

Women's oppression

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The oppression of women in the 21st century is perhaps more multifaceted and developed than it has been historically. Gains in women's rights have been products of the protracted struggle of women and anti-sexist allies, but these gains have not ended the oppression of women.

On average women make about 30 percent less than what men make for the same job, hours and skill level. Women of color make even less on average than white women. This evident economic discrimination is just one part of the systematic oppression of women.

For centuries the labor of women has been devalued and exploited through lesser or no wages; unsafe and unregulated working conditions; the nonpayment for extensive and valuable domestic work; and being forced to give all wages to one's father or male spouse. The "glass ceiling" — limits placed on the upward mobility of women in the workforce — traps women in low-wage industries.

Since women are paid less than men but take up the bulk of the domestic work in the home, women are oftentimes trapped into economic dependence on men or are forced to rely on a sexist system for economic help. This assistance is very underfunded and does little to aid women in economic need.

In some instances women are forced to enter into sex work — an extra-legal system of sexual and economic exploitation.

Currently women make up the bulk of the poor and are most affected by economic crises; this is the "feminization of poverty."

Women's oppression is evident in the political arena as well. Capitalist politics have historically disenfranchised women by allowing only men to vote and hold public office. The women's suffrage moment of the late 19th and early 20th centuries obtained the right to vote for women, but women's roles in politics are often still limited to the appearance-making spouse of a political candidate. Even women who have had some level of success entering the political arena have had to adhere to the rules and expectations of a male-dominated political system.

Women are still vastly outnumbered on the Supreme Court and in the U.S. Congress, which for a hundred years has failed to pass a simple Equal Rights Amendment.

The oppression of women is based in the historical status of women as private property, and their unequal relationship to men in the institution of family. Legislation upholding the status of women as property still exists today. These laws limit the self-determination of women by placing boundaries on their sexualities and their bodies. Though some reproductive rights, like abortion and birth control, are legal for most women in

the U.S., the right to abortion and birth control are still legally and extra-legally restricted for many women and often times these rights are out of the economic reach of working and poor women. These rights, which were fought for by generations of women and allies, are now under attack. Many states are successfully passing legislation to severely restrict abortion and other methods of birth control.

It is hard to see how in this system women could ever obtain true reproductive justice — meaning not just the right to choose to reproduce, but the right to bear children into a society that will ensure that child is well-fed, clothed, sheltered and educated.

When discussing women's oppression it is easy for people to ignore the social and cultural manifestations of women's oppression. The cultural manifestations include the sexual degradation and overall sexualization of women in popular culture; the

association of women with products that can be bought and sold; the normalization of abusive behavior towards women; and the classification of women as intellectually and physically inferior and submissive to men. These aspects of women's cultural oppression are reinforced through popular television programs and commercials; popular music and music videos; pornography; magazines; and other forms of advertisement.

Women are stereotyped in the media as sexual objects that men can obtain through monetary or material exchange. These images of women, which are by far the most prevalent images of women in all popular forms of entertainment and advertising, encourage men to mimic these sexist views in their social interactions with women. Women are also encouraged to fit into these stereotypes and discouraged from taking active and independent roles in defining their sexualities, body image and social interactions.

One may ask, when faced with the historical and current oppression of women, "Was it always like this?" The answer is no. Though women have been oppressed and exploited for centuries, this sexist hierarchy was not always the case. During the majority of human history women were not oppressed. In fact, in the old communal societies women were equal to men. In some instances, matriarchal societies existed. It is important to note that in these societies men were not oppressed by women, but women held a certain social and cultural importance to the family and community that was not based on the exploitation or oppression of men.

While the division of labor (social roles that men and women fulfilled) was different, there was no system of inferiority or superiority based on the division of labor. Not until the emergence of private property, and therefore class society, did the oppression of women emerge. Since then women have been oppressed in all forms of class society, including slavery, feudalism, and capitalism. It is easy to conclude that women's oppression is historically based in class oppression and is currently

perpetuated by class society.

Marxists argue that the absence of women's oppression in pre-private-property societies proves that women's oppression is based on the system of private property and not a natural outgrowth of male dominance over women. Consequently, the abolition of private property will lay the basis for the complete liberation of women.

Additional reading

- [Feminism & Marxism](#) (PDF) - by Dorothy Ballan
- [Introduction to Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State](#) (PDF) - by Eleanor Burke Leacock

- Return to [What is Marxism?](#)