

Speciesism & Sexism: What's the Connection?

The drug Premarin is made from the urine of pregnant horses. Mares are cruelly confined and subjected to invasive procedures throughout their pregnancy only to have their colts taken away from them after birth. This perversion of the reproductive cycles of female horses produces a harmful drug that is marketed to women by convincing them that their own natural reproductive cycles are abnormal signs of sickness. Marketed as a cure for menopause, Premarin hurts both female horses and female humans in order to provide profits for a pharmaceutical corporation.

This intersection of the oppression of women and the oppression of animals is not unique. Women and animals, along with land and children, have historically been seen as the property of male heads of households. Patriarchy (male control of political and family life) and pastoralism (animal herding as a way of life) appeared on the historical stage together and cannot be separated, because they are justified and perpetuated by the same ideologies and practices.

Both women and animals have historically been considered less intelligent and closer to nature than men. Tactics like objectification, ridicule, and control of reproduction have been and continue to be used to control and exploit both women and animals.

Here are a few of the current symptoms of the sick intersection of speciesism and sexism:

Milk

Milk may be defined as the exploitation of the reproductive capacities of the cow in order to produce profits for the dairy industry. Cows are forcibly and repeatedly impregnated so that their bodies will produce the milk intended to sustain their calves. People then steal both the milk and the calves. The cows suffer painful physical ailments, such as mastitis, as well as the emotional distress of having their children and their own freedom torn away from them. Meanwhile, milk products are responsible for an unhealthy acceleration in the onset of menses in girls and are also correlated with breast cancer in women. Thus the mammary glands of cows are exploited in order to produce a product that harms the mammary glands of women.

Rape

One out of every three women is sexually assaulted in her lifetime — one in four before the age of 18. Experts agree that rape is about power, not sex. Rape puts into action the idea that women and children are objects that can be used for pleasure without regard for their own wishes or subjective experiences. The same attitude underlies a host of abusive practices toward animals, ranging from circuses to factory farming. Animals are raped too, sometimes for the pleasure of the male human rapist but more often to control their reproduction so that corporations can have the pleasure of profits.

Cockfighting

Sex role stereotypes hurt both human and non-human animals. In cockfighting, the natural behavior of roosters (who will fight to the death to protect the flock from predators) is perverted in order to force them to act out human ideas about masculinity. The birds are traumatized and then deliberately placed in harm's way so that their handlers can feel like big men. They die in stylized spectacles of masculinity that have nothing to do with natural bird behavior and everything to do with human ideas about gender. Meanwhile, human boys are also traumatized in order to make them conform to cultural ideas of masculinity. Those who do not may find themselves "gay bashed" to death.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is one way that men maintain control of the women, children, and animals in their households. The World Health Organization has identified domestic violence against women as a global public health emergency of the highest order. Here in the United States, partner violence is the number one reason women visit the emergency room and at least two out of every ten pregnant women are beaten by their male partners. Very often, domestic violence includes abuse of companion animals as a way to frighten, traumatize, or control women. Many women remain in dangerous households because battered women's shelters do not accept animals and they are afraid of what will happen to their animal companions if they leave them alone with the abuser. No one knows how many companion animals have been killed by domestic abusers or how many women are dead because they stayed to protect a companion animal.

Eggs

Can any of us imagine the life of battery hens — birds! — crowded into cages without enough room to spread their wings or lie down comfortably... unable to nest or spend time with roosters or lay their eggs in privacy... the tips of their beaks burned off so that they don't peck themselves or each other to death out of frustration and misery? And why? So that corporations can profit from the fruits of their reproductive systems: their precious eggs. Control of reproduction is one of the foundations of both speciesism and sexism. Indeed, just as the hens are oppressed specifically so that their reproductive organs can be exploited, many believe that the original point of patriarchy was to control the reproductive systems of women.

Sex Tourism

Nobody likes to talk about it, but it's true. Right now, in many impoverished countries and even here in the United States, women and children are literally enslaved by the sex industry. The customers — the men who knowingly impose sex on girls, boys, and women who are not free to say no — men who sometimes travel to other cities or foreign countries solely in order to be able to do so — are almost exclusively from the United States and other wealthy countries. Locked up and raped daily, these women and children suffer unspeakable physical and emotional trauma. Like the hens in egg factories, many are murdered when their bodies have become so exhausted by the abuse that it is no longer profitable to maintain them.

One of the most basic tenets of the animal liberation movement is that there is no moral difference between human and non-human animals. If something ought not be done to humans, then it ought not be done to animals. And vice-versa. If we are serious about animal liberation, then we must work for the liberation of all animals, human and non-human. If we are serious about feminism, then we must shun speciesism just as we shun sexism. No one is free while others are oppressed. And, if we work together, understanding how seemingly different struggles are related to one another, then someday we will all be free.

For more information and ideas about the connections between speciesism and sexism, visit:

www.farinc.org
www.bravebirds.org/sexism.html
www.geocities.com/bostonecofem
www.gsara.uarc.com

read:

The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory by Carol J. Adams (ISBN 0-8264-1184-3)
Reworking the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism edited by Diamond and Orenstein (ISBN 0-87156-623-0)
Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations edited by Adams & Donovan (Duke University Press)