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The Sexist in Me

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My girlfriend and I had been arguing most of the day. As we were returning from the laundromat, she ran ahead of me to our apartment building. I caught up with her at the front door, dropped the clothes at her feet, went inside and slammed the door behind me. She carried the bundle in, set it down and started back outside. Enraged, I grabbed her by the seat of her shorts and pulled her back into the apartment. We struggled in the kitchen, the dining area and the bathroom. As we were moving toward the living room, I shoved her into the bathroom door. Her face bruised, she began to cry uncontrollably, and I tried to calm her down as we wrestled on the living-room floor. When she let out a high pitched yell for help, I jumped to my feet, suddenly aware of what I was doing. Shaking with fear and exhaustion, I watched my girlfriend run barefoot out of our apartment into the street.

I still shudder when I think of that scene one year later. It was my first serious relationship and, notwithstanding my proclamations of “I’m one Black man who’s gonna do the right thing,” I managed to join the swelling ranks of abusive men with relative ease. Soon after “the incident,” accusations of sexism flooded my guilty conscience. Like a lot of men, I tried to pin much of the blame on my now ex-girlfriend. She must have done something to provoke my outburst, I rationalized to myself.

But I couldn’t delude myself for too long. I kept thinking of all the women I had ill-treated in some way. Without fully realizing it, I had always taken women for granted, but it wasn’t until I committed a violent act that it hit me how deeply I believed women to be inferior to men.

Ashamed of what I had done, I knew that if I didn’t deal with my deeply-rooted sexism—the desire of man to dominate women—I could not seri-
ously enter into another emotionally intimate relationship with a woman. Psychologically drained, I consulted young women friends my own age, older Black women and men, and any book that dealt with the issue at hand. Everywhere I turned, I found someone who was pointing out the dangers of exhibiting sexism.

For example, one woman friend drew an analogy to racism. If a child is taught from an early age to dislike another child because of his or her race, she said, the former is likely to become a hardened racist by adulthood. The same logic, she offered, applies to sexism.

Keeping in mind my friend’s analogy, I recalled my childhood. I evolved as many boys do in this society: Machismo gripped my psyche, and by the time I reached my teen years we “boys” did whatever we felt like doing—which ran the gamut from squeezing girls’ buttocks in gym class to “gang-banging” girls in abandoned buildings.

My chauvinistic demeanor merely ripened with age, and even after my political consciousness blossomed in college, I self-righteously continued to rationalize that the real battle was against racism, and if the “sistas” on campus couldn’t fall into line, well, then, those women weren’t really down with the program anyway.

In retrospect, what happened in my relationship was inevitable. Left unchecked my entire life, my sexist inclinations were building up to a breaking point. Unable to handle the pressures of a serious relationship, I first sought to “control” my girlfriend through verbal tirades and then finally through violence—the highest form of sexism.

The entire experience has been incredibly stressful—including writing about it now. I will never be able to remove the pain I inflicted on my ex-girlfriend, but at least I’ve taken measures to ensure that it will not happen again.

Acknowledging my inherent sexism was the first step. I then had to recognize that women are not footstools or servants or punching bags, but my equals on every level. And as I’ve struggled against my own sexism, I’ve also had to struggle against it when it manifests in my male friends. I can no longer tolerate the use of words like *bitch* or *skeezer* to describe women. Silence is acquiescence and acceptance. Moreover, true manhood does not rest on the subjugation of women—verbal or physical—and meaningful relationships between men and women won’t exist until we men understand that.