

Me Too: Recognizing That I Have Been Part Of The Problem

By Dominee Meek (OSCI) Oshkosh, WI

Lately, there have been many stories in the news regarding sexual harassment and sexual abuse, primarily perpetrated by men against women. When these stories first started coming to light I was quick to point the finger of condemnation at those accused of these acts; however, to paraphrase an old saying, every time I pointed my finger at someone else, there were three pointing back at me.

One evening, while I was idly paging through one of the many salacious, semi-pornographic magazines floating around this place, I suddenly began to ask myself, "What about me?" Am I guilty of engaging in the same type of behavior for which I'm condemning others? And following fast upon the heels of that thought was another, "Do I value the lives of chickens," (I'm a recent convert to vegetarianism), "more than I value the lives of women?"

Judging from my past actions, I would have to say that the answer to both of these questions has been an unfortunate yes.

As a vegetarian, one of the reasons that I stopped eating meat was that I no longer wanted to participate in or profit from the suffering of animals. Yet I apparently had no problem with participating in and "profiting" from the unimaginable and untold

amounts of physical, emotional, mental, and sexual abuse and exploitation the women displayed in such magazines as the one I was looking at were likely to have been, and possibly still were being subjected to.

Chickens were definitely more valuable to me than women.

Admittedly there are those who would argue that, unlike chickens, many of the women participating in this form of "entertainment" are doing so voluntarily-maybe. What I am beginning to realize is that for me, that really doesn't matter.

What does matter are the thoughts, the attitudes, the underlying beliefs I have about women and the impact that this form of entertainment has had upon them. What matters is the suffering I saw in their eyes once I began to look beyond their scantily clad, semi-nude bodies; suffering that I could no longer ignore.

As for the sexual harassment, I only have to think about the untold number of women I've encountered throughout my life, before and since my incarceration. Women whom I've not just looked at, but stared at, ogling them as they approached and nearly breaking my neck to continue doing so as they walked by. Beyond the looks though, there were the numerous conversations that I've engaged in with others and the comments, full of innuendos, if not overtly and explicitly sexual in nature, that I've made about women often times within their hearing.

Now I don't know much about psychology, but one thing that I have learned from my own past criminal activities is that in order to intentionally hurt someone - to murder, assault, or harass someone, we must first strip them of their humanity, we must objectify them; they must first become to us a THING.

This is what I believe that the men in the news did to the women whose dignity they failed to acknowledge and whom they ultimately violated. This is what I did every time I picked up one of those magazines, made some lewd and wholly inappropriate comment about a woman (in or outside of her presence), and every time when, instead of seeing a fellow human being, all I saw was her body.

I wish that I could find the many women whose lives have been affected by my actions and apologize to them; tell them that I regret the harm I've caused them; tell them that I am sorry. What I did was wrong and the amount of pain and suffering I've caused and contributed to is inexcusable.

I would also like to let these women know of my commitment to be part of the solution to a problem which I have helped to foster, perpetuate and, far too frequently, have contributed. I would like to let them know that the process of change that began when the mirror was held up to my own face and I had to acknowledge the truth about my own attitudes and actions will continue and that not only am I determined to continually confront it in myself but that I will continue to challenge the same in others.

I know better. I will do better. I will be better.