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REBECCA SOLNIT ON THE #METOO BACKLASH

STOP TELLING US HOW TO CONFRONT AN EPIDEMIC OF VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

February 12, 2018 By Rebecca Solnit (<https://lithub.com/author/rebecca-solnit/>)

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This thing has gone too far. It has terrified people, driven them out of their workplaces and even professions, made them afraid to speak up and punished them for speaking. The thing, by which I mean misogyny and violence against women (and girls, and men, and boys, and even babies, but I'm going to skip the horrific baby story that was reported last week).

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The #MeToo upheaval is an attempt to address something old and deep and very destructive, and if you've forgotten how serious it is let's take a visit to my favorite radical feminist data center, the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics. There (<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv16.pdf>) you can learn that there were an estimated 323,450 rapes or sexual assaults in 2016, as well as 1,109,610 reported incidents of domestic violence. Less than a quarter of those rapes are reported to police; slightly over half of the domestic violence incidents are.

Roughly 3,000,000 rapes over a decade is a lot of raping, and the figures are, for various reasons, a very low, conservative estimate. Here's some Center for Disease Control estimates,

(<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/consequences.html>): a little out of date, but still illuminating about the scale of the problem we face: domestic violence—or as the CDC designates it, intimate-partner violence—against women costs the US more than \$8.3 billion dollars, much of it for medical and mental health services. Money is not a direct translation of anguish, but it may give some sense of scale. This violence causes its victims to lose more than eight million days of paid work annually. “Nearly 14 percent of women and 4 percent of men have been injured as a result of IPV that included contact sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime.”

The latest wave of response to this brutality, known by the hashtags #MeToo and #TimesUp, has not gone far enough. It will have gone far enough when we are no longer a society in which 75 percent of employees don't report harassment for fear of disbelief,

blame, or retaliation, and 75 percent who do report it experience retaliation (<https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/10/15/16438750/weinstein-sexual-harassment-facts>). Those figures mean that a quarter of a quarter of those harassed, or one out of 16, may get justice. It will go far enough when it's no longer one out of four women who experience workplace sexual harassment, and more than a third of women (<https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/meetings/1-14-15/graves.cfm>) in the restaurant industry, 8 percent of farmworker (<https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/meetings/1-14-15/graves.cfm>) women according to one recent survey, enormous percentages of women in the military (and, of course, men are harassed and assaulted in all these sectors, in lower numbers).

It will have gone far enough when there are no longer realities like those behind a recent report (http://www.theadvocate.com/new_orleans/news/crime_police/article_5c1b85ea06af-11e8-80b4-87d1cfa1d8c5.html) that revealed 40 percent of women students and 1 percent of men students at Tulane University have experienced sexual assault, and a quarter of the women, 10 percent of the men have been raped. It will have gone far enough when rape is not an issue on campuses. It will have gone far enough when women scientists are no longer driven out of their fieldwork and research because, as a recent article (<https://www.sciencefriday.com/segments/how-sexual-harassment-and-bias-undermine-womens-access-to-scientific-careers-2/>) put it, “26 percent of female researchers had reported assault at field research sites, and another 71 percent reported harassment.” It will have gone far enough when we look back at the levels of sexual and gender violence, at the pervasiveness of harassment, at the lack of adequate response, as the shocking sins of the bad old days. Getting there means changing things.



For detractors of the #MeToo movement the “going too far” argument tends to focus on misfires, cases when men who have committed comparatively minor offenses or done something that’s not confirmed or clarified get swept up in the torrent, or when due process seems to be missing. It would be helpful if people would remember that feminists and women as a class aren’t actually making those decisions; management is, and management in these cases is often a panicky version of the powerful people, often male, who turned a blind eye to the problem when they weren’t being held accountable by the seepage of these stories into the public realm. Each workplace makes its own decision, and there is no standard method to calculate what each charge means.

There is much yet to be done to better address all this, and no one deserves to be unfairly accused or punished, any more than anyone deserves to be raped, assaulted, threatened, harassed. No one deserves to be unfairly driven out of their workplace or their profession; we would do well to remember how common this has been for women when we deplore it happening to some men in the limelight. We don’t even need news about this, because Anita Hill made it all perfectly clear in her narrations of her travails 27 years ago.

But that this epidemic is being addressed is a good thing, and we should never lose sight of the gravity of the wrongs this movement or insurgency or whatever it is seeks to right. One of the extraordinary things emerging from the torrent of stories that has broken loose is that there are not only far too many perpetrators, but far too many enablers, from those who dismiss charges or dismiss from employment those who make charges to those who actively protect some of these powerful men—most notably the lawyers and enforcers and decision-making executives who silence victims and let the victimization continue.

Think, for example, of Susan Fowler’s extraordinary exposé (<https://www.susanjowler.com/blog/2017/2/19/reflecting-on-one-very-strange-year-at-uber>) a year ago about working at Uber, where she said that she and other women reporting the same sexual harasser were told that there would be no consequences

because it was his first offense (and Fowler was told that it wouldn't be retaliation if she chose to stay on the team with the harasser and experienced negative reviews as a result). Think of all the excusing and defending and covering-up on behalf of the two wife-beaters recently obliged to depart the White House.

The cure is not punishment, though a little fear of consequences can have a salutary effect on wrongdoing and increase safety and equality for those who were targeted. The cure is cultural transformation, and it is underway, as it has been for the past half century. As I said in the Guardian

(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/12/challenge-extreme-masculinity-harvey-weinstein-degrading-women>) in October, "The change that really matters will consist of eliminating the desire to do these things, not merely the fear of getting caught." I always find it helpful to remember how far we've come, from a society that did not recognize discrimination against women as an issue, let alone something that should have legal consequences, that did not address domestic violence in a meaningful way, that too often blamed and shamed victims for rapes and did not acknowledge the reality of date rape, acquaintance rape, and marital rape.

As for workplace sexual harassment, it was a framework feminists came up with in the 1970s that began being treated as a serious concern in the 1980s and is nevertheless still rampant. There's a tendency to trivialize it as cheesy remarks and unwelcome passes; remember that this category includes assault, forcing people to have sex to keep their jobs or firing them for refusing to provide those blowjobs and other services, intimidation, and long campaigns that are deeply psychically and professionally damaging.

The statistics on rape and domestic violence show a meaningful decline over the past few decades, which is encouraging in a way—and not in another way, because each of these crimes harms someone, often in lasting ways, and there is still enough of each that we would call it an epidemic or a crisis if it weren't these particular categories of perpetrator.

and targets (and I haven't even talked about domestic-violence-related deaths, but they average out to a few per day in the USA, and the other epidemic of mass shootings has many links to domestic violence).

I sometimes think we are in this extraordinary moment of stories breaking loose because of the slow, quiet work feminism has done over the past decades to put many women in decision-making positions and make far more men willing to hear women's stories and trust the tellers. These stories are in many cases old, and there are reasons they were not told before. That they are being told now may be because there are more women and people who believe women and think their rights matter who are assignment editors at newspapers and producers at television stations, who are judges and juries (remember that women did not serve on juries in earlier eras), who are in management and law and congress and news and other positions. This incremental shift made the conditions right at last.

A friend told me a tremendously moving story the other day about, as it happens, jury selection. A member of a prosecution team related that the results of asking routine questions for sex-crimes trials has changed. The question about whether the potential jurors or their family and friends have been raped or sexually abused would usually elicit a few hands and then some private disclosures. But among members of the most recent jury pool, two-thirds raised their hands and told their stories. They told them publicly, so that everyone in the court could hear. One man answered in the affirmative, and his eyes filled with tears when he was asked if the crime against him had been prosecuted; it had never even been mentioned to a living soul, until that moment.

Something is changing. When the 43 male students of the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College were kidnapped and, presumably, murdered in 2014, a phrase came into circulation, first in Spanish—*Quisieron enterrarnos, pero se les olvido que somos semillas*—and then in English: “They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds.” Watered by tears, the seeds that are a thousand thousand stories are germinating, breaking through

the hard earth in which they were hidden. They are ugly stories. Telling them is painful, adjudicating them a process that we have yet to refine adequately, but letting lives bloom free of this hidden grief and fear is what this movement is for.

Secrecy, silence, and shame are what allow these things to happen, and those forces punish victims a second way by isolating them, by leaving their story a hard seed in the heart. In telling, we tell the world that what has happened should have not happened to the teller, should not happen to anyone, and many of these stories are told to prevent others from becoming victims, to terminate a perpetrator's freedom to harm. Shining light on these crimes, this suffering, is work that must continue until it is not necessary because these things have become rare, and because there is a clear and adequate and immediate process when they do happen. That is when it will have gone far enough.

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San Francisco writer, historian, and activist, Rebecca Solnit is the author of twenty books about geography, community, art, politics, hope, and feminism and the author, most recently of *The Mother of All Questions* and (with Joshua Jelly-Schapiro and a cast of thousands) of *Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas*. She is a contributing editor to *Harper's*, where she is the first woman to regularly write the Easy Chair column (founded in 1851).

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Thank you. The story of jury selection is one of the strongest I have read relating to #metoo.

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Please provide evidence of your qualifications to accurately assess Solnit's work.

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see more

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