

# The “Dear Sisters” Who Can’t Hear the Time’s Up Alarm

by Zere Kairbekova

*“The clock has run out on sexual assault, harassment and inequality in the workplace.” Or so claims the website of a movement started by a group of high-profile personas who might be living in a bubble that needs to be burst.*

One gloomy morning, not long after the New Year’s holidays spent back home in Kazakhstan, coming back into the usual routine of my student life in Hong Kong, I was casually checking on what was new with the world. I scrolled down my Instagram feed – the surest and quickest way to get the hottest trends and the latest buzz. One post after another featured these women wearing black. On the red carpet. It looked like a *Men in Black* sequel only instead of Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith, it was a bunch of women posting pictures from the Golden Globes with the hashtag #timesup and #whywewearblack. I had no idea about the meaning of those hashtags, or the significance of wearing a black gown.

After a few clicks on Google I discovered that the *Times Up* movement was established on the first day of 2018 in response to the *Me Too* campaign that had been all over the media a few months earlier, by a small group of Hollywood celebrities. According to the Time’s Up official site, which you can find at [timesupnow.com](http://timesupnow.com), it is a “unified call for change from women in entertainment for women everywhere”. Among the organizers are famous names such as Shonda Rhimes, Ava DuVernay and Reese Witherspoon, who claim that *Time’s Up* will address and deal with the issues of sexual assault, harassment, solidarity and gender parity. In the open letter released on January the 1<sup>st</sup> of 2018, the organizers claim that they “...want all survivors of sexual harassment, everywhere, to be heard, to be believed and to know that accountability is possible.” Upon reading the letter and examining the official site, I couldn’t help but notice the words “all”, “everyone” and “everywhere”. These words stuck in my head and I kept thinking to

myself: “Are they trying to say that they are going to help every woman in the world that has ever experienced harassment or inequality?”. No way. There is no way that this movement will do what it claims to do. There is no way this movement will become a worldwide trend.

As a young woman who was born to a country with an Eastern culture, I do not share the views and the ambitions of the Hollywood stars who so fervently seek justice and are confident in their coming success. They either don’t see what is actually happening in the daily life of women from all over the world, or they choose to ignore the fact that their plan of salvation might not be suitable for “everyone” and “everywhere”. “A unified call for change for women everywhere...” *Which* everywhere? In a distant village in some African country? Or perhaps in a town located in Afghanistan or Syria that is now at war, in flames and filled with corpses?

Let alone Afghanistan, there is even a problem with equality here in such a progressive city as Hong Kong. Remnants of the patriarchal Chinese society are still deeply rooted within the households of many families. Sonia Lam, a native Hongkonger and student from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, elaborates: “The reason behind gender disparity in Hong Kong is that according to the Chinese tradition, women are supposed to be the homemakers and are expected to raise kids, while men are seen as the financial supporters, which allows them to have a greater say in the family. When it comes to sexual violence, any kind of rape or sexual relationships might be considered shameful for women in the Chinese society, which often results in non-disclosure of such cases.”

From Sonia’s words, I draw the conclusion that the Chinese culture largely influences women’s attitudes towards gender disparity. This mindset of male superiority is firmly established, and even if some women from Hollywood are “calling for change”, women from other countries might not want to respond.

In my home country, Kazakhstan, the situation is similar to that of Hong Kong. According to Symbat Kuttibay, a 21-year-old female university student from Kazakhstan, “The mentality of Kazakhstani people is that it is a norm for women to be inferior, to be the keepers of the domestic hearth, to look after children and let men dominate. It is a lifestyle for women,

really. It has originated many centuries ago and it will never fully be displaced by anything else”. She continues, “Sometimes feministic movements in the West just don’t make sense to our citizens, because it is odd for our people to organize movements in support of things like gender equality. We are just not there yet and the question is whether we will ever get to that place of even wanting to seek gender parity. The majority of Kazakh women are satisfied with the existing social contract on gender division, and I don’t think many women would support a movement like Time’s Up.” Surely, aside from Hong Kong and Kazakhstan, there are other countries where the cultural and historical background affect the way people treat gender equality, which may be quite different from what the American celebrities expect. Unfortunately, not everybody wants to answer their call for change.

Let us not forget about the women who are not able to answer the call of Hollywood for gender parity at all and whose opinions are never reckoned with. Women in some crisis-torn regions of the world simply have no time to deal with rights, law suits and proving the world that they are worth just as much as men. These women have to survive among men who beat them to death every day, who sell them to other men like slaves and who give them absolutely no rights to begin with. For instance, in Afghanistan, it could be said that the law encourages domestic violence towards women. According to Article 398 of the Afghan penal code, a man whose spouse or other family members will be found in a compromising position has the right to kill or injure them in order to defend his dignity and respect. If a man catches his spouse involved in adultery and murders her, he will only get a prison sentence of 2 years. While if a woman does the same, she will obviously face a much more serious retribution.

In the first half of 2016, there were more than 5,000 cases of domestic abuse reported in Kabul, Afghanistan. Of these 5,000 cases, 241 of them were for murder. It is safe to say that these women did not hear the calls of the glamorous superstars dressed up in little black Dior dresses.

So yes, if you ask me, it enrages me when women like Reese Witherspoon tell us we know nothing, should speak up, should embrace change; it enrages me when women blinded by the spotlight pretend that they are equality superheroes who can save every woman in the world

from the unfair hands of men; it enrages me when a pop-singer or an actress talks about her harassment story and the whole world comes to the rescue, but millions of other harassed women remain unheard and helpless.

In no way do I want to discourage these women who are trying to bring changes upon our society or downgrade their achievements in making the world a better place. I do not doubt that they do what they do from the best of intentions and from the bottom of their hearts. However, for clarity and fairness, I would like things to be called what they actually are. Time's Up is not a worldwide trend. Time's Up is not a call for change for women everywhere. Time's Up is not a universal solution to end harassment and inequality. Time's Up is NOT a panacea.

While the Time's Up movement clearly targets the US, and a perhaps a smattering of European countries, it is a considerable step forward in the fight against harassment and discrimination. Nevertheless, Hollywood stars sometimes forget about the real issue in pursuit of big words and catchy phrases to be posted on social media. If you are not going to keep your promises, don't make them. For campaigns and movements like this to work, it is important to be realistic about the hopes that are given to people and fulfill the promises made at the end of the day. Or else it just becomes a hashtag on Instagram and nothing more.