



# Sexual Violence and the Shifting Faces of Feminism in the Age of #MeToo and Donald Trump

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On October 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano posted a tweet: "*If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too.' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.*" Within days, millions of such posts, from women all over the world, publicly proclaimed they too had been sexually harassed or assaulted in their lifetime. This provided a match to the kindling of the #MeToo movement, and within the following year, over a dozen high profile Hollywood producers, actors, and other industry personnel accused of sexual misconduct were fired, publicly ostracized and/or faced legal ramifications. The increased public profile for sexual misconduct that ensued was deemed empowering for women the world over. As a result, even more women were expected to report sexual abuses due to what many perceived would be an inevitable change to the predominant cultural narrative about appropriate and allowable treatment for women.

According to annual statistics compiled by the Department of Justice, the percentage of rapes or

sexual assaults reported to police *did* in fact rise from 23% in 2016 (the year that Trump was elected President) to 40% in 2017 during the height of the #MeToo movement (Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) 2017). However, the same cannot be said for reporting between 2017 and 2018. Not only did the percentage of reported sexual assaults decrease from 40% (2017) to 25% (2018), but the rate of actual rape or sexual assaults *more than doubled* from 6% in 2016 to 13% in 2018 (BJS, 2018).

What should we make of the reversal of reported sexual assaults from 2017 to 2018 (with 75% of women not reporting their assaults to the police) and the large increase in assaults experienced by women in the #MeToo era? Were women not empowered, as predicted, to report their assaults to the police? Were men not *disempowered* from assaulting women as a result of the perceived increase in accountability and public shaming exhibited by the #MeToo movement?

During this Summer Internship, we looked at the discrepancies between expected and exhibited outcomes through the lens of President Trump's rhetoric and behavior towards women by examining the role of political leadership in harnessing and legitimizing sexual violence. Finally, we concluded by looking at changes in the feminist movement and how a feminine identity may mitigate and/or inform personal and societal understandings of sexual violence.

## Methods

### Participants

The sample consisted of sixty-five participants at the date of this writing. Of those respondents, 76.9% were Female, 21.5% were Male, and 1.5% self-identified as Non-binary. Over 90% of the respondents identified as Heterosexual, or straight; 4.8% Queer, 3.2% Bi-sexual, and 1.6% Asexual. The largest race category was White, with 81% of respondents. Black or African-American, Asian, and Latinx each comprised 4.8% of respondents. For marital status, 59.4% of respondents were married, 20.3% had never been married, 14.1% were divorced, 4.7% were widowed, and 1.6% were separated. Over half the participants (55.4%) had Doctorate degrees, 27.7% had Masters degrees, 10.8% had Bachelor's degrees, 3.1% had professional school degrees, 1.5% of respondents had a JD or LLM, and 1.5% had a high school diploma or GED.

### Materials

Data was collected via a web-based survey divided into five parts: 1) Demographics, 2) Sexual harassment, 3) Gender equality and gender discrimination, 4) Feminism, and 5) Feedback on the survey instrument. This survey had a total of 97 questions; comprising both closed- and open-ended questions, in an attempt to obtain a more

nuanced evaluation of respondents' perceptions of sexual harassment, feminism and Donald Trump.

## Procedure

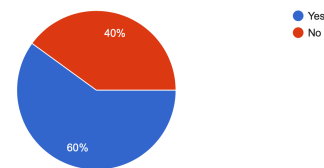
The survey was distributed via a snowball sampling method. Closed-ended questions were assessed using computer-aided quantitative methodology. Open-ended questions were qualitatively analyzed using thematic analysis, by which the most consistent responses were culled from the data and used to establish general parameters of the predominant themes of participants' perceptions and beliefs.

## Findings

### Sexual Harassment

The data revealed that 60% of respondents indicated that they had experienced what they would define as sexual harassment, either in the workplace or in their personal life (with a 100% response rate).

Have you ever experienced what you would define as sexual harassment, either in the workplace or in your personal life?  
65 responses



In a follow-up open-ended question, respondents were invited to provide more detail on what happened and how they responded. There was a 52% response rate to this question. A broad range of responses were given; from catcalling to inappropriate comments to rape. Despite the vast disparity in type of incident experienced, however, the predominant response to the behavior indicated was to ignore it or laugh it off; even though respondents consistently described these incidents as upsetting or uncomfortable.

Respondents articulated this decision not to report and/or respond to incidents of sexual harassment/ assault along three lines of reasoning, listed below, that are articulated in the accompanying quotes:

- 1) Acceptance of sexual harassment as unavoidable, or a “way of life.”

*“As a woman **these things happen all the time**. You learn to just live with it. Most of these things are such a **normal part of life** that you stop even thinking about them...I knew to never show how uncomfortable I felt and to just deal with it, because I learned long ago to expect this kind of behavior from men and to tolerate it as best you can.”*

*“There are endless examples I could give of what I consider to be endemic sexism in academia that I think of as **‘business as usual.’**”*

*“When I was an assistant professor, a colleague made a joke about rape. **That it's like rain, you just have to wait until it's over.**”*

- 2) Concerns for the consequences of defending oneself, or reporting an incident.

*“I used to yell back...but I stopped doing that when friends expressed concerns that **it was dangerous to yell back at them.**”*

*“I did nothing as I was on my first job interview and **he was, obviously, someone who would decide my future.**”*

*“...my husband was in the department, as a contract lecturer tied to my position, and he told me not to make waves...**he did not want me to cause problems that might compromise his position as well as my own since I was untenured. So I did nothing.**”*

- 3) Recall of an earlier incident of having one’s account questioned, or not believed.

*“When I was about 15, I was riding the school bus and a boy boarded the bus and squeezed my breast **HARD** through my shirt. It hurt. I remember yelling at him that he was ‘sick.’ I told my mother about the incident when I got home **and she said, ‘What were you wearing?’**”*

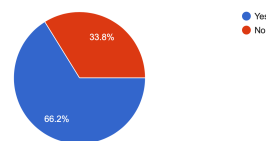
*“...he walked over to me and held my neck and tried to kiss me. The only thing I could do was push him away and ran. Unfortunately I ran into campus security, **who didn’t believe me...**”*

*“I don't want to tell my family members the truth because **I feel like they would just excuse his behavior** as some sort of cultural / machismo type.”*

## Gender Discrimination

When asked whether they had ever experienced any gender discrimination, either in the workplace or in their personal life, 66.2% of participants responded to the affirmative (with a 100% response rate).

Have you ever experienced any gender discrimination, either in the workplace or in your personal life?  
65 responses



In a follow-up open-ended question, respondents were invited to provide more detail on what happened and how they responded. There was a 57% response rate to this question. Qualitative analyses of these responses revealed three themes that predominantly emerged from the data, listed below, that are articulated in the accompanying quotes:

1) Respondents viewed gender discrimination as pervasive, or “*constant.*”

*“Women of my generation **always** had to work twice as hard, do twice as much to get promoted. **This continues in 2020.**”*

*“Students **routinely** comment on my appearance in course evaluations.”*

*“**Every day in every way.**..These implicit biases are shared by both men and women, largely unconscious, but totally pervasive and super destructive.”*

2) Respondents acknowledged an element of punishment that informed their decision on how to respond to instances of gender discrimination.

*“It was early in my career and **I needed the job and the experience**, so I tolerated it and sought to avoid being around this boss.”*

*“Our dean (a woman) thinks that promoting too many women will result in too much cattiness (her words); **I didn't say anything because I'm not tenured.**”*

*“**Punished me** for asking for counteroffer, e.g. lowered my annual review scores.”*

3) Respondents were more likely to have accepted gender discrimination than attempted to fight against it, in work or academia.

*“(I) **accepted it** and tried harder.”*

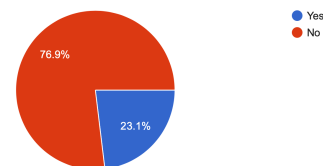
*“I usually don't respond to these types of things, **just ignore them.**”*

*“The individual I current live with is incredibly sexist and makes quips or comments all the time, which **I normally ignore.**”*

## Sexual Harassment/Assaults

A series of questions were asked pertaining to specific acts of sexual harassment and sexual violence; response rates ranged from 98-100%. In sum, 73.8% of respondents stated that they had been subjected to unwanted teasing, jokes, remarks or questions of a sexual nature; 66.2% had been subjected to unwanted sexually suggestive looks, gestures or comments; and, 56.3% had been subjected to unwanted deliberate touching, leaning over, cornering or pinching. A lower percentage of respondents (33.8%) reported having been subjected to unwanted letters, texts, e-mails, or phone calls a sexual nature. Likewise, 30.8% of respondents reported having been subjected to unwanted pressure for dates, and 23.4% reported having been subjected to unwanted pressure for sexual favors. When asked whether the respondent had ever been subjected to actual or attempted rape or sexual assault, 23.1% of respondents answered to the affirmative.

Have you ever been subjected to actual or attempted rape or sexual assault?  
65 responses

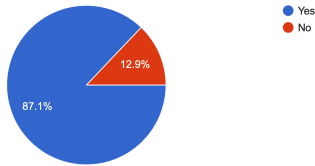


## The Shifting Faces of Feminism

A series of questions were asked that addressed feminism and its impact on both men and women. According to respondents, 92.2% (with a 98% response rate) considered themselves a feminist. In an open-ended question asking respondents what feminism means to them, the overwhelming majority of responses explicitly mentioned, or focused on, gender equality. When asked whether they found important differences in attitudes toward feminism according to age,

87.1% of respondents (with a 95% response rate) answered to the affirmative.

Do you find important differences in attitudes toward feminism according to age?  
62 responses



Analyses of responses to a follow-up open-ended question (with a 75% response rate) revealed a great disparity in answers regarding the role of feminism according to age, or what one respondent termed “*different generational perspectives, like on most issues.*” Some respondents felt that younger women were less likely to consider themselves feminists, as articulated by the responses below:

*“Many young people do not call themselves feminists. They are less likely to help other women.”*

*“Younger women, by and large, hate the word and the phrase. They associate it with bitchy women.”*

*“(I) Think younger generations of women do not realize the gains made; take for granted”*

Other respondents considered younger women bolder and more radical in their approach to feminism, as stated below:

*“Younger women are often bolder, assume they have certain rights. Older women may assume they will face discrimination.”*

*“As a Gen Xer, I've had considerably more difficulty dealing with Baby Boomer feminists than I have with other GenXers or Millennials. Boomers are highly competitive, more used to being either the*

*only woman or one of a small few, more territorial, and more tolerant of misogynistic practices.”*

*“Older women and men have accepted what they deem as a women's place, the norms women can conform to, and what is unacceptable for a women. The younger you are the more reasonable you are on equality for all women”*

## The #MeToo Movement

Respondents were asked to comment in open-ended responses on the importance and impact of the #MeToo movement for them personally, and for society more generally. Analyses of the data, with an 80% and 86% response rate, respectively, once again revealed a great disparity in responses. These responses can be categorized under three main sentiments:

### 1) Positive effects

*“Gratifying! I have been engaged in this issues since my student days and it's wonderful to see it on the front pages.”*

*“Finally, the issues I've worked on throughout my career have come to the forefront! I'm glad to have more of a platform and opportunity for change.”*

*“It may have helped in making it more acceptable for women to come forward if they were abused.”*

*“It got my department to take what happened to me more seriously.”*

### 2) Negative effects

*“Little impact on me personally though I have seen how badly it is put into practice on my campus, where due process is being ignored and we are following rules of law from the 18th Century, with character witnesses instead of factual evidence.”*

*“Many contacts from men who say they have been falsely accused.”*

*“This is where I see the harmful elements of the ‘Me Too’ movement. Some women want to be equal, but then they expect to be treated like princesses...These (women) use feminism as a weapon.”*

### 3) Indifference

*“As a man it has had no impact on me personally.”*

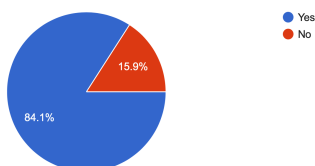
*“Played no role in my life as I was not experiencing those uncomfortable things before.”*

*“The #MeToo movement has really not impacted me personally. The only women who saw some ‘justice’ from this movement were famous/rich/celebrity women, or those women who were lucky enough to have been abused by a man who had several other victims who could align with their testimony.”*

## The Role of President Trump

One issue that many respondents were in agreement on, was the importance of Donald Trump as President. With a 97% response rate, 84.1% of respondents felt that Donald Trump has made a difference for how women are treated that has had an impact on society.

What about the importance of Donald Trump as President? Has he made a difference for how women are treated that has had an impact on society?  
63 responses



In a follow-up open-ended question, respondents were asked to describe what they believe President Trump’s impact to be. An analyses of

responses indicated that respondents overwhelmingly felt Trump’s role was predominantly negative in terms of propagating and legitimizing inappropriate conduct and speech, as articulated below:

*“Donald Trump’s treatment of women as sexual objects has made it more comfortable for all men to treat women with little respect.”*

*“He has ‘made misogyny great again’ ”*

*“His impact was severely detrimental to women, especially his comment on ‘grabbing her by the pussy’ and comments that generally just degraded women into nothing but slabs of meat for men to pleasure themselves with.”*

*“President Trump makes abuse of women okay by publicly defending men accused of abuse and questioning the allegations of women, including calling them outright liars...President Trump essentially provides a blueprint for men on how to get away with sexual assault and a strong warning to women that no one will believe you and the price you will pay for talking will be worse than keeping quiet.”*

Although most respondents saw Trump’s role as negative, some respondents saw a positive side to his rhetoric and behavior in office in terms of inspiring and revitalizing women’s activism, as articulated below:

*“He has inspired women to rise up and protest and run for office...in that way his presidency has been effective in promoting women’s issues.”*

*“On the more positive side, I think his election (and the second year of the woman) have helped revitalize the women’s movement (along with BLM and*

*other movements for marginalized groups).*”

Others did not see any impact from Trump’s presidency. As stated:

*“He has had no impact”*

*“I doubt if many men look up to him. I do not. He does not make it easier, but he does not play the role of a cultural influencer in my social circle.”*

*“Personally, I do not think the treatment of women has changed much since he has been in office- neither worse or better. I believe we are still fighting the same issues we always have been fighting.”*

## Discussion

There are several predominant lines of discourse that arise from an evaluation of the data. The open-ended responses, when coupled with the closed-ended questions, provide a nuanced understanding of the complexity of the issues surrounding the intersecting roles of feminism, the #MeToo movement, and President Trump. Several themes that consistently emerged from respondents’ appraisals are discussed in greater detail in the subsections below.

### Lack of accountability

Many of the respondents cited the lack of accountability for perpetrators of sexual harassment and assault, and gender discrimination, as contributing factors to the increased disparities between men and women. Lack of accountability is not only important to note in terms of the men that “get away” with this reprehensible behavior, but it also is instrumental in understanding why women do not report such egregious conduct in the first place.

“Porn movies at company meeting even social events, and **not turned off when women complained...**”

“**legal system** advances spousal abuse and protects the abuser”

“It has raised awareness but as the Kavanaugh saga illustrates, **much less has changed in regard to actual punishment** for offenders or preventing future abuse”

The continued perceived lack of accountability for perpetrators of sexual violence is a critical component that must be addressed moving forward if individuals are to come forward with claims of abuse. As seen in the BJS data previously reported, the initial surge in reporting following the height of the #MeToo movement, was quickly reversed in the year that followed. This speaks to a change not only in the momentum of the moment, but also a change in women’s beliefs regarding who can be heard (and believed) and under what circumstances.

Issues surrounding shifts in accountability is one of the areas where the impact of the #MeToo movement was most evidenced in the responses of participants, and perhaps where long-lasting changes in the systems of power that govern and propagate normalized standards of behavior will be most impactful. As one respondent stated,

“The impact was/is accountability. Men are finally being held accountable for bad behavior and they are being held accountable in a BIG way. Men are being prosecuted in court, losing their fortunes, losing their careers, and losing their reputations. Also, this is all being done publicly. Everyone gets to see. I think it makes a good case for the importance of accountability in society.”

## Role of those in power

The role of those in power to either reinforce and legitimize sexual violence and gender discrimination, or to publicly rebuke and penalize this type of behavior, cannot be understated. This is especially important when considering the compounding effect of the lack of accountability for offenders and the lack of believability for women, as evidenced below:

“...**senior faculty** told me ‘not to worry about him, that’s just how he is’”

“My (divorced) **parents** knew about it and my father even raised some concerns about it but didn’t explain to me what was wrong with it or try to stop it.”

“I found out years later that my complaint was not submitted to the **department liaison** tasked with meeting with the women.”

“My work and voice were, at times, not given priority by male **management.**”

“I talked to the **ombudsman and the inclusion profession** but they didn’t help.”

The distinction between those that have power and those that do not seems to be an important factor in understanding how people respond to inappropriate behavior perpetrated against them. When people get power, their response to instances of sexual harassment and/or gender discrimination change.

“...as I became older and **had more power**, I worked with other women to demand change in the workplace and in my family. Now I just directly challenge people and tell them to stop.”

## “**power** in numbers”

“It has helped to **empower** women to succeed and to avoid/mitigate/rectify harassment.”

This phenomena not only affects those who expressed feeling a greater sense of agency with increased perceptions of power. A shift in power may also help to explain the increase in cases of actualized abuse reported by the BJS (2018) post the height of the #MeToo Movement, as this newly presented symbolic “competition” over power is consistent with power threat theory (Blalock, 1960).

## Nature of sexual harassment/assault

A review of the types of sexual harassment identified by a majority of respondents as having experienced is revealing. One might have believed that those individuals who commit sexual harassment would do so equally across the board, however these data do not support that premise. Those incidents identified by respondents as having experienced centered on 1) unwanted physical touching, 2) unwanted looks, gestures, or comments, and 3) unwanted teasing, jokes, remarks, or questions of a sexual nature.

The sexual harassment incidents that were not experienced by a majority of respondents were those that involved 1) pressure for dates, 2) unwanted written or phone correspondence, and 3) pressure for sexual favors. This leads one to question the motivations behind sexual harassment and why certain inappropriate behaviors are specifically targeted over others. Each of the three actions least experienced by respondents connote a certain level of intimacy not found with lascivious looks or sexual comments in passing, etc. There is a relationship quality inherent in exchanging correspondence with someone or going on a date with them. These



actions involve an exchange between two parties, i.e. one person asks for a date and the other responds; one person sends an email, text, etc. which often invites, or compels, a response depending on the position/role of the author. Likewise, pressure for sexual favors invokes a quid pro quo relationship that is intimate by its very nature of being a sexual transaction. But the fact that these more intimate, relational aspects of sexual actions were not experienced by a majority of the respondents speaks to the motivation of sexual harassers, and suggests that, consistent with prior research, sexual harassment is more about the desire for power than about the desire for sexual intimacy or sexual “relationships” with their victim.

Finally, although the majority of respondents surveyed did not report having been subjected to actual or attempted rape or sexual assault, the finding that 23% of the sample did report being the victim of such actions is still alarming. This finding is considerably higher than the number of victims of rape or sexual assault (13%) identified by the U.S. Bureau of Justice (BJS) for 2018; the most recent year of data collection. We cannot empirically state an increase in sexual violence due to the fact that attempted and actualized sexual assaults were combined in our survey, and the BJS only counts actualized assaults, however the finding is still significant in that it is clear that in 2020 sexual violence continues to be a prevalent problem.

Furthermore, this problem is overwhelmingly experienced by women. When the data were desegregated by gender, 7% of male respondents reported having experienced attempted or actualized sexual assault or rape, compared to 27% of the female sample. When these data are considered in light of the relatively small sample population of this research study, the figure becomes even more alarming.

## Limitations

There are several limitations inherent to a snowball sample. Responses are limited to those participants who receive the survey, and thereby have a chance to be a participant in the study population. This is not a random process, but rather depends on the known contacts of the researchers. This results in a biased sample of both the pool of participants, but also in regard to the demographic characteristics of the participants themselves.

The sample for this study is comprised of an overwhelmingly white, female, highly educated, upper SES group of individuals. Many of these characteristics are not representative of the country at large. For example, according to the most recent U.S. Census data, less than 5% of Americans nationally have a doctorate degree (Census, 2019) compared with 55% of our sample. These discrepancies are expected to affect the generalizability of our findings to the broader population. Yet, while we acknowledge the limitations of this sample, the data serves as a stark signifier that the current reporting of sexual harassment and gender discrimination, which have long been cited in social science research as especially prevalent among *less* educated, *lower* SES group of individuals, may be drastically understating the prevalence of this problem.

## Future Direction

An expanded research design that reaches a larger audience, and is more inclusive of a broader demographic pool would be very helpful here in terms of generalizability for this study. Since this survey compounded attempted and actualized sexual assaults and rape into one question, there is no way to desegregate the data to determine what percentage of the data reflects actualized sexual assaults and/or rapes, and what

percentage reflects the participant's conceptualization of an attempted assault, to determine whether this is consistent with the Bureau of Justice's methodology. Future iterations of this line of research should be expanded to establish more specific parameters for collecting and analyzing these data. Further research on the potential role of feminism, or a feminist "identity," and the #MeToo movement in mitigating the effects of sexual assault in light of the predominant anti-feminist rhetoric exhibited by President Trump would be helpful in expanding the conversation around this issue and assessing the interplay between competing identities, both on an individual and a group level.

## Conclusion

Sexual harassment and gender discrimination continue to prevail in our society despite the increased attention given to the issue by the #MeToo movement and the increase in public accountability for those accused of inappropriate conduct. This discrepancy between the ways in which society speaks publicly about sexual harassment and gender discrimination, and its continued, persistent prevalence speaks to a larger social issue regarding the standards for normative behavior in our society, and the compounding effects of discrimination and harassment on those who experience it. As stated by one survey respondent, "*Discrimination takes a toll on individual self worth and self confidence.*"

Until women are able to regain the individual self-worth and self-confidence that is eroded by decades of discrimination, women will continue to ignore and allow inappropriate conduct in men. This was never more clearly articulated than by law professor Anita Hill in her response as to why she had not filed a criminal complaint against Judge Clarence Thomas after he

repeatedly sexually harassed her during the course of her employment with him:

*"I assessed the situation and chose not to file a complaint. I had every right to make that choice. And until society is willing to accept the validity of claims of harassment, no matter how privileged or powerful the harasser, it is a choice women will continue to make" (Hill 1998).*

The ways in which pervasive harassment and discrimination set a precedence to other women and men about allowable conduct and speech make the implications of President Trump's role as the President that much more pronounced. The combination of his large, visible platform, coupled with the ingrained authority inherent in his position, reveal that powerful elite figures hold a profound level of weight to the messages that they disseminate to their listening audience.

Society must address the lack of accountability to perpetrators at both the institutional and social level, but this accountability must start at the top with the political and social elite. As long as President Trump is given impunity to speak about women in sexist, crude, defamatory language and openly flaunt his sexually assaultive behavior toward women ("*I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. ... Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything.*" Trump, 2005), then it is unlikely that true change regarding allowable and appropriate conduct towards women will change in a substantive manner; especially if Trump is re-elected in 2020.