



# Women's Online Participation and the Transformation of Citizenship

A study in Hong Kong and Guangzhou

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This research brief captures insights from a qualitative study of the emerging techno-social paradigm in China in relation to women's engagement, and practice of citizenship, online. The study was a part of the CITIGEN research programme. It explored the dynamics of the multiple counter-publics and alternative public spheres in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, two distinctive Chinese societies under the regimes of post-colonialism and authoritarianism, respectively. The research study looked at the uses of new media among women's organisations and activists for community building and campaigns for social justice. It explored both the institutional approach of women's NGOs and the individual approach of female activists, attempting to address the following questions:

1. How do women's NGOs and women activists enact their ideas of citizenship on the Internet?
2. How do their interactions with the government (or institutionalisation processes) affect their imagination of citizen rights, self-positioning in public engagement and appropriation of online tools?
3. What kinds of public sphere do they create respectively? What are the differences and the dynamics between these?

The study looked into the history and development of two well-established organisations, namely the Guangdong All-China Women Federation (GDACWF)

and Association for the Advancement of Feminisms (AAF), as well as two less established organisations, namely Gender Media Action in Guangzhou (GMA) and Nutong Xueshe (NTXS) in Hong Kong. The analysis of these organisations and networks was foregrounded against the local political context, the history of social movements and technology. The different public spheres generated by women's organisations, networks, and individual actors, respectively, were studied through a content analysis of key online debates. This brief reflects on the key findings of the research, discussing the imperatives for feminist civil society from the standpoint of social justice and equity, in the emerging techno-social context. It articulates the need for women's rights advocates to grasp the transforming public sphere ushered in by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for political organising, and to engage actively with the question of citizenship.

## Use of ICTs by women's organisations and activists

What was seen through the research is that women with institutional resources in China tend to work with the government towards legal and policy reform. While such established women's organisations are less likely to enlist community participation in policy advocacy, less established women's groups adopt a participatory model. The efforts of the former towards the

institutionalisation of gender perspectives in policy making have been limited to women related issues and not really extended to successful intervention in major policy areas or important decision-making processes. In terms of ICT applications, they tend to adopt a conventional media approach, such as in the form of online resource centres, and have very limited interaction with the public through the Internet. Such established organisations have therefore failed to become key players of the radical frontier of the civic movement. On the other hand, marginal women's groups have actively pursued public engagement and education. Importantly, they depend on ICTs for organising and advocacy.

As for individual women activists, their engagement with policy issues extends beyond institutional boundaries. Calling themselves as citizen journalists, their online interventions critique the state and the wider masculine citizen movements, embracing autonomous feminist traditions. Having grown up in a techno-mediated environment, as in the case of Hong Kong, or constantly having to deal with state censorship, as in the case of mainland China, individual activists are very flexible with different media forms and platforms.

### How women's organisations and activists intervene

Established women's organisations tend to intervene in the structural and representational dimension of the public sphere by engaging with media policy (including censorship) and criticising the stereotypes of women and sexual minorities in mainstream media representations. Yet, the institutionalisation of such a 'gender' perspective in Hong Kong for instance, through the introduction of a gender studies programme in the University curriculum, has paradoxically resulted in the de-linking of gender and feminist discourse from more radical social movements. Conventional media approaches towards ICTs have failed to generate an interactive space in the feminist counter-public, resulting in the disappearance of 'productive antagonism' within the feminist circle.

The more marginal organisations depend on network modes, using ICTs for community building and self-empowerment, and thus are more active in representing themselves and engaging in discursive battles in the online public sphere. In mainland China, where associational and academic freedom is relatively absent, network groups and individuals seem to be actively claiming and practising feminism in their public engagement, trying very hard to work out a distinctive path away from the statist agenda which subjugate

women through population policies and ideological controls. Even though these small groups and individuals have very little resources, they have a strong sense of solidarity and pull their resources together to create a counter-culture to negotiate and resist neo-liberal ideologies and the state.

Moreover, given their relative isolation as a cyber-ghetto, these groups are more open to collaboration with other social groups and organisations in issue-based social campaigns. The nature of individualised communication facilitated by social media has resulted in a new form of political engagement that is centred around friendship, which is semi-private, emotive and personalised. Based upon such online social networks, activists also further politicise their extended network by organising events, which have evolved into counter-publics that share similar political agenda.

### Civil society and political society

Although Hong Kong and Guangzhou are both part of China, Hong Kong has been a colony under the British government for about a century until it was handed over to China in 1997. The city's civil society started developing during the post-war reconstruction of the social system. Most of the NGOs were social service organisations. After the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, civil society began to politicise. However, with the change in the political climate since 1997, the civic sector of political NGOs has been shrinking and the social service NGOs sector has been expanding. The post-colonial nature of the political system under the shadow of the Beijing government has largely limited the political effects of social mobilisation. In mainland China, NGOs are embedded in the one-party state apparatus and do not enjoy autonomous status. These semi-governmental organisations, due to their patron-client relations with the state and bureaucracy, fail to address social grievances. On the contrary, individuals with the motivation to act independently and make changes are forced to leave institutions. The only resource that helps them sustain their work is a dissent network sustained through the Internet.

The economic transformation to a capitalist market since the 1980s has, to a large extent, weakened the mass base of the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its political organisations. Facilitated by information technology and a large number of info-activists, local incidents easily gain public sympathy and echo throughout the country and develop into nationwide incidents, forcing the government to react in order to pacify public sentiment. In order to cut off the channelling of social unrest and grievances into

political transformation projects, the CCP has adopted a hard-handed policy towards political dissidents. At the same time, it has also changed its methods of political organisation from patronage based relationships to a network hub that can generate public opinion to consolidate its legitimacy through the political performance of 'policy deliberation'. In both cities, NGOs and political organisations have been appropriated by the state to contain and marginalise the citizen movement, thereby preventing it from growing into a politically transformative force.

## Citizenship discourses and gender

The liberal discourse of 'equality' and 'rights' has become the guiding principle in gender mainstreaming and is upheld by many women's organisations in their policy advocacy work. However, such a liberal framework has failed to address the situation of social minorities; in particular, the interest of 'non-citizens' who are outside the protection of the legal system.

On the other hand, right-wing populist discourse against sexual minorities, foreign domestic workers and new immigrants continues to remain as the dominant voice in the online public sphere, fuelled by anxiety derived from the city's changing economic structure, which has increasingly become dependent on financial and property markets. Right wing politics operates through endless rounds of social debate, while the policy advocacy of women's organisations has failed to address public anxiety over the complicated social, cultural and political relations embedded in the wider context. Very often, public discussion has been channelled to the issue of restricting citizenship by legal means rather than to a more reflexive and comprehensive programme of social reform to expand the scope of citizenship that can address the diverse needs of various displaced social groups.

The populist sentiment behind the citizenship debate is driven by a rejection of social security based upon redistribution, justified by the perception of the subordinated groups (lower-class, women, children, sexual and racial minorities) as irresponsible citizens, and as a social burden. The citizen movement in both Hong Kong and China has been depicted in gender neutral terms, very often represented by male human rights lawyers. The violence in the 'private' domain has either been downplayed or neglected in the citizen rights discourses. Feminist discourses in the discussion of social differences, needs and rights, private and public, can help re-politicise the debate and engender a new movement dynamics for redefining the relationship between social groups in society as well as their relation to the state.

## Some pointers for feminist intervention in China

This research study has important pointers for how feminist intervention in citizen movements can be revitalised in China and how digital spaces will need to be imagined and deployed.

### **1. Going beyond gender mainstreaming**

The agenda of gender mainstreaming was introduced in the Chinese speaking world at the Beijing conference in 1995. However, the notion has evolved in Western society where institutional democracy has been accomplished, whereas in most of Asia and in the Global South in general, political systems are less crystallised and more emergent. In the case of Hong Kong, the agenda of gender mainstreaming helped introduce a set of legal reforms in the late 90s; yet, after the handover, the policy assessment and gender audit operations have directed the progressive women's movement away from mass movements. The practice of women's citizenship led by the group of relatively resourceful women's organisations under the principle of gender mainstreaming has its limitations. It has meant negotiating with the government for more positions for women in official institutions, as well as policies that address women's needs rather than engaging in oppositional politics that address the fundamental social injustice experienced by the multitude of social minorities. Such an orientation has alienated women's groups from radical politics that challenge the very legitimacy of the government. As women's organisations are already part of the state apparatus in China, the principle of gender mainstreaming, to some extent, has helped to facilitate legal reforms. At the same time, women have been tied in a patron-client relationship with the state and are very often used by the government to justify censorship practices and even the repression of grassroots elections. This co-optation has led to alienation of the women's movement from the autonomous citizen rights movement. The starting point for a radical feminist politics in China would be in adopting a rooted approach to gender justice. Imported notions will not work. The transformation of the public sphere in China in the emerging techno-social paradigm, and the diverse and decentered practice of feminism in the contemporary juncture, requires new frameworks to redefine both the agenda and tools of political action towards social justice and gender equality.

### **2. From 'access' to feminist consciousness**

The gender digital divide in Hong Kong and China is not so much an issue of 'access' or 'skill'. The stories from

the study show us that in the current context in China, once a woman knows what she wants to do, regardless of her educational background and age, she will manage to find her way out to the online world. At the same time, it is also true that the Internet public spheres in both mainland China and Hong Kong are dominated by male voices and male opinion leaders. Instead of technical training, more resources should be spent to encourage online feminist advocacy projects that help nurture the subjectivity and feminist consciousness of active women citizens and an online feminist counter-culture that can connect to the wider politics for social justice.

### 3. Feminist engagement in citizenship struggles

Many researches have shown that gender, racial and sexual discrimination and stereotypes keep circulating and reinforcing themselves on the Internet. In addition, social networking tools, with their 'echo chamber' effect can easily lead to the rise of right wing populist politics. The global division of labour and disparity between the rich and the poor has intensified ethnic conflict within Chinese society, as the role of government in poverty relief is increasingly becoming important and social services and benefits are usually allocated to those with full citizenship. Feminist intervention in the debates over citizenship is crucial. It is important to re-politicise feminist discourses and re-

connect feminist theory and practice for generating a reflective space in the online public sphere.

### 4. New NGO cultures for online possibilities

Many NGOs have spent a lot of resources on their new media projects but with little impact. Since social media are mainly designed for individual use, the motivation comes from the individual's friendship networks and spontaneous responses online, while NGOs usually have an organisation structure that requires collective decision making. These two communication modes somehow are in conflict with each other. While existing online tools need to be adapted for advocacy purposes, it is also necessary to keep work methods in alignment with online cultural habits so as to encourage more participation. However, many online engagement projects initiated by women's NGOs have not taken off because of the lack of vibrant interactions. In fact, when the rights department of a semi-official women's organisation decided to use a micro-blog, it had to re-adjust its communication policy by giving power to its cadre to interact spontaneously to online news and comments. The adaptation of new media for public engagement is not only a question of technical know-how, but also a question of effecting a change in organisational cultures of interacting with the public, and carving out a space for spontaneous campaigns initiated by the participants.

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More information and a digital version of this policy brief is available at [www.gender-IS-citizenship.net](http://www.gender-IS-citizenship.net)

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