

“Does Gender Inequality Exist After #Me, Too?”
A Service co-led by Rev. Kim D. Wilson and Susan Odessky
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos
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Kim Wilson:

Some months ago, I listened to several podcasts about the rights of girls that made me say to myself, “Wow, I thought we had progressed more than this. More people should know about these things.” I approached Susan Odessky, because I know she is a strong advocate of women’s rights, and I asked her if she’d like to join me in leading a service on several aspects of girls and women’s equality issues. Susan said yes.

As we began reading and searching for UU resources to use in the service, we both noticed something that seemed strange: we could find NO readings in any UU sources that specifically mentioned the struggle for women’s rights. It almost seemed as though there’s a collective feeling among UUs that women’s rights are passé. Which is surprising, especially given that there have been many UU women who fought for women’s rights, including suffragists like Olympia Brown and Mary Livermore.

Since that initial conversation Susan and I had, the string of revelations began about the incidents of sexual harassment, abuse and assault of women by well-known men; what now has been shorthanded to the Me, Too, movement.

Around that time, in early December, I attended a weekend series of workshops with Ruby Sales, who’s in her 70s now, but she was young woman in the thick of the Civil Rights movement in the 60s. She had so much wisdom and many stories to share. Her theme that weekend was the pain of racism, which affects all of us in this country.

When we talk about multiple oppressions, such as being black and a woman for example, there’s a relatively new term called Intersectionality which describes how these multiple oppressions overlap, or intersect. Susan’s going to say more about that in a few minutes.

Ruby began talking about patriarchy. And what she said now seems so clear and obvious, I don't know why I didn't see it before. Our form of patriarchal society, of course, came to us by way of white people from Europe. The way Ruby explained it is that an important aspect of European patriarchy has always been dominance and control over territory --colonization. Think about it: Entire continents were colonized and controlled by Europeans. By extension, males felt that they had a right to colonize not only land, but they had the right to colonize and control human bodies: for example, slave bodies and female bodies.

Kind of makes sense.

Now, we want to be clear that what we're saying here this morning is not that any man here has done anything wrong or is doing anything wrong. We mean to say that the system is flawed. That any system of oppression, when we're not conscious of it, has the power to control all of us, and to hurt all of us, men and women. Because, we're unaware of the effects that our ingrained socialization is having on us. Because, we're unaware of the extent to which our behavior and our thinking and our attitudes are coming from our conditioning.

But as we examine the system, we begin to see its components, like how the concepts of ownership and property play out in our relationships. The goal in deconstructing patriarchy is to affirm the humanity of everyone as we are critiquing the system.

So -- we can look back on our history and see how the patriarchal value of colonization and control has influenced what women could and could not do. Women couldn't vote until 1920. Women couldn't open a bank account on their own or get a credit card in their own name until 1974. The year before I graduated from high school. A woman could not run in the Boston Marathon until 1972. Women did not have universal access to the birth control pill until 1972. And until 1978, a woman could be fired for becoming pregnant.

I think it's important to remember that there were men AND women who opposed these changes. Even in the last election, many women were against the idea of having a woman president. Remember? Even if a system is unjust, and an oppressed group would benefit from the change, there are usually some in that group who prefer the status quo.

As human beings, we operate sometimes out of faith and love, and sometimes out of uncertainty and fear. I believe that God, known by many names, is a life-affirming force in the Universe, and so we are called to affirm and respect all life, including each other. When we act in pure love, we encourage another person to fulfill their human potential. Because life calls us to be extensions of the spirit of love, Susan and I strongly believe that the social justice work we do needs to include women's rights, with the goal that women and men both will be able to fully realize their potential and be treated with equal dignity.

Susan is going to speak about some of the more insidious ways that patriarchy affects our day-to-day relationships, and then I'll talk about some of the ways it still plays out in young people's sexual relationships. Yes, we're going to talk about sex in church!

Susan Odessky:

I'd like to call this portion of the service "Gender Discrimination --- Is it Over Yet?"

First, I want to issue a disclaimer. If you are of the male persuasion, please do not feel that you need to shrink down in your seat or think that the woman next to you is giving you an icy stare. Please don't second guess everything you say from now on and wonder if you've been "sexist." We are not saying men are the enemy. Men can be and are allies in the discussion about some of the more subtle forms of gender discrimination that exist in society today. Sexist behaviors towards women are learned, passed along through many generations. Often women as well as men perpetuate the anti-women conduct and perceptions. Gloria Steinem defined a feminist as "**anyone** who recognizes the equality and full humanity of women and men."

Good, I'm glad we've gotten that out of the way and we can all relax --- well sort of.

The obvious answer to the question I posed a moment ago is of course, gender discrimination is not over yet. But the #MeToo Movement has brought it to the forefront in a way that it hasn't been since women marched in the streets and burned their bras in the 1970s.

The Me Too Movement was started by an African-American woman, Tawana Burke in 1997, before hashtags were a thing, after she listened to a 13 year-old girl relay her experience of being sexually abused. Ten years later, Ms. Burke created Just Be Inc., a non-profit organization that helps victims of sexual harassment and assault.

This past October, #MeToo exploded when actress Alyssa Milano and then many other actresses recounted their experiences of being sexually assaulted and harassed by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. The floodgates opened and soon many powerful Hollywood men were being accused of wielding their power to abuse women.

In our own faith, Susan Frederick-Gray, the newly elected first woman president of the UUA recently expressed her commitment to take up the challenge:

It is tempting to want to believe that sexual harassment and assault do not happen within our own faith tradition, among our leaders, or within congregations. But this is naïve and false. Just as we are being asked to confront the culture of white supremacy within and beyond Unitarian Universalism, we have much work to do to understand the way that patriarchy and sexism operate in society and in ourselves. In all of these forms of oppression, we see the ways that dominant forms of power – consciously and unconsciously – can discount, distort, and even seek to destroy those who speak truth in the face of abusive power.

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I take the commitment to examine and improve our processes around sexual harassment and assault seriously. We also must not isolate gender, but take up this issue intersectionally, understanding the multiple layers of race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, and role, and how they serve to make it even more difficult for people to name their truth and be believed.

As Susan Frederick-Gray mentioned, we must tackle sexism intersectionally. Intersectionality is “the complex, cumulative manner in which the effects of different forms of discrimination combine, overlap, or intersect.”

The term is now used to describe the interplay between *any* kinds of discrimination, whether it's based on gender, race, age, class, socioeconomic status, physical or mental ability, gender or sexual identity, religion, or ethnicity. While we are today discussing gender discrimination, we do not forget the commitment of our UU faith to fight for justice on all these fronts.

I want to focus today on the more subtler and perhaps even insidious forms of sexism that exist today. Our tolerance of the devaluing of women in subtle ways on a daily basis is at one end of a long spectrum of sexist aggression that runs the gamut from sexual harassment to sexual assault.

Here are some subtle and not so subtle ways in which women have reported being devalued:

Mansplaining

"Mansplain" is a mash-up of the words "man" and "explain." Most of the time, there's nothing wrong with men explaining things!

But when a man "mansplains" something to a woman, he interrupts or speaks over her to explain something that she already knows — something in which she may already be an expert — on the assumption that he must know more than she does. In many cases, the explanation concerns things unique to women — their bodies, their experiences, their lives. When men interrupt or presume to correct a woman who is speaking of her own experience or expertise, they are implying that she is ignorant, that she is incapable of having authoritative knowledge. They are saying, essentially, "Shh. I know best."

Research supports the idea that men take up more verbal "space" than women: Studies have shown that men account for 75 percent of speech during business meetings, men dominate classroom discussions, and men's tweets are even retweeted almost twice as much as those of female Twitter users.

In her essay on the subject, "Men Explain Things To Me," Rebecca Solnit recounts a party during which a man presumed to explain her own book — *yes, the book that she wrote* — to her.

Another form of mansplaining that occurs on the street is a type catcalling. Women commonly hear on the street, "Smile!" or "You should smile more!" In telling a woman how she *should* appear, how she *should* act in public, men are overwriting her actual experience (and her actual facial expression), and suggesting that they know what's best for her.

Microaggression

Microaggressions are indirect, subtle or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group. Sexist microaggressions are often so common that women and even men don't notice them. Nevertheless, they are a normalized part of being a woman in our society. It takes constant awareness and toughness to remind ourselves that we are *not* what the media and other people make us out to be. Remembering our worth takes a toll on our energy, focus, and social approval. It can be exhausting!

When people talk about "mankind," for example, they are expressing an implicit belief that men are the most important part of humankind. When they use "pussy" as an insult or "castrated" as a metaphor for losing power, they are saying that being female makes you weak. When they use the pronoun "he" about someone in a stereotypically male profession of unknown gender, they are discounting the women in that profession. And when they use phrases like "suck it" as threats, they are making light of sexual violence.

Gaslighting

Have you ever tried to explain to someone how they are harming you, even using examples to prove that there is a problem, only to be faced with a blanket denial? Have you been left wondering if your perception of reality is correct, or if you're actually the perpetrator? This specific form of psychological manipulation is commonly known as gaslighting.

The term was coined after the play "Gas Light" by Patrick Hamilton was adapted into a popular film starring Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman. The story is centered around a husband who manipulates his wife into questioning her sanity and perception of reality. The husband distorts their home environment (mainly by dimming the gas lights) and then denies any change has occurred at all. The wife is left disoriented. She can no longer trust what she believes to be true.

We see gaslighting much more often in the daily lives of women. When women are merely attesting to the sexism they've experienced they are often labeled as hysterical, crazy, or PMSing.

Women in the work force are often subjected to each of these and many other subtle forms of sexism.

When I worked in a law firm run by men, my bosses, who all considered themselves nice guys, thought nothing of interrupting me mid-sentence, even though I had as much experience and knowledge as they did, second guessing me even though I had tried more cases than they did, and criticizing me in scathing emails rather than to my face while praising my male counterparts.

When I went to court or to another proceeding, I knew that I not only had to know my stuff, I also had to prepare for things that male attorneys probably did not think about. I had to fight to have my voice heard when necessary without yelling and to make my point as best I could over the interruptions of male attorneys and judges.

Once a male opponent told me that I reminded him of his mother, and he hated his mother. Another day, at the end of a long settlement negotiation, all the attorneys were shaking hands. When I held out my hand to the senior partner on the other side, he didn't shake it. Instead he said, "Nice job, sweetheart." In both cases, I said nothing and kept moving, knowing that to express anger or confront them would be detrimental to my career.

Luckily, the #MeToo movement has allowed women to find their voice and begin to confront sexism. But men are needed as allies.

In a recent book by Joanne Lippman, "That's What She Said: What Men Need to Know (and Women Need to Tell Them) about Working Together," she quotes the male head of a high-profile consulting firm: "Men have a critical role to play. It can't just be women."

But Lippman notes that men who support women in the workplace require courage. Even the most benign show of support from men can spark outrage from other men and even from women.

Ultimately, Lippman writes, “equality for women means equality for men too.” She quotes Gloria Steinem’s observation, “I’m glad we’ve begun to raise our daughters more like our sons, but it will never work until we raise our sons more like our daughters.”

Despite all the sexism I see and have encountered, I still feel very hopeful.

On January 20th, I attended a Women’s March in Philadelphia with my college roommate Fay. My sign (made by my husband Jim) said “Respect Existence or Expect Resistance.” That about sums up where I am. I, like everyone else, just wants to be treated with respect.

I also find hope in the millennial women and men who will carry on the fight against sexism.

I note the courage of Malala Yousafzai. When Malala was only 15, the Taliban shot her in the head because of her work on behalf of girls’ education in Pakistan. Malala survived and now, at age 20, she attends Oxford University and continues to advocate for girls across the globe. Speaking about her work, Malala wrote, “I raise my voice – not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard. We cannot succeed when half of us are held back.”

Kim Wilson:

Intimate Justice

So...sex. The availability of the pill, beginning in the early 60s, gave women for the first time the freedom to engage in sex without the fear of becoming pregnant. It was the pill that made the Sexual Revolution possible. So now women could be free to enjoy sex as much as men always had. But did they?

I’m sure some did. But I remember reading Betty Friedan’s account of some of the early women’s consciousness-raising groups she helped lead. It was the first time women were able to openly discuss taboo topics with each other, such as details of their sex lives.

Several women admitted that during a sexual encounter, their biggest fear was that their breasts would flop off to the side and that this would be repulsive to their male partner. Each woman shared that she would lie with her arms tightly at her sides to try to hold them in place. I imagine it was gratifying to discover that they weren't alone in their anxieties, but this does not sound like they were enjoying themselves.

A writer named Peggy Orenstein recently spent 3 years talking to girls ages 15 to 20 about their attitudes toward and experiences of sex. What she found is that while young women may feel entitled to have sex, they don't necessarily feel entitled to enjoy it. A sophomore at an Ivy League school proudly talked about how she comes from a long line of strong woman, and that she and her sister are loud, that's their form of feminine power. But then she described her sexual experiences as a string of short term relationships that weren't especially responsible, not especially reciprocal and not especially enjoyable.

This young woman shrugged and said, "I guess we girls are trained to be these docile creatures who don't express our wants or needs." When Ms Orenstein said, "Wait a minute. Weren't you just telling me what a smart, strong woman you are?" She hemmed and hawed and finally said, "I guess no one told me that that smart, strong image applies to sex."

Ms Orenstein says that teenagers are not engaging in intercourse more often than they were 25 years ago, but that they are engaging in other sexual behavior. Usually, it was the guy on the receiving end. Ms Orenstein started asking the girls, "What if, every time you were alone with a guy, he told you to get him a glass of water, and he never got you one? Or if he did, he'd sound reluctant and begrudging. You wouldn't stand for it!"

But often it was the girls who didn't want them to. Girls expressed a sense of shame about their genitals. And a darker theme emerged: avoiding humiliation. They feared their partner would be repulsed. A few girls are going so far as to have surgery, with the most popular form being called...the Barbie. But wait a minute! Barbie doesn't have um...oh, I see. I think that's the point.

What we are talking about here is something called Intimate Justice. Intimate justice asks us to consider who is entitled to engage in an experience. It also asks

us to consider who is entitled to enjoy it. And how does each partner define what is a good experience?

Sara McClelland, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, found that young women were more likely to use their partner's pleasure as a measure of their satisfaction. Girls reported pain in 30 percent of their encounters. They also defined a bad experience as depressing, humiliating, or degrading. So if absence of pain and negative feelings and a satisfied partner are the criteria for a good experience, that's a pretty low bar, wouldn't you say?

Ms. Orenstein found that in lesbian relationships, intimate equality was pretty much a given. She also found that there was less of an understanding of there being a race to a goal. Maybe all girls and their partners, male or female, would benefit if we reconceptualized sex as a pool of experiences that includes warmth, affection, arousal, desire, touch, intimacy.

The only way that can happen is if we talk to young people more about sex. If we talk to girls differently about sex. We tend to load them up with instructions on safety and responsibility, and the conversation usually ends there. In the Netherlands, girls embody everything we say we want for our girls. Perhaps we could learn something from their approach. Unlike in the US, the Dutch girls' doctors, parents and teachers talked to them candidly from an early age about pleasure and mutual trust, and about balancing responsibility and joy.

As parents, teachers, advocates and activists, we have raised a generation of girls to expect equal treatment in their homes, at school and at work. Now it's time to help create that justice in their personal lives as well.

Twenty years ago, the UUs and the UCCs partners in creating a sex education curriculum called "Our Whole Lives," which emphasizes responsible and respectful behavior and healthy sexual relationships.

On the long road toward justice and equality, it's important to look back from time to time to be able to appreciate how far we've come. And we have made big strides in women's equal rights. But we also need to stay vigilant so that we can see the work that still needs to be done. Until there is equality in our work, social,

personal and intimate relationships, we must continue to advocate for the equal treatment of all women and girls.

We close with these words by MJ Abell:

For She Who is Being Tried

What does she know who has not been tried?
The woman who has traveled lonely paths
knows how to find her way.
She who has weathered losses
gains compassion.
Tested, she multiplies her resourcefulness.

She who has not been tried,
what does she know?
She who has been surprised
abounds with vigilance.
Betrayed, she recognizes what is true.
Scarred, she finds her resilience.
Her illusions gone, she deepens.

O woman, you follow a spiral,
rounding and revisiting.
The furrow you plow
is your own life. Reach deep within
the soil you've loosened--
draw forth its richness.
Be strengthened by the grace of your experience.