Unseen: the sexual harassment of low-income women in America
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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the harassment of vulnerable women whose lives and experiences remain largely unseen in the era of #MeToo.
Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws from the sparse empirical literature as well as the more informal accounts provided by social justice organizations, investigative journalists and legal commentary about four spheres that have largely remained invisible: women in low-income housing, agricultural workers, janitorial workers and restaurant workers. It also reviews the surprising success stories that some of these groups have achieved and invite us to ponder what we can learn from them.
Findings – Farm workers, sub-minimum wage restaurant workers, single mothers and janitorial workers are several groups that were not highlighted by the current movement.
Social implications – Highlighting the experiences of those who remain largely hidden in and from academic discourse and, more largely, the public eye enlarges the scope of knowledge and encourages further scholarly inquiry.
Originality/value – Combining the perspectives of scholar and social justice activist illuminates the depth and breadth of largely invisible classes of harassment victims and the potentially novel remedies they have initiated.
Keywords Gender, Feminism, #MeToo movement
Paper type General review

Although sexual harassment has been documented since at least the Industrial Revolution (Bularzik, 1978), it was only in the last quarter of the twentieth century that the issue reached public awareness, first as a joke, then as an aberration, and finally as a social problem. Even today, when powerful men have toppled before our eyes and #MeToo has become a catchphrase, there are millions of women for whom these changes are irrelevant or nonexistent. This paper is about them.

In the following pages, I explore the intersection of sex and power in the lives of some of the women whom science, the movement and sometimes the law have forgotten: farmworkers raped in the fields and packing sheds of the agricultural industry; sub-minimum wage restaurant workers groped by the customers upon whose tips they depend to survive; single mothers, threatened with eviction unless they have sex with their landlords, and janitorial workers, harassed and assaulted by supervisors, contractors and customers. These are by no means the only women who are, for all intents and purposes, invisible in the literature on sexual harassment; there are others more invisible still, including those in homeless shelters, female arrestees and inmates, childcare and domestic service workers and those who provide various forms of home health care.

These women are the lowest paid workers in the USA: according to the Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor, agricultural workers average $352 a week and that counts only those who work full time, whereas the minimum wage for restaurant workers is capped by federal law at $2.13. Their jobs are tenuous, their skills fungible and institutional protections few or nonexistent. These women may never tweet; never write an Op-Ed, or appear on a late-night program; indeed, many will never think of themselves as part of the #MeToo movement at all. Yet, their struggle reveals much about the fundamental realities of harassment and resistance.

This paper explores what little is formally known about these women’s experiences; it begins by reviewing the sparse empirical literature as well as the more informal accounts.
provided by social justice organizations, investigative journalists and legal commentary with an eye toward making visible the experiences of those who even today remain largely hidden in and from academic discourse and, more largely, the public eye. I then review the surprising success stories that some of these groups have achieved and invite us to ponder what we can learn from them.

Untold stories
Single women in low-income housing

Every month when he come over to get the rent […] he would say ‘you know, you a single mom, you shouldn’t have to work so hard […] you wouldn’t have to pay no rent at all if you just let me have a little of that pussy’.6

Research on the issue of sexual harassment in housing is virtually nonexistent. Aside from an occasional law review article, most of what is known about the issue is drawn from the popular media. In the early 1990s, a number of women’s magazines such as Ms., Redbook, Glamour and Jet brought the issue to the attention of their readers (Bode, 1987; Deane, 1992; Gross, 1992); but this brief flurry of publicity dissipated without engaging public or scholarly consciousness in the same way as its workplace counterpart.

In one of the few formal studies, Cahan (1987) surveyed 150 public and private fair housing organizations across the country to examine the extent of the problem. Of those that responded, nearly two-thirds reported receiving complaints of sexual harassment, yielding a total of 288 incidents. Like all studies that base prevalence rates on formal complaints, this is most certainly a drastic under-estimate. The author attempted to correct this problem by extrapolating from reporting rates described in the US Merit Systems Protection Board’s (1981) study, producing an estimate of between 6,818 and 15,000 cases across a five-year period; however, the very different nature of these samples as well as the small number of actual reports renders these estimates suspect and probably unrealistically low (Litt et al., 1992).

Using a different approach, Novac (1994) directly surveyed 1,000 women living in rental households in Ontario, Canada. Of the 352 useable surveys returned, 25 percent of survey respondents reported experiencing residential sexual harassment; however, the survey items were based on a typology of workplace harassment and may not have adequately captured the types of behavior experienced by tenants. For example, Novac (1994) noted that 29 percent of respondents reported that their landlord had entered their home without notice or permission, a behavior not featured in workplace surveys.

Reed et al. (2005) examined the sworn testimony of 39 victims involved in harassment litigation against their landlords with the purpose of determining the nature of their experiences compared to workplace victims. They found that most instances of harassment fit the three general categories found in the workplace (gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion); however, they also identified two additional types of behavior that appear to be unique: home invasion (see Novac, 1994, above) and what they labeled “hostility towards significant others,” usually boyfriends or husbands.

Home invasion refers to instances in which the landlord or property manager would enter the victim’s home uninvited and unannounced, using his key to access the apartment when the victim is home alone; such entries are often the prelude to sexual assault. For example, one victim testified: “He said he come over to fix the sink, but he didn’t have no tools with him. He went down the hall with me and said ‘show me where the sink is broke’ […] I bent down to show him under the sink. The next thing, he pushed me down. He said ‘I want to fuck your brains out’ He was grabbing me and pulling my clothes. His pants were down and you could see his penis” (Reed et al., 2005). In other cases, the landlord made clear he did not want other men coming around the tenant, or living in the tenant’s apartment
(e.g. “I don’t want you having any boyfriends around the apartment”; “The landlord threw the tenant out on the same day that he saw and found out that she had a boyfriend” (Reed et al., 2005, pp. 453-454)).

Nearly a decade later, Tester (2013) reported virtually identical findings. Interestingly, both Tester (2013) and Reed et al. (2005) found that sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention (including assault) were by far the most common forms of harassment in housing; this is in contrast to the repeated finding that gender harassment (hostility) is the most common form of workplace harassment in organizations and sexual coercion the least.

More striking than the prevalence figures and structure of housing harassment, however, is the vulnerability of these women and, by extension, their children. Women constitute the largest subgroup of the nations’ “insecurely housed”[2]; the majority are black or Hispanic single mothers, poorly educated, marginally employed if at all and living at or below the poverty level. These circumstances combined with the dramatically increasing lack of affordable housing[3] produces a virtual formula for harassment by predators who literally hold the keys to women’s homes. Vouchers can be withdrawn on the basis of a complaint by a landlord (e.g. drug use; a boyfriend living in the house), evictions are swift and often brutal; and most victims are unaware of their rights or how to exercise them. One victim who complained to her local Public Housing Authority (PHA) that her landlord was requiring sex from her was simply told to call the police.

Most PHA employees have traditionally received no training on sexual harassment and tenants’ rights; indeed, newspaper accounts make clear that these employees – much like the agricultural foremen discussed above – are often very much part of the problem, either through ignorance or direct participation. As one of Collinsworth et al.’s (2005) victims testified:

[A man] from HUD came out to the house […] and I told him the same thing [I’ve told you.]

Q: And did they do anything in response to your complaint?

A: No. They just said that they was going to work on it.

The next month the tenant was evicted.

A cursory search reveals numerous examples of sexual harassment by housing authority officials themselves; for example, in 2014, the Department of Justice filed a lawsuit alleging that the Section 8 Housing Coordinator for a North Carolina county, along with a Housing Inspector, used their authority to make unwanted sexual comments, sexually touched and made other sexual acts toward women who applied for or received Section 8 housing vouchers; they also retaliated against women who rebuffed their advances. The previous year, a similar suit had been filed against the same two men. One of the most egregious examples involved a hearing officer for the Kansas City Housing Authority; hearing officers assist applicants who have been rejected for public housing to file appeals for reconsideration. In this case, an applicant was discussing her appeal with the hearing officer when “(H)e began telling her that her Facebook pictures were sexy. He then, according to the complaint, unzipped his pants, exposed himself to her, and asked her inappropriate and offensive sexual questions about men’s genitalia” (Mock, 2015).

*Agricultural workers*

They call it the field de calzon – the field of panties – because so many rapes happen there. (Stone, 2012).

Farm work is considered one of the most dangerous occupations in the USA. In 2016, the average worker earned approximately $12 an hour many considerably less; approximately
26 percent of these workers are women. According to Waugh (2010) most “live far below the poverty thresholds […] Poor nutrition and health, limited access to medical care, exposure to pesticides, and substandard housing are pervasive (Bullock and Lott, 2001; Lott, 2002; Lott and Bullock, 2001, 2007).”

The Farmworker Sexual Violence Fact Sheet, published by the Community Alliance for Social Justice in Seattle cites Waugh’s (2010) study among farmworker women finding that 80 percent had experienced sexual harassment at work. Human Rights Watch concluded recently that sexual harassment is so common among agricultural workers in the USA that many see such abuse as an unavoidable condition of the job (HRW, 2012). Among the farmworkers studied by the Southern Poverty Law Center, one described the reality in the fields succinctly: “You allow it or they fire you”. Although the nature of this population, as well as the nature of the work, makes scientific study a challenge, it is clear that the problem is enormous[4] and some researchers, particularly those located in large agricultural regions, have begun to address it.

Waugh (2010) produced one of the only formal social-scientific studies of farm-working immigrant women, studying 150 Mexican immigrant women who worked in the fields and packing sheds of central California. Employing methods developed specifically for assessing harassment among Latina women (Cortina, 2001), combined with qualitative interview techniques, she found that 80 percent of the women farmworkers in her sample had experienced some form of sexual harassment from supervisors or co-workers. Their experiences ranged from crude and offensive verbal behavior through unwanted verbal and physical sexual attention, sexual coercion and sexual assault. Only a very small number ever reported the problem to someone in authority.

Although fear of reporting is the norm for virtually all victims of sexual harassment, the barriers for female agricultural workers are staggering. Employers tend to be white, English-speaking family members who turn over day-to-day farm operations to a foreman, a long-time trusted employee who is bilingual; the workers generally speak little English, the owners rarely speak Spanish, and the bilingual foreman, or “mayor domo,” is thus the single link between the workers and their employer.

It is difficult to over-estimate the power wielded by this individual. “The foreman may, in addition to recruiting and hiring workers, also help find housing, provide transportation to work (usually for a fee), and help newcomers adjust to life in the US. A foreman can have significant authority because he informs workers which fields they should report to and is typically responsible for determining pay” (HRW, 2012). According to William Tomayo, a long-time Regional Attorney for the EEOC: “The workers are geographically isolated from community services, have few options in life and are in desperate poverty. They are dependent on (the foreman) to navigate the English-speaking world for them. If (he) is a predator and/or his supervisors below him are predators, it is the ideal situation for sexual harassment to occur—unfettered, unpunished, and unstoppable”. Unlike the more well-studied industrial, bureaucratic and organizational workforces, most harassment of agricultural workers is perpetrated by foremen and supervisors.

Female farmworkers suffer additional vulnerabilities. Although exact figures are hard to come by, it is estimated that 50 percent or more of the agricultural workforce is undocumented, and even those with guest worker visas depend on their employers to remain in the country; importantly, visas are not transferable from one employer to another thus maximizing the “stakes” for holding that particular job and minimizing the likelihood that a worker will complain. Because family members frequently work for the same employer, women who complain risk not only their own job but the jobs of their entire family. Recent immigrants, particularly younger girls and women who speak no English, have little education, and do not understand how to navigate their new situation are at particular risk, as are single women, often with children, who have no husband or male
family member to protect them. Because agricultural workers are exempt from many of the protections of US labor laws, there is no minimum age for children working on small farms as long as they have their parents’ permission, and once they are 14, they can work on any farm even without parental permission.

Farmworkers, by design, were excluded from most of the protections of traditional labor legislation; some have speculated that, because at the time such legislation was enacted most farm workers were black, such exclusion represented a conscious attempt to maintain the social and economic conditions of the Jim Crow South. Although the great majority of farmworkers are now Hispanic immigrants – up to 50 percent of them undocumented – this power dynamic remains unchanged: powerless women with few options and much to lose are sexually assaulted by predatory men with no accountability and little to fear. Although legalized slavery is long gone from American life[5], its legacy remains powerful in the fields, orchards and packing sheds of America.

Janitorial workers

The fourth assault occurred in a secluded area off the docking area of the mall. (The supervisor) told (her) that she needed to help him find a gasoline can […] they eventually wound up searching in a secluded storage area by the loading docks. The supervisor grabbed her by the hair and pushed her head down, as if he were going to force her to perform oral sex. She said to him “This again?! Why?” He responded, “Because that’s the way I want it”. [5]

Variously known as janitors, custodians, cleaners, property services workers and more, janitorial workers are employed in an industry that regularly awards large contracts to the lowest bidder. This practice produces slim profit margins and a situation in which labor costs are the main element of profitability, a combination that in turn exerts downward pressure on wages as well as the financial incentive to skimp on worker protections.

There are literally no formal published studies of this occupational group in the social science literature, although their isolated, late-night work conditions, low wages and (mainly) immigrant status create what Chen et al. (2016) refer to as “a perfect storm” of conditions that place them at risk for sexual assault[6]. Janitorial workers enter empty shopping malls, high rise office buildings and other commercial structures at night, long after other workers have left; they work almost always alone, a situation that maximizes the chances that there will be no one to help them in the event of an attack. Chen et al. note that it is not unusual for the woman’s only point of contact with her employer to be the supervisor who is harassing her. Along with this isolation, they identify other risk factors such as victim vulnerability (arising from undocumented status, language barriers and lack of knowledge of their rights) and a workplace culture of poorly trained supervisors and managers, as well as nonexistent sexual harassment policies, that serves to embolden harassers (Chen et al., 2016, p. 1).

The janitorial profession has changed considerably in the last few generations; until the 1970s, most janitors worked as employees for the stores and facilities they cleaned; as the landscape became dominated by towering high rises in major (and not so major) American cities, this business model changed. Large office buildings, typically owned by investment groups, contain multiple separate companies and firms, each with its own set of offices, who share services such as cleaning, which are delegated to large property services corporations who compete for contracts to serve them; such contractors often “piece” such contracts out to various subcontractors, whose workers may never know or see another employee other than the supervisor who hires and supervises them. This system of contracting and subcontracting loosens and blurs lines of employer responsibility.

Large service contractors (e.g. ABM Industries, Service Management Systems) have traditional corporate structures including a formal HR function, and some are unionized; in
contrast, smaller contractors and subcontractors are often unregistered with the state and
do business almost completely “under the table.” Much of the janitorial economy functions
almost solely in this “black market.” Although “traditional corporate structures” have not
solved the problem of sexual harassment in the industry, as demonstrated by the multiple
law suits filed against the major property services companies, these smaller companies often
have virtually no hierarchy or structure, the supervisor (or foreman) has unchecked
authority to hire and fire, and the protections of traditional labor and civil law go
unobserved and are, to many, unknown.

According to the Maintenance Cooperation Trust Fund (MCTF) – a California
watchdog group that works with janitors – as many as three quarters of janitors experience sexual harassment (Garcia-Brower, 2016 in Chen et al, 2016), virtually all of which goes unreported. Governmental labor law enforcement depends on the assumption
that workers know their rights, but because agencies do virtually no outreach, this is often
not the case with those who are primed for abuse (language barriers, no education or
salable skills, non-documented status). It is these groups who gravitate toward janitorial
work, an industry that takes all comers, most of whom have no other options. Many have
no idea that there are legal standards governing working hours, breaks, overtime and the
like, much less that sexual harassment is illegal and there is something they can do about
it. It thus falls to groups like MCTF, which regularly sends outreach investigators on
unannounced night-time visits to talk with janitorial workers, win their trust and
eventually coax them in to a relationship; in this way, the group can “keep tabs” on unfair
labor practices (e.g. shortchanging paychecks, no breaks, unpaid overtime) as well as
educating and supporting workers who are being exploited. Unfortunately, given the
number of buildings that are cleaned every night and the thousands of non-unionized
janitors that clean them, there will never be enough labor advocates to identify abusive
workplace practices, much less prevent sexual assault.

Restaurant workers

So, it was happy hour, and I went out to the dock and greeted my table and there were three guys,
and I’m like, “Hi, my name is Jaclyn,” I introduced myself, the usual, and “What can I get you?” and
they were you like, “You, on the table, naked.” (Dirks, 2004).

The restaurant industry is one of the fastest growing sectors of the American economy and
the all-important “first job” for most young people; it employs nearly 11m people (ROC
United, 2014). Restaurants are a subset of the larger hospitality industry (e.g. hotels, resorts
and the like), which is itself a subset of the overall service industry, the largest segment of
the nation’s economy. The service/hospitality industry has been recognized for at least
several decades as a “high risk” industry for sexual harassment and recent research
confirms that restaurant employees, in particular, experience harassment as a fact of
working life (ROC, 2014). Indeed, the restaurant industry qualifies as the single largest
source of sexual harassment claims in the USA; whereas 7 percent of American women
work in the restaurant industry, more than one-third (37 percent) of all sexual harassment
claims to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission arise from restaurant employees
(Tahmencioglu, 2011). In ROC’s (2014) study of restaurant employees, the most
comprehensive to date, the highly sexualized environment in which restaurant workers
labor affected every major workplace relationship, with 80 percent of restaurant workers
reporting harassment from co-workers and 66 percent from restaurant management; 78
percent had experienced harassment from customers.

As elsewhere, women bear the brunt of sexual harassment in the restaurant industry.
Over two-thirds (69 percent) of women in this study reported sexual teasing, jokes,
remarks or questions from co-workers, and 39 percent were deliberately touched or
pinched; 21 percent were inappropriately kissed or fondled. Women were also more likely to receive sexually suggestive text messages from co-workers (19 percent), sexually suggestive looks or gestures (45 percent) and pressure for dates (36 percent). The numbers for men were considerably lower, though still higher than those reported in other industries.

Researchers and activists have posited a number of reasons for the high levels of harassment in the restaurant industry. ROC (2014) emphasizes the vulnerability inherent in tipped occupations, including the little-known fact that, in 1976, at the behest of the National Restaurant Association, federal legislation capped the minimum wage for tipped workers at $2.13 an hour, where it has remained for the past 40 years! These “wages” go almost exclusively to pay social security and employment taxes; as a result, servers and other tipped workers typically receive no pay check, but rather a paystub for $0 marked “THIS IS NOT A PAYCHECK” (Jayaraman, 2016) an unsubtle reminder that their livelihood is completely dependent on the goodwill and generosity of their customers.

The perverse nature of such incentives is obvious. Not only do managers encourage servers to flirt and dress to emphasize their “assets” to customers, often requiring them to don skimpy or sexualized uniforms, but servers themselves can come to internalize the commodification of their bodies (Dirks, 2004). ROC reported that restaurant workers in sub-minimum wage tipped jobs experienced twice the amount of sexual harassment as those living in states that pay the same minimum wage to all workers. Interestingly, this finding held not only for harassment from customers but also for that by co-workers and managers. Clearly, there are additional factors at play other than the perverse combination of a sub-minimum wages and tips.

One possible candidate is the nature of restaurant work itself; the sexualized workplace culture often found in restaurants can “normalize” the sexualization of female workers, creating the tolerant organizational environment long implicated by organizational psychologists as the main precursor of sexual harassment (Hulin et al., 1996; Willness et al., 2007). Of course, not all eating establishments are the same; not only do they vary by type (fast food, family chains (e.g. Olive Garden, Applebee’s), fine dining (e.g. Capitol Grille, Morton’s)) but they also exist on intersecting continua of the degree and nature of customer interaction and the degree of overt sexualization. For example, employees of McDonald’s and similar fast food chains have only brief, highly transactional interactions with customers that do not lend themselves to harassment in the same way as the more personalized interactions common to, say, TGI Fridays; the nature of McDonald’s atmosphere is also considerably more prosaic and family-oriented. This is not to say that fast food employees are not harassed; but rather that customer harassment is less likely to be as widespread. This is in contrast to “party chains” such as TGI Fridays, through the “sanitized” sexuality of bars and grills such as Hooters and resort-type establishments in tourist playgrounds; to the euphemistically named “gentlemen’s clubs” such as Solid Gold, Platinum Plus and the like. It is reasonable to suggest that this continuum of sexualization influences the degree to which female servers will be objectified and harassed by all manner of other employees, not just customers.

Other scholars point to the vulnerability-related characteristics of service workers themselves; that is, under-educated, low skilled, highly fungible and mainly female, particularly at lower levels. In addition, restaurant staff are often gender-segregated, both horizontally and vertically; women tend to occupy jobs that are considered lower-status and are rarely found in “men’s work” – for instance, they are concentrated in waitress and hostess positions as opposed to management or sommeliers in fine dining – and also set off from male co-workers through practices such as the requirement to wear revealing clothes or uniforms, the expectation that they will flirt with customers as part of their job (particularly servers) and the common perception that whatever work women do is less skilled or valuable. As ROC (2014) points out, sexual harassment is both a form of this social distancing and a result of it.
The promise of collective action: “the times, they are a changin’”

Williams et al. (1999) set out to determine how organizations could reduce sexual harassment; they operationalized organizational climate via examining actual organizational practices, including worker education (e.g. training), the provision of resources (e.g. hotlines, counseling) and policy implementation (both prevention and enforcement activities) in a sample of more than 22,000 members of the armed forces, both women and men. They found that the only set of practices that reduced sexual harassment involved implementation, that is, tangible actions to prevent harassing behavior and enforce sanctions against those who harassed others. Although training and the provision of resources had a minor effect on incidence rates, these were weak, inconsistent and accounted for very little variance. Implementation, on the other hand, had a strong linear relationship with harassment rates; the more effort the organization (in this case, various military units) put into tangible efforts to prevent harassment and sanction those who engaged in it, the less harassment occurred, accounting for an astonishing 14 percent of the variance of harassment rates in the female sample. Unfortunately, nearly 20 years later, organizations of all kinds continue to place their emphasis on devising policies and implementing training. One dramatic exception has recently appeared, however, and that in a most unlikely setting.

The coalition of Immokalee workers (CIW)
The CIW is a worker-based human rights organization built on farmworker community organizing and headquartered in Immokalee, Florida, the center of Florida’s huge tomato-growing industry. In 2011, CIW initiated the Campaign for Fair Food Program (FFP); under this program, a coalition of farmworkers, along with a national network of consumers, convinced large-scale corporate consumers (e.g. Whole Foods, Wal-Mart, McDonald’s) to partner with them to create structural change. According to the FFP (2017) annual report: “(Stores) agree to purchase covered produce only from farms that meet the standards required by the Fair Food Code of Conduct, as verified by the Fair Food Standards Council (FFSC).” They also pay their suppliers a small “Fair Food Premium,” known popularly as a “penny-per pound,” which is then passed on to farmworkers in their regular paychecks to augment low wages:

Growers agree to implement the Fair Food Code of Conduct on their farms, to cooperate with monitoring by the FFSC, and to pass along the Fair Food Premium. Farms that fail to come into compliance with Code standards are suspended from the Program until they do so and cannot sell their product to Participating Buyers during that time.

In the brief six years of its existence, this program has created a remarkable record of success in improving all aspects of farmworkers lives; the Fair Food Code of Conduct, drafted by farmworkers themselves, requires among other things a strict anti-harassment, pro-respect policy with comprehensive education, a safe and effective complaint process, and strong anti-retaliation provisions that are strictly enforced; each year, the grower is audited for compliance by the Standards Council. Requirements for continued participation include complying with the Zero Tolerance policy for forced labor, child labor, physical violence and sexual assault. Sexual harassment that includes touching is cause for immediate dismissal and a year-long ban on employment by any participating grower; a second offense results in a lifetime ban. The process is monitored by the Standards Council, which conducts a yearly audit. According to its 2017 Annual Report, “Cases of sexual harassment by supervisors with any type of physical contact have been virtually eliminated, with only one such case found since 2013.” This is a remarkable record, unmatched by any other organization or group. The power of such comprehensive implementation, enhanced by strong accountability and tangible consequences, has not only dramatically reduced incidence rates but improved the quality of working life on a large scale. Along the way, it has provided strong “real life” evidence for the validity and generalizability of traditional theoretical models of sexual harassment in organizations.
Other worker-based initiatives

The Immokalee Collective is the most well developed but not the only worker-based initiative of its type. After the (2015) Frontline documentary “Rape on the Night Shift” exposed widespread rape and sexual assault in the janitorial industry, female members of the Service Employees International Union worked to pass a California legislative initiative mandating in-person training for all janitorial workers every two years, training that deals specifically with the power dynamics and culture of the industry, with an emphasis on peer-to-peer training. The narrative of their struggle, from the initial attempts to convince their male peers of the importance of this issue to their dramatic six-day hunger strike on the front lawn of the California capitol, has been documented by Yeung (2018b).

Meanwhile, far from the West Coast, a group of hotel janitors successfully lobbied the Chicago City Council for a city ordinance mandating that all hotel room attendants be issued a “panic button,” a button fob to wear around their neck on a lanyard, plus an iPod that interacts with the hotel’s existing communication system to track their location. As reported by Elejalde-Ruiz, the ordinance also requires hotels to maintain written policies that encourage workers to report incidents of sexual harassment by guests and lay out procedures that will be followed when they do. The policies must state workers can leave the area where they feel endangered and be reassigned to work away from the offending guest, without fear of retaliation from their employer.

A key aspect of such worker-based advocacy is the utilization of “on the ground” knowledge to develop solutions keyed to the specifics of the relevant industry. The panic buttons and tracking systems that promise greater safety for room attendants are relatively useless for restaurant workers and servers whose greatest hazards often play out publicly and in full view of others. Identifying one core industry problem as the two-tiered wage system that relegates some workers to the extraordinary vulnerability that comes with being forced to live off tips, ROC United is waging a One Fair Wage campaign[7] that would raise the lower minimum wage of tipped workers to match the regular minimum wage, while still allowing tipping to continue. ROC is also enlisting both restaurant owners and diners in this struggle, a strategy they refer to as “surrounding the industry”; their Diners United program engages consumers to patronize and support “high road” restaurants in various ways, including a free downloadable Dining Guide app to investigate and rate restaurants. Their effort to engage workers, owners and diners in a comprehensive movement for change recalls the Immokalee Collective’s tripartite focus on workers, growers and large-scale produce consumers, designed to improve farm workers’ lives by comprehensively changing the culture of the industry.

Low-income tenants: a counter example

Despite some indication that governmental indifference to the plight of the precariously housed may be changing, signs of similar progress for this group are notably absent from this list of nascent success stories. In October 2017, The Justice Department launched a pilot program to combat sexual harassment in housing in Washington, DC and Virginia. HUD has issued its first set of guidelines on sexual harassment in housing, and while this paper was being written, DoJ and HUD joined forces to promote interagency cooperation on this issue. The two agencies have distributed a brief educational video to all public housing authorities in the country, as well as a Public Service Announcement to raise awareness and make it easier for victims to report harassment and find resources to help them.

It remains to be seen how effective these efforts will be. Although any progress is better than the silence and neglect that for years have shrouded the exploitation of women in their own homes, research has shown that informational and resource-based initiatives have limited impact on reducing harassment (Williams et al., 1999) and there is so far no sign of any tenant-based advocacy effort that might mirror the success of worker-based groups.
This is, perhaps, not surprising, given not only the extreme vulnerability and powerlessness of these women but also the lack of any sense of the group consciousness that appears to drive worker-based movements. Not only is the relationship to one’s abode (e.g. tenant, owner) largely incidental to one’s identity, but the material realities of these women’s lives provide little basis for group consciousness. With the increasing demise of mass urban housing projects, poor women increasingly reside, disconnected from one another, in privately-owned apartments and houses, at the mercy of individual “slum lords” and without the focal connection of shared experience that can lead to action. If there is a single lesson to be learned from the stories of the disparate groups discussed above, it appears to be the powerful reminder that unity makes for strength, and that collective consciousness can provide strong impetus for collective action. Indeed, it is that very consciousness that is embodied in the slogan #MeToo.

Concluding thoughts

Too many have been left behind in the whirl of publicity that has attended the victimization of famous women and the fall of powerful men. This is ironic, in that the original founder of #MeToo, Black activist Tarana Burke, began her career as a teenager working with girls in marginalized communities. Even as we celebrate the bravery and strength of those who risked so much to come forward, it is important that the glamour of Hollywood and its associated celebrity not blind us to the experiences of these unseen women. Otherwise, we risk replicating the mistakes of Second-wave feminists in the “1960s” and “1970s” who, with the best intentions in the world, were nevertheless blind to the vulnerability and oppression of their sisters of color and other women disadvantaged by race and class. This necessarily brief and narrow look into the lives of unseen women reminds us not only that they have stories to tell, but that we have much to learn.

Notes

1. Deposition in a housing sexual harassment case; original on file with the author.
2. Although definitions differ, it is generally agreed to refer to lack of security in an individual shelter that is the result of high housing costs relative to income, poor housing quality, unstable neighborhoods, overcrowding and/or homelessness.
3. See the 2017 Frontline documentary “Rape in the Fields” for a graphic account; more generally, see Yeung (2018a, b) for a compelling and comprehensive discussion of female agricultural workers and “invisible” women more generally. This paper owes much to her groundbreaking account; I am deeply grateful for our enlightening conversations.
4. Although not the subject of this paper, modern-day slavery in the form of labor trafficking is far from unknown in the agricultural fields of America; labor traffickers use force, fraud, or coercion (including isolation in labor camps, debt bondage, exorbitant recruitment fees and outright violence) to force victims to provide labor services against their will. No one knows how widespread this form of exploitation is; the Human Trafficking Hotline annual report indicates receiving over 30,000 substantive reports in 2016; the agricultural industry has been identified as at high risk for labor trafficking. https://humantraffickinghotline.org/labor-trafficking-venuesindustries/agriculture, downloaded, accessed September 14, 2018.
5. Excerpt from court document; original on file with the author.
7. ROC’s activism reaches far beyond the One Fair Wage program; a comprehensive description of their activities can be found at https://rocunited.org
References
Lott, B. (2002), Listening to the Voices of Poor Women, Grove/Atlantic, Inc.


Further reading


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