

Priority #2: Racism, Sexism, & Rights

Civil Rights, Women's Rights, Gender Rights, Immigrant Rights

Let's begin by acknowledging that racism, sexism, and other negative, discriminatory perceptions, and practices, really do exist.

They are wrong and they cause a great deal of harm to individuals, families, and society as a whole.

Racism and Sexism have existed in one form or another throughout all of human history.

When I think about racist realities in the history of the world, I think back to Pharaoh and Egypt enslaving the Hebrew people.

I think of the killing of millions of Jewish people in Germany prior to and during World War II and by other countries and by religions for thousands of years.

I think of women being burned as witches, women being sexually assaulted and trafficked, and women being denied many educational, employment and political opportunities.

I think of black women and men being enslaved and black men being lynched for supposedly being a threat to white women or being "uppity" to white men.

I think of black women and men being denied the right to vote or being required to pass tests which hardly anyone, black or white, could pass.

Though less lethal, but something which I remember growing up, was discrimination against ethnic immigrant groups such as the Irish ("Irish need not apply") in help wanted ads; Polish immigrants called "Dumb Polacks;" and Italian immigrants called "Dumb Dagos." These terms were considered jokes, but they carried over into lesser job and higher education opportunities.

All of these examples and many more, too numerous to mention, have been part and parcel of the history of the world and the history of our country.

Some Progress Has Been Made

On the plus side, I have seen some positive changes come about to combat racism and sexism in my lifetime.

Back in the 1950's and 1960's, there was a strong and growing middle class. Most Americans had enough to live comfortable, hope-filled lives for themselves and their families.

In 1962 a very important book titled The Other America by Michael Harrington clearly and convincingly told the story that though most Americans had been lifted up to a higher standard of living, there were still many individuals and groups struggling to survive and to give their children chances for a better life.

Because the majority of American's were doing better, they were agreeable, and even enthusiastic about sharing the growing wealth and opportunities in our country with all Americans.

This optimistic mindset formed a strong base of support for making positive changes of laws which had hurt so many people for so many years.

This optimism supported the work of the groups and individuals who led the Civil Rights movement. Important landmark legislation was passed in the 1960's which made discrimination in voting, housing, and employment illegal.

Within this optimistic environment, the work of the groups and individuals also changed the perception of the equal rights and opportunities which were due to women and led to more women enjoying their full humanity.

Neither of these movements and resultant positive changes have been 100% effective in our country. But some progress has been made.

Extreme Capitalism & Concentrated Wealth: A Source of Racism & Sexism

Over the past forty years, the abundant wealth of our country has shifted from the majority of the people, including our once vaunted Middle Class, to a tiny fraction of our population.

- The top 1% of the wealthiest people in our country now own 33% of the total wealth.
- The top 10% own 70% of the total wealth.
- The next 40% own 28% of the total wealth.
- The bottom 50% of Americans own 1.9 % of the wealth, with one-half of that group having no wealth at all.

Let me translate these percentages into a more visual and understandable example.

Let's begin with a table with 100 cookies on it. 100 people are invited to share those cookies. When people are invited to the cookie table, everyone thinks they will get a fair share of the cookies. Based on the wealth that exists in our country, here is how the cookies actually get divided.

1 person walks in, grabs 30 cookies for himself, and leaves.

9 more people walk in. They grab 40 of the cookies to share among themselves, and leave.

40 more people walk in. They grab 28 cookies to share among themselves, and leave.

The last 50 people walk in and see that there are only 2 cookies left.

25 of those people are told they need to share those two cookies among themselves.

25 of those people are told that they do not get any part of those cookies.

Not surprisingly, those last 50 people start arguing and fighting about who is going to get some small part of a cookie.

They are not told what happened to the other 98 cookies. They are just told that this is what is left for them. If you get no cookie or only a crumb or two, you are told you are less of a person and/or not as hard a worker as the other people who already got the 98 cookies. And the best way for you to get a tiny part of a cookie is to blame others of their group of 50 and fight them for the 2 cookies.

This scenario has been done deliberately and successfully through a well-funded promotion of what is often called Extreme Capitalism. One of the basic premises of this economic theory is that if business is allowed to grow and prosper without any real limits or restraints, then that is what is best for the economy as a whole. That theory

says the great wealth which is created by Extreme Capitalism will “trickle down” to the rest of us. We will all become richer and be able to buy more things which will make us all happier.

This has not worked.

After 40 plus years of this economic theory, the wealth, and related opportunities for most individuals and families, has been greatly diminished. The shift of wealth to the top was a major contributor to the Great Recession of 2007-09.

Many people lost jobs and their homes because of the Great Recession. Hard-working people who never needed to ask for help in supporting themselves and their families had to come with hat in hand to not-for-profit groups and government agencies to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table.

They were embarrassed and angry that they had to do that.

The wealthy and powerful told these Americans that their problems and the negative change in their fortunes were the result of two things:

- Lazy people on welfare (Welfare Queens) who wanted more and more benefits without working for them
- Immigrants (rapists, thieves, and terrorists) stealing their jobs and getting welfare without paying taxes

Neither of those reasons is true.

But it gave the powerful and wealthy a way to divide the 50% of the people with little or no wealth into two polarized camps who angrily blamed each other.

And it kept most of us from understanding who and why racism has increased in our country and sexism continues to be an on-going problem.

Progress Can Still Be Made

Economic inequity fosters racism and sexism.

But it isn't just about money.

Unless we create a more equitable and balanced economy which gives everyone a chance to provide for themselves and their families, racism and sexism will continue to become even larger problems which affect our freedom, our democracy, and our hopes for the future.