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# Haters

Bailey Poland

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# HATERS



# **HATERS**

## Harassment, Abuse, and Violence Online

Bailey Poland

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For my mom, who has always been my first and best reader



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# HATERS





## THE MANY FACES OF CYBERSEXISM

### Why Misogyny Flourishes Online

Online spaces are fraught with the abuse of women. The past few years have produced one high-profile case of harassment after another, suffusing news headlines with the lurid details of women forced from their homes, their online and offline lives shattered by a torrent of sexist, racist, and transphobic abuse. Hate mobs like those associated with Gamergate and individual abusers and stalkers have proliferated online in recent years, causing women to fear going online at all. Whether it's organized campaigns of unrelenting harassment, "doxxing," and violent threats loosely coordinated on various message boards and social media sites or abusive spouses taking their violence into cyberspace (once ending up in front of the Supreme Court), hardly a month goes by when the news isn't following yet another extreme example of the price women pay for being visible online.<sup>1</sup> What is it about online spaces that makes abuse so common? And what can we do to make the Internet safer?

Before we can begin to explore the answers to those questions, it's important to understand the core terminology used to describe the online abuse that characterizes so much of women's experience with the Internet. A grasp of how this book talks about sexism and cybersexism is essential. While other definitions of sexism and cybersexism may exist and the definitions themselves are fluid, for the purposes of this book the two terms have specific definitions that are used as frames for the concepts discussed.

In this chapter I discuss the basic terminology used throughout the book in discussing sexism and cybersexism. I also explore the prevalence

of offline sexism that informs women's day-to-day lives and how such attitudes moved online, and then I examine the mindset that leads to cybersexist harassment.

Sexism is a combination of prejudice against persons based on their gender, combined with the privilege and power required to cause harm. In other words, because men as a group hold the majority of social privileges, such as political and financial power representation, their prejudices against women as a group are more likely to hurt women, limit their opportunities, and cause other difficulties for women trying to go about their daily lives. Further, as women do not hold the majority of the privileges or power that exist, their prejudices against men (frequently a reaction to already-existing injustices and unequal levels of power and opportunity) do not rise to the level of sexism.

“Privilege” in this context is often misunderstood as primarily class or financial power; however, the definition of privilege used here takes a more nuanced approach. Privilege is, for the purposes of this book, the set of social advantages associated with particular axes of identity that are considered to be dominant. These social advantages are often unnoticed by those who have them, but they nevertheless carry a great deal of weight. Privilege is often associated with those forms of identity (and the associated benefits) that are considered default by virtue of overrepresentation. While having privilege will not correlate to success or power in all cases or situations, it simply increases the likelihood that it will. The term “privilege,” therefore, is used to describe the broad social attitudes that impact power, access, safety, and representation along the axes of gender, race, sexuality, and more.

Male privilege, for example, is associated with greater representation in media, business, politics, and journalism, as well as easier access to positions of power, employment, capital, and so on. The same attitudes that produce sexism in the form of negative stereotypes about women often find footing as positive stereotypes about men—where women are seen as irrational or overly emotional, men are painted as levelheaded and logical.

As a result, while sexism is often understood solely as prejudice against someone on the basis of their sex—and, under that definition, it is often said that women who push back against sexism are themselves engaging in sexism against men—the ability to cause harm to a group (women) while conferring benefits on another group (men) is a core part of the definition of sexism used throughout this book. Sexism as it affects online life is the major focus of this work, with the key caveat that online harassment and abuse are rarely—if ever—linked to gender alone.

Although this book addresses women as a group and uses sexism as the guiding framework, racism is another key element of online harassment and one that, as a white person, I discuss but cannot ever fully speak to. Online harassment of women of color, and specifically misogynoir, requires far more in-depth analysis.<sup>2</sup> A call to action for addressing that issue is a central part of my goal here; while this book is intended to start a discussion, it is only the first part of a much broader and deeper conversation that must take place in order to improve the well-being of online communities.

With that said, cybersexism is the expression of prejudice, privilege, and power in online spaces and through technology as a medium. While this book focuses on the verbal and graphic expression of sexism in the form of online harassment and abuse aimed at women, it's important to note that cybersexism can also occur in less overt forms not directly as a result of ill intent. For example, the design of technology to suit an ideal user (presumed to be male) or to make it more difficult for women to access and use is also cybersexism. Some examples include making smartphones too large for the average woman's hand, health and fitness tracking apps that exclude menstruation (or regard the tracking of menstruation as only for cisgender women and aimed only at pregnancy), or designing a “revolutionary” heart implant that works for 86 percent of men and only 20 percent of women.<sup>3</sup>

This book examines the use of harassment and abuse aimed at women in online spaces, with an understanding that cybersexism often has a goal of creating, enforcing, and normalizing male dominance in online spaces—

norms preferred by straight, cisgender white men, primarily located in the United States. While online harassment is a global problem, the norms established in the early years of the Internet tend to reflect Western-centric patterns of use and abuse. The types of cybersexism examined here include everything from casual sexist harassment to overt abuse, illegal threats, doxxing, and other behaviors that make online spaces uncomfortable, unpleasant, and unsafe for women's participation, along with a discussion of the justifications used for such behavior and women's ability to respond. While sexism itself is the overarching focus here, issues of race, sexuality, disability, and others also play a role in determining which women get targeted for certain kinds of abuse and how that abuse functions.

This book also looks at the ways in which this cyberabuse affects women in their online and offline lives—and the increasingly blurred boundaries between the two. Chapters address the ways women cope with abuse, the solutions currently in place, and why so many of them fail. This book also attempts to outline possibilities for long-term changes to the way we live, work, and play online.

Sexist attitudes color the majority of women's interactions with the world, from expectations about how—and if—women should talk (online and off), to the skewed media representation of women, to male dominance, to violence against women, and more. Stereotyping and gendered abuse are a common fact of life for women. The continued and rapid erasure of the lines between online and offline activities makes it impossible to fully separate online and offline harassment. Online harassment is rooted in offline beliefs, and those offline beliefs are supported and reinforced by the prevalence of sexist behaviors online. Domination of specific spaces deemed important is, as ever, a central goal for those who engage in sexist activities. With the Internet the quest for male domination is disguised by a mythology of level playing fields and equal opportunity, and it is backed by the vicious and constant harassment of women.

Understanding how cybersexism works requires an understanding of how sexism itself functions in offline spaces. Attitudes displayed online—whether in the form of YouTube videos, Facebook comments, Twitter replies, Reddit threads, or blog posts—do not occur in a vacuum nor do

they exist only in online spaces. While people may be more comfortable expressing extreme views online than they would in person, such expressions often reflect the true beliefs they hold. Those views, extreme or not, are also not confined to or created solely in online spaces.

The United States in particular has a strong set of expectations regarding appropriate gender roles for men and women, and sexist, demeaning beliefs about women's roles are still common. Power, money, violence, and control continue to exist along highly gendered and raced lines, and taking a serious look at the ways sexism operates in offline spaces is key to understanding how it became so prevalent online.

## DOMINANCE AND VIOLENCE OFFLINE

The decision to target women with abusive, gender-based harassment online is rarely random or spontaneous. While individual actions may not be impelled by a goal other than disagreeing with a woman and wanting to put her in her place, as it were, the decision to engage in obviously sexist harassment to achieve such ends indicates how cybersexists think the Internet should work. In many ways activities aimed at building and reinforcing male dominance online are conducted in order to re-create the patterns of male domination that exist offline. In offline spaces sexism occurs in a variety of ways, from the obvious examples of financial and political control to violence, including almost invisible factors, such as policing the ways in which women talk.

### Political and Financial Power

Offline, men remain in powerful positions throughout the world. From a political standpoint every U.S. president through 2016 has been male and, with the exception of President Barack Obama, white and male. The 114th U.S. Congress consisted of roughly 80 percent men and more than 80 percent white people, regardless of gender.<sup>4</sup> Among countries around the globe, however, the United States is not even in the top seventy countries in terms of representation of women in political bodies. The top five countries are Rwanda, Bolivia, Cuba, Seychelles, and Sweden; the United States stands at an abysmal seventy-first place, and the United Kingdom is

thirty-sixth.<sup>5</sup> Of the top five countries only Rwanda and Bolivia have equal or greater numbers of women in a lower or single legislative chamber; no country in the top five has parity in an upper chamber.

Around the world women are often grossly underrepresented within the legal bodies that govern the everyday lives of citizens. As a result, decisions are made that affect women without women's input. Men's ability to control the legal environment in which women live and work is a source of much conflict and power. However, this overrepresentation of men is not unique to the political arena.

From the highest ranks of business, where women occupy fewer than 5 percent of Fortune 500 CEO positions, to the individual level, where working single mothers are disproportionately likely to be women of color who are living in poverty, men have significantly more control over the economic fate of the world and, as a result, most of the women in it.<sup>6</sup> Financial control is an issue from the most senior positions within a business to the most entry-level role, with men consistently making more money than women, controlling more resources, and having easier access to higher levels of power.

The wage gap remains a gender issue within the United States and around the world, with men still making more than women at every level of employment. Further, it is important to remember that women's wages vary widely by race, with white women having the greatest advantage.<sup>7</sup> Although all women are at a disadvantage where financial impact is concerned, race plays a major role, as do sexuality, disability, and gender identity. In the United States companies in twenty-nine states can legally fire gay employees for their sexuality; in thirty-four states companies can legally fire transgender people solely for being transgender.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the Fair Labor Standards Act permits organizations to pay disabled workers less than minimum wage—often far less than minimum wage.<sup>9</sup> The ability to find and retain work, and to be fairly compensated for that work, without being discriminated against based on race, gender, ability, or sexuality continues to be an immense challenge across the globe.

## Media Stereotypes

Beyond the world of finance and politics, even something as seemingly simple as entertainment remains a male-dominated field—on the screen, at the writer’s desk, and behind the camera. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media found that men still make up 93 percent of directors and 83 percent of writers. The Geena Davis Institute also found that there is a 5 to 10 percent increase in women on-screen when women are writing and directing media rather than men, who consistently write more male characters and cast more male actors.<sup>10</sup> Movies and TV shows still feature significantly more men than women, and even when women are present they are often relegated to supporting roles or are characters whose existence only matters in relation to a main male character. Women are more likely to be sexualized than men in entertainment, and degrading comments about women’s bodies and intelligence are common across all types of media.

Sexism in media and entertainment is linked to numerous problems for women and girls. Media and advertisements often reflect unattainable and deeply manipulated imagery of women’s bodies, and a company such as Unilever (owner of the Dove brand) sells a version of empowerment with one hand while selling skin lightening creams that contribute to racist stereotypes with the other.<sup>11</sup> Multiple research reports across decades have shown that exposure to sexist, racist stereotypes in media—such as consistently portraying women as irrational and hyperemotional or only casting people of color as a variety of stereotypes (the nerdy Asian, the strong black woman, the hotheaded Latina)—can have serious real-life consequences.<sup>12</sup> Eating disorders, feelings of inferiority, reduced personal and educational goals, feelings of invisibility, and more all result from people’s limited opportunities to see their lives accurately and intelligently portrayed on TV, in books and comic books, through music, and even in the news.<sup>13</sup>

Although media stereotypes might at first glance seem harmless, as easy tropes needed to quickly convey information, research has also shown time and again that the images we see on the screen both reflect and reinforce

our preexisting social beliefs. While the media do not bear full responsibility for the creation of sexist attitudes and other negative problems, the representations of casual sexism and racism in media become part of the way viewers see the world around them. Cybersexists and sexists who operate offline both try to argue that something like a book, movie, or video game is “just entertainment” and that seeing social patterns reflected within entertainment is the work of people who are looking too hard.

The refusal to critically examine media or acknowledge its effects is often known as the “third-person effect”: people who assume that they are not affected by stereotypes in media are often the ones who are most likely to absorb harmful messages and beliefs from it, because they do not interrogate the messages presented by the shows and movies they watch and the video games they play.<sup>14</sup> A failure to examine something like sexist messages leads to passive acceptance of them as reflecting something true about the world, often leading to a reinforcing and strengthening of sexist attitudes about women.

This pattern of behavior contributes to a cycle of reification and reenactment of negative social beliefs. People who do not examine the attitudes implicit in media are less likely to examine their own beliefs and more likely to absorb those messages from the media they consume—whether or not the messages are deliberately included. People who go on to create their own media then unthinkingly perpetuate the same stereotypes, further reinforcing the validity of sexist portrayals of women for new audiences.

## Violence

Economic power and the erasure and sexist portrayals of women through entertainment and media are not the only ways that gender comes into play. How people interact with one another at the personal level is keenly shaped by gender, expectations of proper gender roles and behaviors, and the power structures that uphold men and degrade women. Too often these interactions include violence. Violence remains closely linked to gender, and its intersections with race, sexuality, gender identity, and other factors increase the likelihood that certain groups of women will experience violence.

Even violence against the self is gendered, for while men commit suicide more frequently, women attempt it significantly more often than men do.<sup>15</sup> And while the number of young men with eating disorders has been rapidly climbing in recent years, women still make up the bulk of people who develop anorexia and bulimia.<sup>16</sup> Eating disorders are deeply linked to mental health, and their catalyst is often an attempt to deal with the constraints society places on women's bodies. Thinness is an ideal, and girls and women starve themselves trying to reach it. Eating disorders remain the form of mental illness with the highest mortality rate, and for those who survive it, recovery is an ongoing, lifelong process.

Violence committed by the state is another aspect of offline violence. Although men of color make up the largest segment of the prison population, the incarceration of women of color—especially black women—is rapidly increasing, reflecting the racist policies enacted across the country.<sup>17</sup> Racism remains all too common offline, as it does online. The American legal system disproportionately affects people of color, especially black and Latino men. People of color have significantly higher rates of policing, incarceration, and death sentences than white people, who are more likely to receive lighter sentencing for similar crimes.<sup>18</sup> Despite the preponderance of men already in the prison system, women are now incarcerated at nearly double the rate men are, and since 1985 the rate of women's imprisonment has increased by 800 percent and has disproportionately affected women of color. Black women are three times as likely as white women to be imprisoned, and Latina women are nearly 70 percent more likely than white women to be sentenced to prison.<sup>19</sup>

Legal and social biases around race remain thoroughly ingrained in American society, leaving white men firmly in the most advantaged position. In addition to systemic racism, racist hate crimes remain a fact of life for many individuals, especially within the United States. In late 2013 the FBI released the collected 2012 hate crime statistics, which showed that 48.3 percent of nearly six thousand recorded hate crimes were racially motivated and that a further 11 percent were due to bias against the victim's ethnicity or national origin.<sup>20</sup> Around the world, xenophobia, racism, and

gender-based violence intersect with government surveillance, control, and violence.

Intimate partner violence, domestic violence, and rape all occur with astonishing frequency across the world. While the most readily available statistics are for the United States, similar statistics can be found for nearly every country. Within the United States 20 percent of women experience nonfatal partner violence, compared to only 3 percent of men.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, 33 percent of female murder victims were killed by an intimate partner, versus only 4 percent of male murder victims. Overall, 84 percent of spousal abuse victims are women. One in twelve women is likely to be stalked in her lifetime, versus one in forty-five men, and 87 percent of all stalkers are male, regardless of the gender of the victim. Furthermore, most people who are stalked know their stalker, who is frequently a former spouse or boyfriend. While all domestic violence is serious, the majority of interpersonal relationship violence between adults is directed at women, and when men experience such violence it's most often at the hands of other men.

Rape also occurs along gendered lines—78 percent of rape and sexual assault survivors are women. Sexual violence is inextricably linked with domination of women and is frequently committed as an assertion of masculine power, which is also why most of the people who commit rape and sexual assault are men. For example, one Department of Justice study found that nearly 100 percent of acts of sexual violence committed against women over the age of eighteen were perpetrated by men, as were 92 percent of physical assaults and 97 percent of stalking incidents.<sup>22</sup> When men are attacked, other men commit 70 percent of rapes, 86 percent of physical assaults, and 65 percent of stalking incidents.

However, gender is not the only factor leading to domestic violence and rape. Violence against women offline, like online violence, also has a highly racial component. For example, 17 percent of American Indian women within the United States are stalked, compared to only 8.2 percent of white women, 6.5 percent of black women, and fewer than 5 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander women.<sup>23</sup> Nearly half of all black girls have been sexually assaulted before they turn eighteen.<sup>24</sup> Rapes of American

Indian women are frequently committed by white men and take place on reservations, a situation in which men abuse women knowing that they are unlikely to have to deal with the legal consequences of doing so; in 1978 the Supreme Court of the United States handed down a decision prohibiting tribes from arresting and prosecuting non-American Indian individuals who commit crimes on tribal land.<sup>25</sup> Race and gender both provide opportunity and motive for violence, and women of color are far more likely to be on the receiving end of it.

Violence extends along multiple axes of individual identity, especially when that identity is seen as deviating from an expected norm. Acts of violence against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) people are common, and anti-LGBT violence often begins in childhood. A study of nearly forty European countries found that more than half of LGBT students reported dealing with bullying in school that related to their sexual orientation or gender.<sup>26</sup> Violence against adult members of the LGBT community is also common, with verbal and physical attacks being a regular occurrence for many individuals.

The highest tracked anti-LGBT homicide rate that GLAAD (an organization originally founded as the Gay & Lesbian Alliance against Defamation) has reported was in 2011; even though 2012 saw a 16 percent decrease, that year still saw twenty-five homicides directly tied to anti-LGBT attitudes.<sup>27</sup> As with all types of violence, violence against LGBT people often occurs along intersections of race and other factors, with LGBT people of color at a significantly higher risk for hate crimes, suicide, and homelessness. In 2012, of all anti-LGBT homicide victims in the United States, 73 percent were people of color.

Transgender women, and particularly black transgender women, face even higher rates of homelessness and suicide, as well as violent attacks and murder due to hate crimes aimed at them for their gender and often their race; 53 percent of homicide victims of anti-LGBT violence in 2012 were transgender women, and the high percentage of attacks on people of color makes it likely that many of the murders of trans people were also attacks on women of color. In another testament to the inequalities of the legal system in the United States, few of the people who attack

transgender women of color ever face legal or even social consequences for doing so; many of the attackers, who tend to be white cisgender men, face no jail time.

The “trans panic” defense, so called because it allows cisgender men to claim that they found out that a woman was transgender, “panicked,” and killed her, allows many men to walk free after committing violence and murder.<sup>28</sup> In summer 2015 a U.S. Marine, Joseph Scott Pemberton, was being investigated for murdering a transgender woman named Jennifer Laude after he discovered that she was transgender. In his defense testimony Pemberton said that he “felt violated and angry,” which was what led him to strangle Laude and leave her to die.<sup>29</sup>

In 2002 a transgender teenager named Gwen Araujo died after being brutally beaten for several hours by a group of cisgender men, who used a similar defense.<sup>30</sup> The assailants received sentences for second-degree murder and voluntary manslaughter, but the charges likely would have been much more severe had Araujo not been transgender. While Araujo’s murder was a turning point that led the State of California to ban the trans panic defense, such a “defense” remains a viable option for many attackers. At the same time, trans women of color, such as CeCe McDonald of Minnesota, are frequently imprisoned for defending themselves from such attacks and often incarcerated in men’s prisons, exposing them to further attacks and abuse.<sup>31</sup>

Violence is a fact of life for women, and women who experience multiple axes of oppression, including racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, discrimination due to disability, and bigotry due to being a religious minority, are more likely to be attacked. Additionally, women with fewer social privileges are less likely to receive assistance or find justice following an attack and are often unable to report violence due to fear of further violence or even criminalization at the hands of the state. The attitudes that result in violence toward women are an extension of the social, financial, and political privileges already held by men—beliefs about what roles women should play in society, what can be done to keep them there, and what kinds of behaviors are permissible in enforcing those

roles. Violence that affects women's physical bodies is all too common, yet it is not the only kind of violence that occurs.

#### Male Control of Conversation

As with economic domination and media control, there are subtler forms of violence against women. Policing the ways in which women interact with men—the very ways that women talk—is a form of verbal violence that maintains systems of control favoring men and masculinity. Although not as overt as physical violence, socially permissible male domination is no less dangerous for progress toward equality and justice.

Men tend to be the primary speakers in any mixed-gender group. The deliberate, although often subconscious, silencing and erasure of women's voices contributes to systems of male control, and deviations from the expected norm are met with harsh retaliation. This pattern is perhaps most visible in the business world, where the more highly placed a man is, the more he talks. The opposite is true for women, however; the more highly placed a woman is within a company, the less likely she is to be talkative.<sup>32</sup> Women who are seen as assertive in the workplace are more likely to be the target of negative gender stereotypes that paint them as “ball-busters,” “abrasive,” bad managers, and overly emotional, which can impede career advancement.

Outside the realm of business women are frequently characterized as chatterboxes; although the stereotype includes seemingly positive aspects about women's facilitative role in conversations, it has negative effects on women's ability to be seen as authoritative or worthy of respect. This type of benign sexism has insidious undertones, painting women as “emotional” and men as “logical,” or women as “caring” and men as “harsh”—characterizations that are then used as excuses to restrict women's access to equal power—in addition to limiting the acceptable emotions men can exhibit. There is a commonly used saying based on this type of benign sexism, which is that women talk three times as much as men.<sup>33</sup> The statistic has been repeatedly shown to be false but nonetheless persists, as it allows for men to insist that women are talking

too much and supports other stereotypes about women's appropriate place in a conversation.

The stereotype that women talk too much is, in fact, an offshoot of the fact that men have a tendency to dominate all casual and professional discussions. The prominence of men's voices in conversation even extends to how much they interrupt women; in one study of mixed-group conversations, men were found to have interrupted more than forty times on average, while women interrupted only twice.<sup>34</sup> Interruptions are a common tactic for establishing a hierarchy of power within a conversation and are used to keep women from taking up too much verbal space. Men tend to be socialized to assert themselves in conversation, including interrupting other speakers—especially women—to position themselves as the most authoritative individual in the discussion. Most studies on linguistic patterns and gender find that men use interruption to take control of a conversation.

The dominance of men's voices in conversation doesn't end with simple interruption, however. Men also talk significantly more than women in group situations, despite the chatty stereotype applied to women's conversational styles; while men and women use a roughly equal number of words each day, men begin to talk more and women begin to talk less in mixed-group discussions. As a result, men are so used to being the primary voices heard that any violation of what they perceive as the norm becomes an oddity and is often seen as an injustice.

In situations in which women do talk as much or nearly as much as men, the men begin to perceive women as having taken up more than their fair share of conversational space. One example from a study cites a male teacher who created space for his students to spend equal time speaking in class sessions, yet he felt that he was devoting 90 percent of speaking time to the girls in his classroom. On top of that the boys agreed with him, and many complained to the teacher about how much time the girls spent talking. In a similar vein, public speaking events at which men and women are given equal time to speak also result in men feeling as though women have spoken too much.<sup>35</sup>