

'It is not hopeless': China's #MeToo movement finally sees legal victories

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Despite suspicion from authorities about grassroots activism, the courts and policymakers are starting to respond

Liu Li has spent the past year fighting what many said would be a losing battle. Inspired by a flood of MeToo accounts that emerged in [China](#), last year she brought a lawsuit against her former boss, a prominent and award-winning social worker, whom she claimed sexually harassed her four years ago.

Over the course of proceedings, Liu Li, who uses an alias, saw her life scrutinised inside and outside the court. The defence argued that online posts she made about the play the Vagina Monologues suggested she was "open" to sexual advances. Friends and acquaintances, not realising Liu Li was involved, said they thought the claimant was a fame-hungry liar.

But she carried on, helped by women's advocacy groups and a lawyer. Then, on 11 July, a court in Chengdu ruled in her favour and ordered her former boss to publicly apologise.

The win, while modest, is one of the first legal victories for [China's MeToo movement](#), which emerged last year as a dozen women publicly accused men in media, academia, the non-profit world, the tech sector and elsewhere of sexual assault and harassment.

Earlier this month, another man was [sentenced to six months in prison](#) for molesting a woman and a minor on a subway in Shanghai, marking the first time someone has been criminally punished for sexual harassment on public transport in the city.

"The movement really needs this right now," said Lu Pin, a Chinese activist, based in New York.

Liu Li's case especially offers a much-needed injection of hope into a movement that has struggled recently under the weight of censorship, counter lawsuits and the detention of activists.

Earlier this month, Chinese journalist and leading MeToo activist Sophia Huang was detained by police after she [wrote about taking part](#) in anti-Beijing, pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. Several women who have publicly accused former co-workers, employers, or professors are now facing defamation lawsuits, including Liu Li.

"We were feeling our way in the dark, with no light ahead that we could see. You spend so much energy for a result that you can't imagine," Liu Li told local media after the court ruling. "Now, I want to tell even more people about this win. I want to tell them: this is definitely hard, but it is not hopeless."

Liu Li's former boss, Liu Meng, said in a statement on Wechat in August last year, after Liu Li went public with her allegations, that the information online was "not true". Calls to Liu Meng and his

organisation were not returned and he did not respond to requests for comment. His lawyer has told Chinese media he plans to appeal and countersue Liu Li for defamation.

The victory of Liu Li is definitely a positive influence. It must have been very difficult for her.

- Huahua

In China where authorities regard grassroots activism with suspicion, the MeToo movement has frequently been censored. Authorities have shut down feminist social media accounts and banned search phrases related to MeToo while activists have been detained. Today, the movement is often referred to in Chinese as *Mi Tu*, or “rice bunny”, a homonym once used to get around censorship of the term.

Still, authorities appear to be paying attention. Harassment and gender discrimination are illegal in China, but in December last year the country’s highest court added sexual harassment to the formal list of grounds for civil litigation, making it easier for such cases to go ahead. The government is also drafting a law on sexual harassment that will further define its meaning and require employers to better protect employees.

Advocates say the movement still has a long way to go. Of at least 12 cases reported last year, according to [NGOmetoo](#), a monitoring group, none have made meaningful progress aside from Liu Li’s.

One case is that of Huahua, one of the earliest to go public with allegations against a well-known charity founder and anti-discrimination activist. In July last year, Huahua, who is also using an alias, published a letter online accusing the man of raping her during a fundraiser in Beijing in 2015 when she was a volunteer. The activist apologised and stepped down from his role as head of his charity but later told Chinese media that the sex had been consensual.

Facing the prospect of a long legal battle in civil court, Huahua has decided for now not to pursue the case. Still, she has taken inspiration from Liu Li’s case. “It’s definitely a big victory. I’m very encouraged.”

“The victory of Liu Li is definitely a positive influence. It must have been very difficult for her,” she said, of Liu Li.

In one of the most high-profile cases of last year, a woman known by her nickname Xianzi accused a prominent CCTV host of touching and kissing her in his makeup room when she was an intern. Her case has stalled and the host, who has denied the allegations, has countersued friends who helped publish her account last year.

Even Liu Li’s case is only a partial win. She did not win compensation for mental duress, as her complaint alleged – evidence, critics say, that courts still treat the impacts of sexual assault too lightly. Her former boss’s only punishment from the court is a public apology.

Still, advocates say Liu’s case is one step forward and that they are encouraged by other less tangible improvements. More victims are getting help from others – forming support groups and seeking legal advice. Another former colleague of Liu Li’s is also pursuing a case against the same manager.

“I used to be desperate,” added Xianzi, who said she finds younger women are becoming bolder and

less ashamed to talk about cases of assault or harassment than previous generations. “Now I’ve become more optimistic.”

Lillian Yang and Jiahui Huang contributed additional reporting

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