

#MeToo in Vietnam: One Year On

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For a while, #MeToo stories popped up in Vietnam. Yet the movement failed to take off. A year later, though, more discussion of sexual assault and harassment is taking place, after two cases that took place in residential lifts drove home the message that it can happen to anyone.

A year after Vietnam's high-profile but short-lived #MeToo moment, lawmakers are finally discussing amendments to obsolete regulations on sexual harassment.

For the first time, the draft Labour Code—up for discussion at the National Assembly's May/June session this year—offers a definition of sexual harassment and a means of implementing its ban in the workplace. It's a step forward; while sexual harassment was first acknowledged in law in 2012, the lack of a working definition had severely limited its practical impact.

In March and April, videos of a woman and a child being sexually assaulted by older men in lifts sparked one of the most spontaneous yet intense campaigns in the country's recent history demanding justice for survivors of sexual violence.

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#MeToo tends to spring to mind the moment anyone brings up the issue of sexual harassment and violence these days, but it would be over-simplistic to credit it with this strong response. In fact, #MeToo had died off within three months in Vietnam, before amassing anything that could be described as a movement. When the topic of sexual violence began trending again a year later, Vietnamese used new hashtags, none of which carried a message calling for survivors to break the silence.

But it doesn't mean that #MeToo in Vietnam was all for nothing. Gender experts agree that it's helped bring awareness of sexual harassment, an issue that local NGOs had been working on for years, into the public consciousness. And even its apparent failure in the country has proven a valuable lesson.

When speaking up backfires

Like in many other patriarchal countries, talking about sexual harassment carries a stigma and is often met with victim-blaming in Vietnam.

What made it especially difficult for #MeToo to take off in Vietnam was its confrontational nature. In a conservative country where speaking up is often seen as causing unwelcome trouble, it simply wasn't a popular approach.

In Vietnam, "women are forced to keep the image of her family, meaning that she should never say any negative things about her family to the public and if anything wrong happens, it's her fault,"

Hien Nguyen from the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) explains.

“[In] the context of Vietnam’s culture and politics, I think #MeToo stories are seen as a political tool,” says Dr Khuat Thu Hong, director of the Institute of Social and Development Studies. “Those who speak up are perceived as trying to berate the system, to weaken the system.”

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This is reflected in how organisations and society at large responded to last year’s sexual harassment allegations, explains Hong, citing efforts to undermine #MeToo by blaming the victims and questioning their motives.

Dancer Pham Lich, the central #MeToo figure in Vietnam who eventually received an apology from rock singer Pham Anh Khoa in May 2018 for harassing her, struggled to find work for the rest of the year, according to [reports](#) (*link in Vietnamese*) in local media. Meanwhile, Khoa, after initial backlash, appeared in *Furie*, the highest ever grossing Vietnamese film screened nationwide and internationally this year.

Investigation into rape allegations against an editor at *Tuoi Tre* newspaper, which kicked off #MeToo in Vietnam’s media industry, have also hit a dead end as the police said they hadn’t found sufficient evidence to press charges. The outcome was vaguely reported by *Tuoi Tre* and ignored by other mainstream media, leaving plenty of room for speculation and rumours that equated insufficient evidence with “it didn’t happen”, feeding suspicion toward the victim’s motives.

“Protecting him [the editor] means protecting the paper, the country’s press, which is the mouthpiece of the [Communist] party, the government and political organisations. Protecting them means protecting this system,” says Hong. “This is a system ruled by men, where men set the rules of the game.”

With few people speaking up alongside dancer Lich, #MeToo, which started in March 2018, completely died down by June the same year. Both Lich and the alleged rape survivor at *Tuoi Tre* didn’t respond to requests for comment for this story.

Gender experts aren’t surprised. “[In] Hollywood, people dared to speak up because they trust the legal system will protect them, even though the evidence may be weak,” Hong explains. There was little such confidence in Vietnam.

When sexual assault hits home

What it took to unite the nation against perpetrators of sexual violence were two cases of sexual assault in lifts that exposed huge gaps in Vietnamese law when it comes to punishing sexual predators—even when the violations are indisputable.

The first case had to do with a man who forcibly kissed a young woman in the lift of an apartment building in Hanoi in early March. After he refused to apologise to the woman in front of other residents, she reported the incident to the police, who fined him just VND200,000 (US\$8.60) for “indecent speech and behaviour”. The woman didn’t agree with the fine, but there wasn’t much she could do—Vietnamese law doesn’t treat such cases of sexual assault as a criminal offence. According to the law, only rape and child molestation are criminalised.

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Video of the second lift incident showed a seven-year-old girl being grabbed and kissed on the way up to her apartment in Ho Chi Minh City by Nguyen Huu Linh, a retired deputy chief prosecutor in the central city of Da Nang. Linh stood trial for child molestation, which carries a maximum sentence of three years, on 25 June, but the court dismissed the charges and requested further investigation because the indictment didn't specify which act constituted molestation. From day one, Linh has repeatedly denied accusations that he molested the girl, claiming he just nuzzled her, earning himself the nickname Linh Nung or "Linh the Nuzzler".

The #MeToo cases had been dominated by people in showbiz, seen as a scandal-ridden industry that few could identify with. But the cases in the lifts struck a chord with the public, as they could have happened to anyone. The discourse was no longer about some women trying to bring down an individual, organisation or system—it shifted towards ensuring safety for everyone.

"For other cases, people could put the blame on going out late with men," women's rights activist Nguyen Ha Trang tells *New Naratif*. "The context of lift cases is so everyday-life, people were forced to pause and think."

Dissatisfied with what they saw as half-hearted efforts to resolve the two cases, angry members of the public showed that they were ready to deliver their own kind of justice. Unsurprisingly, it's proven problematic.

On Facebook, the most popular social network in Vietnam, Hanoi residents started sharing photos of Do Manh Hung, the man in the first case, as an "additional punishment." He was reportedly evicted from multiple apartment buildings in Hanoi because residents refused to share lifts with him.

"The law might have its limits but our force has no limits," a [Facebook post](#) shaming Hung reads. At the time of writing, it's been shared 1,200 times.

There was even more public outrage with the second case, especially due to the slow police response even two weeks after the video had circulated online.

People threw dirt and trash into his house in Da Nang, and [vandalised](#) the front gate with black paint that read "â dâm"—a misspelling of the word paedophile. Linh's family was harassed so much, his wife filed a [complaint](#) with the police demanding an investigation into the vandalism and those who smeared the family online. She later withdrew it, without giving a reason.

Public pressure

Such responses to unfair rulings on sexual violence had been unheard of in Vietnam, although it isn't the first time public anger has compelled the authorities to act.

Last year, the supreme court overturned an 18-month commuted sentence handed down by the appeals court to 78-year-old convicted child molester [Nguyen Khac Thuy](#) after [50,000 people signed a petition](#) expressing their disagreement. Thuy was eventually sentenced to three years' in jail.

But this year's expressions of disagreement with the justice system wasn't directed by anger alone. In a country that has yet to pass any law on organising protests, a significant chunk of the public have found creative and nonviolent ways to express their discontent online and offline.

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Hashtags #congly200k and #nhanpham200k ridiculing the paltry VND200,000 fine trended on

social media. “So I just need to pay 200k to kiss any woman,” was a popular joke seen on Facebook, online forums and comments under news articles.

Even the media contributed its own share of sarcasm: they pointed out that exchanging a dollar on the black market is apparently a more serious violation than sexual assault, because it carries a fine of up to VND100 million (US\$4,300).

For the second case, photos of locals in Da Nang with placards challenging Linh to nuzzle them circulated on Facebook. Residents of the apartment building where Linh allegedly molested the girl signed a letter urging competent authorities to launch a criminal investigation against him—they also began sporting [T-shirts condemning child sexual abuse](#). All this happened despite the girl’s family’s wish to resolve the matter privately.

Unlike the petition against Thuy’s sentence, a new petition triggered by the two lift cases called on the National Assembly and the government to amend existing laws to prevent and punish sexual violence and harassment. [The petition](#), drafted by a network of civil society organisations fighting for women’s rights, attracted 15,000 signatures in a matter of days.

These are all signs that “the public’s awareness is maturing,” says Khuat Thu Hong of the Institute of Social and Development Studies. “They are more clearly aware of women and children’s rights, human rights, the most basic rights.”

This maturity is also reflected in how the cases came to light. “If in the past, women forcibly kissed in a lift would stay silent, [but] this woman demanded an apology, [and] no one blamed the victim,” says Nguyen Van Anh, director of CSAGA, a local NGO that’s been fighting for women’s rights for over 20 years. “Or in case of the girl in the lift, the prosecutor might consider it as just nuzzling, but now it’s different.”

“With current public understanding [of sexual violence], the law’s got to change,” Van Anh adds.

A feminist movement in the making?

Vietnam is known for having little tolerance for dissent, and crackdowns are usually done in the name of maintaining stability. The short-lived #MeToo illustrated that.

“Even if there are feminists in Vietnam, it’s unlikely they can create a widespread feminist movement because it will challenge the existing [patriarchal] ideology,” says Hong.

So when lawmakers started to talk about amending the laws on sexual violence in late March following the first lift incident, they didn’t treat it as a systemic issue of patriarchy. Instead, they underlined the need to update the law to reflect changing public perceptions and maintain social stability.

Speaking of the currently vague legal definition of sexual violence, lawmaker Bui Van Xuyen said “when the description of the act is incomplete, it will lead to fines that are out-of-date.”

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Similarly, vice chair of the Culture and Education Committee of the National Assembly Pham Tat Thang said “the time has come to pay attention to sexual harassment and offer provisions on resolving this matter in the law.”

"I heard that ever since that incident, many women are worried about going into lifts alone, they even remind one another to be careful if a man enters," [said](#) vice chair of the Committee on Social Issue Le Thi Nguyet. "It means that not only has the incident sparked outrage, it has also led to social instability."

When condemning the actions of the two men online, Vietnamese have singled them out as "thang bien thai", or perverts, that need to be punished. But it hasn't quite led to a discussion on the importance of consent in a country where sexual violence has, until recently, been the elephant in the room. A [report](#) by Fair Wear Foundation launched in April shows that nearly half of 763 surveyed female factory workers in Vietnam had suffered at least one form of violence and/or harassment in the previous year. A [survey](#) conducted in five Vietnamese cities and provinces by the labour ministry and NGO ActionAid in 2016 found that 51% of women admitted that they had experienced sexual harassment at least once. Last year alone, more than 1,000 children were molested, according to [data](#) from the police.

The question is: can the Vietnamese change the system to make it more equitable, given that those benefiting from patriarchy are likely to resist?

"The most feasible option is trying to change things gradually when the time is not yet right," Hong says.

NGOs and local civil society organisations understand this challenge. Instead of adopting confrontational strategies, many have chosen to focus on education. And things are changing on that front.

CSAGA's first workshop on sexual harassment, for instance, was 15 years ago and although many people came, only one survivor was brave enough to tell the story. A decade later, during a similar event for universities, the organisation was told sexual harassment was a Western concept unfit for Vietnam.

Fast forward to 2019, anecdotal cases of women standing up to men grabbing them in public are making CSAGA director Van Anh "very happy."

Online, popular Facebook pages dedicated to the issue of sexual violence focus on spreading awareness and helping people understand why it's so problematic, rather than directly condemning perpetrators. SOS - Share Our Story, a page established in 2016 with over 180,000 followers, is dedicated to sharing anonymous confessions from survivors. Nearly 1,000 have been published so far.

Another popular page is Dua Thi Phai Vui (Jokes got to be funny), which has nearly 30,000 followers. It takes a relatively bolder approach by showing how popular sexist jokes aren't actually funny.

"The police can catch perpetrators but they can't erase misogyny in the communities," Nguyen Ha Trang, co-founder of the page, explains. "I know some girls who have incorporated the name of our page as a comeback line to verbal harassment disguised as joking."

Feminist ideas have been incorporated subtly and gradually into broader issues too. Most of the women-centered projects by international NGOs are about livelihood development, climate change and other issues that are pressing not just for women but for everyone.

This strategy is not simply a response to Vietnam's specific political climate, but could be the answer to addressing the growing stigma against feminism in the Asia Pacific region, due to a misunderstanding of feminism as a movement to bring down men.

And it doesn't make these initiatives any less feminist, says Wardarina, programme officer at APWLD. "They don't label themselves feminists, but they are [...] and the issues of poverty and climate change are not a side agenda for feminist movements but integral part of it."

Sally Moyle, the former director of Care Australia which closely works with its sister organisation in Vietnam, shares a similar view. Not involving men in the process was a mistake made in the early days of feminism, she tells *New Naratif*, because while women proceeded to change, men didn't.

"We have so much proof now that gender inequality is bad for women, so now we have to understand that we all benefit from gender equality. We can all have a share," she says.

Looking back on #MeToo's short stint in Vietnam and the more recent lift cases, Hong is positive that while campaigns come and go, the Vietnamese people are becoming more outspoken on sexual violence.

"Now they know how to raise their voice to compel the legislative authorities to respond to them," she says.

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