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Unlearning Sexual Harassment

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Unlearning Sexual Harassment

Abstract

In an androcentrist society, where men are the most privileged group, and where they are not taking issues seriously that do not personally affect them, they are the ones who need to change the most. In this spirit, I offer three suggestions that could help us move toward a less sexist future.

Keywords

Gender Equality, Sexual Harassment, Sexism, Objectification

On Saturday Nov 18, the Miami Herald covered two recent cases of prominent men accused of sexual harassment. Florida Democratic Party Chairman Stephen Bittel resigned from his post because he had created an “unprofessional work environment”. He commented on this decision by apologizing “for all who have felt uncomfortable during my tenure at the Democratic Party.” Senator Al Franken (D-Minnesota) canceled his appearance at the Miami Book Fair “amid allegations over sexual misconduct”. He also apologized, trying to explain his behavior with sentences like the following: “Over the last few months, all of us – including and especially men who respect women – have been forced to take a good, hard look at our own actions and think (perhaps, shamefully, for the first time) about how those actions have affected women.” Franken’s story is ongoing – confronted with further accusations of “groping” he insists that he feels ashamed, but is equally certain that he will not resign.

Of the many individual cases of sexual harassment that have come to light in recent months, these two are not among the most noteworthy, except that they seem to be comparatively “civilized”. First, both men admit something. They do not categorically deny allegations, as others have done, regardless of how many women have come forward (in this category fall men like President Trump, who has defended his “locker room talk” as “only talk”, GOP Senate candidate of Alabama Roy Moore, and, if you want to go back further, Bill Clinton). Second, both Bittel and Franken have done harmful things to women, but they are not in the Weinstein league of repeated and systematic sexual abuse and rape. Finally, they offer an apology.

A good first step? I am not so sure. I read these comments aloud to my 12-year old daughter, making clear my anger about their insufficiency. She responded: “I get that they should not have done these things in the first place, but what SHOULD they say?” As most parents, I want a safe life for my child, so it seems useful to think about this issue along the following lines: Could we as a society use this historic moment of public awareness, triggered by the #metoo campaign, to create a world where our children, in particular our girls, can be protected from sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape, now and in the future? Do we have the chance to radically change the sexism in our culture that makes far too many men think it is ok to objectify and sexually abuse women?

As a long-time feminist, I have watched the recent debates with interest, but not with much hope. How often have women already made this point? How often has their suffering been swept under the rug, their courage to come forward been trampled on, and no healing for their trauma been offered? The damage and social cost of sexual violence is known, but it is still not relevant. Why? Because men don’t think it has anything to do with them. If there is a chance in the current situation, it is that men, finally, realize this is their problem. I am deeply grateful to Jackson Katz and many others for their unrelenting work pushing in this direction: Violence against women is a men’s issue (watch his [TEDtalk!](#)).

I am aware that it is simplifying to only talk about male perpetrators/ bystanders and female victims here. Society is more complicated. We know that transgender persons are exposed to sexual violence at much higher rates than cisgender persons. We know there are male victims of sexual violence. And we know that women contribute to the normalization of sexual

violence, both as bystanders, supporters, and perpetrators. However, I also want to stay on target. In an androcentrist society, where men are the most privileged group, and where they are not taking issues seriously that do not personally affect them, they are the ones who need to change the most. In this spirit, I offer three suggestions that could help us move toward a less sexist future.

Number one: Men need to unlearn objectifying others and take responsibility for their actions. Let's return to the quotes above – in them, we hear two men who do not understand this rather simple idea. Stephen Bittel says he “apologizes for all who have felt uncomfortable during my tenure at the Democratic Party”. This sounds like he deplores an unfortunate incompatibility. In this sentence, he does not actively do anything; there are only those who “felt uncomfortable” during “my tenure”. But it was him who actively created this atmosphere of discomfort. Mr. Bittel: You are responsible for making your employees feel miserable, but you do not only not admit it, you also do not say you will never do it again. How about this for an alternative statement: “While chairman of the Florida Democratic party, I abused my position of power and harassed my female employees. Due to their brave testimonies, I came to understand my misconduct. I step down to enable healthy Party leadership. In addition, I will do my best to learn from this process and promise to change. I offer my apology to all who suffered from my behavior and respect their decision to accept this apology or not.”

Al Franken's statement is equally interesting in terms of accepting own deeds and taking responsibility for them. He writes: “ Over the last few months, all of us – including and especially men who respect women – have been forced to take a good, hard look at our own actions and think (perhaps, shamefully, for the first time) about how those actions have affected women.” All of us? This is a statement about your misconduct, nobody else's. “Including/ especially men who respect women” – is it a sign of respect to force-kiss a woman and touch her breast while she is asleep? And then, the passive voice: “all of us ... have been forced” – indeed, it does not sound as if you volunteered to take “a good, hard look at our own actions”. In the end, there is some shame involved in all this, but only “perhaps”.

From both of these men I would like to get an answer to these questions: Can you explain to my 12-year old girl what you did and why? In case you have a daughter yourself, would you be okay if she encountered powerful men mistreating her like you mistreated several women? If you have a son, have you thought “good and hard” about how you can help him learn to treat women with respect, not only in theory, but also in practice?

Number two: Since it will be difficult for men to transform in this way, societies as a whole have to support this effort. What does that mean? On the one hand, sexist behavior needs to be discredited and punished. No more “boys will be boys”. Bittel and Franken are in politics, which means that they are taking responsibility for public wellbeing. If they don't understand how their behavior creates trauma and discomfort for any group of people, and that they should rather *care for people*, they are not fit to run for office. It does not matter if they are “otherwise good politicians”. You would also not want to have a killer as your political representative just because he is a real expert in, say, infrastructure development (badly needed in Miami).

On the other hand, we all have to unlearn our daily life acceptance of sexism. For men who may not feel I am speaking to them because they would never sexually assault women: It may be that you have made it an active part of your life to support gender equality and undermine sexism in speech and action, for which I would applaud you. But you may also be in the category of thinking all of this has nothing to do with you as long as you stay out of trouble. That would not be enough. You have to take more responsibility and resist the normalization of Weinstein & Co masculinities.

And what about women? We also often surrender to everyday sexism. We cannot do much, right? For example, when our supposedly diversity-sensitive institutions miraculously produce almost exclusively white male leaders (yes, I am looking at my own university here). There is one straightforward way to confront a culture of sexism in the workplace: Hire and promote more women. According to Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev (2017), this is more effective than trainings and reporting systems. Gendered power imbalances and male-dominated management, both factors that add to toleration of sexual harassment, can be corrected by more women in leadership positions. And more women in a profession in general decrease the likelihood of sexual harassment by sheer power of numbers. However, we have to step up to this challenge.

Number three: Many women have spoken up about their traumatizing experiences of sexual harassment. Many have not, or they have waited very long to take that step. Because the risks are high. Collectively, we have to create an environment that reduces this risk and supports demands for justice. And we must amplify the risk of committing acts of sexual harassment and deter even the most ruthless “risk taker”.

An example of how this can be done is the labor contract negotiated by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, covering over 30,000 workers in Florida’s agriculture industry (Fernandes, 2017). Sexual harassment used to be rampant in the fields, mostly committed by male crew leaders. When negotiating for better working conditions and better pay, the Coalition insisted on having a safe complaint system to address sexual harassment including an independent dispute settlement body. To become part of the Fair Food Program, large farms had to commit to upholding these standards. Further, their biggest purchasers – Walmart and Whole Foods, for example – would only buy produce from farms that treat their workers according to the agreement. Hence, not fulfilling the requirements means not to be able to sell. The consequence: Preventing sexual harassment has become a core concern of large tomato farms in Florida. This success was only possible due to organized, persistent collective action. Those who did this work – immigrant farm workers - did not have the advantage of powerful social status; the fact that they succeeded raises hopes for collective action anywhere.

It is good that we have a public debate about sexual harassment, and sexual violence more broadly speaking. Yet in this debate, we often seem surprised that in a “society like ours” these things “still” happen. There is an assumption that we are moving in a different direction, and I can see some elements validate this assumption, in particular the many social movements that have confronted the humiliation of one part of humanity by another (such as women’s, anti-racism, LGBTI, indigenous, and immigrants’ rights movements). However, some fundamental

elements of our modern lives actually seem to *foster* violence, in particular: Our celebration of individualism (only my desires count), materialism (I need objects for my happiness – sometimes, I want humans to be my objects), the admiration of the wealthy and powerful (they can have it all, and I want that, too), and the indifference toward the military and ecological violence committed in our name and to support our life style in many parts of the world. These priorities, often packaged as “freedom”, “choice” and “upward mobility” do not enable struggles for justice and respect. They detach us from each other and our human needs of community and dignity, and put us in a constant mode of separation and competition. We need the exact opposite, not only to end sexual harassment. Time for some reorientation toward responsibility, respect, community and solidarity.

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