistema familiar. Esta perspectiva se adoptó para alentar un examen más nivelado y menos prejuizado de estos temas y para evitar las limitaciones que al presente se asocian al concepto del villano-victima. Las ideas presentadas en esta disertación fueron preparadas originalmente para una conferencia sobre la igualdad del hombre y la mujer con propósito de ayudar a que cada sexo entendiera mejor la perspectiva del otro. El artículo muestra semejanzas entre el rol del desarrollo sexual adolescente y el estado evolutivo alcanzado actualmente por nuestra sociedad. Ofrece ejemplos que demuestran como tanto los hombres como las mujeres son oprimidos, aunque en formas diferentes, y la forma en que la opresión de uno de los sexos tiene por resultado directo la opresión del sexo opuesto. Se hace bosquejo aquí de las implicaciones del logro de la igualdad tanto para la paz mundial como la unidad intrasíquica individual.

The thoughts in this paper are by way of biography. I am a woman commenting on the behavior, attitudes, and beliefs of men. I am therefore an outsider in a sense, and my perspective is a biographical one. A man writing this paper would provide an autobiographical perspective—the insider's view so to speak. I state this not to undermine the validity of my thoughts on the topic of male oppression but, rather, to indicate that my ideas are one of two important perspectives. A complete understanding of this issue will occur when several biographical and autobiographical perspectives are joined.

The term "male oppression" is a little ambiguous because you, the reader, are not sure whether I am going to write about the way men oppress women or the way men themselves are oppressed. On one level, it makes no difference. These issues are both sides of the same coin—the point being that men and women are both oppressed by our current societal system although in different ways. Harmful, degrading, and limited expectations of women imply corresponding, but different, harmful expectations and limitations of men. While it is important to acknowledge and study these differences, we need to keep in mind that our current system has been in place for thousands of years, and both men and women are socialized within this system. Present-day people did not create the current system, so blaming them is not useful, although the reaction is certainly an understandable one. The issue

is not just women's liberation but human liberation, which means liberating both men and women from restrictive expectations, so everyone can reach their potential.

I think it is helpful to place the issue of the equality of men and women in context. The Universal House of Justice, in "To the Peoples of the World," describes human society as having passed through several evolutionary stages analogous to those of infancy and childhood. They write that humanity is "now in the culminating period of its turbulent adolescence approaching its long-awaited coming of age" (4). While signs of a gradual maturity are emerging, the turmoil of adolescent development is still very much with us. What we know about individual adolescent development is that teenagers initially have somewhat rigid sex roles. While one is trying to grasp a crucial aspect of identity—what it means to be a man or a woman—there seems to be a period in which being rather orthodox about sex roles is developmentally appropriate. As teenagers move into adulthood, a shift occurs. They seem willing to tolerate more flexibility.

A parallel can be drawn between individual adolescent sex-role development and the current inequality between the sexes in human society. The inequality and sex-role rigidity may represent a developmental step in the evolution of our society. It is a step in our progress towards a mature understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman and to relate to the opposite sex. The inequality between men and women has been useful in some ways. Sharp divisions of labor have helped organize society; they have improved its efficiency and helped it to advance. In addition, having clear-cut roles reduces the anxiety associated with uncertainty. What you are supposed to do is at least clear, even if you have to deny some parts of yourself.

However, society has reached the point where it is recognizing the painful costs of inequality. Both men and women have had to deny important aspects of their humanity in order for inequality to continue. Each has therefore experienced considerable pain. The Bahá'í writings emphatically describe the deleterious consequences of sexual inequality. The Universal House of Justice writes:

The denial of such equality perpetuates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations. There are no grounds, moral, practical, or biological, upon which such denial can be justified. ("To the Peoples" 13)

A full explication of how harmful attitudes present in the family environment are carried into the international arena is beyond the scope of this article. However, I would like to offer one example. Anne Wilson Schaef, in her book *Women's Reality: An Emerging Female System in a White Male Society*, suggests the superior-inferior relationship that characterizes the relationship between men and women strongly promotes dualistic thinking. The relationship therefore promotes seeing only two solutions to any problem, often a one-up and a one-down solution; other options are difficult to see (12).

I wish to approach the issue of male oppression from a family-systems perspective (Beavers, *Psychotherapy* 19–40). Using this perspective means keeping the following principles in mind. First, any human behavior has many causes. Second, causes and effects are interchangeable. For example, the hostility of one sex towards another leads to deception and anger in the other, which simply increases hostility and suspicion. Tyrannical control promotes angry defiance that is either overtly or covertly expressed, which then affirms the need for further tyrannical control. Finally, stopping at a villain/victim understanding of a problem is highly limiting.

An example using a married couple will illustrate the last principle. Joe and Linda have been married for fifteen years. Joe hardly says a word. His wife talks a lot. She is angry and frustrated. Joe is not sure what is wrong, but he knows his wife is very dissatisfied. Joe looks like the typical male who cannot talk about his feelings, and we feel sorry for Linda who has to live with a silent statue. Linda is the victim, and Joe is the villain. The solution is to "fix" Joe. If we could just get him to talk, everything would be terrific in this family. However, if you explore a little further, you discover that every time Joe tries to talk about his feelings, he looks very uncomfortable—nothing like the John Wayne/strong provider Linda thought she had married. If she keeps talking and "helps" Joe remain silent, she avoids having to face the anxiety she experiences when she realizes Joe is not always strong and that she must therefore become more independent. Since her own socialization has promoted dependency, she is naturally apprehensive about the prospect of increased independence. The solution then is not simply to fix Joe. The solution is two-pronged: help both Joe and Linda. Rather than a villain and a victim, you now have two people with different painful human dilemmas who both need help, albeit in different ways.

If we approach the problem of male oppression from a family-systems perspective, we identify the family as humanity. The family's presenting symptom is oppressive behavior by men against women. The identified patient is the female sex; it is her dilemmas that catch our attention, arouse our concern, and signal that trouble exists in the family. Her pain is obvious and needs to be attended to and understood. But since we are using a family-systems

perspective, we know that someone else in this family is hurting too. If we want to fully help the female sex, we also need to understand how the male sex is hurting.

To explore the presenting symptom, we examine society and find that women receive less protection against violence perpetrated against them in their own homes than if the same violence occurred outside their home. They are paid less than men for doing the same or similar work. If a woman obtains a degree, acquires a job in her field, and tries to participate in work groups with men by putting forward her ideas, she often finds they are quietly ignored. Worse, when men subsequently put forward the same ideas, they are eagerly embraced. Her contributions may be criticized if she exhibits multidimensional rather than linear thinking. She will be told, "That doesn't make sense. What does that have to do with this? Stay on the topic." Women are often seen as innately inferior to men. They are somehow perceived as less intelligent and less competent due to what one writer has called the "Original Sin of Being Born Female" (Schaef, *Women's* 27). For this sin, there is no atonement—no matter how many degrees one earns or male children one bears. Women are frequently valued more for beauty and body shape than for personal capacities and qualities. A woman's body is used to sell everything from motorcycles to cigarettes. The curved outline of her form even graces the mudguards of some eighteen-wheel trucks. In fact, women have learned how to use their bodies to gain approval and exert power covertly, since they are denied access to overt power.

This brief exploration of the presenting symptom provides us with compelling evidence that indeed women are oppressed. Their plight arouses our empathy, and we feel anger over the many injustices women have had to face and continue to experience. However, we resist the urge to eradicate all men on the face of the planet or to enact radical solutions, such as forming a single colony of women. We begin investigating men's experiences.

At first, we are overwhelmed by the fact that men have more overt social power than women. However, we notice that men of color are also frequently denied overt power. We also notice an interesting parallel to the female-as-sex-object phenomenon. Men are marriageable/financial objects. They are often valued for the job they have, the car they drive, and the salary they earn rather than for their intrinsic qualities. Women readers will no doubt quickly respond with the following: "That is because women don't get paid equally and have had far fewer opportunities than men. Marriage to a financially secure man has been the only way society has allowed us to have security." While this response is certainly accurate, it does not negate the feelings a man (or anyone else, for that matter) experiences when he realizes that his worth lies in what he produces. Men often become so engrossed in providing and producing to prove themselves that they have almost no time to consider their own inner state.

Take Ralph, for example. Ralph is not fictionalized. Nor is he a composite of several men. Ralph wanted to be a social-work lawyer and really help people. His peers convinced him not to do "missionary law" right away. He decided to enter corporate law and acquire experience, so he could earn the respect he needed to be effective. He joined a top corporate-law firm and gradually began moving up the ladder. At each step, there were good reasons why he could not become that social-work lawyer he had always planned to be and why achieving the next step would enable him to do what he really wanted to do. The day he made senior partner, he rushed home to tell his wife, who responded with superficial enthusiasm. When pressured to talk, she finally told him that every time he got a promotion, he spent less time with her and that she would like more time with him. He started realizing that he did not know much about his children. They were now teenagers, and talking to them had the awkward feel of talking to strangers. In describing his life to a men's group, he said:

I feel like I spent forty years of my life working as hard as I can to become somebody I don't even like. When I talk about my doubts with the guys I've worked with for the past seventeen years, they'll listen for a few minutes and then joke or leave. For all practical purposes I've lost my wife in the process and my sons. What really gets me angry is that I did everything I was supposed to do for forty years, did it better than almost any other man I know, and I lost everyone I love in the process including myself. I'm supposedly one of the top decision-makers in the country, and when it comes to my own home, my own life, I don't even know how to begin. (Farrell, *Why Men* 3-7)

It is difficult to read Ralph's personal reflections and not feel sad. While he certainly was not physically battered or in a life-threatening situation, he lost a vibrant aspect of himself while he struggled to achieve. Such a loss represents a painful psychological form of oppression.

Men have limited choices of work and lifestyles that are seen as acceptably male. If they leave their accepted role, they are rejected or shamed either overtly or covertly. Their masculinity is often questioned, just as when women are assertive or angry and their femininity is questioned. Imagine how people would regard a man who married a highly paid professional and who chose to work full-time as a teacher in an early childhood program earning a third of his wife's salary. Rather than choosing a higher paid, traditional "male" profession, he chose this work because his talent is helping children learn and he delights in daily one-to-one interactions with children.

Drawing on a beautiful image in the Bahá'í writings, where a human being is likened to “a mine rich in gems of inestimable value” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 260), we can see that society not only limits the type of gem each sex can mine but also limits the amount. Individuals who violate these “mining restrictions” often face social criticism and isolation. In certain cultures, their behavior could meet with brutal punishment.

As we continue our investigation, we find that a man's capacity for being compassionate, loving, and nurturing is frequently minimized in the same derogatory fashion as a woman's capacity for professional competence has been derided in the past. The differences in nurturing receive considerable attention in humorous articles about male-female distinctions. A photocopied sheet that recently made the rounds at my office described a woman as someone who knows all about her children; she knows about their appointments, romances, friends, secret fears, hopes, and dreams. In contrast, a man was described as being vaguely aware of some short people living in his house. In other words, a woman is portrayed as carefully attuned and attentive, while a man is presented as blockheadedly ignorant. As a society, we have become aware of prejudice against women. The example just given seems to illustrate a prejudice against men.

A particularly damaging form of oppression occurs because men are viewed as the sex that does not feel as much pain or hurt. In general, boys experience a painful socialization process best summarized by phrases such as “act like a man,” “big boys don't cry,” and “don't be a wimp.” When boys and men cry, they often experience humiliation, rejection, threats, and isolation at the hands of their peers, fathers, mothers, or girlfriends. Being hurt is viewed as a sign of weakness. Not allowing someone to cry is the same thing as not allowing someone access to psychological healing. As a result, most men acquire a storehouse of poorly understood and painful experiences that simply remain repressed.

Although the previous discussion is short, the evidence presented suggests that despite their overt social power, men also experience oppression. What implications does this have? I would like to describe two possible dynamics that can occur from the oppression men experience. These are not the only dynamics that can occur, but they are common, and each one illustrates the interplay between the difficulties of each sex.

If every time a man shows vulnerability or expresses a wish to be nurtured, he is punished in either subtle or not so subtle ways, he begins placing feelings of weakness, uncertainty, and hurt (i.e., the vulnerability of being a human) in what Harry Stack Sullivan called the “not me” part of the self (quoted in *Psychotherapy* 118). This is the part of the self that is rejected by significant others; it houses those aspects of his humanity that he has been taught are unacceptable. This part of him is unclaimed; he does not want it. It is like a psychological “hot potato” poised for projection onto others. When unacceptable feelings, thoughts, and ideas arise inside him, they are quickly projected, which means they are attributed to another person.

Men frequently project their vulnerabilities, fears, and wishes for nurturance onto women and close family members. They deny their own vulnerability, see the vulnerability and capacity to be nurtured in their wife, child, or perhaps another male who does not fit the stereotypic mold (e.g., gay men, men who are physically weak). They then treat the vulnerability they see in the same way that their own vulnerability or wishes to be nurtured were originally treated. So if a man was physically punished as a child, there exists an increased possibility that he will beat his wife and children. If he was ignored when he cried, he will probably ignore his wife when she is in distress. Through projection, instead of an internal battle, men now fight an external enemy. It is as though they say: “It's not me who is vulnerable and wants to be cared for, it is you, and being vulnerable is a bad thing that should be punished, criticized, and/or ridiculed. I'm stronger, smarter, and better than you because I don't have that defect.” If a male treats a female this way over a long period of time, she is likely to believe that she is an inadequate and helpless being. This underlying self-concept may then be reflected in behaviors that confirm male expectations and reinforce prejudiced perceptions. In the dynamic just described, we can see how the oppressive socialization of men can directly have an impact on their subsequent treatment of women.

Another way of handling unacceptable feelings of vulnerability is to deny these feelings (and thus preserve the illusion of strength) but always be available to comfort “weaker vessels.” Helping someone “weaker” may help a man feel strong and superior, qualities he has been told men must have to be acceptable. The problem with this strategy is that he needs someone around who is more vulnerable and dependent than he. If his “weaker vessel” becomes increasingly assertive and competent, he has a problem. There are at least three solutions: (1) squelch the development; (2) get himself another weaker vessel; or (3) claim his vulnerability for himself.

Having described some ways in which both men and women are oppressed and how these two forms of oppression are related, I would like to discuss some possible solutions. What can be done? First, we must recognize that the problem of inequality is multifaceted. While each sex may harbor considerable anger towards the other sex, whenever you find yourself thinking in villain/victim terms, try to stand back and consider another perspective. Try to put into practice an American Indian saying that before you criticize someone you need to walk in his moccasins for two weeks. Such efforts will help minimize the tendency for men and women to view each other as enemies. As

Sam Keen proposes in *Images of the Enemy*, before you treat someone badly, you first create an enemy in your mind.

Second, solving the problem requires helping both sexes, if a woman's place is only in the home, then a man's place is only at work. Until women are free to choose any kind of life, men will not have freedom of choice either. If women have the means and increased opportunity to support themselves financially, they will be freer to embrace men for who they are, rather than for what they produce. If men are allowed to be uncertain, vulnerable, and to express their capacity to be nurtured, there will be room for women to claim their own competence.

A third solution involves altering a basic question society has consistently asked. The question is not, "Are there differences between men and women?" but "What is going to be our response to these differences?" In the past, we have seen these differences as representing weaknesses. Maybe we could begin to see the differences as representing strengths and embrace the differing contributions of each sex.

The Bahá'í writings speak potently about the societal implications of establishing the equality of men and women:

... man and woman, the two parts of the social body, must be perfect. It is not natural that either should remain undeveloped; and until both are perfected, the happiness of the human world will not be realized. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 134)

Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge. (Universal House of Justice, "To the Peoples" 13)

Such far-reaching and profound implications, arousing our longings for world peace, can distance us from seeing the internal psychological peace each individual can experience when the equality of men and women is established. When sexual equality is present in families, it will have a powerful impact on the psychology of human beings reared in those families. Each of us has internalized the family in which we were reared. This means that whether you are male or female, your internal psychic structure includes contributions from a male parent and female parent, although to different degrees. Given this internalization process, males do not escape the consequences of females being devalued in our culture. Deborah Luepnitz succinctly explains the consequences when she writes:

To help mother reclaim the self does not help only mother. According to object-relations theory we all, as children, form internal versions ("introjects") of our mothers, fathers, and other people important to us. If the real mother is injured or silenced, so will the internal mother be injured and silenced. Children whose mothers have been battered or degraded grow up with a part of themselves—the part they associate with mother—also degraded. This often creates a recalcitrant cycle of devaluing their own needs (and capacities) for the "maternal" activities of loving and nurturing others, and also of devaluing these capacities in others. In short, degradation of the mother is ultimately a self-degradation—for both males and females. Conversely, the reconstitution of motherhood in culture will mean a reconstitution of the self, for everyone of woman born. (*Family* 183)

Not only has inequality alienated men from women, women from men, and men from each other, it has also alienated each of us from a part of our own selves. Any efforts we make as a society to improve the station of women do not simply benefit women. Everyone benefits. Indeed, the Bahá'í writings state that "As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 133).

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