

An Analysis of Gender and 'Culture of Silence' In Light of #MeToo

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The very crux of the #MeToo movement is speaking out, which stemmed out of broken shackles of age-old culture of silencing. This paper would try to understand how silencing works in this context and what the movement has done to affect so and how. The paper would further analyze the motto of this social media movement while trying to critically unfold the complex connections silencing and power, this paper would simultaneously attempt to understand the development of the movement over time and its drawbacks.

I. WHY THE SILENCE?

To impose dominance over the so-called weaker sex (the patriarchal society dares to call women weaker sex is a concern itself) the most powerful mean used is developing an ecosystem of gagging the voices of women. The toxic culture of silencing is found in every industry - from sectors that are much more male-dominated like engineering to more supposedly "enlightened" environments such as academia.¹ People belonging to all genders knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate the culture of silence. #WhyWomenDontReport resulted into a long thread of personal experiences on Twitter. Rose McGowan, one of the most vocal accusers of Harvey Weinstein Twitted "a (female) criminal attorney said because I'd done a sex scene in a film I would never win against the studio head." with the hashtag. The followings are a few among many reasons why survivors remain silent.

i) Peer pressure and majoritarianism

In Men's world women and people belonging to other genders need to struggle harder to be established. The survivors are the minority everywhere and they are continuously under a peer pressure of being secluded. Noelle Neumann's spiral of silence explains how majority opinions become dominant over time.² The fear and threat of isolation keep minorities from being open and honest.

ii) Reputation

In a patriarchal set-up the concept of reputation is itself gender discriminatory. Feminist activists are often laughed at for being "Feminazis" because they make a big deal out of "small" issues". Rampant trivialization, normalization and stigmatization of sexual-misconduct and a collective hostile attitude towards the accuser discourages women to lodge a complaint. Who wants to be labelled as 'troublemaker' at their workplace?

iii) Inaction

Inaction on the part of the management or authority is a very common occurrence, sometimes to protect the public image of a company, sometimes in the name of honour (to answer whose honour would be a difficult trajectory), sometimes citing lack of evidence, sometimes to maintain peace, etc. Thus, despite existing provisions women, assuming or knowing inaction would be the outcome, stay silent.

iv) Fear of retaliation

Fear of retaliation stems out of the evident power politics rather than anything connected to 'sex'. We have seen with #MeToo the predators mostly hold significantly influential positions. Losing one's job is the most pervasive fear at work.³ The fear of retaliation is most probably the biggest reason women are always apprehensive of reporting. Victims fear expressing their concerns can put them at risk, or they could lose their jobs, so they silently accept such behaviour. The largest section of the survivors consists of young, vulnerable women in need of work thus there always lingers a fear that dismantling the established power equations could ultimately make them more vulnerable.⁴

Even, sometimes women are silenced unconsciously by herself and her own people. So deep is the roots of the culture of silencing inside our psyches go that Poorna Jagannathan, who faced sexual abuse multiple times in buses of New Delhi said on an interview "...even at 9, it was a calculated choice. I chose to stay silent because it was better than telling parents and teachers and they not doing/unable to do anything about it. By staying silent, I betrayed just myself. Speaking out would have led to my betrayal by the people I loved the most."⁵ Her account and many others' show us the vicious cycle of silence is reinforced every day where our conscious and unconscious choices function as agents of patriarchy.

II. BREAKING THE ICE

Internet came as soon as 21st century, connecting the like-minded in a world wide web. With nowhere to go suppressed voices acquired modern technological means to speak out and social media became a newfound platform for survivors to share experiences, build solidarity and support and reach out for help if needed. This particular hash-tag was first used by Tarana Burke on Myspace and in an interview with 'Business Insider' activist Burke said "#MeToo is essentially about survivors supporting survivors. And it's really about

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community healing and community action.”⁶ This is why the movement is often referred to as “empowerment through empathy.” The movement visibly demonstrated the unimaginably high number of survivors of harassment in their workplaces.⁷

The experimental model started in 2006 by Burke on a small platform showed exponential growth across all social-media platforms as actresses like Rose McGowan and Ashley Judd chose to come forward against an influential producer Harvey Weinstein in October 2017.⁸ Soon many powerful figures were named and shamed on internet and the whole world was affected by ‘mere’ (as the patriarchal system have been saying since eternity) voices of women. The ice that had been carefully preserved by unequal power relations of men’s world begun to melt.

III. SILENCE, JUSTICE AND THE IMPACT OF #METOO

A flawed justice system :

Under the existing legal system, “justice” for sexual violence requires convincing first the police and then a court of law that what was done to you actually happened, and only then it counts as a crime.⁹ Be it the state authority or the HR of a company the struggle to obtain any effective justice remains the same. The system, precisely the patriarchal system, we are living in is designed to reinforce the hierarchy and the cycle of dominance. Before delving deep it has to be understood the vicious threads of patriarchy and dominance are leaking from each corner of our lives. The violations are not purely or even mostly about sex, but instead reinforce a structure that offers power to a few by pretending to offer rewards to many. Patriarchy spreads the lie that there are rules we can follow that will keep us safe—that if we wear the right clothes, say no loudly enough, walk away, don’t laugh at men, work hard, no harm will come to us.¹⁰

The hash-tag on MySpace started off as a gesture of solidarity and support for survivors, the basic intention was to create a safe space for them, so they felt heard and validated which provisions lacked in almost every mainstream structure. With time the characteristics of the movement developed and survivors started to call out their perpetrators and maybe the Harvey Weinstein case can be marked as a starting point. Nevertheless, the movement never meant to change the definition of ‘justice’. Rather, this is, Tressie McMillan Cottom noted, a conversation about norms.¹¹ It is more about the acknowledgement that what was done to a survivor had actually happened. As written by Sarah Jaffe, it worked like a ‘Whispering Network’. Backlashers were worried about men going to jail on the basis of mere narratives, although they were mostly not.

Analysis of the impact of the movement from West to East

Previously mentioned the landmark case of disgraced 68 year old film mogul Weinstein, after being accused by around fifty women from the film industry of rape and sexual misconduct he received a 23 year sentence at the New York State Prison.¹² It was definitely good news for the movement, but it took decades of misconduct and abuse to ultimately dethrone him. Besides, a recent report shows only seven accused are convicted and four others are facing legal charges in USA.¹³

These facts infer that the problem of sexual harassment is beyond Harvey Weinstein, Bill O’Reilly and Hollywood, although public outrage seems to fixate on high profile cases like them. Sexual misconduct in the workplace is pervasive, spanning industries and putting low-income women at particular risk.¹⁴ It would not be wrong to say the social media movement was mainly focused on glamour industry and high profile cases of West. We have time and again witnessed that the renowned and influential actresses did not know where to report and when they finally called out the predators they even had to face a plethora of hindrances to establish their case. Then, As ‘TIME Person of the Year 2017’ rightly asked—what hope is there for the janitor who is being harassed by a co-worker but remains silent out of fear she’ll lose the job she needs to support her children?¹⁵

Although not many were convicted, we witnessed an explosion of resignations. 201 men lost their jobs due to the accusations brought against them by 2019. Many of the leading positions previously occupied by men were replaced by women. For example, Roy Price, Head of Amazon Studios, resigned in October 2017 after a Hollywood producer accused him of making unwanted sexual advances and was permanently replaced by Jennifer Salke (for interim period the position was occupied by Albert Cheng). The impact could be seen even among Government Officials. Al Franken, the second term US Senator for Minnesota Resigned on January 2nd, 2018, after accusations of groping and improper advances came from at least six women. He apologized, but also denied many of the allegations. His position has been given to Tina Smith for the interim period and still she is holding the position.¹⁶

But as Franken left he told, “I, of all people, am aware that there is some irony in the fact that I am leaving while a man who has bragged on tape about his history of sexual assault sits in the Oval Office and a man who has repeatedly preyed on young girls campaigns for the Senate with the full support of his party,” pointing at Donald Trump and Roy Moore who was the Republican Senate candidate for Alabama.¹⁷ Franken had to resign but his statement was bold enough to rethink about the impact of collective voices of women on social media. The two men he had indicated at were accused by many women of harassment and are in power as this paper is being written.

Let’s take the gut-wrenching hearing of Brett Kavanaugh, who was nominated to the Supreme Court by President Donald Trump, over the allegations of attempt to rape almost three decades ago brought against him by Christine Blasey Ford. In her mid-forties, she wanted a second way out of her house driven by teenage trauma of locking herself in a washroom to hide from her attackers. Her account was penned by her therapist in 2012 as she sobbingly remembered during the hearing in 2018.¹⁸ The accused categorically denied all allegations. He was 100 percent sure it did not happen, and she was 100 percent sure it did, but when it came to the voting his nomination came through. Such results could be predicted from new NPR/Marist poll¹⁹ found that while a large majority of Democrats and independents believed Kavanaugh’s Supreme Court nomination should be rejected if Christine Ford’s allegations are true, a majority of Republicans believed Kavanaugh should be confirmed even if Ford’s allegations are found to be true. The hearing didn’t actually

seem to be about the truth, but stabilizing the power equations that were disrupted on two levels- first, within the Republicans and second, in the Senate. Perhaps, that is why the truth was never really what Senate Republicans were after. Quotations by some 'powerful' men regarding Kavanaugh makes the picture clearer, two of them are as follows

"To my Republican colleagues," Graham spat, "if you vote no, you're legitimizing the most despicable thing I have seen in my time in politics."

Trump, who has a heap of allegations of sexual misconduct piled against him²⁰ was thrilled at the response received in the case. "Judge Kavanaugh showed America exactly why I nominated him," he tweeted shortly after the hearing ended. "The Senate must vote!"

Not only her plea to subpoena Mark Judge, the key witness and launch an FBI investigation were denied by the all-male Republican panel, it was followed by a series of lamenting speeches by Kavanaugh about his family's sufferings on live television. He sympathized with the accuser for what happened, but convincingly said that her memory was flawed to accuse him. Why wouldn't women remain silent when trials become more about the sufferings of the accused than acknowledging the pain of the survivor?

Kate Manne, a feminist philosopher, rightly coined the term "himpathy" to explain the "tendency to dismiss the female perspective altogether, to empathize with the powerful man over his less powerful alleged female victim."²¹ The Ford-Kavanaugh hearing is unfortunately not an exceptional case. Ford is the representative of all women who had been to the courtroom and went through a second phase of traumas and harassment to find justice for her harassment.

The Kavanaugh hearing is not to be marked as a complete failure in feminist discourse. Few other women followed Ford's footsteps and called him out for harassment and rape. The whole of the USA and the world witnessed overwhelming protests and the outrage ultimately culminated into an amendment of decades-old Congressional Accountability Act for the first time since 1995. The bill was referred to as MeToo bill and it improved the procedure of reporting sexual harassment for congress employees as well as increase transparency.

Unlike the West, especially the American counterpart of the movement, in developing nations saw the rise of the MeToo movement in a different light. Here the growth of the movement was sporadic and spontaneous in nature, but as we have seen from the West, in the limelight of the movement remained the high profile cases mainly coming from entertainment and industries. The movement was not so impactful here as in the West, but the blow was strong enough to bring about a few significant changes. Although they are very few, some so-called 'ordinary' women too stole the limelight of the social media movement. Khadija Siddiqi, a law student in Pakistan who was stabbed twenty-three times in 2016 by a fellow classmate after spurning his advances. Her well-connected attacker was later on acquitted by a court system that routinely excuses perpetrators of violence against women. But Khadija refused to remain silent and more than two million supporters used the hashtag #JusticeforKhadija

to champion her case on social media, ultimately helping her to win her appeal.²²

In Jyoti Singh's (also rewarded with the name of Nirbhaya) hearing in India a rapist attempted to justify the horrendous violence, saying "When being raped, she shouldn't fight back. She should just be silent and allow the rape. Then they'd have dropped her off after 'doing her', and only hit the boy,"²³ Silence is expected of women naturally any deviation is punishable. Almost a nationwide protest was launched on social media alongside the streets of Delhi against the heinous crime. As a result the definition of rape was changed under Indian Penal Code and a law was passed to treat juveniles between 16 and 18 as adults for serious crimes such as murder and rape.

Another case that made headline was Vinita Nanda's allegation of rape against veteran actor Alok Nath about 23 years ago. Here Nath responded in the same tone as Kavanaugh. "Neither I am denying this nor do I would agree with it. It [rape] must have happened, but someone else would have done it," Mr Nath is quoted as saying by the Indian Express newspaper.²⁴ From West to East the defence-mechanism of men noticeably follows similar patterns.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

#MeToo did not change the structurally patriarchal justice system except for a few amendments or even the setting in which we live, but added another mode of expression for systematically oppressed voices. Supreme Court lawyer of India, Karuna Nundy, rightly depicts "They are using their words, smartphones and laptops to speak their truth and be heard," because they do not have faith in the system. Yet many successful personalities had to step down or were fired as a direct effect of the movement. Feminists have long been questioning the patriarchal version of the 'normal' and the movement revealed the tragic living conditions of women under the prevailing norms of the societies. Thus, new angles are being accommodated to trace back the origin of the problems in gender-crimes as an indirect effect of the movement. The Indian Supreme Court recently held that the character a victim should be irrelevant while judging such crimes. The magnitude of the problem was never before exposed so explicitly. In West non-disclosure agreements covering sexual harassment are being banned and power is being re-imagined. Acceptance that work-environments are inherently unsafe for women has triggered a new conversation and that has been the most crucial contribution of the social media movements.

Like every other movement this one too has its drawbacks. It is true that throughout the time the focus remained on high-profile cases and by nature the movement is quite Westernized. A survey was conducted with thousands of women from Afghanistan and Nigeria, and they had no clue about the viral has-tag.²⁵ Women living in the world's most dangerous corners felt no improvement whatsoever in their lives due to #MeToo movement. This could be explained as women in these countries face challenges (for example-female genital mutilation, child marriage) that are different from the West. Equality is still a far cry yet a Kenyan female Journalist Sharon Kate Ng'ang'a assessing the impact of

#MeToo in the context of Africa shows progress towards equality for sure.²⁶ With all its downsides #MeToo has ignited the beginning of a new perspective in both legal and moral thinking.

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