

## Ambiguities and dilemmas around #MeToo: #ForHow Long and #WhereTo?

European Journal of Women's Studies

2018, Vol. 25(1) 3–9

© The Author(s) 2018

Reprints and permissions:

[sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](https://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)

DOI: 10.1177/1350506817749436

[journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw)

Hardly a day has passed since the accusations of sexual harassment against US film producer Harvey Weinstein in October 2017 without a new allegation being made. Powerful men – producers, actors, directors, politicians, well-known TV anchors, journalists and sports doctors – have been publicly accused of sexual harassment, assault and rape by a growing number of women.

Within days after the first accusations against Weinstein appeared in the media, women who had had similar experiences began to use the #MeToo platform to tell their story. Since then #MeToo has become a global phenomenon, spreading from the US to the UK, Canada, Australia, Israel, India and beyond. The end is nowhere in sight.

Given that the new *EJWS* co-editor Christina Scharff is on maternity leave until April 2018, and Kathy has agreed to stay on as guest editor, we decided to use this editorial to explore some of our concerns about #MeToo and, more generally, feminist responses to the problem of sexual harassment and sexual violence. It is worth remembering here that #MeToo started in the USA a decade ago as activism by Black women who had experienced sexual violence. It was supposed to ‘let other survivors know they are not alone’ and create solidarity with the victims.<sup>1</sup> This is what the present #MeToo campaign is claiming to be doing now. However, we have found ourselves asking if this is actually what is being accomplished. We have both worked on issues of violence against women, and have watched the unfolding of the accusations of sexual assault around #MeToo with mixed feelings.

**Kathy:** I came of age as a feminist in the 1970s. Sexual harassment, rape and sexual violence were top priorities on the feminist agenda and one of our strategies for combating them was the personal testimony of what we at that time referred to as the ‘survivors’. I remember as a young student helping to organize a teach-in at my university. In addition to offering many fiery feminist speeches decrying sexual violence against women in any form and blaming individual men (‘in every man lurks a rapist’ was a popular slogan) or, more generally, patriarchy, we had one – and only one – personal testimony from a woman who had been raped. She bravely, but with a shaky voice, described her experience to a mostly sympathetic audience, although there were a few hecklers in the room as well. It felt daring to be breaking the silence and we were prepared for contemptuous reactions from men who did not see sexual harassment or even sexual violence as a problem. (Those were the days when a married woman could not be raped according to the law.)

Given this background, I should have been overjoyed at the far-reaching responses to #MeToo and the immediate consequences of some of the perpetrators admitting their guilt, providing public apologies, and – in some cases – being forced to resign their jobs or step down from public office. To my surprise, however, I felt a bit ambivalent about the #MeToo phenomenon. And it troubles me that my response as a feminist is less clear-cut now than it was in the 1970s.

**Dubravka:** I missed the 1970s feminist teach-ins on rape, but I have dealt with sexual violence against both women and men in war and violent conflict in my research on ex-Yugoslavia. I have also learned from the work of feminists around the globe involved in research on Indian partition, the liberation struggles in Bangladesh and Vietnam, on wars in Democratic Republic of Congo and Darfur, and finally, on the violence perpetrated in Abu Ghraib. One thing all this research has taught me is that the context matters; and within the context the question has to be asked about the social locations of the perpetrators and victims. Another lesson has been that both acts of violence and their media visibility are important to analyse. Both of these lessons have forced me to twist my brain around #MeToo. And who better to twist it with than Kathy!

If I take a look around me, I do not see that things have changed for the better since the 1970s regarding the voyeuristic, sexist and misogynist nature of our societies. I have always been wary of public descriptions of sexual assaults with vivid details. In many ways, such descriptions re-inscribe women as sexual objects. However, the dilemma remains how to speak about the sexual assault on a body without addressing the hard facts of corporeality. Standing in the public eye and speaking about an experience of assault not only takes courage; it also takes incredible strength of mind and sense of self-possession in order to remain a *person*, and not be reduced to, or by, the acts of violence. In the 1970s – and still today, I might add – such acts of speaking out are usually defined by feminists as ‘agency’ – an active defiance and resistance to the patriarchal prescription of silence and shame.

Yet agency has always been important for feminism precisely because it is more than an individual capacity; rather, it is *practice* that is instrumental for social change. Clearly, there has been change. Sexual assault against women, including marital rape, has been criminalized in many places across the world; many institutions (including the military) now acknowledge the reality of sexual harassment and assault, and have created mechanisms (such as ombud representatives and complaint committees) to address it. All of this is thanks to feminist activism throughout the 1970s and 1980s. But we are all too aware what an ordeal it still is for women to bring up legal charges and go through trials, not to mention how rare it is for the perpetrator to get an appropriate punishment. Without belittling the relevance of legal change, we also all know this is not the same as social change. Whether and to what extent the recent

wave of accusations will translate into any kind of substantial change remains to be seen.

**Kathy:** I want to raise the question here of who is able to speak out. There are still many women who would not be able to participate in what has now become the #MeToo movement, either because they don't have access to the (social) media or because the sanctions would be too great. While it certainly took courage to come out on #MeToo, it was also a platform for individual women who were confident enough to stand up and powerful enough to be heard. Many of the women were well-known celebrities and they situated themselves as agents, not as victims. This is a very different kind of activism than, for example, *Take Back the Night* rallies in the USA, the collective protest in India around the ubiquitous harassment of women in public (called 'eve teasing') or OpAntiSH (Operation Anti Sexual Harassment) in Cairo where women and men support women's access to political demonstrations and religious festivals and rescue them from situations where they are being harassed or assaulted. This kind of activism does not focus on the testimony of individual woman, but frames sexual violence as a collective issue facing all women, which requires raising public awareness and involving both women and men in grass-root activism as well as transforming institutions which condone violence against women.

**Dubravka:** Yes, who speaks and who is heard remains crucial! Today the most visible #MeToo women are powerful: rich and famous celebrities, well-known TV personalities, journalists, and members of political elites. The fact that they are famous and that many are speaking at the same time, makes all the difference in allowing their accusations to be heard and believed. I am reminded of Nafissatou Diallo, the New York hotel maid who accused Strauss-Khan of sexual assault in 2011. She stood no chance, precisely because their social locations were so hugely, un-comparably different: she was a black immigrant hotel maid, he was a white national of a powerful European state and the director of one of the most powerful financial agencies in the world. And Kathy, as you wrote in the editorial of the time, feminists at that time missed an opportunity to join with protesting chamber maids who stood by Diallo (Davis, 2012). When Anita Hill accused Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment in 1991, she stood no chance because she was the only one who spoke against him. Worse still, because both she and Thomas were black, she was accused of kindling racism against Thomas and harming the black cause in the US. In both cases, media have turned against the accusers, not the accused. Today, we see the opposite: media seem to believe the accusers, fully and unconditionally – precisely what feminists hoped for since the 1970s! But should we rejoice about it? What are media doing here?

**Kathy:** This makes me think of a particularly disturbing example of the power of the media in the #MeToo campaign which recently occurred in the

Netherlands. A popular male journalist accused a male TV producer of drugging him and forcing him to have oral sex. His story appeared first in a local newspaper and a few days later he talked about his experience in a TV talk show. The accused appeared a week later on the same talk show, accompanied by his lawyer. He was clearly shaken. He denied that he had forced the journalist into having sex with him. Although he agreed that the experience had not been particularly memorable, it had certainly not been a rape. However, this accusation so many years later had done irreparable damage to his reputation and career. I found myself wondering uncomfortably who was right, but, more importantly, I wondered why we, the general public, were being called upon to decide about the innocence or guilt of these two individuals in the first place. The #MeToo phenomenon has provided public recognition and support for individuals who have experienced sexual harassment or sexual violence. However, it has also generated a 'trial by media' where individual men are publicly 'blamed and shamed' for actions for which they often suffer severe consequences, and before having a chance to defend themselves. As imperfect as the legal system is, I must admit that I really longed for a juridical procedure here.

**Dubravka:** The media – and especially social media – have made a huge difference for #MeToo, allowing it to become much easier to spread the word. But I share your discomfort. We should be concerned about a number of things here. 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). Second, as someone who has studied media representations, I am also worried that *visibility* and exposure will be taken as a *solution* to the problem of sexual violence. In other words, I am worried that 'making a person (especially the accused) visible' will be mistaken for 'making the problem visible'. Sadly, this is not the same, and the former can actually hamper the latter. Making powerful men as perpetrators and young, beautiful women celebrities visible as victims carries a danger of forgetting that sexual harassment, assault and violence are very much part of everyday life of many different women and men, and that when feminists say it is a matter of 'power relations' we do not actually reduce this power to a number of powerful men. We want to look at larger power structures that allow men – be they 'powerful' or not – to treat women as their sex objects. And this is where I also see the danger of this current mode of public 'blaming and shaming' of specific 'bad men'. This is a moralizing approach that takes us back to the 1950s when anything that had to do with sexual violence against women was seen as an attack on morality, decency, etc.

**Kathy:** It used to be easy to think of sexual harassment in terms of oppressors (men) and victims (women). However, things have become more complicated in our postfeminist era in which harassment is embedded in a culture where pornography is ubiquitous and women's autonomy is translated into always being 'up for it' (Gill, 2007). There are plenty of instances of powerful men who believe they are entitled to do what they like (Trump's 'grab her pussy' remark comes to mind). However, there are nuances and differences in acts and in actors and we need to look at sexual harassment with the same careful attention that we give to any other experience where individuals are negotiating complicated and often ambiguous relations involving sexuality and power. There are grey areas and we need to expect misunderstandings. I was really struck, Dubravka, by a recent incident at your university where a young male student was accused of groping by two female students. While his behaviour was clearly out of line and the female students were right to initiate an official complaint process, he was baffled by their response and didn't seem to understand that what he did was wrong. At this point, you might have cast your eyes upward with a disgusted: 'Yeah, right, where have we heard *that* before?' But I think your response was actually much more perceptive. You said: 'He's very young, has come from a traumatic war situation, and finds himself in a place he doesn't understand very well. I keep thinking: what kind of man is he going to become?' I think that that is exactly what we need to be worried about. The #MeToo phenomenon avoids thinking about the ambiguities involved in doing masculinity (or, for that matter, doing femininity), especially in a globalizing world where men and women are confronted with different and sometimes confusing norms concerning gender and sexual relations.

**Dubravka:** There are a few things to consider when it comes to men: one is what kind of masculinities are offered as ideals to boys and young men, and how to make them not just aware that sexual harassment is simply unacceptable, but also to recognize it and act in the situations in which they see other men do it. I agree with you that there is a grey area there. If young men learn at every step that they need to pursue a girl until she gives in, that 'no' means 'yes' or at least 'maybe', or that sexy clothing means a girl is a 'slut' – then there has to be, in my view, some space that allows the idea that these young men can – and can be willing to – change. If there is a hope from the current wave of exposures of harassers, then maybe it is a message to the young men that these are not the role models they should follow, however rich, powerful or famous the harassers might be. And this might mean that we need to make a difference between such (young) men, and the 'grab-her-pussy' types who do it with an absolute sense of entitlement. And we also have to look at men who sit on the fence. We should not forget that many (by your and my standard) *very powerful men and women* have known of others'

behaviour and *never* spoke up. Speaking up comes with a price and many are not ready to pay it. They literally do not want to lose money, position, prestige by going after predators from whom they earn this same money, position and prestige. In some African countries there is a term 'Big Man', which not only specifies a particular powerful man, but that he is powerful because he is located within the social structures that keep him so. So I am worried that the fact that some of the famous Big Men – like Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey – are basically finished, does *not* signal a social change. Rather it simply illustrates the mechanisms of self-preservation of a system that both makes these men the way they are, and then pukes them out when they become a liability. After Abu Ghraib 'a few bad apples' discourses have been used to justify firing several officers (one of them a high ranking female officer), but all the effort was put to present and preserve the US military as a 'healthy tree'. And with the 'Groper-in-chief' heading the US, it is clear that some structures of power are more difficult to shake than others and some contexts of harassment are more ambivalent than others. It is not the 1970s clear-cut oppressors-men and victims-women situation any longer. Even though men are clearly still the main perpetrators, these days we hear much more about sexual assaults on men, and a number of men also spoke publicly in the last few weeks about being harassed and assaulted. But whether that will make any difference for activism against sexual harassment is yet to be seen.

**Kathy:**

So, where should we as critical feminist scholars go from here? I recently read a wonderful piece on cultivating ambivalence (Kierans and Bell, 2017) as a strategy for understanding social problems and it applies to the recent moral panic around sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is an urgent issue which clearly needs to be addressed. While earlier feminist critiques were primarily faced with the task of establishing it as a problem, the #MeToo movement is showing just how widespread sexual harassment is and how it affects countless women (and men) across the globe. This is a welcome development in feminist struggles for more gender justice and a more equitable social world. However, I think that a moralizing discourse which evaluates, judges and sanctions, all in one go, may not be the best way to address the problem. Instead I think our task may be a more difficult one – namely, directing our attention to the murky and complicated ambivalences in which sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement itself are embedded. Nowadays we as feminist scholars do not have the comfort of always knowing what side we are on. We need to be able to embrace ambivalence and to ask the often uncomfortable question: What is going on here?

**Dubravka:**

I think the question is whether something such as #MeToo, which is essentially a (social) media movement, can also engender other actions and forms of activism. While there seem to be a few law suits in the making against celebrities and politicians, so far many #MeToo stories

have been coming-out-with-righteousness narratives of rich, famous, young and beautiful women. The need for recognition of being wronged is essential to victims of violence and injustice, as it is essential for the societies to publicly distinguish what is and what is not acceptable within their value systems. But when too much public sympathy and understanding are expressed towards victims of sexual violence from within essentially sexist, racist and classist societies and institutions (such as entertainment and politics) than the question: What is going on here is really the one we need to be asking. We can still hope for the best, but maybe we shouldn't hold our breath for too long.

### Note

1. [http://wapo.st/2yrg9rt?tid=ss\\_mail&utm\\_term=.2ffc7e8dcdd3](http://wapo.st/2yrg9rt?tid=ss_mail&utm_term=.2ffc7e8dcdd3) and [www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/10/19/the-woman-behind-me-too-knew-the-power-of-the-phrase-when-she-created-it-10-years-ago/?utm\\_term=.2ffc7e8dcdd3](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/10/19/the-woman-behind-me-too-knew-the-power-of-the-phrase-when-she-created-it-10-years-ago/?utm_term=.2ffc7e8dcdd3)

### References

- Davis K (2012) 'Stand by your man' or: How feminism was framed in the DSK affair. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19(1): 3–6.
- Gill R (2007) Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10(2): 147–166.
- Kierans C and Bell K (2017) Cultivating ambivalence: Some methodological considerations for anthropology. *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7(2): 23–44.

Dubravka Zarkov  
*International Institute of Social Studies/ EUR, The Netherlands*

Kathy Davis  
*VU Amsterdam, The Netherlands*