

# *Through the Lens of #MeToo: A Discussion on Sexual Violence in Chinese Schools*

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**Abstract:** There is a global school sexual violence crisis, and China is not free from it. This study discusses the causes and influencing factors of school sexual violence first, including power imbalance in school, traditional gender roles and respect for teachers, as well as the ambiguity or lack of laws. To further study the natures and perspectives of school sexual violence, we analyse the impacts and hindrances of #MeToo movements in the specific context of school sexual violence. Although the positive impacts of #MeToo such as increasing social awareness and individual empowerment proves its efficiency to certain extent, there are still multiple hindrances ahead such as threats from school management and media censorship still reflects, showing how complex the issue of the school sexual violence is.

**Keywords:** School sexual violence, China, #MeToo movements

## 1. Introduction

At present, the widespread occurrence of sexual violence at school settings across the world has posed threats to countless students, affecting their physical and psychological wellbeing. China is not an exception---for instance, according to Girl's Protection, a Beijing-based non-profit, 34% of alleged sexual misconduct occurred at school settings from analysing 301 media reports in 2019[1]. The definition of school sexual violence is sexual violence incidents occurring in educational settings according to Bangkok Conference. To be noted, the term "sexual violence" here is a relatively broad word which includes but not limited to sexual harassment, sexual assaults, abusive verbal messages and comments. It is harder for victims of sexual misconducts in school that are not classified by laws as criminals to fight for justice due to lack of evidence and difficulty of investigation. It is also often misunderstood that the victims of school sexual violence are limited to women students. However, although the majority of the victims are women, in other cases, other genders can also be victims. Liang Gang, who was a form teacher in a high school in Sichuan, China, sexually assaulted and harassed more than 20 boy students from 2010 to 2020, arousing concerns in society[2]. The point here is that sexual misconduct occurring at school setting is outcomes of many factors such as power difference between teachers and students, conservative traditional sex cultural, authoritarian government. When we study on the origin of the issue school sexual violence, it is not sufficient to

draw parallels and find similarities between cases occurred in different countries, we should look at the problem in the specific political, cultural, educational context of China. For the longest time, those incidents have gone unnoticed due to the immense shame of speaking out and fear of retaliation. However, with the development of communication technology in China, things have changed. Encouraged by the wave of #MeToo movements America, a former PhD student Qianqian started the first #MeToo movement in China by criticizing her professor from Bei hang University for sexual harassment. Since then, an increasing number of victims of school sexual violence stood out online to fight against injustice and reveal the misconducts of their teachers. However, due to the numerous hindrances such as pressure from school, social media censorship, to what extent is #MeToo movement effective in dealing with the issue of school sexual violence in China and how has the empowerment and hindrances of #MeToo reflect the different perspectives of school sexual violence?

## **2. Causes and Influencing Factors of School Sexual Violence**

### **2.1. Unequal Power Relationships**

The occurrence of sexual violence at schools is not accidental. Some structural factors contribute to the persistence of sexual violence at school, and some objective constrains have led to its lack of effective regulation. It should be emphasized that although various theoretical perspectives can be focused on to analyze different types of sexual violence, concentrating on the “school relationship”[3] proves most essential. “School relationship” denotes a power dynamic in which the perpetrator can take advantage of their superior position at school to infringe on their victims’ basic bodily rights. Additionally, perpetrators often assume educational or management responsibilities at school, exercising strong influence over school atmosphere and implementation of school regulations. Therefore, an unequal power relationship between teachers and students emerges as one of the most important causes of sexual violence in schools. Such situations can also be analyzed with the “abuse of organizational power” [4]. When an organization is divided into different power classes, those at the top of the power hierarchy hold absolute superiority. They assign supervisors and maintain the operation of the administrative system in ways that strengthen their authority. Within schools, the prevalence of this imbalanced power structure is blatantly clear; students stand at the receiving end of education, with no formal approaches to protest against sexual violence perpetrated by their educators. In most situations, teachers and other members of school staff treat such instances of sexual violence as a negative event and suppress its spread by all means, such as private negotiation or threat. Many victims have to use social media to attract public attention; otherwise, they may lose the opportunity to strive for their legitimate rights and appropriate justice entirely. Unequal power relationships between teachers and students also manifest in the fact that teachers can influence students’ future development through examinations, scholarship graduation and paper publishing. When students choose whether to expose sexual harassment or faculty misconduct, they have to rationally think about these vested personal interests.

However, although the analysis of the power structure model above explains the power difference between teachers and students, it can not well explain peer sexual violence in schools. For example, according to a survey by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 79% of male students and 81% of female students from eighth to eleventh grades have experienced peer sexual harassment[5]. Sexual harassment may be an attempt by adolescents to express sexual interest, something they have not learned to do in a socially appropriate manner[6]. Especially for cross-gender sexual harassment, the perpetrator tends to exert pressure onto the victim on a simultaneously psychological and physical level. Taken together, although the power imbalances in peer-to-peer sexual violence are more varied and circumstantial, perpetrators tend to oppress their

victims using various sources of coercion and pre-existing advantages, hence enforcing and exploiting an unequal power relationship.

## **2.2. Traditional Gender Beliefs and Teacher Idealization**

Sexual violence is a common and urgent problem in Chinese schools, but victim silence is widespread and there is a severe lack of invisibility. According to a survey that interviewed college students in Liaoning Province, 35.8% of male students and 30.9% of female students will keep silent after sexual harassment, only 2.6% of male students and 2.3% of female students tell their parents or teachers afterwards, and only 13.8% of male students and 7.8% of female students choose to call the police afterwards[6]. Most victims attribute their silence to the constraints of an oppressive societal and cultural atmosphere. The formation of this cultural atmosphere is deeply rooted in two persisting ideologies: the long-standing Confucian culture and the deep faith that “a teacher for a day is a father for life.” Confucianism has influenced Chinese people for thousands of years and has long been internalized into the nation’s spiritual structure. However, the gender related doctrines of Confucianism is feudal, with many of its preachings rooted in the belief that women are inferior to men. For example, it posits that a man’s duty is to rule his family and govern the country well, while a woman's duty is playing the role of a good wife and a diligent mother. During the Han Dynasty, typical feminine virtues, namely obedience and loyalty, were developed into “feminine ethics” [7], which required women to obey sexual moralities (such as remaining virgins until marriage), speak politely, and perform properly. In the male-dominated society, women's sexual moralities were defined not by themselves but by the men around them; a woman who “broke” the rule met punishment by her husband and male family members. Evidently, these traditional ideologies manifest into situations of sexual violence today, where male perpetrators of violence continue to endorse unfound gender norms that heavily objectify women.

The power dynamic between students and teachers can also be traced back to a traditional Chinese virtue. In ancient China, people who were knowledgeable held a high reputation, resulting in a ubiquitous demand for private education amongst the general public. In contemporary society, the continuation of this virtue makes sexual violence perpetrated by teachers more difficult to identify. Many child predators claim to sexually harass students in the name of learning, which reduces students’ awareness of prevention. Generally, traditional gender beliefs and teacher idealization internalizes victims’ shame when voicing their experiences. To solve this problem, countermeasures must be taken to strength sex education in schools, and it is necessary for relative administration at schools to set up a reporting system for sexual violence.

## **2.3. Ambiguity and Lack of Relative Laws**

The ambiguity and lack of Chinese law regarding sexual violence also influences the rampancy of sexual violence in schools. In Chinese society, the definition of sexual violence is often left to intuitive generalizations and lacks legal definition. Disputes on the extension and connotation of the term “sexual violence” and “sexual harassment” remain unresolved. The Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women states that “sexual harassment for women is prohibited,” the content brief and lacking specific descriptions or practical applications. The Chinese Civil Code specifies the definition to sexual violence “against others by verbal, literal, pictorial and physical means,” but still lacks a objectively measurable standard. Chinese Criminal Law only adjudicates sexual violence with obvious physical contact,such as obscenity,rape and insult. the concept of “sexual harassment” or other forms of sexual assault are not included[8]. Another negative phenomenon is that psychological knowledge is generally ignored in China’s case trial of sexual violence[9].

As for sexual violence in Chinese schools, the relevant legislation is even rarer, as schools are specialized public places and thus require the formulation of laws according to circumstantial investigation and evaluation. Therefore, the legislation on sexual violence in schools deserves utmost attention, particularly in regards to the detailed definition of various forms of sexual violence.

### **3. Empowerment of the #MeToo Movement**

#### **3.1. Background**

The onset of the #MeToo movement in China has allowed a new platform through which sexual violence can be discussed, catalyzing an influx of student-activist voices and an unparalleled level of discourse. Within this new era of student-led online activism, sexual violence in schools have taken on new lenses of framing, which engage and contend with the traditional causes of campus sexual violence in innovative ways. In the following section, we will explore the various narratives proposed by such dialogue, as well as the advances and hindrances the movement has on combatting sexual violence in schools.

#### **3.2. Anecdotal Framing and the Collective Narrative**

Spear-fronting China's #MeToo movements are "participant narratives"—anecdotes told through the lens of first-hand experience. As Tyler Caple finds in his qualitative content analysis of *Zhihu's* #MeToo-related posts, the top comments were ones detailing a "personal anecdote that illustrated the point the commenter was trying to make" (Caple, 2019)[10]. The uniqueness of this storytelling method lies in its personalization; the dispersion of sexual violence incidents in schools are not simply factual and abstract, but inescapably infused with the personhood of the victim. Taken together, the commonalities within these student voices form a collective narrative revolving around a "striking numbers of survivors and heart-breaking stories" (Chen et al., 2020)[11]. Such an overt manner of speaking out is unseen in China's social and educational spheres, and stands in stark contrast with the norms that traditional hierarchies imposed onto female students. As previously outlined, female Chinese students are subject to two prevalent societal expectations that reinforce their silence: the maintenance of purity and obedience to men, and the unconditional reverence and respect to their teachers (Zeng, 2020)[12]. At the core of these gendered norms is the internalization of shame upon being victim of sexual violence, and consequently, rape myth. Thus, the use of anecdotal evidence attacks the basis of victim-blaming that plagues school campuses. Instead, it boldly attaches student identities behind sexual violence awareness, underscoring the idea that the victims of school violence do not—and should not—need to hide behind shame or guilt.

#### **3.3. Practical Advances**

The proliferation of online discourse and awareness has seen marginal translation into the smaller, more nuanced environments of school campuses. The existing literature detailing quantitative change are scarce, as foreign investigation into Chinese schools are largely restricted and the stigma against sexual violence remains predominant, exacerbating participant bias. Dr. Hongliang Chen has conducted one of the few studies regarding this topic, in which he finds that exposure to the #MeToo movement has positively correlated with increased bystander intervention, the act of "interven[ing] timely and effectively in the harm situation," amongst Chinese college students in situations of sexual violence (Chen et al., 2020)[13]. Although the underlying mechanism behind this phenomenon are under-explored in relation to Chinese students specifically, the tangible effects of personalized framing draw parallels within other social movements; the empathy and credibility that stories, and the identities behind them, can foster has proven to engender public agency in other social movements,

as argued by Marshall Ganz and Joseph Davis (Ganz, 2001 & Davis, 2002)[14]. Thus, it can be tentatively concluded that the increase in bystander intervention documented by Chen are the beginnings of a broader shift towards public awareness, and thereby public agency, on sexual violence in schools, as catalyzed by the proliferation of participant narratives through the #MeToo movement. It is this accumulation of public pressure that has instigated instances of school reform. As The New York Times columnist Chris Buckley reported, in April 2018, following the initial rise of the #MeToo hashtag on Chinese social media, Professor Zhang Peng, one of the many accused of sexual violence towards students, was barred from teaching and stripped from academic awards in face of mounting student pressure (Buckley, 2018)[15]. In response to another incident, “the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China claimed the plan to implement sexual violence prevention mechanisms into college campuses” (Chen et al., 2020)[16]. Despite these measures being provisional and mitigatory at best, they demonstrate the shifting interplay of power between China’s student population and its higher level institutions, underscoring the potential move away from little to no student voice. Yet, it is imperative to note that documents of such reform exist only on a case-to-case basis in journalistic investigations; widespread, structural reform has yet to be seen and documented in scholarly work, and thus the effectiveness of the online movement on systematic change remains uncertain. However, what is clear is that the movement has not flourished to its fullest: various sources of resistance have, and continue to, impede its success.

## **4. Hindrances of #MeToo movements**

### **4.1. Pressure from School**

The most significant and most immediate hindrance is that in fear of their reputation being tarnished, teachers and schools will try their best to keep the student victims silent and prevent the news from spreading out to the public. They may do so by threatening the students with the possibility of delaying graduation, failing their papers or other sorts of troubles. An article from CBH (Chinese Business Paper 2018) reported that 69.3% out of 6592 respondents experienced different types of sexual misconduct in school and more than half of them remained silent. According to attorney Li Lin, perpetrators usually take advantage of the power imbalance between a teacher and a student and threaten the student in terms of publication, project approval, post-graduation studies and career opportunities[17]. In fear of such consequences, most students would choose to keep silent about their experiences. For those who bravely stand up and say #MeToo would then be likely to receive direct warnings from the school management or teachers, and most of them will simply delete their posts afterwards.

### **4.2. Media Censorship**

Although it may appear that school sexual misconduct victims do not get censored as often as #MeToo survivors in other arenas such as Xian Zi who sues against CCTV host Zhu Jun, media censorship is still evident in these cases. Social media platforms like Weibo will not censor individual recounts of students, the authorities are very worried about the potential of these individual posts in sparking civil dissent. Ultimately, the government may fear the threat of #MeToo to their centrality of power and perceived social stability based on the mainstream values and practices. In the cases of sexual misconduct in schools, although the incidents themselves do not seem so threatening, the government may fear that many politically woke dissidents may draw parallels to other incidences of power imbalance and power abuse. This makes #MeToo fundamentally a questioning of power and the government has every reason to crack it down because of its very defined nature. This is evident in how they have banned variation movements of #MeToo such as “Mi Tu” or emoji expression of #MeToo. Since the end of 2018 into early 2019, almost every variation of the #MeToo hashtags on

Weibo were censored ( Tyler, 2019)[18]. The victims of school sexual misconducts are not only discouraged from voicing online in this atmosphere, but also face higher probability of being questioned or criticized on their intention.

### 4.3. Lack of Sex Education

Moreover, the lack of proper sex education and the overemphasize of virgin in most Chinese schools creates another hindrance. According to a China Family Planning Association and Public Health School of Peking University study in 2015, only 10% of nearly 20000 university students had received any sexual education in primary school (UNESCO, 2019)[19]. There is thus a general aversion from talking about anything sexual for students, even the names of body parts are not explicitly referenced in daily conversations, so there is also a shame for students of speaking out about their experience of being sexually harassed or assaulted in school online and just blame themselves and internalize their suffering. According to a study by Luo in 2000, the Chinese rape survivors disclosed traumas that are not commonly reported in Western studies, including a heightened sexual shame over “loss of virginity or chastity, guilt about derogating family honour...”(Chan, K. L., 2007)[20]. On the one hand, these mindsets make the student victims unwilling to share their experiences via #MeToo, and on the other hand, they will also be scrutinized by the public who tend to blame the victims also because of the shame in the culture.

## 5. Conclusion

School sexual violence in China remains pervasive and under-addressed. The causes are multi-fold; on the ideological level, the Confucian gender roles of female obedience remain endemic in modern Chinese culture, which, when coupled with an idealized reverence towards educators, subjects female students to disproportionate instances of sexual assault. Moreover, the lack of clarity in law enforcement restricts the prevention and punishment of sexual violence in schools. Given this societal backdrop, the rise of the MeToo movement in China serves as a ray of hope for many student victims: the online platform has garnered attention at an unprecedented level, and serves as a new environment in which discourse can unfold. As such, student activism has boldly challenged sexist narratives, and engendered instances of public agency and school reform. Despite this, pushback from educators and censorship from the government epitomize the deep-rooted nature of traditional power imbalances. The internalized stigma against speaking out also serves as a primary hindrance against victims' voices. Therefore, China's future regarding school sexual violence remains unclear. What is certain is that student victims must utilize emerging platforms to magnify their voices, continuing on the fight against gendered oppression into an ever-changing, and hopefully more equal, future.

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