

# Dear Men: It's You, Too

By: Roxane Gay

*Adapted by Fishtank Staff*

- 1 Statistics about the scope of sexual violence are always chilling, but even such accountings do little to capture the true breadth and scope of harassment and assault women face. In feminist discourse we talk about rape culture, but the people we most need to reach—the men who are the cause of the problem and the women who feel moved to excuse them—are often resistant to the idea that rape culture even exists.
- 2 Women are being hysterical, they say. Women are being humorless. Women are being oversensitive. Women should just dress or behave or feel differently.
- 3 Skeptics are willing to perform all kinds of mental acrobatics to avoid facing the very stark realities of living in this world as a woman.
- 4 And then, a man like Harvey Weinstein, famous but utterly common, is revealed as a sexual predator. Or, more accurately, the open secret stops being a secret and makes the news. The details are grotesque and absurd (who among us will ever look at a bathrobe the same again?). More women are emboldened and share their own experiences with the predator du jour or another of his ilk. They share these experiences because all of us know that this moment demands our testimony: Here is the burden I have carried. Here is the burden all women have carried.
- 5 But we're tired of carrying it. We've done enough. It's time for men to step up.
- 6 I confess I am sick of thinking about sexual violence, both personally and publicly. I've talked about and written about and responded to tweets about it for years. I am filthy with the subject, and yet I know this work must be done so that someday we can banish the phrase "rape culture" from our vernacular because it will have become an antiquated concept. I do not dream of utopia, but I do dare to dream of something better than this world we are currently living in.
- 7 We are a long way from that better world, in part because so many seemingly well-intentioned people buy into the precepts of rape culture. So many people want to believe there are only a few bad men. 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.

- 8 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.
- 9 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.
- 10 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.
- 11 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.
- 12 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 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.
- 13 In the wake of the Weinstein allegations, a list appeared online, an anonymous accounting of men in media who have committed a range of infractions from sleazy DMs to rape. And just as quickly as the list appeared, it disappeared. I saw the list. A couple of people didn't belong on it simply because their behaviors weren't sexual in nature, but some of them were men whose behavior called for a warning and who deserved public shame. Even where I live, outside the media bubble, in a small town in Indiana, I had already heard some of the stories that were shared.
- 14 There are a great many open secrets about bad men.

- 15 As the list circulated, there was a lot of hand-wringing about libel and the ethics of anonymous disclosure. There was so much concern for the "good men," who, I guess we're supposed to believe, would be harmed by the mere existence of an accounting of alleged bad men. There was concern that the "milder" infractions would be conflated with the more serious ones, as if women lack the capacity for critical thinking and discernment about behaviors that are or are not appropriate in professional contexts. More energy was spent worrying about how men were affected than worrying about the pain women have suffered. Women were not trusted to create a tangible artifact of their experiences so that they might have more to rely upon than the whisper networks women have long cultivated to warn one another about the bad men they encounter.
- 16 Meanwhile, there was a hashtag, #metoo—a chorus of women and some men sharing their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. Me too, me too, me too. I thought about participating but I was just too tired. I have nothing more to say about my history of violence beyond saying I have been hurt, almost too many times to count. I have been hurt enough that some terrible things no longer even register as pain.
- 17 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 who act so overwhelmed, who ask, "What can I possibly do?"
- 18 The answer is simple.
- 19 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 co-workers or refused to take no for an answer or worn a woman down by guilt-tripping 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 time for men to start answering for themselves because women cannot possibly solve this problem they had no hand in creating.