

[UN leadership: China must fully #FreetheFive](#)

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(Geneva) - Ahead of the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Plan of Action this September, the UN and its Member States have the opportunity - and the obligation - to demand that China improve its human rights record, said ISHR and [CHRD](#) today.

This call follows the release of an open letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and the Executive Director of UN Women by the 'Feminist Five', five women activists [detained](#) by Chinese authorities ahead of International Women's Day. Their crime? Organising efforts to raise awareness of sexual harassment on public transportation.

'The courageous letter from "the Five" shows the dramatic and broad-ranging impact of China's crackdown; these women are not just concerned about their own situation, which remains precarious', said Sarah M. Brooks, ISHR's programme manager for East Asia.

'This is not an isolated case. The plight of the "Feminist Five" is emblematic of the harassment, [abuse](#) and other risks, including government reprisals, faced by many women human rights defenders in China', added CHRD Director Renee Xia.

The 'Feminist Five' were released on bail, but remain criminal suspects and thus continue to be subject to surveillance and report periodic interrogations. Some have been able to make [light](#) of their time in detention, and some have [struggled](#) to keep their organisations viable.

'Four months later, there is still no investigation underway to hold authorities accountable for the arbitrary detention and traumatic experiences that these women endured', Ms Xia said.

As the letter also makes clear, the crackdown has had negative effects on the communities helped by the work of the Feminist Five and their allies - work that is further stymied by the antagonistic operating environment under Xi Jinping's administration and by the likelihood of new, restrictive legislation.

Numerous organisations, including both ISHR and CHRD, have noted that the impending '[foreign NGO management](#)' law is likely to put up significant barriers to NGO registration and to effectively block the vast majority of funding sources of independent Chinese civil society. This will further weaken organisations like the anti-discrimination NGO Yirenping, which is being [targeted](#) for its connections to a number of the detained women.

Finally, the letter shows an increasingly proactive Chinese civil society. Despite the serious risks, these brave women are calling on a range of international actors to put their influence behind a major human rights campaign, defined and actively promoted by Chinese defenders themselves.

'If the Chinese government is serious about gender equality, it must do more than pay lip service and co-host

UN side events', said Ms. Brooks. 'Beijing must take real action on the recommendations of the UN's human rights mechanisms to address challenges faced by Chinese women, including employment discrimination, sexual harassment and domestic violence. And it must stop harassing and intimidating civil society and human rights defenders.

'The UN for its part must use its influence, including high-level advocacy, to make the expectations of the international community crystal clear. Member States must reinforce this message in their bilateral dialogues'.

In the run-up to the 'Beijing +20' Summit, the burden is on the Chinese government to prove that in the twenty years since 1995, it has not forgotten that 'human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights'.

See the original text [**here**](#), and the translated version below:

Open Letter to Secretary General Ban and Head of UN Women From the Chinese Feminist Five

Please help us to regain complete freedom because the Chinese government would listen to your suggestions

Dear Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and
Under-Secretary-General, UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka,

We are the five feminist activists from China, WEI Tingting, ZHENG Churan, WU Rongrong, LI Tingting, and WANG Man. Just before International Women's Day this year, we were detained for planning events to call for anti-sexual harassment on public transportation. Thanks to the national and international pressure on the Chinese government, in mid-April we were finally bailed out and returned home to our families.

After our release, we learnt from the media that the UN Women was deeply concerned about this case. As reported by the Reuter's, the UN Women "has been closely engaged with the developments throughout and welcomes the release of the five women from detention". We are deeply grateful for this.

However, for us this case is far from over. The police still refuse to drop our case, even without evidence of a criminal offense and even after the procuratorate had decided not to approve arrest. We are still considered suspects, continue to be subject to investigation and strict surveillance, as well as restrictions on travel and social activities. This means we have no way to get back to our work in NGOs. Some organizations that have supported us are being investigated, and their normal operations have been limited. Some have been threatened and even forced to shut down. Many supporters and volunteers have been newly listed as suspects, including two recently arrested on trumped-up charges.

Since March, the Chinese feminist movement has entered a historic low point, and civil society in China is unable to play its role as an effective partner with the Chinese government and the UN system. This is an unexpected and shameful setback as well as a historical mistake, on the 20th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

All these years, we have dedicated ourselves to ending gender-based violence and discrimination and to improving the situation of women, especially those affected by AIDS, disability and poverty, as well as girls, lesbians, and other marginalized groups of women. We have earned recognition from the Chinese public for our efforts, and on several occasions contributed to progress on government policies through constructive dialogue.

Our activities not only resonate with the spirit of CEDAW, the Beijing Declaration and the Beijing Platform of Action, but also are beneficial for good governance and social stability. If we can't have our freedom, there will be no way to continue this work; this isn't just our own loss, but a loss for society and for the government.

Tomorrow, 7 July, will mark the fourth full month since our detention, and we still feel deeply disturbed looking back on it. So we are writing to you, Mr. Ban and Ms. Mlambo-Ngcuka, with the hope that you will continue to draw attention to our situation and to use your influence to help us. Of course this issue will have to go through the Chinese legal process before being resolved. But we believe that the Chinese government, as a UN Member State and a party to numerous human rights conventions, will listen to your valued opinions.

Please help us! With gratitude on behalf of our family and supporters,

China's 'Feminist Five'

Wei Tingting, Zheng Churan, Wu Rongrong, Li Tingting, and Wang Man

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