

The Oxford Comment

Episode 85: Revisiting Toxic Masculinity and #MeToo

Rachel Havard 00:04

Globally, an estimated one third of all women have been subjected to physical or sexual violence; however, out of fear and socio-economic disenfranchisement, less than 40% of women who experience such violence seek help. In the United States alone, 1 in 4 women have suffered rape or attempted rape in their lifetime; for men, this figure is closer to 1 in 26. The disparity is staggering; statistics on gendered violence reveal men are more likely to commit violence crimes, whereas women are far more likely to be the victims of violence. Despite greater visibility and awareness of crimes against women, notions derived from what is understood to be 'toxic masculinity', and its proponents, are a growing influence over men, and especially young males.

Rachel Havard 00:53

In 2022, the US Secret Service released a report detailing the rising threat of domestic terrorism from males identifying as 'involuntary celibates', better known as 'incels', a network of mostly young males who uphold the misguided belief that sex with women is an entitlement to which they've been denied. This report considered misogyny not only a threat to women, but to national security itself. So how do we stop the tide of violence and hate-speech stemming from the circulation of such misogynist rhetoric, and how can we move forward while best supporting its victims?

Rachel Havard 01:28

This is Rachel Havard with The Oxford Comment.

Rachel Havard 01:31

On today's episode, we explore two recognizable components in contemporary conversations on gender and gendered violence: that of 'toxic masculinity' and of the #MeToo movement, the awareness campaign that came to global prominence in October 2017 after the public downfall of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein.

Rachel Havard 01:51

Our first guest, Robert Lawson, is the author of *Language and Mediated Masculinities: Cultures, Contexts, Constraints*. He shared with us how language intersects with masculinities in media spaces, how constructed masculinity is performed, and how language may be our best weapon in combatting the rising misogyny hurting women and men.

Rachel Havard 02:13

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Thanks for joining us. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself in your area of research?

Robert Lawson 02:17

Yeah, so I am an associate professor in socio linguistics at Birmingham City University. And so broadly speaking, I'm sort of interested in the relationship between language on the one hand and society on the other. So I'm really fascinated by how people use language, what language tells us about people's histories, their heritage, their links to their local community, as well as what it tells us about who people are, and their day to day lives. And more recently, you know, I've been interested and what language tells us about men in contemporary settings and how people use language and what that language tells us about who people are.

Rachel Havard 03:01

Thank you. What first inspired you to write your book *Language and Mediated Masculinities*. Could you please introduce some of the key ideas in language and masculinity study?

Robert Lawson 03:12

Yes. So this book is fairly-prolonged labor of love that finds its beginnings all the way back in 2012. The initial plan was to convert my PhD about the language of young men in high school in Glasgow and convert that into a book. And over the course of the reviewing process, the editor came back and said, "You know, this is a really interesting idea. But it's got a really specific focus on this particular group of speakers, this particular group of speakers and Glasgow, and I don't know how relevant that will be for a readership outside of Scotland, outside of the UK, maybe we can try and find ways of of kind of expanding some of the focus of of that proposed book, and it's something that's kind of going to be a bit more broadly relevant." So I went back to the drawing board and started thinking about how I could make, you know, this book more relevant that I can have wider readership.

Robert Lawson 04:11

And one of the chapters that was definitely going to be in that original book was a kind of focus on this idea of tough man masculinity or hard man masculinity in the British press. And from there, I kind of thought, well, you know, maybe we can start looking at some of these issues, but across different kinds of media contexts, so potentially, you know, TV shows, social media sites, forums, and so on. And from there, it was sort of a gradual process of "Oh, that's a really interesting kind of context that no one's written about, let's, let's kind of focus or in looking at language and masculinities in a TV show," for example. I think once I got a sense of what the book as a whole was going to look like, it all started kind of writing itself in a lot of ways.

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Robert Lawson 05:02

At that point in 2019, I had become a dad, and so one of the chapters focuses on fatherhood. And I think that was driven a lot by my own kind of personal experiences of fatherhood and of being a new parent. And so I kind of use that as a kind of guide for one of the chapters. But I think more broadly, I was just interested in what language tells us about men and contemporary society in thinking about how masculinity becomes so contested, how masculinity becomes, you know, this thing that a lot of people spend time writing about and thinking about and arguing and debating about.

Robert Lawson 05:41

And I think over the last sort of year or two, we've seen these really critical discussions and debates about masculinity come to, come to the fore and ideas round about toxic masculinity and destructive masculinity, but also, you know, kind of the social media influencing sphere as well, people like Andrew Tate, and being able to sell particular images of what it is to be a man in, in the 21st century.

Robert Lawson 06:07

And so kind of all of that taken together was kind of my inspiration for, for the book, and I try to get to the bottom of understanding what language tells us about men, but also what that language tells us about kind of contemporary gender relations between men and women, what that language may tell is a bit of state of kind of contemporary agenda politics, as, as well. And actually then how we can start to try and do some good based on our understanding of how language is weaponized and manosphere spaces, for example.

Rachel Havard 06:38

Could you just in a couple of sentences, explain what the manosphere actually is?

Robert Lawson 06:42

Oh, crikey. Just a couple of sentences? I can try my best.

Robert Lawson 06:46

Okay, so the manosphere is a kind of loose constellation of male-focused websites, Twitter spaces, blogs, podcasts, social media sites, extensively dedicated to men's issues. So that might be, you know, dating, relationships, working out, diet advice, start up your own business, you know, being an entrepreneur, marriage, having kids, you know, divorce proceedings, and so on.

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Robert Lawson 07:17

So basically, anything that's, that's sort of loosely connected to being a man, but what a lot of researchers find, including my own, is that the manosphere is also a space where kind of anti-feminist and anti-women sentiment runs rampant, as well. And so it's very kind of anti, anti-women and orientation, as well. It's where we find a lot of sexist and misogynistic and abusive content directed towards women. And so, you know, it kind of markets itself as a, as a space for men to talk about men's issues. But like I said, there's this really strong undercurrent of, of misogyny and sexism that we see across a variety of manosphere species.

Rachel Havard 08:01

Thanks.

Rachel Havard 08:02

You talk about both positive and toxic masculinity in your book. Beginning with the latter. In one of the chapters of the book, you examine masculinity in the R/The_Donald community on the social networking site, Reddit. What can you tell us about the alt-right and online forums like The_Donald?

Robert Lawson 08:20

Yes, so this was, this was a really interesting chapter to, to write because I think I had been, so Reddit is a, is a, you know, social media networking site and kind of news aggregator website, as well. It's, it's one of the world's most popular websites; it's, you know, with multi-billions of pounds, and it's a really popular space for people who are on the political alt-right. But also, it was one space where Donald Trump's presidential bid and subsequent presidency gathered a massive amount of support and momentum, and there was a subreddit that was developed and then closed down, and later years, called R/The_Donald that was kind of dedicated to content promoting and supporting Donald Trump and his and his presidency.

Robert Lawson 09:11

And I've started kind of thinking about her masculine he was constituted in that space, so I wanted to look at ideas around a kind of alpha masculine, and how particular forms of masculinity were venerated or exalted. And how this kind of alpha masculinity was, was placed as the aspirational form of masculinity, and it's kind of Donald Trump goes out to, you know, save the world and solve all the, you know, all the problems that the US is, is facing.

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Robert Lawson 09:43

And when I started looking at some of the threads, what I also realized was that a lot of the discussion about masculinity was inflected through this lens of, of race, as well. And so there were really interesting kind of patterns to do with how masculinity and race and ethnicity and nationhood kind of work, interwoven across different threads on The_Donald. And particularly, this idea of kind of white masculinity is something under threat that the subreddit kind of was trying to protect.

Robert Lawson 10:21

This idea that white masculinity was, was something to kind of strive towards; it was, a kind of exalted best form of masculinity, and the other forms of kind of racialized masculinities weren't quite as good. And so some of the threads talked a lot about kind of the technological advancements and inventions of white men and kind of courting that as a, as an element of, of support and kind of white masculinity, while other forms of masculinity were kind of denigrated. So black masculinity and Muslim masculinity, in particular, were the two other elements that I, that I looked at.

Robert Lawson 10:57

So it's just this really interesting kind of confluence of gender, and ethnicity, and nationhood, and community, and one that was really eye-opening as, as well, because The_Donald had been regularly criticized by different people about, as kind of racist content that had been promoted on the site, and one kind of defense that was bandied round about the subreddit was that, you know, people on The_Donald weren't racist, that they were inclusive, and they were just interested in ensuring that America was, was represented on the world stage and that it, it could do good in that dimension.

Robert Lawson 11:42

But what I found in my research wasn't explicitly racist, but kind of implicitly racist in a lot of ways, but that racism was inflected, as I say, through this kind of lens of ethnicity. So, so yeah, so that was, that was a kind of finding that I wasn't expecting; when I was doing the analysis, I kind of thought that there would just be a bit of a kind of chest-thumping sense of masculine in a lot of ways, but, but that wasn't the case, like I say. There was this kind of inflection of, of ethnicity, I want to say gender and masculinity, that I thought was was really interesting as well.

Rachel Havard 12:21

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You also discuss the online construction of fatherhood in online father's forums. You pay close attention to the linguistic practice deployed by fathers in online spaces. Could you tell us about what you learned from analyzing the discourse of fatherhood and masculinity in these forums?

Robert Lawson 12:38

Yeah, so this was, this was a forum that I found called DAD.info. And one of the first things that I kind of realized when I was planning this particular chapter is that there's not that many spaces online for dads to talk about being a dad, to talk about parenthood, to talk about the difficulties of being a father. There are some parenting forums that are really popular and really active. So Mumsnet is probably the most famous example of this; it's a really active community. But even the dad sub-forum on Mumsnet doesn't actually have that much activity.

Robert Lawson 13:16

So the first thing was that it was a real struggle to find an online space where dads had built a community, were supporting one another, were engaging in kind of regular correspondence and communication with one another, and DAD.info was probably one of the more popular more active forums purely dedicated to dads online that I was able to find.

Robert Lawson 13:40

So once I had found that and started kind of reviewing some of the threads, what became really quickly apparent is that a lot of the posters don't actually talk about masculinity, they don't really talk about fatherhood, they don't really talk about being a dad. I looked at a number of different forums kind of ranging from advice about legal issues, through to issues to do with, you know, relationships, sub-forums dedicated to kind of family issues, and then forum, a sub-forum dedicated to child maintenance or child support queries.

Robert Lawson 14:17

They tended to treat the forum as a kind of problem-solving resource. So a lot of the posters would go on maybe once or twice, they would ask a question about, you know, child custody after, after a divorce, for example; other posters would come in and help out and answer that question and give them, you know, links and resources to help support them, and then they would say, you know, "Thanks so much for that." And then that would be the kind of limit of their participation on the forum.

Robert Lawson 14:46

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And that was a really common kind of thread across the forum, that there wasn't this sense of, of kind of community building or ongoing engagement across the forum. Instead, what we saw was the, kind of, this one stop shop for supporting dads when they were really difficult points in their, in their lives. And that was, that was really interesting, I think I was kind of expecting to see much more, kind of, regular conversation, engagement across the forums where people built up these these personal relationships.

Robert Lawson 15:18

Actually, the people who posted more, most regularly were the moderators of each of the individual forums rather than specific non-moderator members of the, of the forums. And so I would, you know, stumble across a thread and go, "Oh, this is, this is a super interesting; they're talking about fatherhood, they're talking about, you know, difficulties being a dad, and there, as I say, weren't really that many instances of that.

Robert Lawson 15:42

One father actually did get back to me and said, "You know, this sounds like a really interesting project you're involved in, and I'm happy to give you consent to look at my data." And that data was about, the arrival of his and his wife's baby wasn't straightforward. And it was underrating, you know, the difficulties of the birth, about the, sort of, the impact that that challenging birth had on on him, in particular, as a brand new dad, on his wife, as well, and the kind of expectations that he had set up in his mind about the level of support that he was expected to give to his wife, but also the, kind of, expectations of normal, of masculinity that what he expected, you know, to, to kind of follow.

Robert Lawson 16:30

And so in his narrative, he talks about, you know, "Oh, I basically broke down because, you know, things were really difficult." And then he follows up by saying, "You know, I know I'm kind of weak, I guess." And so that tension between showing kind of emotional vulnerability on the one hand, and then on the other hand, being like, "Oh, wait a minute, I don't know if I can do that at this time, in that, you know, by doing that, does that make me, does that make me weak?"

Robert Lawson 16:54

And so that was a real privilege, first and foremost, to have those conversations with this new dad about the difficulties he, he had when his and his wife's baby arrived. So yeah, that was something that, again, I kind of didn't expect, I really did think that I would get larger loads of examples to look at how men in the 21st century thought about fatherhood and thought about what it is to be

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a dad, but, as I say, the, the actual site itself was more, kind of, geared towards us best practical support, rather than this kind of form of community-building.

Rachel Havard 17:31

Often in media, the word "masculinity" is preceded by the word "toxic" or triggers negative connotations. However, there is positive masculinity, something we should all encourage. Can you briefly tell us about the language used in relation to positive masculinity?

Robert Lawson 17:47

So the focus on positive masculinity was predicated on analyzing the American TV show, Brooklyn Nine-Nine, which is about a, kind of, fictional police precinct in New York, and it kind of follows the the lives and trials and tribulations of different characters, but mainly the main character, Detective Peralta, who kind of embodies this, kind of, gung-ho form of kind of police masculinities. He's tough, but he's funny, but he kind of wants to be the, the man in charge, and, you know, kind of a bit of an alpha male character as well.

Robert Lawson 18:29

But the TV show was really praised for the way in which subverted a lot of these really kind of dominant tropes of, of stoic, tough, emotionless police masculinity, and a number of the characters in that show were really interesting from both a linguistic perspective, but also from a, kind of, perspective of, of masculinity studies.

Robert Lawson 18:55

And looking at the interactions and the linguistic practices of these characters, what I found was there was a lot of examples of expressing male vulnerability and male closeness and, kind of, affiliation with one another and that was particularly the case between Peralta and Boyle, who are two of the main meal leads in the, in the show. And I looked at the way that this interactional closeness was deployed in conversation. So one excerpt I look at, they copy one another's words, they have, kind of, choreographed dance moves, they pick up on each other's lines and, kind of, complete those lines.

Robert Lawson 19:41

So there's a kind of real interactional alignment with one another. And other examples, so Teddy Jeffords, one of the other sergeants in the, in show. He expresses a real sense of vulnerability when he talks about his, his family, and that's another thing that, that Boyle does as well. There's a lot of discussion about the importance of family, about children, and partners. And so their sense,

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of kind, of them being fathers is an important part of, of who they are was also, I argue, a kind of element of, of expressing this kind of positive masculinity, you know, a healthier conceptually, conceptualizations of masculinity.

Robert Lawson 20:27

So that chapter was actually ended up being one of my favorite ones, because I think there's not that much work in language of masculinity studies that looks at positive masculinity; a lot of it looks at the more kind of problematic and toxic elements of, of masculinity, and, you know, some of the communities who already talked about whether that's the, you know, the mansphere, or pickup artists. But I think if we, you know, as language of masculinity scholars, if we want to really understand the totality of what has to be a man in, you know, contemporary society, we can't just look at the bad and problematic and toxic and negative elements, too. We also need to look at those spaces where masculinity may be configured in a more positive kind of way. But what was really interesting in some of the data that I looked at was that tension between, kind of, traditional forms of masculinity and more progressive forms.

Robert Lawson 21:18

So, you know, Boyle and Peralta, for example, would have these real moments of, of interactional closeness and intimacy. And then they would recognize that as kind of breaking the rules of, of masculine friendship, and, you know, kind of acknowledge that, "Oh, maybe we shouldn't be this close, maybe we need to kind of distance ourselves from from one another." A lot of the humor being, kind of, constructed in the show through that tension of, kind of, progress and masculinity, on the one hand, and more traditional demands on masculine behavior on the other.

Rachel Havard 21:53

Why is it important in improving our understanding of the role media plays in promoting alternative constructions of masculinity?

Robert Lawson 22:01

So one of the arguments that I make across the book is that the media is a really powerful and important force in presenting, kind of, normalized slips of gender behavior and kind of setting how expectations of, of how we behave. And sometimes we measure them, you know, consciously or unconsciously, other times we may go, you know, that's definitely not the kind of person that I want to be. And so we distance ourselves from those representations. But I think that the, because the media is such an integral part of our daily lives, and, you know, we all engage with the media in different ways over the course of, you know, a normal day.

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Robert Lawson 22:47

Because of that, I think that the media has a responsibility to present alternative visions, alternative compositions of masculinity, and given how dangerous I think some of the, kind of, toxic masculine representations that we see both online and in the media more generally, I think that we need to really encourage media producers and writers and, you know, creators to embrace aspects of positive and healthy masculinity and promote those for our readership and for our viewership and for, you know, different types of audiences.

Robert Lawson 23:28

Because I think, if you're looking at, you know, a lot of what's happening, you know, over the course of the last 6-12 months or so, with, you know, male influencers like, you know, people like Tate, a lot of the question is, well, you know, what's the alternative? What, what other kinds of role models are there out there for young men to look up to and to, and to model and, you know, can aspire to. And I think that the media has a role to play there and filling that, that gap in offering, you know, kind of more positive, healthy role models, and examples of masculinity for young men in particular, to follow, for the media to, you know, kind of, promote alternative constructions of masculinity and ones that are aligned with a kind of healthier, more empathetic, more positive kind of orientation.

Rachel Havard 24:22

Do you think that the almost overwhelming presence of media in our day-to-day life makes people's thoughts more susceptible to be molded than they were in a pre-media-dominated, pre-social media world?

Robert Lawson 24:34

I don't know if it makes us more susceptible to be molded, but I think the level of influence is different to, you know, the kind of paid-media dominated world then and it is our fingertips through mobile phones to laptops, through tablets, and all the rest of it. And people regularly engage with this content on a, on a day-to-day basis and it's a really intense form of engagement that's kind of driven by your own interest, or your Twitter account, or your YouTube timeline, or your Instagram feed, or whatever form of social media that you consume, is shaped by your interest in a kind of cyclical way, so once you find something to get interested, the algorithm feeds you more of that content.

Robert Lawson 25:30

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But that content is also multi-directional. So you're not just a kind of passive consumer of that content, you like things, you retweet things, you comment on them, you share them, you write blog posts about them, you may do podcasts about them, you may write an article about them. And so that engagement is multi-directional, is multi-modal, and it's, and it's prolonged over, you know, over a period of time.

Robert Lawson 25:58

So I think taking all of those elements together, that our engagement with today's media is really different to maybe what we had before social media became a real thing. And I think, because it's more accessible, because we engage with it on a more regular basis and a more prolonged basis, that it can, you know, that it does, influences, and whether that, you know, whether we're more susceptible, or not, because you know, that engagement is going to lowering our defenses against that influence, you know, I don't know. But there certainly are a point to be made, I think, about the ubiquity of, of social media and our daily lives.

Robert Lawson 26:43

And I think that people are now starting to be really conscious about the dangers that social media represents, you know, not just in terms of, kind of, mental health problems and, sort of, comparing yourself against social media personalities that you see online, but, also, you know, the real level of influence that those people have, on, on folks' everyday lives, I think, again, going back to the, you know, Andrew Tate stuff that we've seen. Recently, one of the big concerns about Tate is the level of reach that that he has, and, you know, how many young boys in particular that engage with his content that they end up parroting or repeating, you know, his talking points in classrooms, or in the, you know, school hallway or out in the playground, or whatever it is.

Robert Lawson 27:33

And the question becomes, you know, what can what can we do to try and address that? Is that we need interventions at an educational level, and classrooms or assemblies? Is it that we need teachers to be trained in to intervene in these conversations? Is it that we need to really sit down and have in depth conversations with with young men about why those kinds of male supremacist ideologies are dangerous. But all of that stuff that we've seen over the course of the last eight months or so highlights anything, the dangers that social media influencers represent, you know, I think the question is, then what do we do to help guard against those, those influences? And what will it take to help young men develop, you know, a kind of toolkit to be able to challenge some of some of these discourses when they're exposed to them?

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Rachel Havard 28:26

About Andrew Tate... Does his use of aspirational language influence toxic masculinity? For example, take sometimes talks about ambition and aspirations of his life and work, which young men in particular then latch on to. Does this make his misogyny easier to justify?

Robert Lawson 28:46

So I think Tate's message of self-improvement, of bettering yourself, of striving to achieve something bigger than yourself is one that resonates across a lot of his fans. I think it's something that people certainly will look up to him as a success story, with the money, and the cars, and the, you know, globetrotting lifestyle. And I think he markets and sells a very seductive form of, of masculinity and, kind of, male identity one, you know, kind of based on, on power and conspicuous consumption, on prestige, on, you know, kind of, the jet set lifestyle.

Robert Lawson 29:32

And I think that that kind of aspirational discourse potentially make some of his audience quicker to overlook the more problematic elements of his messaging. Certainly as it relates to, you know, sexism and misogyny. I think the, because of that then, it becomes, you know, more difficult to separate the good elements of that message versus the more problematic elements of that message.

Robert Lawson 30:04

But what I would say is, folk can get that kind of aspirational content from other sources, from other public figures who don't engage in some of the more difficult or problematic or sexist or misogynistic, kind of, content that Tate espouses. You know, you're looking at someone like, you know, Marcus Rashford, for example, who has been a real, really positive force for, you know, things like preschool meals and raising awareness of, you know, childhood poverty, but also being, you know, just a genuinely nice guy, as, as well.

Robert Lawson 30:42

So I think that if folk are looking for those kinds of aspirational messages and role models to look up to, that those role models are out there, and those role models don't necessarily engage in some of the kind of sexist and misogynistic tropes that we see other social media influencers, kind of, promote as well.

Robert Lawson 31:03

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I think that, yeah, it's always dangerous to, kind of, put social media influencers on a pedestal and think that they're the answer to every, everything, that they have the answer to everything. I would encourage people to look much more close to home, for mentors, for role models, for other men in their lives to, kind of, look up to and aspire to, whether that's, you know, community leaders, or coaches or teachers or, you know, other family members.

Rachel Havard 31:33

Finally, has the #MeToo movement positively affected masculinity over the last few years? Has there been a backlash? Has the toxic gotten more toxic? Or has it been largely successful?

Robert Lawson 31:46

That's a really interesting question. I think things like the #MeToo movement definitely raised people's awareness of certain forms of masculinity as a social ill. But I think it, I think it raised the profile of some men are, you know, a problem, that some forms of masculinity are a problem. I think that it probably wasn't, at least in my own experience, until the murders of Sabina Nassa and Sarah Everard in the UK, where I started to see more conversations about, "Right, okay, now, men really need to start looking what men are all about," and the role that men are playing, and violence against women and ghettos, and trying to reframe the conversation. So I think up until that point, it had been very much on a, kind of, victim focus, you know, what can women do to keep themselves safe?

Robert Lawson 32:40

What can women do to avoid being attacked in the evening? What can women do to make sure that they kept safe? I think particularly following the murder of Sarah Everard, that on places like Twitter, that conversation really shifted, and it wasn't then just about, you know, focus solely on "What can women do?" with "What responsibility, what role did men play?" and all of this because men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of sexual violence against women and ghettos and, you know, as well is, you know, non-sexual violence as, as well. So I think that was probably a bit, I saw the conversation start to shift towards men's culpability and role and responsibility in these kinds of issues and starting to think how men can be better allies to women. And how men can really reflect on their own behaviors and practices.

Robert Lawson 33:40

I think, one of the points I make in the book is that it's really difficult to reflect on our own behavior, especially when that might force us to look at the modern, salubrious kind of elements of who we are. No one ever really likes, thinking that they are the bad person, or whenever like

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thinking that they're the bad guy, because our whole sense of self was wrapped up and, you know, in a kind of, "Oh, folk like us, and folk like me and I'm a good person."

Robert Lawson 34:07

And when you, when you make people, kind of, reflect on themselves and their behavior, that's a really difficult step to make. And I think that, that was, you know, one of the reasons is kind of the backlash towards the #MeToo movement, you know, there was the trending hashtag, #NotAllMen, which kind of really derailed the focus and the conversation on violence against women. And again, it just really pulls focus away from the important issues of, well, actually, how do you go about reducing rates of violence against women and ghettos?

Robert Lawson 34:40

What can we do in terms of education for men and boys? In particular, how do you address issues of sexual privilege, of expectations round about relationships and dating, and so on? So I think those are all, again, really big questions. And there are a number of charities and organizations engaged in really good anti-violence work with men and boys.

Robert Lawson 35:06

I think, you know, it's really important that that work continues. The government had just, in the UK, had a big national advertising campaign about, you know, kind of, that refocus on men's role in sexual violence against women and ghettoes. So that, you know, those are the kinds of conversations and interventions that I think we need to see more of. But I think the fact that we're having these conversations is a positive step, right? You know, I think, the flip side would be that we don't talk about any of the things or stuff and we just pretend everything's okay, everything's fine, everything's normal.

Robert Lawson 35:42

And actually, these issues are not issues at all. I said much the same about Andrew Tate. You know, the fact that his influence is so corrosive, and the people are talking about, you know, a kind of reaction against some of the viewpoints that he's promoting, that's a good thing, right? Because if no one was saying, "Well, hold on. Actually, no, we don't agree with that." If everyone's saying, "Yeah, yeah, that's, that's, yeah, yeah. What, that's, that, I totally agree with that." That's, that's a problem, right? Because then it just becomes normalized. So the fact that we're not there yet, I think, that's a good thing. So silver-lining on all of this, as much as there can be with these kinds of topics.

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Rachel Havard 36:18

Well, thank you for joining us. It's been an absolute pleasure to have you on the podcast.

Robert Lawson 36:23

Thanks very much. I really enjoyed that. Thank you.

Rachel Havard 36:27

Our second guest, Iqra Shagufta Cheema, is the editor of *The Other #MeToos*. She spoke with my colleague, Megan Schaffer, about the origins of the #MeToo movement, how it has been received around the world, and how it has changed, and will continue to change, to meet the needs of the victims for which it advocates.

Meghan Schaffer 36:46

Thanks for joining us, Iqra. If you could please introduce yourself and your scholarship and in turn, share with us when you were first made aware of #MeToo as a social movement and your understanding of its initial conception and goals.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 37:00

Thank you so much for inviting me to the podcast, Meghan. I am Iqra Shagufta Cheema. I am an Assistant Professor of Humanities at Graceland University in Iowa, where I'll also coordinate a new major called Social Change starting this fall. I teach and write about digital transnational feminisms and post-colonial literature and films. My edited book, *The Other #MeToos*, recently came out with Oxford University Press and, and other co-authored book, about the work of Palestinian filmmaker Annemarie Jacir will be out later this year with Edinburgh University Press.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 37:32

My interest in the #MeToo movement and my edited book, *The Other #MeToos*, also resulted from these interests in transnational cultural interactions around gender and sexuality. I became aware of the #MeToo alongside everyone else in October 2017, when the hashtag was first tweeted, and my understanding of the #MeToo as a social movement and your schools and conceptions developed, you know, with every tweet, social media post, online interaction, and the reportage that I encountered while I was reflecting on the movement and its different directions. While the initial conception and the goal in the moment that the #MeToo movement had in 2017 was largely to create awareness around sexual violence, it gradually and organically has gone far beyond that, to really transform both the publics and policies around gender and sexual interactions.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 38:22

Generally, we observed that laws and policies for gender equality and redressal of sexual violence are created, but those policies do not always smoothly transition into the cultural and public practices. But #MeToo inverted that order. It transforms the cultural understanding of sexual and gendered violence and created a transformative public, which then led to reflections and questions about state policies and cultural practices in professional and personal spaces. I say this in the preface to *The Other #MeToos*, and I will say it here too, that I truly feel incredibly lucky to have witnessed and experienced a social movement of this magnitude in my life.

Meghan Schaffer 39:01

Could you share with us several of what you would consider pivotal moments for the movement?

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 39:06

Yeah, absolutely. The answer to this question is somewhat complex, and it significantly varies depending upon how and where we locate the #MeToo movement, and its various international iterations and adaptations. However, in an attempt to answer this question, I would think retrospectively and go back to 2006, when Tarana Burke first founded the #MeToo movement on MySpace. But even Burke's 2006 movement was a result of her interaction with a 13-year-old sexual abuse survivor in 1997. Burke shares that at that time, she didn't have a response, or a way to help that child in that moment.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 39:45

She couldn't even say me to these initial movements and initiatives like the young girl talking to Burke in 1997. And then Burke initiating the #MeToo on MySpace in 2006 have been critical in laying the foundation for a movement like the #MeToo that finally happened in 2017 on a larger scale. In terms of significant cultural moments that have been pivotal in and since the 2017 #MeToo movement, I believe women's marches have internationally been one of the most powerful and empowering events that feminists have successfully sustained and continue to organize every year, despite the major challenges that come with organizing these events. But they become critical sides of conversation each year, where both the questions and answers about the need of #MeToo are the women's marches become visible and available to the public.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 40:38

Besides that, despite the many complexities of that attention that the Hollywood #MeToo cases receive, I think they become an effective tool in raising public feminist consciousness in different

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ways, since there is usually massive attention to every minute detail of these cases, and many around the globe enthusiastically follow the reportage of these cases. And more critically, they also attempt to develop an informed opinion about these cases. So, for example, at the start of the #MeToo movement, cases like Harvey Weinstein and Louie CK, but especially, like, more recently, cases like Aziz Ansari, and then Johnny Depp and Amber Heard.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 41:18

Irrespective of any personal opinions that people may have, these cases serve as pivotal moments of reflection, and help the public grasp the complexities and nuances of the conversations and experiences of gendered and sexual violence. And, most importantly, I believe the act of saying, "Me Too" is the most pivotal moment in a crisis, a moment that highlights the shared experience. It creates solidarity, invites reflection on shared ethos, and sets a shared goal. So from Burke's inability to say "Me Too" in 1997, to the #MeToo becoming the largest social movement of our times in 2017, I believe it is millions of people's willingness to say "Me Too," and hear "Me Too," that became the primary agent of change during these two decades between 1997 to 2017.

Meghan Schaffer 42:11

As well as serving as a #MeToo primer, your book also covers the impact of the movement and others like it around the world, whereas most western scholarly and popular treatment of the movement assumes it is a primarily western phenomenon. Why is this the case, and could you share with us successes for which #MeToo may have been responsible, of which we might not be aware of?

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 42:33

Great question. Yes, I think in many ways the successes of the #MeToo movement have been similar in different contexts and locations. So it has attended to the questions and contentions that we have seen emerge in the works of scholars like, let's say Chandra Mohanty, or Gayatri Spivak, or Bell Hooks, or Gloria Anzaldúa, and like many others like them. However, long histories of cultural erasure and cultural imperialism also serve as a context for the differential attention that we observe in the #MeToo movement. Alongside that, realities like class and race, and their corollaries like fame and visibility, have been major factors in helping highlight some cases from some locations more than others.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 43:17

And while it is impossible to account for the many successes of the #MeToo movement, internationally, I believe the biggest success has been the expansive feminist publics that the

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#MeToo has helped create. We have witnessed sociopolitical shifts in conversations around feminist politics, increased international recognition of the need for feminist justice, greater awareness about intersectional feminism, wider availability of feminist vocabularies, and decreased taboos around conversations about gender and sexual violence, which have all been significant around the globe and they, have, like, tremendously changed how we view and approach sexual and gendered violence.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 43:57

So for example, you know, like within a month of the initiation of the #MeToo movement from October to November 2017, the hashtag #MeToo had been tweeted more than 2.3 million times, and #WomensMarch had been tweeted more than 11.5 million times in multiple languages worldwide. And that is one of the successes of the #MeToo movement, that it created the kind of shared vocabularies that are simultaneously global and local, or that can be employed as such.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 44:27

So for example, the application of the #MeToo in China's rice bunny hashtags, or its various adaptations in the Middle East or in South Asian countries like Sri Lanka, and even if various translations in different languages, have made the feminist vocabularies more familiar and normalized, being able to name what you experience and then being able to grasp a collective expression of that experience are immensely powerful acts that have been possible due to the #MeToo movement.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 44:56

However, #MeToo itself highlights that white feminists, a lot of times, as holders of white privilege seats, at to what we view as the proverbial feminist roundtable, and as a signal of, like, solidarity, the #MeToo recognize the differential attention that feminists of color receive a lot of times are the cases that are not located in the West, especially in America receive, and acknowledge this differential treatment and the need to recognize the contributions from other people who are working on this.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 45:29

And I believe the only way to think and act responsibly now is to think transnationally, and this transnational thinking, not in the unilinear flow from best to the rest but in a more rhizomatic fashion where we consider the inequities that exist globally, but also account for the inequities that exist locally everywhere and pay their impact on the global reflections on these social issues irrespective of where we are located when we are thinking about these problems.

Meghan Schaffer 45:58

Has the #MeToo movement changed since its inception? For example, has it gained additional meaning or nuance? Has awareness or support for the movement peaked and its momentum stagnated? In any instance, what can account for such change?

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 46:13

That's a very important question, which encapsulates not only the questions of the success of the #MeToo movement, but also its momentum over half a decade now. Like any other organic movement, I think #MeToo has changed significantly since its inception, but mostly in good ways. That initial shock or denial of the many realizations that came in the wake of the #MeToo has gradually waned now to make more room for a nuanced and critical understanding of the conversations that were taking place before the #MeToo happened, or that have taken place after and during the #MeToo movement.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 46:50

But also there has a reason and need to at least engage more thoughtfully with the problematic certainly to movement highlighted. When we read articles about men being afraid to date or flirt with women, it is essentially a differently worded or misworded announcement that the conversations about sexual and gendered violence are more nuanced, and people, particularly men, might not have the vocabulary or the tools to fully grasp these nuances, or even the willingness to do that. But they definitely observe the changes around them that have taken place since the #MeToo.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 47:24

And that observation itself, even if it comes from a place of protest, or as a pronouncement of helplessness, is a catalyst for sustaining the momentum of the #MeToo movement and even further expanding it. We can't think about the #MeToo as a movement that has peaked, or that sought a peak because the strength of the movement lies not in a peak moment, but in a slow and steady recurrence of events and conversations that help us think more critically, and continually, about the problems that the media highlights in the cultures that we inhabit.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 47:58

And I'm happy to say that these #MeToo conversations recur around us all the time, both in good and bad ways. We see that people experienced violence, but also that people say #MeToo, and they speak about it, and that sustains the momentum of the media conversations. Annual

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women's marches have become almost synonymous with #MeToo movements, which I think is a great thing. In fewer words, I would say yes, the movement has changed.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 48:23

But it has assumed more nuance, it will not stagnate because the experiences that it speaks about occur, and with every new experience, another person says "Me Too" in different ways, whether it is reporting to a human resources department, or filing a legal case, or even just complaining to a friend, or maybe doing all of these together. So as long as people have to say "Me Too," and as long as people are there to hear about it, the #MeToo is alive and it will not stagnate.

Meghan Schaffer 48:54

Has the #MeToo movement had any noticeable positive effect on how men act in public and private settings? With controversial internet sites such as particular subreddits and 4chan and figures like Andrew Tate continuing to be popular among a certain segment of the population, can it be said that there has been backlash to #MeToo?

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 49:15

Absolutely. There has definitely been a lot of backlash. And even the nature of that backlash has changed over time, like how people responded to it when it started and how it has changed over time. Because I think, like, initially, a lot of times when a movement starts, or something goes viral, let's say, many people perceive of it as a temporary thing that will just go away with time, and #MeToo has not done that, and I think that can. That is a wonderful thing for many of us, but that is also not, like, you know, what many other people are hoping. And I think we have all noticed changes in man's behavior in both public and private settings.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 49:56

Since the #MeToo, there are some aggressive and reactionary responses, but mostly these changes, in my opinion, have been positive. People approach their interactions with some level of thoughtfulness and caution, or they're at least pushed to be more reflective about how they interact with other people when gender and sexual dynamics are involved. And this change has been on every level people in their workspaces, people at home, people in their friendships, in their professional roles. I mean, in 2016, we had a president talking about assaulting women. And then in 2019, we had a president promising to be more careful about personal space. Both were in response to women coming forward to say "Me Too," but both these men's responses are wildly different.

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Iqra Shagufta Cheema 50:41

Each person is different. But also, I think we owe a lot of these changes to the #MeToo movement, because it had forced people into spaces where they have to be more careful about how they conduct themselves. As for the Andrew Tate phenomenon, I think that is a lot more complex and will have to take into account Islamophobia and the racism, along with sexism, to understand how things like that occur. Like there is this wave of even more conservative women employing Muslim traditions and Muslim women as fodder to feed into progressive and misogynist narratives about women's rights, which is absurd. That is what we have observed with conversations around trans and LGBTQ rights as well.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 51:24

So in some ways, it is reactionary alliance of ultra-conservative misogynists across national and cultural boundaries, but we can only understand it if we used to historicize these trends in the context of global histories of colonialism, racism, sexism, and, particularly, Islamophobia in the case of Andrew Tate.

Meghan Schaffer 51:44

Do you feel that awareness led movements, especially those with a pronounced online components are a universally effective form of protest that can result in meaningful change? Or do such movements resonate better with, and for, particular audiences?

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 51:59

Absolutely. We have observed online conversations making significant meaningful changes in ongoing politics and responses in recent years. So I think it is interesting to think of the divide between the online world and offline world, but I don't think it is useful to view them as is a complete binary opposites in some ways. These worlds are connected and inhabited by the same people. And in most ways, online worlds enable large groups of people to become an active part of the on-ground politics, like we saw in the #MeToo movement.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 52:31

And we have observed since then, a lot of times, like, not everybody is afforded the privilege and the luxury of participating in, like, offline politics, or learn about it, but then these online spaces enable that kind of feminist consciousness raising. It teaches people these vocabularies, it gives people the experiences and tools to understand their own experiences, and then participate in these conversations. They can do it with their identities visible or they can keep their identities hidden in some ways. And all of that then makes room for people, and accommodates the

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different challenges that are they may have if they were to interact solely in offline spaces with each other.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 53:13

It has been a really effective form of protest on local levels in many communities and countries, but also internationally. So for example, we have seen many expedient responses from the law enforcement agencies in many cases of sexual assault in Pakistan in last few years. But recently, also, the Zan, Zendegi, Azadi movement in Iran has very impressively, kind of, like, demonstrates the power of how online and offline forms of products seep into each other and inform each other. The digital divide is still a real challenge, but I think the online products and organizations impact everyone's life in powerful ways. It could be negative, sometimes, depending upon the political orientations of the people, but that can also be countered in a similar fashion.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 53:59

So, as an example, let me share a small event that kind of shows how these dynamics play out. Two years ago, a person was accused of blasphemy in Pakistan; it was nothing documented, nothing officially reported, just some random person sharing a news on Twitter and, like, sharing some screenshots, and then people rallying to go attack the house of the blasphemer, the accused. And they were all using one hashtag to connect with each other. It is a scary thing to see a large group planning to gather in front of a stranger's house to harm them. I saw this because it was under a trending hashtag on Twitter. But then someone started another hashtag about the South Korean band BTS with the intent to remove the blasphemy hashtag from the trending hashtag list on Twitter.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 54:47

So it was, it became visible to far fewer people, and their plan was disrupted. It was a strange but also very heartening experience to observe this whole episode play out on Twitter; like, it saved a person's life and, possibly, their entire family from getting hurt or feeling threatened. And it also became a place where people were just sharing the love for music, the love for a South Korean band in Pakistan; all that to say that, though online spaces like Twitter and Facebook have changed in some very unpleasant ways, but social movements with a pronounced online component are universally effective form of protest that do result in meaningful change for people in online and offline spaces. I think it is critical for any social movement to be located in both online and offline spaces to be successful at this moment in our history.

Meghan Schaffer 55:36

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Thank you so much for joining us today and for sharing your insight into #MeToo and the efficacy of contemporary social movements.

Iqra Shagufta Cheema 55:43

Thank you so much for having me.

Rachel Havard 55:46

We want to thank our guests, Robert Lawson and Iqra Shagufta Cheema, for speaking with us about contemporary conversations on gender and gendered violence. Please check out our show notes on the OUPblog for a recommended reading list exploring just a few of the ideas discussed today.

Rachel Havard 56:02

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Rachel Havard 56:22

Lastly, we want to thank the crew of The Oxford Comment for their assistance on today's episode. Episode 85 was produced by Steven Filippi, Meghan Schaffer, and me, Rachel Havard.

Rachel Havard 56:33

Thank you for listening.