

The Dilemma of Women Participating in the Discussion of Public Issues on Weibo: A Case Study of Sichuan Changing the Rule for Birth Registration

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Abstract: Weibo, as a new channel for online political participation and a becoming important platform for the feminist movement, has become the most important Internet public sphere in China, and more and more women are participating in the discussion of public issues on Weibo. This research focuses on the dilemma of women participating in the discussion of public issues on Weibo through a case study of Sichuan changing the rule for birth registration. Based on the three characteristics of Weibo: freedom, immediacy, and interactivity, this study selects the discussion period of the night of the announcement that is worth studying, which was intense and the sample size was large. A total of 282 valid data from Weibo users and the observations on the discussion of the rule demonstrate that traditional moral values have a profound influence on women. Women still need to improve their subjective awareness and improve their participation and influence in the discussion of public affairs, while men need to increase their attention to the dilemma of women. Weibo platform must simultaneously reduce its restrictions on free speech. The government should spread education about gender equality and protect victims.

Keywords: social media, online political participation, public issues, female

1. Introduction

Weibo, as a new channel for online political participation, has become the most important Internet public sphere in China. In this Internet sphere, public opinion can be formed and it is open to all users. The diversification of information sources and discourse subjects on Weibo made some scholars see the prospect of the revival of the public sphere [1]. According to Weibo's official "2020 Weibo User Development Report" released on March 12, 2021, its user base shows a trend of youthfulness, and the percentage of post-90s and post-00s is nearly 80%, and female users are much higher in scale than male users. Weibo has an active information discussion environment, where the caused most Weibo users are female, so Weibo is an important platform for females participating in the discussion of public issues. Weibo has also become an important front for the feminist

movement, which shows that more and more women participate in the discussion of public issues on Weibo.

Women's participation in issue discussions exhibits three characteristics in the modern Internet public sphere: (1) The plurality of women's identities is evoked, promoting the awakening of female subjectivity. (2) The decentralized interactive platform changes the patriarchal discourse system and makes women's voices "visible". (3) The open social environment enables women to support each other and build a women's gender community, which effectively resists the symbolic violence of the patriarchal society [2]. However, the widespread use of Weibo also faces many challenges. In recent years, the Chinese government has stepped up its state control over social media. In some cases, users' permission to comment has been turned off, which has led many people to speak out in anger at the controls. What is more, the speech of some network celebrities or hot posts is easy to appear in the first area of the topic discussion, which is possible to cause people misleading.

In academia at present, even though there are many studies on the characteristics of Weibo as an important medium, few studies have focused on the current situation and the characteristics of Chinese women's participation in issue discussions on Weibo. This study attempts to analyze the current situation of Chinese women's participation on Weibo under a real case: Sichuan changing the rule for birth registration. Many Weibo users have expressed their opinions on the incident. This study analyzes their perspectives, emotional attitudes, and discourse styles through their discussions, and compares the results of male and female users. Based on the results, this study discusses the dilemma of women's participation in public discussion and provide countermeasures and suggestions for women to effectively show their opinion and protect their rights through online platforms so that more women can realize the importance of participating in public issues. Therefore, there can be further focus on the ultimate goal of supporting gender equality.

2. The Characteristics of Weibo

2.1. Freedom

Weibo provides a platform for free communication, breaks the monopoly of traditional media on statements, moves the right of making comments from the elite class to the common people, reduces the cost and lowers the speaking threshold [3], and gives "the silent majority more opportunities to speak" [4]. Users can freely express their views and publicize their personalities on Weibo. A large number of original content keeps appearing, which makes Weibo full of creativity and development potential. On the other hand, the freedom of communication and the low threshold of users also make some offensive, discriminatory, and anti-social remarks appear constantly, resulting in a flood of online violence and online abuse on Weibo. For example, in April 2022, a girl who was confined to her home thanked a delivery man on Weibo who helped deliver food for free to her father living in the affected area. However, she was questioned by netizens about "giving too little pay" and was subjected to online violence. In addition, all kinds of information provided by netizens on Weibo constitute a micro-information environment, in which the information is incomplete and unbalanced, which easily leads to the irrational judgment of the public on the event [5].

2.2. Immediacy

On Weibo, whenever a topic emerges, related comments appear at an alarmingly fast pace, reflecting the immediacy of Weibo. Weibo is a social media based on mobile clients, where the fast speed of news dissemination is due to the massive popularity of cell phone usage nowadays, so users can log on to Weibo anytime and anywhere to receive new news and express their opinions on

it. Additionally, with the development of technology, 4G has greatly reduced the delay of news updates. People can go through countless news almost without waiting [6]. Immediacy expands the platform's information accommodation in a short time and enhances the public's enthusiasm to participate in public opinion [7].

2.3. Interactivity

Weibo provides a good interactive communication platform, enabling interaction between bloggers and readers, as well as between events and events. To be specific, the blogger can reply to his fans through personal messages, comments, and more. Moreover, this interaction is timely and direct and can be known to the public, which supplements the content of Weibo. This interactive information delivery connects related topics according to the shifting focus of Weibo users, while in the process of information interaction, users generate more thoughts on existing topics, leading to more social topics.

3. Event Description

China's Sichuan province has taken an exploratory step to relax birth registration. The new rule, released in late December 2022, cancelled restrictions that people can only get their babies registered in a marriage, aiming for a more sound population surveillance system and balanced population growth. Since the new rule was announced by several authoritative state media on Weibo on the afternoon of January 30, the topic has continued to dominate Weibo's hot search throughout the night. Weibo's readership on this topic reached nearly 240 million on January 30 alone (figure 1). The huge attention received by this independent issue in the network fully demonstrates the influence of gender issues with "birth" and "marriage" as keywords in the network field. This event is also closely related to the topic, public issues, and women's rights and interests. This event is closely related to the topic, public issues, and women's rights and interests.



Figure 1: The reading volume of the rule changes [8].

4. Method

This study selects the discussion of Sichuan province's new rule for birth registrations released in late December 2022 on Weibo as a specific case analysis.

The method refers to the research on the discourse expression of women on Weibo [9]. The keyword "birth registration cancels marriage restrictions" was searched on Weibo, and the period from 19:00 on January 30, 2023, to 22:00 on January 30, 2023, was selected through the advanced search function to find the Weibo that mentioned the specified keyword during this period.

After excluding corporate Weibos, medium Weibos, as well as personal Weibos that make fun of and that could not be identified for opinions or emotions, a total of 282 valid Weibos were collected.

As for gender judgment, the user's gender is based on the "male" or "female" information he or she filled in when registering on Weibo. For statistical purposes, the study defaults to the user's personal page showing their real gender. The research samples were grouped according to gender, and the Weibos of male and female users were compared and analyzed from three categories: perspective, emotional attitude, and discourse style.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. Emotional Attitude

It can be seen from Figure 2, among the 282 valid data collected, 75 came from male users and 207 from female users, with the proportion of female and male users being 73.4% and 26.6%, respectively. This shows that female Weibo users are significantly more active in participating in this issue than male Weibo users.

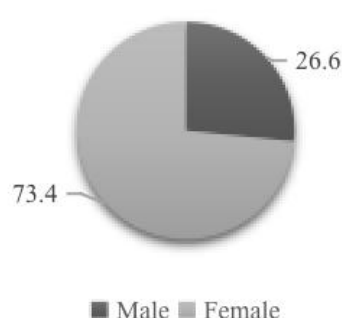


Figure 2: Comparison of male and female Weibo users' participation in the topic Sichuan changes rules for birth registration.

From an overall perspective, out of 282 valid data, a total of 55 support the policy, 161 oppose it, and 66 show a neutral attitude, which shows that the largest number of people, 57.1%, have an opposing attitude. From a gender perspective, those who oppose the policy also represent a majority across genders, accounting for 61.4% among women and 45.3% among men, which been shown in Table 1. Strong social opposition to the policy was revealed.

Table 1: Male and female Weibo users' attitudes toward Sichuan's new birth registration system.

Gender \ Attitude		Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Female	N	36	44	127	207
	percent	17.4%	21.3%	61.4%	100%
Male	N	19	22	34	75
	percent	25.3%	29.3%	45.3%	100%

5.2. Perspectives

The 8 perspectives mentioned in the 282 Weibos were ranked in order of frequency, with fertility, morality and ethics, and marriage in the top three. The perspective of female rights shows the biggest difference between male and female users, with 25.2% of female users mentioning this

perspective, while only 12.2% of male users, and less than half of female users (figure 3). It can be seen that women are much more concerned about female rights than men.

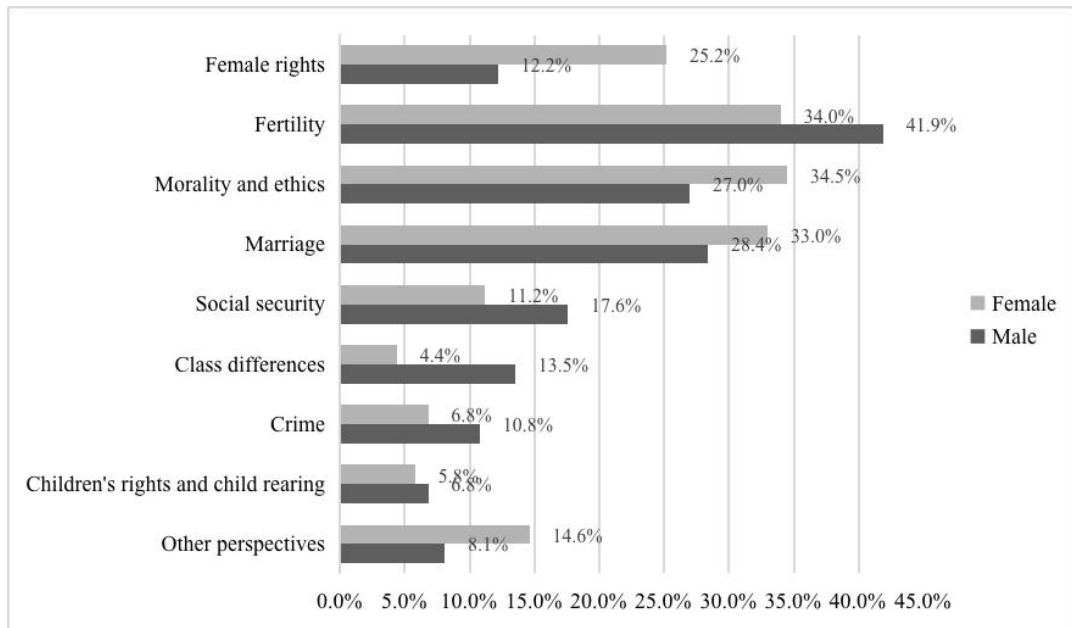


Figure 3: Male and female Weibo users' perspectives about Sichuan's new birth registration system.

Figure 4 shows the three most frequently mentioned perspectives of female users with three emotional attitudes respectively. Women with positive attitudes toward the rule mention female rights the most. The ability to take the initiative in childbirth and to escape from the constraints of traditional marriage on their development are important reasons for their support of the rule. Women who oppose the rule mention morality and ethics and marriage the most, which can be regarded as the 2 main reasons for their opposition.



Figure 4: The distribution of the five most concerned perspectives of female users with different attitudes.

5.3. Discourse Style

It can be easily found from the data in Table 2 that the discourse style is dominated by a macro way. Users tend to take into account the influence of the policy on the whole society rather than their personal preferences. For women, the macro way accounted for 82.6%, and for men, the proportion

is even higher, reaching 94.7%. The total proportion is 85.8%. Compared with the macro way, there are few micro statements. Women's micro statements only account for 17.4%, while men are only 5.3%, accounting for only 14.2% of the total.

Table 2: Male and female Weibo users' discourse styles about Sichuan's new birth registration system.

Discourse		Macro	Micro	Total
Gender				
Female	N	171	36	207
	percent	82.6%	17.4%	100%
Male	N	71	4	75
	percent	94.7%	5.3%	100%

In Figure 5, for the macro statements, the perspective of morality and ethics is more concerned, with 62 people. Then there is fertility with 57 people and marriage with 53 people. Fewer people will pay attention to social security. For the micro statements, people expressing opinions on the aspect of marriage make up a larger proportion.

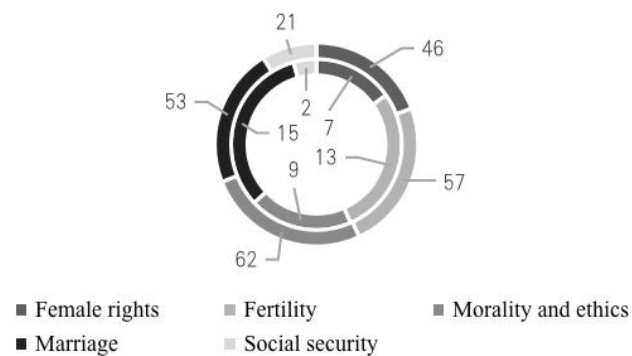


Figure 5: The distribution of the five most concerned perspectives of female users with different discourse styles(The outer ring represents the macro analysis, and the inner ring represents the microanalysis).

6. Result

It is clear from the above that the dilemma for women to participate in public discussions is multi-dimensional. Firstly, in terms of the external environment, men are far less involved than women, while society's attention to women's rights has long been inadequate [10]. In addition, from the perspective of women themselves, the dilemma is that they are influenced by patriarchal ideology, so it is difficult for women to jump out of this mode of thinking, which also leads to their difficulty in striving for their own rights.

According to Figure 2, women's participation in this issue is significantly higher than that of men. As a direct result, men pay insufficient attention to women's issues in society, which has shown that the voices and actions for solving issues about female rights are still limited to female groups and are not valued by male groups. Men, whether intentionally or unintentionally, evade the responsibility of working with women to face the harm caused by gender inequality to the entire society, perhaps because they still do not understand the benefits of improving women's living conditions for themselves and women. The lack of a male perspective on gender issues greatly

reduces the possibility of fundamentally addressing gender inequality. At the same time, women's issues are not taken seriously because of the long-standing patriarchal constraints of society, which place women in a position of second sex and otherness [11]. When men, the subjects of a patriarchal society, do not speak out on women's issues, women as objects do not receive the amount of attention they need to participate in public discourse. Thus, this is the dilemma of women's participation in public discourse in terms of the external environment.

On the other hand, the deep-rooted patriarchal ideology makes it difficult for women to truly value their rights. Patriarchal ideology has a profound influence on women, which makes it tough for some female users to pay attention to their vital interests when protecting their rights. As can be seen from Figure 3, lots of women pay more attention to their rights and interests and express their views on the new rule from the aspects of women's reproductive autonomy, employment security, and criminal industry chain against women. However, although women are significantly more concerned about their rights and interests than men, the perspective of female rights is only ranked fourth in the perspective of women's concerns. Due to the long-standing dominance of traditional Chinese culture and the deep-rooted patriarchal ideology, a number of women, including some feminists, are still unable to transcend traditional concepts. When they try to break free or think they have broken free from the limitations of traditional culture, they unconsciously fall back into the rut. Among women with negative attitudes, 43.7% mentioned the new rules' violation of morals and ethics, and 30.2% mentioned the collapse of the traditional institution and the meaning of marriage. These women argue the new rules will lead to the infidelity of the husband, the benefit of the other woman, and the justification of illegitimate children. Not only would it put women at a disadvantage in marriage, but it would "completely negates the meaning of marriage and family" and potentially revert monogamy to polygamy. Under the influence of traditional gender concepts, many women still emphasize the necessity of marriage and husbands for women, which means they still promote and strengthen the patriarchal ideology. As a result, they have difficulty empathizing with broader and deeper women's issues and have limited perspectives when discussing public issues. Meanwhile, their over-emphasis on marriage also makes it hard for them to reach an agreement with some women who pursue the freedom of marriage and childbearing, which leads to internal disputes and divisions among women.

From these phenomena, it can be seen that the fundamental problem of the dilemma of women's participation in public discussions is that the patriarchal ideology has had a deep-rooted impact on society. Therefore, in order to solve this dilemma, it is necessary to make adjustments both from the external environment as well as the women themselves.

7. Recommendation

Solving the dilemma of women participating in the discussion of public issues requires the joint efforts of society to create a public sphere of gender equality through the joint efforts of men and women and to achieve freedom of expression on a more free platform. At the same time, women also need to address the difficulties they face in discussing public affairs and expressing their opinions through a stronger sense of subjectivity.

7.1. For User

Women still need to improve their subjective awareness, actively pay attention to social public affairs and topics, take the initiative to participate in the discussion of public topics, and improve their participation and influence in the discussion of public affairs. Likewise, women should deeply study and actively publicize feminist ideas, oppose unfair rules and policies for women, and support proposals conducive to women's development. Furthermore, men need to recognize that women are

important subjects in social construction; in other words, women's interest is an important manifestation of social progress. Men and women should work together to build a public sphere of gender equality by considering women's interests, listening to women's voices, and safeguarding women's rights and interests.

7.2. For Weibo

Weibo users' opinions are likely to differ from the authority's values, while the perspective of the general public is difficult to be managed in an institutionalized manner [3]. In order to improve the relationship between the government and the general public, an opinion monitoring system can capitalize on this disparity between authority and popular opinion. A policy trial period can be proposed when Weibo, as a powerful opinion platform, can use big data to count the perspectives that appear more frequently, and these people's opinions can be used as an effective way to improve the policy. The platform must simultaneously reduce its restrictions on free speech. Only then can the true views of the populace be revealed, leading to the development of more advantageous policies.

7.3. For Government

The government has a responsibility to use its authority to combat gender stereotypes and promote gender equality. The design of students' textbooks, such as eliminating phrases like "women are more likely to invest in the family" should be supervised; The traditional gender attitudes should be denied through social media, such as highlighting women's equal status with men in news reports and policy promotions. People's awareness of women's helplines, complaints, and redress mechanisms should be expanded so that women in potential danger are aware of their situation and have the means to protect themselves. Staff in places where gender inequality is likely to occur so as to prevent discrimination against women in these places for example, staff in marriage registration offices should emphasize the equal responsibilities of men and women in marriage. In addition, penalties for discrimination against women and social security to protect women should be implemented.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, in the discussion of the new birth rule in Sichuan on Weibo, female users are significantly more enthusiastic than male users. They are more willing to express their attitude towards the policy. After comparing the Weibo contents of male and female users, this study found that women faced both internal and external dilemmas when participating in the discussion of public issues. The traditional marriage thought and fertility concept deeply rooted in female cognition brought by patriarchal ideology makes it difficult for women to truly value their rights, which leads to internal disputes and divisions among women at the same time.

Men's lack of concern for the female situation and women's entrapment in traditional thinking, essentially resulting in the extension of traditional cultural stereotypes of gender to participation in public issues. Furthermore, as the subjects of a patriarchal society, men evade the responsibility of facing the harm caused by gender inequality to the entire society, reflecting the fact women's issues are not taken seriously because of the long-standing patriarchal constraints of society.

Solving dilemmas of women participating in the discussion of public issues requires the joint efforts of societies. Women need to improve their participation and influence in the discussion of public affairs, while deeply studying and actively publicizing feminist ideas. Men should work with women to build a public sphere of gender equality. The platform can reduce its restrictions on free

speech. The government must use its authority to combat gender stereotypes and promote gender equality.

This study bridges the gap in Chinese scholarship on the characteristics and dilemmas exhibited by women's participation in public discourse on Weibo through a case study. Undeniably, there are some limitations in this study. The presentation of this result is related to a simple case selection; meanwhile, because of the limitation of technology, the data for the study was collected less, which may deviate from the overall situation. Additionally, the study was based on the gender of Weibo users. It cannot be excluded that some users chose a gender that does not match their real situation or the default gender of Weibo, which brings inaccurate results to the study. Furthermore, the collection of views in the content of tweets may be influenced by the subjective judgment of the researcher. To have a more comprehensive and accurate analysis of women's perspectives, personal interviews should be adopted in future studies.

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