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Rebecca Solnit: Feminism, Now with Men

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Misogyny is over (if you want it).



feminism
needs men

Illustration by *Guernica* staff.

By **Rebecca Solnit**

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What do the prime minister of India, retired National Football League punter Chris Kluwe, and superstar comedian Aziz Ansari have in common? It's not that they've all walked into a bar, though Ansari could probably figure out the punch line to that joke.

They've all spoken up for feminism this year, part of an unprecedented wave of men actively engaging with what's usually called "women's issues," though violence and discrimination against women are only women's issues because they're things done to women—mostly by men, so maybe they should always have been "men's issues."

The arrival of the guys signifies a sea change, part of an extraordinary year for feminism, in which the conversation has been transformed, as have some crucial laws, while new voices and constituencies joined in. There have always been men who agreed on the importance of those women's issues, and some who spoke up, but never in such numbers or with such effect. And we need them. So consider this a watershed year for feminism.

Take the speech Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave on that country's Independence Day. Usually it's an occasion for boosterism and pride. Instead, he spoke powerfully (<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/narendra-modi-independence-day-speech-full-text-red-fort/1/377299.html>) of India's horrendous rape problem. "Brothers and sisters, when we hear about the incidents of rape, we hang our heads in shame," he said in Hindi. "I want to ask every parent that you have a daughter of ten or twelve years age, you are always on the alert, every now and then you keep on asking where are you going, when would you come back... Parents ask their daughters hundreds of questions, but have any parents ever dared to ask their son as to where he is going, why he is going out, who his friends are? After all, a rapist is also somebody's son. He also has parents."

The highest powers in the country have begun calling on men to take responsibility not only for their own conduct, but for that of the men around them, to be agents of change.

It was a remarkable thing to say, the result of a new discourse in that country in which

many are now starting to blame perpetrators, not victims—to accept, as campus anti-rape activists here put it, that “rapists cause rape.” That act, in other words, is not caused by any of the everyday activities women have been blamed for when men assault them. That in itself represents a huge shift, especially when the analysis comes from the mouths of men.

The Obama administration, too, recently launched a campaign (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-rolls-out-its-on-us-initiative-to-combat-sexual-assault/>) to get bystanders, particularly men, to reach out to protect potential victims of sexual assault under the rubric “It’s On Us.” Easy as it might be to critique that slogan as a tone-deaf gesture, it’s a landmark all the same, part of a larger response in this country to campus rape in particular.

And here’s what it all means: the winds of change have reached our largest weather-vanes. The highest powers in the country have begun calling on men to take responsibility not only for their own conduct, but for that of the men around them, to be agents of change.

When X Doesn’t Equal Y

Feminism needs men. For one thing, the men who hate and despise women will be changed, if they change, by a culture in which doing horrible things to, or saying horrible things about, women will undermine rather than enhance a man’s standing with other men.

There are infinite varieties of men or at least about 3.5 billion different ones living on Earth now, Klansmen and human rights activists, drag queens and duck hunters. For the purposes of feminism, I’d like to delineate three big blurry categories. There are the allies, mentioned above (and below). There are the raging misogynists (<http://wehuntedthmammoth.com/2014/10/23/a-voice-for-men-has-set-up-a-phony-white-ribbon-website-to-coopt-the-international-anti-violence-campaign-of-that-name/>) and haters in word and deed. You can see them in various places online where they thrive (and seem to have remarkable amounts of time on their hands): the Men’s Rights forums (<http://wehuntedthmammoth.com/2014/10/20/ladies-your-weight-is-somehow-a-mens-rights-issue-and-five-other-lessons-drawn-from-six-terrible-a-voice-for-men-memes/>), for instance, where they

endlessly stoke the flames of their resentment (<http://wehuntedthemammoth.com/2014/10/16/the-top-four-mens-rightsiest-things-said-about-the-recent-threats-against-anita-sarkeesian/>) , and the guys on Twitter who barrage almost any outspoken woman with threats and insults. Take the recent threat not just to kill media analyst Anita Sarkeesian for daring to speak up about sexism in video games, but to launch a massacre of women at a speech she was to give at Utah State University. Sarkeesian's not the only one in that world to receive death threats. And don't forget all the gamers who have gone down the rabbit hole of misogynist conspiracy theories (<http://www.newsweek.com/gamergate-about-media-ethics-or-harassing-women-harassment-data-show-279736>) under the hashtag #Gamergate (<http://www.businessinsider.com/gamergate-death-threats-2014-10>) .

The plethora of men attacking women and anyone who stands up for women in order to prove that women are not under attack and feminism has no basis in reality are apparently unaware that they're handily proving the opposite.

Their position was recently attacked in a striking rant by avid gamer, former football player, outspoken queer rights advocate (<http://deadspin.com/5941348/they-wont-magically-turn-you-into-a-lustful-cockmonster-chris-kluwe-explains-gay-marriage-to-the-politician-who-is-offended-by-an-nfl-player-supporting-it>) , and feminist Chris Kluwe. He told his gaming brethren, in one of his more polite passages: "Unfortunately, all you #Gamergaters keep defending this puerile filth, and so the only conclusion to draw is the logical one: That you support those misogynistic cretins in all their mouth-breathing glory. That you support the harassment of women in the video game industry (and in general). That you support the idiotic stereotype of the 'gamer' as a basement-dwelling sweat-beast that so many people have worked so hard trying to get rid of."

Someone then tweeted at Kluwe, "Go fuck yourself you stupid cunt. Gamergate is not

hating on women.” To which I’d like to append a variation on Lewis’s Law (“all comments on feminism justify feminism”): the plethora of men attacking women and anyone who stands up for women in order to prove that women are not under attack and feminism has no basis in reality are apparently unaware that they’re handily proving the opposite.

There are so many rape and death threats (<http://wehuntedthemammoth.com/2014/10/26/on-friday-anita-sarkeesian-called-out-toxic-masculinity-on-twitter-heres-what-happened-next/#more-14027>) these days. In Sarkeesian’s case, the University of Utah declined (<http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/58528113-78/sarkeesian-threats-threat-usu.html.csp>) to take the threat of a massacre at the school seriously (despite the fact that weapons could legally be brought into the lecture hall), because she gets death threats all the time and as a result, she had to cancel her own lecture.

So there are the allies and the haters. And then there are a slew of men who may mean well, but enter the conversation about feminism with factually challenged assertions that someone—usually, in my experience, a woman—will spend a lot of time trying to rectify. They may be why Elizabeth Sims started a website called [The Womansplainer](http://thewomansplainer.com/) (<http://thewomansplainer.com/>), “for men who have better things to do than educate themselves about feminism.”

Other times they try to refocus anything said about women’s woes on men’s woes. Reading men commenting online about campus rape, for example, you’d think that unconscious but malicious young women regularly impaled themselves on innocent bystanders for the purpose of getting them in trouble. *Forbes* recently ran, and then scrambled to delete, a tirade by a former president of an MIT fraternity titled “Drunk Female Guests Are the Gravest Threat to Fraternities.”

Sometimes, men insist “fairness” means admitting that men suffer from women just as women do from men, or even that they suffer more. You might as well argue that white people suffer from racism exactly as much as black people, or that there are no hierarchies of privilege and degrees of oppression in this world.

Ansari pointed out that men never have to deal with women whipping out their genitals and masturbating at them in public or harassing them in other similarly grotesque ways. “Women just don’t do that shit!” he exclaimed.

It’s true, for example, that women do commit domestic violence, but the consequences are drastically dissimilar in both numbers and severity. As I write in *Men Explain Things to Me* (http://www.powells.com/partner/41288/biblio/9781608464661?p_ti), domestic violence is “the number-one cause of injury to American women; of the two million injured annually, more than half a million of those injuries require medical attention while about 145,000 require overnight hospitalizations, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and you don’t want to know about the dentistry needed afterward. Spouses are also the leading cause of death (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/10/27/health-pregnancy-violent-idUSL3E7LR03R20111027>) for pregnant women in the US.” Pregnant women are not, however, a leading cause of death for spouses of pregnant women. There’s just no equivalency.

Not all men get this, but some do (and that might make a nice hashtag). Late this summer, for instance, I saw stand-up comic Aziz Ansari perform in a routine focused on sexual harassment. “Creepy dudes are everywhere,” he said, while describing a woman who had to take refuge in a pet store for an hour to shake off a guy following her. He pointed out that men never have to deal with women whipping out their genitals and masturbating at them in public or harassing them in other similarly grotesque ways. “Women just don’t do that shit!” he exclaimed. (He credits his girlfriend with turning him into a feminist.)

The comedians Nato Green (<http://www.natogreen.com/>) , W. Kamau Bell (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WH7b4QCPuXc>) , and Louis C.K. are among the other

feminist stand-up comics now speaking out, and Jon Stewart has had some fine feminist moments (<http://feministing.com/2014/06/26/watch-the-daily-show-offers-campus-safety-advice-for-him-and-her/>) . It's great that men are not only in the conversation, but an increasingly witty part of it as well.

The uproar over last week's news that three women say they were brutally assaulted by popular Canadian radio personality Jian Ghomeshi (http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/10/26/cbc_fires_jian_ghomeshi_over_sex_allegations.html?utm_medium=twitter&utm_source=twitterfeed&app=noRedirect) has been an interesting test case for the discourse. People of both genders have taken both sides, though those defending him have often reverted to the recurrent stereotype (<http://www.damemagazine.com/2014/10/28/hey-jian-ghomeshi-i-call-bs>) of the vindictively lying woman. This might, however, have been undermined by the five more women (http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/10/29/jian_ghomeshi_8_women_accuse_former_cbc_host_of_violence_sexual_abuse_or_harassment.html) who then came forward to testify to similarly horrific experiences.

Ideas are equipment to address and sometimes adjust reality. Seeing a host of new feminist ideas deployed in this case is a sign of how much ground those ideas have gained in the last year or so. During that time, I've watched several good men do the work of rethinking much of what they've been taught and reach new conclusions.

The Obsession with False Rape Accusations: A Handy Pullout Section

Of course, the old ideas are out in force, too. Pretty much every time someone raises the subject of rape in my hearing (or online reading), a man pops up to raise the "issue" of "false rape accusations." Seriously, it's almost inevitably the first thing out of some guy's mouth; men appear obsessed with the subject, and it often becomes a convenient way of changing the focus from widespread female victims to exceedingly rare male victims. As a result, I've assembled this handy pullout guide to the subject in the hope that I never have to address it again.

Rape is so common in our culture it's fair to call it an epidemic. After all, what else could you call something that impacts nearly one in five women (<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/sv-datasheet-a.pdf>) (and one in 71 men) directly and, as a threat, virtually all women, that is so pervasive it modifies how we live and think and move

through the world for most of our lives? Actual instances in which women have untruthfully claimed a rape occurred simply to malign some guy are extremely uncommon. The most reliable studies (http://ndaa.org/pdf/the_voice_vol_3_no_1_2009.pdf) suggest that about 2 percent of reported rapes are false, which means that 98 percent are real. Even that statistic doesn't mean that 2 percent are false rape accusations, because saying you were raped if you weren't isn't the same thing as claiming a specific person raped you when he didn't. (No one sifts for the category of false rape accusation per se, by the way.) Still, those stats don't stop men from bringing the subject up again and again and again. And again.

Him: Your tribe is full of malicious liars. I don't really have evidence of that, but my feelings are more rational than your facts.

Here's what such accusations sound like in translation:

Her: There's an epidemic afflicting my people!

Him: I'm worried about this incredibly rare disease I heard about (but didn't research) that could possibly afflict a member of my tribe!

Or maybe it sounds like this:

Her: Your tribe does horrible things to mine, which is well documented.

Him: Your tribe is full of malicious liars. I don't really have evidence of that, but my feelings are more rational than your facts.

Keep in mind, by the way, when you consider those figures on rape, that most of them are not reported. Of the rapes that are, most are not prosecuted. Of those that are prosecuted, the great majority fail to achieve convictions. Bringing rape charges is gen-

erally not a fun and effective way either to seek revenge or justice, and falsely reporting a crime is itself a crime, something the police do not generally look kindly upon.

Hundreds of thousands of [rape kits \(http://www.endthebacklog.org/backlog/what-backlog\)](http://www.endthebacklog.org/backlog/what-backlog) collected by the police in this country were, we now know, never sent to crime labs for testing and a few years back, various cities—New Orleans, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and St. Louis—were exposed for not even bothering to file police reports on tens of thousands of rape claims. This should help convince you that the system does not work that well for rape victims. And remember who the police are: an [increasingly militarized \(http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175881/tomgram%3A_matthew_harwood_one_nation_under_swat/\)](http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175881/tomgram%3A_matthew_harwood_one_nation_under_swat/), mostly male group with [high rates \(http://www.womenandpolicing.org/violenceFS.asp\)](http://www.womenandpolicing.org/violenceFS.asp) of domestic violence and some [notable rape charges \(http://thefreethoughtproject.com/raped-cop-police-chief-advice-break-law/#B996hyLUEB9VSbYK.99\)](http://thefreethoughtproject.com/raped-cop-police-chief-advice-break-law/#B996hyLUEB9VSbYK.99) of their own recently. In other words, they're not always the most sympathetic people for women—particularly nonwhite women, sex workers, transgender women, and other marginalized groups—to talk to about male sexual misconduct.

People also often wonder why colleges adjudicate rape cases themselves rather than report them to the police, particularly since [many of them \(http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-releases-list-higher-education-institutions-open-title-i\)](http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-releases-list-higher-education-institutions-open-title-i) don't do it well. The reasons are numerous, including the fact that campuses are required under Title IX (<http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/cor/coord/titleix.php>) (a 1972 amendment to the 1964 federal Civil Rights Act) to ensure equal access to education for everyone. Sexual assault undermines that equality under the law. Then there's the fact that the criminal justice system is broken when it comes to sexual violence and that many rape survivors regard dealing with the legal system as a second round of violation and humiliation. Sometimes charges are dropped simply because the victim can't endure the process any longer.

And now, back to those false rape accusations. In the new hardcover edition of *Men Explain Things to Me* (http://www.powells.com/partner/41288/biblio/9781608464661?p_ti), I added this footnote: "False accusations of rape are a reality, and a relatively rare one, though the stories of those convicted falsely are terrible. A British study by the Crown Prosecution Service released in 2013 noted that there were 5,651 prosecutions for rape in the period studied, versus only 35 prosecutions for false allegations of rape (or more than

160 rapes for every false allegation, well under 1 percent). And a 2000 US Department of Justice report cited these estimates for the United States: 322,230 rapes annually, resulting in 55,424 reports to police, 26,271 arrests, and 7,007 convictions—or slightly more than 2 percent of rapes counted and 12 percent of rapes reported resulted in jail sentences.”

In other words, reporting a rape is not likely to get someone jailed, and though perhaps 2 percent of rape charges are false, only slightly more than 2 percent of all charges result in convictions. (Some estimates go as high as 3 percent (<https://rainn.org/get-information/statistics/reporting-rates>) .) In other words, there are an awful lot of unpunished rapists out there. And most rapists, when accused or charged, do not admit to committing rape. Which means we have a host of rapists who are also liars out there, and that maybe the lies that abound are by men who have raped, not women who have not been raped.

Of course false-rape allegations have happened. My friend Astra Taylor points out that the most dramatic examples in this country were when white men falsely accused black men of assaulting white women. Which means that if you want to be indignant on the subject, you’ll need to summon up a more complicated picture of how power, blame, and mendacity actually work. There have been incidents—the infamous Scottsboro Boys gang-rape case of the 1930s, for example—where white women were also pressured by the authorities to lie in order to incriminate black men. In the Scottsboro case, one of the accusers, seventeen-year-old Ruby Bates, later recanted (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/scottsboro/peopleevents/p_bates.html) and told the truth, despite the threats against her.

Maybe what these guys are saying is: men are finally going to be held accountable and that frightens them. Maybe it’s good for them to be frightened or at least accountable.

Then there's the Central Park jogger case of 1989 in which the police coerced false confessions and the judicial system (including a woman prosecutor) convicted and jailed five innocent African-American and Latino teens. The white victim, who had been beaten nearly to death, had no memory of the incident and was not a witness against them. In 2002, the real assailant confessed and the five were exonerated. Convicting the innocent tends to result from corruption and misconduct in the justice system, not just a lone accuser. Of course, there are exceptions. My point is: they are rare.

The false-rape-allegation obsession apparently arises from a number of things, including the delusion that they are common and the enduring slander that women are naturally duplicitous, manipulative, and unreliable. The constant mention of the issue suggests that there's a weird kind of male confidence that comes from a sense of having more credibility than women. And now that's changing. Maybe by confidence I mean entitlement. Maybe what these guys are saying is: men are finally going to be held accountable and that frightens them. Maybe it's good for them to be frightened or at least accountable.

What Makes a Planet Inhabitable

The situation as it has long existed needs to be described bluntly. Let's just say that a significant number of men hate women, whether it's the stranger harassed in the street, the Twitter user (http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/24/showbiz/celebrity-news-gossip/chrissey-teigen-twitter-exits/index.html?sr=sharebar_facebook) threatened into silence online, or the wife who's beaten. Some men believe they are entitled to humiliate, punish, silence, violate, and even annihilate women. As a consequence, women face a startling amount of everyday violence and an atmosphere of menace, as well as a host of smaller insults and aggressions meant to keep us down. It's not surprising, then, that the Southern Poverty Law Center classifies (<http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2012/spring/misogyny-the-sites>) some men's rights groups as hate groups.

In this context, consider what we mean by rape culture. It's hate. Those sports-team and fraternity rapes, the ones that sometimes result in young men swapping phone videos that they never seem to recognize as evidence of felonies, are predicated on the idea that violating the rights, dignity, and body of another human being is a cool thing

to do. Such group acts are based on a predatory-monster notion of what masculinity is, one to which many men don't subscribe but that affects us all. It's also a problem that men are capable of rectifying in ways women are not.

And maybe this is the answer to the guy in Alaska who asked me last June what feminism had in it for him. Remembering that conversation now, I can't help but think of the slogan that John Lennon and Yoko Ono began to circulate in the Vietnam era: "War is over (if you want it)." It was always assumed to be about the Vietnam War and was revived in the years of George W. Bush's wars, but it could mean any kind of war or every kind of war, including the ones that live in our own hearts and minds.

Hate is an exhausting pursuit with no real victories, and enemies are not a good thing to have. The mind of a rapist must not be a pleasant place to inhabit, and men who can't hear or recognize the humanity of half the population are missing something. If only the war were over! But, guy in Alaska, it would be nice if you could care about the well-being of others without reference to whether it confers advantages on you, too, especially since you have a lot of the advantages we aspire to, like being able to walk around without worrying about being a target.

The other evening, I left a talk on what makes a planet inhabitable—temperature, atmosphere, distance from a star—by an [astrophysicist \(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTydrh0VfQE\)](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTydrh0VfQE) I know. I'd thought about asking a young man who was a friend of a friend of mine to accompany me to my car in the very dark park outside the California Academy of Sciences, but the astrophysicist and I fell to talking and walked to the car together without even questioning the necessity of it, and then I drove her to her car.

A couple of weeks earlier, I joined [Emma Sulkowicz \(http://nymag.com/thecut/2014/09/emma-sulkowicz-campus-sexual-assault-activism.html\)](http://nymag.com/thecut/2014/09/emma-sulkowicz-campus-sexual-assault-activism.html) and a group of young women who were carrying a mattress between classes at Columbia University. You may already know that Sulkowicz is an art major who reported being raped and received nothing that resembled justice either from the campus authorities or the New York Police Department. In response, she is bearing witness to her plight with a performance-art piece [\(http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/arts/design/in-a-mattress-a-fulcrum-of-art-and-political-protest.html\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/arts/design/in-a-mattress-a-fulcrum-of-art-and-political-protest.html) that consists of carrying a dorm-room mattress with her whenever she's on

campus, wherever she's going.

The media response has been tremendous. A documentary film team was along that day and the middle-aged camerawoman remarked to me that, if campus consent standards had existed when she was young, if the right of women to say no and the obligation of men to respect women's decisions had been recognized, her life would have been utterly different. I thought about it for a moment and realized: so would mine. So much of my energy between the ages of twelve and thirty was given over just to surviving predatory men. The revelation that humiliation, harm, and maybe even death was liable to be inflicted on me by complete strangers and casual acquaintances because of my gender and that I had to be on watch all the time to avoid such a fate—well, that's part of what made me a feminist.

I care passionately about the inhabitability of our planet from an environmental perspective, but until it's fully inhabitable by women who can walk freely down the street without the constant fear of trouble and danger, we will labor under practical and psychological burdens that impair our full powers. Which is why, as someone who thinks climate is the most important thing in the world right now, I'm still writing about feminism and women's rights. And celebrating the men who have made changing the world slightly more possible or are now part of the great changes underway.

Rebecca Solnit, a TomDispatch regular, is the author of 17 books, including an expanded hardcover version of her paperback indie bestseller Men Explain Things to Me (http://www.powells.com/partner/41288/biblio/9781608463862?p_ti) and a newly released anthology of her essays about places from Detroit to Kyoto to the Arctic, The Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness (http://www.powells.com/partner/41288/biblio/9781595341983?p_ti)



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