

# #MeToo movement fights harassment

Emboldened by similar actions in the West, China's younger generation signals a shift and seeks gender equality

By YANG WANLI, CAO YIN and WANG KEJU

The #MeToo movement in the United States, which has exposed alleged widespread sexual assault and harassment in Hollywood, reached a crescendo on Jan 7 when TV host and philanthropist Oprah Winfrey gave a rousing speech at the Golden Globes ceremony in Los Angeles.

"I want all the girls watching here now to know that a new day is on the horizon," she said, as the star-studded crowd erupted in applause.

Thousands of miles away, that message also resonated in China. Women quickly began to speak out about sexual harassment, but rather than celebrities leading the chorus of disapproval as in the West, the movement is centered on college campuses.

Luo Qianqian is being credited as the first Chinese woman to evoke the spirit of #MeToo. Early in January, she accused Chen Xiaowu, a professor at Beihang University in Beijing, of sexual assault when he was her doctoral adviser in 2005.

She then contacted fellow alumni who had endured similar experiences, and provided evidence to the college's disciplinary watchdog, including damning audio recordings. As a result, Chen was fired from his job.

Other women quickly followed suit. Within days, three more cases had been brought to public attention, all involving female college students who claimed to have been sexually assaulted or harassed by lecturers.

The most recent allegations were made anonymously by a graduate of the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing, who said the strength shown by Luo and the other women had inspired her to speak out.

She alleged that a male professor sexually assaulted her in his office. To back up her claims, she posted text messages exchanged between the two in the wake of the alleged assault online.

A study released in 2014 by the All-China Women's Federation suggested that the problem is worryingly prevalent in China. The federation surveyed 1,200 female students at 15 universities; in response, 50 percent said they had been subjected to sexual misconduct, either physical or verbal, while 23 percent described the situation as "severe".

In most cases, the aggressor was

male, usually a classmate, though 9 percent of respondents claimed they had suffered at the hands of lecturers or college officials.

According to research released in March by the Guangzhou Gender and Sexuality Education Center, an NGO in South China's Guangdong province, 70 percent of college students and graduates claimed to have been sexually harassed — again, verbally or physically — with women accounting for 75 percent of the victims.

The findings were based on 7,000 responses to online questionnaires.

However, campuses are just one of the places where sexual harassment frequently occurs, according to Lyu Xiaoquan, executive director of the Beijing Qianqian Law Firm, which specializes in the legal protection of women's rights.

"In the past two decades, we've seen a rising number of complaints relating to incidents in the workplace, but the majority still relate to public incidents, such as casual molestation (opportunistic assault on public transportation, for example)," he said.

According to Lyu, his firm handles eight to 10 sexual harassment cases a year, but many more women consult the firm's lawyers seeking help: "We estimate that probably seven times the number of cases we see go unreported."

## Removing stigma

Many experts hope the #MeToo movement will change the situation and also help to remove the stigma often attached to women who speak out against sexual abuse.

Cai Yiping, a campaigner for economic and gender equality in Beijing, said women have remained silent about sexual harassment for decades for fear of not being taken seriously or being blamed for men's behavior.

Harassment often happens in environments where the balance of power is unequal, according to Cai. "A boss can decide an employee's future; a professor can stop a student from publishing a paper or from graduating; and men have a greater say than women in a male-dominated society," she said.

"There's often an undertone of 'blame the victim', which overlooks the manipulative behavior of the person in power. Plus, many victims fear their allegations will be dismissed. Some women don't even see that the way they are being treated is wrong; they believe it's an unspoken rule



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they must simply accept."

Some experts believe younger women are now in a prime position to bring about changes in gender equality.

Unlike earlier generations, who tended to care more about other people's feelings, young women today focus more on how they define and value themselves, and have greater legal awareness, according to Chen Wei, from the Yingke Law Firm in Beijing, who specializes in laws related to domestic disputes and the protection of women.

Jiang Yue, a law professor at Xiamen University in East China's Fujian province, echoed Chen's view. "Most of the women speaking out now are well-educated. With their greater knowledge and broader horizons, they are brave enough to break with social norms and speak for themselves. Also, public opinion toward the issue has become more supportive in recent years, which has become a crucial driving force," she said.

Luo Qianqian exposed Chen Xiaowu by sharing her story on Sina Weibo. Her post received more than 3 million hits in a single day, instantly triggering a nationwide debate.

On Jan 11, Beihang University said an investigation had found Chen guilty of misconduct. He was removed as vice-president of the Graduate School and his teaching credentials were revoked.

On Jan 14, the Ministry of Education announced that Chen had been removed from the list of Changjiang Scholars, the highest academic award for individuals in China, and ordered to repay the stipends that came with it.

The ministry also said it would not tolerate any behavior that contravenes the professional ethics of teachers or harms students. It pledged to

work with other government bodies to build an effective, long-term mechanism to prevent further cases.

"The result was a surprise to me," Luo said, speaking on the phone from her home in the United States.

"From the beginning, I stuck to the belief that all our efforts and the evidence we had collected deserved an answer. I'm proud of Beihang. It demonstrated the unity of knowledge and behavior it taught us."

## Hard to replicate

While many people have applauded Luo's bravery and the outcome, others believe it will be hard to replicate, because many people who allege assault give confused or contradictory accounts, which means their stories are dismissed or ignored.

A male student at Beihang's School of Reliability and Systems Engineering, who preferred to remain anonymous, said the system often discourages people from lodging official complaints.

"It seems the only way for victims to obtain justice is to display their wounds on the Internet and attract media attention," he said.

According to thepaper.cn, a news portal in Shanghai, on Jan 15, students from more than 40 universities nationwide, including Peking and Tsinghua, China's most prestigious seats of learning, publicly urged the establishment of a mechanism to deal with, and prevent, sexual assault in colleges.

In 2005, the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests was amended to prohibit sexual harassment of women, and also empowered them to lodge complaints with relevant organizations. It was the first time the issue of sexual harassment and assault had specifically been addressed by Chinese law.

In 2014, the Ministry of Education published the "Seven Red Lines", a guideline that prohibits sexual

harassment of students, improper relationships between students and lecturers, and other activities that run counter to professional ethics.

"But still, a better mechanism should be established. It should provide a secret channel for complaints and a support group to help victims overcome the physical and psychological damage they have suffered," said Lyu of the Beijing Qianqian Law Firm.

Fang Gang, director of the Institute of Sexuality and Gender Studies at Beijing Forestry University, said any such mechanism must protect the legal rights of both parties in cases of alleged sexual harassment, especially while investigations are ongoing.

"Many similar reports have been disseminated online or through social media, with the accused person's personal details being unveiled to the public while the name of the accuser is withheld. Even if the allegations are found to be untrue, the accused person's reputation and career could be ruined.

Luo and more than 100 Beihang students and alumni decided to send an open letter to the head of the university.

In addition to calling for a ban on intimate relations between teachers and students who share educational relationships, they suggested training courses should be established to provide greater awareness of ways of preventing sexual harassment. They also called for the formation of an independent body to ensure that investigations are conducted fairly.

Lyu, the lawyer said: "Six large (Chinese) businesses have already started pilot programs to formulate their own anti-sexual harassment regulations, and about 200 to 300 companies in the textile industry have joined anti-harassment campaigns.

"I hope this grassroots movement will become a force for change in society, and ensure that sexual harassment becomes a high-cost 'mistake' that people will not dare to make."

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