

## Documenting Privilege

### priv·i·lege

*/ˈprɪv(ə)liʒ/* 

*noun*

1. a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group of people.

"education is a right, not a privilege"

*synonyms:* [advantage](#), [benefit](#); [More](#)

*verb formal*

1. grant a privilege or privileges to.

"English inheritance law privileged the eldest son"

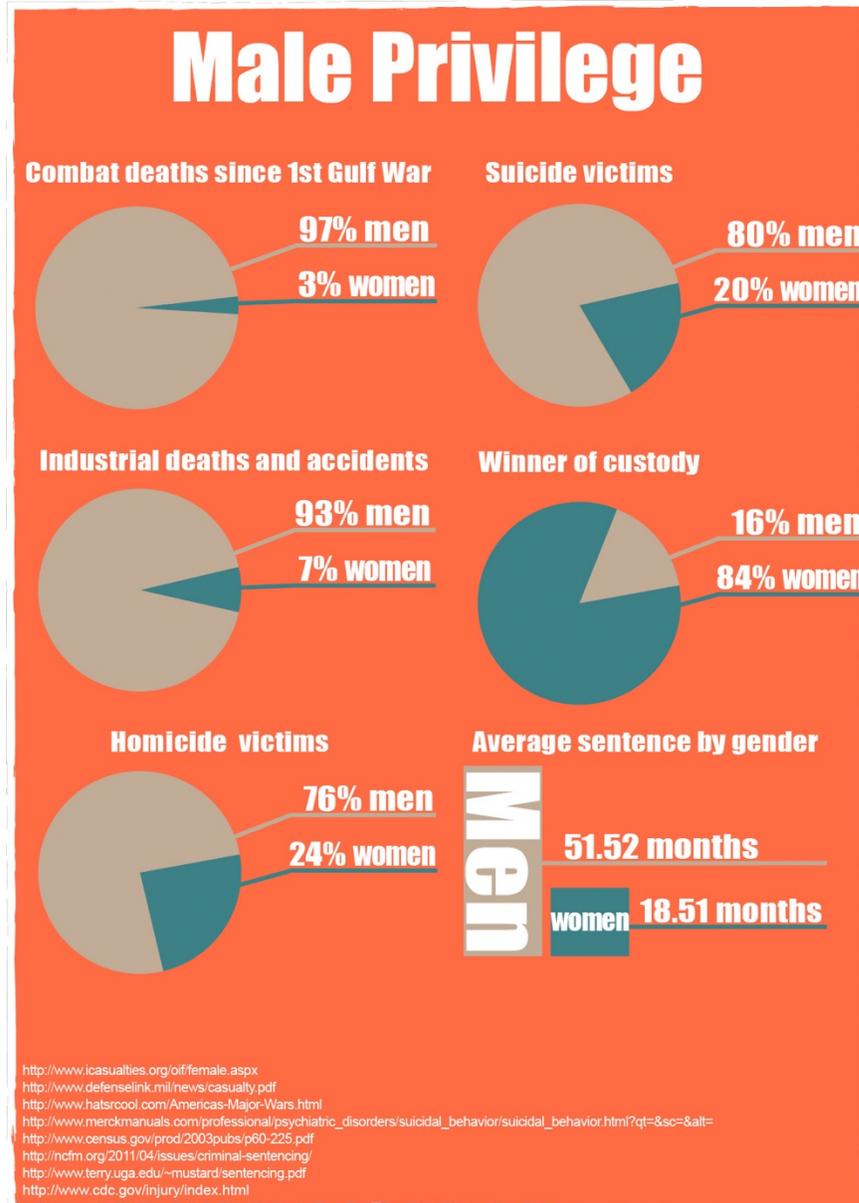


Translations, word origin, and more definitions

White privilege refers to the set of social, political, economic opportunities conferred to people born with white skin. McIntosh (1990) has referred to this as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day...like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks” (p. 1). The terms “unearned assets” and “blank checks” point to intersections between white privilege and economic advantage. “Unearned assets” are possessions, passed on to us from our parents while the notion of “blank checks” denotes a limitless purchasing power which is rooted in the banks that we, the people of white skin, happen to own.

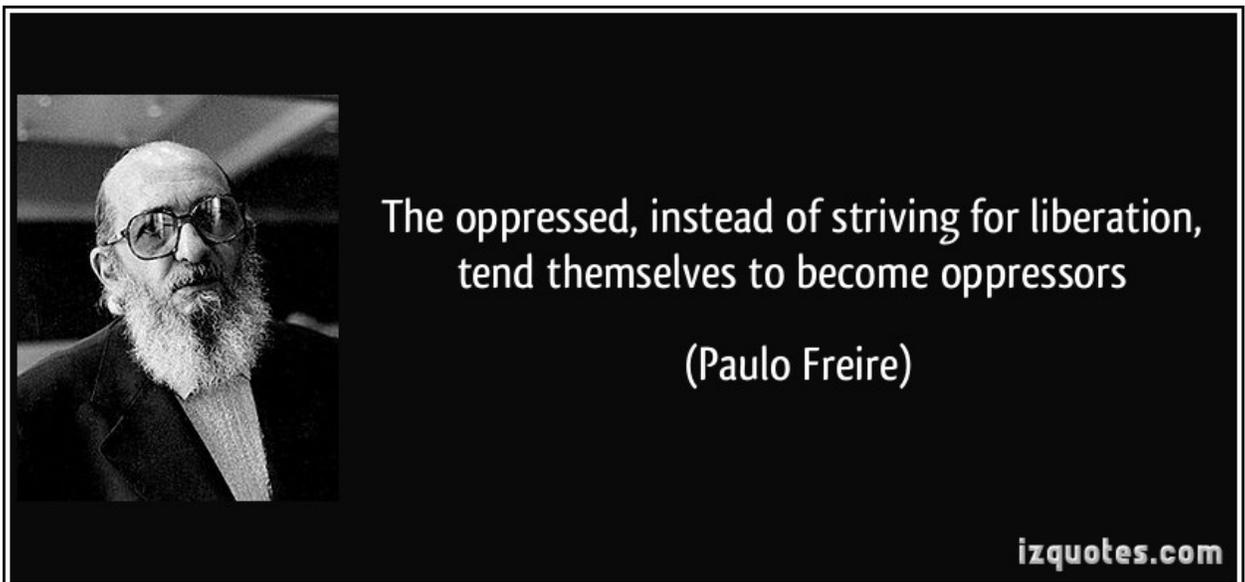
There are many forms of privilege and these can have interactional effects. As McIntosh (1990) points out, “hierarchies are interlocking” (p. 1) and the same can be said of privileges awarded in accordance with politicized differences. Thus gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, religion, sexual orientation, disability can all be considered distinct but combining factors in the awarding of privilege or the infliction of discrimination. McIntosh observes that in order for one group to have privilege another must be deprived of it.

Given the irony that so few men are present in the context of an academic course called “Diversity in the Classroom”, it seems necessary that the notion of gender should be explored. The notion of female privilege is a contentious one because feminism has successfully and justly presented over 100 years of valid arguments to support the fact that women have consistently been disadvantaged and discriminated against in social, political and economic spheres. One wonders: how can the oppressed be the oppressor? To this second point, McIntosh (1990) explains that white women may be seen as oppressive by women of colour, even though both groups of women share an oppressed status relative to men ( p.1).



The notions of privilege and discrimination are context-relative and locally defined. Relative to inhabitants of poorer countries, we in Canada are all privileged regardless of race or gender. Yet within Canada, a white male may enjoy greater privilege in relation to a white female, a white female more than a black male and so forth. I remember the story told by a high school social studies professor in which an African American, a Jew and a woman were filing

grievances for discrimination suffered while teaching at Harvard university. The professor's point was that those three complainants could not talk about discrimination without also talking about privilege because they had jobs teaching in one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the world. Privilege appears to be a relative proposition, dependent upon when and where it is occurring, *who* has it and *who* does not. Thus 2 points appear essential in framing any discussion about privilege and discrimination: 1) These experiences are influenced by the very local context in which they occur; and, 2) One can simultaneously be oppressed and an oppressor.



3.

I will enumerate 10 effects of female privilege in society, while attempting to check my own white, male, cisgender perspective for bias. As a woman:

- 1) I can have peace of consciousness regarding nearly all of the rape, murder, war and childhood sexual abuse in the world because I know that my gender has not historically or directly inflicted those injuries upon humanity.

- 2) I can benefit from the implicit trust accorded to me because I am not presumed to be complicit in the acts of rape, murder, war and sexual abuse which have historically been attributed to patriarchy.
- 3) I can benefit from the “empathy gap”  
[\(https://www.reddit.com/r/FeMRADebates/comments/2vyhbm/why\\_does\\_the\\_empathy\\_gap\\_matter/\)](https://www.reddit.com/r/FeMRADebates/comments/2vyhbm/why_does_the_empathy_gap_matter/) , the perception that I inherently possess more empathy, care and consideration for others, and that I consequently deserve more empathy, given that my gender is responsible for creating and nurturing human life as exemplified by the personification of earth itself as a mother.
- 4) No one will wonder if I am a sexual predator if I am unaccompanied while interacting with other people’s children in a playground.  
[\(http://www.feministcritics.org/blog/2008/06/08/female-privilege/\)](http://www.feministcritics.org/blog/2008/06/08/female-privilege/)
- 5) In most cases, my reproductive rights as a mother take precedence over the reproductive rights of a father.
- 6) I am far less likely to be homeless, a victim of violence or rape or die in work related accident, commit suicide or be given jail time.
- 7) Today, in this culture, I can take on a traditionally masculine gender role or a traditionally feminine gender role [often] without penalty.
- 8) If there is a dangerous situation or violent confrontation or if someone needs help with heavy lifting, I will generally not be expected to intervene.
- 9) There are fewer restrictions upon my demonstration of affection to either women or men.

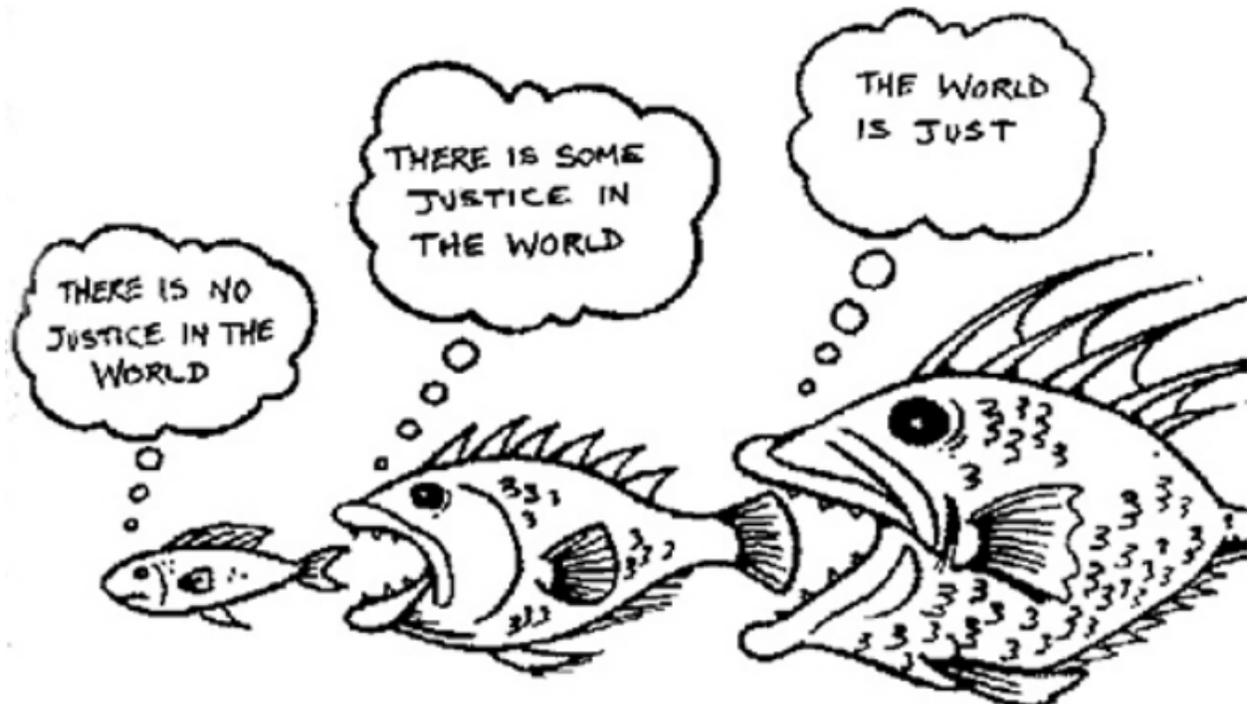
- 10) I have a biologically innate sexual power which enables me to choose a mate from a wider selection of available options and I have easier access to sex as a result.
- 11) My reproductive capability confers me a status of essential to the human species and this accords me the privilege of being helped first in the event of a life threatening situation where men and women are at risk.
- <http://www.feministcritics.org/blog/2008/06/08/female-privilege/>
- 12) "I'm under less pressure than others to engage in risky, dangerous and unhealthy behaviors - one of the reasons I get to live longer than others do".
- <http://sweatingthroughfog.blogspot.ca/2007/10/mens-privileges-vs-womans-privilege.html>
- 13) "My role in my child's life is generally seen as more important than the child's father's role". (<http://www.feministcritics.org/blog/2008/06/08/female-privilege/>) and as a result I am more likely to be awarded custody in the event of a separation from a male partner.
- 14) If I am arrested for a crime, I will often receive a more lenient sentence than a man arrested for the same crime.
- 15) As a professional in the fields of nursing, childhood education, social work I can be assured that my colleagues will be mostly women. Similarly, as a student of Art therapy, Art education or Education 454 "Diversity in the Classroom," I can be assured that most of the people in the room will belong to a college of women who share many social and biological experiences in common with my own.
- 16) As a feminist woman, I can claim that the movement which bears my gender's name (feminism) is the movement for equality of all people and social justice. I can further

call out people who do not identify with the term which bears my gender's name as being anti-woman or anti-egalitarian.

As a white cisgender male, I have been made aware of the privilege which I possess. We have been considered to be at the top of the food chain, perched like monkeys, above all non-white forms of privilege. In the tree tops, above the privilege accorded to any other group in the western hemisphere. In this sense, I was born into the dominant group in my geographical location. However, unlike most white men in the dominant group, I find myself in the unique position of working and studying in a professional sphere where I am a minority (which could also be considered a privilege depending on how one wants to see it). In fact, for much of my life, I have found myself in predominantly female environments. My lifelong education in the arts placed me in ballet classes for 8 years from the age of 9 to 17 where I was usually the only male in a group of 10 to 20 students. This early experience opened my young eyes and sparked my curiosity about how the other half lives.

Eventually, I went on to earn undergraduate degrees in fine arts, psychology and Art education (in progress) and a master's degree in art therapy. In the first degree, my gender was represented about equally, in psychology slightly less than 50% of students were male while in the art education bachelor's and art therapy master's degrees, the percentage of males dropped down to about 5%. My chosen career paths and interests have led to my current employment as an art educator and art therapist where I am one of 4 men working in a primary school with a staff of approximately 30. When I was a student of art therapy, all of my "fellow" students were women, as were all of my instructors. I eventually wrote my thesis on the relevance of gender in the profession and practice of art therapy. Few other white men I have met, can claim they have experienced being a minority in their work or study environments. Even fewer can claim to have

suffered discrimination while living in the broader culture of their own dominant group, but I have. Similarly, I have suffered from being on the losing end of many of the female privileges listed above. It is for this reason that I have presently chosen to explore the notion of female privilege.



I once approached a feminist lecturer after her presentation at a conference on Art Therapy and Gender, to ask her how she could make the claim that feminism rather than humanism was the only organized movement which acted in the name of equality for all people. She responded that humanism had failed to do what feminism was doing even though it had placed considerable energy into philosophical and ethical positions of an intellectual nature. I mentioned to her that I did not feel included in her movement for social justice and equality of all humankind because that movement was named by, for and originally about women. She responded that it was perhaps not a bad thing for men to feel excluded because this would enable them to understand the position of women. This only helped to cement my distancing from

feminism as a word. While her words initially hurt me, I believe there is some truth to the idea that living the experience of another goes a long way to helping one develop empathy. In terms of pedagogical practice, I believe that my knowledge of being a local minority while also being a member of the broader dominant social group has given me a privileged perspective. Being a dominant and subdominant group member simultaneously has increased my understanding of the kind of isolation and discrimination which a minority in my classroom could easily face. I am proud to say that I am constantly attentive to that reality when I teach today.



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