We Have To Do Better

I just read a response to the article, “What the UC Santa Barbara shootings tell us about the consequences of misogyny, and why we should care.” The responder asked, “Was the violence at University of California Santa Barbara a LA/SoCal problem?” This is neither a “LA/SoCal” issue nor an isolated incident. This gendered sense of male entitlement exists all over the world and is part of a male system of misogyny that has been oppressing women for decades.

One leader of one small subsection of a religious community recently decided that girls should not be educated and kidnapped more than 200 of them from a school in Nigeria. He then decided that if someone tried to come get these girls that were now his property he would sell them into sexual slavery.

And before this level of misogyny gets relegated to one religion, one race or one continent, let’s look back to 1989, the "Montreal Massacre”. One white male with no identified connection to a religious institution murdered 14 women at a college in Montreal. He entered the room and ordered the men out and began shooting women. He indicated he was entitled to be in a program that he was not admitted to and women were to blame for that omission.

And before this level of gendered hate is essentialized to only be connected to the “ultimate” act of murder by people that are clearly mentally ill in all of those communities over there, I’ll share a personal story.

I was riding a University of Iowa Cambus with my one-year-old son in March of this year. He just wanted to ride around. I did not pay attention to the fact that it was a Saturday night and the Hawkeye men’s basketball team was playing. Halfway through the ride a large group of men climbed on the bus that was populated by me, my son and at least half a bus full of women on the way to the basketball game. As they entered the bus, the men started chanting, “Show titties for the boys!” As the ride went on, they started chanting, “I want some pussy!”

I chose not to challenge what they were saying. I justified my lack of action by telling myself that I did not want to scream in my son’s ear. The language and the implied threat (“If you don’t give me what I want, I will take it” and “This is our world and we will terrorize, sexualize, and objectify you anytime we want and you will just take it”) were not directed at me. I was not scared for myself on that bus that night. What a privilege to ride a bus without fear of sexual victimization.

Were those words imprinted in my son’s brain that night? Could I have overwritten the message of the chanting men by speaking up? Would women have felt more empowered to challenge the men if a male voice had called out the other men? Would other men have said something if I had spoken up? What a disservice to my son, the women on that bus, and probably some other silent men, that I chose to say nothing.
This event happened not long after University of Iowa President Sally Mason made the mistake of suggesting rape was inevitable, and subsequent protests started questioning the victim blaming focus of the sexual misconduct policy. President Mason apologized, disclosed the abuse she had experienced, and then moved to improve implementation of the sexual misconduct policy. Everybody was aware of what was going on. It triggered a national discussion. I wonder if what I witnessed was at all connected.

Women were protesting and more importantly they were being listened to and things were changing rapidly. How many men felt threatened by the possibility? How many men were defensively talking about what was going on before hopping on that bus that night? How many of the women on that bus were frightened or nervous about what would happen next? Whether or not there was a direct connection, women were being put back in their place. The women, all of the women consciously or unconsciously, had to live through that bus ride recognizing the real possibility, that if they said anything, that sense of male entitlement to the space and hatred of women would be turned on them.

Misogyny is a worldwide threat to all women, even when the threat does not seem direct and even when women choose a path that seems contrary to their best interests. The silence of women on that bus was a reasonable response. The woman who pleaded and said "I am not a feminist" before being killed during the Montreal Massacre was making a reasonable attempt to save her own life. Women that choose not to send their daughters to school in communities around the world are making a rational choice to protect their children. The language on that bus was the foundation of the hate and sense of male entitlement that silences women and leads to mass shootings and more individually the murders associated with domestic violence.

Women have lived with this threat of violence for decades, all women, all over the world. Women have shaped their lives to avoid the threat and the reality of men’s sense of entitlement to their bodies, minds, and spirits since gender has been defined. It must stop, and guess who needs to take responsibility for ending it? We men.

We have to listen. Start by reading, not posting, on #yesallwomen. We have to stop making excuses. We have to stop giving cover to the men that implicitly and explicitly threaten women. We have to stop saying, "I would never do that," while benefiting from the privileges that have been afforded us to not have to live with the fear and to not be silenced by the possibility that the violence could be turned on us. We have to stop being complicit with the violence through our silence. We have to listen and change. Our sisters, daughters, mothers, and our sons need us to find the courage and strength to speak up. We have to do better. I have to do better.

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