

Women and Internalized Misogyny©

by Rita Andrews

Although the subject of misogyny isn't often discussed--either in mixed company or in all-female groups--the impact of misogyny is felt in every society and organization throughout the world. When misogyny is discussed here in the U.S., the focus is often on our country's patriarchal legacy.

In the women's groups, for example, we talk about how men have historically been accorded power, privilege and access, while women have not. As a facilitator who speaks of misogyny often, I have cautioned participants that, while I believe the power differential between men and women is an excellent place to start, I am particularly concerned with women's own internalized misogyny.

As women, we have to become more aware of what we do to ourselves and other women. If we ignore it, this phenomenon will continue to influence every aspect of our lives. To shift the status quo and address issues of internalized misogyny, we must first be able to see it.

Here are ways that this dynamic shows up:

QUESTIONING, DOUBTING AND NEGATING ONESELF

Women often begin their statements with the following caveat: "I'm not sure of this..." or "This is probably not true..." rather than making clear, direct statements. This is a very public way of questioning, doubting and negating oneself.

Often in all female groups and mixed groups, participants will display this dynamic, completely unconscious that they're doing it. Highlighting and raising awareness of this behavior will help it to shift.

It seems women are also willing to negate their contributions to organizational/team effectiveness. When complimented about a work contribution, some women will still reply, "Oh, it was nothing," rather than accepting the compliment, saying, "Thank you. Yes, I did a great deal of work on that project."

FINDING ONESELF UNACCEPTABLE

Our society constantly tells women they are physically unacceptable because they don't measure up to advertisers' images of beauty. This is particularly true for women of color, older women and women who are considered overweight. It's also important to note that the "idealized/advertised woman is air-brushed and unreal.

In addition to a narrow beauty standard, there are other ways women learn that who they are is unacceptable. In general, in our society, masculine qualities are valued and feminine qualities

are consistently devalued. Women in organizations learn quickly that to be accepted, they must be “male identified”—in short, the better way is to “do it like a man.”

Recent Catalyst research finds, “To facilitate their advancement, the majority of women develop a style with which male managers are comfortable.”

But even that isn’t acceptable. When women choose to “do it like a man,” they are criticized. Women talk about being coached in their organizations to avoid being too aggressive, too assertive, or too demanding. For men in organizations, these characteristics would be entirely appropriate and often encouraged.

HATING, MISTRUSTING OTHER WOMEN

How often have you said, or heard other women say, “I hate working for women. They are so difficult!” This is internalized misogyny. In her work on *Jealousy, Envy & Rivalry in Girls*, Anne Litwin shows where this mistrust comes from and how it results in horizontal violence—women hurting each other.

One of the biggest questions among women at the start of an all female group is, “How can I trust these women?” Often, this lack of trust comes from women’s experiences with being socialized not to trust women—a blatant misogynistic message—and from experiencing each other’s internalized misogyny.

UNDERMINING AND NOT SUPPORTING WOMEN

What is missing for many women in organizations is mentorship and support. In the Catalyst study referenced above, 46% of women—compared to only 13% of men—said a barrier to advancement for them was the lack of role models.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

A collaborative experience in a women’s group gives women a sense of being supported by other women, which is often something they haven’t experienced before. If you want to be a better supporter of women, and perhaps a role model, as well, here are six keys to addressing internalized misogyny:

- 1) Make a decision to address misogyny in yourself and others.
- 2) Begin to open your eyes and see the misogyny around you.
- 3) Raise awareness with information and statistics, such as from the Catalyst survey.
- 4) Help women to know when they are being misogynistic; call them on statements about women that are generalizations and stereotypes, such as, “Women are so _____ (fill in the blank) bitchy, undependable, emotional, catty, etc.”
- 5) Ask other women to call you on your own internalized misogyny, such as when you make similar statements, or when you make self-negating statements, such as, “I may be mistaken, but....”

6) Be compassionate—not judgmental—in your observations of your own or another’s unconscious misogyny; otherwise, it’s just more of the same.

REFERENCES:

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Litwin, Anne. Jealousy, Envy and Rivalry in Girls. Unpublished paper 2003.

About The Author:

Rita Andrews has been an organization consultant for over thirty years. In addition she has devoted the past 20 years of her work life to supporting women to find their power and step into their leadership. Her focus has been on three areas of interest-(1) women's individual development, (2) the interpersonal dynamics between women and among women and (3) systemic and political issues that face communities of women. According to Rita, "oppression and misogyny are the threads that constitute a dynamic interplay between and at each of these levels of system."