

Book Review

Laura Bates (2022) *Fix the System, Not the Women*. London: Simon and Schuster, hardback, 208 pp., ISBN 9781398514331.

In *Fix the System, Not the Women*, Laura Bates charts the pervasive sexism in society that shapes women's experiences from childhood to adulthood. She questions and dissects the widely held and accepted notion that women are responsible for their own protection. This book is an excellent exploration and articulation of years of seemingly disparate yet interconnected experiences of sexism from around the globe and how they impact our daily lives.

The initial chapter 'The List' offers a personal history of Bates' own experience of growing up as a girl in a society where people identifying as female are often seen as lesser. Reading it is, at times, uncomfortable as she pieces together her own history with the patriarchy. Her mention of 'hot lists' at school made my inner teenager squirm with shame as I remember the girls waiting with anticipation for the 'hot list' to be revealed by boys, self-appointed, who deemed themselves the purveyors of female attractiveness. This chapter is a vivid illustration of how the value of a woman or girl was still based on how attractive one was to the opposite sex. Like Bates, we were devastated not to be included. The terrible reality is of course that this list will never be finite, never complete.

Following her personal history, Bates begins charting the effects of sexism on childhood in 'It Begins'. As a secondary teacher, the reading of this was uneasy but incredibly relevant. Bates discusses the impact of gender stereotyping on clothing, and I think of trying to buy a gender-neutral card to celebrate a friend's newborn, before she addresses the devastating perception of teen girls that if they are assaulted at school, nothing will be done. The reason this book resonates so powerfully is the ability for any woman reading to identify with it; we have all seen, heard or experienced these issues ourselves. The interconnectedness of these experiences is

vital and Bates makes this point through the discussion of not only the most pervasive and explicit aspects of the patriarchal system and its effect on our lives but also the more seemingly innocuous; the choice of school texts, for example.

She makes the crucial point that most school curricula are ‘dominated’ by white male authors; this ensures that men are seen as those who achieve greatness at the ‘centre’ whilst women are on the periphery and merely ‘revolve’ around them.

As the book continues, Bates draws on all aspects of society. Chapters entitled ‘Rotten Apples’, ‘Putting the Victims on Trial’ and ‘Isolated incidents’ address how institutions, such as the police and justice system, who are responsible for keeping us safe, in fact perpetuate the patriarchy. This is seen most clearly with the imbalance of gender and race in the top ranks of these institutions and the insistence of the media and the bodies themselves, that individuals who commit egregious acts are merely singular and do not represent an endemic issue. The book condemns the way domestic abuse and femicide is reported on in ‘Media Misogyny’ such that women must also be the perfect victims in order to avoid victim blaming. Bates’ statistics are stark, three women die at the hands of men every week, and as I write this another woman and her child have been murdered by her husband. In this case, the tabloids shriek ‘Was it her success that drove him to it?’. As I continued reading, my frustration, anger and disappointment at the world grew.

In the penultimate chapter, ‘Joining the Dots’, Bates connects all of her insights before she finishes with the eponymous title of her last chapter ‘Fix the system, not the women’. Following quite grim and affecting reading, this chapter closes the book by offering systemic solutions from feminist campaigners, providing a sense of optimism as well as relief from the responsibility of protecting ourselves. Instead, society must act to change the institutions that fail to appropriately tackle the school sexual violence, the pernicious misogyny that hounds all those who identify as female, the attitudes towards women when accessing basic healthcare, and challenges the status quo of powerful institutions. The powerful conclusion invites the reader to create their

own list and to not be afraid of backlash—a backlash I am all too aware of as a female member of staff attempting to teach from a feminist perspective.

Throughout, Bates weaves anecdotal evidence from her instrumental Everyday Sexism project with other sources to create a book that feels like it speaks to the reader through a personal lens; a lens that is sufficiently evidenced through reference to numerous academics and studies. She invites the reader to participate and it feels at times as though we are indeed in a conversation with her. This conversational tone allows this book and its, at times complex, subject matter to be easily accessible. This book is powerful and relevant reading for anyone who believes in gender equality and making society a safe place for all.

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