

When is #MeToo coming to my workplace? 8 things you can do now

By [Judith Taylor](#)

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As a sociologist who studies feminist activism, I often get asked when and how the #MeToo movement is going to trickle down. This is a fair question, and not one easy to answer.



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We know social movement ideas often become part of the [cultural fabric of the everyday](#), but how they get there, and how long they percolate as they make their way, varies. The [#MeToo movement has rocked many workplaces](#): Actors, artists, journalists, politicians, chefs, corporate executives have all been felled for poor behaviour.

Women globally have experienced vicarious justice learning about the courage of the women who have come forward, and the innovativeness of Tarana Burke, the New York community organiser who coined the term #MeToo.

Each month, new revelations roll out, almost timed, featuring another high-profile man with abusive tendencies. These revelations are often based on expensive and expert reporting, and can be deeply educational and cathartic.

But it's eerie for many women to continue in their familiar work-a-day capacities, [where the justice has not yet trickled sideways, or down](#). Many have worked at their organisations for decades and have witnessed casual and concerted sexual harassment, and in some cases assault.

Others have been subject to less direct aggression, but still must contend with a toxic workplace of sexual insult and innuendo, riven with bad feelings.

Covert resistance

Most women are not heartened by the idea of trickle-down justice, and they feel, rightly, that it is not going to come to them. They are the sociologists of their own lives, recounting for me in unionised and non-unionised settings, that speaking out against harassment doesn't serve a victim well. These have been informal admissions made to me as a public feminist.

From these informal stories, I understand everyday people to be master strategists, opting for schedule shifts that enable them to steer clear of known harassers, trying not to be in the elevator or alone with or next to the same, keeping their heads down and not making eye contact, knowing when to be direct and when to say nothing, laughing insults off, holding their breaths when leering, expectant men walk by their offices, pulling out file drawers to prevent harassers from coming into their personal space, eating lunch at their desks, never going for drinks on Thursdays with the rest of the crew, exiting the building to a back alley to avoid a co-worker waiting at the front door to walk with them to the subway.

I believe women share these tactics with me because #MeToo has made them conscious and proud of their own survival skills. I admire these strategies and through listening to them, have realised that for many women, work is often video game-like, as they tiptoe, run, duck and hide, to avoid harm.

Fear reprisals

The #MeToo movement has changed the air in some places of work, but led to recourse in far fewer. Most women workers cannot afford a trial, and don't want a soul-killing mandatory training module on sexual harassment in their divisions.

Many have confessed to me that a meeting with higher-ups would ensure that within days HR would be coming with a box and a five-minute timer to evacuate the complaint-maker from her desk.

How do the great majority of working women reckon with #MeToo when there will be no confrontation, revelation or watershed moment for them?

Academics, journalists, teachers, social workers and psychologists have experienced a notable outpouring of questions and concerns, but this is not a professional moment, this is a people's moment to decide what is no longer OK, partly because it's illegal, partly because it violates workplace policy and mostly because harassment is soul-killing.

While researchers have shown formal reporting mechanisms to be often disappointing, other scholars show that [everyday referencing of social movements, and allying with them, makes women feel stronger and more capable of refusing sexism](#)

The #MeToo movement won't make a tsunami level wave in every place of work. But with small gestures, we can remove the sandbags from the thresholds of our doors, open the windows and invite something of the force of that water to trickle in. Inviting the water in while small may feel more energising than wondering whether, and when, it might come.

Eight things you can do about a toxic work environment

We have to commit to ending this toxic culture. Here are eight suggestions for how to do it.

1. If you have sexually harassed or belittled people you work with, meditate on what you have done or are doing, and stop. If you can't control your own toxic impulses, get professional help or quit.
2. Everyone should search on the Internet: "What is professional workplace behaviour?" Read the top 10 sites that come up. Other helpful sites will pop up including, "[Top ten things not to do at work.](#)" Print them out. Follow them.

3. Read [federal law](#) on harassment and safety in the workplace.
4. Read your employer's guidelines on harassment and safety in the workplace.
5. If you see harassment, [intervene](#).
6. If you are experiencing harassment, do your research. Educate yourself [on the help you can access](#): Non-profit, governmental, private sector and popular advice is available, which will give you options and make you feel less alone.
7. Ask management for an [equality audit of your workplace](#). Questions to ask include: How are we doing with homophobia, racism and sexism as these relate to mentoring, advancement, leadership and decision-making?
8. Gather together colleagues you trust to write a concise letter stating that in your place of work, harassment has happened, and that you'd like everyone to commit to a new awareness of gender dynamics in the workplace. You can circulate the letter, tack it to the bulletin board, leave it in the mailroom. This is subversive, and there might be blowback, so folks have to think about whether they want to be so direct and deal with the consequences. On the other hand, colleagues may be grateful for your leadership.

Let's assume going forward that those among us who have been toxic want to let that go. Those among us who are easy targets are going to start reading up on rights and recording bad behaviour.

The rest of us are going to try our best to create a new normal and pay attention so we don't look like we have better things to do when people get hurt, other than to help them. It might be awkward while some people adjust. Awkward is a small price.

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