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Unquestioned and Ascripted

MALE PRIVILEGE IS ALIVE
AND WELL DESPITE OUR
BEST INTENTIONS.

Vincent E. Gil, PhD

I had volunteered to accompany a female member of my family to the cardiologist's office for a series of tests and follow-ups which I knew could initiate a risky diagnosis. Many medical practices now allow relatives in the exam room, knowing how much a known other in the room can destress. So yes, the atmosphere was tense.

In walked a competent female NP to take the history and do the initial workup. Cordial and affable to the point of bubbly, I got the immediate impression she could calm the nerves of my relative in short order.

I sat in the corner chair of the exam room on purpose, to be out of the way and to allow the conversation to occur with my relative, the patient. But it didn't take long for this NP to start to turn her eyes and her voice toward me. Sure, she addressed the patient, and the patient in turn conversed and reported in like manner to the NP. But what became overwhelmingly clear was that her attention was directed *toward me*, the male in the room.

The NP looked toward me more than she did the patient. She looked at me even more when she was discussing what could be the course of treatment options, *as if I were the patient*. No, the patient didn't vanish, but it was obvious by the time the visit ended that my presence in that room took precedence.

Mind you, I'm not good looking (any more); I was masked; and I hadn't said two words—*okay*, maybe nodded twice. I had even steered my eyes *away* from the NP and *on to my relative* each time the NP spoke, an effort to help this NP *focus on the patient*, not me! But I had become *male ascripted* to be of focal attention.

This situation has happened to me in other occasions, so often that I concluded once again we haven't changed male stereotypy enough at all, despite over a half-century of "trying."

By osmosis, special notice and statuses are still embodied into males in our society. I'm certain this female NP wasn't aware of how much unconscious bias was directing her eyes and attention. And I'm also sure the privilege I was accorded—to receive her eyes and attention, her words re-directed—were not an effort to disregard those of her own sex. However, those inherent benefits that men gain "just because they're men" puts women like my family member at an innate disadvantage.

The term "male privilege" may now raise eyebrows for a different reason than it did during the 1970's, when feminist scholarship was underscoring those special statuses granted

males in patriarchal societies.¹ After all, we seem to have filled libraries with studies of how, in societies defined by male supremacy (i.e., in political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, economic control) men gain advantages that are less available to women.² Understanding such, women generated a revolution; and men,—well *some* men—determined their path to glory must change if there was to be any semblance of sexual equality.

We've made some progress since the 1970's, so to say male privilege is still alive and seemingly well today appears to deny progress, and reek of postmodern cynicism. Socially, we've generated some alterity, sure enough; but apparently not enough to generate the kind of equality that doesn't get toppled over by the mere presence of men in a space. When an unconscious bias favoring males continues to be perpetuated, sits alive still in the subconscious of both men *and women*, we continue to have double trouble. This living bias feeds and maintains inequalities.

Let's face it, we men continue to have, and hold, an upper hand. According to sociolinguist Deborah Tannen, we continue to socialize our children in ways that favor the male. And we inscribe that difference with language, so much so that lexically, men and women *still* don't get to talk the same language.³ According to Tannen, men will still: be the first to talk in a group; be the first to ask a question, maybe prep the question with a comment and then ask the question; complain they don't know why women talk so much (when it's statistically the opposite); and most important, get to hold the attention of others more than women.⁴ She popularized use of the term '*male register*' (a voice term used to denote the range of male vocalizations) to suggest men's voices considerably draw more attention than a woman's. That is, the more "manly" the voice, the more attention it gets in cultures that prize their masculinity over femininity.

That may all be true. **But I wasn't speaking in that exam room.** So, what else is playing out here *aside from voice* that allows this ascription to men? Let's be truthful.

Privilege and ascriptions aren't shared equally by all males. However, those that most closely match an ideal masculine norm seem to benefit most from privilege and ascription.⁵ That ideal in Western society has been described as "white, heterosexual, stoic, wealthy, strong, tough, competitive, autonomous."⁶ But I would propose that *even without these descriptors*, a male, *by being male*, commands more attention—still today—than a woman with many of the same descriptors suiting her femininity. Men continue to be ascribed this "special status" irrespective of whether they are aware of it or not, and irrespective of their own individual merits, qualities, or achievements.

These are unearned advantages that privilege the male in a room.⁷

¹ Shaw, Susan, and Janet Lee. *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*. McGraw-Hill, 6th Edition, 2015.

² Among the many, see: Kimmel, M., A. Ferber, L. Abby, (eds.) *Privilege: A Reader*. Westview Press, 2003; K. Singh, "Man's World, Legally." *Frontline*, 29(15); M.S. Kimmel, "Men's Responses to Feminism at the Turn of the Century." *Gender and Society* 1(3), 1987:261–283; and B.M. Coston and M. Kimmel, "Seeing Privilege Where it Isn't: Marginalized Masculinities and the Intersectionality of Privilege." *Journal of Social Issues* 68(1), 2012:97-

³ Tannen, Deborah. *He Said, She Said*. William Morrow, 2001.

⁴ Tannen, *He Said, She Said*, 94.

⁵ Phillips, D., and J. Phillips, "Privilege, Male". In J. O'Brien (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, V.2 (2009), 683–685.

⁶ Coston, M. and M. Kimmel, "Seeing Privilege Where it Isn't: Marginalized Masculinities and the Intersectionality of Privilege." *Journal of Social Issues*, 68(1) 2012:97–111.

⁷ Phillips and Phillips, op.cit., 684.

Not to get heady here, but it is clear we haven't changed *systemically* enough to alter power structures generate the intergenerational change we aspired by the close of the 20th Century. We now talk of *intersectionality* among factors which perpetuate inequalities; we understand these factors better; yet we've done little to alter the foundations which continue them.

For instance, we remain adherent to *gender stereotypy* in rearing our children. And I mean by this maintaining themes of traditional masculinity and traditional femininity in place—through toy selection, lexical descriptors, permissions we grant boys but deny to girls; and especially, the affectations we give girls and not boys. Boys are still expected to be tough, be able to care for themselves, not cry readily (wimps if they do!), etc. To “get all that,” we use that *male register*, tell them to toughen up, encourage them when they win but question why they lost.⁸ Girls still get the “girly thing”—the *female register* (even if you are a father, you soften voice when you talk to your daughter, since you don't want her to think you are angry).

Is it a wonder, then, that many boys still grow into men thinking that they are smarter, stronger, better at winning than women? Is it a wonder, then, that many men still commodify women, make sexist jokes, and truly believe that when women are raped, these *wanted* that kind of sex? Cultural traits are learned within social systems. Men aren't inborn with biological traits that make them superior or magnetic. They also aren't born with propensities to harm women.⁹ But they do learn the habits of past generations of men, seemingly unfiltered; today, still not altered enough and reinforced through the language we use to socialize men.

The title of this piece begins with “unquestioned.” That purposeful word takes us to yet another level of male privilege: Men being taken more seriously than women, being given more credibility, and thus authority. Actually, numerous investigations have coined this occurrence the “*authority gap*,” to indicate how much more seriously we take men than women, thus how much less we question what they say.

We tend to assume that a man “knows what he's talking about”—much more than a woman does, and until he proves otherwise. For women, it's often the opposite: Women's knowledge is underestimated, and consequently questioned more, talked over more.¹⁰ In fact Sieghart, who

⁸ In a recent study by the American Survey Center, 37% of young men today say they were denigrated for not conforming to masculine ideals—for not acting like a man or being masculine enough. Others stated they were criticized for expressing emotions or not being assertive. All this compares to only 6% of senior men who responded to denigrations, and who apparently didn't need that same amount of pressure to conform to male norms in their day. They just did. (See Cox, D.A. and D. Popky, *2022 American Perspectives Survey*, “Politics, Sex, and Sexuality: The Growing Gender Divide in American Life.” April 27, 2022.)

⁹ There's a lot written on testosterone, the male hormone, that would make it seem it is the culprit behind most male aggression and in particular, aggression against women. It is well established in the biomedical literature that testosterone plays a role in arousal of behaviors such as anger, verbal aggression, competition, dominance behaviors, aside from building muscle mass and male body form. However, the biomedical literature is also clear on the fact that aggressive tendencies influenced by testosterone are mediated by familial and social inhibitions. Testosterone alone does not cause violence. In other words, there are many other variables that contribute to violent behaviors in men. In fact, increasing levels of testosterone does not cause the male to become more violent: Current research suggests there is a weaker interconnection between the two that was formerly suggested (see Mims, C. *Strange but True: Testosterone Alone Does Not Cause Violence.* Scientific American, July 5, 2007.)

¹⁰ King, Michelle Penelope. “*The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men.*” ForbesWomen, October 26, 2021.

wrote *The Authority Gap* (2020), suggests women have to prove their competence more and more frequently than men, thus can feel uncomfortable when questioned. This discomfort is often interpreted by men as women being unsure, particularly if there is additional information or correction in their following statements.¹¹ Moreover, when women display stereotypically masculine traits in order to be taken seriously—like being confident or assertive, or taking charge of a situation—it makes men uncomfortable because women are defying gender-typical behaviors for their sex. Men use negative labels on such women: “*they’re abrasive,*” “*aggressive,*” “*overbearing,*” or commonly use the “*B—*” word to describe them overall.¹²

All of this still happens in the first quarter of the 21st Century. It begs the question of why we haven’t *really* socialized the genders differently, enough to leach out the toxins that perpetuate this male privilege and ascription by default, if not design. Gender norms and expectations from birth forward continue to create beliefs about each gender and its roles that perpetuate the stereotypy I’ve alluded to.

The question, really, is why we haven’t changed this enough, particularly today, when young men themselves (ages 21-34 in the *American Perspectives Survey of 2022*) continue to report being harshly socialized into stereotypic masculinities.

There’s an inherent defensiveness, me thinks, that also comes into play here—one that men *may*, or *may not* be cognitively aware of, but which nevertheless biases their responses to any challenge. In her work, Tannen introduces the notion of “*one up, one down*” in male socialization, where boys’ play to forward their position and gain status rather than fomenting deep relationships. Boys’ play is hierarchical in nature (like “*may the best boy win*”), which reinforces a quest for status. Their use of conversation is to attain a position that is not to be questioned, but rather respected: The boy who talks the most, speaks longest and loudest attains a high status position.¹³

Tannen’s old, “*one up, one down*” hierarchy in male socialization continues to get transferred into adult male acts, and from there, to social interactions which enable the power of their hierarchical superiority.¹⁴ A lot else follows from this that enables sexual inequalities, little of which we have altered when socializing men in this new century.

For those that say, “*Wait, Vince! Men have changed, and are now constantly changing their masculinity into masculinities which are more androgynous than sex typed,*” I say: Surely, but not enough; and not enough to counter intersectionalities which keep men in power: the structural stuff of workplace, of roles, of values toward ambition, competition, money-making, aside from all those ascriptions we continue to give away to men...

Which, for those of Christian faith reading this and waiting for application, gets me to ask “*How’s the Church doing?*” in changing stereotypy and gender bias.

¹¹ Sieghart, Mary Anne. *The Authority Gap*. Transworld/Doubleday, 2021.

¹² King. P. “The Authority Gap”, 2021:2.

¹³ Tannen, Deborah. *Gender and Discourse*. Oxford, 1996.

¹⁴ Tannen, Deborah. “The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why.” Harvard Business Review. Reprint 95510, 1995.

Tannen suggests, “Men tend to be sensitive to the power dynamics of interaction, speaking in ways that position themselves as one up and resisting being put in a one-down position by others. It affects who gets heard and who gets credit.” (p. 141)

In my recent book on gender,¹⁵ I've argued for the church to stop replaying themes that may be socially and historically distorted when separated from time and context, and thus needing different renderings today. This is not biblical revisionism. It is not altering the biblical text. It is to acknowledge how much of an externally imposed and fixed narrative we continue to carry forward in some of our theology.

For example, we continue to portray Adam and Eve as the *sui generis* embodiments of what humanity *ought be*; and we continue to emphasize Adam's dominion over creatures, names, the earth, while relegating Eve to childbearing. Even modern renditions tend to understate the key meaning of the story of creation: Humans being complementary images of each other. We minimize the equality of "*bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh*," and the "*equal helpmeet*" elements, which reflect the complementarity and equality in the Godhead.

Instead, we continue inured in the history of the Christian church—which remains mired in male patriarchy, male superiority as pursued earlier by Israelitic tribal cultures and inherited, sadly, by Paul in many of the commentaries he makes early on. Instead of complementarity—which by the way, Jesus emphasized by including women in his ministry and as his followers—Paul emphasized hierarchy and obedience, refusing initially to recognize women directly as equals in ministries. It isn't until the Holy Spirit begins to push Paul toward the recognition of sexual equality that he acknowledges the works of such as Phoebe, Priscilla, Claudia, Aphia, Lydia, and others in his greetings (Romans, I & 2 Timothy) and in mentioning the gifts of the spirit (1 Corinthians).

Paul isn't a misogynist. But early on, he does rely on his Jewish upbringing and Torah teachings to ferret out the workings of this new *ecclesia*. It is not until the Holy Spirit prompts his key, "*Hey, am turning the corner*" statement in Galatians 3:28, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" that Paul himself breaks free of patriarchal Judaic tradition.

So why are so many of our churches repeating Paul's mistake?

We need to approach Scriptures differently. "The letter kills but the spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6), and "where the Spirit is...there is freedom" (v. 17). Our theology needs more work on those *human* characteristics it sees as essential for the image of God, *imago Dei*. The church should be helping families socialize their children within the *imago Dei* model, not a model handed down through centuries of masculine superiority.

As I see it, the traits that we should be cultivating in our children—boys especially—are *androgynous*, not sex-typed, regardless of their male body. This will not wilt the male. It will encourage a socialization schema which enables all the best attributes of *imago Dei* to be cultivated, and these include a boy's *dethroning*. Cultivate servanthood instead!

Boys should also be showered with the same affectivity and time investments as we do with girls. Boys should be spoken to with language that discredits toughness as a central male trait (and that doesn't mean making him a wimp!) and which doesn't denigrate activities beyond normative

¹⁵ Gil, V.E. *A Christian's Guide through the Gender Revolution: Gender, Cisgender, Transgender, and Intersex*. (Cascade, 2021), Chapter 7.

male ones. (One young respondent in the *American Perspectives Survey* recalled being chided by his own family for wanting to be in Choir along with his girl friends, who loved his voice.)

And fathers, boys need role models which exemplify love, respect, faithfulness, gentleness, equality, both in and out of the home; that provide opportunities for women and men in mutual engagements, in leadership, in worship. Households should be egalitarian communities where decision-making is discussed and each participant given opportunity to voice and to have a say in outcomes. Egalitarianism requires democratic thinking, and I'm not talking about a political position here; it's an ethical one!

Anyone who's done research on the topics involved here will tell us that cultural change of the caliber I'm addressing requires time and intention. We can't single-handedly change many of the systems; but we *can* singlehandedly help our children to grow into more egalitarian persons, boys especially becoming more aware of their social obligations to equity, and working to generate the equanimity that comes from being fair and responsible.

For the Christian man reading this, I urge you to become aware and alert to how you are often placed in a situation where you get unmerited ascriptions, where your presence can generate or tip the equality paradigm. Doing so and working on how your ethics should structure your responses, the best image of yourself as *imago Dei*, will work wonders in your efforts to correct the moments. You may not be successful always, but you will rest assured in the fact that your awareness, your efforts, aren't perpetuating a system that continues to generate unquestioned and ascripted superiority.

Let's make it a better and more egalitarian world for men and women.

And yes, on the *next appointment* I'll share my thoughts with the NP, and step out of the room...

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