

COMMENT

Will the men in the room please stand up?

To celebrate International Women's Day Sasha Borissenko says male entitlement as a result of an unequal distribution of power is the real issue undermining gender equality



by **Sasha Borissenko** 07/03/2019

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We're making great strides in female representation at board level, but we're lingering at 30 percent, a figure not devastatingly low to demand fast change, but high enough not to do anything about it. Photo: Getty Images

Last year saw the introduction of new domestic violence legislation, where police have charged almost five people a day with strangling or suffocating their partners since it kicked off in December. The recent crackdown could be seen as a great triumph, but the [numbers](#) have been sobering for far too long.

Police investigated an incident of family violence in 2016 about every five minutes. Yet 76 percent of family violence incidents are not reported to police. Same goes for sexual violence. One in three women experience physical and/or sexual violence from a partner in their lifetime. Only nine percent of sexual violence cases are reported to the police and just 13 percent of overall recorded cases will result in conviction.

And these issues don't discriminate on the grounds of cultural or socio economic status. Take surveys conducted around the legal 'fraternity' after the advent of the Russell McVeagh allegations of yesteryear, for example. The Law Society found nearly a third of female lawyers had been sexually harassed during their working life and only 12 percent had made complaints.

The issue of underreporting



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Why is there overwhelming under-reporting in domestic and sexual violence cases? Let's look at it through an employment context. Little light has been shed on the power and influence of business reputation protection, otherwise known as the human resources enterprise. New Zealand, being such a small country, means our defamation laws are tight, and job security is even tighter.

What incentive is there for an individual, who is in the throes of trauma to take on the source of their livelihood, let alone go to the police, when non-disclosure agreements and 'making a quiet exit' have less cognitive, financial and emotional costs. Suppose you decide to pursue legal or police action, the adversarial nature of New Zealand's justice system has failed and re-victimised those who have been harmed.

What we're lacking is a discussion around the bystander effect – the social psychological phenomenon where individuals are less likely to offer help to a victim when other people are present.

Despite these cold, hard, facts, when sexual or domestic violence makes the headlines, 'a floodgate of false claims' rhetoric bubbles to the surface. And yet, [US figures dating back to 2010](#) suggest only 2-10 percent of rape allegations are false (that means people actually reporting to police and going through the gruelling process). That's a drop in the bucket for every woman who is assaulted every five or so minutes.

What I'm trying to get to here, is that the reality of the situation is simply not accurately viewed. Researcher Dr Jess Berentson-Shaw put it best in a [Newsroom article](#) looking at sexual assault last year:

"[D]o groups of people just choose not to see or deal with the facts [...] because it does not fit with their existing ideas and beliefs about what matters most in our institutions and society more generally?"

An ode to toxic masculinity

For the keyboard warriors the world over: the fundamental issue is male entitlement as a result of the distribution of power. Men are raped and abused and that's absolutely not okay, but you can't refute the fact that when the All Blacks lose a game, domestic violence rates go up.

Same goes for those who argue that "not all men" rape and pillage. For those who barb the idiotic point, if you haven't assaulted or abused anyone there's nothing you should personally worry about. Sure, men may feel a sense of discomfort, but perhaps less discomfort than what must be felt by the screeds of women who are abused, assaulted, and denied opportunities and pay. And reverse sexism is not a thing. It's a distracting argument. It supposes everyone is on an equal playing field, and ignores a history of discrimination.

Women are still categorised as being a 'nurse or a purse'

It's not political correctness gone mad to expect you'll be heard in a workplace, be able to sit on a bus without a man's legs taking up all the space, go out at night without being assaulted or not have to stomach any comments around your appearance.

Underneath those 'harmless' comments are men actually saying that women are either being given the tick of approval or disapproval, reinforcing that the power remains with them.

And this extends to the home. The issue of emotional labour is finally coming to the fore, where women shouldn't have to bear the burden of all the caregiving or housework responsibilities.

And for those women who work part-time, it's seldom the case where all those hours are honoured or there's no resentment from other colleagues. The issue is that we have a workforce that's designed around the idea that [men can and should work a 40-hour work week](#), whereas women are expected to work around the clock – and for less, or no pay. Same goes for parental leave. It will be extended to 26 weeks this year, but when will it be socially acceptable for men to take it?

How do we change the conversation?

It shouldn't be for the marginalised to advocate for their rights, or educate the dominant force of their struggles. While there are different forms of feminism, and different marginalised groups who have legitimate stake in these issues, the patriarchal structure remains firmly in place.

What we're lacking is a discussion around the bystander effect – the social psychological phenomenon where individuals are less likely to offer help to a victim when other people are present. Sure, we're seeing male heroes of feminism, insofar it has become in vogue to label yourself as a 'male feminist'. But, there's nothing to be lost by championing women's rights, especially if it means said male feminist is still enjoying the privileges that are wired against women. And getting social capital from it.

Rather, what we don't see is men speaking up against the paradigm on a social and employment level,

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whether that's telling their mates not to take advantage of 'that pissed chick' at the club, or ask why they're getting a better salary.


It may mean that there are losses, that there's a re-distribution of power, but who's to say feminism can't benefit men? Hell, they could freely buy homewares, wear pink without prejudice, and maybe some of those horrific suicide/mental health rates among men (Māori males under 25 being the most over-represented) may decline.

For the meantime, this writer will have to go back to her lair for another year in the hope that pigs will fly in the form of meaningful social change.

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