

What MeToo hasn't yet accomplished

Social media movements fade. Survivors of sexual assault and harassment need living communities.

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Five years ago this month, *Time* magazine named “the silence breakers” as its Person of the Year, honoring “the voices that launched a movement.” That movement was MeToo, begun in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke to encourage survivors of sexual violence to tell their stories. MeToo was popularized through social media in 2017, and scores of survivors found a sense of empowerment and solidarity in telling their own stories of assault and harassment.

But data indicates that things haven't improved much since #MeToo went viral. While some perpetrators have been shamed, fired, or prosecuted, many have not been held accountable. In 2018, Brett Kavanaugh joined the Supreme Court despite credible sexual assault allegations. The number of proposed state laws combating workplace sexual harassment and gender inequity rose until 2019 but then plummeted. And a 2019 study reveals that MeToo has unintentionally contributed to another problem: 21 percent of American men are now less willing to hire women for jobs involving personal interaction, and 27 percent of men avoid one-on-one contact with female colleagues.

What about the survivors who told their stories? After enduring the trauma of assault and the secondary trauma of talking about it, some are now experiencing the tertiary trauma of realizing that their disclosure hasn't made the difference they'd hoped. Others have paid a steep personal cost simply for speaking out. According to law professor Anita Hill, herself a survivor of very public trauma around sexual harassment, about 60 percent of women who report sexual harassment or assault experience retaliation. Some lose their jobs, some are labeled as "difficult," and many feel exiled from their professional and social circles.

The last five years have shown us that survivors of sexual violence need more than a social media movement. Such movements are temporary and diffuse; they fade from the public consciousness, leaving their participants feeling isolated. Their organic nature makes them good at building solidarity—and ineffective at producing broader, lasting change. Survivors need living, local communities to accompany them.

The church can be one such community—but doing so requires ongoing commitment and discernment. Holding space for survivors to tell their stories on their own terms is not easy. Neither is taking concrete action against structural inequity. But a community has the potential to cultivate change over the long haul by attending to these kinds of difficulties, staying in conversation, and creating structures that confront abuse when it happens.

At the heart of the MeToo movement are laudable values: a belief that truth telling can change hearts, a priority on accountability for harm, and a commitment to bind wounds and heal the brokenhearted. One thing the MeToo movement has done very well is to fill the world with truths that cannot be unheard. The movement has left the news cycle, but there are still more stories to be told—and far more actions to take. The church is positioned to play an important role in this healing work.