

## **#UsToo: The Venezuelan #MeToo Movement and Mediatic Vigilantism**

Ana Patricia Romay

[#MeToo](#) is a 21st-century movement created to draw attention to the problems of sexual harassment, assault, and sexual violence. The cause spread like wildfire across the globe, mainly through social media. With its epicenter in the United States, the movement was later emulated in other countries, such as Venezuela. In Venezuela's case, this article will examine the causes behind the mediatization of sexual crimes and accusations. To understand such phenomena, it is important to closely study the causes behind the #MeToo movement from a macro to a micro perspective.

In 2006, American activist Tarana Burke created a non-profit organization designed to help women of color from low-income communities who had survived sexual violence and called her movement "Me Too" to emphasize that the women were not alone in their experiences.

In October 2017, the #MeToo movement gained worldwide attention after three journalists published articles accusing now-convicted sexual felon and former movie producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual assault and harassment. The movement then took to social media as a hashtag. American actress Alyssa Milano encouraged survivors on Twitter to use the hashtag "[Me Too](#)" to prove how widespread sexual harassment and assault had become, unearthing decades of abuse within the entertainment industry. The testimonies of public figures inspired social media users worldwide to share their stories. As stated in the [Yale Journal of International Affairs](#), "within 20 minutes, Milano received ten thousand replies on Twitter. Within the first 24 hours, the viral #MeToo hashtag appeared on Facebook twelve million times, with similar hashtags emerging in 23 other languages."

Soon after #MeToo started spreading in late 2017, [several allegations](#) against former US Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar of Michigan State University resurfaced, accusing him of "sexually assaulting gymnasts as young as six years old during his treatments." The Nassar case was, arguably, the most critical case because it legitimized the #MeToo movement. After more than 150 women came forward inspired by the #MeToo movement, [Nassar was effectively sentenced to life in prison](#) in 2018.

### ***YoTeCreo: When #MeToo reaches Venezuela***

In Venezuela, the #MeToo movement began with remarkable similarities. It all started on Instagram, where an account was created to denounce Alejandro Sojo, lead singer of Venezuelan pop-rock band Los Colores, for abuse of minors. According to a report by news outlet [Americatevé](#), the first Instagram post, on April 19, 2021, called to "collect testimonies" to proceed criminally against Sojo and warned of cases of 14, 15, and 16-year-olds documented with "WhatsApp, FB (Facebook) and Instagram conversations."

The Sojo case brought cascading accusations against members of other local bands such as Tony Maestracci (drummer of Venezuelan band Tomates Fritos), and theater personalities such

as directors Juan Carlos Ogando and José Pepe Arceo, as well as Venezuelan poet and writer Willy McKey. McKey committed suicide on April 29, 2021, and beforehand admitted to the accusations writing in Spanish in a [now-deleted Tweet](#): “Don’t be this. It grows inside you and kills you. Sorry.”

Following the echo of the globalized #MeToo movement, the slogan *Yo Sí Te Creo* (I do believe you) began to ignite as a sign of support for the victims in Venezuela. New accusations of Venezuelan public figures, including actors, musicians, professors, and politicians were reported via Twitter and Instagram. One journalist, Daniel Lozano, wrote: “the crudeness of the stories shocked a society marked by *machismo*.” However, reports were met with mixed public reactions, with some accusing the movement of being instilled by the Venezuelan government to distract the population from the social and economic crisis. Nevertheless, the movement continued to grow, and it reached its peak when the Instagram account @yotecreovzla was created the same year.

YoTeCreo defines itself as a “social movement against violence, harassment, and sexual abuse”. It has almost 60,000 followers and over 200 posts as of today. It started posting soon after the first accusation was formulated in Venezuela against musician Alejandro Sojo. The account’s [second post](#) was a statement of purpose of the movement, which spoke on the recent day’s accusations and promised to be a platform to amplify the victims’ voices, collect data to register information on the victims and their testimonies, channel the cases towards NGOs, and invite everyone in the artistic and entertainment setting to participate and support the cause.

The statement of purpose of YoTeCreo has been signed by 75 Venezuelan women authors, intellectuals, singers, musicians, actors, dancers, and public figures. Its posts immediately drew attention as the page reposted the victims’ videos and accusations. It soon became a platform that held information on all the cases and allegations for victims, women, mothers, politicians, social workers, public figures, and curious minds alike to read. And with this was the beginning of the expansion of the movement, which began in Venezuela’s capital, Caracas, and spread to the rest of the country, as well as other fields beyond entertainment. The testimonies even exposed private cases that did not involve public figures, such as domestic abuse and intrafamilial sexual assault cases.

### ***Mediatic Vigilantism***

The expression *mediatic vigilantism*, as we suggest, may best describe the movements related to #MeToo that organized in the US and Venezuela. [Bateson](#) and [Corvino](#) define vigilantism as “the extra-legal prevention, investigation, or punishment of offenses.” According to [Weston](#), three factors lend themselves to the emergence of vigilantism: dissatisfaction with justice, awareness of other vigilantes, and a pre-existing social or cultural template. Similarly, [Corvino](#) attributes recent widespread approval of vigilantism and extra-legal measures to three factors: insecurity and fear of crime, social inequality, and institutional weakness, especially in Latin America. Traditional intrastate vigilantism expands and transforms into mediatic vigilantism through social media, a means of immediate, vast reach.

As for the common factors for the accusations in both the United States and Venezuela, they seem to be the public figure status of the accused parties, an overall lack of trust in the system due to impunity, and widespread support to the alleged victims, mainly coming from other women. *Mediatic vigilantism* then arises from broken justice systems resulting from fragile and authoritarian states such as Venezuela and a result of unequal systems with widespread impunity for the wealthy and powerful that exists in the US. According to US-focused research by [Evans](#), about 40% of reported assaults garner attention from news media outlets, with the majority involving unusual or high-profile circumstances and people. Denunciations are likely deemed more effective when made towards people whose careers, which are public, would be more affected by the accusations than if made through a private proceeding. Moreover, the preference for extra-legal measures such as mediatic vigilantism comes from fear of the public figures' support base, connections, wealth, and popularity that may lead to legal impunity.

It seems that the origins of the earlier #MeToo movements are the same as those in the Venezuelan case, but that some factors further complicated the latter, due to the social, economic, and political crisis in the country. Political and social crises create distrust in traditional legal measures, which make the use of extra-legal measures preferable. This caused the movement to expand beyond just accusations to public figures, which is why the role of the Instagram account @yotecreovzla became essential: it became a platform to report all sorts of cases otherwise neglected by unreliable justice systems.

### *Venezuela's singularities*

Some scholars, such as [Corvino](#) and [Weston](#), have studied how Latin American states were deemed illegitimate in resolving local disputes by the general population, and how this led to vigilantism and extra-legal measures, including lynching. The Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict [recorded](#) around 200 attempted and successful criminal lynchings cases in 2017 alone. The crucial specificity of the Venezuelan #MeToo movement lies in the regular, endorsed, and normalized usage of extra-legal measures as crime control in Venezuela and Latin America, which arise from a broken justice system and political unrest. Both lynching and the mediatization of the #MeToo movement arise from the same sentiment: distrust in unreliable justice systems. In Venezuela, factors of mistrust and turmoil contributed to the #MeToo movement's politicization, uncontrolled spread, and more aggressive criticism of the accusations than in the US's 2017 movement.

The victims' public denunciations were met with both overwhelming support and harsh critiques. The women were met with accusations of attempting to get the accusers "lynched". The term *linchamiento mediático* (social media lynching) was widely used to condemn the accusations during the 2021 Venezuelan #MeToo movement, which started in April. The International Criminal Court, according to Human Rights Watch, has found a reasonable basis to believe that crimes against humanity had been committed in Venezuela, citing "crimes of imprisonment, torture, rape and/or other forms of sexual violence, and persecution on political grounds by the civilian authorities, members of the armed forces, and government supporters."

### ***Structural factors***

Massive protests and the use of repression in this context by governmental forces in Venezuela from 2014 to 2017 imply that the overall distrust in law enforcement and legal proceedings in Venezuela does not only arise from economic and social factors that motivate the use of extra-legal measures in Latin America, but also from political sentiments. Fear of crime, social inequality and institutional weakness all contribute to a feeling of insecurity in Venezuelan citizens. According to Human Rights Watch's [2021 report](#), "research has shown that Venezuela's judiciary has failed to adequately investigate widespread abuses, (...) has stopped functioning as an independent branch of government, and Supreme Court justices have openly rejected the principle of separation of powers." The Venezuelans' overall discontent with the country's social, cultural, and political environments is yet another factor that increases vigilantism, as the one observed during the 2021 #MeToo movement, which reflected the people's sense of helplessness and skepticism on the legal route, regardless of the victims' political affiliations.

Adding to the Venezuelan political situation, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 may have aggravated gender inequalities. According to the [UN Women's 2020 worldwide report](#), "gender-based violence increased exponentially, as many women were on 'lockdown' at home with their abusers while services to support survivors were disrupted." In the case of Venezuela, no shelters for women survivors of gender-based violence were operational during 2020. However, the situation was already uncertain before the pandemic. According to a 2021 Amnesty International report, "no official information on [femicide](#) rates has been issued since 2013 [in Venezuela], nor a national plan to prevent them, with NGOs reporting a steady increase in cases of violence against women." Similarly, [Nikolau](#) states that Venezuela's political and economic crises have human rights experts concerned about the country's rate of gender violence, for which legal systems are in place, but no government data is available. The lack of gender violence data also implies a lack of reports on sexual assault and harassment, with the only data available on the 2021 accusations (both legal and extra-legal) in Venezuela coming from news outlets and social media. Aside from the lack of data available, the overall sense of distrust in the justice system and authorities in Venezuela is palpable, which, according to Supancic [& Willis](#), influences the rise and normalization of vigilantism as "citizens likely define extra-legal acts as legitimate even when their intent is to challenge the authority of the state and the criminal justice system."

The reason the Venezuelan #MeToo movement spread amongst all social classes, regions, positions of power, ages and genders lies in the distrust and ineffectiveness of the Venezuelan justice system, the politicization of justice, the repression, and the overall economic crisis in Venezuela. Nevertheless, it is crucial to consider that, although @yotecreovzla became an all-inclusive platform, it does not mean it reached the majority of the population or all those affected by domestic abuse or sexual assault. Still, it is a representative sample of the distrust in law enforcement and justice.

***More justice as the only way forward...***

The 2021 #MeToo movement in Venezuela held interesting particularities, which can be analyzed through the same lens which examines phenomena such as lynching and vigilantism: they both have origins in a widespread desire to take “matters into one’s own hands” due to slowness of legal measures, bureaucratic tediousness, the possibility of not obtaining desirable results, and distrust in the justice system (rooted in distrust in governmental institutions).

In the case of Venezuela, the discontent with governmental institutions and the widespread belief in the government’s participation in criminal activities make it all the less desirable to take official and legal paths. Moreover, this same discontent with the Venezuelan justice system made the Venezuelan #MeToo movement different from all others: the accused parties were not just limited to public figures. Victims no longer sought justice, but support from a community that would believe them, as they had neither from the law. The movement may have had its origins in the same factors which result in events such as lynching but accusing those who engaged in the movement of *social media lynching* may be radical - and perhaps unfair.

However, the social media accusations and the increase of *social media lynching* happening around the same time indicate that Venezuela’s justice system has not delivered satisfactory results and thus led many to recur to extra-legality. Social media is a mirror of society; thus, the analysis of the movement provides insight into Venezuela’s situation. The victims’ need to publicly report their cases reveals the country’s lack of resources for victims of sexual violence and the failure to provide justice effectively for legitimate crimes under the law. Corvino [states](#) that vigilantism can only be stopped if “social groups return to considering their government fair and incorruptible so that future crimes do not fall into bureaucratic sluggishness, only to end in slight punishment or even impunity.” Mediativ vigilantism will not cease as social media is now another resource to amplify a message or cause. The only way to prevent the downsides of vigilantism is for the legal paths to be improved and more accessible. Thus, the #MeToo movements worldwide arise from the same factor that causes extra-legality and vigilantism: distrust in justice systems, which is brought to an extreme in Venezuela due to its political situation. vigilantism can only be stopped if “social groups return to considering their government fair and incorruptible so that future crimes do not fall into bureaucratic sluggishness, only to end in slight punishment or even impunity.” Mediativ vigilantism will not cease as social media is now another resource to amplify a message or cause. The only way to prevent the downsides of vigilantism is for the legal paths to be improved and more accessible. Thus, the #MeToo movements worldwide arise from the same factor that causes extra-legality and vigilantism: distrust in justice systems, which is brought to an extreme in Venezuela due to its political situation.

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#### *Appendix*

The following is an interview of two Venezuelan women, victims of harassment and assault, who actively participated in the Venezuelan #MeToo movement. They expressed their wish to

take part in the investigation under pseudonyms. Their answers reflect their endorsement of social media to report crimes and dissatisfaction with the Venezuelan justice system.

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1a4Et7g9bgaAlzbNGYT9NgRFgfHe87fHpYVGRu56ufU/edit?usp=sharing>

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