

They're Not Going to Take it

China's women, facing pervasive discrimination,
decide to fight for their rights.

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China, a place once synonymous with concubines and bound feet, has for decades prided itself on being a nation that bars all forms of sexual discrimination. That's made the recent headlines especially jarring. Last month, five local officials in southwestern Guizhou were jailed for forcing underage rural girls into the sex trade; the fact that the men were initially charged with "having sex with underage prostitutes" added to the public outrage. Then there was the case of the two schoolgirls accused by police in the southern city of Kunming of working as prostitutes—even after hospital tests proved they were both still virgins. Or the one in May, when Deng Yujiao drew national attention after she was arrested for stabbing to death a local government official who she said had tried to rape her. Plans to charge the 21-year-old waitress with murder provoked a huge outcry in the media and online, leading to a rare government retreat: rather than murder, Deng was convicted of using excessive force in self-defense and then released (on grounds of diminished responsibility).

These incidents have struck a powerful chord among ordinary citizens because of what they reveal about the status of women in China. While Beijing has officially promoted gender equality ever since Chairman Mao proclaimed that women "hold up half the sky," implementation of this ideal has proved patchy. In its early decades, the Chinese Communist Party did make significant improvements in women's lives—granting them the right to divorce and to work on an equal footing with men, and offering greater educational opportunities than those found in most other developing countries.

Since the beginning of China's great economic opening in the 1980s, however, there's been some serious backsliding. Many Chinese women—especially the wealthy elites—do live the kinds of lives once unimaginable here, enjoying good education, working for multinationals, and owning their own homes. But millions of their sisters, especially among the poor, have yet to see much change. And there's been a resurgence of many of the old attitudes and types of exploitation that the Communist Party sought to stamp out.

Perhaps the starkest example is the boom in the sex trade. The government abolished prostitution in the 1950s and worked to rehabilitate former escorts—one of its proudest accomplishments. Yet today, massage parlors, hair salons, and other venues offering sex for money have become ubiquitous, and some estimates put the number of prostitutes in China at 4 million. Such growth reveals how China's market economy has in some ways contributed to the exploitation of women, even as it has created new opportunities for others. Since the 1980s, rural women have enjoyed the freedom to move to urban areas to seek work. But that has produced a large urban underclass, who often find they have no way to make money but to sell themselves—a dilemma likely to grow more common today thanks to the global economic crisis.

The problems go far beyond prostitution. According to Sun Zhongxin, a sociologist specializing in Chinese women's studies at Tufts, capitalism has created a tendency "to treat women as a

commodity" throughout China's poorly regulated labor market. "For example, lots of job advertisements now say, 'Seeking a woman, with good features, over 1.6 meters tall.' If you're a woman but you're not pretty, companies may not [hire] you."

Reports of on-the-job discrimination have become commonplace. In a society where state-run enterprises and work units once provided free day care to ensure that mothers could keep working, resistance to hiring women of childbearing age has become widespread. Prof. Jiang Jin, a specialist in women's history at Shanghai's East China Normal University (ECNU), says, "It's harder for women graduates to find jobs than male graduates because of the childbirth issue. Personal quality still matters, but the less-competitive females will face more difficulties." The situation is particularly bad, Jiang says, at the millions of small private businesses. In China's civil service and its remaining large state enterprises, according to Jiang, socialist-era egalitarian attitudes are stronger. But at small outfits, bosses are often "not that well educated about gender equality," she says. And even government workers are not immune. Feng Dongyan, a young Shanghai office worker, recalls applying for a job in a state-run bank and being told by a staff member that "they applied looser standards to male applicants. So out of 100 posts they appointed 80 men," she says.

While there are some signs of progress—50 percent of university or college students in China today are women, up from 23 percent in 1980—the gaps are still huge. The nation's leading headhunter, Chinahr.com, reported in 2007 that the average salary for white-collar men was 44,000 yuan (\$6,441), compared with 28,700 yuan (\$4,201) for women. Even some women who have done well in business complain that a glass ceiling limits their chances of promotion. A recent Grant Thornton survey found that only 30 percent of senior managers in China's private enterprises are female.

Part of the problem lies in poor regulation. "China's Constitution emphasizes that men and women are equal," says Tufts's Sun, "but if you really try to go and implement it, it's very difficult—our laws are not very specific, or they're too weak." If you go to court, says Li Ying of the Women's Center for Legal Aid at Peking University, "it's very hard to prove that you've been discriminated against because of your gender."

Sun argues that even during the supposed feminist heyday of the '50s and '60s there were problems. China did accomplish "a great deal," she says, but "it was never 100 percent: for example, we said women should work, but in many state enterprises they did cleaning or manual labor." These practices continue today and are reflected in China's political sector: despite a few success stories, women make up around 20 percent of the Communist Party's 70 million members and hold only 13 of 204 seats on the Central Committee, the party's top body.

Signs of patriarchal attitudes abound, down to details like the tendency of male customers in restaurants to click their fingers at female staff and address them as "xiao mei"—meaning "little sister" or "little girl." Experts say these kind of attitudes also help explain the prevalence of domestic violence, which Li of Peking University says may affect 30 percent of all families. Biases are also reinforced by policies like the one that allows rural families to have a second child if their first is a girl (on the assumption that daughters are less useful to poor farmers).

In recent years, the government has attempted to tackle the gender problem. Last year, for example, it launched a high-profile campaign against domestic violence, and in 2005 it introduced new laws against sexual harassment, though the definition remains vague.

Perhaps more significantly, some Chinese citizens are taking matters into their own hands. In a number of big cities, women-run nongovernmental organizations now provide training and information to migrants to help them avoid falling into the trap of prostitution. The Internet has also helped Chinese women to organize. "It's had a big impact in filling in the gaps—you can find information about discrimination," says Sun. Internet activism has been particularly noticeable in recent months: much of the publicity surrounding the case of the Kunming schoolgirls was generated by the blog posts of Wu Hongfei, a well-known rock singer and journalist. And the truth about Deng Yujiao, the waitress who stabbed a Hubei official to death, was revealed only after Wu Gan, another blogger, visited her in the hospital after her arrest—and found her strapped to a bed. His photos, posted online, helped spark public outrage.

These episodes may be a sign that, as Chinese society becomes more affluent and better educated, concern about the rights of women is increasing. "The young generation who've grown up in the cities with a good education have much more of a sense of individual legal rights," says Jiang of ECNU. Wu, who also tried to help the families involved in the Kunming case, emphasizes, "If society doesn't provide a fair environment and guarantee legal safeguards, then anyone can become a victim." That thinking was on full display during the Deng case, when activists in Beijing and Wuhan staged street demonstrations in which bound and gagged women carried placards that asked, who is the next deng yujiao?

Although the government reversed itself in that case, so far most official reactions to women's activism have been decidedly cool. Jiang says most people in China "don't feel any urgency—there's so much we need to reform, and the gender issue seems not the one people are most concerned about." Other activists complain that it's still more or less taboo to describe oneself as a feminist in China. And many successful urban women seem to feel little solidarity with their rural counterparts. Still, the recent scandals—and the big public reaction to them—may mark a turning point. Sun notes that Chinese universities began creating women's-studies centers and courses only in 1995. Today these programs are commonplace, she says, and are starting to have an impact. More and more young people, she suggests, "are sensitive about discrimination." Her students already work in elite jobs in media, government, multinational companies, and NGOs, and they get women's issues. It may not be long before more of their fellow citizens start to get the message, too.