

Reshaping Women's Social Roles in the New Media Era

Ruisi Gao*

Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong 999077, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: With the development of new media, women's social roles have been significantly reshaped. Through a review and comparative analysis of relevant literature, this study examines the reconstruction of women's social roles in the new media era, to help women make more effective use of new media tools to articulate the self and enhance social participation. Drawing on two major strands of scholarship, the technology-and-gender perspective and the cultural-sociological perspective, the paper analyzes both the enabling and constraining effects of new media on women's social roles. The study affirms that new media platforms have, to a certain extent, created opportunities for women to express themselves, participate in public affairs, and pursue higher social status. Nevertheless, because gender bias is deeply shaped by historical structures and enduring stereotypes, the realization of substantive gender equality still requires sustained efforts by governments, society, and the public.

Keywords: New media; Women; Social roles

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1. Introduction

To examine changes in women's social roles in the new media era, this paper uses "new media" and "women" as search terms in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database. Nine articles published in Peking University Core Journals and CSSCI-indexed journals were selected, and one highly relevant article from Web of Science was added for comparative analysis.

1.1. Key Definitions

The term "new media era" is often set against traditional media. Traditional media covers radio, television, and newspapers. The new media era rests on internet technologies. It has changed how information gets produced and shared.

Human beings are naturally social. In social life, each person holds a certain identity and position. These shape the rights and duties one carries. The mix of identity, status, rights, and duties is what scholars call a "social role"^[1]. In many countries and regions, women have long faced unequal treatment. China offers a clear case. Confucianism became the state ideology during the Han Dynasty. From that point, women lost their independent personhood and basic rights. Over a long stretch of history, women's roles narrowed to just "mother" and "wife". They were expected to rely on husbands and sons. Their main tasks were to assist the husband and teach the children. From the modern period onward, the state and society

took many measures. These measures aimed to protect women's rights and status. The results have been largely positive.

In the new media era, many digital platforms now appear. These platforms give every individual an equal chance to speak. They also create more ways for women to show their individuality and realize their own worth. This helps women raise their social status and reshape their social roles.

1.2. Research background, purpose, and significance

The new media era developed at a rapid pace. Internet tools like social media, blogs, and video platforms spread quickly. These shifts transformed how people share information and connect with one another. Within this change, women adopted new media to express their views more broadly, share opinions, and take part in social life. At the same time, older expectations about women's roles are now being questioned and reshaped. New media offers a stage where women can display their identities and push for social change. It allows them to be heard and to play an active role in many fields, including politics, economics, and culture.

This paper presents a review of existing studies. It traces how women's social roles evolve and take new shape in the new media age. The analysis focuses on how new media helps women enter public debate, speak their minds, and shift their roles. It also explores the chances and the limits women face in this digital space. Another goal is to help women use new media tools more skillfully to present who they are and to take a more active part in society. Through a closer look at women's social roles, the research aims to change social thinking and push for practical steps toward broader gender equality and social justice.

2. Multidimensional perspectives on women's social roles

Scholars have approached the construction of women's social roles from various angles. The main perspectives may be organized into two broad schools of thought: the technology-and-gender perspective and the cultural-sociological perspective.

2.1. The technology-and-gender perspective

The technology-and-gender perspective examines the interaction between technological development and gender. It focuses on how technological change influences women's social roles and how technology may both empower and constrain women's role development.

As a representative figure in this perspective, Friedrich Kittler argues that media technologies are key forces in shaping discourse networks and gender relations. The emergence of the typewriter in the mid-to-late nineteenth century de-gendered writing to some extent. Women became professional typists. They entered a writing field that men once controlled. They moved from the edges of discourse toward the center. Chen Yanjie takes a media evolution approach. She describes three stages. In the print-media age, women had little access to outside information and their roles changed slowly. In the electronic-media era, television and related media blurred the boundary between male and female information systems, encouraged women to participate in public settings, and expanded women's social space; in the network-media era, low entry thresholds created relatively equal discursive platforms and interactive spaces, enhanced women's subject position, and reshaped female images. Sun Guirong notes that online platforms have generated a "female-oriented" mechanism of reading reception. As the power of traditional gatekeepers has loosened, a women-centered notion of "I read" has emerged, promoting women's liberation. Fang Lingling and colleagues argue that increased technological accessibility has given disadvantaged women greater discursive power. Rural women with limited formal education can acquire self-media skills through short-term training; many full-time mothers and rural women have gained opportunities for self-expression, confidence, satisfaction, and even considerable income through new media, thereby improving their social recognition, social status, and voice. Jiang Jinnian finds that women in consumer culture are not wholly passive; rather, they occupy a dual position as both subjects and objects.

By showing consumer attitudes and aesthetic tastes, they build their own images. They slowly see the value of self-expression and help diversify representations of women. New media also helps women organize online and stand up for each other. One case is the internet celebrity Yuya, who made her domestic violence experience public in 2019. An online community quickly formed, created public pressure, and triggered official responses. Research based on CGSS data from 2010 to 2015 shows another pattern. People who use the internet more often are less likely to agree with biased views like “women workers should be laid off first in a recession.” New media gives platforms for talk and raises visibility. It plays a useful role in reducing gender discrimination at work ^[2].

New media has built many different images of women. It lets them use these channels to express themselves and challenge unfair gender structures in public talk. But in the new media age, tech empowerment stays complex. On one side, women’s speech is still influenced by male-centric ideas. It often stays in private topics and lacks public concern. Driven by media power and profit-seeking, it can easily shape images just to satisfy male desires. This turns women into objects of watching. The topics women care about are also colored by a male lens. Their share in the tech field stays low, and old gender stereotypes keep going strong. On the other side, in the chase for clicks, fake feminist content and consumer traps have spread. These things do not change the real situation. Instead, they make gender tensions worse and stigmatize women. So, it is clear that tech-driven changes in women’s social roles are not simple. Gender bias is still a deep obstacle.

2.2. The cultural-sociological perspective

This school of thought looks at the links among cultural background, social structure, and individual women’s actions. It studies how women’s social roles are built and kept going through social interactions.

Inside feudal culture, rules and moral demands on women shaped their status and roles a lot. Old concepts such as the “Three Obediences and Four Virtues” kept women mostly in the home. They had low social standing and little public voice. But things changed. The old farm society production model relied on physical strength. That model faded. The feminist movement also rose. Because of these shifts, society began to see the gap between biological sex and social roles. Women then started to hold more roles in society.

Scholars like Tabea Meier, Ryan L. Boyd, Matthias R. Mehl, Anne Milek, and James W. Pennebaker have shown that language culture helps form women’s social roles to some extent. Women often use language that feels more intimate and authentic. On social media, they talk more about social ties, use emotion-filled words, and share personal feelings and life events ^[3]. For instance, female bloggers often write from a first-person view. They tell their emotional stories and life struggles. This style builds a stronger bond with readers. This traditional female image can even affect people with high status. Reports say that female professors get a much larger share of student requests for special help.

Social media does give women a space to express themselves. But hierarchical parts of gender stereotypes are deeply stuck. People often still think men are more competent and have a higher status than women. Research shows that speeches by female speakers on video platforms tend to carry less influence than those by male speakers.

Cultural and social settings are formed over a long time. So, changing women’s social roles will take steady, long-term effort and many-sided actions.

3. Binary perspectives on the impact of new media on women’s roles

Academic writing shows two separate views on how new media reshape women’s roles. One view is positive. The other is negative. The author brings the two together and looks at them with data and case studies.

3.1. Positive perspectives

Scholars like Chen Yanjie, Kittler, Fang Lingling, and Jiang Jinnian hold a positive view. They say the new media era has created good conditions for women to express themselves and seek gender equality.

One reason is that new media platforms give everyone a place to speak and see varied opinions. The barrier to joining

is low. A person only needs a mobile phone or any device that links to the internet. Then they can spread their views. People do not need high formal schooling. They just need to know how to type. Data from China Business News Network in 2023 shows that female creators make up 49.3% of short-video platform users in my country. That share almost equals the male share. Meanwhile, middle-aged and older creators keep joining. Those over 50 years old now make up 22.1% ^[4]. This shows that the low barrier of new media gives a voice platform to women and even to weaker groups like the elderly. On Xiaohongshu, a blind female blogger named Huang Ying has 120,000 followers. She uses her phone's accessibility features and gets help from friends to share her daily life online. She aims to help others see the world from a blind person's view and give more support.

Another reason is that new media have brought many new jobs to society. Old ideas often say women are physically weaker in physical strength. But women's strengths show clearly in roles that do not center on physical labor. They are good at keeping emotional balance, noticing details, and sensing feelings. So, women do not need to stay in labor-heavy industries. They can do well and succeed in other areas. Many self-media operators now earn money from their content. They keep posting material to build a large follower base. Then they work with brands and earn ad income. Also, jobs like live-streaming host and online shop owner grew with new media. These jobs have helped some women with less education gain financial independence and more self-confidence.

People also get more varied information from new media platforms. This spreads ideas about gender equality. It also helps change old gender norms. Beyond these two points, the author thinks the wide reach of new media audiences also helps reshape women's roles. The large audience lets women's content reach many viewers. It creates deeper resonance and makes people think. People with similar views may even form communities. They share experiences and help each other. This lifts each other's confidence. Resource integration is another factor. Platforms can sort and group many types of information. When women have trouble, they can use these platforms to find legal help, mental support, study resources, and more. The #MeToo hashtag spread widely on social media after the Harvey Weinstein sexual harassment case in October 2017. The movement started on social platforms. Women added the hashtag to their posts and shared their own stories of sexual harassment and assault. Through new media, many survivors felt a bond. They built communities and supported one another. This pushed for bigger public talk on sexual violence and led to legal changes.

3.2. Negative perspectives

Scholars like Yang Xia and Zhang Wenyang hold a critical view. They admit that new media has given women chances to speak. But they stress that women's talk is still shaped by the male gaze. Old gender stereotypes remain. These problems cannot be solved in a short time ^[5].

In the new media age, women's words stay under the influence of male beauty standards. They are often misread through a male-centered lens. Take Douyin as an example. Many female bloggers try to grab attention and clicks. They wear fishnet stockings, sheer hosiery, or tight black clothes. They flaunt their bodies to fast-beat music. Such content panders to male taste. It objectifies women. It also affects public values to some degree. On many new media platforms, women's content is often misunderstood or looked down on because of male views. When women share ideas on gender equality or social topics, they often face negative comments or attacks from male users. This not only cuts down women's right to speak. It may also lead them to censor their own words while creating. Their voices and creativity get held back.

So, new media alone are far from enough to reach gender equality at both the social level and the thinking level. The old idea of male superiority has a long history. It still exists in some less-developed rural areas. Changing these ways of thinking needs joint effort from society and the public. Reshaping women's social roles and raising their status will take long, ongoing work. Society should actively build positive images of women. It should balance the number of women and men in government offices and leadership positions. It should push women to speak in public spaces and boost their ability to join public matters. For female opinion leaders on new media platforms, the platforms can give some traffic support. This can urge women to join online public talks. It can help spread women's views more widely.

4. Conclusion

Although scholars hold diverse views on the reshaping of women's social roles in the new media era, most studies maintain a generally positive evaluation. New media platforms have, to a certain extent, helped women obtain opportunities for self-expression, participate in public affairs, and achieve higher social status. Nevertheless, substantive gender equality cannot be realized through technological change alone. It requires sustained efforts by governments, the public, and all sectors of society.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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