

# We Don't Care About Women

You'd think Lady Liberty would grant asylum to someone fleeing forced prostitution, rape or an attempted honor killing. Lisa Margonelli reports it ain't necessarily so.

A doctored passport and a wild story: That's all Z had when the 20-year-old Chinese peasant arrived in the U.S. on Dec. 7, 1995. Z said that she had quashed her powerful boss' sexual advances by stabbing him in the thigh with scissors. As punishment, the police in her village had forced her to work in a brothel owned by Z's boss.

Z escaped from the brothel and from China. But once Z was in the U.S., she found herself in a whole new nightmare: She had to apply for asylum. She spent the next 361 days in an Immigration and Naturalization Service detention center before an immigration judge reached a decision, and then four more years with her case on appeal while the INS battled internally about its view of women. What's even scarier is that you could say that Z and her wild story are every woman, and she is all of us. Come along, we'll explain.

Z was born in 1975, one year before Mao Tse-tung's death. Although Mao made women's rights a priority, Z came of age as China was leaving Mao behind. Favoritism toward boys under the country's one-child family policy led some to ditch daughters or

abort female fetuses—resulting in a 1996 population with 36 million more males than females. Ironically, women became more valued, but as a commodity: By that time tens of thousands of women were being bought and sold as brides and prostitutes.

Z, a farmer's daughter, was naive. "There was a lot in the world I didn't know," she said in a San Pedro, Calif., immigration court. Her U.S. lawyer describes Z as shy, with bad acne, and innocent—almost puritanical. In April of 1995, Z got a job working in a hotel restaurant. Pretty soon, her manager started inviting her out, but Z was fearful and refused. She testified, "Sometimes you see [a] hand [which] seems like [it] wants to touch you."

According to Z, on the night of Sept. 12, she was sorting linens in an out-of-the-way room when the manager began to touch her hair. When he moved to her breasts, she asked him to please be a little bit respectful. She testified that he responded by grabbing her so that she couldn't escape. Z guessed that her boss was going to rape her, and she screamed for help. No one answered.

One human-rights group reports that something like 60 percent of Chinese people say that a woman is

better off dead than losing her virginity before marriage. Z was a virgin. Scared, she grabbed a pair of scissors from a nearby table and plunged them into her boss's leg. Z ran out and was quickly nabbed by hotel security guards, who took her to the police.

*"I don't know why Z is so unlucky and suffering. This is only because we are ordinary people, and we have no rights."*—a letter from Z's father to her sister, who lives in the U.S.

Let's get a few facts out of the way: U.S. asylum laws came to be at the start of the Cold War, around the time our country realized we should have accepted Jewish refugees during the Holocaust. The laws were meant to protect people who faced persecution, particularly at the hands of their government. An applicant had to have a well-founded fear of persecution on account of religion, race, nationality, political opinions or membership in a particular social group—a catch-all which now covers gays, transgendered people and those from certain castes or subgroups.

But the rules didn't specifically protect those who suffer so-called "cultural" persecution by families or communities while governments look the other way—the kind more specific to women. It was only in the '80s ▶