



Sexist behaviours

Looking at men as a whole more widely, it is a sadly undeniable truth that there are some men who feel either a deep rage or a genuine, unquestioned superiority towards women. I have received too many long, specific, intricate emails from men detailing their fantasy of my rape and murder to believe those who say that it's always just a bit of harmless fun.

It is often suggested that these men are angry at something else – that they are probably unpopular teenage boys transcending the frustration of their own powerlessness by terrorizing innocent strangers across the net. But this seems too convenient a theory to fit the coordinated gang attacks and entire message-board threads religiously devoted to persecuting female ‘targets’. As Fogg points out:

It comes down to defence of privilege. A lot of it seems to stem from the feeling that something which is rightfully theirs is at risk of being snatched away – the right to make rape jokes, the right to sexually proposition women or whatever.

There is also a sense of tradition – of men’s entitlement and expectations being handed down from one generation to the next – which is accepted unthinkingly as just the way that men are ‘supposed’ to behave. This is an idea many project entries corroborate...

◆ *It’s been quite a hot summer here (London), and I was wearing a mid-thigh dress. I got on the bus on my way home from school, and, as I passed him, a man looked, pointedly, down my legs and back up again. Reckon his son was sitting next to him, and the teenager looked to be about my age. For the record, I’m 17.*

◆ *On the bus to a friend’s house, father and son sat next to me. Father looks at son and points to me and says very loudly ‘Have you checked that THING out?’ He repeats this statement 4 or 5 times with the son nodding and saying ‘Yeah, I’ve checked IT out.’*

And this is important, because those vitriolic, hate-filled emails aside, the vast majority of those men who are occasionally sexist, just like the vast majority of women who sometimes are, are not deliberately, hatefully trying to hurt women or put them down. They’ve simply grown up in a world that teaches them that this is the way things are.

All the same tiny cultural signifiers and media messages and behavioural norms that affect young girls impact on their male peers too. Teaching them that it is their job to be strong, and macho and masculine, that women should be treated as objects, and that putting girls down, or harassing them, or making sexist jokes, is a way for men to prove their manliness, particularly to one another. So, if we are to rightly be aware of the huge impact of these subtle influences on women, we must also, fairly, acknowledge that much of men’s sexist behaviour is not intentional, or deliberately prejudiced, but simply the result of being immersed in a very patriarchal culture.

This comes out strongly in many of the project *Everyday Sexism* entries*, which paint a clear pattern of boys receiving these messages from a very young age. Like the father who told his son, when he threw a tantrum on the bus, 'Would you stop behaving like a little girl already?' Or the mum who described this litany of sad restrictions and social 'rules':

◆ *At three my son couldn't play with a pushchair because it was for girls. My friend's five-year-old son was teased for wearing colourful wellies. At seven he couldn't have a pink water bottle or luminous-pink football socks. At eight he shouldn't go to dance because it's girly. My fourteen-year-old can't accept a hug or a kiss from his family especially in public.*

And the idea of peer pressure and masculine expectations only increases as boys get older, with countless stories of lad culture and teenage sexism including heavy elements of coercion.

One female university student told me:

◆ *The over-the-top type of culture is particularly apparent in sports teams and with reference to lad culture I've noticed it mostly in the rugby and football teams. An ex-boyfriend who played in a university rugby team often told me about the 'banter' that flew around and it seemed that the worse you treated a female the louder the applause, whereas any respectful behaviour or indeed any indication of liking a female as opposed to just using her body as a means to an end was met with ridicule. There is a big emphasis put on humiliation.*

It's important not to underestimate the degree to which our young men are affected by the cumulative force of normalized misogyny. Such pressure doesn't only come from friends and peers, as one heart-wrenching project entry revealed:

◆ *I'm a 17-year-old boy and started following *Everyday Sexism* and was shocked by what women go through all the time. I started noticing it more and pointing it out. I think some friends listen but the most opposition I've had is at home. My mum tells me to 'man up' when I try to discuss sexism and that there's 'something wrong with me' when I pull up my older brother (who's very into all that lad culture) on sexism. She said I'll never get a girlfriend because they want 'real men' not ones who 'act like girls' and said I shouldn't be bothered about sexism because it doesn't affect me and to 'stop being such a whining girl'. My dad ENCOURAGES me and my brother to harass women on the street and so my brother now does all the time. I'm not letting it stop me because all*

the stories I've read are terrible and talking to girls at school they all say they experience sexism regularly, but I can't believe how much my family and especially my mum hates me caring about it.

It is absolutely right and important not to demonize men for learned behaviour, nor for the invisibility of a problem that they may genuinely have been oblivious to. But what we can hope is that, once they are made aware of it, they might join the ranks of those other men who stand voluntarily alongside us in the fight for change. This is quite possible. Already a vast number of men have written to the project to express their shock and anger upon reading about women's experiences. Their determination to help make a difference is brilliantly clear:

◆ *As a guy, this Twitter feed has definitely opened my eyes and changed my behaviour.*

◆ *When I was a teen I probably said a lot of sexist things I remember telling and laughing at rape jokes. Looking back at it I see that it was abhorrent and that I was allowing rape culture to run rampant. I did not go to a normal college but film school in Canada, I then had the honour of meeting a bunch of women from all over the world, and that helped me and changed me for the better. As I grew close to these women as friends I heard countless stories about not just sexual harassment but assault. It filled me with rage, but made me realize that I was part of that culture. I wanted to be part of a solution; the Dad that tells his son 'Don't rape' instead of putting the onus on women.*

And of course, with the support of those many wonderful men who are willing to assist the move towards equality, we are also far better equipped to tackle the issues that those truly concerned about men's wellbeing rightly raise.

There should never be any victims who don't matter, because this simply isn't about men vs women. It's not about taking away men's rights, or about failing to focus on the issues that affect them, but about working, together, towards a more equal society in which both men and women are inherently protected and able truly to fulfil their natural potential.

* The Everyday Sexism Project exists to catalogue instances of sexism experienced on a day-to-day basis.

Laura Bates
Everyday sexism
Simon & Schuster, 2015