

#MeToo: Breaking taboos, raising awareness, empowering and uniting victims around the world

Abstract:

The #MeToo movement made headlines by drawing attention and raising awareness to the pervasiveness that sexual harassment and abuse is a phenomenon that occurs globally in different settings whereby previously there was a lack of understanding of the underlying impact on victims. This paper delves into the importance of online advocacy through hashtag activism by focusing on the positive aspects of the 'Me Too' campaign through the ways victims feel empowered and are breaking taboos and destigmatizing the guilt of being a sexual assault victim by speaking up on their experiences, which is creating a community among survivors allowing them to heal.

Keywords: #Online Advocacy, #MeToo, #SexualHarassment #Awareness #Victims #Community #Empowerment

Introduction:

The #MeToo movement has become a revolution around the globe as a movement to empower survivors of sexual harassment or abuse to stand and tell their stories and heal themselves. The 'Me Too' movement started way back in 2006, by activist Tarana Burke who tried to put an end to abuse and sexual harassment of women and aiming to support and unite victims and hold the perpetrators accountable for what they did, creating empowerment through empathy (Murphy,2019). Following actress Ashley Judd's revelation of the sexual harassment of Harvey Weinstein with the use of '#MeToo', Actress Alyssa Milano used her social media account as a communication tool by tweeting on October 15, 2017, and encouraged women who experienced any form of harassment or misconduct to come forward and share their stories by using #MeToo to show the number of victims who have been through these situations. According to Palmer et al. (2021) research, within that day, people used the hashtag 12 million times that created a participatory culture within the online community and became the most trending hashtag and went viral around the world. The development of the movement helped to build a safe and supportive community whereby survivors worldwide build the courage to break their silence that they kept for a long time by speaking up about their experiences, testifying against the perpetrators, hoping for a change in the society.

MeToo movement raising awareness and breaking taboos

With the popularity of the of #MeToo movement, women are no longer silent and afraid to speak about their experiences. The #MeToo movement has globally helped raised awareness and break taboo about how sexual violence exists in a widespread spectrum of misogynistic behavior that is supported by hierarchies of silence and domination and is helping people to understand and acknowledge the need to listen and believe the stories of survivors as well encouraging people to engage in the topic and learn the detrimental impact of sexual harassment or abuse on victims' health, (Crawley & Simic, 2018).

The allegation against producer Harvey Weinstein have generated an important conversation about sexual assault and misconduct in the Hollywood and beyond that. According to BBC News, (2020), Harvey Weinstein was found guilty due to his misconduct and was sentenced to 23 years of prison, which gave hope to sexual harassment survivors that through the #MeToo movement they can bring changes in society. Several survivors of sexual harassment or other form of misconduct came out to speak on the topic using the hashtag #MeToo to show the magnitude of the problem and sharing their testimonies and reasons why they kept silent before and now feel encouraged and safe to share their stories. Through the Sambaraju's research (2020), online advocacy is an important factor to bring change in the society by empowering victims and allowing them a platform to speak about their experiences which was difficult without digital advocacy due to fear of being judged. Seeing how Harvey Weinstein went down, more victims do not feel the need to hide and are feeling empowered through the #MeToo movement to disclose the name of their perpetrators. An example to illustrate the reason victims keep their silence on topic is because of the stigma surrounding being a victim of sexual misconduct and being told to accept it is shown through Najwa Zebian, a Lebanese-Canadian activist, author, and poet who took to Twitter on October 16 2017, using the hashtag #MeToo sharing the way society view harassment and what she was

told.



Figure 1: Najwa Zebian’s tweet illustrating what she was told in the past when speaking on harassment.

Empowerment through empathy

Harassment, rape, and abuse cases were previously considered taboo in the society. With the help of online advocacy movement like #MeToo, victims feel less intimidated to speak up and where people used to be suspicious of their confession, in today’s era more people believe their words, and understand the importance of the subject (Roth-Cohen, 2021). In China, The #MeToo movement has empowered and motivated the women to raise their voices and share their stories from the past by fighting for the rights of women. On university campuses, was first seen where female students started to speak openly against the misconduct of their professors, and on January 2018, a former doctoral student alleged her former supervisor of assaulting several students and her, (Zhongxuan & Liu, 2019).

In 1990's a student at Peking University in Beijing ended up committing suicide, after she was sexually harassed and raped by a popular lecturer at the university named Shen, feeling empowered by the #MeToo movement, the late student's friends and supporters paid tribute to her death at a festival which gained attention and sparked anger which resulted in Shen having to resign from his job, (Zhongxuan & Liu, 2019). This shows how in 1990's the situation was disregarded and how in the current time with online advocacy and movement like #MeToo the situation has reversed and changed in the sense that now women in general do not feel weak and intimidated to speak out about their experiences and are aware they are not the one to be blamed but rather, it is the offenders who should be punished by the authority and should be re-educated about sex education, violence and harassment. According to Zhongxuan & Liu, (2019), victims of sexual assaults were able to reconstruct their identity through efforts and encouragement through the #MeToo movement and heal from the pain that was caused.

Impact of #MeToo on sexual survivors' mental health

Being sexually assaulted takes a toll on the health of victims. One of the primary forms of trauma is sexual assault, which has a severe effect on the psychological health of victims where they get anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and have suicidal thoughts, (Campbell et al.,2009). According to Roth-Cohen, (2021), the online #MeToo movement revealed the reality of sexual harassment occurs throughout the globe. According to the study of Gundersen & Zaleski, (2020) researchers find that when victims are talking about their assault, their psychological and physical health at the same time improved. Through a study, participants were asked what pushed them to reveal their story online, to which most of them replied that they no longer wanted to remain quiet and want people to know their story as they have seen posts where some people are using

rape as humour and making jokes out of it and therefore they wanted to come out and reveal that anyone can be a victim of abuse or rape and they are not weird like how society regards them as the 'others,' (Gundersen & Zaleski, 2020).

Before the movement, the survivors felt guilty and at fault for their situation and did not dare to talk to someone about their experience and kept their hidden pain to themselves; while they were suffering from mental health issues. With the progression of the movement, survivors feel empowered to bring a change in society by shining a light on the problem and help other victims feel safe, united and make them realise they are not at fault and the perpetrators who are to blame and punished. According to the research of Strauss Swanson et al., (2020), through the activism of the movement, when survivors are volunteering in protests and helping other victims simultaneously, their mental health state is improving, and they are healing from their trauma.

Conclusion

The #MeToo movement helps and serves as a medium for survivors who experienced any sexual misconduct to break their silence by raising awareness, highlighting the impact of sexual misconduct on victims and breaking the stigma surrounding being a victim of sexual assault. The movement created a safe, supportive and united community for victims, allowing them to contribute to the global conversation, aiming to bring positive changes in society. With the help of the #MeToo campaign, survivors' mental health is improving and healing when engaged in advocacy activism and helping other victims. The #MeToo is still an ongoing movement trying to bring equality in society and where everyone is safe and bring justice for the survivors by punishing the offenders and educating people about violence, harassment and the consequences from a young age.

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