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Speak Out Now

revolutionaryworkers.org speakout@revolutionaryworkers.org (510) 343-9105

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. This violent predator was a Hollywood celebrity and a friend of the Clintons. The rumors about Weinstein go back to 1984. Nothing was done to stop him until recently when 50 women exposed his sexual assaults. Weinstein has lost his company and the police may charge him.

Unfortunately, Weinstein is not the exception - he is the rule. Those with power feel above the law and think they can treat people however they want. 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. The victims of rape culture are those with less power.

Media personalities, star athletes, musicians and other celebrities are charged with assault or rape with little or no consequence. Trump 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." Sexual assault has become normalized.

Sexual violence and rape are at epidemic proportions in this country. Every 98 seconds someone in the US 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 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?

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 wealth. It seems normal that they can decide what to do with the wealth. They can open a factory or close it, without regard for the lives of those affected. They lower our wages, which means more profits for them. Is it a surprise that those in positions of power, who control so many aspects of our lives, think they have the right to control and use our bodies too?

These power relations extend throughout the society, those with small amounts of power dominating those with less power. 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 job or more. And many do refuse to accept the more blatant abuse and fight back.

But many suffer these indignities alone and blame ourselves for 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 felt that they aren't alone and could say "Me too." It breaks down the isolation. It ends the silence and it changes how people feel and that is a start, an important start, but not enough.

We deserve better. And it is possible to have a world that is better, so every generation doesn't live under the yoke of exploitation – sexual or otherwise. But to bring this change about we will have to first recognize the reality we live in - that this is not just our problem. When we realize this, we can stand together and support each other and begin to take the necessary steps to throw out this system of exploitation, oppression and sexual violence. Then, we can replace it with one of equality, dignity, respect, and kindness.