

The Trial of Public Voice in Anti-Sexual Harassment: Functions, Limits and Risks

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Abstract: With the awakening of women's consciousness, sexual issues are brought to the front stage, and the call to solve sexual harassment has been growing. The network's social public voice plays a huge role in this process. This study focuses on the effect of public voice in social sexual harassment incidents and analyzes its multiple functions in detail by combining legal theory and actual events. In conclusion, public voice helps spread sex-related events rapidly across all social strata, increasing the public's and relevant departments' attention. However, radical public voice will also cause the focus of the problem to shift, promoting unnecessary group confrontation so that the real problem cannot be solved. This paper puts forward a targeted policy to solve the problem of sexual harassment and also points out the future optimization direction of the judicial system.

Keywords: public voice, anti-sexual harassment, judiciary improvement, “#Metoo”

1. Introduction

Modern information technology has profoundly changed social life and communication modes, including information acquisition, transmission, processing, and recording [1-3]. Through the Internet, the expression of individual opinion and propagation of public voice take on a new form. People feel more engaged in social events, and public voice reflects people's true thoughts. However, due to the anonymity of the Internet, people sometimes act like they are out of control online. With the frequent cyber-attacks and insults, scholars have begun to conduct scientific research on public voice. Existing studies mainly focus on the mechanism of the large-scale public voice in the Internet era and the negative role of the public voice in social events, aiming at guiding the masses to stay rational and calling on the authorities to give correct guidance to the public voice. They hold the same opinion as Irving Janes. When the crowds have the same thinking mode, narrow-minded views are formed because they are convinced that there is only one “right” perspective, and any other opinion is seen as disloyal to the group [4]. This mindset ignores the positive role that public opinion may have in network events. Another common shortcoming is the lack of a proper scope. Current articles either work on a specific case or give no restrictions on the object of public voice, and both cannot reach an accurate and universal conclusion. To solve these problems, this paper makes a comprehensive assessment and consideration of the advantages, limits, and risks of public voice. Furthermore, the research scope is set in the field of anti-sexual harassment so that it is neither too broad nor too narrow.

This paper first introduces the characteristics of public voice and regards it as a variant of social movement. Secondly, from three dimensions, advantages, limits, and potential risks, the role of public

voice in anti-sexual harassment is explained in detail. Some current events cases are given to reach a more specific interpretation. Finally, the conclusion is drawn: public voice is a double-edged sword. Its explosive spread makes it easier for people to access events that happen far away and keep track of the situation's progress, but it also quickly covers up the truth and produces mobs. A more precise understanding of the public voice is a must to maintain rational judgment in the crowd, and then people can use it as a weathervane in dealing with sexual harassment. Through this research, people can understand the various functions of public voice and provide a conventional paradigm for effectively solving social problems in the information age.

2. The Effects of Public Voice on Anti-Sexual Harassment

2.1. Awake of Public Awareness

Public voice makes full use of the network to achieve rapid dissemination. Especially for sensitive topics such as sexual harassment, the public voice can quickly ferment through the media, social platforms, and other channels. As the issue of sexual harassment comes into public sight, more people can understand the case and put their opinions forward. Not only does it attract the audience's attention, but it also encourages victims to walk out of the closet. When victims receive a supportive and comprehensive attitude from the majority, they are more inclined to come forward and voice their experiences aloud to pass on the torch of anti-sexual harassment.

The “#Metoo” movement in America is an excellent case demonstrating the strength of public voice. In 2017, Harvey Weinstein, the founder of the Hollywood Weinstein Film Company, was revealed by the New York Times to have sexually harassed at least eight women, which immediately set off the anti-sexual harassment social movement #Metoo. Women from all walks of life were inspired to share their experiences of being mistreated just because of sex. By gathering public force, the movement eventually results in reforming company supervision and creating space for employee rights protection [5]. More importantly, the view on sexual harassment changed completely. The victims were no longer told to remain silent or to just “shrug it off” or even be the ones to blame for being sexually harassed. Instead, the crowd comforted them by exposing and punishing the harassers. In December, “The Silence Breakers,” who sparked nationwide outrage over sexual harassment, were named Time magazine's “People of the Year.” The successful “first shot” also promoted this force out of the workplace. More and more women began to use the power of public voice to guard their legitimate rights.

2.2. Public Voice Redemption

Professor Yuan Wenhua proposed the concept of “network public opinion relief,” which refers to a spiritual relieving activity triggered by public concern in cyberspace [6]. Seen from the current social background, people are more likely to feel isolated because they live in a profit-oriented, dehumanized, industrialized, and highly bureaucratic society. Sociologist William Kornhauser suggests that social movements fill this emotional gap by providing a sense of belonging and engagement, and public voice works similarly. The moral resonance of participating in anti-sexual harassment can be powerful, for people feel they are supporting the disadvantaged group. Therefore, upholding justice online is a low-cost way to achieve a sense of accomplishment, which turns more and more bystanders into participants.

The slogan “girls help girls” shows another form of public voice redemption. By popularizing biological knowledge of the female body, which was once avoided by being brought up in public, women are using their way to fight against sexual harassment. They are trying to spread the idea that females no longer need to be ashamed of their bodies, and no one can use their beautiful bodies as an excuse to violate them.

2.3. Pressure of Public Voice

The expansion of public voice will eventually turn into public pressure on the relevant legal institutions. In such cases, the only way to ease public anger is to respond positively to the incident as soon as possible. In other words, public voice can effectively accelerate handling events by creating this invisible pressure.

On March 8th, 2023, to answer the call of eliminating workplace sexual harassment, six Chinese government departments, including the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the National Health Commission, issued the “System for Eliminating Sexual Harassment in the Workplace (Reference text).” As the most detailed text so far on sexual harassment, it clarifies the definition of sexual harassment as well as its principal manifestations, public commitment, and employee complaints. Moreover, the decree emphasizes that every means should be used to avoid secondary harm to the victims. It proves that the government is contributing to dealing with sexual harassment and making substantial efforts to combat it.

3. Limits of Public Voice in Sexual Harassment

3.1. Deep-Rooted Prejudices

Solving the problem of sexual harassment is not just about stopping inappropriate behaviors. More importantly, it is about reversing the gender inequality ingrained in many people’s minds. In other words, some traditional customs in China, such as the extreme preference for sons in rural areas, must be changed. So far, however, China’s official organizations have not played a very active role in leading the fight against sexual harassment. What’s worse, some of them continue to spread wrong gender concepts. During a female mental health education class at a middle school in Guangdong province, the speaker declared that “many sexual harassments happen because the girls dress gorgeously and behave coquettishly.” He confirms and deepens the idea that victims are guilty, depriving women of their right to protect themselves while having the freedom of dress. A so-called public service advertisement is even further off the right track. The poster shows the mother has no head and legs, only a uterus to carry the baby. Her body is composed of dense text. Only the position of the fetus is complete and blank. Ironically, the words that make up her body are secular labels of a good mother and a good woman, such as “bearing hard labor work” and “maintaining harmonious family and neighborhood relationship.” Her personality is erased in exchange for a healthy life for the fetus. Before a child is born, people have begun to view her as someone’s mother instead of herself, which is her most authentic identity. Women are still seen as reproductive machines rather than autonomous beings. Once this mindset forms, female lives become commodities.

Despite the fierce protest and criticism of such incidents from the public, those who dare to speak out are always the tiny number of people who understand and fight for the victims, and they are not even able to change the attitudes and thoughts of the indifferent onlookers. There is a massive gap between people’s understanding of sex equality and sexual harassment, and it cannot be filled by public voice alone.

3.2. Priority of Exceptional Cases

People pay less attention to social events that have nothing to do with them in a fast-paced life, so not many events can arouse a strong public voice. The media considerably affect the spread of different events, and they deliberately choose controversial cases controversy to gain enough volume. Celebrity incidents are one of their preferences. As a group with supporters and opponents, the discussion of stars is much more heated than that of the general public. Part of the reason so many women responded to the call in the #Metoo movement was that they were led and encouraged by a

high-profile woman, who they believed had the power to change the current situation. Therefore, the media and the audiences are more willing to give priority and continuous attention to incidents involving celebrities.

Another exceptional case is extreme events happening to ordinary people. Reports of domestic violence often receive sympathy but fail to cause public outrage. Only when the abuse reaches imprisonment or murder can it arouse widespread public attention. That means the public voice is one-sided, as people tend to get so caught up in exceptional cases that people ignore those less severe but most frequent incidents of sexual harassment. The problem can only be effectively addressed if people pay equal attention to every case of sexual harassment.

3.3. The Difficulty of Changing the Legal System

Public voice is dynamic. Rapid propagation comes along with quick dissipation. Uncertainties such as time, events, and conflicts of interest can lead to abrupt changes in public voice, making it difficult to maintain the initial standpoint. Heated discussions gradually fade with time, leading to the short existence of public attention on anti-sexual harassment issues, let alone the achievement of long-term change and solutions. In addition, the case of sexual harassment not only involves legal constraints but also is closely related to moral cognition. Thus, it isn't easy to constitute laws that the public can recognize. Among the two types of sexual harassment, quid pro quo sexual harassment and hostile work environment harassment, confirmed by the Supreme Court of the United States [7], the Chinese judiciary mainly focuses on the former now. The government hopes that progress could be made on the latter's solution. However, a thousand "hostile" are in a thousand people's eyes, so public acceptance can hardly be defined accurately. From this perspective, public voice may also hinder the advancement of the judiciary.

4. Potential Risks Caused by Public Voice

4.1. Malicious Rumors

Considering the utilities of public voice, some people may want to use it for their interests [8]. In 2020, a famous blogger claimed in a video that she, including many of her female co-workers, had been sexually harassed by her boss. With her tearful accusations, she received sympathy and support from the public, and her boss became the one to be abused. The boss tried to explain that the pictures provided by the blogger were counterfeited via live streaming, but he was never spared from the crossfire. People firmly believe that a girl wouldn't spread rumors at the expense of her innocence. It was not until a year later when the boss posted the legal evidence that he had won the case against the blogger, that he finally managed to turn the table. The court later confirmed that to achieve a "low-cost" termination of the contract, the blogger used all means to charge the boss with "workplace sexual harassment," she eventually paid a high price for her behavior.

As this case shows, it is easy for people with bad intentions to take advantage of the fact that it is hard to tell whether online information is real or fake. Due to the rapid iteration of the network, tracing the source of an online comment can be extremely complicated. Therefore, they distort and make up the facts to catch people's eyes and hardly pay any price. Rumors in this vicious circle easily mislead the public voice, and true justice is denied.

4.2. Irrational and Radical Public Voice

Emotions often precede rationality in groups. According to Gustave LeBon, this is called "the theory of infection" [9]. People don't take much responsibility for their actions in a crowd because no one knows them. Some people even develop a fearless mind and think they can do anything. When the

collective will is formed, people could be carried away by any opinion. Then, an infection that is to some extent akin to a collective coma prevails, releasing destructive instincts that society has been so careful to suppress. The three factors, invincibility, infection, and susceptibility, sustainably fascinate new people in the group. There have also been irrational actions in the #Metoo movement. With the fermentation of the situation, some women were too eager to use it to get a sense of recognition, which led to radical feminism in the later period of the movement. In the face of it, hundreds of women in France signed an open letter in the French newspaper *Le Monde* in early 2018, accusing the #Metoo wave of degrading to ancient witch hunting.

The popularization of the Internet may even make things worse. In boring daily life, publishing radical opinions is undoubtedly an ideal way of thrill-seeking. This not only buries the truth but also causes irreparable secondary injuries to the actual victims. In May 2023, a six-year-old child was accidentally killed on campus. While his mother was in great grief, some people began to discuss the poor mother. They criticized her for her decent dress and elaborate makeup, claiming she didn't care about her child, and some even played dirty jokes. Eventually, the mother could not bear the Internet violence and committed suicide, but the murders were never sentenced.

At the same time, the irrational ones themselves may be involved in the group's confrontation and become victims of the struggle [10]. Sociologist Raphael Ezekiel once tried to analyze the minds of racists. He pointed out that they distract young people from real-life problems by drawing their attention to racial struggles. If this trend continues, radical public voices could soon become the weapon of sexists.

5. Conclusion

By studying the role of public voice in anti-sexual harassment, this paper draws several conclusions. Public voice has certain utilities, such as raising public awareness, providing public voice redemption, and accelerating social event processing through public pressure. However, limits and potential risks also exist. The former includes the priority of particular cases, ignorance of general ones, difficulty changing the current legal system, and mental prejudice. As to the latter, malicious rumors can easily mislead the public voice or become irrational.

The following ways can be adopted to avoid these deficiencies: firstly, A steady mindset can help us avoid becoming radical in the crowd. The ability to tell right from wrong is necessary, and people should consciously rely on authoritative evidence. Secondly, sexual education should be strengthened. As mentioned in the paper, sexual harassment can only be eliminated if a correct value of sex equality is built, and that should start from the young generation. Furthermore, people should be taught to stop spreading incorrect information before legal proof exists.

Based on existing studies, this paper fills some academic gaps by comprehensively analyzing the issue and establishing a proper cognition of sexual harassment. It helps reduce gender discrimination and conflict and suggests perfecting current Chinese laws. Public voice can thus work better in the fight against sexual harassment. This paper inspires subsequent studies on public voice in anti-sexual harassment and helps create a more respectful social environment.

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