Yes, #MeToo

The burden of being a sexual harassment victim

LAM-YA MOSTAQUE

Identifying a problem is always the first step towards solving it, and this is why I think this campaign against sexual harassment will go a long way in starting a much-needed conversation.

"ME too," such easy words, and yet, it took so much courage to post them on social media.

As an avid social media user, I have posted thousands of status updates, ranging from complaints about mom's food to sophisticated words about issues I care about. In most cases, I don't think twice before posting something; and I am pretty vocal about social issues. But I thought of a thousand things before I wrote #MeToo in support of a campaign to raise awareness about sexual harassment.

Why was it that hard though? Before I could write those words, I thought about whether I had ever been sexually assaulted. I wondered if being touched inappropriately while on public transport qualified as sexual harassment. I thought about how I cringed as a child when some distant male relative would try to get too close to me.

I wondered, if I post this, will people think that I have been raped? I thought about what my family members and friends would think, and most of all, I thought about how it would reflect on me as a girl. Is it alright for an unmarried 20-plus woman to claim something like this?

It is always hard to admit that I too have been a victim. Being raised by a strong-willed mother, I was always taught to protest and be vocal about these issues. Most times, I made sure to retaliate when harassed on public transport. But that never changed how that physical contact that lasted a fraction of a second made me feel for the rest of the week—sometimes coming back to haunt me.

But it was harder to admit it because of the culture of victim-shaming that surrounds issues like rape and sexual harassment in our society. Whenever a girl or woman is harassed, questions like "What was she wearing?" eventually arise. Sexually assaulting women who step out of the house is seen as somewhat of a "right" of men. As if it's their sacred duty to put these women back in their "rightful place".

But is it only women who suffer?

Many young boys and men often fall victim to sexual harassment and do not know what to do about it. Like women, it is hard for men to come out as victims. After all, the same societal norms prohibit a man from showing any sign of weakness. They are thus left alone to suffer.

As I was dwelling on my thoughts about whether or not to post the words #MeToo, my social media timeline kept updating itself. A senior who always got teased for looking too young for her age, her too. One of my respected teachers, her too. A cousin of mine, her too. My aunt living in a different country. She too had been harassed. The range of emotions that I felt at that moment is indescribable. These are women from all backgrounds and places. And yet, what united them is that they had the courage to admit that sexual harassment/assault can happen to anyone and it is not the shame of the victim.

As part of the #MeToo campaign, social media users have been using the hashtag to show that they have been sexually harassed or assaulted. It is only after the campaign started that I realised the gross extent of sexual harassment in our society. Most of us would choose not to talk about it, as we are taught that being a victim is something to be ashamed of. I also realised that in most conversations I have had with other women on the issue, people tend to give examples of others rather than talking about themselves. Yes, our society has taught us well—that it is for the victim to feel the shame.

Looking at all these brave women who wrote those words, I gathered the courage to post them myself. As I pressed the "post" button, a heavy burden was lifted from my shoulder—I felt lighter.

Of course, there's the debate about the effectiveness of social media campaigns and how much change they can actually translate into in real life. Will my admission stop a harasser? Will girls feel a little safer in public transports or roads? No, posting a social media status does not dramatically change the realities. But in this case, it is important because of the impact it has on changing the culture of victim-blaming. This hashtag shows that sexual harassment victims are not people outside of the society—they can be any one of us. You don't have to "imagine" the victim as your "ma/bon". It is literally our mothers, sisters and friends who are harassed, sometimes on a regular basis.

Identifying a problem is always the first step towards solving it, and this is why I think this campaign against sexual harassment will go a long way in starting a much-needed conversation. I hope many other victims will find the courage to come forward, because they should know that they are not alone in this. We are in this together. And when we come together, our actions can change society for the better.

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How tech is used to distance and dehumanise others

If technology does not serve a humane end, then what is its point?

FARISH A NOOR

IT is often said that "sorry" is the hardest word to say. If that is true, then "thank you" may come as a close second.

As I stood at the back of the queue in a food court recently, I noticed that there were at least a dozen customers standing in line before me. As they walked up to the counter one by one to collect their food, most of them had their eyes glued to their mobile phones, and few of them looked up until they were served. The most glaring observation was that not a single person replied to the greetings of the server, who said "thank you" to them. It was as if the servers did not exist, and the transaction had a mechanical feel to it.

Living as we do in an age of sophisticated technology and where everything we touch and feel seems smooth and seamless, human contact seems to be rarer than ever. Yet the experience at the food court was not the first, nor was it an isolated case: I see this neglect or avoidance of human contact everywhere, in every country I visit these days; and it cannot be said to be an "Eastern" or "Western" phenomenon. It seems instead to be a symptom of the age we live in, where human interaction seems burdensome, a thing to be avoided if possible.

Avoiding human interaction is not new, of course.

From the 19th century, people have noted how human beings chose to hide behind their newspapers while taking public transport, and even then, we bemoaned the end of human communication. But compounding matters today has been the manner in which technology has made it easier for us to avoid actual human contact—notwithstanding the often bandied about claim that modern communications technology has connected people the world over.

Where is the love?
So are we connected but not communicating?

It is undeniable that present-day communications technology in its myriad of forms has brought individuals and communities together. But that does not mean that we are any closer to meaningful human communication or dealing with the differences between us.

By now, it is equally clear that communications technology and social media have not created a complex world of differences but, rather, contributed to the emergence of closed in-group communities made up of like-minded individuals who seek similarity rather than complexity.

Analysts have noted how the rise of ethno-nationalist movements, hard-right extremist groups and militant organisations thrive on the insecurity and isolation of individuals, and how like-minded people can congregate virtually in cyberspace to affirm their commonalities while denying the identities of others. Rather than opening up the minds of people, the Internet can and has provided a safe haven for those who seek to confirm their biases; and those biases can range from the denial of climate change to the denial of the identity and history of other communities they happen not to like.

This has been—and will perhaps always be—the problem that lies in the use of technology itself. For no matter how sophisticated a communication platform may be—no matter how fast, how seamless, how convenient or cheap—it cannot somehow compel the user to want to engage with other human beings. Simply put, technology cannot make us love our fellow human beings, and cannot compel us to say "thank you" to someone who has done us a favour. Such behaviour, whether genuine or normative, stems from our social education and conditioning (parents, school, friends), but it also presupposes that we are social beings in the first place, who recognise the common humanity we share with others.

Negating the other
Those who bemoan technology's impact on the dehumanisation of society are often chided for being technophobes or Luddites at heart, but I would argue that such dismissals miss the point. Few would argue with the benefits of modern medicine, or decline the offer of anaesthetics that would make a visit to the dentist less painful.

We still choose to fly when we can as no one would walk all the way to Europe as a sign of protest against technology. But what is worrying for some is how certain forms of technology can and have been used to dehumanise the Other, and allow us to negate the complex realities of human co-existence.

Video games are perhaps the most notorious culprits in this case, and scores of critics have written about how many games continue to glorify violence, machismo and misogyny on a daily basis. Worse still, there exist the so-called "Dark Net" games that are truly dark in nature, featuring torture and wanton slaughter as "entertainment". And by now, we have all seen how social media can be manipulated to produce desired outcomes that have nothing to do with simple human contact and communication, but rather to flood the public domain with fake news, hate speech and normalised bigotry—all with serious sociopolitical consequences that are borne by society in the long run.

Those of us who work on the domain of political violence know very well how it is never accidental or contingent; and that long before pogroms and riots occur, there is always an enormous amount of stage-setting that has to take place where targeted victims—be they individuals or communities—are singled out as potential targets first.

Part and parcel of this process of targeting is the practice of dehumanisation: where the Other is cast as somehow less-than-human, and deserving hate. This has been the case in all the conflicts that have blighted humanity but, today, this process of dehumanisation has been amplified thanks to communications technology and social media.

A humane future
The question that should perhaps be asked is this: Rather than try to turn the clock back and attempt to retreat to some Luddite fantasy land, can we imagine ways by which technology can be harnessed to serve human and humane ends instead?

A "humane turn" can be seen in other industries such as mining, oil and gas, and agriculture: We have come to understand that environmental degradation is as much a responsibility of companies as it is the responsibility of consumers and, as such, their practices are regulated for the public good. An oil company that pollutes the environment, for instance, would be expected to be fined and made to clean up the mess it made. Likewise, agricultural companies that cause massive forest fires are today expected to heal the land that they have scarred.

But in the domain of social media and communications technology—where the social cost of abuse can be greater, and borne by people—there seems to be little regulation of the same kind. Over the past decade, there had been enough reports of political conflicts and crises that were fanned by fake news sites, malicious content providers and so on, to show that social media can be used for the sake of hate campaigns.

While it would be difficult to control everything that happens in this ever-expanding virtual realm, surely imaginative incentives can be thought up, to encourage the development of more humane and people-friendly uses of social media and communications technology? At some point, our thinking about technology has to take on board these concerns, for if technology does not serve a humane end, then what is its point anyway?

And for those of us who are concerned about security, violence in the public domain, and the question of social resilience, let us remember that such concerns only make sense when there is a society to speak of.

A world where people would rather speak to apps and phones is one where human communication has become secondary, and when such human bonds are weakened, conflict and distrust are often close at hand.

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ACROSS

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19 From the US
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24 Square or plane
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39 Baseball's Carew
41 Maiden name preceder
42 Snaky letter

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER