

On the #MeToo campaign that has taken the country by storm



In time, it may well be referenced as the autumn when a thousand Durgas descended to destroy a few thousand Mahishasuras. For now, less prosaic descriptions have to do. I refer of course to #MeToo, that has currently taken India in its grip. It's led to an outpouring of rage by several women — some disclosing identities, others not — across several industries, particularly film, media and stand-up comedy, on social media. All these women have bravely shared their wounds, some inflicted several years and jobs ago and some recent — but all horror stories of sexual harassment and abuse at the workplace, or in the course of pursuing professional work at the hands of powerful bosses, seniors and peers. One actress recounting the way a senior actor harassed her a decade ago opened the floodgates to a whole host of well-known journalists, comedians and film industry professionals being named and shamed on grounds of sexual misconduct and harassment of women colleagues and juniors. This is round two of #MeTooIndia. Late last year, the 'List of Sexual Harassers in Academia' (#LoSha) went around anonymously crowdsourcing names of male academics accused of sexual misconduct and harassment. Usually, this column rants about public space and experiences of women who attempt to access it in myriad forms. On one level, workspaces are private spaces, on another, they are in the public domain. Women often have to negotiate many familial, community and gender boundaries to access work opportunities outside their domestic space. They arm themselves with requisite skills and education before they enter the work domain. But as the #MeToo stories reveal, work often comes at a high price, demanding compliance and silence in the face of gross abuse, sexual and otherwise.

Many stories being shared now are by urban middle-class women and some argue that makes them less significant as they aren't the 'real' Indians slogging it out in the villages and hills. Of course, we wait to listen to working women from across the spectrum — rural, tribal, urban, illiterate, informal work sector. But that doesn't make the current narrative shared by middle-class women irrelevant. If these women — privileged by class, education, urban location — can face high levels of sexual harassment and take years to share their stories, feel coerced, fearful and silenced, just imagine how much tougher it is for other less-privileged women in this country. Their narratives set the stage and tell us that we have just hit the tip of the iceberg, and gosh, isn't it a hard place to be.

What does it say about our country when the overwhelming experience of women in private and public — at workplaces and on the street — is one of violence, fear and anxiety? Listen in on the stories being shared, so little seems to have changed over the years. In the wake of #MeToo, for example, many older women journalists, who kept quiet when faced with harassment, fearing recriminations and job loss, are now asking each other in despair: "Did we adjust too much, keep too quiet, so that these jackals could continue preying?". Sharing also has the result of calling out repeat offenders, of which there are many, and noting their eerily similar modus operandi. In some cases, it has brought younger and older women together in one voice, so that they feel more heard and less victimised. This moment of collective rage is an opportunity to initiate change to make workplaces friendlier to women and marginalised people. Some argue that we need to separate and establish a hierarchy of unacceptable behaviour — rape high up, groping little lower, ogling lower still, sexist jokes or creepy bosses at the tolerable level. No more! Instead, let's use the sexual harassment law and gender training to establish a zero-tolerance workspace. Remember, it's the everyday presence and small acts of violence that make it possible for bolder acts of assault to take place.