

**BREAKING THE SILENCE ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE: #METOOHASHTIVISM AS  
A TRANSFORMATIVE MEDIA SPACE FOR PUBLIC FEMINIST DISCOURSE**

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**Abstract**

*The long history of deep-rooted female subjugation and oppression along with the matrix of domination based on gender came to serious question with the emergence of feminism. The traditional male-centric society grew inequality and intersectionality to such an extent that women were marginalized, excluded, and denied participation, perceiving them as the weaker sex. The waves of feminism tried to sweep away the gender discrimination and protested for women's rights in libertarian terms of equal and natural rights. The contemporary society has, to an extent, rejected the gender-specific roles in favour of an individual approach. But the evils of rape and sexual violence still prevail in all society, and cuts across all social classes, as a stain that undermines the social fabric of society. Rape culture and victim blaming are so pervasive and entrenched globally that it normalized the societal attitude of the objectification of women and the glamorization of sexual violence. The silence was broken when the #MeToo movement broke through the social media, revealing and sharing the experience of the hidden truth about the sexual assault and harassment the victims suffered. The "silence breakers", enabled by digital technology, began to freely engage in open dialogues in a transformative media space, becoming a paradigm and a new discourse of the fourth wave of feminism. The hashtag activism or 'hashtivism', thus dawned, empowered countless women from passivity to resistance. This study aims at analyzing the transformation that the society witnessed as part of the #MeToo movement through with the help of a significant corpus of Twitter feeds that shaped the public feminist discourse.*

**Keywords:** feminism, #MeToo movement, sexual violence, hashtivism, empowerment, technology

Women have faced gender discrimination and inequity in social, political, familial, and economic grounds from time immemorial. The advocacy for egalitarian rights and freedom from norms that restrained women gained momentum with a movement that campaigned for the emancipation of women from the traditional gender roles and the patriarchy that kept women in a state of dependence. The ideologies and social movements

of feminism shared the goal of achieving social integration and civil rights. The struggles ranged from women's suffrage, right to education, fair wages, equal marital rights, property rights, to protection from sexual exploitation and violence. The abusive environment lingering in the shadows with rape, assault, harassment, and domestic violence was hardly conducive to the woman to lead a relaxed life.

A consistent transformation in the growing strength of women's movement has sown the seeds of awareness among women to report cases without fearing the consequences and victimization. The dark figures of under-reported rape, according to statistical surveys, estimate up to 91% as the victims were reluctant to raise their voice against the sexual violence distressed by the social stigma, exclusion, and prejudices. The victims suffer from psychological distress, emotional and physical pain, self-blame following the traumatic incident and employ coping mechanisms to numb the assault while the perpetrator walks free preying on the next victim.

While the third wave of feminism sought to transform the traditional notions of sexuality and embrace "an exploration of women's feelings about sexuality that included vagina-centred topics as diverse as orgasm, birth, and rape", the fourth wave of feminism found its association with a technology-driven campaign showing resistance and hostility towards sexual harassment and sexual violence against women. The women employed social media as a platform for confrontation sharing their personal stories of assault, accepting the need to stand up for the ultimate justice of womankind.

Media and social campaigns have immense power to deconstruct the negative social conditioning of women being subservient to the superior men, breaking the matrix of domination and oppression imprinted on society. Digital activism has revolutionized the idea that media is not gender-sensitive and women have the right to occupy the public media space in order to campaign for safety concerns. The extensive use of blogs, social networking websites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and YouTube has become influential public media space for women to talk about the injustices, sexual violence, and violation of human rights. The public visibility of digital activism allowed women across national, class, race, religious, and cultural boundaries to join hands to challenge sexism and misogyny. The virtual call out for help globally ensured a medium for debates, discussions, and dialogues and creating a new awareness for healing and empowerment. Such widespread revelations of assault in the public sphere will alter the post-assault treatment of sexual assault victims, giving them the confidence to approach the court of justice.

The trend of digital media activism originated around 2012 when fourth wave feminists focused their attention on areas such as street and workplace harassment, rape culture, sexual assault in campus, body shaming, sexist imagery in the media, online misogyny, and assault on public transport. The shocking and atrocious incidents like 2012 Nirbhaya Delhi gang rape, 2012 Jimmy Savile allegations, 2014 Bill Cosby allegations, and 2017 Harvey Weinstein allegations contributed and galvanized feminists to launch this

movement. These issues which gained global recognition gave birth to campaigns like Everyday Sexism Project, No More Page 3, #YesAllWomen, Stop Bild Sexism, 10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman, #BeenRapedNeverReported, #RapeCultureIsWhen and the most recent #MeToo movement.

Nancy Chodorow in her book *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1992) examines how the use of social media has become a cornerstone in feminist struggle and describes the term “networked feminism” as “the online mobilization and coordination of feminists in response to perceived sexist, misogynistic, racist, and other discriminatory acts against minority groups.” (Chodorow 1992) One of the powerful weapons of this networked feminism is the ‘hashtag’ and the campaigns of the fourth wave of feminism with its hashtag activism or ‘hashtivism’ helped in recognizing the magnitude of the issues. It elicited spontaneous responses and strengthened the bonds among women, giving constant and mutual support for questioning their social and legal rights against such atrocities.

Among the Twitter feminism or hashtag feminism, the #MeToo movement which started in Twitter spread like a wildfire virally and demonstrated the magnitude of sexual assault and harassment prevalent in contemporary society. Coined by American social activist Tarana Burke, as early as 2006 on Myspace in a pre-hashtag era, campaigning to promote “empowerment through empathy” and advocating assistance to women and girls of colour who survived sexual violence as she herself was a survivor of sexual assault. It was later popularised by American actress Alyssa Milano on Twitter (Figure 1) whose tweet started an outpouring from women across the globe who withstood harassment and abuse. It was an aftereffect of the scandal of Harvey Weinstein, an American film producer who was accused by dozens of women of rape, assault and sexual abuse over a period of 30 years. Alyssa’s friend Charles Clymer sent her a screenshot that read: “Suggested by a friend: if all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘me too’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” Milano posted the screenshot on Twitter after adding, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted, write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” Within several hours, she got 61,000 replies and the hashtag trending No 1 on Twitter. It shaped a perfect storm and reignited a movement that denounces sexual assault and harassment. She was supported by millions of victims who shared their stories, including stars Uma Thurman, Anna Paquin, Rosario Dawson Gillian Anderson, Björk, Sheryl Crow, Lady Gaga, Molly Ringwald, and Ilana Glazer.



**Figure 1:** Alyssa Milano's tweet on October 15, 2017 which started the #MeToo movement (Actress Alyssa Milano)

In the replies to Milano's tweet, there was a trend where people opened up about how the assault and abuse affected their life as they suffered from Post-traumatic stress and still struggling with the painful memories. The replies read victims acknowledging the abusive behaviours by strangers, distant family members, colleagues, acquaintances, and employers, and some of them made a plea not to blame oneself over what has transpired. Another notable tendency was the "I believe you" replies on those who replied to Milano's tweet. The traumatized victims fear not being believed, being blamed and judged and will ultimately make a stand for being silent. The survivors believe that being assaulted make them "damaged goods" when it is completely not their fault and even take upon themselves extreme fears that it may occur to one's child. A damaged sense of self and self-esteem ensues whereby they drive themselves to the point of suicide for the crime where the perpetrator is responsible entirely.

One of the reply tweets on October 26, 2017, by Miss Morgue (realmissmorgue) read, "#metooStanding in a line for food when a man took unwanted pictures of my chest. I was shocked. Later my mom and aunt said I deserved it." The blame falls on the modesty doctrine of clothing while the "male gaze" that perceive women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the viewer is not condemned. Another tweet on December 7, 2017, by Amanda Yennie (ayennie34) read the bitter experiences at workplace, "I have been fired from jobs for not sleeping with the boss, fired for not letting customers grab me (Hooters), groped,

up-skirt photographed without my knowledge, kissed without permission, and more..... it sucks thinking about this stuff.” The harassment from both the employer and the customers belittles the self-esteem of the victim and many of them succumb to the bullying to hold the job.

Alyssa Milano tweeted to US President Donald Trump on September 21, 2018, for blaming the victim Christine Blasey Ford on why she didn't report her abuse. Alyssa reply feed read, “I was sexually assaulted twice. Once when I was a teenager. I never filed a police report and it took me 30 years to tell me parents.” Sexual assault survivors overwhelmingly underreport their assault, because in rape culture, sexual assault is normalized. The number of women reporting doubles when the victims are asked about specific inappropriate behaviours like groping or verbal and emotional harassment.

#MeToo has tilted public sympathy in favour of survivors by changing the default response to belief, rather than suspicion; the hashtag has revealed how widespread sexual coercion is. The hashtag is meant for the public, a massive show of scale to prove that the issue is unavoidable. Viral campaigns like #MeToo can impact society massively as it creates awareness about the magnitude of women who are survivors of any kind of sexual abuse, from an inappropriate look to the heinous rape and assault.

The Weinstein effect triggered off a cascade of allegation which led to the removal of several men in position. Both men and women aired declarations of sexual misconduct in workplaces across multiple industries. The multitudinous industries that alleged accusations on men in power are film, television, politics and government, church, finance, sports, medicine, military, music, and pornography. Casting couch accusations in film and television came to the limelight as actors and actresses divulged the demanding of sexual favours for entry into the industry and for career advancement.

A great number of musicians opened up a dialogue around the continued sexual harassment, objectification and degradation of women. Sheryl Crow, an American singer and songwriter, was harassed by her manager on her first big tour and she even wrote a song about it on her first record. When she proceeded to report it to her lawyer, she was silenced by what the manager could do for her career enhancement. (Figure 2) The female body was degraded as her career was given much priority than the abuse she had undergone. Lady Gaga, Christina Perri, Björk, Halsey, Alice Glass are a few of them who used the hashtag as a transformative media space. Such a public feminist discourse could bring about a tremendous reform in the music industry which is as deplorable as the Hollywood.





**Figure 2:** Sheryl Crow's tweet on workplace harassment on October 16, 2017. (Lady Gaga, Sheryl Crow)

Another series of tweets by video producer Leena Norms mentions how the silence surrounding any instance of abuse or harassment can help normalize the behaviour. (Figure 3) She revealed her share of experiences like unwanted advances, inappropriate comments or the use of sexual language, threats, and demeaning occurrences and states that women refuse to drain the short attention span the world has for the subject 'harassment'. On wondering the silence has done any help for bigger cases, she found that it has helped the perpetrators in more serious cases of assault. The more women talk of such atrocities based on gender, the harder it will be to ignore the very problems of assault. Every single story deserves to be heard in the public space to understand the enormity of the situation. Thus the media of public space has been used a means for reconstructing the outlook towards woman as objects of sexual gratification.



**Figure 3:** Leena Norms' Tweet on October 16, 2017. ("Your 'Not That Bad' Sexual Harassment Story")

The *Westworld* actress Evan Rachel Wood spoke candidly about her experience with being a victim of sexual abuse during a hearing about the Sexual Assault Survivors Bill of Rights Act. (Figure 4) Wood unreservedly discussed being assaulted the first time and how she dissociated herself from her body as a defense mechanism during future instances of abuse. The guilt and confusion of self-blame led to long-term trauma, struggling with self-harm to the point of suicide, and at last, she was diagnosed with PTSD. The perpetrators never realize the extent of the harm they are inflicting upon their victims physically, emotionally and psychologically.



**Figure 4:** Evan Rachel Wood’s Tweet on October 15, 2017. (“Evan Rachel Wood Testifies”)

The #MeToo hashtag spearheaded a chain of other hashtags like #ChurchToo, #MeTooMilitary, and #HowIWillChange. The hashtag #ChurchToo initiated in November 2017, by Emily Joy and Hannah Paasch highlighted the need to cease sexual abuse in the church. On November 22, 2017, Carrie (carrie\_helen13) shared her story, “I was 11. I went to the restroom. I was followed by the youth pastor. He grabbed my arm. I was lucky enough to fight him off and escape. I just wonder how many girls weren’t so lucky. #ChurchToo”. The sex abuse allegations against the abusive priests and pastors came from both young girls and boys. The hashtag #MeTooMilitary came to be used by service men and women who suffered sexual harassment while in the military. There was also a spreading of allegations against the sports and gymnastic industry, medical field and financial industry.

The most surprising phenomenon found in the aftermath of the launch of #MeToo movement was the support lend by men, either for openly speaking about being abused or taking responsibility for their actions. They promised to rectify the situation and urged their male counterparts to look inward and judge the circumstances themselves. They reiterated

#HowIWillChange and “we will do better” and realized their responsibility in preventing further abuse. A group of actors, advocates, writers, producers, and directors including David Arquette, David Schwimmer, Justin Baldoni, Michael Kimmel, Kirby Dick launched a new campaign #AskMoreOfHim. They pledged to support sexual assault survivors and to condemn sexism wherever they see it and hold themselves responsible and others accountable. There is a gradual transformation from the times when women were accountable for the misconduct by men that befallen them, blaming either on the apparel choices or the questionable character and conduct, to a responsible male society who stand alongside to bestow support on this endeavor of reformation.

On October 17, 2017, Indian actor and comedian Vir Das (thevirdas) tweeted, “Every educated man needs to use the #MeToo movement to learn. Above all, To spread knowledge. To be inclusive and to be aware. I vow to try.” AlaOueslati (Alaoueslat), on October 17, 2017, wrote on Twitter, “#MeToo No to all kinds of verbal, physical, sexual, and psychological harassment that people go through every day irrespective of gender.” Another tweet by ShariqRafeek (\_riqsha) on October 16, 2017, read, “I wanted to write a full piece on this but meanwhile here’s a thread on how I’ve been horrible to women in the past. #MeToo”. On October 17, 2017, Steve Torres (HeySteeb) made his support shown by writing, “To those with a #MeToo Story: I see you. I acknowledge you. I believe you. We should be better. We can do better. We will do better.”

It was an Australian journalist and screenwriter Benjamin Law who created the hashtag #HowIWillChange in response to Milano’s twitter post. (Figure 6) Law initiated this hashtag as a tool to announce in public space his support and commitment to change the culture of sexual violence. Actor Mark Ruffalo also publicly acknowledged how he used to cat call women and supported the cause by joining in using the hashtag #HowIWillChange. The transformation in from men’s earlier behaviour towards women to what they promise in future is clearly evident through the feeds. (Figure 5) The celebrities and social media are setting a paradigm shift in the outlook of society towards the issue of violence and harassment towards women. The supporters of this movement raised a great awareness beyond the boundaries set by the earlier waves of feminism. It stepped into every field of public space as the present industry is controlled by technology.





**Figure 5:** Mark Ruffalo’s tweet on October 19, 2017 (“Men Respond To #MeToo”)



**Figure 6:** Benjamin Law’s tweet on October 16, 2017 (“Men Respond To #MeToo”)

Another interesting occurrence was the inclusion of the queer into the midst of the #MeToo campaign. There occurred a global online storm with thousands of LGBT community taking to Twitter to detail their stories of verbal abuse, sexual attack, and physical violence, morphing the hashtag into #MeQueer. The rate of violence among LGBT community is really widespread and the awakening of social media as a form of protest

against such inhuman monstrosity has catalyzed the emergence of this movement. It has also contributed to pursuing one's sexuality without hiding behind the curtains and accepting their orientation in public space. It is in these circumstances that openly gay American actor and singer Javier Muñoz replied to Milano's post and revealed his own #MeToo moment for the public view. (Figure 7) It brought into public consciousness the struggles of the marginalized community oppressed for their sexual orientation.

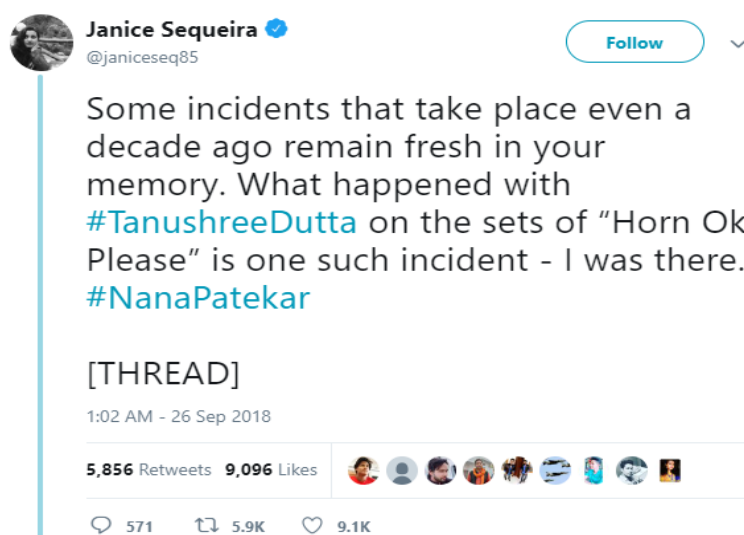


**Figure 7:** Javier Muñoz was one of the first gay men to reply to Milano (“Gay Men”)

Tarana Burke (TaranaBurke) on October 15, 2017, exclaimed what the term ‘metoo’ she coined has become. She said, “It’s beyond a hashtag. It’s the start of a larger conversation and a movement for radical community healing. Join us. #metoo.” Sharing is healing and the #MeToo movement is nothing short of healing for the survivors of sexual violence. Such awareness will grow the confidence and self-esteem lost while they were blamed for the crimes committed on them. Angelina Jolie at the London summit on ‘End Sexual Violence in Conflict’ said, “We must send a message around the world that there is no disgrace in being a survivor of sexual violence that the shame is on the aggressor”. American singer and songwriter Halsey urged the society to “Stop teaching girls how to avoid rape and start teaching men not to rape.” The real reordering of society can be ingrained only when the conventional mind-set of victim shaming and faulting.

The manifestation of the American MeToo movement made its appearance in India, especially in the entertainment industry of Bollywood, when former Miss India and Bollywood actress Tanushree Dutta accused Nana Patekar of sexual harassment on the sets of her film, *Horn OK Pleassss*. The offshoot of the western phenomenon was found not only in the film industry but also in government, media, and every field of Indian society as a campaign against sexual harassment and violence in workplace. It was Janice Sequeira, a cub reporter at the sets of the film who supported the claims of Tanushreeby tweeting her

eyewitness account. (Figure 8) Tanushree received support from famous Bollywood actors and actresses like Farhan Akhtar, Sonam Kapoor, Priyanka Chopra, Varun Dhawan, Anushka Sharma, Taapsee Pannu, and Kalki Koechlin. On being shamed by some acknowledged directors, author Twinkle Khanna supported Tanushree with her tweet, “Please read this thread before judging or shaming #TanushreeDutta a working environment without harassment and intimidation is a fundamental right and by speaking up this brave woman helps pave the way towards that very goal for all of us!” (*hindustantimes*) Actor Priyanka Chopra joined the bandwagon saying that the world needs to “#BelieveSurvivors”. The torchbearer of the movement in India Tanushree refused to be titled as a victim and boldly said, “But I just want people to know that I am not going to be reduced to a survivor. I have a name, I have a story and I have this truth that I am trying to get out because it’s not for me but for people who will come forward in the generations to come.”



**Figure 8:** Janice Sequeira supported the claims of Tanushree Dutta by tweeting her eyewitness account.

As a repercussion of the Tanushree-Nana controversy, many actors of the Bollywood industry opened up their bitter experiences of sexual harassment through media outlets and social media platforms. Sajid Khan, Salman Khan, Vikas Bahl, Alok Nath, Piyush Mishra, Abhijeet Bhattacharya, Rajat Kapoor, Kailash Kher, Jatin Das, and Zulfi Syed were some of the popular names that were being accused of molestation and sexual harassment. With the revelations that shattered the public image of well-known personalities, the MeToo movement in India broke the image of the all-enduring and silent women the society demanded.

Aishwarya Rai Bachchan termed the #MeToo movement as the “need of the hour since time immemorial” and “pledged to help women “find their voice”, strength and confidence to speak up about their stories.” (*timesofindia*) Actress Kajol reveals that sexual harassment is the reality of every industry and unpleasant incidents happen with men and women. *Helicopter Eela* fame Rashi Mal commented,

I think it is about time the movement came to India. The first time around did not see any names being taken although it did highlight the magnitude and scale of the problem. But what is happening now will definitely help purge the system and make it safer for girls to work in. We have all been subjected to stuff like this in one way or another. It takes great courage to speak up and I greatly admire all those who are standing up against abuse and harassment. (*timesofindia*)

The MeToo movement not only created waves in the entertainment industry but also in fashion, politics, government, and media. Utsav Chakraborty, a widely known stand-up comedian and popular YouTuber, and a freelancer with the comedy group All India Bakchod, faced the accusations of sending lewd messages and photos to women through social networking sites. His fellow comedians Kunal Kamra and Tanmay Bhat supported the claims of the women and came forward with acknowledging Utsav’s habit of harassing women. Veteran character actor Alok Nath known for his films and television programmes faced allegations of raping Vinta Nanda who worked along with him in the TV show *Tara*. Anirban Blah, the founder of talent management agency KWAN, was accused by four women on sexual harassment charges. Acclaimed Tamil poet and lyricist Vairamuthu, was accused of sexual misconduct and sexual harassment by several women singers and artists from the Tamil film industry including singer Chinmayi Sripaada. Singer Sona Mohapatra accused fellow singer Kailash Kher of sexual misconduct. MJ Akbar, India’s Minister of State for External Affairs, was also accused of sexual harassment by several female colleagues.

Actor Siddharth supported the movement and praised the courage of women to name her abuser. He also commented on the current trend of accusing someone for professional or political grudges or for personal gains and urged them to fight back with full force. On October 9, 2018, Siddharth (Actor\_Siddharth) tweeted,

If the accuser names herself, you say she’s doing it for attention. If the accuser stays anonymous, you question her authenticity. The identity of the accuser is not relevant. That she chose to identify her abuser publicly is! Courage & closure supersede all else. #TimesUp #MeToo. And to any innocent man who feels he’s been targeted by vested piggy-backing on the #MeToo movement to settle personal/professional/political scores, fight the good fight! Don’t become the collateral damage. Don’t give up! Your innocence is also part of this movement! (*ChaiBisket*)

The MeToo movement which gained momentum encouraging women to be verbal about the misconduct and harassment they suffered at the hands of the abuser has to be viewed from both perspectives. The highly problematic of great prominence must be solved in the public arena with transparency and evidence which will give justice to the victim and punishment to the offender. To resolve the issue in confidential and private ways will never wipe out the core issue of misconduct and harassment towards women. The justice system should consider the viewpoints of both genders to ensure the probability of equality. The unique experiences of the LGBT community suffering harassment at workplace stand as a testament to the society's perception on sexual orientation. A combined effort of the judicial system and the society alone can find a solution to such a magnanimous movement that took the internet by storm.

The United Nations statistical survey states that one in three women suffer some form of physical, sexual and psychological violence in their lifetime, but this grim and alarming statistic is exceedingly downplayed. The multi-layered rubble of humiliations and violence drowned in silence has now got a voice, signaling the destruction of patriarchal values with the help of the digital revolution ensued by the fourth wave of feminism. The use of 'hashtivism' has immediately created an enormous cultural impact and made the public media space a vehicle for emotional support for the victims.

#MeToo has advanced a version of public feminism out of step with currents in academic feminism. While describing the importance of social media in signalling sexual assault, Prof. Beverly Bain, lecturer in the women and gender studies program in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga, notes, "When using these hashtags, we also have to be aware that they don't go beyond this—they don't end violence, and we must continue to create strategies and continue to work towards changing consciousness and addressing men's approaches to sexual assault." (*The Medium*) The hope of transformation is the key to create freedom, literal and metaphorical, spatial and spiritual, and ultimately to create alternative agendas to "victim-based" feminism.

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