

A male perspective on the plight of women, presumptuous as that may seem

Nico Koopman

IT IS difficult and might even be presumptuous for a man to write about the injuries women suffer in our societies and institutions in both overt and covert forms.

The attempt to live with communal interpathy, empathy and sympathy assists us on this journey: Interpathy implies that groups who are historically and currently still estranged from each other learn to think and feel themselves into each other's shoes.

Empathy implies that individuals and groups develop the capacity to feel ourselves into the shoes of the other, to live in the other's skin, to stand in the other's shoes, to attempt to look at the world through the eyes of the other.

Sympathy means that we feel with each other, that where a person suffers, we suffer with them, that they are honoured, we celebrate with them.

Communal interpathy, empathy

and sympathy pave the way for solidarity in struggle. Worldwide, and especially on International Women's Day today, the plea is therefore made that injustices, like the injustice of patriarchy, is opposed through partnerships and solidarity between men and women, and through partnerships and solidarity among all genders and sexual orientations.

In these partnerships communal interpathy, empathy, sympathy and solidarity develop.

As a man, I humbly, vulnerably and fully aware of an inadequate understanding, attempt to write about gender injustices because of a second reason: namely, the interdependence, interwovenness and intersectionality of all forms of injustice.

Racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and discrimination in terms of factors like age and disability (differently-abledness) are all interwoven. They impact upon each other. They nurture each other and also shed light upon each other.

Experiences of racism, for instance, shed some, albeit not complete, light on experiences of sexism.

Like racism, sexism is expressed in both overt and covert forms. Overt sexism is more easily recognised, and is addressed with different levels of success through various measures, policies, protocols, procedures, plans, programmes and practices.

Covert sexism is harder to recognise. It functions on sub-conscious levels, and is expressed in subtle forms. It takes attention-paying to recognise and expose these forms of injustice and injury.

Women also experience the injustice and injury that resides in language. Male language still dominates and gender-exclusive language still exists.

Words that hurt are still in use. Words make worlds; through sexist words and languages we still maintain and freshly construct a world of sexism and patriarchy.

We, for instance, use the diminutive



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so often with regard to women, not to express kindness and love, but to inferiorise and to patronise. This we do with good intentions. We are not even aware that our use of the word might reflect the deeper, hidden, subconscious prejudice that

women are weak and that they need the protection of males.

Some women, for instance, refer to the prejudice that might reside in the word "lady". Although we use the word explicitly to express respect, it might hide the prejudice and manipulation that women must act in a certain "lady-like" way, which we do not expect from men.

Our body language might also express our subtle and hidden sexism. When men contribute to a discussion, our body position, attentive faces and high levels of eye contact show how attentively we listen. When women speak, this body language is often the opposite.

The body language of inattentiveness when women speak might express our subconscious prejudice that women are intellectually inferior; that they are too emotional and not rational enough, and that we, therefore, should not expect a substantial intellectual contribution from women.

The negative emotions that

assertive women evoke among many men and even some women also reflect the subconscious prejudice that women are supposed to behave in a submissive manner. Assertiveness and authoritative conduct is expected from men, but not from women.

These prejudices that underlie small, seemingly innocent behaviours betray and perpetuate prejudices of male superiority and female inferiority. These subtle and subconscious prejudices are powerful.

They influence the behaviour of some women and men, and impact negatively on the development and implementation of structural measures to overcome sexism.

To be included in a male-dominated world, women are consistently under pressure to allow themselves to be simply assimilated into this male world, to yield to accommodation, co-option and conformation – to become like them in order to be included and to make progress. Women are also under pressure

to behave in line with sexist prejudices, and therefore to avoid assertive conduct and the full taking up of co-ownership.

Subtle and subconscious sexist prejudices also impact negatively on the structural measures we develop to overcome sexism.

Our policies are often still contaminated with sexist prejudices. Moreover, where progressive measures are in place to overcome sexism, the subconscious sexist prejudices hinder the appropriate implementation of these measures.

The formation of partnerships of interpathy, empathy, sympathy and solidarity between men and women, and among people of all sexual orientations is one crucial mechanism to jointly conscientise each other about both overt and covert sexism, to jointly organise against it, and to jointly mobilise all our resources against it.

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