



Extract of International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine

<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5326>

Women

What we learned when women said #MeToo

- IV Online magazine - 2018 - IV516 - January 2018 -

Publication date: Thursday 11 January 2018

Description:

The latest example of the power of #MeToo moment came at this year's Golden Globe Awards, as celebrities wore black to stand in solidarity with survivors of sexual abuse and assault, and presenters and honorees alike spoke out about the violence and discrimination women face. Actors brought activists as guests to the event—like Tarana Burke, a longtime advocate for young survivors who first coined the phrase "Me Too." It was a sober and strong statement at a venue that is usually a celebration of glitz.

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This is characteristic of the last few months, when the #MeToo campaign has broken the long silence about sexual harassment and assault, especially in workplaces, and shone a spotlight on it. In this special feature, *Socialist Worker* contributors Leia Petty, Jen Roesch and Elizabeth Schulte discuss the roots of the #MeToo moment and where it could lead.

Elizabeth: It was just in October that the *New York Times* chronicled women's experiences of sexual assault and harassment with Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. It started with actors and then quickly cascaded throughout U.S. society, so that last month, it reached Capitol Hill, with several politicians forced to step down.

Let's talk about the impact #MeToo has made so far—both the concrete changes it produced, but also the broader ideological impact it has had on how people think about sexual assault.

Leia: One concrete thing is how many powerful men have fallen from grace. In a matter of months, dozens of high-profile, previously-thought-untouchable men—who got away with this for decades because they knew they were untouchable—are gone.

The fact that the silence was broken meant that people had the confidence to come out in unprecedented ways, and it had real consequences.

It started as a hashtag, but grew much broader than that. *Time* magazine said the "[silence breakers](#)" were the Person of the Year, and from personal experiences at work, it's clearly now part of the conversation to talk about sexual assault.

The whole #MeToo moment was about women telling their stories for the first time after feeling for so long they couldn't tell that story, and now it's become common conversation.

Jen: #MeToo has transformed what lots of people, including many women, treated as the background noise of women's lives—what it means to be a woman in this society, particularly a woman at work.

For decades, putting up with groping, sexist jokes and invasive, sexualized personal questions was the price of admission for women at work. Now that's being challenged in a very fundamental way.

There was an idea coming out of the women's movement that women were going to be equal in society—the mass entry of women into the workforce, into higher education, the breaking of the glass ceiling for a very small layer of women—and now we're seeing how far that didn't go in some ways.

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How much women were able to operate and exist in that world was posed as a personal question for women, and now it's being re-posed as a collective and a political question for women.

It's being challenged in a fundamental way that is deeper than just recognizing the pervasiveness of sexual assault and rape, but is really looking at the entire sexist society within which women are forced to operate.

It's also opening up big questions about how unequal women are—starting with the thin number of women who have been able to make it into middle-class professional jobs, but even they are subject to this kind of abuse and harassment.

That is the tip of the iceberg for millions of working-class and poor women, farmworkers, service workers, domestic workers—you go down the line and that's the condition of work for the vast majority of women in this country.

Elizabeth: The impact is twofold. All the horrors are exposed, and at the same time, women's ability to talk about them is also a part of what #MeToo has accomplished. Being able to speak out about it gives it a different character.

I read a quote from a former congressional staffer who said, "I thought this was just the way that it was. I didn't think I could say anything." How many people are thinking that now?

At first, there was some dismissiveness about #MeToo because it was Hollywood women. But in many ways, the impact of sexual assault on working-class women is more in the newspapers than before because of the opening these Hollywood women pried open.

When I saw the [exposé that the New York Times did on the Ford workers](#)—Black women who had faced sexual harassment at work for decades—I appreciated the fact that the *Times* had to report on that now.

The media has also had to talk about the institutions and mechanisms that let abusers off the hook repeatedly—in Congress for instance, where women with complaints have been [forced into silence for decades](#).

You brought up the women's movement, and I've been thinking a lot about that in terms of how successfully the backlash of the late 1980s and '90s furthered the idea that "the women's movement went too far" or we're in a post-feminist society. Leia, [you've written about that recently](#).

Leia: About the women who have been facing sexual harassment at Ford, I have to say that when I read that article, I was kind of astounded by how little had changed. Susan Faludi wrote in her book *Backlash* about women who came to work in factories with signs that said, "Kill a women, save a job."

This was happening during the 1980s during an economic recession, and it represented a full-scale backlash against the women's movement of the 1970s.

I was shocked to read about those conditions in Faludi's book, and then I read about the women in Chicago Ford plants, and it really felt like things weren't that different. You have constant sexual harassment, and when women were hired and given a tour of the plant, they were called "fresh meat." They were required to do sexual favors to further their careers.

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These women felt trapped in their jobs. For some, it was the best job they'd ever had, and this is what allows this to continue—women feel like they don't have any other choice but to endure, because to quit is a non-option. The conditions of the backlash are very much alive.

I was surprised at how quickly #MeToo was able to topple powerful people. But then, when the question of politicians came up—specifically Al Franken, but also others who were being accused and about to suffer for it—that's when a series of articles came out saying maybe it had gone too far, that there was panic underway which might have repercussions for society and people ability to be sexually free. That was just horrifying.

I don't think the timing is a coincidence. I think there was a panic, but the panic was by people who run this country, who felt like this was going to go too far and was going to have political consequences for the establishment and their ability to rule in the way they want to rule.

It felt like they were willing to do away with a Harvey Weinstein or a CEO or an actor here and there, but when it came to the question of how our government functions, that's when they began to panic and produced a narrative that this was going too far.

All of a sudden, they cared about due process. But they didn't care about it when Black men were unjustly accused of sexual assault, [like the Central Park Five](#). It's clear that they don't care about justice for women or the unjustly accused—they care about the maintenance of their political order.

Jen: If you look back at the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and '70s, it totally transformed people's ideas about women in society. It was part of the mass entry of women into the workforce. Obviously a significant number of working-class women and women of color had always worked, but this was a significant transformation.

You had the sexual revolution, abortion rights were won—there were a number of reforms that paved the way for people thinking that women were going to be equal in society.

But think about how shallow the gains were in terms of economic equality. We didn't win provisions for funded childcare or the Equal Rights Amendment.

So on the one hand, you have the idea that women can do and be anything, but the material basis for women to actually be able to do or be anything wasn't there. You can see that in the fact that male-dominated industries have one of the highest rates of sexual harassment, which is clearly connected to keeping women out of those jobs.

I think there was also a parallel development of a sense of sexual liberation and freedom coming out of the women's liberation movement, where divorce became commonplace and was a real benefit for women.

There was more freedom on that front, but the fact that abortion rights have been rolled back in the last 30 years—that women don't have real autonomy in a material and economic sense or bodily autonomy over reproductive rights—sets up a situation where on the one hand, women are supposed to be sexually liberated and free, but at the same time, they don't have that kind of control. That's central to understanding how sexism and sexual violence operates.

The contradictory gains of the women's movement set this up. The message is: You're free, but it's on you—it's your own personal struggle.

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One of the things that is heartening about this moment is the sense of collective solidarity among women who say they are coming forward to protect other women.

I think there's been pushback from some liberals and some on the left who are worried about a moral panic: Are we not going to be able to flirt and have fun anymore? First of all, it's a terrible lack of political imagination that people can't envision fulfilling relationships that aren't based on inequality and the degradation of women.

People have referenced old debates—what they call sex-positive feminism vs. the idea that all sex is inherently sexist, going back to the radical feminist critique.

But this moment raises a different notion: that you can't talk about sexual freedom, women's liberation and mutually satisfying relationships unless women have full material economic social equality. That's a condition for all of these things.

The #MeToo moment has produced an opportunity for a discussion about those structural conditions that inhibit actual equality and liberation and freedom.

Because like you said, Elizabeth, they knew about what people like Weinstein were doing for years. The reason that they toppled so quickly wasn't because there was a moral panic—it's probably because there are personnel files a couple inches thick that they knew would be discovered if these guys weren't jettisoned right away.

For the people who did the firing, it was less about "going too far" and more about clearing the decks—as opposed to opening up everything that was beneath the surface. The people in power knew about this, but the vast majority of us didn't know the scale.

Elizabeth: Coming back to the narrative about the moral panic: [Masha Gessen raised it in the New Yorker](#), and it was talked about elsewhere in relation to AI Franken.

That was also an attempt to flip the script and say: Wait, are some "good men" going to go down because of the massive number of women speaking out about the harassment they face every day?

Part of the power of #MeToo has been just how gargantuan the outpouring was—that so many women were standing up and talking about everything from the horrendous cases like Weinstein to the daily slog of going to work and being harassed.

It's not done yet, obviously, but it's begun to transform the way women think that they should be treated.

There are all these mechanisms that are supposedly in place, but it's very difficult to file complaints. You put yourself in jeopardy if you try to respond to sexual harassment. The statistics show that women would rather not report.

You have to ask, too: What kind of equal, supposedly post-feminist society are we living in where this sort of behavior can exist? And how is this connected with women's unequal position in society by every measure, from wages and access to health care, to childcare, housing and education.

The question of Ford was a good one—the *New York Times* couldn't figure out how to explain it, but some working-class men went along and took part in the harassment that was encouraged from top to the bottom at Ford.

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Socialists have an opportunity to talk about how sexual harassment and violence is linked to women's unequal roles in society while #MeToo is shaking people's conceptions.

I want to steer us toward how #MeToo fits into the Trump era. And also what came before that—the anger about sexism that was brewing, but hasn't had a way to express itself.

Leia: One thing that was astounding to me is that Trump won a month after the tape was released where he was bragging about committing sexual assault. I've been thinking about what's happened to people since Trump's election: There's a sense that people need to stand up, and if they don't, then nothing will change.

On the one hand, Trump's election has emboldened the far right, racists, sexists and so on. And at the same time, it's exposed the nature of this country.

That was true with the [NFL take-a-knee protests](#), with #MeToo, with actions against immigration raids. A lot of what's being protested under Trump was in place under Obama and decades before that. They're foundational to our country.

But things that you used to have to use a magnifying glass to see are now laid bare for everyone to see. It's like the emperor has no clothes, except it's the whole country in this case.

The anger and resistance is directed at Trump, and rightfully so. But there are people in the Democratic Party who want to contain this and *just* make it about Trump. I think that would be a mistake. It's our job to look beyond Trump and talk about how to build a wider resistance.

I remember Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor talking before Black Lives Matter erupted that there was going to be a Black rebellion in this country soon because of the mass despair, injustice and daily police violence—and zero expression for it in the mainstream political establishment.

You can see a parallel with feminism. There's a daily sexual violence, degradation and exploitation. People are struggling to get by, and there wasn't a conversation happening about those conditions.

It's like a powder keg that can explode at any point. That was true of the Women's Marches—they weren't organized by the main women's organizations, but by individual women who [brought millions of people into the streets for a counter-inauguration](#).

That sentiment was brewing beneath the surface if you remember the SlutWalks that began a few years ago. You see it again with #MeToo, and we can expect more. The task is to organize this sentiment so that it's not just a moment, but there are organizations that go alongside the resistance.

We can't just have a sentiment of resistance in the air without organizational mechanisms to fight for demands to push forward.

Jen: I think a women's movement on a different kind of basis has been struggling to emerge for some time, and it hasn't been successful yet at an organizational level, but you see the seeds of it.

I've had the opportunity to speak with campus activists who have been deeply involved with the struggle against

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sexual assault on campuses, which was a prelude to this movement. It was very similar in the sense of women speaking out about how they've been treated by campus administrations.

The [first spark was Angie Epifano from Amherst College](#), who talked about how, when she was raped on campus, instead of getting justice, the administration had her committed to a mental institution, and she was forced to leave school.

When she told her story for the first time, it set off a significant protest on that campus, and then there was a rolling effect on campuses across the country.

Most people have heard of Emma Sulkowicz at Columbia University, [who carried the mattress she was raped on around campus](#), with hundreds of students helping and supporting her. One part of that action was a day called "Carry that Weight," which happened on 300 campuses across the country and internationally.

These women have done a great job organizing, rejecting some of the narratives around criminalization and trying to articulate a different understanding about why sexual assault happens.

There are many examples like this because of the failure of any of the groups like the National Organization for Women or NARAL to take up these issues.

Planned Parenthood is facing extinction, and it can't organize a national march in its own defense. When anti-choice bigots decide that they want to surround their clinics, rather than combatting the right, Planned Parenthood directs its fire at the activists who want to defend clinics.

They're more afraid of the people rebuilding militant tactics than the people gunning for them because they're so used to figuring out how to cut backroom deals in Congress, or work in the courts or with the police. They want to rely on all the mechanisms that have utterly failed us.

Leia and I are involved in a group called [NYC for Abortion Rights](#), and one of the first things we heard at meetings was how sick women were of writing letters to Congress and sick of apologizing for abortion.

I think that "I'm sick of it" feeling is very much there, and it hasn't exploded into a movement yet, but #MeToo is one of the ideological expressions. Now the challenge is taking the next step to building that movement.

It won't be overnight, and it won't be massive at first, but even small networks of people coming together to defend a clinic, or hold campus administrations accountable on rape and treat survivors with the dignity they deserve, can begin to lay the groundwork for something different.

It will be challenging over the next few years, because what's being planned out of the Women's Marches last year is a convention on the anniversary in Las Vegas to launch the biggest voter registration drive ever.

There will be a lot of focus on elections, and it will be challenging to keep the focus on what initiatives we take. So it will be important to lay claim to what #MeToo has accomplished and continue pushing forward.

Just last month, 1,500 anti-abortion bigots surrounded a clinic in North Carolina. Elizabeth, you and I were involved in [running Operation Rescue off the streets 20 years ago](#), but initiatives like that don't exist now. It would be great if

those mainstream organizations would move, but I don't think we can wait for it or count on it. We have to begin with the basic building blocks.

Elizabeth:When you were talking about the "sick of it" feeling, I was thinking of that "Shout My Abortion" campaign a couple years ago, which was such a contrast to what all the political forces like NOW and NARAL tell women they're supposed to say about abortion rights.

Abortion is put on the backburner, when politicians talk about defending Planned Parenthood, but women spoke out about their abortions to say: No, this is fundamental and necessary for all women. It felt like people chomping at the bit to do something, but not having the organization to do it.

It will be important to keep on track building independent organizations to take up women's rights, including abortion, and not let them get put on the back burner. The NYC organizing has been really impressive. Sometimes, people can forget the impact that more modest organizing can have on a broader layer of people.

Right now, many activists are figuring out what's next. What are some of the things we can organize around, including Title IX on our campuses, taking on harassment in women's workplaces? What kind of demands and initiatives are you thinking about?

Leia:About the mainstream women's organizations and the Democratic Party, I think this is a real challenge. I think we're going to have to drag them out to fight.

That was true with the Women's Marches. They were started by a group of friends and then ballooned, and eventually, NOW mobilized and sent buses. They came out, but they were dragged out. That's the unfortunate state of affairs, but it's the moment we're in and we have to find more ways to self-organize and put pressure on those organizations.

The Seattle Clinic Defense group that was started by socialists and other activists is now in a conversation with NARAL locally about how to defend clinics and confront the right directly. We have to continue on that front with the expectation that we can't rely on those organizations to do it for us, but if we can organize our side, we can force them to move.

I've heard of activists on campus talking about organizing around Title IX [\[1\]](#), which is under threat from the Trump administration. It will be up to activists to demand that their campus administrations have Title IX protections for students, whether or not it exists at the federal level.

At Brooklyn College, a coalition of groups led a modest speak-out and march called "Stand with Survivors." Members of the Black fraternity joined. Now these groups have come together to talk about how this newly established coalition can continue to call for justice on campus for survivors of sexual assault.

Some [70,000 farmworkers signed onto a statement in solidarity](#) with a march in Hollywood standing with survivors, but also bringing attention to the sexual harassment experienced by women in agriculture.

The [Coalition of Immokalee Workers](#) in Florida is part of a campaign taking on some huge fast-food corporations, and one of its demands is around sexual harassment in the fields. It's planning actions targeting Wendy's, which is one of the companies that still refuses to meet the workers' demands. This could bring attention to the intersection between exploitation and sexual violence at work.

The union question is a really serious one, because here are organizations that we have to drag out to fight for us. Reading about the Ford women, it's just devastating to find out that the United Auto Workers was complicit with some of the sexual harassment in this plant.

We need to rebuild a new kind of union that connects the economic struggle to questions of rights and dignity at work, and that sees the struggle against sexual assault as connected to economic rights at work. That seems to be what the Coalition of Immokalee Workers is doing in Florida, and that could be a model.

The United Federation of Teachers, which I'm a member of, is launching a campaign around parental leave, which the Movement of Rank and File Educators caucus has been pushing for a while. An individual woman put together a petition that got 50,000 signatures demanding that the UFT put up a fight around parental leave, so they're finally they're doing it.

Once again, you have this example of having to drag these institutions out to fight, but when they do, they have power.

Jen: I agree about Title IX—there's a big fight over it right now and a lot of confusion about it. So in addition to what Leia is saying, we should have discussions and debates about Title IX on campus.

We also need to expose the right-wing foundations of the attack on Title IX. For example, the Koch Brothers are funding the attack, as is this right-wing group, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

The importance of Title IX is about expanding options for survivors and saying that rape and sexual assault aren't just criminal offenses, but civil rights offenses, because they hamper a woman's right to continue her education at an equal level.

This is about holding administrations and institutions accountable so that women can complete their educations, have funded rape crisis centers and advocates who don't have biased interests, and not have to go to the police to get those protections on campuses.

This is a very radical direction for the movement to take—away from criminalization and seeing rape and sexual assault through a very narrow lens.

One thing about the Immokalee workers: They say that sexual assault claims have decreased 80 percent in the fields where they have contracts.

What's interesting about their campaign is that they have metrics to hold growers accountable and internal education in the union so that all the workers—men and women—understand the toll that sexual harassment takes. The entire coalition is part of it, so it's an issue for every worker in the industry, just like wages or other issues.

In terms of unions and workplaces, I think starting small is really important, and the role of socialists and labor militants in those circumstances is really important.

If you're in a union workplace, you could call a lunchtime meeting about sexual harassment in the workplace and get people to talk about what their issues are—in other words, providing a venue for that viral experience in real life.

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You can imagine situations where people agree that when they have a sexual harassment complaint, whether they have a union or not, a bunch of co-workers will go together to file, so that it's not just one woman having to file a complaint by herself.

You can imagine petitions demanding that HR offices release statistics of the number of sexual harassment complaints they receive every year. One of the requirements of Title IX is that campuses must disclose how many rapes were reported each year—imagine if you had that for workplaces. That would begin to deliver a measure of accountability.

These are small steps of organizing co-workers and beginning to have conversations, and it may be six months or a year before actions takes place, but I think that's the process of rebuilding a working-class movement in this country.

Lastly, Congress just cut funding for childcare. The question of poverty and support of the poor is important, because half of poor families are supported by women—that's a very central feature of women's oppression looks like.

These are things that may not be viewed immediately as part of the #MeToo movement but are very much part of creating the conditions where women aren't vulnerable to abuse.

January 9, 2018

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[1] Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive Federal financial assistance. Title IX states that: 'No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance'.