

Passive Voice Is the Preferred Language of Oppressors

Ambiguity shields them from responsibility.



Image by [Gerd Altmann](#) from [Pixabay](#)

I have been working in education and development aid for more than 25 years. I have seen a lot of human rights abuses. Therefore, I am often on my toes about acts of oppression. Of course, I cannot rid the world of such atrocities on my own. But I can still attempt to address issues, whenever I can. Oppression often involves the dehumanization of its victims. Irrespective of context. It can be on an interpersonal level, such as [domestic violence](#). Or it can be a broad context, as we can see in Gaza, Ukraine, or Yemen. One of the most powerful tools of dehumanization is language. With proper use of language, we can frame how we speak about atrocities. We can influence how others perceive what happens. And by far the most common language tool at the disposal of the oppressor is the use of passive voice.

Passive Voice Lets the Perpetrators off The Hook

Consider headlines like this:

A staggering one-in-three women, experience physical, sexual abuse

Violence against women and girls is among the most widespread, and devastating human rights violations in the world...

news.un.org



The headline states that women experience sexual abuse. It is written in passive voice. What it implies is, that sexual abuse against women is something that just happens. They 'experience' it. As if this experience is caused by an uncontrollable force. Or coincidence.

But later in that same article, we get a bit more disclosure.

Some [national studies](#) examining incidents in the United States show that up to 70 per cent of women have experienced physical and or sexual violence from an intimate partner, according to [UN Women](#).

As most people are heteronormal, we can only come to one logical conclusion. The vast majority of perpetrators are male.

Yet, this simple fact is never mentioned directly in the article. And it is an article published by the U.N. itself. In essence, the article does a disservice to the women who suffer sexual abuse every day. The author(s) used passive voice. Therefore, it becomes a mystery who commits sexual assault against women, and what we can do about it.

If the vast majority of perpetrators are men, then we must address it. Regardless of which gender each of us identifies as, we must take responsibility. It is our task to teach the coming generations of men. We need them to develop healthier relationships with themselves and others. Especially women.

But when we use passive voice in our writing, we hide the actor behind an action. When we talk about issues like women's rights, we cannot get to a core understanding of the issue.

I will give the authors of the article the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they did not consider the impact, their use of passive voice has on their message. Intentional or not, the result is the same. We readers don't get to a deeper understanding.

Passive Voice Prevents the Cycle From Knowledge To Action

If we want to make a difference and solve any problem, we need to understand that problem. There are always three levels we climb to solve any issue.

knowing -> understanding -> acting

This is true for any issue, no matter how big or small. Let me give you a very simplified example.

Let us say, that I struggle to keep order in my kitchen. The first step is to acknowledge, that reality. My kitchen often looks messy. I could jump straight to the action part by cleaning the kitchen. But this will only cure the symptoms. I am not addressing the underlying issue. To do this, I must understand it.

I know my kitchen is often messy. I clean it daily but still cannot keep it in order. Understanding the issue means digging deeper.

Why is my kitchen always messy, even when I clean it daily? Do I have good enough structures around my cleaning? Maybe I don't have good enough storage systems? Could a dishwasher alleviate the problem? Is it a combination of all of those?

If I ask deeper questions, I can find better answers to solve the problem. So it is not just an issue about 'cleaning more often'. In this example, the answer can involve designing my kitchen and my structures better. In this way, they better serve the purpose of keeping my kitchen neat.

To Go From Knowing to Understanding We Need to Ask Deeper Questions

I know it sounds like a mundane example. But it works the same way with every other issue. We must ask the deep questions. When it comes to sexual abuse against women, a few questions come to my mind.

- Who abuses these women?
- Why do so many men act in such a harmful way?
- Do we have the right legal framework to prevent this from occurring?
- What role does education and socialization play in this?
- Does anyone benefit from letting men get away with abusing women?
- How do they benefit?

Only then can we get to an understanding of the issue and find solutions that work. Framing sexual abuse against women in a passive voice does the opposite. We make the process unnecessarily hard.

The Use of Passive Voice Is Not Always a Coincidence

In the example of the article above, I stated that I would give the authors the benefit of the doubt. I merely used it as an example to illustrate my main point. The U.N. and its member organizations are fighting very hard for women's rights around the world. I know from personal experience, that they do a lot of excellent work.

Unfortunately, I cannot always say the same about our mainstream media.

Gaza reports more than 11,100 killed. That's one out of every 200 people.

More than 11,100 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since Oct. 7, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. They include...

www.washingtonpost.com

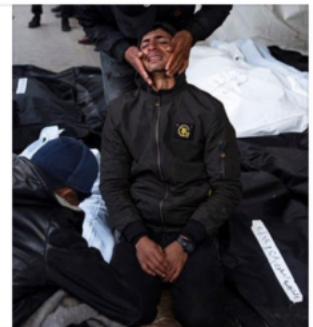


Articles like these are revolting to me. Notice how the authors deliberately write in passive voice? This is to shield Israel from responsibility. If it happens once, it is a coincidence. But if it happens over and over, it is a pattern.

Israel-Hamas war has now killed at least 30,000 Palestinians, most of them civilians

The Israel-Hamas Gaza war death toll has reached 30,000, Palestinian health officials said, as U.S. President Joe Biden...

www.nbcnews.com



A group of Palestinian men waving a white flag is shot at, killing 1

The incident, recorded in a neighborhood of Khan Younis that the Israeli military had designated a "safe zone," raises...

www.nbcnews.com



'The war has killed...' 'A group was shot at...' 'More than 11.000 have been killed...'

Well, who shot at the group of Palestinians waving a white flag? Who killed 11.000 civilians? It is not the war that has killed. A war is not an actor. A war is a situation perpetrated by actors, who make deliberate decisions. So

who is doing the bombing? The only legitimate reason to use passive voice would be if we didn't know who committed these acts. But we do know for sure.

The mainstream media is determined to frame the narrative in Israel's favor. These examples show this clearly. Passive voice is an instrumental tool in this. Like with other atrocities, the use of passive voice lets the perpetrators off the hook. This is a powerful manipulation tactic. When it comes to consuming News, this is something we as readers should be very aware of.