

Speak, Woman

The world is what it is. It does not believe a woman easily. It tells her she asked for it; or that she was inappropriately dressed. It tells her the powerful man did no wrong if he violated her. It tells her he will get away. Should she speak up even then, the omerta kicks in, erasing all protest, eroding her credibility and leaving her with a deep sense of shame. Since Sunday, women across the world have been aiming a two-word slingshot against this toxic silence.

It started with the American actress, Alyssa Milano, asking women who had been sexually harassed or assaulted to publicly acknowledge that experience with the hashtag: Me too. In response, thousands of women have posted stories of horrific experiences at the hands of friends, employers, lovers, relatives, and their own Harvey Weinsteins - a real-time map of the pervasive assault and harassment in which women's lives are embedded.

The trigger for this near-cathartic outpouring was not just Milano's tweet, but a larger, insistent conversation about a culture that enables sexual violence. Earlier this month, a New York Times investigation revealed how Weinstein, one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, had, for over close to three decades and with total impunity, assaulted women in the industry.

He is only one among recent successful American men to have been revealed as sexual predators - the list includes Bill Cosby, Jimmy Saville, R Kelly, and, according to a Washington Post investigation, the POTUS himself. Closer home, our own experience of the rage on Delhi's streets after the gang rape of a young woman in December 2012; the students' protest in the Banaras Hindu University, and a recent high court judgement that doubts the veracity of a woman's "feeble" no, among many others, have led to a long-due acknowledgement of the routine violation of a woman's sexual autonomy and freedom - as well as the entrenched systems of denial that enable it.

In that context, the #MeToo movement is an astonishing assertion. For women, it allows a rare experience of public solidarity. It turns a private trauma into a collective voice of anger and indignation. But this is not a conversation about women alone.

The bigger question is: What difference has it made to the men listening in? If this wave of anguish points to a pervasive pathology at the heart of sexual relations, what are men - and the institutions they control - willing to do about it? The women have spoken. Now, the responsibility of action - whether in India or America - is also on men: To join the conversation, to acknowledge their role in silencing women and then push for change.

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