

STATUS OF WOMEN

Findings

- During the Commission's 2025 reporting year, Chinese political leaders implemented several legal measures related to women's rights in marriage and divorce. A law delegating more power to rural village assemblies sparked debate as to whether it is enough to guarantee women equal land rights and social insurance benefits. Additionally, online commentators spoke out against a revised draft law aiming to make registering for marriage easier and filing for divorce more difficult, citing concerns about domestic violence victims within the controversial 30-day "cooling-off" period.
- The Commission observed reports of sexual violence against women in China, along with varied responses from PRC authorities. Netizens expressed concerns about a lack of sufficient official response to the following cases: a Ph.D. student accused of drugging and raping at least seven young women in China, a university professor who sexually abused his student for two years, the alleged trafficking of a rural woman suffering from mental illness, and cases of sexual assault of young girls. Such posts often faced official censorship.
- Women in mainland China and Hong Kong faced discrimination and harassment in the workplace. One report revealed that one-third of women in Hong Kong experienced workplace sexual harassment in the last three years, while other reports showed widespread discriminatory hiring practices based on female applicants' fertility and family status. Some blame the CCP's recent pro-natal policies and rhetoric for employers' reluctance to hire married women of child-bearing age.
- The Commission continued to monitor cases of official harassment and arbitrary detention of women's rights activists, including **He Fangmei**, **Sophia Huang Xueqin**, **Zhang Zhan**, and **Li Qiaochu**.

STATUS OF WOMEN

Introduction

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and People's Republic of China (PRC) government officials upheld and promoted legislation and practices that violate the human rights of women in China, including freedom of expression, equality in marriage, and equal protection in the workplace, violating the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.¹

The year 2025 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in China in 1995 ("Beijing Conference").² The milestone prompted observers to reflect on the "watershed" conference as well as continuing discrimination against women in Chinese law and society, as treatment of women today in China is "far away from its 1995 commitments."³ In March 2025, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced plans to host a new women's conference within the year to showcase China's "historic achievements in women's development," though women's rights activists responded with skepticism, with one claiming this is likely to serve a political purpose for the CCP to attempt to further legitimize its rule.⁴

Legal Developments in Women's Rights

Despite Chinese officials implementing new policies connected to women's rights this past year,⁵ the PRC government has not yet implemented recommendations from the international community to better codify women's rights in law. In the spring of 2023, the U.N. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women issued recommendations to the PRC government to strengthen compliance with the respective treaties and to provide a report on its progress.⁶ According to reports submitted to the committees in April and May 2025 by a non-profit organization, the PRC government has not made progress toward implementing the committees' recommendations.⁷

Chinese political leaders implemented legal provisions this reporting year on topics related to women's legal rights in marriage and divorce.⁸ One issue rural Chinese women face is that of land rights and village membership, as those who marry outside their *hukou*, or household registration area ("married-out women"), are routinely stripped of their village membership and related rights, including land ownership and health insurance.⁹ An increasing number of affected women have taken legal action through lawsuits and petitioning, and while some win their legal battles, laws have failed to protect these rights in practice.¹⁰ The National People's Congress passed a law in June 2024, effective May 2025, delegating more power to village assemblies, sparking some debate among observers as to whether this legislation helps married-out women.¹¹ While some remain concerned that the law is not explicit enough in stating that women are village members regardless of their marriage

Status of Women

status, some also note that this law marks progress in specifying the path for newly married individuals to obtain village membership.¹²

Public debate surfaced this past year regarding marriage registration law. The State Council passed revised *Marriage Registration Regulations* in March 2025, which took effect on May 10, 2025.¹³ In August 2024, the Ministry of Civil Affairs released a draft of the regulations for public comment, which included making registering for marriage easier and filing for divorce more difficult, sparking online debate.¹⁴ In an attempt to make marriage registration easier, the draft regulations stipulated that couples would no longer be required to present a *hukou* while registering for marriage.¹⁵ Some voiced concern that this may lead to an increase in bride-trafficking, forced marriages, or young people being coerced or impulsively entering into marriage without parental consent.¹⁶ The draft regulations also maintained the existing controversial 30-day “cooling-off” period from the PRC Civil Code but allow for one partner to more easily stop divorce proceedings unilaterally in the 30 days following an initial divorce filing.¹⁷ Online commentators and one member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference voiced concern that women seeking to escape abusive marriages and domestic violence would suffer, echoing concerns raised in response to the PRC Civil Code revisions in 2020, though Weibo quickly censored such discussion.¹⁸ The final regulations did not mention the “cooling-off” period.¹⁹

Official Handling of Cases of Sexual Violence

The Commission observed reports this past year of sexual violence against women in China, along with varied responses from PRC authorities. Selected examples include:

- **Sexual assault of minors:** In two cases involving young girls, the public called for more protection for minors. In November 2024, various news groups, including state-owned news outlet *The Paper*, reported on a 13-year-old girl identified by the pseudonym “Li Xiaoxia,” who suffered abuse and was forced into prostitution by 14 individuals, including 3 public officials.²⁰ Online commentators raised concerns about “systemic flaws in sexual assault protections for children” while also calling for greater accountability for the public officials involved.²¹ A month later, public discourse erupted over a report of a 12-year-old girl admitted to a hospital in Xintai municipality, Shandong province, who tested positive for the sexually transmitted disease human papillomavirus (HPV).²² The girl’s doctor met resistance in her attempts to report the case to authorities, despite the age of consent in the PRC being 14.²³ Police eventually detained the 17-year-old boy responsible, though social media users again expressed contempt for “systemic failures” that did not protect the girl, including those of her parents, the school, and the hospital.²⁴
- **UK Ph.D. student:** In March 2025, a court in the United Kingdom found Zou Zhenhao, a Chinese Ph.D. student at University College London, guilty of drugging and raping 10 women in England and China, though police stated there may be more than 50 other victims.²⁵ Zou attacked 7 of the 10 victims in the

PRC, and although British police stated that PRC authorities had been cooperative with their investigation, reports did not indicate that Chinese authorities were pursuing a criminal investigation into Zou in China.²⁶ WeChat, Weibo, and RedNote (Xiaohongshu) censored news about Zou's case following his conviction, frustrating the hopes of UK police that publicity from the case would help them in identifying more of Zou's victims.²⁷

- **Wang Di:** In what some touted as a rare victory for China's #MeToo movement, Renmin University fired a professor in July 2024 after verifying allegations that he had sexually harassed a student for two years.²⁸ The student, Wang Di, posted a video on Weibo accusing her Ph.D. supervisor, Wang Guiyuan (no relation), of sexual harassment, and shortly after the video went viral, the university announced the professor's firing and revocation of his Chinese Communist Party membership.²⁹ Some women praised Wang Di for speaking out against her abuser, while feminist activists and scholars noted the university and state media's failure to describe the professor's actions as "sexual harassment," instead characterizing it as a "moral failing."³⁰ Some posts related to the case, including Wang Di's original video, were later taken off WeChat and Weibo.³¹

- **Bu Xiaohua:** In November 2024, local authorities in Tuling village, Qingcheng town, Heshun county, Jinzhong municipality, Shanxi province, found 45-year-old Bu Xiaohua, malnourished and unkempt, in a village approximately 100 miles from her family home after disappearing over 13 years earlier.³² When found, Bu was living in the home of a man named Zhang Ruijun, with whom she had at least two children.³³ Initial reporting of Bu's case raised concerns among the public, as official media seemed to compassionately describe Zhang as having "taken in" or "sheltered" Bu after finding her wandering in 2011 following inpatient treatment for schizophrenia.³⁴ Social media users argued that Zhang should be investigated for human trafficking and rape, given Bu's mental illness and the physical state in which authorities found her.³⁵ Local authorities began investigating the possibility of criminal activity.³⁶ Online commentators also highlighted broader issues of lack of law enforcement protection for women in rural China, noting the similarities between Bu's case and that of the woman found shackled in a shed in Jiangsu province in 2022.³⁷ In both cases, official narratives praised the "good intentions" of the men involved while downplaying signs of trafficking and abuse.³⁸ [For more information on human trafficking in China and the handling of Bu Xiaohua's case in the media, see Chapter 9—Human Trafficking and Chapter 1—Freedom of Expression.]

Workplace Discrimination

Women in mainland China and Hong Kong faced harassment and discrimination in the workplace this past year, because of both government policies and lack of official response to existing problems. One survey highlighted the persistence of sexual harassment in the workplace in Hong Kong, revealing that one-third of women in Hong Kong have faced sexual harassment in the workplace in the last

Status of Women

three years, including text messages, emails, inappropriate conversations, or physical contact.³⁹ A majority of those women reported not doing anything in response, most commonly because of fear or feeling it would be futile.⁴⁰

This reporting year, observers also expressed concerns with the PRC government's focus on pro-natal policies to boost China's birth rate, some of which threaten to disproportionately burden women in the workforce.⁴¹ As stated by one journalist, PRC leader Xi Jinping's call for Chinese women to promote childbirth "is happening against the backdrop of persisting discrimination against women in the workplace over the issue of fertility."⁴² The Commission observed several reports of discriminatory hiring practices by Chinese employers against women based on their fertility and family status.⁴³ One study found that employers in Nantong municipality, Jiangsu province, often required women to take pregnancy tests during the hiring process and discouraged the hiring of pregnant women because of labor costs.⁴⁴ In another study, 61 percent of women reported having been asked about their plans to marry and have children during the hiring process by China-based employers, as opposed to only one-third of men being asked the same questions.⁴⁵ Although it is illegal in the PRC for companies to discriminate against applicants based on sex, observers suggest that the high labor cost of maternity leave, and rhetoric from the top echelon of the CCP, contribute to firms opting for male candidates.⁴⁶

Treatment of Women Activists

Women who engage in human rights advocacy continued to face surveillance and the threat of detention by PRC authorities.⁴⁷ One report revealed that in China, women political prisoners outnumber men, despite the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women calling on the PRC to reduce the number of women in detention following its May 2023 review.⁴⁸ The report's authors expressed particular concern about these statistics due to PRC authorities' documented gender-based violence against detained women human rights activists.⁴⁹ Gender-based violence and harassment extended beyond China's borders, too, as evidenced by multiple reports of transnational repression against women activists abroad.⁵⁰ Female human rights activists around the world reported disproportionate harm from transnational repression at the hands of authorities and proxies, including online gender-based abuse, harassment, and intimidation.⁵¹ [For more information on the PRC's use of transnational repression, see Chapter 17—Human Rights Violations in the U.S. and Globally.]

The Commission continued to monitor multiple cases of arbitrary detention of women human rights defenders in its Political Prisoner Database,⁵² including the following selected cases:

- In October 2024, the Huixian Municipal People's Court in Xinxiang municipality, Henan province, sentenced **He Fangmei** to five years and six months in prison for "bigamy" and "picking quarrels and provoking trouble."⁵³ This is He's second detention for her advocacy work for vaccine safety and accountability following her daughter's diagnosis with a paralyzing neurological disease after receiving a defective vaccine.⁵⁴

- The Guangdong High People’s Court secretly rejected an appeal from **Sophia Huang Xueqin**, a journalist and feminist activist sentenced in June 2024 to five years in prison for “inciting subversion of state power.”⁵⁵ Prior to her September 2021 detention, Huang’s activism included women’s rights and civil society advocacy.⁵⁶ Human rights advocates and Huang’s defense attorney denounced the court’s secretive sentencing process, as it violates defendants’ rights in Chinese law.⁵⁷ [For more information on abuses in the PRC’s justice system, see Chapter 4—Criminal Justice. For more information on the PRC’s repression of journalists, see Chapter 1—Freedom of Expression.]
- Authorities in Shanghai municipality criminally detained journalist **Zhang Zhan** in August 2024, three months after her release from a four-year prison sentence for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.”⁵⁸ Zhang’s first sentence was linked to her early reporting on the spread of COVID-19.⁵⁹ Following her release in May 2024, Zhang resumed her public support and advocacy for fellow activists in China, despite being kept under surveillance.⁶⁰ Zhang began a hunger strike following her August 2024 detention, similar to one during her first sentence which left her dangerously ill, and authorities have force-fed Zhang, according to reports from January 2025.⁶¹ Chinese legal experts have expressed worry about Zhang’s condition, noting that Chinese dissidents tend to face harsher treatment and sentences when detained for a second time.⁶² [For more information on the PRC’s repression of journalists, see Chapter 1—Freedom of Expression.]
- Women’s and labor rights activist **Li Qiaochu** was released in August 2024 after completing a sentence of three years and eight months for “inciting subversion of state power.”⁶³ Observers commented that Li’s detention was likely due to her speaking publicly about the torture and maltreatment in detention of her partner, **Xu Zhiyong**.⁶⁴ Prior to her initial detention in 2020, Li advocated for the rights of Chinese workers and political prisoners.⁶⁵ [For more information on Li Qiaochu and the PRC’s repression of labor rights activists, see Chapter 10—Worker Rights.]

Notes to Chapter 7—Status of Women

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Status of Women

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