

United States: On backlash - #MeToo is powerful but will fail unless we do more

Monday 4 December 2017, by [COONTZ Stephanie](#), [REESE Hope](#) (Date first published: 29 November 2017).

"Where we go next depends on how we take — or don't take — advantage of this moment."

When strides are made toward equality — as when women and minorities gaining rights and social status — the result is often a backlash. For instance, in response to the women's liberation movement of the '60s and early '70s, there was a strong attack on *Roe v. Wade* and the Equal Rights Amendment. Those who fear change react by focusing new energy into maintaining their privilege. In doing so, they prevent progress.

The recent flood of sexual assault allegations against politicians, comedians, journalists, and artists casts a spotlight on gross misconduct by men in power. While these behaviors are nothing new, they are now leading to accountability, with men like Harvey Weinstein and, most recently, Matt Lauer losing their jobs.

To understand the historical significance of these allegations of sexual misconduct, I turned to professor Stephanie Coontz, a historian and frequent commentator on women's issues. Coontz taught family studies at Evergreen College back in the '70s — she founded the department — and is co-chair and director of public education at the Council on Contemporary Families and a contributor to the New York Times's Sunday Review. She cautioned the current #MeToo movement to be wary of the potential for backlash. "Where we go next depends on how we take — or don't take — advantage of this moment," she said.

Here is our conversation, lightly edited for length and clarity.

Hope Reese

There has been an outpouring of allegations charging men from Harvey Weinstein to Louis C.K. to Roy Moore to Al Franken with some sort of sexual misconduct, ranging from statutory rape to groping. What is happening? Have the floodgates officially opened?

Stephanie Coontz

We're in the middle of a major sea change, one that's long overdue, but there's a lot of churn in the crosscurrent. I don't think there are easy answers. It's not as if men have been blindsided about women's objection to being treated as sexual objects and subjected to unwanted intimacies. That was one of the earliest critiques of slavery. Slavery activists, union women, have raised this [issue] for a long time. On the other hand, it's true that women have tended to accept that this is one of the costs of being female.

Right up through the '60s and '70s, dating manuals and respected counselors were telling boys to push as hard as they can because girls are afraid to say yes, that sort of thing. We really didn't get any press coverage of the problem until 1975, when this woman at Cornell filed a claim for unemployment because she resigned from her job due to unwanted touching. They denied her benefits on the grounds that she quit for personal reasons. Then she formed an organization called Working Women United. They had a speak-out event that then got covered in the *New York Times*.

We all know [the protest] was not dealt with seriously. A 1976 survey by Redbook found that 80 percent of respondents reported an encounter in sexual harassment on the job; again, mostly ignored.

At home, remember, even forcible sexual intercourse didn't have a name yet and wasn't criminalized. Rape was defined as a forcible intercourse with a woman other than your wife. This was still a period when it was considered funny to have fortune cookies that said, "Confucius says when rape is inevitable, sit back and enjoy it."

Now we have this situation where women are emboldened to speak out. Yes, the floodgates have been opened.

Hope Reese

What could happen as a result of this outpouring? Have there been any precedents that can shed light on this moment?

Stephanie Coontz

The reason historians don't like to predict the future is it depends on what we do now. If we allow these salacious details to take over everything and don't get at the root of why women, for so long, did not feel able to express this, we will either have this blow over or have it continue — and it will be a convenient way of bloodletting every few years.

For those who did not cross a line into actual assault [but still acted inappropriately], it's extremely important to encourage them to admit and apologize. We must ask why women previously did not feel that they were in a position to admit [harassment and assault]. It's not just because we've been socialized to be accommodating and spare people's feelings. It's because we lack protections and power in the workforce.

Hope Reese

Do you see this as real progress, or could it be an illusion of progress? Do you worry about a potential backlash?

Stephanie Coontz

People have finally recognized that this is a major problem that has been systematically covered up. Where we go next depends on how we take — or don't take — advantage of this moment.

If we just focus on the sexual abuses of individual men, we could have something similar to a downside of the progress we made in race relations. When everybody started saying that discrimination is a bad thing, people then started to argue that discrimination is over — the argument being that because we say it's bad, we no longer have to do anything about it. The parallel here is that you could say it means we just need to teach men to behave better, and go after individual men instead of talking about women's lack of power in the workforce.

Hope Reese

At one point, people thought that saying they were "colorblind" was a good thing...

Stephanie Coontz

The analogy to colorblind would be that even if we got rid of the sexual exploitation, it would not solve the fact that women are discriminated against in other ways. Somebody who is very sexually proper in their relationships may still engage in the outright sexism of thinking that women are less competent than men, or engage in benevolent sexism, thinking that women need to be protected and not exposed to these terrible situations.

Hope Reese

Sometimes we'll see something happening in the tech world or entertainment and say, "Sexism and harassment is rampant in this industry." It seems that it's touching politics and arts and culture, all these different areas. Do you see any distinctions? Should we treat all these harassments the same way?

Stephanie Coontz

It's pretty pervasive, and it's especially pervasive in occupations where women are without resources — the lowest-paid ones, such as hotel maids. It used to be assembly line workers; I think unions have protected that to some extent. So very vulnerable women. But it also seems to be very prevalent in high-paid, high-prestige occupations where men have this tremendous sense of entitlement. I think it's everywhere, but I think it's particularly [present] when you have power imbalances.

Hope Reese

The allegations cover such a huge range of behavior. In the most extreme cases, it's the allegations of coercion and force against Harvey Weinstein or R. Kelly. Then there's the still-not-appropriate but lower-level stuff like the groping. Should all of these different behaviors be lumped together? How can we separate them?

Stephanie Coontz

I think that's a danger. We have to come up with a way of distinguishing between men who are simply jackasses and ones who are outright predators. These are all on a range that are connected to the ways in which even people who haven't groped women have devalued and objectified them for so many years. This is a wild thing to say, but in some ways, we might need to work toward something like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission [a thorough reckoning of violent crimes during apartheid that offered offenders a chance for amnesty from prosecution in 1994, in an attempt to unify the country] for the men who fall short of actual rape and assault to find a way to get them to apologize and to move on.

Hope Reese

What about politicians, specifically? What kind of behavior should we not tolerate? Today we're discussing Roy Moore and Al Franken, but the conversation has also circled back to Bill Clinton.

Stephanie Coontz

First of all, we need to make a distinction between bad behavior like infidelity that is consensual on the part of the two offenders, but not the same as predatory behavior. To what extent do we want to use that human failing, which is more common than many of us realize outside politics, as our bar for whether somebody is able to run for office or not?

I do think that we need to recognize how extraordinarily pervasive the devaluation and objectification of women has been — meaning discounting women's opinions, ignoring their preferences, overriding their objections, and expecting them to smooth everything over — for so many years.

Someone like Bill Maher, why does he have to call Trump a whiny little bitch, as opposed to a whiny little loser? There all of these built-in, longstanding devaluations of women, objectification of women that is even shared by many women. On the one hand, we absolutely take it on. But getting too punitive about it could really backfire.

We'll do best if we recognize that it is a hard dilemma, and that we're dealing with things that we've allowed to go on for so long. There are cases, many cases, where it seems to me we're going to have

to accept apologies and move on. But we should demand those apologies first.

Hope Reese

In this era where so many people are distrustful of media and disagree about facts, are the accusations being heard equally? It seems that whether victims are believed often comes down to what side your politics fall on.

Stephanie Coontz

I think you're right. First of all, this comes at a time when people are being much more political in their decisions about what new stories they will accept and what they will not accept than in the past. I think we could be vulnerable to a backlash that will give people some excuse for disbelieving. It could prevent us from winning over many men and women who might otherwise be willing to join us in a zero-tolerance position from this day forward.

We have to be very careful about how these charges can be used selectively, and we have to be attentive to the civil rights of the guys who are charged with doing these things, open to understanding contextual factors and ambiguities. It's vital for women to speak out loudly and forcibly, and to share their pain and outrage. But it's also important that we turn this into a teachable moment, not a bloodletting.

Hope Reese

Over the course of history, when we think about progress, it's not a straight line — there have been downturns along the way. Where are we now? Is this a major dip?

Stephanie Coontz

Yes. Here's another sense in which this is a two-sided thing. I want to be absolutely clear that I think it's overdue for these men to be called to account. On the other hand, this particular kind of accounting [concerns] only the sexual abuse and objectification of women, as opposed to the other ways that women are discriminated against.

It's cover for people who get indignant about sexual immorality but are perfectly at ease with economic discrimination, with exploitative behaviors toward women in other ways, with just refusing to acknowledge the fact that another part of women's reproductive systems means that they actually need paid maternity leave. It allows them to ignore and even excuse paternalistic restrictions on women's behavior, like taking women's reproductive rights and contraception.

Hope Reese

So much discrimination of women, when it's not blatantly physical, can be difficult to pinpoint. How can we make sure we pay equal attention to the subtle discrimination?

Stephanie Coontz

Yes, it's the same for the kind of policies that allow lead poisoning [which has been linked to infertility] to go on — not investing in the kind of clean infrastructure that protects women's reproductive powers.

It's a real dilemma for us, and it's incumbent upon us to channel the outrage and to not let it take over all the other ways in which women are silenced or discriminated against, and drown out the differences between people, for example, who behave badly as individuals but have actually voted for things that help women get equal pay. The dramatic nature of these accusations can crowd out other sources of inequality.

P.S.

* Updated by Hope Reese Nov 29, 2017, 11:40am EST:

<https://www.vox.com/conversations/2017/11/29/16712514/me-too-feminist-backlash-weinstein-effect>

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