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EMPOWERED INDIVIDUALS AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

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When I read Emily Cain's essay, "Gender Inequality is Preventing Female Students from Success," I was shocked by the statistics she cited regarding unwanted sexual intercourse and sexual harassment on campus. I have been working in higher education for almost twenty years in two different countries, other than my country of origin, and although I am/was aware of cases, I have never imagined the magnitude of the problem. Am I/was I naïve to ignore this issue? Does my ignorance make me complicit and part of the problem as a member of the academic community and a woman? And how is it possible that after all the awareness and campaigns, especially since the #metoo movement, sexual harassment is still so prevalent in institutions?

Emily's article struck a chord with me as a woman and an educator, and I felt both responsible and appalled. It was also shocking to read that such behavior goes unreported as only one in seven students with such experiences reported their cases. Emily argues that there is a connection between patriarchy, misogyny, and sexual harassment, which unfortunately leads to insufficient reporting and action. Normalizing aggressive behavior is a by-product of power imbalances and systematic inequality, a well-documented situation in private and public sectors alike.

While I was writing this piece, *The Guardian* published an article called "Teachers' sexual harassment of students is widespread in the UK and Ireland" (Tuesday, 29 August, 2023), citing Dinh et al. (2002) demonstrating that "responsibility-focused power triggers moral licensing, which, in turn, decreases perceptions of sexual harassment and increases intentions to engage in sexual harassment." Empowered individuals, usually men, feel entitled to misuse their power, and they may carry the belief that they are exempt from adhering to the rules. This hegemonic and patriarchal attitude is something that I have also experienced, and now, as a middle-aged educator, I feel the impact of it more. Although I am lucky enough not to have a sexual harassment/violation experience, I have witnessed many times how powerful individuals underestimate others' emotional state, as both Galinsky et al. (2006) and Gonzaga et al. (2008) argue.

Considering that such behavior is prevalent even in the early years of schooling, we as members of an academic community have a moral responsibility to hold accountable individuals who misuse their power, demand a safe and responsive reporting system, emphasize the punishable consequences of abusive behavior, challenge gender stereotypes and roles by actively engaging with and being part of leadership and regularly review, and update sexual harassment policies and procedures based on feedback, best practices, and changing legal standards.

A zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment and inappropriate behavior should be applied equally to all individuals who mistreat others despite their position. Students and

staff alike should feel safe and protected to develop and operate, and each one of us should strive to create an equitable and respectful environment.

Final Thoughts

In closing this piece, I would like to thank Emily for writing this thought-provoking article and starting a dialogue on an issue that very few people want to expose and take actionable measures. As a woman educator, I feel saddened that, although unconsciously, I have been/still am part of a system that normalizes and accepts power imbalance and wrongdoings while at the same time aiming to educate and empower socially responsible individuals.

Thank you, Emily, for publicly raising your concerns and empowering other individuals to speak up. Your dedication to drive positive change in the academic environment is an inspiration and motivation for all and making us all accountable for a situation that it seems is not improving. I promise to become more engaged and demand actions to promote accountability in my work environment. Hopefully, I will not fail you and other individuals again!

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