

Transfer Function of a Roommate

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A very interesting conversation I had a few weeks ago was spurred by the current #MenAreTrash tag used on social media. A few people use this tag to be part of a movement opposing violence against women. I was constantly being tagged in memes on social media that contained the tag and jokes about men. I wouldn't usually be offended and just laugh it off, but I was receiving the memes often at the time and so felt a little hurt. I thought "well, I'm not trash so clearly not all men are trash. I won't stand for this!" and so I asked the person who was sending me the memes about it. This is about how that conversation went.

The person explained the statistics of the violence against women, and that they, as a woman, often felt unsafe around men, even in public spaces. They went as far as to say they would feel safer in a cell full of woman prisoners than a room, at a party say, full of 'normal' men. This shocked me and I found it a senseless statement. I quipped "That's crazy. How could 'normal' men be more dangerous than convicted women?" The person felt attacked by my questioning and dismissal of the topic and clearly, they were hurt. I reconsidered and then asked them to explain further because maybe I didn't understand her perspective because I was a man. I have been friends with white, heterosexual boys and men my whole life, so maybe my worldview *was* limited.

She informed me of the violence she has seen and heard from friends and family. She also told of countless nameless women in South Africa and the world who experience terrible violence and feel ashamed or shunned when they speak out about it. These women feel their cries for help will be in vain. She also explained that the #MenAreTrash tag was one of the very few successful movements helping women speak out against violence and so its wording is trivial, and that the movement behind it should rather be considered.

I knew that I didn't know much about the topic and so listened attentively and tried to walk on eggshells so to speak, not trying to say anything judgmental or mean. Eventually once she had explained the topic to me, and I had explained my naïve understanding of the topic, we were not speaking in 'attack mode', but had settled to a point of understanding. At the very least, I knew her point of view and uncovered that this was not a 'non-issue' as I thought and had previously dismissed.

We then discussed a few rules for similar conversations about such issues in the future. First, the person representing the disadvantaged community always has more leeway in what they can say and how they act. This is because what they are talking about is coming from a place of pain and a bruised and sensitive 'roommate'. 'Roommate' being the term used by our lecturer for the filter each person has when perceiving the world and situations and topics in that world. Second, the person representing the 'advantaged' community should listen considerately and not pick a fight. Thirdly, the conversation should not be a shouting match, but a long, safe and enlightening conversation that invites all, otherwise everyone gets offended and more division is created. I hope this piece of writing is of some use to anyone also offended by the #MenAreTrash movement or want to know how to deal with such sensitive topics in the future.