



MeToo

**The Impact of Rape Culture
in the Media**

Meenakshi Gigi Durham

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Dedication

Dedicated to Jayalakshmi Venugopal, a feminist in times
and spaces where it wasn't always easy, and the best
mother anyone could have.

MeToo

The Impact of Rape Culture in the Media

Meenakshi Gigi Durham

polity

Copyright Page

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Acknowledgments

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 campus was officially closed. The amazing colleagues and friends who have supported and encouraged me have my deepest gratitude: I feel lucky to be part of such a lively and collaborative community. Many thanks to Mary Savigar and Ellen MacDonald-Kramer at Polity Books for believing in this project and for their encouragement, knowledge, and patience.

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.

Epigraph

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.

Carina Chocano, "Plain Sight," *New York Times Magazine*, November 26, 2017, p. 13

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

Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 2016, p. 203.

Introduction

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

We are in a “MeToo¹ 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.² 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.

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.³ 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.”⁴ 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 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,”⁵ 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, 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.⁶ 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.”⁷ 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;”⁸ 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.”⁹ 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.

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 scholarship¹² 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.
- 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,¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ The ways in which race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability are used to discredit and trivialize sexual violence survivors leaves some of them with fewer

legal protections than others and inhibits the reporting of sexual violence.

The silencing of sexual violence survivors as a result of the influence of rape myths is one of the most serious consequences of rape culture. Sexual assault survivors are reluctant to report for a range of reasons, many of which are related to fears created by rape myths. It is telling that such fears are reflected in studies across a wide range of countries and cultures, races and identities. Worldwide, a pitifully small percentage of sexual assaults are reported to the police or other authorities: the estimates of reported cases of sexual violence range from 5 to 25 percent of the number of actual cases.¹⁶ Even for rich and famous white women in the global North, a culture of silence allowed multiple incidents of sexual assault, abuse, and harassment to continue unchecked for decades in some of the world's wealthiest corporations.

In the chapters that follow I will trace the specific strategies and structures of rape culture that harbored and hid sexual predation in the media industries, silencing the capacity of survivors to disclose their assaults. Delving into these processes requires a multifaceted analysis of the media environment: the workplace conditions that condone and conceal sexual violence, but also the mediated representations and images through which rape culture is circulated and interpreted and the ways in which the media—especially social media—have become a catalyst for silence breaking and for feminist activism against rape culture.

To think about media culture in this way frames it as a social apparatus in the sense defined by Michel Foucault: as an assemblage of interconnected images, discourses, laws, policies, philosophies, and other forms of social knowledge that operate strategically in the service of

power.¹⁷ Sexuality is, for Foucault, “a domain saturated with power,”¹⁸ constructed through mechanisms such as religion, law, or the media, all of which claim to offer the “truth” about sex and thereby exert control over its meaning. The media are saturated with sex, as well as with sexual violence. In this book I explore how the media environment serves as a prime conduit for both silencing and silence breaking around rape culture.

Understanding the media environment involves paying close attention “to the production of culture, to the [media] texts themselves, and to their reception by the audience.”¹⁹ In conformity with this logic, the present book is divided into three chapters that address different facets of rape culture in the media, especially in terms of silencing and silence breaking. My starting point in [chapter 1](#) is US media corporations, as these were the epicenter of the revelations that fueled the global spread of #MeToo and the current engagements with rape culture. Scrutinizing the media corporations in which rape culture ran rampant yet was deliberately hidden from view provides insight into the institutional framework of sexual predation at work. To say this is not to presume, blithely, that the way things happened at Fox News or in the Weinstein Company can be mapped directly onto a meatpacking plant in Iowa or a casino in Macao, even though those workplaces are just as likely to abet sexual violence. Plainly, that would be too easy a leap. But there is also evidence, given the rise of #MeToo/MeToo movements globally, that the sexual predation exposed in Hollywood and New York bridged systems and structures of workplaces in the United States and around the world. Sandra Pezqueda, a working-class Latina woman, observed in *TIME* magazine: “Someone who is in the limelight is able to speak out more easily than people who are poor. The reality of being a woman is the same—the difference is the risk each woman must take.”²⁰

Those differential risks are, of course, significant; the life consequences—financial, familial, physical—are much greater and potentially more calamitous for poor women, women of color, lesbian women, transwomen.

This is even more alarming in light of the uptake of rape culture and endorsement of sexual violence, particularly against women, at the highest levels of political power, in parallel with the global rise of despotic populism.

The second chapter shifts the focus from organizational structures to media content, examining how rape culture has been systemically incorporated, resisted, and reinforced through representations, from pornography and sexual cybercrimes to news reporting. Some of these representations preceded and gave rise to the MeToo moment, some coincided with it and energized it, and some unfolded after #MeToo made its mark; some functioned to reassert silencing strategies, while some reinforced the structures that consolidate rape culture. My analyses center on forms of media that have had a global impact, from revenge porn to the work of the *Boston Globe's* investigative “Spotlight” team.

The third chapter takes up the backlash against MeToo/#MeToo that has arisen after the hashtag went viral and runs from accusations of a “witch hunt” to intersectional critiques that challenge the movement’s whiteness and its links to criminal justice systems that oppress marginalized and minoritized communities. These provocations and perceptions are important to the evolution and constant metamorphosis of MeToo and to the breaking of silences around rape culture.

The Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire writes of a “culture of silence” in situations of domination, where subordinate groups are rendered mute by those in power. Breaking this enforced and subjugating silence will, he

believes, create the conditions for the oppressed to enter into dialogue with the oppressors, so that together they may create a vision for collective social change.²¹

#MeToo/MeToo called out the “culture of silence” that rape culture has imposed for centuries on sexual violence survivors. The silence has been broken. For all the ambivalences, tensions, and confrontations of the “MeToo moment,” by breaking the silence, we are beginning to see our way toward transforming a rape culture.

Notes on Terminology

The MeToo/#MeToo movement’s core concern is for survivors of sexual abuse, assault, and harassment, in the workplace as well as in other spaces and places. The term “survivor” has largely displaced “victim” in feminist writings on sexual assault; this is a consequence of the feminist conviction that those who experience sexual violence are never responsible for its occurrence. The sociologist Liz Kelly argued for the need to shift “the emphasis from viewing victims as passive victims of sexual violence to seeing them as active survivors.”²² While I concur completely with this view and support attributing to survivors of sexual abuse the overtones of courage, self-determination, and strength that attend the term “survivor,” I find power in the term “victim” as well: the fact of victimization calls out the reality of a perpetrator, an assailant who deliberately sexually violated and harmed another being. “Survivor” seems to move past the harm done by the assault; “victim” re-centers it. In addition, not all people who are sexually attacked survive. In this book, while I use the term “survivor” most of the time, I use the word “victim” as well, not with a pejorative sense but to honor the fact that sexual violence causes harm and trauma. Sometimes I use “victim-survivor.” This