

He, Too

For the #MeToo Movement to be effective, due process must be observed for both sides

By Bobbie Kirkhart

EVERY WOMAN HAS HAD THE EXPERIENCE, NOT ONCE, NOT TWICE, but many more times. How many? There are no reliable statistics. Sometimes it was irritating; sometimes it was terrifying; sometimes it caused injury; sometimes it caused death. Until recently, we rarely talked about it outside a close circle of female friends. It wasn't so much that we wouldn't be believed as that we would be blamed, even by other women.

This blaming had consequences beyond hurt feelings. If a woman was thought to have invited an advance from one man, she was assumed to be open to similar behavior from others. Her reputation allowed him to act with impunity.

Consequently, it is no surprise that many women in the “he said she said” situations always believe the “she” and take offense when someone questions the accusation. Statistically, we are right to believe the woman. Women rarely lie about such things, but “rarely” is a long way from “never.”

It is a sad surprise that the freethought community is tearing itself up over such accusations and denials. Unless the accused man confesses and apologizes immediately, our discussions on the allegations eat up much of our time and energy, destroy friendships and embarrass our movement. Although there is much emotion involved, I believe we can—and must—look at these things as the rationalists we are.

I remember a time in my college years that I believed I had fought off an attempted rape. When he went further than I wanted to, I told him “no,” but he didn't stop. He continued his aggression until I pushed him back. He backed off, and in my naiveté, I thought I had overpowered him. It didn't even occur to me to report it. One just didn't. It was years later when I realized that it would have been impossible for me to physically subdue the muscular boy. By that time, I knew more of what men had been taught, and undoubtedly, he had been told, as many boys were, that when a woman says “no” she often means “yes.”

Today, with more openness about sex and more public discussion of the issues of consent, such misunderstandings are less common, but we have not yet arrived at the point where all of us have the same signals or standards. He and she often interpret the same set of facts differently.

Misunderstandings should not be dismissed. As a community, we need to make explicit guidelines so that both parties

are aware of what the other might be thinking, so that each takes care to be clear about limits and expectations.

Too often I hear, “Women don't lie about these things.” Hogwash. Even in the 1950s, when complaining about sexual abuse was punished, I knew women who lied. Although it's still unusual, we must assume that it is increasing with the times, when there is less for the woman to lose. The motives for lying are varied, usually attention, money, or spite. Sometimes to discredit an opponent. We should be open to strong evidence of an ulterior motive when an accusation is made.

A Responsibility to Our Community

Outside of the courthouse, it's not reasonable to say that the accused deserves the benefit of the doubt because in these situations there will almost always be doubt. As a people who pride ourselves on rational thinking, it is reasonable to expect us to make judgments based on a logical examination of the facts, and when the conclusion is not absolutely certain, temper our response.

As a community, we should not tolerate online verbal wars as a method of settling any dispute, much less this kind.

We would do well to follow some guidelines when an accusation is made:

First, we should ask, “Was the alleged behavior abuse or simply rude?” There is a difference between being offended and being intimidated. Was it a single off-color joke? Women complain, understandably, about a man's verbal persistence. It can be irritating, but if there is no stalking, no threat—explicit or implied—it falls short of abuse.

I have heard, “If a number of women tell the same story it must be true.” If we really agreed with that logic, we would all be worshipping Jesus. It seems we have left out the important caveats in this test. “If a number of women who have not heard the story or had opportunity to discuss it tell the same story it is likely to be true.” It is possible that a United States senator lost his seat because of unqualified “truth in numbers” reasoning.

In our community, we have a responsibility to offer our accused members and our accusing members the best justice we can find. When there is strong evidence, we should insist that accused perpetrators accept limits on their involvement in situations that would intimidate others. When there is not, we should not tolerate either side persisting in arguing its case with repeated invective. Our organizations should make and publish standards of personal conduct with explicit, enforceable guidelines.

As a people devoted to reason, we also have a responsibility to the larger community. We should not miss an opportunity to teach principles of reasoning wherever they are needed, and they are very much needed in allegations of sexual abuse. 

Bobbie Kirkhart is a former president of Atheists United and former editor of this newsletter.

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