

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

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### **Abstract**

The Venezuelan #MeToo movement, ignited in 2021, adapts the global initiative against sexual violence to a local context characterized by profound distrust in the justice system. This paper explores how social media served as a catalyst for “mediatic vigilantism”—a contemporary digital form of vigilante justice. By employing qualitative research methods, the study examines an array of social media posts, news articles, and conducts interviews with participants of the Venezuelan #MeToo movement. It draws parallels between traditional forms of vigilantism, rooted in a lack of faith in legal paths and justice systems, and the modern phenomenon of “digilantism”. The research compares these findings to the broader global #MeToo movement, highlighting the unique adaptations and challenges faced in the Venezuelan context. Results indicate that the movement in Venezuela expanded its scope beyond public figures to encompass a wider array of abuses and uncover government inefficiency and neglect. The study concludes that the Venezuelan #MeToo movement, like traditional vigilantism, arises from mistrust in legal systems and conventional judicial pathways in a country in crisis. It underscores the need for legal reforms that enhance the reliability and effectiveness of justice systems.

In recent years, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for social activism, providing a platform for voices that were previously marginalized or silenced. This transformative power was vividly illustrated in late 2017 when the *#MeToo* movement exploded across the United States and the world, utilizing digital platforms to call attention to sexual harassment and assault. In the United States, the movement began as a response to high-profile allegations in the entertainment industry, rapidly gaining momentum as millions

shared their experiences of sexual violence, thereby spotlighting the pervasive nature of the issue.

By 2021, the *#MeToo* wave had reached Venezuela, a country already grappling with political turmoil and a deeply fractured trust in public institutions. Here, the movement took on unique characteristics, reflective of the local socio-political environment and the general public's profound distrust in the legal and justice systems. Venezuelan activists adapted the *#MeToo* template to their context, using social media not just to echo the global call against sexual violence but also to challenge a failing justice system. This adaptation highlights a significant shift in how Venezuelans address social issues, relying increasingly on what this paper terms “mediatic vigilantism” or “*digilantism*”—digital forms of taking justice into one's own hands in the absence of reliable legal recourse.

This study aims to investigate the Venezuelan *#MeToo* movement as a case study of *digilantism*, drawing on comparative analysis with the global movement and traditional forms of vigilantism. It investigates how digital platforms have facilitated a new form of activism that merges public advocacy with elements of extralegal justice, reflecting broader trends of digital engagement and social change. Through examining social media posts, news articles, and firsthand accounts from movement participants, this paper aims to understand the dynamics of this digital outcry and its implications for justice and social activism in a digitally connected yet legally strained world. This inquiry is particularly timely and relevant, given the increasing reliance on social media as a tool for both empowering activism and, potentially, for enacting extralegal measures in authoritarian and crisis contexts where the official avenues for justice are viewed as inadequate or inaccessible.

### **Theoretical Framework**

It is important to define extra-legality, a term that will be mentioned several times in the paper, as well as to clarify what sexual harassment, sexual assault, and statutory rape mean. These terms were

widely used in social media in the context of the *#MeToo* movement, especially in Venezuela.

According to research by Supancic and Willis (1998),

Legal justice is administered and sanctioned by an official and formalized legal authority, and includes all formal responses to crime by the police and the court system. Extralegal justice is that form of informal collective action directed against deviant and criminal conduct, administered outside formalized legal authority and not legally sanctioned by such authority. This definition includes community responses to crime, ranging from nonviolent citizen patrols who report crimes or disorderly conduct to the police, to vigilante groups.

According to the Office on Women's Health (2019), sexual assault is any sexual activity or contact you do not consent to, including rape and sexual coercion. Sexual harassment is described as "all unwelcome sexual advances, such as comments of a sexual nature, and requests for sexual favors. It is commonly perpetrated by someone in a position of authority over the victim" (Legal Dictionary 2015). Thus, the difference between the two lies in the presence of touch and physical contact in the case of sexual assault. Statutory rape is defined as the crime of a person of age having sex with a person younger than the age at which they can legally have sex (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). Different countries have legislations of sexual offenses with different criteria, some being more specific than others (for example, not specifying what "sex" refers to, namely if it is penetration or if it includes other activities, can result in legal loopholes in which the accused is not convicted).

In the case of Venezuela, according to Magdymar León, coordinator of NGO AVESA (Venezuelan Association for Alternative Sexual Education) for the journal *El Diario* (2021), the legal age of consent is 18, and The Organic Law for the Right of Women to a Life Free of Violence which focuses on sexual violence and sexual abuse defines sexual violence in general, in Article 15, as "any conduct that threatens or violates the right of women to voluntarily and freely decide their sexuality, including not only the sexual act, but all forms of

sexual contact or access, genital or non-genital, such as lewd acts, violent lewd acts, violent carnal access or rape itself.” León states that for a crime to be considered rape under Venezuelan law, there must be penetration by the aggressor. On the other hand, lewd acts are a broader crime with a significantly lower sentence. León explains for *El Diario* (2021) that lewd acts can be diverse and consist of approaches of a sexual nature that can involve physical contact, such as touching, or not, without involving penetration. Statutory rape, as terminology, is not considered within the Venezuelan legislation. León believes that the term statutory rape is old and becomes “problematic” because it assumes that teenagers cannot consent to sexual activity. Nevertheless, the term *estupro* (statutory rape) was used during Venezuela’s #MeToo movement.

### **Origins of the #MeToo Movement**

In 2006, United States activist Tarana Burke created a non-profit organization designed to help women of color from low-wealth 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 American and 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 on social media as a *hashtag*. United States actress Alyssa Milano encouraged survivors on Twitter to use the hashtag “#MeToo” to prove how widespread sexual harassment and assault had become (Evans 2018; Yale Journal of International Affairs 2021). Alyssa Milano’s (@Alyssa\_Milano) tweet read: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted, write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” As stated in the Yale Journal of International Affairs (2021), “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.” The replies to Milano’s tweet included public figures, actors, musicians, and people in

sports, both male and female, acknowledging their experiences with sexual harassment and abuse. The worldwide movement brought up conversations about gender inequality, equal pay for women, rape culture, impunity in the justice system, and harassment in the entertainment industry.

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” (Correa 2018). The Nassar case was, arguably, a pivotal which legitimized the need for the *#MeToo* movement, as accusations against the doctor had been initially published in an article in 2016 but received little attention at the time. According to Correa (2018), only after more than 150 women came forward inspired by the social media movement, Nassar was effectively sentenced to life in prison. Moreover, the *#MeToo* movement, although it encouraged social media engagement from all, worked to exhibit and uncover harassment and abuse issues within the entertainment industry worldwide, ranging from a diverse range of statuses of fame and wealth.

According to an International Labour Organization Policy Brief (2020), “live entertainment, film, and television are the sub-sectors most affected [by sexual harassment], often as a result of a workplace culture, which is considered an obstacle to reporting and addressing incidents, as well as fear of career repercussions” (5). A survey conducted in 2020 by the International Labour Organization, alongside the International Arts and Entertainment Alliance (IAEA), was carried out “among over 90 trade unions in the live entertainment, film and television, and broadcasting industries. 74 trade unions responded to the survey across 42 countries, which covered over 400,000 members” (5). The results indicated that 34.3% of respondents had witnessed incidents of sexual harassment, and 40% of respondents were the victims or targets of sexual harassment in their work environment. 38.7% of respondents mentioned that incidents of sexual harassment had been reported in the last 12 months by members of their trade unions (6).

Many studies available, such as the one carried out by the International Labour Organization, come from organized worker unions, which suggests that independent or aspiring workers in the entertainment industry are likely affected by sexual harassment and assault and face problems with reporting them.

### **The #MeToo Movement in Venezuela**

Four years later, in Venezuela, the #MeToo movement began with remarkable similarities. It all started on Instagram, with an account opened 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 (2021), 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, 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. Like Sojo, writer Willy McKey was accused of *estupro* (statutory rape) (although, as stated before, this is not a crime under Venezuelan law) through an anonymous Twitter account under the pseudonym “Pía” and the username @mckeyabusador. The biography of the account reads: ““Pía” is an anonymous victim of child abuse by Venezuelan writer Willy McKey.”

On April 28, 2021, the user stated that she was 16 when the then 35-year-old writer coerced her into maintaining sexual relations after they met in the cultural and theatrical Venezuelan setting in which “she was dying to take part.” On the same day, McKey posted a statement on Instagram in which he admitted to the accusations. “Amid allegations of abuse of women in Venezuela, through the Twitter account @mckeyabusador, an episode of rape in 2015 has come to light, told from the protection of anonymity but of which I must take responsibility because it is clear that I know who the person is and I know how

the events occurred,” he wrote. A day after, on April 29, 2021, McKey committed suicide shortly after registering, in a now-deleted Tweet: “Don’t be this. It grows inside you and kills you. Sorry” (Lozano 2021).

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, actors, musicians, professors, and politicians were reported via Twitter and Instagram. According to Lozano (2021), “the crudeness of the stories shocked a society marked by *machismo*.” The reports were met with mixed reactions, some of which accused the movement of being instilled by the Venezuelan government to distract the population from the social and economic crisis. Nevertheless, the movement kept growing in the following months, and it began to grow even beyond accusations to influential and famous figures when the Instagram account @yotecreovzla was created.

*Yo Te Creo*, which states on its Instagram account biography is a “social movement against violence, harassment, and sexual abuse,” has almost 60k followers and over 200 posts as of today. It started posting soon after the first accusation against musician Alejandro Sojo. The account’s second post is a statement of purpose of the movement: “How to change the structures that perpetuate sexist actions, degrading, and silencing of the Venezuelan girl and woman, knowing that our country is facing the worst social and institutional crisis in its history? The answer is always the same: the power lies within us, and it’s time to use it, raising our voices, facing injustice... we, as women in the entertainment and artistic scenes, refuse to keep gender matters postponed in the public agenda.” It then promises to be a platform that amplifies the victims’ voices, collects data to register information on the victims and their testimonies, helps manage the cases with the help of NGOs; and invites everyone in the artistic and entertainment setting to participate and support the cause. The statement was signed by 75 Venezuelan authors, intellectuals, singers, musicians, actors, dancers, and public figures. The post immediately drew attention as the page reposted victims’ videos and accusations. It soon

became a platform that centralized information of all the cases and allegations, for victims, women, mothers, politicians, social workers, public figures, and curious minds to read. Under @yotecreovzla's statement post, a comment by @mayaguezv read: "I applaud the initiative, but why limit the movement to the artistic and entertainment scenes? What happens to the voices of the women in other areas? The bigger and more diverse this movement is, the bigger the noise and support," to which @yotecreovzla responded: "We started with this page because this is how the movement started, but this is a platform for all. If you know anyone who would like to write their testimony, encourage them to visit the link in our biography. We are preparing psychological and legal support for all." This was the beginning of the expansion of the movement. A movement that began sharing testimonies of women in Venezuela's privileged capital reached more underprivileged areas, other fields beyond entertainment, and even included intrafamilial testimonies.

Its third post stated the instructions to be posted on the account. The caption read: "Would you like to participate? Go to our profile and click on the document." The Google Forms document was open for anyone to share their story, which they could choose to keep anonymous, and soon the account began to be flooded with accusations that received both support and backlash.

The first anonymous testimony on the account was published on May 11, 2021. The victim, who used the pseudonym "Ella," shared her story of sexual abuse by her older cousins when she was a minor. She states: "I had never shared my story for fear, and I am from Maracay, Aragua. I am afraid to be called a liar or an attention-seeker, so I won't say my name or the name of my cousins." The platform had become an account where victims could get their painful burdens out of their chest without the implications of reporting the incidents through the law. After this testimony, another one under the pseudonym "Él" (him) was posted on May 12, 2021. It was the story of a man who was groomed and harassed by another male when he was underage. Men were also beginning to share their stories, both venting and



accusing their abusers by name. The movement was also spreading to other states. It is important to note that the Venezuelan capital has a significant cultural, economic, and social centralization. In contrast, the rest of Venezuelan states tend to be more isolated and even suffer from more scarcity of basic services. The spread of the movement to rural areas and other parts of Venezuela is proof of the magnitude of the movement.

Many testimonies also denounce the inefficiency of law enforcement bodies in the management of cases of domestic violence. One, posted on November 8, 2021, on @yotecreovzla's profile, tells the story of a witness who heard loud sounds followed by a woman screaming and asking for help in her neighborhood, so she called the police. The user, @SaraahiEsaa, narrates how the police arrived and told her that it was a "private marital incident" and that they could not do much. According to her story, she asked an officer: "what if they kill her?" The officer responded: "Well, then they killed her." Many others were inspired by this testimony and shared incidents reported and later ignored or dismissed by the law. Many victims stated that they were sharing their stories on the page because they were not believed or because their case had been closed or ignored.

### **Hypothesis**

After studying the #MeToo movements and the report of sexual assault and harassment cases through social media platforms worldwide, specifically in the United States in 2017 and in Venezuela four years later, the term "mediatic vigilantism" is deemed suitable to describe them. Vigilantism refers to the "the extra-legal prevention, investigation, or punishment of offenses" (Bateson 2020, 4; Corvino 2021, 6). According to Weston's research (2013), three factors lead to the emergence of vigilantism: dissatisfaction with justice, awareness of other vigilantes, and a pre-existing social or cultural template (223). Similarly, Corvino (2021), in more recent research, attributes widespread approval of vigilantism and lynching to three factors: insecurity and fear of crime, social inequality, and institutional weakness (8).

In contrast, vigilantism in social media or “mediatic vigilantism” goes beyond this definition, as seen in movements such as *#MeToo* in the United States and Venezuela. The common factors for the accusations in both countries seem to be the following: the accused parties are either public figures or are based in the entertainment industry, there is an overall lack of trust in the system, possibly due to impunity; and widespread support is given to the victims (and comes mainly from other women). Therefore, considering these factors, mediatic vigilantism arises from broken justice systems, often resulting from states in crisis such as Venezuela; and as a result of systems where justice for the wealthy and powerful is scarce. Vigilantism against sexual offenses can be seen through the available framework of aversion to legal measures and distrust in the justice systems delivering the desired results after costly, lengthy, and emotionally consuming trials, so a focus on the particularities that birthed the Venezuelan *#MeToo* movement and on the ways in which it unfolded may be useful to assess the viability of this framework in cases of digital vigilantism.

In both the 2017 *#MeToo* movement and the 2021 Venezuelan movement, the vast majority of popular accusations was against public figures. According to United States-focused research by Evans (2018), about 40% of reported assaults garner attention from news media outlets, with the majority involving unusual or high-profile circumstances and people (12). This phenomenon may be linked to the social and economic power of the accused and the sense of powerlessness that the victims may feel when facing wealthy figures through the justice system, implying that they could “buy their way out” of the legal cases. In addition, public accusations against people with public careers that perpetrated abuse in their professional settings, whose image (and in consequence their job) would be more affected by the allegations, may be deemed more effective than private proceedings. Moreover, the preference for extra-legal measures such as mediatic vigilantism may also come from fear of the public figures’ support base, connections, wealth, and popularity.

The origins of the 2017 *#MeToo* movement seem to be the same as those in the Venezuelan case, but with factors that further complicated the latter. These stemmed from the social, economic, and political crisis in Venezuela, which created even more distrust in legal measures and made the use of extra-legal measures preferable. This caused the movement to expand beyond just accusations against public figures and made the role of the Instagram account @yotecreovzla essential for this research. The account became a public and accessible platform to report all sorts of cases otherwise neglected by justice. Using the 2017 movement as a backdrop, the particular elements that marked the 2021 Venezuelan *#MeToo* movement may be analyzed, as well as its origin, causes, and the similarities that the modus operandi of social media vigilantism holds with other cases of extra-legal measures in unreliable justice systems (e.g. lynchings). This comparison does not seek to consider the public reports of sexual assault and harassment as extreme as lynchings, but aims to analyze both situations as arising from the same sentiment: lack of trust in unreliable justice systems.

### **Methodology/Ethics**

The methodology for this research involves participant observation and analysis of news outlets, academic journals, and international reports, looking into statistics and studies. However, there is little information available on the particular 2021 Venezuelan *#MeToo* case beyond just news articles. For this reason, two interviews were conducted in April 2022. They are centered around one of the first cases published by the account @yotecreovzla after accusations of sexual harassment against Venezuelan actor Juan Carlos Ogando were made public by two women. Ogando worked as a theater producer, director, and co-founder of the *Skena* theater group (El Nacional 2021), which began operating in the basement of the private catholic school Champagnat in 1979 in Caracas, Venezuela. Later, the group expanded and offered workshops and productions for young actors and adults (Grupo Skena n.d.). Two videos and several posts on

Instagram and Twitter describe experiences of assault of women and girls by Ogando, the majority of which happened when the women were minors. One of them was a student of the Champagnat school when Ogando was her professor.

The two victims interviewed reported that their encounter with Ogando did reach the point of harassment and assault. They got in touch with NGO directors to seek guidance and report their case legally, but due to different circumstances and delays, the case never proceeded. One of the women affected continues to attempt to report her case under the law. These women were interviewed for the purpose of this research (see Appendix) under the pseudonyms María and Isabel. The topic of this paper is most delicate in nature and may bring about painful memories to anyone with experiences with assault and harassment, for which it was decided not to be explicit in the accounts of sexual crimes and to be as theoretical as possible to avoid any appeals to emotions that may undermine the intended objectivity or put the victims' testimonies under scrutiny.

A Zoom meeting was scheduled to speak with the women. The women explicitly expressed their wish to take part in the investigation, and they were receptive, supportive, and even encouraging when the methodology and purposes of the study were explained, as "every account of their case counts for something." The nature of the questions, which were then sent to María and Isabel via Google Forms, was discussed beforehand. The women were encouraged to be only as descriptive as they wished to be.

Ten questions were sent to the women. They agreed to respond to the interview in English as they are fluent in the language and as a precaution to not distort their message when translating it. The responses were not paraphrased in deference to the women and the personal nature of their experiences. Due to the public nature of the case, the names of the accused parties were not changed or omitted, but the women's wish to use pseudonyms was respected.

Their answers and timestamps are provided in the paper's Appendix, retrieved directly from Google Forms.

**How old are you?**

Isabel: 21

María: 24

**Do you currently still live in Venezuela? If not, why did you decide to leave, and when did you?**

Isabel: I don't. I left because as an aspiring actor I felt like I had no opportunities in my own country. Left in 2019.

María: No. I left in 2018.

**Were you active in the 2021 Venezuelan #MeToo Movement? If so, how, and where did you engage? (Twitter, Instagram, protesting, lobbying, supporting victims via text, etc.)**

Isabel: I was active, supporting victims and talking about my experience. Isabel: Yes. Through my Instagram account.

**If you were a victim of one of the accused abusers during the 2021 #MeToo movement, where did you become acquainted with him? Be as explicit as you wish to be. You can choose whether to name him or not.**

Isabel: I was, with Juan Carlos Ogando. I met him in 2016, when I was 16. I was doing a show and I met him at one of the rehearsals. He started talking to me and offered me an audition without ever seeing me perform.

María: He is one of the co-founders and directors of the theater group where I performed as a teenager. He was also a close friend of my mother's and is the father of two other students at the school where my sister and I went. Not to mention he is a public figure and is involved with many different areas of Caracas' artistic movement.

**When did it happen and how old were you when you experienced any unwanted advance by this person? Did you decide to report this at the time? If so, how did you report it and what was your experience?**

Isabel: I was approached by this person in several different ways, he would contact me on social media, text me, call me

and offer me auditions after we met. He was someone relatively important in the theater industry in Venezuela, so I played along. I was also very naive at first and genuinely thought he wanted to help me. I always felt like there was something odd about the whole situation, so I feared telling my mom and ruining my chances of getting an acting job. I never reported it. When he finally touched me, I was 18. And even if I had wanted to report I knew it was of no use, I knew cops wouldn't do anything, or the law, those things don't work in Venezuela. And I was told by someone from the same theater group, Guido Villamizar, to stay quiet. That I was going to get what I wanted at least.

María: This happened from 2011 and lasted until 2016. I was 13-18. I didn't report him. I waited years until I left the country and decided to talk about it on my Instagram account. It ended up going viral, so the authorities contacted me, but they haven't done anything about it to this day.

**Are you acquainted with any victims of the same person? If so, did you meet before or after the 2021 #MeToo movement? Did you find a pattern common to your case and the other victims'?**

Isabel: Yes and yes.

María: Yes. All my friends at the theater's company were suffering from his abuse as well. I got to know more victims after the #MeToo movement. The pattern was: we were all women, most of us underage and all of it was not consensual. For none of us.

**How did you feel when the 2021 #MeToo movement began? Did you decide to report your case when this happened, alone or with a group of other victims? Please specify if you did so through social media or the public justice system, and why.**

Isabel: Social media works better than the justice system. The point is putting these people in the spotlight, making sure everyone knows what they did.

María: The person who began this wave made an Instagram account where they reported Alejandro Sojo. That inspired me to talk about my abuser too. Social media blew up after many different girls started sharing my video saying they had been through the same thing or knew someone who had.

**Did you make a report through the Venezuelan justice system (such as Ministerio Público) or did you consider the possibility of doing so? What were your doubts? How was your experience? Was the outcome what you desired?**

Isabel: Never considered, they don't do anything. It's silly. María: Not yet, but I will. I'm just taking my time to do it.

**What, if anything, would you criticize of how the 2021 #MeToo movement was handled? Either by the victims or the accused parties, as well as how social media was employed.**

Isabel: I think it was pretty okay. They did what they could. María: I don't think anybody was prepared for what was coming towards us as a society. I think everybody did what they could with the tools they had at the moment.

**Did you ever submit your experience to @yocreovzla with the intention of making your accusation public?**

Isabel: Yes. María: No, they just reposted my video. But most people did submit theirs.

### **Analysis**

The interview responses show how the movement inspired the women to report their cases through social media after the first accusation against Alejandro Sojo became public, which was received with support to the victims and condemnation of Sojo, who later admitted to the allegations. This implies that mediatic vigilantism is somewhat similar to a *domino effect*, with several accusations following a single one that proves successful, with the later accusers expecting the same

results. The interviews reflect the women's endorsement of social media to report sexual crimes, not being critical of how the movement was handled or its downsides. Moreover, the women's responses account for the role @yotecreovzla played in their own and other people's cases, with María stating that "most people" submitted their experience to the page intending to make their accusations public. Another critical element to consider is that both Isabel and María resided outside of Venezuela when they made their accusations public, which indicates a factor of fear of persecution and retaliation. Most importantly, the interviews show, more so in Isabel's account, how her participation in the 2021 #MeToo movement (as well as her departure from Venezuela) were linked to her distrust in the Venezuelan justice system.

Vigilantism and lynching then become relevant to the analysis, as they stem from distrust in justice systems. Scholars (Corvino 2021; Weston 2013) have studied how Latin American states were deemed illegitimate in resolving local disputes and how this led to vigilantism and extra-legal measures. Corvino and Weston's research is focused on the increase of lynchings in Latin America. Corvino (2021) concludes that "in contemporary Latin America, the motivations behind lynching are wide-ranging, from economic to legal-social aspects. However, the population mainly takes refuge behind the need for greater social security" (12). Corvino (2021) states that lynching and vigilantism were measures citizens took to cope with the increasing crime rate that characterized Latin America in the last decade, with the case of Venezuela's increasing criminal lynchings beginning to arouse interest (5). The Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflictivity recorded around 200 attempted and successful criminal lynchings cases in 2017 alone (Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social 2017). 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 arises from a broken justice system, turmoil, and political unrest. In Venezuela, these factors contributed to the movement's politicization, uncontrolled spread, and a more aggressive criticism of the accusations when compared to those



seen in 2017.

As part of participant observation, it was evident that Isabel and María's public accusations were met with both overwhelming support and harsh critiques. The women faced people accusing them of lying and of attempting to get Ogando "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 2021. Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodríguez made use of the term in May of the same year, stating that Venezuela was being the target of *media lynching* by bots and false statistics that were shared on Twitter. She urged the authorities of the International Criminal Court to "verify the data presented on Venezuela, because a preliminary examination cannot be made based on falsehoods and lies published on social networks" (Entorno Inteligente 2021). This was a response to the International Criminal Court's report on Venezuela in December 2020. The International Criminal Court, according to Human Rights Watch (2021) had found a reasonable basis to believe that crimes against humanity had been committed in Venezuela. According to Human Rights Watch (2021), these include, at least since April 2017, "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." Rodríguez's use of the term "media lynching" shows a broad and normalized use of extra-legal measures for justice that have become part of Venezuelans' vocabulary, and in consequence, she reveals a deep issue with the very justice system she tries to defend. The prevalence of the issue of extra-legality and lynchings is seen in the widespread use of terms like "social media lynchings" to call out "unfair" or "false" accusations online. In modern Venezuelan society, the link between politics, extra-legality, and social media is evident. Extra-legality as the normal and only pathway for justice is deeply ingrained in the social imaginary.

Furthermore, massive protests and governmental forces' use of repression in Venezuela from years 2014 to 2017 imply that the

overall distrust in law enforcement and legal proceedings in Venezuela does not only arise from Corvino's (2021) factors that impulse the use of extra-legal measures in Latin America (insecurity and fear of crime, social inequality, and institutional weakness) (8), but from political factors as well. According to Human Rights Watch (2021), "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 interviews that were conducted with Isabel and María also exhibited distrust in the country's judiciary due to its politicized nature. This was demonstrated mainly by Isabel, who stated she left the country because she had "no opportunities" and said that she never considered making a report of her case through the Venezuelan justice system because "they never do anything." Venezuelans' overall dissatisfaction with the country's social, cultural, and political environments is yet another factor that increases vigilantism. The case of vigilantism observed during the 2021 *#MeToo* movement reflected the people's sense of helplessness and suspicion of 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 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 are being disrupted" (2). In the case of Venezuela, no shelters for women survivors of gender-based violence were operational during 2020 (Amnesty International 2021, 10). However, the situation was already uncertain before the pandemic. According to the same Amnesty International report (2021), "no official information on femicide rates has been issued since 2013, nor a national plan to prevent them, with NGOs reporting a steady increase in cases of violence against women" (10). Similarly, Nikolau (2017) 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 being from news outlets. Besides from the lack of data available, the overall sense of distrust in the justice system and authorities in Venezuela is palpable, and this 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” (Supancic and Willis 1998, 193).

The reason the Venezuelan *#MeToo* movement spread amongst all social classes, areas, positions of power, ages, gender, and types of abuse, as observed in the social media account @yotecreovzla, lies in the ineffectiveness of the Venezuelan justice system (and in consequence, in a distrust in traditional justice), in the politicization of justice, political fear and repression, and the overall 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 the majority of those affected by domestic abuse or sexual assault. Still, it is a representative sample of the distrust in law enforcement and justice.

## **Conclusions**

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, their politicization, and the widespread belief in the government’s participation in criminal activities make it all the less desirable to take official and legal paths for justice. Moreover, this same discontent with the Venezuelan justice system made the Venezuelan *#MeToo* movement differ from all

the others: the accused parties were not just limited to public figures, but included family members, coworkers, and neighbors. Many victims did no longer seek justice, nor a “lynching” of their abusers, as their careers were not public and many of the accusations against them did not mention their names. What the victims wanted was support, as they had either not received a desired outcome from the law or did not intend to seek it.

The 2017 *#MeToo* movement that was subsequently mimicked in Venezuela held widespread Western support and endorsement, and was generally not regarded as violent. The movement may have had its origins in the same factors which result in events such as lynchings, yet accusing those who engaged in the movement of “social media lynching” becomes extremist and even unfair. The violence of this term lies in the Venezuelan social imaginary that has been marked with violence against criminal activities and unreliable legal pathways for justice. In Venezuela, many of those who reported their cases to @yotecreovzla did not even seek to taint their abusers’ reputations but to vent and share their experiences, which is far from being a violent measure. Moreover, equating the two makes a post hoc flawed argument: just because lynching has increasingly become a violent measure in Venezuela does not equal the circumstances. However, the social media accusations and the increase of lynchings happening around the same time indicate that Venezuela’s justice system has not delivered satisfactory results and thus has led many people to recur to extra-legality.

As social media can be seen as a mirror of society, the analysis of the Venezuelan *#MeToo* movement can provide insight into Venezuela’s situation. The victims’ need to publicly report their cases (as did Isabel and María) and anonymously (as was the case of “Él” and “Ella”) reflect the country’s lack of resources for victims of such crimes and the failure to provide justice effectively, even when these offenses are stipulated as punishable crimes under written law. What is on paper has not matched government authorities’ actions. According to Corvino (2021), 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” (12). Mediatic 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 become more accessible. Thus, #MeToo movements worldwide arise from the same factor that causes extra-legality and vigilantism: lack of trust in justice systems, many of which seem to fail to effectively respond to citizens, with this factor brought to an extreme in Venezuela due to its political situation.

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**Online Appendix**

[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1a4Et7g9bgaAlzbNGYT9NgRFg-fHe87fHpYVGRu5\\_6ufU/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1a4Et7g9bgaAlzbNGYT9NgRFg-fHe87fHpYVGRu5_6ufU/edit?usp=sharing)