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Hong Kong

#ProtestToo: the women at the forefront of Hong Kong's anti-government movement

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Female protesters are increasingly facing off against police amid escalating violence during the city's summer of discontent. Some say the movement has helped change stereotypes but it has also seen reports of sexual violence and other forms of harassment.

Jordyn, 23

Jordyn sleeps at night cuddling her teddy bear, while surrounded by dolls. She keeps her voice low and slow – and gets easily startled by loud noises.

“I am not a brave person at all,” says the 23-year-old.

But on recent weekends, she has mustered the courage to take to the streets – sometimes by herself – equipped with goggles, a respirator, filters and bottles of water to extinguish tear gas canisters.

“I am not physically strong, and I don't do sports,” she says. “So I feel quite surprised how girls, including myself, have reacted in these situations. I think we have all toughened up.”

Jordyn, an NGO worker, is among the millions of Hongkongers who have protested against the city's government since June 9 [\[1\]](#), with weekend demonstrations increasingly boiling over into violent clashes between protesters and the police.

The leaderless movement, now entering its 13th week, has mostly been represented by male faces. But women joining the protests have become more daring, with many increasingly willing to go on the front lines and actively engage in a face-off with the police, according to more than a dozen female and male protesters interviewed by This Week in Asia.

Protesters and scholars closely watching the movement say it has helped empower women and combat certain stereotypes about female Hongkongers, who are sometimes described as materialistic.

Yet there is a dark side to this apparent gender parity [\[2\]](#)

As the movement has progressed, fears have emerged of women being more exposed to sexual violence and other forms of harassment. The role of female protesters has also become politicised, with allegations being made of sexual violence by the police. Such accusations prompted thousands to rally on August 28 [\[3\]](#) adopting the cry #ProtestToo as a form of solidarity and resistance.

Hope renewed

Jordyn joined the 2014 pro-democracy Umbrella Movement [\[4\]](#) – when thousands occupied the city's streets for 79 days – but was left angry and disappointed after seeing it end with no progress made on universal suffrage.

After June 9 this year, she says she “finally saw hope in Hong Kong again”. That was the day 1 million people, according to the organisers, attended a protest against the now-shelved extradition bill that would have allowed the transfer of fugitives to jurisdictions such as the mainland, Taiwan and Macau.

Jordyn, who gave only her first name, began the summer going to protests with her parents. But as the movement evolved and grew more violent, she started taking to the streets whether or not she had company. “If I go with my friends or alone, I will get closer to the front line and try to help ... I believe that if you want justice, you need to fight for it.”

The first time the NGO worker was tear-gassed, she was wearing only a surgical mask. She could not see or breathe properly, but – to her surprise – did not panic. Instead, she tried to help a group of younger girls who were screaming next to her. Since then, she has learned how to build roadblocks and extinguish tear gas canisters by covering them with a traffic cone and pouring water over them.

When she thinks back to her weekends, all she hears are sounds of protesters groaning after being hit by tear gas, and the rhythm of riot-police boots chasing after her.

“I am not afraid of getting arrested – perhaps because I think that I will be lucky enough to get away,” Jordyn says. “But I am scared of being beaten up. I’ve seen their facial expressions and their eyes while beating people up ... it’s like witnessing someone trying to kill you.”

She intends to continue taking to the streets until the government meets the protesters’ five demands, which include a formal withdrawal of the extradition bill as well as an independent inquiry into police’s use of force.

“I see much anger and sadness among the protesters,” Jordyn says. “I also feel sad for myself because I did not hate anyone this much in the past ... I blame it on the police and [chief executive] Carrie Lam. Why do you have to turn me into someone I don’t like to be?”

Testing the limits

What began as a leaderless protest to halt the extradition law’s introduction has evolved into a mass anti-government movement demanding genuine universal su!rage and a pushback against what it sees as Beijing’s encroachment on Hong Kong’s basic freedoms and rights.

Graffiti has appeared on the walls of different neighbourhoods where protests have taken place, bearing messages such as “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times”, the election slogan of a pro-independence activist now in prison.

While the city’s leader has previously suggested that the violence is the product of a “small minority of people” who “have no stake in the society”, a recent study by scholars from three Hong Kong universities shows that most of those taking to the streets are middle-class, under the age of 30, and have some higher education. Nearly half, or about 46 per cent, of them are female.

Stephy, 21

#ProtestToo: the women at the forefront of Hong Kong's anti-government movement

Stephy is wearing black full-body motorcycle armour, with a grey fabric mask covering her face. "We are ready to fight the triads" , she says firmly, referring to suspected gang members who clashed with protesters in North Point [5]

The 21-year-old is sitting in the middle of Hennessy Road in the bustling commercial district of Causeway Bay, which is swarming with protesters, while watching some of her friends testing their equipment.

More often than not, her group of about 20 friends, including three women, is at the front lines. Throughout the protests, Stephy – who gave only her first name – has seen some of them arrested, and others getting hurt.

More than 800 protesters have been detained since the movement began, and over 130 are facing charges, including for rioting.

The level of violence has also escalated. More than 2,000 rounds of tear gas have been fired, in addition to rubber bullets and beanbags, while water cannons have recently been deployed. Protesters have also resorted to bigger weapons, from throwing projectiles like water bottles to hurling bricks, bamboo poles and petrol bombs.

But far from being cowed by the increasing violence, protesters like Stephy have in fact become more galvanised to fight tooth and nail for their cause. "After two or three protests, I started seeing many more girls coming out and standing in front, instead of hiding in the back," she says.

Stephy, who works as a freelance designer, says she has played multiple roles in the movement, including assisting those hit by tear gas and scouting the protest areas to check if there are any police around. "We usually see what we can do on the day of the protest. Every day tends to be different."

Yan, 23

Yan, a 23-year-old graduate who works in property management, says that while her company has monitored those who have taken days off to join the protests, she is willing to lose her job for the movement. "I am still young and I can pay the cost ... We need to protect Hong Kong's freedoms."

Yan, who gave only her surname, says women have become more daring as the movement evolved. "We are still exploring our limits on how and what we can do," she notes. "Most women are not as physically strong as men. I see [how men] can play an important role, like moving materials and protecting others."Automatic word wrap

But recently, she and a female friend tried to extinguish tear gas canisters for the first time. "Actually, I realised that women can do more," she says.

Cheung, 17

Cheung, a 17-year-old student, is standing on a footbridge in Tsuen Wan, helping her fellow protesters use bricks to prepare a new defence line. She compares the protests to a "battlefield" where everyone, regardless of their gender, plays a role.

She says she had not taken part in a protest before the movement started, but since June her efforts have only grown stronger. "We feel that this movement is very important for our future ... This is our home."

On the front line

Women have long played a prominent role in social movements. They have been at the forefront of the fight for suffrage and women's rights, and have also been critical in many other recent front-line situations – such as in Sudan this year, where they led protests that toppled long-time president Omar al-Bashir [6]

In contemporary China, female activists have been outspoken voices for change in society. Their numbers include the Tiananmen Mothers [7] who still demand to know exactly what happened on June 4, 1989, the date of a bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Beijing.

Susanne Choi Yuk-ping, a professor

The place of female Hongkongers in society has also evolved over time. While gender parity in terms of participation in education was reached about a decade ago, the city's gender wage gap has remained wide for at least the past 20 years. According to a recent report by the Women's Foundation, women in Hong Kong are paid 22 per cent less than men on average.

"If you look at leadership in higher education, the judiciary and listed companies, the male dominance is still very pronounced," says Susanne Choi Yuk-ping, a professor with the Chinese University of Hong Kong's sociology department.

Despite such a gap, the gender expert notes the high rate of female voting in Hong Kong as well as strong female engagement in community organisations.

"I am not surprised that in this anti-extradition movement we have seen a lot of women taking to the streets, joining the marches, rallies and even [being] at the front line," Choi says, recalling that large numbers of women had also taken part in the Umbrella Movement. "I think all these experiences will certainly empower women, and make them feel they have a stake in society and that they can make change by directly participating."

Choi notes that the leaderless movement has been marked by initiatives from female groups, such as a group of housewives and a group of mothers who organised petitions and rallies [8] "We have seen women coming out in a specific feminine way and using these roles to speak out."

At the same time, the city's female leader Carrie Lam has positioned herself maternally to court public sympathy. But scholars say her strategy has backfired, as Lam's remarks respectively comparing herself and anti-extradition bill protesters to a mother and her spoiled children angered many residents.

"She has this perception from ancient China, where officials are the parents of those whom they govern," Choi says. "But Hong Kong people feel that she is a civil servant paid by taxpayers." Automatic word wrap
While Lam has not been able to gather public support as a woman, Choi says she has noticed a positive shift in the way local women have been described online.

"Before, Hong Kong women were often ridiculed as gong nui [or 'Kong girl', usually a reference to being materialistic]," she says. "But since last month, I've seen some posts on [the forum] LIHKG addressing their changing perception on Hong Kong women."

Darker side

Petula Ho Sik-Ying, professor

However, as Hong Kong University professor Petula Ho Sik-Ying notes, women have been more vulnerable than men to different forms of abuse and attacks since the movement began. Automatic word wrap
“Women will always be an easy target,” the gender expert says. “You have to be prepared because things will be posted online about you, about your physical appearance, personal opinions or relationships.”

Ho was criticised online after dozens were detained during a protest outside Tin Shui Wai Police Station on August 5, which was organised after a female protester was photographed with her underwear exposed as police dragged her away.

Activists blame her [9] for telling protesters not to run away and for urging them to stop throwing stones. Despite having denied these accusations, Ho is still grappling with online harassment.

“It’s been a masculine movement and very patriarchal,” she says. “We all enjoy the romantic aspect of the movement, but there are more dangers than we are willing to talk about.” Automatic word wrap
Allegations of sexual violence by the police have also grown stronger of late, while anger and resentment towards the force has increased.
Humiliating strip-search

A female protester who had been arrested publicly accused the police [10] last week of subjecting her to a humiliating strip-search. “I want to ask the police: does being arrested mean our rights are deprived and we could be treated without basic respect for women?” the protester said.

She claimed that after being told to take off all her clothes – including her underwear – she was ordered to squat, as one female officer patted her thighs with a pen and instructed her to open her legs wider. A police spokeswoman has denied the allegations [11] maintaining there is footage that contradicts the protester’s story.

On Wednesday 28 night, thousands gathered in Central to demand answers from the Hong Kong police over such allegations. An emotional crowd shouted slogans such as “Shame on Hong Kong police” and heard several alleged victims’ accounts.

To those arguing that these protesters are weaponising their gender, Choi from the Chinese University of Hong Kong notes that some recent incidents have been witnessed by journalists and documented in videos and photos.

“Indeed if the police thinks that these are wrongful accusations, they should support an independent investigation,” she says.

The police did not respond to questions sent by This Week in Asia, but the force previously denied any wrongdoing and said those who had complaints could submit them through an existing mechanism.

While the Independent Police Complaints Council does not currently have a breakdown on complaints of a sexual nature, a spokeswoman for the police watchdog says it is conducting an overall study that includes looking into police guidelines and the events of the past few months.

"If there are repeated complaints on a particular issue, then we need to look at why that happened. Is it because of individual operations, management or guidelines? There might be some issues to be improved," she says.

Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women

â€"I FEEL MORE EMPOWERED'

An ongoing survey launched on August 21 by the Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women saw 46 out of 221 respondents, as of noon on August 27, report having experienced sexual violence since the movement began. These reports include being touched in sensitive parts of the body, attempted sexual assault, and being humiliated by the use of sex-related language.

Of the respondents, who are from different genders, 23 made allegations against police or other law enforcement officers, and eight said they had suffered abuse while in detention facilities.

The survey also found there were 18 accusations against pro- establishment supporters, and four involving other demonstrators.

A number of design posters have been shared online in the past few days with the hashtag #ProtestToo, a reference to the global #MeToo movement, which has amplified the voices of victims of sexual harassment and abuse.

Leo and Chan, males

Leo, a 17-year-old male student who has joined the protests as a first aider, says he is particularly concerned about the mistreatment of female protesters by the police.

"At the beginning there were not that many female protesters on the front lines, but more women have come up to fight for the cause," he says. "Unfortunately, some of them have been caught by the police and have faced unfair and rude treatment."

Another male protester surnamed Chan, 24, says he is surprised by the female protesters' fearless attitude. "They are very efficient and brave ... some even walk in front of us ... I respect that," he says, noting that many have been hurt.

Serious injury to the eye

On August 11, a woman who is believed to be a volunteer medic suffered a serious injury to her right eye, with protesters claiming she was hit by a beanbag round fired by the police. Automatic word wrap

The force has refused to take responsibility [12] pending an investigation, and has asked for a search warrant to access her medical records. The woman has since been discharged from hospital [13] and has turned into a symbol of the movement.

Jordyn, 23

Jordyn, the NGO worker, says she has become more self-driven since the protests started.

"In some ways, Hong Kong youngsters tend to be a bit passive, mostly because of our education system ... I feel more empowered now. Not sure if that relates to my gender. But I have grown as an individual," she says.

Jordyn also says the movement has shown another side of female Hongkongers: "Some are now realising that Hong Kong girls are not afraid of getting their hands dirty."

[South China Morning Post](#)

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[1] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/hong-kong-protests>.

[2] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/gender-equality>.

[3] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3024789/thousands-gather-metoo-rally-demand-hong-kong-police-answer>.

[4] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/occupy-central>.

[5] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3021708/rumours-armed-gangs-heighten-north-point-tensions-after-anti>.

[6] <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/africa/article/3005737/sudans-president-omar-al-bashir-forced-out-power-after-apparent>.

[7] <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1962016/weve-suffered-27-years-state-terror-chinese-mothers>.

[8] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3014613/mothers-stage-sit-hong-kong-park-calling-government>.

[9] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3021713/pan-democrat-lawmakers-call-protesters-calm-down-avoid>.

[10] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3024164/woman-arrested-anti-government-protest-accuses-hong-kong>.

[11] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3024614/three-men-arrested-storming-legislative-council-hong-kong>.

[12] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3024947/hong-kong-police-apply-search-warrant-access-medical>.

[13] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3024147/woman-who-suffered-severe-eye-injury-during-hong-kong>.