Is the Media Response to Sexual Assaults Colour-Blind?

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The “Me Too” movement has led to a change in the media approach towards sexual harassment allegations against men in position of power, but it has also exposed the lack, or a different standard of representation of black women who have denounced sexual harassment.

While the #MeToo hashtag was launched on Twitter in October 2017 by actress Alyssa Milano in the wake of sexual harassment allegations against Harvey Weinstein, the actual movement was founded back in 2006 by a black activist Tarana Burke. Although Burke was included in the story Person of the Year: “The Silence Breakers” by the TIME, she was omitted from the magazine’s cover.

Burke, who is the Senior Director of the Brooklyn-based Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) was
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mentioned in a tweet by journalist Britni Danielle as the founder of the movement “Me Too”. Burke itself explained in an interview for Democracy Now! how she being a survivor of sexual violence herself, launched the movement with the aim of reaching out to young victims of sexual violence, and particularly young women of colour who could not find support in their local area. The motto of the movement is “empowerment through empathy”.

“It [Me Too] wasn’t built to be a viral campaign or a hashtag that is here today and forgotten tomorrow. It was a catchphrase to be used from survivor to survivor to let folks know that they were not alone and that a movement for radical healing was happening and possible”, Burke to Id Ebony.

Despite Burke’s aim and desire to avoid divisions in the “Me Too” movement, their existence in the media cannot be denied.

“The message of #MeToo is the same across the board. Sexual violence knows no race, no colour, no gender, or class. But the response to sexual violence does, and I don’t want us to get pigeonholed into a racialised or classist or sexist or gendered response to this moment,” Burke says.

For example, the Oscar-winning actress Lupita Nyong’ o was one of the few actresses whose sexual harassment allegations Harvey Weinstein denied in the personal statement saying he has different recollection of the events.
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While the Me Too movement’s reach has been widely expanded, in the wake of the Weinstein scandal, and many other powerful men have fallen in disgrace, including Oscar-winning and House of Cards former star Kevin Spacey, the path towards major inclusion in terms of class and diversity, when it comes to tackling sexual harassment remains a long one.

Egyptian-American feminist journalist and commentator Mona Eltahawy pointed out on Twitter: “So again, for millionth time: so that we don’t lose this watershed moment, #MeToo can’t be just about what powerful white men do to white women. It has to look at foundation that allows any man to abuse a woman, and not just sexually i.e this reckoning must be w/patriarchy itself”.

In an interview for the Media Diversity Institute (MDI), Kristina Kay Robinson who is a New-Orleans based writer, visual artist and co-editor of the Mixed Company publication, emphasized the long-term consequences of patriarchy. “The outpouring of women’s stories of abuse related to Tarana Burke’s #MeToo movement has been cathartic and overwhelming. I’ve been thinking a lot about the women accusing [hip-hop mogul] Russell Simmons of rape. I have been thinking of all women of colour working as executives, writers, producers in the music industry who stopped working in their respective fields following the abuse they suffered. And because of that we lost their perspectives and influence on what the culture looked like. That devastates me. I live and write in New Orleans where gentrification has made Black women’s cultural products commodities but left us out of the credit and profit. It’s rough — every day lately I have to convince myself not to give up.”

Highlighting the need for greater media coverage of women of colour, Monique Judge wrote for Nieman Lab that in 2018 “journalism will need to do a better job of seeking out the voices of black women. It will not be enough to give black women credit for the things that they do; it will be crucial to allow their stories to be told through their own voices.”