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Hearing all the voices of the #MeToo moment - Working-Class Women Say '#MeToo'

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Camila Quarta explains how and why the exposure of sexual harassment and assault in Hollywood has taken on wider significance in the weeks that followed.



The #MeToo movement on the streets of Paris, France

IN THE days and weeks since evidence of Harvey Weinstein's decades-long pattern of sexual abuse surfaced, millions of women, trans and gender nonconforming people, even men around the world have exposed the scale of sexual violence in our society, telling their own stories using the hashtag #MeToo.

A slew of men in positions of power—from British Defense Secretary Michael Fallon to actor Kevin Spacey, and now U.S. politicians such as Roy Moore and Al Franken—have been accused of sexual misconduct, and many of them are finally facing real consequences. #MeToo set off a profound moment of collective bravery, a moment that would have been impossible without the broad sense of solidarity and support that welcomed people coming forward.

I still vividly remember feeling the power of such support during a SlutWalk protest in 2012, as we rallied at Praça Roosevelt in São Paulo, Brazil. We were all gathered in an enormous circle. At one moment, a protester came up to one of the women leading the rally with the megaphone and whispered in her ear. The woman with the megaphone announced that there was a man in the back—she pointed, we all pointed—in a gray shirt, blue cap and sunglasses, who was touching the women without their consent. Hundreds of us chanted at him to get out, our voices getting louder, faster, angrier. He fled. It was the first time I cried about my rape.

Yet despite the mass outpouring of #MeToo stories, we know that there are millions of other people who can't or choose not to speak out in this particular way. In the overwhelming majority of cases in which survivors come forward, they are dismissed, their names are dragged through the mud, institutions try to cover up the wrongdoing or retaliate against them. Blamed and forced to keep quiet, they're shown that their experiences are taken for granted and should simply be assumed to be part of what it means to be a woman in society, rather than grueling experiences of oppression

that completely reshape people's lives.

FOR DECADES, women have been coming forward about their experiences of being abused, harassed, assaulted and raped by renowned men. The difference now is that they are being believed. The confidence that the #MeToo welcoming has given survivors goes beyond the inner circles of the rich and famous.

In the lead-up to a "Take Back the Workplace" march that stormed the streets of Hollywood on November 12, the Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, an organization made up of female farmworkers and women who come from farmworker families, released a moving letter of solidarity with the women in Hollywood who have come forward in the wake of the Weinstein scandal.

"Even though we work in very different environments, we share a common experience of being preyed upon by individuals who have the power to hire, fire, blacklist and otherwise threaten our economic, physical and emotional security," the letter reads. "As you cope with scrutiny and criticism because you have bravely chosen to speak out against the harrowing acts that were committed against you, please know that you're not alone. We believe and stand with you."

As many as 80 percent of female agricultural workers are abused or raped in the fields, according to a 2010 study in the journal *Violence Against Women*. Because so many of these workers are undocumented immigrants—50 to 75 percent of them—speaking out can mean risking deportation and being torn away from their families.

Sexual violence and harassment extend to all levels of society, but working-class women often experience its impact disproportionately. One of the ultimate expressions of dehumanization and objectification, sexual violence is part and parcel of a society that functions based on women's exploitation. It both stems from and reinforces women's inequality and the different ways that women experience that inequality.

Women are incommensurately burdened with unpaid domestic labor and child-rearing. They make less money than their male counterparts for the same work. Some 60 percent of families headed by a single mother live in poverty. The United States is still the only country in the world other than Papua New Guinea and Lesotho that does not guarantee paid maternity leave for new mothers. The decline in social spending—from the destruction of welfare programs to reductions in food stamps and cutbacks in childcare services—has made the situation of women and their families even more precarious.

THE DEVALUATION of women goes all the way to—and comes all the way from—the top. In the last few months, for example, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has rolled back Title IX gains won by campus anti-sexual violence activists, the Department of Health and Human Services defined life as beginning at conception, reproductive health care and abortion clinics are under constant attack, and an admitted rapist still sits in the White House.

For working-class women, the vast majority of women, their economic and social conditions have only gotten worse since the financial crisis, as they face policies of austerity alongside a narrative of "personal responsibility." In the absence of a social safety net, more work is heaped on families, and women in particular, while they're blamed for not being able to provide what should be socialized services and resources available to everyone for free.

It comes as no surprise, then, that working-class women are especially vulnerable to sexual violence in the workplace. A recent ABC News/Washington Post poll found that 3 in 10 women have put up with unwanted advances from male co-workers and a quarter have endured them from men who had

influence over their jobs. Among women who have been subjected to sexual violence in the workplace, 95 percent say that male perpetrators usually go unpunished.

The study also gives a glimpse into the emotional and psychological toll these experiences take on women: 83 percent of survivors are angry about what happened to them, 64 percent feel intimidated, and 52 percent feel humiliated.

Sexual violence in the workplace helps maintain women's unequal status and creates greater obstacles for women to advocate for themselves. Legitimizing sexual violence in the workplace helps legitimize it outside of the workplace, contributing to and shaping sexist ideas in society at large.

Women are relied on as a permanent, low-wage sector, and many are located in overwhelmingly "female" occupations based on sexist ideas about what women are supposedly naturally predisposed to do, such as nursing and teaching kindergarten through 12th grade. Women make up more than 75 percent of the workforce in the 10 lowest-wage occupations in the United States, with nearly half of them being women of color, according to the National Women's Law Center. In low-wage jobs, women, particularly Black women, face astronomical levels of harassment and abuse.

A 2014 study found that 80 percent of women restaurant workers experienced sexual harassment from customers, two-thirds from managers and half from co-workers. Eighty percent of hotel workers also experience sexual violence on the job. Women workers in the janitorial industry—disproportionately women of color, 70 percent of whom are undocumented—also face staggering levels of harassment, assault and rape.

A 2016 report by the University of California Berkeley Labor Center, tells the story of Erika, an undocumented woman who worked as a janitor for eight years: "One of her recent supervisors, Raul, said he would fire Erika if she didn't have sex with him. Raul threatened her, 'I know where you live, who takes care of your kids, and what time you pick them up.' The harassment and threats went on for a year."

Erika and her co-worker Laura, who had also been facing constant harassment at the hands of Raul, "summoned the courage to approach the manager...the manager responded that he had to investigate. The investigation resulted in Laura being retaliated against; they cut her work schedule from five days to two days."

THE #MeToo campaign struck such a profound chord and became a powerful expression of the growing rage not because most of us have had the experience of being abused and exploited in Hollywood, but because of the pervasive reality of sexual violence in people's everyday lives, because our lived experiences fly in the face of everything we've been told about how we live in a "post-feminist" era.

We understand the significance of the #MeToo moment, just as we understood the significance of millions taking to the streets for the women's marches the day after President Trump's inauguration in what became the largest day of protest in U.S. history. These events are what allow us to recognize that the oppression that weighs down on us is not of our own doing but that it goes beyond us. Our shared understanding is what allows us to begin to challenge gender-based violence not individually, but on a social level, against the institutions and systemic inequalities that dictate and distort the conditions in which we live.

That SlutWalk protest in São Paulo in 2012 not only helped me come to terms with my emotions surrounding my rape, but it was also the first time I realized that we, the majority, united, organized, have the power and potential to win.

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P.S.

* November 22, 2017:

<https://socialistworker.org/2017/11/22/hearing-all-the-voices-of-the-metoo-moment>

* This article is an expanded version of one published at the Independent:

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