

# “#YesAllWomen”: Countering Everyday Sexism in Academe

*Gender Shrapnel in the Academic Workplace*

by Ellen Mayock

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Despite centuries long protests, we still lack common agreement on the centrality of women’s oppression and the systemic nature of sexism. Misogynist messages by the perpetrator of the 2014 Isla Vista killings generated a public discussion of whether all men are sexist (#NotAllMen) and a counter protest on and off social media (#YesAllWomen) that expressed the idea that all women experience misogyny in myriad forms. In her new publication—*Gender Shrapnel in the Academic Workplace*—Ellen Mayock tells us that any time one woman in the academic workplace experiences sexism, all women are impacted, as they share a position as members of the same class. This is what she calls “gender shrapnel” in academic environments, “a series of small explosions

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in the workplace that affect women and men and reveal an uneven gender dynamic at all levels of the organization” (6).

Mayock suggests that stories can tell us about how gender shrapnel at work is manifest. These stories can be gathered through interviews but they are also embedded in our mission statements, brochures, and student newspapers. Our “talk” in all its forms tells stories as well. If we look critically, they reveal prevailing gender attitudes, practices, and ideologies that privilege men. These stories can also help us create transformational knowledge from the margins of society. Knowledge from spaces outside of power and privilege reveals the practices that create and maintain subordination and marginalization, indeed, oppression. Mayock situates women’s stories of their experiences as academics in the context of data that reveal the impact of gender shrapnel. She is critical of how laws created to protect us from sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination are invoked in academe. Along the way she makes suggestions for further study, teaching, and strategies to counter gender shrapnel.

As a White woman, Mayock writes from a particular position in academe and in society. She is a humanities professor in a private university that has a tradition of male dominance in power, position, and number. Her experience working in the humanities and with women’s studies, serving on campus committees and task forces, and working with administration also frame this work. The problems she enumerates through a series of stories supported with data from contemporary research and reference to anti-discrimination laws are shaped by this context.

The guiding principle of Mayock’s feminist treatise argues that a critical gender consciousness must frame how we look at academic workplace practices and culture, and the strategies we undertake to make progressive changes. She says sexual harassment, which she views as a form of male violence against women, is minimized in our talk, referencing the recent national election when we heard that descriptions of sexual harassment were just “locker room talk” and should not be seen as harmful or misogynist. Central to her examination are the stories of women’s everyday experiences in the academic workplace, including her own.

Although all women experience gender shrapnel, experiences vary, as do their views of these. As Mayock’s own narrative shows, women are not automatically imbued with a critical feminist reflexivity despite

their experiences. And though gendered values and practices prevail, the silence on these is deafening. Consider Mayock’s work a response to that silence and to acts of silence-ing. Like the #YesAllWomen campaign, her work insists we recognize the prevalence of sexism and the harm it causes, intentional or not.

*Gender Shrapnel* is Mayock’s response to what she sees as a “professional mystique” that is akin to the “feminine mystique” dubbed by Betty Friedan. This is another “problem with no name”—a deep silence that obscures the dissatisfaction marginalized academics experience at work and the systems that produce their dissatisfaction with their roles and treatment. Mayock cautions us to consider that gender shrapnel is not the only thing exploding on campus. She advocates, but does not fully develop, an intersectional perspective that sees gender shrapnel as one form of the “intersectional explosions” impacting us in particular ways due to our gender, race, and sexual orientation, among others. A central problem in recognizing gender shrapnel, and other forms of shrapnel, lies in our tendency to cast any form of discrimination only in overt, individualist terms. We have yet to establish a practice of attending to the systemic forms of discrimination and oppression embedded in our daily interactions and practices, as well as the cultural values that maintain these.

#### STORIES BACKED BY DATA

While some may dismiss Mayock’s stories as mere anecdotes, the data she presents demonstrates the prevalence of misogyny and sexism on college campuses. Given that, the stories that illustrate different forms of gender shrapnel should help readers understand how these phenomena are produced, experienced, and contested. Mayock’s concept of gender shrapnel incorporates the idea that gender micro-aggressions—everyday insults and denigrations based on group membership, like racial micro-aggressions—are part of our everyday life. The notion of these as little explosions that wound all members who share membership in that gender (and race and sexual orientation) class is a compelling and useful metaphor that links individual experiences of discrimination and abuse to wider systems of sexism, racism, and heterosexism.

So, what are some examples of gender shrapnel at work? Individual stories and data illustrate how women advance more slowly than men,

enjoy lower salaries than their male counterparts, have their scholarly contributions ignored or minimized as is the scholarship that focuses on gender and women in society, and confront the persistent stereotypic notions of women as nurturers and less-than-men, not to mention sexualization and sexual harassment. Women are also encouraged to be compliant rather than complaining by a system of rewards and sanctions that privileges men. “Hard workers” are those who are visibly still on campus after 5 pm—not those who have to rush to pick up children from school and daycare. Space is gendered: women’s bodies shouldn’t take up a lot of space, nor should their voices, but men’s voices can be prevalent and loud and authoritative. Positions of power are masculinized and made apparent by the greater import, space, and time accorded to those—mostly men—at the top. A practice of what she calls “academic ventriloquism,” where some voices are ignored and others (apparently) speak for them, keeps those voices marginalized. Even if all women don’t have all these experiences, the concept of gender shrapnel suggests all women are negatively impacted.

Limited choices are available for academics marginalized by their gender, race, sexuality, nationality and other dimensions of inequality to contest bad treatment without risking further abuse, Mayock shows. Many faculty prefer to “turn a blind eye” to the micro-infractions in our everyday work lives. It is easier to ignore maltreatment, than to risk identification with those marginalized, even for those who share that group membership. Legal protections don’t do what they were purportedly designed to do, as Title VII and Title IX are not firmly reinforced in a climate framed by “risk management” policies designed to protect the institution first and foremost. This is why some women experience a “feminist fuse” when the accumulation of shrapnel makes them go off!

Mayock devotes attention to sexual harassment, an extreme form of gendered violence against women that cycles unabated through all levels of campus life. Because men still occupy most of the managerial positions and women are prevalent in temporary, part time academic assignments, their marginalization impacts the attention, import, and protection afforded to women victims of sexual harassment. Those who are victims of harassment often don’t report it. If and when they do, further victimization is common in a climate of silence. When sexual harassment is covert

(one on one), it is hushed up and a shame-game targets victims. The more prevalent form of sexual harassment, that which creates a hostile work environment for all women, is not uncovered because of the widespread refusal to see sexism as prevalent and systemic. This is why Mayock argues that we should see “talk as action” and silence as an expression of fear. If this is so, then it follows that campus culture is one laced with fear.

#### PRIVILEGE RUNS DEEP

Mayock relays signs of the privilege White men gain from campus cultures steeped in sexism and racism. Some men are privileged over other men because of their sexuality, marital status, and race. Married men earn more than single men, men earn more than women, and there is still a bias seen in the expectation for women to be nurturing while they are punished for their family responsibilities and associated obligations. Mayock argues that White women still confront a glass ceiling that prevents their promotion to top positions, White men ride a glass escalator of opportunity, and women of color face a concrete wall.

To deepen our understanding of gender shrapnel—this “series of small explosions”—we need to ask who sets off these “explosions.” In the cases advanced by Mayock, individual men and institutional policy and practice are the culprits, but so are the compliant members of our institutions who, by turning a blind eye or acting as silent witness, or even as practitioners of “academic ventriloquism,” contribute more shrapnel to our wounded selves. If women as a class are wounded, then White men as a class are privileged by the onslaught, even if only by its absence in their work experience. If we understand wounding and being wounded as two aspects of our collective dehumanization, it follows that we are all damaged by our participation in such a system. We all should be invested in making change.

Mayock’s social and academic position at a particular kind of academic setting should suggest that we read her work as an invitation to turn the same critical lens on our academic settings and use our own positionalities—our particular group memberships and work situations—to consider different experiences of shrapnel—as bombers and victims, as those who contest and those who stay silent.

As a Black woman professor, I am a member of an underrepresented

group at a comprehensive public university where women faculty and students of color are a majority. How do my experiences as a woman from a racialized group with only token (3 percent) representation on the campus compare to those of women faculty from groups with greater representation, such as Latinos at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (with more than 25 percent)? We need to examine how gender shrapnel is interwoven with racial shrapnel, as well as understand how this varies for sexual minorities.

A recent report, *Equity Interrupted*<sup>1</sup> from my union, the California Faculty Association, notes that as the California State University (CSU) system has grown darker, funding has grown lighter. The transition from a predominantly White student body to one that is “majority minority” has been accompanied by diminished per capita funding for student education in the CSU—the largest public system of higher education. At the same time, the number of “temporary” faculty has mushroomed to become the majority of faculty positions. It is of no surprise that the majority of them are women. The accumulation of gender shrapnel is becoming a common experience of faculty life in a profession that is increasingly feminized and temporized, and deserving of our concern and attention.

We also need to give as much attention to the “concrete wall” (as opposed to “glass ceiling”) that Mayock says confronts those women faculty who are racialized, as the gender shrapnel they experience is shaped by hegemonic perceptions of their failure to conform to White, heteronormative proscriptions for gender performance. While Mayock presents a spate of examples, stories, and data to show how gender shrapnel operates in everyday interactions, established institutional culture and policy, in a climate of silence and suppression of righteous anger and indignation, in the prevalence of sexual harassment and the perpetuation of stereotypes that tell us how to perform gender, there are more stories to be told.

How are these experiences different for women of color who often view their reality through the prism of race, one further specified by our historically and culturally contingent racial/ethnic group membership? What are the particular experiences of lesbian and transgender women? Given the compelling argument Mayock makes for the widespread harm to women as a class, do solutions like adopting a “tempered” form of radicalism and satisfying ourselves with “small wins” appeal to those who

dwelling deep within the margins? Most problematic, when those marginal voices are squelched so effectively by the “blind eye” and “academic ventriloquist” responses, when power resides outside the margins, how do we mount forms of resistance that will lead to transformation in our institutions?

#### THE PACE OF CHANGE

Academic change is slow when it is cultivated through organizational channels. The solutions that Mayock presents are important step-by-step means for changing ourselves and our practices, but these require buy-in from both administration and faculty, and face obstacles in a climate of silence and fear. When, however, we move outside the established channels and cultivate change through social protest and collective struggle, change can be swift and dramatic! We are witness, in recent days, to the power of collective protest. Feminists across all social groups responded to the election of a candidate who boasted of sexual conquests with a #PussyGrabsBack campaign that led to a Women’s March on Washington and has galvanized the nation back to movement time.

The most activist elements of our campuses are not to be found in the administration, though periodically visionaries are hired and may make progress toward change. Nor are they to be found among the faculty when formal and informal rewards accompany conformity, and formal and informal sanctions follow complaint and protest. Radical change that boldly names and takes action against systems of oppression built into the fabric of academic institutions has always come first from students, those most vulnerable to all the forms of shrapnel that may be exploding around and into them. Change by committee and task force, by new academic policies and workshops, is unlikely to be the panacea that will stem the onslaught of gender shrapnel.

Mayock’s treatise on gender shrapnel should not be criticized as failing to serve up the end-all and be-all on sexism in academe. It should be heralded, however, as a good starting point for us to explore the metaphor by gauging the forms and extent of gender shrapnel. To do this, we need to collect more stories from faculty in diverse social contexts. This will allow us to build a base for the development of a deeper intersectional analysis of faculty experience and thus, of our academic environments.

To analyze these stories, we also need to make connections between the situations they describe and the students we teach. If it is true that, as the California Faculty Association insists, “faculty working conditions are student learning conditions,” we must ask how gender shrapnel and other forms of shrapnel shapes student learning experiences. We must ask what they are learning about contesting inequality, abuse and oppression when our prevalent responses are silence and silencing. Perhaps this will spur us to attend to our working conditions so that we may move further toward a transformational educational experience for our students. Or perhaps they will take the lead.

## ENDNOTES

1. California Faculty Association, “Equity Interrupted: How California is cheating its Future,” January 2017, <http://www.calfac.org/equity-interrupted>. Retrieved February 11, 2017.