

ON SECOND THOUGHT
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Society must stay vigilant to ultimate abuse of power

We have to give voice to the silenced among us, creating an environment where they can find justice

Recently, I attended a special film screening of *Silenced*, organized by RainLily, Hong Kong's centre for sex abuse victims. The sad and shocking Korean film's plot was based on a true case involving students with hearing impairment who were sexually abused for many years by their school principal and teachers.

I kept thinking afterwards about the causes of such abuse. The most common answer is, of course, power imbalance. In this case, as in other sexual harassment cases we have seen at the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) or in recent news, the perpetrator took advantage of their position of power vis-à-vis the victim, be it teacher-student, boss-employee, or, in many cases, man-woman.

I firmly believe that one of the reasons for sexual harassment and sexual abuse is the absence of respect. Unchecked power inevitably corrupts. The lack of respect for the dignity of others in a stereotyped relationship makes it worse. In the film, the victims are doubly condemned: as students powerless to fight the teachers and supposed-protectors, and as people with disabilities often neglected by society. In each of these positions, they are viewed as unworthy of respect.

Often, however, the withholding of respect is a result of deep-seated but biased thoughts about who is worthy of our respect. Without being aware, many of us make assumptions about others based on the way they dress, or because of other factors like their disability or race. On numerous occasions we have heard victims of sexual harassment say, "I was told it was my fault because of the way I dressed."

In the EOC's 2010 survey, about one in four respondent felt that a person who has physical disability could not lead a happy or

fulfilling life even if they receive assistance or treatment. By not viewing others as equals, many come to believe it is acceptable to treat them with disrespect. Violence, in many senses, is a display of power, an attempt to subdue others who are viewed as weaker and inferior.

The release of *Silenced* in Korea sparked wide public outcry for the victims, some of whom are still fighting for justice. Indeed, most victims of sexual abuse are reluctant to come forward, because they are afraid of being blamed. Some become consumed with shame, their anguish deeply buried, their trust in people shattered. Feeling like they cannot seek help without inviting hurtful judgments, they suffer in silence.

Recently, the EOC assisted two women to take their sexual harassment claims to court. In both cases, the harassment happened in the workplace, and the employers compounded the pain by their inertia or failed policies. One had no policy in place to deal with sexual harassment complaints, while the other had in place a mechanism whose standards were too stringent, leading to the dismissal of the victim's complaint for lack of third-party evidence. The judge in the latter case commended the plaintiff for her courage and persistence in standing up for herself despite the enormous challenges she faced.

Yet for others, those challenges may seem too great, and their suffering continues. It has been said, rightly, that a society reveals its true character in the way it treats its most vulnerable members. The absence of respect, of course, extends beyond simply between men and women, but can occur any time there is a powerful majority and a marginalized minority. We can, and must, do better to give voice to the silenced among us and create an environment where they can freely speak up and demand justice.

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