

What Does it Mean to Respect Women?

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

The Nation of Islam (NOI) popularized the slogan, “Respect, Protect, Love the Black Woman.” This is still a popular slogan displayed on t-shirts, sweaters, hoodies and other objects.

However, the NOI is the most rigidly patriarchal organization in Black America. Like their counterparts in the Catholic Church and other religions, members of the NOI do not respect women as equals, or as leaders of men. Their conception of respect is important, but still very superficial and limited.

It is certainly important not to call women derogatory names. However, to insist in the name of God/and or culture that men must lead them is the height of disrespect.

White evangelicals were caught in a bind in 2008 when John McCain unexpectedly chose Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential candidate during the 2008 US Presidential election. White evangelicals have tried to consistently argue that men are supposed to lead women. However, considering their hatred and distrust of Democrats, they had to find a rationalization for the support of a highly unqualified woman on the Republican ticket. Therefore, many White evangelicals “reasoned” that women only have to be submissive to their *husbands*.

Progressive religionists also use rationalizations to *defend* women’s rights. For example, they will claim that according to their “interpretation” of the Bible (which is apparently the only *legitimate* interpretation), God considers men and women to be equals. They contend that Paul’s sexist statements were only meant for a small subset of early Christians. This despite the fact that the biblical God is hopelessly and mercilessly hyper-masculine and patriarchal.

One major obstacle to genuine respect for women is bibliolatry, or the worship of the Bible. Many people respect the Bible – an object – more than they respect women and women’s rights. Only when we place people before objects will we be able to achieve universal human rights.

However, how lightly must we tread when it comes to critiquing harmful though deeply cherished religious and cultural objects and belief systems? If we truly respect women, we must reject Female Genital Mutilation (FGM.) At some point, we might have to choose between defending an object or practice, or respecting women by challenging the object or practice responsible for their oppression. For a truly humane and rational person, though, the choice should not be that difficult. We must forcefully, unapologetically, and consistently oppose harmful religious and cultural practices in order to demonstrate respect for women.

We must respect women as leaders of men. After all, women have shown for millennia that they can successfully lead men. Harriet Tubman was a leader that any reasonably intelligent enslaved man would have followed to freedom. The Black Lives Matter movement was started by Black women and women have demonstrated brilliant leadership in many other areas. All they need is opportunity.

If we truly respect women, they should be paid fairly. Women still make less than men in the workforce. We should all be advocating equal pay for equal work across the board.

By truly respecting women, we improve society with their brain power and humanity. The wealthiest, most democratic and happiest societies in the world today are those where women are most free. Conversely, those societies in which women's rights are least likely to flourish tend to be poor, undemocratic and unhappy.

It has been said that respect must be earned, not freely granted. However, how much more must women do before they are genuinely respected? As W.E.B. Du Bois noted, to no race are the women more important than to the Black race. Indeed, Black women from slavery to the present have had to endure forced servitude, Jim Crow *and* sexism! Without their endurance and love, without their important contributions to Black life, it is frightening to think what might have become of Black people. Yet Black women are still widely respected by Black men and by White men that deem them "angry" and so forth.

Some Afrocentrists romanticize Africa and completely disregard the history of sexism among African people. They maintain that African societies historically

have been matriarchal. This is false, however. African cultures have been *matrilineal*, that is to say, descent and kinship have been traced through the mother. As in most other parts of the world though, African women still have to deal with disrespect through sexism.

Last but not least, women's sexuality and sexual freedom must be respected. We must do away with the sexist double standards, the slut-shaming and so forth. Women should be free to pursue sexual enjoyment without being made to feel self-conscious about it. As long as double standards exist, there can be no true respect for women.

The next time we hear men talk about respect for women, we should carefully inquire into what they mean. Oftentimes, these are just buzz words to sucker women into the patriarchy.

Don't let 'em do it!