Why standing up and speaking out matters

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In 2019, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, a government agency, released a report: Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story.

A national story? What a shameful national story! And while there are organisations, people and schools working to support people who have, or are, experiencing abuse, assault, neglect, violence and harassment, there is an uphill struggle to create meaningful, positive and societal change when there is still such dismissal, even vitriol against women who have been harassed, abused and assaulted, particularly when the perpetrator/ perpetrators have positional power.

Early in 2021, Grace Tame was named Australian of the Year – for her advocacy for survivors of sexual assault, particularly those abused in institutional settings. Most notable is her role in advocating changes to a Tasmanian law that prevented sexual assault survivors from speaking out; while perpetrators were able to talk to the media and provide the only narrative of events publicly.

In speaking out, Grace has prompted other women to publicly and formally report harassment, abuse, sexual assault and rape – with allegations made against high-profile Australian politicians.

The dismissive and lacklustre responses by the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and other high-profile members of parliament is indicative of the entrenched “beliefs and behaviours reflecting disrespect for women,

low support for gender equality and adherence to rigid or stereotypical gender roles, relations and identities.”1

Many were left flabbergasted when our Prime Minister acknowledged that he had to seek advice from his wife to understand rape allegations – from the perspective of a father who has daughters – and when Minister Linda Reynolds’ response to her staff member’s allegations of rape was to call her a “lying cow”.

Outrage and shock across the country, promoted the groundswell of a grassroots movement: March4Justice (march4justice.com.au), similar to #MeToo, #LetHerSpeak, #TimesUp, #BalanceTonPorc, #NotYourHabibti, #Teknisktfel, #QuellaVoltaChe, #YoTambien, where globally people have been calling out sexual harassment and gender inequality.

Rather than taking the opportunity to show leadership, compassion and a desire to eradicate harassment, violence, abuse and rape in Australia by speaking to, or at, the events – the Prime Minister offered to privately meet with a small delegation from the March4Justice organisers in what can certainly be viewed as publicly dismissive, and a means of silencing the voices of women.

The Prime Minister again completely failed to understand the issues of gendered violence through his exceptionally ill-conceived choice of words when he proudly stated in parliament that day: “Not far from here, such marches, even now are being met with bullets, but not here in this country.”

The Deputy Prime Minister also declined to attend the march indicating he already had commitments that day.

Hundreds of thousands of women attended March4Justice events across Australia on 15 March (14 March in Perth) this year, signing petitions and having begun/continue conversations with family, friends and colleagues.

And while the crowds were huge, there were thousands more women who were unable to attend or chose not to attend for fear of their own safety, or for whom the issues of domestic and workplace violence, abuse and/or harassment are still too raw.

“Since 2003, the Australian Human Rights Commission has conducted four periodic surveys on the national experience of sexual harassment. [The] most recent survey conducted in 2018 showed

that sexual harassment in Australian workplaces is widespread and pervasive.”2

“One in three people experienced sexual harassment at work in the past five years.”2

The 2020 Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report – undertaken by Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins – made
55 recommendations to improve “the coordination, consistency and clarity between the anti-discrimination, employment and work health and safety legislative schemes.”2

“Consultations and submissions [into this inquiry] described the complex and interconnected ways in which experiencing and reporting workplace sexual harassment can affect individuals, including through:

- Negative impacts on health and well- being.
- Negative impacts on employment (both day-to-day and in relation to career progression).
- Significant financial consequences.”2

“The impact of workplace sexual harassment is not only limited to individual victims but extends to their families, friends, bystanders and other co-workers.”2

“Sexual harassment is not a women’s issue: it is a societal issue, which every Australian, and every Australian workplace, can contribute to addressing.”2

The time to act is now. The time to speak up is now.

“Workplace sexual harassment is not inevitable. It is not acceptable. It is preventable.”2

The 2020 Respect@Work report can be found at bit.ly/3sBKfAz

References

1 Our Watch, Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS) and VicHealth. 2015. “Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia.” Our Watch, Melbourne. bit.ly/3bipO5Y.

2 Australian Human Rights Commission. 2020. “Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report”. Sydney. bit.ly/3sBKfAz.

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