A woman publicly known as Grace went on [**a date with actor and comedian Aziz Ansari**](https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/1/15/16893468/aziz-ansari-allegations) in September. What happened between them is at the center of the latest debate around consent, sexual assault, and the #MeToo moment.

In an account published Saturday,Grace told [**Babe.net’s Katie Way**](https://babe.net/2018/01/13/aziz-ansari-28355) that when she and Ansari got back to his apartment after a dinner out, Ansari kept trying to initiate sex, despite her physical and verbal indications that she wasn’t interested. At one point, she says she told him, “I don’t want to feel forced because then I’ll hate you, and I’d rather not hate you.” At first, he responded well, saying, “Let’s just chill over here on the couch.” But then, she says, he pointed to his penis with the expectation of oral sex.

Later, she says he suggested they “just chill, but this time with our clothes on” — but once they were dressed, he tried to remove her clothes again. Eventually, she stood up and said she would call herself a car. “I cried the whole ride home,” she told Babe. “At that point I felt violated. That last hour was so out of my hand.”

In a [**statement**](http://www.thefader.com/2018/01/14/aziz-ansari-sexual-assault-accusation?utm_source=tftw), Ansari says that the two “ended up engaging in sexual activity, which by all indications was completely consensual.” When he found out she had been uncomfortable, he said, “I took her words to heart and responded privately after taking the time to process what she had said.”

Unlike many reports that have emerged in the wake of [**revelations about Harvey Weinstein**](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html?_r=0), Grace’s story is not one of workplace harassment. But what she describes — a man repeatedly pushing sex without noticing (or without caring about) what she wants — is something many, many women have experienced in encounters with men. And while few men have committed the litany of misdeeds of which Weinstein has been accused, countless men have likelybehaved as Grace says Ansari did — focusing on their own desires without recognizing what their partner wants. It is the sheer commonness of Grace’s experience that makes it so important to talk about.

**Grace’s story gets to the heart of our culture’s problems with sex**

The [**backlash**](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/05/opinion/golden-globes-metoo.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur&_r=1) against the supposed excesses of #MeToo has been roiling for some time now, and Grace’s story has been quickly incorporated into the narrative that women, in their zeal to expose harassers, are now going too far. Writing at [**the Atlantic**](https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/01/the-humiliation-of-aziz-ansari/550541/), Caitlin Flanagan argues that, feeling regretful after not getting what she wanted out of her encounter with Ansari (“perhaps she hoped to maybe even become the famous man’s girlfriend,” Flanagan speculates), Grace teamed up with the Babe writer to produce “3,000 words of revenge porn.”

“Together,” Flanagan continues, “the two women may have destroyed Ansari’s career, which is now the punishment for every kind of male sexual misconduct, from the grotesque to the disappointing.”

Grace’s story may tarnish Ansari’s reputation, especially since he’s gotten credit for [**dealing with the issue of sexual harassment**](http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2017/11/16/revisiting_master_of_none_s_harassment_episode_after_the_louis_c_k_revelations.html) on his show *Master of None*. But it is not clear what effect the story will have on Ansari’s career. Unless other women come forward to allege similar behavior in the workplace, there’s no indication that he has committed workplace harassment, and no particular reason to believe he poses a threat to female colleagues on his show or elsewhere. Unlike the reports of the many women who have come forward about Weinstein, Grace’s story is not about work. It’s about sex and dating, and about gendered patterns of behavior that are both incredibly common and deeply in need of change.

Despite a growing conversation around enthusiastic consent, most everything in American culture still tells men that they should be pushing for as much sex as possible at all times. The idea that men have more sexual desire than women still goes unchallenged, leading too many men to believe that a lukewarm yes is all they’re ever going to get, because women don’t like sex that much anyway. Boys learn at a young age, from pop culture, their elders, and their peers, that it’s normal to have to convince a woman to have sex, and that repeated small violations of her boundaries are an acceptable way to do so — perhaps even the only way.

As [**many**](https://twitter.com/laurenbeukes/status/952911585550446592) have pointed out, movies past and present frequently depict men overcoming women’s initial lack of interest through persistent effort — that is, when they’re not mining coercion and voyeurism for laughs.

The presence of stalking in romantic comedies has even given rise to research, with [**one 2015 study**](https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/02/romantic-comedies-where-stalking-meets-love/460179/) finding that watching a man stalk his “true love” onscreen can make some viewers more accepting of messages like, “An individual who goes to the extremes of stalking must really feel passionately for his/her love interest.” Believing in stereotypes about sex appears to affect men’s perception of sexual situations — [**a 2017 study**](http://www.newsweek.com/rape-myths-prevail-causing-confusion-some-men-between-sexual-interest-and-727833) found that men who believe social messages like “women generally find being physically forced into sex a real ‘turn-on’” and “when a woman says no, she really means yes” were more likely to perceive women as consenting.

Meanwhile, girls learn from an early age that it is rude to reject boys. They learn to “let them down easily” and never humiliate them. They learn to give other people what they want, and to put their own desires second — especially when it comes to sex. And few girls get any sex education, either at school or from the culture they consume, that encourages them to think about sex in terms of what they actually desire, as opposed to how they will be perceived by others.

Recent [**abstinence-only curricula**](http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&PageID=1199) have included messages like, “Girls need to be aware they may be able to tell when a kiss is leading to something else. The girl may need to put the brakes on first in order to help the boy,” and, “Girls need to be careful with what they wear, because males are looking! The girl might be thinking fashion, while the boy is thinking sex.”

Even when girls learn comprehensive sex ed, they frequently don’t learn how to ask for what they want, or even how to think about what that is. “We, as a nation, are uncomfortable with women having pleasure,” Lynn Barclay, president and CEO of the American Sexual Health Association, told [**Bustle**](https://www.bustle.com/articles/104233-7-problems-with-the-state-of-sex-ed-in-america-today-and-how-we-can-make) in 2015.

The result is that situations like the one Grace describes, in which a man keeps pushing and a woman, though uncomfortable, doesn’t immediately leave, happen all the time. For all the criticism Grace’s story received from Flanagan and others, it also received countless nods of recognition on social media, from women [**and men**](https://twitter.com/DavidKlion/status/952928186714685441). Too many people saw something familiar in the story of a man who badgers a woman for sex, again and again, as though hoping to wear down her resistance.

Creating a culture in which fewer people experience what Grace describes will require better sex ed, that teaches more than just consent, challenges gender roles, and encourages people to put their desires and those of their partners above social expectations. This education should [**start much earlier**](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/14/opinion/to-prevent-sexual-assault-start-early.html) than today’s sex ed usually begins, with lessons on topics like empathy and respecting others’ boundaries.

For adults who have already grown up in a culture with a skewed view of sex, a widespread social conversation about the importance of communication, consent, and actually caring about one’s partner’s experience certainly couldn’t hurt. And this moment, when Americans are already having difficult conversations about sex, gender, and power, isn’t a bad time to start.

“Apparently there is a whole country full of young women who don’t know how to call a cab,” Flanagan wrote, “and who have spent a lot of time picking out pretty outfits for dates they hoped would be nights to remember. They’re angry and temporarily powerful, and last night they destroyed a man who didn’t deserve it.”

But Ansari has not been destroyed, nor have [**many of the men**](https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/1/6/16855434/weinstein-reckoning-sexual-harassment-due-process-daphne-merkin-keillor-franken) who have been the subject of reports of harassment or assault in recent months. It’s also not true that, as [**others**](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/05/opinion/golden-globes-metoo.html) have worried, flirting has been banned. What has really changed is that women are speaking out about sexual misconduct, more publicly and in greater numbers than before — and, more than before, they are being heard.

Perhaps what is especially threatening about Grace’s story is that it involves a situation in which many men can imagine themselves. But this is a reason to discuss it more, not to sweep it under the rug. Listening to Grace doesn’t mean deciding all men should go to prison, or should lose their jobs. It does mean admitting that many men behave in exactly the ways their culture tells them to behave. It means asking men to recognize that and do better, and it means changing the culture so that badgering and pressuring women into sex is deplored, not endorsed. None of this will happen if we refuse to reckon with stories like Grace’s.

Right now, many people in America are afraid of women talking. But talking is exactly what we need.