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Speak Out Now

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Sexual Violence – An Abuse of Power

Harvey Weinstein, a Hollywood power broker, was recently charged by a number of well-known actresses with rape and sexual assault. The rumors about Weinstein go back to 1984. This violent predator was a Hollywood celebrity and a friend of the Clintons and others in positions of power. Nothing was done to stop him until 50 women exposed his sexual assaults. Weinstein has lost his company and may face criminal charges.

Unfortunately, Weinstein is not the exception - he is the rule. Many of those with power feel above the law and think they can treat people however they want and usually they get away with it. But after the Weinstein accusations, there has been a huge public outcry and many others including corporate heads, media personalities, star athletes, actors, musicians, politicians, and other celebrities have been named and publicly accused of sexual harassment, assault or rape. Some have lost their jobs or positions as a consequence.

Attention was also focused once again on Trump who was recorded talking about his relationship with women. He said, that because he was “a star” he could, “Grab ’em by the pussy. You can do anything.” This obvious case of sexual assault was pretty much overlooked despite being revealed during the presidential election period.

Sexual violence and rape are at epidemic proportions in this country. It has been reported that every 98 seconds someone in the U.S. is sexually assaulted. An estimated 7,700,000 million women have been raped since 1998. This is not the work of strangers. In eight of 10 cases of rape the victim knew the person who assaulted them. It is estimated that one in five women and one in 16 men are sexually assaulted while in college. And more than 90% of these assaults are never reported. And even when rape charges are filed, of those charged with sexual assault, 99% walk away free.

Sexual violence victimizes society’s most vulnerable people, especially children. One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18. A 2010 study showed that 80%

of women farm workers (many are undocumented immigrants) said they had been sexually harassed. People with disabilities are twice as likely to be assaulted or raped. Sixty percent of inmates are assaulted by jail or prison staff. Do we need more proof of what a barbaric society this is?

It shouldn’t come as a surprise that in a hierarchical society like ours, a culture of rape has developed; it mirrors the power relations of the society. This sexual violence arises from the foundations of this society - a society that rests on the right of a very small group of people to control the majority of the resources of society. It can seem normal that they have the right to decide what to do with the wealth they claim to own. They can open a factory or close it, without regard for the lives of those affected. Lowering our wages, means more profits for them. Is it a surprise that those in positions of power, who use our labor and try to control so many aspects of our lives, think they have the right to use our bodies too?

These power relations extend throughout the society, with those having more power dominating those with less. Sometimes this can involve sexual assault or demanding sex. This can end up being one of the many indignities we end up tolerating because we are told that, “This is just the way it is.” To stand up, means to face the threat of losing a relationship, a job or more. And many do refuse to accept the more blatant abuse and fight back.

Many suffer these indignities alone, blaming themselves for being in the situation we are in – even when we are assaulted. Then when the cover gets ripped off, like it did with Weinstein, millions of women suddenly see that they aren’t alone and can say “Me too!” It breaks down the isolation. It ends the silence and it changes how they feel. That is a start, an important start but not enough.

Like the other indignities imposed on us by this system of capitalism, sexual exploitation won’t end until we are in full control of our lives. Refusal to tolerate this culture of rape can be part of that fight.