

Combating Sexual Harassment: The Transformational Impact of the MeToo Movement and Its Future Potential

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Abstract

The MeToo movement was created in 2006, but its massive popularity in 2017 led it to shift away from its original focus. Originally, Tarana Burke, a social worker, created the MeToo movement to create a safe space for survivors of sexual harassment to share their stories and listen to similar experiences while also focusing on changing the American culture which perpetuates the issue. The original goals addressed the ways in which a person's identities could change their experiences and understood that more vulnerable people in society are more likely to be sexually harassed. As the MeToo movement gained popularity in 2017, it shifted to focus much more on the individual cases of sexual harassment of public figures rather than on the prevailing issue as a whole. The movement lost much of its intersectionality and failed to address the ways in which American culture perpetuates sexual harassment and how people could effectively change it. In order to truly address sexual harassment, activists need to reexamine the original foundation of the movement and create goals and programs which combine those ideas with the current movement.

Keywords: MeToo movement, intersectionality, public figures, feminism, sexual harassment, media

Introduction

“You took away my worth, my privacy, my energy, my time, my safety, my intimacy, my confidence, my own voice, until now.” Chanel Miller, a woman involved in a highly publicized sexual assault case, wrote these words in a personal statement addressed to her attacker. 81% of women and 43% of men have experienced some form of sexual harassment or assault and often endure these same feelings in silence (Kearl 2018). Just like Miller, many victims of sexual harassment are finally able to share their stories due to the recent popularity of the MeToo Movement online. Millions of women were able to become part of an online support network which aimed to bring awareness to the pervasive issue of sexual harassment. Despite the MeToo Movement’s beginnings with a focus on intersectionality and helping vulnerable populations, the media’s focus on celebrity involvement in the movement caused it to become more focused on seeking justice in individual cases than changing the culture around sexual harassment in American society. The creation of a safe place for survivors became secondary to the cause of demanding repercussions for powerful individuals, which does not solve the greater institutional issues that perpetuate sexual harassment. This paper seeks to examine how the movement developed and grew into what it is today, while focusing on how the inclusion and focus on celebrities shifted the movement away from its original goals. It also discusses how the effects of this shift could be addressed by future participants in the movement.

The Origins of The Movement

History of Sexual Harassment

Before the recent explosion of interest, sexual harassment was not discussed or understood by most of American society, and many, especially women, accepted it as a necessary evil of having a job. In 2019, only 310 out of every 1000 sexual assaults were reported to police, and even fewer of these perpetrators faced justice (Morgan, Truman 2019). Lin Farley, a professor at Cornell University, coined the term sexual harassment in the 1970s as a way to raise awareness of the way women were treated while at

work (Siegel 2003). According to “A Short History of Sexual Harassment,” this movement was an important push in creating laws protecting women from sexual harassment. As part of this process, feminists needed to “persuade the American judiciary that sexual harassment is ‘discrimination on the basis of sex’” (Siegel 2003). Since the beginning of the term sexual harassment, social movements, specifically ones born out of significant cultural events, have been an instrumental part in changing and creating new laws.

Emergence of the Phrase “MeToo”

Despite the phrase’s recent connection to the hashtag, “MeToo” originated with a youth worker named Tarana Burke in 2006 (Ohlheiser 2017). On her official MeToo program website, Burke cites a story about a young girl sharing her story of sexual abuse as helping spark the original ideas of the movement. Through this event, Burke realized that an important factor in healing from sexual assault or harassment is being able to share your story, which has been found to create “improvements in physical and mental health as well as the development of closer social bonds” (Pennebaker 2000). Burke utilized this idea, as well as her own experiences as a Black woman working with many other women of color, to create the goal of her movement as giving “young women, particularly young women of color, a sense of empowerment from the understanding that they are not alone in their circumstances,” also known as “empowerment through empathy.” Burke’s original MeToo movement sought to spread their cause through the creation of “an extended network” of women who could support each other. Burke’s ideas for the movement show a deep understanding of the intersectionality of the issue. Intersectionality is the ways in which different parts of a person’s identity merge to give them varying aspects of marginalization or advantages in society. Statistically, women of color are more likely to be targeted by a sexual harasser than white women (Hernandez 2000), and gender, race, and class all create inequalities in the workplace, which can lead to greater risks of sexual harassment (Acker 2006). Burke sets out to help victims of sexual harassment by first focusing on those who are the most vulnerable and do not have opportunities to combat or report it. She creates an effective foundation for her movement

because she chooses to address the intersectionality of sexual harassment and create an attainable goal of how to help victims. Burke's MeToo movement continued throughout the 2010s and gained more popularity after cultural events gave people greater insight into the issue of sexual harassment.

Catalysts for Future Discussion

Recently, numerous significant events have occurred in popular culture which have forced American society to evaluate its views on sexual harassment and assault, ultimately offering the MeToo movement the foundation it needed to make change. In 1991, when Anita Hill was brought before Congress to testify about the sexual harassment she faced while working with Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, many people saw no issue with the behavior she described, which included discussing various sexual topics, often specifically aimed at Hill, at work (Totenberg 2018). In fact, after the hearings, 58% of participants in a Gallup/CNN poll said that they supported Thomas' nomination (Sparks 2018). Even many of the lawmakers who were questioning Hill very explicitly denied her story, some even going as far as to refer to it as "perjury" and "fantasy" (Totenberg 2018). Thomas was ultimately confirmed to the Supreme Court, which seemed to prove the public's views about sexual harassment at that time (Totenberg 2018). The backlash Hill received for her testimony exemplifies the ways in which the culture at the time did not perceive sexual harassment as an issue. Even with increased media scrutiny on the topic during the hearings, the culture did not shift its views; however, the increased attention introduced the term to many people and set the stage for future discussions.

One of these discussions occurred during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaigns. During the campaign, many instances came to public attention of Trump joking about or describing how he sexually harassed women (Gibson et. al 2019). After Trump's election, many people were enraged that the nation seemed to confirm the idea that sexual harassment was not a big enough deal to stop someone from holding the highest government office, and even though many people reacted with public protests about women's rights, not much of the focus was on sexual harassment itself (Gibson et. al 2019). The events created a culture in which many people knew about sexual harassment,

but not many addressed it, which created a perfect opportunity for the MeToo movement to use social media to spread awareness and demand accountability.

MeToo's Resurgence in 2017

Many reference the beginning of MeToo and the topic of sexual harassment in the news as a series of articles published by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey in the New York Times in October 2017. The articles put forth a detailed account of how Harvey Weinstein used his power to sexually harass young women and cover it up (Kantor, Twohey 2017). In their book *She Said*, the pair stated that their investigation began with Kantor reaching out to many famous women and people who worked with Weinstein. Despite finding many victims of Weinstein, these women were either unwilling or unable, due to non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), to go on record. Eventually, Kantor and Twohey, by creating a network of women who agreed to share their stories together, were able to publish their article on October 5, 2017. In it, they establish Weinstein's record of assaulting women and covering it up:

After being confronted with allegations including sexual harassment and unwanted physical contact, Mr. Weinstein has reached at least eight settlements with women, according to two company officials speaking on the condition of anonymity. Among the recipients, *The Times* found, were a young assistant in New York in 1990, an actress in 1997, an assistant in London in 1998, [and] an Italian model in 2015. (Kantor, Twohey 2017)

Harvey Weinstein's story exemplifies the way the culture of a company can allow its most powerful members to exploit their power to harm workers lower on the corporate ladder. His power within the company also allowed him to continue his cycle of abuse, which spans his decades-long career in the film industry, without fear of anyone speaking out. Weinstein had the power in his company and the film industry to silence those who would stand against him. As stated in one of Kantor and Twohey's later articles about the Weinstein company, the culture of a company like this can often force other employers to become complicit in and normalize this behavior. This article helped expose what many referred to as the "open secret" of the

movie industry and created much more media attention for the issue of sexual harassment. Unfortunately, the media attention seemed to focus only on certain aspects of the issue and the movement to solve it, specifically by putting the focus on highly visible public figures.

After the publication of these highly influential articles, the MeToo movement spread even more, especially on social media websites such as Twitter. The first usage of the words MeToo in 2017 came in October after a tweet from Alyssa Milano, which read “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” (Twitter. October 15, 2017). Burke was not immediately connected with the movement, though. After the phrase became popular on Twitter, many news outlets, such as the Washington Post, published articles acknowledging Burke’s involvement in the creation of the movement, as well as the attention she was receiving from many Black feminists and news outlets (Ohlheiser 2017). Despite not being credited immediately with the movement, Tarana Burke’s vision of “empowerment through empathy” came through as survivors, 12 million in the first 24 hours of the hashtag (CBS 2017), shared their stories and heard from others like them. In addition to people sharing their stories, awareness of the issue rose tremendously, with searches for topics relating to sexual harassment and assault reaching an all-time high at 86% higher than expected (Caputi, et. al 2018). The far-reaching nature of social media platforms ultimately created a path to the ultimate goal of Burke’s original MeToo Movement: creating a network of survivors who could share their stories and support one another.

However, media outlets did not focus on this aspect of the movement so much as they focused on the public figures involved on both sides of the movement. Many articles were written about famous men and women coming forward with their stories and about famous men facing consequences for previous sexual harassment claims. The most famous of these cases were Louis CK, Kevin Spacey, and Matt Lauer (Carlsen, et. al 2018). These men subsequently faced repercussions, such as Spacey’s loss of the lead role in *House of Cards*, CK’s canceled production deal with FX, and Lauer being fired from his position as an anchor on NBC’s “Today” show (Carlsen, et al 2018). After so long, the public began to listen to those accusing famous

men, which worked to create a cultural shift and led to less acceptance of sexual harassment. While justice is being served in these cases, the position of each of these men as public figures played a large part in these consequences, and many men who are exhibiting this same behavior in other sectors are not experiencing the same consequences due to not being involved in public-facing fields. Additionally, not much focus was brought to the pervasive issue of sexual harassment to all people and how to shift the movement to meaningful change. The influence of media sites ultimately caused the public to care more about the recognizable people involved and seeking justice against powerful individuals rather than the original goal of the movement: creating a safe space for survivors to share their stories and changing the culture that supported sexual harassment.

Impact of the Movement

As the ideas of the MeToo movement became more widely accepted among the public, many activists began to push for a shift in the laws and the way the legal system views sexual harassment. After MeToo, 15 states enacted various sexual harassment bills which all aim to solve different issues regarding sexual harassment (Johnson et. al 2019). Additionally, due to the origin of the movement focusing heavily on Weinstein and his use of non-disclosure agreements to silence victims, many state legislatures “are considering or have passed prohibitions on certain types of non-disclosure agreements” (Tippett 249). These states include New York, California, and Pennsylvania, but each of these states have different ideas of what a ban on non-disclosure agreements should look like (Tippett 249). There is no data that non-disclosure agreements, despite their recent popularity in higher-profile cases, are used often enough in sexual harassment claims to warrant this much focus. Non-disclosure agreements may be used in other cases, but it seems that the only times they would be necessary is if the perpetrator or company involved was well-known enough to warrant a public response to accusations. Once again, the focus of the movement is being pulled away from creating broader sexual harassment protections in favor of focusing on the specifics of high-profile cases. Despite the many federal bills that were introduced regarding sexual harassment protections and arbitration agreements

(Tippett 235), only one Congressional bill managed to pass: The Congressional Accountability Act (Tully-McManus 2018). The Act focuses on congressional employees and ensuring that lawmakers are held accountable for their actions, including banning congress people who have been accused of sexual harassment from using taxpayer dollars for settlements (Tully-McManus 2018). This bill once again focuses on a very specific section of the population: congress people and congressional employees. While this act was beneficial for federal workers, it fails to apply these same protections to all workers. Even with all of the backing behind the movement for better legislation for sexual harassment, only specific groups of workers have been protected, which may be a positive effect of the MeToo movement, but it does not apply to enough workers to truly address sexual harassment. To improve the issue of sexual harassment, legislation needs to focus on broader protections in order to focus on changing the cultures which support sexual harassment and protecting all levels of workers, not just those in public-facing fields.

The organization Time's Up, which was founded by women working in the entertainment industry, works to change the culture around sexual harassment and how companies deal with such issues (timesupnow.org/work). According to their website, they are looking to create a conversation between important figures in different industries, activists, and lawmakers about the prevention of sexual harassment. Time's Up is also specifically using the power of its members, notable female entertainment industry leaders such as Ava Duvernay and Shonda Rhimes, to encourage the inclusion of female creators in Hollywood. The organization aims to do this by launching a mentorship program to promote diverse stories in media and challenging "key players" in entertainment to include female directors. Ultimately many of these initiatives were successes, with Amazon, Universal, Warner Brothers, and many famous directors and actors joining the pledge to work with female directors. Despite the narrow focus on entertainment, the actions taken by Time's Up can have a lasting impact on our culture. The inclusion of female creatives behind the camera can improve female representation in film and help viewers better understand the stories of different women. Additionally, Time's Up supports women who bring claims against major companies, such as harassment claims at McDonalds, pregnancy discrimination at

Nike, and pay disparities at Google (timesupnow.org/work). Even though not much tangible change occurred because of these efforts, they were important steps to shape companies' and the public's views on how the serious repercussions of discrimination and sexual harassment. By believing these employees and using resources to support them, Time's Up is putting pressure on companies to take sexual harassment more seriously and shift the way they handle it, for fear of public outrage over their actions. While Time's Up's work often focuses on smaller sectors, they are utilizing the attention these sectors receive to change our culture by bringing women into power and holding powerful people and corporations responsible for their actions.

Due to the prevalence of stories of sexual harassment from Harvey Weinstein and many other figures in media, many famous women and men spoke out about their experiences with sexual harassment, which helped to normalize it in public consciousness. According to Chloe Hart's article "The Penalties For Self-Reporting Sexual Harassment," "there is a cultural bias against women who self-report sexual harassment compared to other harassment targets." These biases could be motivating factors for women to stay quiet about this harassment, which normalizes it in office settings. Many women fear the negative connotations that follow sexual harassment, such as being "seen as less moral, warm, and socially skilled (but not as less competent), and less suitable for career advancement" (Hart 2019). After #MeToo, however, Hart acknowledges that these biases have shifted slightly, and while she cannot explicitly say whether that was the cause, she believes it may have contributed. The prevalence of celebrities, such as Ashley Judd, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Alyssa Milano, in this media attention may have also contributed to this shift in cultural thought. To many people who implicitly hold these biases, seeing famous women whom they respect and admire speaking about their own experience with sexual harassment may have forced them to reevaluate their ideas about women who report. Ultimately, the MeToo movement, especially the celebrities involved, helped increase cultural awareness about the truths of sexual harassment and shift cultural biases.

What Do We Do Now?

As the movement grew and focused more on awareness, which Time's Up has been aiding, it shifted the focus from creating spaces for women to share their stories, to acting against men who have been accused. In an editorial for the European Journal of Women's Health, Dubravka Zarkov, who is part of the International Institute of Social Studies, discusses her views on the harder questions to answer for the MeToo movement, such as the official end goal of the movement. She says:

First, we should not assume that what is happening among the political and cultural elites will automatically 'trickle down' to the streets. In other words, we should not expect that office workers, teachers, shop owners or policemen will be equally easily publicly 'blamed and shamed' or dismissed from their jobs because they have harassed and assaulted dozens of women (and men). (Zarkov, Davis 2018)

Many positive effects are associated with the recent ousting of several famous sexual harassers, such as a shifting of what is deemed normal as well as an improved working environment in those places. However, this massive push to change companies' cultures is not reaching all levels of society. It is not "trickling down" as Zarkov says. The movement's tools of supporting public accusations and pushing for consequences does not work in less privileged parts of society where not enough public support can be created. The people in these situations, often lower income women of color, have received some legal protections, depending on their residential state, but more needs to be done to create specific regulations. True change would come about by making it successful to hold someone accountable for sexual harassment through the criminal justice system and shifting our culture away from the normalization of sexual harassment.

In order to change culture and policies, the MeToo movement needs to stay true to Tarana Burke's original vision. Burke created a foundation for the movement that was built around intersectionality and a focus on the people most affected by sexual harassment. The loss of this original intention and shift to seeking justice against powerful men has resulted in a lack of true change in policies and cultures at all

levels. Despite the media's focus on this aspect of the movement, Burke's original movement has utilized the overall media attention to expand into more issues while still holding true to her original ideas. On the organization's website, they promote specific programs which are working to change American culture by helping underrepresented communities, such as transgender people, women of color, migrant women, domestic abuse survivors, queer people, and more. These different programs are necessary to address the many different aspects of sexual harassment. The movement also focuses on improving gender equality in the workplace and in society, which may help reduce rates of sexual harassment. For those who seek to do their part to stop sexual harassment, taking action by being part of Burke's MeToo movement is the most effective way to do it. In addition to aiding programs they are currently working with, activists can also help by referring back to Burke's original idea of the importance of education.

The MeToo Movement has effectively brought awareness to the issue and prevalence of sexual harassment, but more steps can be taken to educate young people about it in order to make it less acceptable and normalized. One of the main issues with sexual harassment in the late twentieth century was that not many people talked openly or cared about it. Many women were being sexually harassed, but there was not even a term to capture the experience or laws banning it until well into the 1970s and 1980s. As sexual harassment becomes a more mainstream topic, many people are learning that behaviors they may do or experience from a coworker are unacceptable. In fact, younger workers and men are less likely to even realize that they are being sexually harassed (Acker 2006). To combat this, activists need to embrace Tarana Burke's original idea of education materials which schools, communities, and other organizations could use to help their members talk about sexual harassment and assault. By teaching people to recognize these situations from a younger age, it makes it less likely that they will believe these behaviors are acceptable, which could decrease sexual harassment and increase reporting. Unfortunately, many people fear reporting sexual harassment due to "reactions of coworkers, the mishandling of past reports, fear of job loss, and concerns about potential damage to one's reputation following reporting" (Acker 2006). With education, many more people would understand sexual harassment, so each of these

reactions would seem less likely, and the people not already involved may be more motivated to step in to help with education. In a 2007 study about bystander sexual violence prevention education, researchers found that, after this education, both men and women had more knowledge, changed attitudes, and improved bystander behavior for the length of the study: one year. Introducing education about sexual harassment and assault into schools and community groups would help shift the current culture of silence.

Conclusion

Starting in 2006, the MeToo movement aimed to bring more cultural awareness to the issue of sexual harassment and act as a way to support victims. Tarana Burke created the movement with the ideas of intersectionality and addressing the ways sexual harassment affects more vulnerable populations, such as lower income women or women of color. After the publication of articles exposing Harvey Weinstein in 2017, the movement grew on social media, leading to an outpouring of messages from survivors of sexual harassment which increased awareness. Some of those sharing their stories included famous women, who often accused famous men. Unfortunately, the celebrity involvement caused the media outlets to focus more on the involvement of these public figures than the core issues of the movement. In order to right these wrongs, those who want to support the movement need to return to Burke's original vision of intersectionality and using education to change culture. This paper highlighted the shift of the movement and the negative implications of that shift. It also sought to convince people who support the movement to take a step back from the justice-seeking side of the movement in order to focus on actions that can help a broader range of people, such as supporting education about sexual harassment and changing public policy. Throughout this paper, many new questions were raised about related topics, such as how public education could be used to affect a culture and empower underrepresented communities to speak up. The MeToo movement created a lot of positive change in American culture, but more can be done to combat sexual harassment and gender equality through Tarana Burke's ideas.

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