

NEW JERSEY

Sexual harassment no longer a silent secret, as #MeToo, Trump embolden women to speak out

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Published 3:24 p.m. ET Nov. 3, 2017 | Updated 4:50 p.m. ET Nov. 4, 2017

When Anita Hill stepped into the spotlight 26 years ago to accuse then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment, she faced a skeptical all-male Senate Judiciary Committee and a dismissive public.

For decades, her testimony served as a cautionary tale for women.

To speak out was to become part of a “he said, she said” narrative and it was the “he” that usually drowned out the “she.”

No more.

The fall of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein last month has opened the floodgates on sexual misconduct allegations, toppling the careers of powerful men in multiple industries and inundating social media with victims’ declarations of “#MeToo.”

The hashtag has been used millions of times on Twitter and Facebook primarily by women to share their experiences of sexual assault and harassment.

“It’s a domino effect: the more women are speaking up, the more others feel confident to speak up themselves,” said Sarah McMahan, associate director of the Center on Violence Against Women and Children at Rutgers University. “That’s in stark contrast to a number of years ago, when we used to more easily dismiss actions as ‘boys will be boys’ and women were often just disbelieved.”

A reporter's shares her #MeToo experience: 'He has no idea how much he hurt me'

Accusation: Montclair author accuses George H.W. Bush of groping her

The reaction now is different: Weinstein has been fired from his company, NPR's news chief Michael Oreskes has resigned, production on actor Kevin Spacey's series "House of Cards" has halted and apologies — from former president George H.W. Bush, actors Ben Affleck and Dustin Hoffman and countless others — have mounted.

The exposure of Weinstein's transgressions may have blasted the issue of sexual assault into the public consciousness with a unique force, but the pressure had been building for some time, McMahon said .

The Trump effect

Women began coming forward en masse several years ago, when the Obama administration led a national dialogue about sexual violence on college campuses, she said. But it was the election of President Donald Trump, accused by multiple women of sexual assault and caught bragging about grabbing women by the genitals, that mobilized even more.

In January, the day after Trump's inauguration, millions around the world marched in support of women's rights.

More: Former ABC News executive Mark Halperin apologizes for harassing five women

Editorial: Male Hollywood's response to Weinstein is appalling

Nine months later, with the rollback of guidelines on campus assault and renewed attacks on reproductive rights and women's equality, women are fighting harder than ever to have their voices heard, said Moira Weigel, author of "Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating" and a postdoctoral researcher at Harvard University.

"The rage and energy and solidarity that's being expressed seem to be at least partly fueled by the general mood about the highest levels of government and the backlash moment we're in after a very hopeful mainstream feminist, Hillary [Clinton] moment," Weigel said. "We're in this dark moment where a lot of people are appalled by what's going on and feel so helpless."

#MeToo has channeled that frustration into a movement that gives strength to victims and highlights the pervasiveness of the problem, she said.

"What's interesting and new right now is there is a structural conversation about misogyny where it's not just that this one dude is a bad dude but that our entire society is built on oppressing women in this way," Weigel said. "That's the kind of thinking I haven't seen be this mainstream since the 60s or 70s."

New Jersey pushes for reform

In New Jersey, efforts to transform the discourse into action have ramped up in the wake of #MeToo.

Patricia Teffenhart, executive director of the New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault, hopes the mass disclosures help give momentum to two pieces of legislation the organization is championing to fill gaps in state policy on sexual assault.

One would remove the current two-year statute of limitations for civil litigation against sexual abusers and the other would require schools to disclose past reports of sexual misconduct by employees when they apply for jobs in other schools.

The descriptions in #MeToo posts of assault from long ago have demonstrated that many women need years to come to terms with their trauma, said Teffenhart, while the Weinstein saga has shown that decades of abuse can be hidden by settlements with nondisclosure agreements.

“High profile cases give us an opportunity to really contextualize these bills,” Teffenhart said. “The more survivors come forward and the more media attention these cases get, the better the arguments we get to advance legislation to protect the largest number of citizens and hold the largest number of perpetrators accountable.”

Sexual violence is a notoriously under-reported crime. Rape alone is estimated to affect nearly 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

New Jersey law enforcement agencies reported 1,453 rape cases last year, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

At the office

At work, silence about sexual harassment is overwhelmingly commonplace. Roughly three out of four people who experience harassment do not speak of it to a supervisor, manager or union representative, according to a 2016 study of harassment in the workplace by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Victims stay silent because they fear they will not be believed, that their claim will not be pursued, that they will be blamed or that they will face social or professional retaliation, according to the report.

“We are just beginning to discover how many survivors are bearing the burden of their victimization in silence,” Teffenhart said.

Still, there are signs of progress.

#MeToo has given rise to #IWill and #HowIWillChange, imploring men to state how they will challenge sexist cultural mores and combat sexual assault and harassment.

First-hand accounts of abuse are particularly compelling and effective for bringing men into the fight against sexual violence, said Tova Walsh, assistant professor at Rutgers University.

“For men, it’s surprising how far it goes,” Walsh said. “You knew it was a problem but you assumed it was happening to other people somewhere, not to the women in your life, not to your colleagues and your friends and realizing that it’s so widespread it seems to be hitting people in a different way.”

The opportunity is ripe now for self-reflection, said Walsh, not only about sexual violence but the casual sexism — catcalls, sexist jokes, derogatory language, gender stereotyping — that allows such behavior to take root.

“These comments might seem casual and innocuous but they add up over time and happen again and again and people don’t get called out on them,” Walsh said. “They’re part of setting the stage and creating an environment where someone like Weinstein would feel entitled to act in the way he’s accused of acting.”

Tackling that casual sexism at a young age and teaching both girls and boys about healthy relationships and respect will ultimately determine whether #MeToo becomes a watershed moment, McMahan said.

“All of us, men and women, in both the workplace and our communities and schools, need to work to create cultures that do not tolerate any form of sexual violence,” McMahan said. “If we really want to see sustainable change and an impact, that’s really where our efforts need to be.”

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