

# Making the Connections: Masculinity, Power, and Inequity

Where the “Man Box” represents the expectations placed on men, using a framework of “oppression” helps to understand how manhood expectations contribute to from sexual assault to broader gender inequities.

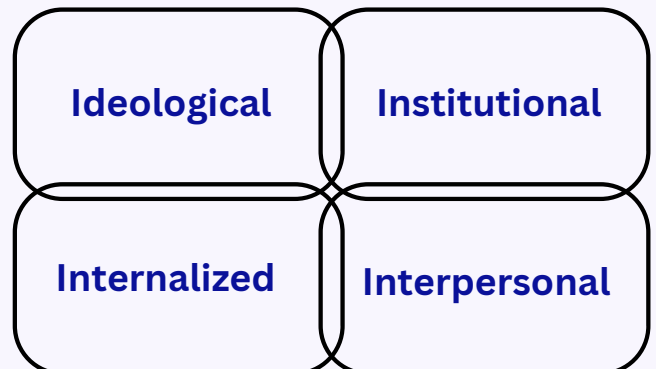
**While “oppression” is a buzzword and may be intimidating, it is ‘just’ a way of describing power: Who has it? How do we use it? And why?**

The concept of “oppression” helps us understand the roots of violence and how to build a safer, more equitable world.

**Oppression refers to:** Organized patterns of culture, society, and law that mistreat and exploit one category of people (oppressed) in order to bestow power, benefits, and resources to another (privileged group) ([National Museum of African American History & Culture](#)).

**Gender Oppression (Sexism) refers to:** Patterns of culture, society, and laws that mistreat and exploit women, non-binary, and transgender people in order to bestow power, benefits, resources to men and cisgender people.

**There are four interconnected levels of oppression represented by four “I’s”:**





Level of Oppression	Examples	Positive Change Examples
<p><b>Ideological</b></p> <p>The ideas that underpin mistreatment: One group is more intelligent, deserving, and superior; the other is lazy, weak, and inferior. Ideas become “natural” and unquestioned.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idea that women’s “natural” role is to raise children and fulfill domestic responsibilities.</li> <li>• Idea that men’s “natural” role is to provide, make decisions, and control finances.</li> <li>• Idea that women cannot lead or hold public office because they are “irrational” or “too emotional.”</li> <li>• Idea that sexual violence by men is inevitable due to male biology (e.g., “boys will be boys”).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Normalize men’s more substantial roles in raising children and domestic responsibilities.</li> <li>• Shift towards valuing feminine leadership qualities as strengths (e.g., emotional awareness).</li> <li>• Shift towards the idea that violence and gender norms are socially constructed. All men can act responsibly.</li> </ul>



<p><b>Interpersonal</b></p> <p>The idea that one group is better than and has the right to control another group, which gets structured into institutions, gives permission and teaches members of the dominant group to mistreat the oppressed group through language and actions.</p> <p><i>*Note: Oppressive language can be unintentional/unconscious.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexist language, harassment, or insults. 81% of women experience sexual assault and/or harassment, compared to 43% of men [<a href="#">Equimundo</a>].</li> <li>• Telling victims of sexual assault that they “deserved it” or “asked for it” due to their behavior or clothing.</li> <li>• A hiring manager’s prejudice (or unconscious bias) against a pregnant employee or parent.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Men speak out against instances of sexual harassment (e.g., cat calling) or degrading language.</li> <li>• Educational efforts that promote practices that support survivors of sexual and domestic violence.</li> <li>• Employees and managers always advocating against bias and for equitable policies in hiring decisions.</li> </ul>
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<p><b>Institutional</b></p> <p>Ideas of superiority/inferiority become embedded in society’s institutions such as laws, education, housing, hiring, media, and political power. By reinforcing existing disparities in power, these institutional practices further justify the ideas that these disparities are “natural.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the U.S., on average, women earn 18% less than men [Pew].</li> <li>• In U.S. congress, there are 3 male representatives for every 1 woman [Brookings]</li> <li>• Women are disproportionately responsible for household labor [Equimundo].</li> <li>• Most abortions are banned in 14 states despite a 61% of Americans belief that most/all abortion should be legal [Pew].</li> <li>• Rape was legal in marriages until 1976 in the U.S.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies hold employers accountable to equitable pay.</li> <li>• More women hold public office. Institutional efforts to support female candidates.</li> <li>• Ensure affordable access to all forms of healthcare and childcare, including reproductive healthcare.</li> </ul>



<p><b>Internalized</b></p> <p>People who experience oppression from individuals and institutions can come to believe harmful ideas about themselves. Those who benefit from oppression come to believe these false ideas about the oppressed group and superiority/correctness of themselves.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Studies</u> have shown that sexist stereotypes affect academic performance.</li> <li>• Disordered eating caused by comparisons with harmful beauty standards.</li> <li>• Self-policing from women, for example saying “I’m being crazy.”</li> <li>• Men (from a dominant position) or women (from an oppressed position) not believing, or denying, that oppression exists.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change in public messaging and images over time to prevent harmful ideas around body image from being internalized.</li> <li>• Women don’t shame each other for what they wear or their sexual choices.</li> <li>• Men learn how they are harmed by oppression, heal from trauma, and believe in equity.</li> </ul>
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How power is used can either maintain oppression or enable freedom.

To create gender equity and communities safe from sexual violence, we need men to leverage their roles and power to create individual, interpersonal, institutional, and ideological change.

## Our Engaging Men efforts should strive to:

- 1 Address the ideological roots of oppression by challenging rigid gender roles and promoting the “counter-pillars” of the man box.
- 2 Educate on the institutional nature of gender-based violence and promote systems-level advocacy for gender equity.
- 3 Promote attitudinal and behavioral change on the interpersonal level towards healthy leadership and positive bystander intervention.
- 4 Meet men where they have internalized harmful gender attitudes through self-reflection and healing-based approaches.

## References

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