

. . . Calling gender violence a women's issue is part of the problem, for a number of reasons.

The first is that it gives men an excuse not to pay attention, right? A lot of men hear the term "women's issues" and we tend to tune it out, and we think, "I'm a guy; that's for the girls," or "that's for the women." And a lot of men literally don't get beyond the first sentence as a result. It's almost like a chip in our brain is activated, and the neural pathways take our attention in a different direction when we hear the term "women's issues." This is also true, by the way, of the word "gender," because a lot of people hear the word "gender" and they think it means "women." So they think that gender issues is synonymous with women's issues. There's some confusion about the term gender.

And let me illustrate that confusion by way of analogy. So let's talk for a moment about race. In the US, when we hear the word "race," a lot of people think that means African-American, Latino, Asian-American, Native American, South Asian, Pacific Islander, on and on. A lot of people, when they hear the word "sexual orientation" think it means gay, lesbian, bisexual. And a lot of people, when they hear the word "gender," think it means women. In each case, the dominant group doesn't get paid attention to. As if white people don't have some sort of racial identity or belong to some racial category or construct, as if heterosexual people don't have a sexual orientation, as if men don't have a gender. This is one of the ways that dominant systems maintain and reproduce themselves, which is to say the dominant group is rarely challenged to even think about its dominance, because that's one of the key characteristics of power and privilege, the ability to go unexamined, lacking introspection, in fact being rendered invisible, in large measure, in the discourse about issues that are primarily about us. And this is amazing how this works in domestic and sexual violence, how men have been largely erased from so much of the conversation about a subject that is centrally about men.

. . . I want to share with you this exercise that illustrates on the sentence-structure level how the way that we think, literally the way that we use language, conspires to keep our attention off of men. This is about domestic violence in particular, but you can plug in other analogues. This comes from the work of the feminist linguist Julia Penelope.

It starts with a very basic English sentence: "John beat Mary." That's a good English sentence. John is the subject, beat is the verb, Mary is the object, good sentence. Now we're going to move to the second sentence, which says the same thing in the passive voice. "Mary was beaten by John." And now a whole lot has happened in one sentence. We've gone from "John beat Mary" to "Mary was beaten by John." We've shifted our focus in one sentence from John to Mary, and you can see John is very close to the end of the sentence, well, close to dropping off the map of our psychic plain. The third sentence, John is dropped, and we have, "Mary was beaten," and now it's all about Mary. We're not even thinking about John, it's totally focused on Mary. Over the past generation, the term we've used synonymous with "beaten" is "battered," so we have "Mary was battered." And the final sentence in this sequence, flowing from the others, is, "Mary is a battered woman." So now Mary's very identity -- Mary is a battered woman -- is what was done to her by John in the first instance. But we've demonstrated that John has long ago left the conversation.

Those of us who work in the domestic and sexual violence field know that victim-blaming is pervasive in this realm, which is to say, blaming the person to whom something was done rather than the person who did it. And we say: why do they go out with these men? Why are they attracted to them? Why do they keep going back? What was she wearing at that party? What a stupid thing to do. Why was she drinking with those guys in that hotel room? This is victim blaming, and there are many reasons for it, but one is that our cognitive structure is set up to blame victims. This is all unconscious. Our whole cognitive structure is set up to ask questions about women and women's choices and what they're doing, thinking, wearing. And . . . Let's be clear: Asking questions about Mary is not going to get us anywhere in terms of preventing violence.

. . .
I understand that a lot of women who have been trying to speak out about these issues, today and yesterday and for years and years, often get shouted down for their efforts. They get called nasty names like "male-basher" and "man-hater," and the disgusting and offensive "feminazi", right? And you know what all this is about? . . . It's because the women who are standing up and speaking out for themselves and for other women as well as for men and boys, it's a statement to them to sit down and shut up, keep the current system in place, because we don't like it when people rock the boat. We don't like it when people challenge our power. You'd better sit down and shut up, basically. And thank goodness that women haven't done that.

(Accessed on 10.26.17 at https://www.ted.com/talks/jackson_katz_violence_against_women_it_s_a_men_s_issue/transcript)

One of Julia Penelope's books on language and gender, *Prescribed Passivity: The Language of Sexism* can be found here: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1088&context=englishfacpubs>