MeToo

The Impact of Rape Culture in the Media

Meenakshi Gigi Durham
MeToo
Dedicated to Jayalakshmi Venugopal, a feminist in times and spaces where it wasn’t always easy, and the best mother anyone could have.
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This book came to its conclusion in turbulent times, as a deadly virus wracked the globe and Black Lives Matter demonstrations called out the ongoing crisis of racial injustice. Writing was challenging, in part because of the emotional toll these events took, and in part because I couldn’t easily get to the library or to my office at the University of Iowa. So I wrote at home, in between checking news feeds, and I am eternally grateful to my family for understanding and support, as random stacks of books piled up everywhere and I huddled with my laptop behind closed doors. My heartfelt thanks go to my husband Frank, who (as he has done for years) mulled over ideas with me, read and edited draft chapters, brought me cups of coffee when my energy was flagging, and got me to take exercise breaks. My daughters Sonali and Maya inspire me every day with their commitment to feminism and racial and social justice. I’m also deeply grateful to the University of Iowa librarians, especially Tim Arnold and Donald Baxter, for helping me obtain the materials I needed even when
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Most of all I thank my mother, Jayalakshmi Venugopal, for her brilliance, sense of humor, and love. Her passing this year has left a chasm in the world.
In ancient Greece, Pandora’s box was not actually a box but a jar, or a clay pot with a lid that was kept in the kitchen, where the women were also kept. Maybe it contained evil—or maybe it just concealed it. Maybe Pandora let the evil out, or maybe she blew the lid off what was really going on back there, where nobody else could see it. Anyway, the truth got out, and all hell broke loose, leaving behind only hope.


A feminist ear can be how you hear what is not being heard.

The media are a linchpin in the contemporary feminist movement against sexual violence.

We are in a “MeToo” moment—or so the media tell us. The very term is a media goldmine: not only is it jauntily alliterative, but it seems to have an instantly recognizable meaning. It pops up in headlines and in TV news teasers whenever a famous man is accused of sexual abuse, assault, or harassment, which seems to happen on the hour somewhere in the world.

Although sexual misconduct in the workplace and elsewhere is not a new issue and feminist activism against sex assault has persevered for at least a century now, the intensity of the global upheavals of this MeToo moment marks a striking social shift. The scope and virality of MeToo/#MeToo have exceeded those of any previous online organizing effort around sexual violence. The movement is variously referred to as a “culture shock,” a “tsunami,” or an “explosion,” since its ripple effects are being experienced in life-changing ways at multiple levels across the world.
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The media are in fact, quite literally, sites of sexual violence: for decades, sexual harassment and assault have been routinized and concealed in corporate media workplaces. Acts of rape have been committed in newsrooms, on film sets, in media executives’ hotel rooms. The strategies used by many media corporations to conceal, and thereby enable, serial sexual assaults show that sexual violence is systemic violence, embedded in the structures of workplaces and buttressed by other institutional mechanisms, such as legal processes and human resources (HR) policies. In the wake of #MeToo, it has become increasingly apparent that these mechanisms and structures are deeply entrenched in a variety of social institutions and in most countries and cultures. The media industries are not unique, but they have awakened a realization that workplaces harbor a rape culture—a culture that not only facilitates rape but, perhaps most damningly, silences its survivors. Media worksites, mediated images and messages, and media social networks all serve to illuminate the way sexual violence percolates throughout societies. The media’s relationship with rape culture is thus of vital contemporary importance.

This book centers on rape culture in the media, especially with regard to the silencing and the silence breaking of survivors of sexual violence, practices that have shaped rape culture in multiple and complex ways. This focus on silence as systemic, especially in the media, contributes new insights into our understanding of rape culture.

Silence has always haunted sexual violence. Terrorized, shamed, or discounted, survivors have had
to harbor their sexual assaults as dark secrets, often coping with the trauma and the injury while they were bereft of support systems or resources. Media corporations such as Miramax and Fox News actively silenced and concealed the acts of sexual violence that occurred in their workplaces for decades. Yet the media—social media—were also key to the breaking of silence when #MeToo erupted in 2017; and the media are sites where many dimensions of rape culture have been exposed, through representation, discourse, and commentary.

Rape culture, as a concept, has become highly visible in this MeToo moment. It is a hotly contested term and idea, which refers basically to “a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women,” leading to the acceptance of rape as a normal part of life. While this definition addresses the societal dynamics that embed rape in everyday life, it rests on a male–female gender binary that doesn’t capture the diversity and range of experiences of sexual violence. Statistically, perpetrators tend to be cisgender straight men, but sometimes people of other genders initiate sexual violence too, so that rape occurs across categories of race, class, gender, nation, sexual orientation, and other intersectional categories of identity.

Recognizing this, it becomes important to construe rape culture in terms of sexual power that has been historically entrenched and culturally validated: the kind of sexual power that tacitly condones rape as an explicitly sexual expression of dominance. Nor is “rape culture” limited to any legal definition of “rape,” as it encompasses a range of sexually aggressive behaviors that
sustain sexual power relations and reinforce an individual’s sexual violability as a result of social classification.

Critics of the concept of rape culture reject it on the premise that the “developed” societies of the global North are relatively rape-free and penalize rape severely by comparison to the societies of the global South. These claims are disputable, both because rape is vastly underreported everywhere and because penalties vary, especially when social vectors such as race, class, and citizenship status are taken into account. As the second-wave feminist scholar Susan Griffin pointed out, “[t]he fact that rape is against the law should not be considered proof that rape is not in fact encouraged as part of our culture.”

The concept of rape culture as a framework has been validated by the #MeToo hashtag and its aftermath: the millions of tweets and social media discourses swiftly exposed the pervasiveness of sexual violence in most societies. In doing so, they engaged with rape culture in myriad ways, at once recognizing, resisting, and reevaluating the concept from multiple perspectives.

From these online engagements it has become clear that the media are not only the physical sites of rape culture in the workplace, they are also an active discursive site of interrogation about rape and the cultures that produce it, sustain it, and conceal it. Like Tarana Burke’s “me too™” movement, #MeToo served in the first place to create a space for survivors to voice the experience of sexual violence, as it was impelled by a keen recognition that accounts of sexual abuse and assault are routinely stifled by dominant institutions and their powers of insidious sexual censorship. I use
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the term “censorship” to claim, not that survivors’ stories are explicitly excised from any public record, but rather that sexual violence survivors face powerful cultural silencing mechanisms that often prevent them from disclosing their victimization: they are disbelieved, blamed for the assault, accused of wanting and even enjoying it, retraumatized through enforced retellings of the incident and brutal interrogations about it, persuaded to take hush money and sign nondisclosure agreements, shunned by families and communities as a consequence of their injury, stigmatized, and even persecuted or prosecuted. Hence #MeToo served a “silence-breaking” purpose, providing an outlet for speaking the realities of sexual violence in which survivors could find a community of support. Such movements had been emerging in many spaces and places around the globe; #MeToo, for a variety of reasons, including its genesis in the United States and its connections to powerful white celebrity women, both accelerated these movements and eclipsed them.

Survivors’ ability to speak is inflected by race, class, gender, and other intersecting sociocultural factors. The legal scholar Angela Onwuachi-Willig has pointed out that “[t]he recent resurgence of the #MeToo movement reflects the longstanding marginalization and exclusion that women of color experience within the larger feminist movement in US society,” despite the fact that women of color have been in the vanguard of legal action and community organizing against sexual violence, and despite their greater vulnerability to both sexual harassment and silencing.

In all these ways, the so-called MeToo moment,
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itself a media invention, highlights the implications of rape culture for our media organizations, representations, and discourses. That, as I just argued, the media themselves serve as a conduit for rape culture is not a new idea: even as rape culture emerged as a powerful concept in second-wave feminism, its relationship to media culture was clear. The very term “rape culture” was coined during that period, in the 1970s, and gained traction as feminist activists and thinkers started to recognize sexual violence as an outcome of patriarchal power, “a systemic problem that is institutionalized throughout the society.” This perspective radically revised traditional perceptions of instances of rape as isolated phenomena caused by deviant individuals enticed by blamable victims.

The reframing of rape as a systemic or structural problem was, even at the time, complicated by issues of race and class that were raised in the writings and speeches of women of color. The legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw crystallized these themes in a landmark essay, in which she pointed out that “the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities such as race and class;” women of color experience sexual assault in ways that differ from how white women experience it. The neglect of racial and other factors, she argued, was another way of silencing survivors, as it “relegated the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling.” Thanks to these theorizations, the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and other identity markers is now an essential component of feminist approaches to rape culture, as well as to all aspects of culture and society.
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The feminist scholar Ann Russo reminds us that race, class, sexual orientation, and other identity categories afford “differential access to a claim of innocence” in sexual assaults.\(^{10}\) Her insight underscores how sexual assault survivors, unlike victims of other crimes, are automatically suspected of lying about their assaults. Skepticism about survivors’ “innocence” also implies that they were somehow “guilty” or complicit in their own victimization. The idea that sexual violence survivors fabricate the stories of their assault is one among the many “rape myths” that form the building blocks of rape culture.

Feminist contemplation and theorization of sexual violence has identified a series of prevalent “rape myths,” which are deeply embedded in many contemporary cultures and serve to undermine the credibility and capability of survivors.\(^{11}\) As a consequence of these myths, rape is allowed to flourish as a social norm. A substantial body of feminist scholarship\(^ {12}\) has identified the following prevailing rape myths:

- Only “bad girls” get raped (which implies that survivors’ behavior, clothing, sexual history, and attitude invite rape).
- Women enjoy rape (although this myth is largely gendered and not projected onto all survivors, it is nonetheless used in many contexts to rationalize rape).
- Survivors lie about being raped, especially if they have a grudge against the perpetrator.
- Survivors confuse “bad sex” with rape.
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• If the survivor was drunk or used other judgment-impairing substances, the act was not rape.
• There is only one definition of rape: it is heterosexual, it involves penile–vaginal penetration, it is perpetrated by a male stranger on an unsuspecting woman, it involves the use of a weapon or considerable force, and it must be corroborated by evidence of resistance on the part of the female victim. This myth places responsibility for rape on the victim and eliminates the possibility of marital rape, rape by an acquaintance, same-sex rape, male rape, or rape of trans people; it also misses sexual violence that does not involve heterosexual intercourse. Although the US Department of Justice currently has a much more expansive and reasonable legal definition of rape, this myth is still culturally prevalent in the United States and in many other societies.

Other rape myths refer specifically to racial and class stereotypes: “the placid Indian ‘squaw’ who readily gives her sexual favors, the passionate Black or mulatto woman who is always ready and sexually insatiable, the volatile Mexican woman who is fiery eyed and hot blooded, and the languid, opium-drowsed Asian woman whose only occupation is sex.” Racialized rape myths also specify what counts as a “credible” survivor and as a “credible” account of rape. In recent research, factors such as the race, class, gender, and sexual orientation of victims and perpetrators are found to play a significant role in the treatment of victims by the police, as well as in prosecutors’ decisions as to whether to accept a case. The ways in which race, class, sexual orientation,