

A couple of years ago while writing about [autism and Asperger's in film and TV](#), I came across a quote from a psychologist. I'm paraphrasing, but the gist was that there isn't a woman alive who hasn't - at one time or another - suspected her male partner of being on [The Spectrum](#).

The point - hyperbolic of course - was that most women have tales of men not listening, not picking up on cues and devoting excess energies to solitary pursuits like computer games.

Men and selective spectruminess is plaguing me at the moment.

I've been doing a bit of media about sexual harassment recently (i.e., [here](#)) and, depending on the program, there'll be calls or text messages fielded - or emails sent privately afterwards - from men expressing scarcely smothered frustration about just how "complicated" all this stuff is: that sexual harassment is notoriously subjective; that women are too sensitive/looking for opportunities to get outraged; that we need to spend more time thinking about men's "innocent" intentions.

The more I hear such claims the less sympathetic I am. If I'm to put effort into fretting about the blokes accused, my worries lie in the realm of trial by Twitter (which I've [written about previously](#)). But the idea of the actual concept of sexual harassment being "confusing" - the notion that *motive* could have any relevance to this discussion whatsoever - is merely cunning circumvention of necessary conversations about gender and power. Clever, but cunning.

There has been sexual harassment legislation in several states in Australia since the late 1970s and federal legislation since the early 1980s. Sexual harassment as bad is not breaking news.

Legislation encompasses not only the obvious no-nos such as unwanted touch, but also references concepts like "hostile environment". (The latter being particularly fascinating in light of [recent comments](#) from former Channel Nine CEO, Sam Chisholm, who described the

recently accused Don Burke as a “grub” and a “disgrace”. Those in power have a *legal obligation* to create safe environments for all employees; admitting awareness of problematic staffers but not doing anything is a) complicity and b) another brick in the wall of rape culture).

Having legislation of course, doesn’t mean people understand it. That said, wasting words - and time - debating what kind of touch/“compliment”/advance is permissible in a workplace doesn’t get us to a point of better understanding, but rather is just yet another distraction and attempt to downplay seriousness.

Why are there people in power - men, most commonly - devoting even a moment to strategising what they can “get away with” in the workplace? Why is *any* kind of touching of employees - or, for that matter, any kind of chatter about the physical appearance or sex life of colleagues - on anybody’s agenda? Why is anyone under the impression that the workplace is an appropriate environment for this kind of behaviour or banter?

We’re all going to work because we need to buy food and pay for our shelter. It’s not the [Blue Light Disco](#) where - if you play your cards right you might just cop a feel - nor is it an over-28s night at the local where it’s all pick up lines and games of [Toss the Boss](#).
It’s a bloody *workplace*.
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The answers to these questions of course, are not uncomplicated.

There is a reality that many people will actually meet their partner at work. This is a fact. But initially crossing that line - by escalating a professional relationship to something intimate - is treacherous. Liking someone you work with is insufficient grounds to touch them or sexualise them without knowing - without a shadow of a doubt - that your advance is welcome. Email them and suggest lunch; don’t turn “interest” into something that’ll necessitate a trip to HR and a hashtag. Equally, blurring the discussion - talking about the “naturalness” of human sexual attraction - is yet again steering the conversation away from power and gender.

Which brings me back to The Spectrum. I wrote not too long ago about [consent](#) and, notably, the downside of our culture's preoccupation with "no means no". In the repetition of this phrase - in our misguided belief that a woman will always verbalise a "no" when things go too far - a two-fold burden has been created. First, there is an expectation that unless that "no" gets articulated, that consent has been given: that unless she verbally stops you, all is okay to continue. Second, a dynamic is created whereby women are positioned as sexual gatekeepers: that men may as well proceed, proceed, proceed until she holds out a hand to stop things because that that's the way the courtship ritual plays out.

The exaggerated notion of all men being on the spectrum becomes most relevant here: there is a necessity for men - but it's also something we can all get better at - to pay attention to body language, to note all that *isn't* being vocalised. Just because she isn't saying no/stop/get away from me, Mr. President, doesn't mean that there are not other ways such sentiments get demonstrated. The excuse that "she didn't tell to me to stop" is just illustrative of a willful ignorance on the part of perpetrators who think they need to be spoon-fed a woman's dissent. It's just indicative of the burden on women to have to manage men's attention.

Rather than assuming women in the workplace are fair game until they say stop - alternatively, to assume that some kindly feminist will produce you a diagram of good touch and bad - is retrograde thinking. It's positioning women as available-by-default until they make it clear that they're not; it positions women as needing to police men's behaviour.

Don Burke has been accused of sexually harassment dating back to the 80s and 90s; i.e., a time before the internet when people were bored enough to be curious about whatever was going on in his [backyard](#). And predictably there are some attempts to point to these decades as though they were, somehow, *a whole other era*.

Sexual harassment was every bit as inappropriate then as now. The differences however, were that in the 1980s and 1990s there were less women in positions of power, less women coming forward with disclosures, a heightened perception of cost of complaining, and, notably no social media. This stuff wasn't somehow "okay" back then - it was against the law then too. Women didn't suddenly decide in 2017 that they resented being preyed upon by lecherous colleagues, we're just in a not-going-to-take-it-anymore Zeitgeist. One that was always going to arrive on our shores; Don Burke is just the first scalp in Australia's entertainment industry.

While the victims of sexual harassment are disproportionately women and the perpetrators are

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disproportionately wielding penises, overcoming this scourge is a problem that can't be overcome until we all acknowledge and address the sexual politics at play; the same sexual politics at play in terrorism and domestic violence and mass shootings - the same sexual politics, incidentally, that we apparently delight in dodging.

Lady Gaga, "Til It Happens To You", 2015.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/sexual-harassment-sexual-politics-and-the-gatekeeper-millstone-88143>