

What Should We Do With #MeToo?

By Bianca Martin

Until recently, I worked in the community services sector where I facilitated weekly social groups. One Friday morning, a client asked how my PhD research was going. I would usually avoid talking about my research at work, because the topic of sexual violence doesn't exactly make for light-hearted social chatter; this particular morning, however, the group really wanted to talk. Not specifically about my research, but about a closely related topic: the prevalence of stories about sexual violence in the media.

"I'm so sick of turning on the news every night and it's everywhere. You can't escape it," one person complained. Feeling defensive about my research, I argued that the subject of sexual violence was important to talk about and not just sweep under the rug. I justified this stance by contending that if we don't talk about sexual violence, most people assume that it doesn't happen.

The conversation went back and forth for a while, with me firmly in the 'silence is erasure' camp and her adamant that there had to be a better way to circulate these stories that wasn't so triggering. We eventually moved on, agreeing to disagree, but internally I had softened throughout the course of the conversation and was left



wondering if, in my own passion for advocacy and activism, I had overlooked the impacts of such wide-scale reporting on other survivors or people sensitive to such topics.

In the era of #MeToo, stories about sexual assault and gender-based violence are receiving more media attention than ever before. But what are we meant to *do* with this information? What are we meant to do when every time we turn on the news we are confronted with another story?

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#MeToo, as we most commonly understand it, surfaced in October 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano tweeted: “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”. She then followed it up with a call to action: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” The series of tweets were initially inspired by the growing number of allegations against Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein, and Milano took this as an opportunity to participate in the public conversation surrounding the pervasiveness of sexual violence.

People were quick to link Milano’s use of #MeToo to African-American activist Tarana Burke, who began using the phrase “me too” in the context of her social justice work in 2006. While each iteration has a different origin and intention—Burke’s work was specifically aimed at connecting survivors of sexual violence in the Black community—they have since become socially conflated. This is important to understand when we’re attempting to quantify the impact of #MeToo. #MeToo is often referred to as a movement; however, there is no singular vision and no official spokesperson.

Academic Lauren Rosewarne cautions those who criticise #MeToo for failing to instigate significant social change, suggesting that such thinking is “premised on the assumption that it ever set out to achieve revolution rather than to exclusively raise consciousness” (177).

I suspect the reason people may feel exhausted by the continued reporting of sexual violence is the lack of visible or tangible change that comes from these conversations. After seven years of #MeToo discourse, we’re still seemingly going around in circles. Rosewarne explains that “while the news media may care about exposing stories of sexual misconduct, the general population isn’t quite concerned” (172). We’re receiving an onslaught of these stories, yet somehow many people still don’t really believe sexual violence is a problem. That leaves those of us who are concerned and who do believe it is a problem exposed to all of these terrible things without much resolution, or even a sense of solidarity that these things are, in fact, terrible. Of course that’s exhausting.

I live and work on Giabal and Jarowair land, and the name Bruce Lehrmann has been hard to avoid in conversations about sexual violence. When I first started drafting this piece, the former Liberal staffer had recently been found by Justice

Michael Lee, on the balance of probabilities, to have raped Brittany Higgins at Parliament House in 2019. Following this civil defamation trial, he now awaits a criminal trial in his hometown of Toowoomba for two counts of rape in a case unrelated to the Higgins allegations.

The local paper naturally had a field day. While I didn't read the actual articles, I found myself regularly lost in the comments sections on social media. Despite all of the positive conversations that have emerged from #MeToo, I was transported back to the commentary surrounding the 2010 Collingwood AFL team "sex scandal" (as *The Age* so delicately put it). You know, the one where another football player defended the accused players when he tweeted "Girls!! When will you learn! At 3am when you are blind drunk & you decide to go home with a guy ITS NOT FOR A CUP OF MILO!" (Hunter & Brodie).

The vitriolic comments aimed at Brittany Higgins were astounding: she just regrets hooking up with him, she's lying about it, she just wants her fifteen minutes of fame, she's just after his money, we'll never really know what happened that night, there's no evidence to prove either way, he's one of the good guys and she's just trying to ruin his career. Not much has changed in the fourteen years since the news reports on the Collingwood team. It's almost laughable how clichéd and predictable the comments are, except for the fact that it isn't very funny.

In a study on journalistic reporting before and

after #MeToo, researchers found that one of the key markers of change was the language used to describe sexual violence (Noetzel et al 1243). Prior to the viral hashtag, sexual violence was reported on in ambiguous terms. Whereas previously we might have seen the terms 'sexual misconduct' or 'inappropriate behaviours', we're now met with specific acts of harm. On one hand this serves to broaden the cultural understanding of what constitutes sexual violence, but on the other hand it exposes sympathetic readers and viewers to ongoing distressing, and often triggering, information.

This change in language also seems to provide unsympathetic and outright hostile commentators with more fodder to conjure doubt. Life writing scholar Leigh Gilmore contextualises this dilemma: "Before we can consider what we are to do when confronted with terrible incident after terrible story about women's vulnerability to violence and inadequate justice, we are often confronted by doubt about a woman's motives or innocence" (19). We unfortunately still live in a culture of victim blaming, where many people seem to feel entitled to add baseless commentary and rehash tired rape myths.

So yes, there has been an increase in exposing stories of sexual violence, but are we really talking about it in a useful way?

Sexual violence researchers Mary Iliadis, Bianca Fileborn, and Rachel Loney-Howes wrote about this exact issue in 2021 for *The Conversation*,

and it seems that not much has changed since then. While they report that there are certain guidelines in place for how the media reports (or is meant to report) sexual violence, the oversaturation and surrounding public commentary is hard to avoid. This exposure puts “many sexual abuse survivors at risk of being traumatised all over again” (Iliadis et al). So if the #MeToo era has prompted the ongoing public conversation about sexual violence, what do we do with this information?

In Tarana Burke’s memoir *Unbound*, she retraces the moments of discovering that #MeToo had gone viral on social media. She writes, “My heart dropped at the thought of inviting people to open up and share their experience with sexual violence online without a way to help them process it” (4). Similarly, Rosewarne asks, “What happens after the stories are told and retold?” (176). Most of us are not social workers or mental health professionals; instead, we are often voicing support through our own lived experience.

My Friday morning conversation swirled around in my head for days. Had I handled it well? Did it make people uncomfortable? The conversation made me really reflect on my own role in how we’re talking about sexual violence. Am I taking enough care with what I’m saying? Am I responding or am I reacting? How do we talk about something that is triggering or confronting for so many people without falling

into the traps of silencing? In that moment I could recognise that saying “me too” was likely not going to be a moment of empathetic connection but instead would be a burden—yet another story of sexual violence to add to the constantly growing list.

Burke continues to do significant activist and social justice work with “me too”. One of her founding tenets is the notion of “empowerment through empathy”. My initial understanding of this was of empathy towards others, enacted by listening to and believing survivors and acknowledging shared experiences.

In a piece about news-related compassion fatigue for *The Guardian*, Elisa Gabbert reflects on the limits of empathy when “[j]ust opening Twitter on your phone, or looking at the TV in a bar, exposes you to enormous problems you can’t possibly solve”. Sometimes you simply do not have it left in you to extend the empathy, particularly when it feels so futile. The prominence of #MeToo seemed to offer the promise of a feminist reckoning, but now it often just feels like shouting into the echo chamber. The people who are listening and acknowledging are those who already know this stuff.

I wonder instead if in this #MeToo era, we should be considering what kinds of empathy we extend to ourselves, and how to locate patience and kindness for ourselves while we work through this mess together.

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