


Chapter 1

**Silenced Women:
The Invisible
Problem**



'Even though I am an experienced businesswoman, I feel I can't say anything. It's my choice: tell him to please not touch me and create a fuss, making things awkward with my clients, or stay quiet. I stay quiet'

*Everyday Sexism
Project entry*

Vital Statistics

After experiencing workplace sexual harassment only 27 per cent of women reported it to someone senior
[Slater & Gordon, 2013](#)

Of women seriously sexually assaulted during their time at university, only 4 per cent reported it to their higher-education institution and only 10 per cent to the police
[National Union of Students \(NUS\), Hidden Marks survey, 2010](#)

50 per cent of those students seriously sexually assaulted who didn't report it said it was because they felt ashamed or embarrassed
[NUS, Hidden Marks survey, 2010](#)

90 per cent of victims of the most serious sexual offences know the perpetrator
[Ministry of Justice, Home Office & Office for National Statistics \(ONS\), 2013](#)

Only 15 per cent of female victims of the most serious sexual offences reported it to the police
[Ministry of Justice, Home Office & ONS, 2013](#)

28 per cent of women who are the victims of the most serious sexual offences never tell anybody about it
[Ministry of Justice, Home Office & ONS, 2013](#)

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🐦 It's something I just always accepted as a reality since I was young. No one told me that it wasn't my fault or that I could/should speak up. I was told to be passive and not to stir things up.

🐦 Being told I have no sense of humour when comments are made about my breasts, vagina or behind.

🐦 I joined a dating site. Got one message instantly. 'I'd pay to ram you up the ass.' And guess what his excuse was when I argued with him? 'Chill out love, it's just banter.' It really isn't.

🐦 Dismissal of arguments or thoughts because 'she's just pms-ing' or hormonal.

🐦 I was raped by 2 men at the age of 14 and my family normalized it by ignoring it ... I was confused ... I was sure it was wrong.

🐦 Called a prude for objecting to Porn Fridays where female colleagues' faces were photo-shopped onto porn pics.

Sexism is an invisible problem. This is partly because it's so often manifest in situations where the only witnesses present are victim and perpetrator. When you're shouted at in a deserted street late at night. When a senior colleague with wandering hands corners you in the empty copy room. When a man presses his erection into your back on a tube so crowded nobody could possibly see what's going on. When a car slows down as you walk home from school

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and the driver asks you for a blowjob then pulls away up the road as smoothly and silently as he arrived. When your boss casually mentions as she passes you on the stairs that you need to arrive with a lower-cut top and more make-up on tomorrow if you want to keep your job. When a pair of hands moves you aside in the queue for the bar and slides down to grope and feel your bottom. Moments that slip like beads onto an endless string to form a necklace that only you can feel the weight of. It can drag you down without another person ever witnessing a single thing.

It's not easy to take something invisible and make people start to talk about it. There's a lot of wariness and caution at first – people sneakily giving each other the side-eye because they don't want to be the one to admit they see it if everyone else is going to carry on pretending not to. Nobody wants to be *that* guy. So at best the person who's experienced the sexism is left jumping up and down with their arms in the air pointing out the patently obvious, while everybody else scratches their chins and gazes earnestly into the middle distance.

At worst the victim doesn't say anything either.

In this, sexism is a bit like climate change. Human beings tend to cling to convenient obliviousness – 'I haven't seen it, so it can't really exist!' – in spite of embarrassing, burgeoning bodies of evidence to the contrary. In order for this comfortable bliss of ignorance to be maintained, it follows that any flagging up of the problem will be met with denial: so naturally you get accusations of lying, or exaggeration. These aren't always intentionally unkind

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– I think they're as often motivated by a horrified inability to accept the severity of the problem as by a deliberate attempt at dismissal.

But, whatever the motive, such reactions come as a secondary blow on top of the initial injurious experience. As girls grow up, these responses start to impact on their own judgement of situations – they learn not to trust themselves and not to make a fuss. Society teaches them that they don't have the right to complain. One way or another, women are silenced.

One girl who wrote to the Everyday Sexism Project described just such a 'learning experience':

► When walking to a friend's house on Saturday at about 6.30pm, two drunk men started following me. One grabbed my hair and said 'you are too pretty to be out alone' – they had been shouting at me for the last 100m. I felt violated and arrived shaking. I told my boyfriend the next day; he said my 'story' was unlikely as I was just being attention seeking. I began to feel like I myself was exaggerating and should just remain quiet. We are both 15.

Disbelief is the first great silencer.

The incidents that go unwitnessed definitely help to keep sexism off the radar, an unacknowledged problem we don't discuss. But so too do the regular occurrences that hide in plain sight, within a society that has normalized sexism and allowed it to become so ingrained that we no longer notice or object to it. Sexism is a socially acceptable prejudice and everybody is getting in on the act.

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The past year alone has given us some stonking high-profile examples. During this time the Russian conductor Vasily Petrenko helpfully announced that in his profession men will always be superior because orchestras are distracted by a ‘cute girl on a podium’ and German artist Georg Baselitz declared that ‘Women don’t paint very well. It’s a fact.’ Meanwhile London Mayor Boris Johnson ‘joked’ that women only go to university because ‘they’ve got to find men to marry’ (hilarious, no?) and the Canadian literature professor and author David Gilmour blithely revealed that he’s simply ‘not interested in teaching books by women’. (I expect Zadie Smith, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Margaret Atwood could set him straight on their relevance, were they not so busy winning more awards than Gilmour has ever managed to scrape nominations for.)

In November 2012 Labour MP Austin Mitchell directed a sexist tirade at his former colleague Louise Mensch after she disagreed in an interview with something her husband had said. In a message that appeared on his Facebook and Twitter pages as well as his official website, Mitchell wrote: ‘Shut up Menschkin. A good wife doesn’t disagree with her master in public and a good little girl doesn’t lie about why she quit politics.’ He later showed his great amusement at the ensuing public anger, first telling those who protested to ‘Calm down, dears’, and later asking: ‘Has the all-clear siren gone? Has the Menschivick bombardment stopped?’

Clearly none of these men feared repercussions. In fact Mitchell’s ‘Calm down, dears’ just couched his ‘prejudiced and proud’ stance firmly within the political context of a prime minister who publicly silenced a female MP with the same words the previous year.

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Against such a backdrop it's little wonder other politicians feel so confident wearing their bigotry like a badge of honour.

From highbrow to lowbrow these attitudes are rife across the board of celebrity. In the same week as Mitchell's outburst, and with the earnest air of a Radio 4 consumer phone-in about synthetic versus feather duvets, BBC Radio Cumbria produced a segment that cleverly managed to combine both sexism and racism, asking: 'If you could have a Filipino woman, why would you want a Cumbrian one?'

In 2012 US radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh managed to keep his job and his show despite launching a misogynistic barrage of abuse at law student Sandra Fluke, whose only 'crime' was to be invited to testify to Congress on the importance of including contraceptive coverage in health-insurance plans. Limbaugh attacked her repeatedly on air, labelling her a 'slut' and a 'prostitute', suggesting that her parents should be ashamed of her and saying she was 'having so much sex, it's amazing she can still walk'. With all the unimaginative persistence of a dog with a chew toy, he seemed unable to drop the subject – later adding: 'If we are going to pay for your contraceptives, and thus pay for you to have sex, we want something for it, and I'll tell you what it is. We want you to post the videos online so we can all watch.'

Over in Hollywood actor Seth MacFarlane decided that the best possible way to celebrate the combined talents of actresses attending the 2013 Oscars ceremony was to sing a song entitled 'We Saw Your Boobs'. (No prizes for guessing what it was about.) Apparently the fact that several of the breast-baring scenes he gleefully referenced explored rape or abuse passed MacFarlane

by. (As did, it seems, the abilities and, you know, *humanity* of the women themselves.) That this was presented as a hilarious piece of entertainment at one of the most widely watched media events of the year speaks volumes.

Back in the UK, television critic (and noted Adonis) A. A. Gill was busy veering into wildly irrelevant sexism in his review of *Meet the Romans*, a series presented by Cambridge Classics professor Mary Beard. Rather than critiquing Beard's credentials or presenting skills he chose to condemn her looks and style, branding her 'too ugly for TV' and suggesting that she 'should be kept away from cameras altogether'. In a column for the *Daily Mail* Beard responded with the dry observation that Gill had 'mistaken prejudice for being witty' – which excellent riposte frustratingly gave rise to the common excuse that sexism isn't a problem because 'women can handle it'. Yes, some can, but the point is that they shouldn't have to! (In this instance who knows what incisive historical revelations would have occupied that week's column had Beard not been forced to waste her time responding to Gill's puerile snot-flicking?)

During the London Olympics the *Telegraph's* Andrew Brown pronounced a breathtakingly patronizing and pompous censure on the female athletes daring to represent their country in the martial arts. 'I realize this will probably sound appallingly sexist,' he wrote, and then carried on regardless. 'It's disturbing to watch these girls beat each other up...' – his condescension was spectacularly misplaced when you consider how easily the 'soft limbs' he was wringing his hands over could have taught him a swift lesson about respect for equal rights had he strayed into the Olympic arena.

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In each of these situations – which together represent just a tiny sample from an extensive daily stream – we have women being openly lambasted, dismissed or objectified on the simple basis of their gender. Nothing more. From our politicians to our national broadcasting corporation, from the biggest media event in the world to the most famous sporting contest. It's partly sheer normalisation that leads to such widespread acceptance of gendered prejudice. We're so immersed in sexism that we find it impossible to see it, even when it stares us in the face. Rashida Manjoo, UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, visited Britain in 2014 and said: 'Have I seen this level of sexist culture in other countries? It hasn't been so in your face in other countries.' Yet despite her (lengthy and detailed) assessment, commentators immediately dismissed her expert findings out of hand. On one radio programme, sceptically asked to defend Manjoo's view, I had to reply that, while I strongly agreed that sexism was a huge and under-acknowledged problem in Britain, I wasn't in possession of enough concrete data to make a decisive global comparison. If only, I was very tempted to add, there was an international expert we could ask whose job was to do precisely that. Sexism seems to occupy a ludicrously acceptable position when it comes to public discourse, with a general willingness to laugh and ignore it rather than define it as the prejudice it is. And this makes it particularly difficult to fight, allowing objectors to be ridiculed and dismissed as 'overreacting' while perpetrators like Mitchell can take up cowardly defences behind the poor shield of 'humour' or 'irony'. Consider, by comparison, the fate of his contemporary and namesake Andrew Mitchell, who was forced

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to resign from his position as Chief Whip at around the same time amidst allegations (denied by him) that he called policemen ‘plebs’, voicing offensive class prejudice.

One woman’s project entry read:

► **It’s amazing that many of us feel so resigned to something which if directed at any other group of people would be considered very offensive.**

So, women are silenced both by the invisibility and the acceptability of the problem. And perhaps the most powerful evidence of all for the public acceptance of sexism is the ever-growing number of major daytime television programmes taking issues around women’s safety and assault as topics for ‘debate’.

The very fact that it is necessary in 2013 to explain why it’s not OK to publicly debate whether or not women are ‘asking’ for sexual assault is mindboggling. Yet the refrain has become so common that it seems difficult to open a newspaper or turn on the television without hearing the issue being discussed, as if it is a perfectly valid question with interesting points to be made both for and against.

In February 2013 the ITV morning show *Daybreak*, with an average of 800,000 viewers, ran a segment asking ‘Are women who get drunk and flirt to blame if they get attacked?’ The discussion was introduced with: ‘Some of you think so ... others vehemently disagree...’ Then: ‘Keep your thoughts coming in – it’s really interesting to hear what you think.’

The words ‘horrifying’, ‘depressing’ or ‘painful’ would have

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better described what it was actually like to hear what some of the *Daybreak* viewers thought. Comments were aired from interviewees on both sides of the debate, including one young man who said that ‘if you want to be treated with respect, you’ve got to dress with respect’ and a studio panellist who – when discussing *sexual assault!* – used the phrase ‘It takes two to make a decision about something’. The presenters later announced the results: ‘One in six people in the *Daybreak* poll think sexual-assault victims are to blame if they’re drunk or flirtatious with the offender.’ No comment was passed on this statistic as it was presented.

It’s the topic of the day, with one TV presenter musing over whether 13-year old girls walking past building sites in crop tops are ‘asking for it’, while online community Debate.org is running an ongoing poll on the topic: ‘are rape victims who dress provocatively “asking for it”?’

In the very same week as the *Daybreak* poll, the BBC 3 current-affairs programme *Free Speech* ran a segment posing the question: ‘Are young women in this country putting themselves at risk of being abused by going out clubbing and wearing provocative clothing?’ Once again, the ensuing debate showcased points made for and against. One panellist put herself firmly in the camp of agreement: ‘Absolutely ... You should not be going out dressed like a hussy, quite frankly. There’s no other word for it.’ She later added: ‘You are putting yourself at risk. And, as women, we need to understand we are vulnerable.’

Yes, for the love of God young women, come along – *learn your limits*. Or, rather, know society’s limits. How dare you think you have the right to go out wearing whatever you like – how *foolish*

and *ignorant* of you to expect not to be assaulted, you *brazen hussies*! What do you think this is? A free country?

There has been a long string of similar public declarations in all corners of the media. In the *Telegraph* Joanna Lumley urged young women to behave properly: ‘don’t be sick in the gutter at midnight in a silly dress with no money to get a taxi home, because somebody will take advantage of you, either they’ll rape you, or they’ll knock you on the head or they’ll rob you.’ In an interview soon afterwards Conservative MP Richard Graham appeared to support her: ‘If you are a young woman on her own trying to walk back home through Gloucester Park, early in the morning in a tight, short skirt and high shoes and there’s a predator and if you are blind drunk and wearing those clothes how able are you to get away?’ (Actually, as one young woman shrewdly pointed out to me, you’re generally much more able to run in a short skirt than in a long one...)

It is notable that, in the main, these sanctions seem to be coming from adults of a particular generation – they are a natural reaction, some might argue, to a series of societal shifts that have seen youth culture change dramatically over the past twenty-five years. But, while this might slightly mitigate the *intention* behind some of the comments, it neither excuses nor explains their intense focus on young women’s behaviour to the near-exclusion of all else. If anything, those who grew up in a generation with rigid and sexist gender roles and expectations of young women’s dress and behaviour are, sadly, only perpetuating such oppression by projecting it afresh onto girls operating within a new, freer youth culture. But to see such young women as ‘brazen hussies’ is to entirely miss the point – the focus instead should surely be on the

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fact that society is dictating to young women that this is the only way for them to win acceptance and approval. Miley Cyrus is the perfect recent example of this. Yes, her 2013 VMA performance (which saw her near-naked, grinding sexually with a much older male singer and sticking out her tongue provocatively) stirred strong emotions, but the resulting censure was reserved entirely for her choices as a young female – not for the man standing behind her, nor the rigidly gendered industry that led her so compellingly down that particular path while her male contemporaries are free to peddle their pop in suits and ties.

It is in this focus on young women's behaviour while utterly failing to analyse the actions and impact of the society around them that we encounter the greatest silencing method of all: the blaming of victims.

Let me immediately make two important points. First, the idea that women's dress or behaviour is in any way to blame for sexual assault or rape is *utter nonsense*. Second, to publicly debate such a notion is to give it credence, to spread the idea; it is to send perpetrators the message that they can act with impunity – and to remind victims they may be blamed if they speak up.

The victim is *never* to blame.

The 2013 UK government figures on sexual offences state that the vast majority of rapists are known to their victim: 'Around 90 per cent of victims of the most serious sexual offences in the previous year knew the perpetrator.' According to Rape Crisis (England and Wales), 'women and girls of all ages, classes, culture,

ability, sexuality, race and faith are raped. Attractiveness has little significance. Reports show that there is a great diversity in the way targeted women act or dress.’ Rape is *not* a sexual act; it is not the result of a sudden, uncontrollable attraction to a woman in a skimpy dress. It is an act of power and violence. To suggest otherwise is deeply insulting to the vast majority of men, who are perfectly able to control their sexual desires.

The same inaccurate conclusion is drawn about pretty much every form of assault and harassment you can think of. Popular television show *The Wright Stuff* (where female viewers are frequently addressed as ‘you girls’, making me want to claw my own eyes out – but that’s beside the point) ran a jaunty segment asking whether men pinching women’s bottoms in nightclubs was ‘just a bit of fun’. The question arose in response to a campaign by women in London to encourage nightclubs to expel men who groped them uninvited. This time the healthy side order of ‘they’re asking for it’ was thrown in by panellist Lynda Bellingham. ‘Oh for God’s sake, it’s just a bit of fun,’ she opined. ‘Have you seen what women wear in clubs these days? If they bend over you could see their knickers.’ So once again a direct line of causation is drawn between women’s dress and sexual assault.

Setting apart the euphemistic description of groping and physical assault as a cheeky ‘bum pinch’, the fact that such efforts are immediately met by cries of ‘aren’t you making a fuss about nothing?’ from such high-profile platforms shows the uphill battle women are fighting to even *begin* to object to sexism and harassment. What we are really hearing is the suggestion that if women dare to leave the house they simply must expect to

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be manhandled and touched by strangers against their will. If something happens to a woman when she's in a club, or when she has dared to dress up (in the way, incidentally, dictated and demanded by the media with which she is constantly bombarded), then she certainly shouldn't have the audacity to complain.

These three powerful silencing factors – the invisibility of the problem, the social acceptance of it, and the blaming of victims – are corroborated loud and clear by the reports we received, particularly from young women who are learning such lessons hard and early. They said they felt unable to complain about incidents, either because they wouldn't be taken seriously or, sometimes, because they didn't even think they'd be believed.

🐦 I tried to tell family about harassment or assault, but they'd almost always imply I'd done something to make it happen.

🐦 Pretty much told it was my problem or that I was 'too sensitive'.

One woman explained how her family's attitudes towards victims in the public eye spilled over into their indictment of her.

▶ **Just watching BBC Look North. Story about a woman who was raped in a park at night. My mother: 'Stupid woman, what on earth was she doing walking in a park?'**

Incidentally, when I came home and told Mum I'd been raped by my boyfriend, she replied: 'That's what you get if you behave like a slut.'

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Often the social acceptability of sexism and harassment is so ingrained that the abuse itself appears to come second in importance to the family's desire to avoid a scene. As one girl explained:

► **When I was about 13, a friend of the family used to grab my bum or my breasts whenever we saw him (which sadly, was quite a lot). He would do it right in front of my mum, sister and his WIFE and nobody ever said anything. It made me feel really uncomfortable (obviously), but at the time I was far too young to understand what was going on and it's only very recently that I've come to understand that he was actually assaulting me. I have felt so confused and unhappy about this for years, I'm so angry that his wife and my own family never questioned the fact I was being inappropriately touched right in front of them. I want to bring up the subject with my mum and sister, but I'm afraid that they won't take it seriously.**

We've received endless accounts reflecting this theme of young girls learning early and even from their parents that responsibility for sexual harassment falls on their own shoulders.

🐦 **Harassed in the street aged 12 (by an adult man), told by my mum it was my own fault for wearing a short skirt.**

It is significant that the silencing starts early. One woman's entry highlights how the impact of learning such 'truths' from the people you trust the most can cause them to become very deeply

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ingrained – making it much harder for women to realize that what is happening to them is wrong, or to speak up about it later on:

🐦 **My father told me it's impossible to rape a girl, it's the girls fault. I was 16 & a virgin when I was raped several times – I was 30 when I realized it was rape thanks to dad.**

Sadly many women describe similarly belittling comments from their own partners:

▶ **Had a frightening experience with a drunk man muttering threats while sitting across from me on a train, and then following me off and throughout the station, until I literally had to run and hide to lose him. When I later told my boyfriend what happened he said: 'well I'm glad you're home safe now' and completely dismissed it.**

▶ **I told my husband [about a sexual assault] but he didn't believe me and said it must have been a mistake.**

Such dismissal is not limited to an 'out of touch' older generation; it is reported just as frequently coming from young people. After somebody she knew had been sexually assaulted, one young woman heard her acquaintances discussing the case, saying: 'She's an attention whore; she should have seen it coming.' Young people repeatedly reported their peer groups silencing and policing victims who tried to speak out:

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► **At a nightclub at my uni a guy walked past me and put his hand right up my dress, at the front, very violently, and then walked past. I was SO shocked, furious and confused. Went back over to my group of friends and told them what happened; general apathy and no surprise. One male in the group said, 'Well, you are wearing a really nice dress tonight...'**

The crucial thing to understand is that dismissive patterns learned from an early age become internalized, which in turn begins to prevent women from even trying to speak out should the need subsequently arise. One young woman describes an experience that took place at a house party when she was just sixteen. The end of her account starkly reveals how strongly society had already programmed her not to report what happened:

► **One guy kept calling me a bitch... 'excuse me bitch', 'oi bitch, what's your name?' I thought he was a bit weird – and had a terrible sense of humour. I kept away from him and chatted to my friends for the rest of the night.**

Later on I was so drunk I went upstairs to sleep in a spare bedroom of my friend's house.

I woke up later, it was quiet and it sounded like everyone had gone home – except that guy from earlier who was on top of me, having sex with me, one hand covering my mouth and the other round my throat.

I knew that, being drunk, no one would believe me.

Another young woman reported a case where the man who

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harassed her went on to sexually assault another girl. Her description of the public reaction to the case perfectly illustrates why so many girls believe they will not be taken seriously from the outset:

► **I was waiting at a bus stop late at night and a drunk, leering man was also waiting for the same bus. He intimidated me into a conversation with him. I tried to be polite as I was scared not to talk to him. He said he'd get off at the same stop as me, which filled me with fear.**

Once the bus arrived I let him get on first to not sit near him. I rang my Dad who thankfully met me a few stops early. Sadly, a few months later I was reading our local newspaper online and saw the photo of the same man and an article – he was convicted of sexually assaulting a 14-year-old girl on the same bus by groping her bottom. I can imagine how frightening this was for her after encountering him myself. The worst thing was the comments people left regarding the 14-year-old girl – saying she had 'over reacted' was a 'drama queen' and 'had been wearing a short skirt', and that 'it was harmless touching – a bit of fun.' How must she feel reading that? What must she make of our society, and her place as a young woman in it? So many people dismissed what he had done.

Even for those who do find the courage to speak out, often after a long period, being dismissed, disbelieved or silenced by their own family or friends can be a devastating experience. The refusal to believe that something has happened – from minor sexist incidents all the way up the scale to more serious harassment,

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assault or violence – is re-victimization. It silences the victim and often prevents them from reaching out for help. For one woman, the response she got from a friend was as much of a blow as the horrendous experience of domestic violence she had survived:

► A friend of mine who I told my story to decided to tell everyone. And then he had the nerve to tell me that he didn't believe me. That I just wanted attention. That I just wanted people to feel sorry for me. And that something like that couldn't have happened to me because I have a family and a house and I go to a good school. I guess the worst part of the whole thing isn't even the betrayal, but the desperation that I felt. Not only had I experienced the abuse, but when I tried to trust someone with my feelings, they were dismissed as a lie.

There is a triple bind here. Media coverage in which victims are blamed sends insidious messages to young people, causing them to criticize and doubt themselves; the dismissive responses of those closest to them make them question their own experience; and the abject normalization of it all makes them wonder what the point is in speaking out anyway. In short, society, the media and those close to the victim collaboratively demonstrate such extensive doubt that they simply stop trusting themselves...

► Once at a party when I was 16 I was lying half-asleep and drunk on a sofa when I felt a boy I barely knew put his hand up my skirt and touch me. I was too embarrassed to confront him when I realized what he was doing, I just moved away. I told my

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boyfriend and he didn't believe me. I had been sleepy and drunk so I decided not to tell anybody else because I thought it seemed implausible although I was certain it had happened.

The impact of these multiple methods of silencing is immense. Heartbreakingly, the women who have finally shared their stories with the Everyday Sexism Project have often already suffered the effects of keeping their stories to themselves for months or years.

▶ **I haven't told anyone else about it six years later. I still feel ashamed and dirty, and some part of me resents myself for not doing anything – I still feel like it's my fault.**

▶ **Once I found the Everyday Sexism Project, I felt (in a bizarre way) relieved to see other women with stories similar to mine. It also made me realize that these and other incidents in my life was sexual harassment, not just me overreacting.**

▶ **Reading through the stories on this site has been both painful and healing. I have admitted more here than I have to my dearest friends.**

One of the saddest things about the silencing of women through shame, normalization, dismissal, disbelief and blame is that it has become so common that it is used as a controlling tool by abusers themselves.

▶ **My neighbour raped me when I was 16 – he said I was a slut and was asking for it and no-one would believe me if I told anyone.**

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As long as we as a society continue to belittle and dismiss women's accounts, disbelieve and question their stories, and blame them for their own assaults, we will continue to provide perpetrators with this powerful and effective threat.

▶ **In hindsight, I probably should have reported him but due to previous experience I felt like no one would have done anything about it [...]**

This is an all-too-common refrain.

There is another, final and widespread silencing tool: the defence of 'humour'. The backlash against feminism has played a significant role here, in its portrayal of all criticism as 'humourlessness' and its veiling of harassment and abuse under the protective shield of 'banter'.

▶ **Colleague just used the term 'lady logic'. Another colleague then said 'Oooh heads down chaps' meaning that I was about to kick off. My attempts to halt the sexist banter have become part of the joke for them now. I'm being silenced.**

▶ **My twenty-year-old brother recently revealed to me that he didn't see the point of my university education, as I am 'only a baby machine' anyway. Hurt, I tried to protest, while he and his friends loudly laughed at me, told me to get back into the kitchen and to stop being so publicly 'menstrual'.**

▶ **In a club a group of guys watched me and my then-boyfriend for**

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a few minutes before coming over to me and putting their arms round my waist and asking for a blowjob the second my boyfriend left me to go to the toilet. I told them to have some respect for both me and my boyfriend, a bouncer overheard the whole thing, burst out laughing and told me to lighten up 'because it's only banter'.

► Two weeks ago at work my manager came up behind me and slapped me very hard on my bottom. I spun around and confronted him, then reported the incident to a manager in a higher position. The man in question phoned me the following day [...] he said 'I didn't realize you couldn't take a joke'.

The correlation between humourlessness and people trying to talk about sexism is strong in the public consciousness – since starting the Everyday Sexism Project I've become painfully aware of it. There's an almost absurd lack of questioning on this subject: people who have known me for years have suddenly refused to tell jokes in front of me in case I'm 'offended'; others have expressed sympathy with my husband on the basis that he probably now has to 'watch what he says'.

The irony is that I've never needed my sense of humour *more* than when facing the daily barrage of sexist incidents reported through the project, and the constant stream of online insults and attacks. It's often the strongest line of defence – and frankly the only way I've held onto my sanity. When people like to write to me on Twitter, for example, telling me that writing about these issues is a pathetic waste of time when I could be concentrating on more important things, I find some light relief in replying that while they

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may be right I'm quietly confident it's a better use of time than writing to other people to tell them what they shouldn't be wasting their time on! It's the wry smile that keeps me going when I receive an email like the recent ironic missive that began: 'Sexism doesn't exist [...]' but ended: '[...] so why don't you get off your high horse and change your tampon?' Or the tweet from a man who felt I was misguidedly barking up the wrong tree in trying to expose sexism where it didn't exist. Obliging, he helped to solve the problem by writing: 'Still not seeing the sexism, you daft cunts. Go back to the kitchen, you slags.' You have to laugh.

Over the last year or so I've come up against this insistence on equating feminism with humourlessness a lot. Perhaps the most revealing example, though, was when I took part in a televised debate on the issue of the *Sun's* Page 3. It was to be me and a glamour model discussing our points of view. The driver taking me to the studio was kind, welcoming and loquacious, chatting away and cracking jokes. We had a great time until I incidentally revealed which side of the debate I was on. He stammered, stuttered and stopped talking – he apologetically explained that he'd assumed I was the Page 3 girl. Sadly the stream of conversation quickly died away after that. It really brought home to me how firmly cemented in the public consciousness was the idea that a young blonde woman couldn't possibly be talking about feminism and women's rights – particularly not if she also had a sense of humour and the ability to chat happily away about frivolous topics! It was as if I had morphed terrifyingly before his startled eyes into a green-skinned, horn-sprouting monster FEMINIST with not only a capital F but all shouty letters after it too.

silenced women: the invisible problem

This idea of the humourless feminist is an incredibly potent and effective silencer. It is used to isolate and alienate young girls; to ridicule and dismiss older women, to force women in the workplace to 'join in the joke' and, in the media, to castigate protest to the point of obliteration. Former News International employee Neil Wallis's weak attempts to discredit the No More Page 3 campaigners by branding them whining 'Wimmin' is a classic recent example, where the ridiculing of the women as out-of-touch harpies was used as a smoke screen to cover the fact that he had not a single actual argument to make to counter their cause. It's a pernicious and cowardly silencing tool, which uses baseless bullying as an excuse to avoid engaging intellectually with the issues at hand, and it has been used to shut down feminist campaigners for decades. Most sad of all is the impact it has on really young girls, who are faced with a barrage of objectification and abuse, yet told to lighten up and find their sense of humour just for voicing tentative objections.

► I'm 16 and in my last year of school. Constantly the guys (and girls) in my friendship circle make sexist remarks. Most of the time they don't realize they're being offensive, most of the time it's just 'banter'. For example, the other day my male friend said to me if I wear shorts to this Halloween party he will 'rape me, oh but it won't be rape because I will like it'. I responded telling him you shouldn't say things like that and I got called uptight [...] What is wrong with the world so that this is deemed OK? I am scared of going to university when I am older. Not because of exam stress but because of the horror stories I have heard from friends and

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family. The horror stories of girls that have been subjected to assault for 'banter'. I am scared. I am actually scared of being a female.

So, there's a lot to overcome if we're going to start talking properly about sexism, sexual harassment and assault. The invisibility; the social acceptability and normalization; the dismissal, disbelief and blaming of victims; and the accusations of being a Humourless Feminist Bore™. The good news is that the stereotype is starting to shift, as more and more people stop scratching their chins and finally admit to being able to see sexism. But in the meantime, as one woman wrote in her project entry, victims navigating this maze of denial can feel like they're caught between a rock and a hard place:

► You complain, they try to silence you. You shout so as not to be silenced, they roll out the mad-woman clichés. Lose lose.

