

Culture, Marriage, Sexuality

The Truth about Men, Women, and Sex

December 13, 2017 By [Mark Regnerus](#)

Recent revelations about sexual harassment, assault, and abuse underscore certain blunt realities about men, women, and sex. How can we confront those realities in a way that leads to less sexual violence?



The surprising avalanche of publicized sexual misdeeds rolls on, picking up actors, executives, and politicians along the way. What each are guilty of no doubt varies widely. But the court of public opinion is in no mood for fine distinctions.

What interests a sociologist is less the scope of the purge, its timing, or predictions about who's next than what it all reveals about the social structure of sexual interactions between men and women, and how change here could actually happen. The revelations of late have plenty to do with the [exchange model of sexual behavior](#), which is and will remain an accurate lens through which to understand sex. (There are other sensible lenses, too.)

The "Weinstein avalanche" highlights three stable observations about men, women, and the relationships they form. [Ignoring them](#) in the name of virtue signaling will not help. But it may require new perspective to guide our way forward toward less sexual aggression.

Three Blunt—but Essential—Truths

First, men's sex drives are, on average, stronger and less discriminating than women's. If this were not true, we would not be talking about this in the first place. Men's arousal patterns are effective at commanding their attention. With this biological tendency comes not only the next generation, but plenty of present-day risk. Who's on the sex offender registry? Men. Many seem ready to jeopardize career, marriage, family, and reputation—all because of genital urges. Women's interest in sex tends to be more diverse in origin and goal. But some, we know, have sex for the social status it may foster—sleeping with a rock star or pro athlete—while a few have sex in order to get ahead. This highlights an aspect of the exchange model many find loathsome—that men can employ their status, and the promise of work or the threat of retaliation, as a resource to help coax (or else gain access in order to [coerce](#)) sex from women. Despite how much moderns pine for equality, "[\(s\)ex is an impediment to any idealism](#)," as one observer recently put it.

Second, men have the upper hand in the contemporary mating market, even as—and partly because—women are flourishing economically and educationally. These are not criticisms; they are observations. This new

mating market doesn't expediently match and move people out of the market (into marriage, which most still desire), but rather seems particularly adept at sexual partner recirculation and relational indecisiveness. A recent exchange with a graduate student contesting my [recent *Wall Street Journal* essay](#) highlights this. She writes:

A woman who has achieved academic success, can earn her own living, can have children without having to entangle herself with a narcissistic infantile male, and has achieved a level of self-esteem that protects her from predatory objectification is disinclined to form a legal partnership with (an unmarriageable man). Like all human beings, she may be willing to engage in sexual activity with such a partner, but if she is wise, she would never consider him a satisfactory life partner.

She's wrong on three counts. The avalanche of revelations has made clear that no woman is safe from "predatory objectification." Even [sleeping soldiers in uniform](#) aren't free from it. That women have sex with "a narcissistic infantile male" in return for little or nothing reveals just how much men call the shots today. And when women have sex with whomever they wish, men win, not women: the [collective "price of sex" drops](#) and men's behavior becomes more boorish, expecting sex. Don't get me wrong; I am not blaming women for this predicament. But the strategy my interlocutor suggests is conducive to nothing except mutual manipulation. There is no dignity and flourishing in that. If this is our future, it will be a lonely and distrustful one.

Third, women are usually physically smaller and weaker than men, and—as already noted—more discriminating in their sexual choices. Hence women are more prone to find themselves in situations of sexual risk with regard to men. The "Me too" hashtag phenomenon bore witness to this. But it also highlighted that one of the unique strengths of women is in their *collective* action—when they speak and act in unison. It's happening, and that's good. But might we expect real, sustained reform? The renewal of a cartel

mentality? I wish. It's unlikely, since the mating market pits women against each other, because the media seem [more interested in revelation](#) than in reform, because [lawsuits are always a long shot](#), and because women and men alike continue to affirm choice over chastity.

Women are due not just consent or respect. They are also owed actions and words that consistently uphold their bodily integrity, security, and dignity. This shouldn't require legal expression. It should be obvious. Unfortunately, it's not. And sometimes women's best efforts to repel are not enough. While we must hold men accountable for their actions, how do we lower the risk of such acts in the first place? By adding laws and building jails? That's one way. By taking to new media to shame old men? That's another way. But each of these seeks retribution after the fact.

A third way, however, may help reduce incidence by focusing on the *social* nature of sexual interactions. This approach understands men as embedded in particular situations and [not just walking risk factors](#) now meriting wider skepticism and tougher rules. It doesn't blame the victim. Rather, it equips everyone to discern men's distinctively *situational* sexuality. Knowledge is power, and power can spell less downstream grief. That is our shared objective, right?

From Persons to Situations: How Understanding "Fly" and "No Fly" Zones Reduces Sexual Risk

One of the more thoughtful contributions to understanding the crisis in consent comes from a Naval Academy English professor, of all sources—one who has observed three decades of cadets as well as shifts in Annapolis culture and policy. Bruce Fleming's February 2017 [article in *Society*](#) proposes rethinking men's sexuality in terms of "fly" and "no-fly" zones. Fleming holds that male sexual behavior—and hence risk—is situational rather than personal. If a man is with his willing girlfriend, he's more apt to perceive himself as in the "fly" zone and at low risk of a nonconsensual interaction. But the vast majority of life, Fleming notes, is

lived in the “no fly” zone. For example, a young woman with her family at a restaurant is at no risk of a man’s sexual advances because she is in a “no fly” zone, and everyone recognizes it:

Men come on to women for generally accepted reasons and under generally accepted circumstances. Can they sometimes get it wrong? Of course, but this is a limited and specific problem. We need to be talking with men to make sure they understand how to read the signals of whether they are or are not in a “no fly” zone—especially the men who grew up without male role models. When are you allowed or even expected to make the first move? The answer is not never, but young men have to be taught how to read signals to get answers, which are always tied to specific situations.

Unfortunately, Fleming paints too broadly here. Just how “generally accepted” are these reasons and circumstances? The two zones are certainly socially constructed, but men and women tend to perceive and construct them differently, and men with considerable power are more apt to construct a wider fly zone. Guessing wrong about “shared feelings,” as renowned journalist Charlie Rose claimed to do in his public apology of inappropriate behavior, is an example of this. He thought he was in the fly zone. His accusers disagreed. But how women define their own zones is how men ought to discern them.

Fleming argues that it’s the border between “fly” and “no fly” zones—a party, for example—that is most apt to foster confusion and tempt risk, not the classroom or the bus. This is the social space in which most problems, ranging from sexual badgering to diminished consent to downright rape, are apt to occur. Comparable dynamics can occur at after-work gatherings, professional conferences, on a first date, or after texting to “hang out.” Just as the students in a classroom may perceive different norms at the party, so too men in the meeting room may sense alternative norms at the bar after work or while on business travel. Why? Because they may perceive it

as border territory, Fleming holds. Hence it is an act of empowerment when women signal the existence of boundaries, whether subtly or bluntly. It's gatekeeping; [doing so reflects their authority](#), not their powerlessness.

Unfortunately, the ubiquity of online pornography is eroding norms and expanding the "fly zone" in the minds of men. It plays a [corrosive role here](#), no doubt affecting the [nearly 50 percent of American men](#) who indulge it at least once a week. Porn depicts the successful pursuit of sex *regardless of the social setting*. Sustained exposure to this "fly zone" can trick the male brain into thinking that real women might actually desire the attention men attempt to show them. (See [Louis C.K.](#), for example.) It is, I hold, why Peggy Noonan remarks that the current revelations of sexual harassment have ["gotten weirder, stranger, more brutish."](#)

Porn doesn't show men how to interact with women as equals or demonstrate concern for their dignity and bodily integrity and security. On the contrary, it makes the transition from the classroom to the party, or the boardroom to the bar, more difficult for men, who think they're in border territory—and perhaps even the "fly" zone—when they are not.

What most want, Fleming suggests, is reasonable: "to stop (men) coming on to women past the inquiring stage when the woman makes it clear she's not interested." Saying that it's all on men to change their behavior may signal progressive virtue online, but it will do little to diminish real-life grief. The realities of sexual exchange will not disappear and cannot be eviscerated by fiat or reformed by speech rules. And eventually, the social media shaming will come to an end. Then what?

These are liminal times in male-female relationships. Treating men as if only threats of shaming, expulsion, and litigation will beat back their urges is not only an erroneous theory, [Fleming asserts](#), "it's downright dysfunctional for everyone, because it distorts the rules in such a way as to disorient men and women alike."

Women should not silently put up with men's boorish and aggressive expressions of sexual interest. But as we combat that we must ensure that men and women do not come to fear and suspect (and then avoid) each other, where we lean on law and regulation over convention. Now is the time for men to exhibit—and women to reinforce—norms of interaction that respect women's dignity, bodily integrity, and security, while preserving the capacity to express (when appropriate) romantic interest and handle rejection. It is not rocket science. We know how to do this.

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