

What's a Girl to Do When a Powerful Man Asks Her to Flirt?

We are so used to the idea that, with a college degree and a packet of contraceptive pills, women are invincible, we are still trying to get our 21st century heads around the #MeToo phenomenon. Over the past year, countless women working in a variety of professions around the world have revealed that the price of the post-pill employment deal is sexual harassment in the office and rape after drinks in the hotel room.

That is, minus the drinks, the story of Melissa Thompson, one of three women pressing criminal charges against Harvey Weinstein. Back in 2011 Thompson was a 28-year-old business school graduate starting her own video and analytics company and pitching its merits to the Hollywood mogul in his New York office.

The encounter was recorded by Thompson as part of her demonstration, and clips included in a [Sky News interview](#) with her – plus her commentary – throw some light on how Weinstein was able to take advantage of women. At the same time it raises questions about her role in the way things developed, and whether she should accept some responsibility for it.

No sooner is the door closed – and locked – than Weinstein starts making advances. Instead of shaking hands he wraps his arms around her and strokes her back. He asks if they are “allowed to flirt a little”. “Um, er, a little,” she says. She does her pitch; he suggests using a Marilyn Monroe movie as an example, but he is only interested in fornication, “what we can do and when it’s going to happen,” not the technology. She says, “OK, we can do both.”

At one point she leans towards him and touches his shoulder, saying, "Data's so hot, right?" He agrees and follows up with, "You're hot." He then reaches under the table and things go further. She is awkward but allows him "a little" of what he wants before protesting mildly that it's "a little high".

The Sky interviewer, a woman, asks her an unavoidable question: "Do you think you might have encouraged him?"

Thompson answers, "Not purposely," but she clearly temporised with his propositions as a strategy to clinch a deal with him. As she told Sky: "Now I see he's trying, in any way he can, to move me into that zone of comfortable then uncomfortable and confused, and vulnerable, and recognising that he's powerful and I'm not, and that I need this deal from him, and he has the power to give it to me."

On video Weinstein says that he is going to buy the service she has described. He invites her into the kitchen for "water" and they re-emerge within a few seconds. The interview ends with her agreeing to meet him at a hotel bar a few blocks away at 5.30, for a drink. She assumes it is to confirm the deal. When he got there, she says, he straightaway led her up to his room where he blocked her efforts to get away from him, held her down and raped her.

Harvey Weinstein, without doubt, is a dissolute and manipulative creep. He may even be a criminal. He took advantage of an ambitious young businesswoman – as he has countless other women – to get a few sexual kicks, and thought that he could crown the episode in bed with her.

Until that sequel, however, he played by the rules of "consent", driven by perverse motives but actually asking her at each twist and turn, "Can we...?" "Are we allowed?" "What are you doing later?"

And here's the thing: Melissa Thompson did not have to say "Yes," or "OK," or "Just a little." She could have stopped at

any point, preferably after the opening hug and back rub. She does not say she was afraid of him (there were people just the other side of the door, presumably); she was 28, had worked in the male-dominated environment of Wall Street after college, been to business school (perhaps one like [this](#)), and was confident she could “handle” men. The reason she gives for stringing him along is that she needed the business deal with him.

Certainly, the deal would have been off if she had given a clear “No” to his advances, but where did she get the idea that it was better to sacrifice her own instincts and dignity than a contract with a wealthy and influential customer, albeit a sleazy and manipulative one? Is that the implicit message of the great gender equality movement – that success in the sphere of work and money is worth more than anything?

If she had walked out on him that afternoon in New York, or at least have gone to the police with her rape complaint, she might have saved many other women their horrible experiences with Weinstein and made a name for herself as a women’s rights trailblazer. Even if the police were not interested then, the New York Times surely would have been. It was only seven years ago, after all, not the Dark Ages. And she had video of it, for goodness sake.

Perhaps, though, until The Times et al and #MeToo framed all those women as victims pure and simple, until the “rape culture” era laid down as dogma that a woman is never to blame for any act of sexual aggression she suffers, no matter how small, Thompson had the idea that she did choose the wrong tactics with Weinstein initially and was just a little bit responsible for the way things turned out. That would be the really grown up view for her to take, as well as for some other women whose experiences have been detailed in the media.

Lawsuits, of course, make that impossible. But until women can take responsibility for their actions in the sexual sphere, it

is difficult to see how they can be fully responsible in any other, including business.

—

This [article](#) has been republished with permission from Mercatornet.

[Image credit: [MaxPixel](#)]