

# Remove Richard Stallman

And everyone else horrible in tech.



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Sep 12 · 9 min read

*Edited on 09/12 at 11:44PM EST:*

*I'd like to add a **Content Note**: this piece contains mentions of child abuse, rape, and other upsetting topics. An appendix of additional information has also been added at the bottom.*

*Edited on 09/13 at 3:59PM EST:*

*I have now leaked the full thread, with identifying information removed, to Vice.*

*Edited on 09/16/2019 at 8:43AM EST:*

*Added a separate post, Remove Richard Stallman: Appendix A*

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I'm writing this because I'm too angry to work.

I'm writing this because at 11AM on Wednesday, September 11th 2019, my friend sent me an email that was sent to an MIT Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory (CSAIL) mailing list.

This email came from Richard Stallman, a prominent computer scientist.

In it, he's responding to a female student's email about this Facebook event, which calls for a protest by MIT students and affiliates regarding Jeffrey Epstein's donation.

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*The announcement of the Friday event does an injustice to Marvin Minsky:*

*“deceased AI ‘pioneer’ Marvin Minsky (who is accused of assaulting one of Epstein’s victims [2])”*

*The injustice is in the word “assaulting”. The term “sexual assault” is so vague and slippery that it facilitates accusation inflation: taking claims that someone did X and leading people to think of it as Y, which is much worse than X.*

*The accusation quoted is a clear example of inflation. The reference reports the claim that Minsky had sex with one of Epstein’s harem. (See <https://www.theverge.com/2019/8/9/20798900/marvin-minsky-jeffrey-epstein-sex-trafficking-island-court-records-unsealed>.) Let’s presume that was true (I see no reason to disbelieve it).*

*The word “assaulting” presumes that he applied force or violence, in some unspecified way, but the article itself says no such thing. Only that they had sex.*

*We can imagine many scenarios, but the most plausible scenario is that she presented herself to him as entirely willing. Assuming she was being coerced by Epstein, he would have had every reason to tell her to conceal that from most of his associates.*

*I’ve concluded from various examples of accusation inflation that it is absolutely wrong to use the term “sexual assault” in an accusation.*

*Whatever conduct you want to criticize, you should describe it with a specific term that avoids moral vagueness about the nature of the criticism.*

There are so many things wrong with what Richard Stallman said I hardly know where to begin. First, he didn’t even give the typical, whiney, ‘he’s accused but not convicted’ defense. No, Stallman went much further than that. Instead, Stallman said “Let’s assume that Marvin Minsky had sex with an underage girl who was a victim of child sex trafficking” ...

*The reference reports the claim that Minsky had sex with one of Epstein’s harem...Let’s presume that was true (I see no reason to disbelieve it).*

...and then he says that an enslaved child could, somehow, be “entirely willing”. Let’s also note that he called a group of child sex trafficking victims a ‘harem’, a terrible word choice.

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*We can imagine many scenarios, but the most plausible scenario is that she presented herself to him as entirely willing.*

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This is someone who is respected far and wide by the technology community.

This is someone who is a Visiting Scientist at MIT.

MIT claims it never wanted to elevate Epstein's reputation by allowing him to donate. But, here they are, not only elevating but funding and endorsing a person like Richard Stallman as a visiting scientist.

What's more, somehow Richard Stallman decided it was appropriate to email his opinion to an almost department-wide mailing list ("csail-related") which had undergraduate students on it. In an email further down the thread, he also said,

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*"I think it is morally absurd to define "rape" in a way that depends on minor details such as which country it was in or whether the victim was 18 years old or 17."*

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in response to a student who said "Giuffre [the victim who testified] was 17 at the time, this makes it \_\_rape\_\_ [sic] in the virgin islands" .

Again, this mailing list has undergraduate students on it. It is likely some of them are "18 years old or 17".

I was shocked. I continued talking to my friend, a female graduate student in CSAIL, about everything, trying to get the full email thread (I wasn't on the mailing list). I even started emailing reporters — local and national, news sites, newspapers, radio stations. I couldn't stop thinking about it. During my 45-minute drive home, when I normally listen to podcasts or music, I just sat in complete silence.

The only reporter who responded quickly was one from WBUR, and they didn't seem to be in a rush to publish this information. So, I told my friends that I would just write a story myself. I'd planned to do it after work today; instead, because I can't possibly focus, I'm working on it now.

### **MIT does not deserve its women.**

The world does not deserve them either. I thought back to every person who has ever asked me how to "fix" the gender problems in STEM, how to "get more girls" to join STEM programs. I thought about every time that someone has suggested "men are

better at spatial thinking” and that “testosterone is linked to better performance in math”.

In my mind I look at all these people, a crowd that is gathered. And in my mind, I stand up and I scream at them. I would put my hands around their shoulders and shake sense into all of them, individually, if I had enough time and enough hands

The problems are *so obvious*.

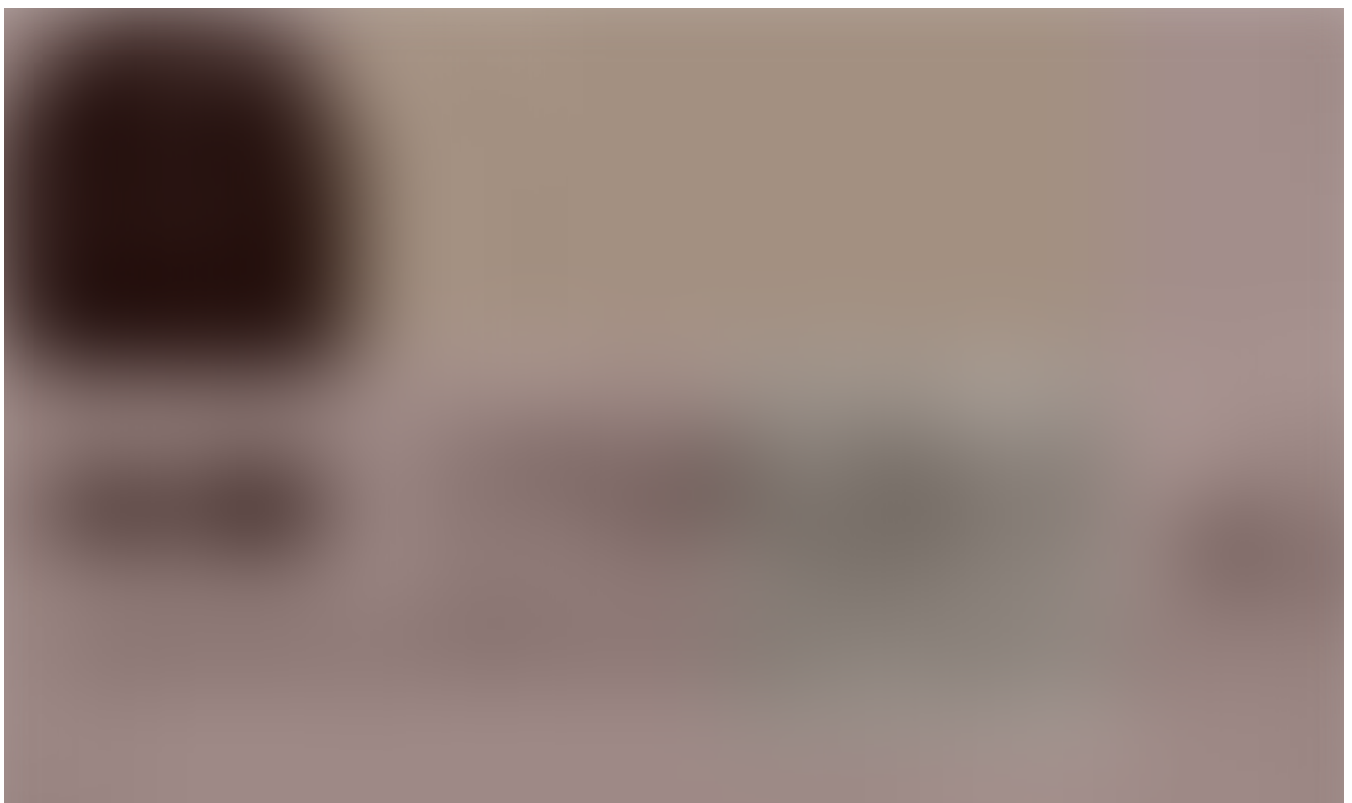
There is nothing wrong with women. There is nothing wrong with girls in STEM. There are many women and many girls who, in spite of everything, love STEM-related disciplines. Some of them even go through 4-year bachelors degrees at MIT, maybe even 7 years of a PhD, and then begin questioning whether they should continue in these fields, because they are filled to the brim with so, so many *shitty men*.


Jeffrey Epstein. Marvin Minsky.

Richard Stallman.

Travis Kalanick. James Damore. The laundry list of men in tech and academia who have continued this pattern of harassment, misogyny, and discrimination.

Richard Stallman was known to be problematic long before this. This is the door to his office:





A relatively less serious or even funny gaffe, but I'm told he's sent incendiary emails to the CSAIL list before. One friend joked that they have an email filter explicitly for Stallman's emails, to always remove them from their inbox.

Why do we tolerate this?

Why do we allow the jokes and the comments and everything small to just 'slide'?

Why do we wait until it becomes bad and public and unbearable and people like me have to write posts like this?

Why do we ponder the low enrollment of female and minority graduate students at MIT with one hand and endorse shitty men in science with the other? Not only endorse them — we invite them to our campus where they will brush shoulders with those same female and minority students.

Why do we excuse people simply because they are “geniuses”?

As Michelle Obama says, “they are not that smart”. Even in STEM fields, I have to agree.

There is nothing I have seen a man in tech do that a woman could not. What's more, the woman would probably be less egotistical and more team-oriented about it.

There is no single person that is so deserving of praise their comments deprecating others should be allowed to slide. Particularly when those comments are excuses about rape, assault, and child sex trafficking.

*Child.*

*Sex.*

*Trafficking.*

This reminds me of Sandy Hook. We knew, then, that if America would do nothing in response to the deaths of children, we would do nothing, ever.

I know, now, that if prominent technology institutions won't start firing their problematic men left right and center, we will do nothing. Ever.

I don't care anymore that the Epstein issue is airing the dirty laundry within our community, even though Harvard has certainly taken far more Epstein funding and stayed far more silent about the matter. I understand, now, that powerful institutions will not remove their problematic members until we make it messy and public and awful. I am ready, now, to join others in calling for burning everything to the ground.

I have a great love for my home institution. It's where I wanted to go to college since I was 7 years old. When asked, I still say that my happiest memory so far in life, or the accomplishment I'm most proud of, is that day on 12/14/13 at 12:14 PM when I received my letter of acceptance. I write this with the fervent wish that it changes for the better, along with all other institutions in tech and in STEM, along with all other institutions in the country and the world.

This behavior cannot go unchecked, simply because someone is seen as a "genius". Simply because they are powerful, influential, or have friends in high places.

Those are the same forces that allowed Jeffrey Epstein to rape and traffick children for so long.

At least Richard Stallman is not accused of raping anyone. But is that our highest standard? The standard that this prestigious institution holds itself to? If this is what MIT wants to defend; if this is what MIT wants to stand for, then, yes, burn it to the ground.

Or remove them. Remove men like Richard Stallman and, I'm sure, the many others that are now hiding. #MeToo showed us that they are not safe, not as isolated as we thought in their towers of power and prestige.

Remove everyone, if we must, and let something much better be built from the ashes.

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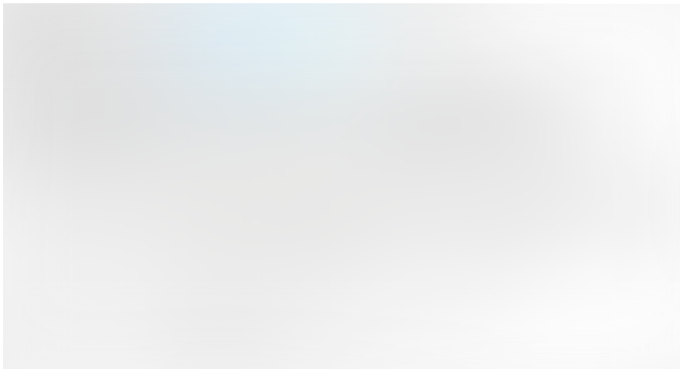
## **Addendum:**

I honestly did not think about it that hard when I wrote this post, which is probably why I wrote it and shared it publicly. Had I thought a little harder, maybe I would have thought about my reputation, the fact that I was insulting someone well respected who

I had never met, and doing that on so insignificant a whim as wanting to stand up for a close friend of mine in the MIT CSAIL department. Maybe I would have thought about what might happen to me if this were to go viral, that maybe my own already insignificant reputation would go down the toilet and the reputation of this person further elevated.

But I didn't think about any of those things, and here I am. There have been a few "viral moments" in my life but I think this is the most attention I have ever single-handedly generated on the internet.

I would like to add some information that may be helpful for context. First, screenshots of some similar "incendiary comments" I alluded to, provided by another student:



Additionally, a catalogue of other problematic things Stallman has said in the past:

**Richard Stallman**

Richard Stallman (also known as RMS) is the founder of the Free Software Movement, author of EMACS, etc. Among other...

[geekfeminism.wikia.org](https://geekfeminism.wikia.org)

A direct quote which stands out: "I am skeptical of the claim that voluntarily [sic] pedophilia harms children."

This was not, actually, all that much about Richard Stallman. Stallman was just the last straw. This was really about all the times I have heard about a classmate's advisor crushing her dreams, about Seth Lloyd mocking female students, the number of women alumni that were too jaded to feel surprised by this revelation, the story I read from a 1987 alumni about the trauma she experienced at the MIT and the world of that era. This was really about everything that has come out before and after the Epstein revelations, before and after Richard Stallman's emails.

Perhaps the only criticism I will accept is that I, personally, have been lucky enough to avoid a lot of gender-related discrimination in comparison to my peers. I, personally, was not someone with a terrible advisor or a sexist professor or lecturer and while I am often the only woman in a room or the only woman in the section of my office building, I am surrounded by mostly nice, well-meaning men who have taught me a lot about engineering. I acknowledge that this is a privilege I have. The privilege to face only microaggressions.

Did I even really know who Richard Stallman was before those emails? To be honest, not really — I'm a mechanical engineer who didn't pay enough attention, apparently. I did not possess the awe and reverence many people commenting and retweeting seemed to. Maybe if I had known I would have been more "careful". Maybe if I had known I, too, would have been able to let such comments and behavior slide because of "genius".

Yet here we are. I don't regret a thing. 🙌

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*Continue to "[Remove Richard Stallman: Appendix A](#)"*

Jeffrey Epstein

MIT

Computer Science

Women in STEM

Women

**Medium**

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