



#MeToo: The Beginning of Change

March 8, 2018

Worldwide, one in three women experiences physical or sexual abuse in her lifetime. Violence against women and girls is embedded in cultural and societal norms.

Women are and always have been paralyzed by fear of what men do, it shrinks our world. In the midst of everything that has occurred, women and girls have been and continue to be integral in ending discrimination and injustice.

This is precisely what has been revealed by all the #MeToo accounts of harassment and assault that have been shared on social media and other public platforms. These accounts illustrate the myriad ways in which women live smaller lives due to male violence. Violence against women happens on a continuum. From verbal harassment, like cat calls on the street to sexual harassment in the workplace, to the power and control tactics used by an intimate partner, to sexual assault, to felonious physical harm, to murder. This is a system of power and a values system that must be challenged and changed.

Research studies of sexual harassment in the workplace, violence in the home, and sexual assault are all startlingly similar in how they document the impact on women. All of these crimes have a detrimental impact on women's physical and emotional health. The more severe the abuse, the more profound the effects. Physical problems can include anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, weight loss or gain, headaches, somatic complaints, and gastro-intestinal problems. The financial effect can also be severe and can be exacerbated when an employer has no policies or procedures to address harassment or violence in the workplace. Financial harm to victims such as taking leave without pay or being terminated or forced to leave a job due to safety concerns is not uncommon.

The #MeToo hashtag has existed for over 10 years, but now it has become a social movement. It is not a witch-hunt against men who are perpetrators of violence, rather it is an opportunity for empowerment that for many years women have been waiting for in order to feel free and safe to share their stories. Unfortunately, like all social movements, the time in which #MeToo exists will not remain static. True social change can only be sustained by infiltrating the institutional and ideological structures of society so that the burst of social action can become firmly established. The challenge is of course holding to the goals of change while trying to influence the institutions and individuals that can be expected to resist or subvert such goals.

The social movements to end sexual assault and domestic violence have strived to change the public discourse surrounding violence against women over the past 40 years. We have moved from Take Back the Night marches and sheltering battered women and their children in private homes, to creating a public awareness and an understanding that victims are not to blame for the violence perpetrated against them. As a result, we have worked with legislators to improve and create laws to protect victims/survivors and changed systemic responses to be more appropriately victim/survivor-centered.

We still have much work to do as we continue to push against prejudice to end inequity and violence toward women. As we embark upon a culture free of victim blaming, bashing and shaming, we remain dedicated and hopeful that #MeToo is the beginning of authentic change. Will you join us?

Respectfully,

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