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It’s still a man’s world

Epstein was more than an individual perpetrator; his networks and systematic sexual exploitation reproduced social, economic and gender inequality

The Jeffrey Epstein case is far more than a legal scandal and it is certainly no mere curiosity. It involves the systematic sexual exploitation of underage girls, enabled over decades by a global network of influential and rich men, who protected Epstein from a misdirected sense of solidarity. Hints and statements about what was going on surfaced fairly early on, and still, Epstein’s ability to move in the close proximity of political and economic decision-makers remained unaffected. This is the real problem.

This case points to a very real political danger. If sexual violence can be protected by informal power the entire democratic promise of equal rights starts to falter. It is becoming clear how over a period of years elite networks were able to mobilise resources to get the law and institutions to look the other way and thus to forestall equality before the law.

The key issue is thus not who can be found on which guest list. It is rather about how a convicted sex offender was able to carry on his deeds in the direct proximity of political and economic decision-makers and even profit from it commercially. The scandal is not merely a matter of individual prominent persons or exclusive private jets, but rather concerns how power was organised, safeguarded and normalised in this sphere. But also how legal and institutional control mechanisms failed repeatedly. Despite the publication of millions of documents – albeit severely redacted – the network around Epstein remains elusive. One pattern has become all too clear, however: access was a resource.

Linking violence and power

Private meetings, exclusive trips and closed rooms cultivated proximity but also social obligations. Anyone who comes to be invited becomes part of the circle, in which discretion, loyalty and reciprocity are assumed. Such proximity creates expectations: those who remain silent remain part

of the network, anyone who strays off the reservation risks exclusion, loss of reputation and diminished influence. Such informal expectations stabilise power.

It is thus totally inadequate to demonise Epstein as some sort of isolated monster. This leaves the structures that supported him intact. Which grew over time, male dominated and organised informally. Political decision-makers, billionaires, royals and tech entrepreneurs move in transnational social spaces that only tangentially encounter democratic controls. Anyone on the inside gains access to information, prestige and influence; those on the outside remain dependent or are instrumentalised.

Epstein stands out from so many other perpetrators because of the systematic dimension of his crimes. Underage girls, often from precarious social backgrounds, were deliberately targeted. The young girls and women were controlled and made dependent to the point of sexual exploitation and abuse, while influential men enjoyed resources and protection. The violence involved was not spontaneous or occasional but structural. Not everyone in his milieu were involved in all these actions, but they moved in the same social spaces as the perpetrators. In networks based on proximity, resources and reciprocal obligations, and from which all participants benefit, moral responsibility and loyalty become blurred.

The economic dependence and social isolation of the underaged girls combined to form a kind of invisible security system.

Sexual violence had a functional role in Epstein's system. It ensured control, fostered dependency and stabilised networks. Proximity was a power asset. Underaged girls, socially vulnerable, economically dependent and lacking institutional protection found themselves in private spaces with influential men. The threat of not being believed did its job long before investigations got under way. Sometimes the victims were pressured to recruit other girls themselves, a connivance that ensured loyalty and silence, while at the same time extending the reach of the network. Statements by survivors and documents such as the reports of Virginia Giuffre show how intimidation and the risk of being compromised put the affected individuals in jeopardy.

In Epstein's networks not only was proximity established, but protection was organised — for the perpetrators. Sexualised violence or abuse was thus a functional component of the system: it ensured the perpetrators

control over the victims and also stabilised relations within the network. The economic dependence and social isolation of the underaged girls combined to form a kind of invisible security system. The weak remained vulnerable, while the powerful were able to prolong or mitigate legal proceedings. Violence and power were linked systematically.

The rise of real inequality

The 2008 cut-off in the legal proceedings marks the most blatant institutional failure. Many survivors were thus excluded from the proceedings. The network's resources and contacts could move much more swiftly than any judicial scrutiny and police action. In the end, Epstein managed to procure an extraordinarily mild plea deal, despite the plethora of underage victims. Sweetheart deals, overextended law enforcement and judicial authorities, together with legal loopholes combined to let the perpetrators off the hook. The existing power asymmetries were thus entrenched even further.

The rule of law requires more than the existence of laws on the statute book, but rather that they are applied equally to all. But those with the wherewithal can shape the narrative, delay proceedings indefinitely and call on people's loyalty. Perpetrators with sufficient financial resources and political contacts can mitigate charges, spin out legal cases or procure more favourable settlements. This means that de facto there is inequality before the law. This is not the result of open corruption or formal abolition of norms, but their asymmetric application as a consequence of informal power. The informal networks that put so many young women in jeopardy bestowed access, influence and power on the men. Economic actors thus played a key role: business relationships carried on despite Epstein's conviction. His reputation and access to his network lost none of their economic appeal, no matter what serious crimes came to light.

For the survivors the upshot of all this was structural powerlessness. They faced not a single perpetrator, but a whole network of influence that severely limited their options.

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Public criticism is thus not moralising overreach, but the exertion of democratic control. Transparency creates trust; in its absence, power shifts into private spaces. The Epstein case is not so much evidence of an all-powerful conspiracy, but the convergence of access, money and institutional indulgence. Reputations are protected and proceedings are neutralised, while the most vulnerable can

> scarcely gain a hearing. This gives rise to real inequality before the law. Just outcomes are not derailed by chance but as a result of a power architecture designed and implemented by men and stabilised by male networks.

Epstein's network shows that 'it's a man's world'. Informal power circulates in spaces dominated by men and which they keep open for one another. Loyalties emerge and protection is organised there. Decisions are made about who belongs, but also about who may be deemed dispensable. The Epstein case has begun to bring to light where this can lead. The networks have proved stronger than the efforts to safeguard underage girls.

This calls for an adequate response. Investigations need to be conducted properly, whether influential networks are involved or not. Criminal proceedings should not depend on resources, reputation or political contacts. Independent public prosecutors, transparent procedures and effective witness protection are required to ensure that the law is applied to everyone. The general public also has an important role to play. Where power is organised in informal networks critical reporting is a democratic necessity. It is no substitute for the courts, but it can prevent influence and privilege from side-lining responsibility.

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A proper response to the Epstein case is not the demonisation of individuals, but a sober analysis of the structures that enabled such crimes and have protected the perpetrators for so long. In a system in which networks are stronger than protection of the weakest, power results in impunity. That should worry us all.



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