

Person of the year

FRA REDAKTØREN

RAGNHILD ØRSTAVIK

Ragnhild Ørstavik (born 1964), deputy Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association. She is an MD/PhD, and holds a secondary position as researcher at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health.

Time Magazine named the #MeeToo movement 'Person of the Year 2017' ahead of Trump – the incarnation of a man with power and a patronising view of women. Now, the movement to stop sexual harassment and abuse of power must entail consequences in the health services and academia as well.



Photo: Einar Nilsen

It was on a class outing to the Botanical Gardens in the 1970s. I was wearing a red knitted sweater, itchy and a little too tight. In the clammy atmosphere of the greenhouse I could feel two fumbling hands grabbing what I hoped one day would turn into a pair of real breasts. Then I could hear someone yelling: 'Hey, Ragnhild has no more than a pair of knobs' – followed by raucous laughter. I said nothing, did nothing. It was just the way it was. Some took the lead, others joined in the merriment, and the rest turned away, fearful of losing status with the leader of the pack.

As we have learned this autumn, sexual harassment and abuse are not phenomena restricted to insecure boys in early puberty. In fact, the 'me too' campaign started ten years ago with the efforts of the activist Tarana Burke to prevent sexual abuse of young African-Americans (1). This autumn, women celebrities in the music and theatre business attached the hashtag to this expression. After that, things really took off. The working environment of artists attracted a lot of attention: many young people are hired on short-term contracts, many people work evenings and nights, there is passion and enthusiasm for the job. In other words, not so very unlike academia and the health services.

Academia launched its campaign in November (2). In December, some courageous young doctors collected stories from the health services through a closed Facebook group, while also asking for signatures to an appeal. More than 3 200 women doctors signed, and the appeal #utentaushetsplikt was published in the *Aftenposten* daily on 8 December along with 20 anonymised narratives (3). The printed narratives provide no more than a glimpse of all

that was revealed on the Facebook page.

This informal study confirms what many already know: things have to change. In my opinion, three things in particular.

First, off-colour jokes are not funny, especially when they are made at the expense of a colleague. The pranksters may be few in number, but it's just like in the schoolyard – some act as bullies and many more let it happen. We all need to learn that it's cooler to put one's foot down than to laugh along, even when the prankster is a colleague whom you admire or someone you think you may be dependent on.

Second, channels need to be established through which those who feel subjected to sexual harassment can blow the whistle without fear of retaliation. Moreover, those who are the objects of such whistleblowing need to have *their* rights safeguarded. Most institutions already have such arrangements. However, as called for by the campaign: routines need to be improved, with a clear distribution of responsibilities and specific guidelines for managers, trade union representatives and ombudspersons (3).

Last – and most importantly: Those who harass others or commit abuse should not feel safe. Serious incidents need to entail serious consequences. If the impression left by the campaigns is correct, they often involve men with power. They may possess competencies that are hard to replace, a list of publications or academic merit that their institution can pride itself on, or they may have the authority to decide who will be appointed to the next permanent position. These men need to be stripped of their power, even though it may hurt. Let us never again have to see the professor who did not have his engagement renewed because someone finally made the taxing effort involved in blowing the whistle – but soon thereafter reappeared as a professor at another university with new (young, female) PhD scholars in tow.

For, as the *Aftenposten* daily writes in an editorial that requests Bent Høie, the minister of health and care services, to clean up: nobody in a workplace is so important as to be permitted to pester others (4). Eva Vingård, Swedish professor of occupational medicine, goes even further when comparing 'old geniuses and cultural profiles [who] have a hard time adapting' to asbestos and solvents – meaning other factors that we have needed to remove to safeguard the working environment. In her words: '... of one thing we can be certain: new geniuses and cultural profiles will appear, and if we implement good, statutory working environment regulations, they will not turn into harassing, power-hungry lechers' (5).

My gang of girls in the 1970s stood as one and paid back in kind. It worked a treat. Of course, we should rather have talked to our teacher (who obviously must have seen what was going on), the school nurse or others who held the real responsibility for our 'working environment'. But the thought never occurred to us at the time. Hopefully, things are different now.

Absence of bullying and sexual harassment of all genders and age groups should and must be self-evident in modern working life. Women have again joined forces and this time we have made a stand. Those in charge appear to be taking it seriously, and that bodes well for the new year.

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