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op-ed: Feminist Action at Middlebury, Men Against Violence and Women of Color Sexual harassment is an issue

We would like to thank James O'Brien for raising some important concerns in his recent op-ed article "Sex and Shaq don't mix — but we talk about it anyway" (Nov 15). The level of apathy on this campus needs to be addressed and we are glad that Mr. O'Brien brought up this issue. However, we feel that several of his arguments were misguided and problematic. When Morgane Richardson '08 and Micah Macfarlane '09 began the recent gender violence poster campaign, they knew they were going to face opposition, but the entire point of this campaign was to incite discussion. Mr. O'Brien admitted that these posters have sparked debate on this campus, but then insinuated that dialogue is insignificant. We would argue that in reality, dialogue is key. When people talk about issues, ideas are formed and changes can be made. Did Mr. O'Brien ever step back from the situation and look at the conversation he had with people in the process of writing his article?

In addition, Mr. O'Brien argued that the problem on this campus is not awareness, but apathy. While apathy is clearly an issue, how prominent is awareness at Middlebury College? Mr. O'Brien himself has clearly been misinformed. He claims that he does not think that violent language used in reference to sex or to women in general has anything to do with sexual violence. This is entirely incorrect. There is a connection between this discourse and gender violence through the desensitization of language within the male population as well as through the general objectification of women. While clearly not every person using this type of language will go on to perpetrate sexual violence, considering every two and a half minutes some-

one in America is sexually assaulted, some will (RAINN). In fact, this issue is not as black and white as most people think, considering 84 percent of men whose actions matched the legal definition of rape said that what they did was definitely not rape (Koss 1998). How many people on this campus are even aware of the legal definition of rape? Maybe if Mr. O'Brien had attended one of the discussions or screenings that were advertised along with these posters before he criticized the campaign, he would have had a better basis with which to offer a critique.

In regards to Mr. O'Brien's claim that students have the right to people-watch, there is a certain level of unacceptable and inherent objectification when women are those being 'watched', or in this case, rated. Mr. O'Brien stated that if he knew if women were rating him in the dining halls, he would attempt to improve his appearance. That is the problem here. Mr. O'Brien, unlike a female, does not *expect* to be objectified in this way. The vast majority of women is aware that they are being constantly surveyed and judged and that, because of their unique position as women, they will always be the object of the male gaze. This has undeniable effects on self-confidence, body image and self worth.

Maybe Middlebury students could benefit from talking to some of their female friends or the next time they make or hear a sexist comment, think about how they would feel if someone was making this comment in reference to their family. Better yet, we would suggest that Middlebury students take the time to learn about gender violence and recognize that it exists in various forms — even in our bubble.