

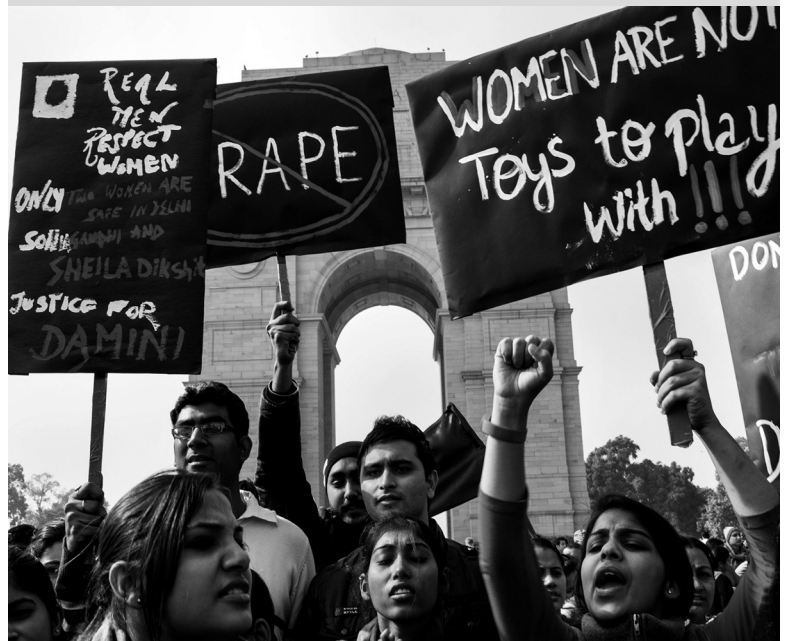
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COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR ACCOUNTABILITY ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

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Collective Struggles Against Sexual Harassment: What We Have Learnt About Pathways to Accountability and their Outcomes^{*†}

Mariz Tadros¹ and Jenny Edwards²

Abstract The #MeToo movement that spread across the internet in 2017 sparked a focus on sexual harassment as an issue; this article, however, highlights the grass-roots work that had been happening for years before this collective action against sexual harassment and which has been hidden by the spotlight on a (white) Western perspective. It argues that this focus not only negates the work done in many other countries and localities, but also risks losing what can be learnt from these places, as well as potentially hindering that work by giving it the label of a Western agenda. This *IDS Bulletin* seeks to pluralise voices, experiences, and insights from the world that offer opportunities for learning. This introduction uses examples from the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* to explore the triggers to collective action and the pathways for mobilising for accountability. It concludes by looking at key issues in relation to collective action for countering sexual harassment.

Keywords sexual harassment, collective action, accountability, #MeToo, mobilisation, feminist, power.

1 Introduction

The words 'collective action against sexual harassment' may immediately conjure up images of the #MeToo movement that spread across the internet from 2017. But the story contained in this issue of the *IDS Bulletin* on sexual harassment shows that collective action predates that movement. Well before the #MeToo campaign went viral across the internet, there have been expressions of collective action around the world – and in the United States (US), by women of colour – that have ruptured silences on the prevalence of sexual harassment, made it extremely difficult for powerholders to bury evidence of its existence, and mobilised successfully so that perpetrators

did not go unpunished and broader institutional politics were challenged. Why were they not looked to for inspiration, learning, and transnational solidarity?

Even '#MeToo', which went viral in 2017 in response to calls by actress Alyssa Milano to speak up against sexual harassment in the film industry, had its origins in a movement with the same name that had been founded a decade earlier by Tarana Burke (Vagianos 2017). While Milano was quick to recognise the origins of the movement, the way in which many parts of the media report on these issues highlights a clear pattern: 'Feminist movements are often whitewashed when they're brought into mainstream conversations. Women of colour are often overlooked and left out of the very conversations they create' (*ibid.*). When Burke was invited to the Golden Globe awards, her initial reaction was 'Why? I'm trying very hard not to be the black woman who is trotted out when you all need to validate your work' (Brookes 2018).

What accounts for this oversight, this non-recognition? Is it that in Western societies (and some non-Western societies as well!), it is acceptable for women of colour to 'represent their own' but not womenkind or humankind at large? Is it that diversity means, as Burke put it, that you are 'trotted out' when the optics of plurality are important but the campaigns you initiate are never good enough to be seen as a trendsetter for the rest of the world?

In 2011, groups of young people initiated a formidable movement that involved a highly effective interface of online-offline mobilisation to respond to a sudden spike in sexual harassment in public spaces (Tadros 2015). Success here refers to an ability to capture the imagination of a deeply patriarchal society about the meaning of women's bodily integrity and to empathise with their messages; success also refers to an ability to encourage hundreds of women to speak up and not feel ashamed; and finally, success refers to receiving hundreds of applications from young people who want to make the streets safe, volunteering to spread the message that it is never OK to harass women.

As co-editor of this *IDS Bulletin*, I (Mariz) shared the idea with an important international donor of bringing the activists to speak to human rights activists, feminists, and development practitioners in the West. Therein was the problem: the case of young people initiating a movement to respond to the spike in sexual harassment was set in Egypt. To sum up the donor's response, 'It is great that there is so much learning. It may be worthwhile bringing together other activists in the Middle East to hear and discuss this.' The message was clear: horizontal learning across the 'global South' is welcome, but the starting point to sharing and disseminating globally starts from the West.

Since the emergence of #MeToo, local activists have capitalised on the media interest in the global spread of the campaign to

highlight aspects of the problem they had been campaigning against in their own contexts. However, instead of using the #MeToo campaign to spotlight local activism which has gone on for decades, the narrative in the media sometimes became one attributing the emergence of local struggles to the global campaign (Kurian 2019a, 2019b; Ajayi 2018).

Such a framing is problematic and even dangerous on several levels. First, it is ahistorical; as Titilope Ajayi, a Ghanaian feminist scholar, writes:

Tagging [#MeToo] as the vanguard in the global fight against sexual harassment implies that the problem didn't come into sight until 'the West' named it. Spotlighting movements like #MeToo has a way of obstructing our vision of longstanding mobilisations on the ground in other parts of the world against the same issues. As much as transnational activism agendas are set in the 'West', a lot of significant movements tackling the same issues – even long before #MeToo – went on or are going on elsewhere (Ajayi 2018).

Ajayi cites the mobilisation in response to the ban on miniskirts in Uganda in 2014, #MyDressMyChoice protests in Kenya, and movements of similar scale and impact in other countries including Nigeria and South Africa in support of her argument (*ibid.*).

Framing local struggles as being inspired by #MeToo can also hinder the work of local movements. As Munshey (this *IDS Bulletin*) notes, movements in the 'global South' can experience pushback if their agenda is seen as coming from the West, a phenomenon which she reports from her experience in Lebanon as being criticised as 'American imperialism in a new form'. Ultra-nationalists and religious extremists have time and time again sought to vilify women's rights as a Western concept intended to corrupt pious local communities while vilifying women's rights advocates as traitors and proxies to the West.

This *IDS Bulletin* aims to represent the genealogy of collective action around countering sexual harassment. Collective action against sexual harassment did not start with the #MeToo campaign and perhaps, if the prospects of learning, sharing, and dissemination were not so skewed in one direction, from the West to the rest, other campaigns that began in other contexts, whether Egypt, India, or South Africa, way before #MeToo, would have also served as the 'spark' of solidarity.

A great deal is at stake here. First, narratives that misrepresent accountability for sexual harassment globally as the offspring of #MeToo inadvertently contribute to the negation of the voices, experiences, and struggles of those who have trod the path of collective action at the grass roots for some duration, and sometimes at great cost. It is almost as if decades of struggle

were wiped out, and their agency reduced to responding to a global campaign. Such a narrative denies recognition where it is due and understandably creates among some, a sense of resentment.

Moreover, the muting of the mobilisation of women and men against sexual harassment globally over many decades risks losing opportunities of learning associated with eliciting positive transformations in the struggle to counter sexual harassment. One of the most powerful messages from #MeToo was about the appropriation of social media for breaking the silence. However, experiences from around the world also offer much learning around questions such as 'When and under what conditions are tipping points reached in transforming an individual or group experience into a campaign of national scale?', 'What strategies of effective mobilisation challenges powerholders?', and 'What does justice or accountability look like?'

In other words, restricting our learning to one global campaign limits the horizons of what pathways of claims-making can look like, and it potentially risks straitjacketing what accountability entails. This *IDS Bulletin* seeks to address the questions of 'What triggers and enables collective action for countering sexual harassment to hold powerholders accountable? Under what conditions is it effective, and under what circumstances is it stalled?' The perspectives shared here from Australia, Benin, Burkina Faso, Egypt, India, Lebanon, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, Spain, and Uganda demonstrate a whole spectrum of experiences from well-defined and visible collective action to contexts where voices are still silenced.

In presenting these perspectives, the intention is not to pitch voices and perspectives from the global South against the West. Such a binary polarisation is counterproductive at many levels. Binary framings of the Western feminist versus the authentic woman have often been politically appropriated for delegitimising struggles as not sufficiently authentic, grass roots, or indigenous (Tadros and Khan 2018). The framing of the championing of women's rights as a Western agenda is used to invoke some imaginary traditional social hierarchy in which women's natural place is to accept their inferiority in the gender hierarchy to men (Tadros and Khan 2019). In such contexts, local feminist activists can sometimes find themselves not only fighting local hostilities but also Western feminists who are judging them as too elitist/secular/inauthentic to legitimately champion a women's rights agenda.

Thus, in critiquing the power dynamics that have informed the representation of collective action around sexual harassment, the intention here is not to inadvertently entrench binaries. The intention is also not to deny that international movements can energise, galvanise, and open spaces for national and local

movements to become more visible and have their voices amplified. For instance, as Ayesha Khan (2018) notes in the context of aid agency support for women's movements in Pakistan and the campaign for a women's quota in elected assemblies in the 1990s:

Activists who took part recalled how aid agencies took decisions during the 1990s within a broader global context that gained momentum from a strong international feminist movement and landmark UN conferences – Vienna '93, Cairo '94 and Beijing '95 – after which Pakistan committed to act on women's rights and signed CEDAW [Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women] (Khan 2018).

Rather, our goal is to pluralise the voices, experiences, and insights from around the world that offer opportunities for learning and potentially forging new solidarities.

Before engaging with the themes of this *IDS Bulletin*, we briefly interrogate, in Section 2, the concepts of collective action, sexual harassment, and accountability. In Section 3, we explore the tipping points, and the triggers, that elicit action that brings people together, and in some cases, generate a snowballing. In Section 4, we explore the pathways of mobilising for accountability in terms of modalities and tactics and the sites and spaces. Finally, in Section 5, we identify three key points that have particular relevance to the praxis of organising to achieve accountability outcomes for redressing sexual harassment.

2 Framing our enquiry

The framing of this critical enquiry requires defining how we use terms such as 'sexual harassment', 'collective action', and 'accountability' as well as some elucidation of the underpinnings of our framing.

There is no internationally agreed definition of sexual harassment. There are often legal definitions emanating from generic criminal law or sometimes embedded in gender-based violence legislation. What constitutes sexual harassment and what does not is complex, given that it is not only about the nature of the physical contact, but its intention, whether it was consensual, and how it made the person receiving it feel. The UK Equality Act defines sexual harassment as 'unwanted conduct of a sexual nature which has the purpose or effect of violating someone's dignity, or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for them'.³

The key words here are 'unwanted' which suggests non-consensual; the words 'purpose or effect' convey intent and impact. The words 'creating an environment' may be very broad; however, the way sexual harassment itself is being expressed is now broader than decades ago. For example, sexual harassment

is now often carried out via online spaces and on the phone. This has taken many forms: girls and women are blackmailed through sexually compromising images and videos of themselves; they are sent demeaning or intimidating sexual messages via the phone; and in social media spaces, they are 'trolled'⁴ with comments explicitly targeting their bodies. The UK Equality Act definition is by no means standardised or universalised, and in many contexts, there are dynamic debates regarding what constitutes sexual harassment.

In this *IDS Bulletin*, the contributors are engaging with phenomena that broadly speak to the definition above. They discuss forms of sexual harassment that encompass everything from name-calling, touching, and groping, to digital forms. The contexts that contributors describe, as with others globally, are ones where sexual harassment occurs side-by-side with forms of gender-based violence that are distinct, such as rape. It is important here to note that this issue of the *IDS Bulletin* does not engage with rape as a weapon of war or its use as an instrument of genocide. There is a rich and prolific scholarship on sexual violence in relation to UN Resolution 1325 (UNSC 2000) which recognises the impact that conflict and war has on girls and women. While we recognise that sexual harassment exists on a continuum of gender-based violence that also includes the use of women's bodies as a battlefield for broader geo-strategic goals, this lies outside of the scope of this *IDS Bulletin*.

While most contexts in this *IDS Bulletin* engage with sexual harassment in public spaces, there is a recognition that the demarcations between the public and private are blurred, as for example, pertaining to the position of domestic servants (see Munshey, this *IDS Bulletin*). The lines of responsibility for action are sometimes also blurred; for example, in the case of women on ships who cross different national jurisdictions in a context of the absence of a universally agreed maritime law (see Tangi, this *IDS Bulletin*).

Sexual harassment is often experienced at an individual level, though sometimes it is experienced *en masse*. In this *IDS Bulletin*, we particularly focus on the relationship between the individual and the collective. When women experience individually a violation of their bodily integrity, sometimes this has significant implications on their coping strategies. First, there is the individual sense of responsibility: was it my fault? Was there anything in my appearance, character, or behaviour that elicited this? Second, there is the question of how powerholders will react: will schools, universities, places of employment, the police, the judiciary, etc. engage with the complainant as a deviant? Third is the prospect of redress: what will come out of it?

On account of these and many other factors, one of the most critical issues with countering sexual harassment is breaking

the culture of silence. And the kind of silences that need rupture are many: the silence with regard to blaming assaults on bodily integrity on what women wear; the silence around the conditions under which women are seen as 'fair game', in particular, when they come from despised classes, ethnic groups, religious minorities, and so forth; and the silence around the fact that in some contexts, these are not unconnected cases, but of broader cultures, sometimes reaching epidemic proportions. There have been many brave women and men who have broken this silence singularly through their testimonies, their legal battles, and media advocacy. However, it is when they capture the imagination of others that they are able to create strong ripple effects. This interface between individual experience and broader societal engagement is, for us, key to understanding how the status quo is challenged.

Collective action, this *IDS Bulletin* argues, is critical for transforming sexual harassment into an issue that is everybody's business. We borrow Tilly and Tarrow's (2007: 5) definition of collective action as 'coordinating efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs'. Collective action can take a myriad of forms involving different levels of organisation, unity, and mobilisational power. Collective action can express itself through one-off events such as protests and marches, to more sustained and ongoing forms of activism such as campaigns, coalitions, and movements. In looking at how this is triggered, how the silence is broken, we draw on Rowlands' understandings of power, as power from within, power with, power to (Rowlands 1997). The 'power within' is the strength inside individuals that forms the basis of 'self-acceptance or self-respect', which is an important ingredient of working towards 'power with', i.e. the power of individuals to work together to solve issues, and from thence the 'power to': 'generative or productive power that creates new possibilities' (*ibid.*: 13).

However, the exercise of power with or collective action needs clear actors that are being held accountable. This collective responsibility needs a face: actors to whom we can direct our claims and hold to account. Most understandings of accountability are underpinned by two principles: (1) answerability – the responsibility of duty-bearers to provide information and justification about their actions, and (2) enforceability – the possibility of penalties or consequences for failing to answer accountability claims (McGee and Gaventa 2011: 11). Accountability is not a concept that is easily translatable to other languages, and the contexts in which women and men are mobilising are not ones where even governments recognise citizens' entitlement to hold them to account in the first place.

For example, in the Arabic language, the literal word for accountability, '*mouhasaba*', immediately conjures the word 'accounting' since they are the same. Some academics have been reluctant to take an approach that is premised on 'we will

recognise accountability when we see it'. Such an approach, they would argue, runs the risk of diluting accountability of any concrete meaning. In this *IDS Bulletin*, we seek to take an approach that recognises the need for some level of conceptual rigour, while also being inductive, drawing on the experiences of actors on the ground to inform what accountability means in a contextualised manner.

3 Triggers to collective action

Triggers to collective action can emanate from seemingly single voices calling out unacceptable behaviour after years of frustration with a lack of institutional answerability, whose voices are then joined by others. Or they can come from humanity-shaking acts of violence so indescribably awful that they spur anger and action; for instance, the gang rape and murder of a young Indian university student in Delhi in 2012. In some cases, collective action is taken in the name of the cause even when the subject herself has not sought representation or has not engaged in the delegation of others to speak on her behalf. Collective action occurs when the subject of sexual harassment comes to be emblematic of a broader phenomenon where people can legitimately say 'if it can happen to her, it can happen to us'.

The contributors to this *IDS Bulletin* highlight a few such trigger moments: the speech by the marine captain in the Philippines sharing her experience of sexual harassment (Tangi, this *IDS Bulletin*), the posting on Facebook of a list of Indian academics alleged to have committed sexual assault (Dey, this *IDS Bulletin*), and the sexual harassment of a young student caught on CCTV at Cairo University (El Said and Hamada *et al.*, both this *IDS Bulletin*). For the few who do take the first brave step in speaking up, this can be a demonstration of 'power within', which Kabeer suggests is a necessary step before moving to 'power to': undertaking action for control of our own resources, agendas, and decision-making (1994: 229). But for action and voice to be sustained and to effect institutional change and accountability, there needs to be collective action and the 'power with' (Rowlands 1997). This is the power that comes from people working together for a common goal; as Cornwall and Edwards note, it 'comes from being embedded in kin and community relationships, principally with women, which enable women to gain the power to act' (2010: 5).

These triggers ignite action, but they do not happen in a vacuum. They occur in the context of grass-roots work, like a fireworks display which bursts into life but where the work to get there is hidden from view. This is the case with the #MeToo movement. Tarana Burke had been working with young female survivors of sexual abuse for ten years under the banner of 'Me Too', before #MeToo taken up on Twitter acted as a flashpoint (Garcia 2017). These kinds of actions can move things forward and create a snowball effect as they did to an incredible extent in the #MeToo

example: the tweet was shared 12 million times in the first day (*ibid.*). The articles in this *IDS Bulletin* demonstrate a spectrum of experience on the path to collective action for accountability and they all show that this is a long and hard journey.

In the case of the Philippines' seafarers, Tangi (this *IDS Bulletin*) shows how women seafarers sharing their experiences of sexual harassment proved cathartic, but also paved the way for the women's committee of the seafarers' union to work together to mobilise for a sexual harassment policy to be included in contracts. This sits within a context of gender inequality, with the first Filipino women only entering the seafaring industry in the 1990s. In India, Dey (this *IDS Bulletin*) explores how the publication of a list of academics accused of sexual harassment led to a student movement mobilising against sexism and sexual abuse. The students were frustrated by years of inaction and the inability to get their complaints heard through the system. This example, however, complicates the idea of 'power with' as the publication of the list on Facebook split the young student feminists from some older feminist academics causing 'a civil war in Indian feminism' (Ghosh 2017 cited in Dey, this *IDS Bulletin*) over the way the names were shared.

The examples from Egypt (El Said and Hamada *et al.*, both this *IDS Bulletin*), show how one incident can be the tipping point towards action, setting in train the establishment of anti-sexual harassment units within universities to hold abusers to account. Yet the process to get real accountability is still ongoing. Along with other issues, without independent financing, the work of the anti-sexual harassment units is hampered. At the other end of our spectrum of collective action, running from visible and organised to less visible and isolated, is the article from Steiner and Spear (this *IDS Bulletin*) which looks at sexual violence in schools in Benin and Burkina Faso. The authors detail an experience which is still unformed, noting that 'mobilisation against sexual violence in schools within the last decade lacked a critical mass', although there are some pockets of resistance at the grass roots. Drawing on Novelli (2010), Weldon and Htun (2013), and Jaffe (2018), Steiner and Spear make an important point about the ingredients missing from these contexts which we see elsewhere:

a privileged class willing to continually and sustainably speak out... long-term activists and legacies of women's movements... building steps toward collective action with an increased critical mass of opposition, and friendly international media sources that support the movement (this *IDS Bulletin*).

The Pakistan study from Khan, Yousuf and Naqvi (this *IDS Bulletin*) provides a salutary lesson for what happens when someone bravely speaks out, but the action fails to trigger collective support or action. The authors highlight the case of Ayesha Gulalai, who claimed that she had received unwelcome

text messages from her party leader. Despite her saying that other women in her party had had similar experiences, only women from other political parties supported her. Ultimately her career was wrecked, and she left the party.

4 Pathways to accountability

The pathways to accountability for sexual harassment via collective action are ridden with conundrums, ethical dilemmas, and hidden and invisible power dynamics. A courageous woman rupturing the silence by public testimony may propel a centripetal coalescing of women and men who want to support her quest for justice, but consensus still needs to be established about what strategy/strategies to pursue for accountability. Divergence on how to strategise may lead the movement to disintegrate. Even when collective actors agree on the agenda, the struggles are endless because of the scope of the hostilities and opposition they face from counter-organised movements and powerful individuals. For example, Khan *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) point to the role of the media in normalising derogatory and inflammatory language towards women politicians in parliament by its repetition and dissemination. As they note, 'verbal insults to women – normalised in everyday exchanges – become amplified when they are reported in the media'. Moreover, when collective actors are mobilising for institutional change, this requires sustained activism over years, perhaps decades and this is not always easy to maintain emotionally, financially, or politically.

Thinking about accountability in the long haul is not always easy. Against the backdrop of the popularity of 'advocacy campaigning' in the twentieth century, sometimes we have been conditioned to think about pathways for change in boomerang terms: citizens/organisations mobilise, policies change, citizens/organisations revert back to collective action to ensure enforcement. This theory of change is problematic. The pathways to policy change can be opaque and ridden with behind-the-scenes actors' actions. Years of mobilisation for a policy change may be reversed in a strikingly short time by popular reactionary movements' counter-mobilisation. While recognising the centrality of organising as 'a major route to change and a key pathway of empowerment' (Pathways of Women's Empowerment 2011: 9), the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* are a sobering reminder that any romanticisation of collective action that overlooks the conundrums at hand will be at our own peril, if we are to achieve accountability with teeth. Of the many such conundrums, here we will briefly touch on three.

4.1 Protecting those seeking accountability

One of the major struggles facing women and men engaging in collective action to address pervasive forms of sexual harassment is the personal safety risks emanating from state crackdown and non-state individual and collective actors' pernicious assaults on them. Undoubtedly, to speak truth to power will always come at

a price, and challenging norms, values, and practices that have enabled those who have engaged in sexual harassment to avoid accountability is going to be a battle. However, it is important also that in defending the rights of the survivors of sexual harassment, we consider ways of shielding participants in those struggles from becoming objects of trolling, abuse, and even physical violence. Such shielding is required both for the survivors as well as for those whom they have delegated to speak on their behalf if the latter are also in vulnerable positions.

The cases from Lebanon (Munshey, this *IDS Bulletin*) and on crowdmapping across various contexts (Tanner *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*) are examples of organising under the radar and in safe spaces. In Lebanon, a context where migrant and domestic workers are extremely marginalised and vulnerable, being entirely within their employer's power in terms of living in their house and often having to forfeit their passport to them, Munshey (this *IDS Bulletin*) describes how the women 'turn to a limited underground network for support' using their only day off a week to join with colleagues to advance their rights. This has echoes of the domestic worker movement in Brazil about which Creuza Oliveira (former domestic worker who became President of the Brazilian National Federation of Domestic Workers) notes:

It is fundamental to establish partnerships with organisations and entities of the social movements... The objective is to fortify the struggle of the domestic workers also incorporating the agenda of these movements, in the struggles against racism and sexism (Goncalves 2010: 66).

Describing the Free to Be project, which crowdmapped women's experiences of sexual harassment across Delhi, Kampala, Lima, Madrid, and Sydney, Tanner *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) note the importance of respondents' entries being anonymous, not only to ensure their safety but also to overcome a reluctance on the part of women to share their experiences, particularly if they have been met with resistance or a lack of response from authorities when previously reporting incidents. This process facilitates the sharing of stories which paints a powerful picture of a pattern of sexual harassment across urban spaces around the world – providing a valuable tool for activism while shielding participants from myriad sources of vulnerability.

4.2 What kinds of outcomes constitute accountability?

There are sometimes dangers in confusing mobilisation (which can be a positive result in and of itself in terms of developing the concept of 'power with' and 'power to'), and a change in policy or practice which is the end goal. Such conflation is understandable given that both can constitute change in the status quo: mobilising brings a rupturing of the existing inertia with action while pushing for a change in policy or practice in the desired direction.

However, if accountability only counts when laws and policies are changed or 'have teeth', then the situation, as described by the contributors to this issue, looks bleak. In Benin and Burkina Faso, Steiner and Spear (this *IDS Bulletin*) observe that laws are not applied as they are too vague and there is not enough investment to ensure their integration. Instead, pervasive patriarchy and rigid social norms translate into sexual harassment, causing shame for a girl's family, meaning that survivors have no family support, there are no mechanisms for reporting incidents, and perpetrators are left unpunished. In Lebanon, similarly to Benin and Burkina Faso, Munshey (this *IDS Bulletin*) notes that the reporting system is inadequate, particularly for the most marginalised such as domestic and migrant workers, and this is exacerbated by a lack of trust in the authorities. Tanner *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) note that a lack of trust in the system means that many incidents of sexual harassment go unreported in cities.

In Pakistan, although progressive laws have been introduced, particularly the law against sexual harassment in the workplace in 2010, women politicians, who have to work in a toxic environment of verbal harassment and threats to their safety, have felt unable to report or progress any cases, due to this oppressive organisational culture (Khan *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*). In the Philippines – as in Pakistan – there is a sexual harassment law, but for this to have real meaning and 'teeth' in the context in which seafarers work, Tangi (this *IDS Bulletin*) notes that this needs to be integrated into seafarers' contracts.

In the universities in Egypt, anti-sexual harassment units are being established to tackle harassment on campus which is a positive move, but there are still issues, as Hamada *et al.* and El Said note (both this *IDS Bulletin*). The units lack independence from the university which hampers how cases are dealt with; it is rare for a verdict to be implemented against a professor, and in a case where a student is accusing a professor, it is not unknown for the student to suffer repercussions.

However, in all of these cases, the presence of these forms of contestation have changed the power equation. True, in the immediate term, the outcomes they aspire to achieve may not have been fully accomplished, but this does not mean that accountability is unachievable. It may be that the timing of the assessment of accountability outcomes may need to be rethought. In other words, in order to fully appreciate the contribution of collective action for addressing sexual harassment to accountability outcomes, we may need to assess these very contexts and cases in five or even ten years' time. Sometimes accountability outcomes cannot be delivered through fast delivery or fast-tracking. The impact of collective action requires that accountability is conceived of for the long haul.

4.3 The end versus the means in feminist accountability struggles

In the case of the anti-sexual harassment struggles in India discussed in this issue, Dey (this *IDS Bulletin*) shows that it was the frustration of years of getting nothing achieved through using the formal mechanisms that led students to use a more drastic method of naming and shaming via social media. Raya Sarkar, a law student, posted a crowdsourced list on Facebook of male academics accused of harassing students in Indian academia. The shock caused reverberations around the Indian academic sphere, and an important case for this tactic is that it gets the conversation out into the open. However, as Dey reports, there are concerns for due process when claims are not supported by evidence and there is a complete withholding of survivors' identities. It is important to note here that the divergence is not over the goal. There needs to be a zero tolerance policy towards all forms of sexual harassment, a holding to account of perpetrators, and an assurance of redress for survivors, instituted at all levels.

Moreover, the contention here is not around the normative values underpinning the struggle for accountability – those feminists choosing naming and shaming as a strategy and those expressing concern over due process come from a common point of departure. This point of departure is that there are power inequalities in institutional politics which obstruct survivors' chances of securing justice through official channels such as the legal and judicial pathways. The issue here is whether in the absence of an equal playing field and with biased formal pathways of accountability, naming and shaming without giving detailed evidence is justifiable.

This raises important ethical questions of a political philosophical nature. Ethically, is naming and shaming justifiable without a survivor speaking out herself or himself, and in the absence of detailed evidence? Just by dint of the fact that the actor is a feminist, should their naming and shaming therefore be taken for granted as 'truth'? Some advocates of gender justice are uncomfortable with this because it assumes that feminist claims-making is necessarily always and consistently in a position to make superior moral judgement and can never be driven by ulterior agendas. This poses a moral dilemma: in their claims-making, should feminists not be held by the standards that everyone else is held to, namely, to provide evidence for accusations or at least to allow survivors to speak for themselves?

The ethics of claims-making for addressing sexual harassment is not one of simply political philosophy. The 'means to achieve the end' (accountability for sexual harassment) are of such importance to collective actors that on occasion, such as in the case study presented by Dey (this *IDS Bulletin*), they risk creating real schisms within movements. Disputes over the legitimacy of claims-making in the absence of due process can escalate

into attacks not on positions but on the people or organisations behind them. This not only challenges the strength of collective action, but it paves the way for opponents to critique feminists as holding others to account for values that they themselves do not uphold. The word 'witch hunt' becomes particularly poignant in this case. Historically, women were the objects of vicious witch-hunt campaigns; however, if allegations are made about perpetrators of sexual assault without evidence or the survivors themselves speaking out, some are concerned that feminists would become seen as instigators of a different kind of witch hunt.

5 Collective action for accountability in addressing sexual harassment

In this section, we offer three key points. First, collective action may not be the only path towards achieving justice and accountability in relation to sexual harassment, but as this *IDS Bulletin* shows, its contributions are significant in terms of providing 'power with'. When an individual on her/his own speaks out against sexual harassment, opponents may launch vicious smear campaigns targeting her/his personal character, behaviour, or both (see Khan *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*). A collective front makes speaking out less traumatising and helps to empower individuals to withstand vulnerability to such forms of assaults.

Moreover, the process itself of coming together – independently of the outcome – can be empowering. In a context where, as Tanner *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) note, 'sexual offences more broadly face low levels of reporting and successful convictions', the Free to Be tool allows women to experience 'power with' by sharing their stories and thereby experiencing agency by giving them an action to take against the perpetrators. Moreover, when collective action is undertaken by the survivors themselves, it supports the legitimacy of the claims-making. As a migrant domestic worker (MDW) representative in Lebanon says:

*Throughout the years there has been a growing number of groups that are self-led by MDWs. Like we see in the last three years, less dependency on NGOs [non-governmental organisations] and more groups trying to help each other and trying to form their advocacy and also their community work so that's a great positive change because they're the ones who are more aware of their needs... (Munshay, this *IDS Bulletin*)*

When the claims are informed by data gathered from hundreds, perhaps thousands of survivors, it makes it more difficult to deny its prevalence. The Free to Be project (Tanner *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*) like others such as HarassMap and Fiu Fiu (Peuchaud 2014; Berke 2018) show the power of collectively gathering data to demonstrate the scale of street sexual harassment and to bring the conversation into the public domain.

Second, collective action for accountability for redress for survivors of sexual harassment is an absolute necessity in view of the strength of anti-feminist movements who collectively organise to circumscribe women's rights. Kretschmer and Meyer (2013: 393, in Tadros 2016: 51–52) define anti-feminist movements as 'those meant to counter the claims and gains of feminist movements, protecting or restoring traditional gender norms. They are, understandably, generally conservative in nature, defending traditional gender roles for both men and women'. Against the backdrop of the growing power of ultra-nationalist and extremist religious movements, anti-feminist movements that are committed to reversing the gains made by feminist movements are gaining ground.

It is important to note that anti-feminist movements are not movements that diverge on only some ideas or issues in the gender equality agenda. Rather, they reject the fundamental legitimacy of a movement that is ideologically committed to women's liberation (see Tadros 2016). In the case of Egypt for example, when women protestors were being exposed to sexual violence in Tahrir Square, anti-feminist activists challenged the very right of women to be protesting in the first place and decried the feminist movement mobilisation for the right of women to be occupying such spaces.

Such attacks are not only in Egypt. Anti-feminist movements are thriving in India, Pakistan, and elsewhere, and they are engaging in collective action, making their claims-making on the basis of their right to be heard, the strength of their numbers, and being able to claim they are speaking on behalf of women who have delegated them with this right. They too are making counter-accountability claims *vis-à-vis* powerholders. A lack of attention to movement building to break the silence on the impunity of those who engage in sexual harassment will serve to strengthen the counter-claims of anti-feminist movements that demand that women go back to their homes to avoid sexual harassment 'by strangers'.

Third, there needs to be a commitment to plurality within anti-sexual harassment movements (Langohr 2013, 2015; Tadros 2016). Historically, women's movements have recognised that achieving gender equality requires the pursuit of multiple strategies, entry points, and perspectives (Aina *et al.* 2019; Nazneen and Sultan 2010). It also requires a recognition of the plurality of actors themselves and their different backgrounds, insights, and standpoints (Mohanty 1988). This plurality has to exist within loose parameters of a commitment to women's equality, but by and large, attempts at homogenising identities or strategies are counterproductive.

The case studies in this *IDS Bulletin* attest to the plurality of actors that coalesce into a collective front to counter sexual harassment

as well as the diversity of strategies deployed. However, as we can see from the case study outlined by Dey (this *IDS Bulletin*), contestation around approaches in terms of ethics, for instance, not only influence the prospects of achieving the desired outcomes but also the cohesion and continuity of the collective actors themselves. When advocates in anti-sexual harassment campaigns differ on strategies, how can open disagreements occur without vilification and while resisting the temptation to call those with whom we diverge 'traitors to the cause'?

5.1 Accountability for the long haul

There have been many instances where collective action for countering sexual harassment has elicited transformational change in laws, practices, or even discourses – the anti-sexual harassment units at Egyptian universities discussed by El Said and Hamada *et al.* (both this *IDS Bulletin*) are just one example. However, as most case studies in this *IDS Bulletin* demonstrate, the struggle for recognition is one that is neither unidirectional nor linear. There are incremental successes, but also setbacks that require regrouping to press forward again.

Often there is no fast track to achieving accountability outcomes. Court cases may take years. Policy shifts may contain loopholes. The recognition of zero tolerance towards sexual harassment in public discourses may continuously be challenged by those who wish to enforce qualifiers on the basis of dress, character, or others. Repertoires for claims-making are critical to sustain the struggles for challenging the systems and practices that perpetuate a culture of impunity *vis-à-vis* how sexual harassment is handled. While in some instances the momentum and the will to press on is lost, in many other cases, it is not so much about whether accountable outcomes are possible, as opposed to when we choose to assess the situation. Accountability must be for the long haul.

Recognising the successes of activists fighting sexual harassment, wherever they are located, is essential to the global fight against this phenomenon. The #MeToo case study and its beginnings, as previously mentioned, is particularly instructive. Most Americans initially learnt of #MeToo through the testimonies of privileged, largely white film-industry survivors of sexual harassment by Harvey Weinstein. Yet #MeToo was started by a black woman, Tarana Burke, in 2007, as a way to support young women of colour who had survived sexual assault. Writing in the *Washington Post* in 2017, as the #MeToo movement became a household term in the US, Burke noted that:

I often say that sexual violence knows no race, class or gender, but the response to it does. 'Me too' is a response to the spectrum of gender-based sexual violence that comes directly from survivors – all survivors. We can't afford a racialized, gendered or classist response. Ending sexual violence will

require every voice from every corner of the world and it will require those whose voices are most often heard to find ways to amplify those voices that often go unheard (Burke 2017).

Notes

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- † We are grateful for the very helpful feedback provided by Dr Vicky Langohr and Professor John Gaventa on an earlier version of this article. All errors of fact and interpretation remain those of the authors alone.
- 1 Mariz Tadros, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 2 Jenny Edwards, Project Manager, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 3 See **UK Equality Act (2010), Section 26**.
- 4 'Trolled' means to experience an anonymous person making deliberately insulting and/or hurtful comments about you on the internet.

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