Understanding Heterosexism and Heterosexual Privilege

Heterosexism - system of oppression, based in homophobia, of persons who display non-heterosexual behaviors or identities.

Heterosexism includes three components:

1. the assumption that all people are heterosexual
2. prejudice and discrimination against persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual based on the assumption that heterosexuality is the only “normal” sexual orientation and therefore preferable
3. systemic display of homophobia in societal institutions, laws, and policies by excluding the needs, concerns, and life experiences of persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual

Examples of Heterosexism:

- Assuming that everyone you meet is heterosexual
- Assuming that everyone has or is interested in having an opposite-sex partner
- Assuming that all mothers and fathers are heterosexual
- Assuming all sexually active women use birth control
- Assuming that all unmarried people are “single,” while in reality they may have a same-sex partner
- Assuming all children live in families with a male-female couple in parental roles
- Using language that presumes heterosexuality in others, such as husband or wife, instead of gender neutral language such as partner
- Using official forms which allow only for designation as married or single
- Denying equal employment benefits to people with same-sex partners (i.e. spousal insurance)
- Omitting any discussion of homosexuality or persons who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual as part of educational curricula
Examples of Heterosexual Privilege:

- Ability to talk openly, comfortably, and without fear of judgment about one’s friends, social activities, personal relationships
- Never having one’s normalcy questioned
- Ability to show affection in public with one’s partner without fear of negative reactions or hostility
- Ability to have children without any questions of one’s fitness to do so
- Right to legally marry
- Right to purchase insurance benefits for a partner, such as health care
- Right to job security and freedom from sanctioned discrimination
- Right to take family or medical leave for a partner
- Ability to purchase family memberships in health clubs or other recreational activities
- Validation of one’s human dignity by one’s chosen religion