

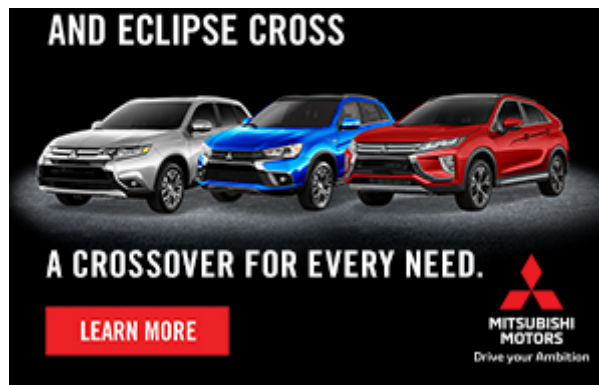


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# What #MeToo Means For Feminist Allies Is Pretty Simple

By **Lilli Petersen** | Oct 17 2017 |

For the past two days, the hashtag #MeToo has been taking over social media as a way for people (mostly women) to share their experiences of sexual assault or harassment and highlight how prevalent it really is. As it blew up, I, like many women I know, dithered and hesitated. I didn't know if my stories were serious enough, were "real" enough. I didn't know if I wanted to put myself out there. But I couldn't let others go at it alone. I took a deep breath, and I shared two simple words: Me too.



Though the #MeToo campaign was first started a decade ago by black activist Tarana Burke, the hashtag took off on Sunday, Oct. 15 in response to allegations of sexual assault against movie producer Harvey Weinstein, who has now been accused by more than two dozen women of sexual harassment and assault. (Weinstein has denied allegations of assault, saying in a statement that all his encounters were "consensual" and that he did "not retaliate against women who turned him down.") When actress Alyssa Milano shared the call for #MeToo stories on her Twitter on Sunday night, it became almost like a force of nature: a swell of women sharing their anger at what had happened to them, illuminating just how common harassment and assault is, and venting their fury and dismay at feeling like they had to stay silent.

By Monday morning on Oct. 16, it felt like every woman in America had tweeted the hashtag or posted it on Facebook. Some were open enough to share their stories in detail, while others, like me, stuck to just the hashtag. As I scrolled through my feed, flashing by woman after woman declaring that they too had had it happen to them, I noticed a jarring shift. While nearly every post I saw from a woman was about sexual assault, the posts from men were mostly just... business as usual updates: posts about work, political issues, or brunch shots. Their silence was deafening.

I spent all of that evening heartbroken for all the women — fantastic, smart, accomplished, and authoritative women — who shared their stories of sexual assault or harassment using the hashtag. And I spent all of the next morning angry at the men — supposed caring, supportive, "feminist" men — who said nothing.



And while there were allies who did speak out, or who did later step forward to stand with survivors, the initial silence speaks to a bigger problem: namely, that survivors of assault and victims of harassment still have to shout it out on their own.

Let me be clear: sexual assault or harassment is not solely a woman's problem — approximately [3 percent of men will experience an attempted or completed rape](#) in their lifetime, according to the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN), and 21 percent of trans, queer, or nonconforming students have been assaulted (for LGBTQ individuals in general, the [statistics are also appalling](#)). But it's been mostly women speaking out. While women posted messages of support, or virtual hugs and hearts, in response to the hashtag, many men — at least initially — stayed silent. And that's not enough.

**Being an ally means using your voice to step up and say: You're not in this alone.**



ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP/Getty Images

It means not speaking over, but speaking up for. But, yes, it does mean speaking.

Many women who have experienced sexual assault or harassment don't report it because they fear they won't be believed — according to a 2014 Bureau of Justice Statistics report, only around one-third of college-aged women reported sexual assault to police (less, if they were a college student), and the most common reason for not reporting is that police "would not or could not do anything to help." In professional spaces, women may fear retaliation or losing their jobs, like the employees at Fox News who told *The New York Times* that they reportedly wanted to stay anonymous while speaking about their alleged sexual harassment out of "embarrassment and fear of retribution." Or they may think that whatever happened to them isn't "serious" enough — a 2003 study published in *Personnel Psychology* found that only about 24 percent of women said they had experienced sexual harassment at work, but if researchers asked instead about specific behaviors, 58 percent of women said they had only experienced "harassing behavior."

Assault and harassment are trivialized in our society, creating a culture that says it's easier for victims to simply brush off and ignore what happened to them — and it's often true.



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That's why it's so important to believe victims when they say it happens to them, even if it seems unlikely to you, or you've never seen the accused person do anything like that. Believe that victims are *believable*, that if they are saying that something is serious that it is, or that if they reacted a certain way, that they had good reason to do so.

Don't let things slide. Call out sexist or harassing behavior when you see it, even if someone else wants to write it off as a joke, or not a big deal. That might mean doing things that make you uncomfortable — confronting that friend who gets touchy-feely after two drinks and telling them that behavior isn't OK, or spending 20 minutes waiting for a late-night bus with a friend so they don't have to be alone.

Yes, it's inconvenient and nerve-wracking. But women have to do it every day.

**And maybe more important? Share the hell out of women's voices.**



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There's been a lot said, particularly recently, about the [cost of emotional labor](#) and how it falls heavily on women. If women — and survivors of assault and harassment are mostly women — are expected to both protect themselves from sexual harassment/assault and then deal with the aftermath, and *on top of that*, help men understand how bad the problem really is... well, it's exhausting.

Don't ask women to constantly take on the task of repeating just how bad the problem is over and over again. Share their voices. Amplify them. Take on the responsibility of keeping the focus on a problem that might not affect you personally, and don't wait to be asked to do it. Give women and survivors the gift of breathing room to deal with other things.

This is, after all, why women and survivors are doing this. So that everyone who hasn't been personally affected can see that, yeah, this is pretty huge. It's pretty major.