

#MeToo in China: movement gathers pace amid wave of accusations

Thursday 2 August 2018, by [KUO Lily](#) (Date first published: 31 August 2018).

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A Chinese anti-discrimination campaigner, an environmentalist, three journalists, an academic, two badminton coaches, and one of China's most watched television hosts. These are some of the men who have been accused of sexual misconduct in the last week, in an avalanche of cases that signal China's #MeToo moment is gaining momentum even as authorities try to suppress it.

"There is no industry where this isn't happening. These are not isolated cases," says Yi Xiaohe, a Shanghai-based producer who has accused a well-known journalist and commentator of sexually harassing her in 2011.

More than 20 women have come out with allegations against former bosses, acquaintances, and colleagues this week. On Monday, the founder of a well-known charity admitted to raping a woman, a case that was followed by other allegations.

On Wednesday, a woman published a statement online accusing the journalist Zhang Wen of raping her in May. Six more women, including Yi, accused him of sexual misconduct. In a statement Zhang has denied the rape, saying it was consensual. He accused the other women who alleged he had harassed them of trying to harm his reputation and said kissing and hugging was common in the industry.

"A single spark can start a huge fire," Yi wrote, in an open letter on Thursday. She detailed an incident she said happened in 2011 when she was a writer at [China](#) Newsweek and accepted an invitation from Zhang, an editor at the time, to share a meal. When they met, she said, he put his hand on her thigh. Zhang said in a statement that it was normal for people in media to hug and kiss each other while drinking.

"What happened that night was consensual. I didn't force the other to do what is described in the article online," Zhang said.

Then on Thursday allegations arose against a prominent host of China's state broadcaster CCTV, who was accused of groping an intern.

Now, Yi and others are calling on other women to say "MeToo." Since publishing her letter, she has received about 200 messages describing misconduct, harassment and abuse. A magazine in Beijing that asked readers to share their experiences said it was flooded with more than 1,700 stories in less than 24 hours. A lawyer who posted on Weibo offering free legal services to victims said he had gotten almost 30 requests in a day.

'An awakening of women's power'

It's a sign China's #MeToo movement, which has so far been [restricted to universities](#) and is often described as fledgling, is starting to spread. "Women are starting to come out and uncover pain from the past, and fight for their own rights," said Zhong Ying, a journalist in Beijing.

Still, even those who support it say there are limits to how far it can go. "This is an awakening of women's power, but there is also huge push back. The voices of those who are against are the majority," Zhong said.

At first articles and debate over allegations of sexual misconduct flowed freely online early last week. Then on Thursday, a Weibo user published a 3,000 word post, in which the writer accuses a well-known CCTV host of groping her when she was an intern on another show with him in 2014.

She had been sent to the host's dressing room to bring him fruit when she said the TV star began talking about his influence at the state-owned network, China's flagship broadcaster. As he spoke, he grew more animated and started to grope her. She was able to escape when one of the show's guests came in.

"Some people think sexual harassment is not common," she told the Guardian, asking to remain anonymous. "I wanted to let people know that I am your friend, relative, classmate, colleague, or acquaintance, and I've experienced sexual harassment. It's not something new on Weibo, but something that has happened to a real person beside you.

"In Chinese society, sex-related topics are seen as forbidden, which makes it less likely for young women to know how frequent or common sexual harassment is. At the time, I was a third-year student at university. I didn't know I should be cautious in that kind of situation."

Soon after her post was published, the CCTV host's name was trending on Weibo, with thousands of comments.

He could not be reached for a response. CCTV did not respond to requests for comment.

By Friday, all stories and mentions of his name were scrubbed from Chinese social media. Search terms "Me too" or "Metoo" were among the most blocked, according to Free Weibo, which tracks censored terms on the microblog.

Yi said a newspaper planning to interview her abruptly cancelled their appointment, saying they "could not report on this anymore," according to Yi. The Wechat account for the magazine in Beijing collecting #MeToo stories was also shut down.

"When public opinion touches on some official departments, the authorities show up immediately and censor the related topics. They are not manipulating opinions, but allowing the opinions that don't do large harm," said the lawyer who offered his services to victims, and asked not to be named.

Discussion of #MeToo inevitably leads to debates about rights, organising among the public, and protests - all things Chinese authorities quickly clamp down on.

Censorship is not the only obstacle. Police often pressure those reporting sexual assault to drop their cases, especially in incidents that don't involve rape. Criminal punishment for sexual harassment is rare, and in civil suits are limited to compensation and apologies, according to legal experts.

The former CCTV intern said the police persuaded her to withdraw her report, given the CCTV host's "enormous positive influence" on society. The police also said for the sake of her parents work as public servants she should let the case go.

“Sexual harassment is not necessarily about gender, but power,” she said. “If the strong harm the weak, that is what is most unfair.”

Still, people are finding ways around these pressures. Internet users have started using dialect to evade censors, substituting a northern term for “me” in “me too”.

“Even the strictest censorship cannot stop someone from standing up and speaking out. The right of speaking always exists. The meaning of MeToo is to let more people speak out,” the former CCTV intern said.

Yi, whose public account on WeChat has not yet been censored, plans to publish the hundreds of stories readers have sent her. Zhong and a group of concerned netizens have organised a petition against Zhang.

“Women here won’t make as much as noise as they do abroad,” said Zhong. “But there will still be people who learn from this. There will be some men who inside will start thinking about their actions. It doesn’t matter men or women, this will give them more courage, and at the very least, breath to speak out.”

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