

# On My Mind: Why I have changed my byline



My wife approached me as I was dressing for work, and told me that she thought it was time that she give up the job of editing my essays. “What? Why?” I asked. I am sure that my voice sounded more whiny and panicked than I intended, but the fact is that my writing would not be nearly as good without her help. “Well,” she said, “I am a professional writer, and I’ve started a major work of my own. When I work on your writing, it takes my creative juices away from mine. Also, I’ve realized that it’s important to me to be acknowledged for my work. If I were to continue working with you on your column, I’d want to be included in your byline. But your writing is good, and the editors at The Times can help you.” At dinner just the night before, a friend had told us how much he enjoyed my writing. Sometimes when people comment on my writing, I make a point of telling them how much Laura improves it; but that evening, I just drank in the accolade and let it puff up my self-esteem without any acknowledgement of the help I receive from my partner, who was sitting right there in the room.

Laura often spends almost as much time as I do on my columns. She makes great suggestions for topics. She usually restructures some aspects of the essay; she suggests word changes, and the deletion or addition of sentences or whole paragraphs; she adds ideas, asks laser-like questions that serve to clarify and expand my ideas, and often talks them through with me at the dinner table. All that, plus she corrects my grammar and punctuation. I am not the first to comment on the fact that she is a brilliant editor. I have never thought of myself as having a sexist streak, but the truth is that it had never before occurred to me to fully acknowledge how much my wife contributes to my work.

My first response when she talked to me was to feel a flush of panic that I was losing my writing partner. When I realized how right she was, my panic turned to embarrassment. After all, it's not news that at least since the first agricultural revolution in about 10,000 BC, women have played an equal role to men without getting the credit, power, and freedom that their contribution deserves.

Back in the days before social and physical distancing, Laura and I were at a dinner party with six other couples. It was a smart and accomplished bunch, and the conversation turned to this very topic. With the self-assurance of a man with a credential, I chimed in that about a third of American women have been the victims of abuse at the hands of men. Immediately one of the women corrected me and said that the number was closer to 100 percent. Every woman at the table agreed. Each one of them reported that they had been the victim of male sexual assault and aggression. I was dumbstruck. Could that be right?

When I got home, I started Googling, and here's what I found. According to the CDC in 2011, "more than 31 percent of women in the United States have been physically abused by an intimate partner at some point in their lives." (See [bit.ly/2U49n42](https://www.cdc.gov/women/2011-physical-abuse).) So at least I sort of had something right. But in a 2018 national survey of 2,000 women, "81 percent reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetimes." Fifty-one percent of women reported that they had been "touched or groped" in unwanted ways. (See [bit.ly/2U3ck59](https://www.pewresearch.org/2018/08/01/sexual-harassment/).) And of course, none of those statistics take into account all of the people who protect themselves by denying or burying the memories of how their boundaries were crossed. They also probably don't consider all of the microaggressions against women — the catcalls, the inappropriate comments, the ogling and leers, and the subtle and not-so-subtle messages that are repeated from an early age that girls and women need to be more ladylike, less aggressive, less sensitive, sweeter, and less "bitchy." (As Bette Davis wryly noted, "When a man gives his opinion, he's a man. When a woman gives her opinion, she's a bitch.")

I must confess here that my daughter had been telling me for years that aggression toward women was far more routine than I acknowledged. I think a part of me didn't want to believe her; it would have been unbearable to imagine that anyone (including me) might be treating my daughter, my wife, or my female friends and patients with anything less than kindness and respect. No doubt I, too, have been unwittingly influenced by a culture that for thousands of years has been teaching that women are less valuable than men, despite all of the evidence to the contrary.

That dinner party conversation changed my lens, and awakened me to what my daughter had been trying to tell me. I have come to agree that the real statistic regarding women experiencing abusive male behavior is closer to the 100 percent number testified to by every woman at that dinner gathering. As a clinician, I have come to recognize that most people who enter my office (and perhaps all women) have been the victims of boundary violations and microaggressions. That fact certainly colors whatever brings them to see me.

A young cousin recently told me that her boss at a suburban Pennsylvania bank had given her a promotion and spoke about a salary increase, but now more than two months have passed, and her paycheck has not reflected the promised raise. "How about just telling her how much you love the job and that you hope the raise that she mentioned will be forthcoming?" I asked. "I can't do that," she said. "And anyway, I have enough. I don't really need the money. I'm doing fine." "Do you think she would have given you the raise if you were a man?" "Probably," she said. "The last raise I got was a few years ago, when a man joined the company and was doing the same work for more pay." "So it's an issue of social justice," I said. "You deserve that raise as much as a man would." "Oh, come on," she replied. "Look around you at all of the social injustice in the world. I've been given so much; this issue is nothing compared to everything else going on."

We went on to other topics, but I thought about how as a man, I would have felt absolutely entitled to that raise, and would have insisted on it. I remembered one of my favorite James Baldwin quotes, "You've got to tell the world how to treat you. If the world tells you how you are going to be treated, you are in trouble." According to the U.S. Department of Labor, women in the U.S. get paid about 20 percent less than men for doing the same job.

Somehow, as a society, we have been brainwashed into thinking that it is all right for women to accept less than they deserve. I hope my cousin will overcome this and ask for the raise that she deserves. I think about her female boss, and wonder what lessons she has been taught about the value of women's work. And I think of

how Laura and I have both accepted her receiving insufficient acknowledgment for the four years that we have been writing this column together. That changes now, with this column.

Eleanor Roosevelt said, “You can often change your circumstances by changing your attitude.” If we are going to live in a more loving, healthy, safe, and productive world, men need to acknowledge our micro- and macro-aggressions of the past, and determine not to repeat them. And men and women alike need to be conscious of the ways that gender stereotypes deprive all of us of the kindness, tolerance, fairness, and productivity we deserve. Unless we do this, our world will fall short of what it could be.

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