



ARTICLE

GETTING MEN TO SPEAK UP

A primer for men who want to be allies
by Michael Kimmel

In early November 1991, a month after Anita Hill’s testimony about being sexually harassed by Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, my mother invited me to dinner. After a long and pleasant meal, she told me that Hill’s stories were all too familiar. When my mother was in graduate school, her mentor groped her. She left school the next day and didn’t complete her PhD for 30 years.

Back in the 1990s, Hill wasn’t believed when she bravely came forward. Instead she was vilified by the Senate Judiciary Committee as [a woman scorned](#), as “a little bit nutty and a little bit slutty,” as [a now-contrite David Brock](#) put it in [his article smearing Hill](#). That response set the tone: Over the next 25 years, whenever a woman stood up to publicly accuse men like Bill Cosby or Bill Clinton of sexual assault, she usually ended up being the one on trial in the court of public opinion, charged with a lack of credibility.

But outside this public narrative, something started to shift: Women like my mother began to speak privately about their painful experiences. Mothers told their children, wives told their husbands, women told their friends, daughters told their parents. And they were believed.

Social scientists who study movements often speak of [the three elements of revolution](#). First come the structural preconditions — long-term institutional changes that slowly build pressure, sometimes without even being noticed. In this case, those 25 years of simmering private conversations paved the way for today’s widespread backlash against harassment. The second element of a revolution is precipitants — pivotal events that cause change to rapidly accelerate. One precipitant here was the 2016 release of the [Access Hollywood](#) videotape of Donald Trump [bragging about kissing and groping](#)

[women](#). After his election to the U.S. presidency despite this evidence, many women were both incredulous and furious.

Finally, there are trigger events that ignite a major explosion. In this case it was the rapid succession of revelations about [Roger Ailes](#), [Bill O’Reilly](#), and [Harvey Weinstein](#). In what seemed like a first, the women’s tales of abuse were not doubted — they were *believed*. And so #MeToo began, a reckoning so public that the women who spoke out were named [Time magazine’s people of the year](#) in 2017.

We are in a new moment. For many of us, particularly men, it is scary and uncomfortable. Men are feeling vulnerable and afraid of false accusations (or perhaps true ones). They fear that things they did a long time ago will be reevaluated under new rules. They tell me they’re walking on eggshells. Because of this, many men are staying silent rather than taking part in the conversation. And yet inaction isn’t necessarily the right approach; there are important things men can do and say to support the women in their lives.

My experience studying masculinity and working with companies on sexual harassment has led me to focus on how men can take action to address

this problem in the workplace. To do so effectively, we must come to terms with four questions: Why do men harass women? Don't they know it's wrong? How do they get away with it? And finally, what can we do about it?

WHY DO MEN HARASS WOMEN?

This one's easy. Men do it because they feel they can. It's hardly the case that men are so overcome by lust that they cannot restrain themselves, as [some people have suggested](#). No, it's often about being in a position of power and feeling entitled to have access to women. These male harassers are emboldened to act by their privilege and authority and by the fact that their targets are in a weaker and more vulnerable position.

DON'T THEY KNOW IT'S WRONG?

Nearly all of us know that grabbing a woman by her genitals, patting her butt, making lewd comments, or forcing her to engage in sexual activity is wrong. This is not some blurry line we have to negotiate. *We know*. "They let you do it" is the most telling quote from that *Access Hollywood* tape. Trump is saying, in effect, *You see what a big celebrity I am? Look what I can get away with*.

Some men, however, may not realize that the occasional shoulder massage, calling women "sweetie" or "honey," or making suggestive comments is also wrong. Men who are older tend to fall into this category. It's startling to remember that a mere two generations ago, white-collar workplaces looked like a lot like Don Draper's world on *Mad Men*. The offices with the windows and doors were occupied by men; the women were gathered in the secretarial pool in the center of the office, a sort of crude corral. Sexual access to them was considered a perk.

This might be why men in their sixties who are accused of behaving badly 30

years ago sometimes seem bewildered. They may feel they are being judged by contemporary standards for things they did under what they perceive as different rules. This is reflected in the data: [According to a recent analysis by The Economist](#), "younger respondents were more likely to think that a behavior crossed the line than their older peers were."

This does not absolve younger guys of their own bad behavior, nor is it reason to forgive the older men being accused. Still, it's important to talk more about these generational issues and how they color our thinking about the way we treat women.

HOW DO THEY GET AWAY WITH IT?

Complicit assent. Think again about the *Access Hollywood* tape. What might have happened had Billy Bush, the show's host at the time, responded with, *Donald, that's disgusting — not to mention illegal!* Or if the other guys on the bus had said, *That's gross*. What if Harvey Weinstein's brother, Bob, had grabbed him by the shoulders and yelled, *Harvey, stop it! I will throw you out of the company if you continue!*

Sexual harassment persists because of three factors: the sense of entitlement that some men feel toward the women they work with; the presumption that women won't report it or fight back; and the presumed support — even tacit support in the form of not calling out bad behavior — of other men.

What we've seen recently is the second leg of the stool getting kicked out. There's been an outpouring of resistance from women. Women are speaking out, loudly, and not stopping.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Now it's time to kick out the third leg. When men remain silent, it can be taken as a sign that we agree with the harasser, that we think the behavior is OK, and that we won't intervene. Men

are complicit in a culture that enables sexual harassment, so it is up to us to actively, volubly speak up and let the perpetrators know that we are not OK with what they do.

I'll make one assertion here, which is backed by my experiences working with companies to promote gender equality over several decades: The overwhelming majority of men do not want to be jerks. We don't want to make women uncomfortable and don't want to say things that are offensive.

This puts a slightly more positive spin on the current male anxiety, which most assume is about being reported for harassment. But it also might be about the desire not to behave badly — and about not knowing exactly how to act.

We can act in a positive manner, however. Here's one scenario I suspect is remarkably common:

Adeline is sitting in a meeting. She is the only woman in the room. Rob is in the meeting, too, and he makes a sexist comment. The room goes silent. Everyone's attention is on Adeline: Is she going to do something, say something? *Oh, God, here she goes*, many of the other men are saying to themselves. Big eye roll. *She's gonna call him out and make everyone feel bad*. And Adeline has to decide if she's going to say something and make everyone miserable, or swallow it and stay miserable herself.

After the meeting, one of Adeline's colleagues, Fabrice, privately apologizes to her for Rob. "I'm really sorry about what he said in there," Fabrice says. "I didn't like that at all."

Fabrice thinks he's being supportive, but he's actually introducing another dilemma for Adeline. Does she nod politely and thank him? Or does she say, "Uh, where were you when I needed you?"

Men, what could you do differently? The obvious answer is that you could speak up, right then in the meeting, and

say that you aren't comfortable with those kinds of statements. But typically we don't do that. Why not?

We're afraid that if we do, we'll be marginalized, kicked out of the men's club — that we'll become, in effect, "honorary women." Men know that doing the right thing sometimes carries costs, and most of us are worried about jeopardizing what we have. So we betray the women in the room, abandon our ethics, and slink away uncomfortably.

But think about that moment when Rob made his comment. I'm sure there were guys in the meeting who were looking down at their shoes, laughing uncomfortably, or shuffling the papers on the table. They didn't like it either but were too frightened to act.

Men, this is your chance. After the meeting, don't apologize to Adeline. Talk to one of the other guys who looked uneasy:

"Listen, Mateo, I hate it when Rob says things like that."

"So do I," says Mateo.

This is your opening: "The next time he does that, I'm going to say something. But as soon as I do, you have to jump right in and say that you don't like it either. Can I count on you?"

Because here is what we know. It might be too scary for one guy to risk marginalization by speaking up, even though failing to do the right thing will make him ashamed later. But when two guys call out sexism, that opens a space for more men to chime in. And the behavior that makes women feel uncomfortable and alone might stop right there.

A global insurance company I consulted with developed informal "male allies" training, teaching men how to develop strategies to support one another. Critically, they were not being asked to "rescue" women; they were charged with challenging other men. The men developed several

approaches, including supporting one another when a child was sick or a family issue arose. Soon the company's male employees started talking more openly with one another about their experiences, their families, and their efforts to balance their lives. And after a year, the men reported higher levels of job satisfaction. Though it remains to be seen how these changes will affect sexual harassment at the company, the shared language and norms the men have developed will help them challenge one another and support men who speak out.

So, where do we go from here? After decades of accepting sexual harassment as the status quo, we have to take some of the weight off women's shoulders. It's simply not their responsibility alone to talk about and enforce workplace equality. We must call out the sexist behaviors of other men because it's wrong and because it undermines women's confidence and effectiveness in the workplace.

This is what it means to be allies, men. To stand up together and do the right thing. We know how to do it, and we're good at it most of the time. Brotherhood, teamwork, and camaraderie are the essence of the fraternity, the foxhole, and the sports team. Now we have to learn how to come together at work — and on the right side of things. ■

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