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Nanci's Listening

Sexism—What It Is and What It Isn't...

by Nanci Luna Jimenez



This quarter, we are honored to profile Linda Ximenes, an LJS Associate based in San Antonio, TX. With over 30 years of facilitation and collaborative planning experience, Linda brings a phenomenally expansive skill set to her work with us. Since 1984, Linda's worked primarily with non-profits, school, neighborhoods, and local governmental agencies. For her, the most rewarding professional endeavors are those that involve helping groups to define exactly who they are and what they want to accomplish.

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Nanci and Linda first met at a ToP© (Technology of Participation) training almost four years ago. Inspired and excited by Nanci's presentation on cross-cultural communication, Linda soon supported a group of community leaders to bring Nanci to San Antonio to work with issues surrounding

Everywhere you look these days, it seems as though sexism is making headlines. More than usual, my conversations with family, colleagues, and strangers on planes have led to this topic. These discussions highlight for me how 'sexism' is understood, or rather misunderstood, when talking about power imbalances between men and women. They also help me to better understand what sexism is and what it isn't.

When "Same" Isn't "Equal"

In the US legal system, we seek "equality" by treating everyone the same. However, **when there is an imbalance of institutional power, treating people the same does not ensure equality or guarantee fair treatment.**

Think about the last time you went to a concert or a sports event. Did you notice long lines outside the women's restroom only to see no one standing outside the men's room? In this case, the idea "same = equal" went into designing these buildings without accounting for how men's and women's use of bathrooms is different.

On average, women take three minutes to use the restroom while men only take one. In this example, a 1:1 restroom stall ratio would treat men and women the "same" while a 3:1 ratio would accommodate for this difference and ensure equal access.

Unfortunately, we've been taught to see building bathroom stalls at a 3:1 ratio as giving women "special" rights. This confusion reinforces institutional sexism.

Discrimination Sees No Gender; Sexism Does

Both men and women can be discriminated against based on their gender. As a society it is important to recognize how men are discriminated against simply because they are men.

I've listened to many men talk about how their opinions are discounted because they are men, not seen as team players because they are men, or viewed as

leadership oppression. Over the past three years, these efforts have led to amazing success in the mostly Mexicano and Chicano Westside community. Linda also joined Nanci and Barb Mackay to facilitate meetings for the Amazon Alliance, a group dedicated to bringing together the leaders of indigenous groups in Amazonia with others to protect the Amazon. This “exciting, rewarding, and challenging” experience was the perfect opportunity for Linda to bring her community building experience, bilingual skills, and aptitude for leading longer workshops to the LJS team. As Linda shared, “the three of us as a team were great because we each brought a significant skill set and were able to use all of those skills to strategize the challenges we faced as well as celebrate our successes.”

Linda is looking forward to her continued collaboration with LJS. When she’s not facilitating community meetings or helping non-profits hone their mission statements, Linda stays more than busy raising her amazing 12 year old granddaughter and spending time in her garden. A graduate of the Lionheart Institute of Transpersonal Energy Healing, Linda also enjoys deepening her eclectic energy healing work. Stay tuned to future newsletters to learn more about Linda and her fantastic work with LJS!

Upcoming Events:

Join LJS for our powerful workshops! Follow the links below for more information on how to register:

Canada
April 20th & 21st
2009

“You Don’t Know What You Don’t Know: The Facilitator’s Path to Authentic Cross-Cultural Practice”

Facilitated by

perpetrators or aggressors because they are men. **When we talk about institutional oppression such as sexism we’re not talking about discrimination or prejudice based on individual hurtful experiences.**

Even if these examples are individual experiences, they are no less significant and they are certainly not excusable. They are also not sexism or “sexism in reverse” —which can’t exist. Sexism is about institutional power based on dominance.

Institutional Power is Behind Every ‘Ism’

In the face of accusations of sexism, individual men defend themselves by saying “I don’t have any power over women” or “I don’t mistreat women.” While these claims may testify to the personal experiences of these men, **this conceptualization of sexism doesn’t account for the institutional power men receive just by living in a society dominated by men and their patterns.**

This is not to take away from anyone’s individual power. It’s to acknowledge that institutional power and individual power are very different concepts.

Some argue that when there are local examples of women having power over men, sexism can “go in both directions” or “be reversed.” Even though it’s true that an individual woman may be in a position of power, perhaps by being a department head or city council chairwoman, she gets that power by being hired or elected, not by virtue of being a female.

Even if she mistreats men through her position of influence, she’s can’t be labeled as sexist because she doesn’t gain that power because she is female. She has this power because she’s a boss.

This distinction by no means justifies injurious behavior. Mistreating someone is still not alright and still an abuse of positional power, but it is also not sexism. Institutional power comes from being part of a dominant group based on one’s identity. From this view, you can’t have “reverse oppression” because only one group is the dominant one. In the case of sexism, this group is men.

Ending What Is Sexism

Women live with the consequences of exclusionary and demeaning policies and men get put into roles or confused to view the world as one in which they dominate. **If we continue to misunderstand what sexism is by talking about it only on an individual, local basis, it will skew both how we understand and work to eliminate institutional power imbalances.** By coming to a common understanding of what sexism is and what it isn’t we can start to envision dismantling sexist institutional policies.

Given this refined definition of sexism as inherently grounded in institutional policies, I offer you a challenge. If you’re a man, work to identify how these ideas about women and their role in our communities play out in your life.

One of my male colleagues recently did this while out to lunch with two female friends. At one point during the meal, he said “I wonder where the salt is,” knowing full well that if he made no move to look for it, one of the women would find it for him. As one of the women got up to get the salt, **he recognized how, as a man, he is trained to exploit the ways women are socialized to nurture, serve, and care-take for others, especially men.**

Recognizing this behavior helped him to better understand how subtle sexist beliefs and behaviors can be.

As women, I invite you to look closely at how sexism has affected you in a way that allows you to see the personal impacts on a societal and global scale. Once you’ve

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Training Workshop

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Or contact Kati for more
information.**

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identified this piece, imagine what it might look like to take on this particular form of dominance and organize with other women and men, as allies, to eliminate it at every level in our world.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Send your stories and comments to Nanci's Listening.

www.lunajimenezseminars.com