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The Violence of Shuttering Feminist and Queer Communications

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For vulnerable people, to check in is to live. Variations of “call me when you get home” and “text me if you need to vent” are not phrases tied to specific cultures. These messages are commonplace among friends, acquaintances, and allies in groups facing gender-based and sexual violence, and they can be a significant part of survival. In the internet age, information and communication technology have a prominent connection to gender justice and safety. To cut off access is to cut oxygen from freely accessible and much-needed tools for combatting violence at the personal and institutional levels.

China is no exception to how gender and intimate partner violence (IPV) is discussed digitally. Since surveys of IPV began in the 1990s, the Women’s Federation of China data have indicated that IPV is the most common form of violence against women.¹ Underreporting remains a serious concern, with 72 percent of a 176-count sample responding that they stayed silent in response to rape.² Of 133 women who reported intimate partner violence to family members, nearly half (44.4 percent) were not supported by the family.³ As more relationships are built digitally within a nation of nearly 1 billion internet users, online communication has connected disparate groups and provided

About the Series

Gender-based violence (GBV) affects one in three women worldwide, making it an urgent and important policy challenge. Many countries around the world have passed laws intended to protect women from violence, yet violence persists. Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised awareness of the perils women face from gender-based violence—what has come to be known as the “shadow pandemic”—but it has also aggravated risk factors while increasing barriers to protection, support, and justice.

This publication aims to focus on the intersection of gender-based violence and the rule of law by examining how legal frameworks, judicial system responses, and public policy contribute to the ways in which gender-based violence is—and is not—addressed around the world. Each piece addresses the complicated challenge of gender-based violence and the successes and failures of various public policy responses globally, and offers recommendations for a path forward.

other options for support.⁴

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Sina Weibo and Tencent’s WeChat blogging tools and commenting features have been used to push back against gender norms and the problem of gender violence. Through these social media tools, individuals from different walks of life publish and comment on each other’s citizen journalism, blogs, and essays—as long as they’re not censored. LGBTQ circles, which overlap with feminist interest groups, have also been used to share resources, health information, and safety tool kits. However, the future of both these group types is at greater risk in recent years as authorities clamp down on more varieties of space creation by Chinese feminist and queer communities. As a result, the availability and future of these platforms has taken a concerning turn; likely restrictions and censorship have put Chinese individuals with marginalized gender and sexual identities at greater risk.

Gender violence and homophobia-linked safety issues go hand in hand with the problems of online access. Though state regulators monitor social media spaces for political dissent, blogs and chat spaces have remained an important buffer between the state and civil society. Online resources have

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allowed LGBTQ individuals and domestic violence survivors to find camaraderie and sympathetic communities. Parents of LGBTQ children also network through social media, swapping advice to help promote solidarity and safety for gender-nonconforming individuals.

The erosion of Chinese social media’s thin buffer between the state and civic spaces spells trouble for groups that do not conform to the standards being written on cultural discourse.

Chinese Communist Party Chairman Xi Jinping’s core vision of China’s social landscape includes 家风建设, or the “construction of family values.” In a July 2020 speech, he specified that families are the cellular components of society, emphasizing the “civilized” construction of family.⁵ With a cursory nod to China being a “feminist country,” Xi nonetheless singled out the “unique and distinct” roles that women must fulfill as mothers and wives, including their role in preserving the sanctity and beauty of the traditional Chinese family. This construct has brought about an uptick in images of a heterosexual nuclear family in propaganda and official media, as well as acted as bureaucratic guidance in communication policy. Women were profiled as workers within China’s COVID-19 pandemic, but they were simultaneously commended on their ability to keep their families fed, safe, and stable.⁶ These shifting stakes by state actors also contextualizes shutdowns of feminist and queer spaces. As a new law that implements a divorce cool-off period reaches the one-year mark and encouragement that families produce more children becomes more common within propaganda work, the role of biological children and family stability serving political ends re-emerges. Whether intentionally or not, the problem of harder-to-access web resources about violence and resisting violence can be devastating. Veteran organizers, however, are accustomed to having to destroy organizing materials and rebuild web content from backups, knowing that their discussions are sensitive and likely to be taken down.⁷



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By the summer of 2021, state encouragement of traditional gender roles and suppression of content that rebuffed it had coalesced into a tightening on social media and fresh waves of crackdowns. In the wake of high-profile rape cases involving high-profile perpetrators, censorship accelerated. As Canadian-Chinese pop star Kris Wu faced allegations of rape that brought forth a fresh wave of discussions about feminism, consent, and violence, a phrase emerged in online spaces: “It is women that save women.”⁸ This phrase trended alongside denials by Wu and assertions that the victim made up her accusation, which refreshed assumptions that she sought money and attention from mass media.^{9, 10} Undergirding these dueling sentiments about violence is an implication that is troubling on a societal level: In the absence of institutional support, women can only rely on their sympathetic peers.

As with many aspects of online life in China, the state will remain a key player in regulating speech related to gender violence. However, influencers encouraged by state apparatuses have also accelerated suspicions toward feminist and queer internet

users using their civic-space tools. On Sina Weibo, one prominent user posted a call for tips, alleging unsubstantiated rumors that LGBTQ and feminist organizations were colluding with foreign influence operations.¹¹ Though veteran activists may be undeterred by the new wave of shutdowns, the dampening of information can be devastating to younger internet users with nowhere to turn.

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Shrinking discursive space is itself a problem for the future of confronting domestic and gender violence. Powerful perpetrators remain at large, both legally and in the court of public opinion, as discussions about them remain stifled, depending on their connections. If sunlight remains a disinfectant for social issues, those dedicated to promoting feminism and discussing gender politics are finding it harder to

shed that light and share resources. As the social order in China solidifies under Xi Jinping's eighth year in power, it may do so at the cost of safety for marginalized gender and sexual identities.

NOTES

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