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The #MeToo movement is at a dangerous tipping point

By **Alyssa Rosenberg** January 17

It has taken just 3½ months for our national conversation about sexual harassment and sexual assault to go from revelation to backlash.

A Jan. 13 article about an anonymous woman's date with comedian Aziz Ansari, which ended with "Grace" feeling sexually pressured to the point of tears, served as a reminder that it is not just the Harvey Weinsteins of the world who stand between America and a healthy sexual culture. **The piece also made clear that if we expand our reexamination of sexual ethics without preserving the distinction between criminal acts and merely unattractive or immoral behavior, the #MeToo moment could easily founder on miscommunication and acrimony.**

The piece about Ansari, which described an unhappy sexual push-and-pull between people who wanted very different things, struck a pair of concurrent nerves. To some readers, the juxtaposition of the woman's discomfort over her encounter with Ansari's positioning of himself as a modern-dating guru in his book "Modern Romance" was proof of how deep our sexual problems run, and how we need to create norms that work for everyone. To others, characterizing Ansari's actions as sexual assault was an example of how #MeToo could devolve into dangerous overreach.

Both sets of readers are right. Americans desperately need to examine our sexual culture beyond the condemnation of criminally violent acts. And the #MeToo conversation can only expand in an effective way if it is conducted carefully and strategically. Being clear about what behavior is criminal, what behavior is legal but intolerable in a workplace, and what private intimate behavior is worthy of condemnation helps focus where the work of a movement has to take place.

There's an obvious difference between an alleged serial rapist and harasser, such as Weinstein, and someone who has consensual sex with a large number of women. But the distinction between behavior that is illegal and actions that are legal isn't the only dividing line worth drawing here. There's also a contrast between someone who sleeps with a lot of people on terms that are clear and acceptable to everyone involved, and someone who conducts themselves in such a way that their partners end up feeling misled or disappointed about the nature of their encounters. That distinction is between conduct that is ethical and that which ranges from morally dubious to outright unethical (but does not rise to the level of criminal).

Preserving these nuances isn't merely a matter of cushioning men from the harsh truth about their behavior (though, generally, when you're trying to bring about social change, choose messaging that the people you want to reach can actually absorb). It also helps us figure out what is genuinely the best solution to the problem we're trying to solve.

It is not entirely clear what the piece about the woman's encounter with Ansari was intended to accomplish. Joshi Herrmann, the editor in chief of Tab Media, the parent company of Babe, which published the piece on Ansari, said the story was newsworthy "because of who he is and what he has said in his standup, what he has written in his book, what he has proclaimed on late night TV." That is not the same thing as defining the nature of Ansari's offense according to relevant law and prevailing morals, and articulating what sanctions he should face.

Unlike the allegations against Weinstein, it is difficult to see how this story would lead the police to open a case against Ansari. Unlike the allegations

against Kevin Spacey, which involved the abuse of his fame and professional standing, and which led Ridley Scott to replace him with Christopher Plummer in the film “All the Money in the World,” this account of sexual miscommunication doesn’t offer a good reason for Netflix to fire Ansari from “Master of None.” And if Ansari’s offense is being a bad, inconsiderate sex partner, the graphic details in the story seemed better left to a whisper network to disseminate.

Changing culture is hard, even exhausting, work. The current conditions make it harder still to do the things that are most necessary, and that would be most useful. Moral discussions of sex have often been limited to condemning people for who they like to sleep with, or for enjoying sex at all. And any conversation about a woman’s behavior or decision-making can be weaponized to deny that men should ever be held accountable for anything. Despite these profound challenges, it is also true that morality must pick up where the law leaves off, and that a true sexual revolution has to involve both men and women speaking clearly about what they want and need.

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