Opinion: Public discussions on sexual harassment changing

By Juliet Williams

Twenty years ago, major news outlets reported allegations that then-President Bill Clinton had a sexual relationship with a 22-year-old White House intern.

Looking back, the Clinton-Lewinsky affair heralded a sea change in political discourse by normalizing public discussion of sex acts. Today, it is hard to believe that esteemed presidents, from Thomas Jefferson to John F. Kennedy, were sheltered from public judgment by a code of decorum that conveniently regarded the subject of sex as beneath the dignity of political discussion. That all changed in the Clinton days when terms like “oral sex” and “semen stain” were catapulted from the domain of hushed whispers to front-page news.

Fast forward to today, and once again the man sitting in the oval office is dogged by allegations of sexual misconduct. As a scholar who has examined public reaction to political sex scandals since the Clinton days, this is hardly where I expected we’d find ourselves in 2018. Twenty years ago, it seemed plausible that difficult conversations spurred by revelation of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair – about issues ranging from sexual harassment to the nature of sexual consent – would lead to lasting changes in the way women and men conducted themselves in the workplace, and well beyond.

But how far have we really come?

Sexual harassment remains prevalent

The election to the presidency of a man who boasts of “pussy-grabbing” is an indication that we still have a long way to

go.

Today, sexual harassment remains commonplace, despite legal protections and the introduction of anti-harassment training in many workplaces. Surveys report that between 25 percent to 85 percent of women say they have been sexually harassed at work. Even the most conservative of these findings indicate a widespread problem. For women in certain employment sectors – including male-dominated industries like construction or service jobs where workers rely on tips to earn a living wage – rates of sexual harassment and sexual assault are likely to be far higher.

The persistence of workplace sexual harassment is a powerful reminder that gender-based subordination pervades modern life. But that doesn't mean nothing has changed since the Clinton era. Looking back, three differences between now and then deserve our attention.

Signs of progress

First, no longer are the only men held to public account for sexual misconduct those who represent us in the most literal sense – elected officials. Today, prominent figures in entertainment, corporate America, sports and academia are facing public scrutiny for their actions. Already this has led to serious professional consequences for some and may even result in criminal prosecution for others.

Stars wore black at the 75th annual Golden Globe Awards in solidarity. Photo by Jordan Strauss/Invision/AP

There is, however, a risk that the scope of the problem will be minimized by the media's focus on high-profile perpetrators and the mostly privileged, mostly white women who have drawn attention as victims. The notion that men made powerful by fame or wealth can abuse their power is easy to understand. But a person doesn't have to be rich or famous to have power

over another. The fact is that anywhere there are gender relations, there are power relations.

Second, as more accusations come to light, we are witnessing a shift in the terms of sexual discourse. In the past, the media has fallen into a Victorian-era vernacular when reporting on sexual allegations involving prominent men. Think about it: When is the last time you heard a modern-day journalist use a term like “adultery” or “chambermaid” outside of covering a sex scandal?

Now, the media faces sharp criticism for using the noncommittal term “sexual misconduct” when discussing legally actionable crimes, including rape. The shift to more explicit language is important because it helps counter the idea that there is something inherently shameful about naming sexual abuse for what it is.

Finally, sex today is being discussed in terms that are not just personal, but political. In the Clinton era, women like Gennifer Flowers, Juanita Broaddrick, Kathleen Willey, Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky paid a steep price in terms of their own privacy when allegations of presidential sexual misconduct arose. At the time, it often seemed as if these women were the main story.

In contrast, today’s scandalous revelations are quickly leading to conversations about questions of gender equality that implicate all of us. Meanwhile, social media campaigns like #MeToo are drawing attention to the failure of the traditional media to make space for victims to speak in their own voices and on their own terms.

Twenty years ago, millions around the world learned of a sexual affair between a president and a young intern. Two decades and countless sex scandals later, stories of sex and power are still roiling the public. This time, however, they are also galvanizing a broad-based movement with concrete

demands for change. It’s been a long time coming, and I hope there is no turning back.

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