

How #MeToo calls everyone to fight sexual harassment and assault

The ultimate goal is to dismantle toxic constructions of masculinity. There are steps we can take now.

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When women offer their experience as truth, all the maps change,” said novelist Ursula Le Guin. After movie producer Harvey Weinstein was outed as a sexual predator, thanks to the courage of a few actresses who spoke out, a multitude of other women began speaking the truth about their experiences. Women in the film industry stepped forward with more charges against Weinstein—who was fired—and hundreds of thousands of people around the world used the #MeToo hashtag on

social media to highlight the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault. Their messages raised hopes that the old maps of gender and power are indeed beginning to change.

This burst of speech is a defiant counter to the patterns of silence that allow sexual predators to thrive. For almost 30 years Weinstein used his money and power to buy or bully women into silence. In another case, Fox News broadcaster Bill O'Reilly paid \$32 million to settle a harassment case and silence the woman making the claim—and still got rehired by Fox, at an increased salary.

Will the resurgent conversation about harassment have any lasting effect in changing such patterns? Will the example of famous women speaking out against Weinstein be of any help to the lone, nonfamous woman trying to get a supervisor to believe her testimony and act on it? Will it change the culture of the workplace?

Ultimately, patterns of abuse will change only when toxic constructions of masculinity are replaced by practices of empathy and mutuality. That change can begin in the workplace, advocates say, with men calling out coworkers on speech and behavior that's offensive—speaking up in the moment, naming the reality of what has happened in the presence of the harassed and the harasser.

Pending that long-term cultural shift, the target of reform must be those who wield power and too often look the other way. More workplace forums on the evils of harassment are good, but not likely to have as much effect as seeing a colleague dismissed or disciplined for his harassing behavior.

“People need to be afraid not just of doing these things, but also of not doing anything when someone around them does it,” Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer at Facebook, told the *New York Times*. “If you know something is happening and you fail to take action, whether you are a man or a woman—especially when you are in power—you are responsible, too.”

Power is good or bad according to the purposes for which it is used. Is it used for self-aggrandizement or for the flourishing of others? In recent weeks, survivors of abuse have overcome stigma to speak about the assaults they have endured. They have used the power of their voices to help others flourish. Their example should inspire the rest of us to do the same.

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