

#MeToo Movement [UPSC Notes for GS II]

#MeToo Movement

Origins of the MeToo Movement:

- The MeToo hashtag gained prominence a year back in the United States.
- In the U.S., women came out one after another to first corroborate allegations of sexual assault against Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein.
- There were many allegations levelled and each further account made it clear that there was a systemic pattern of abuse and silence.

A Note on the Due Process:

- Experts believe that there has been an utter failure of due process.
- Unfortunately, victims have written formal complaints and have also tried to get their organisations to act, but they have mostly found themselves facing a system that prefers to be complicit with the perpetrators.
- A couple of cases further illustrate this:
 - Take the case of RK Pachauri, the former Chairman of TERI. In spite of the victim having filed a police complaint and compelled the organisation to start an inquiry into the matter, Pachauri continued in his position for one more year, and was also publicly endorsed by the organisation's board members.
 - There is another case of rape that one can sight against the former Editor of Tehelka, Tarun Tejpal. It has been five years since the case was started (and this is a 'fast-track' case), and it has only seen a series of adjournments with no sign of justice being served any time soon.

It is poignant to note that these incidents, when coupled with the everyday news cycle of rapes, harassment and stalking from all over the country, have led to victims of sexual crimes losing faith in the country's justice system.

Experts believe that the failure of due process is the success of #MeToo. After decades of witnessing the impunity of the perpetrators, #MeToo is fuelled by an impunity of sorts of the 'victims'.

Certain areas that need clarity:

- Currently the floodgates have been opened and various kinds of stories are getting exposed. These stories range from awkward flirting to physical assault.
- One other factor that is dividing the discussion into two is the nature of consent.
- It is important to note that what consent is often a construct/function of society. For instance, what was acceptable as part of intersexual behaviour in the workplace, say 3 decades ago, are no longer accepted or tolerated.
- However, we observe that with the advent of smartphones and instant messaging, interpersonal behaviour and the definition of consent have undergone a major change in the last decade.
- Thus, stemming from this, it is imperative at this point to understand that consent is not static, but needs to be continuous and incremental.
 - In these cases, we find that social media became the multiplier and aggregator of voices.
 - During these revelations, we find that women are raging about how they thought they were lone victims, how they could not speak up for fear of inflicting familial 'shame', and how they were afraid benign 'protection' would mean being married off or imprisonment at home.
 - Women are revealing how seniors and officials they complained to, reinforced fears - such as that of losing a job, losing face and losing independence.
 - Unfortunately, we find that women have been subjected to humiliation and harassment.
- It is felt that without this massive collation of narratives, single episodes would have remained

isolated transgressions that could be defused.

There are certain negative trends that have been associated with this movement. These are as follows:

1. We observe that first-person accounts are dissolving into unverified lists.
2. Fakes are jumping onto the bandwagon.
3. People are giving disclosures, offering up their timelines almost like a panacea or certificate of courage. It is important to note that this is unwise because vulnerable women might be pressured to think it could be just that.
4. Further, while being cathartic, disclosures might not always help in either healing or closure, especially in low-profile cases.

Things to be kept in Mind:

- It is important to identify the exact transgression in the various cases that are being expressed, and to ensure that action is taken with due process.
- Further, it is important to note that no one can be deemed guilty only because he/she had been named and any punishment must be proportionate to the misdemeanour.
- It is also important to consider that many people, especially men, have raised concerns regarding false accusations.
- No fight or movement is perfect, and there is little amount of collateral damage associated with all.
- It is important that men be proactive associates in making the due process of law fair and functional, in which all victims, including victims of false allegations, can seek justice.
- It is imperative now that the building of a new, fair system that delivers brisk justice, critical to everyone's interests is initiated.
- We should note that there has been a systemic disregard for making workplaces and common spaces free of harassment.
- A disturbing thread binding many of these allegations is that many women thought that their feelings and words would be ignored, their careers would be negatively affected, or that their families would restrain them from stepping out.
- It is this fear of making a complaint that needs to be overcome in all workspaces, not only the media and the film industry.
- All sections of society need to internalise a new normal - one which safeguards a woman's autonomy and freedom from discrimination at the workplace.
- Further, desire cannot be moral-policed and judged by age, sex or marital status. Do we want the excision of all expression of sexual interest at workplaces? Or is it possible we will learn a language of trust where desire can be expressed and rejected/accepted without repercussions.
- For men, it would mean stepping over desire to respect and understanding that reciprocation is not a divine right. For women, it implies learning to reject with confidence, and learning how to deploy power.
- Further, it is important to point out that once the dust settles, substantial solutions are needed.

Few steps that can be taken:

- Institutional responses should become faster, better, and more robust, but behavioural changes are even more pressing.
- Efforts should be taken to include a gender curriculum in schools and colleges, form anti-sexual harassment cells, conduct frequent awareness programs on consent all over the country, and codify measures to address sexual harassment incidents.
- The police should start community engagement drives so that students are aware how to report cases of sexual harassment.

- Successful programs in this regard include campaigns like Operation Nirbheek, which are conducted to improve the safety and security of girls while in school.

Steps already taken in wake up of MeToo:

- The Centre has recently established a Group of Ministers to recommend measures to effectively implement the law against sexual harassment at the workplace and to strengthen the legal and institutional framework in response to the #MeToo campaign.
- A government sub-committee formed in the wake of the #MeToo movement to recommend ways to prevent sexual harassment at workplace is likely to propose waiving the three-month time limit for victims to file complaints as laid down under the law.
- The Committee might also propose that Internal Committee members be treated on a par with “public servants” as defined under Section 21 of the IPC so that they have immunity from prosecution. “It will ensure that the members don’t get entangled in court cases,” the source said.

Conclusion: The problem is fundamentally one of socialisation. Men have to unlearn a lifetime of imbibed contempt for women. It must be pointed out that this can only be addressed by familial and social sensitisation that begins from infancy, creating a society that grants women equality and dignity by default. If today’s anger can begin that process, it will have been a success.