

Leadership in an age of #MeToo: global perspectives

Introduction

We begin by sharing a story that concerns a roundtable discussion on global perspectives on leadership, gender and #MeToo, which took place at an international conference. One of the roundtable participants said she assumed #MeToo was an American movement. From the nodding heads around the table, this seemed to be the general consensus. Although it is true that the #MeToo movement began in America, it was not the 2017 tweet from the actress Alyssa Milano that sparked this movement but rather the community-based activism of Tarana Burke that began over a decade earlier in 2006. Today, it is apparent that the effects of #MeToo are felt across the globe. In this special issue, we share different narratives from diverse places and organizational spaces to demonstrate how the effects of #MeToo are global, rather than confined to the USA.

The original purpose of this special issue was to consider how leadership and the #MeToo movement challenges organizational practices and policies in diverse cultural arenas. The lead editor originally became interested in this topic because of a research project she is engaged in. This research considers how well policies on gender-based violence translate into organizational change. In conversation with another editor, the idea of a collaboration on leadership and #MeToo was initially developed. We invited the other two editors to join us and, collectively, develop our initial proposal to encourage a global conversation on leadership and #MeToo, one cognizant of intersectional identity and cultural difference/s. Thus the plan for this special issue was born, and we can think of nowhere better than this journal to embark on this international conversation. We had three main aims. The first aim was to provide new lenses with which to view the impact of #MeToo on organizations. The second aim was to expand discourses beyond a narrow heteronormative focus and our final aim was to highlight the global impact of the #MeToo movement. In what follows, we consider how well we achieved these aims alongside a discussion of some key components of the literature studies. In addition, we discuss how this special issue contributes to setting an agenda for future research in gender, management and leadership research that examines how organizations are responding to #MeToo.

Before discussing each article in this SI, we provide some background on some of the scholarly conversations around #MeToo movement, as it relates to organizations, gender and leadership issues. We focus on three main strands: the global impact of the #MeToo movement, the importance of collective action and leadership and organizational culture.

Global impact of the #MeToo movement

The #MeToo movement is a global phenomenon that took social media by storm. The reaction to the initial tweet by the actress Alyssa Milano in 2017 was staggering; within 24 h the hashtag had been used 12 million times (Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019), and people from 85 countries soon became involved in the movement (Gill and Orgad, 2018). Across the world, the #MeToo movement has encouraged many people to share their stories, and also led to other social movements. In Europe, French women adopted the hashtag #BalanceTonPorc (“name your pig”), while, in Italy, #QuellaVoltaChe proved a popular hashtag for sharing stories about sexual and gender-based violence (Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019). In Japan and South Korea, hashtags #WeToo and #WithYou have become popular (Hasunuma and Shin, 2019). Furthermore, Lin and Yang (2019) argue that the



Chinese #MeToo movement has resulted in individual and collective levels of empowerment.

The #MeToo movement has also received significant coverage in the mainstream press (De Benedictis *et al.*, 2019). Yet there is much variation in that coverage based on the different ideological platforms of the media. To date, most media coverage focuses on white female celebrities. This approach reaffirms the idea that some bodies are more worthy of attention than others (Joyrich, 2019). From media stories, it can seem as if white, female and heterosexual bodies are the only intelligible subjects in conversations about sexual violence. Our aim in this special issue is to make space for other narratives and to spark new conversations.

Collective leadership action through hashtag activism

Before #MeToo became a social movement, hashtag activism had provided alternative fora for those who wanted to speak out against violence. For example, #NotOkay emerged during the 2016 US presidential election to voice concern at Trump's actions (Jenkins and Mazer (2018). During times of crisis, these hashtags are a form of resistance, enabling marginalized individuals to launch a discursive protest through social media platforms (McCauley, Bonomi and Leija, 2018). These platforms not only help people organize more efficiently but also allow for the rapid exchange of information beyond geographical borders (Xiong *et al.*, 2019).

The #MeToo movement has shown how individuals can work collectively to mobilize and motivate organizations to address gender-based violence. Indeed, when organizations are slow to change, collective action may prove a powerful catalyst to shine a light on organizational inaction (Gardiner *et al.*, 2019; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018). Further, paying attention to the gaps between what organizations purport to do through mission statements, policies and protocols, and what is actually occurring in many organizational settings is important (Ahmed, 2017).

Yet this global conversation is not only secular; #ChurchToo hashtag saw Christian women joining the conversation to highlight the silencing of clergy sexual abuse. In perhaps the most widely reported case, the founder and senior pastor of the Mega Church Willow Creek Community Church – a church that boasts a congregation of 25,000 people – Bill Hybels was accused by several women of long-standing sexual harassment and abuse. Church leaders refused to believe the accusers, eventually relenting owing to public pressure.

Leadership, #MeToo and organizational cultures

Although much of the scholarship on the collective action underpinning the #MeToo movement has been positive, some scholars question why it took until 2017 for many societies to turn their attention to issues surrounding gender-based violence, given its prevalence in many cultures and workplaces (Gibson *et al.*, 2019). And despite the global nature of the #MeToo movement, in organizational cultures, there is often a resistance to address systemic issues arising from gender-based violence (MacKinnon and Mitra, 2019).

Until recently, many survivor/victims suffered in silence because in most workplaces, there is a lack of organizational will to deal with these issues. This triggered further hashtag activism with #SilenceIsNotSpiritual, a global movement started by women clergy and leaders in evangelical churches, in recognition of intersections of gender, economic status and power differentials in which clergy sexual abuse takes place – and how that silences victims and observers alike.

In many organizations, [Fernando and Prasad \(2019\)](#) contend that employee silence regarding gender-based violence is due to acquiescence by some senior managers and leaders. The overall effect of this silence is the maintenance of the status quo around violence in the workplace. Some female employees reported feeling unable to fight the system if their issue was perceived as commonplace ([Fernando and Prasad, 2019](#)). Moreover, penalties for self-reporting allegations of sexual harassment are commonplace in some countries ([Hart, 2019](#)). In reviewing US national survey data, [Hart \(2019\)](#) also observes organizational bias against those who self-report. In short, negative consequences can affect those employees who had the courage to speak out about instances of gender-based violence and can lead to ostracism in the workplace ([Brown and Battle, 2019](#)).

Experiencing negative co-worker reaction can have a detrimental effect on job performance, causing further isolation (Hamilton, Park, Carsey, and Martinez, 2019). To counteract workplace ostracism, [Brown and Battle \(2019\)](#) urged employers to create targeted programming to challenge negative behaviors. Such programming must acknowledge how people of color, persons with disabilities or gender minorities may be more likely to experience harassment in the workplace. Moreover, there is a need to move beyond a gender binary in workplace discussions of what constitutes harassment (Flores, 2019). Employers must be careful of placing marginalized folk in a singular category by acknowledging the complex nature of lived experience. Although some forms of harassment may not meet legal definitions of assault, this does not mean they are not worthy of leaders' attention (Flores, 2019). In short, when senior leaders fail to address various forms of workplace harassment, this makes organizational change unlikely.

Leaders interested in effective organizational change need to consider systemic workplace problems and commit to addressing structural injustices. One systematic problem in many workplaces is toxic masculinity. [Ely and Kimmel \(2018\)](#) maintain that organizational practices that shore up a toxic form of masculinity are damaging not only to workers but also have a negative impact on organizational outcomes. Wherever masculinity contest cultures flourish then so, too, does toxic leadership. Any leader who wants to use the #MeToo movement as a catalyst for changing workplace culture must therefore be prepared to challenge business as usual. This means being willing to offer employees training that teaches them to have difficult conversations. Leaders interested in propelling cultural change need to be willing to listen and learn so as to understand which organizational norms are detracting from change ([Ely and Kimmel, 2018](#)) and work to address structural power inequities that negatively affect gender-based violence and other forms of workplace harassment.

Leaders have the power to create and sustain the conditions in which people work in every organizational type, a power that [Palmer \(2000\)](#) refers to as either illuminating with light or casting hellish shadows. In the case of gender-based violence and harassment, leaders must use their power for good rather than for evil. Many of the famous cases such as Bill Hybels, Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby point to an abuse of power by the individual perpetrators and a failure to take responsibility by the bystanders and those who enabled their misconduct. The individual actions of abuse of power, failure to assume responsibility and misplaced loyalties intersect with the organizational cultures and structures that silence bystanders. Such cultures and structures must be deconstructed, shining a light on their pathological perpetuation of abuse with more just alternatives constructed in their place.

Creating effective institutional procedures to deal with structural injustice means taking the complexities of intersectional identity into account. Yet, while many scholars and practitioners recognize gender-based violence as a recognized problem in institutions, there is still widespread institutional indifference to solving this issue ([MacKinnon and Mitra,](#)

2019). In short, despite having a plethora of policies meant to address harassment, there is little cultural change toward lessening its severity or frequency. Ahmed's (2012) notion of nonperformatives is relevant here. That is, workplace policies that purport to be about establishing safe spaces are often nonperformative in the sense that the institutional sexism and racism that underpins many organizations remains the same. Finally, ensuring due process is fundamental to the creation of procedures that work to eliminate all forms of harassment, but this requires organizational leaders to alter their approach to gender-based violence. Intervention from bystanders is one important aspect of organizational reform (Monroe, 2019), but there is much more work still to be done, as the articles in this special issue show.

Leadership in an age of #Me Too: global perspectives

Turning to the special issue, we are impressed by the breadth and depth of the four articles that follow. The articles selected provide new lenses from which to think about the concept of #MeToo in the workplace and beyond, expanding the discourse in diverse ways: across multiple national, gender, sexual, professional and embodied contexts. This diversity was important to us, as we wanted to develop a special issue that was not only international but also intersectional in scope. We are delighted that the countries represented (Canada, El Salvador, Spain and the USA) offer such different socio-cultural and organizational perspectives. In terms of gender and sexuality, there is new research here. Different kinds of organizational perspectives on leadership and #MeToo are also present. Readers can learn about the complexities of gender in football organizations in Spain through to problems with sexual violence complaints in higher institutions.

The first paper is Lisa Maniero's "Workplace romance versus sexual harassment: a call to action regarding sexual hubris and exploitation in consensual workplace romances." This conceptual paper tackles the complex issue of sexual relationships, hierarchy and power in organizations, painting a familiar landscape of the workplace fraught with power imbalances. These power imbalances lead to abuses of power and can result in general acceptance of sexual harassment as an organizational norm. Maniero argues that, in some cases, passive leadership can create toxic masculinist cultures. Advocating for greater transparency, less concern about privacy and enforcement of policies through proactive leadership, the author provides some valuable recommendations on how to develop meaningful workplace romance policies.

The issue of toxic masculinity is sticky in many workplaces; changing the workplace culture may prove particularly challenging in organizations where there are few women in senior leadership positions. Our second article examines some of the gender imbalances in leadership in Spanish football organizations while also exploring how the effects of #MeToo in this arena. In "Gender and the #MeToo effect in professional football organizations: an exploratory, qualitative approach," a team of authors from Spain, Henriette Klavenes, Alicia Orea-Giner, Fernando García-Muiña and Laura Fuentes-Moraleda consider this question by examining experiences and perceptions of managers, male and female, in Spanish football organizations. Through their use of in-depth interviews with men and women in senior organizational positions, the impact of #MeToo on gender equality issues is explored. Many of the well-known issues associated with gendered organizations are described including the ill effects of the "ideal leader" prototype as male, white and old. Gender bias in hiring decisions is evident as is the "queen bee" effect (Mavin, 2008). What is illuminated is a toxic,

masculinist culture where sexual harassment is an accepted norm. The football industry in Spain appears to remain unchanged, as yet, by the #MeToo movement.

The third article, “#MeToo and LGBTQ+ Salvadorians: social and leadership challenges,” uses the lens of the global #MeToo movement to explore some of the sociocultural, organizational and leadership issues that prevent gender and sexual minority people in El Salvador from being full participants in society. Using qualitative techniques, Randall Thompson and Sofia Figueroa conducted interviews with respondents which illustrate how movements such as #MeToo parallels and contrasts with the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ Salvadorians. Even though many participants were not aware of #MeToo when asked, Thompson and Figueroa found that many leadership lessons overlap with both the struggle for queer Salvadorian acceptance and efforts to combat sexual assault: confronting organizational patriarchy; mobilizing stakeholders and building community, particularly online; and advocating for just, inclusive workplaces. They use both the #MeToo movement and their respondents’ stories to advocate for a new social imaginary that permits multiple social actors to be seen, be heard and fully participate in organizations.

The final article takes a new approach to thinking about #MeToo, that of peace-building. In “Perils of conversation: #MeToo and opportunities for peace-building,” Nancy Ross and Sue Bookchin explore how a community might use a holistic leadership approach to promote healing and restore justice. Their case study, set in rural Canada, explores what happened when a group of teenage boys distributed nude photographs of female classmates without the girls’ knowledge or consent, and how community members begin online, anonymous and damaging attacks of all parties. By using peace-building strategies, such as fostering conversation, avoiding blame, giving voice and educating one other, these authors contend that the community simultaneously could give space for the targets of harassment to heal while changing social conditions to foster a culture of sexual consent.

Moving forward

So what are some of the key messages for leaders and managers in the workplace? First, policies alone are insufficient; we need leaders to show courage in addressing ongoing institutional bias in racism and sexism. It is no longer enough to deal with the problem through nondisclosure agreements or by talking about “bad apples.” Research shows that there are systematic organizational problems that need to be rectified if organizational change is to occur. There is no quick fix; rather, what we need are leaders and managers who are prepared to work on effective change strategies over the long term. Furthermore, because this problem is so intractable in many workplaces across the globe, each and every one of us needs to be willing not only to speak out but also to challenge systematic injustices. An additional “take away” from our special issue’s global/intersectional ethos is that leaders should consider the connections between gender-based violence and organizational change in a global context and thus encouraging more consideration of diverse stakeholders. Greater interrogation is needed regarding problems with organizational structure and culture to ensure diverse, disadvantaged and global voices are included in conversations, solution construction and coalition building whenever and wherever appropriate.

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also like to thank Brittany Cox for her research assistance. Finally, we thank all those brave individuals who have the courage to step forward and speak out about organizational injustices. In exposing institutional wrongdoing, wherever and whenever it occurs; you are exhibiting leadership-in-action.

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Further reading

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