

'Time to start talking about consent': Thailand's nascent #MeToo moment

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A web project that let people share stories of sexual assault is growing into an influential force for change

In a small bookshop in Suan Phlu, a lively district of Bangkok, an unusual conversation is taking place. Men and women crammed into the nooks and crannies between the books listen intently as Wipaphan Wongsawang picks up a microphone and gestures around her. "Women in Thailand should not have to be silent about rape and assault any longer," she says. "It's time people started talking about consent."

Wongsawang is the founder of Thaiconsent, a project that began as a series of articles explaining the concept of sexual consent to her friends. In the past 12 months it has grown into an online platform containing hundreds of stories of rape and assault, and inspired an exhibition of artworks designed to challenge Thailand's culture of misunderstanding over sexual assault.

"Before, in Thailand we never spoke about this concept of 'consent' in sex," Wongsawang tells the Guardian. "And when it comes to news about assault, or rape, particularly rape by someone you know, the first questions that anyone asks the woman are: 'How did you let this happen?', 'What were you wearing? or 'Were you drinking?' The first instinct is always to blame the women. And there's a damaging assumption here by men in Thailand that if women don't say anything, that means yes."

Wongsawang is one of a growing number of Thai women who, after years of silence, are forming a unified movement vocalising frustration at how sexual assault, rape and gender-based violence are treated, or even ignored, in Thailand. A UN study published last year revealed that almost 90% of rape cases in Thailand go unreported to authorities.

'Our culture is not one that is so confrontational'

Activists agree that it is premature to call this Thailand's #MeToo moment - there has been no naming and shaming of public figures, and the subject is only slowly filtering into public discourse. But the Thaiconsent project and recent hashtag #donttellehowtodress, which went viral in Thailand this year, have revealed a desire to change the perceptions and handling of sexual assault.

One of the first to speak out was Thararat Panya, a law student at Thailand's Thammasat University, who last year posted an uncompromising account of her sexual assault by a fellow student on social media. Then in April, Thai model Cindy Sirinya Bishop began the popular #donttellehowtodress hashtag after hearing that Thai authorities told women to "not dress sexy" to avoid sexual assault.

"Our culture is not one that is so confrontational, and it's going to be a while until a woman comes out and names names or points a finger in the media," says Bishop. "But over the last few months, I've seen women in Thailand begin to collectively speak out, sharing their stories and pushing back

on this victim-blaming which previously has gone completely unchecked here.”

Panya agrees. “Society here really misunderstands sexual assault – everyone told me to keep quiet – and the justice system works against the victim,” she says. “But this year I’ve started to see a real change in attitudes.”

Our attackers would go on as normal around us, as if nothing wrong had happened.

Wipaphan Wongsawang

Wongsawang experienced an attempted rape when she was 20 by a friend while at university. “At that time I didn’t understand what had happened to me,” she says. “So for a year I kept quiet, with this eating away at my heart.”

But over the course of a year, the same thing happened to eight of her friends, who were all raped, harassed or sexually assaulted by people they knew but had no idea how to handle it or who to go to. Those who did report it were rarely taken seriously. “I kept thinking: was this normal in our society?” says Wongsawang. “Especially as our attackers would go on as normal, as if nothing wrong had happened.”

For Wongsawang, learning about sexual consent was “like a light went on”. She began writing articles and, after graduating, opened the Thaiconsent Facebook page in late 2017. She encouraged people to share stories, anonymously, of incidents where they had been forced into sex without their consent, be it through violence or emotional coercion. The response was overwhelming.

“People had never been given a platform like this to tell these stories before and feel like they were valid and not judged.” Over the course of this year, more than 400 stories have flooded in. Most have been from women, but three have been from men. Most had never taken their accounts to the authorities. It proved so successful, she now intends to make Thaiconsent into a formal organisation.

There is still a long way to go. Both Bishop and Wongsawang railed against the way rape and assault were normalised in Thai popular culture, particularly in TV soap operas. It is so pervasive that since she began started #donttellyouhowtodress and organised the Social Power Exhibition Against Sexual Assault, which will continue to tour Thailand in 2019, Bishop has had to turn down several TV roles that she felt compromised her activism.

“The biggest problem I see in Thailand is the dangerous gap in conversations about sex, where men don’t ask what women want, they just take it,” says Wongsawang. “And for women, often they don’t dare to express what they want or don’t want. Thai women are taught to say yes – we are groomed to please others – and not empowered to say, ‘No, I don’t want this,’ especially to someone she knows. It’s these attitudes we want to change.”

Hannah Ellis-Petersen

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The Guardian

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