

"The people with the strongest voices have to invite the rest. Some of them understand that; other people think that they can speak for 'those who have no voice.' But we all have voices. Some are just too loud for the others to be heard."

TARANA BURKE,
FOUNDER OF THE ME TOO MOVEMENT

Tarana Burke launched the "Me Too" movement more than 10 years ago to support black girls. Today, she fears the widely used hashtag could alienate marginalized groups.

BY SANDRA PANDEVSKI
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A recurring question Tarana Burke is asked by men is: "Can you teach me how I can do better?"

"Do I have to teach you how to be human?" is my usual answer. When a man wants something from another man, he knows he can't be disrespectful or insult him. But when it comes to women, that awareness goes away completely," she said.

One Sunday morning at the end of October, she was lying in bed when her friend tagged her in a Facebook status using #MeToo. The friend wanted to know if Burke was the reason behind the post. She wasn't. But it was hard to ignore the fact that someone was using "Me Too" virally. She went on Twitter and immediately panicked.

"I thought all the work I had done the past 10 years would be overshadowed and that people wouldn't understand that it's not just about words," she said. "I didn't know what to do. My friends called me, saying,

'But you were the one who started "Me Too."'

When Burke was 21 she had taken a job as a leader at a youth camp. When the participants were divided into two groups – "sisters" and "brothers" – a 12-year-old girl told her "sisters" that her stepfather had raped her. Burke found it difficult to process what the girl had said. It triggered memories of the rapes she herself had repressed. That time, she was unable to say "me too."

"I felt guilty and ashamed," she said. "But I have also realized that I was only 21 years old myself."

Ten years after meeting the girl, Burke was living in Alabama, where she founded the nonprofit Just Be Inc., where "Me Too" became a phrase used to help victims of sexual harassment and assault. She later moved to Philadelphia, where she lectured on the topic. After a workshop, the students were asked to write down two things they learned, as well as "Me Too" if they had also been the victims of sexual assault.

"When we got home, we saw how many people had written 'Me Too.' Almost

everyone. It was horrible, and we weren't prepared for it," Burke said.

Today, the 44-year-old Burke is working on creating a durable plan for the organization. It is going to offer tools online to help people host Me Too events in their hometowns, covering field work, lectures and workshops with the purpose of preventing sexual violence.

On that Sunday in October, actress Alyssa Milano was one who borrowed the phrase Me Too and encouraged the public to use the hashtag when describing their own experiences. The initiative started when The New York Times and The New Yorker exposed movie producer Harvey Weinstein after he'd spent decades allegedly abusing women.

To avoid letting her many years of work stand in the shadow of #MeToo, Burke shared her website and videos on social media. A viral discussion arose as to why Milano hadn't directed attention toward Burke. But Milano responded quickly and gave her credit. Today they are friends.

The day after #MeToo went viral, Burke

started to worry about the significance of its newfound popularity. She thought of everyone sharing their stories. She wondered, who is there for them?

"Imagine posting #MeToo and no one likes your post or gives you a little heart or says, 'I hear you and I'm here for you.' How would that make you feel? Or if someone ridicules you or says, 'I don't believe you; that didn't happen to you,'" she said.

The first two weeks after the hashtag was born, Burke gave more than 60 interviews for radio, TV and print. At the same time, she struggled to find her place in #MeToo since her "Me Too" is different from the hashtag. Burke's "Me Too" is a platform for survivors of sexual assault, while #MeToo has a wider use. But one made way for the other, Burke said. There is a broad spectrum of gender-related violence, she said. It ranges from sexual harassment to deadly violence because of your gender.

"Sexual harassment creates an environment where sexual violence can thrive," she said. "Workplaces, for example,

need to have strict limitations on what's acceptable and what's not."

In New York, Burke started working full time as the program director of Girls for Gender Equity. Its mission is to create better conditions for marginalized groups, including people who are black, gay or trans. On one of the walls hangs a frame containing two questions: What will you accept? What will you refuse?

Burke said Girls for Gender Equity is what Just Be Inc. would have been today if she had had the funds to put into the project.

For people, particularly men, who think the #MeToo has become excessive or takes the fun out of flirting, Burke has a forceful retort.

"How about learning how to flirt?" she said. "It doesn't have to involve touching or harassing anyone. Think of all the women who have carried shame, guilt and fear for decades, who have looked at themselves in the mirror and felt that their value has been reduced. Sit in it!"

It doesn't have to do with having a

daughter, a wife or being a woman, Burke said; it's all about being human.

"That's how change happens, by staying in what's uncomfortable," she said, slapping her palm against the table and saying, once more: "Sit in it!"

This month, Burke is visiting Sweden with her 20-year-old daughter, Kaia, to speak at a conference. I showed her the list of the many different industries in Sweden that are joined in calling out sexual harassment and assault.

"Wow, are all of those hashtags? Can you send them to me?" she asked. "I'm so fascinated by how these women are supporting one another."

She doesn't see the same support for #MeToo in the United States, but rather a divide between black and white people. She is saluted by the black community, but since many of the women who have testified in conjunction with #MeToo are white and rich, a lot of black people are avoiding the hashtag, not using it to the same extent.

When Burke heard about the hashtag

#blackgirlstoo, she was hurt that black people didn't feel that #MeToo belongs to them.

She's afraid that marginalized groups will be left out, not keeping up with the movement, that those with privilege will be the ones who are heard the most.

"The people with the strongest voices have to invite the rest," she said. "Some of them understand that; other people think that they can speak for 'those who have no voice.' But we all have voices. Some are just too loud for the others to be heard."

Her other concern is that Me Too will be used for political gain and that the testimonies thereby will lose their credibility. For a durable change, Burke believes in taking it slow. She wants to introduce extensive sex education, starting in preschool when children are aware of gender and able to understand the meaning of boundaries. In every grade, the teaching should expand and be based on human rights.

Burke's daughter, Kaia, knows what her mother has gone through and has had a

rough time herself, Burke said.

"I'm glad that we get along so well and that I can offer her the kind of support that my mother didn't show me," Burke said.

It wasn't until Burke was in her 30s that she talked to her mother about the rapes. There was never any room for her personal experiences, she said.

Burke met Kaia's father in high school. She said he was the only person she could imagine starting a family with because she trusted him, trusted that he would protect her. But she didn't feel trust in him enough to confide in him what she'd been through – that she, as a child, had been raped multiple times.

"For a long time, I blamed myself. I didn't distrust men. I distrusted myself. To others, I could say, 'It wasn't your fault,' but I couldn't say that to myself."

"But loving has been hard for me," Burke said. "I just haven't found the right one."

Translated from Swedish into English by Liv Vistisen Rörby. Courtesy of Faktum / INSP. ngo



Civil rights activist Tarana Burke launched the Me Too movement more than a decade before it took off as a hashtag on social media.

PHOTOS BY PONTUS HOOK