

A woman with short, curly hair is shown in profile, looking down at an open book she is holding. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top. The background is a dense, overlapping collage of many small, semi-transparent portraits of diverse people, creating a sense of a large community or a vast field of study. The overall color palette is muted, with greens, greys, and dark tones.

# THE ASSISTANT

DISCUSSION & ACTION GUIDE

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## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Almost three years ago, I began developing a film about consent and power. As a female filmmaker who has been in the film industry for almost ten years, I had both experienced and witnessed sexual misconduct, some of which was easy to talk about and some of it more difficult. I was deeply concerned to learn how prevalent sexual misconduct was not only within my industry but also across so many parts of our world, and how rarely it was discussed publicly.

I began my research by travelling to colleges across the United States to talk to students about how they were taught about consent. I was at Stanford, meeting with a group of survivors who were exploring performance art as means of education, when the Harvey Weinstein story broke. All of a sudden, the subject of consent and abuse of power were being discussed openly. Whilst I was amazed to see predators being named and shamed, I also sensed that there was more to this story.

I shifted the focus of my project to the systems and institutions that keep predators in power and, more importantly, lock women out. I reached out to former employees of The Weinstein Company and Miramax to speak with them about the gender imbalance within those companies. They told me stories of being worn down by a system that was inherently structured against them. I continued those same discussions, with people from throughout the film industry (production companies, studios and agencies), followed by those in other industries and spheres, who shared similar frustrations and concerns. It was devastating to discover how pervasive it was.

With *The Assistant*, I focus not on the men at the top, but at how assistants and other employees with less status and power are pressed into a system of abuse. Therein lies the delicate and human tragedy of our protagonist, Jane. It is my hope that her story illuminates the experiences of thousands of women like her, and ultimately, empowers all of us to act.

**KITTY GREEN**

**JUNE 2020**

# THE FILM

## About the Film

In 2017, a series of shattering exposés leveled allegations of sexual assault across the entertainment industry, and sending powerful predators running for cover. As the courage of outspoken accusers inspired women in all industries to step forward and say “me too,” documentary filmmaker Kitty Green knew she had found the subject for her first narrative film: not the misdeeds of one person, but the entrenched system that supports the many.

Inspired by real-life stories, *The Assistant* follows an ambitious young woman working for a powerful film producer, throughout one work day that may define her future. Meticulously researched and written by Green (*Casting JonBenet*), the film is a fictional exploration of one of the most destructive issues in today’s workplace, as a low-level employee at a top media company tries to reconcile her own beliefs with a deeply entrenched atmosphere of abuse and exploitation.

An aspiring film producer, Jane (2019 Emmy® nominee Julia Garner) has landed what she hopes is a plum job with a prestigious entertainment company. As one of several assistants to the headman, her duties, mostly mundane administrative tasks, begin early and end late, and include putting up with the mercurial executive’s verbally abusive outbursts. When Jane is asked to train a new hire, an attractive young woman with no experience whom the company is putting up in a luxury hotel, she can no longer ignore the fact that her boss is a sexual predator. But whom does she turn to when the perpetrator is also the top dog?

Set in the competitive world of film and television production, *The Assistant* captures the universal experience of being at the bottom of the office hierarchy at any company. Garner (“Ozark,” “The Americans”) anchors the film with a quietly powerful tour-de-force performance that will have audiences wondering what they would do in her character’s place. Based on copious research, including scores of interviews conducted by Green with a wide array of workers from across several industries, *The Assistant* is a searing indictment of a system that perpetuates America’s endemic culture of workplace harassment and enables the predators within it.

“To be honest, it all started because I had been in the film industry for 10 years and I had my fair share of bad experiences. I both experienced and witnessed misconduct. I was kind of angry and I didn’t know what to do with that anger. I decided to talk to friends about what we can do.”

- Kitty Green  
(Source)

*The Assistant* also stars Matthew MacFadyen (“Succession,” *Anna Karenina*), Makenzie Leigh (“The Kick,” Billy Lynn’s *Long Halftime Walk*), Kristine Froseth (“Looking For Alaska,” *Sierra Burgess is a Loser*), Jon Orsini (“The Nance,” “Fish in The Dark”) and Noah Robbins (*Miss Sloane*, “Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt”).

*The Assistant* is written and directed by Kitty Green (*Casting JonBenet*, *Ukraine Is Not a Brothel*) and produced by Green, Scott Macaulay (*Casting JonBenet*, *Raising Victor Vargas*), three-time Academy Award® nominee James Schamus (*Brokeback Mountain*, *The Ice Storm*), P. Jennifer Dana (*It Follows*, *Table 19*) and Ross Jacobson (*Brigsby Bear*, “Manhunt: The Unabomber”).

Executive producers are John Howard, Philipp Engelhorn (*Beasts of the Southern Wild*, *Sorry to Bother You*), Leah Gibling (*Black Mother*), Abigail E. Disney (*The Armor of Light*, *The Invitation*), The Level Forward Team (*What The Constitution Means To Me*, *On The Record*), Mark Roberts (*In a World...*, *Table 19*), Sean King O’Grady (*In a World...*, *Big Sur*), and Avy Eschesnasy (*The Tomorrow Man*, *Casting JonBenet*). Co-producers are James Price (*The Kindness of Strangers*, *Three Christs*) and Rita Walsh (*Casting JonBenet*, *Buoyancy*). Director of photography is Michael Latham (*Casting JonBenet*, *Island of the Hungry Ghosts*). Editors are Green and Blair McClendon (*Mr.Soull*, *Raf*). Production designer is Fletcher Chancey (*Her Smell*, *Skate Kitchen*). Costume design is by Rachel Dainer-Best (*Waves*, *Dreamland*). Sound designer is Leslie Shatz (*Carol*, *Milk*). Music is by Tamar-kali (*Mudbound*, *Come Sunday*). Casting is by Avy Kaufman, CSA (*Suspiria*, *Brokeback Mountain*).



## Short Synopsis

*The Assistant* follows one day in the life of Jane (Julia Garner), a recent college graduate and aspiring film producer, who has recently landed her dream job as a junior assistant to a powerful entertainment mogul.

Her day is much like any other assistant's: making coffee, changing the paper in the copy machine, ordering lunch, arranging travel, taking phone messages, onboarding a new hire. But as Jane follows her daily routine, she—and we—grow increasingly aware of the abuse that insidiously colors every aspect of her work.

Her day is an accumulation of degradations: what *Rolling Stone* called “discrimination by a thousand paper cuts.” Inspired by hundreds of real-life stories and meticulously researched, written and directed by filmmaker Kitty Green, the film is a nuanced exploration of sexual harassment and gender-based workplace discrimination, one of the most destructive issues in workplace culture, particularly for entry-level employees and disproportionately for women and people of color. It's a system against which Jane ultimately decides to take a stand, only to discover its true force—its complicity with the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable.

*The Assistant* premiered at the Telluride Film Festival in 2019, followed by a national theatrical release in early 2020.

## About the Director

Kitty Green is the director and writer of *The Assistant* and an award-winning Australian filmmaker. Prior to making *The Assistant*, Green directed the 2017 feature documentary *Casting JonBenet*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and screened at the Berlinale before receiving the AACTA Award for Best Feature Length Documentary. It was acquired as a Netflix Original. Her work includes *The Face of Ukraine: Casting Oksana Baiul*, which won the Short Film Jury Prize for nonfiction at the Sundance Film Festival; and *Ukraine Is Not a Brothel*, which premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2013 and won the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) Award for Best Feature Length Documentary.

## *The Assistant* & The New York Women's Foundation

*The Assistant* is partnered with The New York Women's Foundation, whose grantmaking invests in women-led, community-based solutions that promote the economic security, safety and health of women and families in New

“[In my research,] I started with a friend of mine who had been with the Weinstein Company, and a few former Weinstein Company employees. Then I went to Miramax. Then I did studios and agencies and other production companies. I can't really name the other ones because their boss is still their boss. From there, I went to assistants in other sectors. The same stories came up again and again, patterns that cross the globe.”

- Kitty Green  
(Source)

York City. The Foundation's grantmaking places it at the top of public women's foundations in the United States, and in the top two in the world. Through its dynamic philanthropic strategy, the Foundation fosters women's leadership, creates partnerships that spark catalytic change, exchanges insights with experts across sectors, and empowers women by training them in activism and philanthropy to accelerate and sustain forward progress.

Ten percent of profits from *The Assistant* will be set aside to support The Foundation's grantmaking in New York City, where the film was made.



## Key Crew

KITTY GREEN *Director, Writer, Producer, Co-Editor*

SCOTT MACAULAY *Producer*

JAMES SCHAMUS *Producer*

P. JENNIFER DANA and ROSS JACOBSON *Producers*

MICHAEL LATHAM *Director of Photography*

BLAIR MCCLENDON *Co-Editor*

FLETCHER CHANCEY *Production Designer*

RACHEL DAINER-BEST *Costume Designer*

LESLIE SHATZ *Sound Designer*

TAMAR-KALI *Music*

AVY KAUFMAN *Casting*

JJ HoMEward PRODUCTIONS *Production Company*

CINEREACH *Production Company*

LEVEL FORWARD *Production Company*

*Written & Directed by Kitty Green 2020 / USA /  
Color / 87 minutes / English*



## STARTING A CONVERSATION

*The Assistant* offers audiences a forum for conversation about workplace abuse, sexual misconduct, and the complex systems of power and privilege that can govern human interactions in the workplace. After watching the film, choose several questions below to reflect on the film's themes. Questions marked with an asterisk are particularly topical for workplace sexual harassment trainings and discussions.



1 Director Kitty Green decided to follow a single day in the life of Jane, an assistant at a production company in New York City. Why do you think Green chose to restrict the film's timeline to one work day?

- a. Despite its focus, what do you imagine about Jane's previous days, based on what we see in the film?
- b. What do you envision for her future days?

2 *The Assistant* is written from Jane's point of view as a young, entry-level hire who is early in her tenure at the company. Why do you think director Kitty Green chose to tell the story from an assistant's perspective?

- a. Now imagine the events that unfold in *The Assistant*. What additional information might we know as viewers had the story been told from a more senior employee's vantage point? The boss's vantage point?
- b. What would we not have been privy to had we not been inside Jane's experience?

3 After *The Assistant's* festival premiere, two film critics offered divergent takes on the film. Read both below. Do you agree with either? Both?

**"...an exasperatingly low-key look at gender dynamics in the workplace...This is no time for subtlety, and yet Green's film feels so restrained, you'd think she was afraid of being sued for slander."**

[\(Source\)](#)

**"...the movie hovers in silent moments when taking action simply doesn't seem feasible. The absence of payoff only adds to the haunting spell, and imbues the drama with purpose. Amid galvanizing stories about what it took to speak out, *The Assistant*" is an essential reminder of why it took so long for the world to hear about it..."** [\(Source\)](#)

- a. Why do you think one critic felt the film's pacing and tone undermined its message, while another interpreted the film's approach as instrumental to its purpose?
- b. In the second review above, the critic notes an "absence of payoff." Do you think the film has no payoff? Why or why not?

4 *The Assistant* is full of bystanders--assistants, producers, drivers, HR personnel, actors and business partners--who perceive the boss's workplace sexual misconduct. Can you identify specific moments when the film's characters—not including Jane—might have taken action to acknowledge, question, document or report the boss's actions? (\*)

5 The threat of dismissal hangs over Jane at many points in the film. Twice, her boss yells at her and her colleagues coach her to send an emailed apology. Her encounter with the HR employee also makes clear to her that she is replaceable. Even the background context of her job--she's a relatively new hire herself, recently graduated from college--indicates her disposability. Why do you think the film highlights the tenuous nature of Jane's job? (\*)

- a. How does Jane's replaceability make her more vulnerable?
- b. How does it protect her boss?

6 Much of Jane's professional role is about cleaning up and fixing things. She tidies the boss's office, washes the dishes, scrubs at a stain on the sofa, picks a lost earring off the boss's floor, orders lunch for her colleagues. Multiple times she overtly vows to "fix it" when problems arise over the phone or email. Beyond these tangible examples, what more symbolic fixing and cleaning is also a part of Jane's role?

- a. Do you think the division of tasks in Jane's office are gendered? Do we see men in the film performing "fixing" or "helping" roles? In what ways?
- b. What other common job titles, in addition to assistant, are often charged with "fixing," "cleaning" or "helping"?

7 Jane accompanies a young woman from Idaho--her boss's most recent hire--to a hotel room to meet the boss. In this scene, both women face the camera head-on from the back of a moving town car. How does this scene contrast emotionally with the first scene in the film, when Jane's being driven to work?

- a. What do we learn about Jane when she's placed in juxtaposition to the new hire?
- b. What do we learn about the new hire in contrast to Jane?

8 *The Assistant* is full of apologies—from Jane, from her colleagues—but it’s also a film about a lack of accountability from those in positions of power. How do the themes of responsibility, fault and apology play out throughout the film?

- a. Who or what do you think is to blame for the toxic work culture Jane finds herself in?
- b. Who is blamed?

9 Sexual violence experts often refer to a concept called the **“sexual violence continuum”** to describe the spectrum of behaviors that sexual violence can comprise, from gendered belief systems or sexist joking on one end, to sexual exploitation and rape on the other. Study one depiction of this continuum, linked above, and then think about the actions--seen and unseen—that are depicted in *The Assistant*. (\*)

- a. First, reflect on the foundation of the continuum, the *social norms of entitlement*, which are defined as “accepted behaviors, attitudes and beliefs that create an environment in which all individuals are not treated equally.” What are the accepted norms we see in Jane’s office? Who upholds them?
- b. Where on the continuum does the action in the film take place?
- c. Which elements of the continuum do we plainly observe, and which are merely suggested or hinted at?

10 The HR scene in *The Assistant* represents a powerful turning point for Jane, who feels compelled to verbalize what she’s seen throughout her day at the office. Think about the context of this scene, as well as the dialogue and nonverbal cues given by each character as you think about the following questions. (\*)

- a. From the moment she walks into the “other building,” and throughout the encounter in HR, what signals does Jane get about her value at the company and her concerns about her boss? Do you think her report is taken seriously? How can you tell?
- b. Why can’t Jane speak directly about what she’s observed? What happens when she tries to provide specifics, for example, a found earring and hair tie?



## TAKING ACTION

Throughout much of *The Assistant*, Jane feels disempowered, alone, cowed and on edge. But there are ways that all of us--supervisors, employees, bystanders to and targets of workplace misconduct--can take collective and individual action against gender-based violence and sexual harassment. Here are a few:

## 1 Ally yourself.

As allies, we can use the privilege we have to stand up for those who are targets of gender-based bias, discrimination, harassment and violence. Review the National Sexual Violence Resource Center's [Bystander Intervention Tips and Strategies](#) or Better Brave's [Guide for Allies](#) to learn how to align yourself with those who are vulnerable and shift the balance of power that allows abuse to continue. Need specific talking points and sample language? Read [this advice from experts](#) on how to respond to specific instances of harassment as a bystander or target.

## 2 Report workplace sexual misconduct.

Speaking up can be emotionally difficult, socially awkward or overtly discouraged in the workplace. But knowing how to safely and effectively report workplace harassment can help ensure that practical and legal protections are maintained for all employees. Review the National Women's Law Center [Frequently Asked Questions about Sexual Harassment in the Workplace](#), and then read Better Brave's [Guide for Targets](#) for step-by-step guidance on responding to workplace sexual harassment, documenting abuse and reporting incidents of harassment to HR. Additional resources are also included in the Learning More section of this guide.



### 3 **Change workplace culture.**

Whether you're an ally, an employer, a colleague or a friend, you can offer nonjudgmental support and serve as a portal to resources and help in your workplace. Employers in particular should follow the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's [\*\*Checklist for Employers\*\*](#), which includes tips on changing training and compliance as well as shifting norms of accountability and leadership. Employers seeking to make culture shifts can also consult [\*\*#NowWhat: The Sexual Harassment Solutions Toolkit\*\*](#) from the New America Foundation; Fran Sepler's informative short lecture: [\*\*Everything We Do Is Wrong: Our Approach To Sexual Harassment Doesn't Work\*\*](#); and Futures Without Violence's [\*\*Culture Walk Checklist\*\*](#), which offers planning tools to organize an audit of your company's workplace culture and helps employers spotlight policies and practices that maintain systems of inequity and disrespect.

### 4 **Share your story.**

Workplace abuse is disempowering and isolating, and survivors often feel that they are alone—or to blame for their situation. That's partly why the #MeToo slogan is so powerful; it communicates the personal and yet collective nature of sexual and gender-based violence in the workplace and beyond.

If you have a story you'd like to share to help combat the stigma and isolation of workplace sexual abuse, you can contribute a written story through the National Women's Law Center [\*\*Share Your Story\*\*](#) portal, or tell your story in words, audio or video through the [\*\*Women Workers Rising\*\*](#) site.

### 5 **Become an advocate.**

Many organizations are working toward political, legal, legislative and culture change on issues related to sexual harassment and gender-based violence and workplace abuse and discrimination. Review the list of [\*\*organizations curated here\*\*](#) by the New York Women's Foundation and included below in the Learning More section of this guide. Many provide opportunities for volunteering, charitable giving, grassroots action and voter mobilization activities that individuals and groups can undertake to push for safer, more equitable workplaces.

# LEARN MORE

## Organizations

**Catalyst** is a research and advisory organization that builds workplaces that work for women. Its research focuses on building inclusive workplace cultures and engaging men as champions to help women advance and succeed. It provides tools and solutions to combat unconscious bias and sexual harassment and to promote inclusion.

The **MeToo Movement** reframes and expands the global conversation around sexual violence to speak to the needs of a broader spectrum of survivors, including young people, queer, trans, and disabled folks, Black women and girls and all communities of color.

**The National Women's Law Center** has worked for more than 40 years to protect and promote equality and opportunity for women and families, championing policies and laws that help women and girls achieve their potential at every stage of their lives.

**Nine to Five** is dedicated to putting working women's issues on the public agenda. The membership is composed of mostly women, many working two jobs or more. They have worked for and won major policies including the Family Medical Leave Act and the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act.

**The Purple Campaign** is a broad coalition of stakeholders working together to implement stronger corporate policies, establish better laws and empower people to create lasting change within their own workplace and communities. The Purple Campaign organizes advocacy campaigns to empower people to act to end sexual harassment.

**Safe Horizon** is the nation's leading victim assistance organization. Its mission is to provide support, prevent violence in all its forms, and promote justice for victims of crime and abuse, their families and communities. For confidential hotline and counseling support, contact 1-800-621-HOPE (4673).

**Time's Up** helps to change the culture, companies and laws, aiming to create a society free of gender-based discrimination in the workplace and beyond.

**The Workplaces Respond** campaign at Futures Without Violence is focused on shifting workplace culture toward respect, support and resilience. It houses a virtual library of useful tools for employers, employees and advocates that help unpack abuse of power and provide new models for workplace culture.

## Resources

**[A Legal Toolkit for Women’s Economic Equality](#)**

from LegalMomentum

**[Bystander Intervention Tips and Strategies](#)**

from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center

**[Frequently Asked Questions about Sexual Harassment in the Workplace](#)**

from the National Women’s Law Center

**[Guide for Advocates](#)**

from Workplaces Respond

**[Guide for Allies](#)** and **[Guide for Targets](#)**

from Better Brave

**[How to Formally Complain About Sexual Harassment at Work](#)**

from The Balance Careers

**[How to Report Sexual Harassment at Work](#)**

Nolo

**[#NowWhat: The Sexual Harassment Solutions Toolkit](#)**

from the Better Life Lab at the New America Foundation

**[The Assistant Resources](#)**

from The New York Women’s Foundation



# THE ASSISTANT

This guide was developed and written by Caitlin Boyle in collaboration with Level Forward and with advisory and resource support from the New York Women's Foundation and the NYC Commission on Human Rights.

LEVEL  
FORWARD

