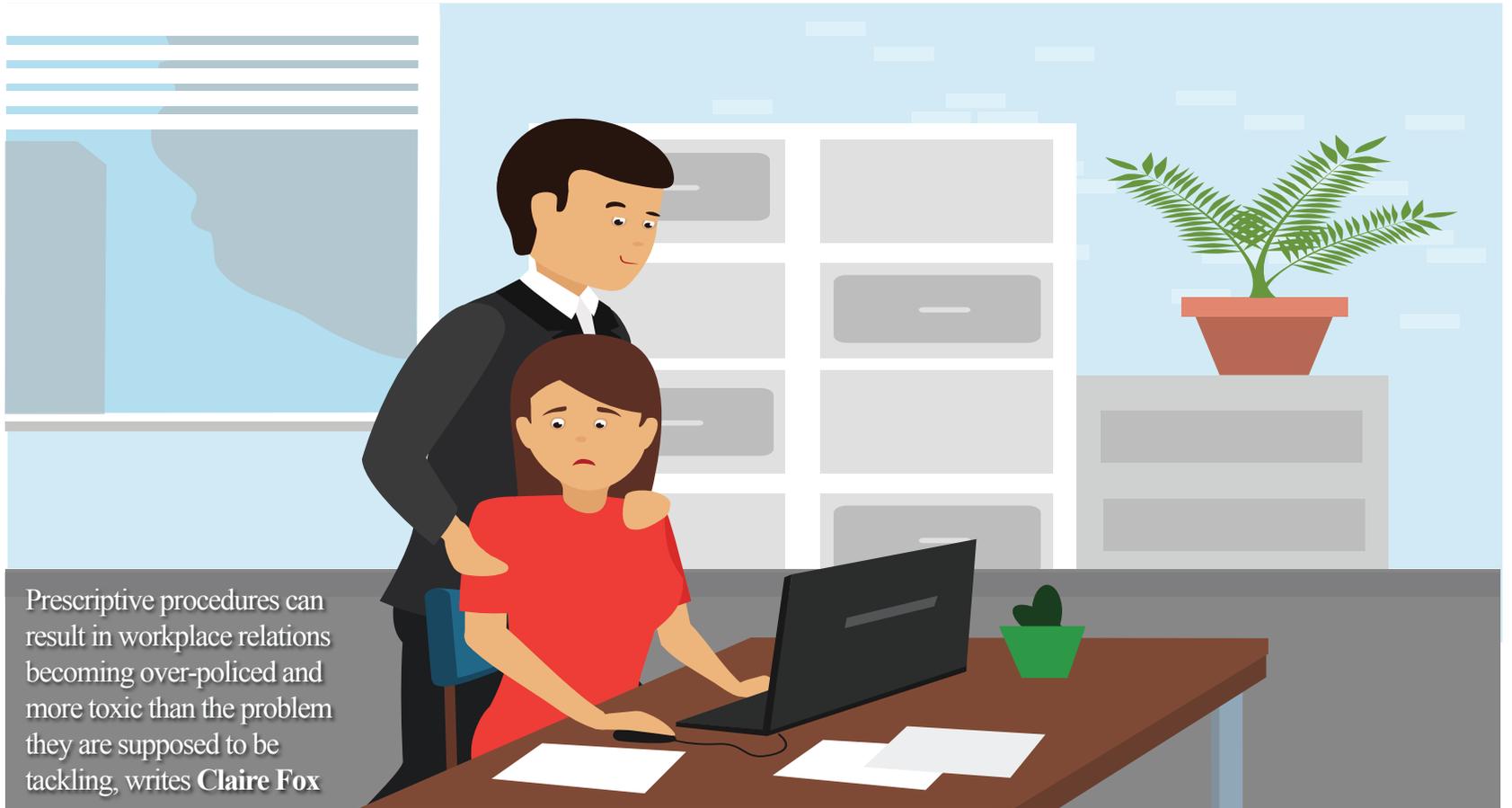


#MeToo's unintended consequences



Prescriptive procedures can result in workplace relations becoming over-policed and more toxic than the problem they are supposed to be tackling, writes **Claire Fox**

There's a tradition in the Fox family of officially starting the countdown to Christmas when the radio starts playing the festive classic *Walking in the Air* on the radio. Consternation this year, as Aled Jones, who made the theme tune for *The Snowman* famous in 1982 when he was a 14-year-old choir boy, has been taken off air by the BBC in light of sexual harassment allegations made against the singer. Now the media reports that the song is to be banned.

An unintended consequence of the #MeToo campaign is the ruining of family Christmas traditions.

It might seem glib to complain about the 'bah humbug' consequences of #MeToo, in light of some of the vile sexual assaults that have been exposed. But while we can all rejoice when sexual predators are brought to justice, I am worried about the consequences of the feeding frenzy that has been unleashed.

For example, the sometimes-hysterical lack of proportion and a 'something must be done' atmosphere around sexual harassment at work is in danger of leading employers and HR departments to over-react.

Following #Pestminster, I am wary of angst-ridden debates in local government about whether the power imbalance of the officer-member relationship or the fact that the council workforce comprises 78% female staff, often with male bosses, is a problem to be addressed. Councils should resist the temptation of concluding this means sexual harassment is rife and certainly must avoid frenetically introducing ever more prescriptive codes of conduct. Often

such prescriptive procedures can result in workplace relations becoming over-policed and more toxic than the problem they are supposed to be tackling.

A 'something must be done' atmosphere around sexual harassment at work is in danger of leading employers and HR departments to over-react

To complicate matters, the present debate is creating a fuzzy definition of what constitutes sexual harassment. The law doesn't help. The Equalities Act's legal definition is of 'unwanted behaviour which is *perceived* as offensive or which *makes someone feel* intimidated or humiliated' (my emphasis). This catch-all seems dangerously subjective, especially when one considers that a recent YouGov survey reveals that two-thirds of women aged 18 to 24 view wolf-whistling as 'always or usually' being a form of sexual harassment and 28% see winking in the same way. Yes, *winking*.

Maybe this is unsurprising when #MeToo – originally set up to empower women to speak up about Harvey Weinstein-type allegations – has spiralled into blurring the heinous with the petty. Look at the way flirtatious text messages are discussed in

the same breath as rape allegations, knee-touching is posed as a precursor to persistent groping, lewd jokes seen as one step away from assault.

The anonymous Westminster WhatsApp dossier, based on malicious gossip and prudish hearsay (yet taken as evidence of wrong-doing by much of the media) listed politicians accused of everything from philandering to over-zealous hugging.

In this climate, Christmas parties have suddenly become a minefield. A group of work colleagues on the razz, staff mingling freely with bosses, everyone dressed up to the nines, lots of alcohol and mistletoe – cue HR departments issuing risk-averse memos warning of the dangers of over-familiarity.

A slew of articles capture the dour mood: 'Should employers fear the office Christmas party?', 'Has #MeToo killed the office Christmas party?', 'Why nearly half of office Christmas parties won't have booze this year' or 'The "Weinstein effect" is ruining the office holiday party'.

HR consultants are queuing up to give killjoy advice such as: 'put limits on the amount of alcohol served' (cheers); run seasonal seminars 'to make sure... policies and punishments on sexual harassment are clear'.

The worst idea must be to designate coaches and mentors to stay alcohol-free so they can keep an eye out for 'inappropriate touching or any other unacceptable or potentially dangerous behaviour' at the party. I'm not sure it is a step forward for women's liberation to imply women need

surveillance by management-appointed spies when they're partying. It seems the days of the chaperone are back.

With this backdrop, we might worry about whether #MeToo is likely to incite a problematic climate of acrimonious finger-pointing among workmates. With vogueish demands that 'we believe all women', there can be a cavalier approach to due process, the importance of presumed innocence and the need to show extreme care about carelessly destroying reputations.

Recently, a columnist at *Teen Vogue*, Emily Lindin, hit the headlines herself when she tweeted: 'I'm not at all concerned about innocent men losing their jobs over false sexual assault/harassment allegations. If some innocent men's reputations have to take a hit...that is a price I am absolutely willing to pay.' But it is not a price a just society should pay. Already, tragically, two Labour Party members appear to have taken their lives following unproven allegations of sexual misdemeanours.

And, when a campaign to support women ends up overly frightening them about the dangers of workplaces full of leering bosses, which advises us to remain sober, be on our guard and wary of each other, that leads to suspensions and sackings based on allegations without proof and festive songs being banned in case the singer is guilty, maybe we should pause for thought.

In the meantime, let the Christmas parties roll. Enjoy. ■

Claire Fox is director of Institute of Ideas