

Before #MeToo, There Was #MyDressMyChoice

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On July 19, 2017, a court in Nairobi, Kenya, sentenced three men to life in prison for stripping, robbing, and violently sexually assaulting a female commuter on a public bus. The incident, which took place in 2014, rose to national attention because the men were bold enough to film themselves and post the video online. This is one of two landmark court cases in Kenya involving the assault of women in the public transport system. In the other incident, a street vendor was sexually assaulted, robbed, and stripped of her clothes at a bus terminal.

The harsh sentence sends a strong message to perpetrators and encourages victims to report incidents. Moreover, it makes clear that violence against women is a criminal act and that women have the same rights as anyone else to access public spaces and transport services. This may seem obvious, but to the men who bragged about their crime with video evidence, it clearly was not. Nairobi, like many cities around the world, has been plagued by various forms of gender violence in public spaces and on public transport.

Outrage about sexual harassment has taken many forms recently, including, of course, on social media. In Nairobi, this has been the #MyDressMyChoice campaign. Members of the famous women-only Facebook group Kilimani Mums, which has more than 25,000 active members, rallied and held a peaceful procession to stand in solidarity with the survivors. On November 17, 2014, this culminated in thousands of women protesting on the streets of Nairobi about sexual violence against women in the public transport system.

The demonstration in the center of Nairobi prompted Kenyan leaders to respond. William Thwere Okelo, chief of state of the Inspector General's Office, denounced the mob in the videos as "criminal[s]" and promised the public that "the police will take action." Kenyan deputy president William Ruto

Thousands of men and women took to the streets of Nairobi protesting sexual violence against women in public transport. The protests prompted a serious response by Kenyan leaders.

denounced the attack as "barbaric" and ordered a criminal investigation, leading to the arrests.

The pressure generated by the #MyDressMyChoice campaign led to a number of critical reforms. The Kenyan Parliament passed a law against forcible "stripping", making it punishable by 10 years in prison. Eleven operators were arrested and 240 matatus were grounded pending remedial actions. The National Transport and Safety Authority adopted a new driving school curriculum, and civil society organizations are working with matatu operators to expand access to driver training programs.

Social media continues to play an increasingly key role around the world in spurring and expanding collective action, especially around "explosive" issues. #MyDressMyChoice and campaigns like it also show that social media can be part of more profound and long-term changes—even when it comes to issues that are as persistent and deeply rooted as social norms regarding gender. These campaigns contribute toward a larger goal of achieving equal rights to transport and public spaces for everyone.

Images: Brian Inganga