

My Questions About the #MeToo Moment

by Phyllis Chesler



I am glad so many women are speaking out—and I hope that this leads to some enduring changes; I would be delighted if this moment becomes a movement which leads to legislation that is both funded and enforced. Good faith and hard-won victories such as The Violence Against Women Act and the William Wilberforce Act Against Human Trafficking were passed, underfunded and therefore, could not fulfill their missions.

I am glad that women-workers-as-prey are each publicly confirming the details of their working lives—but I worry about our blurring all distinctions. An unwanted and forcible kiss is not legally the same as being forcibly touched, sexually assaulted, or kidnapped, beaten, and gang-raped.

The New York State Penal Law distinguishes between Sexual misconduct, Forcible touching, Sexual abuse, Aggravated Sexual

Abuse, Rape, Criminal Sexual Act, Facilitated Sex Offense with a Controlled Substance, and Predatory Sexual Assault. Each violation is described differently and is subject to different penalties. We must remain aware of these distinctions.

However, I am concerned about something that is not even part of this Penal Law. Can we reduce to a single penalty the reality of an ongoing sexually hostile and coercive work environment, one filled with leers, sexualized comments, demeaning pats, humiliating exposures to pornography, street corner-like wolf calls and low whistles, repeated discussions of how women “look,” non-stop invitations to go out drinking, to a strip club—or to a hotel ? What do we call having to endure a brothel-like atmosphere at work?

I also worry when a mere accusation is equivalent to a conviction. Most entertainers and Talking Heads are employees at will and, as such, are not entitled to due process. They can be hired and fired and will. Those employees with union protection are entitled to inside hearings which may take years and in which the woman who has made the allegation will be fired, or eventually paid off with a pittance. This, too, is worrisome.

I am glad that Hollywood celebrities have crafted a very good ad and launched a fund for lawsuits about on-the-job sexual harassment and abuse. Yet, however noble this statement may be, I wonder whether such “virtue signaling” will be able to change the working conditions of farm and factory workers? More important, how will we be able to monitor and intervene in the daily work lives of female agricultural workers, waitresses, secretaries, housekeepers, bar tenders, miners, students, soldiers and prostituted women?

Yes, I am concerned with prostituted women who are *paid* to be

treated with contempt: groped, grabbed, cursed, slapped, beaten, and sexually assaulted. I now wonder whether their working lives will become harder, harsher, if powerful men lose their sexual perks in the office and have to *pay* to treat women badly.

Still, I am glad the #MeToo Moment is happening. One hopes that women will be less afraid of exposing work-related sexual harassment and rape. But will they? Will lawyers agree to represent these women? Will juries find the perpetrators guilty when they really are?

Will men in positions of power decide not to hire women in order to avoid such trouble?

After fifty years of Second Wave feminism, are most young women still unable to hold their own against sexual harassment (not rape) on the job? If so, why? Are young heterosexual women still confused about their rights? Do they still believe that powerful men will protect them, that male sexual interest is a compliment, that their youthful sexual allure is a form of power that they may exercise without harmful consequences?

Finally, and perhaps most important: Will women who have traditionally covered up the sexual abuse of *other* women on the job—change their behavior?

We shall see.

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