

# Some Reflections on #MeToo

#MeToo has seen countless people coming forward with experiences of sexual violence and harassment and has become central to conversations around gendered violence.



Understanding gendered violence is key to understanding women's oppression more broadly and #MeToo has largely centred around uncovering the violence of men in positions of power. Of course this doesn't mean that sexual violence is solely perpetrated by men against women; the way in which people are made vulnerable to gendered violence is not monolithic. I won't pretend to be able to do justice to all of these subtleties in a short article. My focus will be on the need to understand men's violence against women as a form of gendered power and as part of women's oppression, to be able to extract lessons from the #MeToo moment to aid our political practice around women's liberation.

Many approaches have, at least implicitly, tended to treat #MeToo as a "campaign". There are campaigns that are and have taken place under the #MeToo umbrella, but actually what we have seen is a much more loosely defined, and sometimes aimless, outpouring of experiences of harassment and violence. It was after the stories about Harvey Weinstein broke that the MeToo hashtag went viral. Alyssa Milano, a Hollywood actress that had worked closely with Rose McGowan, one of Weinstein's victims, tweeted: "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too.' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem." It went viral in October 2017, and represented a major phenomenon for several months. The response has varied from women posting on their individual social media profiles, some detailing their stories and some simply using the hashtag, to attempted

campaigns to uncover the scale and severity of the problem. We have seen numerous revelations in the media about widespread abuse in the workplace, touching almost every sector, as well as an absolutely unprecedented amount of personal testimonies from women on social media and disclosures of experiences of abuse to media outlets.

One of the primary responses to the revelations about Weinstein took the form of an open letter from actresses and other women working in the entertainment industry demanding an end to workplace harassment, intimidation and violence. At the Golden Globes awards actresses wore black in “a silent protest”, and both men and women were encouraged to wear pins saying “Time’s Up” – the name of the campaign spearheaded by women in Hollywood. There have been other campaigns outside of Hollywood. In Norway and Sweden women in different trades unions collected #MeToo stories and used them in anonymised form in open letters detailing concrete demands for change in their industries. This format meant that anonymised stories were “everyone’s” stories, and were signed by often hundreds of women who worked in each sector. In this way these actions deployed incredibly personal and private experiences to do something politically. Other examples have included trade union campaigns against sexual harassment in specific contexts. Both Unite and a number of Trade Unions across Scandinavia were simultaneously running a campaign called “Not on the Menu” against harassment of waitresses and other workers in the hospitality industry.

These inventive and inspiring initiatives represent some of the clearer avenues for tackling sexual violence in society, but outside of this context there are a lot of limitations. There is often a lack of clarity as to who demands are directed at, especially when they are made in the absence of a previously existing political structure like a trade union and in the absence of a more developed political or theoretical position on the connection between harassment, sexual violence

and women's oppression. The aforementioned Golden Globes awards is a very good example of the limitations of the more mainstream campaigns, since people wearing the Time's Up badges in a "show of solidarity" with the Weinstein's victims included several men who are known perpetrators of domestic violence or sexual assault. Several of the women victimised by Weinstein were not even invited to the ceremony, nor were they consulted about the open letter or the Time's Up campaign more generally. In that sense, the ceremony can be seen as a form of containment of the revelations, a coordinated exercise in disciplining those who had spoken up and containing the political implications. The subtext is that there are "monsters" who are kept outside, but there are normal, "good" men that are kept inside, despite it being public knowledge that these men are also perpetrators. Likewise, whilst there was a "silent protest" by women in Hollywood, there is a cruel irony in the fact that silence has been the issue all along, and that so many of the women who had spoken out are still blacklisted, still not able to be heard, and actually not even consulted in the campaigns supposedly inspired by their courage.

Outside of Hollywood, we are grappling with further questions; what is the impact of a tidal wave of women speaking up about their experiences, especially in a context where for many, the effect can be retraumatising, with limited avenues for receiving appropriate trauma-support? What is the impact of a mainstream acknowledgement, and maybe even co-option, of certain ideas or ways of analysing sexualised violence? What does it mean for how we organise politically? How do we think about integrating an understanding of widespread trauma amongst those we organise with, and what does it mean for how we think about workplace organising that this is the background? Of course, it is important to bear in mind that none of this is new. The #MeToo "moment" has not happened because women have suddenly begun experiencing higher levels of sexual violence and harassment. It is also not the case

that women have not previously spoken up about the harassment they have experienced. A great deal of feminist activism for decades has centered around consciousness-raising, campaigns against domestic violence and street harassment, setting up rape and domestic violence shelters, and developing a shared political identity on the basis of living with the constant threat of violence from men; at home, on the streets and in our workplaces. What this particular moment has demonstrated is a new ability to uncover the reality of sexual and other forms of violence in the mainstream. This partly explains the uncoordinated and embryonic nature of a lot of the activity, and cautions us to remember that this is not really “a campaign”. The #MeToo moment paradoxically reflects how far the feminist or women’s liberation movement has pushed public debate at the same time as demonstrating the relative weakness of the movement, given that so many of the attempts at dealing with it are scattered and lack clarity.

A few months ago revelations broke over endemic sexual harassment at the all-male Presidents Club charity fundraising dinners, where waitresses reported that they were repeatedly groped, flashed and assaulted by guests. This relates very closely to the campaigns mentioned above run by trade-unions to emphasise that waitresses are ‘not on the menu’. The dynamic this points to, and the idea implicit in the affective labour performed by service staff; that customers are entitled to their time and attention; obviously relates to broader issues of male entitlement and how this plays into issues of domestic violence and sexual assault. It’s not hard to see how these scenarios both sit on a spectrum; where, because in certain contexts such as hospitality work customers feel entitled to the attention of workers (especially women), this also reinforces the entitlement that men feel in environments of greater intimacy due to their socialisation. There’s a certain kind of capitalist logic that makes this inevitable – the stark inequality in power between workers and management for example, or the precarity of women workers in the

hospitality sector and the way this forces workers to stay in uncomfortable or violent situations. It's easy to buy into the idea that powerful and charismatic leaders, who ruffle feathers and don't care for niceties, are necessary to drive the business, and that they should be followed and obeyed by their staff. As we've seen, though, trade unions have been able to use the #MeToo moment to challenge these assumptions and this fatalism in inventive and inspiring ways.

On the Left we already have a well established cultural understanding of how workers' power can be used to resist workplace harassment, though #MeToo has undoubtedly stimulated greater concern for seeing sexual harassment as a particular dynamic in the workplace. What is less easy to answer is how we deal with sexual violence and harassment which occurs outside these quite formal settings. How we build the means and institutions for holding perpetrators accountable, a task which is especially complicated by the fact that many of them will also be friends and comrades? These are questions which we urgently need to develop solutions to, but which may also only be possible alongside a vastly strengthened feminist movement which can provide institutional and political support to survivors and victims of harassment, and provide the political influence to hold their perpetrators accountable. In that sense it is crucial not to buy into the very liberal impulse to think that it is sufficient to simply "speak up about it"; that if you just fight the stigma or empower women to speak about their experiences that will, in and of itself, lead to change. What we see most commonly is that speaking up actually does not help create change of its own accord, and it often re-victimises the person who has chosen to do so. There has been a lot of discussion about Save the Children and the serial harassment perpetrated primarily by Brendan Cox and Justin Forsyth, chief strategist and chief executive respectively. It's tempting to ask why we are only talking about this years after the fact, after both men had already left the organisation and walked into equally high-paying and

prestigious jobs in other charities – why didn't anyone speak up before? But the truth is people (women) did speak up before – and nothing was done, the men were allowed to leave their roles quietly. The *Guardian* and other liberal news outlets refused to even report on the stories, despite having been approached multiple times, and continued to publish and promote the men in question.

While we should caution against a naive feel-good narrative that speaking out about your experiences will in and of itself create change, what we have seen with the #MeToo moment is something much more inspiring. The way stories have been shared, even on people's personal social media profiles, has often been either infused with, or very explicitly about, solidarity. Whilst the liberal mainstream, riven with the forces which benefit from women's silence, will attempt to portray this as just another example of personal 'empowerment', we can see the glimmers and the potential for something much more powerful.

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