

# Nepal is having its #MeToo moment as women break the silence around sexual harassment

Monday 12 November 2018, by [ADHIKARI Deepak](#) (Date first published: 10 November 2018).

**Ideas flow easily across the border so it was only natural for the movement to enter Nepal via India.**

Inspired by the #MeToo storm in India, [women in Nepal](#) have in the past month taken to Twitter and Facebook to tell their stories of sexual harassment at the hands of powerful men. It was only natural for the movement – which first took off a year ago in the United States with widespread accusations of sexual assault against heavyweight Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein – to enter Nepal via India as ideas and movements tend to flow easily across the border.

In early October, two Nepalese women, one a former journalist and the other a correspondent with Al Jazeera, broke their silence on sexual harassment, triggering a wave whose ripples are still felt. Subina Shrestha of *Al Jazeera* said she was harassed by a minister at an event in a resort town near Kathmandu at the turn of the century. Meena Kaini, a former reporter with *The Kathmandu Post* and *The Himalayan Times*, who later worked at the United States embassy in Kathmandu, said a senior journalist had tried to kiss her in his car. She added that another man she had considered a mentor had refused to leave her hotel room. Both stopped short of naming their perpetrators.

In an op-ed for [The Kathmandu Post](#) on October 16, Shrestha elaborated on the incident and narrated other instances when she had faced harassment. Acknowledging that sexual harassment was pervasive in the country, she, however, called out men in journalism, pointing out that they were expected to fight injustice and abuse.

Later the same month, two women alleged that Keshav Sthapit, a former mayor of Kathmandu and a provincial minister, had harassed them. Ujjwala Maharjan, who worked as a reporter for *Republica* newspaper in 2012, accused Sthapit of phoning her repeatedly after an interview. Rashmila Prajapati, a former employee at the Kathmandu municipality, accused him of sexual harassment in the workplace.

Sthapit, the most high-profile person to face sexual harassment charges as part of Nepal's #MeToo movement, [dismissed](#) the allegations. He was, however, forced to step down as minister last Friday – not because of the charges against him but after a verbal spat with the chief minister of Province 3.

## Why the silence

In the past month, there have been several such accounts of sexual harassment narrated by women in the fields of theatre, politics and film, and in public institutions. Some of them chose not to name and shame the perpetrators. Many also pointed out that Nepalese women possibly suffer the worst

abuse in the country's crowded public transport system. Lending credence to this charge, a World Bank survey published in 2014 said that one in four women between the ages of 19 and 35 felt insecure while riding the bus while over half of those surveyed said they avoided standing next to middle-aged men.

Indeed, as soon as a girl or a woman steps out of her home, she faces abuse in many forms. Sometimes, she encounters this abuse even within the supposed safety of her home.

Lack of institutional support, the fear of being entangled in defamation cases and a backlash from men (and even woman) discourage Nepalese women from fighting for justice, many of them say. Sharing experience from many years ago also causes trauma and mental stress.

### Misogyny in Nepalese society

Nepal was a latecomer in terms of introducing laws against sexual harassment. Under the Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Prevention Act of 2015, a harasser faces up to six months in jail or a fine of 50,000 Nepali rupees or both. An employer who fails to comply with the law could be fined up to 25,000 Nepali rupees. The legislation, which is gender neutral, envisions external and internal complaints committees. But hardly any institutions, including media houses, have set up these panels.

The #MeToo movement evolved from workplace harassment, which was the result of unequal power dynamics between men and women. Private and state institutions must ensure a safe workplace for women. In the wake of #MeToo, this is the time to implement the law so that justice is delivered, on time.

An in-depth look into Nepalese society shows misogynistic practices are widespread. The structural misogyny and social hierarchies are so entrenched that women are not only deemed weak, they are also often not taken seriously. From early childhood, girls face restrictions on their activities and social interactions. Indeed, boys and girls are segregated very early on. Despite the existence of a co-education system, girls keep the company of girls and boys of boys. Popular media reinforces the notion of women as caregivers and homemakers, and of men as office-goers and bread winners. In October, a guest on a popular television show made a [reference to the movement in jest](#) - "Me Three", he joked - to the fury of audiences in Nepal, forcing the channel to apologise.

For too long, men have made women uncomfortable, with comments about their appearance, with sexist jokes and abusive language. The #MeToo movement proves men cannot always get away with this and normalise what is in essence predatory behaviour.

The campaign has brought out in the open what used to be a taboo subject, spoken only in hushed tones. This will encourage more women to come forward, triggering a long overdue cultural transformation that can lead to equality between men and women.

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