#MeToo

Why Gender Violence Is Everyone's Problem
Learning Objectives

1. Describe how #MeToo has given publicity to forms of exploitation most people used to conceal.
2. Define different types of gender violence and illustrate how each reflects the perpetrator's sense of entitlement.
3. Identify why blaming survivors of gender violence is a way of further victimizing them.
4. Explain how gender violence is a by-product of conventional ideas about masculinity.
5. Recognize that while only certain people are to blame for gender violence, all of us are responsible for it.

Publicizing Trauma: How Social Media Has Brought Gender Violence out of the Shadows

At 4:21 p.m. on October 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano (@Alyssa_Milano) tweeted, “If all the people who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” By the following morning, nearly forty thousand people had replied to her post. Milano’s call to action occurred ten days after the New York Times published an article detailing accounts by numerous women that Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein had coerced them to perform malicious sexual acts. The platform #MeToo created has emboldened people to share similar accounts of exploitation, often inflicted by a friend, co-worker, or family member. Not surprisingly, the spotlight has been on people already in the public eye—a list that includes Louis C.K., Ryan Seacrest, Kevin Spacey, Bill Cosby, Matt Lauer, Al Franken, Charlie Rose, Morgan Freeman, Marshall Faulk, and Donald Trump. Although some people have come to these men’s defense, for many of the accused the egregious behavior has ruined their careers and/or their reputations.
People of varying ages and backgrounds have posted #MeToo testimonials. Here’s a sample from Twitter:

I was 15 he was 24. I said stop! He kept going. The worst part it was my brothers friend and he believed him over me.

Me too, he was 56 and I was 17.

I was 9 . . .

Me too, he was my stepfather.

#me too. More times than I can count.

#ME TOO by several family members.

Me too. Christmas 2010. We were colleagues. He’s a doctor, I’m a nurse. Guess who had no choice other than to quit?

Each post gives visibility to mistreatment that people previously kept private and may have presumed was simply their own fault. During the year following Alyssa Milano’s #MeToo tweet, this hashtag was used nineteen million times on Twitter—an average of 55,319 times per day.⁴

FIRST IMPRESSIONS?

1. Do you know anyone who has written a #MeToo post? If so, what feelings did the person have about making that post?

2. What sorts of replies did the post elicit, either on social media or in person?

3. Have you noticed ways that #MeToo posts have changed people’s awareness of the types of humiliating behavior the posts expose? If so, how?

#MeToo posts characterize gender violence, harm inflicted by people in powerful positions that reinforces norms about appropriate male and female behavior. Heterosexual boys and men are typically the perpetrators of gender violence. Their actions illustrate toxic masculinity, which is the idea that being a “real man” hinges on acting abusively toward others, and often toward oneself too. “If you have a mother or a girlfriend or eyes,” wrote journalist Moises Velasquez-Manoff, “it’s hard not to be aware of the aggressive entitlement that many men feel toward women’s bodies”—and toward the bodies of others with lesser power: girls, gay males, and transgender people.⁵
In addition to fueling gender violence, male entitlement also inhibits remorse about the pain such violence causes. This pain isn’t necessarily physical. Consider the mental and emotional injuries women endure when heterosexual men expect them to act submissively or appear “sexy.” These expectations can demean women by giving them the message that their worth hinges on how well they satisfy male desires and that personal qualities like leadership, intellect, and judgment don’t matter.7

Whereas inappropriate behavior by male celebrities has gotten media attention for many years, the #MeToo movement has uncovered the more typical examples of gender violence perpetrated by ordinary men. The limited statistical data that exist about victimization rates lend support to anecdotal evidence that minority groups experience gender violence more frequently than Whites (see Figure 9.1). Therefore, it’s no wonder that it was a woman of color—Black civil rights activist Tarana Burke—who

![Tarana Burke used “me too” several years before anyone knew the seismic impact a hashtag could have.](dpa picture alliance/Alamy Stock Photo)

**FIGURE 9.1 • Victimized Because of Their Gender**

These are the percentages of females from different racial groups who have experienced sexual assault or rape.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rate per 1,000 females age 12 or older</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan Native</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-racial</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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Seeing Social Problems

White actress Alyssa Milano often gets the credit, however, because it was her doing so on social media that launched a social movement.8

The individual perspective toward gender violence views the perpetrators as uniquely different from other males—as “damaged men.” It’s a compelling view for explaining the behavior of a guy like Brock Turner who behaves unconscionably. On the evening of January 18, 2015, two bikers discovered the nineteen-year-old Stanford University student forcing himself on a half-naked, unconscious woman outside his fraternity house. Since he acted alone, he’s obviously the sole person to blame. It’s convenient, moreover, to view gender violence as limited to a subset of deviant males like Turner. This individual perspective enables both women and the “good guys” who don’t behave abhorrently toward females, gays, or transgender people to believe that they bear no responsibility for the problem.

This chapter takes a less convenient path. It explores various types of gender violence and exposes the physical, mental, emotional, and economic injuries they inflict. We’ll see why assigning violent boys and men sole responsibility for this problem limits our understanding of why it occurs so frequently. By highlighting the social forces that lead some males to act in inappropriate—and sometimes criminal—ways toward individuals with less power, the sociological perspective reveals just how many people play a role in reinforcing the beliefs that lie at the root of gender violence. We’ll see that such violence is not a deviation from social norms but a reflection of them.

Exhibiting Entitlement:
Gender Violence as a Display of Male Power

The ascendance of #MeToo came on the heels of #NeverthelessShePersisted, a movement that arose eight months earlier during the confirmation hearings for Jeff Sessions as attorney general. Senator Elizabeth Warren took issue with Sessions’ record on civil rights and had the evidence in hand to support her case. When she started reading a letter written thirty years earlier by Martin Luther King Jr.’s widow, Coretta Scott King, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell stopped her. He mentioned that he had warned her not to read the letter aloud, yet “nevertheless she persisted.” A new hashtag was born. Supporters appropriated McConnell’s words as a rallying cry for women victimized by men in powerful positions. #NeverthelessShePersisted has...
become a slogan of resilience for survivors of gender violence in all its various forms. *Survivor* is more fitting than *victim* as a way of conveying that, despite the many obstacles they face, a person can move beyond having been exploited.  

**Silencing**

Women whose lives are far removed from politics can still relate to the dehumanization Elizabeth Warren endured. Across a range of workplaces, women are prone to *silencing*, men ignoring, censoring, or reprimanding them simply because they have spoken what’s on their minds. An assertive man is seen as strong; a brazen woman as a bitch (see Figure 9.2). While men also experience workplace penalties if they come across as too abrasive, a woman’s perceived worth to a company drops on average more than twice as much as a man’s when others perceive her as exercising too much power. In addition to the risk of being

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**FIGURE 9.2  ● Double Standard**

Women who exhibit the very qualities at work that enable men to get ahead may face criticism and be denied promotion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEN</th>
<th>WOMEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Abrasive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruptor</td>
<td>Disruptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passionate</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes control</td>
<td>Bossy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>Pushy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>Judgmental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes his time</td>
<td>Takes too long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick</td>
<td>Impulsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>Needs to follow her gut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follows his gut</td>
<td>Irrational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>Show-off</td>
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</tbody>
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Seeing Social Problems

When a woman was passed over for a raise or demoted, silencing can lead women to question their validity and self-worth.  

The forces that contribute to silencing take shape early in girls' lives and are most pronounced at school. In coed classrooms, they're likeliest to participate when the teacher's prompt calls for a brief response, whereas boys are more willing to make open-ended remarks. This inequality may contribute to girls' questioning the worth of their ideas and boys' growing up to become men who believe they're entitled to silence women like how Mitch McConnell cut off Elizabeth Warren mid-sentence while she was speaking on the floor of the Senate.  

**Sexual Harassment**

Any woman who has waited tables knows that even though being friendly is part of the job, making small talk can subject her to abusive treatment. If a customer does something offensive, should she speak up and risk losing her tip—or even worse, her job? An eye-opening *New York Times* investigation accompanied by a jarring video exposed the everyday mistreatment experienced by women who work for tips. It's all too common for customers to make crude comments, touch them, or proposition them for sex. Some men snap photos while waitresses are bending over to take their food orders and then post the pictures of exposed cleavage on social media. These are all examples of *sexual harassment*, which occurs when a person asserts their power over someone else by making sexual innuendos or unwanted advances.  

Sexual harassment most often occurs in the workplace. There are three contexts where the majority of women experience this mistreatment. The first, as we've seen, is restaurants, bars, and other settings where earnings mostly come from tips. The second is environments where women work as chambermaids, janitors, or in other low-wage service jobs. Women in these positions face a significant risk of sexual harassment because they work alone and have few opportunities to find other jobs. And finally, women in male-dominated occupations like construction or finance encounter colleagues who may harass them as a way of signaling that they shouldn't be doing “manly” work.  

Women in jobs where they publicly exhibit authority risk facing particularly malicious forms of sexual harassment. Consider Julia Gillard, who was president of
Australia from 2010 to 2013. In his campaign to unseat her from power, Tony Abbott stood in front of Parliament next to signs saying “Ditch the Witch” and “Man’s Bitch.” Female journalists are another case in point. It’s common for men to post comments on their social media pages that don’t merely criticize their reporting but make crude references to their bodies or sexuality. Nearly half of female journalists routinely experience this sort of degradation. Women who write about gender violence, not surprisingly, receive the most threatening comments of all.

Given this persistent threat, women are much less likely than men to post comments on news sites, and they may resort to using pseudonyms when they do. Research indicates that commenters with female names comprise on average just a third—and in some cases, as little as 3 percent—of those who post most frequently. This means that when journalists turn to online forums for a snapshot of public opinion, women’s voices and perspectives are significantly underrepresented.

**Street Harassment**

A video that went viral of a woman walking around New York City on a typical workday shows many unfamiliar men making unprovoked comments about her body. During the time she traversed the city on foot, there were more than one hundred such comments. Many men also winked or whistled at her. The video depicts street harassment, which occurs when a person receives unwanted sexual attention in public from unfamiliar men. It’s a form of sexual harassment that warrants its own discussion because of the many ways a person can feel violated in public space.

As Figure 9.3 indicates, most women have experienced one or more types of street harassment. Girls often encounter it for the first time at a young age. It may be overtly demeaning slurs about their bodies or phrases that seem harmless to the man saying them, such as “You look beautiful” or “Smile, baby.” Yet such utterances are anything but innocuous. Since girls and women get bombarded with media messages telling them that their bodies exist for male pleasure, it’s degrading for a stranger to say these types of things. Such comments can make girls and women feel that they do not have or deserve equal access to public space.

Figure 9.3 (on page 180) reveals that males encounter street harassment too, though less frequently. Male victims often identify as LGBTQ. The most common...
type of harassment is homophobic or transphobic slurs, which reflect boys’ and men’s power to assert that it’s unacceptable to deviate from heteronormativity, or the view that heterosexuality is the only legitimate expression of desire. Given how often girls, women, and LGBTQ people experience street harassment, it’s no wonder they may feel unsafe in public.

Sexual Assault and Rape

A few years before the rise of #MeToo, Columbia University senior Emma Sulkowicz started carrying a fifty-pound mattress wherever they went—to class, the library, the dining hall, and out with friends. Emma explained in a video that this was a fitting final project for their visual arts degree. Emma’s aim was to demonstrate the trauma of sexual assault, which occurs when a person asserts their power by physically making sexual advances on someone else without their consent, and rape, which occurs when the sexual coercion involves oral, anal, or vaginal penetration.

The mattress was the same size as the ones in Columbia’s dorms, where, Emma claimed, a male acquaintance raped them. Carrying the mattress gave Emma public acknowledgment of their trauma, which few sexual assault survivors receive. Given that deep feelings of shame cause many survivors to hide the pain, Emma got the chance to share a personal story of exploitation and raise awareness about a problem that afflicts one in five college women in the U.S. and one in four...
gender-nonconforming students like Emma. These numbers are even higher than the research indicates since many survivors don’t report their experiences. You may be familiar with these statistics as they’re often publicized on college campuses.18

Because these numbers are also the subject of debate, we need to look more closely at the realities of sexual assault. Let’s probe the validity of the one-in-five statistic concerning college women. First, think about the role of drinking. If you’ve ever had a few too many at a party, you know that alcohol can blur a person’s judgment. This can mean some women waking up with the knowledge that what they supposedly agreed to do the night before while drunk was actually rape. And second, consider false accusations. A 2014 *Rolling Stone* article chronicled the account of a University of Virginia student who claimed that at a party several fraternity brothers had gang-raped her as part of an initiation ritual. There was uproar when a follow-up investigation discredited key details of her story.19

Intoxication and fabricated victimization are topics that may have crossed your mind when you’ve heard about campus sexual assault and rape. These topics foster doubt in some people’s minds about the severity of the problem. But they shouldn’t. In truth, these issues are smokescreens; they divert attention from the underlying truth about consent: It’s a black and white issue. If a person hasn’t explicitly communicated in the moment that they’re interested in sex, they’re not—period.

Let’s first consider the role of alcohol. Research indicates that a significant reason sexual assault is so prevalent on college campuses is because the power imbalance between men and women escalates when one or both people have been drinking. As a guy consumes more alcohol, the likelihood that he will make sexual advances on a woman without her consent increases. And the more intoxicated he is, the more forceful his behavior is likely to be.20

Emma had the mattress with them during the entire school year and walked across the stage with it at graduation to receive their diploma. Andrew Burton/Getty Images

Why do some people believe sexual assault can’t take place if drinking is involved? iStockphoto.com/Django

The “Yes Means Yes” movement promotes that only by saying yes does a person give consent. This movement is involved in a campaign to pass laws holding perpetrators accountable for making sexual advances on people unable to give their consent because alcohol has impaired their ability to do so. HelloWorld Images/Alamy Stock Photo
Likewise, don’t let publicized cases of fabricated sexual assault accounts mislead you into thinking the problem is exaggerated.\(^{21}\) It not only runs rampant but 95 percent of college women who experience sexual assault don’t report it to their resident assistant or campus police because they feel ashamed about what happened. They may believe others will discredit their story if they were intoxicated or will blame them for underage drinking. They also have reason to think there’s no point in coming forward because their rapist will face little accountability. Recall the story earlier of Brock Turner, who assaulted an unconscious woman outside his fraternity house at Stanford University. He served just three months in prison, and oftentimes perpetrators of sexual assault receive no punishment at all.\(^{22}\)

Of the relatively few women who do go public with an allegation of sexual assault, only about 5 percent base their case on fabricated evidence. Because false accusations unfairly stain men’s reputations, they’re certainly a serious injustice. Yet this injustice shouldn’t be our primary concern here. The truth is that the overwhelming majority of sexual assault cases involve women making legitimate claims.\(^{23}\)

### Intimate Partner Violence

Ray Rice was one of the best running backs in the National Football League during his six-year career, but that’s not why his name is familiar to many people. The Baltimore Ravens terminated Rice’s contract after a video went viral of him assaulting his fiancé, Janay Palmer, in the elevator of an Atlantic City casino. **Intimate partner violence** occurs when one person in a romantic relationship uses their power to weaken, shame, and humiliate their lover (see Figure 9.4). The violence isn’t necessarily physical; for example, one partner may continually insult the other, withhold essential financial support, or make the other feel and believe they’re crazy (a tactic known as **gaslighting**). **Intimate partner violence** is a more fitting term than domestic violence since, as Rice’s actions indicate, the victimization may occur in public as well as at home. On any given day across the U.S., hotlines for survivors of intimate partner violence receive about twenty thousand calls.\(^{24}\)
Whether the abuse occurs physically, mentally, emotionally, or verbally, intimate partner violence reflects the perpetrator’s belief that they have the right to exercise control over their partner.


One in three heterosexual women experiences intimate partner violence during her lifetime. This problem occurs in all types of relationships. Gays and lesbians who internalize homophobia may project that bias onto their partners by making disparaging comments or inflicting physical force. Transgender people are especially
vulnerable to abuse from a lover. Nearly half of them experience it, typically when their partner is not also trans. The partner may withhold hormonal medication from the person who's transitioning, sabotage their ability to pay for gender confirmation surgery, criticize them for not being a “real” man or woman because their genitals don't match their gender identity, or threaten to reveal their partner’s birth-assigned sex to coworkers, family members, or others who may be judgmental. All instances of intimate partner violence reflect power imbalances between the people involved in the romantic relationship.25

Adding Insult to Injury: Why Blaming Gender Violence Survivors for Their Victimization Contributes to the Problem

At a time when accounts of gender violence are frequently in the news and posted on social media, it may be hard to imagine that for most of American history this social problem wasn’t a topic of public concern. That changed because of several developments initiated by feminists beginning in the 1960s: the founding of the first shelter for survivors of intimate partner violence, the passage of laws that allowed courts to consider abuse as grounds for divorce, and the creation of rape crisis centers for survivors of sexual assault. #MeToo is just the latest development in a massive movement spanning many decades to publicize the pain and humiliation that survivors of gender violence experience.26

Even though speaking openly about gender violence gives visibility to the victimization, something is still often missing from the ways people talk about this social problem. Consider a statement like “Mary is a battered woman.” The focus is entirely on Mary; there’s no mention of the person who hurt her. Notice how simple it is to erase the perpetrator from public discussion of intimate partner violence. When people initially speak about this issue, they might say something like “John beat Mary.” But then, they’re quick to move to the passive voice: “Mary was beaten by John.” This diverts attention from John to Mary, making it easy for John to drop out of the sentence entirely: “Mary was beaten.” Mary’s identity is now detached from John’s actions, prompting us to say, “Mary is a battered woman.” How might the perpetrator similarly get erased from conversation about sexual assault?27
Removing perpetrators from discussions of gender violence absolves them of responsibility and may lead people to ask questions like “How was she dressed at the party?” This question implies that women are solely responsible for what happens to them in public and therefore undeserving of protection from danger or support in the wake of harm. It’s no wonder survivors may not report incidents of gender violence; they often don’t believe they’ll receive validation. On the other hand, some people may cast blame on survivors who don’t speak out because not doing so ensures that the criminal justice system cannot hold perpetrators accountable. It seems survivors are damned if they do and damned if they don’t.\textsuperscript{28}

Exposing the sociological reasons for survivors’ silence reveals why it’s shortsighted to blame these people for their own victimization. In a study of sexual assault survivors who didn’t report the crime, respondents indicated that they felt doing so would have intensified the shame the assault produced in them and led to reliving the pain and humiliation, or revictimization. They believed going to the authorities would have made them seem blameworthy for not having been sufficiently mindful of how they dressed, spoke, or behaved.\textsuperscript{29}

There’s a similar story concerning intimate partner violence. Some people might wonder why a person in danger doesn’t just leave. The story is never that simple. For starters, a survivor may not necessarily see their partner’s violent behavior as out of the ordinary, given the widespread belief in our society that violence is a legitimate expression of masculinity. Therefore, survivors may be willing to put up with mistreatment. They may also be financially incapable of leaving if they have no immediate way to support themselves otherwise. The most significant barrier to escaping from an abusive partner is fear. Survivors may stay if they view doing so as the lesser of two evils. Fleeing may put them in even greater danger if their partner finds them, which is a real possibility given the vast array of...
tracking apps that can help in locating a missing person. There’s a risk that if the person is found, the abusive partner will become even more violent toward them.

**“Be a Man”: Violence as a Socially Acceptable Expression of Masculinity**

The summer before #MeToo swept across American society, my family visited China. Among the many reasons I found it to be a fascinating trip, one that surprised me was the hordes of motorcycles whizzing by on city streets. This wasn't something I’d read about in a guidebook, nor would have expected to find noteworthy. Yet I was mesmerized and couldn’t stop thinking about motorcycles long after returning home. It certainly wasn’t because I wanted to saddle up on one and hit the open road. After all, I don’t drive due to my visual impairment. In retrospect, it seems obvious that I fixated on the two-wheeled vehicles dotting the streets of Beijing and Guangzhou because this scene starkly differed from the familiar scene in the U.S. of men riding solo. I frequently saw Chinese women driving motorcycles. Sometimes couples rode with one or more children in tow on a scooter hardly bigger than a bicycle.

After the trip, I started to connect the dots and came to see how these differences expose the roots of gender violence. In many cultures—certainly in the U.S., though perhaps not in China—motorcycles aren’t simply a mode of transportation. They also reflect valued masculine traits like independence, risk-taking, and toughness. Moreover, just about everywhere American boys spend time—at home, in school, on the sports field, or hanging out amongst friends—they hear the message that violence is “manly.” Receiving positive reinforcement for trying to win at all costs or for relentlessly exhibiting strength teaches them it’s acceptable to assert power over others. It’s no wonder that the boys and men who perpetrate gender violence have internalized toxic masculinity, believing their manliness hinges on objectifying girls and women. These males are particularly inclined to become violent when educational attainment, occupational success, and other legitimate expressions of status are unattainable to them.

It would be convenient to downplay the many ways American culture teaches males that violence is “manly” and to attribute responsibility for rape or sexual harassment solely to the individuals who perpetrate these crimes. When you think about
gender violence, it makes sense if the images that come to mind are of men who whistle at women walking down the street or who hit their girlfriends. After all, these guys are the public face of this social problem and fit the conventional wisdom that the only people responsible for it are the perpetrators.32

Sometimes I find myself embracing this individual perspective. When I hear about incidents of gender violence, I take pride in knowing I’m someone who would never use my power in these malicious ways. Yet sociology has taught me to widen my understanding of this social problem by recognizing the invisible ways my life connects to broader forces in our society. As a result, I now understand that anyone may reinforce the cultural messages that underlie gender violence. I also acknowledge just how much validation I receive merely for being a man who doesn’t exploit others. The bar for being a “good guy” is indeed pretty low.

I gained this sociological wisdom during college when I started thinking back on the period of my life between roughly ages ten to seventeen. During those years, I spent several hours each week glued to the TV cheering on the New York Jets. They usually lost, but I enjoyed watching them do battle against the other team. Although I no longer closely follow professional football, I still tune in once a year for the Super Bowl. Doing so validates the spectacle of men violently tackling—and sometimes brutally injuring—one another. The truth is I support an activity that reinforces toxic masculinity.33

Beyond the head-butting that takes place on the field, there are many other ways that professional football legitimizes gender violence. What do boys learn when they see cheerleaders with lots of cleavage provocatively moving their bodies to inspire fans to root for teams comprised entirely of men? Or when the few women announcers and the many women in beer commercials dress in ways that cater to male heterosexual desires? What messages might fans take away in knowing that one of the few players the league has punished for intimate partner violence—Ray Rice—just so happens to be one of the only players whose abusive behavior got caught on video?34

Football is hardly the only setting in U.S. culture where people reinforce ideas that lie at the root of gender violence. There’s lots of other evidence of how people who don’t directly perpetrate this social problem still indirectly contribute to it.
For example, consider the millions of males who listen to Rush Limbaugh, the host of one of the most popular talk-radio shows in the country. Here are some of the stances he’s taken on the air:

- When legal rights activists Sandra Fluke tried to impress upon Congress in 2012 that health insurance plans must cover birth control, Limbaugh called her a “slut” and a “prostitute.”

- He questioned why people made such a big deal over Ray Rice’s assaulting Janay Palmer. According to Limbaugh, “Well, how bad could it have been if she said yes to the proposal? How bad could the guy be if she went ahead and married him?”

- After Ohio State University instituted a policy that people must explicitly give one another consent before becoming sexually involved, he commented, “How many of you guys in your own experience with women have learned that no means yes, if you know how to spot it?”

Despite the offensiveness of these statements, it’s not simply the case that listening to Rush Limbaugh causes a person to demean women. I have a friend whose father is a kind, loving, church-going man and also an avid fan of the show. I doubt he’s ever behaved abusively toward his wife, to whom he’s been married for over fifty years. However, the takeaway is that the support my friend’s father and countless other listeners give to Limbaugh’s ideas validates toxic masculinity, which lies at the root of gender violence in American society.

A more relatable example is listening to popular music. It’s easy to find songs that contain lyrics depicting gender violence. Here’s a sampling:

- “Put Molly all in her champagne, she ain’t even know it. I took her home and I enjoyed that, she ain’t even know it.” (Rocko, “U.O.E.N.O.”)

- “Tryin’ to send the b--ch back to her maker. And if you got a daughter older then fifteen, I’ma rape her. Take her on the living room floor, right there in front of you. Then ask you seriously, whatchu wanna do?” (DMX, “X Is Coming”)

- “Now I gotsa to give your mother----kin a-- a beatin. I punched her in the ribcage and kicked her in the stomach. Take off all my mother----kin jewelry, b--ch runnin. I stomped her and I kicked her and I punched her in the face.” (Kool G, “Hey Mister Mister”)
While these songs are all by rappers, hip-hop certainly isn’t unique among musical genres in validating toxic masculinity.

If you start paying attention to lyrics of songs that have been popular during your lifetime, you’ll see that many different musical genres reinforce toxic masculinity. A favorite song of mine before I started listening closely to the words was the 2014 hit “Animals” by Maroon 5: “Baby I’m preying on you tonight. Hunt you down eat you alive. Just like animals.” Likewise, the title of Robin Thicke’s dance party favorite “Blurred Lines” tells boys and men it’s okay to view the murkiness of sexual consent while drinking as entitling them to use female bodies as they so desire: “I know you want it. You’re a good girl. Can’t let it get past me. You’re far from plastic alright. Talk about getting blasted. I hate these blurred lines. I know you want it.” Because there are so many songs like these, it’s easy to sing along without even noticing that they validate toxic masculinity.38

If you listen to popular music, tune in to Rush Limbaugh, or watch football, you support forms of popular culture that condone males’ mistreatment of women as a way of proving they’re “real men.” I’m not blaming you but asking you to become aware of, and take responsibility for, your actions. I too give license to toxic masculinity, even though my intention—both in this book and in my teaching—is to foster awareness about the roots of gender violence. Many people who repudiate such violence may still validate toxic masculinity in ways they haven’t considered. Their validation underscores that gender violence stems from shared ideas about the meaning of masculinity. The responsibility for this social problem extends far beyond the guys who whistle at women walking down the street or drop drugs in women’s drinks at bars and then rape them.

### Seeing Gender Violence as Everyone’s Problem

> 9.5 Recognize that while only certain people are to blame for gender violence, all of us are responsible for it.

In Joe Ehrmann’s eyes, the most destructive words a boy hears while growing up are “Be a man.” It may surprise you that Ehrmann, who played professional football for thirteen years, would hold this view. He appeared to epitomize the strength and toughness that American society prizes in men—towering above 6’0”, weighing over 250 pounds, and intimidating quarterbacks with his blindside hits. But looks can deceive. When his teenage brother developed terminal cancer, Ehrmann felt emotionally unequipped to handle the trauma. Over the next several years, his conception of
what it meant to be a man radically changed. He’s now a motivational speaker who highlights how the ideas boys learn about manliness lead some of them to become violent toward others as well as inflict damage on themselves.\textsuperscript{39}

Ehrmann’s message reminds us that getting to the root of gender violence hinges on widening the lens beyond perpetrators. The males who make crude comments to women or take advantage of them while drunk are hardly the only ones responsible for this malicious behavior. Perhaps you’ve never before considered how your own beliefs or actions contribute to silencing, sexual harassment, street harassment, sexual assault, rape, or intimate partner violence. If not, you now have reason to look inward. The impetus for doing so is high. Who among us doesn’t know someone—a friend, family member, or coworker—who’s experienced one or more of these types of exploitation? #MeToo arose as a way to publicize the epidemic of gender violence that plagues American society. The sociological perspective exposes the value in expanding the meaning of this hashtag to encompass people’s collective role in the persistence of this social problem. So who’s responsible for gender violence? Most people, including me too.

Although Joe Ehrmann’s teammates told him not to cry after his brother’s death, trying to “man up” only intensified his sadness.

George Gojkovich/Getty Images

**What Do You Know Now?**

1. For each of the types of gender violence discussed in this chapter, how do the perpetrator’s actions reflect entitlement?

2. Why is it shortsighted to blame gender violence survivors for contributing to their own victimization?

3. What evidence does the chapter offer to indicate that gender violence stems from widely shared ideas about what it means to be a man?

4. How might your own behaviors reinforce the masculine norms that lie at the root of gender violence?

5. In a TED Talk, activist Tony Porter commented, “My liberation as a man is tied to your liberation as a woman.” Based on what you learned in this chapter, what do you think Porter means?
Key Terms

Gender violence 174
Toxic masculinity 174
Silencing 177
Sexual harassment 178
Street harassment 179
Heteronormativity 180
Sexual assault 180
Rape 180
Intimate partner violence 182
Gaslighting 182
Revictimization 185

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Notes

1. Alyssa Milano’s tweet and the replies to it can be found at https://mobile.twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/919659438700670976.


27. This discussion is based on a TED Talk by antiviolence educator Jackson Katz. He draws on the work of linguist Julia Penelope to show how everyday talk about gender violence erases the perpetrator from our minds.


teresa-c-younger/the-nfl-must-stop-promoting-sexism_b_5836738.html.


