This article looks at the linkages between popular mobilisations against violence with a focus on the specific mobilisation of the #MeToo Movement that addresses a form of violence against women—sexual harassment. It traces the emergence of a new activism that is based on access to and use of social media as a platform for change and its outcomes.

India has witnessed a century or more of resistance by women to all forms of violence.

What is seen now, is an evolution of a movement that addresses different issues at different periods of time. Violence against women in wartime is inextricably linked to violence against women in peacetime—the two ends of a continuum of gendered violence (Jayakumar 2013).

A look at the feminist movements especially since the 19th century shows the constant change and additions made to feminist theory; whether it be a perspective to do with race and the involvement of the black feminists in America during the black liberation movement; campaigning for black women who were oppressed not only as women but due to their race too as a result of which they saw their heritage and roots being strengthened; identity as with the example of lesbian women and their role in the movement as well as the opposition they faced by fellow heterosexual feminists within the movement (Watkins et al 1992); or in
India against caste and religious bigotry, Dalit feminism and the struggle for LGBTQI+ rights.

#MeToo

The use of social media and the birth of a new global community connected through the internet, has made large distances and isolation of experiences insignificant, as the platform for the sharing of these experiences of violence has gained new significance. This “social media feminism,” also termed by some as the fourth wave of feminism, is still a relatively nascent wave. However, the effectiveness and expanse of this type of activism cannot be dismissed. A perfect example and explanation of that statement can be seen in the emergence and establishment of the #MeToo movement and its spread to India. This movement satisfies all the tenets of what a global social movement should be (James and Van Seters 2014):

i. The formation of a collective identity with women all over the world sharing their experiences of facing sexual harassment.

ii. The drive to change the status quo of ignorance towards these occurrences and the lack of action.

iii. The coming together of people in the name of bringing about a social change.

Twitter has been the engine for the growth of the #MeToo movement. The trigger was a tweet by an actor Alyssa Milano urging survivors of sexual assault in all its forms to share their experiences with this hashtag as a result of the exposé on Harvey Weinstein’s frequent sexual harassment and coercion of women in the film industry.

If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet. pic.twitter.com/k2oeCiUf9n

— Alyssa Milano (@Alyssa_Milano) October 15, 2017

This hashtag was shared more than 12 million times in the first 24 hours (Garcia 2017) which put forth the severity and wide prevalence of these occurrences.

However, the origins of the term “MeToo” were far older when Tarana Burke, the founder of a non-profit organisation to help survivors of sexual violence in all its forms, first gave her movement, in 2006, a name - MeToo (Garcia 2017). Her initiative was focused on survivors, and especially young women of colour. Her focus was on empowerment through empathy and that empathy was the antidote to the shame that victims felt.

As mentioned earlier, sexual harassment and rape are similar insofaras they are both forms of violence against women. Burke (2017) states that they are different ends of the same spectrum and that sexual harassment is the gateway point to rape. Empathy would lead to
the question of response, and how to end violence against women. Previously, the ingrained sense of patriarchy and societal norms were mentioned as the reasons why the subordination of women continued to exist. But the culture that perpetuates it is what needs to be changed. These “systems” need to be replaced.

Burke put forth the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism as the reason for the abuse of power by the men in Hollywood, but also emphasised on the importance of the application of these systems to the average person, because the focus here is not solely on celebrities, but on the harassment, abuse and assault women face in their everyday lives in their job environment or their personal lives.

Although the movement started out as the result of calling out powerful men as perpetrators of sexual harassment in the workplace, it evolved into one that took into account the entire spectrum of experiences faced by women around the world. Burke laid a specific importance on “denormalising” the actions that are “socialised” by people, “so much so that they are normalised,” in order to bring about a change.

Erasure, Visibility and Invisibility

There was an outpour of opinions on the actual origins of this term #MeToo and the fact that a black woman’s initiative was ignored by the white feminists when it was first put forth in the past.

These opinions also stated that the response to abuse faced by women of colour was not the same as the response received by white women who have faced abuse. What was necessary was to look at these experiences of sexual violence and violence against women through an intersectional lens, which would ensure that the narrative would include not just women that are visible but also the marginalised sections of society whose voices often go unheard and the experiences of women of colour that were often not paid much attention to in the larger conversation on these issues.

Margaret Atwood had attributed the rise of the #MeToo movement to the failures of the legal system and the danger of the “lynch-mob habit” (Atwood 2018) that according to her the #MeToo Movement was wading into, which was harshly criticised by the “fourth wave” feminists (Kappler 2018). Younger feminists on confining the older generation to the label of second wave feminists, in turn criticised the applicability of due process and its effectiveness which continue to be propagated by older feminists and to which the methods of the #MeToo movement are in complete contradiction. Moderation and extremism are both at play making this “intergenerational divide both painful and necessary” (Harding 2018) as understandings differ and ideas tend to clash.

In the context of the #MeToo movement, activists of colour challenged the lack of acknowledgement of the contribution of women of colour to this movement. From the initial origins of the term, this debate gradually moved to the question of whether this movement
was representative of women of colour or whether it was merely a white-woman-dominated prerogative. The aspect of believability is skewed in these instances.

As Burke (2017) states:

“Sexual violence knows no race, class or gender. But the response to it does.”

It is not confined to any particular section of people, but rather, the ways in which these experiences are perceived are dependent upon these divisions. Surveys and reports over the years have shown that women of colour are more likely and more often victims of sexual violence than white women. This aspect of colour in the sphere of sexual violence can be attributed not just to those that are victims, but also to the fact that perpetrators are most often believed to be men of colour rather than white men, making the former more susceptible to juridical action than the latter, which is made concrete by the white man’s accessibility to financial and legal resources (Farris 2018).

On the other hand, some have said that the #MeToo movement has managed to break this stereotype by bringing down powerful white men that were previously protected by the prevailing social structures of power and dominance through financial influence and so-called social superiority. Survivors of colour more often than not find it difficult to report such instances because of this aspect of believability and whether their voices will be heard and believed or dismissed as untrue. When speaking of responses to these acts of sexual violence and race as one of the determinants one can’t help but think of Harvey Weinstein’s immediate refutation of Lupita Nyong’o recount of sexual harassment. This shows how these dynamics work, and that of the 50-something allegations that directly accused Weinstein of charges that ranged across the spectrum of sexual violence, that what immediately triggered a response from him was the testimony of a black woman which he decided to publicly discredit and declare as untrue (Garber 2017).

Whose Story Is Worth Believing?

Questioning the applicability of the #MeToo movement to women of colour stems from this. Questions like Who is worthy of being rallied around? Who is to be believed? The #WomenBoycottTwitter hashtag was also criticised as this social media uproar and response was not seen when Leslie Jones and Jemele Hill were subjected to consequences such as suspension from their jobs or social media attacks (White 2017).

This led to people calling for white women to acknowledge the fact that white women are heard whereas the same response is not seen in the case of coloured women, who have not been recipients of support of the same magnitude.

Calling white women allies to recognize conflict of #WomenBoycottTwitter for
women of color who haven’t received support on similar issues.

— Ava DuVernay (@ava) October 13, 2017

In order to delve deeper into this diversity in experiences according to social and cultural divisions, the experiences of Brazilian black women are relevant. The hashtag #MeuPrimeiroAssedio or #MyFirstHarrasment in 2015 took South American social media by storm; however, the representation of Afro-Brazilian women was questioned (Jarrin and Caldwell 2018).

Brazil’s healthcare schemes are not always accessible by black Brazilian women and when availed, are not very safe. The ingrained misogyny in the cosmetic surgery industry is perpetuated and targets black Brazilian women in order to conform to white beauty standards, which was also said to be targeted at Brazilian women as a whole and not just those that were a result of “unfortunate racial mixing.”

Racism coupled with misogyny was evident in this industry which mainly targeted Afro-Brazilian women’s “imperfections” (Jarrin and Caldwell 2018). Black feminists in Brazil organised the first Afro-Brazilian national women’s March in 2014 which focused on justice and equality for women and especially black women (Telesur 2015).

But, when one talks of harassment and sexual violence faced by women of colour, the main tool used by the #MeToo movement is a public call-out of the perpetrators and their subsequent criminalisation. Tambe talks of experiences of black men who are incarcerated, which functions along the same lines of believing the accuser over the accused. Many a time this has led to unjust incarcerations due to the lack of application of due process and that it is possible that the reason for black women not speaking out is because they want no part in such a narrative that derives its power from actions that have long been used against their community (Tambe 2018).

The United States (US) Senate hearing on the approval and appointment of Federal Judge Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court in October 2018 has shown the actual spread and power of the #MeToo movement with the accuser Christine Blasey Ford being heralded as brave and courageous by both the left and the right to have come forward as a survivor of sexual assault which she believed to be her civic duty (Gibson and Harte 2018). That the results of this hearing were in line with the precedent set in the Senate hearing for the appointment of Judge Clarence Thomas almost three decades ago despite the accusations of sexual assault levelled against him in Anita Hill’s powerful testimony is a sign of how little things have changed. When speaking of an intergenerational divide, a contradiction can be seen wherein even older women are coming out in order to recount their experiences, which isn’t confined to younger women, which was what was originally believed but has turned out to be untrue as mentioned by a senator on the committee.
Senator Kamala Harris’ statement “I believe you,” shows just how much of a role believability, empathy and understanding play in the larger sphere of ending sexual assault as well as providing closure to victims.

#MeToo in India

India’s experience with the #MeToo Movement has been different. The emergence of social media as a platform was largely used by 21st century “millennial feminists” to bring about a new kind of conversation on forms of oppressions faced by women in India.

India’s dominant narrative has often been governed by instances of victim blaming or statements implying that women invited the sexual violence of which they were victims. There emerged movements in India such as the “Slut Walk” in 2011 and the “Bekhuf Azadi” movement in 2017 which moved from being only a social media movement to an inclusive feminist one on the ground level (Kurian 2018). In 2017, there was also the “calling out” of sexual predators in the academia in India via the List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (LoSHA) also known as “The List,” put out by Raya Sarkar, which was widely debated especially regarding its methods (Rao 2018) and in October 2018, this has spread to the Hindi film industry, and the electronic and print media.

This shows the movement’s transnational and global character and the reactive nature of the movement with its impact on feminist discourse across borders.

Intergenerational Divides, Intersectional Approaches

Another debate that showed the cracks within the feminist movement itself was the one between different generations of feminists. In the West and in India, a divide arose between the methods adopted by the younger feminists who were the main advocates of the #MeToo movement and the “older” feminists from the “second” and “third” waves who were sceptical of the methods used.

As movements evolve with the times, new issues come to the fore and new methods of addressing these issues emerge. Discussions on what really constitutes sexual assault has also come up between the “older” and “younger” feminists and about whether it needs to be used in every circumstance and how the younger women understand this phrase. (Harding 2018).

A manifestation of the divide can be observed in the polarisation that arose among feminists in India on their stand on “The List” compiled by Sarkar. However, when viewed with an intersectional perspective, it becomes clear that most of the accused on the list are dominant-caste men that hold high positions in academia. This divide is based more on structures of power that are determined by caste and the resultant structural and gendered divisions in academia.
Facilities for the deliverance of justice in the cases of sexual harassment in universities are not as open and accessible to Bahujan, Dalit and Adivasi students as it is to students from the upper castes, and the scale and magnitude of these experiences by these women differ greatly. Marginalities needed to be acknowledged with an intersectional approach to the situation [1].

The statement on #MeToo by Dalit Women Fight on their Facebook page mentions that in order to fight structural oppressions, a recognition of the fact that these institutions are ruled by power based on caste, is necessary and essential and that without this recognition of the linkages between caste and patriarchy, a movement such the #MeToo movement will not be relevant for Dalit women.

Kashmiri feminists state the importance of supporters of the movement for self-determination, acknowledging brutalities faced by Kashmiri women at the hands of the state in the course of the movement, rather than staying silent on the issue till a later time, which brings us back to the concepts of believability and empathy and how they should be applicable to all women across the divisions of society in an equitable degree (Raoit Collective 2018) They further emphasise that if a global movement such as the #MeToo movement were to truly be inclusive of the voices of all women in all parts of the world, and not just the privileged or visible, then the way to do so is to uniformly fight against all perpetrators irrespective of communitarian and nationalistic affiliations.

The complexity in understanding the applicability of feminist principles in situations that demand an understanding of marginalities and difference in experiences brings forth the need to acknowledge these differences as well as stand in solidarity with these women, in order to provide them a safer and more effective space for providing and ensuring justice, that are not governed by caste-based patriarchal structures.

The continuity and inclusiveness of the #MeToo movement shows the expanse of the movement through its global and transnational character but also its fault lines in reaching the people at the grass-roots level that do not share the same privilege and access that other women have. There is a need to understand the movement as one that is governed by linkages between different structures, as well as the intersectionality of experiences, which the #MeToo movement has also addressed in its course and which has now become central to its narrative. The movement’s pervasive nature and the fact that it reached so many parts of the world shows the significance of the movement.

End Notes:

[1] Also see Chadha, Gita (2017):“Towards Complex Feminist Solidarities after the List-Statement,” Economic and Political Weekly
References:


https://in.reuters.com/article/usa-court-kavanaugh-ford/in-metoo-era-for...  

https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/intergenerational-feminist-divide-over-metoo-both-painful-necessary-ncna838936


https://theconversation.com/beyond-metoo-brazilian-women-rise-up-against-racism-and-sexism-m-89117

Jayakumar, Kirthi (2013): “Sexual Violence as a Peacetime–Wartime Continuum,” *Peace Insight*, 17 April,
https://www.peaceinsight.org/blog/2013/04/sexual-violence-as-a-peacetime...


**Image-Credit/Misc:**

Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons/By Wolfmann [CC BY-SA 4.0]