

## Dear Men: It's You, Too



Roxane Gay OCT. 19, 2017

(...)

5 So many people want to believe they don't know any bad men. So many people do not realize they are bad men. So many people want to believe sexual harassment is only a Hollywood problem or a Silicon Valley problem when, in fact, sexual harassment happens in every single industry. There is no escaping the inappropriate attentions and intentions of men.

10 These same people buy into the myth that there are ways women can avoid sexual violence and harassment — if we act nicer or drink less or dress less provocatively or smile or show a little gratitude or, or, or — because boys will be boys, because men are so fragile, so frenzied with sexual need that they cannot simply control themselves and their baser impulses.

Some people insinuate that women themselves can stave off attacks. They insist we can wear modest clothes or be grateful for unconventional looks, or that we can avoid “asking for it” by “presenting all the sensuality and the sexuality,” as Donna Karan has said. With each of these betrayals, the burden we all carry grows heavier.

15 What this reasoning does not grapple with — and it is a perennial rejoinder to discussions of sexual assault and women's vulnerability — is that no one escapes unwanted male attention because they don't meet certain beauty standards or because they don't dress a certain way. They escape because they are lucky.

20 Sexual violence is about power. There is a sexual component, yes, but mostly it's about someone exerting his or her will over another and deriving pleasure and satisfaction from that exertion. We cannot forget this, or the women and men who have been harassed or assaulted but aren't “conventionally attractive” will be ignored, silenced, or worse, disbelieved.

25 And then there are the ways that women diminish their experiences as “not that bad.” Because it was just a cat call. It was just a man grabbing me. It was just a

30 man shoving me up against a wall. It was just a man raping me. He didn't have a weapon. He stopped following me after 10 blocks. He didn't leave many bruises. He didn't kill me, therefore it is not that bad. Nothing I deal with in this country compares with what women in other parts of the world deal with. We offer up this refrain over and over because that is what we need to tell ourselves, because if we were to face how bad it really is, we might not be able to shoulder the burden for one moment longer.

(...)

35 We already know victims' stories. Women testify about their hurt, publicly and privately, all the time. When this happens, men, in particular, act shocked and surprised that sexual violence is so pervasive because they are afforded the luxury of oblivion. And then they start to panic because not all men are predators and they don't want to be lumped in with the bad men and they make women's pain all about themselves. They choose not to face that enough men are predators that women engage in all sorts of protective behaviors and strategies so that they might stop adding to their testimony. And then there are the men  
40 who act so overwhelmed, who ask, "What can I possibly do?"

The answer is simple.

45 Men can start putting in some of the work women have long done in offering testimony. They can come forward and say "me too" while sharing how they have hurt women in ways great and small. They can testify about how they have cornered women in narrow office hallways or made lewd comments to coworkers or refused to take no for an answer or worn a woman down by guilting her into sex and on and on and on. It would equally be a balm if men spoke up about the times when they witnessed violence or harassment and looked the other way or laughed it off or secretly thought a woman was asking for it. It's  
50 time for men to start answering for themselves because women cannot possibly solve this problem they had no hand in creating.