

NEWS & VIEWS

Rape culture prevails in elite private boys' schools. So what's the answer?



In the film "Promising Young Woman" our heroine, Cassie Thomas (Carey Mulligan) is avenging her best friend who died by suicide a few years after being raped by a man named Al Monroe while they were in med school.

When Cassie utters her friend's name to those she believes are responsible for her death, she is met with the same blank gaze.

"Who?"

Nobody remembers her name. Everybody remembers Al Monroe though. Women are often erased from history — especially women who are victims of male crimes.

In the film, Al Monroe has become a successful doctor and is about to get married. His life is wonderful and clean. Nina's life has completely been erased. She was Cassie's best friend.

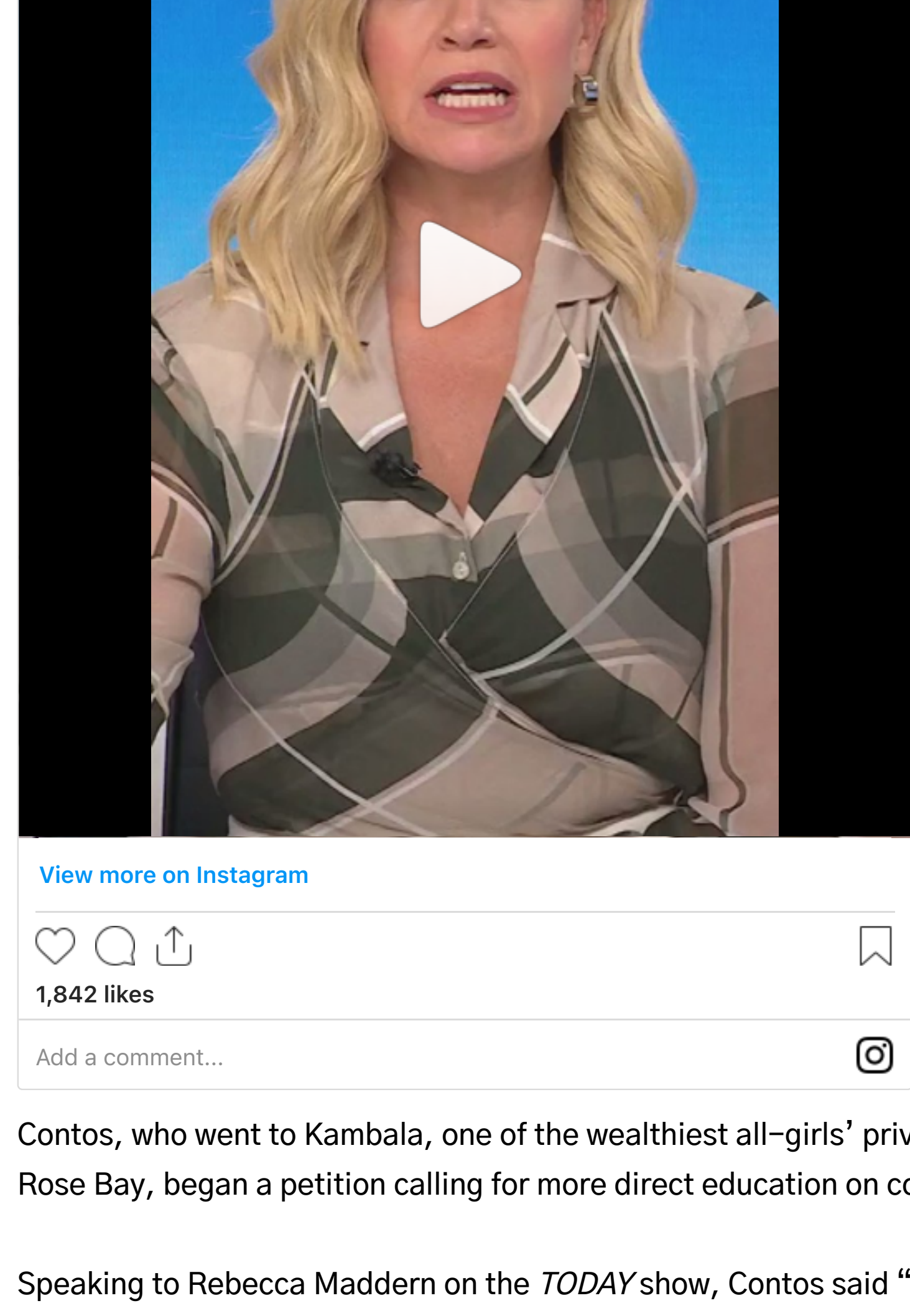
In real life, things don't look much different. Little to no forms of justice exist for women and girls who are attacked by men buoyed by their wealth, status and pedigree, and in our society, the most concentrated cesspools of wealth, status and pedigree are the elite private schools within Sydney's richest suburbs. Think Cranbrook, Scots, Shore and Waverley.

"Once a Scots boy, always a Scots boy."

It's not surprising then, that an online petition which went viral a few days ago has 'boys' from these colleges sprayed across 72 pages of testimonials from their female victims.

Last Thursday, Chanel Contos took to her Instagram account to ask her friends (she has a following of over 7,000 people) how many of them had experienced sexual assault from students at all-boys' schools.

Three quarters of her friends who responded said they or someone they knew had been victims of assault by these boys.



Contos, who went to Kambala, one of the wealthiest all-girls' private schools in Sydney's Rose Bay, began a petition calling for more direct education on consent in schools.

Speaking to Rebecca Maddern on the TODAY show, Contos said "the best way to approach this is to attack the education system because ultimately it's the education system that failed us on this."

"It became very apparent to us that all of us had tens or hundreds of friends who had experienced sexual assault or harassment" she said from London via zoom.

The inspiration behind the campaign began during a conversation Contos had with her friends about rape and consent. She discovered one of her friends had been a victim of assault by a man who'd also assaulted Contos years ago.

"If I knew that was wrong, if I'd done something about it at the time, then that wouldn't have happened to that girl," Contos said. "The boys don't know. They don't know any better. How do we expect them to know better if we don't teach them?"

Within 24 hours of the petition going live, more than 200 women had reached out to Contos to share their experiences of rape, assault and harassment by male students from nearby all-boys' schools.

Since the weekend, more than 12,000 people have signed the petition and Contos has received over 1600 testimonies. In the 72 page testimonial, perpetrators from Riverview were named 21 times. Scots College, 36 times. Cranbrook, 45 times. Knox Grammar, 8 times. Waverley College, 13 times. Shore, 13 times.

The women who shared their stories were students from all-girls schools including Kambala (Rose Bay), Kincoppal-Rose Bay (Rose Bay) Monte Sant Angelo (North Sydney), St Catherine's (Waverley), SCEGGS (Darlinghurst), Ascham (Edgecliff), St Vincent's (Potts Point), Queenwood (Mosman), Wenona (North Sydney) Loreto (Kirribilli), St Clare's College (Waverley) and Pymble Ladies' College (Pymble).

Contos hopes her petition will draw attention to "the prevalence of rape culture in this very specific bubble within Sydney private schools."

She wants all-boys schools to combat slut-shaming and "locker room talk."

"There needs to be a holistic approach, and single-sex schools need to incorporate factors specific to their students," she told The Guardian. "This means addressing slut-shaming in girls' schools, and addressing locker room talk in boys' schools, because that's the foundation for this culture."

In her book, "Boys and Sex", Peggy Orenstein writes that it is through culture that boys often learn the truth about power... "about asserting masculinity through the control of women's bodies."

Our culture still insists on pressuring men to be sexually active as a way to feel more like "a man". Orenstein spoke to over one hundred young boys for her book. A common pattern she found in her discussions with the boys was their compulsion to be 'mean' to girls in order to feel more like a man.

"The biggest single determining factor (re: masculinity) is assertiveness," said an eighteen year old she interviewed. "If I am wanting other people, I am being masculine."

Another boy, 16, told her, "If you want to get girls, you've got to be mean. You've gotta be an asshole."

Which makes me wonder whether having a one hour lesson at school as a 14-year old boy will shift your behaviour and attitude toward girls. By the time a boy reaches Year 7 or 8, he's already had more than a decade's worth of cultural lessons from movies and books and television that teach him how to be a man.

"What we consume becomes part of our psyches, unconsciously affecting how we feel, think and behave," Orenstein writes in "Boys and Sex".

I think of all the movies my straight male friends revere; Kill Bill. Fight Club. The Godfather. Psycho. Films which promoted hypermasculinity, violence and the degradation of women.

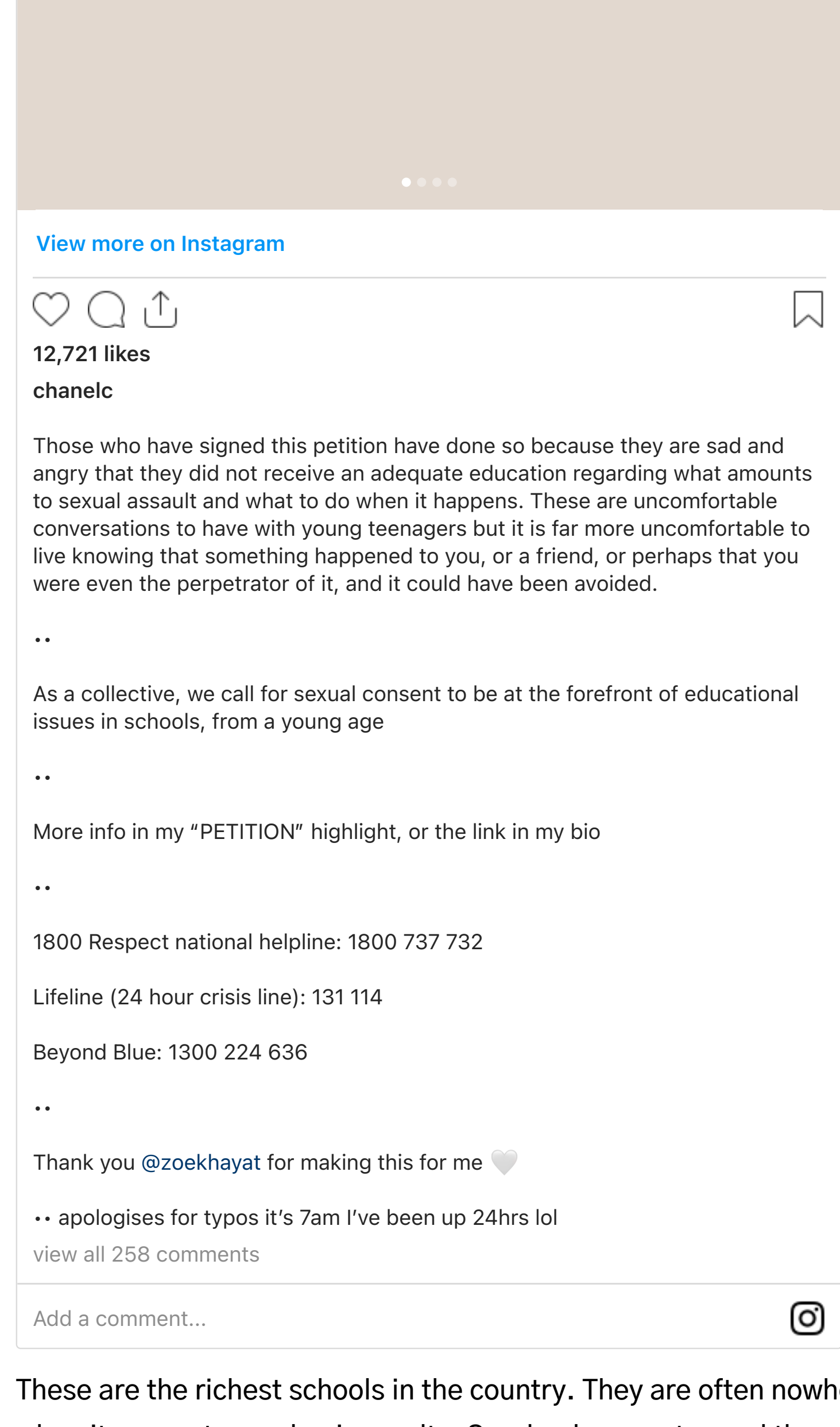
Through this culture, young men learn to see sex as " impersonal, and female bodies as vehicles for their own gratification," Orenstien writes. "The idea of promiscuity is still part of growing up male."

If the government listens to Contos and enacts concrete sexual education around consent in boys' schools, my next question would be — who's writing these lesson plans? Who is teaching them?

I spent almost ten years teaching in all-boys private schools and most of the staff were made up of male teachers. How do they begin to teach these lessons if they haven't been taught how to teach them? How do we know they're modelling feminist (and therefore, fair) attitudes?

It's also hard to change your behaviour if everyone around you continues to perform a socially valid way of belonging; ways of being a 'man' that are passed down from generation to generation.

The principals of these all-boys schools are very often alumni. They are invested in their own histories, and given their \$38,000 a year education got them to where they are today, why wouldn't they?



These are the richest schools in the country. They are often nowhere near the top of the list when it comes to academic results. So why do parents send them there?

Besides connections, sport and status, money provides you immunity from bad behaviour. Money shields you from accountability.

Educating young students on consent laws in schools alone will not change things. Women continue to be nameless and 'anonymous' because they know the consequences of putting their names to these stories.

They'll lose their jobs. They'll be tossed into the 'victim's bin'. And the men?

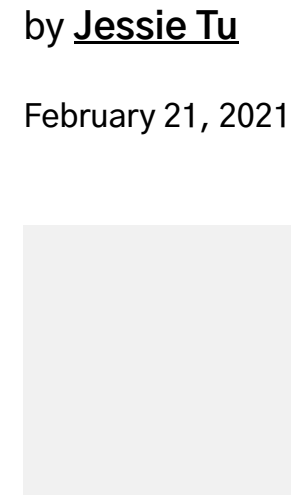
"He is now a high profile investment banker," wrote one rape victim of her perpetrator in the testimonies.

The films reflect real life. He is the Al Monroe.

1800 Respect national helpline: 1800 737 732
Lifeline (24 hour crisis line): 131 114
Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636

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BOYS PRIVATE SCHOOL RAPE CULTURE SEXUAL ASSAULT SEXUAL HARASSMENT



by Jessie Tu
February 21, 2021

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