

# KEEPERS OF THE FIRE:

## Dialogue to Change Sexism and Foster Gender Reconciliation

A Conversation-Starter Booklet  
from the Common Threads Project

Traprock Center for Peace and Justice

by Rev. Sarah Pirtle, MEd.

## HOW THIS BOOKLET CAME TO BE

Following a lifelong interest in mending sexism, the author collects meaningful anecdotes, effective methods to foster dialogue, and supportive online resources.

This booklet was first released at the Women's March in Greenfield, MA on January 21 when 2500 people gathered locally. Sweeping the world, half a million joined in Washington D.C. while world-wide four million in over 600 "sister marches" came together internationally.

We are grateful to the **Markam-Nathan Foundation** for Social Justice for their support for social-activist projects in Western Massachusetts which made possible the printing and free distribution of this booklet.

This is the second conversation starter booklet from the Common Threads Project.

Read on-line or download for free: [traprock.org](http://traprock.org)

**Traprock Center for Peace and Justice** provides leadership to end war and address environmental and justice issues nationally and locally in the Pioneer Valley. Traprock was founded in 1978 as a center for the study of non-violence. Under first director Randy Kehler, Traprock took national leadership in the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign. Today Pat Hynes is President of the Traprock Board. How to contact Traprock: Find the website at [traprock.org](http://traprock.org). Email contact: [justicia@traprock.org](mailto:justicia@traprock.org). Traprock's address: P.O. Box 1201, Greenfield MA 01302  
How to telephone a Board member: (413) 522- 8892

You are invited to send additions, amendments and anecdotes to the author:

**Sarah Pirtle**, director of the Common Threads project.

Email: [pirtle22@hotmail.com](mailto:pirtle22@hotmail.com)

Phone: (413)-625-2355. Website: [www.sarahpirtle.org](http://www.sarahpirtle.org)

Sarah Pirtle is available to lead free dialogue programs addressing sexism. She is an Interfaith Minister who offers concerts of music and storytelling on Women's Voices Rising -- Catching Courage. She is the author of five books including *Better Together* and a young adult novel *An Outbreak of Peace* about changing racism which received the Olive Branch Award for outstanding book of the year on world peace. As a graduate school teacher for twenty years, she developed conflict transformation activities primarily for K-8th. She has eleven recordings including *Everyday Bravery*, and *Two Hands Hold the Earth*.

# KEEPERS OF THE FIRE: Overturning the oppression of the feminine

## PART ONE: OVERVIEW

How do you enter into shared responsibility for helping to change a social system you didn't cause?

“What the world believes about women impacts all of us -- and Earth.”  
-- Jude Rittenhouse

The world reels under the violence and devaluing of women. Whoever you are, you are welcome and you are needed in the struggle to change the systemic oppression of sexism. The insights you bring from your personal perspective, from your many identities and from your study of social change are all crucial for changing and challenging this together.

This booklet offers materials you can use to start conversations and hold dialogues. We want it to be used by schools, libraries and houses of worship to raise a range of relevant social change topics: gender equity, sexism, safety and respect of girls and women, gender reconciliation. You can choose selections from the booklet to show to friends or set up a dialogue session described in Part Two.

The booklet helps us learn about key websites. For instance, the Everyday Sexism Project announces in their home page: “It seems to be increasingly difficult to talk about sexism, equality and women’s rights in a modern society that perceives itself to have achieved gender equality. In this ‘liberal’, ‘modern’ age, to complain about everyday sexism or suggest that you are unhappy about the way in which women are portrayed and perceived renders you likely to be labelled.” Laura Bates, a UK feminist writer, founded the Everyday Sexism Project in 2012 to document examples of sexism from around the world. A huge-outpouring of responses resulted.

In this booklet you’ll find many lenses -- information from individuals, recent social movements, and current organizations that contribute to this change. It’s a collection of anecdotes and analysis. It’s a collection of clues that invites you to share your own discoveries and insights.

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: Western Massachusetts

We catch courage when we learn the stories of women leaders.

1600s

Who was the last recorded leader of the Pocumtucks, the First Nations people in the region that is now Franklin County?

Answer: Mashalisque was the sachem. The village was in the area that is now the Quaker Center of Woolman Hill, on Keets Road in Deerfield. John Pynchon forced her to sign a deed August, 1672. It is likely that she died in the massacre in 1676 when the sanctuary area at Great Falls, which was a gathering place for 10,000 years, was attacked and over 340 women and children were killed.

1700s

Who is the poet who wrote the oldest known work of literature by an African American woman?

Answer: Lucy Terry from Deerfield. She wrote her ballad in 1746 using the colonial term “bars” for a meadow. It was called "Bars Fight" and it was preserved orally until a book on Western Massachusetts published it in 1855.

1800s

Who created a convention for 400 people in Cummington, MA, to help women get the vote by bringing Julia Ward Howe to the Cummington Church?

Answer: Henrietta Nahmer, a teacher, in 1881.

1900s

Who was an inspiring professor of Zoology at Mt. Holyoke College who has a local library named for her?

Answer: Dr. Cornelia Clapp, Belchertown’s Clapp Library.

1960s - TODAY

Who refused to sit in the back car of a segregated train at age 16, and was a lifelong worker for social justice, taking part in the Civil Rights Movement and, along with her partner Wally Nelson, in War Tax Resistance, in starting the Farmer’s Market in Greenfield, and inspiring generations of activists?

Answer: Juanita Nelson who also started the Free Harvest Supper. With Wally, Juanita lived simply on land-trust land in a home without electricity, Woolman Hill, Deerfield. Their large garden was called the Bean Patch.

Who lives in Leverett but travels internationally each year to foster peace in 20 countries?

Answer: Dr. Paula Green from Leverett who founded the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding and the Conflict Transformation Across Cultures program.

Who is a tireless Quaker activist who began in the 1960s to protest the Vietnam War by providing draft counseling, worked for the Nuclear Weapons Freeze, started the first AFSC office in the Valley, and with her affinity group Shut It Down took a big role in closing down the Vernon VT Nuclear Plant?

Answer: Frances Crowe -- Life-long peace activist living in Northampton.

Today there are thousands of women throughout Western MA whose leadership in social-change affects far-reaching areas, including racial justice, the local foods movement, CSA farms, climate change, stopping the pipe lines, honoring First Nations people, peace education, rape and domestic abuse counseling, and rights of immigrants. There are women activists in roles as rabbis and ministers, lawyers and teachers, artists and parents. At the same time we live in a society that is riddled with patriarchal oppression.

**We step into this history and claim ourselves as part of the long line of people who are part of social change.**

## THE ARCHETYPE OF THE KEEPER OF THE FIRE

“The abuse of women and girls continues to be the most pervasive and unaddressed human rights violation on earth.”

-- former US President Jimmy Carter

“Patriarchy can only exist if violence is there to back it up.”

-- Eve Ensler

The Seeing Red Conference was held October 2016 in Connecticut by the Assisi Institute; it used a Jungian approach “to illuminate the unconscious forces behind feminine oppression.” At the opening session, Executive Director Loralee Scott-Conforti gave this invitation: “We need to be present to what is -- how patriarchal oppression has silenced us. Each of us was told not to be who we are authentically in.” Muriel McMahon added, “We go back to who we were before we

became who we are not.” Dr. Demaris Wehr, the author of *Jung and Feminism*, asserted, “Something is terribly wrong, and we have to know the wound.”

While attending this conference, I searched for an archetype to express the force that we call upon as we change sexism together. During the Seeing Red Conference, I found myself discerning what I came to call the Keeper of the Fire.

The Keeper of the Fire says -- “I will stand by you as you look at this and as you speak what is true for you. You are not required to carry this alone. Larger forces help you to be able to face and talk about this ancient outrage.” The Keeper of the Fire encircles us as we move into this work, offering a flame of sacred truth that creates a space for our hearts to feel, and a space for us to learn and grow. The light reveals how all people have been torqued and how sexism skews human intimacy of sharing our hearts. We meet at a fire circle of transformation.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A fourteen-year-old writer for *New Moon Magazine for Girls* said:

“Here are just a few reasons why we all need feminism:

- Because it’s more dangerous to be a woman than it is to be a soldier in a modern conflict.
- Because girls and women are told to be careful not to get raped, instead of teaching men not to rape.
- Because we want our bodies to be simply left alone, and not a constant target of discussion, disrespect and objectification.” — Article by Serenity, age 14

From “What About Feminism?” in *New Moon Magazine for Girls* February 2016

## THE SIGNS AT THE WOMEN’S MARCHES

The number of participants in the Women’s Marches on January 21, 2017 has been estimated at close to three million nationally. This constituted the largest demonstration ever to take place in the United States. Internationally, the marches swept the globe with events in sixty countries including Australia, Kenya, South Africa, the Netherlands, and India in totals that soared to four million. A young girl in Athens, Greece held a sign that read, “I am worried about my destiny.”

We hold onto the sacred outpouring of the signs that appeared, and think about the preparation each person made as they asked themselves -- what do I most

want to put on my sign? Through consciousness, outrage, humor, and insistence these expressions created an outcry that asked to be heard. What do we learn from what the signs and speakers said? How can we let this move us still?

The tens of thousands of signs at the Boston Women's March included:

I will never normalize hatred, never.

Unapologetic feminist marching for my daughter's future.

To all the girls -- you are valuable, powerful. You matter.

Friends, not fences.

Instead of walls, create mirrors.

Women's values are human values.

That's the spirit of our dialogue. As we come together to look at gender injustice and gender reconciliation, we enter a sacred space where our own discoveries are welcomed. The rise of women's voices lifts us all. In Boston the emcee began -- "Welcome, sisters, and our whole human family. You look amazing." A roar spread over the huge crowd, rolling away from the stage in each direction. You could feel the commonly held values being expressed in the trust that was evident in the crowd. Although packed like sardines, people were thoughtful, careful, responsive to each other. There was mutual respect interlacing the event. Our ethical human covenant gets interrupted and blocked by oppression. Women's values are human values.

Mary McClintock, main organizer of the Greenfield, MA rally said in her speech: "This is a story of the power of one woman. Just a few months ago one woman in Hawaii had an idea for a Women's March on Washington. She planted that seed of an idea in fertile ground. Look what has grown from that seed of an idea. Today we join in over 600 cities of women who are taking action because that one woman planted that one seed. I was one of the people who heard about that idea. I thought we should have a march in Greenfield. I took that seed and planted it in the fertile ground of friends and community. We shined the light of the sun on it, and it grew and it really kept growing into all of us here today. What we are is a big glorious plant with many branches, deep roots and ripe fruit. Each one of us is the fruit on that plant and inside each of us are the seeds of more actions. Take the

seeds inside you and plant them in the fertile ground of community. Nurture them with the support of others. Grow many more plants. If naysayers say one person can't make a difference -- they tried to bury us but they did not know we were seeds."

One way to keep the seed power of the Women's Marches spreading is by having dialogues about sexism and about gender reconciliation.

## WHAT CLUES DO WE HAVE FOR FOSTERING DIALOGUE?

"Just don't tell them about the bad stuff," older teens said offhandedly to me as I was about to lead workshops for 11-13 year old girls.

As it happened, there was no opportunity to ask them -- "For you, what's the bad stuff?"

Was it the statistic about campus rape? Findings from the National Sexual Violence report estimated "that the percentage of completed or attempted rape victimization among women in higher educational institutions may be between 20% and 25% over the course of a college career. Among college women, 9 in 10 victims of rape and sexual assault knew their offender."

Was it the information in the One Billion Rising campaign that 1 in 3 women and girls across the planet will be beaten or raped during her lifetime?

Or was it not a statistic at all but experiences that they themselves were having? When we talk about sexism -- when any of us talk -- we get into the realm of painful interpersonal experiences. We are swimming into the waters of bullying, ostracism, degradation, physical danger, sexual assault, overwhelming physical take-over by another. We re-open the door to social events of humiliation, betrayal, and the most basic boundary violations. An intimate trusted person -- a best friend, a partner, a family member -- can become a carrier of mistreatment.

A student at Mt. Holyoke College went to her chaplain for support after what happened to her when she went to vote. She said, "There was a young guy standing behind me at the polls who was covered with Trump buttons. I was surprised when he decided to talk to me, and what he said was so horrible. He said that the reason

he was voting for Trump was that if Trump won, he'd be able to do anything he wanted to do to women."

The NY Daily News reported: "While Donald Trump shrugs off his hot mic tape as 'locker room talk,' women refuse to let their stories of sexual assault be dismissed. Kelly Oxford, author and social media star, encouraged her twitter followers to speak up about sexual assault. Specifically, their first one. That was Friday, just after the tape broke. By Monday morning, she'd received more than 27 million tweets, many under the hashtag #NotOkay."

In a speech in New Hampshire October 13th, Michelle Obama said: "I can't believe that a candidate for President of the United States has bragged about sexually assaulting women. I can't stop thinking about this. It has shaken me to my core more than I ever could have predicted." She added, "This is not how adults behave, this is not how decent human beings behave, and it's certainly not how someone who wants to be President of the United States behaves." She continued, "This wasn't just locker-room talk. This was a powerful individual speaking freely and openly about sexually predatory behavior, and actually joking about kissing and groping women."

The director of a national organization emailed me, "The night that all of this came out, I stayed up late and wrote down all the experiences of assault and rape that ever happened to me. It included an outright murder attempt. The list came to thirty-five events. The next morning I talked to the men in my office and said I want you to understand what women go through behind the scenes."

This booklet is part of a movement of solidarity of the kind that author bell hooks describes when she said it's about all of us changing sexism. This means we are intervening and changing the whole of systemic oppression. Every oppression is a combination of power and prejudice reinforced interpersonally, culturally and institutionally. There is no hierarchy of oppression -- no one of them that is "worse" than the other. They interlock.

In her book, *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks writes:

"Simply put feminism is a movement to end sexism. This was a definition of feminism I offered in (my book) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* more than ten years ago. It was my hope at the time that it would become a common definition everyone would use. I liked this definition because it did not imply that men were the enemy. By naming sexism as the problem it went directly to the heart

of the matter. Practically, it is a definition which implies that all sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate it are female or male, child or adult. It is also broad enough to include an understanding of systemic institutionalized sexism. As a definition it is open-ended. To understand feminism it implies one has to necessarily understand sexism.”

## PART TWO: LEADING DIALOGUES

This section collects questions, quotes and anecdotes that can be used to jump-start conversations. It also illuminates organizations that are taking leadership and lists their websites with information from their homepage.

### A SETTING THAT PROMOTES GROWTH

When I start off a dialogue, I want each person to have a chance to be heard and welcomed. Each voice is important, and so we begin by practicing sharing time to talk. As we go around and exchange names, I ask people to add a very brief description of a major socializing force in their childhood, and encapsulate it within two sentences. Examples might include your house of worship, a school, siblings. For me, it was experiencing the culture of the civil rights movement.

We share word associations to “sexism,” and then to “gender reconciliation.” I also distinguish defending from learning. I invite people to develop an inner tuning fork to feel the difference between when we are defending ourselves and when we are opening to learn, grow, and understand. We talk about the excitement of learning from each other, and what we can do to maintain that atmosphere.

When Paula Green, founder of the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, leads dialogue, she teaches seven principles.

1. Create safe space.
2. Agree that the purpose is learning.
3. Use appropriate communication tools.
4. Surface what is hidden.
5. Focus on the relationship (among participants).
6. Stay through the hard places.
7. Be willing to be changed by the situation.

To help locate ourselves in a place that is characterized by the dynamic of learning and growing instead of domination and ranking, I like to use images of being respected at the Welcome Table, or creating the Beloved Community. Martin Buber spoke of the I-Thou relationship. An image helps us stay connected.

We're all invited and needed as we change and interrupt sexism. Make it clear that you aren't assuming that everyone in the room identifies as male or female. As you set up social safety for the dialogue, ask people what pronouns they use and welcome people who identify as gender queer, gender fluid, and gender non-binary. Concretely welcome LGBTQ+ voices. Make space for people to speak about oppression and targeting they receive. For all dimensions of diversity, set up solidarity as all of us learn more about being allies.

In their website, the training organization Cultural Bridges to Justice writes: "Most progressive, non-profit organizations, whether in human services or social change, recognize that their mission cannot be completely fulfilled until all forms of oppression (racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, et al) are addressed."

Other oppressions need to be named including Islamophobia, transphobia, prejudice against people who have experienced trauma, and ageism. The oppressions listed above interlock in what was termed by Equity Institute in the early 1980's "a wheel of oppression." Within this wheel, each spoke keeps the whole gridlock in place. When one of us is hurt, all of us are hurt.

How can all people engage in solidarity to change sexism and why is that a goal?

Which kinds of oppressions particularly matter to you personally and politically and how early in your life did you start to care about these?

How can dialogue about sexism be meaningful for all?

As Traprock President Pat Hynes articulates, "Due to sexism itself, the term 'sexism' is perceived to be light-weight, but as we see, it encompasses an ever-present threat ranging from harassment to mortal danger."

## SOCIALIZATION IN CHILDHOOD

These are questions that you can use at the start of a dialogue group:

What are some early memories you have about gender assumptions and stereotypes? Did you notice people being regarded in different ways? What messages did you get about what it means to be female or male?

What kinds of friendships and interactions did you have?

What is an early memory of noticing unfairness based on gender?

Do you have memories of harassment or aggression that were gender based?'

Here are **sample anecdotes** that came forth in dialogues:

“This may have looked aggressive, and I don’t know how the girls felt about the game but for us boys it was friendly and fun. When I was eight all of us would go into the woods to play. The girls would ride long sticks and say they were horses. The boys would play war. We liked to suddenly rush at the girls with our shields and it seemed to me that everyone liked the game.”

“When I was in first grade, and that was 1955, I heard from girls who walked home to a different neighborhood than I did, that boys in our class chased girls after school to pull down their pants. That was how they said it -- pull down their pants. Since we all wore skirts in those days, that meant pull down their underwear. I was scared to hear about that and glad that the boys I walked home with never thought of such a thing. I have to say that in the back of my mind I really wondered why no adults were stopping it. It made me scared that our teacher and the principal hadn’t organized to prevent them from doing it. I certainly thought they would have been strong enough to intervene. It made me feel nervous about authority and what things they let slide. Even though it didn’t happen to me, knowing of it was scary.”

“In high school I remember choosing to wear a trench coat to school so I could walk home without men cat-calling from their cars.”

“In high school I carried my notebook like a shield in the hallway, especially in the stair wells where some guys would try to reach out and grab you.”

Do you have memories of thinking about the status or abilities of women?

“As a girl growing up in 1970s, I can remember consciously reflecting that I don’t have to worry about being President because by the time I grow up, a woman will have already become President.”

“In the 1960s in high school I wanted to be a minister but at that time there were no women ministers in any church, and so I felt I had to bury my hope.”

“I wanted to be a dancer but in my family boys weren’t allowed to do that.”

The National Association for the Education of Young Children in 1989 published a book by Louise Derman-Sparks and a task force of teachers that was called *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*. They wrote:

By four years old, preschoolers are strongly influenced by societal norms for gender behavior and accept that boys and girls are supposed to do different things.

Observing that social norms may override children’s first hand experience, the teachers collected examples for the book from their classrooms. They describe this event and showed how an intervention was made.

Judy and Marie ask John to play doctor with them. John wants to be a nurse but Judy doesn’t agree. “You can’t be the nurse. You have to be the doctor,” she firmly states.

The teacher intervenes, “Both boys and girls can be doctors and nurses. In fact, Judy, you dad told me that you used to go to a woman doctor.”

“She was a nurse,” insists Judy.

“Well, her teacher continues, feeling a little stymied, “you may not think that women can be doctors and men can be nurses, but I do and John does, we I want you to let John be the nurse.” Judy agrees albeit reluctantly.

Share this intervention and seek earliest memories of noticing any assumptions about “girl activities” and “boy activities.” The participants will probably have a wide range of responses -- some will recall parents or teachers deliberately helping to expand activities for all people. Were girls and boys asked different questions and greeted differently by relatives or by strangers encountered at a store?

## IS THIS WHAT SEXISM LOOKS LIKE?

In a dialogue group, share this list and ask for reactions. Seek additions people would make to the list as well as disagreements and revisions. This can be used as a way for people to share personal experiences.

Generalizing what happens to many girls:

Trained not to speak up and raise their hands.

Trained to please the other sex.

Trained to defer.

Trained to be agreeable.

Trained to recognize and express feelings.

Trained to be sexually attractive as a socially acceptable source of power.

Trained to compete for a boy friend.

Trained to monitor male aggression and be responsible for keeping it in check.

Generalizing what happens to many boys:

Trained to squelch feelings and keep vulnerability hidden.

Trained to speak first.

Trained to expect that they are going to be listened to.

Trained to evaluate girls.

Trained not to listen to women and not to be interested in the lives of women.

Trained to be physically strong.

Trained to not share most feelings with anger as the exception.

Trained to need to be right.

Trained to allow boys to humiliate each other.

## WHAT SOLIDARITY LOOKS LIKE:

At the same time, we recommend that people collect anecdotes of ways that people have been conscious allies to each other.

\* A boy in high school describes a time that he walked into a stairwell in the school and noticed a tight knot of boys surrounding and harassing a girl. Although he had never met her before, the way he took action was to reach his arm forward, grab her by the hand and pull her away to safety. He said, "I've been looking for you everywhere." With relief, she thanked him later for intervening on the spot.

\* A boy talks about speaking up in gym class to support a boy who was singled out for mockery and continually picked last for teams.

## EVERYDAY SEXISM

An important direction for dialogue is to collect recent personal experiences. Decide what is the most comfortable way for your particular group to do this. People can exchange stories out loud, or they can write anonymously and have them read. Here are two examples from Western MA that could start things off.

\* A twelve-year-old walking with her friend in town felt confused when a forty-year old man came up and talked with them in a overly friendly way that seemed to have overtones of flirtation. She told a teacher but not her parents. The teacher spoke to her father, but he didn't think it would be a significant event in her life and didn't want to follow-up on it.

\* A nursing mother in Western MA told what happened when a man passed her by in a crosswalk. "He felt it was his right to say--someone should get you a bra."

## EVERYDAY FEMINISM

Website: [everydayfeminism.com](http://everydayfeminism.com)

**Sandra Kim** is the Founder and Executive Director of Everyday Feminism. Launched in June 2012, "Everyday Feminism has become one of the most popular feminist digital media sites in the world, with over 4.5 million monthly visitors from over 150 countries and a team of over 40 writers."

Sandra Kim writes: "We cannot afford to continue living in a world built upon the oppression and exploitation of our bodies, lives, and livelihoods. As our resolve to show up lovingly and valiantly for the struggles that lie ahead has grown, so too have the day-to-day challenges of having these conversations with other people."

She provides this overview: "We aren't born sexist. It's not like you pop out of the womb already thinking that women are inferior beings. It's through observing, learning, and understanding society that you come to hold common attitudes and beliefs, including misogynistic ones. Socialization is part of personality formation, meaning that it shapes the ways in which you think about yourself and others, relate to the world around you, form attitudes, and behave. That's why people of certain identities and people from the same culture will often

exhibit similar personality traits and engage in similar behaviors. This is because of how the socialization process works – because its purpose is to shape one’s personality to fit that of the others in their identity group and culture.”

In her Compassionate Activism online workshop, entitled "Healing from Marginalization with Love and Justice,” Sandra said, “The status quo is systemic oppression. We were raised on these lies. We were raised on the lies that certain people are better than others. Other peoples are worth hurting. It doesn't really matter if they get hurt. Only some people deserve to be protected. These are all things that we were taught growing up as children.”

## COMMON THREADS -- INTERSECTIONALITY

Black lesbians in the 1970’s first named and recognized intersectionality. According to blackpast.org: “The Combahee River Collective, founded by black feminists and lesbians in Boston, Massachusetts in 1974, (created)...one of the earliest explorations of the intersection of multiple oppressions, including racism and heterosexism. For the first time in history, black women openly and unapologetically communicated their sexual orientations in the midst of their social justice work, no longer trading their silence for permission to engage in political struggle.

“The Collective’s name refers to a resistance action by Harriet Tubman in 1863 in South Carolina, the Combahee River Raid. Tubman freed more that 750 slaves in this unique military campaign, the only one in U.S. history conceived and directed by a woman. After attending the 1973 National Black Feminist Organization’s (NBFO) regional conference, the Collective’s founders began meeting on their own in Boston in 1974. They experienced much disillusionment with the second wave of American feminism from the 1960s along with the civil rights, black nationalism, and Black Panther movements. They thus knew from the beginning that their new platform would include struggles against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression.”

- See more at: <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/combahee-river-collective-1974-1980#sthash.q0p7kILp.dpuf>

The Common Threads Program of Traprock Center for Peace and Justice began in 2013 under the name Peace Net for Girls and Women. The name was changed from Peace Net to Common Threads at the time of producing a multi-age conference. Since our goal was looking at sexism, racism, and ageism, it felt that a

broader name was needed. At the planning meeting for workshop leaders before the conference, we read from sections of the Combahee River Collective document to honor black lesbian feminists as the first who put forth intersectionality.

The Common Threads Project invites people into dialogue with these words:

*We hold all these threads in common. All of this goes together.*

We build compassionate solidarity with all ages.

We honor women's voices and experiences.

We honor LGBTQII+ voices and experiences.

We transform masculinity together.

We prevent and heal from violence.

We care about changing racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and all oppressions that endeavor to divide us.

This dialogue is a place of listening and learning from each other where these understandings overlap. We yearn to come together.

Our conversation is centered around recognizing how sexism, patriarchy, and the threat of sexual assault have torqued people's lives. We recognize that because of the way these are constructed it is easy to be drawn away from that discussion. We will hold all the common threads while looking for clues.

This means we are learners together and these dialogues are sacred spaces of shared vulnerability where we leave behind accusations as we support our awakening consciousness.

Dialogue conversations can increase solidarity and compassion by squarely facing how racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism and the other interlocking oppressions disengage people from the combined community needed to change the massive inequities that hold us down. From across the generations, we come together.

## SETTING A SUPPORTIVE TONE FOR THE DIALOGUE

As you plan a dialogue session and you look at what agreements will keep it a safe space, it's also helpful to set themes. Here are themes that our multi-age leadership team developed and used for the Common Threads Conference.

\*All are experts and our learning space is designed for many voices to be heard from. There's no hierarchy of age, expertise, of knowledge. All people are welcome.

\* We are thinking about ethics within our activism. We are being conscious not to recycle oppression.

\* We're here to grow. It's okay to "make a mistake" and learn more.

\* We're not all on the same page or in the same situation.

\* We aim to trust each other's intentions.

\* As we talk about equity, we also want to make sure to address sexual assault, and "the war on women," the prevalence of violence against women.

The personal is political: Our belief is that unless you grow at an interpersonal level, structural level change won't be deep and abiding. More than identity politics alone, beyond issues and structural analysis, we foster growth in heart, compassion and communication.

Mutual support: We are inspired by Audre Lorde who said, "The Master's tools can't dismantle the Master's house." Instead of "calling each other out" in ways that shut people out, we call each other into growth and dialogue.

## KEEPING THE DIALOGUE SAFE FROM INVALIDATION

One of the things I say at the start of a dialogue is that people can speak up and ask for a pause in the action if something happens that feels disrespectful or invalidating. It's important to spell out what we can do to validate each other.

Give empathy first to the speaker telling their story  
before moving to understand what is happening for the  
others who are part of the story being shared.

When hearing another person share a painful story, listeners need to  
GO TOWARDS THE SPEAKER WITH SUPPORT -- DON'T JUMP AWAY

The phrase “jumping away” means that a listener has suddenly abandoned support for the speaker and instead has inquired about other people in the story or other aspects of the issue, thereby shifting primary attention to somewhere else.

This is an example of what invalidation looks like. Let’s imagine that a member of the circle shares the example that was presented earlier -- an event on the playground when first grade boys reached under girls’ skirts.

If the first response to hearing this story were -- “I bet none of the adults at that school knew what was happening,” that is jumping away from the speaker.

While that’s a valid line of thinking and while it sounds on the surface like an innocent reaction -- what is happening is that the listener has changed their focus from supporting the speaker to a different frame of reference -- that of thinking about someone else in the story.

A direct first response would be, “That must have been scary.” That’s validating.

The kind of school that pays attention to the safety of all students would have set clear standards. Teachers would have said -- if something harmful happens to you, come and tell me. Teachers noticing frequent scuffles on the playground would have investigated and found out that boys were chasing girls to pull down their underwear. When a speaker remembers back to first grade and tells how scary that experience was, the validation needs to go to her rather than placing emphasis on the teachers and parents who didn’t step in and change it. Then, after giving a validating response, conversation can turn to what was happening for the adults and how something like that can be prevented today.

In preparing for a dialogue, it’s important to put ourselves in the shoes of the speakers sharing memories of sexism, violation, humiliation. The speaker is taking a risk to share something vulnerable. Perhaps it’s the very first time they have talked about it. Telling the story creates an inner discovery of a personal truth that something happened which was not okay. To create a safe circle, it is important that every participant learns how to give primary validation to the speaker.

If you find that instead your thoughts go most easily to justification of the actions of somebody else or sympathizing with someone else, this is a time for self examination as to whether something about this is uncomfortable for you.

We recommend the Compassionate Activism online workshop by Sandra Kim, director of **Everyday Feminism**. It is entitled "Healing from Marginalization with Love and Justice." It offers some of the tools needed to heal and build your capacity to respond to everyday injustice from a sense of wholeness and shared humanity. Kim teaches the ways "systemic oppression has taught us to deny and suppress our feelings and pain, and how to give our experiences as marginalized people the acknowledgement and validation we're too often denied."

## **How Systemic Oppression Teaches Us Our Pain Isn't Real**

by Sandra Kim, Everyday Feminism, Compassionate Activism Online Workshop

"When we share that we've been violated - whether that's physically or emotionally, we're told that:

- It didn't really happen. Denying.
- It wasn't that bad. Minimizing.
- It was your fault. Blaming.
- You were asking for it. Shaming.
- You should have behaved differently. Policing.
- You need to stop talking about it. Silencing.

And we learned this lesson well. So now we're the ones making ourselves wrong for our feelings and suppressing our pain."

Sandra Kim's groundbreaking work is essential to help us be aware of what we can do to create dialogues on sexism which are characterized by mutual respect and mutual support instead of silencing, shaming, or minimizing.

## **GENERATIONAL DIALOGUE**

In the 1960's sexism was called "the problem that has no name." This was described by Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, which is said to have launched the Second Wave of Feminism, the First Wave being the fight for women's suffrage.

One way to structure a dialogue is to create an opportunity for people of many different ages to share perspectives. A carefully crafted format can make sure that all ages get a chance to share. At the Common Threads Conference, in one segment we separated into small groups by ages and then came back together.

I dream of women active in changing sexism in the 1960s and 1970s being able to talk to younger people about our experiences. Here's what I would say about that cross-over time into new possibilities. As I share my story, I send respect for the tens of thousands of women of my generation who have their own stories to share.

When I was nineteen and a student at Oberlin College, I climbed up the stairs to a meeting on the second floor of a building in Cleveland, Ohio. It was 1969, and the gathering had an equal number of women and men. There were people who were active in stopping the Vietnam War, starting a food coop and forming a Free Clinic, both which are still in Cleveland today.

The segment of the meeting I remember best involved listening to Rolling Stone songs like, "Look at that Stupid Girl," and "Under My Thumb." We spoke about how the lyrics affected us. I discovered that my private disgust toward the lyrics was shared by everyone, and I felt part of a new kind of "us."

I returned home from that first meeting feeling I'd walked into a new world of possibility. I never left that movement -- it was the early years of what is now called Second Wave Feminism. I got involved with attending and then leading consciousness raising groups. The inquiry we made was so original that the discussions felt more intellectually exciting than courses at Oberlin, a campus where in 1969 there were only two women professors at the time.

I felt imprinted with the sense that we are all in this together. We need everyone. When I went to give a speech on sexism at a local high school the next year, I explained with excitement -- "You see, it's not women against men or men against women. It's an engrained problem, so we can change it."

When I was 23, seven of us poets in Cleveland Women's Liberation launched a Feminist Poetry Troupe which traveled to four states to give theatrical poetry readings from 1972-1979 and produced two anthologies. A photo of our group, showing our wide age range, appeared on the front page of the local Cleveland Heights newspaper in 1972. Our arms were around each other, striding down the street. We smiled with confidence and ease. The reporter received

positive reactions including: “I’ve never seen a photo of women like that before, women hugging and being friends.”

If I could have looked ahead nearly fifty years, what would I have felt? One reaction would be celebration of the strong organizations local, national, and global that now exist. Section Three offers some of the many significant organizations active today -- a campus movement, and global organizations addressing sexism.

Recently I shared with a young man about this time period. He’d also gone to Oberlin and filled me in on what the campus is like today. I said, “We thought back then in the 1960’s and 1970’s that the world would change. When my whole perception of the world expanded, I felt that If I can wake up to this, anyone can, and it will ripple from person to person around the world.”

He replied, “You were right. The world did change.”

For this is not about just political changes. It’s spiritual as well. It’s about cultural, institutional, interpersonal shifts reinforcing within a larger force.

## DIALOGUE AND CONTINUED ACTION

As you plan your dialogue group, you may want to include a section of the time where people have a chance to explore the actions they could take in the future. However, it is important to validate the sharing that has just taken place as significant action. To speak about personal experiences of sexism, sexual assault, gender inequity is an important event in and of itself. It breaks the silence. It opens the lid on the closed box which has held the truths privately.

I like to describe it this way: When you share your story with trusted listeners, afterwards the caring of the listeners stays inside the story and the painful events have been transformed.

Acknowledge the work -- “What we have done here today really matters. We leave here having exchanged truths with each other, and this has strengthened us. We take each other with us. In community today we have expressed basic trust.”

If appropriate to what you are doing, in the latter part of a dialogue session you can set aside time to look toward the future. Clarify that the group doesn’t have to pick one action that all will engage in, but rather each individual is looking at what they would consider doing.

You could list organizations that exist which they might want to learn more about. You could brainstorm together potential actions that anyone might choose to do. Most of all each individual thinks about their own gifts and what they feel called toward. This might involve journaling and then sharing with a partner.

Examples of potential actions:

- \* Bringing renewed insight to a conversation with someone you care about.
- \* Write a letter to someone that says what you want them to know, a letter which you may or may not decide actually to send.
- \* Create a letter-writing campaign about sexist local ads or actions.
- \* Work with role plays to practice how to make interventions when sexism occurs.
- \* Learn the One Billion Rising dance called “Break the Chain” and do a flash mob at your local coop on Valentine’s Day.

When we let ourselves feel, the emotions create flexibility. The Interhelp network -- now called The Work That Reconnects, inspired by Joanna Macy -- is a network where I helped lead trainings for twelve years. They make a distinction between being able to explore and share our feelings and thoughts as distinct from figuring out what to do and launching a campaign. Time is needed to express without debate or censure. When we share our emotions whatever they may be -- despair or fury or hopelessness -- this allows us to come back into community with each other.

One practice is to ask yourself -- “If money and time were no problem, what is it that you are called to do?” Once that comes clearer, the next step is to meet with one or two other people and share together. What support would you need? How can you take one step this coming week in this direction?

“Every time we care for ourselves, we are changing the world.  
Remember the people walking beside you.  
Together we’re changing the world.  
We are standing on the shoulders of the ones you came before us.  
They are giving us their courage,  
and they say we are glad you’re in this world.”  
-- Song by Girls Week participants,  
Journey Camp

## STANDING UP AGAINST ISLAMOPHOBIA

One action to be visible and outspoken is to sign an online pledge to resist fear and hatred at the site for Showing Up for Racial Justice. Here are insights into how the intersection of kinds of violence is impacting Muslim women.

**“Almost every woman has an unsettling story about the difficulties of being a woman in public — whether it’s a stranger walking behind us too closely, verbal abuse, unwanted sexual advances or physical attacks,”** writes Rana Elmer in the Washington Post, on September 16, 2016. Elmer observes, **“But for Muslim women, these isolated incidents of misogyny or violence have taken on an additional, ugly edge.”**

Her article, called *How Muslim women bear the brunt of Islamophobia*, says **“We’re treated as both villains and victims....Although Muslim men and women may both suffer from a presumption of guilt, women experience the additional presumption of victimhood. We’re seen simultaneously as recognizable representatives of a religion to be “feared” and passive targets of male dominance. In turn, our absurd status as both villains and victims drives not only discrimination, harassment and hate crimes, but promotes cynical policy proposals designed to help us, which actually are rooted in stereotypes and anti-Muslim bias. Officials and news pundits have long used this tactic and the guise of “women’s rights” to promote anti-Muslim ideology.”**

In the article that appeared in “Broadly,” *How Islamophobia Hurts Muslim Women the Most*, Siran Kale writes, **“Violence against Muslims has skyrocketed in recent years, and especially since the Paris terror attacks. For an increasing number of hijab-wearing women, misogyny is combining with Islamophobia to especially toxic effect. Increasingly, Muslim women are bearing the brunt of the hate. Recent incidents on Muslim women have seen them pushed in front of incoming trains; punched and kicked off buses; and attacked whilst collecting their children from school. And it's Muslim women who wear the hijab most at risk.”**

Ilhan Omar, the first Somali American elected to the Minnesota State Congress gives an example of the escalating hate crimes. Omar writes, “I spent yesterday afternoon at the White House, learning about policy ideas that I could implement in the areas I am passionate about. On my way to our hotel, I got in a cab and became subjected to the most hateful, derogatory, islamophobic, sexist taunts and threats I have ever experienced. The cab driver called me ISIS and threatened to remove my hijab, I wasn’t really sure how this encounter would end

as I attempted to rush out of his cab and retrieve my belongs. I am still shaken by this incident and can't wrap my head around how bold people are becoming in displaying their hate towards Muslims. I pray for his humanity and for all those who harbor hate in their hearts.”

## PART THREE: IMPORTANT RESOURCES

### ORGANIZATIONS CHANGING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence is pervasive, vulnerable, unilateral, and often invisible.

1 out of 6 women and 1 out of 33 men will be the victim of a rape (or attempted) in their lifetime. -- Care2Action Alerts

Domestic violence is the major cause of death and disability for women ages 16 - 44, and accounts for more death than ill health, cancer, traffic accidents.

-- *Urgent Message from Mother* by Jean Shinado Bolen

### **COALITION TO END RAPE CULTURE**

Founder: Priya Ghosh

**Website: [umasscerc.weebly.com](http://umasscerc.weebly.com)**

As described by CERC founding President Priya Ghosh, “The Coalition to End Rape Culture is a Registered Student Organization working to dismantle and eradicate rape culture at UMass Amherst by organizing our communities to speak out, stand up, and fight back against sexual violence. CERC seeks to deconstruct and end rape culture by educating the on-campus community and making concrete changes to university policy. We are all living in a rape culture, which is an environment in which rape and sexual violence are ignored, condoned, trivialized and normalized. Rape culture is pervasive, systematic and affects all of us negatively.”

This article from the Recorder Newspaper by Stephanie McFeeters, published on March 2, 2016, describes a rally where CERC demanded that the University of Massachusetts adopt a sexual assault survivors’ Bill of Rights.

AMHERST — Lampposts around the University of Massachusetts Amherst campus bore photos of men and women with their mouths taped shut, captioned with facts related to sexual assault. In front of the Student Union, a voice bellowed through a bullhorn: “When survivors’ rights are under attack, what do we do? Speak up, fight back!”

Under a gray sky Friday afternoon, Priya Ghosh, 23, a fourth-year student at UMass and president of the Coalition to End Rape Culture, led a group of more than 50 people in a series of chants, then outlined ways she said the university is failing victims of sexual violence. Behind her, a mattress with floral sheets displayed a message in red tape: “WE DEMAND A SURVIVOR’S BILL OF RIGHTS NOW.”

Students are asking that the university adopt the document, written by survivors for survivors, and post it around campus. The bill, modeled after a policy the State University of New York system adopted in 2014, outlines ways students would like to see administrators deal with cases of sexual assault and better protect victims.

Since 2011, UMass Amherst has been under investigation by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights for possibly violating Title IX — the 1972 federal law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. The campus also continues to wrestle with the aftermath of a gang rape. Earlier this week, the last of four co-defendants pleaded guilty to raping a former UMass student in her dorm room. She testified that four men repeatedly raped her while she fell in and out of consciousness during October 2012. -- Archival article

## **ONE BILLION RISING**

Founder: Eve Ensler

**Website: [onebillionrising.org](http://onebillionrising.org)**

Their homepage says: “1 in 3 women across the planet will be beaten or raped during her lifetime. That’s ONE BILLION WOMEN AND GIRLS. Every February, we rise – in hundreds of countries across the world – to show our local communities and the world what one billion looks like and shine a light on the rampant impunity and injustice that survivors most often face. We rise through dance to express joy and community and and celebrate the fact that we have not been defeated by this violence. We rise to show we are determined to create a new kind of consciousness – one where violence will be resisted until it is unthinkable. This year, we are rising in solidarity against the exploitation of women.”

## **CONSENT ED**

Because we all deserve a world without sexual violence

**Website: [consented.ca](http://consented.ca)**

“We are a group of 11 individuals who are working towards a world without sexual violence. Although our backgrounds span diverse areas like engineering, education, human ecology, psychology, and medicine, we all met through experiences as volunteer crisis counsellors and educators on sexual violence in our community of Edmonton, Alberta.

“The ideas we’ve shared on this website have been gathered from various sources and experiences and by no means belong solely to us. This website is an invitation to start conversation.” This extensive website provides information to debunk myths about sexual assault, describes what consent is, talks about “our rape prone world” and how media promotes violence.

## **SURVIVOR THEATRE PROJECT (STP)**

**Website: [survivortheatreproject.com](http://survivortheatreproject.com)**

“Survivor Theatre Project's mission is to empower survivors with the tools to break silence and end sexual violence through empowerment, creativity, and public performance. Our original performances are engaging, poignant, funny, and provocative, and open up dialogue within our communities to address the reality of how common sexual violence is, and what we can do to stop it.”

## **TIME TO TELL:**

Sparking stories from lives affected by incest and sexual abuse to be told and heard.

Founder: Donna Jenson

**Website: [www.timetotell.org](http://www.timetotell.org)**

“Time To Tell is a child sexual abuse prevention project grounded in the core values of healing, social justice and joy. We envision a day when all children will grow up safe and sound in their families and communities. We believe that to reach that day scores of people need to tell their stories. Stories from all of us, whether touched by someone else’s abuse or ravaged by the devastation of incest, everyone deserves support to find a way to tell their story. Donna Jenson, founder of TTT, knows firsthand the healing capacity of telling one’s story and the door to awareness such storytelling can open for others. Donna has spoken eloquently in public forums, performances and with friends and families throughout her career.”

## **ULTRAVIOLET**

**Website: [weareultraviolet.org](http://weareultraviolet.org)**

“UltraViolet is a powerful and rapidly growing community of people from all walks of life mobilized to fight sexism and expand women’s rights, from politics and government to media and pop culture. UltraViolet works on a range of issues including health care, economic security, violence, reproductive rights, racial justice, and immigration by putting the voices of all women, especially women of color and LGBTQ women, front and center.

“Sexism is everywhere. At UltraViolet, we combine innovative, cutting-edge organizing with grassroots, people-powered actions to fight for equality and progress. Equality at a higher frequency—that’s what we’re all about.”

This article was sent out by UltraViolet January 2017 with a summary of the contributions to feminism made by President Barack Obama. It contained footnotes backing up each fact.

"This is what a feminist looks like." --President Barack Obama, August 4, 2016

When millions of Americans were being denied care for being too poor or too sick, he pushed and expanded coverage to 25 million more people. He made sure to stop insurance companies from charging women more than men for coverage. And in the face of emboldened attacks on abortion, he barred states from denying federal money to Planned Parenthood.

His administration is the first to push several campaigns to end campus rape. He signed a long overdue bill of rights for survivors of sexual assault. He signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act and put equal pay higher up on our national priorities. He was the first president to fully support marriage equality. He put a record number of powerful women on the Supreme Court. And, he proudly calls himself a feminist. We say goodbye to the probably boldest president to ever fight for women, but welcome him beside us as a fierce ally.”

Note: A website search will turn up hundreds of other organizations including Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) which is an NGO that works to end human trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of women and children worldwide.

# GENDER RECONCILIATION

## **HeForShe**

**Founder: Emma Watson, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador**

**Website: [heforshe.org](http://heforshe.org)**

Emma Watson spoke at a special event for the HeForShe campaign, United Nations Headquarters, New York, September 20, 2014. Here is the first section of this speech which can be viewed on youtube.

“Today we are launching a campaign called “HeForShe.” I am reaching out to you because I need your help. We want to end gender inequality—and to do that we need everyone to be involved. This is the first campaign of its kind at the UN: we want to try and galvanize as many men and boys as possible to be advocates for gender equality. And we don’t just want to talk about it, but make sure it is tangible. I was appointed six months ago and the more I have spoken about feminism the more I have realized that fighting for women’s rights has too often become synonymous with man-hating. If there is one thing I know for certain, it is that this has to stop. For the record, feminism by definition is: ‘The belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes.’

“I started questioning gender-based assumptions when at eight I was confused at being called ‘bossy,’ because I wanted to direct the plays we would put on for our parents—but the boys were not. When at 14 I started being sexualized by certain elements of the press. When at 15 my girlfriends started dropping out of their sports teams because they didn’t want to appear ‘muscly.’ When at 18 my male friends were unable to express their feelings. I decided I was a feminist and this seemed uncomplicated to me. But my recent research has shown me that feminism has become an unpopular word.

“Apparently I am among the ranks of women whose expressions are seen as too strong, too aggressive, isolating, anti-men and, unattractive. Why is the word such an uncomfortable one? I am from Britain and think it is right that as a woman I am paid the same as my male counterparts. I think it is right that I should be able to make decisions about my own body. I think it is right that women be involved on my behalf in the policies and decision-making of my country. I think it is right that socially I am afforded the same respect as men. But sadly I can say that there is no one country in the world where all women can expect to receive these rights. No country in the world can yet say they have achieved gender equality.”

## GENDER EQUITY AND RECONCILIATION PROJECT

Co-founding directors: Cynthia Brix and Will Keepin have organized more than 100 intensive gatherings in nine countries for healing and reconciliation between women and men.

**Website: [genderreconciliationinternational.org](http://genderreconciliationinternational.org)**

The Gender Equity and Reconciliation Project has helped “thousands to heal and reawaken the hidden mysteries of the sacred masculine and feminine. They build trust and compassionate communication through a skillful combination of interactive exercises, contemplative practices, and transformative group process. Going beyond traditional psychological modalities, they’ll help you learn how to apply spiritual principles and practices to transform gender relations. Because gender is inherently entwined with the heart’s inmost yearning — for love, intimacy, and communion with the Ultimate Reality — skillful work with gender relations and masculine and feminine dynamics provides a powerful leverage point for awakening the power of love and compassion in groups and communities.”

With an Interfaith background, their website includes a list of thirteen Principles of Spiritual Activism. The eighth principle says, “Your work is for the world, not for you. In doing service work, you are working for others. The full harvest of your work may not take place in your lifetime, yet your efforts now are making possible a better life for future generations. Let your fulfillment come in gratitude for being called to do this work, and from doing it with as much compassion, authenticity, fortitude, and forgiveness as you can muster.”

## ORGANIZATIONS ABOUT TRANSFORMING MASCULINITY

### **MERGE for Equality.org**

Transforming Masculinity to Advance Gender Equality  
Compassion, Accountability, Partnership

Contact MERGE to get a copy of their new booklet, get on their email list, and attend their annual conference in June. MERGE training services include:

- Introduction to Healthy Men and Boys
- Change Maker Training – 2-day intensive

- Training of Trainers – 5-day intensive, followed by supervised field-work
- Advanced Training – Customized in-depth focus on a range of topics
- Keynote Presentations. \* Conference Workshops

“MERGE for Equality, Inc. works to advance the beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors that allow men and boys to **be their authentic selves** and **embrace their role** in ensuring gender equality. We do this with individuals, groups, and communities across the globe, **in alliance** with girls, women and all marginalized people.

There are three pillars of our work that are proven and remain constant. These are core elements, which MERGE embodies as we work to achieve our mission.

#### COMPASSION

We recognize that boys and men both benefit from, and are harmed by, gender inequality.

#### ACCOUNTABILITY

We believe boys and men have an important role in advancing gender equality.

#### PARTNERSHIP

We work to empower individuals and strengthen communities, by emphasizing collaboration and inclusiveness.”

These insights are shared on the website of Merge for Equality:

#### MERGE FOR EQUALITY cornerstones --

Natural State: Boys and men are naturally loving, life affirming and sustained by connection.

Current Reality: Far too often, boys and men are socialized in ways that promote emotional disconnection, social isolation, dominance and violence. Reinforcement of these social expectations are harmful to all people, including boys and men, relationships, families and communities. Boys and men also have access to opportunity, security and a variety of social benefits, not afforded to people of all genders. These privileges often lead to the oppression of women, children and marginalized groups, in subtle to extreme ways.

Catalyzing Strategy: MERGE seeks to transform how boys are socialized from a young age and engaged later in life as men. This shift is essential to achieving

gender equality. Core strategies for accomplishing this mission include: training and consulting services, annual summits and advocacy initiatives.

Desired Future: We envision a world that promotes the natural loving and life-affirming qualities of boys and men. This empowers boys and men to experience and help create healthy, compassionate, non-violent relationships and partner with people of all genders to serve as effective agents of change – to promote equality at home and in the community.

## **VOICE MALE MAGAZINE**

**Founder -- Rob Okun.** Website: [voicemalemagazine.org](http://voicemalemagazine.org)

A book is available collecting articles from past issues, called *Voice Male: The Untold Story of the Profeminist Men's Movement* by Rob Okun

Rob Okun writes in his article, “DONALD TRUMP AND THE CRISIS IN MASCULINITY,” that Trump’s actions highlight “a culture of sexual assault that men need to play a greater role in uprooting. I have been part of a movement committed to transforming masculinity for three decades.

The kind of manhood I want to pass on to my son and grandsons, and the hopes and dreams I have for my daughters and granddaughter, could not be more different from Mr. Trump’s, a man who is on tape admitting to sexually assaulting women. Ironically, through his vulgar remarks, he may have advanced our cause.

“Mr. Trump exhibits virtually every negative trait about manhood the gender justice movement is challenging. Antagonistic. Boastful. Bullying. Conceited. Condescending. Crude. Defensive. Dishonest. Entitled. Inflexible. Juvenile. Lacking in self-awareness. Merciless. Obstinate. Predatory. Privileged. Rapacious. Sexist. Vindictive. All ingredients in a toxic masculinity sludge that men and women in scores of countries around the world are working to eradicate.

“One organization, the global **MenEngage Alliance** and its 650-members in 66 countries, (including *Voice Male*), is committed to inoculating future generations of boys from the virulent strain of hate and misogyny Mr. Trump is spreading.

For decades, activist women have led the way in advancing gender justice; now men interested in equality for their mothers, wives, and daughters must help develop a social vaccine to protect against poisonous masculinity—as well as continuing to develop positive programs to raise healthy boys.

When men hear a man degrade women the way Mr. Trump did on the NBC tape, too often we walk away rather than confront the misogynist head on. Mr. Trump does not represent what most men think manhood is—or, more accurately—what humanness is.” (The entire article is available on line).

## FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

### **What is Feminism and Why Should We Do it?”**

from [feminismandreligion.com](http://feminismandreligion.com)

By Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ph.D. Professor of Feminist Theology at Claremont Graduate University and Claremont School of Theology.

“What is Feminism and why should we do it? Is it still relevant? Is it relevant cross culturally? Feminism basically means the affirmation of the full humanity of women. This means that all the ways women have been defined as inferior, secondary and dependent on men since the rise of Patriarchy roughly six-to ten thousand years ago are rejected. It means that women are affirmed as fully human, not partly human or complementary to the male, but with all human attributes and capacities, in relationships of both autonomy and mutually with other humans, male and female, as well as the ecosystem.

“Feminism is relevant cross culturally because all known cultures presently existing have been shaped in one way or another by patriarchy, although in different ways. Thus feminism must take a vast plurality of cultural contexts and forms. What it means will be different for working class African-American women than for middle class white women; different for Jewish or for Muslim women than for Christian women. These differences do not negate one another, unless some feminists make the mistake of thinking that their feminist context is normative. Rather this diversity is precisely the wonderful richness of feminism, its capacity and necessity of being articulated in many contexts and cultural locations.

“Feminism has accomplished a lot in the last hundred years since it began to reform law, culture and social relations in the late nineteenth century, but it has still only barely begun. Patriarchy is very deeply entrenched and has endless ways of reasserting its patterns of male domination, covertly and overtly. ... In other areas such as the West women are seduced by dress and appearance to play the roles of bodily mirroring of male power. Religion is evoked to shame and enforce patriarchy; but psychiatry and biological science can also been used to claim unquestionable authorization for women’s dependency.

“The accomplishments of feminism are made ephemeral. Their historical developments are eroded. Its history is not included in the collective memory of the society taught in school. Feminism has to be rediscovered and remade again and again.

“And yet patriarchy never fully wins because each generation ... is born with basic intuitions of their full humanity, their equal creative capacity, and rediscovers this in new ways. Their mothers and fathers remember some of what was accomplished by feminism as valuable human flourishing and pass it in to daughters and sons.

“Feminism is about both women and men. It affirms women’s full humanity, but it is not a putdown of men’s humanity. Rather it is a critique of patriarchy as a system that distorts the humanity of both women and men. Men are distorted by patriarchy both in being socialized into aggression, but also shamed when they seek their other creativities. Feminism critiques both distortions, and liberates men as well as women.

“To ask if it is still relevant ... is to have a very dim and inadequate grasp of the vastness of the feminist task, and the extent of the human history in so many different cultures around the world have been deformed and are still being deformed by patriarchy. Yet the capacity of patriarchal culture to repress the feminist questions, to shame those who ask them, to make it appear that the success of a few exceptional ruling class women have finished the work of feminism, means that it takes courage to speak up, to oppress ridicule and negation and to rethink in each different situation what needs to be done to affirm women’s full humanness in community with other women and men, here, now and in this context.”

### **Internalized Sexism / Internalized Misogyny**

**"When I Doubt Myself and other women –  
Challenging internalized sexism / internalized misogyny"**

**This material was written by Cultural Bridges to Justice.  
Website: [culturalbridgestojustice.org](http://culturalbridgestojustice.org)**

“Cultural bridges to justice was founded in 1986 by jona olsson to provide anti-oppression/ social justice workshops, keynotes, and consulting for not-for-profit organizations, social change groups, universities, fire and emergency services and

communities in the United States and the United Kingdom. Since 1986, cultural bridges to justice has grown into a consortium of competent, highly effective, passionate trainers and activists from across the United States who have trained hundreds of groups.”

Cultural Bridges to Justice writes in their website:

“Internalized sexism is defined as the involuntary belief by girls and women that the lies, stereotypes and myths about girls and women that are delivered to everyone in a sexist society ARE TRUE. Girls and women, boys and men hear the sexist messages (lies and stereotypes) about women over their entire lifetimes. They hear that women are stupid, weak, passive, manipulative, with no capacity for intellectual pursuits or leadership.

“There are two logical, predictable consequences of a lifetime of such messages. First, boys / men will grow to believe many of the messages, and treat women accordingly. They will be thoroughly indoctrinated into their role in sexism, protecting their male privilege by colluding with the perpetuation of sexism.

“But there is a second logical consequence - the same messages also stick to girls and women, resulting in internalized sexism / internalized misogyny. Women and girls are taught to act out the lies and stereotypes, doubting themselves and other females (sometimes called “horizontal hostility.”) This is the way women collude with the perpetuation of sexism.

“For the sexist system to be maintained and passed on to the next generation, we all must believe the messages (lies and stereotypes) to some degree, and collude with sexism by performing our assigned roles.”

**BOOK -- AMERICAN GIRLS: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers by Nancy Jo Sales, Alfred A. Knopf.**

After interviewing 200 girls over two and a half years, Nancy Jo Sales states that the biggest difference between time and decades ago is that young people currently are watching violent and degrading porn on a daily basis. She writes how girls suffer from this ‘necessary evil’ of social media. “It’s an inextricable part of daily life — ‘Girls our age live on their phones,’ one 16-year-old says — but it’s also a source of anxiety and jealousy and a tool for harassment and abuse.”

In Anna North's review in the NY Times, she writes: "Thirteen-year-old Cassy (Sales changed her teenage subjects' names) says boys her age "blackmail" girls for nude pictures: 'They say, Oh, I have embarrassing pictures of you, if you don't send nudes I'll send them all out on social media.' If a girl relents, boys may share the nude picture with others, or post it to an Instagram account devoted to such images. Says Cassy, 'Everyone winds up having it.' Anecdotes like this make a persuasive case that social media has ratcheted up the pressure girls have long faced to appear both desirable and chaste."

"I think a lot of people are not aware of how the atmosphere has really changed in social situations ... in terms of how the girls are treated and how the boys behave," Sales says. "This is a kind of sexism and misogyny being played out in real time in this really extreme way. This is a pressure on social media that goes back, for women and girls, a long time. ... back to a site called "Hot or Not" which came out in 2000. ... The whole idea of "hotness" has become such a factor in the lives of American girls, unfortunately, because according to many, many studies, including a really landmark\_report by the APA in 2007, this has wide-ranging ramifications for girls' health and well-idea being, including studies that link this pressure to sexualize on all kinds of things like rising anxiety, depression, cutting, eating disorders. It's a thing that I don't think that boys have to deal with as much."

## CLOSING

At the Seeing Red Conference, a lunch-time discussion group learned about the conditions revealed in Nancy Jo Sale's book. The women present at that table, spanning ages 40 to 80, passionately felt grief and alarm for the pressures that girls of today are living with. It was then that the archetype -- Keeper of the Fire -- came to the fore in my mind as a supportive force aiding us in speaking out.

The opposite of violence is connection. The opposite of a place of attack and defensiveness is a place where the universal language of collaboration, feedback, responsiveness and belonging is spoken.

How do young people place themselves within the generations whose moral leadership has upheld essential human values?

For twenty-three years I have been directing feminist summer camps in Deerfield, Massachusetts called Journey Camp. At Moonseed, a feminist session of

Journey Camp for teens, we asked the participants to create prayers for the future at the closing. Here are some of their wishes:

“I wish for the girls of the world to know and believe their value.”

“I wish for everyone to treat each other with kindness.”

The exploitation of women is an elephant in the room for society, and also within the Peace Movement. It is not to be sidelined as a “woman’s issue.” It’s a human rights issue, but it is more than that, too. Sexism is a linchpin that keeps global violence and militarism operating as the norm.

There’s a new type of divestment needed. **Individuals need to divest themselves from participating in rape culture.**

There is an epidemic. If we face the facts of victimization and “othering” of women, we see the realities of rape, trafficking, child pornography, boys taught on the internet to gravitate toward pornography, girls taught by the media that their sexualization at a young age is their access to power and self-worth. In these situations the majority of world citizens have their core worth trampled. The assumptions of militarism and consumerism depend upon what has been known as women’s values being rejected and vilified.

War makes war on essential human values. The upholders of these values have been women. As the signs at the Women’s March said, women’s values are human values. A way of life that is exploitative and violent is being replaced through a broad moral revolution.

After a member of the Moonseed community died of suicide, these prayers were written:

“I wish for every girl to wake up each day knowing that she is wanted and loved so that she never feels that it would be better if she left.”

“May they build strong hearts from heartbreaks instead of losing themselves.”

During the dialogues that you yourself participate in, at the closing of your session, wishes can be written and saved. Here is one more wish from Moonseed Camp: “I wish that someday very soon all of us will be valued for our strength and deep wisdom so we don’t have to hide our strength or belittle it any longer.”

## **Imagine a Girl**

A poem collectively written at Journey Camp at the first teen leadership weekend for Girls Week by Meg Cook, Molly Lieberman, Sarah Pirtle, Melanie Meier, Maria Douglas, Isolina Leiva-Bowes, Sarah Brown-Anson, Jody Massa, Jessie Owens, and Miriam Lefler.

Imagine a girl who believes  
that it is right and good she is a girl,  
A girl who feels comfortable in her own skin.

Imagine a girl who writes her own lyrics,  
but opens her ears to other's music,  
A girl who speaks her true voice.

Imagine a girl who takes risks and pushes her limits,  
A girl who isn't afraid to conquer her fears.

Imagine a girl who sees all points of the spectrum  
Even if she disagrees.

Imagine a girl who meets conflict with compassion,  
A girl with the ability to forgive others.

Imagine a girl who changes how she's treated other girls  
Because she feels safe enough to change.

Imagine a girl who doesn't have to fear other girls, who can talk  
about what she wants, who doesn't have to be afraid of not  
being liked.

Imagine a girl who recognizes potential within herself  
and others,  
Who follows her passions to find her gifts.

Imagine a girl who feels connected  
to the strong line of women who have come before,  
a girl who knows her heritage.

Imagine a girl who runs into the future  
with an open mind,  
Who isn't afraid of its bitter-sweetness.

Imagine a girl who loves the whole thing of life,  
Who doesn't look for perfection.  
A girl who embraces all that life has to offer.

Imagine yourself as this girl.