

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by Reverend Ann Batten, Anglican Priest and former Member of Parliament.

The “Me Too” Movement and the Economic Impact on Women

The “Me Too” movement has highlighted in a compelling way the experience of women at the hands of the powerful. The exposure of the experience of a number of high-profile women concerning their abuse echoes the lament in Psalm 55: “Listen to me, and answer me; I am troubled in my complaint.”

According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Centre in the US, one in three women has experienced some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetime. That’s a lot of lamenting – sadly, often in silence.

Background

In 2006, Tania Burke coined the phrase “Me Too” as a way to help women who had survived sexual violence. Since then the phrase has become the rallying cry of the anti sexual harassment movement. Scores of women and a number of men are stepping up and speaking out. They tell heart-breaking, terrifying stories of rape, assault, harassment and abuse at the hands of powerful men. They tell of the negative impact on their jobs, careers and personal relationships. They tell of economic consequences.¹

Recently we have seen the exposure of a number of high-profile celebrities including Bill Cosby and Placido Domingo.² Other powerful men are undergoing court trials for their past behaviour. One of them is Harvey Weinstein. Another, financier Jeffrey Epstein, died while imprisoned and awaiting trial. His trial continues for the benefit of his victims.

Aotearoa New Zealand has amongst the highest reported rates of family violence and sexual violence in the developed world. Nevertheless sexual violence is often not reported to authorities so can be very hard to measure statistically. The New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey (NZCASS) shows that only about 9 percent of sexual offences against men and women were reported to the Police.³ The phenomenon occurs across organisations,

governments and religions. It is an international problem. New Zealand is no exception.

It’s not about sex

Sexual harassment and rape are about control and power. An article in *Psychology Today* by Lyn Yonack⁴ asserts that “most sexual assaults and sexual violence are perpetrated by men, and typically arise within asymmetrical power dynamics, where the perpetrator occupies a more powerful or dominant position in relation to the victim. Typically these men use knowledge of their victim’s aspirations to seduce, coerce, manipulate, threaten or attack their victims. They confuse and control by dangling enticements with one hand and wielding threats, implied or explicit, with the other.”

Where are we today?

The “Me Too” movement has sparked worldwide attitudinal change. Social media, such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook have made public conversation hyper-visible and easier to organise. “Me Too” has resulted in some high-profile men being held to account. Nevertheless, here in New Zealand more needs to be done.

Economic impact

Sheetal Dhir, writing for *Al Jazeera*, posed the question: “Is there a causal relationship between experiencing the event and aftermath of assault and the lack of economic parity that exists between genders in the US and abroad? Could the prevalence of assault also help explain why women make up an infinitesimal margin of the ruling class and power elite?”⁵ Dhir, producer, and strategist working in the field of social justice believes so.

If we accept that there is an economic impact on women victims, how and where does this arise? The Equal Opportunity Commission in the USA states that 85 percent of women report sexual harassment at work. According to the Human Rights Commission (HRC), these statistics are unavailable in New Zealand. The HRC can only provide

¹ *Chicago Tribune*, July 19, 2019.

² Michael R. Sisak and Jim Mustian, *Associated Press*: 8 July and 13 August, 2019.

³ New Zealand Human Rights Commission,

New Zealand Family Violence Clearing House, 2017.

⁴ “Sexual Assault is about Power” by psycho- analyst and psychotherapist Lyn Yonack.

⁵ *Al Jazeera*, 1 Oct, 2018.

estimates from the cases that have come forward to them. Other information sources come from the NZ Police, the District Court, the NZ Violence Against Women Study, the Ministry of Women's Affairs and NZCASS.

Lyn Yonack experienced a number of sexual harassment incidents in the workplace over several years, leading to her quitting those workplaces at some personal cost. She reflects the common experience of women in the workplace. Many women, for reasons such as poverty, lack of education, or emotional damage or stability, do not have the wherewithal to accomplish what she has managed to achieve in spite of her setbacks.

Quantifying the economic cost

Nilofer Merchant⁶ reports that “researchers have been unable to fully quantify the total economic cost to all of us, just as we can't quantify the total costs to human prosperity of racism or other systemic discrimination. But it's only logical that as sexually predatory behaviour goes on and is covered up, some people get to contribute their ideas, while others don't. And we all pay the price.”

Just as institutional racism in Aotearoa prevents full contribution by Māori, it is the system which is the limiting gateway for women's ideas, growth and prosperity.”

An example of the often crippling economic damage to women is the case of former Air Force Sergeant Mariya Taylor, who is trying to overturn a High Court decision that gave her no damages for the abuse she suffered as an 18-year-old Air Force recruit. Justice Rebecca Edwards ruled that, in spite of her allegations, many of which she accepted, the claim was prevented by the Limitation Act and the Accident Compensation Act. After she lost the claim, her abuser, former Air Force Sergeant Robert Roper, (a known serial abuser and paedophile) sought court costs from her and she was ordered to pay him \$27,819.25. This and the lack of compensation is what Mariya Taylor is currently appealing. The High Court in Wellington would not divulge to me whether her appeal has been successful.⁷

Research about the costs of sexual assault are in no way exhaustive, but offer some insight. For example, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics in the USA, the total cost survivors incurred as a result of sexual assault was \$18m in 2002. Adjusted to today,

that number would be significantly higher.⁸ No such data is available in New Zealand because the data is spread across approximately ten different organisations and agencies.

Where to from here?

According to a United Nations report,⁹ “Changing cultures towards zero tolerance for violence against women, therefore, must be a priority for States, communities and families.”

But here in Aotearoa, women are still waiting for a meaningful, co-ordinated and national response. Redress is varied according to the organisation, the situation, and sadly, women's willingness to fight for themselves through the courts. According to Maggy Tai Rakena, manager of the sexual violence agency, START,¹⁰ “Legislative change is needed in order to lift the conviction rates for sexual harassment and violence. That could empower more people to speak out.”

Recourse to justice is distributed across at least ten government agencies. Responding to this need, Jan Logie, Under-Secretary to the Justice Minister, has outlined proposed legislative changes addressing how women are treated in the courts. Changes include a cross-government joint venture developing new ways of working across government, iwi and communities to reduce family violence and sexual violence through an integrated response.

These changes need to occur alongside other measures to reduce sexual violence against women, for example:

- changing social norms related to the acceptability of violence and the subordination of women;
- promoting non-violent masculinities oriented towards equality and respect;
- addressing child abuse and promoting healthy families and nurturing violence-free environments for children;
- working with young boys to address early stages of sexual violence perpetration;
- promoting healthy sexuality for men and addressing male sexual entitlement;
- ending impunity for men who rape; and
- developing interventions that respond to the specific patterns of violence in each context.¹¹

Clearly there is much more to be done to address violence towards women and the economic consequences. And in the process, much more lamenting.

⁶ <https://hbr.org/2017/11/the-insidious-economic-impact-of-sexual-harassment> *Harvard Business Review*, “The Insidious Economic Impact of Sexual Harassment”, 29 November, 2017.

⁷ *NZ Herald on Sunday*, 27 September, 2019.

⁸ <https://mcasa.org/> “Economic Cost of Sexual Violence”, Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Violence.

⁹ https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbap/docs/Research%20&%20Publications/womens_empowerment/RBAP-Gender-2013-P4P-VAW-Report.pdf

¹⁰ <https://starthealing.org/>

¹¹ <http://www.justice.govt.nz/>