



# WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN CHINA AND FEMINISM ON CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA

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*In recent years, women in China have to a greater extent than previously raised their voices about issues relating to women's rights and gender equality. Social media has served as an important tool and venue for women to share their own experiences with sexual harassment, domestic violence, and gender discrimination in the labor market. Yet, while the feminist movement has been on the rise over the past ten years, feminists and women in China who speak up about gender-related issues nevertheless face threats, antagonism, and censorship online.<sup>1</sup> China has stated that it aims to empower women and protect their rights.<sup>2</sup> However, activities and discourses that have the potential to disturb the existing social order or challenge the authorities are not tolerated by the government, as social stability is one of its top priorities.<sup>3,4</sup> This paper addresses how women and feminists in China use social media to speak up, while at the same time having to cope with gender antagonism in Chinese society and monitoring efforts by the government.*

## Oppression and Discrimination Against Women in China

In ancient China, women were subordinate to first and foremost their fathers, secondly their husbands, and lastly, as widows, their sons. At that time, religious and philosophical norms had been set up by men to benefit themselves in a male-dominated society. Needless to say, women's status was far from equal to the status of men, either socially or politically.<sup>5</sup> During the communist revolution in 1949, gender equality played, by contrast, a major role in encouraging millions of Chinese women to mobilize and join the revolution.<sup>6</sup> Mao Zedong's well-known saying, "women hold up half the sky", seems to reflect the party's emphasis on women's role in society.<sup>7</sup> "The equality of women and men" was

enshrined in the constitution, while initiatives that involved women in building the new communist China were introduced.<sup>8</sup> Through posters and speeches, the party projected the image of female socialist icons, so-called "iron women", who were depicted as labor heroes that also managed to maintain a harmonious family. However, women were seldom appointed to high positions, and their workload at home, in terms of housework and childcare, remained heavy.<sup>9</sup> In the 1970s, China was home to the biggest female workforce in the world.<sup>10</sup> Yet, women were often the first ones to be sent home in state factory layoffs, and more women returned to the home when expectations of them having children rose.<sup>11</sup> While China's economy has risen at a rapid pace since its process of reforming

and opening up to the world began, the status of women has regressed severely and gender inequality has deepened.<sup>12</sup>

Traditionally, boys have been preferred over girls in China, since they are viewed as more capable of providing for the family and carrying on the family name. The traditional preference for having sons was evident during the one-child policy, which was adopted in 1979 to curb China's population growth rate.<sup>13</sup> Couples aborted female fetuses and abandoned baby girls to ensure that their only child would be male. As a result, there is a severe gender imbalance in China today.<sup>14</sup> In 2015, it was announced that the one-child policy would be dropped, likely due to the looming population crisis facing the country, driven by decreasing birth rates, an aging population, and a shrinking work force.<sup>15</sup> Although couples have been allowed to have two children since 2016, many choose not to.<sup>16</sup> A population crisis would most likely affect China's economic and social stability, which appears to concern the authorities who are urging people to have more children. However, many worry about the negative effects this push for raised birth rates could have on women in China.<sup>17</sup> Getting married and having children often imply that women take care of the children and most of the housework, even when working full-time, due to the still prevailing traditional gender norms and patriarchal traditions.<sup>18</sup>

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Oppression and discrimination against women are widespread in various parts of Chinese society, including the labor market and home life. At home, many women suffer from domestic violence, which some refer to as “China's hidden epidemic”.<sup>19</sup> The All-China Women's Federation, a state-backed women's rights organization, reported in late 2019 that no less than 30 percent of married women in China have experienced some kind of domestic violence.<sup>20</sup>

Amid the COVID-19 lockdown, police reports on domestic violence doubled in some areas, while tripling in others.<sup>21</sup> Traditionally, domestic violence has been viewed as a private matter in China.<sup>22</sup> This view still prevails, as many Chinese argue that “the disgrace of a family should never be shared outside”.<sup>23</sup> As a result, it has taken a long time for China to pass legislation that criminalizes domestic violence. In fact, it was not until 2016 that the first law targeting domestic violence was enacted.<sup>24</sup> Despite the Anti-Domestic Violence Law, domestic violence cases have nevertheless continued. Some argue that the law is ineffective due to low public awareness about the issue and punishments that are too lenient.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the law has been criticized for promoting family harmony and social stability, a principle that stems from Confucianism, as this seems to contradict the law's principle of preventing domestic violence. The law promotes mediation as a key method in handling cases of domestic violence. Yet, this entails risks for the victims involved. For instance, when family members mediate in these matters, which they are encouraged to do, it often means that victims are convinced to return to the perpetrator to “win him back” and, thereby, “save the family”.<sup>26</sup>

In the labor market, gender discrimination against women is common. According to a study by All-China Women's Federation, 87 percent of female graduates have experienced at least one type of gender discrimination while job searching.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, a report by Human Rights Watch shows that job advertisements in China discriminate against women by specifying requirements about the job being for men only or displaying a male preference.<sup>28</sup> In 2017, 55 percent of the Ministry of Public Security's job advertisements specified “men only”.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, job ads rarely specify any type of female preferences. Some job ads have even required women to possess specific physical attributes, such as a desired height, weight, voice, or facial features. Additionally, large companies like Alibaba have specified in job ads that their female employees are “beautiful girls”, likely to attract male applicants for vacant jobs.<sup>30</sup> Chinese authorities have told employers to stop asking for women's marital or childbearing status

in job interviews. Government agencies have stated that gender bias is not allowed in the hiring process, including gender-based employment restrictions and the requirement of pregnancy tests.<sup>31</sup> Yet, many females are still being treated in this way.<sup>32</sup> For instance, one woman that was married when accepting a job had to sign a “special agreement” saying that she would not get pregnant within two years or run the risk of losing her job.<sup>33</sup>

## China’s Feminist Movement and Antagonism Online

Over the past ten years, discussions about women’s rights in China have come to the forefront to a greater extent than before. An increasing number of feminists, celebrities, and people in general have started to speak up about for instance sexual harassment, domestic violence, and unequal treatment in the hiring process.<sup>34</sup> 2012 marks an important year for feminism in China. On Valentine’s Day, a group of young women took to the streets in Beijing wearing wedding dresses stained with fake blood to raise awareness about domestic violence. Later that month, some of these women occupied men’s restrooms in Guangzhou to protest against inequality in public facilities. Furthermore, March 2015 has been described as a turning point for China’s feminist movement.<sup>35, 36, 37</sup> Some of these same women, five feminist activists in total, had planned to mark International Women’s Day by distributing information about gender equality and sexual harassment. However, they were imprisoned for 37 days on suspicion of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”.<sup>38, 39</sup> The arrest and detainment of these women, who would go on to be known globally as the Feminist Five, sparked outrage both domestically and internationally. The effects of the Feminist Five’s activism have been far-reaching. In addition to impacting the women’s rights movement deeply in China, as the feminists’ cause resonated with millions of women across the country, it also laid the groundwork for the future #MeToo movement in China. At the same time, the Feminist Five’s arrest showed the world that grassroots women’s rights movements

and independent feminists do exist in China.<sup>40</sup>

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Social media has played a crucial role in the rise of the feminist movement in China.<sup>41</sup> Women have to a greater extent used social media as a platform to propel dialogue about and fight against sexual assault and harassment, sexism, and stereotypes.<sup>42</sup> In China, there are few outlets for women to go about this publicly, which is why many go online. More specifically, Weibo, China’s equivalent to Twitter, has served as a platform for women to share their views on and experiences with gender-related issues, such as domestic violence and gender discrimination in the workplace. Gender-related issues are not seldom among the most discussed topics on Weibo. However, speaking out often comes at a price, as many of those who do so have faced threats and censorship.<sup>43,44</sup> Yang Li, one of China’s most famous comedians who is known as the “punchline queen”, is one example. Yang addresses controversial gender issues during her stand-up routines on Chinese television. In one episode from December 2020, Yang said that she had told a male comedian her new jokes, who, in response, said that she was “testing men’s limits”. When telling this story, Yang sarcastically asked if men even have limits. This sparked anger and criticism from male netizens, who accused her of “man hating”. Some accused her of “repeatedly insulting all men” and “creating gender opposition”.<sup>45</sup> Yang was extensively insulted on her social media pages. Some reported her to the authorities in an effort to get her censored. This has been described as a backlash in Chinese public opinion against the feminist movement. In line with this incident, there is a broad gender antagonism in Chinese society today.<sup>46</sup> Such attitudes include viewing feminism as a rather negative word. In addition, feminists in China are often portrayed as radical and extreme.<sup>47</sup> Still,

some Chinese feminists have stated that promoting women's rights in a patriarchy means that men's interests are being touched on, which implies that there will be a backlash. This backlash has even been interpreted as an improvement by some feminists, who argue that conflict can bring about progress. Furthermore, some have described gender equality as a zero-sum game – in order for a woman to gain, a man has to lose.<sup>48</sup>

Attacks against feminists in China intensified during the spring of 2021. At least 15 accounts of prominent feminists were removed from Chinese social media platforms, which has been argued to be a part of an online campaign that aims to silence feminist voices.<sup>49</sup> Douban, an online social networking forum, closed down at least eight feminist channels, citing extremism, ideological content, and radical political views. Among the deleted channels were groups with links to the “6B4T” movement, which stems from South Korea and, among other things, urges women to refrain from relationships with men.<sup>50</sup> This lifestyle is clearly not in line with the government's push for increased birth rates. In addition to the censors employed by the government, nationalistic influencers and their supporters have also started to monitor the discourse online.<sup>51</sup> For instance, online feminist critics have asked for better guidelines regarding how to file complaints against women who are posting feminist views, suggesting Weibo add “inciting mass confrontation” to its list of sanctionable violations. A large share of the most active feminist opponents online has several thousand followers. Some of them have been celebrated by state media, and some are allied with the nationalist movement, which views criticism of any kind as an insult to the government.<sup>52</sup>

During the spring of 2021, nationalist bloggers accused feminist accounts of being “separatists” and “traitors”, while reporting them to Weibo moderators, claiming that some posts had “illegal” or “harmful” content. Only a few days later, the accounts were shut down. Nationalist trolls have been going through years-old posts on feminists' social media accounts in search of so-called “anti-

China” opinions.<sup>53</sup> For example, Xiao Meili, a leading Chinese feminist, had her Weibo account removed after she uploaded a video to the platform about an incident that happened at a restaurant. She had told a man to stop smoking illegally indoors several times, but the man, who ignored her requests, got angry and threw a cup of hot liquid at her table.<sup>54</sup> The next day, her post became a trending topic and sparked a heated discussion online in which many users expressed their support for Xiao.<sup>55</sup> Conversely, she also received thousands of hateful messages. Some users uncovered pictures of Xiao holding a poster reading “Pray for Hong Kong” from 2014, arguing that Xiao was a supporter of Hong Kong independence. Subsequently, Xiao's Weibo account was frozen. The e-commerce site Taobao also removed 23 of Xiao's items from her online store, arguing that they contained “prohibited content” – the word “feminist” was printed on all items. In mid-April 2021, Xiao sued Weibo in a Beijing court, a practice other women have used when their accounts were removed. According to Weibo, some of the accounts were removed due to users complaining about “illegal and harmful information” in some of their posts.<sup>56, 57</sup>

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Feminists are being increasingly targeted online in China. However, the crackdown on feminists is not new. In 2019, local authorities in China claimed that their main task when “cleaning up the internet” was to crack down on extremism, which included so called “extreme feminism”. To justify the crackdown, the local authorities argued that feminist activists, together with other campaigners, such as animal rights activists, wanted to disrupt the social order.<sup>58</sup> China has argued that it aims to empower women and protect their rights.<sup>59</sup> Still, activities and discourses that risk disturbing the

social order or that could challenge the authorities are not tolerated by the government.<sup>60</sup> This also includes the feminist movement. The upholding of social stability is a top priority for the authorities who have claimed that feminists are “provoking social instability”.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, in addition to state censorship, online nationalist accounts try to silence feminists, possibly because they view their cause as criticism against the government.

### Speaking Up on Social Media – Opportunities and Challenges

The challenges posed by severe censorship and tight control of information were evident during the #MeToo movement in China, which took off in January 2018. At that time, Luo Xixi, a former student at Beihang University in Beijing, published an open letter on Weibo in which she claimed that her professor had attempted to force himself upon her while she was a Ph.D. student. The professor was fired, and the university issued a public statement that the professor had harassed students sexually. In only one day, Luo’s open letter post was viewed over three million times. This marked the start of the #MeToo movement in China, which spurred further allegations against university professors. Subsequently, the movement spread beyond academia, as allegations against figures in both the NGO sphere and the media sector surfaced later that year.<sup>62</sup> This shows the important role social media can play in spreading awareness about widespread issues in society, which can encourage other people to do the same, and, in turn, lead to change for the better. Yet, strict internet censorship made it difficult for the #MeToo campaign to thrive freely in the country, as many netizens’ posts and chat pages that related to the movement were censored. Netizens did, however, soon figure out ways of circumventing the censors by using homophones and images as a sort of coded language.<sup>63</sup> For instance, when the hashtag #MeToo was censored, netizens responded tactically by using the Chinese characters for “rice” and “bunny”, pronounced “mi” (米) and “tu” (兔). Thereby, “mi tu” sounded the same as “me too”, without the censors noticing initially.<sup>64</sup> Before the hashtag #RiceBunny was also censored, it

was often used together with emojis of rice bowls and bunnies, frequently in combination with other hashtags, such as #IAmAlso (#我也是).<sup>65, 66</sup>

### ***“The challenges posed by severe censorship and tight control of information were evident during the #MeToo movement in China...”***

In recent years, domestic violence in China has surfaced as a more visible issue, not least on social media. The issue has been raised by several celebrities online, which has been applauded by netizens and has also encouraged other women to share their own stories. For instance, Tan Weiwei, a Chinese pop singer, released a new album in late 2020 featuring 11 tracks that all shed light on women’s rights issues. One of the songs addressed violence against women and was strongly praised by Chinese netizens. The phrase “Tan Weiwei’s lyrics are so bold” was a trending topic on Weibo, viewed more than 330 million times. Netizens praised Tan for her bravery in addressing the oppression against and abuse of women.<sup>67</sup> After the album’s release, women started sharing their own stories of gender-based violence on social media.<sup>68</sup> This demonstrates the important space social media platforms can serve, since users, within seconds, can reach out to millions of others to share their experiences and raise awareness around issues, such as domestic violence. However, since online campaigns that aim to mobilize and gather people are not tolerated by the Chinese government, as they can grow into collective action and demonstrations, it has resulted in social media posts relating to domestic violence being censored.<sup>69</sup> This occurred in September 2020, when the issue of deadly domestic violence attracted the attention of hundreds of thousands of Chinese social media users. Lhamo, a 30-year-old Tibetan woman famous for her video blogging, was brutally killed by her ex-husband. She was livestreaming a video on Douyin, China’s version of Tiktok, when her ex-husband poured gasoline over her and set the house

ablaze. On social media, Lhamo's death dominated for several days. One Weibo user called for a #LhamoBill aimed at protecting women in similar situations, a post that was shared at least 211,000 times. Yet, the hashtag and other hashtags referring to Lhamo were censored shortly after. In Lhamo's case, the police have been accused of refusing to intervene, even though she had previously called for help. Weibo users wrote that calls for help were repeatedly ignored due to the case being viewed as a family affair, and that more people would be harmed by the enforcement of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law, arguing that it "provides infinite connivance for domestic violence".<sup>70</sup> The day after Lhamo's death, President Xi Jinping stated during a UN conference that China is committed to eliminating violence and discrimination against women.<sup>71</sup> The government has also stated that it stands by gender equality and protecting women against violence and discrimination. Yet, Lhamo's case showed that China still struggles with reducing violence against women. The censorship of netizens' calls for further action on a Lhamo bill and posts that related to Lhamo's case also shows how difficult it is for people to push for change and address the issue online.<sup>72</sup>

Sexual harassment and domestic violence, among many other gender-related issues, are widespread in China today. Social media serves as an important tool and venue for women to share their own experiences and views on these issues. Yet, the #MeToo movement and calls for further action in the domestic violence case described above were prevented from spreading freely online. These are only two examples. As this paper has shown, feminist voices in China are continuously and increasingly being silenced, despite the government's aim of empowering women and protecting their rights. As feminists are challenging lingering traditional gender roles, norms, and stereotypes that are deeply rooted in Chinese society, while at the same time raising awareness about issues regarding women's rights, they are, by extension, also calling for change on these matters. The challenges facing Chinese feminists are manifold. In addition to pushing for change and raising awareness about women's situation in China, they must also cope with gender antagonism in society, online feminist critics,

and the government's monitoring and censorship efforts.■

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