

# 1 Women Tweet on Violence: From #YesAllWomen to #MeToo

From the earliest feminist presses to Twitter, women have used technology to create and sustain narratives that demand attention and redress for gendered violence. In this chapter we examine the networks that created and spread the hashtags #YesAllWomen, #SurvivorPrivilege, #TheEmptyChair, #WhyIStayed, and #MeToo. Each of these hashtags highlights women's experiences with interpersonal and institutionally enabled violence, and each was precipitated by high-profile events involving male perpetrators. Along with an examination of these Twitter networks we consider the social and cultural conditions that made the hashtags significant at particular moments, examining the ideological and political work these hashtags perform. We show how these hashtags challenged and changed mainstream narratives about violence against women and extended public debates about victimhood that have long depended on narrow problem definitions and attributions of blame.

Gendered violence has been framed as an individual problem in public discourse in a multitude of ways. From questions about women's dress and behavior to laws that eschew the possibility that wives can be raped by their husbands, U.S. culture is rife with narratives that blame victims and normalize violence

against them.<sup>1</sup> As a result, men are rarely held accountable for their violent behavior, and when they are, they are understood to be individual bad actors. This framing ignores the realities of a culture that systemically and institutionally enables gendered violence. Feminist activists and scholars have been central to critiquing this culture. For example, Ana Clarissa Rojas argues that domestic and intimate partner violence is “medicalized” when it becomes an individual issue managed by law enforcement and doctors rather than a social problem predicated on long-entrenched social norms of gender.<sup>2</sup> Andrea Ritchie’s groundbreaking work *Invisible No More* charts how the sexual violence that Black girls experience in their youth contributes to their likely incarceration years later. She argues for more effective interventions that acknowledge the cultural and social realities that make girls vulnerable to predation.<sup>3</sup>

On social media, victim blaming can intensify. Bailey Poland and Kate Mann have offered detailed accounts of the ways women are targeted through violent online practices such as trolling, doxing, and even swatting, which encourages state violence in the offline world.<sup>4</sup> And just as in the offline world, some narratives of online gendered violence have held victims accountable. If you are being attacked online, these narratives suggest, *why are you talking about this issue? Why are you using this forum or platform? If you don't like it, leave.* But, like media outlets of the past, the web has become a space to challenge these narratives.

The #YesAllWomen network and those we examine that follow it in this chapter and the next two chapters are part of what has come to be known as “Feminist Twitter.”<sup>5</sup> Feminist Twitter is diverse and existed in various forms long before #YesAllWomen, thanks to women and feminist allies online organically building

publics through common concerns. Yet #YesAllWomen seems to have opened the floodgates of feminist hashtag activism—the length of time between the high-profile trending of feminist tags lessened remarkably beginning in 2014—while around the same time, mainstream and traditional media outlets began running profiles of Feminist Twitter debates and figures.

Feminist Twitter, and earlier iterations of it such as feminist blog rings, are spaces where misogyny is challenged online in the tradition of the early feminist press. For survivors of violence, the internet has enabled networks of solidarity beyond geographic boundaries, fostered consciousness raising, and provided a forum for storytelling with less physical risk. Before the popularization of Twitter, a photoblog titled *Hollaback!* became a space for people who experienced street harassment to share the photos of their assailants online. The blog grew to include offline chapters in different cities and countries around the world that fight street harassment through public education and women's empowerment.<sup>6</sup> In 2014 the platform released a video documenting one woman's daylong experience of catcalling that went viral for raising questions about race and street harassment.<sup>7</sup>

The networks that form around women employing hashtags to talk about gendered violence on Twitter, like the ones we examine in this chapter, become spaces where a growing number of people, connected by their use of hashtags and the shared trauma that inspired their deployment, can amplify the same kinds of feminist critiques that have often had only limited or elite reach. This practice has led to the creation of networks that offer cathartic release and solidarity among those sharing stories of victimization and survival while making unignorable the political and cultural demands of a still violently patriarchal society.

For this chapter, Wagatwe Wanjuki, the activist and anti-sexual violence advocate who created #SurvivorPrivilege, has contributed a reflection on pages 8 to 10.

### **#YesAllWomen: The Building Blocks of Hashtag Solidarity**

On May 23, 2014, twenty-two-year-old Elliot Rodger stabbed his three roommates to death before embarking on a shooting spree near the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara, that left three more dead and fourteen injured. Rodger exchanged gunfire with police before fatally shooting himself. It was later discovered that Rodger had created YouTube videos and a written manifesto explaining the impetus for his violence, citing a desire to retaliate against women who would not date him. His logic was nurtured in dangerous online men's rights and incel (involuntarily celibate) groups that the Southern Poverty Law Center has recently added to its list of hate groups.<sup>8</sup> Rodger's manifesto was circulated by many news outlets, some of which played portions of the videos in which Rodger professed disdain for immigrants and disgust for white women who would date men of color but not him. A copy of his final video, with nearly a million views, remains on YouTube as we write.

Rodger's deadly violence sparked a national debate about men's entitlement and violent behavior toward women. Writers at popular outlets such as *Slate* and *Salon* positioned Rodger's violence within the context of the social pressure men exert when they assume that women should be sexually available to them.<sup>9</sup> Male readers and commentators quickly jumped in with arguments that not all men behave this way. Though these men rarely used the exact words "not all men," their message could be summed up with that succinct phrasing. Using the

hashtag #NotAllMen created by Twitter user @sassycrass a year earlier, feminists mocked this recurrent practice of men's desire to distance themselves from misogynistic violence. On May 24, 2014, user @gildedspine started the hashtag #YesAllWomen to decry this distancing practice by men and to highlight women's shared experiences of sexism and misogyny.<sup>10</sup> Within four days, #YesAllWomen had been tweeted more than a million times.

At its peak, #YesAllWomen resulted in more than 60,000 tweets an hour. The oldest and largest of the hashtags we examine in this chapter, #YesAllWomen first trended in late May 2014, following the discovery of Elliot Rodger's misogynistic YouTube videos. During our observation window (May 23, 2014–June 30, 2015), the hashtag was tweeted by more than one million distinct Twitter accounts connected by almost five million retweets and mentions (101,822 accounts and 457,824 connections in our 10 percent sample). The hashtag trended quickly, with one quarter of the tweets appearing the first day and nearly two-thirds within the first week. #YesAllWomen remained popular for another two weeks, an unusually long duration compared with other hashtags reviewed in this chapter. By mid-June 2014 new tweets containing #YesAllWomen had slowed to only a few per day.<sup>11</sup>

Though most popular in the United States and the UK, #YesAllWomen also trended in Pakistan and Iran, often appearing alongside its instigating hashtag, #NotAllMen, and political and cultural hashtags associated with women's issues, such as #RapeCulture and #Feminism. Notably, while they sometimes co-occurred, the hashtag trended on a much larger scale than phrases and hashtags created by elites to discuss women's marginalization, such as Nancy Pelosi and Barbara Boxer's "war on women," showing the power of ordinary women to create

relatable public narrative. #YesAllWomen spoke to a global experience of patriarchal hegemony, rape culture, and misogyny.

The #YesAllWomen network provided a place for women to candidly discuss the harassment they experienced and find solidarity in other stories like their own.<sup>12</sup> As author Soraya Chemaly tweeted, “#NotAllMen practice violence against women but #YesAllWomen live with the threat of male violence. Every. Single. Day. All over the world.” In illustrating the widespread nature of patriarchal and misogynistic thinking, #YesAllWomen documented the impact of gendered violence, demanded that defensive men sit and listen, and created rhetorical kinship among women. As Beins describes in her consideration of feminist slogans in the 1970s, phrases that work to flatten identity-based differences are important in social movements that orient their demands along a single central axis of marginalization.<sup>13</sup> The popularity of #YesAllWomen illustrates the ways the logic of activist slogans and feminist discourse has moved online, and effectively so. And just as activist utterances of solidarity have long worked as a form of interpellation in which collective identities are built through the ideological subject, so too this process works in online networks.<sup>14</sup> In this case, women recognized themselves and their experiences in the ideological criticism offered in #YesAllWomen utterances.

As research by Jackson and Banaszczyk has detailed, the hashtag #YesAllWomen worked ideologically to (1) reprioritize the public’s focus from narratives that downplay the prevalence of men committing violence (vis-à-vis the reactionary #NotAllMen hashtag) to narratives acknowledging the frequency of women’s experiences with violence, (2) illustrate the connection between everyday sexism and violence, and (3) legitimate the concept of rape culture.<sup>15</sup> Popular tweets in the network offered

“Because when a guy kills six people because he’s a virgin and women reject him, he’s met with sympathy. #YesAllWomen” and “#YesAllWomen are taught safety tips to prevent rape but not all men are taught about consent.”

While many early tweets in the network framed the Isla Vista shooting as an example of the consequences of permitting a misogynistic culture, the network later became much broader, with few of the most popular tweets overall mentioning the shooting. Members of the network used the tag to connect issues of gender inequality across economic, health care, criminal justice, and business contexts to misogynistic violence and used illustrative language to show how the prevalence of this inequality normalizes sexual violence against women. For example, the hashtag was used alongside those related to equal pay for women in Hollywood and the renewal of the Violence Against Women Act by congress. Together, the users in the #YesAllWomen hashtag provided a cultural intervention that refused to accept the violence perpetrated by Elliot Rodgers as an aberration, instead connecting it to the various way misogyny is normalized and even celebrated in U.S. culture and the diverse ways the everyday violence of this misogyny is experienced by women.

#YesAllWomen was covered extensively in traditional media outlets, with cable news segments and front-page reporting in prominent print publications such as *Time* and *People* and on NPR and MSNBC. The success of the hashtag can be measured in both its popularity and the other hashtags and online debates it spurred. In addition to responding to #NotAllMen narratives, #YesAllWomen spurred #YesAllWhiteWomen, a hashtag that called for important intracommunity debate about the erasure of women of color in feminist histories and within the most widely

shared tweets using the hashtag itself. We explore the topic of women of color feminist hashtags and intersectionality in more depth in chapter 2. In chapter 6 we explore the hashtag #AllMenCan, a derivative hashtag intended to promote men's solidarity with women on the issues of sexual violence and misogyny.

### **#SurvivorPrivilege: Considering Lasting Consequences**

On June 6, 2014, conservative commentator George Will wrote an op-ed for the *Washington Post* suggesting that the way university administrators respond to sexual violence on campus “make[s] victimhood a coveted status that confers privileges” and makes “victims proliferate.”<sup>16</sup> Will's arguments were painfully out of touch with data showing not only that sexual assault is underreported on college campuses but also that survivors face the most lasting consequences of often poorly written and poorly implemented university student conduct policies.<sup>17</sup> In response, campus antirape activist Wagatwe Wanjunki tweeted, “The #SurvivorPrivilege of being too scared to leave my dorm room for fear of running into my perp.”

Wanjunki detailed in tweets how her assault led her to be kicked out of school, with more than \$10,000 in debt.

#### **A Survivor-Activist on #SurvivorPrivilege Wagatwe Wanjuki**

The story of how I, for the first time, made something trend nationally on Twitter is a perfect example of my journey as both a survivor of sexual violence and a digital activist demanding justice for survivors.

During a bus ride to Washington, D.C., to help with a training I kept seeing links and tweets about a column that the *Washington*



*Post's* George Will wrote about campus sexual assault. In the interest of #selfcare, I tried to avoid reading Will's piece but gathered he suggested that victims of assault somehow benefit from the experience. I didn't want to give the *Post* the online traffic, and once you've read one piece by an old, privileged white man complaining about holding rapists accountable, you've read them all. However, something about the outrage seemed a little different. The righteous anger was stronger and more widespread; I noticed people outside my normal circle of antirape activists were condemning it.

I wanted to join the conversation, and I finally read the piece at the center of the firestorm. It left me so livid that I was shaking a tiny bit from rage. I didn't want to scare the stranger sitting next to me, so I did what any other self-respecting outraged millennial with a smartphone would do—I took my outrage to Twitter. Tweeting "*Where's my survivor privilege? Was expelled & have \$10,000s of private student loans used to attend school that didn't care I was raped,*" I turned my tweets of rage into the #SurvivorPrivilege hashtag and, to my complete surprise, it took off.

I had no expectations that the hashtag would go viral; I just wanted to use the little platform I had to clap back at the sexist media that tried to minimize my experience and discount the work my fellow survivor-activists did for safer campuses by demanding increased accountability. Since I didn't have my own column at a renowned, widely read newspaper, I used Twitter to create space for a counternarrative that revealed the truth about campus sexual assault as well as shining truth on the fact that the article written by Mr. Will was not based on the reality of survivor stories.

In retrospect, I see why #SurvivorPrivilege trended so quickly. It was a powerful hashtag because it both provided a community for survivors to tell their stories while also creating a powerful, overwhelming counternarrative to Will's column. Through the research and activism I've done over the past decade I have reached the conclusion that breaking the silence around victimhood and

more accurate media coverage of sexual violence are extremely powerful tools in countering rape culture.

By creating a public, shared space for survivors to amplify the reality of surviving gender-based violence, we were able to use our truths to debunk irrational concerns that being raped offers privileges or advantages. With the combined power of our stories, we didn't just feel less alone, we also raised our voices to create a stronger and more accurate media narrative. Instead of simply being outraged, we were able to channel our anger in a way that was productive by revealing the truth about survivors' lived experiences.

Rape culture is vast and complex; it can affect every aspect of our lives, often in ways we don't understand. That's why I use Twitter as just one of many tools in my work toward a world free of sexual violence. As we increasingly force institutions with power to listen to our survivor stories, we are able to also chip away at the systems that enable individuals to harm with impunity. We will win—through self-empowerment, community connection, and refusing to shut up.

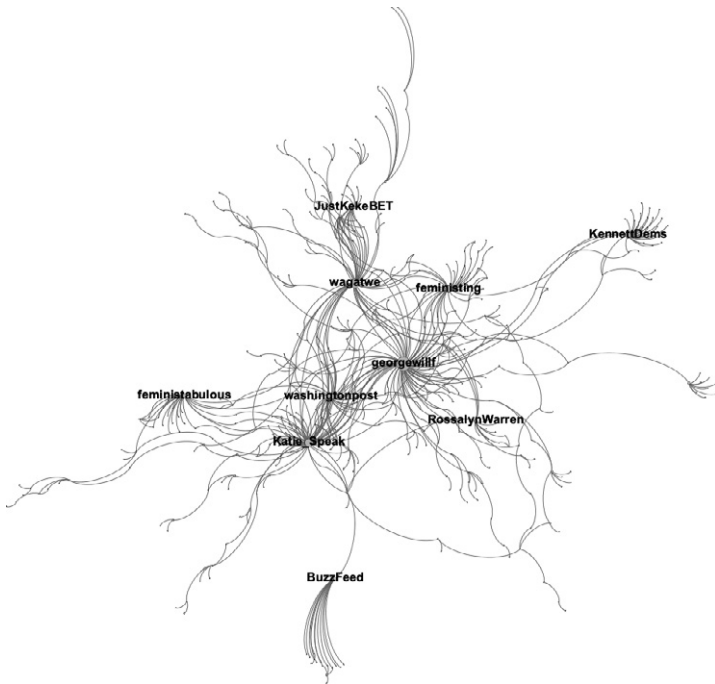
#SurvivorPrivilege trended less than a month after #YesAll-Women, starting on June 9, 2014, and remaining popular for several days, eventually appearing in more than 20,000 tweets in following week. Tweets continued to appear occasionally in the weeks that followed, although nearly 87 percent appeared in the first week, and virtually no tweets containing the hashtag appeared after July 1, 2014. Our data include 1,822 tweets sent by 268 unique users connected by 775 retweet and mention links. The smallest of the networks we examine in this chapter, the hashtag centered on four accounts (pictured in figure 1.1): George Will (@georgewill) and the *Washington Post* (@washingtonpost), respectively the author and the source of

the original article, who were frequently mentioned in critiques, and Wagatwe Wanjuki (@wagatwe) and Katie Klabusich (@Katie\_Speak), whose tweets critiquing Will were retweeted hundreds of times.

Although George Will's Twitter handle appears most frequently in the #SurvivorPrivilege network (through mentions), he did not engage directly with the hashtag or resulting network. Indeed, the most popularly co-occurring hashtags, #Rape, #RapeCulture, and #FireGeorgeWill, illustrate that the prevailing conversation in the network was decisively pushing back against Will's message.

Many high-profile and central members of Feminist Twitter contributed to this hashtag along with Wanjuki, including feminist commentators Zerlina Maxwell and Katie Klabusich. Feminist publications and digital media outlets also shared and spread the hashtag, including Mic and Feministing. The website PolicyMic, a central player in the later hashtag #AllMenCan, which is covered in chapter 6 of this book, interviewed Wanjuki and featured the tweets of other Twitter users, who shared horrific and lasting examples of their so-called #SurvivorPrivilege in action. Users explained how their sexual assaults affected their grades, mental health, relationships, and professional successes and finances.

#SurvivorPrivilege is an example of the thoughtful media criticism that arises from digital counterpublics. This media criticism specifically critiques rape-apology and victim-blaming narratives that construct survivors, and specifically women survivors, as diabolical schemers who reap social reward for accusing men of predatory behaviors. Thus these tweets focused on (1) the lasting, negative, and everyday consequences of assault and abuse that affect women long after their victimization, and



**Figure 1.1**

Visualization of #SurvivorPrivilege retweet and mention network. In this and all network graphs throughout the book, network nodes are individual Twitter accounts, represented by circles, and links are retweets and mentions, represented by lines connecting interacting nodes. Nodes in this graph are sized by in-degree, such that the largest nodes have the most retweets and mentions. This graph was generated in Gephi using the ForceAtlas2 force-directed layout algorithm.

(2) critiquing mainstream narratives that victim blame or work as rape apology, and particularly the fact that high-profile mainstream publications give space to narratives like Will's.

For example, one user tweeted, “#SurvivorPrivilege is actually finding solace in absolutely awful, triggering tweets because I know I'm not alone.” Another wrote, “#SurvivorPrivilege was seeing my rapist every morning in the dining hall casually pouring himself cereal after he threatened to kill me.” In direct media criticism, Klabusich tweeted, “The @washingtonpost column wasn't just a 'difference of opinion.' @georgewill is contributing violent rhetoric and harm. #survivorprivilege,” and the feminist outlet Feministing shared its coverage of the story with the headline, “#SurvivorPrivilege shows George Will just how fun it is to be a rape survivor.” Together, the contributions to the hashtag made demands that women survivors be heard and that the severity of personal consequences faced by victims of violence be acknowledged.

### **#WhyIStayed: Expanding Victimhood**

Similarly, #WhyIStayed became an opportunity for survivors of intimate partner violence to share their stories. Following the September 8, 2014, release of video footage of Baltimore Ravens football player Ray Rice's violent attack on his fiancée and later wife, Janay Palmer, in a casino elevator, news media outlets engaged in egregious displays of victim blaming. Hosts on *Fox News's* “Fox & Friends” argued that Palmer set a bad example to other women by following through on the marriage and staying with Rice through all his legal trouble. An on-air reporter jokingly quipped that Palmer should have just taken the stairs to avoid being in the elevator with Rice.<sup>18</sup> In a discussion of this

newsclip with fellow survivors, Twitter user Beverly Gooden wrote, “I stayed because I thought it would get better. It never got any better. #WhyIStayed.” The same day, Gooden took to her blog to elaborate on why she created the hashtag. She wrote:

For over a year, I was physically abused by my ex-husband. When TMZ released the video of Ray Rice punching, dragging, and spitting on his wife this morning, the internet exploded with questions about *her*. Why didn't she leave? Why did she marry him? **Why did she stay?** I can't speak for Janay Rice, but I can speak for Beverly Gooden. Why did I stay? Check out some of my reasons here. Leaving was a process, not an event. And sometimes it takes a while to navigate through the process. I believe in storytelling. I believe in the power of shared experience. I believe that we find strength in community. That is why I created this hashtag. I hope those tweeting using #WhyIStayed find a voice, find love, find compassion, and find hope.<sup>19</sup>

Her tweet and the hashtag were amplified; #WhyIStayed appeared more than 100,000 times beginning on September 8, 2014. Our data include more than 13,000 of these tweets, 85 percent of which were posted in the week following Gooden's September 8 message. Like #SurvivorPrivilege, #WhyIStayed was relatively short-lived with almost no new tweets appearing after a month had elapsed. #WhyIStayed tweets were sent by 8,952 users connected by 8,663 retweets and featured messages about Rice and Palmer, domestic violence, and escaping domestic violence. The network centered on creator Gooden (@bevtgooden), who was retweeted and mentioned twice as often as the next most popular users. While #WhyIStayed is one of the smaller networks examined here, it is nonetheless diverse, including well-known male writers such as Daniel José Older and Judd Legum, who used the hashtag as a form of allyship to share and highlight women's experiences with their followers; celebrities such as actress Reagan Gomez-Preston (@ReaganGomez);

influential members of Feminist Twitter (including Soraya Chemaly and Dana Bolger); advocacy organizations highlighting resources for domestic violence victims (such as @NOMOREorg and @KnowYourIX); and ordinary women sharing their own stories of abuse and survival.<sup>20</sup>

#WhyIStayed allowed users to share their reasons for staying in abusive relationships by illustrating the coercive language and behaviors their partners used against them and, like other hashtags examined here, created a community around an experience of violence that might otherwise lead to isolation and shame. In #WhyIStayed tweets, two primary frames emerged that (1) countered popular victim blaming narratives and (2) highlighted toxic relational behaviors as a form of public awareness. Thus, like other hashtags reviewed in this chapter, #WhyIStayed addressed the cultural prevalence of victim-blaming narratives and the work such narratives do to absolve men in particular of their responsibility to end violence. This hashtag included tweets that illustrated the systemic consequences of domestic violence. For example, Safe Horizon, one of the nation's oldest domestic abuse hotlines, used the hashtag to share statistics on the startling rate of homelessness among women and families fleeing abuse, and Think Progress, the news site run by the Center for American Progress Action Fund, shared statistics related to the frequent murder of women trying to flee domestic violence. The adoption of the hashtag by advocacy organizations and niche media illustrates that such organizations follow and very much respond to discourses organically produced by ordinary citizens.

#WhyIStayed also served as a form of public education as it outlined the manipulative behavior of abusers, as well as the difficulty women in abusive relationships face trying to avoid and escape such situations. Women shared stories about the

a)

**Safe Horizon** @SafeHorizon · 9 Sep 2014  
 #WhyIStayed Because #domesticviolence is the 3rd leading cause of #homelessness.

**Most Domestic Violence Is Never Reported.**  
 DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS THE  
**3<sup>RD</sup>**  
 LEADING CAUSE  
 OF HOMELESSNESS  
**AMONG FAMILIES**  
 Help change the facts.

Speak up, speak out, and make a difference for victims of domestic violence.

FOR HELP, CALL OUR HOTLINES. IN NY: 800-621-HOPE(4673). OUTSIDE NY: 800-799-SAFE(7233)  
 FOR MORE INFORMATION: [WWW.SAFEHORIZON.ORG](http://WWW.SAFEHORIZON.ORG)  
[FACEBOOK.COM/SAFEHORIZONNY](https://FACEBOOK.COM/SAFEHORIZONNY)  
[TWITTER.COM/SAFEHORIZON](https://TWITTER.COM/SAFEHORIZON)

safehorizon

b)

**ThinkProgress** @thinkprogress · 9 Sep 2014  
 Half of the black women killed by abusers are killed as they're trying to leave them #WhyIStayed thkpr.gs/3564896

Figure 1.2

Tweets from advocacy organizations and news sources featuring statistics on domestic violence using #WhyIStayed.<sup>21</sup>



various forms of physical violence and emotional and psychological manipulation they experienced from people they loved. The hashtag detailed stories of men threatening to kill themselves if the woman they abused left them, men sleeping on the floor in front of exit doors to prevent women from leaving their homes, tearful pleas, apologies, and promises, and a barrage of manipulative blaming in attempts to convince victims their abuse was deserved. In the case of the emotional and psychological violence that accompanies physical abuse, the #WhyIStayed hashtag illustrated that cultural victim-blaming narratives extend and model this violence. As @feministabulous tweeted, "It's not one day he hits you. It's everyday he works to make you smaller," and @juddlegum shared an infographic on the ways abusers exert power and control over their victims with his more than 250,000 followers (figure 1.3).

Together, #WhyIStayed messages demanded the public hear the stories of survivors of intimate partner violence and worked discursively through storytelling and data sharing to expand definitions of legitimate victimhood that have long excluded women who experience abuse in the private sphere. By the end of September, even *Fox News's* "Social Buzz" segment had changed its tune, with an on-air reading of several tweets that included the hashtag. Several major news outlets covered the hashtag and featured survivors of intimate partner violence telling their own stories. In late October 2014 the NFL, Ray Rice's employer, tried to capitalize on the success of hashtag activism and recuperate its public image by using #NoMore in a public service campaign featuring league players offering messages about ending domestic abuse. That month feminist scholar and activist Beth Richie was recruited by the NFL to assist in coordinating an effort to address intimate partner violence within the league.



**Judd Legum**

@JuddLegum

Follow



#WhyIStayed infographic (via @marialiacalvo)



Figure 1.3

Tweet from journalist Judd Legum signal-boosting information about intimate partner abuse using #WhyIStayed.

### #TheEmptyChair: The Scale of Violence

#TheEmptyChair is unique among the hashtags discussed in this chapter as it is created not by a survivor of violence but by an ally, yet it was widely adopted by survivors. On July 27, 2015, *New York Magazine* ran a cover story that featured an image of thirty-five of comedian Bill Cosby's sexual assault and rape accusers who had come forward in the press to detail his decades-spanning predatory behavior. The powerful image shows the thirty-five women in the same position and the same chair looking out from the cover as if looking directly at the reader. Cover story authors Ella Ceron and Lainna Fader wrote that the empty chair at the end of the last row of women "signified the 11 other women who have accused Cosby of assault, but weren't photographed for the magazine. But it also represents the countless other women who have been sexually assaulted but have been unable or unwilling to come forward."<sup>22</sup> The cover was so compelling that *New York Magazine's* website crashed because of the overwhelming number of people accessing it.

Activist Bree Newsome and other Twitter users noted the visual power of the empty chair in the cover photo, and comedian and journalist Elon James White started the hashtag #TheEmptyChair by retweeting the cover image with the hashtag and the hashtag #BillCosby. Up to that point, the tweet had received only 321 retweets and 168 likes—but what White did next, as an ally, received far more attention. After receiving a direct message from a rape survivor that read, "I can't share my empty chair story bc I signed an NDA. needed the money more than justice, and he knew it #TheEmptyChair," White agreed to share the tweet anonymously. His public tweet of this direct message launched a wave of others, leading White to open his

Twitter inbox so that anyone could message him privately and he would post their story anonymously using his own Twitter handle. His tweets prompted the rapid proliferation of #TheEmptyChair, resulting in more than 40,000 tweets total. Our data include 4,275 tweets generated by 3,192 users connected by 3,551 retweets and mentions. Among the hashtags examined in this chapter, #TheEmptyChair proliferated the fastest, with nearly all the tweets (91 percent) posted in the three days following the July 27 *New York Magazine* story. The network was also disproportionately driven by a single user—almost 20 percent of all the tweets were authored by White or were retweets of his messages. White was retweeted more than three times as often as the next most-retweeted user. He used his Twitter platform, which includes 70,000+ followers, and the hashtag #TheEmptyChair to amplify the voices of hundreds of survivors who were too afraid to use their own Twitter handles. White's activism and the anonymous tweets he shared created solidarity among other Twitter users, who in turn shared their stories as well. White's visceral reaction to the messages he received, as exemplified by the tweets in figure 1.4, reveal the startling number of stories published over the course of several days.

#TheEmptyChair worked primarily to show the scale of sexual violence and the scale at which survivors are silenced. It did so through two types of discourse, one affirming belief in survivors and the value of women's experience regardless of when (or if) they come forward and the second calling attention to the often invisible scope of the problem. This discourse again served as a correction to mainstream narratives that victim-blame by suggesting that women's accounts of assaults, here because of time lags to reporting or the decision to remain anonymous, are unreliable. The discourse attached to this hashtag offered

a)



b)



#TheEmptyChair

1:57 PM - 27 Jul 2015

**Figure 1.4**

Elon James White reacting to #TheEmptyChair tweets being sent to him privately by direct message.

important nuance, noting that in light of how survivors are treated by the media, the legal system, and people affiliated with those who perpetrate violence against them, it is wholly understandable that they fear retribution and revictimization in the public sphere. White, for example, also tweeted, “What’s fucking with me most is how many women, hell, how many women I KNOW that sit in #TheEmptyChair because of how we treat rape victims.”

That countless women trusted Elon James White to share their stories anonymously despite his knowing their identities shows the close kinship in the network and the important work men can do as allies on issues related to violence against women. White carefully removed identifying information from screenshots of the messages he received, adding only the hashtag to the messages, choosing to let these anonymous women speak rather than speaking for or about their experiences.

Like #WhyIStayed, #TheEmptyChair reflected a noticeable diversity of users both part of and outside what is generally considered Feminist Twitter. The journalist Jamil Smith also served as an ally in the network, tweeting, “Do not wait for a man to speak to believe women who are already talking. Nothing to add. #TheEmptyChair.” Trans activist Janet Mock, creator of #Girls-LikeUs, which we detail in chapter 3, tweeted, “#TheEmptyChair signals the women who couldn’t come forward mostly b/c we, as a culture, wouldn’t believe them.” Journalist Emily Hauser shared a link to her own reporting on the prevalence of rape culture, noting, “Men have always known that you don’t have to be beloved or famous to get away with rape: #TheEmptyChair.” Writer and actress Pia Glenn offered simply, “It could be so many of us sitting in #TheEmptyChair.” This group is representative of the diversity of engagement in #TheEmptyChair network.

On April 26, 2018, almost three years after the *New York Magazine* cover story that iconized the image of the empty chair, Cosby was found guilty on three counts of indecent assault—a mere scratch on the surface of the overall accusations he’s faced but an enormously important cultural moment for women fearful that justice might never come. His conviction reenergized the hashtag #TheEmptyChair and prompted White to reflect on the experience. He tweeted that reading those 2015 tweets



Figure 1.5

Elon James White sharing #TheEmptyChair direct messages from his inbox with identifying information of senders removed to protect their identities.

from women survivors “destroyed my soul.” He also added, “Even with #metoo happening there are so many women still in #TheEmptyChair. Folks out here worrying about the men’s lives supposedly ruined while ignoring all the women who still can’t come forward because of how society still blames them for their own assault.”

White’s allyship was incredibly successful in amplifying the voices of women who might otherwise have kept their stories to themselves. He used his platform to make space for survivors to tell their own stories without talking over them or sanitizing their sentiments. His useful intervention in the deployment and proliferation of the hashtag differs from the hashtag use of allies explored in chapter 6 because he simply never centered his own experiences.

### **#MeToo: The Tipping Point of Visibility**

White’s recent nod to the connection between #MeToo and #TheEmptyChair is important because it shows that these hashtags create a discernible genealogy that has important cultural resonances. #MeToo is also unique because it was an activist campaign before it was a hashtag. Sexual assault activist Tarana Burke started Me Too in 2007 to provide women and girls the opportunity to connect with other survivors. Through her nonprofit Just Be Inc., Burke has long created opportunities for women to share their stories of survival and access the support they need. However, her work was almost erased with the adoption of #MeToo in hashtag form by actress Alyssa Milano.

On October 15, 2017, Milano responded to the growing discourse about sexual violence in Hollywood initially sparked by actresses coming forward about producer Harvey Weinstein’s



serial predatory behavior. Milano tweeted “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” Milano’s tweet, as we write, has more than 50,000 likes. The difference in magnitude between Elon James White’s initial call to acknowledge #TheEmptyChair and Milano’s reintroduction of #MeToo is explained in part by the evolution of hashtags as a successful vehicle for movement building—in addition to the significantly larger number of followers Milano and other celebrities who picked up and legitimized #MeToo share.

Further, the gender and racial politics of these hashtags and the communities from which they sprang tells another part of the story. Notably, Black women had been speaking up about Cosby’s sexual violence for decades, but their voices were not heard. It was not until another Black male comedian, Hannibal Buress, called Cosby a “rapist” during a 2014 standup show that many in the mainstream discovered the story.<sup>23</sup> Women noted at the time that stories about Cosby’s behavior were frequently shared by them without similar mainstream controversy or interest. Thus Elon James White’s 2015 act of solidarity with #TheEmptyChair was all the more powerful as it exposed a reality first laid bare by the response to Buress—that Black men who were seen as Cosby’s in-group and who carried the benefits of credentialed masculinity were able to propel the conversation forward in ways that women previously could not. Similarly, Alyssa Milano, a wealthy, famous white woman, was able to garner a level of attention for #MeToo that none of the other hashtags discussed in this chapter enjoyed. Yet there is no doubt that without these prior hashtags, the conversation that empowered even the most privileged women to reveal acts of violence perpetrated against them would not have been as easily received.

Both #TheEmptyChair and #MeToo illustrate the power of cross-identity solidarities as White continues to use his platform to share the voices of women survivors and Milano quickly sought to align with Burke in orchestrating the next moves for #MeToo. After an immense amount of press around #MeToo, thanks to the high-profile identities of many of the actresses who came forward with stories about Weinstein, Burke and other longtime women of color activists partnered with Hollywood actresses and started a new campaign using the hashtag #TimesUp, putting men and other perpetrators on notice that time was up for them to keep getting away with their abusive behaviors. At the January 2018 75th Golden Globe Awards, A-list actresses invited Burke and fellow women's rights activists onto the red carpet, where they donned all Black and spoke out about the need for significant changes not only in the entertainment industry but among all industries in which women are sexually exploited under the guise of naturalized labor conditions.<sup>24</sup>

The primary frame of #MeToo is one of solidarity and an insistence that stories about the personal are systemic and political. In their #MeToo stories, women speak to mainstream media, to patriarchal establishments, and directly to one another as a form of community building that works to alleviate the risk and fear associated with coming forward that #TheEmptyChair so eloquently illustrated. As with #YesAllWomen, much more scholarly and media attention has been paid to #MeToo than to the other hashtags we examine here, in large part because of the high-profile status of the celebrities connected to it, but we argue that the #MeToo boon was made possible by its predecessors and by the digital labor, consciousness raising, and alternative storytelling done by #YesAllWomen, #SurvivorPrivilege,

#WhyIStayed, #TheEmptyChair, and many other hashtags and conversations about gendered violence that were pushed into visibility by women and their allies on Twitter.

### **The Personal Hashtag Is Political**

Ultimately these hashtags are embodiments of the feminist demand that “the personal is political,” and illustrate how storytelling on Twitter raises consciousness, creates solidarity, promulgates new cultural narratives, and articulates demands for change. What has become known as the “#MeToo moment” was not so much a moment but a loud chorus of voices that had for years been using Twitter and other social networks to tell the stories about women’s experiences with violence that were not and had not been told in mainstream media, by politicians, or by most journalists. In these networks, unlike in most other public spaces, women told their own stories, women were believed, male allies helped elevate women’s voices, and women—experts in their own lives—added nuance to the all too often oversimplified and inaccurately reported systemic issues of gender, violence, and victimhood.

Each hashtag, from #YesAllWomen to #MeToo, did different work as part of a larger movement, creating cultural interventions in response to particular news stories and events that reached the public sphere. This shows the adaptability of digital feminism and the power of Twitter to be utilized beyond its initial social media purpose. As this chapter illustrates, these hashtags provided a source of discursive and collective energy that catalyzed both online and offline movement work, leading to powerful cultural repercussions and, yes, change. Since the hashtagification of #MeToo, Harvey Weinstein has been

removed from his organization, as has his name, and he has been charged with multiple counts of rape and sexual misconduct in the Manhattan Supreme Court.<sup>25</sup> #MeToo has also been taken up by women in countries such as China that lack the protected freedoms of expression we enjoy in the United States. As Leta Hong Fincher has documented, the #RiceBunny hashtag is widely used by Chinese feminists to get around the nation's censorship of #MeToo after innovative users began employing the emojis for a bowl of rice (phonetically pronounced "mi") and a rabbit (phonetically pronounced "tu") on the popular social media platform Weibo.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the growing number of celebrity men who have been implicated by #MeToo, the repercussions have also had an impact on men in academia and politics. The feminist sociologist Michael Kimmel was accused of #MeToo misconduct when he was on the precipice of receiving a lifetime achievement award for his role in the field at the 2018 annual American Sociology Association conference.<sup>27</sup> Brett Kavanaugh, the Trump administration's 2018 nominee for Supreme Court justice, was accused of sexually assaulting Christine Blasey Ford. Dr. Blasey Ford, an initially lone voice, evoked Anita Hill's experience with sexual harassment at the hands of a nominated and eventually seated Supreme Court justice, Clarence Thomas. As reporters attempted to compare the stories and potential outcomes of the Kavanaugh and Thomas hearings, race and the social climate created by #MeToo were noted as important difference in these two cases. While Kavanaugh was ultimately confirmed even after two more women came forward, the ferocity of the resistance was unparalleled. Tracie Cheng invigorated the growing protests with her visual rendering of Kavanaugh in Obama's red,

white, and blue HOPE posters, replacing the header with the text “Kava” and “NOPE,” accompanied by the hashtag #StopKavanaugh. The image went viral, and #KavaNope and derivatives such as #KavaNo and #KavaNah helped further the feminist fury.<sup>28</sup> Though these actions did not stop Kavanaugh’s confirmation, they did demonstrate the power of feminist organizing both on- and offline.

