

Meet the woman who launched Taiwan's MeToo movement, Chen Chien-Jou

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"I knew before I came forward that I was definitely not alone in being a survivor, there must be others out there."

Taiwan is now several weeks into a [MeToo reckoning](#), with more than 100 survivors having come forward to accuse prominent figures in politics, the arts, academia, and civil society of sexual harassment and abuse.

The movement started after Chen Chien-Jou (陳建如 Chén Qiānróu), a former staffer for Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), [posted](#) on Facebook about being inappropriately touched by a filmmaker during a car ride following a DPP video shoot. She wrote that when she complained to a senior party official, Hsu Chia-tien (徐嘉天 Xu Jiātián), who was then the head of the party's gender equality department, Hsu replied, "So what? What do you want me to do?," and asked why Chen didn't scream or try to escape the vehicle.

Chen's post referenced a hit [Taiwanese political TV series](#), *Wave Makers*, which features a main character who complains to her superior about a case of sexual harassment. In the show, her superior, who works for a political party that resembles the DPP, replied, "We can't just let this go."

In the days following Chen's post, several senior DPP officials [resigned](#), and the party chairperson and presidential candidate, William Lai Ching-Te (賴清德 Lài Qīngdé), publicly committed to reforming the way the party handles sexual misconduct. Though it started within the DPP, Taiwan's nascent MeToo movement has since spread much [further](#), touching most major sections of Taiwanese society.

I recently spoke with Chen about why she chose to come forward and the direction she thinks Taiwan's MeToo movement will take. Our conversation marked the first time she agreed to an on-the-record interview.

She chose to remain anonymous during the first few weeks of the movement, and the DPP protected her identity, but she said she feels now is the time to speak out using her real name.

Ashish Valentine: Can you tell me what it was like to go through this experience and what made you ultimately decide that you wanted to share your story?

Before I posted on Facebook, I actually spent a lot of time taking care of myself, trying to heal and recover from the incident. I was struggling a lot. And a lot of people have asked me, was it the TV show *Wave Makers* that pushed me to come forward? It wasn't entirely. But as it was set in a similar political environment, it did give me an emotional outlet. I felt like the situation really resonated with me, especially since the kind of work I did was so closely related to what was portrayed in the show, I could immediately relate to what was happening.

Actually, the first thing that happened when I watched the show was I had a good, big cry. And that after that good cry, I could then start to work on finding the right language to express myself. And after that emotional release, I realized that it's time to put this thing behind me and find some closure.

In politics, there are a lot of nooks and crannies in the industry that allow for a lot of bad behavior to percolate, and there are a lot of unspoken rules within the environment. So I knew before I came forward that I was definitely not alone in being a survivor, there must be others out there. So that's why I decided to take the first step and come forward and tell my story.

When you decided to come forward, did you have any expectation of what the public's reaction would be?

I knew that if this first story could be handled well, then more people will find the courage to come forward as well with their stories. So the first case really is the key if the hope is for there to be a movement. My big ambition was that others will also come forward, and if not, at least they will know that their story is not singular and they're not alone.

Sexual harassment is so common in Taiwan, it doesn't matter if you work in an office or if you're a student. It is something that women in this society are taught to expect. We are often told that we are overreacting. We are often taught to blame ourselves when something like this happens. I feel like all of these emotions that you experience when you're sexually harassed — disgust, shame, fear — all those emotions are normal and natural, and releasing them is the first step to recovery.

Now, obviously, there have been a lot of cases throughout history where women have had no chance of finding closure or finding recovery. But now there is a chance for people to come forward to tell their stories, and to know that this is a problem that goes beyond politics. This is happening every day, and we take it for granted. But it's time to face the issue, because it's very important for people to start to learn that physical boundaries are to be respected, that human dignity is to be respected.

I think it takes a lot of courage to be the first person to come forward. Now that the movement has grown, how do you feel about the size of the movement, and the number of survivors who have already come forward? Did you expect it could get this big?

I did not anticipate that it would spread to so many different industries, like entertainment and sports. When you start a movement, you can't really predict the end. And you also can't really control it as it's moving forward. So people have said, is there going to be, for example, the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard case, a similar giant, very infamous case where we would ask, "Is it just a relationship conflict? Is it just a messy relationship? Or is it a MeToo case?"

There might be men who come forward, saying, "Well, you're persecuting me now for things that happened 10 years ago. How do I even begin to protect myself?" And there has already been one case of a male influencer who said he has been harassed by a woman. So we need to look at MeToo not as just older men preying on women. And it's important that we don't put all of the responsibility on the women to protect themselves. There are more women who are coming forward because there are relatively more women who are being harmed. But we should look at this as predators versus survivors. Maybe men will also start to learn how to protect themselves and voice their boundaries.

So inevitably, there's going to be some muddying the waters of the MeToo movement, but in essence, for me it's about the survivors speaking out, the survivors themselves finding their voice and telling their story. And once we give them the space and the safety to tell their stories, then we can have the discussion of, "Is this a case of MeToo sexual harassment, or sexual assault? How

should we handle it? How should we educate the public about it?" And whether or not someone who is accusing someone needs to be punished if there's a false accusation.

Sometimes, people have to make the decision of when they should be using the MeToo resources, like the movement right now. But the thing is, if you abuse the resources, you will be taking space, and opportunities, away from true survivors, who would have benefited from the safe space. I've been following a lot of the stories afterwards, reading all of the accounts. And there have been all kinds of stories, and I can't predict the outcome [of all of them]. I don't know when the movement train will stop, so to speak. But at its destination, we want to stay true to the essence of the movement, which is for survivors to have the space to speak out. And that, hopefully, will be something that's sustained.

You referenced the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard trial, and it sounds like you've studied MeToo's development in the U.S. and other countries carefully. Is there anything about the movement [in Taiwan] that you think is different or unique, compared with in other countries? And do you think there are any lessons that Taiwan's movement could learn from how MeToo played out in other places?

It's difficult to learn from other places, especially from Western countries, where in recent years a lot of women are becoming more brave and telling their stories. Because what needs to happen in Taiwan is, the culture needs to fundamentally shift. [Taiwanese feminist sociologist Chén Měi-Huá [posted an essay](#) on Facebook further developing this idea.] It's not something that we can just take from foreign examples. The Johnny Depp case showed us that men can also be the survivor in these relationships. And so, that challenges the Taiwanese movement to be more holistic, to look at the problem in a more comprehensive way, and to be more inclusive when we talk about who's the survivor or who's the perpetrator.

Indeed, something I noticed early on in the Taiwanese movement is that many of the survivors who've been coming forward are men. What do you think of the reaction that you've seen in society to your story, and those of the other survivors that are coming forward? When I look at a lot of these posts, I see some support, and I also see a lot of people saying some pretty nasty things. In your own case, I'm sure you would have seen both kinds of reactions.

I consider the movement much like a filter. There are a lot of people you can see are clearly scared, intimidated, angry — or they're even too happy or just enjoying the show. I had anticipated the trolls or suānmín (literally, "sour citizen") to a degree, but it was obviously still very re-traumatizing to see their comments. I felt like I was being hurt all over again. But I knew I had to be resilient. I knew I had to hold up the movement, partly for other people, partly because of my conviction that I did nothing wrong. And that kept whatever injuries the trolls were inflicting at a surface level. A lot of the misogynistic comments were also expected. And obviously there were people who accused me of stirring up a political scandal before the general election. But the reality is, Taiwan has elections year-round. There was really no "good" time for me to come forward. So the only facts that matter was that I was hurt. And the perpetrator should not get away with what he was doing. That's it.

You mentioned that in Taiwan, the challenge is that there has to be this really significant cultural change in terms of how people behave in society. The movement is still just a few weeks old. But do you see any change happening in society in terms of how people are talking? Do you have any indication of where this will go?

There are two big things that I've observed. One, there are people who are starting to genuinely self-reflect, especially on their daily interactions, like, "Am I offending someone? Am I crossing a line?"

But another thing is that a lot of the perpetrators are taking actions that are re-traumatizing the survivors, through abusing the law and [threatening to sue](#).

And one other thing that makes me very angry is that there have been perpetrators whose spouses have had to come forward with them and apologize together, to be “buried together.” [陪葬 péizàng, which refers to the ancient practice of an emperor’s wife or concubine being buried alive with him after his death.] When these perpetrators were behaving inappropriately and hurting people, they were never considering the feelings of their loved ones or others they were responsible for. And now they’re dragging their loved ones into the mess as human shields, which is something that as a woman I’m very angered by.

MeToo started in the U.S. about four years ago. At that time, it didn’t make it to Taiwan in a significant way. So why do you think this movement is happening now in Taiwan?

Frankly, in Taiwan, society still lacked imagination when it comes to gender and sexuality. Watching *Wave Makers* gave me the emotional relief that I needed. And it made me feel like the show is talking about making waves for others to come forward. I felt like I, myself, who is not a big celebrity or on TV, should still stand up for what I believe and do it for justice.

I think that our society and the Democratic Progressive Party are both going through a [reshuffle](#). And I feel like they are both actually at a place where they’re mature enough to face this problem head on.

Since you’ve come forward, has going public with your story been part of a healing process?

It’s definitely been part of a healing process for me. It’s helped me feel like I have an obligation to the survivors, and I’m happy to see a lot of resources pour out in support of them. There’s better understanding for the survivors that this is not our fault. And now I feel a sense of duty toward gender equality. I feel like I want to share my story more widely. I also feel a sense of duty to the next generation, to the children who are growing up now to improve the kind of education they receive around these kinds of issues.

Is there anything else you’d like to share about your reflections on the past few weeks?

I definitely feel a sense of duty, but when I first came forward, a lot of the comments were quite toxic. I still had a big emotional outburst, I was crying and I called a trusted friend. That friend said something very important to me, which is actually a quote from the movie *The Dark Knight Rises*: “A hero can be anyone, even a man doing something as simple and reassuring as putting a coat around a young boy’s shoulder to let him know that the world hadn’t ended.”

Even though I’m just an average person, when my friend shared this quote, it reminded me that I can’t back down, I have to do what I can for everyone. I want people to understand this isn’t a comedy, this isn’t a drama, this is something that happens every day.

Ashish Valentine is an award-winning journalist and filmmaker based in Taipei. He writes about politics, social issues, historical memory, culture, and climate change in Asia and beyond. Prior to arriving in Taiwan, Ashish worked as a producer at NPR’s *All Things Considered*.

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