

David Benatar

Second Sexism: Discrimination Against Men and Boys

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Reviewed by Ward E. Jones and Lindsay Kelland

Narrated by Kelsey Borrowman

"If we come across one person unjustifiably hurting another, it is not clear that we should be much, or at all, concerned by the fact that the perpetrator is getting blisters on his hand in the process. Indeed, we believe that this is precisely the way to describe the phenomena with which Benatar is concerned: men are hurting themselves in the process of hurting women."

As one would expect from David Benatar, his new book is clear, well-written, and tantalizingly contentious. It is also misguided, superficial, and, ultimately, very difficult to take seriously.

The central claim of Benatar's book is that, throughout history and at present throughout the world, men and boys have become the victims of pervasive and disadvantageous discrimination; hence a "second sexism" that targets men. Although he is at pains not to compare the *extent* of discrimination against females with that against males, his aim is nevertheless that of establishing some *moral parity* between the two. The book establishes neither of the two claims it sets out to defend--neither that men are the victims of pervasive discrimination, nor that there is any moral parity between discrimination against women and that (supposed by Benatar) against men.

One of the great theoretical achievements of twentieth-century feminism is that discrimination against females is part of--and explained by--a much larger phenomenon of *patriarchy*--the broad and pervasive attempt by men to control the lives of women and girls. Social expectations--often internalized by women themselves--that women should not work outside of the home, and should take a larger role than men in the raising of children, are part of a larger phenomenon of men attempting to keep women out of the public workplace. The worldwide and ongoing occurrence of male-on-female rape is part of a larger phenomenon of men exerting control over women's bodies. The quotidian practice of men placing less trust in what women say than in what men say is part of a larger phenomenon of attempting to control women's voices. The most significant shortcoming of Benatar's book arises from its author's refusal to acknowledge that patriarchy exists and his refusal to engage with the possibility that patriarchy is responsible for the phenomena he seeks to explain.

Early on in *Second Sexism*, Benatar admits that discrimination against men and boys is not part of any larger phenomenon of oppression or domination of men and boys. This, by itself, removes a good deal of the book's claimed significance: even if men and boys are being disadvantaged in some way, their lives are not being disadvantaged by *another* group of people. Rather, it would seem that if men are indeed being discriminated against, then the responsibility for that discrimination lies largely with other men. They are--as the gender in power--discriminating against themselves.

This is not an uninteresting result. Nor, it would seem, is it undeserving of philosophical attention. However, it is important to see that the situation being described here is morally very different from that described by feminists. There is no significant moral parity between the oppressive discrimination against women by men and the *self*-discrimination against men by (largely) men. If we come across one person unjustifiably hurting another, it is not clear that we should be much, or at all, concerned by the fact that the perpetrator is getting blisters on his hand in the process. Indeed, we believe that this is precisely the way to describe the phenomena with which Benatar is concerned: men are hurting themselves in the process of hurting women.

To see this, we need to look at some of Benatar's examples of the disadvantages that men suffer, and at what kind of discriminatory agency might be responsible for these disadvantages. Some of Benatar's examples of men's disadvantages--for example, that in most public toilets there are no stalls between urinals, that men's contraceptive choices are limited to vasectomies and condoms--can be set aside as insignificant (and silly). Others are significant--for example, that men are dying younger than women and doing less well in education--but can be set aside as not the result of any discriminatory agency.^[1] This leaves his primary examples: men are more often than women conscripted into the military, men are more often than women the victims of violence, and men (in the military) and boys (at schools) are more often than women and girls the receivers of corporal punishment.

Benatar offers the simple suggestion that these three situations in which men are disadvantaged are to be explained by certain socially pervasive beliefs; primary among these is his jaw-droppingly daft suggestion that the first two--men are more commonly conscripted into military service and are more commonly victims of violence--are to be explained by the widespread belief that men are less valuable than women. We believe that there are far more plausible explanations available; what is more, these more plausible explanations leave no room for a "second sexism." We take these in turn.

Why are men far more commonly conscripted into the military than women? Our suspicion is that the answer requires making reference to the patriarchal attitude that military business--like all business outside of the home--is men's business. Military business is a dangerous activity, but someone has to do it, and those someones must not be women. If someone is to be forced to do this work, then, according to these patriarchal attitudes, it has to be men. This is something that men *just have* to do. Is this a bad thing for those men who are conscripted? Perhaps, although note that service in the military--conscripted or not--has long been associated not with feelings of shame or hardship, but with feelings of pride, duty, honor, valor, and courage. Should the practice of gendered conscription be eradicated? Probably. Is this because there is a second sexism going on here? Certainly not. Patriarchy explains the entire phenomenon.

Why are men far more commonly the victims of violence than women? First, it is important to note that, for the most part, men are not targets of violence *as men*. The reason that the majority of people killed by handguns in the US each year are men has nothing to do with an epidemic of "men-killers." What does it have to do with? Our suggestion is that, as with the military example, it has to do with men being the major players in the public sphere (which includes armed robbery, drug-dealing, gang activity, organized crime, being a cop on the beat, and so on). The greater involvement of men in violence stems precisely from the greater access that men have to this more-violent public sphere. As with the previous disadvantage--that of conscription--we need only to turn to patriarchy (and not a "second sexism") to understand this. As Benatar notes, there have been, historically, situations in which men are targeted *qua* men, but such targetings tend to have a military-like agenda. In Rwanda, for example, Tutsi men and boys were especially hunted down and killed in order to avoid retaliation by future generations; as we saw above, military affairs--in this case, the protection of Hutus as having sole sovereignty over Rwanda--is a business that is to be left between men.

In stark contrast to the violence perpetrated against men, the reason that the vast majority of people raped each year are women has *everything* to do with their being women; rape is a patriarchal phenomenon. Benatar refuses to acknowledge this. For example, he claims that "When men (or women) are the victims of violence, it does not really matter whether the perpetrator is of the same sex or a different sex. What matters is that they have been attacked" (123). However, a good deal of recent philosophical work on sexual assault, by Debra Bergoffen, Ann Cahill, Louise du Toit, and others, convincingly shows that the fact that women are raped *by men* is essential to understanding not only the nature of the assault, but, moreover, the harm that this type of rape causes. Two pages later Benatar writes that "It is no coincidence that males constitute the majority of victims of violence. It is because there are stronger social norms discouraging violence against women. Even if one thought that females were less capable of defending themselves and thus required some additional social protection, it is still the case that the social norms more than compensate women for any defense disadvantage they might have" (125). This claim is outright contradicted by global rape statistics. What "social norms discouraging violence against women" have protected rape victims, and how have women been "compensated" by them?

Let us turn to the third way in which Benatar thinks that men are disadvantaged. Why are men and boys far more commonly the receivers of corporal punishment than women and girls? In order to explain this phenomenon, we believe that one should appeal to the patriarchal attitude that women are to be physically protected, combined with an old (and hopefully dying) belief that physical punishment is more appropriate or effective than nonphysical punishment. The upshot of these two beliefs is that the default state--appropriate and effective physical punishment--is applied to men and boys, whereas the patriarchal belief in women's need to be protected exempts them from such punishment. (It is telling that Benatar never considers the possibility that women and girls are being discriminated against by the *noncorporal* punishment that they, but not the men and boys, receive.) Are men and boys being unduly harmed by this biased practice? Perhaps. Should it be gotten rid of? Probably. Do we need a second sexism to explain it? No, just the one will do.

In all three of these cases, what Benatar sees as discrimination against men is better seen as a side-effect of discrimination against women. Benatar has heard much of this before,^[2] but he does not buy any of it. First, he does not believe in the ongoing existence of patriarchy, at least in Western developed countries. In the face of this denial, the book cannot be said to be in dialogue with contemporary feminism (as it so desperately wishes to be), and, as we have said above, we think it loses pretty much all of its interest. Second, Benatar is eager to point out that in most cases, the discrimination he is concerned to point to will be a discrimination against certain men ("plebian males") by other men ("alpha males"). Benatar does not seem to notice the obvious implication of this claim, namely that we are no longer talking about gender discrimination, but about something like *class* or *race* discrimination.

We cannot help thinking that the phenomena Benatar gathers together could have been explored in an interesting and worthwhile book, investigating, for example, the various ways in which the patriarchal system results in men harming themselves. We suspect that such harms arise not only directly but also in complex and indirect ways, with the aid of various "chivalrous" codes that men have developed for praising--and thus encouraging--their own self-destructive behavior. We believe that men can be, and are, disadvantaged by patriarchy itself and that, given this, serving women's needs--working to defy and undermine patriarchy--will also certainly benefit men. Alternatively, in the light of the class and race concerns that we saw Benatar raise in the previous paragraph, Benatar could have written on the various ways in which men of certain classes or races can be harmed by men *and* women of other classes or races. In the face of what he *could have* written, what we get from Benatar comes as a great disappointment: a set of feeble attempts to portray men as victims and a litany of complaints against feminism for not letting us notice this.

Early on in the book, Benatar complains about potential *ad hominem* responses to him, arguing that they "would be irrelevant to determining whether my arguments are sound" (17). This may be right, and *ad hominem* comments must be chosen with careful consideration. However, in the face of such weak arguments from Benatar, we believe that personal questions about him are raised. What is Benatar really up to, and what has motivated him to write this book? Although he says early on in the book that he is not interested in critiquing feminism, it is, in reality, the most significant target of *Second Sexism*. We think that Benatar is motivated less by a concern for men than he is with attacking feminism. If he were really concerned with understanding the plight of any group of people, one would think that he would have modestly realized that he has a lot to learn from the rich tradition of feminist observation and theorization. Benatar does not see it this way. What we get instead, at the very end of the book, is a five-page dismissal of feminist thought (248–52).

In the end, *Second Sexism* strikes us as the work of a man who is nothing short of *jealous* of the attention that the feminists give to women. What about men, he is saying, what about our adversities? This is certainly understandable. From the viewpoint of a man, feminism does not make for joyous self-discovery, and so we recognize that it can be difficult to accept the reality of being on the male side of patriarchy. We also recognize that there may well be some good philosophy books to come out of that difficulty. *Second Sexism* is not one of them.

[1] Benatar also notes that there is little "outcry" about these phenomena, although there would be if women were on the wrong side of them. This may be right, but if so it represents a *neglect* of men rather than a discrimination against them.

[2] For example, in the four responses to Benatar's paper "Second Sexism," from which this book was developed. All appear in *Social Theory and Practice* 29:2 (2003).

Ward E. Jones teaches in the Philosophy Department at Rhodes University, and he writes in the areas of metaphilosophy, epistemology, moral psychology, and the aesthetics of narratives. He is co-editor of the journal *Philosophical Papers*. w.jones@ru.ac.za

Lindsay Kelland is a postdoctoral fellow with the Critical Studies in Sexualities and Reproduction Research Program in the Psychology Department at Rhodes University, and works on issues surrounding gender, abortion, and sexual violence. She is the managing editor of the journal *Psychology and Feminism*. kellandl@gmail.com
