

MeToo: Turning the tide on abuse of power

Written by Emily O'Reilly on 7 February 2019 in Opinion
Opinion

Where there is power, there is the potential for abuse of power. The MeToo movement is ushering in a new era of cultural change in the EU institutions, writes EU Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly.



Emily O'Reilly | European Parliament Audiovisual

As a woman who began her working life in the early 1980s and in the then highly conservative country of Ireland, I was shocked at the extent to which so many women - in 2019 - continue to be subjected to a spectrum of abuse that runs from casual sexist comments to actual physical violence.

So many women continue to bear their gender as a handicap, to navigate the world as a potentially dangerous place, never to feel that ease and freedom in the world that is gifted to men as a birth right.

And for so long, we - woman as well as men - have taken this for granted, this is the way the world is,

this is for us as women to manage as best we can and hope that we will come to no harm.

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The advent of social media has also intensified the abuse for all genders in a world where private sanctuaries are increasingly rare.

There have been many consequences to the MeToo movement.

For women of my generation or even younger, it was finding ourselves running the film track of our lives back through our minds but this time with new subtitles, with a new clarity, a realisation that some of what happened to us would be called something very different today, would be seen through a very different prism and would not, could not be ignored in the way that we did and we had to decades ago.

The MeToo movement has not just therefore been about a younger cohort of women, it has had a potential impact on every woman alive in this world today.

“All EU institutions and agencies have anti-harassment policies in place but the main issue we identified is the low number of complaints being filed”

It is unsurprising that there is a particular character, a particular vividness, to abuse that takes place in a political setting. Where there is power, there is the potential for abuse of power.

Certain people are attracted to political life and its surrounds precisely because of that power. And even where that power is limited, there remains the temptation to test it out on the world around them and very often the test cases are colleagues and staff.

Some make their presence felt publicly, others attempt to dominate in smaller, more intimate, more vulnerable arenas.

Those who want to dominate, to control, have to be the major character in any exchange, in any relationship, and the scene is therefore set for a wide spectrum of potential abuse.

But every institution, every organisation is in a sense also a political construct and what happens in parliaments often simply mirrors what is going on in less publicly visible places of work.

Theoretically, none of this should be happening in an EU that proclaims our attachment to equality, human dignity, and the rule of law. The problem is that while many human rights breaches are widely

recognised and condemned, the denial of human dignity in this area is often not even recognised as such.

Last year I opened a Strategic Initiative, which is a more informal tool than an ordinary Ombudsman inquiry, to find out about best practice in this area and I concluded it with a report in December.

“People who have been harassed need support, need safe avenues through which they can navigate their complaints and the task of the institutions is to create those safe avenues”

My office does not investigate the substance of harassment, but focuses on the appropriateness and effectiveness of procedures preventing and dealing with harassment cases.

During the Initiative, my office did not focus solely on the Parliament, but cooperated with 26 other institutions and agencies. We asked for details of the institution’s anti-harassment policies and on reported cases of psychological and sexual harassment.

While there were variations in relation to progress made, overall it appeared clear that the EU institutions are ready for a cultural change.

As to the findings of my work, all EU institutions and agencies have anti-harassment policies in place but the main issue we identified is the low number of complaints being filed.

Underreporting suggests that the “old” culture of silence still lingers. There is not yet a fully-shared acceptance of what constitutes harassment and consequently no shared outrage when it happens. At worst, the victim can be deemed part of the problem.

The low number of cases being reported is a pity but hardly surprising. Harassment is not like having your handbag stolen. It isn’t neatly defined, it encourages others to evaluate you as a likely or unlikely victim of harassment, it risks further sexualising you in cases of sexual abuse, and there is the risk of being branded as trouble, as difficult, with the inevitable consequence for one’s career.

It should not take a demonstration of great and solitary bravery to deal with this. People who have been harassed need support, need safe avenues through which they can navigate their complaints and the task of the institutions is to create those safe avenues.

The strategic initiative has shown that the EU administration is addressing the issue of harassment and I hope that it will provide guidance for further progress.

Within the Parliament, I am aware that the two anti-harassment committees, the Quaestors, the MeTooEP activist group, as well as individual MEPs are all working towards the same goal. I encourage all the institutions, and the Parliament, to work together and to be bold in reform.

What is needed above all is a cultural change and this is never easy.

But by continuing to name abusive behaviour - to end its normalisation - and to put rules and procedures in place to deal with it, the EU institutions can encourage that cultural shift.

As the EU elections approach, its institutions need to be seen to be leading by example as the most modern, ethical administration possible.

About the author

Emily O'Reilly is the EU Ombudsman

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