

# ENDING MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

By Ted Bunch

My most memorable experience of what a full sense of privilege probably feels like was when I first received my E-Z Pass for my car. E-Z Pass is a device that allows tolls to be automatically deducted from the driver's account so that cash is not needed and therefore you get processed through tolls much faster when traveling. As I approached the toll, the tollgate began to rise and I drove through with no delay. I looked back at the long line of cars in the cash lane. I remember thinking as I watched the gate rise for me to pass that this must be what it is like to be a white man in America. I had access and privileges that made me feel welcome and preferred.

My male privilege as a black man is different; it does not go everywhere I go. For instance, if the police stop me while I am driving my car, I instinctively know to keep my hands on the steering wheel at the 10:00 and 2:00 position. I don't believe that the average white male experiences the police in the same way. This is because his male privilege is directly connected to and cannot be separated from his race privilege. However, even men of color, while being marginalized by racism, continue to experience the privileges and entitlements associated with being male. The benefit of this privilege operates in virtually every household, from the oldest male member to the youngest male child. Our privilege consists of rights, power and advantages given to men by men. Men control these rights and monitor them often at the expense of women.

**Naming The Problem:** Domestic violence, rape, sexual assault and all forms of violence against women are the manifestation of sexism. The violence and abuse by men toward women is rooted in our history, our laws and woven into the fabric of our society. It must be contextualized within the construct of sexism, because male privilege, patriarchy and misogyny support this violence. The privileges, entitlements and advantage that we as men receive from the existing social and political construct provide us with support to act in overtly and covertly demeaning, oppressive, controlling and abusive ways toward women. Our culture and norms are founded on the belief that women have less value than men, and that the role of women is for the benefit, use, entertainment and pleasure of men.

For many years, concerned citizens, activists, advocates and many other dedicated people have made great efforts to end men's violence against women. The anti-rape and sexual assault community as well as the domestic violence community have been a tremendous change agent and have made remarkable progress in the effort to create safety, justice and fairness for women. Unfortunately, despite years of great effort, sacrifice and loss of life, the terror that women experience has not decreased. Men continue to get away with their violence, abuse, intimidation as well as the misuse of power for the purpose of controlling and dominating women. This is no reflection on those communities or any other effort for change. However, it is a reflection on men and the lack of concern that we as men have for most issues affecting women. This is especially disturbing because the pain, suffering, exploitation and immeasurable loss that women experience is almost always due to violence and abuse at the hands of men.

Domestic violence, rape and sexual assault are the most devastating health issues and social problems facing our society. There is no other problem, disease or illness that claims as many victims. In almost every case the perpetrator is a male and the victim is a female. No other crime or social ill has such a destructive effect on families, children, communities or the workplace than men's violence against women. For this reason, if for no other, it is vital that men become involved in the effort to end men's violence against women. Each man individually, and we as men collectively, must take a stand and own up to our responsibility to challenge other men and end the violence that we allow to be perpetrated against women in our communities.

The American Medical Association estimates that almost 4 million men severely assault their intimate female partner or spouse each year. Men's violence against their intimate female partner is the leading cause of injury for women, and is the cause of at least 35% of all emergency room visits. Every day approximately 4 men kill their present or former intimate female partner. As many as 75% of those men murder the women they were partnered with during or after a separation. It is estimated that 25% of men batter during a woman's pregnancy. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that men will rape 1 out of 6 women and commit more than 300,000 acts of rape and sexual assault every year. It is estimated that 84% of rape and sexual assault goes unreported. In addition, more than 80% of those women and girls will be under the age of 25. It is a fact that more than 3 out of 4 rapists will know the women they rape. In fact there is not a moment or second during any day that men are not violating, assaulting or exploiting women. Men are responsible for a multi-billion dollar industry that supports and promotes the commercial sexual exploitation, enslavement and trafficking of women. There is no time that women are safe or free from fear.

If we as men choose not to become involved in ending our violence against women it is because we choose to remain invested in maintaining our privilege and advantage. Our privileges and entitlements can only come at the expense of women. Any violence, abuse or degradation committed toward a woman by a man supports the status of men as the dominating group while also reinforcing the oppression of women. There is no neutral position or stance for men to take. We can either choose to become part of the solution or remain part of the problem.

**The Use of Accountable Language:** Violence against women is a violation of human rights. If any group were to attack another group of people who are law abiding, peaceful, loving and productive members of a society, the group that was the aggressor would be brought up on human rights violations. Here in the United States men, women and children are socialized to protect the status of men. We protect men in our language and our terminology. We almost always frame the issue of domestic violence and violence against women as a "women's issue". By categorizing domestic violence, rape, sexual assault and other forms of violence against women as a "women's" issue we automatically minimize the seriousness of the problem and therefore the importance of it and ultimately the attention men give the issues. The majority of our citizens are women. Yet, we continue to define them as a "special interest group" or as a "minority group" not because of their numbers but because of their lack of influence, resources and perceived lack of value.

We must all begin to use language that speaks to the issue of men perpetrating violence and that is accountable. Rarely, if ever, do we refer to violence against women as an issue for men to confront. The lack of desire to name the problem is not by coincidence. It is just one way that we protect men by placing the focus on women and on their victimization, there by diverting attention away from the men who perpetrate the crimes. We all have learned well to value and protect men while giving less value or concern for women. The use of our language and the way we organize our thinking around issues concerning women is often presented in a way not to offend men or make men uncomfortable. We label men's violence against women with terms like gender violence, relationship abuse, intimate partner violence and other similarly generic and neutral terms. The inaccurate naming of the problem continues to remove responsibility and accountability from men. Even the term "domestic violence" does not speak to the issue and places no responsibility on the offender.

Most offenses that men perpetrate against women that are illegal and arrestable go unreported and without any form of consequence. The overwhelming majority of the men that do enter the criminal justice system do not experience prosecution and the small percentages that are prosecuted receive little or no penalty. In operating the largest batterers' program in the country, it is clear that men who abuse, batter and assault share much more in common with all men than they share differences. The belief systems and sense of entitlement are one in the same. Both groups of men, those who are well meaning and those who perpetrate violence, have been socialized to support the idea that they have rights that take precedence over the rights of woman and children.

**The Socialization of Men:** Specific beliefs, norms, and expectations are taught to men and boys, which assist them in maintaining and reinforcing the control of their socially constructed and sanctioned male dominance. The foundation that our traditional male socialization is built upon has three key elements of belief about women. The first is the belief that women have less value or worth than men. The second is that women are to be considered as property belonging to men. Finally, women are viewed as objects (to be objectified by men) which again reinforces their status of having less value. We receive constant messages from every segment of our society that reinforce and strengthen this foundation. Due to this belief system, when women are victims of violence, rape or abuse, many men tend not to identify with the victim and do not experience any meaningful concern toward her circumstance or situation. Moreover, most men consider themselves to be well intentioned and one of the “good guys”. These men do not see themselves as men who would ever engage in violent or abusive behavior. In their minds, they are exempt from fault and therefore have minimal concern about how other men behave toward women.

However, most men often blame women for their victimization and excuse men for their abusive behaviors. We tend to judge a woman before we believe a woman. We do this by showing support for men and skepticism toward women. We often create a defense for men in our minds or with other men to excuse the abuser or rapists’ behavior. We too often seek to eliminate his fault while we blame her for his abuse. Men almost immediately begin to examine what she wore, where she was and offer other excuses that have absolutely nothing to do with a man’s choice to violate a woman.

Most tactics of control, abuse and oppression are not illegal. On a conscious and an unconscious level many men engage in disrespectful, intimidating, and controlling behaviors. Most men who are abusive in these ways have not broken any law and will never be a part of the criminal justice system; nor do they consider themselves to be abusive. All men are not batterers, rapists, or abusive and many of us are not fully aware of the extent of our privileges. However, all men do have the latitude to abuse power within their relationship and get away with it. Due to the ever-present privilege that exists for men, the decision to abuse that power or to be egalitarian and respectful is an individual decision and usually made on a daily basis. Yet, when forced to acknowledge abuse, well meaning men consider other men who abuse and assault to be different from them and are quick to separate themselves from the abuser. We look for ways to excuse or analyze the abusive man’s behavior. We attempt to remove responsibility for his choices and actions by viewing his “outbursts” as pathological. We very often excuse his violence and abuse by placing the blame on his anger. The assumption that a loss of control occurred is incorrect. It is clear that he is fully capable of demonstrating restraint and control of his anger and his behavior when he chooses. We too often seek to diagnose his abuse and attempt to provide treatment for his behavior. There is no treatment because there is no sickness. As women have informed us “men’s violence against women is a social ill, not an individual pathology, requiring social change not social work.”

**Men Value Women Less:** In our society we have a double standard concerning violence that men perpetrate toward the women they are partnered with versus the violence that men perpetrate toward a stranger or non-intimate partner. Men who break the law in both instances are hopefully arrested. If they are arrested they are placed on two separate tracks within the criminal justice system and held to quite different standards of accountability. Men who are violent toward their partner are given less of a penalty, consequence or sanction than men who perpetrate the identical violence toward anyone else. Even men of color, when perpetrating crimes against a female partner, experience leniency in the criminal justice system as a norm when compared to penalties they receive associated with other crimes. Therefore, the moment a woman becomes identified as being the intimate partner of a man, her value automatically decreases. Justice is no longer based on the crime that the man committed, but rather whom the crime was committed against. This injustice should not be surprising. As a rule, the social construct of sexism dictates that provisions, allowances and exceptions are to be made for men.

Consider if a person was anti-Semitic or acted out in a racist manner. What excuses would we come up with for that behavior? What prescription or treatment would we offer to cure this prejudice? What term would our

therapists and clinicians find in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual to diagnose such hatred? These questions sound ridiculous because we would not pathologize this behavior or belief; nor would we attempt to make excuses for it. We would simply say stop it! It's wrong and it is not acceptable! Everyone knows that such behavior breaks the social contract and civilized folks don't act that way. In addition, it would not matter if the anti-Semitic person grew up in an anti-Semitic household or environment. It would not matter if the bigotry or racism were "generational" or if the person was under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of the offense. Individual citizens and the entire community would fully understand that there is no excuse or reason for such behaviors. Furthermore, the person of color or the Jewish person would not be blamed for the abusive act that was perpetrated against them.

**The Collusion of "Well Meaning" Men:** I would like to believe that the majority of men are well meaning. It is this group, however, that is responsible for supporting the epidemic of violence that the abusive men inflict upon women. Men who choose to remain silent constantly reinforce the abusive man's behavior. Our silence is also our permission. While the intent of our silence may not be to cause harm, it does. The decision to not speak out is an act of collusion and serves to preserve the privilege of men. The silence of men normalizes the abuser's behavior and this causes additional harm to women. We do this in many ways. Sometimes it is as simple as remaining silent when a sexist joke is told or not challenging a friend who makes a statement that degrades women or is threatening to women.

"Well-meaning" men consciously and subconsciously separate themselves from men who batter and abuse while simultaneously giving them permission to do so. Well-meaning men consider themselves different from the perpetrator because they have an imaginary line that they will not cross. This line represents the separation of what are abusive behaviors from non-abusive behavior and who is a "good guy" from a "bad guy." The well-meaning man, at times, will go right up against the line of inappropriate behavior. But, as long as he doesn't cross it (or get caught crossing it) he is still considered a "good guy". Meanwhile, many of us have at least thought about doing or saying things that are similar to what the abusive man says or does. When men do not speak out about violence against women they are taking an active and/or passive role in affirming the violence. When we remain by-standers we are making a choice to support the abuse. The abusive behavior by any man reflects and therefore reinforces the established status and privileges of all men.

**Recognizing Our Privilege and Entitlement:** As men we are members of the dominating group. Because of this membership, each individual man automatically receives the benefits available to the group as a whole. Even those of us who may not want the benefits, privileges and entitlements that are given to men, as part of the dominating group we have access to the benefits and privileges given to the entire group. In other words, men who are well meaning, who choose to confront their sexism and their male privilege will continue to benefit from the sexist construct that exist for their benefit and comfort. These advantages have been established and maintained for their benefit and are outside of their control. Another example of this is the benefit of white privilege. White people who are well meaning and choose to address their racism and their race privilege will continue to benefit from the racist construct that exist and was established and maintained for their benefit and comfort. Even if and when they do not want their race privilege or advantage to exist, it is still present.

Therefore, all men benefit from men's violence against women. The well-meaning men and the perpetrator have a silent partnership. The perpetrator is the enforcer of the rules that the well-meaning men have helped design, live by, support and benefit from. In return, the well-meaning man does nothing and says nothing about the objectification, the control or the abusive behavior. Our silence and our permission are synonymous.

**How Men Can Become Part of The Solution:** Violence against women is a problem that each man must own and make a personal commitment to end. While some men are the perpetrators all men are the benefactors of the conditions that allow violence against women. It will not end until we, as men, decide that it will. It begins with our challenging our own sexism, privileges and beliefs. We must take ownership of the problem in order to create

positive social change. It will require honesty, sacrifice and transparency. In addition to examining our views toward women (individually and collectively) we must also challenge our views and beliefs about each other. A major obstacle will be to confront our traditional male socialization and how it limits us and boxes us in. We must get out of the socially defined roles that sexism, patriarchy and male privilege provide for us. In addition, we must end our collusion with the violence, objectification and demeaning thoughts and behaviors that we as men engage in toward women. This will require that we address our fears and anxiety about stepping out of our defined roles and challenge the traditional images of manhood. The fear of being perceived as “soft” or “weak” is an obstacle for many men that stop them from challenging sexist attitudes and behaviors. Our conforming to traditional male socialization prohibits us from confronting the abuse and objectification of women by other men. This belief system negatively impacts men and women and the ways that we raise, educate, and socialize our boys and girls.

It is essential that men hold other men accountable for their violence. We must use our effort, resources and influence within our communities to create appropriate and effective systems of accountability for men’s violence and abuse toward women. Every community and social system that is a part of our society is influenced or run by men. When we collectively decide to confront the issue of men’s violence against women in a serious and meaningful way, we can end the terror and abuse.

**Create Systems of Accountability to Women in Your Community:** As men who are part of the solution to end violence against women and sexism, our success is dependent on seeking the leadership of women and allowing that leadership to guide us. We must be informed by the knowledge, experience and voice of the women who are also dedicated to undoing sexism and ending all forms of violence against women. If we do not listen to, invest in and believe the voice of women we are once again maintaining the imbalance of power and reinforcing our status while we continue to marginalize women and their experience. After all, women are the experts on our violence and abuse toward them. The dominating group cannot define the oppression for those who are oppressed.

The moment we as men decide to fully own our responsibility for violence against women we will be on the road to social change. This will require integrity, accountability and consistency through action. Once we commit to this way of life women will not need to worry about where they go, what they wear, or if they are safe. The day when we, along with our sisters, have redefined manhood so that violence is not a part of being a man. We hope for a time when we will be respected for the peace, honor and respect that we demonstrate.

Finally, women do not need to be rescued or saved by men. What is needed, however, is for men not to be abusive or violent. When men end the abuse, safety will take care of itself.

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