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Where to for #MeToo?

Four writers assess the movement's impact in the US and Europe

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Following the first wave of the #MeToo movement, a new phase of reflection has set in. Here, four authors and journal editors from the US and Europe assess #MeToo's achievements and potential, but also its limitations in changing a culture of sexual harassment.

A lot of things are broken: Why focusing on sex won't fix sexual harassment

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Back in the 1970s, radical feminists in the United States like Susan Brownmiller, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, women who theorized rape and sexual harassment, had a valuable message: it wasn't about sex, but about power. So why do we persist in treating the revelations of the #MeToo movement as primarily sexual?

My own workplace is a university, where power hierarchies and potential arenas of sexual danger overlap. We emphasize the boundary that ought to



exist between teachers and students, but neglect other relationships: between academic and administrative staff; support and janitorial staff and their supervisors; graduate students who are teaching assistants and undergraduates; athletic staff and athletes; tenured and untenured faculty; full-time and part-time, contingent or post-doctoral faculty. There are so many different sites of potential power imbalance that the idea of regulating them all is daunting.

So, we try, we wake up a couple of decades later, and we ask why we have failed. Again.

Ironically, movements like #MeToo merely enhance the policing of sex when what we need is greater insight into the nature of power. At my university, one of the functions of sexual harassment training is to teach us how to do this effectively and legally. Training is focused almost exclusively on our legal responsibilities under Title IX, a 1972 amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1965 which mandates gender equity in any educational programme receiving federal financial assistance.

What is interesting is that our trainings are not focused on the causes and consequences of sexual harassment. Nor do they address the nature and consequences of power, and how power is expressed and enforced through sexuality. Instead, they focus on prohibition. The idea is that if we all understood and enforced the rules about sex, we could eliminate the abuse of *power*.

I think this is terribly wrongheaded. Sexual harassment is often, in my view, a subcategory of bullying, and the attempt to address one without the other is doomed to fail. In fact, *it has failed*. Forty-five years after the passage of Title IX, and almost 40 years after *Alexander v. Yale* (a lawsuit which Yale won, but which also established the term 'sexual harassment' in the law), sexist bullying in universities seems to be as pervasive as ever.

Universities aren't unique. In the film industry, where the tidal wave of #MeToo revelations began last fall, it is over sixty years since Marilyn Monroe reportedly announced to the Hollywood press, after signing her first major film deal: 'I'll never have to suck another cock in this town again.' (In another version of this story, she winks and adds: 'unless I want to, of course'.) Yet that sexual act, and others, still seem to be a key point of entry into a media career.



In the industry I know best, education, we live with a dual reality: that people are not supposed to be having sexual relations with subordinates, and that they do all the time. Like the more high-profile media cases, the #MeToo moment in academia has been an opportunity to express our outrage at the miscreants who create chaos in the wake of their sexual affairs, and to reiterate our generally specious belief that universities would run smoothly if only the rules and ethical obligations about intimacy were clear and enforceable.

Enter Human Resources, the corporation counsel and a consultant or two to rectify the problem. Once a year we learn how to identify and report. We are reminded about the importance of confidentiality, and about how to respond to everything we might observe that is out of order: rape, groping, gossip about a student's sexual identity, stalking and comments about appearance, to name a few.

These trainings may well play a role in making us more self-aware and alleviating the inappropriate eroticization of our relationships. But I don't think they do much to address the ethical and moral complexities of a workplace where the personal power to help or harm individuals is so critical to advancing, or stalling, careers.

Important as it has been, the #MeToo moment has two flaws: the first is the assumption that the misuse of sex, rather than bullying and the misuse of power, is the source of harm and trauma in a sexual harassment case. The second is, well, the highly American focus on 'me'. Recently, a valued colleague noted that her hesitation over a proposed prohibition of sexual relationships between faculty and students was not because it was impossible (this is my reservation), but because of her own, rewarding, affair with a professor. This reluctance to accept that there is something much bigger at stake in a sexual harassment case, something that is in the nature of the institution and not the individual, is common.

Some American feminists go further than my hesitant colleague. They have (courageously in my view, because the reaction is often vicious) proposed that the sexual harassment cases, [investigated under Title IX since 2013](#), can conceal the agency of the subordinate partner. For example, Laura Kipnis's book, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* (2017), examines a case at her own university in which a student realized that an affair with a professor was actually sexual harassment only



after extensive meetings with a Title IX investigator.

Kipnis has been criticized for her reporting on this case, [which I have responded to elsewhere](#). But Kipnis's detailed narrative about her colleague also reveals what many sexual harassment trainings do not: that the everyday blurring of boundaries – the need students sometimes have for privacy during office hours; mentoring of colleagues and students; conferences; lab work; inviting students and colleagues for a social call in one's home or a restaurant; and receptions after talks – is actually inherent to the practice of higher education. So is picking out favoured students for an invitation-only conference: in some of the academic #MeToo cases, graduate students were invited to attend an exclusive event with a mentor, only to learn that they were expected to share a hotel room.

Here, we might want to return to 'Blow Job City', as Hollywood was called in Marilyn Monroe's day, for a few lessons about how workplace cultures incubate bullying and exploitation. In October 2017, the actress [Lupita Nyong'o wrote an op-ed](#) about her own painful encounter with the catalyst for the #MeToo movement, film mogul Harvey Weinstein. It was a classic *quid pro quo* or 'pay to play' situation: Nyong'o's potential reward would be a potential role; her punishment, should she refuse, the threat that she would never work at all. Nyong'o describes being socially, and sometimes physically, trapped by Weinstein, which she navigated either by setting boundaries, or blurring them when necessary. But, as she explains, in the performing arts, 'the intimate is often professional and so the lines are blurred'.

When lines are blurred, it's no wonder that simply making rules and expecting people to obey them fails. Shouldn't we consider, instead, how we might inhabit these liminal spaces ethically? Could we not learn more about why the power imbalances in our workplaces make some people so vulnerable and spare others? Discussions that have accompanied the #MeToo movement reveal the under-analysed fact that a vulgar or unwanted action that one person might perceive as navigable, or even insignificant, may be a traumatic snare for another. Sex is only one part of the formula for abusing authority and power. But the failure to address this fact also reveals how confused we are in the United States about what kind of currency sex represents in workplaces that are actually structured around intimate hierarchies of authority.



Which is why, perhaps, an effective #MeToo movement would stop talking about sex and start talking about the workplace itself, as well as what kinds of values are cultivated there. A former employee on the *Charlie Rose Show* told me, after Rose's career and the show were destroyed last year amidst accusations of sexual harassment going back years: 'I've decided to take a step back from media, which has proven to be a pretty toxic environment for me personally in the last few years. I still love it,' she said, 'but it's become obvious that the issues in the industry go well beyond sexual harassment and abuse. The endless layoffs and reorganizations, the stillborn "pivot to video", the bleak native platform ecosystem that allows for the proliferation of wildly dishonest theories and ideologies posing as "news", and the by-line hero culture. A lot of things are broken.'

A lot of things are broken in universities too: and when our only focus is sex, we can't begin to fix them.

Sweden: Work-based campaigns have shifted the focus from victims to structures

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Sexual harassment in Sweden – who would have believed it? For good reasons, or perhaps because of our inflated self-image, Sweden is seen as a world leader in matters of gender equality. So it may be surprising that #MeToo had an unusually strong resonance in this country.

We are used to thinking of feminism as something coming in waves, bringing change (though we also know about backlashes). However, change depends on being heard. Towards the end of 2017, we saw a new tide rising. The threat of sexual violence stopped being perceived as coming mainly from asylum seekers and instead started to be seen as coming from ordinary men. By mid-October, #MeToo was no longer about a powerful man from Hollywood. Starting with the exposure of a few well-known male media personalities – accused of rape, sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour towards women – the #MeToo hashtag motivated tens of



thousands of women to sign open calls. The world of literature and the arts was heavily in focus: one widely reported case pointed directly to the very rooms of the Swedish Academy. It was scandalous and so obviously important that it was pulled out in the open.

However, alongside the celebrity cases, there have been many appeals published in major print media and communicated online. Sector after sector, profession after profession, went public with testimonies of sexual harassment and assault. Actors, academics, artists, doctors, DJs, military employees, lawyers, restaurant workers, members of the building trade and many more. Under their respective sub-hashtags, it was possible to see the campaign broaden, deepen and infuse group after group of women with the feeling that collectively speaking out and going public was important. It was also obvious that victimhood is something completely different when shame is shifted from the individual to a structure -whether because of bad leadership, precarious employment or a 'culture of silence'. As journalist Annelie Dufva said on Swedish Radio, #MeToo was not a disclosure but a confirmation of what women already knew.

This professional, working life-related aspect of the #MeToo campaign in Sweden has a specific importance. It expresses a sentiment felt, and an intellectual analysis made, by many women. For so many years, we have been part of the professional life and the workforce of this society. We have contributed economically, we possess skills, we do art, we work. But we have endured a lack of respect for our bodily integrity. We have been shamed by sexism at the workplace, we have not told our stories loud enough. We will now.

It is important to note that the professional emphasis of the Swedish #MeToo movement is not the whole story. There have been several very big calls and Facebook groups that had the tone of 'all of us', meaning all women, regardless of professional identity, where the lid has once again been opened on experiences of sexual assault in families and close relationships. But this too gains momentum from these 'trade specific' calls, from these working life-based mobilizations. They grounded the calls in the experience of the many.

But haven't there been problematic cases of naming and shaming? Yes, for sure. But the vast majority of stories shared and told have not identified the perpetrator in an easily recognisable way. More important is that the stories



had self-named victims. The #MeToo campaign has had the effect of shifting the focus and the blame from the *victim to the offence*. Moreover, the collective turn taken by the Swedish campaign has shifted the focus towards *structures*. There have also been a few cases of high ranking executives in culture, politics, civil society and the media who have resigned or been ousted from their positions in the aftermath of #MeToo. Some not even because direct sexual harassment has been claimed or proven, but because of the apparent emergence of a new moral standard of leadership. Aggressive masculinity has lost some of its attraction.

The power of men cracks, says Swedish author Nina Björk, when they are *collectively afraid* of being among the accused. After so many years of women being collectively afraid of being among the attacked, maybe this is a greatest change. The public sphere, the media, legislators, and all of us as citizens will have to monitor the aftermath of #MeToo. A shift in both private and public norms will be the result of the calls and accusations, and of the reactions to them. If we want greater respect for women's bodily integrity, that's where we need to keep the focus. If we want structural change, we need to think how.

Whether or not a new law in Sweden on consent to sex is passed – it has been discussed and proposed several times in recent years – a dramatic rise in rape convictions isn't expected. However, the reform could mean that, at a rape trial, the defendant's claim for believing the sex to have been consensual will be more difficult to prove. The mere absence of threatened or actual violence, or of resistance from the victim, would no longer be a sufficient argument. On the other hand, real change must be social as well as private, and can't remain in or be led by the legal sphere.

To some extent, the #MeToo debate has made some conflicts more visible rather than resolved them. Sex – notably heterosexual sex – will stay a politicized issue. And that is a good thing. Leadership, not least in the cultural sector, won't be the same again. Leadership can no longer be acted out via sexual or sexist harassment. But, more important still: it can't involve or rely on *looking the other way*. Because this time around, the victims won't stay quiet.

#MeToo in Hungary: Liberal self-cleansing or real

change?

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The #MeToo movement has shaken Hungarian public life with surprising force, leading to the departure of a number of authority figures in theatre and television. Out of the public eye, however, victims still struggle to be heard. Nor has the movement managed to take on politics. On the contrary, the illiberal government has responded by hardening its anti-feminist stance.

The news about Weinstein was initially met with refusal and victim-blaming, but on 14 October the scandal struck home when the actress Lilla Sárosdi published a post on Facebook under the #MeToo tag. It detailed an episode from her early career when, as an aspiring drama student, she was molested by a successful theatre director. After her story was called into question and played down – some suggested that since actresses are by nature whores, they should not complain – Sárosdi [published a video](#) in which she named her molester: László Marton, director of the major Hungarian theatre Vígszínház and emeritus professor at the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest. After Marton threatened to sue, six further women [testified anonymously](#) against him and promised to testify in Sárosdi's defence; two more allegations were published within a week. Marton was finally sacked by Vígszínház and the university. He issued a problematic apology, which Sárosdi accepted.

A number of further allegations in the performing arts sector emerged, though few with the same level of publicity. The Hungarian Alliance of Independent Performing Artists (AIPA) organized [a forum](#) inviting the leaders of actors' unions, theatre managers and others to discuss how to tackle the revelations. The aim was to find common ground and to involve experts with a background in tackling sexual misconduct, mobbing and other forms of abuse. AIPA is working on a code of conduct for theatres, but major organizations opted out of collective action, stating they would seek their own solutions.

In parallel with the national scandals, a number of private stories were also disclosed, meeting with various reactions. A number of survivors shared



stories of sexual abuse, including rape, suffered at school or in public places. Since the main social media platform used by Hungarians is Facebook, it is difficult to estimate exactly the number of these cases: on Facebook, people tend to share their content only with their acquaintances. This is likely to be a result – at least in part – of growing awareness of how public institutions and employers monitor individuals' social media platforms. It is the eighth year of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's illiberal reign, a regime that has declared open war on feminism.

The feminist movement is historically very weak in Hungary, despite the dedicated and often heroic work of a few devoted activists. The rise of illiberalism has raised a number of issues for feminists, largely due to the Orbán government's obsession with encouraging population growth. Family subsidies and social benefits have been restructured in a way that privileges families with three or more children and those with stable, taxed income; property owners also receive breaks. At the same time, various different forms of social welfare have been cut or eliminated entirely. This policy clearly prefers a closed family model. The ruling Fidesz party speaks openly about what it considers to be family values. In 2015, the speaker of parliament, László Kövér, declared that 'we wish our daughters to recognize the highest means of self-realization in giving birth to grandchildren, instead of careers'. While Kövér became a laughing stock for many, they knew that his words were a reaction to a gender discourse that, for the first time in many years, had engaged the mainstream public.

This shift was largely due to the government's social policy and bigoted agenda, but also because of a number of scandals, which included a horrifying domestic abuse incident involving a Fidesz MP. In 2013, József Balogh beat his wife so badly that she suffered a fractured skull and other broken bones. Balogh became a symbol of domestic abuse, stating that he did not hit the victim but that she had tripped over their blind sheepdog. Balogh resigned from Fidesz but kept his mandate in parliament and was even re-elected, a year later, as a village mayor. He lost his position in the municipality only in 2016, after a court handed him a suspended sentence, which is incompatible with holding public office. The incident encouraged the independent media to open up for women's issues. Feminists and allies began demanding that the government ratify the 1999 Istanbul Convention that would oblige Hungary to combat violence against women and children and provide institutional support for victims. This was the context in which Kövér's comments about a 'gender craze' were made.



As the #MeToo campaign in Hungary gathered momentum, it was pointed out that the Istanbul Convention could be the very route by which to introduce the protocols and institutions able to support victims and help prevent sexual misconduct in the workplace and elsewhere. At the peak of public outrage over the #MeToo controversies, the vice president of Fidesz said that the convention was an attack on the traditional family model and that his party should never ratify the document. Existing criminal law was, he claimed, sufficient for handling such cases.

Experts, NGOs, advocates and those concerned see things differently. People out of the public eye, especially in small towns and villages, have a very hard time standing up to their abusers. Confronting a man of influence has always been risky, especially in settlements of only a few thousand people or less, where employment opportunities are few and those in power control the lives of their constituents and employees. With the illiberal Fidesz openly exercising state capture and tightening the leash on local communities, it is especially hard to seek justice today.

The #MeToo revelations have only recently begun involving national politics. One recent case involved the notorious TV anchor Henrik Havas, who was accused of sexual misconduct on the very same day of the publication of his new book about Gábor Vona, the leader of the far-right party Jobbik party, who is Orbán's only realistic challenger. A highly influential media figure and member of the legendary 1980s generation of public figures who have defined the public sphere since the fall of communism, Havas admitted to one of the allegations. However there have been suggestions that the women's testimonies were sponsored by Orbán's infamous propaganda machine. The independent media have widely discussed the political motivations, without questioning the accusations themselves.

Fidesz keeps far tighter control over its own public image: few if any allegations concern members of its circles. There have been reports of victims who, in part because of their personal values and in part out of fear of the consequences, have decided not to go public. Whether the #MeToo campaign helps them break cover remains to be seen. Until then, however, it will continue to be process of liberal self-cleansing.

#MeToo East and West: A matter of history and



conditioning

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The #MeToo campaign, having started in the US, has swept Europe and created a new social situation in which women feel inspired to speak out against sexual harassment and violence. But, curiously enough, some parts of Europe have remained almost untouched by the campaign. Indeed, as we travel from north to south, and from west to east, women's voices are heard less and less. When we reach the Balkans, they turn into a mere whisper. As if no harassment happens there. While the campaigns will always have a local colour – in France, men have been called 'pigs', which is not the case in, say, Germany – one wonders about the countries where the campaign has barely registered. In Bulgaria, for example, the effects are nothing compared to the tectonic shifts in Sweden, where a new law about consent has recently been proposed (see Anne Ighe's contribution, above). This is important: changing public attitudes is essential, but every revolution should also aim to change institutions.

Differing levels of sexual harassment between countries were demonstrated by [a major study in 2014](#), including 42,000 women from all 28 EU member states. The results were striking. In Scandinavian countries, more than two-thirds of women had been harassed, while in Poland and Romania the figure was 32 per cent. Bulgaria ranked lowest, with 24 per cent. Overall, however, only 6 per cent of women had reported serious sexual harassment to colleagues, only 4 per cent had contacted the police, and fewer than 1 per cent had spoken to a lawyer. Again, the figures were highest in Denmark, Sweden and France.

Even between western countries, understandings of what constitutes sexual harassment vary greatly. A [recent poll](#) of women and men in Germany, Britain, France, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway revealed that, when it comes to sexual jokes, German women are more tolerant than British, while Danish women barely react. Only 37 per cent of British women object when a man puts his arm around a woman's waist, while 72 per cent of French women take offence. Even a look at their breasts upsets half of them.

If such differences exist between western countries, then what about the



differences between western countries and former communist countries, where the response to #MeToo campaign has been comparatively weak? In Hungary, the campaign has had some impact, though remains limited to the cultural sphere and to liberal circles (see Réka Kinga Papp's contribution, above). In Poland, nearly 35,000 posts with the tags #MeToo and #JaTeż appeared in social media between 15 and 22 October, including by celebrities. In the following months, however, [the campaign lost momentum](#) – perhaps not surprising when, according to the Eurobarometer's '[Gender-based violence](#)' report, as many as 30 per cent of Poles think that sex without the consent of the other person might be justified depending on the circumstances (the figure is 27 per cent across Europe as a whole).

Czech Radio reported that, [according to statistics](#), every tenth woman in the Czech Republic has been raped, but only about eight percent ever report the crime to the police, while just two percent of perpetrators are ever convicted. In response to the #MeToo campaign, the European commissioner for gender equality, the Czech politician Věra Jourová, revealed that she too had been a victim of sexual violence and called on women to join the movement.

Although Romania has one of the highest rates of violence against women in Europe, the [police said](#) that only 34 cases were filed in 2017. In Romania, hundreds of stories were shared on social media in reaction to the #MeToo campaign. Among them, the MP Florina Presada revealed that she herself had been harassed. However, the campaign died out before bearing any further fruit.

The same happened in [Slovakia](#). The few stories about sexual harassment that did appear there concerned men who were deceased. 'In Slovakia, we often react in a bizarre way when a woman reveals she has been abused or experienced sexual harassment,' said Ľubica Rozborová of the Department of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities of the Ministry of Labour. 'We tend to distrust her, question her words or blame her for having caused the incident.'

While there has at least been some reaction in these countries, in [Estonia](#) or Croatia, for example, there has been almost nothing. All that appeared in the latter were a few sensationalist articles in the media, to the [dismay of feminists there](#).



All in all, the #MeToo campaign in eastern Europe cannot be compared to that in the West, either in intensity and duration, or in terms of real-life consequences, be it demoting men in powerful positions or widespread public support. The question is why women in eastern Europe, who are probably harassed as much as, if not more than, women in the West, do not *perceive* it as a harassment? Are they more tolerant? Or is their perception of what is permitted and what isn't formed by a different political regime?

Describing how she was sexually harassed as a child and then as an adolescent in Romania, Maria Bucur [writes](#) in *Public Seminar* that, 'I never felt free to discuss my fear of being sexually assaulted, because there was no precedent, no language, no acknowledgement of its pervasiveness.' Differences in reactions to the campaign are a matter of history and *conditioning*. Communism as an ideology and political practice included the emancipation of women. In many countries, communism meant that women got equal rights as men for the first time – the right to vote, education, work, divorce, inheritance, abortion, maternity leave, child support, etc. The truth is that this legislation transformed their lives for the better. However, emancipation came from the top down and in most cases was only formal. Communist governments made clear that there was no reason for women to demand more and that their 'question' was solved. There was no need and no opportunity for an organized feminist movement. Generations after 1989 were left with inherited laws, but also with less awareness of the need to guard their rights, a lack of self-respect and insufficient determination and strength to demand further changes.

Today, standing in their way of joining the #MeToo campaign is not only social stigma, fear of exposing one's self to ridicule, hostility and possible consequences at work, but also the absence of a tradition of voicing one's problems. Awareness among women seems to be stronger if achieved through grass-root movements than by having or inheriting laws imposed 'from above'. Laws protecting women's interests do not automatically change a patriarchal society into one that values women in the private sphere, even over decades. Indeed, the discrepancy between their public and private positions is what most eastern European women had to fight against daily. In order to grasp the response of women in former communist countries *now*, we have to grasp what happened to them *then*.

Many have hurried to proclaim the #MeToo campaign a movement, a revolutionary moment. Though it's too early to tell, one can see that it



hasn't had the same impact for all women. Not in Europe, and much less in the rest of the world. Such a movement would have to have a much broader scope. According to the [World Economic Forum](#), the 'global gender gap' has widened for the first time in over a decade and will now take a century to close.