

The cost of telling a #MeToo story

Why Yael Stone is terrified to talk about Geoffrey Rush



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Yael Stone is scared. We are in New York City, at a ramen place near her apartment in Astoria, Queens, and Stone, who stars in "Orange Is the New Black," has barely touched her soup. She tells me she hasn't been sleeping for the better part of a year.

It's not just her six-month-old baby who's keeping her up, but her decision to come forward for the first time and speak to me about her experiences with Geoffrey Rush, one of the most powerful actors in her native Australia.

Most women who go public with #MeToo stories are fearful for obvious reasons. There is the pain of reliving traumatic experiences. There is the rage of not being believed. And there is sometimes the discomfort of admitting, as Stone readily does, that she didn't say "no" and at times even encouraged some of his behaviour. She did so, she says, out of fear of offending a mentor and friend.

But Stone isn't just afraid of the emotional consequences of talking about her allegations against Rush, her onetime hero, including that he danced naked in front of her in their dressing room, used a mirror to watch her while she showered and sent her occasionally erotic text messages while she was 25 years old and starring

opposite Rush, then 59, on stage in "The Diary of a Madman" in 2010 and 2011.

She is worried that Australia's defamation laws will drag her into a legal and financial quagmire.

In the United States, the legal burden is on the person who claims to have been defamed: He or she must prove that the allegations are false. In Australia, in the area of libel law, it's the opposite. The burden is on the publisher to prove that the allegations against the plaintiff are true. In addition, public figures who sue for libel in the United States must prove that the publisher acted with reckless disregard of the truth, even if the statements prove false.

Rush said in a statement that Stone's allegations "are incorrect and in some instances have been taken completely out of context." But, he added, "clearly Yael has been upset on occasion by the spirited enthusiasm I generally bring to my work. I sincerely and deeply regret if I have caused her any distress. This, most certainly, has never been my intention."

"I know I have truth on my side," Stone told me during a phone call last week. And yet, "you can see in all of my communications with you that there's an element of terror."

The same power dynamics present in #MeToo stories, she said, "are reflected in a legal system that favours the person with a good deal more money and a good deal more influence and power."

Australia's defamation laws help explain why the #MeToo movement, while managing to

take down some of the most powerful men in the entertainment and media industry in the United States, has not taken off there.

"Australia is the only Western democracy without an explicit constitutional protection for freedom of speech," Matt Collins, a defamation lawyer and the president of the Victorian Bar, told me. "People say that Sydney is the libel capital of the world," he added.

The upshot: Not only is it easier for a plaintiff to win a defamation suit in Australia, but people are far less likely to blow the whistle on misconduct, knowing what the legal (and therefore financial) consequences might be. Indeed, if a law firm had not volunteered to represent Stone pro bono, she said, there is no way she would have been able to come forward.

But that financial support goes only so far. Crucially, if the actress is sued and loses, she will be personally responsible for the damages. That Stone is willing to take such a risk indicates how strongly she feels about the matter.

"I think the fact that she's speaking about this now is incredibly courageous," said Brenna Hobson, who was the general manager of the company that produced "Diary of a Madman" and has known Rush for more than two decades.

"The use of defamation cases against women with sexual harassment complaints is having a huge chilling effect," said Kate Jenkins, the Australian government's sex discrimination commissioner. "Women I speak to all over the country are absolutely

adamant that they cannot complain because it risks absolutely everything for them."

An Australian filmmaker named Sophie Mathisen put it more bluntly: "The question in our current context is not, Do you want to come forward and speak on behalf of other women? The question is, Do you want to come forward and set yourself on fire publicly?"

Woman on fire

For the past year in Australia, the particular woman on fire has been an actress named Eryn Jean Norvill — someone who never wanted to come forward at all.

In late 2017, two front-page articles in The Daily Telegraph reported on Rush's "inappropriate behaviour" during a 2015-16 production of "King Lear" by the Sydney Theatre Company. The paper, which memorably dubbed Rush "King Leer," didn't name the young actress who claimed he had harassed her.

Rush adamantly denied the allegation and accused the paper of making "false, pejorative and demeaning claims." He sued the publisher, Rupert Murdoch's Nationwide News, and the articles were removed from the paper's website.

When Nationwide News submitted its defense, it identified the actress as Norvill, who played Cordelia opposite Rush, and her name became a matter of public record. And so for the past several months, Norvill has been in the headlines as a leading witness in the case, despite the fact that she



Yael Stone at one of the movie premieres in New York.

had complained to the theater company about Rush's behavior informally and confidentially.

"What mattered to The Daily Telegraph here was their front page. She didn't matter," David Marr, a journalist for The Guardian, told me.

Still, we have learned much from Norvill's testimony. She said that she felt variously "trapped," "frightened," "shocked" and "confused" during the play's run. She claimed Rush "deliberately" touched her breast onstage,

sent her suggestive text messages, called her "yummy" and more. "I was at the bottom of the rung in terms of hierarchy and Geoffrey was definitely at the top," she told the court. "I wanted to be a part of his world and we were also playing father and daughter. I felt as though if I was to speak or reprimand his behaviour, I would jeopardise the relationship, that tenderness, the closeness that is needed in those two roles."

"I had the least power," she said. "What was I supposed to do?"

Youth entrepreneurship by facilitating



DR YOSSEF BEN-MEIR

The inadequate and unacceptable levels of rural education compel young families to move to cities

Moroccan youth today—whether urban- or rural-based—face enormous obstacles towards achieving their own self-development, and creating change that they seek for their families, communities, country, and even world. They are confronted with the statistical reality that the more education they complete, the more likely they will be unemployed. So often they are directed toward mainstay disciplines, not out of the pull they feel toward them, but out of the fact that there are too few alternatives, especially in public sector university settings. On the one hand, they have the important freedom to create the associations, be part of the cooperatives, and form the businesses that they aspire to build. On the

other hand, however, their faith in their own social system, society's sense of fair play, and real freedom to complete what they set out to, is more often than not heavily diminished.

Youth unemployment is more severe in rural places than in the cities. The cash economies that are now the established condition forces them to perform as day-labourers, and that is provided they are fortunate enough to have those chances. Urban migration is the only alternative for so many, even when their real dream is to remain in their communities and build there, where their heart is. The inadequate and unacceptable levels of rural education compel young families to move to cities. Considering the strong will among youth to alter their reality, there are successes, but, way too few, and those that are fortunate enough to secure funding for new projects appear to be the exception.

With all this said, there is brightness, and the light of change is also rooted in the Mo-

roccan condition. People's participation in their own development is the law of the land and pervades the social structure by way of policies, programs, and legal obligation. Part of these national frameworks for human development further identifies youth as primary and potentially a most effective vehicle toward catalysing and facilitating the local participatory development movements sought by the nation. This is to say that youth's direct engagement in bringing communities together to plan and manage the projects to enhance and fulfil their lives is a key causeway to Morocco's best future. Said simply: Moroccan sustainable development and how and whether it becomes real for all people will be determined by the role played by the youth of the nation.

But how do we move forward and how does this embody true entrepreneurship? Whenever we are acquiring and forging new skills, we learn best simply by doing it. We co-ordinate inclusive, local, dialogue by assisting that



Planning local projects in the Rhamna province of Morocco, with youths' facilitation.

dialogue. We help others define the projects of their heart and future by doing just that: asking the questions, asking others to respond, aggregating with that more responses, helping others talk it through, until a sense of consensus and direction become defined.

We write and submit successful project proposals by writing, submitting, and following-up. We learn how to create budgets by creating them. We build capacities around evaluating past actions in order to build future courses, by engaging in it. We learn from experience, and so