

The Sydney Morning Herald

NATIONAL [HEYDON CONTROVERSY](#)

OPINION

I'm a young barrister. Let me tell you about the ubiquitous nature of sexual harassment

By **Josie Dempster**

June 28, 2020 – 12.00am



TODAY'S TOP STORIES

[CYBER SECURITY](#)



'Offensive capability': \$1.3b for new cyber spies to go after hackers

[CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC](#)



Coronavirus pandemic 'is not even close to being over', WHO chief warns

[SUPERANNUATION](#)



'Hugely disruptive': Combet accuses Liberal MPs of undermining super system

[WARATAHS](#)



'Our priority has been to survive': More than a quarter of staff let go at NSW Rugby
12 minutes ago

I am 29 years old. I am a woman. A daughter. A sister. A friend. I am a barrister. And I have been sexually harassed.

I am not writing this article to cast blame or induce feelings of guilt. In



fact, I have no intention of naming my perpetrators. Not because I am scared of them. And certainly not because I want to protect them.

I commend the women who have spoken out against former High Court judge Dyson Heydon and others. I admire their bravery and want all of them to know that I stand with them.

The reason I do not intend to call out my perpetrators is because I could not possibly recall all of the people who have ever wronged me, nor all of the occasions on which I have been harassed. Because there are just so many. That is the truth. Touching, staring, lewd remarks, invasive questions about my private life. Comments about my appearance, my body. Mostly in a professional context but occasionally in a personal one.

Almost always perpetrated by men.

And while I may not be able to recall every instance of sexual harassment that I have endured, I can tell you how it feels. Every single time. Because no matter who you are, or how intelligent you are, or how assertive you think you are and can be, it takes little more than one suggestive comment to make you feel so small.

When it happens, I feel as if I shrink. I lose my voice. My strength. My capacity for rage. I feel like a little girl. I feel immense discomfort. I feel self-conscious. Exposed. As if my body is not mine. As if being a woman makes me less.

And that makes me angry. But why am I writing this? What point is there in saying anything if I am not going to take these broad-brush allegations I make any further?

When I first read of the allegations being made against Dyson Heydon, I was shocked and intrigued. For how long had the conduct been going on? How many people knew, and did nothing? Was this going to lead to criminal charges? I followed the story closely.

However, after only a couple of days, I had become extremely unsettled by the



Barrister Josie Dempster.

story. I was no longer reading articles objectively. I was irritated. Angry. Upset. Disgusted.

It did not take long for my anger and disgust to turn inwards. I started to recall all of the instances of harassment that I had been subjected to throughout my career in the legal profession, dating back to my time as a young lawyer.

Harassment that I had tried to ignore and bury. And that I had just let pass. How did I let this happen? How did I not stand up for myself, for other women? All of a sudden, I was blaming myself for something I had no hand in perpetrating.

In my mind, I was the one who should have stopped it, called out the behaviour, done more.

As a woman who has experienced sexual harassment, my response to learning of the Heydon allegations was to feel as if I should have stood up and done more. To protect myself. To protect other women. To do something to put an end to the entrenched sexualisation and discrimination of women that permeates the legal profession and wider community.

Is this how men who perpetrate sexual harassment and assault are feeling? Or are they simply relieved that someone else has taken the fall for their bad behaviour?

There is no point pinning all of the blame onto Dyson Heydon. On all accounts, his behaviour was morally, if not criminally, wrong and he should certainly be held accountable.

But this problem is bigger than him. It exists in the fabric of our society. It finds breath and life in our male-dominated profession. It is pervasive. Ubiquitous. Subtle and overt.

And it will not stop if perpetrators of sexual harassment and assault do not look inwards and use this as an opportunity to reflect on their own behaviour.

So that is all I ask.

Please do not merely feel relieved that these allegations have come to light. It is not enough to stand in solidarity with women and condemn Dyson Heydon for conduct that we all know has been carried out by many more in the profession.

Be brave. Stop inappropriate behaviour in its tracks. Call out your friends and colleagues.

And lastly, think of the strong women you know who may not be able to find their voice in times of discomfort and despair. Be their voice.

Josie Dempster is a Canberra-based barrister.

