

#WhyIDidntReport: Survivors of Sexual Assault Share Their Stories After Trump Tweet

By Jacey Fortin

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When the #MeToo movement erupted on social media last year, people who had been sexually harassed, abused or assaulted — and felt ready to discuss it — went public with their stories.

Now a new hashtag has surfaced as if in answer to the question: *Why didn't you say something sooner?*

It began last week when Christine Blasey Ford, 51, came forward as the writer of a letter in which she accused Judge Brett M. Kavanaugh, President Trump's Supreme Court nominee, of pinning her on a bed, groping her and covering her mouth to keep her from screaming when they were teenagers. Judge Kavanaugh has denied the allegation.

Some senators suggested that Dr. Blasey — who also goes by her married name, Ford — was “mixed up” or staging a “drive-by attack” on Judge Kavanaugh. On Friday, President Trump questioned her credibility, saying that if the attack “was as bad as she says,” she or her parents would have reported it to the authorities when it happened more than 30 years ago.

Survivors of abuse responded by rallying around a new hashtag, #WhyIDidntReport, to highlight the difficulties, fear, anger and shame that so often surround sexual harassment and assault.

“It may take a survivor a while to process that trauma, and even to identify what has happened,” said Carolyn M. West, a professor of psychology at the University of Washington who has written and spoken extensively about sexual abuse and trauma.

And even after processing what happened, survivors said, it is difficult to tell friends and family members.

Caitlyn Leong, 20, said she felt that people would not believe her because she was in a relationship when she was assaulted. Lerato Chondoma, 37, felt shame because she had been drinking at a party before it happened. And Amy Selwyn, 59, said she had kept silent, in part, because she was worried about her career.

But all three of them said that they were now speaking publicly because they thought it might help other survivors.

Ms. Leong, a university student, tweeted on Saturday about an abusive relationship and said it took months to realize that what she had experienced was sexual abuse, and months after that to tell her friends.

“It can be traumatic to say something and not feel heard, and not feel believed,” Ms. Leong said in an interview.

She said one of the reasons she did not file a complaint was that reporting abuse can be draining. It can harm reputations and take time and effort.

“What I would say to people who are criticizing survivors’ decisions to come forward 30, 40 or 50 years later is that it may have taken them that long to process their trauma,” Ms. Leong said. “It may have taken them that long to get to the point where they feel secure enough in what they’ve accomplished.”

More than three decades had passed before Ms. Selwyn told anyone what happened to her at a hotel in New York when she was 25. A professional mentor took her to dinner, invited her to his room and raped her, she said.

“I felt stupid,” Ms. Selwyn said. “I felt vulnerable. I felt humiliated. And I also felt like if I said anything, my career would be over.”

But last year, Ms. Selwyn found herself talking with a friend about it for the first time. She felt angry and wanted to support other survivors, so she published her story in an article on Medium in May 2017, months before #MeToo.

She said the hashtag campaigns of the past year had been encouraging.

“I think what’s happened is that there is a greater ability to amplify the voices of the non-famous,” she said. “We are building a movement.”

But even when people do go public with their memories, it can be as traumatic as it is liberating.

Ms. Chondoma used the #WhyIDidntReport hashtag in a tweet on Friday. When she saw how many responses her post got, she felt exposed and overwhelmed — even though many wrote to express camaraderie or gratitude.

“I feel anxious in my stomach,” she said on Saturday. “But I felt like it was important to do this.”

She had tweeted about her experience as a university student in South Africa and not reporting a sexual assault because she had been at a party and then gone to a man’s dorm room. “I thought this was just what happened when you partied too hard,” she wrote.

Ms. Chondoma said that 17 years later, her feelings were still painful and raw.

“I felt so ashamed about the way I lived my life at that time, and the fact that I was always judged based on how I looked or how I dressed,” she said.

It is very common for survivors to blame themselves, said Amy Smith, a nurse practitioner at the Long Island Jewish Forest Hills hospital who treats people who have been sexually assaulted.

“It’s really the only crime where people doubt the victim immediately,” she added. “If your car was stolen, they don’t say, ‘Are you sure it was stolen? Why were you driving such an expensive car?’”

Over the past decade, Ms. Smith has treated many survivors who did not want to report assaults, such as women without the resources to leave relationships or teenagers who felt guilty because they had been drinking.

She recalled patients who felt detached during an assault, and others who had fixated on one or two random details while blocking out others. Our brains, she said, can work differently during trauma.

“Psychologically, when frightened or upset, a lot of my patients go into fight, flight or freeze mode,” she said. “The freeze mode is a dissociative type of situation, because our brain is so protective of us.” (Ms. Selwyn wrote she still remembered her assailant’s socks and the pattern of the bedspread, but not what month it was.)

Dr. West said sexual harassment and abuse are more common than we know because many people never report it at all. “If it is hard for privileged women to come forward, we have to acknowledge how much harder it is for women who are marginalized to be believed,” she said.

Survivors said sharing these experiences, even years or decades later, can be as productive as it is painful.

“Social media movements like this are potentially life-changing because you see hundreds of thousands of other people sharing their stories, and you don’t feel like you’re the only person this has happened to,” Ms. Leong said. “You don’t feel like it’s you in this vacuum where awful things happened.”