Restaurant attack highlights vulnerability of women in China, say netizens

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BEIJING - Netizens and celebrities are calling for the authorities to take severe action against a group of attackers who assaulted four women at a restaurant in China last Friday (June 10), after one of the victims rejected unwanted advances from one of them.

The brutal assault, which ended with two of the victims in hospital, has also triggered public outrage over predatory sexual behaviour in the country.

The attack took place in a barbecue restaurant in Tangshan, a city in Hebei province in northern China, and started with a male patron touching a woman at a nearby table, according to a video that has gone viral on microblogging platform Weibo.

Footage showed the woman pushing the man's hand away when he touched her back. He tried again and when she resisted, hit her. The two started fighting.

The brawl worsened when the two women who were eating with the victim tried to pull the duo apart. Other men - presumably the attacker's friends - then rushed into the restaurant and started beating up the three women.

One of the attackers threw a chair at the women, while others stomped on the victims who had fallen onto the floor.

The men then dragged the women outside the restaurant where two other women tried to help but one of them was pulled into the fight as well.

A hashtag related to the attack hit a peak on Weibo last Friday, when the video first went viral, garnering an all-time high of 2.83 billion views and sparking 1.96 million discussions.

Netizens posted about how the attack highlighted the potential dangers faced in public by women in China when they reject unwanted advances, with many fearing that they would be the next victim.

Weibo user Xiaoliyang said: "The victim was just eating at a restaurant when the man came up to her and hit her. Doesn't she have the right to say no to him? I've always been wary of strange men, but now I'm actually scared of them and what they might do to me."

Ms Zhang Beilin, 28, a physical education teacher in Beijing, told The Straits Times that the video, which was released in the wee hours last Friday, kept her up all night because she was so angry at the injustice done towards the women.

"The attack in the restaurant really shows how vulnerable women in China can be," she said. "It is maddening to watch how other men just stood by while the attacks went on, but other women stepped up to help."

Celebrities including action star Jackie Chan and singer-actor Ma Tianyu, who have a combined total of 64.1 million followers on Weibo, have also condemned the attacks.

Police said last Saturday that nine people had been arrested following the attack, and two of the victims were in stable condition in hospital.

Some netizens have also criticised the police for being slow to respond to the incident, which resulted in the authorities having to hunt for the attackers.

The Communist Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection said on its social media account that offenders who commit violent acts that endanger public safety must be punished harshly - in accordance with the law - to ensure justice for victims.

So far, the authorities have tried to frame the attack as a matter of public security by focusing on the attackers' violent behaviour.

The Tangshan city government launched a two-week campaign on Sunday that included enforcement against organised crime, including intentional injury and extortion. The men were allegedly part of a gang.

"The case blatantly crossed the public's bottom line of social order and morality, and showed a disrespect for the law... Yet to its core, this is not a case about women's rights or gender equality, but about public security," read a report by state media outlet Global Times on Sunday.

Women's rights are a touchy subject in China, where the hashtag MeToo, which highlights sexual violence against women, has been banned.

Police have also reportedly harassed gender rights activists, and a female comedian, Yang Li, received death threats last year for "attacking" men in her routine on national television.

The restaurant attack is the latest in a series of gender-related violence that has gained increasing prominence in the world's most populous country.

In February, netizens called for investigations after a social media video surfaced of a Chinese woman, who had given birth to eight children, shackled by her neck and locked up in a shed in Xuzhou city in north-western Jiangsu province.

An investigation by the local government found she was a victim of human trafficking and rape, which caused an uproar across China. Three people - the woman's husband and a couple who allegedly sold her - were arrested.

Last Friday, Chinese-Canadian celebrity Kris Wu was tried in a Beijing court on charges of rape and group sex, some 10 months after his arrest on July 31 last year. The verdict has yet to be announced.

Teenage beauty influencer Du Meizhu accused Wu of rape last year, along with 24 other women who also stepped forward with complaints of his alleged inappropriate behaviour towards them.

In March last year, a man made headlines for throwing boiling hotpot broth at a woman sitting at the next table when she told him to stub out his cigarette. The local authorities ordered him to apologise and pay a fine of 1,000 yuan (S$206)