

#MeToo in an Educational Context

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The #MeToo movement, the movement in which women dare to speak up about their mistreatment and harassment, often sexual harassment, by males in powerful positions in the work place, had only just begun in October 2017. It began in the Hollywood movie industry in which Harvey Weinstein, a powerful movie mogul who could make or break women's careers in film, was named by some eighty four women as someone who had sexually harassed them, sometimes even raped them, demanding sexual favours for advancing a young woman's career. It spread to many other walks of life in the United States, Europe and elsewhere including the Canadian parliament, and many provincial political jurisdictions, in which women of ability were under the potential control of powerful, often much older, males who either harassed women needlessly or demanded sexual favours in order to advance a woman's career. Such harassment has a strong place too in our educational institutions.

It is hard to know when men began harassing women but this kind of circumstance has been around a very long time. At some point in the last million years the great awe that all humans felt for the female of our species (or so anthropologist tell us) because they mysteriously produced new humans and brought them into the world must have diminished and the importance of the male increased. Whether this was at the point at which speech developed beyond mere grunts and animal noises and at which such notions as marriage developed and was maintained is unknown. But with the diminishment of awe there was room for a revolution in sexual dominance and from that point onward the male has asserted, undoubtedly due to larger stature and muscles on the average, certainly not brains, dominion over the female in most walks of human life. This remains the case until the present day.

Certainly at some point members of the opposite sex got together for more than mere sexual activity from time to time and actually lived together in a special and exclusive relationship having, recognizing and nurturing children. Thus the notion of the "family" in the context of a biological mother and a known father living with the mother and children must have developed. We cannot trace the origins of marriage traditions with any accuracy,

but marriage seems to be as universal an activity and tradition among our species as language itself.

When awe of the mysterious female powers to produce children diminished and an exclusive male had a place in the home with an exclusive female there must have been a transformation of status between them. Except for a few isolated tribes at the present time on the planet the male maintains a certain kind of hegemony over the female that goes back historically a very long way, certainly hundreds of thousands of years. Happily this appears to be in a process of changing and in many of the democratic jurisdictions on our planet the notion of male/female equality has considerable purchase in the context of family relations as well as in the workplace.

The latter development, namely women in the workplace outside of the family and home setting is a very recent development. It is partly due to the Industrial Revolution which largely occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and in which women left the farm family setting, often with their children, and began to work in factories initially in England. The horrific and often dangerous consequences of this for children who ended up working with their mothers in the factories around large and noisy machinery, led to the growth of universal common public schooling for children in many jurisdictions, as it did by 1850 in England, and thereafter in most of the Western European nations that had industrialized shortly after England. Only Sweden and Scotland anticipated universal education as early as the seventeenth century. In Scotland universal elementary schools were developed for religious reasons connected with the dominant Presbyterian faith and the belief that everyone ought to be able to read God's word themselves. In Sweden this took the form of universal home schooling run by the women of the household so that all household members could read the bible and often write, a system fostered and examined by the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church at the behest of the King.

Boys and girls have only been going to school together for a rather short time in the history of our species. From 1850 or so until now is only a little less than a hundred and seventy years. Part of the impact of their doing so has led to general conditions of equality for a large part of the early lives of boys and girls. Sports were often segregated, but certainly not always. And everything else was shared. Even such "male" sports as ice hockey were a shared activity of boys and girls in Canadian provinces like Alberta in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Thus, for example, the University of Alberta, founded in 1907,

maintained both male and female ice hockey teams up to the advent of the Second World War and has resumed the practice in the present day. The first female medical graduate of the University of Alberta, Leone MacGregor, was not only the gold medallist in her graduation year (1925) but was also the goalie for the women's hockey team. She suffered very troubling harassment from her medical professors who thought that a woman should not practice medicine. After a research career in the United States and Germany and marriage to a Swedish industrialist she became the psychiatrist to the Swedish royal family and one of the organizers and the president of the first large international organization of women physicians. It is not too much of a stretch to suppose that the notion of male/female equality developed under the regimen of common schooling for males and females up to and including the university years, largely a development of the 20th century.

One of the more unfortunate traditions of the last many millennia of general male hegemony over the female in our species has been the assumption that all initiative in male/ female relations is primarily the prerogative of the male, especially with respect to sexual relationships. And unfortunately indeed this tradition continues in our own time to the great distress of women who have grown up in our egalitarian educational systems and the culture that it fostered for them of taking their own equality with their male counterparts for granted.

It is has been generally known, long before the #MeToo movement, that in many situations girls and young women have faced what amounts to sexual harassment and often worse at the hands of men in the workplace and even in educational settings. Given the nature of harassment, sometimes boys face analogous harassment from males and females in power as the relatively recent revelations with respect to religious institutions, especially the Catholic Church, have made clear. Similarly young girls may well face harassment from older females in power as well. In an educational setting such power exercised in this manner can be very distressing to the young and vulnerable and may affect them for the rest of their lives. But how are institutions to respond to the possibilities that may arise?

Our schools and universities, at least our public schools and universities as sometimes opposed to our religiously oriented schools and universities, even if publicly funded in whole or part, are often open about such difficulties and willing to offer instruction and discussion surrounding the situation in which students might find themselves. Teacher's too might often undergo such instruction and discussion to prepare them for the possibility

they might have to defend themselves or how to avoid getting into dangerous or inappropriate situations. And governments are often willing to consider such matters as part of a sexual education program that schools ought to implement so that there is early discussion about unwanted and untoward sexual activity or harassment on the part of teachers or professors with respect to their pupils or students.

Parents who grew up in Canadian public schools and who took for granted the equality of both sexes across the board are likely to be supportive of programs that openly discuss the possible harassment situations that young people might face at the hands of teachers or administrators and there must be mechanisms for such children to be able to complain about these things without reprisal from the school itself. Were the harasser to be an administrator, of course, the difficulty is Where can the student turn for relief and safe reporting? In the case of a teacher one would normally assume that an administrator would be the first line of report, though the circumstances are in principle very difficult for the student. And if the administrator happens to be supportive of his teachers and suspicious of students, or even a harasser him or herself, then the situation for the student is practically impossible.

Indeed the situation is not easy on either side of such a report. Many teachers and professors have been falsely accused by their pupils or students, often to get back at a teacher who may have failed the student or who for some reason the student did not like. The teacher's or professor's reputation when such false accusation happens is characteristically destroyed forever in the context of the school or university. As has been noted in the present #MeToo context the mere accusation is often sufficient for someone to lose their position or their employment entirely. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation recently investigated the case of a Canadian teacher teaching at an elite school in Thailand where a student's parent claimed that the teacher must have molested her son. On this parents' say so the teacher was immediately jailed and ultimately convicted of sexual interference on the basis of no evidence whatever. The CBC's investigation tended to suggest there had been no such thing and it was unclear what the parent's motives were.

During my own tenure as Dean of a faculty of education unusual harassment situations sometimes arose. One of the most unexpected cases that came to my attention was that of the harassment of a professor by a young student who had taken a shine to the professor and for whom it had become an obsession. The student was waiting outside of every class. The student was

constantly on the phone or on email to the professor. The student appeared at conferences, gatherings and on the professor's street. As the professor was a married individual the situation caused great stress to the professor's family as well as to the professor personally. Ultimately the campus police force had to intervene and ask the student to cease and desist and happily the harassment stopped. But it had done great personal damage and the professor resigned a year or so later.

How do universities presently handle such harassment? Universities such as the University of Calgary have harassment legislation through the General Faculties Council, the academic governing body, the equivalent of the Senate at most other institutions. The university's harassment policy has only recently been updated to handle all manner of harassment including sexual harassment that might occur in the university context. The policy specifies how such cases are to be handled and what the rights of the person who was harassed are and how to proceed with their concerns as well as the rights of the person accused of harassment. But what appears to be missing is discussion seminars for all students, faculty and staff with regularity on the topic of harassment and of the procedures to be followed as well as clarity about the moral questions and topics that can and often do arise in the university context in which generally all students and staff are over the age of consent.

Unless we are willing to raise such questions in the context of the workplace or the educational setting openly and discuss them, in the manner of the #Me Too movement, we will never be able to leave this chapter in human history behind. It has the practice of many millennia behind it and perhaps almost the entire life of our species on earth. So my strongest recommendation is that we do discuss such questions openly and regularly in our work places, in our educational settings and in our lives so that we protect our girls and women from the harassment they have tended to face since time immemorial. And in the process perhaps we will also protect our boys too in part by educating them to leave one of the worst traditions of the male half of our species behind.

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Editor

