

Checking My Male Privilege - Charles Blow - October 29, 2017

With the recent rash of high-profile accusations of sexual harassment and assault — from Harvey Weinstein to George H. W. Bush to Mark Halperin — I found myself feeling shocked at the pervasiveness of this sort of behavior, and embarrassed that I was shocked.

After all, I know all the data.

According to the [National sexual violence resource center](#):

- One in five women will be raped at some point in their lives.
- One in five women are sexually assaulted while in college.
- Ninety-one percent of the victims of rape and sexual assault in the U.S. are female.
- Eight percent of rapes occur while the victim is at work.
- Rape is the most underreported crime; 63 percent of sexual assaults are not reported to the police.
- More than 90 percent of sexual assault victims on college campuses do not report the assault.
- The prevalence of false reporting is between 2 percent and 10 percent.

Furthermore, a [2015 Cosmopolitan magazine survey](#) of more than 2,234 female employees between 18 and 34 found that roughly one in three said they had been sexually harassed at work.

The survey also found that 71 percent never reported the harassment, and of the 29 percent who did report it, only 15 percent felt the report was handled fairly.

I have also raised a daughter and helped her deal with her own episodes of sexual harassment, including reporting it.

I have used this column to regularly condemn sexism, misogyny, patriarchy and toxic masculinity.

And yet, I am still shocked when I hear of another case that has real names and faces of people I know. Shocked every time.

This is not because I don't listen to women or believe them, but rather, I think, because a personally lived experience is a far cry from a passively learned experience.

I am a man. Six-foot-two, 200 lbs. Able-bodied, and physically fit. I move through the world with the privilege of never even considering the idea of being sexually assaulted or harassed. (Men are also sexually assaulted and raped, but the scale of those occurrences is dwarfed by scale of those problems for women.)

This is one of my male privileges, and I have to check it.

More important, I must follow the advice on sexism that I proffer on racism: If you are not actively working to dismantle it, you are supporting it. It is not sufficient to simply not be a sexist yourself if you are a man. You must also recognize that you benefit from the system of sexism in ways to which you may not even be aware.

Every man must become a feminist. Every man must work as hard as every woman to elevate gender equality and to eliminate gendered violence.

And yes, I understand how hard this can be. Constant outrage is exhausting, even about your own oppression. I am a black man in America. I'm threadbare dealing with the oppressions that men who look like me endure, from racially skewed mass incarceration to being the targets of police violence.

I understand that all oppressions are, in some way, intersectional and connected to all other violence, that the empathic connections of ally-ship are multidirectional and reciprocal.

And yet, it remains a stubborn fact that it is hard to stay fully immersed in another person's pain. No matter how many times you hear them talk about their struggle, and even when you feel deeply moved by their expression of it, unless you have experienced that same pain yourself, a gap remains.

This is a very human limitation, even for the egalitarian and well intentioned. Keeping someone else's struggle and strife top of mind is hard to do.

But acknowledging this deficiency — to yourself and to others — is a healthy and helpful first step. There is no magical solution here for the infinite and permanent expansion of empathy and awareness. It is work: hard work.

We have to stop, listen and receive other people's experiences, validate those experiences and honor the feeling with which they are expressed. And we have to center the speaker and not the listener, center the person who lacks the privilege and not the one who possesses it.

I can't know what women experience in this country and indeed in this world — not on a gut level or an experiential level — but I can learn the facts of those experiences. I can be eager to listen. I can advocate for cultural and policy changes that would make women's lives better. And, I can forgive myself, I believe, for being shocked and saddened when something that I deeply understand intellectually is illustrated in ways that make me deeply understand it emotionally.

When I was in college, there was a popular T-shirt that read, "It's a black thing, you wouldn't understand." I never bought one because I disagreed. Others may not be able to fully know your plight as a lived experience, but they can absolutely be made to understand, particularly if they have an earnest desire to do so. That's how allies are formed. That seems to me to also apply to all other oppressions, including sexism.

Accessed on 8.23.19 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/29/opinion/checking-my-male-privilege.html>

1. What is your reaction to this article?
2. Do you feel that what is described in this article is a significant problem in today's America? Explain.
3. How does this article relate to the circle of respect discussed in class?
4. In previous years, conversations about this issue have been awkward, with some people saying they were afraid to speak their minds. Why do you think this is the case?

Do policies such as the one below serve to reduce or exacerbate the problem described in the article?

Dress Code Alert

Don't Wear: clothing that does not provide adequate coverage of your body

Don't Wear: see through or fish net fabrics or tops with cut-outs

Don't Wear: bandanas or wave caps

Don't Wear: any crude or vulgar lettering or anything gang related

Don't Wear: pants below waistline or allow visibility of undergarments

Don't Wear: spandex or lycra fabrics or skirts with slits above extended finger tips

Don't Wear: backless tops or clothes with revealing holes or tears

Don't Wear: crop tops that do not cover top of pants or shorts

Don't Wear: beach attire or shorts that are above extended finger tips

Don't Wear: pajamas or bedroom slippers

Don't Wear: off the shoulder tops