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# Workplace relationships

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Reclaiming the consent conversation with all its attendant ambiguities.



The ongoing Tejpal and Ganguly cases, ugly as they are, have created the space for an extended conversation on the ways in which patriarchy functions in overt and subtle ways in the workplace.

The opening up of a conversation about not just sexual harassment but also sexism in the workplace is an important one. If we do not let it die out, it has the potential to transform women's workplace experiences. If women are no longer required to laugh at sexist jokes masquerading as "just good fun" or to tolerate men patronizing them, the possibility of a more egalitarian workplace opens up. The recent rush to set up committees to address sexual harassment in various corporate organisations cannot but be a good thing.

One colleague mentioned a company that now has its meetings in an open area rather than in a committee room so that it's all "visible". The awareness that we need to be careful about what we say and what we do is important. However, it would be sad if the conversation were to stop here. This gesture is in part a masculinist response. It is responding to, for instance, Palash Mehrotra's shrill piece protesting that men are now under a state of siege and to Farooq Abdullah's thoughtless comments on being afraid to talk to women or employ them as secretaries.

And yet, it would be short-sighted of us not to recognize that something has changed (at least for the moment) about the workplace and these gestures are tacitly acknowledging that sexism and sexual harassment exist. It would also be remiss of us not to acknowledge the very real anxieties that men are expressing, not just the misogynists and the lechers but also, though in very different ways, the ones we think of as our allies, the feminist and feminist-friendly men. These men are far from endorsing the-over-the-top Mehrotra and Abdullah lines but nonetheless what I do hear is the note of anxiety. As one man, a journalist in his late 40s put it, "It's not as if one did not think about this before. But now, it seems like one is under scrutiny, from oneself as much as anyone else."

It is perhaps not a bad thing that men are feeling anxious and at least some of them are able to articulate these anxieties in complex and nuanced ways. This can be the starting point for us to imagine another kind of workplace where an overt (and inevitably limited and limiting) gesture of visibility and surveillance would be superfluous. The task is to imagine a space where we might have these conversations, where women are free to speak and to voice their discomfort with various forms of speech and actions without being either ridiculed for it or disbelieved. And further one where people might enjoy a consensual flirtation or enter into a long-term relationship even as they feel free to protest and fight against one that is coercive.

For many women, the workplace, like the university, is a space of liberation filled with a myriad possibilities. Among these possibilities is the opening up of avenues for pleasure of all kinds. The possibility of that sexual frisson with another person, one's peer, boss or junior, that one might choose to act on or to not act on. The possibility of simply hanging out with people with whom one spends many hours in the day.

The fun of saying inappropriate and ridiculous things to each other. The comfort of crying on each others' shoulders.

If we assume that we cannot share these 'non-professional' relationships with our colleagues then we take away the very substance of what makes workplaces human and exciting. Just as we as feminists would argue strongly against moral policing on university campuses, it is just as relevant to protect the workplace from any kind of surveillance, even as we assert the need for complaints of harassment to be taken seriously.

We cannot shy away from the reality that consent is grey, in any case, but even greyer and more fraught when it comes to hierarchical contexts where power operates. One cannot but ask troubling questions such as: Does the refusal to enter such relationships mean your job is on the line? Does it mean promotions are on the line? Or even just a congenial work environment, that could turn hostile if one "refused to consent"? These are no rhetorical questions and are often the trajectory of sexual harassment. These questions make it difficult to imagine how consent might be given and how one might recognise consensual from coercive relationships.

And yet the difficulty of these questions does not and should not be taken to mean that consent does not or cannot exist in contexts of power. All gendered relationships are framed by a power imbalance, sanctioned and reinforced by patriarchal cultures and when this is accompanied by structural power in a work context, the giving of consent, indeed the recognition of consent needs further discussion. However, to assume that no consent can be given at all in these contexts of structural power is to infantilise women, marking them as incapable of giving consent.

What is the danger in not speaking of consent? To begin with, ignoring consent endorses the patriarchal assumption that good women would never give consent outside of marriage. This then creates a situation in which violence and coercion are the only language in which one can discuss sexuality in the workplace.

While it is true that the reality of the workplace for many women is that of sexual innuendo, sexism and harassment, we should not forget that the workplace is also a space of opportunity, of possibilities and a space where one seeks and finds camaraderie and stimulation — intellectual and otherwise — as also lasting friendships and romantic relationships.

Even as we acknowledge that consent, already impossibly ambiguous is even more troubled in contexts of hierarchy, we must complicate both our understanding and our agendas to engage with questions of agency and freedom in ways that allow for the messiness of reflecting on consent. We must, and

we are, struggling against violence, asserting women's right to say no, whenever and however we want. In this quest, we should not lose sight of the equal necessity to reflect on women's right to say "yes".

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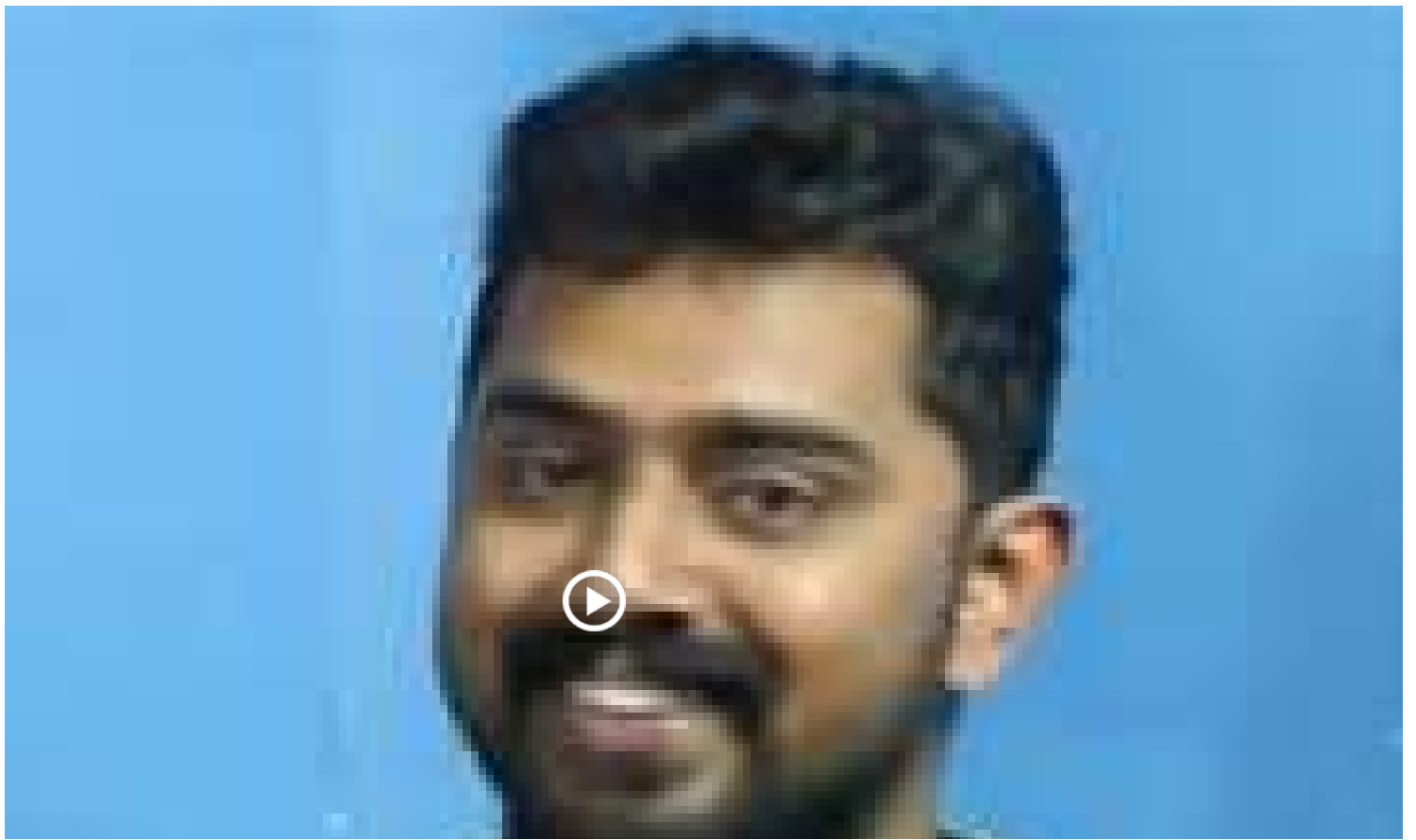




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