

When #MeToo Celebrities Fail Trans Women

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Abstract

If celebrities are going to profit off of being the figureheads for our collective traumas, then we have the right to demand they do it right. Trans people are sexually victimized at a sadly high rate. All victims of sexual harms deserve to be respected and represented by those treated as the spokespeople of the #MeToo movement. [...]

Article



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Trans people are sexually victimized at a sadly high rate. All victims of sexual harms deserve to be respected and represented by those treated as the spokespeople of the #MeToo movement.

Unfortunately, that's not the case. I want to speak out about a nasty case of ally fail that took place this week when a presumed spokesperson for abuse victims shouted down a trans woman.

This is Rose McGowan. You probably know who she is, but if you don't, she's best known as an actor playing one of the attractive witch sisters on the aughties show *Charmed*. Recently, what she's been famous for is being one of the victims of sexual assaults by Harvey Weinstein. Weinstein kept the story of his assault of McGowan quiet for a decade through a combination of paying her settlement

money and hiring agents to keep the story out of the press. That McGowan was sexually assaulted was horrible. That Weinstein could get away with it, appalling. McGowan was victimized, and she has my complete empathy for that.

When the news that Weinstein had assaulted and sexually harassed at least eight women finally broke last October, McGowan initially refused to comment. But after a few days, she became part of the breaking wave of celebrity women speaking out about having been sexually assaulted or harassed by powerful Hollywood men. This was the start of the #MeToo movement. Rose McGowan became a hero of the movement on Twitter, when her account was suspended for 12 hours for allegedly violating Twitter's privacy policy, in the midst of her sending a flurry of tweets about Weinstein. This led to mass outrage about the silencing of victims of sexual abuse. McGowan's actions were one element triggering the birth of #MeToo, and I respect that.

The #MeToo movement detonated by the Weinstein news coverage quickly swelled and spread. Celebrities and scientists and political aides and grad students and masses of ordinary people—a majority of them women, but including men and others—joined in calling out their abusers. People told their stories, to reporters, on social media, in classrooms and face to face. It was an important moment of mass disclosure and mass confrontation.

The #MeToo movement continues to have social influence, and as one of the innumerable victims of sexual assault, that is very important to me. But there is an issue that arises in our contemporary world dominated by media, for-profit and social, and that is the issue of representation. Whose voices get amplified? Who is the face of the movement, and how is that person chosen? Who gets to profit off of their victimization, and who instead pays a steep price for speaking out? Will the person who gets to speak for us represent us well? Represent us all? Or will they actually kick some of us in the teeth while being celebrated as heroes?

Rose McGowan has become a key face of the #MeToo movement. She just published a memoir, *Brave*, about her experiences with Harvey Weinstein. A five-part E! documentary about her experience has also just started to screen. She's doing the full tour of news and entertainment shows to promote her book and talk about what happened to her and what she did about it.

McGowan is a victim, but she's also someone who is getting a whole lot of profit out of telling her story—both in the direct form of the money she's being paid for her book, documentary, etc. and in the form of revived and amplified celebrity. I don't have a problem with that, in principle. Imagine a world in which every one of us who have been abused received karmic retribution in our lifetimes, and became rich and powerful, while those who harmed us made to apologize on national media. That would be cool.

That's not going to happen, unfortunately. A sadly small percentage of the victims of sexual harassment or assault will ever see any justice. Just a tiny handful will become rich and famous as the media faces of our collective suffering. Ideally, those fortunate few would be selected for a good reason. Perhaps they suffered the ghastliest abuse. Maybe they worked for years to directly aid abuse victims. Perhaps they are excellent spokespeople who have put in years studying people's experiences and know how power and marginalization and abuse work, how they play out differently according to class, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and the full range of social statuses—and can explain this to people.

This being America, though, usually the people selected to profit by being spokespeople are celebrities. Like Rose McGowan. That's not fair, but that's the way our culture currently works. We ordinary people will rarely become the media face of a movement. But we can at least demand that the celebrities have chosen to represent us do that: represent us.

The problem, of course, is that celebrity relates to social privilege. One of the earliest aims of the #MeToo movement was to call out men's dominance of the entertainment industry and abuse of that power. We live in a world of #OscarsSoWhite. The underrepresentation of people from marginalized groups among our media figures is pervasive. And so we wind up with spokespeople like Rose McGowan: a white cisgender woman who this week shouted down a trans woman, in the process making transphobic comments and spewing out colorblind racism.

Here's how that went down. McGowan was speaking at a book release party for her memoir, *Brave*. People from the audience were asking her questions. And a trans woman pointed out that trans women suffer extreme rates of sexual and physical violence, and asked McGowan to speak to that. Her motivation for asking McGowan this undoubtedly came out of statements McGowan made in an interview by RuPaul last summer, in which McGowan framed trans women as really men who have no idea what real women go through.

McGowan's response was to deny that trans women face more victimization than cis women, then to put a happy face on that by calling the trans woman "sister" and saying "we're the same"-a gesture, I take it, of McGowan's positioning herself as a good spokesperson for trans women victims of sexual violence.

The woman who asked the question was not happy with the response, and she and McGowan spoke and then yelled over one another. The trans woman was removed by security, chanting "white cis feminism" all the while. And then McGowan proceeded to yell and rant at the audience. She was outraged at being called cisgender and at having her whiteness pointed out. She screamed:

"Don't label me, sister. Don't put your labels on me. Don't you fucking do that. Do not put your labels on me. I don't come from your planet. Leave me alone. I do not subscribe to your rules. I do not subscribe to your language.

"You will not put labels on me or anybody. Step the fuck back. What I do for the fucking world and you should be fucking grateful. Shut the fuck up. Get off my back... I didn't agree to your cis fucking world. Ok? Fuck off...

"I'm fucking mad with the lies. I'm mad that you put shit on me because I have a fucking vagina and I'm white or I'm black or I'm yellow or I'm purple. Fuck off. All of us want to say it. I just do...

"There's not a network here devoted to your fucking death. There's not advertisers advertising tampons with a camera lovingly going up a girl's body as she's being lovingly raped and strangled. Piss off. And until you can collect that fucking check, back up. My name is Rose McGowan and I am obviously fucking brave."

What this rant presents is, in fact, a Top Hits of white feminist colorblind racism, trans-exclusionary feminism, and self-aggrandizing bad allyship.

Shut up and be grateful, trans woman. Terrible things happen to cis white girls! I don't experience cis privilege or white privilege.

You're attacking me because I have a vagina and for the color of my skin. I don't care if people are black or white or purple, and by bringing up my whiteness you are the real racist. (But I do care about what genitals people have, oh yes, and make presumptions about what is in your pants! And I refuse to call myself a cis woman, because that's a trans imposition, more proof that trans women are really men trying to control the real women.) I'm so brave I'm willing to shout down a trans woman, something everyone wishes they could do but is too afraid!

Ugh.

Herein lies the main problem of the spokespeople of contemporary social movements being, not the most qualified person, but the most famous one. You wind up with somebody who has little awareness of their own privileges. You wind up with someone who is below the 101-level of understanding how privilege works. They still see it as an on/off switch. "I've been victimized, so I am not an oppressor." They haven't yet learned to see that all of us have dozens of social statuses, and enjoy privilege along some and endure marginalization along others. They haven't yet done the work to examine how they themselves are benefitting from the marginalization of others. You get people speaking for a social justice movement who are themselves, bigots. You get transmisogynists who paint trans women as a sexual threat rather than as sexual victims. You get the familiar, specious argument that as victims of sexual assault by cis men because they frame their bias against trans women in terms of fear of assault, cis women's transmisogyny should be validated rather than decried.

You get people who frame as personal attacks on them calls for them to recognize how being a person of color or trans or otherwise socially marginalized makes victimization worse. You get people who present those who critique their inadequate spokespersonship as the supposed problem with progressives today. You know: the complaint of a "circular firing squad."

Attacking one's allies because their choice of terms is anything other than 100% perfect is bad, to be sure. But this is something else. This is calling out transmisogyny and colorblind racism on the part of someone who is supposed to be the public voice of #MeToo. You cannot be the voice of people who deal with so much worse crap than you do, as a white cis celebrity, if you are in denial about your privileges, or worse, actively voicing bigotry.

This was #MeToo fail. And we all have the right, and the responsibility, to call on our media spokespeople to stop failing us.

Rose McGowan, you have my complete sympathy and solidarity about your having been sexually assaulted. At the same time, you are harming my family, my community members who are not cis white women, and I demand you do better in exchange for your profiting as our figurehead.

There are allegations being made that the woman who questioned Rose McGowan on her stance toward trans women pursued teenagers when she was over 18. If she did, in fact, engage in harassment or abusive behavior, then I condemn that. Just as nobody should be able to get away with sexual misconduct because they are wealthy white cis men, nobody should be excused because they are poor, a person of color, trans and/or a woman. That said, let me underline that sexual harassment and assault work with social power. Some assailants are women, but many more are men. Some assailants are disabled, but many more are nondisabled. Some assailants are trans, but many more are cis. This is because social power allows people to force their desires on others. It is this point that the celebrity white cis women

speaking in the media for #MeToo need to voice on behalf of those less privileged. - Dr. Costello

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