

Some Men? All Men? Everyone? A NOMAS Perspective

The National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS) is a group of pro-feminist men, women, and people of all genders. Since 1975, NOMAS has worked to challenge and eradicate sexism and other manifestations of systemic oppression (such as racism and heterosexism), and their intersections.

We heartily support the voices of the #MeToo movement and the energizing waves of change it has brought about. Believing women is an essential step if society is to overcome gender bias. We also affirm the importance of accountability for men who use power and privilege to dominate and abuse women.

Revelations of sexual harassment, especially by powerful men in the public eye, have been frequent. Recently, an accusation was made against Michael Kimmel, a prominent pro-feminist scholar and activist with whom NOMAS has enjoyed a working relationship. In the interest of transparency: some NOMAS council members are friends with, and/or have supportive collegial relationships with, Dr. Kimmel. Our organizational affiliation prompted us to respond publicly, and that decision was echoed in Robert Jensen's piece <https://www.feministcurrent.com/2018/08/06/responsibilities-pro-feminist-men-michael-kimmel-case/>

In a patriarchal system, when a man is accused of harassment, it is common for the discussion to focus on either the specifics of the offense(s) or on the individual nature of the narrative. Although exploring the details of an individual story is an immediate and very human response, it is ultimately a distraction from the systemic character of men's oppression of women, and creates an unspoken bias towards the protection of men's images. Specifically, it takes our attention away from why our culture keeps producing perpetrators. Therefore, it is inconsistent with NOMAS's long-standing analysis of oppression.

It is necessary, though insufficient, to support any particular victim and condemn any particular perpetrator who has abused a woman, or exploited her/them in more socially accepted and non-violent ways. Beyond that, it is not NOMAS's role to go through fact-finding and an accountability process for each accused perpetrator, unless that individual's primary affiliation is with our organization. There are other individuals and systems whose expertise and responsibility is exactly that. It is also not our role as a men's organization to prescribe what women victims need from their harassers, oppressors, abusers, or rapists.

It is NOMAS's aim to apply our analysis of the pervasive social inequities that underlie and engender each individual case. It is our role to advocate for social

change that will combat male supremacy in order to eliminate the existence and proliferation of any tool or form of oppression. NOMAS seeks to address the systemic socialization of all men, not just those who are identified for their particular behaviors.

It should not be surprising when we learn that men respected for their anti-sexism work, advocacy of gender equality, and commitment to ending violence against women, have engaged in oppressive behavior. Patriarchal privilege makes it possible for all men to engage in harmful behavior toward women and those less powerful without ever having to be aware of their impact. At the same time, men's power in social and professional settings, their ability to impose personal and institutional consequences, and defensive responses when confronted by women, can make it dangerous for women to expose oppressive behavior.

Over 43 years of combating sexism, NOMAS has developed an analysis that resists seeing the problem as emanating from "a few bad apples," or troubled individuals. Rather than scrutinizing individual instances and the people involved, we look to larger social forces—the context in which incidents and individuals are embedded. The problem is the system that teaches all of us to be players in a game of domination and subordination. NOMAS did not invent this analysis; it has been a part of feminist analysis since the beginning of the movement. Feminism has always sought to see through the veil of individual sexist behaviors to the systemic web of rules, customs, laws, beliefs and institutions that maintain patriarchy in our country.

Whether we realize it or not—and whether we like it or not—we are all taught the rules of male supremacy (and white supremacy, and heterosexual supremacy, and...). All of us learn that men are better than women, deserve more than women, should be heard and believed more than women, and are entitled to subordinate women. For men, this means that power and privilege is gendered, normative, and expected. For women, this means the acceptance of subordination and silence.

The #MeToo Movement broke this silence in a way that signals a cultural shift toward believing women. Its sister-response, "Time's Up," recognizes that the focus must be on systemic change. For the first time in our history, mainstream culture and media has begun to recognize patriarchy as an underlying system of social relationships that has driven the violation, harassment, and exploitation of women through the ages and into the present, a system from which all men benefit, regardless of their individual behavior.

These messages of patriarchy are ubiquitous and are reinforced daily. Not only those who are overtly misogynistic, but also those who advocate for social change and fight sexism, have been bathed in these messages. It

should therefore be no surprise when any man acts in accordance with patriarchal beliefs, as indoctrinated, conditioned, and reinforced from birth, even as a particular man devotes his own effort to recognize and eradicate “bad behavior” perpetrated by other men. Nor should it take us by surprise when the same assumptions of male dominance and primacy, even if subtle or disguised, form the basis of institutional responses.

The NOMAS analysis—that this is not merely individual pathological or criminal behavior but a deep social problem that must be addressed—holds that all men are accountable to do the work of undoing sexism and understanding their role in participating and perpetuating gender oppression. The challenge is that the individual response is often to shift accountability, to make it easier on ourselves by saying “not all men” or identifying as “one of the good guys,” rather than face the uncomfortable awareness that the problem is in each of us, put there without our consent or knowledge by a system that we participate in consciously or not, and that we benefit from consciously or not—a system that we have to change. What needs to change is not “them,” it is US.

Macomber correctly writes that we need to “figure out how to build equity into the very structure of our institutions and daily practices. After all, the goal isn’t just to hold individual perpetrators to account but also to dismantle the rape culture and the other systems of oppression with which it interlocks. Let us not emphasize the punitive at the expense of the transformative.” <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/09/06/case-michael-kimmel-raises-key-questions-academe-opinion>

NOMAS’ position is that recognizing the engine that drives both the egregious and obvious abuses, as well the more socially accepted and often unconscious exercises in dominance, by those who hold power leads us to more productive and revolutionary work. It can take us to the ultimate step of recognizing that societal and cultural patterns of domination and subordination must change, that our institutions must change, and that we all must step up to change them.