

# NOT GUILTY

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An enabler is defined as “a person or thing that makes something possible”, “a person who encourages or enables negative or self-destructive behaviour in another.”

**T**he current debate around the large amount of high profile sexual harassment and assault allegations in international news has sparked a cultural conversation about women, power, male sexual entitlement and sexual misconduct.

What sparked this discussion was news of American film producer Harvey Weinstein. On 15 October this year, actress Alyssa Milano began an awareness campaign encouraging the use of the #MeToo to show the scale and prevalence of sexual harassment as a social problem, tweeting: “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem. While millions of people responded, more cases have certainly gone unreported, because of fear, of judgement, of losing one’s job, of further harm – and not to mention those who

do not have the information or technology to add their voices.

In less than 24 hours, more than 4,7 million people had participated on social media from across the globe. Women (and men) admitted that they too had been a victim of sexual harassment or assault.

For over three decades, Weinstein has been harassing and assaulting young women starting out in their Hollywood career.

In response to the Weinstein case, two questions, amongst others, were raised: Why did the women not speak out before and why was Hollywood silent for thirty years as Weinstein’s abuse was no secret.

This article considers answers to both these questions. The first response is: power. As one of Hollywood’s powerful producers, Weinstein was the gatekeeper of success for upcoming actors and actresses. He could make or break their career. He

knew it. The women knew it. Going against him could have meant passing up on career opportunities and dreams. Weinstein took advantage of the vulnerability of young actresses.

What about all those in the industry who didn’t say anything? Like the women, they too couldn’t say anything without alienating the most powerful man in Hollywood and jeopardising their own career.

Secondly, the issue of power is clearly tied to a further issue: that of enabling. The allegations against Weinstein and Donald Trump are strikingly similar. The evidence is similar. According to Anna North and Ezra Klein, the outcomes have been different because Weinstein had lost enough power to imperil his protection. For Republicans, not protecting Trump, it would have meant giving the Democrats the presidency. Protecting Trump by looking the other way or doing mental gymnastics to

justify or ignore his actions prove that, indeed, power protects. The Trump-Weinstein cases, however, also show that enablers protect themselves and their benefits at the cost of the victims.

What does this show us? At the individual level it shows us that protecting ourselves is ubiquitous. The survivor does not speak out to protect herself from further shame and/or harassment, from not being believed and made out to have asked for it. At communal level, as seen with the Trump-Weinstein comparison, it shows us that something is fundamentally flawed in our societies and institutions, if someone’s rank and “esteem” gives them the ability to harass and assault without question or consequences. It furthermore shows us there are two culprits: both the perpetrator and the enabler(s).

This article wants to draw the reader’s attention to the notion, “conductive



context” as used by Prof Liz Kelly, director of the Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit at London Metropolitan University, which refers to the kind of context which creates or allows for complicity by which bystanders do not intervene in what they know is unaccepted behaviour and where they may even recognise the victim’s abuse. It can be argued that it is unrealistic to expect harassment to be stopped by only the people it is happening to.

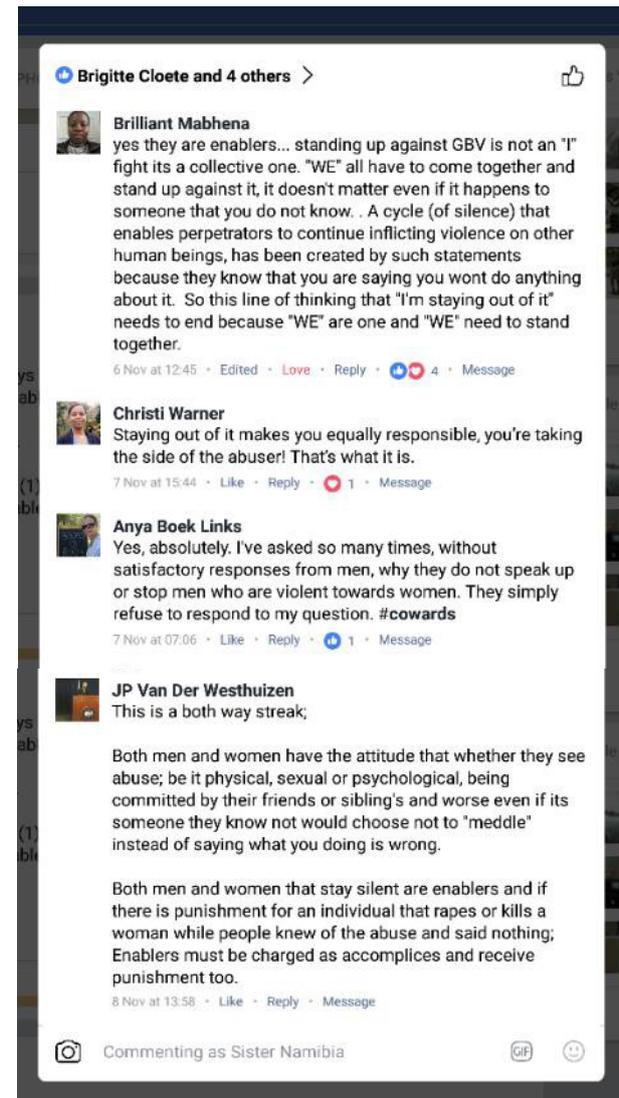
We have seen the power there is in numbers with the consequences the rising up of voices against Weinstein has had for him – being fired from his own company. But as North and Klein argued earlier, Weinstein’s enablers no longer protected him, thus enabling the victim voices that rose up against him to have an impact.

To conclude this piece, we want to consider the matter of enabling. The allegations and the #Me-Too campaign should be a wake-up call to see a fundamental change in our society regarding power dynamics in female-male relations. Individuals are

tasked to choose to no longer be enablers of sexual harassment. The collective response of those who condemn male sexual entitlement and power abuse in the work sphere, should be heard to discourage potential perpetrators from overstepping the boundaries.

This problem plays itself out in similar fashion in all areas of society. Each of us must examine our own lives and recognise, that, as a matter of ethics and effectiveness, we are the ones who enable corruption and impunity by looking the other way and remaining passive bystanders amidst abuse (see Jackson Katz’s views on the bystander approach). In Namibia we have no shortage of examples to prove this point.

By not speaking out against irregularities, we as citizens enable those in power to remain unaccountable for mismanagement. By not speaking out as pupils and even fellow teachers, we enable teachers who have sexual relations with pupils to get away with murder. By not calling for strict enforcement of traffic laws, we



as road users enable the carnage on our roads. By providing clean (government) audits when there were clearly irregularities, auditors enable financial mismanagement to continue at the detriment of tax payers. By not speaking to our brothers and friends about the way they are abusive to the women in their lives, we enable them to abuse. The list of our enabling is long and varied. Our membership in various communities makes us responsible to ensure a conducive environment that promotes individual and communal well-being.

We are also responsible for both the safety of the vulnerable and guilty of the tolerance that allows perpetrators to continue abusing.

To conclude in the words of Jessica Valenti, author of *Sex Object: A Memoir*, “Telling our stories can help – but nothing will change until the social consequences for men are too great for them to risk hurting us.” Similarly, for all the examples mentioned previously, unless there will be consequences for the missteps of perpetrators, it is us – the enablers – who are guilty of tolerating the detrimental status quo. ♀