What’s Next for #MeToo?

Women who’ve worked a decade to get to this “moment” say more is needed to change attitudes about sexual harassment and assault.

By Bryce Covert

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When, ten months ago, The New York Times and The New Yorker published articles describing movie producer Harvey Weinstein’s serial harassing and sexual assaults of women over more than three decades, it appeared to many a stunning revelation. Then, when actress Alyssa Milano asked women on Twitter to speak out about having experienced that kind of abuse, using the hashtag #MeToo, it felt like the world had radically changed. For a while, every day seemed to bring allegations against a new celebrity. More victims began to come forward, finding a new climate in which their stories of abuse and oppression were taken more seriously. It was as if the country had finally come to decide that sexual harassment was no longer acceptable.

But that level of awareness and activity could easily fade from view—especially in a news environment that brings fresh horrors each morning. So, for the advocates and activists that did not just come to this moment by way of a hashtag, there’s an urgency to move beyond the naming-and-shaming phase into something deeper. Tarana Burke, who founded the “Me Too” movement in 2006, likens sexual violence and harassment to a disease, one that infects mass amounts of people but that we rarely acknowledge. “What actually happened when MeToo went viral is people who felt shamed by having this disease touch their life came out of the shadows,” she said. Then the conversation moved too quickly from trying to comprehend the scope and damage of the disease to hand-wringing over the supposed dangers of MeToo and what happened to the men who were accused. “If we thought about it as a disease, we wouldn’t be thinking about that,” she said. “We’d be thinking
about how did we let this disease grow so big, how did we let it take over in this way.”

Those are the questions that advocates, organizers, and survivors want to answer, and they are working together to make sure the MeToo conflagration doesn’t fizzle, but instead burns deep into our collective consciousness.

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It may not be generating the big headlines or photo ops, but since last October, advocates across industries and with different specializations have been meeting to discuss strategy and plot a path forward for progress, sharing best practices and tactics gleaned from their years of prior work. “It allowed us to finally come together in a way that we never had before to determine how we could work across industries to resolve the problem,” said Mónica Ramírez, founder of the Latina Impact Fund and co-founder of Alianza Nacional de Campesinas (the National Farmworkers Alliance). “For the first time, we’re really able to work together in this concentrated manner to think about all the different levers that need to be pulled in order to end sexual harassment across workforces.”

“Before MeToo went viral...there were scores of organizations and advocates around the country who have been working for systemic change,” Burke pointed out. But MeToo has now brought them together and given them a spotlight. “Folks who have been on the battlefield for a long time are emboldened and ramped up because we have new advocates, we have new allies.”

The strategy sessions among activists may not be as high-profile as the defaming of men like Kevin Spacey or Matt Lauer, but they’re just as important. “While all those things were happening in front of the cameras and on the news, we acted as advocates, we continued our work every single day,” Ramírez said.

That collaboration has led to concrete alliances. “One of the most powerful things that has been happening and continues to happen is that
women across industries and workplaces, as well as communities, are really working together,” said Ai-Jen Poo, executive director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. In April, 150 farm workers and domestic workers traveled to Washington, DC, to advocate for expanding Title VII, which outlaws sexual harassment, so that it covers them and others left out of the law, as well as for overtime protection and a domestic worker bill of rights. “‘No loopholes, no exclusions’ is our slogan,” Poo explained. In July, actress Jane Fonda joined them to lend her celebrity to the cause. These groups have all also supported the quest of restaurant workers who are part of Restaurant Opportunities United to be paid the full minimum wage, something that’s associated with lower rates of sexual harassment.

“We continue to show up for each other,” Ramírez said. “We continue to stand in solidarity as it relates to improving conditions across the board.”

There have also been instances of solidarity between high- and low-paid women: the letter sex changed between farmworkers and actresses pledging support for each other, for example, as well as celebrities donating resources to the Time’s Up Legal Defense Fund. That money has already helped women without cash or cachet who are speaking up against workplace sexual harassment or defending themselves against retaliation from their harassers, including 10 women of color who sued McDonald’s. “One of the things that that money is absolutely doing is making a difference in the lives of individual women who are speaking out and challenging the harassment they’ve experienced,” noted Martin, whose organization houses the fund. “Whether it is farmworkers or women working in low-wage retail jobs or immigrant women who are facing a lot of obstacles in exercising what are theoretically their employment rights.”

The fund’s goal is to pursue cases in particular that could have a broader impact beyond the specific people involved. The McDonald’s case, for example, not only could have a big effect because so many people work for the chain—235,000 as of last year—but also because the action could
change norms throughout the fast-food industry, given the Golden Arches’ sway.

Advocates are focusing more on the ties that bind them than on the barriers that divide them. “This isn’t a competition, this isn’t about figuring out which industry has it worse,” Ramírez said. “The reality is all of these women we’re fighting for.” Be it actresses or agricultural workers, “we’re all workers,” she said. “Our workplaces might look different, but...we should be entitled to the same opportunities and protections.”

“The media likes to frame it as these powerful women using their platform to lift up these vulnerable women,” Poo added. “It’s actually like these women in these sectors have been organizing for many years, and we’re joining forces with women in other industries [who have their] own visibility and powerful platforms to actually collectively do more than the sum of our parts.”

Each group brings vast experience to bear on the problem. “People think of this movement as only being a few months old,” Ramírez said. But “the information we’re putting forward is based on years, in fact decades, of experience that allows us to have a deep understanding of what is needed right now.”

Sexual harassment also doesn’t happen in a vacuum. And, critically, it often intersects with other pernicious problems, be it racial harassment, unequal pay, or gender discrimination. “Oftentimes people aren’t experiencing just one workplace problem, they’re experiencing multiple issues at the same time,” Ramírez said. Undocumented workers could experience sexual harassment, racial discrimination, and wage theft all at once, she noted. Farmworkers and domestic workers aren’t excluded just from sexual-harassment protections but also from other labor protections like overtime pay. “Those issues cannot be divorced from the sexual harassment that people are experiencing,” she said. “It’s important that we’re talking about the full range of injustices people are experiencing.”
“The strands can’t be separated,” agreed Gillian Thomas, senior staff attorney at the ACLU’s Women’s Rights Project. “Harassment is a symptom of something else, of a power imbalance.”

One campaign has taken MeToo explicitly into a new realm. In April, a group of British members of Parliament launched an online campaign they dubbed “#PayMeToo” to urge the country’s women to demand equal pay with male coworkers. Others, like the domestic and restaurant worker campaigns, thread multiple issues together. “There is a collective understanding that we need to bring everybody along, that the solutions have to work for farm workers and restaurant workers and hotel workers as well as staffers on the hill or in statehouses or media personalities,” said Jocelyn Frye, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress.

The MeToo moment “is long overdue,” Thomas said. “But we absolutely have to use it as a point of entry into talking about all sorts of other forms of workplace oppression.”

Burke also wants to remind the country that her work didn’t start to confront just sexual harassment in the workplace but sexual violence of all kinds and in all places, be it a child sexually abused in a home, or a college student raped in a dorm. “There has not been a lot of conversation about adult survivors of child sexual abuse. What about women whose rape kits have not been tested, what about statues of limitation…. What about the lack of resources?” she said.

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Get unlimited digital access to the best independent news and analysis. Burke has been raising money to expand the work she’s been doing for 12 years, capitalizing on the increased focus on harassment and gender discrimination, in order to serve a larger group of survivors and communities. “The reality is there’s just way more survivors than there are resources,” she noted. While much of the conversation after the Harvey Weinstein exposé and viral hashtag sidelined the core of her work, it’s also been a “blessing,” according to Burke. “It has given me the
largest platform I’ve ever had in my life to be able to talk about survivors of sexual violence, to be able to talk about the reality of sexual violence.”

It has enabled her, for example, to start a fund for community organizations across the country that focus on ending sexual violence and supporting survivors. Right now she’s trying to raise $25 million to cover its first five years. She’s clear that the money can’t just go to her own work. “We need to spread those resources so that people who have different solutions, better solutions, more targeted solutions also get it,” she said.

The most concrete mark MeToo is likely to leave in the medium term, however, is legislative change. “My phone has rung off the hook for the last four to six months,” Thomas noted, covering the last state legislative session. “There’s a level of engagement with this issue around the country that is unprecedented.” Across the country, over 100 bills were introduced in the most recent legislative session.

One batch focused on the secrecy around harassment, including bans on blanket nondisclosure agreements, used by some employers to keep employees from speaking up, and mandatory arbitration that keeps complaints out of the courts. Congress has even taken up this issue, with companion bills that would ban nondisclosures and require that public companies report settlements over harassment. Nondisclosure bans have passed in Vermont and Washington. Other states have focused on undoing the cap on damages that victims can recoup or changing the statute of limitations to extend the time they have to file charges.

It’s the first time in Thomas’s career—which has spanned stints at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the nonprofit Legal Momentum and in private practice—that such issues have gotten so much discussion. “People are talking about solutions in a way [I] have never seen,” she said.

Emily Martin, general counsel at the National Women’s Law Center, agreed. “When we were talking to state lawmakers a year ago, two years ago, three years ago...there wasn’t a lot of activity focused on sexual harassment,” she said. Over those years her organization had been asked to weigh in on such legislation in a single state. In the last year, it’s been
in touch with lawmakers in somewhere between 25 and 30 states. “That’s not because has changed,” she noted. “It’s just a different level of energy and engagement that really is quite striking.”

Laws are just laws, of course. Most people will feel change when it happens in the office, on a field, and on a factory floor—something a policy can push, but will also take other changes.

On this, Martin is also optimistic about MeToo’s impact. “It’s brought more employers to the table to think about, ‘What does it take to really shift the culture of workplaces?’” she said.

Typically, HR policies are focused on how to deal with problems that arise, not how to prevent them from happening. Advocates will have to harness the new interest and tether it to practices that can have a real effect. That could be conducting regular climate surveys of employees to understand what’s taking place. It could be holding managers and supervisors accountable for how well they deal with harassment. It could be more robust trainings that include tactics like bystander intervention. It could also include pushing employers to diversify their workforces, particularly in leadership roles, so that companies aren’t led only by white men.

The question that hangs over all of these efforts, of course, is whether they can keep moving forward as media attention inevitably fades.

Frye is optimistic. “This issue has continued to be out there and be propelled by folks who have said, ‘This was my experience,’” she observed. “I think that will continue, regardless of what we do or don’t do.” The question is how to add meaningfully to that momentum. “For us it’s less about how do we ensure that this continues and more about how do we ensure that, as that conversation is happening, we can supplement it with concrete policy ideas that are responsive.”

“Giving people a way to plug into solutions is really important for the next stage of MeToo,” Martin agreed. “If you don’t feel that change is
possible and there’s some path to achieving that change, it’s difficult to continue to engage because it seems a little bit hopeless.”

It may also require ignoring the ups and downs of the news cycle. “I know the reality is that the mainstream media moves in waves, and as different waves generate different tensions you lose momentum from the previous wave,” Burke acknowledged. But that makes it “important for us to build our momentum amongst people who are in the movement, people who are the survivors and the allies and the advocates.” That also requires focusing on what can be done. “The way we do that is showing them what the work is,” she said. “What the possibilities are.”

Advocates can’t be complacent, nor can they expect a complete transformation overnight. “We’re obviously in a very early stage,” Poo said. “These things take decades, so we both have to have urgency and we have to have patience.”

“There are no shortcuts to organizing and movement building,” she said.