

China: Signature Campaign to demand the release of the prominent feminists from Mainland

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Signature campaign initiated by The Association for the Advancement of Feminism (website: www.aaf.org.hk).

(8th March 2015) Women and sexuality groups in Hong Kong express grave concern with the recent arrests by the Beijing authorities of five prominent female activists, including Li Tingting (李亭亭)(also known as Maizi (麥子)), Wei Tingting (魏亭亭), Wang Man (王曼) in Beijing, Wu Rongrong (吳蓉蓉) in Hangzhou, and Zheng Churang (鄭楚蓉) (also known as Datu) in Guangzhou, but apparently with no solid legal ground. We urge the Beijing police to respect the freedom of speech as prescribed in the PRC Constitution, and ensure that the women's legal procedural rights including rights to meet with lawyers and families, and rights to personal safety are strictly observed. We urge for their immediate release in so far as no sufficient evidence can be found to accuse them of any illegal act.

According to reliable sources, the arrest began on 6th March. At 4pm, Wei Tingting and Wang Man in Beijing were taken to the Beijing Haidian Police Station (海澱區公安分局) for interrogation. At 11.30pm the same day, five to six police knocked at the doors of Li Tingting in Beijing and Zheng Churan in Guangzhou. Beijing Police entered Li Tingting's home by force and taken her away immediately. She has disappeared for more than 30 hours so far. As to Zheng Churan, she was taken to a local police station, questioned for eight hours, and transferred to a local guesthouse for house arrest. Updates note that she has been criminally charged of "picking quarrels and making troubles" (尋釁滋事) as prescribed in article 293 of the Criminal Code. She was later taken over by the police from the Haidian district of Beijing, and is now in Beijing. On 7th March, Wu Rongrong flew into Hangzhou from Guangzhou. At 2pm upon her arrival at the airport, she was immediately taken to the Hangzhou Xihu District Gudang Police Station (西湖區公安分局) for interrogation by Beijing National Security officials. At 5.10pm the same day, Wu Rongrong's friends received a call from her with cries of pain. The line was cut almost instantly and could not be reconnected again.

We are extremely worried about the well-being of these women, and in particular the personal safety of Wu Rongrong. We wish to remind the Beijing authorities that Wu has been sick recently, and according to both Chinese law and international norms, it is the authorities' obligation to ensure that Wu is provided with timely and effective medical treatment.

The International Women's Day has 40th years of history. In China as in the world, it has been one of the most significant platforms for all to celebrate and to advocate for the promotion of gender equality with the affirmation of the equal rights and status of women.

As early as 1995, China took part in the organisation of the UN 4th World Conference on Women centering on the theme of "Action for Equality, Development and Peace". Therein was endorsed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Then in one of his public speeches made last month, Xi Jinping stated openly that China would uphold gender equality as one of the basic national policies. It is obvious that the discussion and advocacy on women rights and related issues should not be seen as a taboo in China.

According to source of information, the arrests was triggered by the five young women preparing stickers printed with sentences in Chinese such as "Stop sexual harassment, let safety be with you, me and her" and "Run police run, arrest those who commit sexual harassment!", which they planned to distribute on 7 March in the streets of the cities of their respective residence. The action was planned simply because they have learned that the All-China Federation of Workers would submit a bill to the two respective sessions of the National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress regarding sexual harassment in the workplace and the bill may be given some importance. The plan was hence derived by the activists as a means to bring public concern and also to call for the setting up of a mechanism to prohibit sexual harassment in public transport. We see the actions as planned rational and mild as strategies used everywhere by civil society worldwide for drawing public concern and as means for publicity and public education. It is a far cry from constituting the crime of "picking quarrels and provoking troubles" and any other allegations as noted in the Chinese Criminal Code. As such, we strongly question the legality and lawfulness of the current arrests by the Beijing police.

As a matter of facts, sexual harassment has been a social phenomenon in China continuously drawing attention and discussion. According to the survey covering four regions including Beijing and Guangdong done in 2011 by the Beijing Zhongze Women's Legal Consulting Services Center/ Beijing Qianqian Law Firm, sexual harassment had been affecting the daily life of 40%-60% of women in China. Among them 57.5% were young women between the age of 20 and 29, and most had chosen to either keep quiet or quit the job instead of reporting the cases. This problem has always existed with no less attention. In its Concluding Observations over China's State Report, released on 7 November 2014, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has expressed concerns on the issues of sexual harassment in China, and urged the Chinese government to " (a) dopt legal provisions that require employers to assume liability for sexual harassment at work places". (Para. 37c)

In this light, we call for the Chinese government to look into the issues of social concerns genuinely, and resolve them with tenability by enhancing the standard of the laws and their implementation, instead of just maneuvering to quell the voice of the whistle blowers. We, the undersigned, would like to reiterate hereby our grave concerns of this recent series of arrests, and we will continue to monitor the situation unless the cases are handled with justice and activists are released.

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