

# The Dilemma of Women's Voices in the Post-Epidemic Era: Misconceptions of Feminism on Digital Media Platforms—The Example of Sina Weibo

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Weibo, one of China's largest digital media platforms, has become a major platform for women's voices to fight for equality. However, misconceptions of feminism on Weibo have become obstacles to women's voices, for which the platforms did not post women's views prominently. From the perspective of women themselves, this paper adopted a questionnaire to study the misunderstanding of feminism and its impact on women's expression on Weibo.

*Keywords:* feminism, women's voices, digital media platforms, the post-epidemic era

## Introduction

On April 12, 2022, a Chinese media outlet showed respect for revered figures in Communist China's history by posting pictures on Weibo. Some female users posted to the site, complained that the article and its photos had entirely overlooked the contributions of women in Chinese history and culture, and asked that the site rectify that omission and include the stories and pictures of women. Rather than responding by updating their celebration of great moments and great leaders in China's past and including images of women who have been essential players, the media outlet attacked the women who had complained. The outlet called them fake feminists who provoked gender confrontation aiming at social unrest.

The incident immediately sparked widespread discussion. Many women who dared to speak out were attacked. The platform blocked and banned the women, while some netizens came after them with cyber violence and physical threats. Behind this incident was the misunderstanding of feminism which has hindered the contemporary women's movement for equality.

This study explored the phenomenon of Chinese women's difficulties in fighting for their rights and equality online in the post-epidemic era, and examined the misconceptions of feminism on China's most popular social media platform.

## Literature Review

### Feminism Theory

In women's struggle for rights, patriarchal oppression has long been a central issue. Juliet Mitchell (1966) creatively proposed a dual-system theory—the immaterial patriarchal social system and the material capitalist

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system as the sources of women's oppression. However, this view was criticized by Young (1981), who argued that patriarchy could not be separated and that the root causes of women's oppression should be analyzed in an integrated manner. Most contemporary researchers have concurred: Women are oppressed by the combined forces of "the system" and gender biases.

Women's voices—their rights and their abilities to speak out—have been the focus of scholarly research since the 20th century. Based on the idea of discourse as the right (Foucault, 1971), Helene Cixous (Cixous, K. Cohen, & P. Cohen, 1976) proposed that writing is a fundamental force for social change: To overthrow patriarchal control, it is necessary to begin with a critique of language. Luce Irigaray (1985) supported female voices. She approached women's issues from a psychological and post-structuralist perspective and advocated the creation of a set of feminine symbols to evaluate gender differences.

In May 2014, Twitter exploded with the #YesAllWomen, with many female users posting tweets of stories of discrimination, harassment, and violence they had experienced, sparking widespread concern about sexism, misogyny, and violence against women. After this incident, research on feminism in digital media gained widespread attention (B. Barker-Plummer & D. Barker-Plummer, 2017).

### **The Digital Media and Feminism**

A large and growing body of scholarly literature investigating and analyzing discourses on Twitter resulted. Responding to toxic social media discourses became a critical factor in feminist social mobilization (Mondragon, Berasategi Sancho, Beloki Arizti, & Belasko Txertudi, 2021). Jackson (2018) concluded that digital media has gradually become a vital tool for feminist practice and development: More and more women are disclosing their stories of injustice due to gender. More women are connecting through social media platforms, and more and more mainstream media are focusing on the facts of sexual violence and gender inequality. For example, the divorce case of Wang Lihong and Li Lianglei, in December 2021, highlighted the role of social media in providing women with platforms and opportunities to express their opinions (Xie et al., 2021).

However, in recent years, some prior research questioned the roles of digital media in feminist movements (Singh, 2018). Digital media has become an essential channel for women's voices, but there has been growing hostility toward women and feminism growing in digital media (Wilhelm, 2020). Social platforms can be an essential window into feminist advocacy, but people can also use social platforms to promote misogyny and vent gender violence (Lopez, Muldoon, & McKeown, 2019).

Overall, previous studies highlighted the vital role of digital media in feminist advocacy and the feminist movement while critiquing the negative stereotypes of feminism that exist on digital media platforms, but how to eliminate those adverse effects needs further study. Most existing research findings take international social media—such as Twitter and Facebook—as their research platforms. However, because women have had a challenging time in China, and have long been subjected to Confucianism, a masculine culture, Chinese feminists have used digital platforms to fight for equality and respect (Han, 2018). Therefore, Weibo, one of China's largest digital media platforms, deserves to be investigated as a case study to fill the research gap.

COVID-19 exacerbated gender inequalities around the world (Foley & Cooper, 2021). Therefore, this study focuses on misconceptions of feminism on digital media platforms in the post-epidemic era and also analyzes the causes of those misconceptions.

### Methodology

This paper used questionnaires to study the dilemma of female fighting for women's rights on Weibo, how the misconceptions of feminism affected them, and what role COVID-19 played.

This study is based on a questionnaire survey, one of the most basic and commonly used methods in research (Bihu, 2021). A questionnaire with 19 multiple-choice questions was purposefully designed, focused on perceptions of feminism, feelings of female users when expressing their opinions on Weibo, and the impact of COVID-19.

Questionnaires were posted on Weibo for two days, from May 28 to May 29. There were 214 questionnaires completed, 183 by respondents identifying as women. As this study examines the difficulties of women in expressing their opinions on the Sina Weibo platform, and seeks the perspective of women themselves, the findings analyze those 183 questionnaires.

### Findings and Discussion

#### Misconceptions About Feminism Are the Main Reasons for Stopping Women From Speaking out

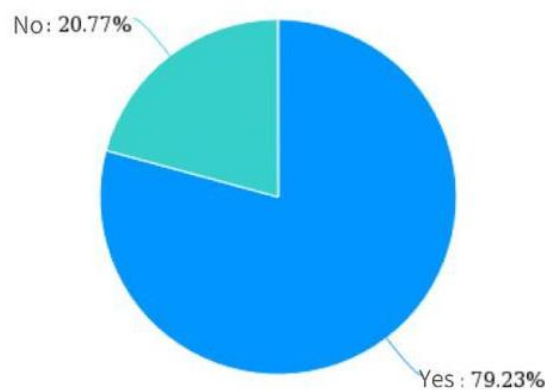


Figure 1. Have you ever fought for rights or helped women in their fights for rights on Weibo (including comments, retweets, etc.)?

According to the study, nearly 80% of the respondents said they had used Weibo to either fight for their own rights or help other women in their fights.

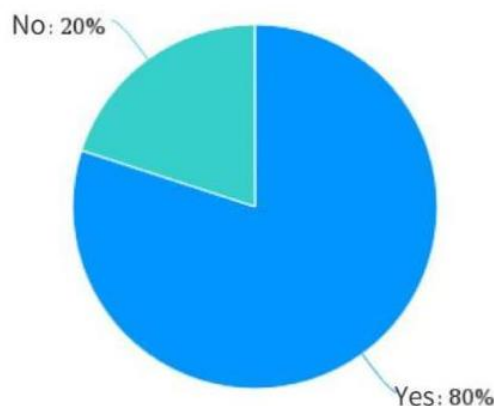


Figure 2. Did you encounter any difficulties in the above process?

Four out of five women respondents who said they had fought for rights or helped other women fight for their rights through Weibo said they had encountered difficulties.

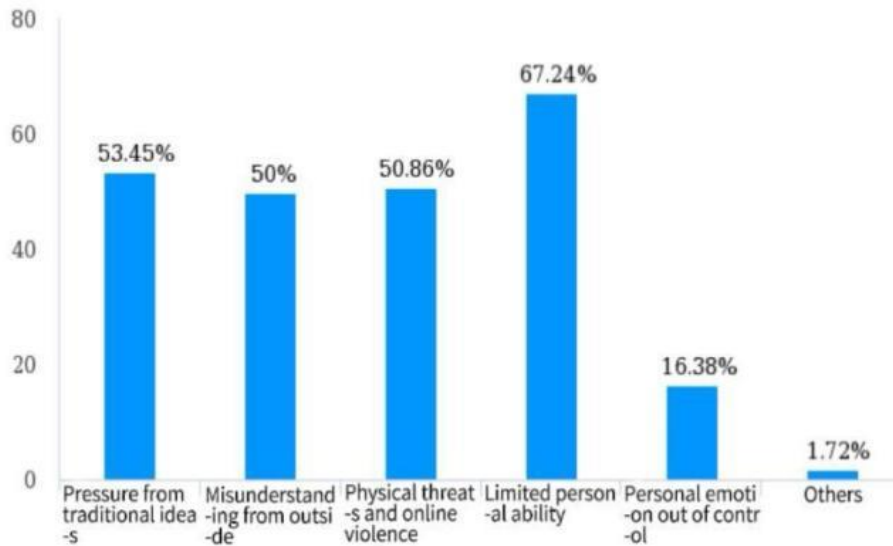


Figure 3. What difficulties have you encountered in expressing views?

More than half said they had encountered limited personal ability, pressure from traditional attitudes, physical threats and cyber violence, or misunderstandings from the outside world. A small percentage said they had experienced personal emotional outbursts and limited message distribution.

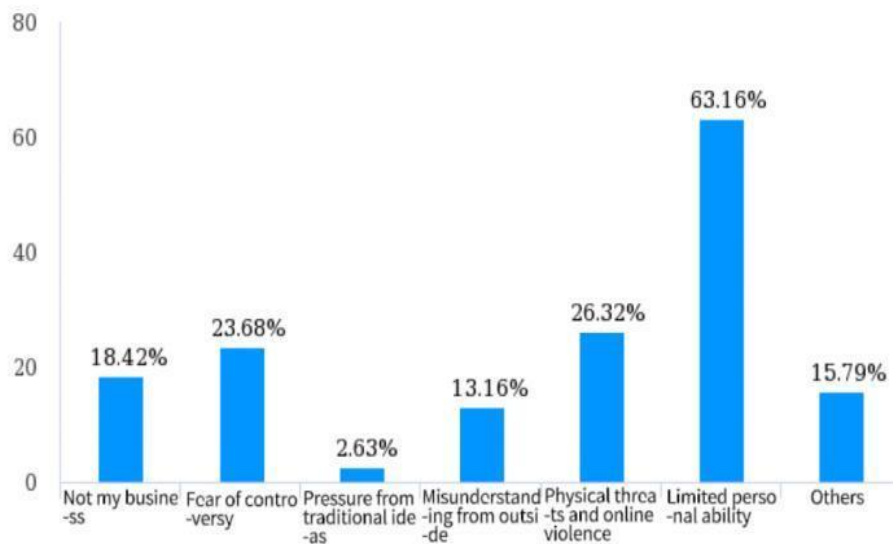


Figure 4. Why are you reluctant to express your views?

The study further queried respondents who said they were reluctant to speak out about their reasons: 63.16% attributed their reluctance to their limited personal capacity. Others said they were reluctant to voice their opinions for fear of physical threats, cyber violence, and causing controversy. Still others said they did not engage

because they believed similar incidents had nothing to do with them or that responding to the attacks on other women would lead to verbal aggression. Pressure from traditional beliefs, not knowing the whole picture, barriers from social media, and the perceived meaninglessness of speaking out on social media platforms also contributed to their reluctance to speak out.

Most female users—both those who reported difficulties expressing their opinions and those who said they were reluctant to do so—cited their limited ability to think and express as one of the main reasons. On the one hand, this phenomenon reflected women's growing awareness of self-reflection and self-growth. On the other hand, that also reflected women's concern about the consequences of voicing their opinions. Women have developed an inferiority complex due to the long-standing notion of male superiority over women and the attacks on feminism on the Internet (Ma, 2020). An inferior complex may be why some women were reluctant to express their views on Weibo or support other women when they had been attacked on the site.

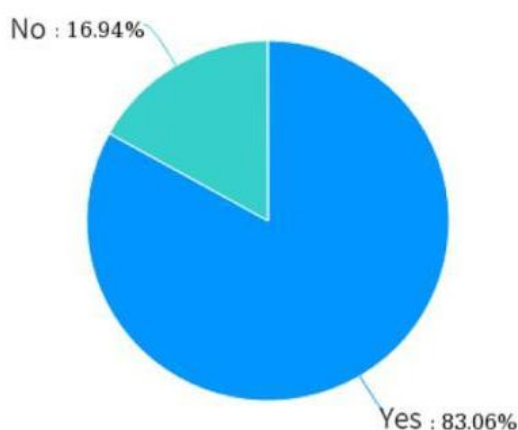


Figure 5. Do you think feminism has been misunderstood by Weibo users?

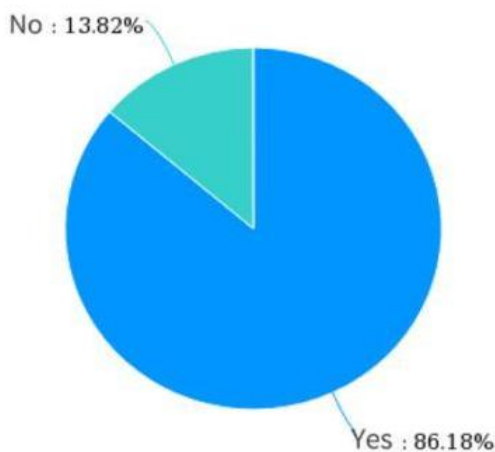


Figure 6. Do you think the misconceptions of feminism are barriers to women expressing their views on Weibo?

The data showed that 83% of respondents—or more than four out of five—believed that feminism had been misunderstood by Weibo users in general. Among those, 86.18% believed that the prejudice and misconception of feminism became an obstacle for women to express their views on Weibo.

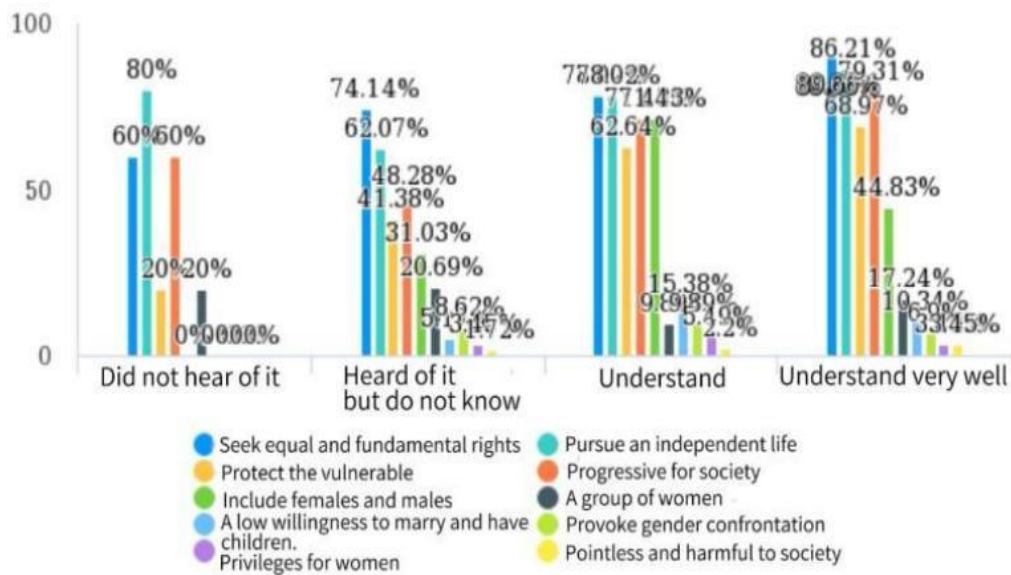


Figure 7. X: Do you know about feminism? Y: Which of the following do you agree with regarding feminism?

An interesting phenomenon was found in this study. The majority of respondents who said they had not heard of feminism were more optimistic about feminism. However, some respondents who said they knew or knew a lot about feminism had deeper misconceptions of feminism than those who said they had not heard of or had heard of but did not know about feminism.

For example, 14 respondents who thought they knew about feminism labeled feminists as having a low willingness to marry and have children (14/91)—a much higher proportion than those who had not heard of feminism (0/5) and those who had heard of feminism but did not know about it (3/58). These responses showed that some Weibo users' understanding of feminism has inherent misconceptions.

According to scholars who have studied women's views on feminism, many women have misunderstandings of feminism—often misunderstandings at the two extremes. Some women believed feminism meant asking feminists to be radical in the struggle for rights, so they did that. However, their radical words and actions made people think feminism was bigoted and hostile (Wang, 2017). On the other hand, some women were afraid to speak out and be perceived as feminists because they believed feminism had negative connotations (Wan, 2020).

In this study, among the respondents who believe that feminism is misunderstood by Weibo users, 68.42% believed that the deliberate smearing of feminism by anti-feminists and advocates of patriarchal ideology were the main reasons for the misconceptions of feminism. With the development of new media, anti-feminists have continuously modified their attack strategies on feminism in response to the changing digital environment, and taken actions to further intensify public misconceptions about feminism (Kruschek, 2019).

It is worth noting here that the interpretation as well as popularization of feminism in China has ironically been dominated by men, often those heavily influenced by patriarchal ideology. Perhaps not coincidentally, the stereotypes of feminism have been deepening. The lack of positive coverage and scientific popularization of feminism in the main media on Weibo has led to a lack of understanding of the views and goals of feminism among the general public (Wan, 2020).

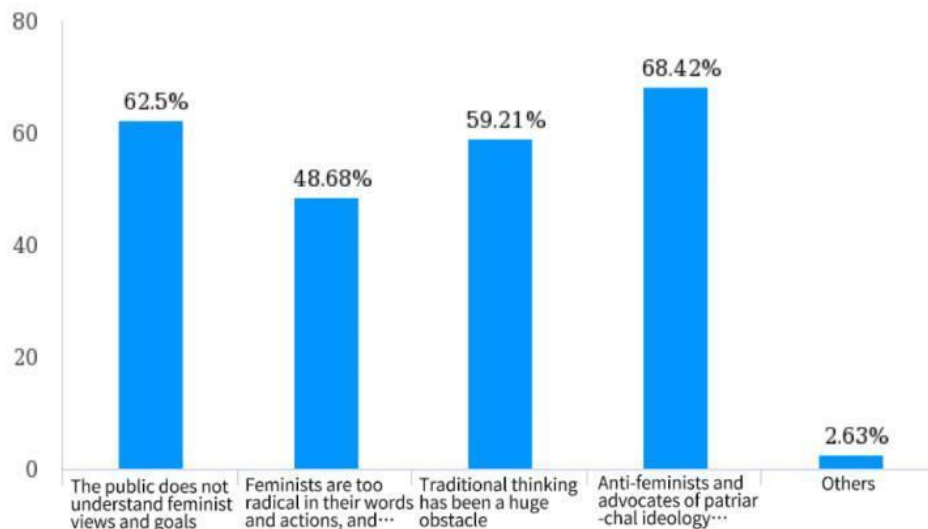


Figure 8. What do you think are the main reasons for the misconceptions of feminism?

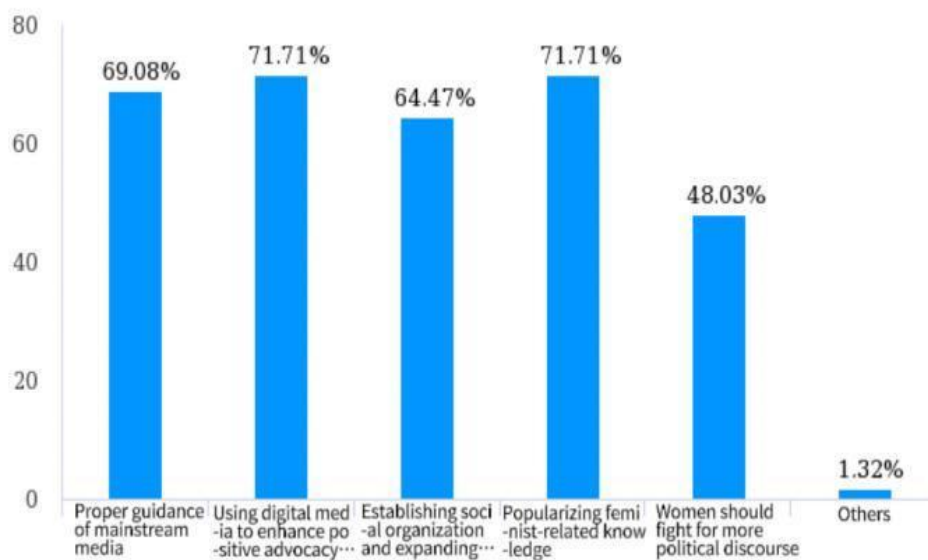


Figure 9. What do you think are the important ways to resolve the misconceptions of feminism?

According to the study, more than 70% of respondents thought using digital media to strengthen positive propaganda about feminism and popularizing knowledge about feminism would help resolve misconceptions of feminism. Almost two-thirds of the respondents thought proper guidance from the main media could help resolve the misconceptions of feminism. More than 60% of respondents believed it was necessary to establish social organizations about feminism and expand more channels for women’s voices. The idea that feminists should strive for more political rights also received 48.03% of respondents’ support.

**The Role Played by COVID-19**

According to the financial data released by Weibo, the average daily number of Weibo posters has increased by 25%. The questionnaire survey also showed that 65.57% of the respondents thought that the frequency of

using Weibo had increased after the outbreak. Only 8.74% of the respondents thought that the frequency of using Weibo decreased.

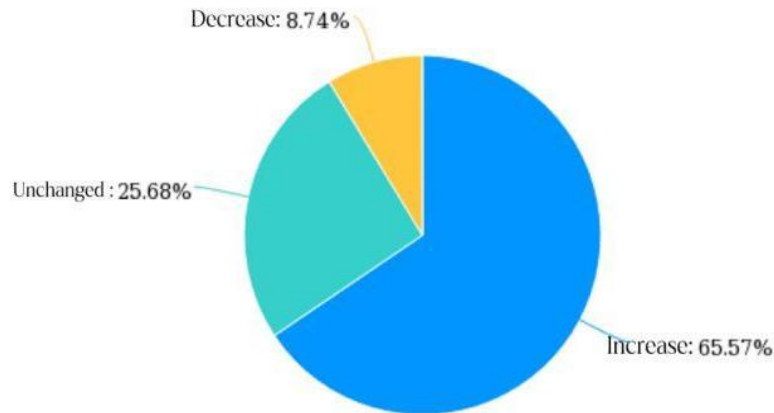


Figure 10. How your frequency of using Weibo changed after the outbreak of COVID-19?

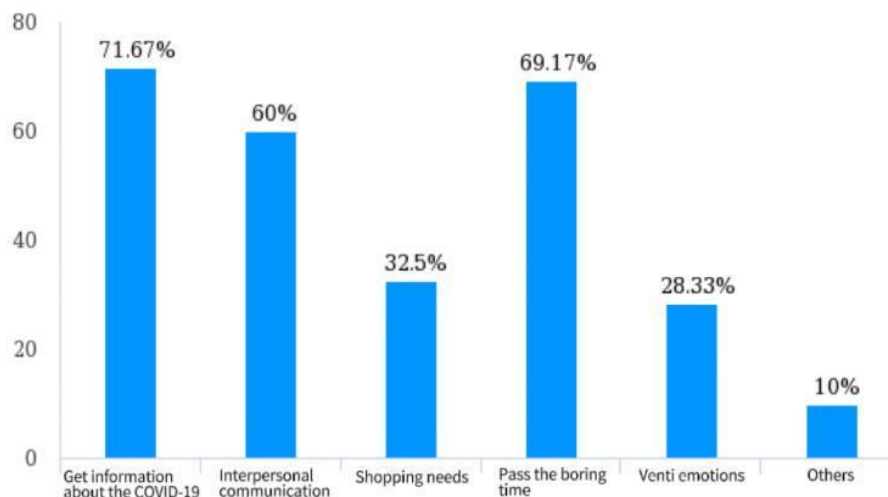


Figure 11. What motivates you to increase the frequency of using Weibo?

For respondents whose frequency of using Weibo increased after the outbreak of COVID-19, this study further set out to ask about the reasons. The data showed that respondents have usually used Weibo to get information about COVID-19, pass the time, and communicate with others after COVID-19 broke out. In addition, some respondents noted that they use Weibo to shop, vent emotions, and follow stars (as fans).

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Weibo has gradually become a window for news about the epidemic, a channel for business promotion, and a platform for public communication (Xie, Liu, & Yin, 2021). When people cannot go out, they showed themselves eager to use Weibo. Yet, at the same time, people are becoming less social in real life and more social online through social media platforms such as Weibo. Together, these priorities have contributed to the growing number of Weibo users and Weibo becoming increasingly popular.



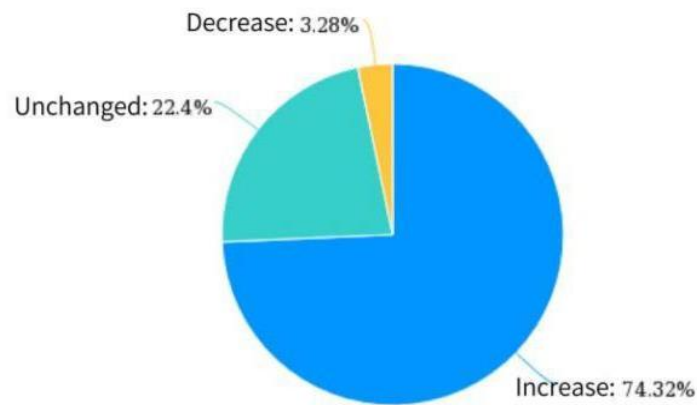


Figure 12. Do you think the amount of contents that women fought for their rights on Weibo has changed since COVID-19 broke out?

The data showed that most respondents believed the amount of content about women's fights for rights and respect on Weibo had increased since COVID-19 outbreak.

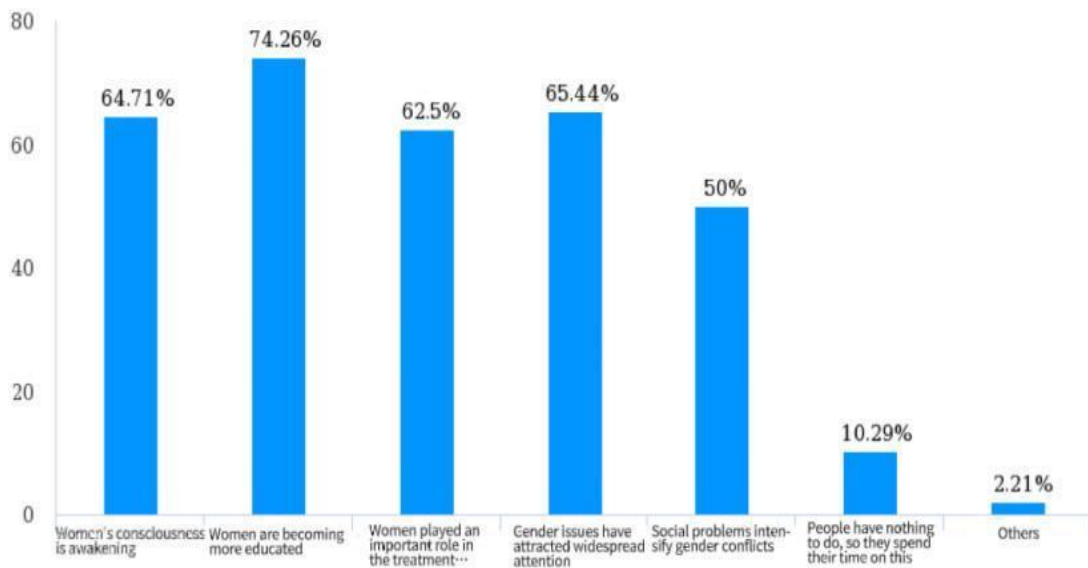


Figure 13. What do you think are the reasons for the increase of contents that women fought for their rights in the last two years?

This study further explored why respondents believed that the amount of content on Weibo about women's fights for their rights and respect has increased. Three-quarters of respondents supported that more women were fighting for their rights in the last two years because women were more educated. China's education statistics in 2020 showed that women made up a higher percentage of general undergraduate and master's degree students than men. Well-educated women were adept at initiating feminist discourse through digital media, pushing women's rights issues and gender perspectives out of the loop, and influencing mainstream media and society (Feng, 2020).

More than 60% of respondents believed the awakening of women's consciousness, the fact that women have played an important role in the epidemic receiving more attention and recognition, and the widespread attention to gender issues were also main reasons for the emergence of this phenomenon. In the treatment of COVID-19, 60% of frontline medical staff in Hubei were women, and more than 90% of nurses were women (Chen, 2020). Across China, women in medicine established an excellent reputation in fighting the epidemic, inspiring other women. But they still triggered widespread concern among men that the number of women who excelled at formerly "male" jobs would be pushed out of those workplaces.

Half of the survey respondents recognized social issues often intensify gender conflicts. For example, the epidemic led to a significant increase in unemployment, yet women were the majority of those unemployed (Cui, Zhang, & Zhou, 2021). At the same time, the World Health Organization reported that the epidemic had increased domestic violence (Cui et al., 2021).

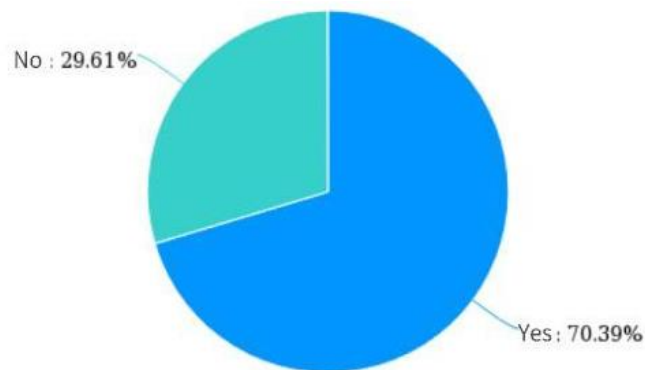


Figure 14. Do you think the misunderstanding of feminism on Weibo increased after the outbreak of COVID-19?

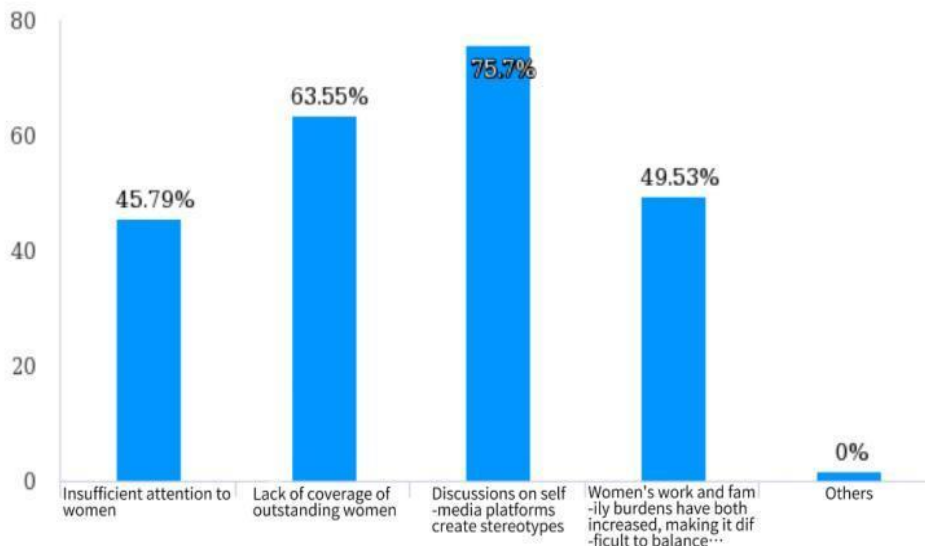


Figure 15. What do you think has aggravated the misunderstanding of feminism under the influence of COVID-19?

Seventy percent of the respondents believed the misconceptions of feminism on Weibo had been aggravated after the COVID-19 outbreak.

Women played an important role in the treatment of COVID-19; however, the discussion and media coverage about women during the epidemic was conspicuously absent (Chen, 2020). According to the study, 75.7% of respondents believed that discussions on self-media platforms could cause stereotypes to worsen misunderstandings of feminism. Nearly 64% of respondents thought the lack of coverage for outstanding women stopped the public from noting women's power.

Many women had to choose between work and family since COVID-19 broke out, which undoubtedly increased the pressure on women. The public thought women had more responsibility of caring for families than men (Zhang, 2020). Therefore, women who tended to pursue their rights and continue working when encountering these problems were often considered selfish and self-serving.

### Questionnaire

1. Please choose sex.
  - A. Male.
  - B. Female.
  - C. Prefer not to say.
2. How old are you?
  - A. Under 18
  - B. 18-24
  - C. 25-34
  - D. 34-44
  - E. 45-54
  - F. 55-64
  - G. 65+
3. How long have you been using Weibo?
  - A. Under 3
  - B. 3-5
  - C. 6-10
  - D. 10+
4. How your frequency of using Weibo changed after the outbreak of COVID-19?
  - A. Increase
  - B. Unchanged
  - C. Decrease
5. What motivates you to increase the frequency of using Weibo? (Multiple choice.) (Answer with "A" in question 4.)
  - A. Get information about COVID-19.
  - B. Interpersonal communication.
  - C. Shopping needs.
  - D. Pass the boring time.
  - E. Vent emotions.
  - F. Others \_\_\_\_\_ (Fill in the blank.)
6. Do you know about feminism?

- A. Did not hear of it.
- B. Heard of it but do not know.
- C. Understand.
- D. Understand very well.

7. Which of the following do you agree with regarding feminism? (Multiple choice.)

- A. Seek equal and fundamental rights.
- B. Pursue an independent life.
- C. Protect the vulnerable.
- D. Progressive for society.
- E. Include females and males.
- F. A group of women.
- G. A low willingness to marry and have children.
- H. Provoke gender confrontation.
- I. Privileges for women.
- J. Pointless and harmful to society.

8. Do you think the amount of contents that women fought for their rights on Weibo has changed since COVID-19 broke out?

- A. Increase
- B. Unchanged
- C. Decrease

9. What do you think are the reasons for the increase of contents that women fought for their rights in the last two years? (Multiple choice.) (Answer with "A" in question 8.)

- A. Women's consciousness is awakening.
- B. Women are becoming more educated.
- C. Women played an important role in the treatment of COVID-19 and received more attention and recognition.
- D. Gender issues have attracted widespread attention.
- E. Social problems intensify gender conflicts.
- F. People have nothing to do, so they spend their time on this.
- G. Others \_\_\_\_\_ (Fill in the blank.)

10. Have you ever fought for rights or helped women in their fights for rights on Weibo (including comments, retweets, etc.)?

- A. Yes.
- B. No.

11. Did you encounter any difficulties in the above process? (Answer with "A" in question 10.)

- A. Yes.
- B. No.

12. What difficulties have you encountered in expressing views? (Multiple choice.) (Answer with "A" in question 11.)

- A. Pressure from traditional ideas.
- B. Misunderstanding from outside.

- C. Physical threats and online violence.
  - D. Limited personal ability.
  - E. Personal emotions out of control.
  - F. Others \_\_\_\_\_ (Fill in the blank.)
13. Why are you reluctant to express your views? (Multiple choice.) (Answer with "B" in question 10.)
- A. Not my business.
  - B. Fear of controversy.
  - C. Pressure from traditional ideas.
  - D. Misunderstanding from outside.
  - E. Physical threats and online violence.
  - F. Limited personal ability.
  - G. Others \_\_\_\_\_ (Fill in the blank.)
14. Do you think feminism has been misunderstood by Weibo user?
- A. Yes.
  - B. No. (Questionnaire ends here.)
15. Do you think the prejudices and misconceptions of feminism are barriers to women expressing their views on Weibo?
- A. Yes.
  - B. No.
16. What do you think are the main reasons for the misconceptions of feminism? (Multiple choice.)
- A. The public does not understand feminist views and goals.
  - B. Feminists are too radical in their words and actions, and it is difficult to win the hearts of people.
  - C. Traditional thinking has been a huge obstacle.
  - D. Anti-feminists and advocates of patriarchal ideology deliberately discredit feminism.
  - E. Others \_\_\_\_\_ (Fill in the blank.)
17. Do you think the misunderstanding of feminism on Weibo increased after the outbreak of COVID-19?
- A. Yes.
  - B. No.
18. What do you think has aggravated the misunderstanding of feminism under the influence of COVID-19? (Multiple choice.) (Answer with "A" in question 17.)
- A. Insufficient attention to women.
  - B. Lack of coverage of outstanding women.
  - C. Discussions on self-media platforms create stereotypes.
  - D. Women's work and family burdens have both increased, making it difficult to balance work and family.
  - E. Others \_\_\_\_\_ (Fill in the blank.)
19. What do you think are the important ways to resolve the misconceptions of feminism? (Multiple choice.)
- A. Proper guidance of mainstream media.
  - B. Using digital media to enhance positive advocacy for feminism.
  - C. Establishing social organizations and expanding voice channels.
  - D. Popularizing feminist-related knowledge.

E. Women should fight for more political discourse.

F. Others \_\_\_\_\_ (Fill in the blank.)

### Conclusion

Today, digital media platforms, such as Weibo, have become an essential way for women to fight for their rights in China (Wan, 2020). However, women's voices have been caught in a dilemma. Women who speak out on social media platforms to fight for rights may suffer from online violence. On the contrary, they will lose their rights if they give up speaking out because they fear harm.

Therefore, this paper studied the dilemma of women's voices through a questionnaire survey. The main conclusions can be found from this work as follows.

Most women felt oppressed on Weibo, and many fought back for themselves or others. Some women did not speak out: some because they felt they had a limited personal ability to do so; some additionally for fear of being targeted.

Several women did not understand some of the basics of feminism because of traditional patriarchal ideology, public misunderstanding, and feminists' radical behaviors.

With the improvement of women's education level and awakening of women's consciousness, women paid more attention to their rights than before. Nevertheless, the misconceptions of feminism had made women's fights for rights more difficult since COVID-19 broke out. The lack of coverage and attention to outstanding women on self-media platforms stopped the public from understanding women's power and feminism. Meanwhile, many women had been forced to give up their jobs and return to their families after COVID-19 broke out, so they lost the economic support to speak out and fight for their rights.

Based on the available data, this study made a clear analysis. That is of great value in filling research gaps and addressing social issues. Although the findings of this investigation completed previous studies, it's not enough. With the development of social media platforms, according to the new situation of women's voices and the change in public attitudes toward feminism, more in-depth research can be continued based on richer data and other perspectives. For example, in the future, it could study men's views on feminism, how they differ from women's, and the impact of men's views, etc. It will be fascinating to see a study of men to support the findings.

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