

#MeToo at 2: What we're learning about men, women and politics as the movement matures



By CATHY YOUNG
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It has been nearly two years since the dizzying downfall of Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, accused of sexual coercion and sexual assault by more than 80 women, set in motion a tidal wave of other disclosures of sexual harassment and abuse, mainly by women against men. The hashtag #MeToo, which [went viral](#) on Oct. 15, 2017 and had half a million tweets by the next day, not only gave this movement a name but added a new word to our vocabulary (“He got #MeToo’d”).

But has this movement changed the world for the better? Is it empowering women or trapping them in a self-defeating victim mentality? Promoting healthier and more equal relations between women and men, or paranoia and polarization? There is no simple answer, except, perhaps, that #MeToo’s positive gains and its darker side are equally real.

The positive side is exemplified by the Weinstein story: accountability for powerful abusers long protected by high status, fame or the aura of indispensability. Besides Weinstein, now a jobless outcast battling charges of rape and sexual assault, the list includes former CBS chief Leslie Moonves, former CBS talk show host Charlie Rose, former Metropolitan Opera conductor James Levine, former New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman and the late financier Jeffrey Epstein.

It should be noted that none of these men except for Epstein have been convicted of any sex offense, and the allegations against them remain, legally, just that. But in each case, there were multiple accusers with consistent, independent stories of egregious abuse, usually confirmed by people in whom they had confided much earlier. In many cases, the abusive behavior had been an “open secret.”



(Jae C. Hong/AP)

But then there are other, far more complicated cases.

There's Al Franken, the former senator from Minnesota, pushed to resign over a scandal that began with the disclosure of a 2006 photo in which Franken, then a comedian, mimed groping the flak-jacket-clad chest of fellow entertainer Leanne Tweeden on the flight home from a USO tour. Tweeden, now a newswoman, also claimed that Franken had deliberately written a kiss between them into a skit.

After she came forward, seven other women, some anonymous, made allegations of misconduct: a touch on the buttocks (or a supposedly demeaning squeeze on the waist) during a photo op, a sloppy kiss during a public event, a move to kiss good-bye after a radio show. A recent [piece](#) by Jane Mayer in The New Yorker made a strong case that Tweeden misrepresented Franken's behavior, that the mock-grope photo was a humorous reference to the skit, and that the other allegations amounted to a few awkward interactions in the course of countless social hugs and kisses.

In New York, beloved public radio talk show host Leonard Lopate lost his job at WNYC for off-color [jokes](#) that some employees felt crossed the line. His offenses included telling a female producer working on a cooking segment that "avocado" came from the Aztec word for "testicle" and making an insensitive quip ("That's how I treat my staff") while discussing a story about sexual slavery.

Some cases have involved messy accounts of intimate relationships gone wrong. In June 2018, actress Chloe Dykstra wrote a blog post describing sexual and emotional abuse by a former boyfriend; he was soon identified as Chris Hardwick, host of the American Movie Classic show "Talking Dead" and the NBC game show "The Wall."

Both networks promptly suspended Hardwick; his name was even removed from the website of Nerdist, a podcast he had created. Hardwick denied the allegations and posted [text messages](#) confirming that he had broken up with Dykstra because of her infidelity and that she had begged for a chance to reconcile. After a review of the evidence, Hardwick was reinstated on both shows. Yet some AMC staffers were sufficiently convinced of his guilt to [quit](#).

There were more questionable claims: about legendary radio host Garrison Keillor, about George H.W. Bush, about [Brett Kavanaugh](#), about [journalist Jonathan Kaiman](#), about videogame developer [Alec Holowka](#) (who committed [suicide](#) after being dropped by his studio). The list of accusations is [long](#), and runs the gamut from clearly criminal to deeply suspect.

Perhaps the most controversial #MeToo story was that of [Aziz Ansari](#), the comedian accused in early 2018 of mistreating a woman on a date. Ansari's defenders said he simply misread the woman's mixed signals; his critics said that he clearly pressured her and ignored cues to slow down. To some, this was obvious #MeToo overreach: There's a massive difference between a jerk and a predator. Others, such as Vox commentator Anna North, [argued](#) that the Ansari episode was important precisely because it was "ordinary" and because sex as usual often leaves women feeling "violated," as Ansari's date said she felt that night.

To many #MeToo champions, questioning sex as usual was always the point.



(Matt Slocum/AP)

“Let [men] think back over every interaction they’ve had with a woman, sexual or not, at work or not, and examine whether each was f---ed up,” tweeted [Slate](#) columnist Cristina Cauterucci in October 2017 after the release of a bad media men list compiled from anonymous reports. She added that few are “totally innocent.” Around the same time, New York Times opinion writer Roxane Gay wrote a [column](#) titled, “Dear Men: It’s You, Too,” urging men to share “how they have hurt women in ways great and small,” from lewd comments to a co-worker to guilt-tripping a partner into unwanted sex.

Despite occasional acknowledgment that women too can behave badly, #MeToo generally paints a stark picture in which men are the abusers and women the abused, and in which virtually all sexuality in work-related settings is forced by men on women.

But this is simply not so. Plenty of women in the workplace flirt and make suggestive comments or jokes. Plenty of women in the workplace make sexual advances — subtle or overt, wanted or unwanted. (At a conference years ago, I noticed a male friend looking around nervously; it turned out he was avoiding a woman who, at their last meeting, had initiated an uncomfortably personal conversation and then abruptly kissed him. Yes, #HimToo.)

Even coercive sex, if we’re talking about psychological pressure, is not a one-way street: In 2016, UCLA professor Lara Stemple [analyzed](#) data from several major studies and found that it happens to men, usually at the hands of women, far more often than commonly known. Yes, it matters that men are nearly always bigger and stronger. But to suggest that women are constantly cowering in fear of men, as so much #MeToo rhetoric does, is truly disempowering: How can women be equals in any area if they’re too scared to say no to a male?

But, of course, unwanted and abusive sexual behavior is only part of the picture. Many people, women and men alike, enjoy some degree of sexual dynamics in the workplace. (It’s where many of us [meet our mates!](#)) At the height of #MeToo, in December 2017, a New York Times [article](#) about sexual harassment charges against restaurateur Ken Friedman contained a remarkable comment from one of his accusers, Carla Rza Betts. Betts, a former restaurant wine director, said she loved the industry’s “grab-ass, superfun late-night culture,” but stressed that “there is a difference between fun and sexualized camaraderie and predation.”

Yet the lines between the two can easily get blurred, especially when experiences once perceived as enjoyable or harmless are rethought in the harsh light of #MeToo. Behaviors that sounds damning when described as one-sided may have been far more reciprocal in reality.

When it comes to the thorny question of the wrongly accused, there is often an assumption that accusations are either true or deliberately false. But it’s much more complicated than that. There are subjective perceptions and “edited” memories. Sometimes, even video doesn’t settle the issue.

Last year, Maryland state Sen. Cheryl Kagan accused lobbyist Gil Genn of groping her in an Annapolis pub. Security [video](#) showed him putting his hand on her waist as they talked, then moving it away. Both parties claimed vindication, and in fact it was impossible to tell whether Genn’s hand may have brushed Kagan’s rear. (Those Franken groping stories may be just as tough to sort out.)

#MeToo supporters often poo-poo claims that accusations of sexual misconduct can destroy careers and even lives: Plenty of men, after all, have survived such allegations. Ansari is back on the comedy circuit — though, given the fact that he was never accused of anything worse than insensitivity, the fact that he needed a “comeback” is itself telling. Lopate is back on the air with a far smaller platform, albeit [over protests](#). Political pundit Mark Halperin has a new book coming out.

But the devastating effect of #MeToo allegations cannot be discounted. Even aside from extreme cases such as Holowka's suicide, some men have yet to recover from charges of very low-grade bad behavior. They include British journalist [Sam Kriss](#), implicated in an Ansari-like saga of boorishness and mixed signals on a date, and former New Republic literary editor Leon Wieseltier, whose new magazine project was [killed](#) after several female ex-colleagues accused him of creating an uncomfortable atmosphere at the office with explicit banter and, sometimes, unwelcome kisses.

Even when the accused is exonerated, such as writer [Junot Diaz](#), the shadow of suspicion still lingers: In many people's eyes, any man who comes back from #MeToo more or less unscathed is a man who [got away with it](#).

Obviously, this does not make the very real suffering of victims any less important. But we need to find a better way to deal with abuse — one that recognizes the nuances of human relationships and does not presume guilt or conflate bad behavior with sex crimes.

We are two years into the revolution. What will the next two years bring? Reconciliation, or reign of terror?

Young writes for Reason.