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The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags

By Sandra E. Garcia

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In 1997, Tarana Burke sat across from a 13-year-old girl who had been sexually abused. The young girl was explaining her experience, and it left Ms. Burke speechless. That moment is where the Me Too campaign was born.

“I didn’t have a response or a way to help her in that moment, and I couldn’t even say ‘me too,’ ” Ms. Burke said.

“It really bothered me, and it sat in my spirit for a long time,” she added.

Ten years after that conversation, Ms. Burke created Just Be Inc., a nonprofit organization that helps victims of sexual harassment and assault. She sought out the resources that she had not found readily available to her 10 years before and committed herself to being there for people who had been abused.

And she gave her movement a name: Me Too.

On Sunday, those two words burst into the spotlight of social media with #metoo, a hashtag promoted by the actress Alyssa Milano. Amid the firestorm that ignited, some women of color noted pointedly that the longtime effort by Ms. Burke, who is black, had not received support over the years from prominent white feminists.

Ms. Milano was seeking to give a voice to sexual abuse victims, after accusations of sexual harassment and assault were leveled against the Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein.

Me too.

Suggested by a friend: "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too.' as a status. we might give



Ms. Burke created the “Me Too” campaign in 2007.
www.justbeinc.org

After her tweet, social media was soon flooded with stories of harassment and assault, as #metoo became a way for users to tell their experience with sexual violence and stand in solidarity with other survivors. The hashtag was widely used on Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and other platforms; on Facebook, it was shared in more than 12 million posts and reactions in the first 24 hours, according to The Associated Press.

It was a particularly combustible moment for social media activism. Days earlier, amid the allegations against Mr. Weinstein, the actress Rose McGowan, who is among those accusing him of sexual harassment, was briefly locked out from her Twitter account, where she had been vocally speaking out against sexual harassment in Hollywood.

The following day, women online participated in a daylong boycott of Twitter, organized around the hashtag #WomenBoycottTwitter. Ms. Milano joined the boycott.



But black, Latino and other women of color started their own campaign. April Reign, a digital media strategist and the woman behind the #OscarSoWhite hashtag, began to organize people around the #WOCAffirmation or women of color affirmation.

The purpose was to uplift one another as they saw a disparity in how women of color were treated when they reported abuse.



Jasmyrn Lawson

@JasmyrnBeKnowing

I'm wary of #WomenBoycottTwitter. Folks looking funny in the light. Picking when we stand up for the silencing of women. #iStandwithJemele

3,714 10:00 PM - Oct 12, 2017

957 people are talking about this



Kimberly Bryant

@6Gems

Intersectionality = when you really want to support #WomenBoycottTwitter but you're conflicted bec Black women never get the same support. 😞

7,345 11:23 PM - Oct 12, 2017

2,011 people are talking about this

“White women have not been as supportive as they could have been of women of color when they experience targeted abuse and harassment,” Ms. Reign said in an interview.

“We saw that with Jemele Hill,” she said, referring to the sports journalist who was suspended by ESPN this month for speaking out against the N.F.L., “and Leslie Jones,” the comedian who was harassed on Twitter last year after being cast in the all-female “Ghostbusters” remake.

“We used it as a peaceful moment to say feminism should be intersectional,” Ms. Reign said. “If there is support for Rose McGowan, which is great, you need to be consistent across the board. All women stand with all women.”

And so, when Ms. Milano tweeted out the #metoo hashtag without crediting Ms. Burke, some noted that black women had again been left out of the story.

“Women of color are demanded to be silent and are erased,” Ms. Reign said. “Like with Tarana.”

Ms. Burke, too, said she was alarmed when she saw Ms. Milano’s tweet.

“Initially I panicked,” she said. “I felt a sense of dread, because something that was part of my life’s work was going to be co-opted and taken from me and used for a purpose that I hadn’t originally intended.”

But Ms. Milano, who said she had been unaware of Ms. Burke’s campaign, moved to correct the problem.

She reached out to Ms. Burke two days after she sent out the #metoo tweet and is hoping to collaborate.

“She has been very grateful and gracious,” Ms. Burke said.

On Thursday, Ms. Milano went on “Good Morning America,” where she publicly credited Ms. Burke for her Me Too campaign.

“What the Me Too campaign really does, and what Tarana Burke has really enabled us to do, is put the focus back on the victims,” Ms. Milano said in an interview with Robin Roberts.

Amplifying the voice of the victims has always been Ms. Burke’s goal. Despite “a great lack of intersectionality across these various movements,” Ms. Burke, whose campaign predates the widespread adoption of social media, said she also believes that the Me Too campaign is bigger than just one person.

“I think it is selfish for me to try to frame Me Too as something that I own,” she said. “It is bigger than me and bigger than Alyssa Milano. Neither one of us should be centered in this work. This is about survivors.”