Consciousness Raising Testimonies on "What is My Oppression"
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Topic: Speaking and writing about my own oppression/what is my stake in the movement
for change

Weight has always been a source of worry and pain for me. In elementary school
I was a little overweight. Babyfat, I guess you'd call it, but I don't believe I was ever
really medically obese. That's hard for any kid, but especially if you are a girl. I
remember the pain of being picked last for teams, being made fun of by other kids, and
even being made fun of by the PE teachers. My weight was a constant source of
humiliation for me.

Boys who were two or even three times more overweight didn't get picked on as
much as I did. In fact, for the few overweight boys in my class, weight was a source of
pride or even power—they were bigger than the other boys and that was a GOOD thing.
They clownied around about being fat, bragged about how much food they could eat. But
for me, a girl, even though I was more chubby than fat—well, it was too horrible to even
joke about. A source of shame.

In high school I grew out of chubbiness. But still I felt fat. I wanted to be as thin
as the popular and beautiful cheerleaders. I knew some boys who were lifeguards and I
wanted them to like me, find me attractive. They would talk about the girls in my class,
who was "fat," who had a good body. I'd see them on the beach and they would rank
the woman as she walked by—a little bit on breast size, but mostly on how thin she was
and how much cellulite she had. Some of them had T-shirts and stickers that said "No fat
chicks." I was the platonic friend of more than a few guys, and they talked openly in
front of me about how disgusting they thought this or that woman was—all of them
normal weight or even on the skinny side. But they thought a woman who was a size 7 or
size 9 was fat, and they were quite open about their disgust. Did they think that about
me? I thought I was fat—they must, too. Did they think that about me? No wonder I
never got any dates, I thought.

When I was 17 I started "dieting" in earnest. This consisted of eating nothing but
cantaloupe for days. I remember being on a lunch break and staring at an apple. I
wanted it so badly. Finally I broke down and ate it. I felt so guilty afterwards, I went
into the bathroom and started doing something I never did before—made myself throw
up. I kept that up for about 6 months, vomiting whenever I thought I'd overeaten—
maybe once every other day. I got down to 112 pounds. I felt really proud—but I still
felt fat. I finally quit vomiting regularly. I knew it was dangerous—that if I didn't stop
soon I might not be able to stop. But still over the years—I sink back into it sometimes
when I'm feeling particularly fat and disgusted with myself. It's embarrassing and I try
to hide it when I do it.
Of course the inevitable happened and I started gaining weight back. I couldn’t stay 112 pounds without starving myself, and vomiting. As I started growing older and my metabolism slowed, I put on a little more weight. By the time my class reunion rolled around, I was up to 150 pounds. Again, not medically overweight, but by men’s standards, fat. I was determined to lose it for my reunion—and, I was ending a long term relationship and I knew if I was going to attract another man I’d have to lose weight. So I started doing Slim-Fast. When I did eat food I made sure it was vegetables, fruit, or low fat yogurt. I lost 20 pounds this way. I was surprised at how differently I was treated by men. Men who had paid little attention to me before, now found me fascinating and sought me out at parties. Men at the Jiffy Lube were especially solicitous. It was wonderful to have men flirt with me, vie for my attention, ask for my phone number. It was also infuriating. I was the same person as when I was 20 pounds heavier. What the hell was going on? It made me disgusted.

Now I’m going out with a guy I’m really crazy about. He only knows the thin me. I worry about gaining the weight back. I know I should exercise, but I hate exercising—I’ve told him that I’ve lost a lot of weight. It’s sick but I’m proud of it—at the same time it infuriates me that I had to do it. Our sex life is really good and he tells me how much he likes my body. It used to make me feel good but lately it makes me paranoid—like, I better not gain any weight or he won’t think I’m beautiful anymore. I think the reason it now makes me feel bad instead of good is because he has started saying little things. He asked me what size jeans I wore. I got the feeling he was scrutinizing me when I ordered food out. He talked about getting us each a pair of Roller Blades as an anniversary present—a nice present but I got the feeling he wanted to get me on an exercise program. Then one day he asked me if I’d gained any weight. “No, as a matter of fact I’ve lost weight,” I calmly replied. But inside I felt like he’d put a knife in me. I knew I hadn’t gained weight but I started to panic. My god! He thinks I’m getting fat! I wondered if he was really thinking what I’d heard my guy friends in high school say when they were rating women. He’s worried I’m going to get fat—he knew I was before—I never should have told him. He really has been watching what I eat like a hawk. Then I felt crushed. Because I knew I would never be able to eat in front of him without worrying—he thinks I’m a pig. In the back of my mind when we are making love I’ll wonder if he’s secretly turned off by my soft stomach. I won’t feel as comfortable naked in front of him (not that I ever felt TOTALLY at ease). And if I do gain weight—maybe he won’t make love to me anymore. Do my saggy breasts bother him, too?

Two days later I asked him if he was worried I was going to get fat. There was a long silence. The silence was excruciatingly painful—he admitted that he was. I started crying—sobbing really. Quickly he said, “But it’s only because I know how good you feel about yourself since you’ve lost weight! You know it’s normal to gain weight when you’re in a relationship...I’ve put on a little weight...” blah blah, bullshit, lies, etc. “What has made you think that?” he asked. I listed all the things. He denied ever asking me if I’d gained weight. “You did! You did!” I told him the time, place, and what we were doing. How nice he could forget—I couldn’t. Then he told me that I looked exactly the same as when we first started dating and he thought I had a great body. Did I
believe him? “No, I don’t,” I said. He told me if I did gain weight, of course it wouldn’t affect his feelings for me. Yeah, right.

I explained to him how painful and hard it is when you are a woman, the whole weight thing. “I know you think I’m some kind of strong woman, that male supremacy doesn’t affect me—but it does, deeply.” I told him he should not comment on what I eat—that day he’d cautioned me that I was putting mayonnaise on my sandwich. “Oh,” he said. “I didn’t know if you knew—that’s all.” “Don’t you think I knew it was mayonnaise? I am painfully, acutely aware of every single bit of food I put in my mouth. And I feel guilt and bad about every bite. I don’t need you to remind me I’m eating mayonnaise. It makes me feel like shit. Don’t try to make me exercise. Don’t talk about what I eat. Don’t comment on my weight. Because there is no way you can do it that will not hurt me.”

So he apologized profusely. Swore he had not meant it that way. Etc. But deep inside I’ll always wonder. It has planted a seed of insecurity in me, of doubt and worry. I love him and I want him to think I’m attractive. He says he’s in love with me, he is so romantic and passionate. I have better sex with him than I’ve had with any other man. He’s out of town right now and I’m already plotting how I can lose another 5 pounds.

This is one of many reasons I work in the Women’s Liberation Movement. I want it to not matter if I gain 10 pounds. I want to be able to do fun things—like Roller Blade—with my boyfriend without worrying that he secretly wants me to get thin. And even if he didn’t think I was getting fat—he’s guaranteed that I’ll be watching my weight by making comments. Comments which, if they weren’t backed up by all the comments and actions of hundreds of men before him, would have been pretty harmless, easy to ignore.

I want to be able to believe him when he says he loves my body. Objectively, I know I look fine. But I know from my experience that the thinner you are, the more attractive men find you—and apparently my new lover is no exception. Understand, he is a feminist “supporter” who likes that I’m a feminist and is pretty progressive on woman. It’s no good to try to find another man out there who doesn’t want a skinny woman. Besides, I want him—why does he have to ruin it with male chauvinism. The only solution is building a movement—to get rid of male supremacy once and for all—so women can get the love we all deserve. I know that the 1960s Women’s Liberation Movement made improvements in the dress codes and beauty standards men demanded that we follow. I work in the movement to gain us more freedom now.
testimony on Relationships and Sex With Men

One way in which I am personally kept down by most men I’ve slept with is in being the one who has to worry about birth control.

In the last few years, the kind of birth control I like to use is condoms, because I know they are my best bet at protecting myself from STD’s, and because, since I’ve been 19, my sex life consists of either short flings—sleeping with a guy a few times—or having longer relationships with men who have slept with other women than just me. Before I was 19, I was content to be on the pill, because my boyfriend and I had both been virgins before we started sleeping together, and I didn’t have to worry about catching anything. I was also really skinny, and the weight gain aspect, along with the mood swings I had, didn’t bother me that much yet. Every once and a while we would use condoms, if I’d skipped some pills that month, but the big pain here was going in to buy the condoms, because I was really embarrassed to go into the store and buy them and my boyfriend acted embarrassed to buy them. Between the two of us, I felt like I was doing something almost illicit, going into buy condoms in a grocery store. We used to try to hide them under our other groceries when we bought them. I remember one time we were going to buy condoms in his hometown, and he wanted me to go in because he was afraid his Southern Baptist mom would find out he was having premarital sex because the pharmacist would recognize him. I was really embarrassed in the store, which then turned to feeling defiant. Why should I be embarrassed about buying condoms?

But when I started to sleep with other men other than my first boyfriend, I got really concerned that I’d catch something, and that, along with being tired of the pill’s side effects, made me think it would be worth it to just stop the pill and use condoms. Living with my new roommate and friend also made it easier for me to start buying condoms and me not feel like there was something wrong with me for wanting to guys to wear them, because she was really pushy and open about buying them, defiant like I described before, and she would try to shock people in the grocery store, by getting the biggest box of condoms -- the three-dozen pack -- and putting them down in the middle of the cashier conveyor belt, to see how people around us in line noticed. I assumed she used them with all the guys she slept with, and this gave me the bravery to always give them to guys or bring them with me to a guy’s house or away on vacation with a guy. By the time I started going out with my second really serious boyfriend, I was really used to condoms, and not at all interested in going back on the pill. It shocked me that the first few times we slept together, he would lose his erection when he or I put a condom on him. I didn’t recall this happening to me before, so I thought maybe it was just him, and that I just had to be patient. After a few times of this happening, I asked him what he did about losing his erection, and he said that most women gave up on trying to make him wear a condom. I don’t know if he thought that this was going to make me give up too, but instead I felt terrified and even more committed to making him wear one. I had heard through my friends that he had slept with a lot of other women, and that gave me a great motivation to make him wear them with me, since I really like him and wanted to be able to sleep with him. I told him I’d just wait.

After a few weeks, he did get over this problem, and started to be able to wear them. (I wonder if this is what Barbara Susan is talking about when she says in her article, “About My Consciousness-Raising,” “After several weeks of bitter hassling, he realized I wasn’t kidding, and finally came around!”) He was pretty good for the first few months, keeping his erection, but I eventually noticed a downward trend, where he’d lose his erection every several times we had sex, when he put on the condom. This made me kind of tense up every time we got ready to put the condom on. Would he lose it?

In the first year of our relationship, he would some times pressure me to go on the pill or another kind of birth control. It was as if after a few months of going out I should give up on the condoms. But I resisted. Condoms don’t prevent you from getting warts or herpes, but they do stop you from getting other things like
gonorrhea, chlamydeous, and AIDS, so I remain committed to them. After I got pregnant from a condom coming off inside me, I went back on the pill for a short time, and then remembered all things that I didn’t like about it -- my breasts got bigger, I felt a little heavier, and my moods didn’t feel like my own.

I continued to use condoms throughout our four-year relationship, and eventually the situation had degenerated to the point that I stopped making him wear condoms to the point where he was pretty grouchy and pushy about not wearing them if I was on my period. After all, I hadn’t made him wear them in the past when I was having sex with my boyfriend, and there was no going back for him! It was a little more fun and exciting -- like uninhibited and crazy -- when we had sex without them, but I think that was mostly because he was so much more aggressive and into it without them, that it made it more fun for me. It was like a reward for me to not make him wear condoms.

Hearing my girlfriends and women in my feminist group joking about how guys lose their erection as soon as you pull a condom out made me realize that other women have this problem, too, and that it wasn’t just my personal problem or struggle with my boyfriend. This made me understand more how I was being screwed over and gave me the courage to talk about “my problem” publicly, so other women could also see that this wasn’t their personal problem. And seeing that my boyfriend could change on losing his erection (after I decided I would just wait until he got over the “condom problem”) made me understand that this wasn’t just a male biological problem he was having.

Since I’ve been single again, three out of five guys I’ve slept with have resisted wearing condoms, even tricked me into not wearing them. One of them grabbed a condom, but I wasn’t paying real close attention to him, I was trying to enjoy myself and let him be in charge, and he never put one on, which I didn’t find out until after he came out of me. He only seemed to be concerned about me getting pregnant, I was still worried about this, and had to go through a really sick day of taking the morning after pill.

Another guy was really turning me on and I was getting really into it, that lost sexy feeling again, until I realized that he was putting his dick, not his fingers inside of me. I had to stop him, too, and put a condom on.

Another guy would lose his erection almost every time I put the condom on him, which made me not sure of why we were in bed together, made me start holding my breath again, and made me not want to even try having intercourse, because I couldn’t stand the suspense.

I thought my current guy was real good on them, but if he thought he wouldn’t get me pregnant, he wouldn’t put it on unless I stopped him, too -- whoa, there -- and made him put it on.

The constant theme here is that I always have to be on the lookout, I have to be the one pushing for the guy to wear condoms, and he is usually resisting me, or at best, not taking the responsibility and making me be the one to say “put it on.”

Anyway, it’s a constant struggle, and it makes sex less fun for me, and puts me on constant guard in bed. I feel like I have to literally guard men from going inside of me until I get a condom on them. It’s not right that I have to go through this struggle, worrying about catching an STD, which they should also be worried about catching!!!
C-R testimony: How am I oppressed?

My culture and race effect everything I do. This is especially true in my political work. For instance, anything I write for the ICP Newspacket will be more relevant to brown people and might even feel foreign to someone from a different background. I really feel this difference during meetings with my political mentors and counterparts. I often take a lot of extra time during C-R sessions because, though relevant and important, my experiences are usually different from my white sisters. Sometimes, I feel like I take too much time, and I feel guilty. After all, white women have so much to fight on for themselves, and I am afraid that my comrades may feel like I take too much time or that I think my work and experiences are more important. Actually, these feelings wouldn’t be too off base. Hard as it is for white women, in each moment, I do struggle differently and more than white women. I also come from a different morality, and sometimes I feel like I have to abandon my values to fit in with everyone else. For instance, after each of our study group sessions, I have felt just awful—guilty, ashamed, and confused. In the C-R about our relationships with men, I gave testimony about how my dad can act sexist with my mother, my sister, and me. I am so ashamed of how I spoke about my father. While I am not the most pious or consistent Muslim, I have always tried to be a respectful and obedient daughter. My parents have sacrificed more than I can ever say for my sister and me. Also, as a brown man and political activist, my dad has suffered too much. He deserves
my unconditional loyalty and respect. By speaking against him during the C-R, I went against one of my fundamental beliefs. I don't think a white woman would feel so guilty. Also, I don't think I would feel so bad talking about my dad with other Asian women. I feel like white women don't understand how much my father has been through, how great he is, and how much I respect him. I don't know if I can ever explain this to white women.

My professional and social relationships with men (and women) also differ from my white sisters'. At my recent graduate school interviews, I was asked about my religion, what country I am from, and if I have a boyfriend. No one asked my white girlfriend, who was interviewed on the same day, though by different people, such personal and irrelevant questions. Not to say my interviewer was motivated solely by my race. He probably wouldn't have asked a guy if he had a girlfriend. Still, he may have been trying to figure out how Muslim I am because, in most Islamic traditions, young men and women aren't supposed to date or participate in any romance outside of engagement and marriage.

So, he could have asked a brown fellow this question. I give myself a headache trying to figure out his motivations. After all, he could have been genuinely interested in my background, and the questions were just his way of getting to know the "real me." Of course, the questions were inappropriate, but I get so tired of being offended by everyone. I mean, everywhere I go people ask about my ethnicity, i.e., "where are you from?" Then the supermarket clerk or the guy trying to pick-me up or the interviewer almost invariably starts in about how they knew a
Pakistani or a Muslim once and weren't they so nice and boy, oh boy, I come from such an interesting culture, and then, sometimes they even tell me how lucky I am to be in democratic, opportunity laden United States and not oppressive old India, oh yeah, Pakistan--- but same thing, right? Yuck, ick, blach, and, even, FUCK!--- the expletives are me fuming, not the genuinely interested and well-intentioned racist.

I am proud of my culture and race. They are a major part of everything--- I repeat, everything--- I do. Because my heritage is so important to me, it is private. As someone gets to know me, she will invariably learn more about Islam and Pakistan. And during a relevant conversation, begun well after the introductions, I am usually more than happy to share aspects of my culture. My friend, when I told her how it pisses me off when people ask me where I am from, said I was overreacting and that this was just how Americans begin getting to know someone. First of all, I have lived in the States most of my life, and I know how Americans get to know one another. Secondly, I have been exposed to enough racism to know it when I experience it; unfortunately, I have had to experience more severe forms of racism than unrelenting questions about my ethnicity. Anyway, usually when people ask me where I am from, I say Florida or Daytona Beach. This answer is acceptable to someone merely trying to make conversation. Someone more curious or "genuinely interested" in my background is not satisfied and usually follows up with, "No, where were you born?" or "Where are your parent's from?" I don't
know about racist, but the questions are at least really inappropriate. I am sick of being a foreigner in my own country.

I am not overreacting. Just when I feel like I fit in—and this is hard because I have to act relaxed (more than I feel) and pretend to have the same sense of humor and home life as everyone else—I find out how white people really see me. (African American and Asian people usually don't act as racist. If they do, I am not as offended, but I do feel more hurt. Like someone poured ice water on me, and I want to cry and hide.) Recently at my job, just when I felt like part of the team, I overheard a comment on how I am so sweet and typical of how helpful and friendly Indians are. I work everyday with the woman who said this, and I like her a lot. I know she was trying to complement me, but, in her mind, there will always be a distinction between all the white workers and me. Even though I am American—and almost all of my co-workers have commented on my near-perfect English accent—I am not completely American. Quite frankly, I don't even care if people see me as American. I just don't want to be seen as foreign, as someone from just someplace that's not the United States. I want the respect I deserve, as someone from a glorious, imperfect, and sometimes boring culture struggling to make it in opportunity laden United States. I think that should just about define "American." AND I DON'T WANT TO BE ASKED ABOUT THIS GLORIOUS CULTURE WHEN I FIRST MEET SOMEONE!

Unfortunately, rather than respecting or, even, accepting us, people usually laugh at brown men and women. I can't tell you how often I have gone to a movie theater, and, as soon as a brown
person comes on the screen, people laugh. I went to see The English Patient a while ago, and as soon as the Indian hero came on the screen, the whole theater roared. He hadn't even said a word, yet. I prayed so hard that he wouldn't be stupid and stereotypical. I think everyone in the theater was shocked to see him act romantic, sexy, and brave.

So, how am I oppressed? I am oppressed as a woman, as a brown person, as a brown woman, as a worker, as a brown worker, as a female worker, as a brown and female worker, as a student, as a brown student, as a female student, as a brown and female student... The oppression is total and nearly constant. I sometimes feel overwhelmed, and I want to crawl into a soft bed and stay there forever. But mostly I want to live my life and be happy.

This morning, I had breakfast with my parents, and my dad started in on stories of his union days. He suffered repression I can't even imagine. And my mother, the strongest and bravest person I know, still struggles with physical illnesses the result of third-world poverty, imperialism, and sexism. And while I understand that my life is much easier than my parent's, I have to work to make my life even better. I am not being ungrateful. On the contrary, I simply want to continue my parents' work. This is why I study class oppression and the economic benefits, to some, of creating division across race, gender, and religious lines. I study and work with others so our actions are organized and more powerful and sustainable. I work in a movement. I do this because I owe it to my parents, my elders. I do this because I
want what's just, and, in nearly every moment of my life, I am treated unfairly. I do this because I want respect for where I come from, what I believe, and how I act. I do this because I have no other choice, and, at each step, I explain my different perspective to my comrades. It's more than worth the time.