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Gender-Responsive Governance and Women's Political Empowerment in China: Implications for Social Justice and Inclusive Governance

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Abstract

This article assesses the relationship between gender-responsive governance, public policy, and women's political empowerment in the People's Republic of China. It argues that China has constructed a relatively dense architecture of gender-responsive policy constitutional equality, successive national programmes for women's development, legislative quotas, and a 2022 revision of the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests yet this architecture has not been converted into commensurate political power. Women's share of National People's Congress (NPC) deputies has risen to 26.5 per cent, and female membership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reached 31 per cent in 2024. However, at the very top of the party-state, women are almost unheard of: for the first time in 25 years, there is no woman in the 20th Politburo; no woman has ever been in the Politburo Standing Committee and no woman has served as a provincial party secretary. The article adopts a gender-responsive governance, gender mainstreaming and gender resources-agency achievement framework developed by Kabeer, and outlines a causal pathway from the design of governance to policy to political participation to empowerment. The chain is demonstrated to be broken in two ways: first, by the uneven implementation of otherwise very ambitious policy; and second, by the lack of link between the descriptive representation of women in legislatures and grassroots committees and their actual influence on decision-making. The idea being that a Leninist party-state can achieve significant social and legal improvements without bringing the male rule of high politics into disrepute. The article ends with suggestions for the binding representation targets, the appointment of women, and improved monitoring and accountability.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of women's political empowerment in China

Since the early years of the People's Republic of China, gender equality has been formally part of the China state's agenda. The Constitution of 1954 mandated the equality of both genders; the Marriage Law of 1950 eliminated many of the patriarchal institutions integral to the family; and the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), established in 1949, was given the task of mobilizing women as a part of the new socialist order (Wang, 2017; UNFPA China, 2024). Howell (2002); Zeng (2014) have noted how the phrase "women hold up half the sky" was adopted as a slogan of state feminism and more recently as a measure to critique the gap between revolutionary ideals and the reality of political implementation in China.

This distance has always been in flux. State-led mobilization and the presence of large numbers of women in production during the Maoist decades, and for a brief time in the 1970s, in legislatures

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and local office, is a significant development recorded by Howell (2002). The reforms of the 1970s and '80s, which enhanced living standards and increased access to education for women, also eroded some of the social protections and services that had facilitated women's public engagement, while the return to household farming and the later one-child policy re-introduced gendered family responsibilities (Yang, 2020). The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, marked a second inflection point. China hosted the conference that globalized gender mainstreaming as a policy strategy (United Nations, 1995; True and Mintrom, 2001) and, in its aftermath, adopted gender equality as a basic national policy, enacted the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (1992, substantially revised in 2022), and launched a sequence of national programmes for women's development that continues through 2030 (State Council of the PRC, 2021; NPC Standing Committee, 2022).

By the mid-2020s the social record was mixed but, in several domains, impressive. Maternal mortality had fallen to 16 deaths per 100,000 live births; women outpaced men in tertiary enrolment; and more than one hundred laws and regulations addressed women's rights (ChinaPower Project, 2025; UNFPA China, 2024). Political power, however, remained "very firmly in the hands of men" (ChinaPower Project, 2025). The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025 ranked China 103rd of 148 economies overall and 111th on political empowerment far below its standing on educational attainment (World Economic Forum, 2025).

1.2 Research problem and gap

The problem to be addressed by the research is thus a structured paradox. China has one of the most comprehensive gender-policy systems in developing countries, including four successive Outlines of Women's Development since 1995, a national working committee on children and women, a gender-statistics system that includes over 2,400 indicators, legislative quotas, and a recently bolstered women's rights statute (State Council Information Office, 2025; Zhou, 2024). However, women are a small and, at the peak, diminishing proportion of the real political power. As of the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, there was no woman in the Politburo for the first time in 25 years, and there has never been a woman on the Politburo Standing Committee, while women held only 13 of 203 full seats on the Central Committee, 2 of 26 ministerial positions, and 3 of 31 provincial governorships, and no woman has ever served as a provincial level party secretary (ChinaPower Project, 2025; U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023; Jiang and Pang, 2025).

The existing scholarship either focuses on the underrepresentation of women in Chinese politics (Wang Howell 2002, 2006; Zeng 2014; Chen 2022; Jiang and Pang 2025) or on the development of gender policy and state feminism (Wang 2017; Zhou 2024; State Council Information Office 2015, 2025). What is still to be worked out is the integrated picture of how gender-responsive governance is supposed to bring political empowerment and where, in the case of China, that causal chain is cut. Recent evidence that female NPC deputies are disproportionately active legislators (Feng, Hou and Liu, 2024) sits uneasily beside evidence that gender-focused proposals at the annual Two Sessions are declining (Chen, 2025). These findings have not yet been joined to the post-2022 leadership landscape or to the 2021–2030 Outline.

1.3 Objectives and research questions

The article has four objectives: to map the institutionalization of gender-responsive governance in China's public policy; to evaluate the current state of women's political representation, participation, and leadership; to explain the coexistence of a dense policy architecture with limited

political empowerment; and to identify reforms that would strengthen the translation of policy into empowerment.

Four research questions organize the analysis:

1. How has gender-responsive governance been embedded in China's public policy framework?
2. What is the current pattern of women's political representation, participation in decision-making, and leadership?
3. Why does an elaborate gender-policy architecture coexist with constrained political empowerment?
4. What policy reforms would more reliably convert gender-responsive governance into women's political empowerment?

1.4 Significance of the study

Theoretically, the Chinese case tests frameworks developed largely in liberal democracies gender-responsive governance, gender mainstreaming, and the politics of presence inside a Leninist party-state in which the decisive arena is not competitive elections but cadre appointment (Jiang and Pang, 2025; Rai, 2008). Empirically, the study brings together post-2021 policy documents, 2023–2026 statistical monitoring, and a new wave of research on female legislators and subnational appointment politics. Politically, the question is timely. In 2025 China hosted a Global Leaders' Meeting on Gender Equality to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Beijing Conference, even as domestic women's-rights advocacy at the Two Sessions receded (Chen, 2025). The Sustainable Development Goal target 5.5 women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership cannot be met by legislative seat shares alone (UN Women, 2025).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Women's political empowerment

Women's political empowerment is not synonymous with the share of seats held by women. Sundström, Paxton, Wang and Lindberg (2017, p. 321) define it as "the increased capacity for women to influence political decision-making," and operationalize it through civil liberties, civil society participation, and political participation. This multidimensional view is consistent with Kabeer's (1999) classic triad of resources (preconditions of choice), agency (the process of making strategic life choices), and achievements (outcomes). In the political sphere, resources include legal rights, education, organisational affiliation, and recruitment channels; agency includes the capacity to set agendas, sponsor bills, and bargain inside the party-state; achievements include both descriptive presence and the ability to change policy.

A parallel literature distinguishes descriptive from substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995; Childs and Lovenduski, 2013). Descriptive representation the presence of women in office is a necessary but insufficient condition for empowerment. Substantive representation acting for women as a constituency depends on institutional rules, party discipline, and the autonomy of representatives (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008). Gender quotas can raise descriptive numbers without guaranteeing agenda power, especially where candidate selection and promotion remain controlled by male-dominated selectorates (Krook, 2009). Cross-national work also links women's political empowerment to broader developmental outcomes, including the quality of public spending and economic growth (Dahlum, Knutsen and Mechkova, 2022).

2.2 Gender-responsive governance

Gender-responsive governance refers to the design and operation of public institutions so that they recognize gender differences, allocate authority and resources accordingly, and hold decision-makers accountable for equality outcomes (UN Women, 2012; Goetz, 2009). It is broader than the presence of women in office. It encompasses electoral and appointment rules, budgeting, bureaucratic procedures, statistical systems, and the relationship between the state and women's organisation. Rai (2008) emphasizes that governance is itself a gendered field: apparently neutral rules of recruitment, seniority, and "merit" often reproduce male advantage.

Gender mainstreaming, adopted as a global strategy in the Beijing Platform for Action, is the principal policy instrument of gender-responsive governance. It was defined by ECOSOC (1997) as the process of considering the impact on women and men of every planned activity, legislation, policy or programme in all fields and at all levels. The strategy was spread by transnational networks, as described by True & Mintrom (2001), and it proved productive but also had a tendency to become a ritualistic process of little real impact on power relations, as reported by Walby (2005) and Moser & Moser (2005). Htun and Weldon (2010) suggest that feminist movements outside government are more likely to influence a government's decision to advance women's rights; this is not the case in contemporary China, as the unchecked promotion of women's rights in the form of autonomous feminist organisation has been constrained since the mid-2010s (Yang, 2020; ChinaPower Project, 2025).

2.3 Gender and public policy in China

There are various stages of scholarship development with regard to gender and the Chinese state. Despite being subordinate to a male political system, Wang (2017) traces the evolution of socialist state feminism during the Mao era and reveals that women within the party-state achieved considerable legal and social advances. Howell (2002, 2006) examined the reductions and partial resurgence in political involvement by women, with a particular focus on the resurgence of women in village elections, which occurred alongside strong patriarchal local norms. Borrowing from Zeng (2014), one question I would ask is whether it had "improved" and I would conclude that it had not at higher levels. Overall, Yang (2020) described the developments as progress, problems, and paradoxes: educational convergence, labour-market retrenchment, and political stagnation.

A more recent group of research studies has focused on the institutional diagnosis. As Zhou (2024) demonstrates, China's gender quotas are a mixture of the heritage of socialist affirmative action and post-Beijing international practices, and that the Outline (2021–2030) pledges to increase the proportion of women at the Party Congress, the legislature, the government, functional departments, and grassroots organisation, sometimes using the vague terminology of an "appropriate number" of women. The quest for female provincial leaders and the gendered tropes in elite recruitment are explored by Chen (2022). Tandem quotas for both executive and legislative posts lead to greater representation of young, better-educated, and more ethnically diverse women, and show that subnational executive appointments are a gendered institution, in which women take different career paths, are assigned to "feminine" executive positions with fewer promotion opportunities, and have lower representation in higher positions. In contrast to the deficit story at the legislative level, Feng, Hou and Liu (2024) demonstrate that even though women make up 23 per cent of the 12th NPC, they have sponsored 44 per cent of the bill proposals. Lu (2023) notes that gender mainstreaming is still in "exploratory" phase in China, as it is rarely mentioned and not well established in policymaking processes.

2.4 Existing research and research gap

Three gaps follow. First, the relationship between research on policy and research on power remains underdeveloped and underdeveloped, respectively. Official monitoring reports show the percentage of women in NPC and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) membership has been increasing (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025) but has never questioned, let alone doubted, where power is. Exclusion from the Politburo is recorded in elite studies but the instruments of policy that were supposed to prevent such exclusion are not covered. Secondly, the causal chain's implementation part is under-specified. It is known that there are outlines, laws and quotas but less is known regarding how the local party committees, organisation departments and women's federations transform the outlines, laws and quotas into cadre decisions. Thirdly, the time from the 20th Party Congress to the 2021–2030 Outline has not been synthesized. The article aims to respond to these gaps, by viewing gender-responsive governance, public policy, implementation, political participation and political empowerment as sequential but separable steps.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Gender-responsive governance

The article takes gender-responsive governance as its starting point. Based on the works of UN Women (2012) and Goetz (2009), the three conditions for governance to be gender-responsive are: (1) gender equality in decision-making, (2) gender equality in access to resources, and (3) the inclusion of gender equality as a priority in the institutional framework. Firstly, institutions are built with gender difference in mind: there is no implicit assumption that an office-holder is male in the recruitment rules, sitting hours, infrastructure of caring and the statistical categories. Second, resources, both budgetary, organisational and informational, are allocated for equality commitments and not just declared. Thirdly, accountability processes can lead to failure. In a party-state, however, the institutions are not only the people's congresses and governments, but also the CCP organisation department and the nomenclature system and the mass organisation including the ACWF (Wang, 2017; Jiang and Pang, 2025).

This is a high bar to clear. A state can have programmes designed specifically for women, and still fall short of passing the test if those programmes have no impact on the distribution of political power. A State, however, does not need to have a designated “women's ministry,” but it does need to be gender-responsive in the way it conducts its normal recruitment and budgeting processes (Walby, 2005). China has a high score on the presence of special machinery and a low score on the gendered nature of political power. Theoretically that combination is interesting, because it demonstrates that a gender-responsive core can be added on to an unreformed core.

3.2 Gender mainstreaming

The journey to gender responsiveness is called ‘gender mainstreaming'. It was introduced as a global norm in the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) of the United Nations, and the canonical one was provided by ECOSOC (1997), while its diffusion was explained by True and Mintrom (2001). The Chinese case is dominated by two tensions that Walby (2005) identifies. The first is integration vs. agenda setting: integration can be done by incorporating women's concerns into current priorities (growth, stability, family), or by having them overturn these priorities. The second is the difference between expertise and participation mainstreaming can be a technocratic approach of the gender focal point or a political process of the women movements. China's approach is to integrate and technocracies. The development of women is interpreted in terms of the development of the nation,

common prosperity and family civilization (State Council Information Office, 2025; Chen, 2025). There is a lack of independent feminist agenda setting (Htun and Weldon, 2010; Yang, 2020).

Without resources and accountability, the process of mainstreaming turns into 'policy evaporation' as described by Moser and Moser (2005): commitments made on paper, but not operational in practice. The Outlines of China are susceptible to this trend whenever targets are qualitative, such as that of an appropriate number of women, instead of numerical and binding. The Outlines of China are susceptible to this trend when targets are qualitative (as “an appropriate number of women”) instead of numerical and binding (Zhou, 2024). Selective mainstreaming is illustrated by the fact that gender is mainstreamed in legislatures but not in top leadership positions of the main party.

3.3 Conceptual link between policy and women’s political empowerment

The core argument of this article is a five-stage causal chain:

Causal Chain

1. Gender-responsive governance
Institutional design
↓
2. Public policy
Laws, outlines, quotas
↓
3. Implementation
Cadres, ACWF, local state
↓
4. Political participation
NPC, CCP, grassroots
↓
5. Political empowerment
Capacity to influence

Gender-responsive governance generates public policies (laws, national programmes, quotas, statistical systems). Women's participation in politics under the policy is expanded in terms of membership in the party, deputies, committee membership and cadres. Empowerment comes from participation if women can exercise strategic agency (Kabeer, 1999) and can influence political decision-making (Sundström et al., 2017). Breaks may be at any arrow. Policy can be a symbolic issue. The implementation can be selective. Entering may be limited to advisory bodies only. The Chinese evidence reviewed below indicates that the first two are fairly secure and the third is inconsistent, with the final step of participation to empowerment the least secure.

There are two other differences that inhibit conceptual slippage. First, social empowerment (health, education, legal protection from violence) is not political empowerment, although it might provide resources for political empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). This is because on some aspects of social indicators, China performs well while on political empowerment, it does not. Secondly, as Pitkin (1967) and Phillips (1995) argued, being in the legislature does not confer control over the party's top leadership. In a system of domination by the Politburo and organisation department, the proportion of seats in the NPC is not the whole story.

4. China’s Policy Framework

4.1 Evolution of gender policies

Chinese gender policy has evolved through four broad phases. The founding phase (1949–1978) established constitutional equality, the Marriage Law, and the ACWF as a hierarchically organised mass organisation (Wang, 2017). Women's political participation peaked in the mid-1970s, when women comprised 22.6 per cent of deputies to the Fourth NPC (Howell, 2002). The reform phase (1978–1995) saw a partial retreat as marketization and de-collectivization shifted care back onto households and as the dismantling of some quota practices reduced women's share of office in the 1980s (Howell, 2002; Yang, 2020). A 1988 instruction that the proportion of female NPC deputies should not fall below that of the previous term introduced a floor without a ceiling (Chen, 2025; Zhou, 2024).

The Beijing phase (1995–2012) internationalized the agenda. China ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1980 (United Nations, 1979) but it was the 1995 conference that catalyzed domestic institutionalization: gender equality was declared a basic national policy; the first Programme for Women's Development was launched; and the 1995 amendment of the Electoral Law called for an "appropriate number" of women in people's congresses, to be increased gradually (Zhou, 2024). In 2008 the government stipulated that women should constitute 22 per cent of the NPC (Zhou, 2024). The Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (1992) and subsequent programmes for 2001–2010 and 2011–2020 built a cycle of planning, monitoring, and reporting (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021).

The legal strengthening and political narrowing are combined in the contemporary phase (2012-present). In 2015, the Anti-Domestic Violence Law was enacted and in 2022, the Women's Rights Law was revised to include formal protections, such as prohibitions on withholding promotion on the grounds of marriage, pregnancy, or parenthood, and pregnancy testing as part of pre-employment physicals (NPC Standing Committee, 2022; ChinaPower Project, 2025). Meanwhile, the 2015. Overseas NGO Law, the arrest of the "Feminist Five" in 2015, and the crackdowns against #MeToo online limited independent feminist politics (Yang, 2020; ChinaPower Project, 2025). Since the end of the one-child policy, the natalist concerns have brought the focus back to women as mothers in official discourse, such as the implementation of a divorce "cooling-off" period in 2021 (ChinaPower Project, 2025). The 2021-2030 Outline and the 2025 Global Leaders' Meeting on Gender Equality are part of this complex process of policy expansion and civic contraction (State Council of the PRC, 2021; Chen, 2025).

4.2 National policies for women's development

The main planning tool is the Outline of Women's Development in China (2021–2030). It establishes 93 strategic measures in eight areas: health, education, economy, decision-making and administration, social security, family development, environment and law. Forty-one party and government departments have responsibilities for implementation (State Council of the PRC, 2021; State Council Information Office, 2025). In this regard, the chapter on decision making is the most relevant. It demands a greater representation of women in the NPC, party and government leading bodies, in functional departments and grassroots organisation (Zhou, 2024). There are still a lot of targets that are qualitative. The importance of choice in drafting: Local drafting bodies can claim compliance without changing the gender balance of the top levels of cadres.

The Women's Rights Law 2022, which will come into effect on 1st January 2023, reiterates women's equal political rights and enhances anti-discrimination rights in employment and education (NPC Standing Committee, 2022). It doesn't, however, set numerical limits on top jobs in leading parties or government, nor does it establish an independent enforcement body. In addition to the obligations

under CEDAW, it provides a rights vocabulary along with the Beijing Platform. How that language is translated into appointment outcomes is dependent upon the CCP's internal personnel system, the law does not regulate.

4.3 Institutional mechanisms for gender equality

Three mechanisms constitute China's gender machinery. The National Working Committee on Children and Women (NWCCW) under the State Council is the inter-ministerial coordinating body. The ACWF, with organisation from the national level to villages and new economic entities, is described officially as a "bridge" linking the Party and women (State Council Information Office, 2025). It is a classic Leninist transmission belt: it represents women upward and transmits party policy downward (Wang, 2017; Howell, 2006). The National Bureau of Statistics operates a gender-statistics monitoring system of more than 2,400 indicators and publishes periodic reports on Outline implementation (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021, 2025; State Council Information Office, 2025). Gender has also been incorporated into censuses and time-use surveys.

These mechanisms are real achievements of gender-responsive institutional design. They generate data, training, and local programmes, including "Women's Federations Plus" mediation models and capacity-building for female officials (State Council Information Office, 2025; UNDP China, 2024). Their structural limitation is political subordination. The ACWF cannot contest the organisation department's monopoly of leading appointments. The NWCCW cannot place women on the Politburo. Statistical monitoring can count female deputies; it cannot, by itself, reallocate power. Gender-responsive governance, in this configuration, is well institutionalised as a sectoral policy field and weakly institutionalised as a constraint on high politics.

5. Women's Political Empowerment in China

5.1 Women's political representation

Descriptive representation has improved slowly and is now concentrated in assemblies rather than in leading posts. In the 14th NPC, women hold 790 of 2,977 seats, or 26.5 per cent (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2026; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025). That is 1.6 percentage points above the previous congress and above the 2008 22 per cent benchmark, consistent with the 1988 non-regression quota (Chen, 2025; Zhou, 2024). Women nonetheless remain only 13.8 per cent of the NPC Standing Committee—the body that legislates between annual sessions (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025). In the 14th CPPCC, women comprise 22.4 per cent of members and 16.1 per cent of the Standing Committee (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025). Globally, women hold about 27.5 per cent of parliamentary seats; China's NPC figure is therefore close to the world mean and above several East Asian peers, but it is not a position of leadership (UN Women, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2025).

Party membership has feminised more quickly than party leadership. Women were 19 per cent of CCP members in 2004 and 31 per cent in 2024 (ChinaPower Project, 2025). The pipeline of politically affiliated women has therefore widened. At the grassroots, women constituted 26.1 per cent of villagers' committee members and 54.3 per cent of urban residents' committee members in 2022, up 4.0 and 5.5 percentage points respectively from 2012 (State Council Information Office, 2025). Urban neighbourhood governance is the one arena in which women approach or exceed parity. Village committees, long identified as a site of patriarchal capture (Howell, 2006), have moved more slowly.

Table 1. Selected indicators of women's political presence in China, 2022–2025		
Arena	**Share of women**	**Source**
NPC deputies (14th Congress)	26.5%	IPU (2026); NBS (2025)
NPC Standing Committee	13.8%	NBS (2025)
CPPCC National Committee	22.4%	NBS (2025)
CCP membership (2024)	31%	ChinaPower (2025)
CCP Central Committee (full, 2025)	13 of 203 (~6.4%)	ChinaPower (2025)
Politburo (20th Central Committee)	0 of 24	Jiang and Pang (2025)
Politburo Standing Committee	0 (never)	USCC (2023)
Central government ministers (2025)	2 of 26	ChinaPower (2025)
Provincial governors (2025)	3 of 31	ChinaPower (2025)
Provincial party secretaries (2025)	0 of 31	ChinaPower (2025)
Villagers' committee members (2022)	26.1%	SCIO (2025)
Urban residents' committee members (2022)	54.3%	SCIO (2025)

5.2 Participation in decision-making

Seat shares understate, and in other respects overstate, women's decision-making role. Feng, Hou and Liu (2024) show that in the 12th NPC (2013–2018) women held 23.4 per cent of seats but accounted for 33.8 per cent of legislators who sponsored at least one bill and for 44 per cent of all bill proposals. They sponsored more than half of bills related to women's rights and interests. Female deputies were also more active as co-sponsors. The finding is important for theory: it indicates that, once inside the legislature, Chinese women deputies exercise agency rather than functioning as silent tokens (Kabeer, 1999; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008). The bottleneck is access to seats and, still more, to the Standing Committee and to party leading small groups that shape the bills' fate.

More recent evidence on agenda-setting is less encouraging. Chen (2025) reports that media coverage identified 13 Two Sessions proposals in 2024 that directly concerned women, falling to eight in 2025. The 2025 Government Work Report devoted a single sentence to women and grouped them with other "vulnerable groups," a framing that recodes women as objects of protection rather than as political agents. Chen concludes that women's rights are treated as an instrument of social stability and growth rather than as a justice claim. If Feng, Hou and Liu (2024) capture latent legislative agency, Chen (2025) captures the shrinking political space in which that agency is allowed to speak a gender language.

5.3 Women in leadership

Leadership is the decisive test of empowerment, and it is where the Chinese record is weakest. Since 1949 only six women have reached the Politburo; none has joined its Standing Committee (Jiang and Pang, 2025). The 20th Central Committee's Politburo, appointed in October 2022, broke a twenty-five-year pattern of at least one female member (U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023). Full membership of the Central Committee remains in the mid-single digits for women (ChinaPower Project, 2025). Ministerial rank is similarly thin. Provincial party secretary—the most powerful territorial post—has been held by only four women in the history of the PRC, and by none among the current thirty-one incumbents; three women currently serve as governors, a clearly subordinate pairing in the party-state dyad (ChinaPower Project, 2025; Chen, 2022).

Jiang and Pang (2025) show why the pipeline leaks. Subnational executive appointments meet the criteria of a gendered institution: women's career patterns differ from men's; women are assigned to "feminine" portfolios (education, health, culture, united front, mass work) while "masculine" posts in development, public security, and party organisation confer faster promotion; and women appointees are younger, more educated, and more often ethnic minorities because tandem quotas encourage the stacking of demographic attributes in a single person. Chen's (2022) study of the search for female provincial leaders documents the cultural counterpart of these rules: women candidates are scrutinised through tropes of youth, purity, and exceptionality—"innocent young girls"—that mark them as deviations from the default male leader. The result is a pyramid (widely noted in earlier work) in which each rung toward the apex is more male than the last (Zeng, 2014; Howell, 2002).

5.4 Policy implementation and outcomes

Official monitoring of the 2021–2030 Outline reports progress where the state has invested: education, health, and the numerical composition of congresses and consultative bodies (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025). The final review of the 2011–2020 programme had already flagged "imbalanced and insufficient" women's development and uneven protection of rights (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). Those imbalances are now starkest in political power. The World Economic Forum (2025) places China's political-empowerment ranking far below its educational-attainment ranking, and well below several countries with weaker women's ministries. Female labour-force participation has fallen from around 80 per cent in the 1980s to 59.6 per cent in 2024, and the gender income gap has widened (ChinaPower Project, 2025). These labour-market trends reduce the resource base on which political careers are built (Kabeer, 1999).

Implementation, in short, has been domain-specific. Where targets are service- oriented (screening, enrolment, legal texts) and where delivery can be bureaucratised, outcomes have improved. Where targets threaten the gendered allocation of political authority, implementation has been formalistic. That is the policy–implementation gap around which the rest of the analysis turns.

6. Challenges

6.1 Institutional barriers

The primary institutional barrier is the structure of elite recruitment. Leading posts are filled by the organisation department through the nomenclature, not by open electoral competition. Quotas that bind people's congresses therefore miss the decisive arena (Zhou, 2024; Jiang and Pang, 2025). Retirement rules that have historically required women to leave formal employment earlier than men shorten the career window in which cadres accumulate the postings required for promotion, although recent national adjustments to retirement ages may narrow this gap over time (ChinaPower Project, 2025). Portfolio ghettoization women in education, health, and mass work; men in organisation, discipline inspection, development, and security—reproduces itself because the latter posts are the feeder tracks to provincial party secretaryships and to the Politburo (Jiang and Pang, 2025; Chen, 2022).

A second institutional barrier is the dual mandate of the ACWF. As a party-led mass organisation it is well placed to implement state policy and poorly placed to contest it (Wang, 2017; Howell, 2006). When the centre prioritizes fertility, family "civilization," or political security, the Federation's incentives run toward those priorities. Htun and Weldon's (2010) finding that autonomous feminist movements are a key driver of women's-rights policy helps explain why China's dense official

machinery has not produced a breakthrough in political authority: the autonomous pole of the women's movement is weak, and the official pole is loyal.

6.2 Gender norms

Institutional rules sit on gendered norms. UNDP's Gender Social Norms Index documents the persistence of biases that associate men with public authority and women with domestic responsibility, including in middle-income countries (UNDP, 2023). In China these biases have Confucian, socialist, and contemporary natalist layers. Official campaigns that celebrate women's "unique role" in the family, however well-intentioned as work–family policy, can naturalize the very division of labour that keeps women off the promotion track (State Council of the PRC, 2021; Chen, 2025). Chen's (2022) evidence on elite discourse suggests that even selectors who formally support women's promotion may doubt women's "toughness" for core political posts.

Civic space for contesting these norms has narrowed. The suppression of feminist activism and of #MeToo reduced the public pressure that, in Htun and Weldon's (2010) framework, makes governments act. UNDP China (2024) still identifies unequal care, social norms, and women's under-representation in local governance as outstanding gaps. Normative change is therefore both a cultural and a political problem: without permission to organize around gender as a power relation, mainstreaming remains a state monologue.

6.3 Work–family pressures

Time-use data show that Chinese women spend approximately 2.5 times as much time as men on unpaid care; marriage itself is associated with more than two additional hours of daily housework (ChinaPower Project, 2025). Geographic rotation, long workdays, and constant availability are requirements for political careers in the CCP. Those requirements clash with care loads which are only partially socialized and are instead defined by the policy. Political recruitment (ChinaPower Project, 2025) is being dealt with more by maternity-leave extensions, and recent childcare subsidies, are addressing fertility more. The feminization of poverty and the gender pay gap also diminish women's economic autonomy and a key element of agency, as Kabeer (1999) sees it. Work–family conflict is thus a political-selection process and not just a private inconvenience**.**

6.4 Gap between policy and implementation

Policy and implementation gap can have several origins. The first one is target ambiguity, which cannot be measured as a 30 per cent quota can be (Zhou, 2024; Moser and Moser, 2005). Second, incentive incompatibility: leaders are judged mainly by their achievement of growth, stability and political allegiance, not the gender balance of their standing committees. Thirdly, selective compliance: Congresses and urban residents committees are already packed with women, but party offices are not. Fourth, even the creation of new policies can be gender-blind, as Lu (2023) shows the gender perspective is only sporadically reflected in ordinary policymaking. Fifth, women's rights are often used as an instrument for other purposes, as noted by Chen (2025). Instrumentalization creates programmes but not power-sharing.

7. Discussion

7.1 Effectiveness of gender-responsive governance

Is China's gender-responsive governance effective? The answer depends on the outcome of interest. As a machinery for expanding women's access to health, schooling, and legal texts, it has been comparatively effective (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021, 2025; UNFPA China, 2024). As a machinery for political empowerment defined as the capacity to influence decision-making (Sundström et al., 2017), it has been only weakly effective, and at the apex it has recently gone

backwards. This split outcome is consistent with Walby's (2005) warning that mainstreaming can be absorbed into existing priorities. It is also consistent with an integrationist reading of the Beijing agenda in which women's development serves national development rather than rearranging authority.

Comparative theory helps specify the limit. Htun and Weldon (2010) distinguish policies that status-quo actors can concede (for example, maternal health) from those that reallocate power (for example, leadership quotas in ruling organisations). China's record fits that distinction closely. Gender-responsive governance has been allowed to go furthest where it does not disturb male control of the organisation department. The 2022 absence of women from the Politburo is therefore not an anomaly in an otherwise successful model; it is the model's revealed preference when empowerment and elite cohesion conflict.

7.2 Policy–implementation gap

The causal chain specified in Section 3 breaks twice. Ambiguity, misaligned incentives and the underutilization of the women's machinery cause evaporation between policy and implementation (Moser and Moser, 2005). Women are funneled into assemblies and "feminine" portfolios that do have an impact on decisions, but are limited (Feng, Hou and Liu, 2024; Jiang and Pang, 2025). First fault – classic implementation failure. The second is a more fundamental failure: policies put in place were never targeted towards the institutions that wield power.

Women's participation has slightly improved in the National People's Congress, but the actual advocacy has restricted and fewer gender-based measures have been proposed, and no new pledges have been made in this area (Chen،2025)

An important finding here is that of the "underrepresented outperformers" by Feng, Hou and Liu (2024). It denies the notion that women are unfit or disinterested in functioning in the Chinese political arena. If the performance of women in parliament is worse than their representation, it will not be because of lack of qualified women. It reflects gendered selection (Jiang and Pang, 2025) and is a result of a policy design that does not take account of decision-makers. There are resources and agency; Kabeer (1999) says it's achievements that get blocked downstream.

7.3 Implications for women's political empowerment

Several implications follow. First, descriptive representation in the NPC and urban grassroots committees must not be viewed as a mere window-dressing, but rather a genuine gain (Krook, 2009; Zhou, 2024) with the help of quotas. Secondly what those gains are not empowerment. Phillips (1995) calls for a politics of presence, which calls for the presence of the decision-making. This is the case with the Politburo, Secretariat, organisation department and party committees at provincial level in China, which remains the Politburo. Third, a state-led gender-responsive governance does not necessarily result in power-sharing (Htun and Weldon, 2010; Wang, 2017). Fourth, as China has grown programmes, it has done so with the help of the international calendar, which includes Beijing+30, SDG 5, CEDAW reporting, and which provides reputational incentives which have not been made into binding leadership targets. Fifth, work–family and labour-market reversals are not 'side-issues'. They reduce the pool of women to be promoted as political cadres, and will, if left unchecked, erode the existing pipeline of women cadres (Kabeer, 1999; ChinaPower Project, 2025).

8. Policy Recommendations

8.1 Strengthen implementation

Hortatory targets will not lead to improved implementation. The 2021–2030 Outline should be amended to replace the term "appropriate numbers of women" with published, specific numerical

targets for leadership positions at each administrative level in the party and government at both the levels of the party and government (Zhou, 2024; Moser and Moser, 2005). There should be Gender impact assessment for major personnel and financial decisions, which is now becoming routine practice from being exploratory practice (Lu, 2023) Gender responsive budgeting, which is still in its infancy, would put dollars behind promises and allow people to see evaporation. The NWCCW's coordinating role should have a right to ask for explanations from any department of the organisation if targets are not being achieved, not just be based on statistical monitoring after the event.

Care infrastructure is also a social-policy problem and is an implementation problem. Improving public childcare, changing parental leave policies so that they are equally shared between men and women, and removing retirement-age requirements that are barriers for women would help mitigate the work–family penalty that currently keeps women out of the cadre pipeline (ChinaPower Project, 2025; UNDP, 2023). If these resource supports were not instituted, then appointment quotas could wind up bringing in a narrow band of outstanding women and not broadening the field (Kabeer, 1999).

8.2 Improve women's representation in decision-making

All legislative quotas can have done much of their work at the NPC. The next step of empowerment is to break down the barriers to quotas or robust targets for those who make the decisions: members of party standing committees, heads of organisation, development and public-security departments, and ministers at the county, municipal and provincial levels (Krook, 2009; Jiang and Pang, 2025). Also, tandem quotas that combine gender, ethnicity, and other factors into a single "diverse" appointee need to be separated, so that gender is not used to meet other requirements as well (Jiang and Pang, 2025). The process of rotating strong female candidates in the portfolio should be done with deliberate steps and not be held back in the education, health and united-front jobs. The shortage of female territorial leaders would be more difficult to explain if there were a publicly managed talent pool for women to be nominated to become provincial party secretaries and governorships, as there are for the Congress (based on data gathered by the ACWF for Congress nominations).

These measures are compatible with the party-state's existing personnel system. They do not require competitive multiparty elections. They require the organisation department to treat gender as a constraint on its own discretion, which is precisely what gender-responsive governance demands (UN Women, 2012; Goetz, 2009). UN bodies have already recommended temporary special measures for decision-making posts in China; the recommendation remains relevant (UNDP China, 2024).

8.3 Strengthen monitoring and accountability

China's gender-statistics system is unusually rich (State Council Information Office, 2025). It should be redirected toward power. Annual publication of the sex composition of leading cadres by rank, portfolio, and locality—not only of deputies and committee members—would make the pyramid visible and comparable across provinces (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025). Independent mid-term evaluation of the 2021–2030 Outline, with civil-society and academic participation, would reduce the risk that monitoring becomes self-congratulation. CEDAW reporting and SDG 5.5 indicators should be used as external benchmarks, including the share of women in ministerial and senior-management positions (UN Women, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2025). Finally, restoring greater space for gender research and for women's organisations

that are not solely transmission belts would recreate the autonomous pressure that comparative research finds necessary for rights policy to deepen (Htun and Weldon, 2010; Yang, 2020).

9. Conclusion

9.1 Key findings

This article has assessed women's political empowerment in China through the lens of gender-responsive governance and public policy. Four findings stand out. First, China has built a substantial gender-policy architecture: constitutional equality, CEDAW accession, four national Outlines, a 2022 Women's Rights Law, a coordinating committee, a mass women's organisation, and a large gender-statistics system (State Council of the PRC, 2021; NPC Standing Committee, 2022; State Council Information Office, 2025). Second, descriptive representation has risen in the NPC (26.5 per cent), the CPPCC (22.4 per cent), the CCP rank and file (31 per cent), and urban residents' committees (54.3 per cent) (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2026; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025; ChinaPower Project, 2025). Third, this presence has not become empowerment at the apex: the Politburo is all-male, the Standing Committee has always been all-male, and territorial party leadership remains almost exclusively male (Jiang and Pang, 2025; U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2023). Fourth, the causal chain from gender-responsive governance to empowerment breaks at implementation and at the conversion of participation into decision-making authority. Female legislators' outperformance (Feng, Hou and Liu, 2024) shows that the constraint is institutional, not a deficit of women's capacity.

9.2 Theoretical and policy contribution

Theoretically, the article establishes five stages in a chain, and indicates that a Leninist type party-state can perform well in governance and policy, but poorly in implementation and participation, and even worse in empowerment. It builds upon gender-mainstreaming scholarship by identifying "policy evaporation" not just in terms of a neglect by bureaucracy, but a deliberate enclosure of high politics in gender rules. It also serves to establish the distinction between the politics of presence (Phillips, 1995) and presence in the organization's department. The contribution for policy is to switch the focus of the reform from more programmatic language to strictures on cadre appointments and portfolio allocations, and from the public reporting of the composition of leading posts to the public reporting of the composition of the committee.

9.3 Future research

Three research agendas follow. The first is subnational variation. If some provinces meet congress quotas and others do not (as earlier fieldwork on county people's congresses suggested), the difference is a natural laboratory for implementation (Zhou, 2024). The second is legislative behaviour after the 14th NPC: whether Feng, Hou and Liu's (2024) outperformance persists as gender advocacy at the Two Sessions declines (Chen, 2025). The third is intersectional. Jiang and Pang's (2025) finding on tandem quotas implies that ethnicity, age, and gender are jointly managed by the personnel system; political empowerment will look different for Han and minority women, and for women in coastal versus inland provinces. Qualitative work inside organisation departments remains difficult but is essential if the black box of appointment is to be opened. Until that box is opened and constrained, gender-responsive governance in China will continue to produce better policy for women than power for women.

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