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## Activism and affective labor for digital direct action: the Mexican #MeToo campaign

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### ABSTRACT

Since it first originated in the United States, #MeToo has spread around the world, giving rise to the most powerful and widespread global campaign against sexual violence in history. In March 2019, Mexican women created Twitter accounts and hashtags to share their experiences of sexual assault at workplaces and schools, in a country where nearly eleven women are murdered every day. The #MeToo campaign was intense and brief. It was trending at the end of March 2019, but by mid-April interest in it had plummeted. This article examines how the hashtag depended on activists' efforts in order to build an affective community for disclosure of sexual harassment. Based on the voices of participants, this study argues that although activists were able to handle affective labor to solve collectively urgent problems arising within the campaign, they failed to withstand the backlash which followed the suicide of Armando Verga Gil, a famous rock musician, after being accused of sexual abuse online. From the perspective of social movements theory, #MeToo is characterized as digital direct action forming part of the repertoire of contention of feminist crowds.

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In 2006, Tarana Burke, an activist and sexual assault survivor, began using the phrase 'me too' to share her story and help other African American women who were victims of sexual assault. However, when the actress Alyssa Milano posted the hashtag #MeToo in October 2017 on Twitter in wake of the accusations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, it sparked a global phenomenon which spread to 85 countries and is still active today (Suk et al., 2021, p. 290).

In the context of the global rise of the #MeToo in February 2018, Mexican journalist Carmen Aristegui interviewed several Mexican actresses who told stories of the sexual abuse they had encountered in their career, but without naming their aggressors. The hashtag #YoNoDenuncioPorque (I do not denounce because) began trending, and Mexicans questioned why, unlike women in Hollywood, they had to remain silent (Coppel, 2018) as victims of widespread structural violence and impunity.<sup>1</sup> According to a report by Mexico Evalua (2020), sexual crimes against women are rarely brought to justice in Mexico, with women failing to report 99.7% of sexual violence cases.

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Nobody expected what would happen just over a year later, when several men in arts, literature and academia circles were named on Twitter as sexual offenders. The #MeToo campaign trended between 24 March and 6 April 2019,<sup>2</sup> becoming a major subject of public discussion. This study seeks to address how disclosure was facilitated by intense activism during that period. The findings provide insights into how collective action can be used as a driver of hashtag feminism.

Several scholars have analyzed the interaction on Twitter of the #MeToo movement; however, to date, very little attention has been paid to the collective activism that fueled it. The research questions posed in this study are twofold: What type of action was developed to enable a highly visible protest in Mexico? And What were its dynamics as a repertoire of contention of feminist crowds? Answering these questions leads to a deeper understanding of the potentials and pitfalls of hashtag campaigns in cases where personal narratives of disclosure name perpetrators.

### **The Mexican purple spring and the #NiUnaMenos crowd**

On 24 April 2016, a demonstration call sent out on social media drew an unexpectedly large crowd which marched from Ecatepec – one of the places with the highest rates of femicide – to Mexico City center (Domínguez, 2021; Kadic, 2019). Thus began the Mexican ‘Primavera Violeta’ (purple spring) – a cycle of feminist crowds that have increasingly shaken the foundations of public life until now (Rovira Sancho, 2018). Since the Argentinian #NiUnaMenos mobilization in 2015, women throughout Latin America have come together to deploy a wide and contagious repertoire of contention, both on the streets and online (Alcaraz, 2017). This has included mass demonstrations and live performances, as well as calls for international women’s strikes and flash mobs to take over public spaces. In this cycle of mobilizations, ‘feminist activism that unfolds through Twitter hashtags’, as Rosemary Clark points out, ‘has become a powerful tactic for fighting gender inequities around the world’ (Clark, 2016, p. 788).

Hashtag feminism was already being used in Mexico before the #MeToo movement became popular. In 2015, #RopaSucia (#DirtyLaundry) showcased incidences of misogyny in literary circles; and in 2016, #MiPrimerAcoso (#MyFirstAssault) enabled women to share experiences of incipient sexual aggressions which had occurred in childhood (Kadic, 2019). In 2017, after the on-campus femicide of the University of Mexico student Lesvy Berlin Osorio, women ridiculed the double-victimization with #SiMeMatan (#IfTheyKillMe) ‘it will be because I like beer’ or ‘it will be because I love dancing’. As women marched against femicide on the streets and at the University, hashtags denouncing violence proliferated.

### **Hashtag feminism for silence breakers**

Linda Alcoff provides an in-depth analysis of how sexual violence is handled by victim groups. Overall, she finds that ‘speaking of rape turned into the universal tactic of resistance because silencing was what continues being the universal tactic of the perpetrators’ (Alcoff, 2019, p. 251). Silence is based on the realistic expectation that the story will be met with skepticism, even amongst family and friends. #MeToo broke abruptly with the ability to ‘preemptively dismiss’ (Alcoff, 2019, p. 56) the voices of the victims of

sexual violence and created a listening community with a ‘hashtag co-occurrence’ (Wang et al., 2016), which repeated words of solidarity and considered the testimonies of victims to be true. Rather than converting shame into resignation, it can be exchanged for ‘empowerment through empathy’ (Suk et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, Alcoff identifies three ways to deactivate speaking out: silencing, disqualifying, and restoring the disruptive potential within a hegemonic framework. The question of what happens when mainstream media amplifies the resonance of the victim’s voice also remains to be answered; ‘Whilst personal silences are broken, political silences can be paradoxically reinforced’ (Boyle, 2019, p. 43).

According to Baer (2016), digital activism is ‘redoing feminism’ and taking it beyond theories, groups and organizations. As a consequence, feminist scholars have interrogated the multifaceted effects of a ‘hashtag’s aggregation of personal stories’ (Clark, 2016, p. 798), making them visible, political issues, especially those relating to sexual violence (Thrift, 2014). This visibility derives from hybrid media systems, digital networks and mainstream media, even if it first begins on Twitter (Lokot, 2018).

Because of the impact and duration of #MeToo, it has become one of the most highly analyzed feminist hashtag campaigns of recent years (Bogen et al., 2019; Mendes et al., 2018; Page & Arcy, 2020; Trott, 2020; Zarkov & Davis, 2018).

Although researchers are investigating new #MeToo campaigns and case-studies from different countries (Chandra & Erlingsdóttir, 2021), the literature mainly focuses on Europe and the United States. A study by Lukose (2018) recognizes the need for further exploration of online activism in the global South, and pushes for more dialogue and collaboration between activists and academics in different cultural settings.

It is worth noting that previous studies warned about hashtag feminism, arguing that although cathartic, individual actions can go unrecognized and forgotten (Jane, 2015). Other researchers express skepticism and concern surrounding the outcomes of ‘call out’ campaigns such as #MeToo, and the potential they have for transforming formal institutional systems set up for rape response (Zarkov and Davis, 2018). For instance, there is increasing concern about the profuse cyberviolence feminist activists receive, as it functions as a backlash to silence sexual harassment (Banet-Weiser, 2016; Cole, 2015; Ganzer, 2014).

In the Mexican context of digital and structural inequality, it is noteworthy that marginalized voices are not equitably empowered by digital networks (Trott, 2020). As researchers point out, race, poverty, and LGBTQ+ identity lead to greater risks and harm, or are an obstacle to participating in the #MeToo movement (Mulla, 2018; Thompson & Figueroa, 2020). Furthermore, hashtag activism is more often than not dismissed because of the general tendency for hashtags to ‘go viral’ and become a trending topic, before dying out, thus converting digital activism to ‘slacktivism’ (Knibbs, 2013; Mulla, 2018); a term derived from combining the words ‘slacker’ and ‘activism’ to mean a ‘feel-good back-patting’ through watching or ‘liking’ response, which avoids taking any real action (Kadic, 2019, p. 7).

The aim of this research is to demonstrate that the Mexican #MeToo campaign was neither accommodative nor easy by focusing on the practices that enable victims to give personal testimonies of sexual harassment; and that an affective community was built through ‘politicizing emotional labor’ (Page & Arcy, 2019, p. 337). Accordingly, Clark-Parsons (2021, p. 2) points out that ‘performance maintenance practices’ are required to

achieve transformative politics of visibility. In the vein of Mendes et al. (2018), the promises and pitfalls of #MeToo are addressed in relation to the affective labor of activists involved in the digital campaign.

### A digital direct action repertoire

From the perspective of social movements theory, a hashtag campaign can be considered as part of the repertoire of contention (Tilly, 1978). This view is supported by Bonila and Rosa (2015), who outline that social movements use both online and offline forms of protest. In this research, the sharp distinction between online and offline worlds is erased, given that both spheres are heavily interdependent (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Digital technologies have become a relevant and ubiquitous component of everyday life and should therefore be considered as two poles of a continuum. It is argued that feminist crowds in Mexico made strategic and intense use of the #MeToo for a period. This is not to say that the fight against sexual violence began or ended in a hashtag. On the contrary, feminist protests continued (Domínguez, 2021); but the intense hashtag campaign that had dominated for a time was left aside.

#MeToo, the online *public outing* of sexual predators (*escrache* in Spanish) (Ruiz Navarro, 2019), can be characterized as digital direct action (Critical Art Ensemble, 1996), resulting from ‘extending the philosophy of activism and direct action into the “virtual” world of electronic information exchange and communications’ (Electrohippies, 1999). The idea of digital activism (Kaun & Ulam, 2018; Rolfe, 2005), includes digital direct action as the Do It Yourself (DIY) of contentious politics in sync with the hacker spirit (Nissenbaum, 2004; Rovira Sancho, 2017); do what you can with what you have without turning to an authorized place for it. As Julián Rebón explains: ‘Through direct action, social actors seek to achieve their objectives by overflowing institutional channels, going without them, or damaging the institutional channels of the social order to process their demands’ (2012, p. 2). In this context, Mexican #MeToo action highlights the inefficiency (social, cultural, legal) of access to justice for women who have been sexually assaulted.

### Methodological note

By employing ethnographical modes of inquiry, I attempt to shed light on the grassroots experience and evolution of a case study analysing the Mexican #MeToo campaign. As a digital ethnographer (Hine, 2000, 2015), I constructed a multi-sited fieldwork with multiple possibilities of ‘being there’ in a combination of online and real-life contexts, and different spaces, digital media platforms and social settings (De Seta, 2020). This meant having to ‘choose a perceived community and select the important nodes in the social network as field sites’ (Howard, 2002, p. 561). Accordingly, the author followed the principal Twitter accounts<sup>3</sup> that were created on March 2019 and revised their digital archive; also participated in Facebook groups, reviewing some of their online conversations.

Methodological triangulation has been found to be beneficial as it provides confirmation of findings, more comprehensive data, increased validity and enhanced understanding of a phenomena (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). For these reasons digital ethnography was used alongside ‘real-life’ ethnographical methods. To compile activist

's voices and open a space for reflection, the author and other colleagues organized a #MeToo Assembly at Galvan House at the Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM) in Mexico City on 13 September 2019. Four items were discussed – firstly in random groups, and then in plenaries: 1) Potentials and limits of the #MeToo; 2) Forms of the action; 3) What justice do we want? 4) What's Next? The fifty or so women who came were recruited using snowball methodology, by word of mouth or email invitation, using bridges built during previous feminist activities. The women were professionals, artists, journalists, academics, students and human rights defenders involved in the #MeToo movement, either as accusers, account managers, protocol and digital security managers, legal or psychological advisors and supporters. They gave consent to audio recording part of the session, which lasted from 9 am to 7 pm, and agreed their voices would be anonymous. This is the reason they are cited in this study as UAM Assembly (UAMA).

This research aims to contribute to an understanding of the complexities inherent in doing digital feminist activism. A reflexive approach crossed with other sources of information was used to analyze and interpret the experiences and perspectives expressed by participants (Thompson & Figueroa, 2020).

For instance, national and international media coverage from televised news and debates to online discussions was followed to capture the Mexican #MeToo movement in the media. Written testimonies of women who took part in the campaign, were collected from various publications and filed. The empirical material for this article includes attending other #MeToo panel debates in Mexico City.

To outline the significant moments and aspects of the Mexican #MeToo campaign, this article is organized as follows: First, an outline of how the 2019 campaign was organized by activists by creating collective Twitter accounts, guaranteeing victim confidentiality and by convening meetings, forums, and assemblies. Second, the scope of the affective community for silence breakers and its collapse after the suicide of the musician Armando Vega Gil<sup>4</sup> is expounded. Third, challenges and reflections from the point of view of activists are discussed. Finally, a conclusion sets out findings and areas for future research.

### **(1) Organizing the Mexican #MeToo**

This section outlines the campaign's origins, and how the women organized activism and a set of 'performance maintenance practices' (Clark-Parsons, 2021) in order to build an affective community for disclosure. It also includes the main data on complaints lodged.

#### ***The trending topic***

On March 22nd, 2019, journalist Ana G. González published on Twitter that the writer Herson Barona had beaten, manipulated, impregnated and threatened more than ten women. As a result, his book presentation in Mexico City was cancelled. The following day, the @MeTooEscritores (MeTooWriters) account was created by a group of women. 'If you are afraid to speak out, send a message and we will publish the name of

the aggressor #MeTooEscritoresMexicanos #NoEstásSola #SeVaACaer'.<sup>5</sup> In less than 48 hours, 134 writers had been mentioned, eight of them accused by more than five women.

This was the beginning of an organizational effort to open new Twitter accounts by jobs and professions. Inger Díaz Barriga (2019) reported how @MeTooEscritores (writers) was not enough for the women who were beginning to denounce sexual harassment: 'After the accusation against a man who did not belong to the literary medium, someone pointed out: "But he is a journalist." Then a demand arose: "We need a #MeTooJournalists".' This led to the female union *Periodistas Unidas Mexicanas (PUM)* (Mexican United Journalists) creating the hashtag #MeTooPeriodistasMexicanos (#MeTooMexicanJournalists), offering @periodistasPUM as a platform for reporting harassment in the media sector<sup>6</sup> and establishing a verification process 'to confirm that the accuser was a real person and not a bot' (AUAM). Within two days, 120 journalists were named.

In the same way, new Twitter accounts were created by groups of women using the @metoo . . . followed by their professions, schools or localities. In addition, an email was used to coordinate all those interested in participating: yotecreomx@gmail.com (I believe you Mexico).

After this, the Mexican #MeToo movement erupted, spilling over into the mainstream public domain and reported by Al Jazeera, The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Guardian before appearing in the Mexican media (Díaz Barriga, 2019).

### **Numbers and accounts**

By the beginning of April, there were already 2,393 complaints of harassment posted on Twitter (Entrelineas, 2019). One of the singular characteristics of the campaign was that the complaints were launched from collective accounts, not personal ones. Human Rights defenders and feminist lawyers laid out the legal tools that justified keeping women who reported harassment anonymous. Activists appealed to the Mexico's General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence, which protects the confidentiality of those who come forward.

On 11 April, the results were presented<sup>7</sup> at the *Metoo Forum* press conference, at the headquarters of the Mexico City Human Rights Commission, and attended by over a hundred activists.<sup>8</sup> #MeTooAgencias (advertising agencies) had received more than 600 claims. #MeTooEscritores showed up with 194 accusations and 147 people's names, 20 named more than once. #MeTooArts and Creatives had 249 allegations against 172 men. #MeTooCineMexicano had 129. #MeTooPeriodistasMexicanos received 329 allegations: 197 editors, reporters, photographers, along with other union members were all reported, 12 of them in more than 3 cases. 74 news outlets were also named. #MeTooAcademia (academics), split by centers of education, accumulated 350 accusations. For some, the consequences were immediate; the newspaper *Reforma* removed its director of operations from his position. *Chilango* and *Más Por Más* cut ties with two of three collaborators accused of sexual harassment. Media outlets such as *CIMAC Noticias* and *Periodistas de a Pie* network helped foster a commitment towards putting new gender protocols in place.

## ***Intense activism***

At the UAMA, MeToo activists explained that they had to moderate online conversations, organize support, solve digital security issues and problems that arose. Along the same lines as Mendes et al. demonstrate that in the case of #BeenRapedNeverReported (2018, p. 237), the #MeToo Mexican tweets were not frivolous responses, but testimonies constructed with care and caution. This public outpouring involved ‘performance maintenance practices’ (Clark-Parsons, 2021) and learning from each other: ‘Many of the girls who came forward who are journalists realized that even they didn’t know how to tell their story. Workshops were held, taught by X. who is with us today. We asked ourselves how we can begin to regroup ourselves to not perpetuate the same narrative’ (UAMA).

The campaign was exhausting for those curating accounts, and who had read through reports, which sometimes made them aware of their own personal experiences of sexual violence:

After one week of reading accusations, there were lots of us who said: That also happened to me! And I didn’t know that that was violence ... We came to realize that without even realizing it, we had been victims of sexual harassment (UAMA).

Without any pre-organization, #MeToo was unpredictable and proliferating. Activists in charge of Twitter accounts explained the difficulty of trying to propose common measures when the accusations differed so greatly from each other.

We were overwhelmed by what we had wanted to get out of our minds, the inner weight that we carry around, and then, for example, the complaints of domestic violence appeared. It was very interesting because in many groups there were disagreements, people saying: ‘no, that is not the same as in workplaces, so that doesn’t fit (UAMA).

At the same time, attempts were made to weave protocols that had ‘some kind of coherence’, and above all, ‘damage control’. What began online, continued to imply increasing organization with meetings, assemblies, and decision making. A significant amount of knowledge, practices and procedures were urgently generated to create a toolbox for those who decided to start new hashtags:

It seemed important to organize training because there were many questions about how to go about making the accusations, and it was also interesting to note that many did not know their labor rights. So, we began to move from the topic of digital violence, and we started organizing workshops on digital security, labor rights, and organized restraint sessions with psychologists (UAMA).

### **(1) Growth and collapse of the Metoo affective community**

This section deals with how an affective community was built for silence breakers through affective labor and the public viewing of ‘#YoTeCreo’ (IBelieveYou); the shock felt when the musician Armando Vega Gil committed suicide; and addresses the backlash against activists.



### ***'Women together are not alone': building a sense of community***

On 26 March 2019, three days after the #MeToo campaign started, women came together in an assembly which took the name *Mujeres Juntas Marabunta* (Women Together Marabunta) (MJM) with the slogan 'We will never be alone again'.

Today we want to see the tools we have, we want legal guidance, we want psychosocial support, we want to have clear security protocols for women who have experienced violence, we want to know how to act, to arm this *community* by supporting each other, being together in case of aggression (Mujeres Juntas Marabunta, 2019).

MJM issued several communications to organize and frame an affective community, explaining the #MeToo movement and how it never pretended to be a court; 'It is not a mechanism for allegations that seek to claim the public stage, it is a *political tool*. What happened in the shadows (all *machista* violence is the shadow of power that operates in camouflage) is what must be brought to light'.

Moreover, MJM also disclosed that they decided to hide the identities of the #MeToo accuses to protect them from being criminalized and attacked. Regarding the names of the aggressors, they were in no doubt; 'They are being published so that this does not happen to anyone else and to show that there are many who have not yet been able to speak. We do so aware of the privilege and the responsibility of being visible' (Mujeres Juntas Marabunta, 2019).

Activists insisted that #MeToo was not a court of law. As Sánchez (2019) explained, #MeToo is not a homogenous movement coordinated from a single point, nor structured as an investigative process.

It is an 'enough is enough' that comes from centuries of silence, from lumps in the throat, from bodily wounds, and many deaths. It's a *mechanism to amplify* our voices and our many experiences, all diverse and singular, but with a common origin: the injustice of suffering violence again and again and not finding useful ways to confront it (Sánchez, 2019).<sup>9</sup>

In the same vein, the assembly MJM stated that #MeToo was a collective effort and part of a broader feminist fight against violence. 'Today we have broken that pact of silence: we write those words, and we act collectively because we live in a country where nine women are murdered every day' (Mujeres Juntas Marabunta, 2019).

### ***'I believe you'***

Activists decided to welcome the testimonies of women who were speaking out with a concurring hashtag to motivate participation and the growth of the #MeToo community. Although #NoEstasSola (YouAreNotAlone) was used frequently, #YoSíTeCreo was crucial: 'When a *morra* (*young women*) went to post an accusation, we organized ourselves so that there would be a massive response of another 70 or 80 *morras* saying #YoSíTeCreo (#IBelieveYou).<sup>10</sup> It seemed very important for them to have public support from other women' (UAMA).

The act of considering every testimony worthy of being taken into account, makes the space the #MeToo campaign has opened unique in that it offers its victims affective solidarity. #MeToo has become an affective community that welcomes, embraces and listens. It collectivizes pain. Hashtags create a space which can put an end to moral

silencing and enable sharing, as much in the sense of being accounted for as in being able to narrate each personal story. This was done by politicizing emotional labor. Lucila Sandoval, a complainant in the Mexican #MeToo movement, explained her feelings:

Never in the history of our country has there been a moment in which a woman can turn to another, who is shakily writing a complaint, and tell her ‘Don’t worry, they’re going to believe you.’ Although we have been chanting the slogan ‘Sister I believe you’ for many years and from many places, we know that it is not the usual response, and that the accusation, whether it’s public or confidential, will be mirrored with revictimization and threats (Mujeres Juntas Marabunta, 2019).

To sum up, #MeToo is affective, yet at the same time painful as it brings to light what was hidden or whispered in small groups and closed places. ‘From therapy addicts to activism addicts’, some might say (UAMA). The phrase ‘feminism has saved my life’ has appeared in the testimonies of many young Mexican women.

#MeToo grants epistemic authority through the experience of each complainant rather than through a legal code. Taking that into consideration begs the question whether #IBelieveYou is compatible with ‘the verification of the source’, as journalists do. In any case, who is responsible for making that verification of a testimony? Mayeli Sánchez puts it thus: ‘We have said #IBelieveYou, this is how we show that despite the pedagogy of patriarchy, we maintain the ability to empathize, to be in solidarity and to look at ourselves in an experience we have in common’ (2019).

### **The shock**

On April 1st, 2019, Armando Vega Gil, bassist of the legendary rock band Botellita de Jerez, committed suicide after being accused on @MeTooMusicaMx of sexually abusing a woman when she was only 13 years old. In his suicide note on Twitter, he stated: ‘My life is over, there is no way out. I know that online I have no way to advocate for myself.’ Vega Gil asked for forgiveness from the women that he made feel uncomfortable with his ‘macho ways’, and recognized that ‘this battle is complicated, as men, males, we are creatures of our times’. And wrote: ‘It’s right for women to raise their voices to make our rotten world change.’ Within hours, his tweet had received 11,200 retweets y 3,300 comments.

One immediate response argued: ‘Instead of committing suicide he should have faced the whole process, and if he was innocent he had nothing to worry about; but no, he already did it and that gives us a lot to think about.’ Another person answered saying it was like a *witch hunt*:

So, what is the use of facing the process if your life is already screwed? Social networks have turned into the Holy Inquisition, they judge, destroy, and they don’t give the accused the right to defend themselves because if they defend themselves, they are guilty and if they don’t defend themselves, they are guilty.

This resulted in #MeToo activists being insulted online: ‘Just a group of hysteric fanatics taking advantage of the fact that he was a public figure to use him as a pawn in the fight against the so-called patriarch.’

Before deciding to close their Twitter account, @MeTooMusicaMx described Vega Gil’s act as ‘media blackmail’; ‘there are no false accusations, cowards are trying to escape the truth.’ The suicide was all over the media. Activists went into crisis, two more women

came forward with similar stories about Vega Gil, exposing their identities; but nobody listened to them. The digital campaign was condemned. This is how the Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza described the moment:

There were tears within the movement and the assemblies, we have to say. There was dissent. There was puzzlement. And long hours of contemplation. And lots of work, hours of dialogue and investigation, whole days of exchanging or discussing strategies (Rivera Garza, 2019).

#MeToo activists were accused of immaturity, lack of agency, puritanism, victimizing sex without investigating or respecting the presumption of innocence. Even women committed to social justice movements condemned them, as did journalist Blanche Petrich, who pointed out the risk of spreading all these ‘demons’ on social networks: ‘There were accusations that smelled of lies, exaggeration, morbidity, and revenge. At times #MeToo seemed like a court of an indictment, hysterical and uncritical’ (Petrich, 2019).

Moreover, Daniela Pastrana, a committed journalist from *Periodistas de a Pie*, wrote against #MeToo activists: ‘Do you really think that macho violence is worse than before and that we did nothing before? What if Twitter had never existed?’ (Pastrana, 2019).

Apart from that, the activists had already clashed with the veteran feminist academician Marta Lamas over her book *Acoso (Harassment)* (Lamas, 2018), written in synchronicity with the hundred French celebrities who accused the #MeToo of being puritan. In April 2019, Lamas spoke out against the anonymity of accusers, but recognized that ‘what the women are saying is enough macho arrogance, enough inequality, enough perverse labor practices’ (in Diez, 2019).

Furthermore, Svenja Flasspöhler, author of the essay *The feminine potential*, was frequently quoted at the time for saying that #MeToo ‘castrates men’ (in Martín, 2019). In turn, the Argentinian anthropologist Rita Segato added wood to the fire: ‘#MeToo comes from North American feminism. A feminism that, aside from a few rare exceptions, I call “pilgrim” feminism, the feminism of the puritan pilgrim founders’ (in Delgado, 2019).

### **The backlash**

Silencing, disqualifying, and restoring voices within a hegemonic framework are usual strategies to reject claims by sexual abuse survivors. Thus, #MeToo activists received threats accusing them of being irresponsible, and labeling them as self-victimizing puritans without agency. It is easy to imagine that they felt their effort had been not worthy: ‘The toughest part is to feel that what you have done has had no consequence, and even more, it puts you in a more fragile place, just the opposite of what we wanted to do’ (UAMA).

The backlash went on. On 2 April, the @MeTooMenPower account appeared with the hashtag #MeTooHombres (#MeTooMen). Within 24 hours there were 9 thousand followers. The main message was a call to attack: ‘This is the Twitter [account] of the “women” that defamed Vega Gil without evidence and with cowardly anonymity. Curiously we were blocked without having had any dialogue. You already know what to do.’ Another tweet under this hashtag was a death threat: ‘Rirom ecerem alle’ (‘she deserves to die’ read backwards in Spanish).

The ensuing shower of insults or ‘shitstorm’ took on an aggressiveness never seen before; a single tweet against a victim was retweeted 400 times, there was trolling and widespread direct threats of rape (Gomez Rico, 2021). While #IBelieveYou gave women the space and the confidence necessary to tell their personal stories, cyberbullying functioned as disciplinary violence. Cyber misogyny extended and legions of trolls were unleashed in defense of masculinity (Pedraza, 2019). On 11 April, even the Commission for Human Rights of Mexico City denounced the ‘threats, harassment, hacking attempts and other attacks are some of the types of violence that #MeToo account administrators have faced’ (@CDHCM, 11 April 2019).

### (1) Outcomes and reflections

This section documents comments and reflections after the intense experience of activism, especially the consequences of fear felt among the men accused, as well as perceived weaknesses of the campaign.

#### *Fear changes side*

#MeToo triggered a series of immediate repercussions. The men named as abusers were put on public display when they appeared on ‘the list’ (Lukose, 2018, p. 45). It was a kind of viral fear: ‘And yes, we scare them, a lot. For their prestige. And yes, I heard about a lot of men anxiously checking Twitter to see if their name popped up’ (UAMA). Many women looked at the lists of the accused: ‘I had never thought about it as a blacklist of men, but yes, it seems important to me that we get the names, so from there we can decide who we don’t want to associate with’ (UAMA).

For some women, #MeToo offered useful information on who they could trust at work: ‘As a journalist, I can read the list and think “ah, that dude, I am going to avoid him”. The multiple accusations about those “macho-leftist” in journalism, for example, well, one feels warned. Thanks, girls, for that courage’ (UAMA).

Nevertheless, the climate was one of anguish and uncertainty. ‘I heard male colleagues say: “How scary everything is around MeToo, now everything can be harassment.” But in other words: When am I going to be named? I just saw men worried about the repercussions that this could have . . . ’ (UAMA).

Taking charge of the problem collectively when a friend or a family member appeared on #MeToo was complicated: ‘. . . it’s hard knowing how to react to an accusation, maybe a start would be to begin asking, investigate the behavior of those accused and propose well-thought out solutions, that is, in the immediate context of those who surround the accused. That would be healing’ (Sánchez, 2019). Some experienced #MeToo as awareness and others as guilt for having done nothing when other women colleagues suffered violence. Claudia Angel wrote:

It took me a couple of days to recognize what I was feeling. A mix between pain for an industry that I love, courage for the women attacked, fear for male friends mentioned, disbelief, frustration . . . But deep down, deep inside, I finally recognized the guilt. Guilt for not having done anything when that boss looked me up and down before giving me a prolonged uncomfortable hug . . . Survivors guilt it’s called. It’s all bad (Angel, 2019).

The complaint was that many men, perhaps the most untouchable ones, never appeared in any posts. Lomelí (2020) wrote in an article:

One of the most despicable guys that I have ever met, whom, despite my inexperience, after his messages, calls and threats, I dared to say ‘I won’t sleep with you no matter what happens’ (and bad things did happen) . . . he was not mentioned in a single #MeToo tweet. Why? Because he is still very powerful; maybe because he has put himself in a good position regarding those he has ‘abused’; because of his control over scholarships and positions.

On the other hand, journalist Catalina Ruiz Navarro (2019) asked: ‘Do we denounce them all? Is a woman beater the same as a rapist, as a stalker, as a wild macho? Should we put them all in jail? Or are we afraid of social condemnation? Or are we aiming to change these patriarchal constructs?’

As a rule, the overflow from the #MeToo movement meant its effects were wide reaching. Its main achievement was that men who knew about the campaign somehow revised their trajectories.

In the chats that I have had these days, a friend told me that for him the necessary result was ‘for us to be scared because you (women) have been scared for a long time’. Then it occurred to me that our slogan ‘fear will change sides’ was maybe beginning to materialize (Sandoval, 2019).

In some cases, the men were suspended from their political organizations or fired, and some professors lost their positions. In short, all areas suffered its own tsunami. In the field of journalism, it was not only the sexual harassment that was highlighted, but also how the stories were being covered by the media: ‘Why do we keep telling the story the way that they tell it, that is, without a gender perspective? It is always a man writing the story of women who have been victims of gender violence. How many women are there in the newsrooms?’ (UAMA).

After the musician’s suicide, the activists failed to construct a collective voice:

There was no appropriate response or way to be together as a group regarding what happened with Vega Gil, and that is the part we have to work on, that of media . . . We need to be more media savvy. That also includes creating another leadership (UAMA).

Furthermore, the spontaneity of the campaign meant it lacked long-term strategies. Activists recognized that narrating sexual aggressions leaves a wound that must be healed, and digital action cannot be separated from physical presence and emotional support. The affective labor carried out was insufficient:

It has been a real challenge to handle so many cases as we have realized that obviously, the strategies used in digital environments are not sufficient on their own, we need to have a lot of plasticity and be able to incorporate a multiplicity of areas: legal aspects, including crime, and also everything involving self-care, psychological support, and the political implications of the activism project (UAMA).

Furthermore, the hashtag was dropped without any immediate results, but at a personal cost for activists, who in many cases had to face difficulties at work and violent online threats. Even at the UAMA, some women reported being depressed. The (affective) community was dissolving

A month and a half later, out of 120, there were now 7 of us coming to the assemblies. I believe this had much to do with the violence that the girls had to live through. Well, many women told us, ‘no, I don’t want to go on anymore’, ‘I don’t want them to know that I was the one who made that accusation’, ‘If I come forward, I will be fired from my job’ (UAMA).

As a consequence of the campaign, many workplaces established protocols against gender violence. However, as several activists complained, there were also many who initiated ‘pseudo-processes’ of internal investigation despite the protocols, and resorted to sitting the woman in front of her aggressor, and telling them: ‘work it out among yourselves’ (UAMA).

### Findings of a #MeToo case study

This investigation shows the activist work carried out for a digital direct action campaign that overflows institutional channels to denounce sexual harassers in a country with high levels of femicide and impunity. Far from being slacktivism, the research contributes to problematize simplistic binaries between online and offline life, and showcases the slippage of experiences across domains. A heterogeneous community of expertise and activism convened around the performance maintenance practices for the #MeToo campaign. A network of journalists, psychologists, lawyers, digital security experts, labor rights, feminists and women from different professions became engaged in the activism that fueled the hashtags; they took decisions together, organized rendezvous, meetings, assemblies, workshops, protocols, press conferences, manifestos and healing spaces. They embraced participants with compassion and made them feel they were not alone. This *affective labor* built a sense of collectiveness that gave many women the strength to come forward and identify perpetrators, to share and redefine their individual experiences, and to denounce a structural condition that could lead to the extension of feminist frameworks.

There is evidence to suggest that an affective community was built on the premise of considering that every testimony of sexual violence was worthy of being taken into account. However, problems arose as the campaign expanded, as it was difficult to distinguish between sexual abuse at work or school, which was the main purpose of the campaign, or domestic violence, or even flirtation. In line with previous studies on hashtag feminism, Mexican activists suffered a great deal of online violence and direct threats. The usual strategies for silencing women extended online. Our earlier observations showed that the Mexican campaign decided to keep denouncers’ confidentiality in most cases. This was highly controversial and warrants further research on how anonymity was managed and why it was not robust enough to ensure the safety of denouncers.

To the same effect, activists lacked the ability to respond collectively to the aftermath of Vega Gil’s suicide. The campaign was gradually abandoned as the voices of critics got louder, silencing the voices of disclosure. That is not to say that this repertoire of digital direct action disappeared; but it was used in a more limited way, for example, in 2020 for #MeTooCancun; and in 2021 for targeting certain men: #MeTooAndresRoemer and #MeTooRicardoPonce.

Without a doubt, the #MeToo campaign in 2019 was a watershed for a more outraged wave of mobilizations against sexual violence and femicide in Mexico. In August 2019, the repertoire of contention of feminist crowds turned into increasingly enraged *black blocks* and street demonstrations, graffitiing monuments, and posting names of

aggressors on ‘clotheslines’. Some schools at the National University were occupied with students denouncing the lack of response of authorities against harassers (Álvarez Enríquez, 2020). On 8 March 2020, the largest women’s march ever took the streets. On September, the National Commission for Human Rights in Mexico City was taken over by #NiUnaMenos activists and family members of victims of femicide.

Further studies should analyze how this hashtag campaign was perceived by broader publics and how it impacted institutions and courts. This analysis focuses on Mexico City; how hashtag campaigns began and developed in other cities in Mexico could also be explored. In acknowledgement of online selective visibility, it is worth pointing out that there were no indigenous voices detected in the overall narrative of the #MeToo.

## Notes

1. In 2019, 2,825 women were murdered in Mexico, 1,006 of which were classed as femicide, according to the National Public Security System.
2. According to Google Trends, it peaked between 31 March and 6 April 2019, dropping off after April 13.
3. The repository #MeToo Watch Mexico ([www.metoowatch.mx](http://www.metoowatch.mx)) used in this research (last visit 3/1/2021) includes the most used accounts of the campaign: @MeTooAbogadosMx @MeTooActivista1 @metooartesmx @MeTooCiclista @MeTooCineMx @MeTooCreativos @MeTooCUM @Metooceca @MeTooDerechoCU @MeTooEmpresario @MeTooEscritores @MeTooFotografos @MetooIbero @IpnMe @MeTooITESO @MeTooJalisco @metoomusicamx @MeTooMedicina @MeTooPeriodista @MeTooPolíticos @MeTooTeatroMx @metootuiteros @MeTooUDEM @MeToo\_UP @PeriodistasPUM.
4. Armando Vega Gil was a Mexican bassist, composer and writer who founded Botellita de Jerez, one of the most influential bands in contemporary Mexican rock in the early 1980s.
5. #MeTooMexicanWriters #YouAreNotAlone #It’sGoingToFall (referring to Patriarchy).
6. In early March 2019, PUM published the results of an online survey with 392 women who worked in the media. 73% had experienced sexual harassment at work, 63% by co-workers; 49% by their immediate boss.
7. The data detailed in this paragraph were made public at the #MeToo Forum (Entrelineas, 2019).
8. The Forum was summoned by the following hashtags: #MeTooAcadémicosMx (academics), #MeTooActivistasMexicanos (activists), #MeTooArtesMx (arts), #MeTooCreativosMexicanos (creative professions), #MeTooEscritoresMexicanos (writers), #MeTooITAM (Instituto Tecnológico), #MeTooMúsicosMexicanos (musicians), #MeTooTeatroMexicano (theater), #MeTooPeriodistasMexicanos (journalists), #MeTooUNAM (National University).
9. ‘Yas Basta’.
10. This hashtag had variations: #IDoBelieveYou, #WeBelieveYou, #IBelieveHerWords, #FriendIBelieveYou.

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