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Taiwan faces a #MeToo wave triggered by a Netflix hit



Students salute Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen during a graduation ceremony at the Na June 21. | REUTERS

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HONG KONG – From an exiled Tiananmen protest leader to an award-winning singer and high-ranking politicians, a growing list of people have been accused of sexual assault and harassment in Taiwan amid a fledgling

#MeToo movement that has rocked the island.

Since late May, dozens of women and a handful of men have come forward with their personal stories amid an avalanche of allegations that observers have called “unprecedented in scale.”

As of Tuesday, there are at least published 61 incidents of sexual assault or harassment in which the identity of the alleged perpetrator is known, according to the [Me Too Taiwan](https://www.metootaiwan.tw/) (<https://www.metootaiwan.tw/>) online database.

A Netflix show inspires

Before May, few had expected a #MeToo wave to hit the island, let alone that it would be sparked by a hit Netflix series.

The recently released show “Wave Makers” focuses on a group of political campaign staffers working in the lead-up to a presidential election in Taiwan — mirroring the run-up to [the self-governed island’s highly anticipated January poll](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/06/05/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/taiwan-2024-presidential-election-candidates/) (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/06/05/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/taiwan-2024-presidential-election-candidates/>).

In the series, a junior ruling party member files a complaint after being groped by a male colleague. Despite the damage to the party’s reputation that would be caused by a public revelation, her female supervisor vows justice, pledging not to “just let this go.”

“We can’t let things go this easily,” the protagonist says. “Otherwise, we’ll wither away and die.”

Deploying this very same line in a [Facebook post](#)

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Chen Chien-jou, a former staffer with the ruling Democratic Progressive Party, triggered the tsunami of claims, accusing a DPP executive of covering up her sexual harassment complaint.

The former staffer said her supervisor, Hsu Chia-tien — the DPP’s women’s affairs director at the time — had asked why she didn’t scream when the incident occurred.

The revelation encouraged more victims to speak up, in turn prompting a number of high-profile party members to resign and the party leadership to issue swift public apologies.

“Our society as a whole must educate ourselves again,” President Tsai Ing-wen, Taiwan’s first female leader, wrote in a [Facebook post](#)

(<https://www.facebook.com/tsaiingwen/posts/pfbid02xa4bgHwvSqJA7Sew9cww49EC6vQjBoDV>

earlier this month. “The people who have been sexually harassed are victims, not troublemakers. These are people we want to protect, not treat with prejudice.”

Decades of work

“Wave Makers” highlighted the real-life issue of sexual harassment in Taiwan, resonating with many since it came as the island’s election season kicked into high gear, said Chen Yi-Chien, a gender studies professor at Shih Hsin University in Taipei.

A clear message delivered by the series, Chen said, is the possibility of aid for victims — namely rallying support and backing each other, something underrepresented on screen.

But despite the on-screen inspiration, experts agree that the current reckoning was not due solely to the impact of the series, but rather a combination of generations' worth of work.



(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/np_file_235486.jpeg).

Taiwanese Vice President Lai Ching-te speaks during a news conference in Taipei in April. | BLOOMBERG

Chen said that the advancement of decadeslong local women's movements and the implementation of gender equality laws in the early 2000s has helped to empower younger generations in defending their sexual autonomy.

“If she (Chen) feels insecure and that no one in the society will listen to her, then she will never reveal her experience publicly,” Shih Hsin University’s Chen said, adding that the creation of a space for discussion where victims feel comfortable about opening up is an encouraging sign.

The growing emphasis on mental well-being in Taiwan has also been a factor in encouraging victims to come forward, said Jennifer Lu, director for Asia at LGBTQ nongovernmental organization Outright International and a longtime activist for marriage equality in Taiwan.

“In the past, the older generation thought it was OK to be groped because there was no physical harm,” Lu said. “Now things are different. It is well understood among the public that the mental suffering brought about by sexual harassment and assault also harms victims’ health.”

A belated movement

As a progressive democracy, Taiwan is proud of its commitment to gender equality. Female representation in Taiwan’s parliament sits at around 43%, according to statistics from the Legislative Yuan, far higher than the global average of 25.8% calculated by the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

But for Taiwanese women, the current #MeToo reckoning is a belated one.

The culture of conformity in Taiwan — a mixture of valuing harmony, deference and respect for power, as well as severe stigmatization of sexual issues — is deeply rooted in people’s mindsets and prevents victims from going public, Lu said.



(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/np_file_235485.jpeg)

Tsai makes a speech to kick off The Women's Power Night to mark International Women's Day in Taipei in March last year. | REUTERS

When the flurry of #MeToo allegations threatened to engulf the ruling party, Lai rushed to make strong public apologies, with these made over three consecutive days, while swiftly removing the alleged perpetrators from their posts, quelling the public's anger.

Huang Wei-hao, an assistant professor at National Sun Yat-Sen University in Kaohsiung, said that Lai's political reputation will "suffer little" from the claims, as the party leader made clear that he stands with victims.

"Despite some DPP candidates withdrawing from the Legislative Yuan election, their chances of winning were already slim before allegations emerged," Huang said, adding that the withdrawals won't be detrimental to

the DPP's number of seats in parliament, especially considering the short shelf life of scandals.

“If (allegations) emerge right before the election, the impact will be much greater than it is now,” he added.

A pivotal social change?

While three laws dealing with gender equality and sexual harassment complaints in the workplace, on campus and in other places have come into effect over the last two decades, experts say the lack of thorough implementation remains a top concern.

Shih Hsin University's Chen questioned how many in society are aware of the measures or believe the current complaint mechanisms in place are helpful, since a majority of #MeToo victims ultimately turned to social media to air their grievances.

“Moving on, we should observe how many victims will receive assistance from NGOs and how many cases will formally enter the complaint stage,” Chen said.

There is no statute of limitations for filing complaints of incidents that happened on campuses, as stipulated by law, yet there are often obstacles to raising complaints about long-ago occurrences.

“What the system can do is enable victims to use the complaint mechanism, rather than stifling an investigation from the beginning by saying there is too little evidence,” Chen said.

According to figures from Taiwan's Labor Ministry, over 80% of employees who have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace chose not to file a formal complaint.

“We can always pass new laws,” Chen added. “But if the public doesn't use it, the law is useless.”

To overhaul the complaint mechanism, Outright International's Lu has urged the establishment of an external organization to handle workplace complaints, due to the possibility of conflict of interest if the perpetrator is the employer.

Even with such a move, though, the law currently only requires firms with over 30 employees to set up a complaint channel, making it hard for victims who work in smaller companies to seek redress.

Yet it remains to be seen whether the current #MeToo moment will bring about any structural changes.

Criminal law reforms removed sexual assault crimes from the “offense against morality” chapter in 1999, instead being included in a separate chapter entitled “offense against sexual autonomy,” which aimed to highlight the protection of an individual's sexual autonomy — a legal reform pushed by local feminist activists.

Shih Hsin University's Chen noted that the changes, however, have not transformed into a broader shift in mindsets, with people still viewing sexual assault as a violation of social morality rather than the infringement of victims' sexual autonomy or their personal rights.

“Transformation takes time,” said Lu. “Society as a whole needs to set up prevention and supporting systems.”

“Sexual assault crimes will not disappear, but we need more gender quality education and a well-rounded mechanism to handle complaints so that it will lead to a pivotal structural change in Taiwanese society in the future.”

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