



## **Contextualizing #MeToo in the Global South**

March 26, 2018, 11.45AM – 1PM | Hauser Hall, HLS

*Notes*

### **Panellists**

1. Durba Mitra (women, gender and sexuality, feminists and queer studies)
2. Jimena Reyes (human rights attorney, how women's rights can contribute to human rights protection)
3. Hala Aldorsari (Middle East: women's rights and gender norms)
4. Salomé Gómez (moderator)

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Aim of the panel discussion: Talking about experiences that have not been talked about in the #MeToo movement

*Is it possible for #MeToo to exist in the Global South? Particularly, is it possible for women to speak up, and if so, at what cost and what are the obstacles? How is saying “#MeToo” different in the Global South?*

1. Hala Aldorsari
  - Social media has provided the platform but the difference is that while social media gives nicknames and alternative identities, and thus provides a kind of safety, it doesn't provide the credibility because their identity is anonymous
  - Women's political and economic representation is very low in the Middle East. Therefore, women in the Middle East, who are already underrepresented at work places, fear that they will lose the small ground they have been able to gain if they speak out.
  - Women in the Middle East are also vulnerable because of the power imbalance. The voice of women is not represented in both politics and economics.
  - There are also institutional issues; because most countries are autocratic it is very hard to have the civil check/protection necessary to provide the protection to afford women the opportunity to who speak out.
  - Finally, there are cultural barriers, the burden of preserving the honor of women, but pressure from the family really compels women to not disclose

## 2. Jimena Reyes:

- The MeToo movement has led to cooperation in Latin America. MeToo has formed a link, and the movement has evolved into an action, however, it has also been in some ways elite.
- It is possible for women to say MeToo in South America but this movement has been going in Latin America before MeToo became a movement.
- Example, in the 1990s there was a very high level of rape and killing of women in Latin America, at the beginning of the 2000s women started speaking out and getting organized,
- Due to this mobilization, in many Latin American countries it is considered an aggravating element to rape and kill women, to rape and kill women was an especially heinous crime
- But the main obstacle and barrier to the speaking out is violence. There have been women activists who have been assassinated for their activism.

## 3. Durba Mitra:

- There have been other movements from the global south that came before MeToo and that were much more impactful
- There have been other political and social movements that have been asking about women's rights and preceded the MeToo movement that created the environment and space that enabled the MeToo movement.
- Especially in India, there have been many social and political movements for women's rights especially concerning sexual violence since the gang rape in 2012.
- The other difference in South Asia is that very few people in the global south have access to social media, only 24-25% have access to social media. This presents a challenge to creating a social media based movement like the MeToo.
- However, that does not mean that nothing is happening. Recently, there was a list passed around online of 50 plus academics who were suspected of sexual harassment and sexual violence
- Finally, MeToo is interesting because it inhabits a spectrum from sexual harassment to sexual violence, and this gets us to many parts of criminal and civil law. In South Asia, sexual harassment laws derive from the penal code of 1800s and it defines sexual violence as "outrage against the modesty of a woman." The language of modesty to think about the sexual harassment shapes the discussion about what it means to say MeToo in South Asia

*What are some examples of local MeToo-like movements in these regions?*

### 1. Hala Aldosari:

- Mosque MeToo came before MeToo. An Egyptian American journalist created the movement after she described her attack during haj pilgrimage on national TV.
- People had not talked about the assaults during pilgrimage because of the idea of modesty and honor but also because women did not know how to fight back
- People have also retaliated against those who have spoken out. There are Muslims who feel that by highlighting these negative experiences the victims are perpetuating stereotypes and negative beliefs about Islam.

- This movement has also been led by those who have been living and educated in western countries, those women felt empowered to talk about it because of their positions, but those who are not in those position might not feel safe to disclose their experience
  - The question is how do we engage men in these discussions.
2. Jimena Reyes:
    - Can't say that the MeToo movement caused a shock in Latin America, there was only some ripples
    - There is sexual harassment problem in a lot of work places in Latin America, but only those who are the same social status as those in the U.S
    - MeToo movement is not just what happened in Hollywood but a general global movement. When you have one women step forward a lot of others follow and in Latin America that has happened. The power of women dismantle male domination by coming together as women
  3. Durba Mitra
    - In South Asia there as such an incredible social movement and mobilization that happened after 2012 that movement was still active when the metoo movement came along and so these two movements have become congruent
    - The relationship between civil codes and criminal codes and "outrage on modesty" is the way that sexual harassment can be prosecuted, but there is no oversight of institutions that are suppose to carry out these prosecutions. Due to the lack of due process and good institutions, the burden the falls on victims.
    - This has led to two questions.
      - Do we abide to the due process?
      - Or has the structure failed us and so do we need to function outside the process that were suppose to give us voice. Additional, MeToo has given us voice but what happens after?

*What are some criticisms of MeToo in these regions?*

1. Hala Aldosari:
  - In the Arab world there is more talk about justification," is the women modes, religious, and how was she dressed." There is a lack of discourse on relationships and sexuality; there is a lack of conversation on the agency of women and consent. These conversations are absent in the Arab world, the conversation usually take place after the event,
  - Men largely dominate institutions, the norms that shape the law do not include the voices of women, and the idea of modesty and religiosity dominate the laws.
  - The challenge of the movement is the marginalization of women from decision-making process has impacted the ability to visible influence the codes and practices.
2. Jimena Reyes:
  - In Latin America the argument of due process has been used against the women, to revictimize and stigmatize women for speaking out .
3. Durba Mitra:

- What is due process when the institution carrying out due process is male dominated? but there is a view in South Asia that there is a need for the MeToo kind of movement that is in excess of due process,
- Backlash in South Asia has been victim blaming. Women who speak out are accused of being promiscuous and seducing men, and this is entrenched in the law, where it is described as “eve teasing”

*Can men be allies? What are the concert actions they can take?*

1. Hala Aldosari:
  - The law working to protect the modesty of the women rather than punishing the rapist, for example paying compensation or marrying their victim
  - The conversation for men has to be done at a much earlier age
2. Jimena Reyes:
  - You really have to change the culture and you cant do that without men. Today in LA you are seeing change, parents are speaking to their children about sexuality
3. Durba Mitra:
  - Men are making the decision, it is also a cultural question, producing many sites of speaking and engaging is important , it is about the status of society not just about women,
  - Sexual harassment laws in South Asia are not neutral – sexual minorities, LGBTQs, young men, are not protected
  - To change the culture you need a culture of change, and asking what are the other kind of people experiencing sexual violence due to their sexuality

### **Q&A with Audience:**

*Role of religion?*

1. Hala Aldosari:
  - Religion major factor influencing law and what is acceptable in the public spaces. In a conservative society it can be used as a pretext to maintain the social order and the hierarchy, for example more separation of women, or to stop women from working, or continued marginalization of women. In the arab world most of the public influence is the voices of conservatives and those dissenting voices are disregarded because it poses a challenge to the order and the state
2. Jimena Reyes:
  - Religion is back in LA and with it all the archaic ideas and propositions about women but religion has been more focused on reproductive issues, and abortion
3. Durba Mitra:
  - Most of the law has been constructed around religious laws and norms, it is not as easy to say that religion is the sight of conservatism, which it is, but feminist mobilization within the law has been the reinterpretation of the religious law to

advocate for women's rights by proving these religious laws are actually not suppose to be repressive but have been misinterpreted in that way.

- For example, sharia law has been interpreted to say that women had to have witnesses to her rape, but there was a large movement to change this law,

*Does the law need to change or do you need to work within it?*

1. Jimena Reyes

- There has been changes in the law due to the movements

2. Durba Mitra

- There have been many movements that have changed the law, but the question is how do we apply and make them work, despite the fact that we are lawyers, this is a problem where the solution lies more in changing the culture

*How do we want to use law in those instances that are uncomfortable for women*

1. Jimena Reyes:

- if the cultural changes do not change the law has a role to play in those zones that are not criminal

2. Durba Mitra:

- What does it mean to criminalize something? There are many structures of law that are problematic and vagueness in the law that creates problems. Additionally, the problem is that the law is also not equally applied, disparate application of the law based on class or race.