

Hashtags and gender equity aren't about either.

They're really about having a voice. Sexual harassment, assault, bias...none of these are new. What is new is our access to information and our access to each other. For folks who have survived harassment, assault, bias, or all three (myself included) hashtags give us a way to stand up, speak out, and connect with each other. We were once living in a world where our voices had been muted, and many of us had been told it was our fault. Hashtags now give us a virtual connection. This is the power of social media. It is the power of connection. The power of standing together.

There are far too many hashtags related to gender equity for one article to cover. There should probably be a library. So instead of covering every hashtag, I've chosen the ones that have been seminal in moving the gender equity conversation forward.

#HeForShe

UN Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson's 2014 speech inspired the #HeForShe hashtag. Emma boldly launched the HeForShe campaign as a call to action for men to be part of the gender equality movement. The momentum behind #HeForShe catalyzed over 1.3 billion commitments (and counting) to take action towards creating a world where gender equality is a reality.

#AskHerMore

This hashtag shed light on the misrepresentation of women in the media. The Representation Project used #AskHerMore to underscore the double standard of questions to female versus male actors in media interviews: male actors are posed questions about their next project and female actresses are posed questions about their attire. While media interviewers ask males questions focusing largely on their work, they ask females questions focusing largely on their looks. #AskHerMore not only questions these media biases, it questions what we believe to be possible for women in power.

#MeToo

This is, perhaps, the most well-known hashtag. Tarana Burke created the hashtag and Alyssa Milano lit it on fire. It was her response to the news of Harvey Weinstein. #MeToo called for women who had been sexually harassed and assaulted to raise their voices online. Only by raising their voices could we begin to view the size of the problem. In less than 24 hours over 4.7 million users spoke up on Facebook. Twitter wasn't silent either, where users Tweeted the hashtag nearly a million times within 48 hours. With #MeToo, we began to see what was previously invisible: the silent epidemic of sexual harassment and assault.

#WhatAboutUs (#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen)

The #MeToo movement unintentionally left out the voices of all women, particularly women of color, who were unable to speak out. #WhatAboutUs responded to the whiteness and elitence of the #MeToo movement and highlighted the harrowing stories of sexual harassment and assault from women. It raises awareness about the intersectionality, particularly of race and ethnicity with gender, in moving toward an inclusive gender equity future.

Hashtags are about having a voice and connecting with others who desire to speak up.. I remember debating whether I should post about my experiences. I remember staying silent. But then #MeToo happened, and it was time. Time to speak up. I was not alone. In less than 24 hours, 4.7 million Facebook users drove 12 million posts, comments, and reactions.

In 24 hours we saw that 45 percent of US Facebook users were connected to someone who said #MeToo. The catharsis of knowing that I was not alone gave me a sense of belonging. I had connection. We had connection. It showed the world that we have a collective problem in our society — one that has largely been a silent epidemic: the sexual harassment and assault, mostly of women and girls.

In the US, 1 in 4 girls will be assaulted before she is 18 (and 1 in 6 boys). 1 in 5 college women will be assaulted; 1 in 4 women will survive domestic violence; 1 in 3 women are sexually harassed; over 50% of boys are physically assaulted before the age of 18.

We can stop this, and part of stopping this is working together. Hashtags give us an easier way to find each other and make change, together. It also gives us a way to bring male survivors and allies into the conversation.

Hashtags will represent the ability to speak up, to hear people's stories, and to be connected. Hashtags of the future will allow us to make change, together. They represent not only the end to an era of silence about things that make us uncomfortable, but also a shift in the burden from survivors to perpetrators. This is where the burden belongs. It is my hope that hashtags usher in an era where those who have done wrong can take accountability and get help, because they are suffering too.

Finally, we must remember that hashtags raise awareness about an issue. It is the first step in taking action. We also need to call on social media platforms to stop the online harassment that happens when people speak up. (Thank you, Twitter, for taking the first step in removing abusive content from your platform.) Let's speak and then move forward to make change, together.

Katica Roy, Apr 16, 2018, Updated: Dec 14, 2020, <https://www.katicaroy.com>

GENDER ECONOMIST, SPEAKER, AUTHOR, CEO, AND BREADWINNER MOM : I am Katica Roy, and I am on a mission to achieve intersectional gender equity, once and for all.