

Submission 246

I need to tell this in my own words in my own way.

For around 4 years, I, a trans and bi woman, worked in various settings with a person who ultimately bullied and, in my opinion, sexually harassed me.

“Sexual harassment is an unwelcome sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favours or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature which makes a person feel offended, humiliated and/or intimidated, where a reasonable person would anticipate that reaction in the circumstances.”

The behaviour I experienced fits all of the legal definition quoted above. However, the perpetrator, (hereafter referred to as Z) showed no awareness of my discomfort.

Z is to my knowledge, a cisgender woman. I do not know how her sexual orientation plays out in practice, regardless of any “label.” It could fall under anything other than heterosexual is all I can say. Z and I volunteered in the same organisation, were on a [REDACTED] committee and on other occasions worked together as “stakeholders.”

Z repeatedly kissed me and would never ask consent. At one occasion, a social function, she arrived in the middle of a speech, sat next to me and in a loud and aggressive whisper said “lean in” so she could kiss me. I refused. One day, almost in desperation, I held up my hand and backed off. She looked disbelieving.

This person [REDACTED] has cultivated a particular image by being a smooth talker and has fooled people to some extent. Some people see her as having a “pretty face” and are thrown off track from more careful scrutiny of Z because of that. Unfortunately, Z is also good at making herself appear competent and useful to those higher up in any hierarchy. I found it difficult to gain headway when trying to raise issues. Efforts to talk with CEO and chair of her employer were squashed by comments that it wasn’t fair to her. Ironically this [REDACTED] organisation claims to support good practice re sexual harassment. While plenty of people from the length, depth and breadth of LGBTIQ communities find her bullying behaviour problematic, few are prepared to put their name to a complaint as Z can be and is on occasions, intimidating.

I went to mediation with Z on this and a number of issues. Z’s response was repeatedly “I didn’t mean anything to be offensive.” Z has a high level of legal knowledge and is aware of laws regarding discrimination and harassment being backed by the approach of “motive is irrelevant.” She showed no understanding about consent. She was rude and sarcastic on occasions during the mediation session. She accused me of being a “complainer.” I do not believe she acted in good faith during the mediation.

I have moved away from working [REDACTED] where Z works for the sake of my mental health. I feel sad and frustrated I cannot contribute as I have plenty to offer in these areas; my health and wellbeing needs to come first all the same.

While any harassment is horrible and causes distress for the recipient, there is an extra factor in my area of work, this being the hypocrisy factor. When people say one thing about inclusivity and justice but don't walk their talk on a day-to-day basis this creates a sense of betrayal along with other thoughts and feelings.

I infinitely acknowledge that the majority of harassment (and other negative behaviours e.g. intimate partner violence) is perpetrated by badly behaved cisgender men onto cisgender women as part of misogyny, gendered power imbalances and similar. I think part of my challenge as a ground-breaker in my area is that people have not grasped a full understanding that any person of any attribute, including gender identity, can perpetrate onto any other person. One prominent campaigner for reform, while doing their best to be helpful, seemed to think my perpetrator was a male. The behaviour (emphasis) of toxic masculinity can be initiated by a person of any gender identity. We need more understanding of this to ensure respect and safety for all.

I believe another factor in my story is my neuroprocessing i.e. how my brain processes information. I have an innate ability to see information in greater detail and process that information more deeply than many people. We live in a society that prioritises so-called "logic" over other approaches. Z's general arrogance and lack of portrayed empathy, led to her dismissing my approach to achieving outcomes in a highly demeaning way.

My experience also faces another obstacle in achieving natural justice and closure in that some of my roles in this time were voluntary. I believe for harassment (and discrimination) that volunteers and paid employees and contractors need equal protection. Further, there needs to be far more time to lodge complaints. The shock, denial, disbelief, anger and other emotions I faced made it hard to start the legalistic processes and work out courses of action.

I hope making this submission can spare one person from having to endure what I have.