



Miss America: Beauty, Scholarships, and Sexism

Sexism towards women as a social phenomenon has been widely discussed by scholars, politicians, and anthropologists for the past several decades. Sexism is a type of discrimination that can be defined as “individuals’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and organizational, institutional, and cultural practices that either reflect negative evaluations of individuals based on their gender or support unequal status of women and men” (Barreto and Ellemers 289). Women are much more susceptible to the impact of sexism due to the historically persistent male dominance in all spheres of life. Aside from the most barbaric instances of discrimination, such as physical violence against women, inequality also exists in economic opportunities. For instance, many countries still have a list of professions women are not allowed to have access to, and female workers often make less money than their male colleagues even if they work for the same number of hours (Plickert and Sterling 2). What is more, as women are expected to juggle career endeavors with motherhood, many young females find it challenging to be financially independent while taking care of the family.

Apart from physical danger and financial disadvantages, women may have a wide range of mental issues related to the manifestations of sexism. In particular, a recent study on the topic of gender discrimination reports that women’s daily encounters with situations of inequality “are significantly associated with worse self-reported mental health” (Harnois and Bastos). The instances of harassment, glass ceiling, and other forms of mistreatment may lead to such problems as depression, anxiety, or emotional distress in women. Besides, the biased attitude, combined with the unrealistic expectations imposed on female appearance as well as behavior, may lead to the lack of confidence and low self-esteem in women of all ages, social positions, or cultural backgrounds.

John Oliver perfectly illustrates how sexism works in the satirical overview of the Miss America Pageant. The host ridicules the idea that women’s beauty is still highly objectified and sexualized by the male-dominated society. The contestants could be judged by such criterion as the “construction of the head” or the “torso,” which clearly shows that female looks are subject to scrutiny for the entertainment of the masses (“Miss America”). Remarkably, it was emphasized that the jury assesses women’s intelligence as well. For example, they expect the girls to answer complex questions on international politics and global crises, which seems to be a tokenistic measure to show that Miss America looks past the pretty faces. However, the format of the contest, with its bikini runway walks and dance numbers, manifests the opposite outlook on women. Finally, Miss America contest statement that they primarily exist to provide scholarships to women seems absurd due to the sexist requirements that have virtually nothing to do with intellectual abilities: not being or having been married or pregnant and appearing conventionally attractive. Therefore, it becomes apparent that the famous and prestigious pageant supports discriminatory attitudes and practices against women.

Oliver’s video, as well as my personal experience, proves that sexism towards women is still persistent in our society, despite the claims that gender inequality is long gone. Women continue facing biased judgments and encounter difficulties due to their historically inferior position to men. I believe that in order to tackle the issue, it important to raise awareness of the subtler forms of sexism, which include Miss America-type pageants, the targeted character of the beauty industry products, preservation of the rigid gender roles confining women to the household environment, etc. Besides, the perpetuate sexism women exercise towards other women due to “the influence of norms that internalized during formative years” also needs to be addressed

through education and sociocultural changes (Charles et al. 46). As it could be seen from Miss America pageant example, discrimination based on gender is irrational, toxic, and has an adverse impact on women's opportunities for self-actualization in various spheres of life.

Undoubtedly, gender roles are forming since childhood. Therefore, proper upbringing based on the principle of equality can lead to the development of children's unbiased outlook. This assumption is supported by the 2018 paper "Challenging Gender Stereotypes in the Early Years: The Power of Parents" on parenting in relation to gender stereotypes. In particular, it is stated that "children become aware of gender from an early age as they observe, learn, test and practice," which makes it crucial for both parents to convey healthy egalitarian views and demonstrate to the child that gender cannot be the basis of judgmental differentiation between people ("Challenging Gender Stereotypes" 10). For instance, mother and father should avoid rigid division of household chores based on gender roles (e.g., cooking is a woman's responsibility, while men do plumbing work). Biased behavioral prescriptions such as "discouraging a girl from raising her voice by calling her 'bossy,' while encouraging much noisier, even rowdy activities among boys" should not be present in the parents' communication with children either ("Challenging Gender Stereotypes" 12). Additionally, it is essential to not judge young girls solely for their appearance and conformity to societal expectations regarding their bodily image. Boys, in turn, should not be taught to hide their emotions in order to embody the archetype of the so-called "real man."

Sexism towards women is still a burning issue despite the claims to prioritize the principle of equality. The existence of beauty pageants such as Miss America is just one of the many manifestations of this phenomenon. It is necessary to raise people's awareness of the adverse influence of gender-based discrimination on women as well as on society and culture in general. Finding new egalitarian approaches to children's upbringing might be a particularly fruitful strategy because people internalize bias, roles, and stereotypes related to gender differences early in life.