

# #MeToo Comes of Age

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The #MeToo movement that erupted in Hollywood last fall and then exploded nationwide shows no signs of diminishing. It is, in fact, continuing to mushroom.

In November 2017, 700,000 female farmworkers published an open letter saying sexual harassment and assault was a “reality we know far too well.”

In mid-December, entertainment moguls—reeling from a wave of sexual assault and harassment allegations made by numerous high-profile actresses against powerful men in Hollywood -- announced they would fund a new Commission on Sexual Harassment and Advancing Equality in the Workplace. It will be chaired by none other than Anita Hill, the law professor who accused then-Supreme Court Justice nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment in 1991. Only women seemed to believe her back then.

As 2017 drew to a close, other powerful men were being toppled from their perches in the news media, the sports world, on Capitol Hill, in Alabama, and elsewhere after being accused of sexual improprieties.

Then, on January 1, came Time’s Up, a bold initiative to battle systemic sexual harassment in Hollywood and in blue-collar workplaces across the nation. The initiative is being driven by more than 1,000 actresses, agents, and other entertainment figures. Its biggest effort will be a Legal Defense Fund, backed by more than \$14 million in donations, to “help less privileged women – like janitors, nurses and workers at farms, factories, restaurants and hotels—protect themselves from sexual misconduct and the fallout from reporting it.”

What is “so special about this moment,” actress America Ferrera told an entertainment publication, “is that we are standing in solidarity with one another. It’s not one single voice or one single industry or one single profession.”

This is encouraging – all of it. Back in 1986, however, when the U.S. Supreme Court said that employers couldn’t let one employee create a hostile work environment for another or be forced to permit sex in return for advancement, we were also encouraged.

In 1992, after Anita Hill's riveting testimony on Capitol Hill, battalions of angry women, who were incensed at how she was treated by the all-male, all-white Senate Judiciary Committee, decided to run for public office.

It was dubbed "the Year of the Woman," and thousands of women were elected to local, state, and national offices. "Yet here we are," observes *New York Times* staff writer Emily Bazelon, "many years later, and we're having another, bigger moment of reckoning."

So, what, if anything, is different today from that "moment of reckoning" 25 years ago? For one thing, so many women are now coming forward. Anita Hill in 1991 was the proverbial voice in the wilderness. Now she – and we—have Oprah Winfrey, and many other brave women, in our corner.

For another thing, said Hill last month, "...in addition to the enormity of the [recent] revelations, the media's real engagement in covering this issue today from the front page to the style section to the business section to the sports section is probably why we're having such a great consciousness-raising moment."

But will it last? I fret that the avalanche of accusations leveled against so many men might provoke a backlash. And right now, everyone is being chucked out the window – the apparently hapless along with the sexual predators. Shouldn't there be different levels of punishment, depending on the severity of the offense? (To wit: I applaud the recent resignation of H. Brandt Ayers, a legendary, progressive Alabama newspaper publisher and editor, after it was revealed that in the 1970s, he *spanked* at least one young female reporter – in the newsroom! – because he was unhappy with her and her work. He also acknowledged spanking another female reporter at her home to "calm her down". And I thought he was one of the good ones.)

In addition, I am fully aware that the centers of power in the United States – political, business, entertainment, the media – continue to be male bastions. Women are making inroads, but slowly.

Still, #MeToo is a promising start. To quote Anita Hill again: "I think we have to move toward having more women in charge of workplaces, and let's just see if it can be different."

I'll raise a New Year's toast to that.

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