

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/swom20>

The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement

edited by Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir, London and New York, Routledge Press, 2021, 472 pp., US\$56.95 (softcover), ISBN-13: 9780357809263

Cymene Howe

To cite this article: Cymene Howe (2023) The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement, NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research, 31:4, 320-322, DOI: [10.1080/08038740.2023.2266237](https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2023.2266237)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2023.2266237>



Published online: 30 Nov 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 34



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement, edited by Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir, London and New York, Routledge Press, 2021, 472 pp., US\$56.95 (softcover), ISBN-13: 9780357809263

In *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement*, editors Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir gather a rich, compelling set of essays that speak to the global movement to end sexual violence. The collection is crafted from perspectives spanning academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, but perhaps more importantly, the book gives vigorous attention to activists' voices. Both professional and personal standpoints are represented in the accounts that the book features, from journalists and academics as well as long-time activists and first-time campaigners against gendered violence. The genres mimic this heterogeneity to feature speeches and survivor narratives as well as blog posts, journalistic accounts, and academic essays.

The *Handbook's* geographical reach is capacious with contributions from China and Iceland, South Africa and Poland, Romania and Kenya, the United States, India, and Egypt, to name a few. Contributors draw from issues and ideas, bridging politics and feminist theory, but they also hew closely to the events that have made up the #MeToo movement—the aggressors' acts and survivors' responses. Transdisciplinary tools and analytics operate along with a deft attention to the structural conditions that have allowed for sexual abuse to infect so many lives and places. The commitment laid out by the editors is to show the “impact of the #MeToo movement around the world, regardless of gender, sexuality, abilities, nationality and class, and to analyse, cultural, political, religious or other impacts upon the movement.” This collection realizes that commitment expertly, offering inspiration as to what the #MeToo movement has already transformed and what it may yet offer to the next generation of activists and thinkers.

In her forward to *The Handbook*, Cynthia Enloe describes the critical importance of the collection's “double-message” (xviii). She notes that there are “bright threads of similarity that run through diverse sites” and yet, as she writes, there is a consistent “multi-dimensional context” that matters (xviii), surfacing both the generalizable and the particular. What is equally useful in *The Handbook* is its framing of #MeToo as not only a *movement* but a movement that has its own internal and external *politics*—politics that are experienced intimately and at scale, that appear through social mediated forms and also compel legal strategies and the acquisition of justice. The contributors, throughout, make clear that the stories shared, the inroads made, and the solidarity created across those affected, were not simply one-offs of hashtag activism—or commentaries restricted to the domain of social media—but have been generative, connective narrative forms and experiences that have ignited grassroots participation across continents, generations and lived experiences.

Many of the book's contributors are readily recognizable thinkers and participants in activist struggles, such as Angela Davis, Catherine MacKinnon, and Jack Halberstam. Other authors, both emergent and established, bring narrative voices of communities with whom they work, as well as their own, offering analytic perspectives from multiple standpoints and politically inflected contexts from several regions of the world.

It can be a challenge to bring together such a range of authorial styles and lived experiences, but *The Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement* is quite successful in accomplishing this. The editors' introduction is immensely useful in attuning readers to the thematics that will unfold across the book's pages; the Introduction also serves as a roadmap for the larger issues that have animated the politics of the #MeToo movement since its inception in the U.S. by Tarana Burke in 2006 and in its later massification in 2017 by the actress Alyssa Milano.

The conceptual and political terrain that the book addresses includes: the generative capacities of revolutionary movements; the importance of survivor narratives and the power of individual and collective stories; the dynamic interplay between celebrity and marginalized women's experiences; decolonization and the importance of women's resistance; the role of social media in feminist struggle; how restorative and reformatory justice are configured within the politics of the #MeToo movement; the role of language, consent and sex; and finally, how theorizing contexts and perspectives can help to realize the current and future aspirations of the #MeToo movement.


In the first part of the book, readers are introduced to the theoretical dimensions of *The Handbook* and key conceptual themes are brought into focus. Through the words of Angela Davis, readers are confronted with the immense scope of the task at hand. She writes that gender violence "is the most pandemic form of violence in the world. It raises the question of why advances have occurred in other realms while gender violence has remained unchanged" (28). Davis's opening remarks are followed by a probing query on the nature of revolutions (Sunstein) and how personhood becomes surfaced in political organizing and movement politics (G. Chandra). Distinct forms of vulnerability (N.H. Halldórsdóttir) come into view through the politics of the #MeToo movement as do questions about anonymity: how is it established, and importantly, whom does it benefit? Giti Chandra, for instance, raises the pointed question, "why is it that when the anonymity attaches to the perpetrator rather than the victim, the standard response is to believe and support the victim; however, if the anonymity attaches to the victim rather than the perpetrator, this belief is withdrawn and replaced with suspicion, disbelief, and even accusation?" (101). Across these discussions, the role of consent—both its form and utilization in distinct situations and by individual subjects—is an overarching query (Berger).

In a key passage, Catherine MacKinnon writes that "we are in the middle of the first mass movement against sexual abuse in the history of the world" (42). By thinking in terms of what MacKinnon calls "butterfly politics" we are asked to envision how earlier movements in the 1970s, coupled with legal strategies against gender discrimination, accompanied by political events (like the 2016 U.S. presidential elections) set the stage for the "tectonic" shift of gender politics found in #MeToo. Contributors also draw attention to how #MeToo has been met with backlash, suspicion, and silencing when patriarchal authority is threatened (Brynjarsdóttir); the role of masculinity (Hearn) also faces reinspection in light of the #MeToo movement. Nkiru Balonwu's chapter provides a useful segue way into the second section of the book as she discusses the multiple forms of African feminisms, and reminds readers that "while all forms of feminist movements are in some way geared towards the advancement of women, not all parts of the world adopt them equally" (123). In this and other essays, the global applicability of #MeToo is often questioned, even as the gendered violence that motivated it remains a crucial object for activist and analytic intervention.

The objective of the second section of the book is to contextualize the theoretical proposals that unfold in *The Handbook's* first section. In her contribution, Marai Larasi begins with words from the poet June Jordan and draws from the "multiple, interwoven, and interconnected spaces of Black feminist knowledge formation and production" (232) to underscore the critical role of these intellectual and activist projects and the importance of intersectional politics. Contributors to this section of *The Handbook* also raise questions about converting theory into practice and how that can become actualized (V. Chandra) as well as how psychological trauma and discourses of denial become manifest in naming perpetrators and their crimes (Runestad). Jack Halberstam warns about slipping into presumptions of heteronormativity within the #MeToo movement and Rochelle McFee meditates on the survivor as an iconic, revolutionary figure who also occupies postcolonial and church settings. Across many essays, authors reflect on how organizations and institutions have helped or hindered the battle against sexual violence. They raise questions about how perpetrators are named and represented in the mainstream media, for example, in the case of Harvey Weinstein (Boyle). Solutions to workplace harassment are discussed as is how pressure must be sustained to make reforms an ongoing project in a "post" #MeToo world (Roofeh). Finally, Freya Haraldsdóttir describes her activism as a woman with disabilities and how her role as a "troublemaker among troublemakers" has been

important to opening further discussion of the role of race and disability within feminist organizing in Iceland, and beyond. She reminds us that to be a feminist killjoy in Sara Ahmed's terms, is not to kill the joy but to animate and enhance it through more introspection and attention to justice.

In Part Three of *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement*, a series of contributors, often writing collaboratively, comment upon the country-specific and region-specific emergence of the #MeToo movement, and sometimes, how its reception was truncated as an imposition of “Western feminism” and liberal values. This section begins with a useful survey of how the #MeToo movement has gone global (Sen), detailing how local struggles and hashtags have converged and how cross-solidarity initiatives can be born from #MeToo. Authors K. Kanyali Mwikya, Judy Gitau, and Esther Waweru write about local anti-sexual violence movements in Kenya and other African countries as they also contend with the fact that while #MeToo may not have been as robustly taken-up in African contexts, it has been drawn into feminist projects in ways that may have yet unseen effects. Rym Tina Ghazal provides a journalist's view on #ANAKAMAN, and shares that while no major Arab celebrities or public figures openly joined #MeToo, there were journalists and others who in private and in their social media posts, were quite vocal about their experiences of sexual violence and harassment in the Middle East and North Africa. A comparative analysis of #MeToo in Romania and China (David), illustrates how post-socialist conditions were imperative to the movement's integration, or lack of integration, into local movements. Readers learn that in Russia (Sedysheva), reservations about the future of the movement remain, especially as #MeToo has been labelled as “western” and thus a threat to certain kinds of traditionalism within the Russian Federation. In Poland (Grabowska and Rawhuszho) the #MeToo movement has had ambiguous effects on local gender equality and anti-violence initiatives; some reactions to #MeToo have led to parochializing effects. In the case of Japan (O'Mochain), the movement has acquired a fascinating identity, becoming codified under #WeToo to evoke a sense of group solidarity rather than indexing the individualism that the “me” of #MeToo appears to do. Contributors writing about the case of France (Pavard, Rochefort and Zancarini-Fournel) recognize that #MeToo was a “major feminist event in every sense of the term” (269), strengthened and extended because of its global reach; in part this eventuality also worked to surface entrenched French masculinism and anti-feminism. Case studies from Argentina and South America (Carlson) and from Mexico and Latin America more broadly (Domínguez R.) show the overlaps and resonances between the #NiUnaMenos (Not One Less) movement in Latin America, an ongoing struggle against gender-based violence, portrayed in vivid form in Cristina Rivera Garza's exceptional book, *Liliana's Invincible Summer* (2023) documenting her sister's murder and the epidemic of “femicide” in Mexico and other countries. In the case of China, Li Jun illustrates how student protests, the justice system, and women's organizations, coupled with social media, offered legal avenues, in part, through #MeToo. Tamara Shefer and Tigist Shawarega Hussen offer a critique of the colonial arrival trope of #MeToo and demonstrate how online and mass activism needs to be understood as both a global phenomenon and one that is bolstered by locally relevant movements—many of which laid the foundation for #MeToo in South Africa. In the Swedish academy (Salmonsson), as in many others that appear in the book, #MeToo has been an opening that also illustrates an unfinished project of equality. Finally, Irma Erlingsdóttir shows how intergenerational dialogues and the invigorating effect of participation in a global movement has had a deep impact upon Icelandic feminism; being part of a global resistance, at once and all together, has built key connectivities and a sense of broader solidarity.

Cymene Howe
 Anthropology, School of Social Sciences, Rice University, Houston, TX, USA
 ach1@rice.edu

© 2023 Cymene Howe
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2023.2266237>

