

# Cisheterosexism

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## The term

This word is formed by the combination of the following stems and affixes:

- CIS-: Latin prefix that stands for “on this side of” or “on the same side as”. It is used to refer to people whose gender identity—and, presumably, gender expression—coincides with the gender they were assigned at birth.
- HETERO-: Greek root meaning “different”. Foucault (1995) describes how identities based on sexual orientation were socially constructed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after which the original Greek term came to be used to label persons who are attracted to the opposite sex.
- SEXISM: it refers to “the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over the other and thereby the right to dominance” (Lorde, 2013, p. 45). Considering the social assumption that sex and gender must align with each other, it describes the secular subordination of women to men based on their gender.

## Key ideas and definition

“Cis-“ implies gender binary essentialism or biological essentialism, which states the existence of just two sexes and genders, with clear-cut, one-to-one correspondence between them: male-man and female-woman, thus effectively banning the existence of trans people. According to this logic, the biological given (sex) must agree with the social construct (gender), making any other possible interaction between them abnormal. On top of this distinction, endless social conventions have standardised what it means to be truly feminine and masculine, with no acceptance of intermediate lifestyles, like non-binary individuals.

Adding complexity to the concept, the second main idea is what Rich (1996) named as “compulsory heterosexuality”: in a world where only two sexes exist, every person must feel attracted to another of the opposite sex. As the author herself puts it, “heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force” (Rich, 1980, p. 648).

Within the logic explained so far, which reduces endless possible combinations of attractions, physical characteristics and social conventions into contrasting binaries, the word's ending "sexism" involves the privileges granted to just one hyperlegitimised identity: cisheterosexual men. However, a privilege can only be held at the expense of someone else's loss of rights. The consequence of the combination of gender hierarchy and heteronormativity (Butler, 2007) is then clear: cisheterosexual men are the social norm and measure; anyone who does not comply by what it means to be a cisheterosexual man will suffer. In short, "sexism" reveals ~~makes us aware of~~ the essential punitive aspect of cisheterosexism, whose victims, given the gender binary logic, are women as a whole, non-cisheteronormative men and non-binary and genderqueer individuals (Serrano, 2007).

In conclusion, as a type of domination by a social group over another (Hovarth, 1972), cisheterosexism can be considered as one of the many manifestations of colonialism in its broadest sense, as Manning et al. (2020) define it: "an intersectionally constituted colonial structure designed to privilege particular intersectional modes of embodiment, identity, and relationality as it dominates others" (p. 6).

Cisheterosexism is, undoubtedly, a "social organization of sexuality" (Rubin, 1975, p. 168). Kate Millet (2000), defining patriarchy, stated that "sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (p. 25). Is (cishetero)sexism synonym to (cishetero)patriarchy?

Regarding their meaning, it must be admitted the terms describe the same phenomenon. However, they are not easily interchangeable, as (cishetero)patriarchy implies a political, activist connotation (cishetero)sexism does not so clearly (López Medina, 2020). In fact, the ~~usual~~ association of patriarchy with other manifestations of exclusion and dominance like imperialism, white supremacy or capitalism (Hooks, 2004) is not unusual. As a result, in some contexts, the word "cisheterosexism" may be regarded as more appropriate than "cisheteropatriarchy" and vice versa.

### **Cisheterosexism in education**

The effects of cisheterosexism are universal and not restricted to education. In general terms, they can be summarised as violence evidenced by sexism and LGBTQphobia, both understood in their broadest sense so as to include ~~though~~ their most varied manifestations, which will vary depending on the context, from the slightest comment to physical attacks among many others.

Focusing on formal education, no school system will admit to educating in prejudice and privilege. It is a fact they do, though. Cisheterosexist teachings are not part of their official syllabus but of the hidden curriculum (Torres, 1998), conveyed by practices, routines, resources, discourses, representations, exercises, methodologies and, very often, silences (López Medina, 2020), eventually leading to the uncritical reinforcement and reproduction of hegemonic powers in society.

It is important to reflect on this, as schools are one of the power mechanisms (Foucault, 1992) that shape individuals. They instil binary concepts like normal/abnormal, good/bad, superior/inferior, legal/illegal, central/marginal, sane/insane and many more, which are implicitly and explicitly applied to people's identity in terms of gender and sexuality, thus creating a hierarchy of privileges and oppressions (Preciado, 2003).

Torres (1998) describes how sexism shapes education in different ways. Among them, the teachers' different expectations for boys and girls or teachers' differentiated reactions to students' behaviour must be highlighted. Even more, in some places it is still socially accepted that girls and boys study separately or divergent contents with different resources, which, to make matters worse, hardly ever offer examples of leading women.

Similarly, homophobia or oppositional sexism (Serrano, 2007), as umbrella terms equivalent to LGBTQphobia, is also pervading in education. It is not uncommon to know about physical and verbal attacks to students and teachers on grounds of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Again, the hidden curriculum that permeates schools leads to their authorities silencing the victims and minimising violence, a proven symptom of institutional homophobia (Pichardo et al., 2015).

Although homophobia is a cultural content (Borrillo, 2001) transmitted in very similar ways to that of sexism, it is instilled not only through the hidden curriculum (Torres, 1998), like when all the representations of householders are women, but through utter silence, known as null curriculum (Eisner, 1994). LGBTQ+ people are usually blatantly omitted in school discourses, and their representation is purposefully deleted in most school resources. Another example is the scarce use of inclusive language in formal education, which also erases both women and non-binary persons (López Medina, 2020).

In short, the education system contributes to LGBTQ+ people assuming that the role society expects them to play is secondary, submissive and hidden. Schools teach them to admit that their lifestyle is not meant to be public, but to be kept private and discreet, social expectation that some authors name as liberal homophobia (Borrillo, 2001). It also often leads to homonormativity (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013): their desire to fit into society by appearing as heteronormative as possible. By doing so, they are able to retain some

privileges cisheterosexism would deny them, should they choose to lead an openly queer lifestyle.

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