

European Parliament “MeToo” blog gives voice to abuse victims

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News

Victims of sexual harassment and abuse in Parliament can now document their experiences without fear of victim shaming.



Photo Credit: European Parliament

A group of European Parliament workers have launched a “MeTooEP” blog to highlight cases of sexual harassment and abuse in the heart of Brussels.

Hot on the heels of the Hollywood-led #MeToo movement, which shone a light on endemic sexual abuse in the entertainment industry, the parliament blog, which launched on Tuesday, is an anonymous forum for victims of sexual abuse to come forward and share their stories.

One account on the blog, which features five victims' stories so far, recounts an assault on an official parliament mission overseas. The blog post says that victim filed a complaint with the "competent authority" in October 2017 and has so far received no response.

Speaking at a press conference, parliamentary assistant Amelia Martínez-Lobo, said "There is a lack of protection for victims - this means that the system is not working. Silence is always more comfortable than speaking out, but we will never leave victims alone."

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FEAR OF REPRISALS

Jeanne Ponte, a French parliamentary assistant, said that the apparent reluctance of alleged victims to come forward certainly did not mean that there was no problem of sexual harassment in parliament.

"It is likely that victims are not complaining officially for fear of the possible reprisals they may face. Just because the number of cases under investigation appears to be low does not in any way reflect the scale or seriousness of the problem," Ponte said.

She went on to explain that there are two parliamentary committees established to investigate alleged cases of harassment against workers: one for complaints about MEPs and political groups and another to deal with complaints against the assembly's administrative staff.

"There is a lack of protection for victims - this means that the system is not working. Silence is always more comfortable than speaking out, but we will never leave victims alone." Parliamentary assistant, Amelia Martínez-Lobo

According to Ponte, 11 official complaints against MEPs are currently under investigation, but come under the umbrella of "psychological harassment" and none involve sexual harassment.

Only one case is being handled by the second committee.

KAVANAUGH LOOMS LARGE

The launch of the blog is taking place against the backdrop of the approval of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court in the United States, despite allegations of serious sexual assault levelled against him dating back to when he was younger.

Kavanaugh won enough votes to take his seat on the Supreme Court despite claims that he

committed acts of sexual misconduct against Christine Blasey Ford and other women.

Kavanaugh's approval, which has sparked a huge debate in America about abuse against women, sends out a "terrible signal" to other alleged victims, said Miriam Lena Horn, a Finnish parliamentary assistant.

"Kavanaugh is elected a Supreme Court judge while [Christine Blasey] Ford gets death threats. Once again, it is the victim who suffers. This whole affair sends out a terrible signal to the 'MeToo' movement and other alleged victims of abuse," Horn said.

"This decision (on Kavanaugh) will just make it even harder to ensure that women working in the European Parliament are afforded proper protection," she added.

"The time has come to break the culture of silence in parliament, our workplace, and to help and encourage victims to speak out" Parliamentary assistant, Jeanne Ponte

Horn called on parliament to take similar measures adopted by the Commission in offering better protection, including mediation services, to victims. Unlike the parliament, the commission, she pointed out, has a transparency register which is an effective a channel for complainants to come forward.

ABUSE MASQUERADING AS 'A JOKE'

According to Ponte, harassment in the parliament is often dismissed by perpetrators, including MEPs, as being "a joke" or misunderstood on "cultural grounds."

She said that the blog was designed to help people who believe they may have fallen victim to some form of harassment to know more about their legal rights and will help victims identify what potentially amounts to abuse.

"Many victims may be even unaware that they have fallen victim to sexual harassment and abuse of power. The time has come to break the culture of silence in parliament, our workplace, and to help and encourage victims to speak out."

Ponte went on to say that a resolution on the issue, which was adopted by parliament last October had still not been implemented by the institution.

In March of this year, campaigners collected 1,000 names from across the political spectrum, calling for the measures contained in the resolution to be enforced immediately.

"We simply have not seen the progress on this that we'd hoped for and you have to question if the political will exists to deal with this problem in parliament," she said.

About the author

Lorna Hutchinson is a reporter and sub-editor at the Parliament Magazine

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