



No Limits
The Liberation of Women

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on Women's Liberation, *Diane Balser*—1

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Basic Understandings from the Work on Women's Liberation

The following are some of the basic understandings that have come from the work that No Limits for Women (No Limits) has done to help women free themselves from sexism and male domination.

A critical goal for all of us is to advance the work on sexism and male domination to where each woman makes taking on these oppressions central to her own life, to where each of us never stops until sexism and male domination are eliminated, and to where eliminating them is central to our work and to all organized activities of which we are a part.

Every woman is the right woman to take on her own liberation as a woman, to fight for herself, and to fight for all women. Our liberation as women also includes fighting for men to free themselves from their oppressor role in the system of male domination and sexism. Both women and men have work to do in this battle.

Women's liberation continues. However, for several decades the ideas of feminism have been under attack, and we have felt the effects of that in No Limits. We have described these effects as a "plateauing" of our work. For the last five years we have worked on the ways that, particularly in the West, women's liberation has been portrayed as irrelevant to the contemporary world: "Sexism is dead, or at least not particularly important" has been one of the widespread confusions, while many women continue to have lives of poverty and stark brutality.

It is crucial to challenge such myths. The following are some basic understandings that can assist us in doing that:

1. Everyone's biology is fine—biology is not the problem.

"I am fully female in every fiber!" is a principle we hold out for each woman. It is used to counter any message that there is anything wrong about her as a female. Each female's biology is fine, and each woman deserves to feel pleased and good. Men's biology is also fine. In fact, human biology is fine, including where there may be gender ambiguity.

2. Biology is the pretext for, not the cause of, oppression.

Society creates ideas to justify oppression. In the case of male domination and sexism, an idea pervasive since the beginning of class- and male-dominated societies is that biology is the cause of and reason for the social, economic, and political inequalities that exist between women and men; that women's subordination and male dominance are inherent rather than caused by oppressive institutions. Also related to biological determinism, women have internalized the oppressive myth (connected to racism, anti-Jewish oppression, Gay oppression, and other oppressions) that some women are more female than others. Our policy is clear: every woman is a *real woman*, and a real woman is completely *human*.

In pre-class societies, the first and most basic division between humans was between females and males, because of women's and men's two differ-

ent roles in reproduction. Interestingly, given that women were the child-bearers, men were more dispensable than women—fewer men were needed for procreation, as men’s role was to provide sperm. This was one of the reasons men were used as warriors and women played a large role in agriculture.

Later, with the development of class societies, women’s and men’s separate roles in reproduction became a pretext for oppression. The division between males and females became exploitative. This went along with the exploitation of workers and the control of wealth by a few, which are intrinsic to *class* societies but not pre-class societies.

3. Male domination and sexism are central to class societies.

Male domination and sexism are the oldest primary props of class societies. From the earliest to the present ones, almost all class societies have been male dominated. The forms this domination has taken have varied as the societies have evolved through slavery, feudalism, and different stages of capitalism, but male domination has been critical to each type of class society.

Male domination and sexism overlap and are both systematic. Sexism is the system in which men are the agents of female oppression. Male domination is the larger system, integral to class and every other oppression, in which almost everyone is oppressed by a dominant group of a few owning-class men.

The difference between sexism and male domination is subtle. For example, a young man can carry sexist distresses aimed at all women, including older

women, but not be dominant with regard to older women.

4. Male domination, assumed to be inherent in societies, has rarely been challenged in totality.

One can imagine the ending of many other oppressions. However, there has not yet been a major vision of a society without sexism and male domination (with the exception of a possible one-time Amazon nation, or projections by some feminists). This is because of the following:

a) The divisions of labor between men and women, and the oppression for which these divisions are the pretext, have been assumed to be natural, therefore making them almost universal.

b) With sexism and male domination (as with young people's oppression), the oppressed and the oppressor are deeply, personally connected. Women have brothers, fathers, and husbands, and male cousins, friends, lovers, and so on. The connections they have with each other are among the deepest, most personal connections women and men have.

The latter can be an advantage in terms of women winning men over as allies. However, it also makes it extremely hard to face the depth of the oppressed and oppressor patterns* operating in close male-female relationships. The most blatant example of this

*"Oppressor patterns" are the rigid behaviors played out by a person who has been conditioned/hurt into being an agent of oppression. They are installed by hurting people deeply, especially when they are young and have no access to accurate information or physical ability to withstand the conditioning.

is the sexual exploitation of women within intimate relationships.

Also, few have understood or acknowledged the exploitative reality of reproduction and child raising. Reproduction and the raising of children have been seen as a natural role for women and not even considered work. The control of this labor has been, and still is, in the hands of men. The value of this labor is taken from women. The necessary and human work of caring for the species has been twisted over centuries. Women, as a class, have been required, bribed, coerced, and forced, to be the sole guardian of this aspect of human survival. The work itself has been denigrated, dismissed, and un-resourced. This has been costly to both women and men. In oppressive societies, reproduction has been used to limit women's lives and as a punishment: women "pay the price" for having children—in terms of money, status, and more.

We cannot emphasize enough that *our present society is an oppressive one and assumes that it is natural for men to dominate and women to be subservient.*

5. No one escapes the oppression.

Today there is a lot of mythology saying that sexism no longer exists—that unlike their mothers' generation, a lot of younger women today no longer have to fight the oppression; that they have narrowly escaped, or are much less oppressed than their mothers. Another myth is that Western women are "lucky," that it is the women in other parts of the world—Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe—who have to fight this oppression.

The oppressive society “likes” to convey the idea that women are “free”: that today’s institutions, including the sex industries and the beautification industries, are no longer sexist.

The reality is that every female faces sexism and male domination. *No one* escapes. *No one*.

Sexism and male domination may look different depending on the generation and the part of the world, but they have not ended. And no matter who he is or what oppressions he faces, no man escapes the oppressor end of sexism.

6. Most women face multiple oppressions.

Women are oppressed as women and then usually face at least one other oppression, for example, racism, anti-Jewish oppression, colonialism, genocide, Gay oppression, class and caste oppression, disability oppression, “mental health” oppression.

In each oppressed group the centrality of sexism is often denied. Women face the challenge of how to keep sexism in the forefront while also confronting other oppressions.

7. Women have been divided.

The earliest divide among women was between enslaved women and women of the owning class. Both groups were oppressed by sexism and male domination, but the enslaved women did domestic work for the owning-class women, as well as general slave work. The division among women between an oppressor and an oppressed has continued in a variety of forms up to the present. In the contem-

porary stage of capitalism, racism is the key divide. Throughout the world, racism permeates all the institutions of sexism, and overlaps with colonialism, poverty, and genocide. Women in oppressor groups, while being oppressed by sexism, can resist looking at their oppressor distresses.

Today age is a major divide among women. In economically starved countries, young women are exploited for their youthful labor and child-bearing abilities. Young and young-adult women are targets of sexual objectification and exploitation within the sex industries, the beautification industries, the media, and the advertising industries—often with a focus on body image or size, the new “women’s diseases” (anorexia, bulimia), or the normalization and glamorization of exploitative sexual practices as “freedom.”

Middle-aged and older women are set up as agents of oppression of younger women. However, they themselves are oppressed by ageism and sexism. Race is important in the age divide. The symbol of the “preferred and desirable woman” is generally young, *white*, and *blonde*.

8. Men are also targets of male domination.

Male domination includes men and boys being dominated by other men, often their fathers, and this in turn pushes them to dominate girls and women. Society tends to blame mothers or other strong women for men’s problems, but the real cause of their problems is often male domination.

Men targeted by racism are oppressed by the white world (women and men) and are also *dominated* by white men.

9. Men of oppressed groups are often stigmatized.

Society often stigmatizes the sexism of men of oppressed groups—Arab men, black men, working-class men, and so forth—by portraying them as *the* symbols of sexism and male domination. At the same time, the ultimate power of white owning-class men is disregarded, along with the accepted forms of sexism and male domination they exhibit.

10. Sexism is caused by societal institutions.

Men are the *agents* of female oppression. Sexism, like all other oppressions, is *caused* and perpetuated by societal institutions and related mechanisms of oppression. (See the women's policy statement and program at <https://www.rc.org/page/nolimitsreadings/contents>.) Several institutions are the primary institutions of sexism. These include marriage, the beautification industries, the sex industries, child-raising and other women's work (paid and unpaid), and institutions related to reproduction. Sexism also permeates many other institutions, such as politics, education, and the media.

Women and men need to discharge (see p. 19) on their histories with these institutions—including the associated misinformation, expectations, and cultural norms (for example, “women should be married,” “having children is the most important job

for women,” “some women are prettier than others,” “politics is for men”) that they have internalized.

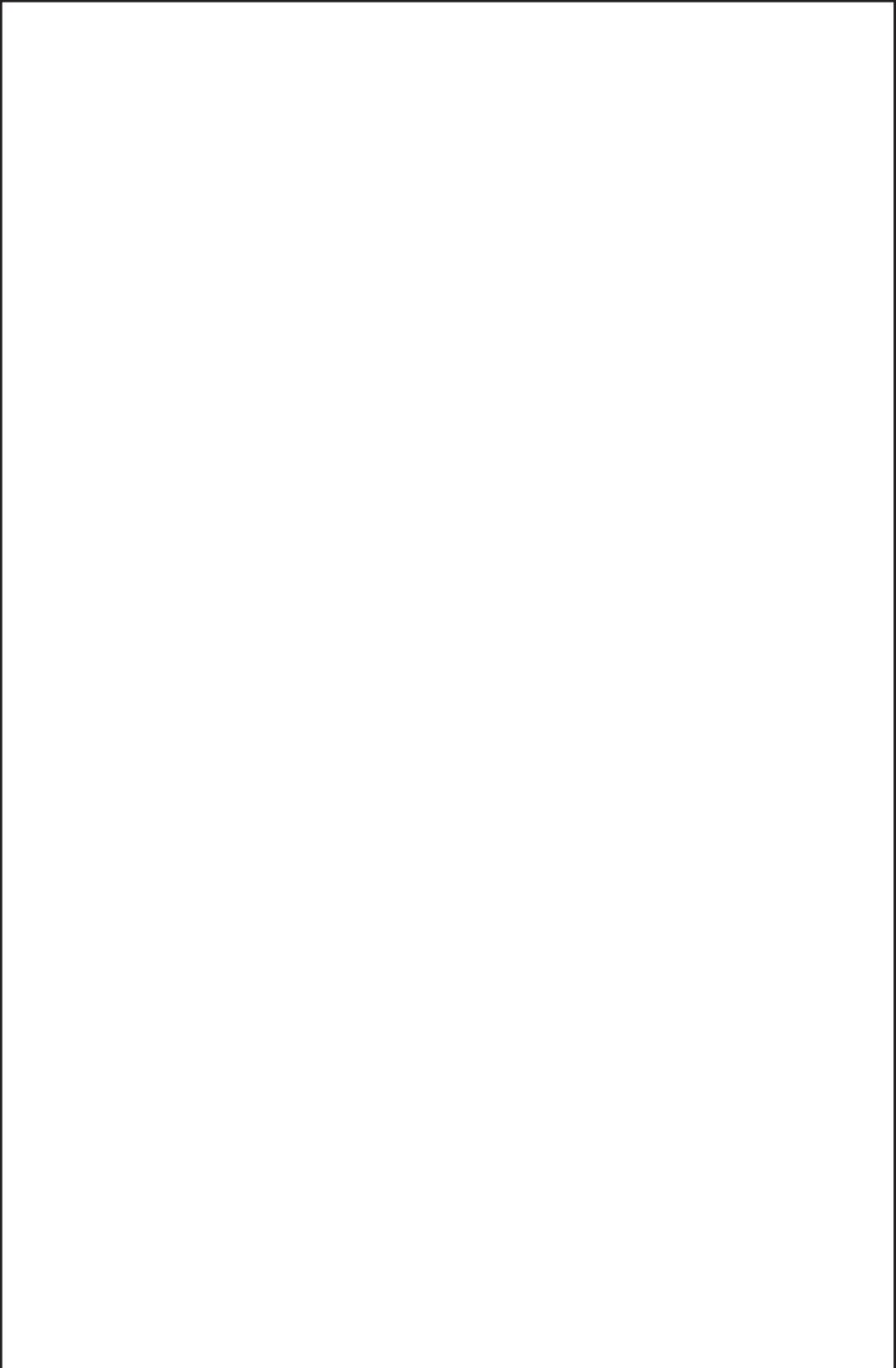
11. We must address sexual exploitation.

The sexual exploitation of women has always been intrinsic to male-dominated class societies, up to the present. This has included sexual violence in wars; sexual violence (rape, abuse) in marriage, in families, and on the street; prostitution; and sexual harassment in the workforce.

Today—in pornography, the media, the sex industries, and the world of entertainment—sexual exploitation is visible, universally accepted, and considered normal.

The sexual exploitation of women is a key issue to address as we challenge sexism and male domination. In the Western world, the idea that women are sexually “free,” as opposed to sexually exploited, brings in untold profits, subjugates women in new and more deceptive ways, and viciously distorts all human relationships.

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Doing No Limits Work

WHAT IS THE WORK OF NO LIMITS FOR WOMEN?

No Limits for Women (No Limits) is an international organization of women (and male allies) dedicated to eliminating the oppression of women throughout the world. Using the tools of Re-evaluation Counseling,* No Limits offers a system of ongoing mutual support in which women can help free each other from any emotional harm done by sexism and male domination. Out of that work, No Limits creates fresh perspectives on worldwide issues such as violence against women, women taking leadership, women in partnership with men, and women ending racism. Ending racism is integral to the work of No Limits for Women.

A key part of the struggle to eliminate sexism is healing the damaging, corrupting effect of it on individual women (and also on men as the “agents” of this oppression). Undoing the internal damage enables both women and men to begin to “see” sexist policies and institutions and sustain the efforts necessary to confront and end them. It builds the courage, stamina,

*No Limits is a project of the International Re-evaluation Counseling Community. No Limits procedures, including No Limits counseling sessions, are based on the theory and practice of Re-evaluation Counseling (RC). You are invited to become acquainted with Re-evaluation Counseling and, if interested, to join the Re-evaluation Counseling Community. For more information and/or a local contact person, please see our website at: www.rc.org or contact the International Re-evaluation Counseling Community by email at ircc@rc.org, or by telephone at +1-206-284-0311.

and confidence to correct past inequities and to create fair and just conditions for everyone. We must work to heal individual women and girls and boys and men; otherwise, inhuman policies and their institutions will re-appear in another guise.

If allowed to persist without healing, the damage not only perpetuates sexism, it also limits everyone's abilities to think and move forward to eliminate the other oppressions in our societies. It makes the work and lives of those fighting to end sexism burdensome. Uncovering and healing the damage removes many of the difficulties of working together, strengthens the building of alliances, and returns us to the enjoyment of setting the world right.

Often, women are able to move forward simply by the force of their own thinking and decision, but unless they are able to heal the emotional hurts of sexism, they continue to carry the effects of those hurts along with them. Even if all anti-female behavior stopped immediately, the results from women having been the targets of this oppression would not disappear. Feelings of humiliation, lack of confidence, competition, fear, and resentment would continue to resurface, confuse people, and erode women's lives.

WHAT ARE THE THREE FORMS THE DAMAGE TAKES?

The damage takes three forms. The first is the damage done to women from being targeted by sexism. Female humans, beginning even before birth, are systematically treated as inferior, weak, and less

than fully intelligent. Their bodies are used as the excuse for the targeting, so much so that girl's and women's bodies become a literal battlefield. Women and girls are exploited yet discounted for their intelligent capacity to care for others. They are narrowly defined by their service to others.

Second is the damage done to women's attitudes toward themselves. Sexist conditioning can be so prevalent and deeply rooted in societies that it is absorbed by women as a true picture of what it means to be female. This can cause women to believe the misinformation about themselves and other women, and treat themselves and other women in a manner similar to the messages that sexism dictates. Women may end up belittling themselves and each other, fearing and loathing their own and other women's bodies as they aspire to a cultural "norm," competing with each other instead of cooperating, and considering themselves and each other as less important—essentially internalizing the oppression.

The third form of damage is the corruption of the minds and spirits of men, those who have been trained by society to be the agents of women's oppression. No one is born with sexism. It results from mistreatment. The individual acting as the agent of institutional oppression has been hurt into playing that role. No man has a better life in this setup in any human sense, though he may benefit materially.

HOW DO WE HEAL FROM THIS DAMAGE?

All three kinds of damage can be healed. If a woman is allowed and encouraged to tell the sto-

ries of her life fully, with others listening with their full respectful attention, she will begin to heal from any hurts, be bolstered by the remembrance of her many strengths, and be reminded of benign times in her life. She will recover her own thinking distinct from the hurts that clouded it. When she is able to allow herself to feel and show what it was like for her personally, feel and express any rage, grief, terror, joy, or connection she felt, she becomes increasingly free of any damage and is restored to a fuller sense of herself. Just recounting a memory of oppression is a powerful antidote to having had to be numb in order to "get through" injustice. All the effects of any mistreatment can be healed if the person is given enough time, attention, and understanding.

Without this healing, any rage, grief, or terror from the past continues to affect the quality and the course of women's lives in aware and unaware ways.

Healing from mistreatment is not fast or easy work, and many of us resist it. We may feel that we have been able to persist in life only by holding inside the stories of how we were hurt. It may seem unbearable to look at and feel those hurts again, perhaps because for so long most of us had no opportunity to tell our stories. We survived by numbing ourselves to the damage and accepting the idea that it was impossible to get free of it. We now know it is possible. We know that all people are capable of freeing themselves and that the apparently unbearable feelings do not persist once the healing process begins.

NO LIMITS FOR WOMEN CO-COUNSELING SESSIONS

No Limits for Women Co-Counseling sessions can be used by anyone to free themselves from the effects of sexism and for recovering their full intelligence. While these counseling sessions are effective in addressing the full range of oppressions and other experiences of mistreatment and/or emotional hurt, this handout focuses on addressing issues of sexism and male domination. Men, too, have found this method to be effective to free themselves from the mistreatment that hurts them into acting in the role of agent of sexism.

NO LIMITS FOR WOMEN CO-COUNSELING SUPPORT GROUPS

It also works well to get a small group of women (or men) together to take turns listening to each other. In No Limits we call this a "support group." Each woman gets an equal amount of time to talk while the rest of the group listens. One person acts as leader of the group to help the group decide how much time each woman will get, who will go first, and so on. Using a timer can be helpful in giving all the women equal time. The leader can actively support each member to speak, in turn, and encourage the release of painful emotion. The leader can also remind the group about the importance of confidentiality, assist the group to schedule its next meeting, and so on.

Four to eight people seems to be the optimum size for a group. Groups can meet as often or as many times as the group members wish. People of

any similar background can use a support group to talk about what they like about being from that background (i.e., what they like about being female), what has been hard about it, what they wish other people understood, and so on. When each person has had his or her turn to be listened to, you can end the meeting with each woman getting a chance to say what she liked best about being in the group meeting, or something she is looking forward to.

STRUCTURE OF A SESSION OR A SUPPORT GROUP

Taking Turns

A Co-Counseling session consists of two people taking turns listening to each other. It's simple to get started. It just takes two people. Find a friend (or co-worker or spouse) who will try it with you. Agree that you will take turns listening to each other without interruption for an equal amount of time, and agree how long that time will be. Then decide who is going to talk first. That person talks about whatever she wants to talk about. We refer to this person as the client. We refer to the person listening as the counselor. The counselor simply pays attention, tries to understand fully, and doesn't interrupt to give advice or comment or tell how she feels about what is said. After the agreed-upon time, the client becomes the counselor, and the one who listened first now talks about anything she wants to talk about.

It is important to agree that whatever is said by either person when in the client role, will not be repeated by the counselor outside of the session. This makes it safe to talk more fully. The whole process

becomes more effective the more you use it. No Limits sessions can be as long or short as you have time for. Even a few minutes shared can make a big difference in how you are able to think and function, and two hours shared is even better. Use a timer for each turn to keep each person's turn equal.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN IN A SESSION OR A SUPPORT GROUP?

Being listened to with care and respect as we tell the stories of how sexism has affected our lives begins the healing process. The client in a No Limits session may choose to respond to questions such as: "What did you/do you love about being a girl or woman?" "What is your earliest memory of being a girl?" "Do you have a memory of a woman or girl as an ally to you?" "Do you have a memory of a man or boy as an ally to you?" "What are your earliest memories of being aware that girls are treated differently than boys?" "How has sexism affected your life?" "What are your earliest memories of being aware that women are mistreated because of their gender?"

Or the client may want to simply follow her mind wherever it goes when being listened to on the topic of sexism and male domination. The client could also tell her life story from the perspective of being female. Or, if a man or boy, his life story as a male ("What was good?" "What was hard?"). This is an important beginning and builds confidence to look at how boys/men are set up to become the agents of sexism.

When we are allowed and encouraged to fully talk about our inherent goodness as females, as well as about how sexism has affected us—with others listening and giving their full attention—we will begin to heal from a place of strength and contact with reality. All of the emotional effects of sexism can be healed and intelligence recovered, if the person is given enough time, attention, and understanding.

No Limits sessions are done primarily for the benefit of the client. As the counselor in a session, the attitude and attention you bring to the listening will make a significant difference in how safe your client feels and how openly she can reflect and share. You will be most helpful if you listen with respect and delight in the person, while assuming that your client is intelligent, powerful, and loving. Be sure to keep the focus on the client, keeping your memories of similar experiences and your emotional reactions to yourself. Don't try to analyze, "psychologize," or give advice. Communicate relaxed confidence in the client, in yourself, and in the importance of the session.

Because we have been so conditioned to try to "fix" anyone who is expressing a difficulty, you may want to counter this tendency by setting out to say very little or even nothing in the session. You will often be surprised at the good use your client can make of just your warm attention. Listening to a woman or girl with complete respect and attention while holding out that everything about her matters deeply is a powerful counter to sexism.

Sometimes the client may begin to laugh or cry or get angry, or sometimes tremble or yawn. These forms of emotional release are a natural human process for healing emotional hurts. For both women and men, healing fully from sexism involves releasing the emotional tensions left from early hurtful experiences in our lives. While this expression of emotion may initially make you uncomfortable, it is actually a sign of progress. It simply means that the person is feeling some embarrassment, grief, rage, or fear and is becoming “un-embarrassed,” “un-sad,” “un-afraid,” or is healing the anger. The person listening can feel pleased if this happens and should continue to pay attention to the client without trying to stop any emotional discharge (a term we use for emotional release) that is happening.

HOW DO YOU USE YOUR TURN IN A SESSION OR SUPPORT GROUP?

You can start your turn by telling your counselor about good things, big or small, that have happened lately. It could be a beautiful sunset you saw, meeting a friend, or solving a problem. The idea is to give yourself a chance to notice the things that are going well. This is particularly important if you feel discouraged. Focusing only on “bad news” and misinformation keeps women (and men) discouraged. Painful feelings can pull our attention into paralyzed (hopeless) inaction or frantic (hopeless) action. Neither is the focused, purposeful clarity and movement that is needed to end sexism.

A No Limits session is a good place to talk about recent events that have been upsetting. Often you will find that being listened to about them, without

someone trying to give you advice, allows you to get a better perspective on them. Often you can think of a good solution, if you just have someone hear you out and show confidence in you while you feel upset and talk about the problem. It can also be useful to ask yourself what earlier experience this reminds you of, or when you felt this way before. You will almost always think of some situation from the past that was hurtful or upsetting in a similar way. Talking about it and/or releasing painful emotions can remove the burden of it. Sessions can also be used for telling your life story, appreciating yourself, reviewing successes, or setting goals.

In general, because of the power dynamics of sexism, it works better for women to be listened to by other women when they are talking about their upsets and feelings related to sexism. However, as men do more and more of their own emotional discharge work, they can become good counselors for women about sexism, and a woman who has done considerable discharge work on sexism may choose to counsel a man on his sexism.

At the end of a session, especially if you have been talking about something difficult for you, take a few moments to redirect your thoughts to something you are looking forward to, or some simple subject you don't feel tense about, such as favorite foods, scenery, and so on.

The process is simple but not easy. It is yours to try out to see if it makes sense to you.