

Solidarity with Chinese Women to Shake up Misogynistic and Authoritarian Xi Jinping Regime

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“We must stay in solidarity with Chinese women who risk their safety and their lives. Support for a new wave of feminist struggles on the call of the progressive forces in the countries around China is necessary.”

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In China, gender equality which is enshrined in the country’s constitution is not guaranteed. In recent years, Chinese feminists have faced censorship and misogynistic attacks. China’s #MeToo movement began in 2018 when a Beijing university student publicly accused her professor of sexual violence. At that time, Huang Xueqin and other #MeToo activists supported the university student. The circle of kind-hearted people extended throughout the country, which has sparked a nascent #MeToo movement in China. After that, Huang Xueqin started several campaigns to support many #MeToo survivors. But at the same time, she had to walk the path of suffering. [1]

Condemning sexual violence is particularly political in China under the imperative leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In the midst of a hostile confrontation with the US, the US-originated #MeToo has been targeted even more. The Xi Jinping regime does not tolerate any opinions or claims that differ from its own. Xi Jinping has spent the last decade centralizing power and consolidating control over the CCP in contrast to the policies of former Chinese president Hu Jintao: allowing a certain degree of “freedom” and “democracy”. At China’s 20th Communist Party Congress, Hu Jintao sitting next to Xi Jinping was unexpectedly escorted off the stage during the closing ceremony although he seemed reluctant to leave the front row of proceedings. [2] The incident symbolizes the way in which Xi Jinping has become the China’s most authoritarian leader since Mao Zedong. Since taking office as General Secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping has emphasized “national security” with a heavy-handed approach to silencing critical voices of the Chinese people.

Sexual harassment law which is not working

In August of this year, a Chinese court rejected an appeal in a landmark sexual harassment case. It was a blow to the country’s #MeToo movement.

Zhou Xiaoxuan, better known as “Xianzi”, became the face of China’s #MeToo movement in 2018.

She publicly accused famous CCTV host Zhu Jun of assaulting her in a dressing room four years earlier when she was a 21-year-old intern working there. In December 2020, the Haidian District People's Court in Beijing held formal evidentiary hearing on sexual harassment case against Zhu Jun. More than 100 supporters flocked to the courthouse. Meanwhile, Chinese authorities scrambled to crack down on legal accusations. Reporters from foreign media were dragged away by police. And Internet censors began blocking social media hashtags and keywords regarding #MeToo movement. Then the SNS accounts of the supporters were suspended.

In 2021, the first accusation against a prominent government official since the #MeToo movement began in 2018 was made. When Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai accused a former Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli of sexual assault, her social media accounts were also deleted. Her post disappeared from Weibo within 20 minutes. [3] And Chinese authorities have blocked online discussions of the sexual assault allegations. [4] After the accusation, Peng Shuai disappeared and reappeared. The country's #MeToo movement has stumbled since 2018, when a wave of women made allegations of sexual harassment. And a new sexual harassment law that was passed in 2020 has not been implemented.

Women's rights activist who was forcibly disappeared

The rise of the #MeToo movement has been a threat to the CCP leadership, which still cannot break away from male dominance/patriarchy. There have been cases of Chinese #MeToo activists disappearing. Following the disappearance and reappearance of Peng Shuai, other cases of women's rights activists disappearing had come to light. [5] Peng Shuai reappeared, but some activists has not yet been reappeared. In October 2017, Beihang University Ph.D. graduate Luo Xixi reported anonymously to the university that her former Ph.D. advisor Chen Xiaowu had been harassing his graduate students for years. However, the university did not respond to her report. Meanwhile, she sought help from women's rights activist Huang Xueqin. They created an alliance and exposed Chen Xiaowu's behaviors in January 2018 on Weibo, which marked the beginning of China's #MeToo movement. But in 2019, Huang Xueqin was arrested in the name of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble". She was temporarily released but was detained again in September 2021 on charges of "inciting subversion of state power". She remained disappeared.

The #MeToo movement is a potential enemy to the overwhelmingly male-dominated CCP leadership. Since 1949, as a Marxist-Leninist party, the CCP has been committed to female equality and has vowed to placed women's liberation on their agenda. However, male dominance/patriarchy is deeply embedded in Chinese society past and present.

Underrepresentation of women in important positions

In the history of the CCP since 1921, not a single woman has been nominated to the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). The higher the rank, the lower the percentage of women. And of the 25-strong Politburo, just one was a woman. [6] But no woman was included in the Politburo members which was newly elected by the first plenary session of the 20th Central Committee on 23 October 2022.

It is the first time in 20 years that the Politburo has lost a woman. At the 19th CCP Central Committee in 2017, just 10 were women among the 200th or higher ranking members of the Committee. In the 19th Central Committee of 2017, women comprised 4.9% as under Xi Jinping regime. That is down from 6.4% in the 17th Central Committee of 2007 under Hu Jintao regime.

The CCP government introduced the “two-child policy” in 2016 and put anti-abortion laws into effect in some areas. [7] The decline in the female percentage in the Central Committee reflects the policies of the male-dominated Xi Jinping regime which has violated Chinese women’s self-determination. At the 20th National Congress of the CCP which started on 16 October, the “past leaders” in the front row were of course all men.

Meanwhile, Chinese media aired images symbolizing current misogynistic CCP leadership on 16 October. Former Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli made his first public appearance in the front row of the Congress since Peng Shuai accused him of sexual assault last year. Jude Blanchette, a scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington said “Zhang epitomized the image of the bland apparatchik that the party has worked hard to cultivate.” And he also added “One would have to imagine, sadly, that in an opaque and patriarchal system of unchecked power these sorts of abuses are not uncommon.” [8] The precarious and inconsistent women’s status dates back to the founding of the CCP.

Unstable women’s status since foundation of the CCP

From its foundation in 1921, the CCP grew to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China under the rule of Mao Zedong in 1949. And the CCP was officially supposed to be committed to female equality and placed women’s liberation in its agenda. [9] But since the establishment of the country, Chinese women’s status has been unstable in terms of education and occupation.

During the Cultural Revolution period from 1966, female equality was often ignored and their lower status was not considered. Chinese women were forced to become “strong capable warriors”. [10] But finally, many women were assigned menial and dead-end jobs next to their male counterparts with better and responsible jobs.

Even at the turn of the 21st century, most women were still at a lower status than men due to the prevalence of patriarchal gender relations in Chinese society. The gender gap is conspicuous especially in rural areas [9]. There are still invisible walls within the CCP that prevent women from rising to the most important positions. In a July 2021 speech, Xi Jinping spoke of the importance of gender equality. But he also said that Chinese women should be “good wives, good mothers”. Then he said “mission of their times, closely link their future and destiny with the future and destiny of the motherland”. [11]

The speech clearly shows the male-dominated policies of Xi Jinping who has violated women’s self-determination. In recent years, the CCP has increasingly emphasized “the value of traditional roles for women” instead of women’s liberation. Women’s policies were mentioned only briefly and partially in two places in the Xi Jinping’s nearly two-hour long speech to the China’s 20th Communist Party Congress opened on the morning of 16 October. [12] The CCP has obviously retreated from the standpoint of gender equality.

For an active Chinese women’s movement based on international solidarity

Organizing a new wide-ranging and united new women’s movement to eliminate structural discrimination against Chinese women will be an extremely important step in the democratization of China, which is extremely closed to the outside world. Most women in China have been stuck in discrimination and oppression where freedom of speech and expression are extremely restricted. The types of social media that can be used in China are limited. And the web services are also

strictly censored and restricted by the CCP.

In the male-led society, women who can openly challenge sexism are minorities. Many activists in the #MeToo movement have even lost their means to express their opinions. However, the movement to create a new history of the feminist struggle cannot be stopped. In the hashtag #FreetheFive movement which was organized three years before the #MeToo movement, Chinese women who were arrested for activities to commemorate International Women's Day won the support from Asian countries such as India and Malaysia. [13] Feminists around the world united and more than two million people signed a petition demanding their release.

We must stay in solidarity with Chinese women who risk their safety and their lives. Support for a new wave of feminist struggles on the call of the progressive forces in the countries around China is necessary. Oppression of the strong against the weak is crimes against humanity. Only international solidarity and mutual aid make their limited political power to unlimited.

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Footnotes

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[5] LORA KORPAR, NEWSWEEK, 24 December 2021, "2 Chinese Activists Who Supported #MeToo Movement, Also Disappeared Like Peng Shuai".

[6] MASAYUKI TAKADA, *The Asahi Shimbun*, 14 August 2022, "Communist Party of China battles to smash the glass ceiling".

[7] KAREN YAMANAKA, IVP, 8 JUNE 2022, "Defend abortion rights and abolish anti-abortion law in East Asia".

[8] Chris Buckley, THE IRISH TIMES, 25 November 2021, "Peng Shuai's abuse accusation pierces privileged citadel of Chinese politics".

[9] Yuhui Li, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, January 2000, "Women's Movement and Change of Women's Status in China".

[10] Chinese posters.net, retrieved 20 October 2022, "Iron Women, Foxy Ladies".

[11] Farah Master and Xiaoyu Yin, REUTERS, 18 October 2022, “For China’s women, this week’s Congress is unlikely to mean progress”.

[12] Nikkei Asia, 18 October 2022, “Transcript: President Xi Jinping’s report to China’s 2022 party congress”.

[13] Sanjana Sanghi, YKA Media, 19 March 2015, “#FreeTheFive Comes To Jantar Mantar - Indians Demand Release Of Chinese Feminists”.