

#MeToo: Memories of Sexual Assault are NOT a Figment of Women's Imagination

The claim by President Donald Trump and others supporting the appointment of Judge Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court that it is impossible for a woman to remember every detail of a sexual assault that occurred more than 30 years ago cannot go unchallenged. Every woman who has experienced a sexual assault of any kind remembers every detail of the encounter. She may not remember the day it took place, or what she was wearing or even the exact location, but details of the assault itself usually remain indelibly etched in her memory.

Women watching Dr. Christine Blasey Ford recounting the details of what she claims was a sexual assault by Judge Kavanaugh when they were both teenagers were warned that watching her speak at a US Senate hearing might trigger their own memories of similar incidents. Indeed that is what happened to me. As I watched Ford give her testimony, I found myself recalling events that I had long buried somewhere in my mind.

I remembered 1985, when I was a university student in the United States. I had just got off the bus and was walking to my apartment in Quincy town on the outskirts of Boston when I noticed a black sports car parked next to a curb and the white man in it jerking himself off while looking at me with a grin on his face. Having never been "flashed" before, I found myself paralysed and unable to move. I did eventually muster my legs to run to my apartment. I do not remember the exact day or time this happened, but I do remember the man's face. He must have been in his 30s or 40s and had dark wavy hair and small beady eyes. I never told anyone about this incident (until now) because I dismissed it as one of those things that

deranged men do to frighten or intimidate women.

Women watching Dr. Christine Blasey Ford recounting the details of what she claims was a sexual assault by Judge Kavanaugh when they were both teenagers were warned that watching her speak at a US Senate hearing might trigger their own memories of similar incidents. Indeed that is what happened to me.

A year or so before, I had almost been raped by a man who was driving me home from a party. I didn't know the guy very well, as I had only met him for the first time at the party. On the way back to my dorm in Boston, he stopped at an empty parking lot and proceeded to unzip his trousers. He then took out his penis and ordered me to suck it. I said no, and then lit a cigarette and threatened to burn his penis with it. I think I managed to scare him. He quickly dropped me off on a street that was nowhere near my dorm, yelling obscenities and calling me a tease. I didn't tell anyone about this incident either because I blamed myself for allowing a man I barely knew to drive me home. But for years afterwards, I did wonder if my lighter and cigarettes had helped me ward off a rape.

I remembered 1985, when I was a university student in the United States...a black sports car parked next to a curb, the white man in it jerking himself off while looking at me with a grin on his face...I never told anyone about this incident (until now)... I dismissed it as one of those things that deranged men do...

In those days, the term "date rape" had not been popularised in American college campuses, and so not much was said when we learnt that a college-mate had been sexually assaulted, or even possibly gang-raped, at a college frat party in an elite university in Boston. I remember one instance vividly. My dorm mate, who happened to be a devout Catholic, asked me to wait in the reception for her while she went upstairs with a male

student she had just met. I didn't think much of the dangers that she might be exposing herself to at the time. (In US college campuses in those pre-HIV/AIDS days, it was quite normal for students to engage in casual sex.) When she didn't return hours later, I decided to go back to my dorm, thinking that perhaps she had decided to spend the night with her new friend.

The next day, she returned to the dorm, visibly bruised and traumatised. It was obvious that she had been raped. She did not say what happened to her, but her demeanor suggested that she had been through something physically and emotionally painful. Her mental condition deteriorated to the point where her parents had to be called to pick her up and take her home. She never returned to college.

And no one in the college administration tried to identify the boys who had done this to her or to charge them with sexual assault. It was just not the done thing in those days. She probably blamed herself for the "sin" she had allowed to be committed against her, and being a Catholic, she probably even forgave her attacker/s. This is the thing that people don't get about sexual assault – the victims always feel a sense of shame and guilt, and this is what often prevents them from coming forward. Worse, they are made to feel that the assault was just a figment of their imagination. Yet, as data shows, almost every woman in the world will experience or has experienced some form of sexual assault or harassment in her lifetime. So why is it so hard for people, especially men, to believe that this is happening?

A year or so before, I had almost been raped by a man who was driving me home from a party.

But was the reality TV-type US Senate hearing of Ford's claims really necessary? I don't think so. In my opinion, Ford should not have agreed to present her case in public on camera in

front of the whole world, especially considering that she had previously requested to remain anonymous, and also because women who come forward publicly with such charges are often ridiculed, and made to feel bad all over again.

And indeed that is exactly what happened. A few days after the hearing, Ford was mocked and made fun of by none other than the President of the United States who suggested that she had made up the whole story at the behest of his political opponents. The laughter that echoed at the Mississippi rally where Donald Trump derided Ford probably brought back memories of the “uproarious laughter” that she says she remembers most about the sexual assault incident in 1982. For those who watched the rally on television, the most shocking scenes were those of women in the crowd laughing and jeering.

Until the #MeToo movement gained momentum, most victims of sexual assault or harassment believed that they were to blame for what happened to them. What the #MeToo movement has done is shift the blame to the perpetrators, thereby liberating women (and men) to speak openly about the trauma they suffered. It is likely that the recent barrage of revelations about Catholic priests in the United States and Australia molesting or raping boys may have remained a secret if these boys (who are now middle-aged men) had not been emboldened by the #Me Too movement. For the first time in a long time, it has become okay for women and men to say they were raped or sexually harassed without feeling that they will be put on the dock and not be believed.

But, as the Senate hearing has shown, despite the #MeToo movement, it is still difficult for sexual assault victims to be believed. And when they do come out, all kinds of questions are raised about their mental health, rather than the mental health of the perpetrators even though during most of the hearing, it was Ford who appeared coherent (though visibly flustered) while the man she was accusing appeared hysterical and overly defensive. Kavanaugh even managed to paint himself

as a victim of a left-wing conspiracy. And despite his repeated declarations about how much he liked beer, none of the members of the male-dominated Senate accused him of having a drinking problem.

Until the #MeToo movement gained momentum, most victims of sexual assault or harassment believed that they were to blame for what happened to them.

In 1991, Anita Hill, a bright young black lawyer, accused Clarence Thomas (another US Supreme Court nominee) of sexual harassment, and she was not believed. She was vilified and accused of being a “man-eating professional” who was just seeking attention. To see this happen now, once again, 27 years later, is discouraging.

Some feminists like Germaine Greer have even stated that women who claim to have been sexually harassed or assaulted by powerful men might have willingly agreed to have sex with these men. Of the Hollywood actresses who have accused movie moguls of sexual assault or harassment, she had this to say: “If you spread your legs because he said ‘be nice to me or and I’ll give you a job in a movie’ then I’m afraid that’s tantamount to consent, and it’s too late now to start whingeing about that.” It is disheartening to hear these sentiments expressed by someone who has spent a lifetime examining male-female relations and how they impact sexuality.

Greer, of all people, should know that rape and other types of sexual assault or harassment are political issues – because they are the result of skewed power relations between men and women. When the man raping or sexually harassing a woman has the power to make or break her career, the issue of consent becomes murky and blurred. What does consent mean in this context?

And it really doesn’t matter if the assault was a rape or a groping of groins while fully clothed; the impact on women and

girls is the same. (I still remember to this day when a big burly man came up behind me, fondled my buttocks and let out a great big guffaw as I was walking to school from my home in Nairobi. Like Ford, it is the laughter I remember most about that incident. That happened more than 40 years ago, when I was around 10-years-old, but I am still wary of walking alone on lonely lanes.)

Recently the Bollywood actress Tanushree Dutta stated that the “casting couch” is alive and well in Bollywood and that leading male actors routinely ask their female co-stars to have sex with them before they approve them for a role. (Apparently, the casting of leading ladies in Bollywood happens in actors’ trailers and hotel rooms, not in the offices of casting directors). Dutta has not had a leading role in a Bollywood movie since she accused a much-respected male co-star of sexually harassing her. This shows that when a woman comes out and accuses her boss or colleague of sexual harassment, she is likely to be committing career suicide. She will be ridiculed, not believed, and most likely fired. Which woman would risk facing all this?

It really doesn't matter if the assault was a rape or a groping of groins while fully clothed; the impact on women and girls is the same.

So when a woman does come forward, chances are that she has either calculated the risks in her mind and has decided to do what is right no matter what. Some argue that women who come out years after being sexually assaulted – when both they and the accused have got married, had children and moved on with their lives – are not doing anyone a favour as many lives and reputations are destroyed. The problem with this argument is that it assumes that the perpetrator has stopped attacking women now that he is happily married with children. As the Harvey Weinstein and Donald Trump cases have shown, men do not stop grabbing p.... just because they have a beautiful wife and

children home. Men who commit such crimes or misdemeanors – and constantly get away with them – are likely to continue committing them unless they are made to account for their actions.

All the men and women who support abusive men should know that sexual crimes have no expiry date and that if this culture of misogyny and male entitlement continues, it is their daughters who will one day pay the price.

The Women for Trump brigade and all the men and women who support abusive men should know that sexual crimes have no expiry date and that if this culture of misogyny and male entitlement continues, it is their daughters who will one day pay the price, if they are not paying it already.