There is one thing I noticed after completing a series of workshops on the topic of sexual harassment with University students – everyone just wants more! More time to discuss, more time to share, to think, more time to challenge beliefs, more time to spend together and juggle with some obvious and not-so-obvious topics and unclear lines.

As I listened to them, an image of a Matryoshka-Babushka Russian came to my mind. Sexual harassment is really like one big doll holding a number of other small dolls and topics and perspectives hidden on the inside. Touch one and you will uncover the other one and so on.

It crossed my mind that great big Babushka holding the other small ones is really that big overarching issue in sexual harassment that everyone perhaps sees...or not....but not many people talk about. So, let’s talk about it...
You see, I doubt that sexual harassment is really just about calling on bad guys and girls, slapping them on the wrist and giving them a set of instructions on how to change their behaviour. I tend to go with an idea that sexual harassment is a symptom of a society that brainwashes human beings into the notion that women are less than men.

Patriarchy is real, and it is the way that the world is organized around gender — to benefit men. It is the way things are-beliefs, behaviours, practices, ideas that are embedded in institutions and social practices. It is the reality we created, the very air that we breathe. This power imbalance is what causes the symptoms like sexual harassment, rape, prostitution, femicide etc.

So, you see, sexual harassment is not about an individual problem or ‘few bad apples’ but about ‘understanding that at the root of all of these problems is a culture of toxic masculinity, about what it means to be a man’ as NYU University professor Niobe Ways puts it (1).

**SO, WHAT IS TOXIC MASCULINITY?**

Research has shown that boys and men are socialized to have harmful ideas about manhood — often to the detriment of themselves, as well as women and girls (2). Many feel pressured to exist within a so-called ‘man-box’, which means that they are trained to think that they need to be self-sufficient without asking for help; acting tough even if they feel scared; looking physically attractive; adhering to rigid masculine gender roles; being heterosexual; having as many sexual partners as they can; and exerting aggression and control.

In other words: to bang, seduce or flirt with as many men or women possible equals popularity. Being cool. Feeling powerful. Feeling wanted. This is who I am. As long as I continue doing this— I will have a sense of power and self-worthiness.

This is how we bring up our boys. And make no mistake, they suffer greatly. They miss out on emotional connection and nurturing, are often driven to violence (3) and their sense of who they are heavily relies on submission to patriarchal rules.

Niobe Way says: “What I learned from the boys I work with is that what ‘girly and gay’ means is all the things we associate with being human: to be sensitive, to be attuned to emotions, to care about relationships, to express your sadness when you feel sad, to express your happiness when you feel happy, to get excited. It literally is linked to everything we associate with humans. And then to be a man is to not be that. The consequence of that is our culture.”
So, here we go...somewhere right here we can stop being shocked about how many men are sexually harassing women all over our planet because they are doing is exactly what society programs them to do.

**IS IT ALL ABOUT MEN, REALLY?**

Ladies, here comes perhaps a hugely unpopular topic but in my eyes, a necessary one: what are we women doing that supports and maintains the patriarchal system of inequality and keeps status quo? How do we conform to baseline expectations of what it means to be a woman?

Majority of girls are trained to be submissive, sexy, passive beings who do not know how to set boundaries on their physical, sexual, emotional spaces. Movies and media make sure that girls are groomed as princesses – waiting for horse-riding, rich and good-looking princess to come and save them, whilst being moulded into more submission, sexualisation and passivity (4).

We learned that to feel attractive we have to be uncomfortable, so we wear heals that twist our feet, we take needles to the face to be forever beautiful, we do things we do not feel comfortable with because that is how a woman is ‘supposed’ to present herself.

**In summary - we were thought, and thought well, that our identity, our goodness and worth is based on how other people react to us, not on how we actually feel.**

So, our task is to self-reflect and examine thoughts and behaviours that continue to promote patriarchal systems of inequality. What are our motives for engaging others erotically? What role does power, opportunity, pleasure play in this? When, and why is our consent or lack of it not clearly understood? And much, much more...

**NEW PARADIGM, ANYONE?**

The thing is that this is not about blame game, but about having an honest and challenging conversation on both sides, and with both sides. The new paradigm of equality has the potential to get us out of this collective mess, but it needs to come firmly grounded in awareness, forgiveness, and acceptance.

We need to say it like it is, we need to learn to listen, to be open to hear things we do not like or agree with, to be ok with not always knowing or having a straight answer. Things might get messy and things might get difficult at first.
We also need to have the courage to honestly and critically look into what role we play or choose to play from now on; and how this affects others and most of all the whole.

Listening to passionate and bright University students at various workshops gives me so much hope and confidence that they are ready to do just that.

I pray that the rest of us follow their lead.

/ Ivana Busljeta

References: