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# Three Hypotheses for Explaining the So-Called Oppression of Men

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## Three Hypotheses for Explaining the So-Called Oppression of Men

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### Abstract

Are men oppressed as men? The evidence given in support of affirmative responses to this question usually consists in examples of harms, limitations, or requirements masculinity imposes on men: men are expected to pay on dates, men must be breadwinners for their families, men can be drafted for war, and so forth. This article explicates three hypotheses that account for the harms, limitations, and requirements masculinity imposes on men and, drawing on the work of Alison Jaggar, seeks to show that these hypotheses collectively are explanatorily superior to the hypothesis the men are oppressed as men.

**Keywords:** oppression, intersectionality, homophobia, masculism, meninism, David Benatar, Marilyn Frye, Alison Jaggar

### 1. Introduction

Well-meaning people sometimes say that if the definition of “feminism” were more widely understood, then almost everyone would be a feminist. I have come to doubt this claim.

I regularly teach a course called Feminist Theory. It is an introductory-level course cross-listed in Philosophy and Women’s and Gender Studies at my university. Because it may be used to fulfill requirements in our General Education program, Feminist Theory attracts a large number of students, many of whom begin with no particular interest in or background knowledge about feminism. In response to what Marilyn Frye calls “a fundamental claim of feminism,” namely, “that women are oppressed,” (Frye 1983, 1) many of my students express reservations.

In this paper, I examine a common source of student resistance to feminism (and to the specific claim that women are oppressed): the belief that men are oppressed (as men). Students who are inclined toward this belief (a large minority in any given class<sup>1</sup>) argue that the masculine gender role imposes a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> I’ve suspected that my social position as a man may influence some students, who perhaps think I will respond favorably, to articulate this belief. If this is true, it would provide support for Alison Jaggar’s claim that “ceteris paribus, women are better

oppressive burdens on men and cite myriad examples in evidence of their view: men must pay on dates; men are expected to be breadwinners for their families; men have more limited fashion options than women and may not wear makeup; men rarely receive primary custody of children following divorce; men are discriminated against when they seek certain types of employment, such as in day care centers; men are more likely than women (overall) to be victims of violence; men can be drafted for war.<sup>2</sup>

One way to challenge these examples as evidence of the view that men are oppressed is to defend an account of “oppression” whose conditions are not satisfied by such examples.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I wish to pursue a distinct but complementary approach. I shall argue that there are better explanations for the data in question (the examples of limitations and harms masculinity imposes on men) than the hypothesis that men are oppressed.

In section 2 of this paper, I outline the feminist conceptual basis for denying that men are oppressed as men by reference to the accounts of “oppression” in the work of Frye, Iris Marion Young, and Ann Cudd. In section 3, I identify the main grounds of student resistance to feminism (and to the specific claim that women are oppressed) with the goal of examining in particular the one already indicated (that men are oppressed). In section 4, I present three separate but compatible hypotheses that make sense of how it can be that men are not oppressed despite the limitations and harms the expectations of masculinity impose on men. Finally, in section 5, drawing on the work of Alison Jaggar, I present two advantages of my hypotheses over the hypothesis that men are oppressed as men. Specifically, I shall argue that my hypotheses collectively are more comprehensive (capable of explaining not only the data in question but also related phenomena) and more impartial (likely to represent the interests of society as a whole) than the hypothesis

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qualified than men to teach [feminist philosophy] courses” (Jaggar 1977, 249). Alternatively, it might be the case that some students were already inclined toward the belief that men are oppressed and that my being their instructor made them less reluctant to voice this belief.

<sup>2</sup> David Benatar defends this sort of view as well, though he avoids claiming that men are oppressed. Benatar claims that men experience unfair disadvantages, or are discriminated against, as men (2003, 177).

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this is Frye’s approach (1983, 1–16). It is also the approach of Iris Marion Young (1990, 42) and Ann Cudd (2006, 25). I examine all three approaches in section 2.

that men are oppressed as men. I take for granted in this essay that women are oppressed as women.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Feminist Accounts of Oppression

It is common for feminist philosophers to conceive of oppression in such a way that, if women are oppressed, then men (considered as such) cannot be. For example, Young argues that “for every oppressed group there is a group that is *privileged* in relation to that group” (Young 1990, 42; emphasis in original). Given this aspect of Young’s account of oppression, together with her view that women are oppressed,<sup>5</sup> it follows that men are a privileged (and therefore, nonoppressed) social group.

Cudd similarly defends an account of oppression on which it cannot be the case that both women and men are oppressed in virtue of their gender. According to Cudd (2006, 25), “oppression” comprises four conditions:

1. *The harm condition*: There is a harm that comes out of an institutional practice.
2. *The social group condition*: The harm is perpetrated through a social institution or practice on a social group whose identity exists apart from the oppressive harm in (1).
3. *The privilege condition*: There is another social group that benefits from the institutional practice in (1).

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<sup>4</sup> More precisely, I take for granted in this essay that women are oppressed qua their intersectional identities as women. See section 2 for a more detailed explanation of the concept of oppression, and section 4.2 for a more detailed explanation of intersectionality. I resist in this paper providing examples of how women are oppressed. Though a list of examples would be illustrative, I also believe it would be misleading. One reason is that any list of examples would almost inevitably be more representative of the experiences of some women than those of others; there are probably few or no examples that are representative of women across all social groups. Second, no list of inequalities, harms, or limitations (no matter how accurate, widely representative, or vividly described) would, by itself, show that a group is oppressed. As section 2 shows (and as Frye [1983] notes in response to examples invoked to show that men are oppressed), demonstrating that any one inequality, harm, or limitation is oppressive requires a complex analysis that goes well beyond what could be accomplished in short list of examples.

<sup>5</sup> Young invokes women as an example in discussion of each of her five faces of oppression (1990, 48–63).

4. *The coercion condition*: There is unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm.

Thus, as is the case on Young's account, Cudd's account of oppression—the privilege condition in particular—entails that, if women are oppressed, men cannot be (given the implausible-to-deny assumption that other gender groups are not the beneficiaries of institutional practices that harm women).<sup>6</sup> Making this explicit, Cudd states, “for every social group that is oppressed there are correlative social groups whose members benefit, materially or psychologically, from this oppression” (2006, 25).

Frye's account of oppression is especially useful to consider in some detail since it is the claim that “men, too, are oppressed” that motivates her to set it out. Frye can be read as arguing that oppression has six individually necessary, jointly sufficient conditions. The first is that one can be oppressed only as a consequence of social group membership. Like Cudd and Young, Frye regards oppression as, by its nature, a group-based phenomenon; no one can be oppressed simply as an individual—that is, in virtue of idiosyncratic characteristics they possess (Frye 1983, 87).<sup>7</sup>

Frye argues, second, that a group is oppressed only if its members experience barriers or limitations to their freedom as a consequence of group membership. Oppression fundamentally concerns limitations on freedom, Frye says, which is illuminated by the root of the word: press. Something that is pressed is caught between forces related to each other so that they jointly restrain, restrict, or prevent that thing's motion (1983, 2). This illuminates Frye's third condition, which is that a group is oppressed only if the barriers it experiences are systematic. Systematic barriers, like the wires of a bird cage, are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. As a result, they are unavoidable; they block or penalize motion in every direction (Frye 1983, 4). The systematic nature of oppression is most evident, Frye

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the expectation that women perform the majority of unpaid domestic labor benefits men who, not being subject to this expectation, are thereby competitively advantaged in the paid workforce. The benefits of women's uncompensated domestic labor do not accrue to, for example, genderqueer or nonbinary people.

<sup>7</sup> Frye does not give an account of social groups, but her examples (which involve oppression on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, class, age, and disability) imply at least that she regards the relevant sorts of groups as nonvoluntary collections of people that are presumed (typically in error) to share physical or biological commonalities.

observes, in double binds (“situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation” [1983, 2]).

Fourth, Frye suggests that a group is oppressed only if the barriers it experiences are, on balance, harmful to the group. A putative case of oppression can fail to meet this condition in two ways. First, some barriers that members of a group encounter (in virtue of their membership in that group) may ultimately benefit them, all things considered, even if the immediate effect is harmful. Second, even if a barrier that a person experiences (as a result of a group membership) is, all things considered, harmful to him individually, the barrier may work generally to the benefit (or at least not the detriment) of his group (Frye 1983, 7–8).<sup>8</sup>

Fifth, Frye argues similarly to Young and Cudd that a group is oppressed only if there is another social group that benefits from the barriers the former faces (1983, 11–12). As this suggests, oppression is a concept that implies the existence of an inequality; when a group is oppressed, the harmful barriers it experiences are causally connected to a benefit for another group. Finally, Frye suggests that a group is oppressed only if another social group plays the primary role in enforcing the barriers faced by the putatively oppressed group. As this illuminates, oppression is, in Frye’s view, externally and coercively imposed (1983, 14–15).

Frye says at the beginning of her essay that she does “not want to undertake to prove that women are oppressed (or that men are not)” (1983, 2), that her goal is merely to bring clarity to the concept. But her observations in illustration of the six conditions of oppression I have identified in her essay go a long way to establish the conclusion that men are not oppressed as men. While the examples of the expectations masculinity imposes on men show that men indeed satisfy Frye’s first two conditions (that one can be oppressed only as a consequence of membership in a social group and that a group is oppressed only if its members experience barriers or limitations to their freedom as a consequence of group membership), it is doubtful that men, considered as such, satisfy any of the other four.<sup>9</sup>

That men do not satisfy Frye’s third condition (that a group is oppressed only if the barriers it experiences are systematic) is revealed by reflecting on why women do: women face pervasive double binds in which they may either conform

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in a society where there is overt racial segregation, a white restaurant owner who is harassed, intimidated, or fined for not excluding black patrons is not oppressed as a white person. This is because the social norms she is penalized for violating (racial segregation laws) work to the benefit of whites in general (and may even benefit her individually, all things considered).

<sup>9</sup> In the two paragraphs that follow, I merely seek to explain the rationale for why men do not satisfy the latter four conditions; I do not attempt to support these claims, which is beyond the scope of this essay.

to feminine norms (which harm them) or resist feminine norms (and be penalized). Men face the same choice (conform to or resist masculine norms), but only the latter is penalized; men are rewarded in wide variety of ways for appearing masculine. Masculine expectations sometimes harm some men, but they tend to the benefit of men all things considered, if not individually, then collectively. Thus, Frye's fourth condition (that a group is oppressed only if the barriers it experiences are, on balance, harmful to the group) is also not fulfilled.

Men would satisfy Frye's fifth condition (which holds, like Young and Cudd's privilege condition, that a group is oppressed only if there is another social group that benefits from the barriers the former faces) only if women or another gender-defined group benefitted from the barriers masculinity imposes on men. The existence of well-documented, pervasive, substantial social *inequalities* (not just sufferings) experienced by women in relation to men makes this suggestion a challenge to take seriously. Finally, the most overt forms of masculine gender enforcement—legal code and physical violence—are nearly the exclusive domain of men. Even when it comes to ridiculing and ostracizing masculinity's transgressors, it is men who do it most vigorously and most often. Thus, Frye's sixth condition (that a group is oppressed only if another social group plays the primary role in enforcing the barriers faced by the putatively oppressed group) is not fulfilled either.

### **3. Resistance to Feminism among Students in Feminist Theory**

Resistance to feminism, and the specific claim that women are oppressed, materializes among students in Feminist Theory as early as the second day of class, when I present them with basic examples of factual gender inequalities such as the gender wage gap. I have found that almost all of this resistance (whether to the specific claim that women are oppressed, or to the more general claim that women suffer morally significant social inequalities that are unjust) has one or more of the following five bases.<sup>10</sup>

1. Skepticism: On this view, women (at least in contemporary Western societies) generally have the same opportunities as men and so do not suffer the sort of restrictions or harms required for a case of oppression. In this most basic form of resistance to feminism, factual claims of gender inequalities are simply

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<sup>10</sup> I take some of these categories from Ann Cudd and Leslie Jones's essay "Sexism" (2005, 81–82). What I label as "skepticism" is the same as what they use the term to describe. I call their "essentialism" "biologism" to distance it from the more general idea of essentialism, which need not have anything to do with biology. Cudd and Jones discuss an idea that they call "defeatism," but mine is different. They do not discuss libertarianism or masculism.

denied, usually on the basis of the gender neutrality of laws and institutional policies.

2. **Biologism:** This view holds that women indeed suffer significant and systematic social inequalities in comparison to men but maintains that these inequalities can be accounted for largely or exclusively in terms of “natural” differences between females and males. This entails (it is assumed) that the inequalities women suffer are not unjust and therefore that women are not oppressed (or that women’s “oppression” is not unjust).

3. **Libertarianism:** In this context, I use “libertarianism” to name the view that the significant and systematic social inequalities women suffer in comparison to men can be accounted for largely or exclusively in terms of the cumulative effect of the voluntary choices of individual women and men (which are supposed to diverge from each other on average along lines of gender). This entails (it is assumed) that the inequalities women experience are not unjust and therefore that women are not oppressed (or that women’s “oppression” is not unjust).

4. **Defeatism:** Defeatists allow that women suffer significant and systematic social inequalities in comparison to men but suggest that these inequalities cannot be redressed without unacceptable consequences for men, children, the economy, society generally, or women themselves. Therefore, defeatists say (or, more commonly, imply) that the inequalities women experience must be tolerated—which suggests the position that the inequalities are not, in fact, unjust or truly oppressive.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, 5. **Masculism:** I use “masculism” to name the view that men are oppressed, or more generally, that men suffer unfair disadvantages as men.<sup>12</sup> The evidence for this view generally consists in examples, such as those mentioned in the introductory section of this paper, of limitations or harms masculinity imposes on men.

The view that men are oppressed as men does not itself (at least on face) entail opposition to the claim that women are oppressed or to feminism generally. Indeed, students who express this view often say that men are oppressed *too*. For

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<sup>11</sup> “Defeatism” reflects what I take to be an implication of the *pattern* of some students’ responses to remedies for gender inequality presented in various readings over the course of the term. No student has articulated defeatism as I have presented it here; rather, students profess to believe that women suffer unjust social inequalities but find every single remedy proposed unacceptable for one reason or another.

<sup>12</sup> That men suffer unfair disadvantages as men is what David Benatar (2003, 177) calls “discrimination” against men, or “the second sexism.”



many students who articulate the view I call masculism, there appears to be a sincere concern for men's and women's suffering.

However, there are two reasons for thinking that one cannot hold both masculism and feminism (where feminism is taken to include the claim that women are oppressed as women). First, given standard elements of feminist philosophical accounts of oppression, if men are oppressed, it is not logically possible that women are oppressed (unless some third gender group is oppressing both). In terms of the privilege condition common to Young, Cudd, and Frye, if men are oppressed, then women are a privileged social group, which would be incompatible with women being an oppressed social group. In terms of Frye's last condition and Cudd's coercion condition, if men are oppressed, then women have the social power to enforce the barriers that oppress men, which would make it hard to understand how the coercion condition could be fulfilled in women's case.

Second, regardless of the details of any specific philosophical account of oppression, "oppression" must surely be thought to name a special, and especially grave, form of injustice. If everyone—men, women, and people who reject these categories—is oppressed by gender norms and expectations, then it cannot be said that women suffer a special, and especially grave, form of injustice. To put it another way: If everyone (considered along lines of gender) is "oppressed," then no one is *really* oppressed—i.e., no one is suffering a special, and especially grave, form of injustice.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. Three Hypotheses for Explaining the So-Called Oppression of Men**

I assume in this paper that women are oppressed as women.<sup>14</sup> I do not seek to deny that men sometimes experience limitations or harms as a result of masculine gender expectations. Instead, my goal is to show that the limitations and harms masculinity sometimes imposes on some men can be explained (well) without invoking the notion that men are oppressed. In order to meet this goal, I present in the subsections below three independent but compatible hypotheses for explaining the limitations and harms of masculinity: the noncompliance penalties hypothesis, the intersectionality hypothesis, and the homophobic contempt hypothesis.

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<sup>13</sup> Tom Digby makes a superficially similar but distinct point about the rhetorical impact (as opposed to the conceptual implication) of saying that everyone is oppressed: "When you say that whites are victims of racism, too, or men are victims of sexism, too, the rhetorical impact is to create the impression that everyone is a victim of racism or sexism, so it must be an unavoidable aspect of the human condition, so little or nothing can be done about racism or sexism" (Digby 2003, 266).

<sup>14</sup> See note 4.

Providing alternative explanations for what appears to be evidence of men's oppression is not a new philosophical project. A familiar hypothesis, defended by Kenneth Clatterbaugh (1996, 300–301) and James Sterba (2003, 229),<sup>15</sup> holds that certain harms and limitations men experience as men are, in fact, side effects of male privilege and men's compliance with masculine expectations. David Benatar, a critic of this view, calls this the "costs-of-dominance" argument (2003, 203–205; 2012, 194–199). The costs-of-dominance argument has its clearest application as an explanation of the fact that men are more likely than women (overall) to be victims of violence: masculinity requires that men be aggressive, quick to violence, emotionally restrained (except with respect to anger, crucially), and "protective" toward women. Compliance with these expectations indeed sets men up for many harms, such as vulnerability to violence; men are likely to see each other as posing a threat for which violence is the best response. But this and other costs of masculinity (such as the demands of being the primary breadwinner for one's household) are predictable results of compliance with and affirmation of a system of gender roles, norms, and stereotypes by which men are able to gain the benefits of social cooperation to a greater extent than women. Violence and threats of violence are powerful and often effective forms of coercion; the breadwinner requirement (and the related expectation that women perform unpaid domestic labor) ensures economic advantages by which men are able to secure greater control than women over valuable resources. The hypotheses I present below are separate from but complementary to the costs-of-dominance argument.<sup>16</sup>

#### **4.1. The noncompliance penalties hypothesis**

The costs-of-dominance argument is useful for explaining cases in which harm accrues to men as a consequence of *complying with* masculine expectations. Defenders of the idea that men are oppressed sometimes invoke examples of men being penalized for *failures* of masculinity, both intentional and unintentional. The example with which Frye opens her 1983 essay (men not being permitted to cry in public) is such a case. Similarly, men who are stay-at-home fathers may be ridiculed or faulted by acquaintances or extended family members. A man who eats a vegetarian diet may have his manliness questioned. Describing a man as "metrosexual" is (lighthearted) way of mocking him for his "frivolous" concern with

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<sup>15</sup> Also see Ward E. Jones and Lindsay Kelland's (2013) review of Benatar's *The Second Sexism*.

<sup>16</sup> Frye (1983, 15) gestures toward the costs-of-dominance argument when she notes that some limitations on men required by masculinity (e.g., emotional restraint) are the consequence of a system by which men are accorded, and women are denied, respect.

fashion and personal appearance. Indeed, many similar portmanteaus (e.g., “bromance,” “manscape”) have been introduced in the past several years for the same purpose: to gently tease men—while simultaneously affirming their heterosexuality—for behaving in ways culturally associated with femininity.

As Frye points out, masculine norms are enforced against men primarily by men (Frye 1983, 14–15); they are not externally imposed, as a claim of oppression requires. To deny that these examples are evidence of men’s oppression is not to say that they do not sometimes involve genuine harm for some men.<sup>17</sup> But these harms are simply penalties for noncompliance with norms of masculinity. Men who defy, intentionally or not, the expectations of masculinity are living counterexamples to the belief that traditional gender roles, the cornerstone of male privilege, are “natural” (i.e., biologically determined). If traditional gender roles are “natural,” then the social advantages men accrue from them are (it is conventionally supposed) inevitable and, thus, cannot be challenged as unjust. The maintenance of male privilege therefore requires that counterexamples to the naturalness of traditional gender roles be eliminated.<sup>18</sup> The threat and application of noncompliance penalties serve a deterrence function as well as a “moral education” function (by encouraging the internalization of masculine ideals in men and boys). Thus, while some men are indeed harmed by masculinity, its enforcement protects

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<sup>17</sup> This is why the noncompliance penalties hypothesis is not a version of what Benatar calls the “inversion” argument (2003, 199–204). The inversion argument claims that, in such examples, the apparent harms to men are actually *themselves* benefits to men.

<sup>18</sup> The noncompliance penalties hypothesis does not imply that men demand men’s compliance with masculine ideals as a conscious strategy for maintaining male privilege. A variety of explanations could be given for why a particular man teases, shuns, or assaults other men for insufficient masculinity. Patrick Hopkins argues that “gender treachery” is penalized because it is understood (even if nonconsciously) as a threat to personal identity for many men: “Because personal identity (and all its concomitant social, political, religious, psychological, biological, and economic relations) is so heavily gendered, any threat to sex/gender categories is derivatively (though primarily non-consciously) interpreted as a threat to personal identity—a threat to what it means to *be* and especially what it means to *be me*. A threat to manhood (masculinity) is a threat to personhood (personal identity). Not surprisingly then, a threat to established gender categories, like most serious threats, is often met with grave resistance, for challenging the regulatory operations of a gender system means to destabilize fundamental social, political, and personal categories (a profoundly anxiety-producing state), and society is always prejudiced toward the protection of established categories” (Hopkins 1998, 171).

from refutation the ideology by which male privilege generally is rationalized. So understood, such examples of harms masculinity imposes on some men are, in fact, evidence of women's oppression.

The noncompliance penalties hypothesis is useful for dispelling a confusion among those who are inclined to think men are oppressed in virtue of the limitations and harms masculinity imposes. A proponent of masculism might be puzzled why, if feminists invoke examples of women being penalized for not satisfying gender expectations as evidence of the oppression of women, examples of men being penalized for the same does not show that men are oppressed. The noncompliance penalties hypothesis provides an explanation of how it could be the case that penalties for insufficient masculinity on the part of men do not satisfy the harm condition in Cudd's account and Frye's fourth condition of oppression: considered as a group, men benefit, all things considered, from the enforcement of masculine expectations.

Given the scope and goal of this paper, I do not attempt to defend this claim (that considered as a group, men benefit, all things considered, from the enforcement of masculine expectations). Nevertheless, supporting the noncompliance penalties hypothesis as an alternative to the hypothesis that men are oppressed does require showing why proponents of masculism should accept Cudd's harm condition (or Frye's fourth condition) as part of the meaning of oppression. First, most of the examples given to show that men are oppressed would be irrelevant if those who say that men are oppressed did not accept that oppression must involve some kind of harm, broadly construed. Further, it seems uncontroversial that oppressive harms cannot be causally connected to a greater benefit for the injured party; it would be arbitrary to count only a subset of the consequences of a barrier to freedom when considering whether or not the barrier is oppressive. Finally, the harm condition requires that the subject of the oppressive harm be a social group.<sup>19</sup> Yet this is something that proponents of masculism accept as well—by virtue of their contention that men (as opposed to persons A, B, and C, all of whom happen to be men) are oppressed as men.

#### **4.2. The intersectionality hypothesis**

One of the most seemingly powerful examples of the oppression of men is expectations of military service. That men are expected to risk physical injury and death in military service is a central example for Benatar of sexism against men. Benatar acknowledges that the burden of military service, combat especially, does

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<sup>19</sup> This need not be taken to mean that the group exists apart from its members; the harm condition merely requires that the aggregate effect on members of the group be a harm. (See Cudd 2006, 52.)

not fall equally on all men; men of color and poor white men are more likely than middle-class and wealthy white men to be placed in active military combat. In their review of Benatar's 2012 book, *The Second Sexism*, Ward E. Jones and Lindsay Kelland (2013) fault Benatar for failing to recognize that such examples therefore provide evidence not of discrimination against men but of class or race discrimination.

But such cases, Benatar might reply, cannot be explained simply in terms of class or race discrimination (or oppression). If they could, we would expect the burdens of military combat to fall as heavily on women of color and poor white women as they do on men of color and poor white men. Since they don't, it may seem that Benatar indeed has evidence for sexism against men.

However, this reply would not salvage Benatar's example, for there is a way to make sense of why the burdens of military combat do not fall as heavily on women of color and poor white women as they do on men of color and poor white men without invoking the hypothesis that men are discriminated against or oppressed simply as men: intersectionality.

Intersectionality is the idea that (among other things) how oppression is experienced by members of a social group varies depending on what other social groups each belongs to.<sup>20</sup> In the classic example, the forms of sexism a black woman encounters differ in some ways from those a white woman encounters due to white women's race privilege and black women's race oppression. Similarly, intersectionality entails that the forms of racism a black man encounters differ in some ways from those a black woman encounters as a consequence of black men's gender privilege and black women's gender oppression.

The intersectionality hypothesis thus provides an alternative to claiming that men are oppressed as men even as one acknowledges that the burdens of military combat do not fall as heavily on women of color and poor white women as they do on men of color and poor white men. Specifically, the intersectionality hypothesis makes it possible to understand the unique burdens of military service on men as a gender-specific instantiation of race and economic oppression. Via intersectionality, other examples, such as police violence against black men, can similarly be understood as gender-specific instantiations of race oppression rather than as instantiations of the oppression of men qua men.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> A very long list of references could be included here. For a start, see Combahee River Collective 1982, hooks 1984, Crenshaw 1989 and 1991, Spelman 1988, Collins 1993, and Gines 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Sally Haslanger's view is relevant to consider here. Haslanger notes that "there are contexts in which being Black *and male* marks one as a target for certain forms of systematic violence (e.g., by the police)" and adds to this that "In those contexts,

To this suggestion, a proponent of masculism might ask why we should not instead say that expectations of military service for poor and working-class men (and police violence against men of color) are class- and race-specific instantiations of the oppression of men. For my reply, I assume that the proponent of masculism acknowledges the racist oppression of people of color and economic oppression of the poor and working class in contemporary Western societies. (If they did not, they could not make the claim that expectations of military service for poor and working-class men and police violence against men of color are class- and race-specific instantiations of the oppression of men.) If (it is not disputed that) people of color are oppressed by racism and the poor and working class are oppressed by economic institutions, no explanatory purpose is served by positing that men are oppressed (in race- and class-specific ways): police violence against black men and the overrepresentation of men of color and poor and working class men in military service are already accounted for by race oppression, class oppression, and their intersection with gender categories.

To clarify, I am not simply arguing that the simplest explanation is the best one. After all, by invoking intersectionality to explain the putative examples of men's oppression, I have put forward a more complex explanation than proponents of masculism generally do. However, my argument has been that intersectionality is necessary to explain such examples: if particular harms (such as the burdens of military service and vulnerability to police violence) are borne disproportionately by men of color and poor and working class white men, then these harms cannot be

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contrary to Frye's suggestion, *being male* is not something that a man 'has going for him'" (Haslanger 2000, 41; emphasis in original). Haslanger's view is not necessarily contrary to my own, however; in saying that police violence against black men can be understood as a gender-specific instantiation of race oppression, I have argued that black men's being men is indeed part of the explanation of such phenomena. Had Haslanger argued that being male is something black men have going *against* them, it is possible that our views would be in conflict. (Whether Haslanger holds such a view is doubtful; later, she says "when systems of White supremacy and male dominance collide, a Black man's male *privilege* may be seen as so threatening that it must be violently wrested from him" [42; emphasis added].) Nevertheless, even if it is Haslanger's view that being male is something black men have going against them, this would not support the general claim of masculism that men are oppressed, or suffer unfair disadvantages, as men simpliciter. At most, the view that being male is something black men have going against them would mean that black men qua black men suffer unfair disadvantages or are oppressed. See my response to the second objection to the intersectionality hypothesis for further explanation of this point.

entirely explained by any one of the gender oppression of men, the race oppression of people of color, or the economic oppression of the poor and working class alone. Thus, in order to fully explain the phenomena in question (the burdens of military service and vulnerability to police violence), proponents of masculism must incorporate as elements of their explanation three things: the race oppression of people of color, the economic oppression of the poor and working class, and the intersection of these oppressions with gender categories. Yet, once they do so, proponents of masculism render one element of their explanation—the claim that men are oppressed as men—superfluous.

One might object that my use of intersectionality to account for harms some men experience without saying that men are oppressed as men misconstrues intersectionality. On this view, intersectionality entails that black men (for example) are a social group unto themselves and that phenomena such as police violence against black men are instances of the oppression of black men qua black men (rather than gender-specific instantiations of race oppression).<sup>22</sup> It would be beyond the scope of this paper to defend a particular understanding of the implications of intersectionality for social ontology. If the understanding of intersectionality suggested in this objection is correct, it would undermine my claim that certain harms experienced by some men are gender-specific instantiations of race or class oppression. However, it would not undermine my claim in a way that is beneficial for proponents of masculism; indeed, it would undermine the central claim of masculism (that men are oppressed as men) in a distinct way. On the understanding of intersectionality suggested by this objection, men simpliciter do not exist and thus “men” do not constitute a social group. If “men” do not constitute a social group, then they cannot be oppressed as men.

#### **4.3. The homophobic contempt hypothesis**

In some cases, men are penalized for gender deviance but not in ways it seems appropriate to describe as lapses of masculinity simpliciter. Boys who naively extol the virtues of Madonna to their classmates and men who order colorful cocktails or gab excitedly about figure skating may be viciously harassed, accosted, or physically attacked.

But such examples involving men (and boys) being ridiculed, harassed, or threatened for engaging in certain behaviors culturally associated with femininity are of course not penalties *for* being a man; they are penalties for being (or seeming) gay, as gay men are stereotyped in contemporary American society. In other words, what explains such cases is not the oppression of men but contempt for homosexuality. In contrast to the noncompliance penalties hypothesis, where

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<sup>22</sup> For a proponent of this sort of construal of intersectionality, see Spelman 1988.

violations of masculinity *themselves* precipitate the imposition of a harm, the homophobic contempt hypothesis explains cases in which violations of masculinity are taken as evidence of homosexuality and a man's assumed homosexuality occasions the imposition of a harm. In such cases, the goal of the imposition of harm is not to deter or teach, but simply to punish or perhaps incapacitate.

Does the homophobic contempt hypothesis prove too much? One might argue (as Benatar does [2012, 137]), that the penalties imposed on men suspected of being gay support the claim of masculism since (one might think) lesbians are not as severely penalized for homosexuality. Indeed, Benatar claims that "homosexual males suffer more victimization than do lesbians" (2012, 54), and takes this as evidence of his view that men are unfairly disadvantaged as men.

One might imagine that responding to such an objection is primarily an empirical matter, requiring that one reference criminal statutes, statistics, and social scientific data that compare the disadvantages associated with being identified as a lesbian with those associated with being identified as a gay man. Empirical research would be only limitedly helpful at best on this question, however. First, given the tendency, consequent on the oppression of women,<sup>23</sup> to regard men's experience as paradigmatic human experience, there is a plausible basis for suspecting that disadvantages more associated with the oppression of lesbians than with the oppression of gay men are less readily recognized in empirical research (which could, thus, be misleading).

Second, even if it could be empirically established that gay men are more disadvantaged than lesbians, this would not by itself constitute evidence for the claim that men are oppressed. As the foregoing discussion of the intersectionality hypothesis illuminates, the putatively greater disadvantage of gay men is conceptualizable as a gender-specific instantiation of homophobic oppression—or as the oppression of gay men qua gay men. Both of these ways of understanding the allegedly greater disadvantages of gay men would challenge the notion that such disadvantages are evidence of the oppression of men as men.

Finally, if gay men are more disadvantaged than lesbians, this would only appear to be evidence that men are oppressed if one fails to reflect on why such disadvantages are imposed on gay men. Perpetrators of homophobic discrimination and violence against gay men ostensibly regard gay men with contempt for gay men's stereotypical effeminacy and womanliness. In other words, it is disdain for women and the feminine that would explain the alleged greater disadvantage of gay men, not the oppression of men.

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<sup>23</sup> That women are oppressed is generally not disputed by proponents of masculism, the logical implications of their position notwithstanding.



## **5. Advantages of the Three Hypotheses**

These three hypotheses, together with the costs-of-dominance argument, are at least the explanatory equal of the hypothesis that men are oppressed as men in accounting for the various harms and limitations masculinity imposes on men. Making use of two criteria of theoretical adequacy that Alison Jaggar invokes in defense of socialist feminism in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, I argue that collectively they are, in fact, superior to the hypothesis that men are oppressed.

Jaggar argues that the socialist feminist theory of women's oppression (and liberation) is preferable to that of liberal feminism, traditional Marxism, and radical feminism because it (best) represents the social world from the standpoint of women. All theories of political morality represent the world from one standpoint or another, even if some do not acknowledge that they do so. In general, theories that reflect the standpoint of the oppressed (women, in the case of feminist theories) are superior to those that do not because they are (a) more comprehensive and (b) more impartial, in Jaggar's view.

Jaggar explains that the standpoint of the oppressed is comprehensive because "whereas the condition of the oppressed groups is visible only dimly to the ruling class, the oppressed are able to see more clearly the ruled as well as the rulers and the relations between them. Thus, the standpoint of the oppressed includes and is able to explain the standpoint of the ruling class" (Jaggar 1983, 371). Abstracting from this, Jaggar's defense of the theoretical virtues of socialist feminism implies that one hypothesis is superior to another if, besides accounting for the phenomenon in question, it explains the appearance of truth in the competing hypothesis. The noncompliance penalties, intersectionality, and homophobic contempt hypotheses (together, along with the costs-of-dominance argument) are more comprehensive than the hypothesis that men are oppressed in the following sense: they can explain the appearance of truth in the hypothesis that men are oppressed because they together account for the various examples given in evidence of men's alleged oppression. In contrast, the hypothesis that men are oppressed cannot itself account for social disadvantages imposed on women, people of color, the poor and working class, or sexual minorities.

The standpoint of the oppressed is impartial because, Jaggar argues, "it comes closer to representing the interests of society as a whole; whereas the standpoint of the ruling class reflects the interests only of one section of the population, the standpoint of the oppressed represents the interests of the totality in that historical period" (1983, 371). More generally, the criterion of impartiality favors hypotheses that come closest to representing the interests of society as a whole. Political strategies designed to ameliorate the putative oppression of men may benefit men but would leave in place and perhaps exacerbate the oppression of women, people of color, the poor and working class, and sexual minorities. The

noncompliance penalties, intersectionality, homophobic contempt, and costs-of-dominance hypotheses are more impartial, and therefore pose less social risk, than the hypothesis that men are oppressed: political strategies designed to challenge the forms of oppression these hypotheses invoke would (in principle) benefit women, people of color, the poor and working class, and sexual minorities (respectively) as well as the men whose disadvantages these hypotheses explain.

## 6. Conclusion

Responding to the claim that men are oppressed as men merely by presenting a definition of “oppression” whose conditions men do not satisfy may be perceived as sophistry by undergraduate students, however sound a philosophical strategy it is. It is my hope that the hypotheses presented here might reduce student resistance to such feminist conceptions of oppression by showing that the examples that inclined many of them toward what I’ve called masculism can be accounted for without positing that men are oppressed.

I sometimes gather that students are led to endorse the view that men are oppressed, or that men experience sexism too, because it strikes them as a failure of inclusivity or, worse, a microaggression to deny that any group is oppressed, especially if some members of the group claim that they are. In other words, acknowledging the oppression of men is supposed to be required from a progressive, forward-thinking perspective. The three hypotheses delineated here reveal that just the opposite is the case. The noncompliance penalties hypothesis shows that many of the harms and limitations masculinity imposes on men are evidence of the oppression of another group—women. The intersectionality hypothesis shows that certain harms and limitations experienced by some men, as men, are similarly examples of the oppression of other groups—people of color and the poor and working class (among others). And the homophobic contempt hypothesis shows that some of the harms and limitations masculinity imposes on men are an aspect of the oppression of yet another group—sexual minorities. The notion that the examples of harms and limitations masculinity imposes on men are evidence of the oppression of men is therefore insidious, for it has the effect of directing concern for social justice away from actually oppressed groups.

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