

Gender and Privilege



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This article represents personal reflections on the topic of gender bias from a straight, white, upper middle-class, highly-educated, middle-aged lifelong feminist—a person, admittedly, of great privilege. From this perspective, I focus on male privilege over female, and leave discussion of gender privilege in the context of transgender or those with non-conforming gender identities to others more qualified than I. Finally, I focus on the U.S. rather than address male privilege in other societies. May I add that I very much enjoy the company of men; I like working with them and I have a husband and son to whom I am devoted.

I write from the following premise: male privilege represents privilege conferred on men by virtue of their gender. As is the case with most privilege, its beneficiaries are largely unaware of the inherent advantages they enjoy. Male privilege underlies and perpetuates gender inequality.

I imagine most women reading this article have experienced a common form of male privilege: they've been ignored by men during a meeting. At a recent meeting of local heads of school, a male head repeated an observation that I had made earlier. In referencing that observation, another male head acknowledged only the other man. I actively contribute to these long-running deliberations. I'm confident this slight was unintentional, nor did it matter particularly in this case. However, how does it affect women's ability to advance if men don't hear what they say? And if they give credit for women's ideas to men?

If one starts looking for it, male privilege appears everywhere. Why do we keep building facilities without enough ladies rooms when everyone knows the difference in wait times for men's and women's bathrooms? More seriously, for years, women's health was unnecessarily jeopardized because doctors, who



had only studied men, failed to understand that heart attack symptoms of females' differ from males'. A recent *Washington Post* article¹ noted that we know more about erectile dysfunction than breast-feeding. I ask you, which is more important to the human race? And what about health insurance policies that, prior to the Affordable Care Act, frequently excluded coverage for prenatal care and childbirth,² an approach that remains popular with many politicians? Ensuring healthy babies seems like something from which society benefits, and surely providing insurance helps that goal. But only women get pregnant and give birth, and women don't run insurance companies.

Indeed, women don't run very many American corporations, nor do they hold many positions in the C-suite or sit on corporate boards. The 32 women who led Fortune 500 companies in 2017 accounted for only 6.4% of all Fortune 500 CEO's.³ While the percentage of women on the boards of Fortune 500 companies⁴ is larger at 27.3% (in 2016) than CEO's, that number represents a decline of two percentage points from 2015. Last year

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the percentage of women whose title began with “chief”⁵ among the top 1000 revenue producing US companies was 23%, also a decline from the previous year. How do we explain these inequities when research repeatedly shows that more diversity, at all levels including leadership, makes companies more profitable? Male privilege.

Politics tells a similar story. Only 22 of the 100 senators are female; the 84 women in the House of Representatives make up 19.3% of that body. Six of the 50 governors are female and women make up slightly more than 25% of state legislators.⁶ We could write a book on the many ways male privilege, sometimes supported by women, contributes to this lack of female representation.

1. Yarrow, Allison. “Why do we understand so little about breast-feeding?” Feb. 21, 2018 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/02/21/why-do-we-understand-so-little-about-breastfeeding/?utm_term=.46101f87fa9e

2. Kodjak, Alison. “GOP Health Bill Changes Could Kill Protections For Those With Pre-Existing Conditions.” March 23, 2017 <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/03/23/521220359/gop-health-bill-changes-could-kill-protections-for-people-with-preexisting-conditions>

3. Zarya, Valentina. “The 2017 Fortune 500 Includes a Record Number of Women CEOs.” June 7, 2017. <http://fortune.com/2017/06/07/fortune-women-ceos/>

4. Zillman, Claire. “The Share of Women Appointed to Fortune 500 Boards Declined Last Year.” June 20, 2017. <http://fortune.com/2017/06/19/fortune-500-boards-women/>

5. “Korn Ferry Analysis of Largest U.S. Companies Shows Percentage of Women in Most C-Suite Roles Dramatically Lagging Male Counterparts” December 18, 2017. <https://www.kornferry.com/press/korn-ferry-analysis-of-largest-us-companies-shows-percentage-of-women-in-most-c-suite-roles-dramatically-lagging-male-counterparts/>

6. “Women in State Legislatures 2018” Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/women-state-legislature-2018>

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While the gender pay gap⁷ keeps narrowing, women in the U.S. still make \$.83 on the dollar that men earn. Women are more inclined to take time off to raise children which negatively affects their earning power. They also tend to cluster in lower paying jobs such as teaching, nursing, and social work. But why are those low paying jobs? Precisely because women make up the majority⁸ of workers. Gender privilege strikes again.

Male privilege also reveals itself in hiring and compensation practices. For example, a 2012 Yale study⁹ found that working from identical resumes distinguished only by names, both male and female science professors were more likely to hire men than women and when hired, the men's salaries were \$4000 more annually. Moreover, while men have steadily assumed more responsibilities at home, including taking care of children, women, including those who work full-time outside the home, still bear disproportionate responsibility in that area. The second shift is alive and well, buttressed by male privilege that both informs what kind of tasks men do in the home and the belief that they deserve

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downtime (for an extended discussion of this topic, I recommend Jennifer Senior’s *All Joy and No Fun*).

Male privilege also explains our society’s refusal to enact policies such as paid maternity leave. It explains why critical advancement processes, such as making law partner or earning academic tenure, occur during women’s prime child-bearing years. Women have achieved parity in the pipelines of many professions, but remain underrepresented at the highest levels. For example, women constitute the majority of law students,¹⁰ but still represent only 20% of equity partners¹¹ in law firms.

7. Brown, Anna and Patten, Eileen. “The narrowing, but persistent, gender gap in pay.” Pew Research Center. April 3, 2017 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/03/gender-pay-gap-facts/>

8. Cain Miller, Claire. “As Women Take Over a Male-Dominated Field, the Pay Drops.” The New York Times. March 18, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/upshot/as-women-take-over-a-male-dominated-field-the-pay-drops.html>

9. “Scientist not immune from gender bias, Yale study shows.” YaleNews. September 24, 2012. <https://news.yale.edu/2012/09/24/scientists-not-immune-gender-bias-yale-study-shows>

10. Olson, Elizabeth. “Women Make Up Majority of U.S. Law Students for First Time.” The New York Times. December 16, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/business/dealbook/women-majority-of-us-law-students-first-time.html>

11. Olson, Elizabeth. “A Bleak Picture’ for Women Trying to Rise at Law Firms.” The New York Times. July 24, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/24/business/dealbook/women-law-firm-partners.html>



Perhaps gender privilege manifests itself most perniciously in sexual harassment and assault. Since last fall, countless women have shared their stories of degrading humiliation at the hands of men who felt they had the right to sexually harass them. Until the emergence of the #MeToo movement, most of these women felt they couldn't speak out because it would jeopardize their employment. It's particularly notable that the #MeToo movement began among movie stars, some of the most highly paid and seemingly influential women in the country. Yet, even they felt powerless in the face of male aggression from the likes of Harvey Weinstein. Male privilege unquestionably encourages sexual harassment and assault, explaining their pervasiveness and persistence.

As educators, we need to recognize that manifestations of male privilege begin when children are quite young. Any girl can tell you that boys dominate most coed elementary school classrooms. Moreover, sexual harassment and misogyny are common in schools. Harvard psychologist Richard Weissbourd¹² cites one large report's findings that close to 50% of 7th through 12th graders had been sexually harassed in the 12 months prior to the study. His own research found that 87% of 18 to 25 year-olds had experienced harassment ranging from catcalls to unwanted touching. College cultures are often very toxic; he explains,

"A 'bro's over ho's' culture exists among many men on myriad college campuses across the country and misogyny is often brazen, if not celebrated." Moreover, Weissbourd observes that the higher the percentage of women students, the more men seem to feel entitled to dominate and degrade women. The worst form of male privilege.

We live in a country where we've made tremendous strides towards gender equality in many areas of life. However, achieving true equality will require continued cultural change. For that to happen, both men and women need to recognize the power of male privilege. The fact that the privilege is, by definition, largely unrecognized, makes it harder to address than more obvious forms of discrimination. In addition, privilege, again by definition, confers any number of advantages that those who have it, understandably, rarely want to relinquish. This is particularly true if those advantages feel as though they are part

"We live in a country where we've made tremendous strides towards gender equality in many areas of life. However, achieving true equality will require continued cultural change."

12. Weissbourd, Richard, et al. "The Talk: How Adults Can Promote Young People's Healthy Relationships and Prevent Misogyny and Sexual Harassment." Harvard Graduate School of Education. https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/files/gse-mcc/files/mcc_the_talk_final.pdf

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of a finite universe, a universe where if one group, say women, gains opportunity another loses. There is considerable evidence¹³ that a substantial portion of the male population feels that way. Herein lies the challenge. How can we help men see their privilege for what it is, encourage those with power and influence to pursue policies and practices that broaden opportunity for women, without making men feel that they are losing out in the process? We can start by building awareness among all our students. ●

13. Cassino, Dan. "Why More American Men Feel Discriminated Against." *Harvard Business Review*. September 29, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/09/why-more-american-men-feel-discriminated-against>

Further Reading

Articles

Palmer II, Bedford. "Men's Intersectional Relationship to Male Privilege." *Psychology Today*. January 1, 2018. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/who-we-ought-be/201801/men-s-intersectional-relationship-male-privilege>

Deutsch, Barry. "The Male Privilege Checklist." <https://www.cpt.org/files/US%20-%20Male%20Privilege%20Checklist.pdf>

Rothman, Joshua. "The Origins of 'Privilege.'" *The New Yorker*. May 12, 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-origins-of-privilege>

Beinart, Peter. "The Nancy Pelosi Problem." *The Atlantic*. April 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/04/the-nancy-pelosi-problem/554048/>

Books

Required reading should be:

Banaji, Mahzarin R. and Anthony G. Greenwald. *Blindspot: The Hidden Biases of Good People*. Delacorte Press, 2013.

Related reading:

Steele, Claude M. *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* (Issues of Our Time). W.W. Norton & Co., 2011.

Thought-provoking:

Beard, Mary. *Women in Power: A Manifesto*. Liveright, 2017.

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