Responsibility and Consent

In recent weeks, the news of young women or teenage girls being sexually abused during their time at school has dominated both the social and mainstream media. This tidal wave of coverage comes in the wake of a young woman having the courage to reveal that she was raped within the hallowed halls of the Australian parliament.

Since watching Brittany Higgins disclose details of what I can only describe as a living nightmare, my mind has not been able to rest. Her speech at the March 4 Justice in Canberra crystalised the enormity of the problem:

"I was raped inside Parliament House by a colleague and for so long it felt like the people around me only cared because of where it happened and what it might mean for them. It was so confusing because these people were my idols.

I had dedicated my life to them. They were my social network, my colleagues and my family.

And suddenly they treated me differently. I wasn't a person who had just gone through a life-changing traumatic event, I was a political problem."

Not long after Ms Higgins first shared her story, Chanel Contos' online petition for schools to start earlier sex education also began to gain serious traction. Alongside her petition, Ms Contos has gathered a staggering list of other women's personal stories that reveal the quantity and significance of sexual abuse endured by young women at the hands of young men, most still in schools.

The stories themselves are distressing on a level that first and foremost warrants support. Nothing else can or should come before supporting the women who share them. What must come next is the mission for a solution.

What concerns me about the common thinking around that solution is the institutional reaction to push the responsibility for teaching young people about consent solely onto schools. Where on Earth has the responsibility gone for parents to teach consent, amongst other things, to their children? Why aren't parents teaching their sons about consent and ensuring they understand their impact on others, and the life consequences of not upholding that most basic social and human standard?

There is massive work in the political, educational and corporate spheres to be done in enacting the change our world needs to see, but Ms Higgins' speech perfectly describes the work that needs to be done even before *that:*

"If [our leaders] aren't committed to addressing these issues in their own offices, what confidence can the women of Australia have that they will be proactive in addressing this issue in the broader community?

This isn't a political problem. This is a human problem."

The same question could be asked about all of us: if we aren't committed to addressing these issues in our own homes and our own families, what confidence can the women of Australia have that any of us will be proactive in addressing this issue in our schools?

Many young women's rights to consent are not always respected, and that distresses me to no end. The knowledge of a person not having full control over what they do or how they do it is denying them of their most basic human rights. But when did it become a school's responsibility to be the sole educator for sexual

consent? I do accept schools have an enormous role to play in educating young people about sexual health, reproduction, sexually transmitted diseases and sexual consent. However, schools are not parents, and their primary purpose is not to replace the moral and ethical obligations of parents to teach their children to be socially responsible.

I recall my father teaching me in no uncertain terms about two key responsibilities, not rights, when I was sixteen. Firstly, he spoke of when I would eventually drive a car. He made it clear to me that if I ever did anything stupid while driving a car that brings harm to anyone, whether that is a passenger or anyone else in another car or on the street, I'd better hope the police get me before he does. What I recognised even at that young age was the credibility he had with me. This existed because he had always been the utmost example of a responsible driver throughout my entire childhood, and that credibility ensured that his lesson stuck with me.

Secondly and most significantly, my father consistently modelled the highest standard of all. He explained to me that if I ever caused harm to a woman in any way, I would be best served to go straight to the police because he would hunt me down and the outcome of him finding me would not be pleasant. Once again, his credibility gave his words meaning. For all my life, my father has treated my mother with extraordinary dignity, respect and most significantly, as an equal. He has always been the exemplar of how a man should treat a woman. He has never conveyed to me the perception that he is superior to my mother.

Herein lies a deeply ingrained issue that has become the ultimate challenge for society in this modern era: putting the responsibility for the moral and ethical development of children back onto their parents.

When are we going to be brave enough to change the conversation from "what we are entitled to?" to "what we are responsible for?"

When are we going to stop blaming institutions for the behaviours of individuals and hold those individuals accountable for their own errors in judgement? When will we take responsibility for our own actions and the consequences of those actions on the world around us?

Mothers and fathers are leaders to their sons and daughters as much as schools are. When will we collectively take responsibility for the moral and ethical development of our children so that they grow into responsible adults who do not commit crimes unto others?

This is not an attempt to divert responsibility away from schools. This issue is deep-seated, complex, and institutional. If the issue is this all-encompassing, then schools, like everyone else, have a role to play. Instead, this is a call to action for *everyone* to remind ourselves that our first response to a problem shouldn't be to ask, "Who should take responsibility for this?"

The first question should always be, "How can *I* take responsibility for this?" so that the second question can be, "How can I help fix it?"

Instead, this is a call to action for *us all* to remind ourselves that our first response to a situation shouldn't be to ask, "Who should take responsibility for this?"

Our first question should always be, "What does this situation require of me?"