

In the #MeToo Era, Student Activism Makes a Comeback in Singapore

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When Monica Baey took to Instagram to express dissatisfaction over the National University of Singapore's handling of sexual harassment, a network of students mobilised to demand reform. Two students actively involved in the movement reflect on this episode of student activism.

"Change has finally come," Monica Baey wrote on Instagram on 1 May 2019, after weeks of intense media coverage of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) policy towards sexual assault and harassment. Following pressure from both within and without the campus, the university administration had finally been forced to overhaul their policies relating to these issues.

Earlier in April, Baey, a third-year NUS student, sparked a national debate on these issues after speaking out about how she'd been filmed while showering in a university residence by Nicholas Lim, another NUS student. She posted multiple Instagram Stories about her disappointment with both the NUS disciplinary process and the Singapore police, saying that Lim had been let off with a slap on the wrist despite the trauma and humiliation he'd caused her. Screenshots of her account went viral, not just on Instagram, but other social media platforms too.

This was the second time in three years that the university had come under public scrutiny for its handling of sexual harassment on campus; in 2016, a national controversy had similarly erupted over [sexualised orientation activities](#). But Baey's experience struck a chord with others who'd also been victims of sexual violence at NUS, or who knew friends who'd been victims.

Singaporean student activism has been regarded as practically extinct since the 1980s, after decades of government intervention to quell youthful dissent

Students, both from NUS and elsewhere, wrote in to the university administration demanding they address the issue; an [open letter](#) was signed by almost 500 NUS students. Hundreds more [turned up at a town hall](#) convened by the university administration to address student concerns.

Though this incident pales in comparison to student activism in societies like Hong Kong and Malaysia, it nevertheless came as a surprise to many; after all, Singaporean student activism has been regarded as practically extinct since the 1980s, after decades of government intervention to quell youthful dissent. As former *Straits Times* journalist Bertha Henson [observed](#), "I have often told undergraduates that they are an apathetic lot... [b]ut over the past week, they have turned their eyes away from the computer screen, even though examinations are due next week, and decided to tackle the university authorities".

However, instead of seeing this case as an aberration from the archetypal apathetic norm, it might perhaps be more accurate to view this movement against sexual harassment as part of a [revival](#) of student activism in Singapore. Unfortunately, media coverage of the flurry of events sparked by Baey's revelations have paid scant attention to how and why this resurgence of student activism

happened.

Singaporean student activism in history

To appreciate why it was perhaps extraordinary that student activism made a comeback, one must first recall how it had died. Between the 1950s and 1980s, students in Singapore were at the forefront of matters concerning democracy, labour, academic freedom, and the anti-colonial struggle, among other social justice matters. This ranged from political action carried out by the Chinese middle school students, Nanyang University undergraduates, and the University of Malaya Socialist Club against the colonial government in the 1950s and 1960s, to the polytechnic and university student unions' protests against labour issues under the People's Action Party (PAP) government in the 1970s.

The University Socialist Club (USC) is illustrative of how deeply rooted student activism is in Singapore's political history. The USC was a socialist student club, well-known for its in-house magazine *Fajar*. In May 1954, eight members of the *Fajar* editorial board were arrested for allegedly publishing a seditious article entitled "[Aggression in Asia](#)". Via John Eber, a former political detainee living in exile in London, the USC hired a Queen's Counsel, D. N. Pritt, to defend the students. The students were eventually acquitted, a result Pritt described as a "[tremendous victory against those who want to suppress freedom of speech.](#)" Prominent members of the USC included Singapore's former president S.R. Nathan and current ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh.

Numerous events saw student activism take more subtle forms in the late 1970s and 1980s, even as challenges to organising grew. The PAP government passed the University of Singapore (Amendment) Act in 1975, which essentially nullified the autonomy of the university's student union, which had been actively campaigning for workers' rights and on other socio-economic issues. Similar legislation was enacted to strip the polytechnic student union of its independence. Several active union members were also arrested, detained, or pushed into exile. In historian CM Turnbull's [words](#), this spelt "the end of student political activism in Singapore". And as restrictions on civil liberties such as freedom of assembly and freedom of expression grew, student activism seemed to have been left deeper and deeper in the dust of Singapore's history.

The millennials strike back: student activism returns

Given the historical events that have since depoliticised and disempowered multiple generations of young Singaporeans, what might have led to this unusual student "uprising" following Baey's disclosure of her experience as a survivor of sexual harassment?

As activist and writer Rebecca Solnit observed in her book, *Hope In The Dark*, "uprisings and revolutions are often considered to be spontaneous, but less visible long-term organising and groundwork—or underground work—often laid the foundation." The students' organising wasn't a one-off fluke, but the result of intentional community building at the university among students concerned with social—and in particular, gender—justice. The intense public scrutiny simply offered a chance for these activists to mobilise both their peers and the public to effectively pressure the university administration for urgent policy reform.

This was facilitated by social media; Baey's Instagram Stories had been shared so much, triggering so many responses, that mainstream media outlets began reporting on the issue. In addition, the global #MeToo and the Time's Up movements, led by Hollywood celebrities, had helped to familiarise Singaporeans with the serious issue of sexual harassment. But Singapore, too, has had its own experiences.

As early as 2014, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) [highlighted](#) the importance of education on consent in universities. In 2015, they released the results of a [survey](#) in which 35% of 500 young respondents said they'd experienced sexual violence. In 2016, Louis Ng, a Member of Parliament from the ruling PAP, filed a parliamentary question direct at then-Acting Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung, asking about the introduction of anti-harassment training and guidelines for tertiary education.

"All our tertiary institutions have harassment prevention policies and guidelines within their own institution-specific Codes of Conduct for staff and students. In addition, institutions have in place guidelines to govern staff-student relationships. These policies and guidelines are explained to staff and students during staff inductions, student dialogue sessions and other internal events," he was [told](#).

NUS was forced to pay attention to the issue in 2016, when videos of sexualised orientation games, organised by more senior students for the incoming freshmen, circulated widely on social media. The university set up a review committee, which resulted in serious disciplinary sanctions on the students organisers. But while the school administration said they'd introduce consent education on campus, this promise failed to materialise until after Baey's case blew up.

In addition to building community, student groups also helped to foster a more receptive culture towards student activism

It might have taken years for the university to finally live up to its commitments, but extracting such a promise in the first place had itself required work. The Gender Collective and The G Spot—both NUS student groups concerned with gender justice—issued a [joint statement](#) in 2016 urging the university to focus on long-term measures "to foster a culture of respect and consent" on campus, rather than merely punishing students who'd come up with the inappropriate orientation activities. The two groups are housed in Cinnamon College and Yale-NUS College respectively, both of which had already introduced consent education separate from the wider NUS network. Cinnamon College, in particular, had put up an [online resource on sexual respect](#) several years before, as a result of Gender Collective's early advocacy efforts.

Despite the inaction on the part of the university administration between 2016 and 2019, student groups pressed on in their advocacy for a safer and more respectful campus community. The Gender Collective, The G Spot, and tFreedom collectively spearheaded various initiatives, such as an annual Sexuality & Gender Month, to educate their peers and raise awareness about issues of sexual harassment, inclusivity, and feminism. Their activities helped bring together students interested in and concerned about sexual and gender justice, and many eventually became actively involved in campaigning for change following Baey's exposé on social media. In addition to building community, these groups also helped to foster a more receptive culture towards student activism, by demonstrating to their peers the safety and possibility of engaging in advocacy work.

A return to the student union, and rallying behind Monica Baey

In September 2018, a group of students concerned with the apparent irrelevance of the NUS Student Union to the larger student community came together to run for the union's upcoming elections. Because of [prolonged student disillusionment](#), the student union elections have often been unchallenged and receive little attention from the student body.

This emergent group, which called itself [Concerned NUS Students](#), campaigned on the platform of introducing major reforms to ensure that the union and the university would work effectively for students. In particular, the group sought to ensure that the union would keep students informed of

school matters by obtaining information from the university and working with the administration to communicate “more openly, accessibly, and transparently”.

Most of the candidates put forth by Concerned NUS Students ran successful campaigns and were elected into the union, which eventually became an important conduit between the university administration and the student population in the midst of the campus sexual harassment controversy. Without these students in positions that allowed them to exert pressure on the university, it’s unlikely that the administration would have taken measures like organising a town hall for students to air their concerns, or [admitting](#) that they’d failed Monica Baey.

Existing networks meant that students were able to convene a working group within hours of Baey airing her grievances on social media

Existing networks also meant that students were able to convene a working group within hours of Baey airing her grievances on social media. This flurry of student organising led to multiple [public statements](#) directing attention to the steps the students felt the university should take to properly address the matter, and fostered a sense of investment and engagement among the larger student population.

The turn-out to the town hall was an indication of this interest; despite pressing assignment deadlines and looming exams, the venue was packed with over 400 students and staff. Those who got the opportunity to speak didn’t hold back, demanding accountability and genuine answers from the vice-provost of student life, dean of students, and a counsellor. But many were left [frustrated](#), especially after the NUS dons refused to stay on beyond the two hours that the meeting was planned for despite repeated demands from students.

Undeterred, the working group pressed on. Cognisant of the university’s sensitivity to bad press, the students maintained communication with the media throughout this period to apply public pressure on the administration to take swift action. Eventually, the university [accepted a review committee’s recommendations](#), many which the students had campaigned for. This included tougher penalties for sexual misconduct, stronger support to survivors, and a greater focus on the victim’s rights and role in the disciplinary process. The university has also since made consent education mandatory.

Limits of the movement

Although the campus sexual harassment saga has resulted in positive changes to both NUS and other universities’ policies towards sexual misconduct, several issues remain unresolved.

Firstly, while student activism was an important factor in bringing reforms, it’s likely that wider public backlash was an equally, if not more, important factor. It remains to be seen whether this incident will prompt the NUS (or any other university) administration to be more responsive to and engaged with students on a day-to-day basis in the absence of active public scrutiny.

Furthermore, while much attention has been focused on NUS’ failure to impose a strong deterrent sentence in Baey’s case, little was said about the state’s decision to let the perpetrator off with a conditional warning on the basis that a criminal record would “ruin his future”.

The fact remains that Singapore’s legal and sociopolitical landscape discourages and deters individuals from going up against the Singapore state

It’s likely that, while students are generally more emboldened to speak up and agitate for the changes they want to see, there still remains a fear of state reprisal if one goes up against the government and state organs. This limits the breadth and scope of student activism to the

boundaries of the campus, even if more holistic solutions could be implemented elsewhere.

After all, a more fundamental problem with the lack of consent education in universities is the fact that such an initiative is still required at that level. A more effective solution would have been to incorporate consent education into earlier stages of the education system, such as in secondary and pre-tertiary institutions overseen by the Ministry of Education. Yet there appears to be significantly less appetite among university students to take on such a fight, nor is it clear that such activism would be well-received by the state.

More recent developments have also shed light on the difficulties of doing activism in Singapore. In September 2019, Yale-NUS College [cancelled](#) a planned week-long programme on dissent and resistance out of concern that students may end up on the wrong side of the law for participating in some of the proposed activities. After news of the cancellation broke, public sentiment was highly negative as online commenters and public figures criticised the institution for having planned such a programme in the first place. The fact remains that Singapore's legal and sociopolitical landscape discourages and deters individuals from going up against the Singapore state.

Lessons learnt

Looking back on the campus sexual harassment uproar, the university administration perhaps ultimately outsmarted students by adapting its methods to contain student dissent. While the town hall exposed the NUS administration's incompetence in dealing with student issues concerning sexual harassment, it quickly followed up by employing [a favourite weapon of the neoliberal university](#): the automated online feedback mechanism. The administration also began conducting multiple smaller closed-door sessions with various groups of students. They exercised power by fielding the questions (sometimes framing complex questions as needing only yes/no responses) and shaping the agenda.

In doing so, the administration's consultation process has provided the illusion of student participation, but without any of the transparency or accountability that one would associate with genuine engagement. This rendered the process undemocratic and akin to a corporate customer-supplier relationship. Nonetheless, in its bid to salvage the university's public reputation, the administration was able to give the impression to the media that it was being consultative.

Such strategies of encouraging public participation without democracy aren't unique to NUS; in fact, they've been [employed](#) by governments across Southeast Asia. As Professor Mohan Dutta—NUS' former head of the communications department—[argues](#), the way to overcome the neoliberal university is to demand the structural reform of the university management itself.

That said, all is not lost. Despite the administration's adaptation to the widespread student mobilisation and dissent, significant concessions have been made to the students' demands. They include the setting up of a [Victim Care Unit](#) for survivors of sexual assault and a [reform](#) of the sanctions and disciplinary process. The university also accepted the students' demands for better education regarding sexual consent and harassment, [conducting](#) first-responder training for student leaders and relevant staff members, and introducing a compulsory module on "respect and consent culture".

Moreover, the momentum the movement accumulated has evoked responses from government representatives, clearly elevating the issue beyond just a campus matter, but a national conversation. On 22 April, Minister of Education Ong Ye Kung said that the penalties applied by NUS in Baey's sexual "misconduct" case were "[manifestly inadequate](#)". On 6 May, 10 parliamentary questions concerning sexual harassment were filed.

The way ahead

Instead of being a single isolated event, the student's action against sexual harassment may more accurately be considered a part of a larger process, akin to a campus movement. The working group wouldn't have formed, or been as effective, if not for the issues that had already been raised by student groups responding to the 2016 orientation camp controversy. The working group would also not have had the institutional and campus support it needed without the networks and spaces that had been built over time. Finally, the opportunity to organise such action would not have been possible without Baey's brave decision to step forward in the first place.

This students' movement against sexual harassment—which was both criticised and praised by members of the public—indicates the importance of the everyday praxis of activism. While certain advocacy efforts may seem to have initially failed, such efforts usually create the social space and networks of support necessary for other causes to achieve success in the future.

If the student action against sexual harassment proves anything, it is that the kids are all right

Young Singaporeans are reclaiming our activist history by both the acts of [remembering](#) and practicing activism. The movement against sexual harassment was and will not be the only student “uprising”; over the past few years, groups concerned with the climate crisis have also been fostering strong ties across institutions, leading to initiatives such as an [NUS divestment campaign](#) and a [climate rally](#) in late September. Student organisations focused on building political literacy also exist in almost all university campuses in Singapore. These organisations have also been building advocacy networks with one another, conducting outreach programs to secondary and tertiary-level campuses to empower others.

Challenges still exist, but, as the old adage goes, practice makes perfect. And if the student action against sexual harassment proves anything, it is that the kids are all right.

Suraendher Kumarr recently graduated from the political science degree programme offered by the NUS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

Daryl Yang co-founded and served as the inaugural Executive Director of the Inter-University LGBT Network. He was also an intern with ILGA World and a summer law clerk at the National Center for Lesbian Rights.

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