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'It started with this one post': #MeToo, India and higher education

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ABSTRACT

In October 2017, Raya Sarkar, a 24-year-old law student from India, posted a crowdsourced list on Facebook of male Indian academics who allegedly harassed women. This led to the start of the #MeToo movement in India, where universities became key spaces of discussion, debate and activism. Due to failures of both the criminal justice system and the described capitalist, patriarchal, casteist structures of Indian academia, hundreds of survivors who had experienced sexual violence at universities came forward online, disclosing their stories of harassment and abuse. Drawing from interviews with seven sexual violence survivors who disclosed their experiences online, this paper provides insight into reasons why survivors choose to bypass formal reporting mechanisms in HEIs, and instead turn to online spaces in their search for justice and healing. We argue that students are wary of university processes and often seek alternative forms of justice beyond the 'punishment' that HEIs are often unable or unwilling to provide. As such, this article provides compelling empirical evidence of the urgent need for universities to adopt survivor-centred approaches in their processes and conceptualization of justice, as well as how online spaces enable healing, catharsis and new means of informal justice.

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Introduction

In 1997, a 13-year-old girl disclosed to Turana Burke, then a youth worker, her story of sexual abuse. Hearing the girl's experience had an immense impact on Burke, who in 2006 started the MeToo campaign for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Although open to all sexual violence survivors, it was created especially for young women of colour from low-income families to ensure they were not alone in their experiences. As Burke wrote: 'the me too movement started in the deepest, darkest place in my soul' (Me Too Movement, 'The Inception', 2013). We begin this paper with reference to Burke because her desire to communicate empathy with survivors of violence informs and drives the research underlying this article, and in recognition of the contribution that she, and other marginalized communities have made to contemporary feminist activism.

As is now well documented (see for example Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019), although initiated by Burke in 2006, the movement did not receive widespread attention until nearly a decade later when, in October 2017, Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano sent a tweet urging those who had experienced sexual violence to share their stories with the hashtag #MeToo. Milano's tweet went viral, being used 19 million times within the first year (Pew Research Centre, 2018). Google Trends data demonstrate that since its inception, 'Me Too' has been searched in every country throughout the world (Saar, 2018). Although the movement began in the USA, it has subsequently spread to nations in both the global North and South, albeit at different speeds, sparked by different events, and communicated through different media platforms. In some cases, the English hashtag has

spread, in others, direct translations have trended (#BalanceTonPorc, #QuellaVoltaChe, #YoTambién) – while in others, creative, alternative or culturally specific version have emerged (米兔, #RiceBunny). Although Twitter has been a key platform for the spread of the movement, it has also been shared via Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Weibo and Google Docs lists such as Shitty Media Men (Haire, Newman, & Fileborn, 2019).

#MeToo also spread to academic institutions across the world and allegations of sexual harassment were made against powerful academics such as Junot Diaz and Avital Ronell (Harris & Wong, 2018). Following the global trend of calling out powerful sexual predators, in October 2017, Raya Sarkar, a 24-year-old law student from India, posted a crowdsourced list on Facebook of Indian male academics who allegedly have harassed women. Sarkar's list may have been inspired by an open letter in the *Huffington Post* by academic Christine Fair in which she accused famous Indian academic Dipesh Chakrabarty of sexual harassment (Fair, 25 October 2017) and the Shitty Media Men list which came to prominence in the USA, naming high profile sexual predators in the media industry (Haire et al., 2019). In the first phase of India's #MeToo movement, universities became key spaces of discussion, debate and activism, offering many students the opportunity to stand up to powerful male academics and the prevalent culture of patriarchy and misogyny (Chadha, 2017; John, 2019; Roy, 2019)

While India's #MeToo movement, like many others around the world, has been significant, it did not spontaneously appear. Instead, it was the culmination of years of anger brewing in campuses across India. As the first author has documented elsewhere, the 2012 Delhi Nirbhaya rape case started a new phase of feminist activism in India (Dey, 2020a; Molyneux, Dey, Gatto, & Rowden, 2020). It was the first movement where social media and digital technologies were used on this scale to organize around a feminist cause in India. The next few years saw the emergence of a large number of feminist movements centred around college and university campuses, mostly led by young feminists. Campaigns such as #HokKolorob (let there be noise), #WeWillGoOut, #AintNoCindrella or larger movements such Pinjra Tod (Breaking the cage) used social media and catchy hashtags in creative ways to spread awareness and conversations about important issues such as women's rights to public spaces, setting up sexual harassment committees in college and universities, and demanding the abolishment of curfew times for women's hostels within campuses. Hence, when Sarkar's list became public, it quickly snowballed into one of India's biggest feminist movements of recent times.

As with the Shitty Media Men list in the USA, Sarkar's 'list' as it came to be known, sparked controversy for leaving out the name of accusers, and specific details of incidents. This raised questions about the merits of anonymity and the ethics of 'naming and shaming' alleged perpetrators online (see also Haire et al., 2019). Although naming and shaming is a broad tactic that feminists have long used to highlight sexual violence as a political issue (Serisier, 2018), it is never-the-less a controversial practice, and one that risks legal consequences for those involved. Scholars have explored issues such as the limits of naming and shaming (Dos Santos Bruss, 2019), how they function as part of the 'safety work' that women do to protect themselves and others (Haire et al., 2019; Vera-Gray, 2018) and as part of broader feminist politics of risk-taking (Chakraborty, 2019). It also started, what many have referred to as, 'civil war in Indian feminism' causing major ideological rifts in the feminist community (Ghosh, 7 November 2017). As with Shitty Media Men (see Roiphe, 2018), many in India, including some feminists, argued that the list devalued 'due process'.

Such critiques shaped public debate about the list, as questions of caste and due process became central to India's #MeToo movement. However, while substantial scholarship has explored debates emerging from the list (Chadha, 2017; John, 2019; Lukose, 2018; Philipose and Kesavan 2019) Philipose and Kesavan 2019), there is a lack of survivor-centred studies that explore the experiences of bypassing formal processes, and speaking publicly about sexual violence in the wake of India's #MeToo movement. This research therefore fills this gap by exploring the motivations of sexual violence survivors who have subsequently used digital technologies to discuss their experiences of sexual violence in Indian universities.

Globally, while there is research on the failure of the criminal justice system for survivors of sexual violence (see McGlynn, 2011), there is less research that explores failings in due process in institutions such as HEIs, or on why survivors may bypass due process (for an exception, see McCaskill, 2014). Although academia is not intuitively recognized as a site of violence, nor does it recognize itself as an agent of oppression, statistics demonstrate HEIs are key sites of violence (see Krebs et al., 2007). Their hierarchical nature gives rise to sometimes visible and other times hidden power dynamics which oppress certain minority bodies while privileging others. Furthermore, lack of (functioning) reporting mechanisms, wider cultures of sexism, casteism, queerphobia, victim-blaming, 'slut-shaming' and an absence of support structures are some features that make academic organizations structurally violent (Dey, 2020b).

Research and currently available data from the across the world show that few survivors are willing to report cases of sexual violence within universities and that this is due to the lack of support structure and a lack of faith in existing reporting mechanisms even though many students experience violence while studying (Fisher et al., 2000; Krebs et al., 2007; Revolt Sexual Assault, 2018). A survey carried out by Revolt Sexual Assault in the UK (involving information from 153 institutions) stated that only 1 in 10 students reported their experiences of violence to the university itself or the police (Revolt Sexual Assault, 2018). A study carried out by Spencer, Mallory, Toews, Stith, and Wood (2017) in the USA show similar results. None of the survivors interviewed for this researched went through formal reporting mechanisms (Dey, 2020b). Some tried and failed while others were opposed to it. Even in Indian universities that have exemplary reporting mechanisms in place (such as the Gender Sensitization Committee against Sexual Harassment (GSCASH) at Jawaharlal Nehru University), many survivors felt unable to access due process because of the lack of institutional and peer support and larger culture of victim-blaming. This fear was intensified in students coming from marginalized backgrounds (Dey, 2020b).

In the sections below, we argue that students are wary of university processes and often seek alternative forms of justice beyond the 'punishment' that HEIs are seen as being unable or unwilling to provide. As such, this article provides compelling empirical evidence of the urgent need for universities to adopt survivor-centred approaches in their processes and conceptualization of justice, and further evidence of how online spaces enable healing, catharsis and in some cases, new means of informal justice (see also Powell, 2015).

Methodology

Among feminist scholars, ethnographic approaches which involve listening and observing have long been favoured since they allow for active listening, relational knowledge, and reflexivity as significant elements of the research process (DeVault, Gross, & Hesse-Biber, 2012; Harding, 1989; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Scholars such as Harding (1989) stress that women should be allowed to reveal their experiences on their own terms, and that feminist research must be centred around their voices and narratives. While centring the voice of participants is a key feature of feminist research, Harding (1989) simultaneously warns against universalizing their experiences. Instead, she notes, 'women come not only in different classes, races and culture: there is no "woman" and "no woman's experience"' (Harding, 1989, p. 7). As such, this research adopts an intersectional feminist approach (Bilge, 2010; Bose, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2002) which enables us to explore varied social stratifications and how these shape life experiences.

This research draws from empirical data collected in the form seven interviews with survivors of sexual violence who disclosed online testimonies after the #MeToo movement gained traction in India, and after the publication of Sarkar's 'list'. While some shared their testimonies on their individual Facebook pages, others formed a group in which they anonymously shared testimonies against a single perpetrator on the online portal *Medium*. These interviews were conducted between July 2018 to September 2019. The Interviews were conducted as a part of the first author's post-doctoral research project at SOAS and ethical clearance was obtained for all fieldwork through that

institution's ethics committee. The time gap between the disclosure and the interview, gave survivors the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences and in some cases even be critical of some aspects of it. Data were analysed using thematic analysis which is useful for identifying and analysing patterns of meaning in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although we identified a number of themes through thematic analysis, the four we address below were the key ones emerging from the interviews.

All survivors interviewed identified as cis-gender, heterosexual, Hindu women and all came from an upper-class, upper-caste¹ background. We recognize the homogeneity and privileged position of our participants as a distinct drawback of both the research and India's #MeToo movement as a whole. We continue to be mindful of how power and privilege continue to shape whose experiences are not only heard but recognized and believed (see also Alcott, 2018). All survivors are anonymized in the research process and were recruited through the first authors' contacts and networks with students and activists in India, generated both through social and scholarly networks. While four survivors were happy to speak about their experiences in the form of semi-structured interviews, three others were not. The most important aspect was to create a safe space where survivors felt that they could speak. Hence, three interviews were conducted in an informal manner spending time with the participants to establish trust. Some interviews happened informally over several days, sometimes in secluded corners of university campuses, or even while walking in a park. Two interviews were also conducted in London while the survivors were completing postgraduate programmes at British universities. These survivors repeatedly pointed out that they felt empowered to speak because of their physical distance from their place of abuse and the lesser chance of getting 'trolled', due to their absence. To protect their identities, all survivors have been assigned pseudonyms.

Further, data were also collected through observing one particular #MeToo story for four months, May 2018 to September 2018, where several survivors came together to write a joint testimony which was supported by other feminists, activists and students in the UK. Other #MeToo stories from campuses across India were also observed on Twitter and Facebook, which provided useful context for this study.

Finally, we have decided against citing authors, academics and activists in our paper who either have been mentioned in the list or have been named in any other disclosures. This is done to support an academic methodology and practice which is survivor-centred and above all believes in survivor narratives. In the sections that follow, we outline four key themes emerging from our interviews, beginning with the issue of due process.

Due process

In 1997, following the Vishakha Judgement,² the University Grants Commission (UGC)³ in India advised all universities to establish permanent gender committees to develop guidelines to deal with Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) within their institutions. However, following the 2012 Nirbhaya rape case,⁴ several cases of sexual harassment on University campuses came to light, both in urban and rural India. In response, the UGC set up a task force to review procedures for reporting and dealing with sexual harassment on campuses. They were asked to submit a report that came to be known as the Saksham Report or the Saksham Guidelines.

In 2013, The Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 superseded the Vishakha Guidelines for the prevention of sexual harassment. Following this, on 2 May 2016, the UGC introduced the UGC (prevention, prohibition and redressal of sexual harassment of women employees and students in higher educational institutions) Regulation. This regulation mandated every university to have an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) with elected student representatives for the prevention, prohibition and redressal of SGBV on campus. It also strongly advocated for all HE institutions to put in place support structures, infrastructural

development and sensitization mechanisms to ensure safety and accessibility for all students on campus.

Despite these laws and guidelines, we were interested in exploring why survivors turned to online spaces to disclose their experiences, and to name and shame perpetrators. An emergent theme was that despite having good policies in theory, systematic failures of due process left survivors feeling that they had nowhere else to turn to find justice, closure or healing. For example, one survivor shared that universities did not have working ICCs. Furthermore, where they did exist, few survivors could access them because of lack of support from the institution, peer groups or family (Sonia, Hyderabad). Previous research has demonstrated the important role supportive networks play in enabling disclosures to take place (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2019). Still others have spoken about how institutional processes, victim-blaming and stigma were significant barriers to coming forward and had witnessed other women being stigmatized, victimized, shamed and bullied, and wanted to avoid the retraumatization of disclosing their own experience (Wolbert Burgess et al., 2009).

Other survivors discussed the ways the ICCs refused to accept anonymous reports of violence, or to guarantee the confidentiality of their testimonies. Two survivors from the same institution who were harassed by the same perpetrator wanted to remain anonymous in the complaint, stating that revealing their names would result in severe consequences from their conservative families. However, the institution said that 'their hands were tied' and that they could not do anything to accede to the survivors' requests for confidentiality. No action was subsequently taken, and the perpetrator is reported to have continued to study at the same institution (Pooja, Delhi). Another survivor recounted a harrowing story of pursuing due process throughout which she was victim-blamed and shamed by the ICC, confidential information was leaked to the media, and no follow-up verdict or information was provided. As she recalled:

This is what the administration does – they stay quiet and tell the media that we haven't received a complaint... I can guarantee you that all women who have gone to ICC have been depressed at some point or [are] victims of mental health issues. Nobody has been offered psychological or legal support. The university lawyer neutralizes the complaints in a way that will benefit the university... I already had anxiety issues after molestation and this doubled my anxiety. Within a few days I had to go to a psychiatrist who increased my medication which [has gone] on for months. (Priya, Kolkata)

Although some scholars (Chadha, 2017) argue that the ideal way to address sexual harassment is through institutional mechanisms that would guarantee all women equal access, others (McGlynn, 2011; Payne, 2009; Stern, 2010) have noted that formal mechanisms for reporting sexual violence and misconduct are often highly problematic, with high attrition rates, meaning most cases are filtered out of the system, and only a small proportion will result in punitive outcomes such as a criminal conviction (see Haire et al., 2019). As such, there have long been calls for a broader vision of what constitutes 'justice' for sexual violence survivors which take a more encompassing approach such as having agency in sharing experiences as well as having these listened to and believed (see McGlynn, 2011; Payne, 2009; Powell, 2015). In this context, although we recognize they are not without their problems, the emergence of online public disclosures are not only unsurprising but we argue, may be welcome (see Chadha, 2017).

A growing body of work also explores issues of power and privilege in being able to disclose sexual violence (Alcoff, 2018; Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Loney-Howes, 2018; Loney-Howes, Mendes, Fernández Romero, Fileborn, & Núñez Puente, 2021). Several of our survivors were also cognizant of power imbalances, acknowledging that Dalit or disabled students were particularly marginalized because of their lower caste status, or assumptions that they should be grateful for any sexual attention at all (Ayyar, 2017). Mary John (29 April 2019) describes the relationships between students and academics as more feudal than capitalist within institutions which are structurally patriarchal, sexist, casteist and queerphobic with the social composition of faculty being overwhelmingly upper-class, upper-caste and male. In this context, the notion that women from marginalized caste backgrounds have equal access and support to reporting mechanisms, is what Chadha (2017,

p. 5) calls ‘misplaced optimism’, with women often trapped between gender and a sense of loyalty to caste groups.

The call for due process or legal action becomes redundant within institutions which are inherently patriarchal, sexist and structurally violent. Putting the onus of proof completely on survivors further prevents them from speaking out, as proof beyond reasonable doubt is often impossible to obtain about crimes committed by (powerful) men in private spaces in the absence of witnesses. Although it is widely presumed that punishing offenders through punitive means, secured through due process, benefits survivors, others have questioned this and instead have explored the important role ‘whisper networks’ and finding communities of survivors plays in healing and keeping others safe (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Haire et al., 2019).

Whisper Networks and speaking out as a form of safety work

One common theme emerging from this research was the important role that ‘whisper networks’ played – both in terms of identifying serial predators, but also for fostering forms of solidarity and support among survivors, which can lead to healing and feelings that justice has been done. The term refers to the process of warning others about predatory men (see Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Haire et al., 2019) which can be communicated in the form of lists, social media posts, but also through public or private speech acts (Serisier, 2018). Although contemporary lists such as Sarkar’s or Shitty Media Men have gained significant attention, the act of publicly naming perpetrators is not new (for a discussion, see Sen, 2017; Serisier, 2018). Because a key feature of whisper networks is to *warn* others about predatory men, we may understand them as constituting a form of ‘safety work’ that women undertake to respond to, avoid or cope with (the possibility of) men’s violence in their lives (see Vera-Gray, 2018).

It should be noted that although whisper networks have been praised for placing the focus on sexual perpetrators and making such violence visible, they have been also criticized. For example, as Haire et al. (2019) note, although they may give women some power in *knowing* which men to avoid, they do not ultimately challenge the structural issues which enable violence. Instead, armed with the knowledge of who to be wary of, the responsibility for preparing for, and staying safe against, sexual violence rests with women. As such, drawing from a ‘responsibilizing’ discourse, it may reinforce victim-blaming attitudes in the event that such knowledge was ‘out there’, but women simply did not take adequate measures to protect themselves (see Haire et al., 2019). Instead, as Gotell argues, the “‘ideal’ and valorised victim is a responsible, security conscious, crime preventing subject who acts to minimize her own sexual risk’ (2008, p. 878).

Nevertheless, while we are fully aware that whisper networks are not without their problems, our survivors described the important role they played in knowing that they were not alone, and feeling that by speaking out, they were potentially preventing further violence from taking place. For example, one survivor shared how she had been in a physically, mentally, and sexually abusive relationship with someone for a year. Several years after separation, his next partner contacted her to discuss his patterns of abuse. Although she admitted she was initially hesitant to respond, she did so because ‘I felt it shouldn’t happen to anyone in the future’. After deliberation, she decided to share information about this man’s abuse of women online in the hopes of preventing further abuse. Although initially sceptical that anyone would take notice, four more women came forward – all with similar accounts of abuse from the same man. It appears that the man did resign from his job after these disclosures prompted his employer to initiate an investigation (Tina, London).

A criticism of whisper networks is that they bypass due process. However, as discussed in the previous section, survivors had little faith that systems of due process – both the criminal justice system or university mechanisms – were fit for purpose or were capable of achieving forms of justice beyond criminalization and punitive measures, such as validation or acknowledgement of their experience (see Powell, 2015). Until mechanisms are reformed so that survivors know support and

alternative forms of justice are a possibility, it is perhaps unsurprising that survivors are turning to alternative platforms.

Furthermore, contrary to popular myth that survivors seek ‘vengeance’ through the formal criminal justice system (McGlynn, 2011), as one of our survivors shared, ‘for the stuff he has done I don’t really care if he goes to jail or not. For my peace of mind, I just want to know that it has stopped and doesn’t happen to anyone else’ (Tina, London). While some may take the view that survivors chose to name and shame solely to punish or humiliate perpetrators, our survivors unanimously disagreed. Instead, they articulated their hope that in being identified as a sexual predator, they could find help, support or therapy to overcome their abusive behaviours.

Finding justice, finding healing

While many sexual violence survivors are simultaneously seeking justice and healing, those interviewed here did not necessarily seek ‘punishment’ for perpetrators. When asked about what appropriate consequences would look like, most participants emphasized that they did not seek to end the perpetrators careers or sabotage their personal lives. When reflecting on how her perpetrator was fired after her allegations went public, one survivor shared:

I don’t feel very good about that because what I also know about this person is that he was doing these jobs because he had a lot of debt and I know his parents’ financial situation is not good. I know if he no longer has a job it would affect people other than him. So I don’t feel good about that either. (Tina, London)

This view however was not universally shared. One survivor deliberately took steps to ensure the perpetrator’s family, friends, and even employers were aware of the abuse (Neha, Mumbai). Nevertheless, all research participants spoke about the need for ‘consequences’ for the perpetrator – even if consequences included therapy. Another survivor went on to explain: ‘in terms of consequences, this is a weird case. There is something mentally wrong with him. I feel like in certain cases you can mandate therapy, community service’. This survivor was not certain that therapy could always be a solution. Here, she reflected on how therapists are often sympathetic to patients, and worried that a therapist may not help the perpetrator to acknowledge their problem. Instead, she pointed to the importance ‘for the therapist to be a feminist’ because they need ‘to tell the person to acknowledge that they fucked up. They cannot get away with it every time’ (Tina, London).

It is worthwhile pointing out that several survivors believed their perpetrators were unstable or mentally flawed – viewing them as ‘psychopaths’ or monsters. Such views are in contrast to feminist understanding of rape as a manifestation of power, or as a by-product of entitlement to the bodies of others (see Ellis, 1989). Indeed, such constructions pathologize men, erasing the role of patriarchal power in violence – de-coupling sexual violence from structural power inequalities stemming from patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and more and instead constructing violence as committed by a few ‘bad apples’ (Phipps, 2019), who, with the right support, may individually overcome their flaws.

For all of our survivors, providing testimonies not only became an opportunity to speak out against sexual violence, which in itself can be a radical political act (Serisier, 2018), but also a ritual of healing (Agger & Jensen, 1990; Loney-Howes, 2018). Every survivor used words like ‘catharsis’, ‘therapeutic’ and ‘healing’ to describe their experiences, while others found writing difficult but found catharsis in later reading the testimonies of other survivors who had shared the same experience:

Initially the writing process was very difficult because it was about remembering what had happened in my life. But after I wrote and I read what others wrote, it became a therapeutic experience for the three of us. We supported each other and it was the kind of support which we hadn’t received. We had been in therapy at different points of time but that was a very different experience as compared to being in therapy alone. (Neha, Mumbai)

For survivors, sharing their stories in their own words and choosing when and how these should become public, was essential for most survivors, giving them a sense of control (Alcoff & Gray, 1993;

Powell, 2015). Many felt that this 'gave them back the control that [they had] lost' (Ayesha, Kolkata). Another survivor stated that producing her online testimony gave her a sense of control over her experience (Pooja, Delhi). Reclaiming that control formed a big part of their healing process.

Hosterman, Johnson, Stouffer, and Herring (2018), in their study of the MeToo hashtag, found that the ability to be anonymous, the access to wider resources and people, the ability to disclose and talk about personal experiences of violence without forming close relationships and weak-ties social support, made online media ideal for many survivors. A study by Gallagher, Stowell, Parker, and Welles (2019) revealed that the formation of online virtual communities provided the necessary space for survivors to seek support and validation and also enable them to compartmentalize their experience of their disclosures from their offline networks. The act of disclosing trauma is also believed to not only help survivors contextualize their experiences but also build a more coherent narrative of the systematic nature of sexual violence (Starzynski, Ullman, Filipas, & Townsend, 2005; Wright, Crawford, & Sebastian, 2007).

In our research, all survivors found networks of fellow survivors through the internet or close friends. In some cases, they discovered through these networks that they had suffered violence from the same perpetrator. As Schneider and Carpenter (2019) found, survivors reiterated that the messages of belief and support received after disclosure gave them the emotional support and validation that played a significant role in their process of recovering and healing. As one survivor said here, 'especially in cases of intimate partner violence there is a lot of self-doubt involved about whether you did the wrong thing ... other people validating that what you went through was definitely real and wrong, gives you a sense of closure' (Tina, London). Another survivor reiterated, 'for me it was more about an acknowledgement from people around him that, yes, this did happen. Because many people did not believe me. That felt like injustice to me. The fact that I was believed and supported was enough for me to move on. That was justice for me' (Neha, Mumbai).

From personal to political

The final theme emerging from our data is around how online disclosures of sexual violence enabled our survivors to reframe their experiences from a personal, to political problem. (Phipps, 2019) in her work spoke about how call-out campaigns run the risk of individuating both survivors and perpetrators rather than addressing the structural issues giving rise to sexual violence. She further stated that, 'public feminisms around sexual violence (and the backlashes against them) also legitimate the individualizing imperatives of neoliberalism, as personal pain is commodified in testimonial cultures and the outrage economy of the media' (Phipps, 2019, p. 13). While this may be true, our research reveals that writing personal testimony was not only a personal but also a political process. Furthermore, participants explained how it enabled them to recognize their experience as caused by structural social inequalities. According to Loney-Howes (2018), the process of testimony is both therapeutic and political, giving voice to private suffering and bringing the private into the public sphere to be witnessed. Page, Bull, and Chapman (2019), agreed, stating that

[W]e suggest that until students and staff are safe in their institutions, we need to use all the tools at our disposal. We should be working toward the solutions ... in order to bring about deeper and more long-lasting change. But in the meantime, we argue that it is important to retain the right to name experiences, to name what happened to us, and to name who did this—the individuals, institutions, and structures responsible. Often, this naming occurs when institutions are insistent in their refusal to listen; it is seldom the first option survivors reach for. This can be thought of as a form of direct action, or a route for activists who have exhausted all legal and civil-society means at their disposal and feel a sense of urgency at the need for change (2019:1320).

The #MeToo movement has shown the potential power of personal narratives in feminist activism. Internet and social media have blurred the lines between the personal and political, resulting in what Highfield (2017, p. 15), called 'political talk' which draws on people's own experiences to inform political debates. This personalization of politics has the potential to reimagine what we term as political. So, while many survivors may come to these virtual communities as individuals, soon they

become a part of larger collectives held together by shared experiences leading to the development of social and political consciousness (Mendes et al., 2019). Individual stories of oppression, when seen together in one movement, therefore have the potential to demonstrate collective experiences of structural inequality (Baer, 2016).

As further evidence of the political power of speaking out, while some survivors had not previously been involved in feminist debates and campaigns, their act of disclosures introduced them to the larger feminist movement. As a result of disclosure, some survivors here had even started their own collectives. One survivor shared how posting her testimony on Facebook resulted in other survivors asking her to post their stories anonymously on their behalf (Tina, London). Another shared how her disclosure led to the formation of a survivor-led organization which helps others who have faced violence within educational institutions. As she shared:

We organised rallies, gender sensitization program, we keep writing about harassment, we provide support to people who have faced harassment. In my personal life, after this incident I felt much more responsible for the women around me. I don't know a single friend of mine who hasn't undergone some form of abuse in her life, especially if they are women. God help you if you are a woman and lower caste, and for that matter transwoman. (Priya, Kolkata)

Another survivor became part of a collective of 'pretty badass' women to demand institutional change and implement better policies and practices related to gender-based violence on their campus (Pooja, Delhi). The realization that they were not victims anymore but survivors was perhaps the most powerful transformative experience for every woman we spoke to.

#MeToo – The beginning

The #MeToo movement is perhaps the first movement of its nature and scale that speaks about institutional sexual violence, highlighting this as a structural issue that requires urgent attention. Globally, it took various forms – in some cases carrying on ongoing struggles and in others starting new struggles and conversations. While there is much to applaud about the movement, it would be unwise to ignore the way it has been dominated by white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual women's voices and experiences which have historically dominated popular forms of feminism (see Phipps, 2019). As such, attention is needed to understand the movement in contexts beyond the Western, Anglophone, Global North. As a step in this direction, this article contributes new knowledge on how #MeToo exploded onto Indian university campuses, initiating much-needed conversations around power dynamics and hierarchies in academia which lead to it being structurally violent especially for minority bodies, including women.

The nature of academia and the inherent feudal relationships it fosters also play a crucial role in actively invisibilizing this violence. Through interviews with survivors, albeit those from relatively privileged positions as cis-gender, heterosexual, upper-class, upper-caste, this article has attempted to bring their experiences to the fore, shedding light on why university students are bypassing university processes in favour of online disclosures, as they seek alternative and informal modes of justice, healing and closure. While we recognize the homogeneity of our sample size as a limitation of this research, there never-the-less remain important lessons for universities – in India and the rest of the world – in as much as they remain key spaces in which sexual violence occurs. We further recognize the need for empirical research with those from marginalized communities, and how their experiences map onto the findings presented here. Particularly queer bodies, trans bodies, Dalit bodies and disabled bodies.

As scholars, we must also acknowledge that #MeToo stands on the shoulder of a vibrant and long feminist struggle. It builds on many discourses, struggles and movements that feminists have fought for and built for decades (Loney-Howes et al., 2021). In #MeToo, we see an acknowledgement of these struggles but also the fierce will to learn from previous mistakes and move away from them. One of the most important aspects of #MeToo globally has been the tendency to move away from the purely legal changes and challenge larger cultures of abuse and harassment. As Catharine MacKinnon argues:

But #MeToo has been driven not by litigation but by mainstream and social media, bringing down men (and some women) as women (and some men) have risen up. The movement is surpassing the law in changing norms and providing relief that the law did not. Sexual-harassment law prepared the ground, but #MeToo, Time's Up, and similar mobilizations around the world – including #NiUnaMenos in Argentina, #BalanceTonPorc in France, #TheFirstTimeIGotHarassed in Egypt, #WithYou in Japan, and #PremeiroAssedio in Brazil among them – are shifting gender hierarchy's tectonic plates. (MacKinnon, 24 March 2019).

Following #MeToo and similar movements across the world, many survivors have been introduced to feminist politics, often for the first time, providing a unique opportunity for groups, collectives and unions to bring in new voices to the movement and expand conversations around gendered labour, social reproduction, class struggle and the need for feminism to be anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and intersectional. Only the kind of feminism that has the power to challenge the structures of a patriarchal and capitalist society and build collective movements that centre marginalized voices, have transformative potential (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, & Fraser, 2019). This means that existing movements, collectives, organizations and unions have an enormous responsibility on their shoulders.

Finally, many people have asked us this question – in classrooms, conferences, seminars and even casual conversations – How would you evaluate #MeToo? How successful do you think #MeToo was or will be? To all of them we say – #MeToo is not the end, it is only the beginning of a much wider and longer feminist struggle. And because of #MeToo and similar other movements across the world, we have many new allies to continue this feminist work.

Notes

1. Caste is one of the oldest forms of social stratification that divides Hindus in strict hierarchical order based on their Karma (work) and Dharma (religion/duty). The four main castes are Brahmins (priests/teachers), Kshatriyas (warriors/rulers), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (labourers). Dalits are considered to be outside the caste system and are responsible for dirty work such as cleaning toilets and streets.
2. Vishakha vs. State of Rajasthan was the landmark case where the Supreme Court dealt with the question of the safety of women from sexual harassment in the workplace and laid down detailed guidelines for the same.
3. The University Grants Commission is a statutory body set up by the Indian government and is responsible for the coordination, determination and maintenance of standards in higher education in India.
4. On 16 December 2012, a young woman was gang raped on a moving bus in New Delhi and subsequently died from her injuries. Under the Indian Penal Code Section 228-A, the name of a rape victim cannot be revealed and is a punishable offence. Hence, the actual name of the victim was never used by the media and the most common pseudonym used was 'Nirbhaya' (transl. fearless) and the case came to be known as the Nirbhaya case.

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