#METOO AND SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

In the fall of 2017, the hashtag #MeToo went viral on Twitter and other social media platforms. Popularized by the actress and activist Alyssa Milano, it sought to bring attention to the issue of sexual harassment and sexual assault, especially in the workplace. The resulting Me Too movement, which led to charges of sexual misconduct against film mogul Harvey Weinstein and people in other industries, showed the influence of social media in creating social change.

Roots of the Social Media Campaign

In October 2017, dozens of female celebrities came forward to accuse Weinstein, a Hollywood film producer, of predatory sexual behavior, ranging from harassment to groping to rape. In what became known as the "Weinstein effect," these allegations produced a tidal wave of sexual misconduct charges against other powerful men in the worlds of media, entertainment, and politics. Prior to the Weinstein scandal, many women quietly endured indignities and abuse by high-ranking men in the workplace. Shame and embarrassment, fear of retaliation, and concern that authorities would dismiss their complaints prevented many women from reporting sexual harassment. When a parade of famous women spoke out against Weinstein, however, it prompted a national reassessment of how sexual harassment claims were viewed and handled. Millions of women gained the courage to share their own experiences, offer support to survivors of sexual abuse, and denounce sexual offenders.

Much of the credit for the shift in public attitudes belongs to the #MeToo movement, a social media campaign aimed at supporting survivors of sexual misconduct. Milano popularized the phrase on October 15, 2017, and it quickly became a rallying cry for women around the world. Milano's message featured a screenshot from a friend suggesting that "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me Too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem." Milano added, "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted, write 'Me Too' as a reply to this tweet." Within 24 hours, 500,000 people responded on Twitter, and the hashtag #MeToo appeared on Facebook 12 million times. Many celebrities lent their voices to the conversation by acknowledging that they had experienced sexual harassment or assault.

Activists Raise Awareness of Sexual Violence

Milano became a teen idol through her starring role as Tony Danza's daughter Samantha on the popular sitcom *Who's the Boss*. She went on to co-star with Rose McGowan on *Charmed*, a hit fantasy-drama series about three witches who used their powers for good. She also supported charitable causes and spoke out on issues that mattered to her. She served as a UNICEF ambassador; wore a dress made of vegetables in an advertisement for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA); raised money to provide clean water for people in developing countries through Charity: Water; and publicly discussed her struggles with postpartum anxiety and depression to help eliminate the stigma surrounding mental illness. As social media emerged, Milano took full advantage of the platform to educate and inspire her fans. When she saw her friend's tweet about sexual harassment at the height of the Weinstein scandal, she immediately passed it along to her 3 million Twitter followers.

Milano had no idea that her #MeToo tweet would go viral and launch an international movement. At the time she posted it, she was also unaware that the phrase "Me Too" had been coined in 2006—before the widespread adoption of social media—by the African American civil rights activist Tarana Burke. Burke met a 13-year-old girl who confided that she had been sexually assaulted by her mother's boyfriend. In the moment, Burke struggled to come up with an appropriate response to express support for the girl and let her know that she was not alone. As
a survivor of sexual abuse herself, Burke later realized that she could have provided a powerful message of "empowerment through empathy" by simply saying, "Me too." She turned it into the catchphrase for a grassroots campaign to promote healing for women of color who had experienced sexual violence or exploitation.

A number of Twitter users responded to Milano's #MeToo tweet by pointing out that Burke had been using the phrase for more than a decade. Some expressed irritation that the media inadvertently attributed it to Milano. Burke acknowledged that she initially felt upset when the hashtag suddenly began trending on social media. Milano quickly corrected the mistake and publicly credited Burke as the original founder of the movement. Given Burke's long history of helping women of color who had experienced sexual violence, some supporters questioned why the #MeToo movement only gained traction after Milano and other celebrities came forward.

#MeToo Becomes a Global Movement

The #MeToo hashtag launched a global conversation about sexual violence. As millions of women used #MeToo to tell their stories, it built a community of survivors. Milano and Burke worked together to amplify survivors' voices and give them access to resources to promote healing.

The #MeToo movement encountered a backlash to its mission of exposing the pervasiveness of sexual violence and holding abusers accountable. Critics expressed concern that the sudden cultural shift prompted by the movement created uncertainty and confusion about the boundaries of acceptable behavior. They worried that #MeToo would lead to men being accused of sexual harassment based on awkward attempts at flirting or mildly sexist humor, with severe repercussions for their reputations or careers. Some critics also asserted that #MeToo might encourage women to make false allegations in order to join the movement. #MeToo activists rejected these criticisms, arguing that most survivors found it so arduous to come forward with sexual harassment claims that they never told their stories. They noted that #MeToo provided a safe environment for survivors to receive support without sharing traumatic personal experiences.

Further Reading