

Sexual Misconduct in The Fashion Industry

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With the recent allegations of sexual assault and gender inequality occurring in Hollywood, workers in other fields have been inspired to open up about their experiences with sexual misconduct in the workplace. One of these fields is the fashion industry. The fashion industry has recently been subject to sexual misconduct allegations, opening up the discussion that models are being mistreated. “With multiple allegations of misconduct, and models taking to social media to decry sexual harassment, fashion is in the midst of its own #MeToo moment” said Vogue writer, Janelle Okwodu (2018, para. 1). Multiple instances of assault happening behind the scenes have come out since the #MeToo movement surfaced and voices are finally being heard. What is especially concerning about this is not only that models are treated poorly, but many are under the age of 18, making them extremely impressionable. The main issue here is that even though models’ jobs are based on beauty and sexual desire, they should not be expected to endure sexual abuse.

Fashion is synonymous with sexual objectification. When you see a woman on the cover of a magazine, the first thing that catches one’s eye is not who she is, but what she looks like. Because fashion is so centered on beauty and sex, the question is: can fashion ever be an ethical business? For decades, fashion has been based on sex, because as we have been taught, “sex sells”. These images are all about catching the eye of the consumer and sparking their interest. And, if, “the fantasies depicted didn't trigger a little flicker of absurdity or distaste, the images didn't seem to be doing their job” (Bugbee, 2018, para.2). Fashion is meant to be “provocative” and “fraught” (Bugbee, 2018, para.3); it is meant to spark a desire in the consumer to want what they see, even though they can never have it. What is so wrong about this is that designers and photographers are creating a girl or boy that isn’t real. “Photographers could hide behind the

excuse that they were just pushing us into uncomfortable places in order to challenge norms” meaning that they can take their twisted ideas and turn the model in this unattainable person (Bugbee, 2018, para.5). So, if these models are displaying something that isn’t even real, just a photographer’s fantasies, then imagine the pressure put on them to fulfill this idea. Their job is to conform to someone else’s idea of beauty, which is a lot of pressure when one can only go so far to change how they look. And the models themselves don’t even have the support from those they are working for. When news broke out of certain designers and photographers being accused of sexual misconduct, many designers who were friends with these people chose to take their sides. When famed photographer Bruce Weber was accused of sexual assault, models and designers started the hashtag “#istandbyhim”, choosing to ignore the models’ stories and staying with their biased opinions (Pressler & Tsoulis-Reay, 2018, para. 4). Vogue editor, Lisa Love, stated, "What a load of crap. I would be more than happy to send models for Bruce to shoot! Makes me nervous that I'll get sued next! Ha ha” (Pressler et al., 2018, para. 4). To some people, like Love, these stories are a joke. These people who have the power to stand up for their models decided to ignore their stories and stand by their “friends”, which is a huge problem. If models can’t even be protected by those they work for, then who are they supposed to lean on? Perhaps this stems from the fact that models have never really been seen as more than puppets on a string, where their purpose is to look nice and obey. “We are in a business that is supposed to exalt women, and it is filled with people who don't like them, and especially a lot of women who don't like women” so how are models supposed to feel safe? (Pressler et al., 2018, para. 11). Model Louise Parker described her experience as a model as completely impersonal. She described fashion week as extremely tiring and hectic, sometimes going to 15 castings a day. And models have no choice but to smile and be appeasing, because, “girls just want to please

whoever they are working for and to walk away leaving a good impression” (Pressler et al., 2018, para. 12). Parker said she was never asked how or who she was, it was all about looking at her body (Pressler et al., 2018, para. 12). This is where the change needs to start. Models firstly need to be seen as human beings in order to be treated like one.

The main issue with these allegations is that people are choosing to ignore them, adding more fuel to the fire. WWD recently interviewed four male advertising execs asking them their opinion on the recent allegations, but their answers made them seem completely uninterested. They said, “they'd only heard ‘stories’ about ‘certain photographers’ showing that they were hardly concerned (Petrarca, 2017, para.1). Their “if I didn’t see it, it didn’t happen” attitudes are what allows sexual assault to continue to happen around them (Petrarca, 2017, para.8). Even the news of Harvey Weinstein, who has had major influence in the fashion world, has sparked many allegations, but few have chosen to respond. Weinstein’s wife owns a major fashion label, Marchesa, which is sold across multiple retail outlets. But these fashion outlets have chosen not to comment on the allegations. When they were asked about these allegations, their response was, “We just don't want to be part of this story” (Friedman, Bernstein, &Schneier, 2017, para.8). These responses allow stories to be swept under the rug; they do nothing but allow sexual misconduct to continue to happen. In order to see change, those in high power positions need to recognize these models’ voices and allow them to be taken seriously, instead of brushed to the side.

What is also extremely concerning, is that models have to deal with other issues as well as sexual assault, including eating disorders and going through puberty. Many fashion magazine readers are unaware that these cover models are underage. And as models, the dangers of the industry, including sexual harassment, affect them directly. “Models, in general, lack adequate

legal protection” says Anais Paccione of Seton Hall Legislative Journal (2017), “but minors are doubly disadvantaged as modeling agencies and designers take advantage of their youth, naiveté, and pure determination to be successful in the industry” (p.418). That is something that has been a major issue as of late; the new fluctuation of models that are successful in the industry are ones that are pre-pubescent looking, making younger girls desired for modeling. There is always a “fad” in modeling, something that is desirable at the moment. Recently, it has been the look of someone who has not hit puberty yet, which is why it is so scary that young girls are being brought into an industry that isn’t known for treating their workers fairly. Eating disorders are another huge issue in the industry but are looked past just like sexual misconduct. Because women are trying to fulfill this pre-pubescent look, they tend to starve themselves. “A lot of girls that start out when they're younger are really naturally thin. But then as you age, your body shifts, and so some girls who are trying to stay that thin do become anorexic” meaning they risk their lives to achieve acceptance (Pressler et al., 2018, para. 19). Eating disorders are so common that they aren’t even recognized in the industry. Everyone may see it, “from the agent to the casting person to the photographer to the person dressing them,” but they refuse to admit it because the models are achieving the look they want (Pressler et al., 2018, para.19). The danger behind these eating disorders can alter someone’s life. Poor nutrition not only stunts bone development, but shrinks the brain and causes health issues later on in life (Treasure, Wack, & Roberts, 2018, para.4). All of these issues are tied to the fact that models are forced to conform to something highly unattainable, and nobody is protecting them. So how are they supposed to maintain a lifestyle like this while not being able to trust those around them? They simply can’t. A toll is taken on their minds and bodies that can never be fixed. The only choice is to prevent these problems from happening, which is up to fashion officials.

There is a light at the end of the tunnel though. There are positive changes slowly developing in the fashion industry, giving us hope that models will feel more protected in their jobs. Even though there are many stories of abuse, “there were also many who tried to protect women: photographers who never mistreated girls, model agents who went to great lengths to protect their charges and many strong, young females who knew how to say no” (Sheffield, 2017, para.6). There are also more female CEOs and female designers who are creating their own idea of sexy to please themselves, not a man (Sheffield, 2017, para.7). Also, the fact that models are able to speak up and have their stories heard is progress in and of itself. Famous model, Edie Campbell, recently released a letter stating her concerns and experiences of sexual misconduct in the industry. She started off with this statement: “Inside the modeling business, I have been the victim of inappropriate touching, sexual assault and was drugged once in the course of my 19-year career” (Conti, 2017, para.4). She went to share detailed experiences of assault that she, and other colleagues, had experienced while working or at work events. What is so groundbreaking about her letter is it was one of the first detailed letters released by such a high-profile model. She had everything to lose, but chose to share her experiences not just for herself, but for all other models. “This could be the moment at which everyone within the fashion industry takes stock of where we are, and the culture we operate within and perpetuate” said Campbell (Conti, 2017, para.8), showing how now is the time so recognize the ongoing issues happening in the industry. Her words opened up a new chance for other models to come forward, which is what the industry needs. Vogue also released an article recently depicting how the fashion world is taking precautions to help models feel more comfortable. The Model Alliance and the Council of Fashion Designers of America recently released a statement saying private changing rooms would be available to models backstage. Model Alliance director Sara

Ziff (2018) stated, “it wasn’t until now, with the allegations in the fashion and entertainment industries, that it really felt like the industry was ready to take these concerns head-on” (para.2). This statement is an example of how some in the industry are actually responding to models’ pleas, showing how there is hope for change.



Figure 1. Changing Rooms Backstage at a Fashion Show, Vogue (2018)

Throughout the last year, the fashion industry has hit a wall. Although steps are being taken to fix what has been broken, there is still so much room for improvement. It is an industry that is widely known for, “revering the body of young teenage girls” (Sheffield, 2017, para.2). Abuse has happened in plain sight, to men and women. Girls have been forced to stand in their underwear for men to judge them, without given an explanation (Sheffield, 2017, para.3). It hasn’t always occurred on shoots too, but in nightclubs and at events, where drugs and alcohol are circulating. The fashion industry needs a major makeover. If it wants to continue its success,

it can no longer be known as the place where young girls are preyed upon and tossed to the side. It really cannot afford anymore sexual assault revelations; models are putting their foot down and refusing to be ignored. The accused are losing friends and jobs, discrediting everything they have worked for. The time to seek change is now; without doing this, the fashion industry could be headed for an even harsher awakening.

These circumstances that come from the fashion industry show that nothing is ever as it seems. The fashion industry has always been seen as glamorous and admirable. Many young girls have been raised to think that being a model confirms your beauty; they aspire to be in these gorgeous womens' shoes. And while it is still an industry that many are very passionate about, it is true that not everything about it is ethical. Behind closed doors, there is always another story. The story behind the fashion industry is that these men and women who seem so valued, are actually struggling. They not only deal with the everyday pressures of seeming perfect, but have internal struggles as well. And while they deal with these struggles, they have to respond to those who are above them and endure abuse, such as sexual assault. It is frightening to know that some of these models that are undergoing high pressure and experiencing misconduct, are also still growing up. They have barely matured and are still finding out who they are, while also being defined by those they work for. It is time for fashion officials to step up and protect those who work for them. Sexual assault should not be tolerated. Underage models deserve to be protected. And while some people are taking steps to make sure this happens, more need to come together and take these issues seriously in order to produce an environment that is safe.

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