

Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research

Insights from Literature

The Language of Sexual Violence

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It has been twelve months since allegations of sexual misconduct against Hollywood's star-makers and stars moved the #MeToo movement into our homes and conversations. Although Tarana Burke had created the phrase "Me Too" some 12 years before, to help other women who had experienced sexual violence, the term was catapulted into the "Twittersphere" in October 2017 after the accusations against Harvey Weinstein emerged.

For those of us who live in Queensland, the disturbing revelations of last October coincided with 2017 **Sexual Violence** Awareness Month- our state's time to, among other objectives, "raise community awareness about sexual violence". If you live in the United States, however, you'd be encouraged to take action during April: **Sexual Assault** Awareness Month.

So, what's the difference in these terms 'sexual violence' and 'sexual assault'?

OurWatch (2014, p. 11) describes sexual violence as "an abuse of power (which)... can happen to anyone, regardless of sex, sexuality, gender identity, or any other marker of identity", noting that "sexual assault" is a similar term. According to OurWatch (2014, p. 11) sexual violence covers

a range of sexual behaviours that make someone feel uncomfortable, frightened, intimidated or threatened. These behaviours are all 'violent' in the sense that they are a violation, whether they involve physical violence or not. Some can be life-threatening. They include:

- *sexual harassment (for example, unwanted sexual comments or jokes)*
- *sexual coercion (pressuring or forcing someone into having sex)*
- *unwanted sexual touching of any kind*
- *being forced to watch sexual things, including pornography*
- *voyeurism (being watched doing intimate things without having given your permission)*
- *threats or other kinds of intimidation of a sexual nature...*
- *sexual assault, including rape.*

Although it has been suggested that sometimes the term 'sexual assault' is also used loosely to cover all of these behaviours (OurWatch, 2014), usually this term is reserved for describing

an unwanted act of a sexual nature forced upon (a person)... by intimidation, physical force, or coercion, or where an attempt is made to do this. This includes rape, attempted rape and aggravated sexual assault (assault with a weapon), acts of penetration by objects, as well as acts which don't involve penetration. It also includes situations in which a person is unable to give consent (for example, because they are under the age of consent, affected by alcohol or drugs, or otherwise physically, intellectually or mentally unable to give consent). (OurWatch, 2014)

However, with respect to legal definitions, Fileborn and Gargett (2011) underscore that there is variation in the terminology used to describe sexual offences between Australian jurisdictions; for example, different states and territories define rape, sexual assault, and sexual penetration or intercourse without consent in different ways.

Meanwhile, the #MeToo movement maintains its momentum, exposing the issue of sexual violence in workplaces beyond Hollywood's studios. There are now, for example, data published from the medical (Jagsi, 2018) and public library (Civitello, 2017) fields and the media- traditional and social- continues to highlight the pervasive and destructive nature of this violence in all its forms.

Closer to home, last month the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) released the results of its latest Sexual Harassment Survey and the news isn't good: sexual harassment continues to be a major problem in Australian workplaces (AHRC, 2018). However, these survey results are informing the Commission's current *National Inquiry into sexual harassment in Australian workplaces*. According to the Commission, this is a chance to "contribute to the national conversation... an opportunity... to hear from individuals and organisations about their views, experiences and suggestions for change". Is this your chance to say #MeToo? Or our chance to say "No more!"?

Submissions will be accepted until 31 January 2019. You can find out more here:

<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/projects/national-inquiry-sexual-harassment-australian-workplaces>

References

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