

# WHAT IS MISOGYNY?

By Charles Davis | Photographed by Tyler Harris

Why Black Men  
should stop  
referring to Black  
Women as “females”



Misogyny is an elusive concept. This is not because we cannot comprehend what it means when explained; it is because many of us are still trying to understand what 'sexism' and 'patriarchy' really mean. In addition, misogyny is too easily reduced to extreme forms of how women and girls are despised and disregarded which we often feel mischaracterizes how we think of our own relationships to women and girls.

The reality is that misogyny works as part and parcel of concepts like patriarchy. Patriarchy is broadly defined as a structure of authority that privileges men and places them in powerful positions within institutions, organizations, and interpersonal relationships, all of which is at the exclusion and expense of women. Similarly, sexism refers to overlapping social, economic, and political systems of disadvantage on the basis of biological sex or gender identity. Misogyny, as a tool of sexism and patriarchy, then works to further limit and exclude women, effeminate men, trans and gender non-conforming people from the rights and conditions to act freely on their own behalf.

Altogether, the trifecta of patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny can easily apply to many of the everyday ways we as Black men feel the need to be the judge and jury of women's autonomy and right to self-determination. This may function simply as our own entitlement to women's attention, affection, and care, whether or not we reciprocate those behaviors as men. In fact, we are often motivated to recognize women's humanity only in as much as it serves our own desires for what emotional and physical labor the women in our lives perform to our benefit. Here's the thing about misogyny: it disguises our motivations for treating women and girls with the respect and dignity they deserve as well-intentioned and selfless when they are actually self-serving. Consider the nature of our relationships to women generally and Black women more specifically. From an early age, other men in our lives and what Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins calls the "controlling images" in media shape how we understand and accept as normal relationships between Black men and Black women as transactional. Regardless of our intention, the impact of these transactions is almost always orchestrated to the advantage of men and to the detriment of women. That is, we are taught how to persuade, coerce, and exploit women for their loyalty, their love, their money, their bodies, and other parts of them with relatively little to offer in return. We are also taught to offer them protection, regardless of our offering being solicited, in ways that usually makes that protection conditional, a more common form of "pimping" that may look different but often feels the same.

Finally, we are taught to think of and engage with Black women in the ways the larger white supremacist world engages with us as Black people, which is to disregard and dispose of them because we don't see them as primarily equal. Instead, and in all the ways our oppressors continue to see us as their property, we are taught to uniquely see Black women as objects to use at our discretion and for our pleasure. It is why we commonly refer to them as 'females' rather than women. To be sure, the terms male and female are, at best, descriptors that suggest a particular anatomy or biological sex of human and non-human living things. And, although we believe "male" and "female" to be the same as the terms "man" and "woman," which are really nothing more than labels society has (re)created to categorize behaviors commonly associated with masculinity and femininity, they are actually different. For that reason, referring to Black women as females further removes them from their humanity in exchange for something, anything else in nature. And because we are also taught to regard human life in higher esteem than other living things, the language of separating Black women from their humanity allows us to think of them as unworthy of the same respectful and dignified treatment we expect as Black men. Similarly, this is why using the term "bitch," which originated as a reference to female dogs, to refer to women and to characterize their behaviors when they challenge our own efforts to control and dominate them must also be discontinued.

While the above examples are clearly sexist they are also deeply anti-Black, a convergence of racism and sexism that Moya Bailey and Trudy termed misogynoir. To be sure, we engage in misogyny and misogynoir as a result of having been so disempowered and dehumanized by the violence of interpersonal and systemic racism. For that reason, we are left to grasp at whatever semblance of power to which we have access and that is our privileged position as men and masculine identified folks in a patriarchal society. So, ` Will we continue to dismiss these casual and accepted ways of being? Or, will we heed the instructive lessons from Brother Malcolm, W.E.B. DuBois, and Frederick Douglass, our feminist forefathers who understood what foremother Anna Julia Cooper meant when she declared to the world in 1892: "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole...race enters with me'? I insist that we not only answer the call, brothers, but that we also fall back from our ascribed positions as charismatic leaders to listen to, learn from, and follow the leadership of Black women. More importantly, we must do all that we can intercede between them and the world that seeks to do them harm, even when that means protecting them from other men as well as ourselves.