

Enlightened Sexism, Structural Violence or the Failure of Representative Democracy? The 2016 Gender Equality Referendum

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EPIGRAPH

Enlightened sexism is a manufactured process that is produced, week in and week out, by the media. Its components—anxiety about female achievement; a renewed and amplified objectification of young women’s bodies and faces; the dual exploitation and punishment of female sexuality; the dividing of women against each other by age, race, and class; rampant branding and consumerism— (Douglas, 2010, p. 10).

Structural violence, says Galtung, is “the indirect violence built into repressive social orders creating enormous differences between potential and actual self-realisation ... The general formula behind structural violence is inequality, above all in the distribution of power” (1975, pp. 173, 175 cited in Paul, 2009).

In these communities women have gained in influence while the men’s income and status have fallen. ... The class-based changes in family structure reinforce class-based inequality. Write off a high percentage of men as effectively unmarriageable, and women tend to give up on men - and marriage - more generally. The result may or may not be “the end of blue-collar men” but it is definitely the recreation of class (Carbone & Cahn, 2012, p. 884).

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the failure of the gender equality referendum, we have to sit back and take stock of where we are as a country. For sure, we have to consider the resistance to feminism at all levels of society. The word seems to have garnered serious knee-jerk reactions especially among young women. In classes at The College of The Bahamas it is amazing how many young women do not identify as feminists and, in fact, how many reject this label altogether. At the same time,

there are an equal number of young women who apparently rejected the idea of gender equality in the country. While the outcome of the June 7, 2016 gender equality referendum may be uniquely Bahamian, it in some ways needs to be contextualised in a broader sense, and the quotes that opened this piece, I would argue, although disconnected from the local reality and apparently divergent in approach, do that. They provide insight into the impact of inequalities and of structural violence (a big part of the neoliberal state’s treatment of

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its citizenry) on the country. This essay, though, focuses on the failure of the vote to change entrenched constitutional inequalities that render women unequal to men, and attempts to demonstrate how class and level of education work to build walls around privilege. As Douglas (2010) argues, enlightened feminism redeploys messages of separation between women, something that was clearly seen in the vote, as lower-working-class women had no identification with the concerns of the upper-class women who spoke in favour of gender equality. In fact, the divide, notwithstanding the unity that being of the same sex should have created, was exacerbated by perceptions of inequality and anger at the state, but also anger at the structural system that renders the working poor less able to actively participate in the democracy through varied and multiple mechanisms. Ironically, as first-wave feminism and some of its problems have indicated, we cannot assume that just because women are women, they would identify with what was in the early days seen as a white, middle-class woman's struggle and did not include the concerns of minority women or women of colour. In fact, women of colour felt completely left out of the discussion. Perhaps this internal disconnection can also be useful in reading the failure of the vote to end constitutional discrimination based on sex, especially with regard to the passing on of citizenship. This essay is an analysis of the failure of the vote for equality, but it does not claim to be exhaustive in its critique.

Over the last 24 to 36 months since the debate around the referendum really heated up, there has been some discussion in classes about the matter. Many of the young people were obviously not clear on what was being asked, and as the date got closer, the huge misunderstanding became even more pronounced. In focused classroom discussions, many young women responded

that there was no need for such a referendum.

Perhaps a hook on which to hang some of this is misunderstanding and the belief that women have arrived at full equity and equality (Douglas, 2010). The concept that women have achieved all that they need to and should focus their attention on looking seductive is in part some of the fallout from what has come to be seen as an extremely unsexy and lesbian, man-hating movement. The fact that women are now visible in the best schools and, in the Bahamas, are being educated at higher rates than men, may have something to do with perceptions that feminism is no longer necessary.

Women's education

In the 1960s, there were fewer educated women than men. The United Nations made a huge effort to encourage the education of girls so as to improve equity. Interestingly, in the first decade of the 21st century, more women than men in The Bahamas graduate high school, and more women than men graduate college. The tables have turned on the education conundrum, but this has translated into somewhat of a backlash of men arguing that women are replacing them.

Yet another irony, given the data collected, is that women in The Bahamas earn less than men do for the same work. They are treated differently with regard to employment opportunities and tend to suffer from discrimination. However, as there are more women visible in low-wage jobs, the perception is that more women than men are working. So, the fact that more women than ever are being educated or are choosing to educate themselves holds a great deal of sway in convincing people that women have attained equality and so no further work needs to be done to ensure that they are given access to legal equality. There are more women than men, according to public opinion, in influential positions in the country. There are

obviously more women in positions such as middle managers and permanent secretaries in government ministries than men. But women lose their benefits when they marry, whereas men do not. There is a functioning assumption that, following the Biblical assertion, according to the fundamentalist churches in the country, the man is the head of the household, and the socio-cultural understanding that men must lead, to this end, even when there are no men present in homes. Male authority in homes that are run by single mothers is also entrenched. So, even boys brought up in single-mother-headed households where the mother is educated are socially engineered to think that men run things. This dynamic has led to many of these women, notwithstanding their education, determining that women do not need to be equal to men, or, in fact, that women are not and should not be equal to men. Irrespective of the level of education of many women, there is a huge leaning towards biblical teachings as espoused in the Old Testament, which oftentimes ignores any shifts presented by the New Testament.

Government Bias

Governments are always meant to maintain neutrality in matters such as referenda. There should be a strict separation between party politics and the role of government to lead and to promote national development of the country and its people. When the government threw its weight behind the Yes campaign, it seemed to indicate a positive push for gender equality, but by the time this thrust happened, it was perhaps too late to sway the public's opinion in favour of what was seen as being something foreign to the country.

In accepting the challenge of governing the country, the Progressive Liberal Party should have perhaps understood that in this case politics needed to be left aside. Their role was to provide guidance and leadership, not to create an impression of bias in favour of one

side of a debate. By creating the appearance that Yes was their favoured side, they undermined the possibility for an unbiased, de-politicised vote on the issues.

By refusing to support the No campaign, the government created an image of an enemy underdog for whom they had no time. This ultimately worked in favour of the No campaign that was headed up by a number of powerful and influential men in the community and was vociferously supported, perhaps rather unwittingly, by one of the country's former leading justices who came out challenging the government's will to effect change because of its unwillingness to change simple legislation, which, she claimed, would have had the same effect as was being sought with the constitutional amendment.

Of course, lessons should have been learnt from the 2002 referendum that attempted to tackle this same issue and to give women "equality" to men. However, while that was only one of the questions on a long ballot of numerous desired changes, it still failed. Part of the reason for the failure then was that the Free National Movement government, at that time headed by Hubert Ingraham, had postulated that whoever won the referendum would win the election, and so the process of biasing the referendum was clear.

Further, this was made an issue by the Progressive Liberal Party's withdrawal of its backing for the referendum in the homestretch and the leader's claim that he could not support it. Again, the government should have made every effort to appear neutral.

Speaking to both young and old people on this matter made it clear that they believed government could not be trusted. They expressed their disinterest in voting in the referendum because they understood from government's actions in the 2013 Gambling Referendum that government would ignore their wishes. They were skeptical that the

political or electoral process could even function to change the way things were. There were many young women who understood that they were not equal, but felt that they did not need to be equal. There were other young women who thought that women's equality was a given, so there was no need to change anything. Many of them felt that women who desired equality were feminists, and so, bad. Feminism has very negative connotations in the country, especially among young women and certainly among some sectors of the young male population. Numerous women saw women's roles as being submissive to their husbands and to male authority. However, in class groups that are predominantly female, this seemed paradoxical. What did become obvious, though, was the need to unpack all the charged language and attempt to communicate without an agenda. Any progress made towards a fuller understanding or appreciation of the inequalities Bahamians lived with was quickly lost between classes, when they would go back into their communities.

There were a few who literally believed that women had to submit to men and that men were or are superior to women. This completely blinded them to any other approach, any functions of society that did not allow women easy access, such as being able to open a bank account without their husbands' consent, if they were married; all of these were seen as a part of the natural order of things. A great deal of this was espoused through the language of the church or that of their pastors.

Structural, systemic & systematic misogyny

In Marion Bethel's 2012 documentary on the women's suffrage movement in The Bahamas, one can see the deeply held belief that men ruled the roost. Many of the persons who spoke pointed out that their fathers were

the heads of their households. Perhaps this indicates a deep paternalism that descends from slavery and colonialism, but it cannot be deconstructed without greater attention being paid to all the socio-historical and socio-cultural as well as socio-economic structures in place. The Bahamas may have come through independence, but the systematic and systemic structures have not changed: the systems that colonialism implemented remain firmly entrenched and this has far-reaching implications for gendered relations as well as racial, ethnic and socio-economic relations.

Again, the system often espouses that gender-based violence is less hostile than male-on-male violence and that domestic violence is based on love. Often, when a man loves a woman, he must use force to demonstrate his love, and this pervades the music and popular cultural manifestations of many decades. Misogynistic lyrics pepper many Bahamian songs. Allusions to the belief that women should not be trusted are pervasive in music and lore. Further, women are often the first to criticize another woman when her husband or partner beats her. The understanding is, she looked for it. This would go a long way in explaining the response when Minister for Social Development under the Free National Movement, Loretta Butler Turner announced that a marital rape bill would be tabled in the House of Assembly. The church, as became evident, did not support the bill. The legal profession was split. Many people claimed that women could not be trusted with such a "weapon" as Bahamian women are spiteful. There is an obvious level of paternalist, misogynistic thinking inherent in this. But most telling was the lack of support the bill garnered from women. Pastors convinced women to obey the teachings of the good book. The resonance with the current status quo is not surprising.

My pastor says, my uncle says, my minister says, and this was usually followed by "vote

no”. Sometimes people would say that it was because it would herald the start of gay marriage, or what Ian Strachan calls the “sissy apocalypse” (personal conversation, May 2016).

The biblical lesson that the man is the head of the woman was usually expressed at this point as well as the sentiment that women were to obey their husbands. Some sectors of the church have expressed resistance to any teaching that conflicts with this belief in subjectivity. Many churches that are heavily represented on the Christian Council were extremely vocal, especially when it came to the belief that the entire debate was only about allowing same-sex marriage in the country. Listening to many religious leaders showed that the real facts of the vote were eclipsed by the perceived danger of allowing “sissies” the right to get married and so forcing their lifestyle down Christians’ throats. There was little opportunity to reason with congregations whose pastors perceived this as a danger and who used the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra as justification for their attitude while ignoring all the other sinful behaviours being demonstrated by the leaders in their communities. Ultimately, while women are the weaker vessel, the referendum was reduced to the right of gays to get married. Given the problematic relationship between homosexuality and Christianity, the inability to move beyond this sticking point is clear and undeniable. It is understandable that fear and anger can be aroused when a referendum that aims to end legal discrimination based on sex, could be reduced to gay marriage and thereby end any possibility for discussion.

Society is built on massive inequalities and these are often used to empower those who feel or are perceived as being disempowered. So, while it is obvious that there are clear inequalities, persons become dogmatically tied to positions of relative power or privilege that they fear, and very palpably, will be

eroded by giving other people more rights.

It seems helpful here to demonstrate how this thinking feeds into Douglas’s theory of enlightened feminism when she asserts:

While enlightened sexism seems to support women’s equality, it is dedicated to the undoing of feminism. In fact, because this equality might lead to ‘sameness’—way too scary—girls and women need to be reminded that they are still fundamentally female, and so must be emphatically feminine (2010, p. 10).

So, the Biblical and Christian normalising of women’s inferiority to men is undergirded by a focus on the differences between women and men and not on the similarities. As Dame Joan Sawyer offers: “I don’t want to be equal to a man. I want to be me; I am complementary to a man. I don’t want to change what God has [done]” (Davis, 2016, para. 16).

Is this the same enlightened sexism Douglas deconstructs? Perhaps it is, perhaps it is not, but it was used to create a great deal of doubt in the community, especially with the help of the media and many of the pastors who supported the No campaign.

Dame Joan also avers: “I don’t have time to waste, and to me this referendum is a waste of time” (Davis, 2016, para 17). It became increasingly challenging to separate the pros from the cons in this debate. Dame Joan’s words were taken to mean that women were inherently unequal to men and this was used to support the No campaign, as she argued she would vote no because “... what I have seen in the debate leading up to this is a bunch of hot air and emotionalism and no thinking things through” (Davis, 2016, para, 19). Her position reinforces the reality that many persons were unable to think things through because of the brainwashing that went on.

Limited education fails the democracy

Perhaps one of the most damning aspects of the debate and the failure of the referendum is the lack of support for it offered by women. The participatory democracy model needs education, and it is becoming somewhat clearer that even an educated or semi-literate group is easily swayed by fear. Many people prefer not to read for themselves but to swallow what they have been told. They feel confident in accepting and passing on second-hand information, as their pastors are their sources. Pastors, most of whom are men, hold the majority of persons in the palm of their hands, because people feel safe in that position. It is further illuminating that many of the same women who stated that they were voting No, shared that they could not support a female bishop or elder in the church. They could see women being pastors, but preferred to go to male pastors, and as much as they believed women could be good pastors, they could not support a woman leader.

A further irony is that these are all women who, as the old saying goes, wear the pants in their own homes, be they in female-headed households or in marital relationships, because while they believed that men ruled the home, they did not allow men to rule them. They were to submit but they were not submissive. Again, some of the revelatory studies show that there is often more violence in these kinds of situations. There is also economic reliance on the female to make things work in the home; even though the male works, he is expected to go out drinking and carousing.

A democracy needs educated citizens to be able to function adequately. It cannot continue to function in the best interest of the public without their engagement because this is when special-interest groups are able to co-opt the movement towards rights and public empowerment to serve their own purposes. Perhaps this also indicates a problem with

representational democracy and a need for deeper participation.

This entire process has revealed a highly fractured and untrusting society that is systemically misogynistic. It has also revealed a society that has absolutely no faith in government and does not trust its politicians although it worships them. In speaking and listening to other comments, it becomes clearer that persons do not trust the system as they see that they are not treated equally, but they do not wish to lose their superiority or their position of relative privilege for a system they know does not affect them or that they do not clearly understand because the language used was far too opaque and the explanations provided were often more obfuscating of the facts especially given the smear campaign mounted by some sectors.

Most people saw no relation to their lives and so could not identify with why this would matter to them. They have few if any interactions with people who would be in these situations and so cannot identify with them. Again, many of the persons who would feel the need for citizenship for a foreign spouse or children born abroad to foreign fathers married to Bahamian women, are not of their social milieu. Moreover, many of the people speaking on behalf of equality were not persons they could identify with and so a huge level of class and elite distrust arose. To be sure, there is a system of oppression that is fully operational and many have been convinced that it does not affect them; others realise that they are disenfranchised but because they are able to survive and they so utterly distrust the government and the system, they refuse to be reasoned with. The tangible messages of pastors and ministers have a more profound impact than the reasoned arguments of the professional or the political leader, especially the political leader.

Paul (2009) focuses on structural violence in Australia and Douglas (2010) discusses enlightened sexism; both of these premises seem to work very well here. But a great deal of research needs to be done into the impact of structural violence on the psyche of Bahamian women who would opt to remain as they are because they do not feel the barbs of discrimination, as many women said. Many working-class women supported neither the debate nor the idea of equality for women.

The graphs show that wherever the Progressive Liberal Party had the strongest hold, the vote went totally against equality. As with the marital rape debate, many women saw no need for the law to protect them once they had become their husband's. Many of these women understood that they were the property of their husbands and this was as it should be, according to their pastors and ministers.

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