

Speak out against harassment

Honolulu Star-Advertiser (HI) - November 1, 2017

• Section: Editorial

In recent weeks, a cultural levee broke in the United States and hundreds of thousands of women drew courage from one another to share their stories of sexual harassment.

In Hawaii, we saw the young women in our circles be the first to speak up. Then our mothers waded through the thick silence with us. We just kept coming, from every community, and the sheer number of us began to confound the men in our lives. It was our moment, women speaking to women in sisterhood. It was a feminist moment, and we learned that courage is contagious.

We also learned that not much has changed in Hawaii since 1992. Laws have changed in important ways but have not ended women's subordination on a mass scale.

This is not Hawaii's first #metoo moment. In 1992, a number of women in Hawaii brought forward allegations of sexual harassment and sexual assault by U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye. Inouye called the accusations "unmitigated lies" and said he would "welcome" an inquiry. But I contend the women were eventually silenced by a potent brew of political power, old-boy solidarity and the powerful influence of the senator himself. As The New York Times reported in late 1992, all of this allowed him to simply say, "No, I didn't" and that was enough.

Even those who don't know the story, know the story very well. Our abuser gets his name in lights. We fade away.

There is still too much fear. What people witnessing #metoo online were not seeing was the private chatter where women admitted across their networks that, while they had shared vague #metoo stories from the unspecified past, they were experiencing a serious situation right now.

There were also few high-profile women who publicly stood up and shared their stories. None committed to leveraging their power to hold their male peers accountable. There was no talk about how the military plays a role in building a culture where disdain toward and violence against women is part of being a man.

These lessons provide a route forward. We should take steps to ensure that our workplaces and organizations undergo training by people who understand the hierarchical gender system in Hawaii and the limits of the law. We need the men in our lives to lobby under our lead to ensure that our workplaces have formal complaint processes for sexual harassment, and that there is zero tolerance for retaliation.

We need to use our platforms to support the women brave enough to come forward so that their voice swells. We need public forums to discuss this moment, and private spaces where women can define themselves without the threat of male violence. Some of our volunteer lawyers have begun free gender awareness trainings for local groups after we received an outpouring of requests in recent weeks.

We are committed to taking action as young women of color to change the culture in Hawaii, and we hope that others will join us.

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• *Index terms:* Island Voices

• *Record:* b2e03c7029ad31c36239115e1e509b75664a0cd

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