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Women

# #MeToo for All Women

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## Description:

"Times's up" and #MeToo have transformed the discussion on sexual harassment, abuse and assault in the halls of politics, the entertainment industry, and workplaces all over the country. But the issues aren't new quite the contrary. Sexual exploitation and rape have been features of American culture from colonial times. The legal doctrine slaves were property codified rape as one more right of the slaveowners and his overseers. The evidence was plain to see, yet accounts of indigenous and African-American women were irrelevant. Although the Civil War ended with the destruction of the slave system, within a decade Radical Reconstruction was shut down and the rape of Black women became a reassertion of power over not just the woman as an individual, but over her community.

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**"Times's up" and #MeToo have transformed the discussion on sexual harassment, abuse and assault in the halls of politics, the entertainment industry, and workplaces all over the country. But the issues aren't new quite the contrary. Sexual exploitation and rape have been features of American culture from colonial times. The legal doctrine slaves were property codified rape as one more right of the slaveowners and his overseers. The evidence was plain to see, yet accounts of indigenous and African-American women were irrelevant. Although the Civil War ended with the destruction of the slave system, within a decade Radical Reconstruction was shut down and the rape of Black women became a reassertion of power over not just the woman as an individual, but over her community.**

There have always been women who demanded that society recognize that their bodies had been violated and the perpetrators held accountable. Yet their accounts were minimized and dismissed; they were vilified or threatened. That was true for Recy Taylor, who was kidnapped and raped by seven armed white men in Abbeville, Alabama in 1944. Disregarding attempts to silence her, the 24-year-old mother testified before two grand juries.

Despite the fact that one man confessed to the crime, the all-white, all-male juries refused to indict. The Chicago Defender called the work of the organization set up to defend her, the Committee for Equal Justice, headed by Rosa Parks, "the strongest campaign for equal justice to be seen in a decade." But her story did not make the mainstream press. Only in 2011 did the Alabama legislature issue her an official apology, calling the failure to prosecute her attackers "morally abhorrent and repugnant."

The 1975 case of Joanne Little, raped in her jail cell, who killed the guard in self-defense, or the 1991 testimony of Anita Hill against Clarence Thomas received some support, but elites refused to believe them. Today the whole world appears to be listening to the voices of women demanding an end to sexual harassment in its varied forms.

The #MeToo movement broke through the pattern of silence and cover up with vivid accounts of movie mogul Harvey Weinstein's bullying, intimidation and rape. Then women agricultural workers stepped forward with their stories of the daily danger they faced in the fields. The floodgates opened with women workers testifying about their harassment in restaurants, factories, offices, hotels.

Since the term sexual harassment was coined by the women's movement in the late '70s, women workers have told their stories in speak outs, demanding that their workplace be made safe. Dependent on the customer for tips, waitresses have pointed out that often management urged them to dress suggestively in order to earn good tips. Janitors and hotel cleaners frequently working alone recounted how defenseless they were against managers and hotel guests. Immigration status, limited English, perceived sexual orientation or gender identity were other factors that put working women in more vulnerable situations. Often they testified that coworkers didn't support them.

Over the years several unions passed resolutions opposing sexual harassment, but few have carried out active campaigns to make it clear to both management and union members that sexual intimidation is against the law and will not be tolerated. Surely in these days, where everyone carries a cell phone, companies should provide immediate backup for women working alone.

Although it's relatively easy to file a grievance against management when a woman comes forward, it has proven more difficult when a male coworker or a union official is the harasser. Restaurant Opportunities Center-United, SEIU United Service Workers West, UE and UNITE HERE are unions that have pioneered membership training, held

speakers and even partnered with women's organizations against sexual assault. A few have developed a system of peer educators and encouraged coworkers (particularly men) to speak out when harassment first rears its ugly head. Clearly male and female workers need to reclaim their union as a space where discussions about equality lead to a deeper understanding of what solidarity means across genders, across race, across generations. [1]

## The Nassar/MSU Scandal

The testimony of 250+ women who were inappropriately touched or assaulted by the celebrated Michigan State University and U.S.A. Gymnastic sports physician Larry Nassar revealed that girls as young as six were his prey. But it is a mistake to see him simply as a monster. Nassar was a calculating predator protected within a system that discounted his abuse and threatened women who reported him over a 20-year period.

At least 14 coaches, trainers and colleagues had been warned of Nassar's abuse. None reported him until three years ago, when a complaint reached the head of MSU's sports medicine clinic. An investigator then consulted with three doctors and a certified athletic trainer, all of whom backed Dr. Nassar's explanation that his methods were "appropriate." The charge was dismissed and women gymnasts warned against going to the media with "unsubstantiated claims."

In fact, the university hired a prestigious legal team to carry out an investigation, yet it never interviewed any women gymnasts. Former MSU president Lou Anna Simon portrayed the review as a "tireless effort." While the law firm billed MSU more than four million dollars, its aim seems to have been to shield the university from liability.

## Women's Bodies Up for Grabs

Sexual harassment and abuse occur within a larger system that denies women autonomy. We see it in the way women are categorized as either "responsible" or "welfare cheats." We see it in unending rightwing attempts to make it difficult for U.S. women to have access to birth control, abortion and child care.

Over the last year, the Trump regime supposedly opposed to "burdensome regulations" has sought to regulate the lives and bodies of women. Days after Trump was sworn in he signed a global gag rule that cut \$8.8 billion in funding for international health assistance programs if they referred women for abortions when requested, or dared to lobby for abortion law reform.

Trump chose Mike Pence, a religious-right anti-abortionist, as his vice president and appointed Neil Gorsuch, known for his opposition to abortion, to the U.S. Supreme Court. Trump has appointed anti-abortion and anti-birth control people as officials in his administration, particularly in the Department of Health and Human Services. With more than a trillion-dollar operating budget and a staff of 80,000, HHS oversees programs including Medicare, Medicaid, the Food and Drug Administration, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Trump appointed E. Scott Lloyd, an anti-abortion lawyer with limited experience on refugee issues, head of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Lloyd personally flew to Texas attempting to pressure a refugee in an ORR shelter against seeking an abortion. He demanded that shelters receiving ORR grants not support abortion services "pre or post-release." Valerie Huber, an advocate of abstinence-only sex education programs, is now overseeing Title X, the only federal program devoted to family planning.

Trump has since rolled back the requirement that employers provide birth control without co-payments as part of their health care package. Last April he signed a law that allows states to block funds to Planned Parenthood and other clinics that might offer abortions along with contraception, pregnancy care, fertility and cancer screenings for low-income women.

## A Larger System

Under capitalism the patriarchal system has evolved to empower even those who possess little except the fact that they are male. This pattern of "powerful" men (bosses, priests, physicians, union officials, coworkers, even relatives) believing they can arrange situations where women must defer to them often posing as mentors or friends works well because even when girls/women report the molestation, they are told they must have "misunderstood" what actually happened.

Women who have been silenced, or who silence themselves, often face continued abuse. Their self-esteem plummets. Frequently accosted as a child, one ATC editor believed "whore" must be written on her forehead. This is why it is essential to break the silence and let those who have been taught to live in shame that there is no shame.

The power of the #MeToo movement is that it demands an end to the disappearance and presumed murder of indigenous women and those murdered along the southern border. It stands in solidarity with women in workplaces, on streets and those targeted within their homes.

Systems seek to protect their high-status members. We see that clearly in the cases of Hollywood, Michigan State University and the U.S.A. Gymnastics organization and in workplaces. It is particularly prevalent in closed systems prisons, the military, the police, Church institutions, residential schools for indigenous children, special needs children/adults, nursing homes. The system cannot believe that their charming guy is really an abuser. And the consequences are too high, sometimes financially, but always in terms of the system's reputation. Better to interpret the bullying and harassment as "only a joke."

The #MeToo movement has uncovered how the system protects its own. That's true whether it's the staffer who accompanies the young actress to Harry Weinstein's lair only to depart, the physicians and coaches who vouch for pelvic floor techniques that led to penetration, or the coworker who fails to notice the daily harassment.

Most of these situations involve men who molest or rape women, but the culture of violating another person's autonomy also leads to predatory behavior involving boys or young men. The case of Jerry Sandusky, assistant to legendary head football coach Joe Paterno at Penn State University, is a prime example of a man who was able to sexually abuse boys for years. In 2012 Sandusky was convicted of 45 cases of child sexual abuse and is serving 30-60 years in prison. There is a direct parallel between so-called "lack of institutional control" indifference to horrible abuse at Penn State and Michigan State.

Indeed, since the #MeToo movement young male actors and fashion models have also come forward with charges against directors and photographers. Socialist feminists see the culture of the patriarchy at work here too. Just as women are denied their autonomy, young men are supposed to submit to powerful men.

But sexual harassment usually begins in a public space. This means that others are called upon to be co-conspirators. Just as in the case of racial harassment, an immediate response from a coworker can turn the situation around. The powerful must be confronted, and the intended victim reaffirmed.

## How to Resist?

On the first anniversary of the historic 2017 Women's March, over 200 marches and vigils took place across the country and beyond. Many featured women candidates, and certainly more women in political office would be a good thing, especially in view of U.S. backwardness. And given the U.S. electoral system with its monopoly two-party system, it is not surprising that there was an overwhelming sense that voting for Democrats would be a step forward.

Many women and their allies, as they campaign and work for a variety of Democrats, progressive and otherwise, will find themselves trapped. Next to people like Trump, Pence and Ryan, these "lesser evils" look good, of course but that doesn't accomplish what needs to be done.

For socialists whose vision is a society of social equality and full individual dignity and freedom, our obligation to the #MeToo movement is to welcome its insights, and join in the discussion about unequal power relations and what they produce. Bullying, harassment and rape are acts of violence they should never be confused with flirtation as some have claimed. The reality is that they are part of a system that needs to be entirely uprooted. Challenging the assumption that women are men's property is a major step toward envisioning an egalitarian society.

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[1] See "Breaking the Silence on Sexual Harassment," Sonia Singh, Labor Notes, March 2017; "Member-To-Member Harassment: What To Do" by David Cohen and Carol Lambiase, Labor Notes, March 2014, and Stopping Sexual Harassment, A Handbook for Union and Workplace Activists, Camille Colatosti and Elissa Karg, Labor Notes book, second edition 1992.