

MISOGYNISTIC ‘HUMOR’

How Casual Misogyny Fuels Rape Culture and Femicide

Misogynistic humour is humour that involves jokes and remarks that mock and degrade women based on their gender. They contribute to a broader societal acceptance of sexism, thus reinforcing structures of patriarchy. For example, saying women belong in the kitchen reinforces the stereotype that women can only do domestic work, and cannot participate in public spaces. Saying “She was asking for it, dressed like that.”, perpetuates rape culture by implying that a woman’s choice of clothing justifies sexual abuse. Saying all women are crazy dismisses women’s feelings, frustrations or demands for equality by labelling them irrational and unhinged, hence undermining their concerns. These ‘little jokes’ about women’s bodies, roles or capabilities continue to encourage patriarchal attitudes and foster a culture where the objectification and dehumanization of women are normalized.

When serious matters of domestic violence and sexual assault are turned into humour, it sends a message that they are not to be taken seriously. This unfortunately reduces empathy for survivors, and might affect access to justice. Also, women themselves end up absorbing misogynistic ideas though constant exposure to such humour, leading to internalized misogyny. We begin to accept and believe in the inferior status that these jokes assign us.

For survivors of GBV, this type of humour is triggering, and trivializing their suffering through jokes invalidates them. It ends up affecting their mental health as well. It also trivializes consent, by portraying women as “overreacting” when they express discomfort or resistance. Such jokes perpetuate victim blaming narratives, such as making fun of how they women dress, their behaviour or their choices in romantic partners. This leads to the broader societal tendency to blame women for the violence they endure, rather than holding their abusers accountable.

Jokes about women being bad drivers or too emotional to be good CEOs, or generally invalidating the promotion of women in the workplace and terming it as a formality for affirmative action upholds traditional gender roles. They cement harmful stereotypes and discourage women from challenging patriarchal norms and limiting their participation in broader societal roles. Women also end up feeling and being disrespected, marginalized and objectified in the work place.

Misogynistic humour happens due to various reasons. One of them is desensitization. Continued exposure to sexist comments and jokes causes men to become numb to the harm caused by misogyny, and leads to women accepting and expecting the same. Ingrained gender stereotypes about women being less capable, more emotional and inherently inferior are always perpetuated across generations, making them difficult to challenge. Patriarchal societies also maintain power imbalances between men and women and such jokes become tools for reinforcing said dynamics. Toxic masculinity, where men are expected to suppress vulnerability and dominate women, also gives room for the same. It becomes a way for men to assert their manhood while oppressing women. Furthermore, society has sadly normalized sexist humour, and has made it seem like a lesser evil. These jokes are often dismissed as “boys being boys”, and consequently, misogyny gets a rather permissive environment where women are pressured to laugh along so as to avoid appearing overly sensitive.

These jokes disproportionately harm marginalized groups because they contribute to the multiple layers of discrimination they already face. Jokes about angry Black women and submissive Asian women reinforce racist stereotypes and sexist tropes that make it harder for these women to report abuse without being dismissed. Jokes about lesbians being “man-haters” or trans women not being “real women” dehumanize them and reinforce social exclusion, making them more prone to violence with fewer social and legal protections.

Clearly, these jokes are not isolated. They uphold a system of patriarchy that intersects with classism, racism and homophobia. We therefore call for legal reforms that include stronger anti-harassment laws, with clear consequences for gender based hate speech including “jokes” that promote harmful stereotypes. We also call for educational reforms that prioritize intersectional gender sensitivity training from early education through to the work place.

To help women and men who are unsure if a joke is funny or sexist, this line of inquiry can help. Does this joke insult women? Does it devalue women? Does it cement women in a gender role, or reduce them and their actions to exaggerations of existing sexist stereotypes? Does it reduce women to only their bodies? Does it refer to them as an object or property? Are women portrayed solely from a male perspective with no personal identity? Does it include violence against women? If yes, is it portrayed authentically to show reality or is it crucial only to the punchline? Is the violence used to further prop up toxic masculinity and aggression?

In conclusion, the “*it’s just a joke*” argument is used to hide prejudice. A study by Ford and Fergusson shows that while jokes don’t create hostility towards women, they reinforce the prejudice where it exists. Essentially, if you joke about women and get the laughs you are vying for, those who are already hostile to women will see this as a social green light for their views. Men who rank higher in hostile sexism generally express willingness to rape a woman upon exposure to sexist versus non-sexist humour.

So, knock knock!

Who’s there?

Be.

Be who?

Be a better person who does not need to punch down on women for a few minutes of social adoration.