

United States: The year of #MeToo - Pulling back the curtain on women's oppression

Friday 16 March 2018, by [SCHULTE Elizabeth](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2018).

Many things can spark a wildfire, but it's what happens afterward that determines whether that fire will rage. In the case of the #MeToo campaign, the dozens of women who stepped forward to talk about their experiences of having been sexually assaulted by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was the catalyst for tens of thousands more women to break the silence about their own stories of sexual assault and harassment—providing fuel to a fire that has been long in the making.

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On October 5 the *New York Times* published an article chronicling the details of decades of sexual harassment complaints against Weinstein by actors and other women who worked with the powerful producer. [1] Days later the *New Yorker* ran another article in which women told their chilling personal stories of experiencing sexual abuse, including rape. [2]

When a friend of actor Alyssa Milano suggested that women who had been sexually harassed or assaulted write “me too” as their status on social media, she shared that call. Milano didn't know it at the time, but Tarana Burke, a Black woman who is the victim of abuse and a longtime activist for young survivors, had first used the words “Me Too” ten years earlier. Within a week and a half, the #MeToo hashtag had been used in more than 1.7 million tweets from eighty-five different countries as tens of thousands of ordinary women added their names and their own stories to those of famous actors who had been the victims of sexual assault. In a matter of weeks, #MeToo had provided a platform for women who had been silenced for years to speak out—including, significantly, LGBTQ survivors of sexual assault—in collective acts of bravery and defiance. The movement developed so much momentum—producing a seemingly endless string of revelations of sexual misconduct—that *Time magazine* made its “Person of the Year” a collective subject: the “silence breakers”—the women (and some men) who have come forward to reveal cases of sexual assault.

#MeToo may have begun with actors and celebrities with access to the media spotlight, but it had the potential to provide a platform for other women to tell their stories—including working-class and poor women who face harassment and assault on the job at alarming rates.

When activists planned a “Take Back the Workplace” march through Hollywood in November, Latina farmworkers from the organization Alianza Nacional de Campesinas wrote a statement of solidarity that read in part:

“Even though we work in very different environments, we share a common experience of being preyed upon by individuals who have the power to hire, fire, blacklist, and otherwise threaten our

economic, physical, and emotional security. . . . In these moments of despair, and as you cope with scrutiny and criticism because you have bravely chosen to speak out against the harrowing acts that were committed against you, please know that you're not alone. We believe and stand with you." [3]

Working-class women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence in the workplace. According to a 2010 study in the journal *Violence Against Women*, as many as 80 percent of female agricultural workers are abused or raped on the job. But since most of these workers are undocumented, few speak up out of fear of deportation. An ABC News/*Washington Post* poll reported that 30 percent of women said they were subjected to "unwanted sexual advances" by male coworkers, while 25 percent were targeted by men with influence over their jobs. Among women who have experienced workplace sexual violence, 95 percent say the perpetrators usually go unpunished. [4]

Ordinary women's experiences of harassment and abuse at work, at school, in their families, and on the street, which many women have come to accept as a fact of life, were now out in public. Along with revealing the sheer magnitude of the problem, #MeToo exposed the outrage that simmered just below the surface that had few outlets to be heard.

Instead of dissipating, as many suspected a campaign organized around social media might, #MeToo spread and women's stories began to have an impact, as dozens of men in positions of power were knocked down from their pedestals amid revelations of sexual abuse. At the time of writing this article, almost fifty high-profile men accused of sexual misconduct had been fired, resigned, or faced other repercussions according to a running list compiled by the *New York Times*. [5] Weinstein's resignation from the production company he cofounded was followed by others—influential producers, studio heads, directors, actors, editors, journalists, television personalities . . . and then by the abusers on Capitol Hill.

In late October, Rep. Jackie Speier (D-CA) posted a video describing how she was sexually harassed by a chief of staff who forcibly "held my face, kissed me and stuck his tongue in my mouth" when she was working as a congressional staffer in her mid-twenties. She invited others to share their stories because "Congress has been a breeding ground for a hostile work environment for far too long." [6] Other women followed suit with their own accounts of harassment and humiliation in the "halls of democracy." By mid-December six members of Congress, Democrats as well as Republicans, had been forced to resign due to allegations of sexual assault. It appeared that number was likely to grow much larger amid reports that a large media outlet, such as the *Washington Post* or CNN, had dozens more stories to tell involving up to forty lawmakers.

The first senator forced to leave office was Democrat Al Franken from Minnesota, who made an announcement (but not an apology) that he was stepping down while a Senate ethics committee looked into allegations by eight women who said he forcibly kissed, groped, or grabbed them without their consent. His official letter of resignation on January 2, 2018, failed to mention the circumstances of his departure.

Alabama evangelical Republican Roy Moore lost a special election for the Senate seat vacated by Jeff Sessions in December, in large part because of the climate created by #MeToo. National attention focused on Moore after several women accused the judge of sexually harassing them when they were teenagers and he was a district attorney in his thirties. Moore's gross disrespect for women went hand-in-hand with his equal contempt for Blacks, immigrants, and LGBTQ folks. In the end, the holier-than-thou sexual predator narrowly lost the election in the overwhelmingly Republican state, and by association so did Donald Trump, the sexual predator president who stumped for him.

#MeToo's spotlight then turned not just on Congress but higher up—to the White House. Some twenty women have stepped forward to tell their stories of being sexually assaulted by Trump. While

many of them had told their stories before the 2016 presidential election, now that a brighter light is illuminating women's experiences thanks to #MeToo, they may finally be heard. [7] Three of the women—a receptionist, a pageant contestant, and a woman who had the misfortune to sit beside Trump on an airplane—held a press conference on December 12 calling for a congressional investigation into his actions. [8] “They’ve investigated other Congress members so I think it only stands fair he be investigated as well,” said Samantha Holvey, who was sitting next to Trump on an airplane when he started to grope her. [9] “A non-partisan investigation is important not just for him but for anybody that has allegations against them, this isn’t a partisan issue, this is how women are treated every day.”

Even US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, the farthest thing from feminist, added her voice, appearing on CBS’s Face the Nation to say that “a cultural shift is going on in America right now” and the women who have accused Trump “should be heard.” In mid-December, fifty-nine members of the Democratic Women’s Working Group in the House of Representatives signed a letter calling on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee to begin an investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct by the president, and the number of signatories grew to one hundred when it was opened up for men to sign on as well.

The letter asks that the women who have accused Trump be heard, asserting that “the president’s own remarks appear to back up the allegations. The president has boasted in public and in crude terms that he feels at liberty to perpetrate such conduct against women. Subsequently, Mr. Trump apologized and called it ‘locker room talk.’ He has since called all his accusers liars.” [10] This is a reference to the recording released of Trump’s conversation behind the scenes with Access Hollywood’s Billy Bush and other staff in 2005. Here’s what Trump said:

“I moved on her, actually. You know, she was down on Palm Beach. I moved on her, and I failed. I’ll admit it. I did try and fuck her. She was married . . . I moved on her very heavily . . . I moved on her like a bitch. But I couldn’t get there. And she was married. Then all of a sudden I see her, she’s now got the big phony tits and everything. She’s totally changed her look. . . . Yeah, that’s her. With the gold. I better use some Tic Tacs just in case I start kissing her. You know, I’m automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. . . . Grab ‘em by the pussy. You can do anything.” [11]

This tape was released just a month before the 2016 presidential election. At that time, the women who had been sexually assaulted by Trump also stepped forward to tell their stories. Despite that, a few months later the misogynist-in-chief took his seat in the White House. This also fueled what would become the #MeToo fire.

#MeToo has helped to give expression to this anger and allow the women Trump abused to finally be heard, and now Congress is forced to start worrying about the abusers that have been allowed to continue humiliating and degrading the women they work with.

Institutions that protect themselves

What these cases have revealed isn’t just the crimes of individual men, but the systematic way that a set of predators were protected from any potential repercussions for their treatment of women, and how ensuring women’s silence was key to that process.

As the head of one of Hollywood’s biggest production companies, Weinstein had the power to make or break actors’ careers if they spoke out. In addition to creating an atmosphere of fear and

compliance, Weinstein put in place a disturbing network of private security agencies to track actors he had abused or journalists that might report on his abuse. This included hiring the security firm Black Cube, which is made up of former agents of Mossad and other Israeli intelligence agencies.

“Two private investigators from Black Cube, using false identities, met with the actress Rose McGowan, who eventually publicly accused Weinstein of rape, to extract information from her,” according to an exposé in the *New Yorker*. “One of the investigators pretended to be a women’s-rights advocate and secretly recorded at least four meetings with McGowan. The same operative, using a different false identity and implying that she had an allegation against Weinstein, met twice with a journalist to find out which women were talking to the press.” [\[12\]](#)

In many cases, however, the rules that claim to be in place to protect women from abusers are there to protect the institutions from women’s complaints of abuse. For instance, since the #MeToo spotlight has focused in on Congress, the ugly truth has come out about what passes for a sexual misconduct complaint process in the halls of government. The Office of Compliance, which is charged with adjudicating complaints against members of Congress, offers victims little more than a maze of rules. It might more accurately be called the “Office of Silence,” since proscribing women from talking is ingrained in the process itself.

A complaint must be filed with the office within 180 days of the incident. In order make an official complaint, the accuser must submit to mandatory counseling, which usually takes thirty days, and then, if they continue with their complaint, they must complete another thirty days of mediation. During mediation, women must follow strict rules of secrecy, including agreeing to nondisclosure agreements that bind them from talking. “The trappings of confidentiality, they permeate the process,” Alexis Ronickher, an attorney who has represented several people pursuing harassment claims, told Politico. “The law is written to create a system to disincentivize staffers from coming forward.” [\[13\]](#)

On college campuses, university administrations continue to drag their feet on allegations of sexual assault for fear that the publicity may tarnish the reputation of the university. Like other major institutions and businesses, their chief concern is to protect themselves legally rather than empower women and create safe campus environments. Only as a result of activism was the Department of Education forced to announce it was investigating dozens of schools that victims say mishandled their sexual assault claims two years ago. Today, any of the protections ensured victims of sexual assault under Title IX, which bars universities that receive federal funding from discrimination, are in peril, as Education Secretary Betsy DeVos takes aim at that program, arguing that it has “burdened” schools.

Workplace human resources departments—despite companies having volumes of rules governing employee conduct—regularly fail women who come forward with complaints of sexual misconduct and assault. Indeed, these departments, set up by companies and answerable to them, have an inbuilt bias to sweep allegations under the rug and, in many cases, target the employee who comes forward by moving them to another department or firing them—especially when the allegations involve higher-ups. According to University of California at Berkeley law professor Lauren Edelman, anti-harassment policies are “symbolic compliance” done “to protect the company” by indicating that “the company cares about stopping harassment even when they don’t.” [\[14\]](#)

When working-class and poor women report accounts of sexual harassment, they also face a criminal justice system rigged against them, where they risk not just having their complaints ignored but potentially being singled out for punishment. A 2015 report by ProPublica told the story of an eighteen-year-old who was raped and then reported it to the police, who interrogated her as if she were a suspect. Under pressure, she recanted her story—and then was charged with false reporting.

The court ordered her to pay \$500 in court costs, get mental health counseling for her lying, and go on supervised probation for one year. Two years later, her rapist was arrested. [15]

If #MeToo has exposed the injustices in Hollywood and Washington, it has also brought to light the injustices women face in workplaces around the country, where out of fear of reprisal many women see silence as their only option.

A June 2016 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) study of workplace harassment reported that 90 percent of workers who say they have experienced harassment never take formal action. The most common workplace response is to “avoid the harasser” (33 percent to 75 percent); deny or downplay the gravity of the situation (54 percent to 73 percent); or attempt to ignore, forget, or endure the behavior (44 percent to 70 percent). “The fears that stop most employees from reporting harassment are well-founded,” the EEOC report states. “One 2003 study found that 75 percent of employees who spoke out against workplace mistreatment faced some form of retaliation.” [16]

For immigrant women, particularly those who are undocumented and more vulnerable to threats of deportation from their employers, the fear of speaking out is even greater. A 2012 Human Rights Watch investigation also found that in most cases, “perpetrators are foremen, supervisors, farm labor contractors, company owners, and anyone else who has the power to hire and fire workers as well as confer certain benefits. . . . Farmworkers frequently depend on employers for housing and transportation, creating more opportunities for those who seek to take advantage of vulnerable workers.” The study also noted, “Coworkers are also perpetrators, enabled, in part, by an environment that can seem tolerant of abuses.” [17]

A December *New York Times* article told the horrifying story of the decades-long struggle of African-American women workers at two Ford assembly and stamping plants in Chicago who faced a daily barrage of sexual harassment and assault from management and their coworkers, with no assistance from the union. A lawsuit brought by thirty women employees of Ford that the company recently settled for \$10 million revealed stories of managers and fellow male workers repeatedly making lewd comments and come-ons to women workers, pinching them, slapping them on the buttocks, and grabbing their crotches; of managers denying women bathroom breaks and compelling women to sleep with them in order to keep their job. Women who complained about the treatment were ostracized and further harassed, forcing them to shut up and/or leave. Ford had settled a similar multimillion-dollar lawsuit in 2000, and the harassment subsided, but then came back again.

“No person should have to endure that,” former Ford worker Miyoshi Morris told the Times. “You have to force yourself into a place of not feeling anything, of not having any emotion, to exist.” The advent of #MeToo prompted one former female worker at one of the plants to propose a new campaign: “#WhatAboutUs?” [18]

In a society where the lives of working-class women are valued less by just about every measure—wages, benefits, housing, education—fostering ideas that degrade and dehumanize women in the workplace isn’t a sad mistake but a useful weapon. It serves the interests of management to convince men that they are somehow better than women or entitled to treat them like property—because it drives a wedge in any semblance of power they might have as workers standing together in solidarity. Ford is one such place where this was accomplished—but there are others across the country.

The pushback against #MeToo

The #MeToo campaign has had its critics—from every political spectrum. In Washington, where women's serious complaints of sexual harassment and assault are typically treated as "sex scandals," politicians and the political commentators that take their lead from them warned that #MeToo was creating a "sex panic." A headline from Politico sounded the alarm like it was 1950s scandal sheet, screaming "Paranoia Grips Capitol Hill as Harassment Scandal Spreads," enumerating all the ways that lawmakers and their handlers were "gripped with uncertainty" as a new mood created in the wake of #MeToo hit Washington:

Aides in one Democrat's office were summoned recently to a meeting organized by a fellow staffer and asked whether they'd ever heard of an accusation against their boss, according to a source in the room. Other press secretaries have asked their bosses about any personal skeletons, wanting to unearth possible sexual land mines before they detonate in the media.

The pervasive apprehension that's taken hold risks adversely affecting some women's careers. One Republican aide told Politico that she is advising members not to be alone with any women—whether they're female staffers or female reporters. [19]

But it's not "paranoia" hitting Capitol Hill in response to an out-of-control "panic"—it's an acknowledgment that women who have been harassed and abused are finally being heard and drawing attention to the climate of sexist behavior that has been allowed to prevail in Washington. The rhetoric about some kind of moral panic hitting Washington is an attempt by the powers that be to push back on #MeToo and what it has achieved—a sea change in public opinion about what women should be forced to endure at work.

A similar stance was taken by liberal supporters of Minnesota Democrat Al Franken when several women stepped forward to describe being forcibly kissed, groped, and grabbed by the senator. Some went so far as to argue that Franken's actions should not outweigh his record as a liberal lawmaker, or the many dangers that lie ahead if Republicans are allowed to call the shots. In a column for the *Washington Post* titled "I'm a Feminist. I Study Rape Culture. And I Don't Want Al Franken to Resign," feminist author Kate Harding argues that the facts of life under a two-party system compel her to oppose Franken stepping down. Harding writes:

I am a realist who recognizes that we get two viable choices, and Democrats are members of the only party positioned to pump the brakes on Republicans' gleeful race toward Atwoodian dystopia. Meanwhile, I recognize that men's harassment of and violence against women is a systemic issue, not a Democrat or Republican problem, a Hollywood problem, a sports problem, or a media problem. Its roots lie in a patriarchal culture that trains men to believe they are entitled to control women's bodies—for sex, for sport, for childbearing, for comedy. . . .

In other words, if we set this precedent in the interest of demonstrating our party's solidarity with harassed and abused women, we're only going to drain the swamp of people who, however flawed, still regularly vote to protect women's rights and freedoms. . . .

In a sharply divided political climate where toxic masculinity knows no party, yet is only ever acknowledged by one, we must think about how to minimize harm to women. One more empty apology and resignation, one more head on a pike, will not make American women safer or better off. [20]

It's difficult to watch someone twist their political views into a pretzel in the interests of defending a Democratic Party politician at the expense of the women who have spoken out against him, but

Harding isn't the only one. When Franken announced he was stepping down while a Senate ethics committee looked into the allegations against him, Martha Gessen of the New Yorker wrote, "The force of the #MeToo moment leaves no room for due process, or, indeed, for Franken's own constituents to consider their choice," maligning the "selective force" of #MeToo, where the Democratic Party "half is cleaning its ranks in the face of—and in clear reaction to—genuine moral depravity on the other side." [21]

Of course there should be due process. But the point of #MeToo is that there has been no due process at all for women when it comes to having their stories heard. This is all an attempt to flip the script and condemn one of the most powerful things about #MeToo—the sheer number of women who have bravely stepped forward to bring down powerful men who have been allowed to commit acts of abuse for decades. As actor Olivia Munn wrote in response to director Woody Allen's complaint that #MeToo was fostering a witch hunt atmosphere, "the possibility of an overcorrection is much less worrisome than all of the injustices that led us to this moment. Woody's gut instinct to fear what this might become would be better suited to a gut instinct to hold back an urge that could be wrong."

Munn, who spoke out with five other women against film director Brett Ratner, continued:

In our world today—and it's not just Hollywood, it's the same for girls and women all over the world who have survived sexual abuse and/or harassment—abusers don't usually get in trouble unless the victim is broken first, because the violating act alone is not damaging enough to spark society's outrage. It's a marathon towards self-destruction in order to gain credibility and a vicious circle of victim-blaming.

When people ask how these men in powerful positions were able to hurt so many people for so many years, I look to the people at the top and ask those questions.

The system that lets men like Ratner and Allen back in, is the same system that creates disparity. It's tilted to roll back into their favor while the rest of us are saddled with a Sisyphean task. [22]

How resistance takes shape

Initially criticized for being just a social media campaign, #MeToo had echoes of the first actions that took place during the women's liberation movement of the 1970s—speak-outs where women talked about the examples of sexism and discrimination they faced in their personal lives—sexual assault, illegal abortion, lack of access to birth control, domestic violence, discrimination, and sexual harassment at work—and give it a vocal political expression. In this way, the burdens that women faced as individuals in isolation were linked with the experiences of others—and generalized so that they could be seen as part of the systematic sexism in US society at large. [23] Strengthened by the wider struggle for the liberation of all oppressed people—Black Power, the American Indian Movement, the Chicano movement, the fight for LGBTQ liberation and more—the movement for women's rights helped draw public attention to women's oppression in every corner of society, including the workplace. Women in clerical or "pink-collar" jobs who endured low pay, disrespect on the job, and the threat of retaliation began speaking out about the harassment they faced.

In 1975, a group calling itself Working Women United organized a speak-out against sexual harassment at Cornell University, leafleting for it around campus and at Ithaca's two major factories, as well as local businesses. At the event, women spoke publicly about sexual harassment on the job, and a few months later, the *New York Times* ran an article with the headline "Women Begin to Speak Out about Sexual Harassment at Work." [24] More actions by women in other

workplaces followed. An organizer recalled receiving an envelope containing a twenty-dollar bill with the message: "To help with the fight against sexual harassment. I can't sign my name." Events like these that broke the silence helped create the conditions where women could see the possibility of confronting harassment in their own workplaces. Women office workers at the time also fought to organize themselves into unions like 9to5, even though union officials claimed they were "too hard to organize."

The conservative backlash of the late 1980s and '90s sought to push back the gains of the 1960s and '70s. While their attack didn't turn back the clock on all of the rights that women had won, such as abortion rights, it did successfully chip away at them. It also managed to change the conversation in the public at large, so that the problem with the women's rights movement was now that it had "gone too far."

We are now in the process of changing that conversation again—one that acknowledges that no, we don't live in a "postfeminist" world, and yes, we still need to fight against sexism. This moment is serving as a catalyst for activists to strategize about how to build on #MeToo—in our workplaces, schools, and communities. For example, in a December article for Jacobin, Alex Press discussed some important ways that unions can start to act on the concerns of working-class women raised by #MeToo, pointing out some useful examples but also the many ways that unions still fail to address these issues. [\[25\]](#)

Unions should be pressed to take concrete steps to fight sexual harassment on the job; doing this can only make the sadly weakened US labor movement stronger and reinject it with the sense that "an injury to one is an injury to all." In Chicago, hotel workers have shown one way this can be done. After a 2016 UNITE HERE Local 1 survey revealed that a majority of Chicago-area hotel workers—most of whom are women of color and immigrants—had been sexually harassed by guests, workers organized a "Hands Off, Pants On" campaign to win a city ordinance that requires hotels to provide portable panic buttons to employees working alone. The Chicago City Council passed the ordinance October 11, as the storm of sexual assault allegations against Weinstein was raging. [\[26\]](#)

It is also the case that the potential for unions to begin taking on sexism in their members' workplaces—not to mention the majority of women, and men for that matter, who are not organized into unions—is fundamentally linked with the building of struggles for women's rights strong enough to push these concerns to the front burner in US society as a whole.

The massive turnout at the Women's Marches around the country during Trump's inauguration weekend was a sign of the rage people felt about a man who bragged about sexually harassing women taking the White House, but it also gave a glimpse at the burning anger that has been brewing just below the surface for a long time.

The anger found expression on college campuses, as activists challenged university administrations that routinely try to sweep student sexual assault allegations under the rug. One of the most visible actions was the protest by Emma Sulkowicz in 2015 at Columbia University. She vowed to carry a dorm mattress, like the one she was raped on, wherever she went on campus for as long as her assailant remained at the university. This included carrying the mattress across the stage at her graduation ceremony, which her assailant had crossed minutes earlier. Before that were the SlutWalks organized around the world in 2011, kicked off in response to the "advice" given by a police officer at a Canadian university meeting about campus rape: that for women to stay safe on campus, they "should avoid dressing like sluts."

There will undoubtedly be many more opportunities for organizing under the Trump administration, because like so many issues that are mobilizing people today, #MeToo showed the potential for that

accumulated anger and frustration to explode in places that we may not always expect. As Jen Roesch wrote in *Socialist Worker*:

It might also seem improbable that a conversation that began with Hollywood celebrities has touched such a deep chord and brought attention to the pervasive reality of sexual violence.

But this speaks to the growing rage of a generation that has been told feminism is dead and that those battles belong to the past—but who live in a present shaped by an intensifying and brutal war on women. It is a rage that has no organized expression as of yet, but it is nonetheless real.

We are long past due for a revived women's movement—one that can challenge the toxic sexism and violence our culture is steeped in, and the system that generates and sustains them. [27]

As we organize, we'll have to confront efforts by the Democratic Party to minimize, diffuse, and channel this moment into an election opportunity. When cases of sexual misconduct by long-standing Democratic Rep. John Conyers first surfaced, Nancy Pelosi defended him as an icon, and in response to questions about whether or not she believed Conyers' accusers answered, "I don't know who they are. Do you? They have not really come forward." Realizing her mistake, she shifted and by the following Sunday she "commended the brave women coming forward." [28]

If the behavior of Doug Jones, the Alabama Democrat who beat out accused sexual predator, racist, and all-around reactionary Roy Moore for Senate offers any indication of how the Democrats will proceed in the coming election year, the signs are not promising. Asked whether he would join fellow Democrats calling for Trump's resignation over sexual harassment, Jones expressed interest in getting "on with the real issues that are facing people of this country right now," adding, "I don't think that the president ought to resign at this point" over allegations of sexual misconduct. [29]

There are many potential fronts in this organizing—from defending Title IX on our campuses to defending our clinics from the anti-abortion fanatics, from building the solidarity in our workplaces that is necessary to take on sexual harassment to opposing the sexual harasser in the White House and his policies. #MeToo has also given women who have remained silent the confidence to speak out, and can be an important step in building the networks of resistance—men and women standing together against sexism—that are sorely needed, and long overdue.

Elizabeth Schulte

P.S.

* ISR. Issue #108: Features. March 1, 2018:
<https://isreview.org/issue/108/year-metoo>

Footnotes

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