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#METOO BUT NOT YOU

**A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST PROTEST AND THE MARGINALISATION OF WOMEN
OF COLOUR**

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LIBA3003: Liberal Arts Dissertation

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Abstract

The success of the #MeToo movement has been undeniable, but in this dissertation, I argue that this has been at the expense of women of colour. I argue that the experiences of women of colour have remained marginal to #MeToo and the intersectional experiences of women have been silenced. The dissertation develops this argument by using the first chapter to explore the rise of #MeToo as a social movement by drawing on Johnston's (2014) theory and the emphasis it gives to three qualities required if protest is to develop into a social movement: the structural, performative, and ideational-interpretative. I further argue that while Johnston's theory helps explain the rise of #MeToo, his theory fails to account for how certain social groups remain marginalised in the process of social movement formation. In the second chapter I explore the success of #MeToo in more detail by considering two of its main achievements: shifting cultural norms around sexual violence against women and the public 'calling out' of perpetrators as a means of obtaining justice. However, I argue that while #MeToo has enjoyed considerable success in relation to both, for women of colour the impact has been far more limited because it has taken white women's experiences as the norm and has failed to centre the experiences of women of colour. More specifically, I argue that #MeToo did little to shift deep rooted systemic racial stereotypes around women subjected to sexual violence and I use two prominent cases that concentrate on the 'calling out' of male perpetrators to illustrate my argument. In the final chapter, I go on to argue that a further positive outcome of #MeToo has been its encouragement of online activism and how it has accelerated feminist protest using social media. Nevertheless, my argument is that, here again, racial stereotypes persist. To illustrate this, I use two more prominent examples, this time the tragic sexually motivated murders of two young women. Throughout this

dissertation I use an extensive secondary literature that draws from a range of academic disciplines and subjects, and news articles and blogs. This includes sociology, cultural and feminist studies, political science, and socio-legal studies.

Introduction

The MeToo hashtag (#MeToo) has achieved viral significance across online platforms, but at the continuing expense of women of colour. #MeToo is now widely known, but most remain unaware of its origins. It was first coined by the African American social worker and activist Tarana Burke in 2006, who began using the term on her Myspace network in her campaign to achieve 'empowerment through empathy' for survivors of sexual harassment, assault, and violence (Rodino-Colocino 2018, p.96). Burke's campaign was primarily aimed at establishing an online community for women of colour where they could share their experiences of sexual violence without fear of judgement, and to connect with and support one another through collective experiences of suffering and trauma. Burke later followed this by co-founding an African-centred rites of passage programme which later turned into the non-profit Just Be, Inc. to further empower young black girls. Burke utilised unique programmes and workshops where girls and young women could share their stories with each other to help their healing and recovery from sexual violence. The programme proved a huge success and was eventually adopted by every public school in Selma, Alabama (Alexander in NWHM n.d.). Burke's campaigning and activism were timely, because it is blatantly clear that women of colour are far more vulnerable to sexual violence than their white peers. They are also far less likely to report their assault: in the U.S. for every 15 black women who are raped, only one reports her assault (NOW 2018). Burke's great innovation was to create a community for these

marginalised and ignored women to express their anger and hurt in safe spaces that offered sanctuary, coping strategies and potential solutions without fear that they would be ignored, dismissed, or subjected to backlash.

What is significant is that while Burke enjoyed great local success, her use of 'Me Too' went relatively unnoticed for over a decade. It was not until 11 years later, in 2017, that #MeToo gained serious attention in mainstream and social media following online statements of victimisation, but this time by powerful white women (Gomez and Gobin 2019). Understanding the reasons for this are a core concern of this dissertation and will be discussed in much greater detail below. Here, however, it is important to note that on the 5th of October 2017, the now #MeToo went mainstream after white American actress Ashley Judd made the sensational accusation in the New York Times that the highly influential Hollywood mogul and filmmaker Harvey Weinstein had subjected her to serial sexual assault. Judd's accusations proved both startling and seminal, and led to an outpouring of similar accusations against Weinstein from over 80 women working in the film industry. It was in response to this that 11 days later the white American actress Alyssa Milano posted on Twitter: 'If you have been sexually assaulted or harassed write "me too" as a reply to this tweet' (Gordon 2023).

It is beyond doubt that Milano was unaware that Burke had first used the hashtag over a decade earlier and she was quick to give credit to its creator. Yet, what is significant is that it was not until Milano's 2017 tweet that the #MeToo movement was well and truly born. The response to Milano was both immediate and global, extending way beyond Weinstein, Hollywood, and the film industry, as I also further document below. In fact, within a matter of weeks #MeToo appeared in 2.3 million other tweets from users based in 85 different

countries (Fox and Diehm 2017). By using #MeToo, these women were able to express collectively unvoiced experiences of personal assault and shame, and thus have their experiences validated (Holman 2020). In raising their online voices under the #MeToo hashtag, they were also exposing hidden systems of oppression and privilege whose influence extended into the dismal treatment of sexual assault survivors (Rodino-Colocino 2018).

For all its success, it took the participation of powerful white women to establish #MeToo as the focus for a global protest against sexual violence and the reasons for this are another core focus of this dissertation. Indeed, my argument is that what remains relatively hidden is that #MeToo's real and important successes have been at the cost, perhaps even the denial, of the inherently intersectional nature of sexual violence against women and the experiences of women of colour. As it will be argued in this dissertation, it is no coincidence that the origins of #MeToo in the struggles of one black woman living in an oppressive community became, for a while at least, no more than an afterthought as more women expressed their grievances under the banner of #MeToo. #MeToo has been an undeniably successful social movement aimed at the liberation of women from sexual violence, but by generalising the experience of white women the problem faced by women of colour remain at best marginal. At worst, #MeToo reproduces deeply embedded racial narratives which normalise sexual violence against women of colour.

In the next chapter, I account for the phenomenal growth of #MeToo by reference to social movement theory. This allows us to understand how #MeToo came to possess the structural, performative, and ideational-interpretive qualities that are necessary if contemporary protest is to grow into a full social movement. However, I also argue that social movement theory

fails to acknowledge how the social disadvantages experienced by, for instance, women of colour mean that these qualities are much harder to come by. I then move on in chapter two to explore these differences in more detail, particularly how #MeToo's undeniable success in shifting cultural norms and 'calling out' the perpetrators of sexual violence against white women not only drowned out the voices and experiences of women of colour, but also reproduced deeply embedded racial stereotypes. In the final chapter, I then move on to consider the post-#MeToo situation and how the turn to online activism and hashtag feminism continues to operate a double standard which fails to centre women of colour's experiences of sexual violence among women of colour.

CHAPTER ONE: 'Me Too' to #MeToo: From an Isolated Phrase to a Social Movement Hashtag

#MeToo as a Social Movement

It is clear that the rapid rise of #MeToo represents a new type of social activism (Hillstrom 2018). To quote the legal scholar Camille Hebert (2018, p.321), 'there is no doubt that #MeToo has become a powerful social movement, both in the United States, and internationally'. Viewing #MeToo as a social movement is important because not only does it allow us to appreciate its scale and impact, but contemporary social movement theory can explain why it took over a decade for a mass protest movement to emerge. To see #MeToo as a social movement allow us to understand that what started as a local, isolated, and largely unrecognised phrase grew into a mass movement that exposed endemic sexual violence. Furthermore, this theory also helps explain why some groups remain marginal to mainstream social movements, in this case women of colour (Diehl 2019).

Political sociologists state that a social movement in its most basic sense can be regarded as a driving factor of social, political, or cultural change through collective forms of activism that possess identifiable objectives and purposeful intentions (Martin 2015). This is certainly true of those joining together under #MeToo, because it provided a focus for large numbers of women to establish a collective online presence to share publicly their stories, sympathetically connect with other victims, express solidarity, and feel empowered, and pursue social change. As Chandra and Erlingsdóttir (2020) point out, the sheer numbers of women willing to publicly share their experience of trauma meant that the addition of each new voice made real #MeToo's success in bringing about political and cultural transformation of historic global significance. Yet, #MeToo was not just another echo chamber, because in creating this online collective space it also connected these personal testimonies to the demand for justice. To call out abusers so publicly was necessarily a demand for political and social change, because it required pushing for criminal consequences for sexual violence by creating a highly visible and immediately accessible media campaign demanding social and personal justice for all women (Holman 2020).

According to Charles Tilly (1979) (cited in Johnston 2014), social movements comprise three distinct elements which are crucial to their origins and successes. Tilly's theory has been critiqued and refined by Johnston (2014) to create an analytical framework that can be used to explain the growth of #MeToo. Unlike Tilly, Johnston's focus is on the different and diverse make-up of social movements and has the benefit of showing how these different parts can come together in new ways to form coherent and lasting overlapping structures. In more detail, Johnston identifies three necessary spheres of activity, the first of which is the structural sphere which refers to the groups and organisations that form a linked network of

overlapping structures. His second innovation draws on cultural and gender studies to stress the performative sphere. Here, Johnston is clearly highlighting how modern social movements are defined by their creation of distinctive and innovative displays and actions which involve conspicuous and often dramatic public statements and performances. This leads on to Johnston's focus on the ideational-interpretive sphere. This is important because it underlines how the creation of member's shared ideologies are necessary to bind individuals together into the coherent collective required by all successful social movements. In short, for Johnston what defines a successful social movement is that its sum is far greater than its 'parts'. These intertwined parts create a strong collective identity which is a key element of the ideology needed to bind different group members together (Johnston 2014).

A Social Movement for All Women?

Using this framework, it is possible to understand better how #MeToo became so prominent in 2017, and why it took 10 years for this to happen. Looking at the structural sphere, #MeToo's success depended upon the power of linked networks of influential people, such as the celebrity attention it attracted in 2017. As already noted, #MeToo's origins came out of Tarana Burke's local campaigning against sexual violence aimed at girls and women of colour (Rottenburg 2019). However, it was only after white women in Hollywood and the entertainment industry adopted the hashtag to voice their own experiences of sexual violence that #MeToo gained much wider prominence and influence (Onwuachi-Willig 2018). It is this white celebrity, fame and wealth that provided #MeToo with those crucial structural elements necessary if a set of loose discontents and initiatives are to gather momentum and become a social movement. The celebrity involvement not only created widespread attention, but crucially brought the funding needed to organise demonstrations, create media

campaigns, and gain press attention. Initiatives such as Time's Up was a creation by Hollywood women to raise money to support victims of sexual harassment. It did this by collaborating with the National Women's Law Center and the Time's Up Legal Defence Fund to further provide legal and media support for those subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace (Goncharenko 2022). It was the power of this celebrity participation and its easy access to, and knowledge of, the workings of news, television, entertainment, and social media, that provided the structural means through which diverse disaffection and engagement could be organised into a coherent social movement (Chen and Liebler 2022).

However, there is a silence in this account that needs to be voiced: the forgotten and overlooked voice of the 'racialized other'. Rottenburg (2019, p.43) is certainly right to suggest that it was only after celebrity involvement that #MeToo became a 'desirable' social cause. It is also important to remember that social media platforms like Twitter often amplify powerful voices, as the online is still characterised by social hierarchies that dictate which voices are heard, distributed and gain attention (Boyd 2021). Scholar, Jessie Daniels, (cited in Boyd 2021) is correct to argue that 'race' is one important source of hierarchy, and that 'while these [online] microphones provide amplification of their [women of colour] voices, there is still a white supremacy environment present' (Boyd 2021, p.21) and this toxic presence extends into online spheres. It is these hierarchies in online and social media worlds that accounts for why #MeToo's growing influence drew primarily upon the experiences of white women increasingly willing to voice their discontents online (Boyd 2021). Attention to the intersectional experiences of other women, while not entirely absent, remained the exception making it so difficult for women like Tarana Burke to gain public attention. If there is still an online preference for voicing a singular experience of sexual violence, then this

accounts for why #MeToo gained prominence only after powerful white women went public with their accounts of sexual abuse and violence.

What is also clear is these powerful women gave #MeToo the performative aspects that Johnston (2014) further explains are crucial to the formation of a social movement. Acts of public drama are essential for modern social movements because it is through these spectacles that they reinforce their public visibility, drive home their messages and force institutions to recognise their campaigns. The performative element of #MeToo drew on earlier existing practices of hashtag feminism to use different social media platforms to create individual and collective networks of connections necessary to get a grip on an issue quickly (Clark-Parsons 2018). For #MeToo, individual social media users emerged *en masse* to create online a collective account of their experiences of oppression through dramatic and high-profile acts of personal disclosure that often involved naming famous and powerful men. Such performativity was successful in creating a virtuous social movement circle in which an act of disclosure encouraged others to raise their voices (Clark-Parsons 2018). The success of this was evident very quickly in establishing unsolicited sexual conduct as a systematic injustice perpetrated by powerful men holding positions of influence over mainly less powerful women. In effect, the performance of these acts of disclosure created something like a 'call out culture' whose performative power was further harnessed under #MeToo to the cause of positive change. 'Call out' culture is discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, but here it can usefully be defined, following Norris (2021), as publicly holding a person or organisation accountable, who have said or done something deemed to be offensive. By 'calling out' these powerful male abusers their offensive actions could be brought into the full glare of popular scrutiny and the online performance of claiming #MeToo reduced the ability

of those named to hide their abuse and distance themselves from their actions (Andreasen 2022).

However, embedded inequalities and racism give advantage to more powerful white women survivors of sexual violence because their privilege allows them to be heard, believed, and taken more seriously. In contrast, these unacknowledged prejudices meant that ethnic minority women seeking to express their experiences through 'Me Too' struggled to establish a meaningful presence in the performative sphere. They also hindered their ability to gather the resources and influence necessary to bring about structural mobilisation and to express ideas that take seriously the racialised experience of sexual violence and the continuing absence of access to justice as the basis for an organising ideology. Moreover, Johnston's theory of a social movement does not consider that marginalised groups do not possess sufficient performative strength because they are systematically stripped of their power. This stops them from gaining mass attention like that available to Hollywood celebrities or feeling comfortable enough to raise their voice in the public sphere (Diehl 2019). In many instances, the negative consequences for speaking out publicly for women of colour are considerable, including the likelihood that making public statements against male sexual violence means they are deemed complicit in their own sexual violence, as I explore in greater detail below (Phipps 2019).

It is also evident that the attention of famous white women provided #MeToo with the ideological identity and coherence required by all social movements (Johnston 2014). In the spotlight provided by celebrity attention, #MeToo became a focus for a diverse set of ideas and ideologies that had for a long time tried to express how women's subordination was

closely tied to the power and influence that men had over the family in general and to sexual violence against women. For decades, feminists had been seeking to change the narrative around sexual violence by pointing to its systemic existence and everyday manifestations, to build solidarities between victims (Jackson et al 2019). One of the most influential and central themes which united these different ideologies, was the need to change the narrative that normalised sexual violence against women. This was clear in #MeToo's unequivocal rejection that harassment and sexual violence against women was exceptional, or that women were somehow complicit or to blame in their own sexual subjugation. Thus, as part of its emergence as a social movement #MeToo simultaneously expressed new and enabling ideologies capable of unifying the experience of different groups of women while also expressing new cultural norms that repositioned sexual violence against women as intolerable (Ozkazanc-Pan 2018).

However, for all this success #MeToo also reproduced some important and profound structural silences. It was a consequence of the continuing dominance of 'whiteness' to normative culture, media and the rapidly expanding online sphere that Burke's initial attempts at movement building through recognising ideologies of intersectional experiences of sexual violence were first ignored and then later marginalised (Boyd 2021). It is also the case that these norms persisted with the success of #MeToo, which came at the cost of ignoring the core concerns and fundamental ideas from which 'Me Too' had originally emerged. This makes it clear that the intersectionality of women's experiences was once again overlooked and marginalised. Thus, when 'Me Too' gathered influence as a movement, the commitment to addressing racialised sexual violence against women was never centred to its interpretive-ideological sphere. This is well recognised by Burke who publicly stated that

‘the women of colour, trans women, queer people - our stories get pushed aside, and our pain is never prioritised. We don’t talk about indigenous women. Their stories go untold’ (Boyd 2012, p.24). For all the success of its narratives, #MeToo developed on the assumption of a shared and homogeneous womanhood that obscured intersectional and racialised sexual violence against women (Boyd 2021).

CHAPTER TWO: No More Than a Footnote?

#MeToo And Its Selective Success

In this section, I develop the previous analysis by considering in greater detail two key elements of #MeToo: its importance as a public platform for the identification and redefinition of cultural norms around sexual violence against women; and its determination to ‘call out’ individual perpetrators to expose systems of oppression and demands for justice. I argue that with respect to both, #MeToo achieved some remarkable successes, that the movement succeeded in bringing about a cultural shift, and that in doing so it has helped establish important, progressive benchmarks around sexual violence against women (Rodino-Colocino 2018). I also argue that these achievements disproportionately relate to the experiences of white women and that both the shifts in cultural norms and the very public acts of ‘calling out’ failed to centre the experiences of women of colour.

#MeToo Breaks the Mould But Leaves Some Behind

As the originator of #MeToo has commented, history has shown that if marginalised voices are not centred within social movements the danger is that they become ‘no more than a footnote’ (Tarana Burke, quoted in Onwuachi-Willig 2018, p.105). This is certainly the danger for #MeToo. As I argue in this section, #MeToo’s achievements in shifting cultural norms

around sexual violence against women have been significant and there is growing evidence of its positive impact on the cultural awareness of sexual violence against women more generally. However, I further argue that this progress has been to the cost of the relative neglect of the specific experience of harassment and the heightened vulnerability frequently faced by women of colour, so that they have remained marginal to the movement's objectives to shift cultural norms and establish justice (Phipps 2019). Behind this lies #MeToo's deeper lack of awareness of the intersectional nature of sexual violence against women (Onwuachi-Willig 2018).

As we have already seen, what began as a series of statements on social media grew into #MeToo but in doing so it has also reshaped what it revealed to be a deeply misogynist culture by collectively highlighting the systemic nature of sexual violence against women (Maier 2023). As a social movement, #MeToo created a cultural shift in how sexual violence against women is viewed both publicly and by the authorities. Evidence emerging in the brief period since #MeToo is suggestive that it has had a direct and immediate impact on cultural attitudes to sexual violence. This has been documented by Szekeres et al (2020), who show that sexual harassment and assault are no longer seen as taboo topics but are now felt to be a legitimate form of individual expression and public discussion, and that survivors are now less inclined to keep silent and to blame themselves. They further reveal how views on sexual harassment have changed among both men and women, with their US research participants far less likely to dismiss or trivialise sexual harassment and assault than was previously the case. As a snapshot of the feelings and understandings of their US research participants, it is safe to conclude that survivors of harassment and assault now feel more able to disclose their

experiences and that #MeToo has successfully critiqued the deeply entrenched stigma long attached to victims of sexual violence and has shifted this in a more progressive direction.

This is significant considering that for many decades prior to #MeToo, sexual violence was dismissed in dominant discourse as a rarity and male aggression was characterised as the actions of a few isolated individuals pathologically different from 'normal' male culture and behaviour. This individualising and dismissive normativity also extended to the survivors of sexual violence, who were often held responsible for the assaults against them because of the power of misogynistic myths and ideologies that claimed victims behave in 'provocative' ways, fail to communicate their desires clearly or long for this type of sexual attention. This defence of victim blaming, long recognised as a common response of dominant social groups seeking to minimise the consequences of their actions, was reinforced aggressively in relation to sexual violence against women (Greeson et al 2015). It is norms like these that formed the discursive fragments to a normative culture where victims are forced to quietly endure systemic sexual violence through threats, shame, humiliation, and retaliation, or find themselves gaslighted into questioning their own perceptions and reality (Hillstrom 2018).

#MeToo, of course, represented a significant challenge to this culture and disrupted its sustaining norms and ideologies. Nevertheless, what #MeToo neglected is that this culture of victim-blaming took racialised forms, where women of colour not only had to deal with systematic dismissal and manipulation, but also layers of discrimination and deep-rooted racism. In fact, the movement's unquestioned assumption that white women's experience of sexual violence could be generalised across all women and cultures restated the marginalisation of women of colour (Phipps 2019). Furthermore, in examining both the

content and media coverage of #MeToo, Tambe (2018) recognises that its most prominent spokespersons and the examples around which its narrative of sexual violence developed were dominated by white women. This is a familiar problem in a culture where racism is deeply entrenched and one well-illustrated by what might be termed a demographics of disclosure, as exemplified by the comments of African American actress and anti-sexual violence activist Gabrielle Union on Good Morning America, when she noted: 'I think the floodgates have opened for white women' (quoted in Phipps 2019 by Chavez 2017, p.2). As with Tarana Burke, women of colour like Union have certainly been amongst the pioneers of those willing to raise their voices publicly to place sexual violence against women of colour high on the agenda. Yet, the sorry conclusion is that white women's experiences of victimisation remain central to what is and is not considered as normal (Phipps 2019).

One important explanation for this is that, in an article on #MeToo, Lemieux explains how 'white women know how to be victims. They fundamentally know that they are entitled to sympathy' (cited in Phipps 2019, p.10). What she means is that white women are much better placed and possess a better understanding of how to access a culture of recognition and sympathy, whereas for women of colour this is far more problematic. For Phipps (2019), the roots of #MeToo's limited influence in disrupting discrimination can be linked back to the sexualisation of anticolonial resistance and how the construction of norms around the 'purity' and 'woundability' of 'white women's femininity' were central to white colonial culture. She further shows that for women of colour there is an expected norm of 'robustness', so that 'the sexual woundability of white women is the foil to the Black women's status as unrapeable' (Phipps 2019, p.10). It is the enduring influence of this deeply discriminatory colonial construction that not only continues to disadvantage black women but has far-

reaching implications for the treatment of other women of colour too. For example, 'brown' and Muslim women are often repeatedly desexualised or regarded as sexually oppressed, to the extent that this works to diminish their status as victims of sexual violence or lessens their impact on those rare occasions when they are brave enough to speak out against their own experiences of sexual violence (Phipps 2019).

The Selective 'Call Out' of Perpetrators

This marginalisation of the experiences of women of colour is further evident in #MeToo's endorsement of 'call out' culture. #MeToo's success in 'calling out' perpetrators have, once again, been a notable impact of the movement, but these achievements also highlight disparities in how 'call out' has neglected other, non-white groups of women who have also suffered systematic sexual violence. Here again, #MeToo has proved far less effective in using 'call out' to expose the experiences and plight of certain types of survivors, especially women of colour. One consequence is that the perpetrators of violence against these categories of women are less likely to face swift justice (Leung and Williams 2019). This is significant because 'Me Too' explicitly aimed to empower the marginalised, the voiceless, and those women whose experiences and traumas had neither been recognised nor taken seriously. The fact that #MeToo failed to grasp the importance of this for all women, allows Leung and Williams (2019) to argue that in the act of voicing grievances #MeToo perpetrated white privilege by amplifying the voices of certain groups of women at the expense of the continuing silence of others.

However, it is important to start by recognising that #MeToo was successful in exposing the role of global, national, and local institutions, public figures, and individuals in committing

sexual harassment, misconduct, assault, and violence (Wahyudiputra et al 2021). The contribution to this of 'call out' was significant because in identifying the wealthy and powerful, the systematic nature of sexual violence against women was more easily brought into open public scrutiny. Famous names like Louis C.K, Bill Cosby, and Roy Moore, were included among the over 250 powerful celebrities and public figures who were called out either online or in mainstream media for allegedly committing inappropriate sexual acts (Wahyudiputra et al 2021). By 'calling out' these men, #MeToo's aim was not only to publicly identify powerful transgressors, but also to establish new social norms around sexual behaviour. A further goal was to create a more positive set of standards that refuse to tolerate or accept acts that have been excused previously. 'Call out' as a performance represented exactly that. A further aim of 'calling out' was to strengthen public sentiments where those responsible for these acts, and any organisations seen to be condoning them, would face repercussions for their inactivity. In effect, 'call out' came to represent a campaign tactic of public shaming using the threat of damaging consequences for reputations and careers (Wahyudiputra et al 2021).

The success of this is clearest from one of the most notorious examples of 'calling out' since it is immediately following the public naming of Harvey Weinstein as a sexual predator that the #MeToo movement really took off. As has come to light, throughout his career Weinstein took advantage of his huge power in the Hollywood film industry to systematically and repeatedly sexually assault large numbers of women. His transgressions did not begin and end with sexual assault, as he also used his considerable power as a gatekeeper into prime film and television roles to continue to humiliate, silence and coerce his victims, and to professionally advance or tarnish their reputations (The Guardian 2020). However, what is

also important here is that it was only three days after his accuser, Ashley Judd, went public that Weinstein was fired from his own company and subjected to widespread public disgrace. Weinstein was the first and perhaps the most significant example of how the 'calling out' of harassers initiated a new era in which long-established abusive power structures involving sexual violence were brought to public attention and subjected to deep questioning. This helped women redefine what type of male behaviour is tolerable and emphasised that transgressors could be accountable in public culture, if not in law (Leung and Williams 2019).

Weinstein's victims were white women, however, and, as Leung and Williams (2019) argue, when it comes to victims of sexual violence who are women of colour crucial differences in cultural recognition exist. #MeToo's 'calling out' did little to disrupt this convention. This is well highlighted if the 'calling out' of Weinstein is contrasted with that of R. Kelly. Like Weinstein, Kelly too possessed a long history of sexual violence against women but the failure of the 'call out' against Kelly also highlights #MeToo's failure to grasp deep and systemic discrimination against women of colour (Leung and Williams 2019). Kelly is a famous, award-winning musician, but his success was dogged by allegations of predatory sexual behaviour towards girls and young women dating back decades to the beginning of his career. Rumours about Kelly's sexual relations with underage girls and his creation of child pornography continually circulated and in 2017, three months before Weinstein was 'called out', Kelly was accused of trapping six women in a 'sex cult' which controlled their eating and sleeping and forced them into degrading sexual acts that he then recorded (BBC 2023). There are strong parallels between the behaviour of Kelly and Weinstein: two powerful men using their influence to intimidate and coerce young women into performing degrading sexual acts, subjecting them to sexual violence, and manipulating them with controlling behaviour (Leung

and Williams 2019). Yet, the different treatment of the two cases can be traced back to how victims are racialised. In the case of Weinstein, the women were predominantly white, possessed status and some success, and often influence and power. In contrast, Kelly's victims were predominantly poor or lower socio-economic African American girls and women who frequently came from vulnerable families and communities (BBC 2023).

This is significant because attention to their victims goes some way to explaining why during #MeToo's rise the 'call out' of Kelly was so ineffective. In contrast to Weinstein, who was fired from the business empire he had created only three days after he was 'called out', Kelly continued to tour and perform concerts to huge audiences even though he had been named three months prior to the 'calling out' of Weinstein. Indeed, it was not for another two years that the 'calling out' of Kelly was taken seriously and this was only after a BBC documentary named him as a serial sexual abuser of women. Even then, it still took another three years before he was eventually brought to justice in 2022, when he was given a lengthy prison sentence (BBC 2023). More fundamentally, the failure to 'call out' Kelly must be regarded as one part of #MeToo's more general disregard for the suffering of women of colour. The Kelly case clearly illustrates that by directing attention to white celebrity victims, the suffering of poorer African American women went continually neglected while the plight of these more affluent white women took centre stage (Leung and Williams 2019).

CHAPTER THREE: After #MeToo?

The Double Standard of 'Hashtag Feminism'

In this final chapter, I argue that another important success of #MeToo is its contribution to the popularity of 'hashtag feminism' (Keller 2016). Once again, the failure to centre the experiences of women of colour and to recognise the intersectionality of sexual violence against women persist into these new forms of digital activism. As I make clear, arguments that question the relevance of feminism to girls and women are mistaken because they underplay how feminist sentiments and activism have increasingly moved to the internet and to social media. My aim in making this argument is not only to restate how feminist activism remains of central importance to girls and women, but I further argue that this takes place within limits. Once again, the development of 'hashtag feminism' fails to address the aspirations and needs of all women, because this digital feminist activism similarly fails to take seriously the experiences of women of colour to the same degree as it does for white women. I use two recent examples to illustrate my argument but this time with a focus on the victim. In doing so, my aim is to use these two contrasting examples to illustrate how much the ethnicity of female victims still significantly influences what happens when protesting online.

Extending the Influence of #MeToo

What is undeniable is that by growing into a mass social movement, #MeToo has helped accelerate the turn towards digital activism aimed at fighting for women's issues globally. This is a very important point, because it challenges the emergence of a narrative in popular discourse and mainstream media that feminism has become irrelevant to girls and (younger) women, and that they are no longer participating in feminist activism to the same extent as previous generations of women. At first view there seems to be some value to this claim,

however Keller (2016) is right to point out that what has changed is not so much the commitment to feminism and its causes, but a shift in how activism is conceived and practised. Specifically, feminist protestors have moved enthusiastically into online spaces, so that rather than a decline in feminist politics its movement into online realms and social media spaces may not be as visible to generations of feminists more familiar with traditional, off-line forms of activism. Forms of protest that were once the backbone of feminist activism, such as organised marches, street campaigns, group meetings in public spaces and leafleting, may now be less popular because this new wave of 'hashtag activism' sits much more easily with contemporary ways of living among girls and young women (Keller 2016). It is not the case that the views, anger and outrage that motivated previous generations have disappeared or that the most important feminist demands have been achieved, even if some significant change in the focus of feminist politics has occurred. What is significant is that important elements of these dissatisfactions have moved into online campaigns and especially social media (Ahuja et al 2018).

#MeToo is a good example of this trend in that its convenience and immediacy has been especially attractive and has allowed very large numbers of women activists to connect with one another (Keller 2016). #MeToo further captures the effectiveness of social media to express personal experience in succinct and vivid ways, which in turn adds to the authenticity and directness that social movements require if they are to have impact. It is not that traditional feminism has been a victim of its own success or that women no longer feel that they have important grievances around which to campaign. Rather, the importance of #MeToo is one of the most significant examples of a new form of online feminist activism in which women use the power of communication provided by the internet and social

networking platforms to highlight pressing issues, advocate the feminist cause, and mobilise large numbers of women (Ahuja et al 2018).

Who is Still Being Left Behind?

What is especially important, however, is the selectiveness of this digital feminism when it comes to female victims of sexual violence. Here it is useful to extend Gwen Ifill's (cited in List 2021) identification of white women's syndrome, and the double-standard that it involves, to the victims of sexual violence. Specifically, for Ifill, missing persons who are female, white, young, conventionally attractive, and relatively affluent, are much more likely to feature in online campaigns and media coverage. This contrasts with non-white missing persons, who tend to be ignored or are allowed only passing (social) media attention (Slakoff and Fradella 2019). This inexcusable double-standard is certainly not new and criticism along these lines has long been aimed at the mainstream media. Yet, for those who see in social media new ways for women to express their experiences, to question their subordination and the sexual violence they encounter routinely in their lives, and to organise new ways of coming together with other women to build communities, call out power and hold those responsible for this inaction to account, the persistence of this double-standard in #MeToo and other forms of digital feminism represent another form of unacknowledged silence. It also contributes to the continuing marginalisation of these women by reproducing the conditions under which the routine sexual violence they are subjected to is reproduced. When it comes to being a victim of sexual violence whiteness matters and women of colour must struggle much harder to get their voices as survivors and victims heard online.

Two recent high-profile examples clearly illustrate the double-standards at work in online digital feminism. In a dramatic and high-profile recent example, several hashtags went viral after the abduction and sexually motivated murder of Sarah Everard by a serving Metropolitan Police Officer (Jones et al 2022). This case sparked national outrage across both off and online media, and social media platforms were swamped by an outpouring of anger and sympathy expressed under hashtags like #SarahEverard, #YesAllWomen, and #SheWasWalkingHome. What happened to Sarah seemed to touch on the experiences and vulnerabilities felt by so many women, and large numbers took to social media to publicly express their sympathy, anxieties, and anger. What was at stake was the vulnerability to sexual violence that so many women felt, widespread fears about their unaccompanied use of public space and the failure of the police and the criminal justice system to provide protection and justice (Bhattacharyya 2021). The brutality of Sarah's sexual attack and subsequent murder seemed to have sparked a process of nationwide reflection and reckoning that, as was the case with #MeToo, culminated in the creation of an online community where women could come together under related hashtags to express their anger and sorrow, and in the process seek empowerment.

However, the case of Sarah Everard also disappointingly reveals how digital feminism and hashtag activism remain consistent with #MeToo in the continuing absence of an intersectional appreciation of sexual violence against women and the failure to centre the experiences of women of colour. More specifically, the social media outrage and protest at Sarah Everard's murder underlines the double standard that Gwen Ifill (cited in List 2021) has identified as missing white woman syndrome, and how some female victims are more suitable subjects of protest than others. The importance of this double standard is clearly illustrated

by a further tragic example when Zara Aleena, a young, conventionally attractive, and relatively affluent was sexually assaulted and then murdered (BBC 2022). At one level, the similarities between Zara and Sarah are strong: two young women kidnapped, sexually assaulted, and murdered while walking alone in public spaces at night in different areas of the same city. However, there are also important differences, of which the most important here is that Zara Aleena was of Pakistani heritage. While Zara's horrific abduction and murder was also mentioned on social media, her case failed to gain a fraction of the attention that Sarah's attracted. There were no similar mass outpourings of online grief and outrage, and few hashtags invoking her name to build awareness, solidarity, or empowerment. The candle-lit vigils were small, as were the public displays of grief and mourning. Indeed, the case of Zara Aleena has gone relatively unremarked upon and is generally unknown. What these different and sorry tales of women who lost their lives because of sexual violence so clearly underscores is that for all its progressive importance, digital feminist activism has failed to learn from the possibilities and limits of #MeToo, including its gaps and silences.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have argued that the #MeToo movement was undeniably successful, but this success has been at the cost of recognising the real intersectional experiences of sexual violence. In the first chapter, I critically evaluated the conditions needed for #MeToo grew into a social movement, but argued that its structural, performative, and ideational-interpretive spheres failed to acknowledge the marginalisation of women of colour. I argue that it is from these foundational limits that #MeToo's failure to centre the experiences of women of colour have been reproduced. In the second chapter, I further argued that the absence of an appreciation of 'race' and ethnicity were also clearly apparent in #MeToo's real

successes in shifting cultural norms around sexual violence against women and the ‘calling out’ of high-profile perpetrators. However, in generalising white women’s experiences to all women’s experiences of sexual violence, I have argued that these successes did not reach into the lives of all women, that the intersectional nature of sexual violence against women remained hidden and that the experiences of women of colour were never centred. I further argue in my final chapter that these limitations continue to exist beyond #MeToo. I have argued that #MeToo certainly had considerable impact, including accelerating the move to new forms of feminist online activism, or ‘hashtag feminism’, which has involved the creation of new online spaces where women feel able to protest. Yet, it is my argument that these online spaces and forms of hashtag feminism continue the unequal treatment and double standards that the failure to acknowledge the intersectional experiences of sexual violence against women in #MeToo reproduced. The success of #MeToo was often remarkable, but its legacy of failing to centre women of colour persists.

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