

# How Online Activism Enhance Women's Rights in Authoritarian Society?

## The case study of Chinese #MeToo movement

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### Research Question:

- In an patriarchal and authoritarian society, women and other marginalized groups tend to have less access to mainstream media and policy-making in redressing cases of social injustice. In such setting—  
Can online activism become an instrument to enhance women's right in authoritarian socio-political context?

### Background:

#### Lack of legal and social support for gender-based violence

- Prevalent gender-based violence and sexual harassment**
  - 70 percent Chinese college students have experienced sexual harassment, according to the NGO Guangzhou Gender and Sexuality Education Center.
- Insufficient legal provisions**
  - Article 40 of the PRC Law defines sexual harassment an issue of labor dispute.
  - There is no concept of consent, and substantial definition for sex and gender-based offences.
- Distrust in authorities**
  - Out of 50 million court verdicts from 2010 to 2017, only 34 cases are centered around sexual harassment.
  - From those 34, 32 cases were brought by perpetrators rather than survivors.



Major social media platforms used by #MeToo activists in China (from left to right): Sina Weibo, Zhihu, Huxiu, WeChat. Notable Universities reported to have sexual harassment allegations on social media.

### Methodology

- Semi-structured Interviews**
  - Xianzi's sister, founder of the Feminist Voice (the largest feminist online organization in China that closed down by the authority)
  - Objective 1:** Understanding the motives of activists' course of actions.
  - Objective 2:** Understanding the pattern and implications of activism.
- Ethnographic research and text analysis**
  - Participate in the activists' workshop, meeting, and conversation to objectively record their conversations and actions.
  - Objective 1:** Understanding the organizational structure of the movement.
  - Objective 2:** Understanding how online activists influence women's mentality and course of action.

### Prominent case studies: #MeToo exposés

- Case study I, Xianzi vs Zhu Jun.** In the allegation against the state-sponsored CCTV broadcaster Zhu Jun, the survivors organized online protest that attracted an accumulative view of 110 million in 3 months, and it is the first #MeToo in court. Zhu Jun was suspended from his work while the investigation is under the way.
- Case study II, Luo Cici vs Chen Xiaowu.** Luo published her experience on micro-blogging platform, Weibo, which gathered 33 million views. It triggered online protest, and resulted in the grassroots petition spread over to 100 university campuses.

### Authorities' oppositions

- Internet censorship**
  - Posts on social media could be arbitrarily deleted within 24 hours of posting.
  - Social media and publication websites have a set of censorship to eliminate elements of dissents, such as issues of sexual harassment against renown universities' professors in Chinese #MeToo.
- Threat and intimidation**
  - In Case I, Xianzi and her activist friend, Maishao, received threatening call from unknown sources to pressure her drop the case.
  - In Case II, universities administrations threaten the activists who posted their encounters on social media with threats of failing classes.
- Pressure on other stakeholders**
  - Because of Chinese society places an emphasis on familial relation and reputation, family becomes the most basic unit for continuous oppression.
  - In Case I, survivor's mother at hometown was visited by the police and pressured to drop the allegation.
  - In Case II, survivor's landlord and mother are pressured by the authority.



### Online Activists' Tactics in advancing women's rights

#### Claiming patriotism and framing

- Instead of calling for "protection of women's rights", activists often call for "the betterment of motherland", or even call personal allegiance to the Communist Party and to President Xi.
- Case I, Xianzi wrote poems on blog to claim "filling the society with love", and call for the public to work in alignment with government's reform plan, instead of running up against it.
- Case II, Luo reiterates her action against sexual harassment a way to show patriotism.

#### Abandoning intersectional approach

- The government divided marginalized groups from one another, and divided #MeToo from other feminist groups, by means of intimidation and internet censorship.
- Case I, Xianzi issued open letter to denounce the label as a feminist. This action is condemned by many feminists in China, but it ensured personal safety and preserved her allegation in a society that is extremely hostile to the label feminism.
- Case II, Luo Cici never mentioned the rights of other group, such as female ethnic minority, religious minority, or migrant workers, which are predominantly female.

#### Self-censorship

- To avoid crossing the "red line" that would ultimately activate censor, many activists avoid pointing fingers at any specific political leaders, party ideology, or bureaucratic department.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

- Online activism functions as substitute for civil society in the authoritarian China. Social media allows a narrow space for grassroots movement to survive.
- It allows a tic-for-tat negotiation for women to negotiate with the state for better rights, and raise awareness by bringing gender-based violence and sexual harassments under the spotlight.
- However, the activists focus on social justice based on a case-by-case scenario on an individual level, and there is a lack of organizational potential for systematic change.
- The government could address the grievances brought up by female online activists and take preventive actions to reform law.
- Thereby, online activism can become an instrument for advancing women's rights in the form of civil society-state consultation.