

# REPERCUSSIONS, REVERBERATIONS, SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

## For Bangladesh, for all of us and for me too

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Sexual harassment, assault, violence, rape, attempt to rape, molestation and forcing sexual favours out of women have been and are still an ongoing phenomenon. Patriarchy—the all-prevailing ideology which controls every aspect of how women's lives are led at home, at work, privately or in the public sphere—has decided that such unwarranted violence is the norm. That the only option one has is to either keep quiet and swallow this bitter truth that is your fate as a woman, or else make a fuss, publicise, take action and be prepared to face the consequences.

Feminist activists have always stood by women who have been raped, molested, sexually harassed and violated. They have taken up cases and at times been successful in passing laws to try to ensure women's security. Feminists realise that it is the structure of patriarchy that allows men to feel that in order to establish their masculinity, they need to assert their control over women. The more established a man is, the more powerful he is, the more he needs to assert his 'superiority' over women, even if it means resorting to violence. The notion of such a 'masculinity' is ingrained in the minds of most men, and unfortunately, many women too. The women who wish to be considered powerful also mirror the same 'maleness', at times taking on violence to demonstrate their power base.

It is not just countries like Bangladesh where such power-play occurs. Those who had access to TV shows will surely remember the shock waves that were felt when the popular Bill Cosby of the Bill Cosby Show was taken to court and a number of women testified to the sexual abuse that they faced from him. We had heard similar stories about film giants, such as Alfred Hitchcock and Roman Polanski, but no one had the courage to take them to court. Much earlier, the John Profumo scandal in the UK, or the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky case and other such incidents were termed as improper behaviour, but not as sexual harassment, assault or sexual imposition [mis]using one's position of power.

However, about a year and two months ago on October 15, 2017, actor Alyssa Milano tweeted a call to survivors of assault and harassment to post "me too" as a status. This was in response to a large number of women who accused Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment, unwanted touching and other misconduct—an allegation he first denied, then tried to settle.

The effect of that call was phenomenal. By 2.21am on October 16, just a few hours after the post, there were already 52,700 responses. Soon it became a tsunami—women who had felt no one would ever believe them, as their perpetrators were so powerful and so reputed, started relating their experiences. At last, women, and men too, who had been sexually abused, started talking. Names came tumbling out. Some were recent incidents, others many years or even decades old. The embankments

were broken, walls torn down. The original founder of this movement, however, was Tarana Burke, an African-American civil rights activist who started #MeToo over a decade ago in the year 2006. She is still active at the helm of this avalanche. A fierce and long-term activist, she had heard repeated reports of sexual violence while working with women and girls. She co-founded a non-profit, Just Be Inc. and started the "MeToo" campaign to spread a message for survivors. You're heard, you're understood. The "MeToo" phrase came out of an encounter she relates with a young girl she was unable to help. "I couldn't help her release her shame, or impress upon her that nothing that happened to her was her fault," she wrote. "I could not find the strength to say out loud the words that were ringing in my head over and over again as she tried to tell me what she had endured. Those words I needed to say were 'me too'."

Burke fittingly brings the focus back to the central concern, saying: This is a movement about the one-in-four girls and the one-in-six boys who are sexually assaulted every year and carry those wounds into adulthood. It's about the 84 percent of trans-women who will be sexually assaulted this year and the indigenous women who are three-and-a-half times more likely to be sexually assaulted than any other group. Or

people with disabilities, who are seven times more likely to be sexually abused. It's about the 60 percent of young vulnerable girls who will be experiencing sexual violence before they turn 18, and the thousands and thousands of low-wage workers who are being sexually harassed right now on jobs that they can't afford to quit. Among all the different literature I have read, Tarana Burke's words capture most accurately what this movement means and why it should be strengthened at all levels. I could not have worded it better myself.

### The Bangladesh Context

The #MeToo movement in Bangladesh is in a very nascent stage. As in many other countries, Bangladeshi society is always ready to state that the allegations were fabricated to malign the person being hash-tagged, or believe that there is an ulterior motive behind a survivor speaking out. They say that women speak out only to seek publicity. In all cases, the onus of proving sexual assault, harassment, misconduct or violence falls squarely on the survivor—which is a very useful tactic used to discourage further disclosures.

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