

#MeToo – Has the ‘sisterhood’ finally become global or just another product of neoliberal feminism?

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Abstract: The article discusses the #MeToo movement by reflecting on its origins and recent developments to consider its position within feminist theory. On the one hand, the cross-border proliferation of this hashtag revived the question once posed by liberal feminist Robin Morgan: Has the ‘sisterhood’ finally become global? Others questioned the deeper meaning of the ‘me’ as part of #MeToo, wondering whether the need for individual responsibility to come forward indicates that the movement fits only too well with what has been coined neoliberal feminism. Disagreeing with both categorisations, the article positions #MeToo as a transnational feminist consciousness-raising endeavour which can be traced across different places worldwide. Referring to some of these contextualised uses of #MeToo, the article argues that #MeToo has been able to manifest itself as a transnational feminist phenomenon, as it has allowed groups in distinct spaces and localities to take ownership of the varying manifestations of #MeToo.

Keywords: #metoo – feminism – feminist legal theory – sexual harassment – digital activism – transnational movements – transnational law

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I. Introduction

It is now a year and a half ago that the revelation of sexual violence and harassment amongst the bold and the beautiful in Hollywood¹ led to the hashtag ‘MeToo’ going viral. This event permitted the laywoman and layman to share their own story of sexual violence or to ‘just’ express that they, too, have been subjected to forms of sexual abuse by tweeting or sharing on Facebook, Instagram and other forms of social media the now famous expression of #MeToo. Such manifestations, however, have not been limited to the U.S., where actress Alyssa Milano initially tweeted the hashtag,² but quickly spread to other parts of the world in various adaptations,³ for example Muslim women’s use of #MosqueMeToo to draw attention to sexual abuse suffered during the holy Muslim pilgrimage of *hajj*.⁴ The proliferation of this hashtag, in combination with the sudden wave of attention sexual harassment in the work place is receiving across many different industries,⁵ has revived the question once posed by liberal feminist Robin Morgan,⁶ namely whether the ‘sisterhood’ has finally become global. Others have questioned the deeper meaning of the ‘me’ as part of ‘MeToo’, wondering whether the focus on individual responsibility of women to come forward is an indication of the movement fitting in only too well with what has come to be known as neoliberal feminism.⁷ This article discusses the #MeToo movement by reflecting on its origins and its most recent developments in order to consider its position within feminist theory as well as activism.

¹ The story first unfolded after the New York Times publication of this article revealing the sexual misconduct by film mogul Harvey Weinstein: Jody Kantor and Meghan Twohey, ‘Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades’ (*The New York Times*, 5 October 2017), <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html>> accessed 28 April 2019.

² Alyssa Milano, ‘If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet. QT’ (*Twitter*, 1.21pm, 15 October 2017), <https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/919659438700670976?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2F2017%2F10%2F15%2Fentertainment%2Fme-too-twitter-alyssa-milano%2Findex.html> accessed 28 April 2019.

³ Ranging from translations such as the Spanish #YoTambien or Italian #QuellaVoltaChe to adaptations such as the French #BalanceTonPorc (roughly translated to ‘denounce your pig’ or ‘snitch out your pig’).

⁴ See Mona Eltahawy, ‘#MosqueMeToo: What happened when I was sexually assaulted during the hajj’ (*Washington Post*, 15 February 2018) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/02/15/mosquemetoo-what-happened-when-i-was-sexually-assaulted-during-the-hajj/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b3e3721e77b2> accessed 18 April 2019.

⁵ These range from the film industry in and outside of Hollywood, to universities, parliaments, the service industry, international aid agencies and many more industries and professions where allegations of sexual assault and harassment have come to light.

⁶ Robin Morgan (ed), *Sisterhood is Global* (Anchor Press 1984).

⁷ See for example Catherine Rottenberg, ‘Can #MeToo go beyond white neoliberal feminism?’ (*Al Jazeera*, 13 December 2017) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/metoo-white-neoliberal-feminism-171213064156855.html>> accessed 07 April 2019.

After setting out the evolution of the #MeToo movement, the article examines claims that #MeToo has fallen into the traps of neoliberal feminism. Neoliberal feminism, which can be described as an almost oxymoronic feminist theory, places the burden of achieving gender equality on individual women themselves. By framing the objective of gender equality in a way that solely relies on the individual responsibility of each woman, neoliberal feminism disregards structural inequalities and imbalanced gendered power dimensions;⁸ issues which have been at the very heart of feminist theory. Thus, in relation to #MeToo the question whether the fact that women are required to speak up in order for the movement to be able to succeed makes this a product of neoliberal feminism will be considered.

In the second part, the article moves on to consider those voices claiming that the widespread use of #MeToo by women around the world is an indication of the emergence of the ‘global sisterhood’, as advocated for by global feminist theory.⁹ Global feminism, which had its heyday in the early 1980s after the publication of Robin Morgan’s anthology ‘Sisterhood is Global’, argues for an alliance of women worldwide as a sisterhood in their struggle against patriarchy. According to global feminist theory, women not only face the same obstacles, but are also united by a ‘common condition’.¹⁰ As such, by working together as one global sisterhood, women will be able to overcome the common enemy: patriarchy.¹¹ With #MeToo being used by women around the world in order to give voice to and protest against their experiences of sexual abuse, clearly stemming from patriarchal structures, this has led some to regard this as the manifestation of the global sisterhood that Robin Morgan was referring to in 1984. However, this article argues that the movement that #MeToo has developed into can be said to be more nuanced than the broad brush, universalising approach to women’s rights activism global feminism has been accused of.

Disagreeing with voices categorising #MeToo as a manifestation of neoliberal or global feminism, the article concludes by positioning #MeToo and the resulting movements that have emanated from it as a transnational feminist consciousness-raising endeavour which can be traced across a number of different localities in the world. It does so by setting out the idea of transnational feminism as developed as a response to the idea of global feminism in the early 1990s.¹² Transnational feminism encompasses a notion of feminist theory that surpasses the universalising and Western hegemonic language exhibited by global feminism. Instead, it argues for a widening of epistemologies and discourses that allow for a more contextualised and non-hegemonic approach to feminist theory and activism. Referring to some of the varying contextualised uses of #MeToo, the article argues that #MeToo has been able to

⁸ See Catherine Rottenberg, ‘The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism’ (2014) 28(3) *Cultural Studies* 418.

⁹ Harriet Harman, ‘Women have changed the mood. Now we need to change policy’ (*The Guardian*, 21 February 2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/21/women-have-changed-the-mood-now-we-need-to-change-policy>> accessed 03 April 2019.

¹⁰ Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Global* (n 6) 4.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² See especially Indrepal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, ‘Introduction: Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity’ in Indrepal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (eds), *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (University of Minnesota Press 1994).

manifest itself as a transnational feminist phenomenon that has allowed different groups of women in distinct places to take ownership of the individual manifestation of #MeToo in their specific context.

Before embarking on the analysis, the author would like to make clear that whilst this article predominantly considers cisgender women as victims of sexual harassment and violence, this does not suggest that men as well as non-binary and transsexual individuals are not victims of such crimes. Indeed, as will be explained, many cisgender heterosexual men as well as various members of the LGBTQI+ community also have come forward and joined the #MeToo movement.¹³ Additionally, it is acknowledged that especially non-binary and trans individuals are severely affected by crimes of a sexual nature.¹⁴ The focus on women in this article is in no shape or form to diminish or deny other experiences.

II. #Metoo

In October 2017, the New York Times revealed what most in Hollywood already knew: allegations that Harvey Weinstein had been sexually violating women in the industry, abusing his position of power to force women into unwanted acts of a sexual nature with allegations ranging from rape to other forms of sexual violence and harassment.¹⁵ While this had not been the first report alleging sexual misconduct by a man in a position of power,¹⁶ the Harvey Weinstein report developed in a way no one had expected. That social media has become a major outlet for the dissemination of news is nothing new. However, in the case of the Harvey Weinstein allegations the severity and sheer quantity of women affected coupled with their status as celebrities and their proneness to use Twitter, meant that the scandal attracted a particularly great amount of attention on social media websites. One of those expressions of dismay was a tweet by actress Alyssa Milano, which read ‘If you’ve been

¹³ In the aftermath of #MeToo, members of the LGBTQI+ community took to social media and made voice to their experiences of discrimination, lack of representation and sexual abuse through the #MeQueer. See Hugo Greenhalgh, ‘#MeQueer takes Twitter by storm as LGBT community cries #MeToo’ (*Reuters*, 22 August 2018) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lgbt-rights-twitter/mequeer-takes-twitter-by-storm-as-lgbt-community-cries-metoo-idUSKCN1L71WW>> accessed 16 April 2019.

¹⁴ For example, the 2015 Report of the U.S. Transgender Survey revealed that 47% of their respondents had been ‘sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime.’ See Sandy E. James, Jody L. Herman, Susan Rankin et al, ‘The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey’ (National Center for Transgender Equality 2015), 5, <<http://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/USTS-Full-Report-FINAL.PDF>> accessed 16 April 2019. In the UK, whilst not providing numbers regarding sexually oriented crimes, the Stonewall ‘Trans Report’ from 2018 uncovered that ‘[t]wo in five trans people (41 per cent) and three in ten non-binary people (31 per cent) [had] experienced a hate crime or incident because of their gender identity in the last 12 months.’ See Stonewall – Acceptance without exception, ‘LGBT in Britain – Trans Report’ (2018), 6, <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/lgbt_in_britain_-_trans_report_final.pdf> accessed 16 April 2019.

¹⁵ Kantor and Twohey (n 1).

¹⁶ Previous examples of scandals and court cases in relation to sexual misconduct of various natures include those of Bill Cosby, Anthony Weiner, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, and of course the current President of the United States, Donald Trump.

sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet’.¹⁷ Her tweet referred to the statement which appeared as a quoted tweet in Milano’s tweet itself and read:

Me Too.

Suggested by a friend: “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me Too.’ as their status, we might give people a sense of magnitude of the problem.”¹⁸

It was this tweet which initiated the online movement now famously known as #MeToo. Overnight thousands of women (and men) responded to Milano’s tweet either by ‘simply’ writing the words ‘Me Too.’ or by adding their personal experiences to the tweet.¹⁹ Indeed, after just 48 hours over one million twitter users had used the hashtag ‘#MeToo’.²⁰ In the following days, #MeToo spilled over to Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr and other social network websites adding to the visibility of this issue.²¹ Women all over the world wide web were taking part in declaring that they too experienced sexual assault or harassment. Whilst the Weinstein scandal and the following allegations against others in Hollywood focused more on the problematic of sexual harassment and violence in the workplace, #MeToo was much broader than that. It included experiences from all areas of life and as time went by also experiences from women from a variety of places in the world. Thus, although initially predominantly limited to the North American and European context, #MeToo soon spread to be used by women from a wider geographical area, which in some instances were accompanied by their own adaptations to the slogan.

Before engaging in the geographical exploration of the #MeToo phenomenon, it is of importance to highlight the origins of this expression. ‘Me Too’ (without the hashtag) was originally founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke, founder of the youth organisation ‘Just Be Inc.’, as a local grassroots movement particularly for women from underprivileged communities who had experienced sexual assault.²² The concept itself was somewhat different from the viral internet campaign that #MeToo has become today. Indeed, Burke founded the movement on a local level ‘to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing.’²³ ‘Me Too’ was meant to symbolise the movement’s idea of ‘empowerment through empathy’ by creating a space for

¹⁷ Milano (n 2).

¹⁸ Milano (n 2).

¹⁹ Brenda Cossman, ‘#MeToo, ex Wars 2.0 and the Power of Law’ (September 2018), *Asian Yearbook of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law* (forthcoming), available at SSRN <<https://ssrn.com/abstract=3257862>> accessed 15 April 2019.

²⁰ Molly Redden, ‘#MeToo movement named Time magazine’s Person of the Year’ (*The Guardian*, 06 December 2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/dec/06/metoo-movement-named-time-magazines-person-of-the-year>> accessed 20 April 2019.

²¹ Alison Gash and Ryan Harding, ‘#MeToo? Legal Discourse and Everyday Responses to Sexual Violence’ (2018) 7(2) *laws* 21, 22.

²² ‘me too.’ <<https://metoomvmt.org/>> accessed 20 April 2019.

²³ *ibid.*

survivors to come together and build a community of healing and trust.²⁴ As a result of the developments of the past months, the movement's website now explicitly refers to the hashtag campaign of #MeToo by pointing to the expansion of this movement from a local grassroots movement to a campaign including a 'global community of survivors'.²⁵

Indeed, this article will discuss this 'global' character of the #MeToo movement and consider whether the transnational dimension of sexual harassment and violence against women has resulted in #MeToo becoming an expression of what Robin Morgan coined 'global feminism'. Before considering whether #MeToo has led to the formation of a global sisterhood, the question of whether #MeToo can be considered as feminist at all ought to be answered. As the next section elaborates, such a line of inquiry is necessitated as a result of claims by feminist voices that #MeToo could be said to reflect features of neoliberal feminism;²⁶ a strand of feminist theory that raises many fundamental questions in itself, not least whether on the basis of its neoliberal nature it can even be categorised as a strand of feminist theory.

III. Just another product of Neoliberal Feminism?

In order to answer the question of whether the #MeToo movement is a product of neoliberal feminism, it needs to be situated against the background of the continuing debates over neoliberalism and its increasing dominance in today's world. In the words of Peck and Tickell, '[n]eoliberalism seems to be everywhere.'²⁷ Thus, as with so many areas in theory and practice, the concept of neoliberal feminism would suggest that feminist theory was not able to escape the widespread influence of this ideology either. In academic, including feminist, writings, neoliberalism is most commonly referred to in the context of a critique of this ideology. In comparison to liberalism, which besides free market economy, is associated with notions of freedom, democracy and the rule of law, neoliberalism is fundamentally characterised by free and self-regulating markets as well as greater mobility of capital.²⁸ This stark focus on free market economy has been accompanied by changing state structures which moved drastically from the idea of a welfare state to a state prioritising privatisation and privileging markets and capital.²⁹ These developments have further led to neoliberalism's 'free market mentality' moving beyond just the economy. As neoliberalism has become more widespread and established, its ideological dominance is spreading from the economic sphere to social and political life. Thus, whilst it is generally accepted that neoliberalism refers to 'the new political, economic and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility', it has also been

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ See particularly Catherine Rottenberg, 'Can #MeToo go beyond white neoliberal feminism?' (n 7).

²⁷ Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, 'Neoliberalizing Space' (2002) *Antipode* 380, 380.

²⁸ Genevieve LeBaron and Adrienne Roberts, 'Toward a Feminist Political Economy of Capitalism and Carcerality' (2010) 36(1) *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, 24.

²⁹ Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (n 27) 385/386.

highlighted for some time now that neoliberalism has been developing ‘as the extension of competitive markets into *all areas of life, including the economy, politics and society*.’³⁰

For the purposes of understanding neoliberal feminism, this extension of neoliberalism to social and political life is of significance. Indeed, Wendy Brown has criticised scholars for limiting their understanding of neoliberalism to its relevance to economic theory and its ‘idea of a radically free market.’³¹ Instead, she argues neoliberalism has become its own ‘political rationality’, which means that it has gone beyond the mere push for free markets and involves ‘extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action.’³² It is precisely this connection of economic, entrepreneurial values to society and politics that ought to be highlighted when considering the political rationality of neoliberalism. By extending economic liberal rationality to all aspects of life, neoliberalism ‘proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.’³³ This evolution of neoliberalism to develop a political rationality, in addition to its original economic focus, is perfectly captured by the concept of neoliberal feminism.

The focus on the individual as an economic actor and her potential for success if equipped with sufficient entrepreneurial skills and freedoms lies at the heart of neoliberal feminism. By focusing on the economic identity of women, neoliberal feminism puts the individual, her freedoms and the use of those to succeed in the market, at the forefront of her struggle for equality. This economisation of individuals as well as social and political realms has, in the context of feminism, the result that the aim of achieving gender equality becomes an individual struggle for which the woman herself has to take responsibility. She has to make the choice and effort to change her situation, and according to neoliberal feminism she can do so best by becoming the most successful economic actor in the free market rationality of neoliberal theory. As Rottenberg argues, the neoliberal feminist subject has to take ‘full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care’ and as such is ‘mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair.’³⁴ By disregarding the centrality of structural inequality and patriarchy to not only feminist theory but also the struggle for gender equality, neoliberal feminism effectively depoliticises gender inequality and sex discrimination. Neoliberal feminism has successfully moved the focus from powerful actors and their role in perpetuating structural and systematic inequalities to those who are the victims of these systems. By shifting the burden, neoliberal feminism is asking women to change in order to fit in with the neoliberal rationality that has made its way into economic, social and political spheres, thereby allowing those neoliberal structures to not only extend their reach but also to strengthen their dominance.

³⁰ Simon Springer, Kean Birch, Julie MacLeavy, *The Handbook of Neoliberalism* (Routledge 2016), 2.

³¹ Wendy Brown, ‘Neoliberalism and the end of liberal democracy’ in Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton University Press 2003), 38.

³² Brown (n 31) 39/40 (emphasis added).

³³ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press 2005), 2.

³⁴ She further exemplifies this by referring to examples such as Cheryl Sandberg’s book as well as philosophy ‘Lean In’. Catherine Rottenberg, ‘The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism’ (n 8) 420.

This becomes clearer when comparing neoliberal feminism to liberal feminism. Liberal feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, despite their insistence on the significance of individual choices and freedoms as forming central parts of the feminist struggle, looked critically upon the system they were working within and called it out for its structural inequality and patriarchal domination. However, as explained above, neoliberal feminism is solely focused on the capabilities of each individual woman to better her situation without consideration of any systematic and structural discriminations or inequalities which inhibit this progress.³⁵ As such, neoliberal feminism is so deeply embedded in neoliberalism itself that it is devoid of any criticism of the system it stems from. These features of neoliberal feminism leave the question open whether this strand of theory can even be classified as feminist. Whilst the term 'feminism' has encompassed a number of different theories and beliefs with regards to gender equality over the years, one fundamental element of all feminist theories has been the critique of the structural inequalities created by systemic patriarchy. If neoliberal feminism is bereft of this intrinsic feature, how can it be classified as feminist?

Thus, it is unsurprising that neoliberal feminism has not been looked upon favourably by feminist scholars and activists from a range of different disciplines.³⁶ Essentially, it fails to do what feminists have been engaged in since the very idea of feminism came to be: oppose the dominant power structures that are perpetuating, contributing to or failing to address existing gender inequalities. By disregarding the centrality of structural inequality in the struggle for gender equality, and instead focusing on the individual responsibility of each woman, neoliberal feminism removes accountability for gender inequalities from those most powerful and at the centre of decision-making; thereby stripping feminist theory and activism of its very essence.

Shortly after #MeToo went viral, Catherine Rottenberg in an article in Al Jazeera questioned whether #MeToo can go 'beyond white neoliberal feminism'.³⁷ Rottenberg was referring to the criticism that the 'me' in #MeToo and the fact that the movement was conditioned on individuals coming forward with personal stories was in line with the neoliberal feminist paradigm.³⁸ By making it the responsibility of the victim to come forward and recount her experience with sexual violence and/or harassment, #MeToo was said to replicate the essential tendencies of neoliberal feminism by leaving the burden of change to the individual as opposed to drawing it back to the persistence of patriarchal social structures and systemic

³⁵ Catherine Rottenberg, 'The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism' (n 8) 431.

³⁶ See for example Lynne Huffer, 'It's the economy, sister' (*Al Jazeera*, 18 March 2013), <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/03/201331885644977848.html>> accessed 03 April 2019; Julia Zillah Eisenstein, "'Leaning in" in Iraq: Women's rights and war?' (*Al Jazeera*, 23 March 2013), <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/03/2013323141149557391.html>> accessed 03 April 2019; Jodi Kantor, 'A Titan's How-To on Breaking the Glass Ceiling' (*The New York Times*, 21 February 2013), <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/22/us/sheryl-sandberg-lean-in-author-hopes-to-spur-movement.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0> accessed 03 April 2019.

³⁷ Catherine Rottenberg, 'Can #MeToo go beyond white neoliberal feminism?' (n 7).

³⁸ *ibid.*

inequality. Thus, if #MeToo could be said to be in line with neoliberal feminism, the question becomes whether this movement can be said to be at all feminist.

It is argued here that whilst relying on individual victims of sexual violence and harassment to make the choice to share their stories, #MeToo ultimately was able to demonstrate the breadth of the issue that sexual abuse poses to those who either were unaware of it or simply turned a blind eye to it. By creating a platform for victims (and supporters of those victims) to join their voices, the simple hashtag was able to expose the extent to which these crimes are being committed; and it did so not by using emotionally detached quantitative research in the form of statistics, but by allowing for a personal account of these experiences by those affected—the sheer volume of which accomplished what no form of research, let alone statistics, thus far has been able to achieve. In that sense, #MeToo is clearly feminist. The focus on a qualitative rather than quantitative understanding of issues lies at the heart of feminist analysis, after all.

Additionally, #MeToo is an exemplary use of hashtag feminism for the purposes of consciousness-raising. Hashtag feminism is a form of digital activism, which has been used by various feminist movements in recent years in order to raise consciousness about different issues in the context of gender equality. #MeToo has been one (even if initially not planned) in a line of ‘hashtag feminist’ initiatives. These include #BeenRapedNeverReported which went viral in 2014, Laura Bates’ #everydaysexism launched in 2012, as well as #YesAllWomen that followed in response to #NotAllMen which went viral after the misogyny motivated killing spree that left eight dead and fourteen people injured in the US.³⁹ This strategy of hashtag feminism whether intentional in the form of Laura Bates’ explicit project ‘Everyday Feminism’ or whether unintentional and organically arisen as in the case of #MeToo, does not only illustrate solidarity amongst those who come forward, and as such perhaps creates the community of healing Tarana Burke refers to, but also functions as a tool for consciousness-raising that enables women to bring to light that these issues are not solely personal but rather form part of a much broader structural problem.⁴⁰ As Hester Baer explains in the context of previous hashtag feminist movements, ‘[b]y emphasizing the way individual stories of oppression, when compiled under one hashtag, demonstrate collective experiences of structural inequality, hashtag feminism highlights the interplay of the individual and the collective.’⁴¹

Thus, it would be wrong to classify #MeToo as a manifestation of neoliberal feminism when the ultimate goal of such consciousness-raising campaigns is to draw attention to the widespread issue of sexual violence and harassment arising from structural inequalities and patriarchal domination that permeates societies across the world. Whilst it is true that the

³⁹ See Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller, ‘#MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism’ (2018) 25(2) *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 236

⁴⁰ Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller (n 39) 238.

⁴¹ Hester Baer, ‘Redoing feminism: digital activism, body politics, and neoliberalism’ (2016) 16(1) *Feminist Media Studies* 17, 29.

success of #MeToo has been completely reliant on the participation of individuals in the movement, particularly that of victims of sexual abuse, this could be said to be necessary for almost every protest movement. In fact, as with almost all protest movements, there is a need to speak out against the inequality it is targeting; whether this is in form of physical protests such as marching on the streets or occupying buildings, or whether, as in the case of #MeToo it is by creating a digital uprising. Indeed, it could be argued that the #MeToo movement is proof of the ever growing phenomenon of the digital community. No longer restricted by physical borders, the Internet and widespread use of social media from film sets in Hollywood to the war torn cities of Syria, have created the opportunity for digital activism that connects individuals in their struggle for their mutual causes. As the next sections demonstrate, as a form of hashtag feminism #MeToo was able to create this digital transnational feminist movement that has been continuing to raise consciousness about an issue that not only transcends borders but never before has received this amount of attention.

Finally, the repercussions of #MeToo are further proof that it does not fit in the neoliberal feminist paradigm. Since the movement began in October 2017, not only has #MeToo enjoyed continuous attention in politics, media and professional circles, but further has shaken the foundations of some of the dominant structures that for so long have been keeping a stronghold over the way that powerful institutions and individuals have been dealing with instances of sexual abuse. Examples range from the removal of powerful men, including judges, actors, businessmen, politicians and more in a number of countries,⁴² to changing of

⁴² In India, most recently allegations of sexual assault against Bollywood actors by women led to what has been described to have started the 'second wave' of #MeToo in India, after the first attempt led to criticism as a result of the online publishing 'LoSHA' list (List of Sexual Harassers in Academia). See Raksha Kumar, 'Why the 'Me Too' movement in India is succeeding at last' (*Open Democracy*, 7 December 2018) <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/me-too-india-succeeding-at-last/>> accessed 03 April 2019.

In South Korea, lawyer Seo Ji-hyun spoke out publicly about the sexual abuse she encountered by her boss and senior prosecutor Ahn Tae-guen, who in January 2019 was sentenced to a prison sentence of 32 months. Her act further inspired a wave of women speaking out about their experiences of sexual harassment and violence at the workplace leading to multiple resignation by prominent South Korean athletes, actors, politicians and other professionals. See Meighan Stone and Rachel Vogelstein, 'Celebrating #MeToo's Global Impact' (*Foreign Policy*, 7 March 2019) <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/07/metoo-global-impact-international-womens-day/>> accessed 25 April 2019.

In the UK, the Government saw resignations by former Defence Minister Michael Fallon as well as the Prime Minister's deputy Damian Green after accusations of sexual misconduct emerged. See Sian Norris, 'After Me Too, can we trust the UK government to tackle sexual abuse?' (*Open Democracy*, 22 September 2018) <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/after-me-too-uk-government-sexual-abuse/>> accessed 05 April 2019. More recently, the CEO of Ted Baker recently resigned after it emerged that he had behaved inappropriately towards employees, engaging in a hugging policy or unwanted massages. See Amy Tsang and Mike Ives, 'Ted Baker Chief, Ray Kelvin, Resigns Amid Harassment Claims' (*The New York Times*, 04 March 2019) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/04/business/ted-baker-ray-kelvin-resigns-harassment.html>> accessed 19 April 2019.

The U.S. saw a range of powerful men from judges and politicians to actors, sports coaches and many more being held accountable for crimes of a sexual nature that they had been perpetuating for years, as finally victims felt they had the necessary support and space to speak out. See for example Catharine MacKinnon, 'Where #MeToo Came From, and Where It's Going' (*The Atlantic*, 24 March 2019), <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/03/catharine-mackinnon-what-metoo-has-changed/585313/>> accessed 03 April 2019.

sexual harassment policies in a variety of workplaces,⁴³ legislative reform in certain countries,⁴⁴ and in the US a number of celebrities even set up the ‘Time’s Up Legal Defense Fund’ to provide legal assistance to victims of workplace harassment as well as to raise awareness of the many inequalities that continue to stain societies around the world.⁴⁵ These events serve not only as proof of #MeToo being a feminist consciousness raising campaign but further of its success as such. While other feminist hashtag projects have been raising awareness on similar issues, none of them have enjoyed the same attention, nor have they led to such far reaching consequences.⁴⁶

This is not to say that the movement has not faced backlash. In fact, in Egypt for example, efforts of women to use the momentum of #MeToo to break the silence surrounding sexual harassment and violence has led to some being accused of conspiring with anti-government groups, particularly where their alleged perpetrators were powerful men with connections to the government.⁴⁷ In some instances, this even led to prison sentences for ‘spreading false news’, attacking religion or public indecency.⁴⁸ In India, #MeToo faced a wave of criticism, as initially it resulted in the creation of the LoSHA (List of Sexual Harassers in Academia) where anyone could add names of academics to an online list of those accused of sexual misconduct which was then publicly available.⁴⁹ Only in the last few months, has the #MeToo movement, in what has been labelled its ‘second wave’, taken off in India.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, it has largely remained a movement reserved for the elites, only slowly reaching working class and rural communities.⁵¹ Despite these difficulties faced by many of those who have come forward in the wake of #MeToo, the examples above demonstrate the conversations it has started and the doors it has opened when it comes to the question on how we deal with sexual harassment and violence in societies all over the world.

⁴³ Further, in the UK particularly universities are being pressured in reviewing the use of non-disclosure agreements in cases of sexual harassment and abuse, the use of which for silencing victims was highlighted by the #MeToo movement. See

⁴⁴ France was the first country to criminalise catcalling in the aftermath of #MeToo in August 2018. Sweden, encouraged by the Jean-Claude Arnault scandal, strengthened their rape provision, making clear that any all sex without consent constitutes rape, irrespective of the use of violence. See The Local, ‘#MeToo in Europe: New laws on consent and catcalling’ (06 October 2018) <<https://www.thelocal.fr/20181006/metoo-in-europe-new-laws-on-consent-and-catcalling>> accessed 13 April 2019.

In China, where no legal protections against sexual harassment exist, the government, as part of the civil code reform of 2020, has announced the prohibition of sexual misconduct in the workplace as well as provisions that would oblige employers to ‘take reasonable measures’ to prevent such offences from occurring. See Meighan Stone and Rachel Vogelstein (n 42).

⁴⁵ Time’s Up, ‘About Time’s Up’ <https://www.timesupnow.com/about_times_up> accessed 03 April 2019.

⁴⁶ Catharine MacKinnon (n 42).

⁴⁷ Women in the World, ‘Woman tests Egypt’s #MeToo movement, risks government pushback in accusing boss of misconduct’ (25 October 2018), <<https://womenintheworld.com/2018/10/25/woman-tests-egypts-metoo-movement-risks-government-pushback-in-accusing-boss-of-misconduct/>> accessed 03 April 2019.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Raksha Kumar (n 42).

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Aishwarya Iyer, ‘#MeToo Reaches Rural India: ‘Men Have Stopped Sending Us Porn’’ (*the quint*, 18 October 2018) <<https://www.thequint.com/news/india/me-too-sexual-harassment-rural-women-khabar-lahariya>> accessed 03 April 2019.

When considering whether #MeToo can be described as a product of neoliberal feminism, these developments would indicate that the movement is targeted against powerful patriarchal structures attempting to slowly dismantle them from a variety of angles, whether that is in the form of removing perpetrators, supporting victims or prompting political actors to reform existing legal practices surrounding sexual harassment. As opposed to neoliberal feminism, which lays the burden of change on the individual disregarding structural inequalities, #MeToo is clearly targeting those power structures as well as powerful actors who have been systematically perpetuating sexism, discrimination as well as gender-based harassment and violence, and for very long did so without facing any consequences. The above-described aftermath of #MeToo, however, demonstrates how the movement was able to not only hold a small number of these actors accountable, but further push for dialogue on how the issues of sexual harassment and violence, in and outside of the workplace, ought to be tackled in future.

These repercussions and #MeToo's continuing presence in the media as well as in political and legal debates around the world demonstrate that as a consciousness raising campaign #MeToo has been a promising and successful tool for bringing about real change and raising awareness like no other feminist digital activism campaign before. Thus, despite its initial reliance on victim's participation in the movement, it is argued that it cannot be said that #MeToo has fed into or even furthered neoliberal feminism's attempt at individualising the question of gender equality by shifting the burden onto women's shoulders, thereby disregarding deeply entrenched factors such as structural inequalities and patriarchal power imbalances.

IV. So, has #MeToo finally made the 'Sisterhood' global?

#MeToo was not merely limited to the U.S. space where it developed from Alyssa Milano's tweet. Indeed, the many variations and adaptations of the hashtag to different localities and languages demonstrate the cross-border character of this movement. From the French #BalanceTonPorc (roughly translated to 'denounce your pig' or 'snitch out your pig') to #MosqueMeToo as well as simple translations into different languages including the Spanish #YoTambién, the Italian #QuellaVoltaChe, and the Arabic #وأنا أيضاً were twitter hashtags that were used by women around the world to share their experiences with sexual assault and harassment.⁵² This cross-border spread of the movement against the common 'enemy' of sexual abuse has led some commentators, such as former UK Labour party leader Harriet Harman, to exclaim that '[t]he sisterhood is now global'⁵³, which certainly will draw feminists back to 1980s and the calls to mobilise the 'global sisterhood' predominantly advocated for by liberal feminist Robin Morgan's work.

⁵² See for example Kara Fox and Jan Diehm, '#MeToo's global moment: the anatomy of a viral campaign' (CNN, 09 November 2017) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/09/world/metoo-hashtag-global-movement/index.html>> accessed 13 April 2019.

⁵³ Harriet Harman (n 9).

This global sisterhood was a product of ‘global feminism’ and formed part of the wider liberal feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s. It comes best to light in the works of Robin Morgan, who believed that women around the world formed a ‘global sisterhood’ that together could overcome the patriarchy and all its oppressions. The idea of global feminism was expressed most clearly in Morgan’s book *Sisterhood is Global* published first in 1984, which Morgan herself describes as the anthology of the international women’s movement. The idea of depicting the feminist struggle in the form of a ‘sisterhood’ was already visible in Morgan’s first book of the three-fold ‘sisterhood’ collection called *Sisterhood is Powerful*.⁵⁴ However, whilst *Sisterhood is Powerful* was limited to women in the US, *Sisterhood is Global* was an attempt to broaden the sisterhood framework to include women from across the world. By bringing together contributions from women from every possible country (one woman’s account per country), Morgan attempted to create a ‘genuine global movement of women which will have enormous political impact through the end of this century, and will create a transnational transformation in the next century’ and ‘affect every aspect of life and society’.⁵⁵ According to Morgan, this global movement was possible as a result of the ‘shared attitudes among women which seem basic to a common world view’ which stems not from biology but rather from ‘a *common condition* which, despite variations in degree, is experienced by all human beings who are born female.’⁵⁶ The pervasive use of the ‘we’ throughout Morgan’s introduction ought to further cement this feeling of a sisterhood.

The narrative of sisterhood was clearly meant to create the sentiment of proximity and familiarity amongst women in order to unite them against the enemy they all shared, namely patriarchy. However, as explained by Judith Roof ‘the unification of different women into a single sororal protagonist pitted against a figurative father...only tends to complete the erasure of positional differences amongst women (and all issues relating to position).’⁵⁷ Thus, it is unsurprising that global feminism and Morgan’s narrative of a global sisterhood have been severely criticised by other feminists for universalising the experience of women by pointing to its disregard of intersectionality and differences amongst women.

Black and post-colonial feminists were particularly taken aback by this idea of global sisterhood, belonging to a strand of feminism predominantly supported by white, liberal, middle class feminists in the US. Whilst global feminism falls into the category of liberal feminist theories, supporters of diversity feminism, including black, post-colonial and lesbian feminists, vehemently disagreed with the notion of a ‘global sisterhood’ that unites all women in their struggle against the universal problems and obstacles caused by patriarchy. Accusing global, and generally mainstream liberal feminists, of what Angela Harris coined ‘gender essentialism’,⁵⁸ black feminists became frontrunners in advocating for a feminism which took

⁵⁴ Robin Morgan (ed), *Sisterhood is Powerful – Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (Random House 1970).

⁵⁵ Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Global* (n 6) 3.

⁵⁶ Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Global* (n 6) 4.

⁵⁷ Judith Roof, ‘How to Satisfy a Woman “Every Time”...’ in Diane Elam (ed), *Feminism Beside Itself* (Taylor & Francis 1995), 57.

⁵⁸ Angela P. Harris, ‘Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory’ (1990) 42 *Stanford Law Review* 584, 585.

into account differing forms of discrimination women face by acknowledging the significance of intersectionality in this context.⁵⁹ Post-colonial feminists, such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, were quick to follow in their criticism of the disregard for differences amongst women and their experiences in many of the universalising statements made by mainstream liberal and global feminism.⁶⁰ Hence, those supporting a more intersectional approach to feminist studies and activism disagreed with the notion of global feminism and its perception of women's experience as universal irrespective of differing identities or localities.

#MeToo is to a certain degree plagued by similar critiques as global feminism. Thus, the very fact that the original Me Too movement was founded by a black woman but was taken up and initially used by a majority of white middle class white women and Hollywood actresses on Twitter without acknowledging Tarana Burke's and her original Me Too grassroots movement was criticised by many.⁶¹ It certainly does not speak for the 'sisterhood' argument, that Burke's project was not only used by a white celebrity without initially acknowledging its origins, but that it also took a white celebrity in order for it to gain such attention. Instead of a global sisterhood, this rather points towards proof of white mainstream feminism that not only occurs at the exclusion of women of colour but also appropriates their work. Further, black women pointed to the fact that white female celebrities were receiving the support that black women in the industry, such as former ESPN host Jemele Hill, never received.⁶² Indeed, #MeToo has been criticised for a lack of inclusivity when it comes to the consideration of the role of intersectionality in the context of sexual violence with black feminists accusing the movement of contributing to the fact that 'the realities of white women's lives, as opposed to the distinctive harassment employed against black women and other women of color, still define the female experience.'⁶³

While geographically #MeToo was able to spread across the globe and in certain circumstances even adapt to the specific needs of that locality (eg #MosqueMeToo), within a variety of national contexts, the movement was called out for its lack of intersectional awareness. Besides black women, many of the LGBTQI+ community also felt excluded from #MeToo.⁶⁴ Similarly to black women, members of the LGBTQI+ community face double or

⁵⁹ Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' (1989) 1 University of Chicago Legal Forum 139; and 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color' (1991) 43(6) Stanford Law Review 1241.

⁶⁰ See for example Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' (1984) 12(3) boundary 333.

⁶¹ Sandra E. Garcia, 'The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags' (*The New York Times*, 20 October 2017) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>> accessed 10 April 2019.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ Angela Onwuachi-Willig, 'What About #UsToo?: The Invisibility of Race in the #MeToo Movement' (2018) 128 The Yale Law Journal Forum 105, 119.

⁶⁴ See for example Kyli Rodriguez-Cayro, 'Some Members Of The LGBTQ Community Feel Excluded By The Me Too Hashtag, & It's A Reminder Of How Important Inclusive Language Is' (*Bustle*, 19 October 2017), <<https://www.bustle.com/p/some-members-of-the-lgbtq-community-feel-excluded-by-the-me-too-hashtag-its-a-reminder-of-how-important-inclusive-language-is-2953162>> accessed 20 April 2019; Gabriel Arkles, 'Making

triple burdens of discrimination that often make them even more vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment. This disregard for intersectionality in #MeToo was criticised and, as noted above, forms a central critique to the idea of global feminism. Thus, despite #MeToo having spread around the world, it nevertheless cannot be said to have created the ‘global sisterhood’ that Morgan envisaged.

Although the reach of #MeToo and the participation in this form of digital feminist activism can be described as global to a certain degree on the basis of the cross-border reach that the hashtag had around the world, the issue that we are facing is one that has been faced by global feminism since its conception, namely that whilst many women around the world might be dealing with issues that on the surface might be similar, eg sexual harassment and violence, this does not mean that these are the same when looked at with more care, and it most certainly does not mean that the answer and solution to these multifaceted oppressions and marginalisations can be the same.

However, perhaps if #MeToo is not capable of achieving what global feminism in the 1980s attempted to, then that is because the very idea of a global sisterhood was flawed. Instead, I argue that, while not perfect, #MeToo can be said to have the features of a transnational feminist movement. Whilst global feminism falls into the trap of universalising women’s experiences and does so through a Western hegemonic starting point, transnational feminism was developed as a more inclusive and context-specific approach to feminist theory. With reference to the differing uses of #MeToo in a variety of localities, the next section sets out this idea of transnational feminism and demonstrates how #MeToo can be said to constitute a transnational feminist phenomenon.

V. #MeToo – a transnational feminist movement

By arguing for a ‘great need for feminist critiques of the Western model of sisterhood in the global context’, Indrepaal Grewal and Caren Kaplan developed the idea of transnational feminism in their seminal book *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*.⁶⁵ Transnational feminism challenges the idea that women’s experiences around the world can be universalised and as such united under one umbrella of ‘global’ feminism. It argues for a feminism that considers the different subjectivities and ideas of women around the world as influenced by distinctive cultures, histories and beliefs, particularly paying attention to non-hegemonic approaches to and conceptions of feminism, whilst at the same time not denying the potential of transnational cooperation amongst them. When originally devising the theory of transnational feminism, Grewal and Kaplan noted how increasing transnational economic links at the time made multilocational and

Space for Trans People in the #MeToo Movement’ (*ACLU*, 13 April 2018), <<https://www.aclu.org/blog/womens-rights/violence-against-women/making-space-trans-people-metoo-movement>> accessed 20 April 2019.

⁶⁵ Indrepaal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (n 12) 4.

multinational approach to feminist theory ‘imperative’.⁶⁶ Since then the transnationalisation of not only economies but also of other spheres of life ranging from the legal to the social and cultural have increased; not least illustrated by the cross-border reach and effect of movements such as #MeToo.

As demonstrated by global feminist theory, international feminist movements and projects often occur at the exclusion of certain groups of women as well as feminist theories (particularly those from the Global South) leading to a hegemonic system which prioritises Western liberal approaches to gender equality promotion, mostly led and implemented by Western actors. Nonetheless, non-hegemonic feminist theories have been and continue to be developed by different actors in a variety of localities.⁶⁷ Despite the variety of feminist and queer theories and practices developed for the promotion of gender equality around the world, international movements risk the danger of falling into the trap of universalising languages, as seen with the global sisterhood movement, disregarding these varying epistemologies and practices developed by different actors in different localities. Transnational feminism argues for an increased attention to such local knowledges and local actors. By advocating for the *contextualisation* of international movements and norms on gender equality in different localities, facilitated through local actors familiar with the context in question as well as the use of local epistemologies, I claim that transnational movements and international norms have a greater chance of finding success.⁶⁸

One of the central questions posed by transnational feminism is ‘how ... we understand the production and reception of diverse feminisms within a framework of transnational social/cultural/economic movements.’⁶⁹ #MeToo represents such a transnational movement, which is social, cultural, legal as well as political. As described above, not only has it transgressed borders to serve as a social platform for multiple groups of women (as well as certain men and non-binary individuals) to address political as well as cultural issues entrenched in sexual harassment and violence, but it has had an effect on the law as well.

⁶⁶ Indrepaal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (n 12) 3.

⁶⁷ Examples include indigenous feminisms developed and used in the struggle for gender equality in a number of Latin American countries in order to draw attention to not only indigenous epistemologies but further the particular struggle and discrimination faced by indigenous women (see for example R. Aída Hernández Castillo, ‘The Emergence of Indigenous Feminism in Latin America’ (2010) 35(3) *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 539); African women’s struggle for gender equality which has not only led to an influential African women’s rights movement but also to the development of African feminisms (see for example Balghis Badri and Aili Mari Tripp (eds), *Women’s Activism in Africa* (Zed Books London 2017); Gwendolyn Mikell, ‘African Feminism: Toward a New Politics of Representation’ (1995) 21(2) *Feminist Studies* 405); as Muslim women’s efforts in developing the theory of Islamic feminism, whereby they reread and reinterpret the Quran and other Islamic sources in a feminist manner and ground women’s rights in Islamic sources and discourse itself (see for example Ziba Mir-Hosseini, ‘Muslim Women’s Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism’ (2006) 32(4) *Critical Inquiry* 629; Margot Badran, ‘Islamic Feminism: What’s in a name?’ (*Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, Issue No. 569, 2002), <<http://weekly.ahram.org/Archive/2002/569/cu1.htm>> accessed 09 January 2018).

⁶⁸ For an illustration of this argument in the context of international women’s rights promotion see Farnush Ghadery, ‘“Sticking to their guns” – the United Nations’ failure to see the potential of Islamic feminism in post-conflict Afghanistan’ in Ayesha Shahid and Javeed Rahman (eds), *Third Asian Yearbook on Human Rights & Humanitarian Law* (Brill Publishers 2019).

⁶⁹ Indrepaal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (n 12) 3.

Besides the domestic legal changes that followed #MeToo in different countries, the transnational character of this movement is also reflected by the reactions of international bodies. Thus, in the aftermath of #MeToo, not only did Secretary General António Guterres announce that the United Nations would establish a task force on sexual harassment (following the news of a multitude of sexual harassment and violence cases at the hands of UN workers),⁷⁰ but most recently the International Labour Organisation outlined plans for a ‘Convention Concerning The Elimination Of Violence And Harassment In The World Of Work’ where concerns regarding sexual harassment at the workplace highlighted by the #MeToo movement would be tackled on an international level.⁷¹ While the proposed Convention will be voted on in the next ILO Session in June 2019;⁷² it remains to be seen to what extent an international legal instrument would be able to influence such a culturally and socially deeply entrenched phenomenon as sexual harassment and violence.

Thus, there is no denying that #MeToo is in itself transnational. What remains to be illustrated is that it can be classified as a transnational *feminist* phenomenon. In line with transnational feminist theory, a ‘multinational and multilocal approach to questions of gender,’⁷³ or what I have described as *contextualisation* of gender equality norms and movements, is necessary in order to enable the establishment of cross-border social movements that do not slip into hegemonic understandings of feminist theory or activism, nor universalise gendered experiences. If we consider #MeToo to be such a transnational social movement, then a look at its reproduction and reception in the various localities which have either engaged in the use of #MeToo itself or a variation of it inspired by #MeToo, demonstrates not only the transnational reach of this movement but also the idea of contextualisation and multilocality that is so central to transnational feminism.

Thus, taking into account the use of #MeToo in the MENA region or its Arabic equivalent #وأنا_أيضاً, the numbers are not very high.⁷⁴ However, the adaptation of the hashtag to that of Muslim women’s experience with sexual abuse in holy localities (particularly during the *hajj*) gained much greater and more widespread recognition amongst this specific group of women. #MosqueMeToo was started by feminist author Mona Eltahawy after she read a Facebook post by young Pakistani woman Sabica Kahn in which she outlined her experience of being sexually harassed whilst engaging in *tawwaf*, the circling of the Kaaba during the holy pilgrimage to Mecca.⁷⁵ Having seen the success of #MeToo just a few months back, Eltahawy decided to start the #MosqueMeToo and shared her own experience of sexual violence when engaging in the *hajj*.⁷⁶ The tweet went viral amongst Muslim communities around the world and was used in a variety of different languages to direct attention to the

⁷⁰ UN News, ‘UN will ‘not tolerate’ sexual harassment in its ranks – Guterres’ (02 February 2018), <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/02/1001861>> accessed 13 April 2019.

⁷¹ For a draft of the Convention see International Labour Organisation, ‘Ending violence and harassment^[1] in the world of work’, Report V(1), ILC.108/V/1, (International Labour Conference 108th Session, 2019), 15-19.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Indrepal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (n 12) 3.

⁷⁴ Kara Fox and Jan Diehm (n 52).

⁷⁵ Mona Eltahawy (n 4).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

sexual harassment and abuse Muslim women encounter not only during the holy pilgrimage but more broadly in a variety of sacred places.⁷⁷ Indeed, this focus on broader religious settings even led to #ChurchMeToo to be tweeted by those speaking out about their experience of sexual abuse in Christian holy places.⁷⁸

This rings true to the critiques of global feminism that, although women face similar challenges around the world as a result of patriarchal power structures, the experience differs on the basis of the distinct localities and the intersectionality of identities. The different communities participating in the #MeToo movement turned this phenomenon into a transnational feminist movement by taking a ‘multinational and multilocal approach’ to the issue of sexual violence, whether it was their intention or not. Rather than adopting the silencing language of universality and global sisterhood, #MeToo was able to serve as a movement that could be used in response to the pressing issue of sexual violence and abuse as experienced by different communities around the world (or the worldwide web, seeing as #MeQueer for example or #MosqueMeToo did not necessarily have a specific location but arose out of mutual identity traits).⁷⁹ Whilst #MeToo was used by Muslim women in order to direct attention to the problem of sexual harassment and abuse suffered in religious settings, the following sections show examples where #MeToo was used by other communities at the time and in the manner that was befitting to their specific circumstances.

Besides #MosqueMeToo, other groups of women in different countries have made use of the momentum of #MeToo in the circumstances and manner that was appropriate to their respective contexts. In South Korea, #MeToo led prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun to come forward about the workplace sexual harassment she had experienced in 2010.⁸⁰ When the Ministry of Justice of South Korea accused her of making false allegations, Seo went on to post her experience in an open letter on the intranet of her place of work (which she signed with #MeToo) in January 2018. On the same day, she further gave an interview on South Korean TV speaking out about her experience as a victim of sexual violence. That interview is seen as the moment when #MeToo reached South Korea ‘triggering a wave of women’ speaking out about their experiences with sexual violence and protests being held in the country. Seoul even saw a ‘marathon #MeToo protest’ with ‘193 women [standing] at the microphone and told their experiences of sexual harassment for 2018 minutes non-stop.’⁸¹ The South Korean outcry and protests were not without consequences; politicians, poets, actors and many more accused of sexual violence were held accountable and either lost their jobs or at the very least their reputation.⁸² Indeed, #MeToo served as inspiration to other Asian countries as well.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ At least those with access to the Internet. It is not lost on the author that #MeToo really can only serve as a protest instrument to those who have access to the Internet as well as social media, which, of course, leads to the exclusion of a vast amount of women around the world. It nevertheless is seen as worthy to analyse the widespread use that has occurred amongst those with access to the Internet.

⁸⁰ Suyin Haynes and Aria Hangyu Chen, ‘How #MeToo Is Taking on a Life of Its Own in Asia’, (*Time*, October 9 2018), <<http://time.com/longform/me-too-asia-china-south-korea/>> accessed 10 April 2019.

⁸¹ Laura Bicker, ‘#MeToo movement takes hold in South Korea’ (*BBC News*, 26 March 2018)

<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-43534074>>, accessed 06 April 2019.

⁸² *ibid.*

While countries like China and India have been using #MeToo itself, '[i]n Japan, #WithYou has been used to express solidarity with survivors of workplace harassment (an issue with Japan has been grappling with for many years now); in Thailand, women voiced their frustration at being slut-shamed with #DontTellMeHowToDress; and in the Philippines, women have flooded social media and the streets in protest against President Rodrigo Duterte's sexist comments, under the hashtag #BabaeAko (I Am Woman.)'⁸³

Most recently, the video of 17-year-old Khadija outlining how she was kidnapped, raped and tortured by men in her village for two months led to #Masaktach going viral in Morocco.⁸⁴ The bravery of this young woman to speak out about her horrendous experiences as a victim of rape and sexual crime, led to this hashtag which translated to 'I will not be silenced' to go viral.⁸⁵ #Masaktach has been described as inspired by #MeToo, since it was used by Moroccans to voice their outrage and condemnation of the culture of impunity regarding issues of sexual abuse and violence in the country.⁸⁶ As Zineb Belmkaddem, one of the organisers of #Masaktach, describes there clearly is an 'intersection between #Masaktach and #MeToo regarding speaking up publicly and raising the voices of survivors of sexual assault and rape.'⁸⁷

In India, the contextualisation of #MeToo has even led to the movement slowly reaching rural areas (which are generally not as affected by international actions or policies), as demonstrated by the experience of two senior employees of the all-female media organisation *Khabar Lahariya*, which publishes in a variety of dialects for a number of regions.⁸⁸ Faced with receiving unsolicited pornographic images by their male co-workers, the two women took inspiration from the #MeToo protest movement and wrote an open letter in their local languages condemning these actions and demanding that they stop immediately.⁸⁹ As they explained, not many in the region understand the #MeToo movement as a result of its coverage in India being primarily in English, however, when it is reported on in Hindi or regional languages, as in their letter, rural communities do read it and in the case of *Khabar Lahariya* even use it for their own benefit.⁹⁰ Thus, this reach and adaptation of #MeToo to a specific context further reflects the idea of contextualisation in line with a transnational feminist movement.

⁸³ Suyin Haynes and Aria Chen (n 80).

⁸⁴ *Euronews*, '#Masaktach, how the Moroccan #MeToo began' (17 October 2018), <<https://www.euronews.com/2018/10/17/masaktach-how-the-moroccan-metoo-began>> accessed 15 April 2019.

⁸⁵ Souhail Karqam, 'Teenager's Gang Rape Claim Inspires #MeToo Movement in Morocco' (*Bloomberg*, 04 October 2018) <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-04/teenager-s-gang-rape-claim-inspires-metoo-movement-in-morocco>> accessed 15 April 2019.

⁸⁶ Ruqaya Izzidien, 'Morocco's MeToo moment #Masaktach builds momentum' (*The National*, 11 October 2018), <<https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/morocco-s-metoo-moment-masaktach-builds-momentum-1.779421>> accessed 15 April 2019.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Aishwarya Iyer (n 51).

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

A different yet similar development of contextualisation and ‘ownership’ of the movement according to their own terms and struggles, can be seen when considering the LGBTQI+ communities relation to #MeToo. As described in the previous section, many LGBTQI+ individuals felt excluded by #MeToo on the basis of its stark focus on cisgender, heterosexual women.⁹¹ Despite this initial rejection by some at the beginning, #MeQueer was coined a few months later in order to draw attention to inequality issues faced by these communities and grew into a ‘global online storm.’⁹² Addressing the specific issue of being tired of having to hide his marriage to his partner at work,⁹³ the creator of the hashtag used #MeToo as an inspiration and platform to draw attention to problems particularly LGBTQI+ persons are affected by and in a manner that represented them, whilst still fuelling as well as benefiting from the original #MeToo movement.

All these movements, even if they did not explicitly use the original hashtag ‘#MeToo’, can be seen as finding inspiration from the #MeToo movement. Whilst each context might have its own trigger, perhaps even its own hashtag and most certainly its own priorities and objectives, #MeToo can be said to have started a transnational feminist movement against systemic sexual harassment and violence that women around the world have been taking advantage of. Global feminism has been accused of having ‘elided the diversity of women’s agency in favour of a universalized model of women’s liberation.’⁹⁴ #MeToo cannot be said to have fallen in this trap. For those around the world, who used this hashtag or were at least sufficiently inspired by it to create their own variations, #MeToo represented an opportunity to make *their* voices and concerns heard. In this sense, it was able to manifest central features of transnational feminism, namely the need to include ‘viewpoints of feminists from various locations around the globe’⁹⁵ by allowing for its contextualisation in a variety of different local settings by a diverse range of actors.

As can be seen by the continuing momentum of the movement, #MeToo was not a one-off outcry by a few privileged Hollywood actresses that only reached the West. It is a movement that has demonstrated its global reach as well as global force. Whilst rejecting universalising notions of a global sisterhood, I have argued that #MeToo, although not perfect, has been able to fuel a transnational feminist movement by providing a multilocal platform for women (as well as certain men and non-binary individuals) around the world to give voice to problems they face regarding matters of sexual harassment and violence. As a result of the omnipresence of sexual violence and harassment in all societies, #MeToo has been able to direct to a concern not only faced but also experienced by many around the world, while providing sufficient flexibility as a tool to be adapted to specific contexts.

⁹¹ See for example Kyli Rodriguez-Cayro (n 64); Gabriel Arkles (n 64).

⁹² Hugo Greenhalgh (n 13).

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Indrejal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (n 12) 17.

⁹⁵ Indrejal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (n 12) 3.

VI. Conclusion

This article argued that the #MeToo movement represents an online feminist consciousness-raising campaign that has developed into a transnational feminist movement. A transnational rather than global feminist movement, as women, men and non-binary persons around the world were able to use #MeToo and its momentum in order to direct attention to the specific circumstances and issues created by sexual harassment and violence in their respective communities and countries. Thus, from South Korea to Morocco, and from the Muslim world to the Hollywood elites, #MeToo was able to be used by a variety of groups in order to voice their concerns in relation to sexual harassment and violence. Although not perfect, as the initial exclusion of different communities or the publication of the LoSHA in India demonstrate, what all these movements have in common is a dissatisfaction with the status quo in relation to sexual abuse. #MeToo has created a platform for individuals in different contexts to voice not only their experiences with sexual violence but also their dissatisfaction with those in power. As women's rights activist Shalu Nigam described in her article on #MeToo's far reaching effect in India, 'the bureaucratic [sic] as well as the legal system is failing to provide space to women to assert their rights or to fight against the patriarchal forces. In the current regressive environment it is significant that women's agency and choices find space and ... movement[s] such as MeToo facilitate such informal support system and provide a platform where women's voices could be raised.'⁹⁶ Feeling let down by legal systems, politicians, employers, religious leaders and other powerful actors, victims of sexual abuse have taken to digital platforms and online consciousness raising campaigns to not only be heard and find support but also to demand change. As such, the article also rejected the idea that #MeToo can be described as a product of neoliberal feminism. Although the movement certainly depends on and thrives from the participation of individuals, it has been argued here that #MeToo's objectives of effecting change through consciousness-raising regarding systematic inequalities and patriarchal structures in societies cannot be said to have fallen in the traps of neoliberal feminism.

As a digital consciousness-raising campaign facilitated through hashtag feminism and created by victims of sexual abuse, the #MeToo movement does not only demonstrate how deeply embedded sexual violence and patriarchal power imbalances still are in societies around the world, but also that for many the time to stand in solidarity and demand change has come. Thus, whilst #MeToo might have begun as a movement orchestrated by US actresses, it has transgressed to become a transnational feminist movement that although broadly focuses on one issue, namely widespread sexual abuse, has resulted in contextualised and localised manifestations of feminist movements across the world. As such, this cross-border social movement triggered by #MeToo can be said to reflect the multilocal and multinational approach to questions of gender, in this case in the realm of sexual violence, that transnational feminism calls for.

⁹⁶ Shalu Nigam, '#MeToo in India is just a tip of an iceberg and it has shaken the patriarchy to its core', SSRN Paper (23 October 2018), <<https://ssrn.com/abstract=3271508>> accessed 5 April 2019, 1.