

## Sexual Harassment: The elephant in the room

Written by Madi Sharma on 22 November 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

When the cover-up of sexual harassment becomes more powerful than the disclosure, urgent action is needed, writes Madi Sharma.



*Photo credit: Office of Madi Sharma*

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Quote: “I am sickened that since the #MeToo movement, nothing has changed”

Soothing words are spoken, policies are put in place, victims are encouraged to come forward, protection is promised and then boom, you may as well be assaulted again, this time in front of an audience.

I am sickened that since the #MeToo movement, nothing has changed. There are known cases in all of the EU institutions. But how many prosecutions? None.

Gender-based violence, sexual harassment, harassment, are all abuses of power and amount to psychological violence that may or may not be associated with physical abuse. Intimidation, humiliation, a reduction of an individual's worth, are all acts of the perpetrator. This leads to stress, an inability to work and time off work.

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The majority of victims are women, but more and more men and LGBTQI individuals also suffer. "We cannot act without names" says the human resource director (and the journalist).

Yet once the name was out, the individual becomes the target. The victim is urged to: "think of your career, you will never get another job in Brussels, no one else has reported abuse, you are the only one, it would be better not to make a formal complaint."

Of course, as there are no other formally reported cases, the victim remains helpless, feeling it was their mistake. Meanwhile the perpetrator is free to continue their activities, even more empowered as they have got away with it yet again. Now, the human resource director is also complicit. The cover-up becomes more powerful than the disclosure.

I have to commend Antonio Tajani, President of the European Parliament, for clamping down on any hint of harassment - sexual or otherwise. However, as parliament employees rightly say, more needs to be done, and they have launched their disclosures blog.

"I am sickened that since the #MeToo movement, nothing has changed. There are known cases in all of the EU institutions. But how many prosecutions? None."

At the same time, I have to condemn Luca Jahier, President of the European Economic and Social Committee, for allowing harassment to continue despite numerous reports. I shocked the House of Civil Society when I dared to make a formal complaint about another member, listing their abusive activities towards both staff and members.

I was told: "there are no procedures in place to deal with a member, there is no legal framework." An internal investigation has taken place that has been filed as "internal and confidential", the staff have been offered medical services and I have a nice letter admitting there is a problem. Action? None.

These cases of harassment and sexual harassment continue and go unpunished for one reason: "the

reputation of the institution will be damaged if it enters the public domain.” Where are our values, our morals, our respect for dignity? Where do we show that we value our employees?

I was forced to contact OLAF, and I would ask those with harassment cases to report their situation to OLAF. OLAF is responsible for addressing harassment as well as its duty to ensure there is no abuse of public funds. Institutional funds used to defend institutional reputation and members is a misuse of public funds.

In 2016, €55,000 was used to defend a case of harassment regarding an MEP and an employee of the EESC. The institution lost the case and had to pay compensation and costs. The same member has had further harassment allegations levelled against them.

An institution that investigates and prosecutes perpetrators is one with an effective ethical code of practice. The rest are complicit in the crimes.

### **About the author**

Madi Sharma is an entrepreneur and a member of the European Economic and Social Committee

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