

# INDSR Newsletter



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# Problems in Chinese Local Governance: Case of Chained Mother in Xuzhou

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Topic: CCP Politics

## 1. News Highlights

On January 28, 2021, “Xuzhou Brother Yixiu,” a user of the Chinese version of TikTok, posted a video of a peasant woman in Feng County, Xuzhou, who was imprisoned in chains and became a mother of eight children.<sup>1</sup> The video quickly went viral across China and overseas via the Internet, sparking a public outcry that called for the local government to investigate whether human trafficking or sexual assault was behind the crime. However, the official report of Xuzhou’s Feng County was evasive, initially stating that “everything was legal and in order” and that “Yang (the woman) was suffering

from schizophrenia,” but the public was not convinced. On February 17, the Jiangsu provincial government, under public pressure, set up an investigation team into “the Case of Chained Mother in Feng County” and released a report on February 23, identifying the mother of the eight children and the causes and consequences of the incident, and penalized the 17 people involved.<sup>2</sup> On the same day, *Xinhua News Agency* and *CCTV* also released a long interview report to endorse the investigation report. However, the local government had lost its credibility, and most people did not believe the truthfulness of the government report. Hu Xijin, former editor-in-chief of

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1. “Understanding the ‘Case of Chained Mother’ of Xuzhou, China: Public Anger Reveals the Problem of Human Trafficking,” *Central News Agency*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202202080353.aspx>.

2. “Chinese Government Sets the Tone: The Investigation Results of the Xuzhou ‘Case of Chained Mother’ Released, 17 Officials Punished,” *Radio Taiwan International*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.rti.org.tw/news/view/id/2125318>.

Global Times, commented on his personal *Weibo* account, “The Xuzhou ‘Case of Chained Mother’ is sounding an alarm that official credibility is already extremely fragile.”

## 2. Security Implications

### 2-1. “Case of Chained Mother” exposes China’s local governance problems

On the development of the “Case of Chained Mother,” the local government released a total of five investigation reports. First, on January 28, the Feng County Publicity Department said that Yang married her husband, Dong Zhimin, in 1998 and suffered from mental illness. On January 30, the Feng County Joint Investigation Team released the second report. On February 7, the CCP Committee of the Xuzhou Municipal Government Joint Investigation Team released a report confirming that Yang was originally from Yunnan, had traveled to Jiangsu for medical treatment, and was lost there. The report also stated that Yang suffered from schizophrenia and severe periodontal disease. Three days later, the Xuzhou Investigation

Group issued another notice stating that Dong Zhimin and the couple who had abducted Yang had now been subjected to compulsory criminal measures. But some netizens have compared photos on the Internet and suspect that the woman is not “Xiaohuamei” of the Lisu Tribe from Yunnan as stated by the official report, but possibly “Li Ying,” the daughter of an armed police officer serving in Tibet. On February 17, an investigation team was set up directly by the CCP Committee of the Jiangsu provincial government. The final investigation report was released on February 23, confirming the woman’s identity and announcing that three cadres, including Feng County Party Secretary Lou Hai, County Mayor Zheng Chunwei, and Publicity Minister Su Bei, had been punished. They were penalized by the reinstatement of their party positions, dismissal from their posts, and removal from office for covering up the incident and releasing false information, while 14 other officials had been “double fired.”

The “Case of Chained Mother” has again exposed China’s malfunctioning local official authority under centralized leadership. The incident took place at the beginning of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Since it was initially

investigated by the county party committee's propaganda department, it's clear that the local government did not regard the incident as a major social case but rather that "maintaining stability" and "ideological propaganda" were the main considerations. Facing the social pressure, the local government and police agencies reacted passively in a "bit-by-bit" manner and did not handle the case effectively. The authorities even detained people who went to Xuzhou to investigate the "Case of Chained Mother" and deleted the relevant postings, arousing public discontent. As said by Deng Yuwen, a scholar and longtime China observer, the case reflects that due to the "Tacitus Trap" developed in China with the long-standing bad relationship between the government and the people, trust in the government has been lost.<sup>3</sup>

## **2-2. Case reflects loss of media oversight in China**

As the incident continues to be actively discussed by the public, the "Case of Chained Mother" has gradually

risen from the local level to a nationwide concern. Compared to Chinese netizens who continued to dig up relevant information and foreign media doing the same such as *Deutsche Welle*, official Chinese media at all levels remained silent on the incident; *CCTV* only forwarded the official report from Feng County. One of the few exceptions was *Caixin Media*, which tracked the related public opinion on the Internet. Official media reporters, who used to be able to reflect public opinions to central and local cadres through channels such as reporting or internal affairs, have been deterred by self-censorship from covering topics unfavorable to local governments at will. For local governments, "speech control" is the usual measure when sensitive public incidents occur; they tend to exclude mainstream media and self-media from participating in the investigation to downplay the issues as much as possible. This bureaucratic attitude conflicts with the development of the Internet generation and could further exacerbate the social governance problem in China.

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3. "The Tragedy of the Xuzhou Mother of Eight Children Embodies a Multi-faceted China and a Faithless Government," *The News Lens*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.thenewslens.com/article/162794>.

### 3. Trend Observation

#### 3-1. CCP's "fire line" tactic is no longer working

Since the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2019, the mayor of Wuhan prioritized "political education" and "economic development" important to the central government over the alertness to public health emergencies, thus missing the best opportunity to control the epidemic. In the "Case of Chained Mother" in 2022, the local government tried to blur the focus and whitewash the situation, causing a public outcry. These incidents all reflect the governance crisis of local governments in China. The common point of similar incidents is that the local governments initially tried to cover up the truth; as the incidents developed, the handling processes "gradually escalated," and the central government eventually held the relevant local cadres accountable.

However, with the development of Chinese society, people's consciousness of their rights, the protection of women's rights, and the defense of disadvantaged groups have been further recognized. In particular, the public has long been dissatisfied with how the local

governments still protect officials when social issues involving people's lives and properties, eventually only penalizing local officials to "create a fire lane." This "central penalizes local trouble" model will continue to drain China's administrative resources and sow the seeds of distrust in public power.

#### 3-2. Can democracy sprout when "public opinion becomes the judge" ?

Since the "Case of Chained Mother" came to light, the incident has developed rapidly under the close attention of netizens, even revealing the serious problem of human trafficking and women's status in Chinese society. The development led Chinese Supreme People's Court President Zhou Qiang to talk in a meeting of the National People's Congress on March 8. He stressed that China would continue to punish crimes of trafficking women and children severely while strengthening judicial protection for abducted women and children. In addition, the case also demonstrates once again the importance of public scrutiny. Due to the local government's cover-up of the truth and the collective failure of the official media to speak out, it was only through the spontaneous concern and evidence



collection of netizens and the self-media that the officials had to comply with public opinion to reveal the truth. In the future, whether the lack of transparency in government information that forced citizens to use the Internet to collaborate would form a “public opinion scrutiny mechanism with Chinese characteristics” and how effective it may become are worthy of further observation.

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(The contents and views in the assessments are the personal opinions of the author, and do not represent the position of the Institute for National Defense and Security Research.)

Problems in Chinese Local Governance: Case of Chained Mother in Xuzhou



# Social Protection of the Vulnerable in Post-Reform China: The Case of Women

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## 1. News Highlights

On March 1, 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Council held its 49th conference on the protection of the rights of women and children. During the conference, several social organization representatives from China spoke enthusiastically about the improvement of women's rights in China and the great progress the country has made in gender equality.<sup>1</sup> But on March 29, the State Council of China convened a “Joint Conference of Anti-Abduction Forces” to propose plans to address human trafficking issues. Premier Li Keqiang instructed all provinces and localities to promote the special campaign to combat trafficking

in women and children, conduct comprehensive, in-depth investigations into trafficking, and relocate and reassure women who have been trafficked. The discussion and measures to combat trafficking in women and children imply that the situation of Chinese women is very different from that portrayed by the above-mentioned social organizations.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) boasted its support for gender equality so much that gender equality has been written into its constitution; Mao Zedong coined the phrase, “women hold up half of the sky.” However, signs point to the opposite: women in China are still being treated unequally. By the standard of the Convention on the Elimination of All

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1. “Chinese Social Organizations Actively Present Achievements in Protecting Women’s and Children’s Rights at UN Human Rights Council,” *People’s Daily Online*, March 30, 2022, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2022/0330/c64387-32387457.html>.

Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the United Nations, China still has a long way to go when it comes to the protection of women's rights and interests.<sup>2</sup> This article will examine the current situation and assess the causes of inadequate protection of women's rights from the perspective of CCP governance. Since women's rights involve a wide range of issues, this article will focus only on women trafficking.

## 2. Security Implications

### 2-1. Women's rights protection in China still inadequate

According to China's official 2019 statistics, the country has a female population of 684.78 million. Although Chinese women are not "disadvantaged" in terms of total numbers, they have different interests and specific demands depending on their place of residence (urban or rural), education level, occupation, and even age, so it is difficult to form a unified "women's group consciousness," which

in turn reduces women's motivation to participate in collective action for the protection of their own rights. According to the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Gender Gap Indicator, China ranked 106 out of 156 countries in 2021, worsening from 63 in 2006. This trend signifies that China has regressed in recent years and is lagging far behind other countries in terms of gender equality, and Chinese women (compared to men) are becoming increasingly disadvantaged.

The demographic structure of China's population shows the phenomenon and the reasons for the lack of women's rights. In the aforementioned WEF report, China's male population of 715.27 million in 2019 is about 30.49 million more than that of women, indicating a serious gender imbalance. The CCP's fertility policy is a major cause of gender imbalance. The forced promotion of "family plans" has led many Chinese families (especially those in rural areas) to prefer boys in a patriarchal culture. After the "reform and opening up," the family is the unit of production; even if multiple

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2. Wu Weiting, "Gender Human Rights Watch: The Emerging Gender Human Rights View in China," *China Human Rights Watch Report 2020* (Taipei: Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, 2021), pp. 165-196, [http://www.tfd.org.tw/export/sites/tfd/files/download/2020\\_HR\\_004.pdf](http://www.tfd.org.tw/export/sites/tfd/files/download/2020_HR_004.pdf).

births are tolerated in rural areas, boys are considered additional productivity from the family's point of view and are therefore more beneficial to the family interests. Over time, the elective abortion and abandonment of female infants have created a structural gender imbalance.

Gender imbalance is a major reason for the proliferation of women trafficking in China today. Since gender imbalance has created a large group of young single men, the demand for "marriage" has led to the rise of the women trafficking market. Although Chinese officials did not provide complete data on human trafficking, information gathered from human rights organizations, NGOs, and unofficial data suggests that as many as 92,851 women and children were trafficked and sold between 2000 and 2013. Most of the women abducted and trafficked for forced marriages were from ethnic minorities in Anhui, Guizhou, Henan, Hunan, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces and were sold to areas with serious gender imbalance, such

as Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shandong, Henan, and Inner Mongolia.<sup>3</sup>

## **2-2. Law is CCP's tool to govern disadvantaged social groups**

The CCP tends to protect the rights of the disadvantaged groups with law, and the nature of the group influences the CCP's response. Due to the enormous number, diversity, and complexity of their specific demands, Chinese women have initiated very few collective actions to defend themselves, so the CCP does not see them as a threat. The CCP tends to adopt by-case, ad hoc, and piecemeal policies to respond to the demands of women. For the CCP, the law is a governance tool with fewer political risks. Instead of giving these disadvantaged groups stronger civil rights (such as voting, political participation, or protesting) and using the power to rally and challenge the regime, the CCP prefers to let those involved seek compensation through the law after their rights have been violated.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Tiantian Zheng, "Human Trafficking in China," *Journal of Historical Archeology Anthropological Sciences*, Vol. 3, Issue 2 (2018), pp. 171-178, <http://medcraveonline.com/JHAAS/JHAAS-03-00080.pdf>.
  4. A similar governance logic has been applied to protect the rights of farmers and workers. See Christina Chen, "Unintended Consequences of Enhanced Labor Legislation in Reform-Era China," in Szu-chien Hsu, Kellee S. Tsai, and Chun-chih Chang (eds.), *Evolutionary Governance in China: State-Society Relations under Authoritarianism* (Cambridge: Harvard Contemporary China Series, 2021), pp. 284-307.

In the case of women trafficking, Li Keqiang briefly mentioned the protection of women's and children's rights in his report on the work of CCP's Two Sessions. "We are rigorously combating the abduction and sale of women and children and firmly protecting the legitimate rights and interests of women and children." On March 8, NPC Standing Committee President Li Zhanshu attended the Committee. His released work report stated that the "Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests" will be amended this year to improve the relevant provisions in preventive protection, the remedy of infringements, and accountability.<sup>5</sup> In their work reports, the Supreme Court and the Supreme Prosecutor's Office have proposed to arrest crimes through large-scale operations and impose severe punishment on the perpetrators.<sup>6</sup> It can be seen that the CCP has responded to the need to promote women's rights through law-enforcement

programs, the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, and verbal criticism and slogans.

### **2-3. Lack of civil society hinders protection of women's rights**

Fearing that its regime would be challenged, the CCP has allowed civil society very little room to develop. Since Xi Jinping took office, the CCP has been suppressing civil society; many civil activists and organizations such as human rights lawyers, house churches, journalists, social media, and NGOs have been arrested and banned. Although the Charity Law passed in March 2016 provides clearer regulations for local NGOs, it is believed that the Law will increase restrictions on the public fundraising activities of the NGOs to maintain the monopoly of quasi-governmental and official organizations. The Law also gives the government significant powers to arrest NGOs and private organizations that

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5. "Li Zhanshu, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, Reports to the General Assembly on the Work of the Committee," *Xinhua Net*, March 8, 2022, [http://www.news.cn/politics/2022lh/2022-03/08/c\\_1128449237.htm](http://www.news.cn/politics/2022lh/2022-03/08/c_1128449237.htm).

6. "The Two Sessions: Report of the Supreme People's Court and the Procuratorate; Severe Punishment for Crimes of Sexual Assault and Trafficking of Women and Children," *Ming Pao*, March 8, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/OpNGmA>.

the CCP considers detrimental to national security or social interests.<sup>7</sup> The Law on the Administration of Domestic Activities of Foreign NGOs, passed in April of the same year, requires foreign NGOs to find a government department to act as their business director and to register with the local Ministry of Public Security. The passage and implementation of these two laws have endangered most NGOs in the legal grey areas, increasing the risk of their operations in China and causing thousands of NGOs to cease operations or choose to leave the country after the new laws were implemented.<sup>8</sup>

The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), the largest women's organization in China, is now in an extremely awkward situation. Although the ACWF is positioned as an organization that protects the rights of women and children, it is a CCP and government organization under the leadership of CCP committees at all levels while having a dual role in implementing CCP policies and protecting

women's rights. When the two roles conflict, it tends to implement the Party's demands. Moreover, the ACWF has not been granted corresponding legislative and law enforcement powers and responsibilities. In the eyes of outsiders, its function has been reduced to a model organization for the CCP's United Front. It is foreseeable that the ACWF's participation in the special campaign against women and children trafficking and other future policies promoted by the CCP does not mean that the organization will demand more rights and protection from the government.

### 3. Trend Observation

On April 18, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) released the second draft of the amendment to the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, which includes actions against the trafficking of

7. "The First Charity Law in China Raises Questions," *Radio France Internationale*, March 21, 2016, <https://www.rfi.fr/tw/中國/20160320-中國第一部慈善法引發的爭議>.

8. Liu Ruifen, "'The New Law is Like a Knife Hanging Around the Neck,' Thousands of Foreign NGOs Have Ceased Operation or Withdrawn from China," *Mirror Weekly*, June 19, 2017, [https://www.mirrormedia.mg/story/20170616int\\_china\\_ngo/](https://www.mirrormedia.mg/story/20170616int_china_ngo/).

women. The draft requires the relevant authorities to report any act of women trafficking immediately, and the public security departments must handle the case instantly upon receipt of the notification. In addition, the relevant authorities must conduct regular joint checks (case-by-case review) with the public security departments.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned, women trafficking is related to China's long-standing demographic imbalance and has even become a market, so the government needs to curb it institutionally. Judging from the recent response of the CCP to the women trafficking problem, it is anticipated that the measures will be somewhat effective after the implementation of the special operation, but its effectiveness in curbing trafficking could be limited since the operation is not a standing one. As to whether the amendment to the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests can curb the trafficking, the effectiveness depends on whether its contents are sound and whether its enforcement is thorough.

Judging from the contents of the current draft, although the Chinese government has regulated the duties of the relevant local authorities regarding the women trafficking problem, it has not proposed any penalty for violating the regulation. As a result, it may be challenging to raise the willingness of local governments to enforce the law. That means the CCP still chooses to respond to the demand for enhancing the protection of women's rights in a by-case or piecemeal manner rather than actively addressing the issue at the fundamental level of the system.

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(The contents and views in the assessments are the personal opinions of the author, and do not represent the position of the Institute for National Defense and Security Research.)

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9. "Second Review Draft of the Revised Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests: Mandatory Reporting and Inspection of Women Trafficking and Other Violations, and Prohibition of the Promotion Restrictions of Female Workers Due to Marriage and Childbirth," *Xinhua Net*, April 18, 2022, [http://big5.news.cn/gate/big5/www.news.cn/legal/2022-04/18/c\\_1128571154.htm](http://big5.news.cn/gate/big5/www.news.cn/legal/2022-04/18/c_1128571154.htm).



# Women Attacked in Tangshan: An Observation on CCP Response

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Keywords: attack in Tangshan, censorship

On June 10, 2022, a violent incident occurred in Tangshan City, Hebei Province, China, where nine men beat four women at a barbecue restaurant after sexually harassing them in a failed pick-up attempt, causing the women to be sent to the hospital with serious injuries. The news shocked China. Video footage recorded by netizens went viral and sparked outrage before prompting the local police to take action and arrest the nine male culprits. The incident not only hit the “top search” of *Weibo* on June 10 and June 11<sup>1</sup> but also prompted official media, including *People’s Daily*, *CCTV*, and *China Women’s Daily* to criticize the

violence and call on the local government to deal with it according to the law as soon as possible.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has adopted strict control over the press, often blocking news immediately whenever needed. As merely a local community case, why has the Tangshan incident unusually attracted criticism from the central-level official media and even become a hot topic on the Internet? Why did the CCP not shut down the news of this incident but instead take the initiative to comment on it and allow it to be widely circulated and discussed? The following are the author’s observations.

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1. Lin Yanchen, “The Last Suspect Involved in the Tangshan ‘Woman Assaulted by Several Men’ Incident Arrested, the News Took 7 Out of 10 ‘Hot Searches’ on Weibo,” *ETtoday News Cloud*, June 11, 2022, <https://www.ettoday.net/news/20220611/2270952.htm>.
  2. “Tangshan Women Assaulted Incident / ‘They Need Justice’, Public Rage Unusually Reported by Official Media,” *World News*, June 11, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/d2l8XV>.

### **CCP using incident to reverse its negative image on women's protection**

The “Case of Chained Mother” incident, publicized on the Internet in January 2022, sparked discussions about women trafficking and the protection of women's rights in Chinese society. The CCP's delayed intervention, as well as clear attempts by local authorities to deflect the problem through a series of vague, contradictory reports, led many to believe that the party has little interest in protecting the rights of the disadvantaged. The authorities also blocked comments as netizens tried to identify the chained mother of the eight children in Xuzhou.<sup>3</sup> On April 2, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Youth League (CYL) posted on its *Weibo* account a topic titled, “The Long Marches For Each Generation” with six pictures, aiming to highlight young Chinese who contributed to major historical events

of the CCP. However, netizens pointed out that no women appeared in these pictures. In response to the questions, the CYL Central issued a long *Weibo* post along with the Beijing Evening News on April 12 to criticize “extreme feminism” with strong words such as “it's time to control the fake feminism that swings a big stick.”<sup>4</sup> As a result, this year's events related to women's rights have stirred up netizens' dissatisfaction with the CCP, reinforcing the impression that the CCP has been neglecting the protection of women's rights for years. In the author's view, the CCP's intervention after the Tangshan incident was related to the abovementioned events. The CCP hopes to use pressure exerted on local authorities and criticism in the official media to speak for women and reverse its negative image among netizens as “inactive,” “unreflective,” and “bullying with official authority” when it comes to the protection of women's rights and interests.

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3. Christina Chen, “The Logic of CCP's Speech Control from the China Eastern Airlines Disaster and the ‘Xuzhou Eight Children Case’,” *National Defense and Security Instant Review*, No. 344 (April 12, 2022), <https://indsr.org.tw/focus?uid=11=269=22>.

4. Yu Li, “Official Media of Continuous Misstep: Why Did the Chinese National Anthem Lyrics Become Sensitive Words?” *China Digital Times*, No. 95, April 19, 2022, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/679775.html>.

### **Incident exposes limited effectiveness against gang violence, CCP needs high-profile measures**

Although police arrived at the Tangshan barbecue restaurant, they did not arrest the men who were causing trouble; one of the men was even suspected of being a local police officer.<sup>5</sup> Several Tangshan residents later identified themselves and reported other incidents on the Internet, posting video footage of themselves being assaulted and harassed by local gang members. With the evidence, the Tangshan incident triggered suspicions of long-term collusion between the officials and gangs, leading to rampant crimes in the area.<sup>6</sup>

During his tenure, Xi Jinping has focused on fighting corruption and gangs by launching a three-year “special national campaign to fight organized and gang-related crimes” in 2018, aiming to eliminate crimes and reinforce the authorities at the local level. On March

29, 2021, the CCP held a national convention to conclude the campaign and commend the crime-fighters, declaring the campaign’s successful completion.<sup>7</sup>

From the Tangshan incident and the abovementioned development, it can be seen that the effectiveness of the crime-fighting campaign is actually limited. Local violent crimes obviously have not been completely eliminated, and gangs are still present and rampant in the communities. These incidents have directly shaken the authority of the CCP’s governance; as such, its Central Committee needs to intervene quickly in a high-profile manner to dispel people’s distrust of the regime.

### **CCP tries to win back people’s hearts for stability**

The COVID-19 lockdown of Shanghai in March has caused many problems for people’s livelihoods and hugely impacted the economy, leading

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5. Cheng Jing, “Tangshan Women Assaulted Incident is the Tip of an Iceberg, Foreign Media Demanded Reasons,” *The Epoch Times*, No. 95, 12 June 2022. <https://www.epochtimes.com/b5/22/6/12/n13757467.htm>.

6. Chen Yan Qiao, “Tangshan Female Singer Locked up in Dog Cage, Police Quickly Arrested Four Suspects after the Public Enraged,” *World News*, June 12, 2022, <https://www.worldjournal.com/wj/story/121474/6383592>.

7. “Xi Jinping Meets with Representatives from the Conclusion and Commendation Convention of the Special National Campaign to Fight Organized and Gang-related Crimes,” *CCTV Net*, March 29, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/41v81L>.

to many public grievances. During the lockdown, many netizens even circumvented censorship and challenged the CCP's official policy and rhetoric through ironic and satirical expressions.<sup>8</sup> The CCP's response to the Tangshan incident shows that it is aware of its strained relationship with society, and if it does not respond to the needs of the people, there could be more discontent. Even though there has not yet been a large-scale physically assembled protest in China, the CCP's top brass, desperate to get through the year peacefully, must be careful at this crucial moment to avoid the convergence of public opinion on the Internet from turning into actual actions. It is foreseeable that the CCP will make other moves to win back the people's hearts before the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress takes place.

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8. Yu Li, "Official Media of Continuous Misstep: Why Did the Chinese National Anthem Lyrics Become Sensitive Words?" *China Digital Times*, No. 95, April 19, 2022, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/679775.html>.

# WEF's 2022 Global Gender Gap Report, Women's Political Participation in China and Their Declining Status in Recent Years

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Keywords: Women and Political Participation, All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)

Topic: CCP Politics

The World Economic Forum released its Global Gender Gap Report on July 13, 2022. The report uses the Global Gender Gap Index, first introduced by the World Economic Forum in 2006, to benchmark progress towards gender parity and compare countries' gender gaps across four dimensions: economic participation and opportunities, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. According to the latest report, China ranked in the bottom half, 102<sup>nd</sup> out of 146 countries, in 2022. However, in 2006, China ranked 63<sup>rd</sup>, which shows that gender inequality has worsened in rights, resources and voices. Despite China's rapid economic growth since the 1990s after the reform and

opening-up and the fact that China has overtaken Japan as the world's second-biggest economy, Chinese women have not gained more resources and opportunities when compared to men. The author believes that the status of women in China has deteriorated markedly, partly because they are politically underprivileged. According to this year's report, in terms of women's political empowerment, China ranked 120<sup>th</sup> in 2022 and 118<sup>th</sup> last year. In women's representation in the National People's Congress, China ranked 80<sup>th</sup> out of 146 countries, falling 4 places compared to 2021. In women's representation in central government, China ranked 139<sup>th</sup>, falling 8 places compared to last year.<sup>1</sup> This year's Global Gender Gap Report shows

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1. "Global Gender Gap Report 2022, Economic Profile: China," *World Economic Forum*, July 13 2022, [https://widgets.weforum.org/GGGR/edition-22-ranking/pdf/2022/gggr\\_index\\_2022\\_032\\_CHN.pdf](https://widgets.weforum.org/GGGR/edition-22-ranking/pdf/2022/gggr_index_2022_032_CHN.pdf).

that China has not made any progress in enhancing women's political status. This article will focus on Chinese women's participation in politics in recent years.

### **A male-dominated regime**

The Chinese government is run by a single party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). A significant indication of women's political status is their participation in the core ruling body of the CCP. If we look at women's participation in the core ruling body of the CCP, there has not been any female committee member so far in the Politburo of the party, or the Politburo Standing Committee (the decision-making body of the CCP). The Politburo is the highest body of the Communist Party of China. From the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress, among the 25 Politburo members each year, there were only six female Politburo members and two female alternate members in total. Three of the six Politburo members were the wives of CCP top leaders. After the 19<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress in 2017, there has been

only one female committee member, Ms. Sun Chunlan, Vice Premier of the State Council (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the percentage of lower-ranking female members in the CCP has increased but has never exceeded 30%. This figure indicates a significant gender gap considering the ratio of male to female in China is about 51 to 49.<sup>3</sup> From the CCP's power structure, we can see women's political participation has increased with time. However, it also shows the trend that women's representation decreases at the higher echelons of political structure and that women's participation is much lower than men's in general (See Figure 1). It is no exaggeration to say that the CCP is a male-dominated regime.

### **ACWF: Weak women's organization**

With the CCP's restriction on the development of NGOs, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) is the only large women's organization in the world's second largest economy. ACWF was established in 1949. Although it appears to be a social mass organization, it has

2. "China Has Very Few Women in Power. 'Women Can Hold up Half the Sky' is Nothing but a Slogan," *The News Lens*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.thenewslens.com/article/152785/fullpage>.

3. "Number of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Members in China from 2010 to 2021, by Gender," *Statista*, June, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/249975/number-of-chinese-communist-party-ccp-members-in-china-by-gender/#statisticContainer>.

branches at every administrative level (down to the village level), with leadership at each level directly appointed by party leadership at its own level. Since the administrative budget, business activities, and development budgets are government funded, the way it actually operates makes it a mass organization.<sup>4</sup> When choosing between party or women, ACWF's operation leans towards exerting the party's will.

In recent years, ACWF has stressed the implementation of the guiding principles of Xi Jinping. The 2018 All-China Women's Federation Charter listed its 9 major tasks. The first is to organize and guide women in learning and implementing Xi Jinping's "Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" and "The Party's Line, Principles, and Policies". It is not until the third point that the charter mention women's rights and appeals. During this year's Two Sessions (2022), ACWF held a workshop, but it did not discuss at all the Xuzhou Chained Mother

of Eight Incident that happened during the same period. Shen Yueyue, President of the ACWF, reiterated Xi's thoughts and asked government organs to implement Xi Jinping's "Important Talk". The protection of women's and children's rights owes to Xi Jinping administration's "kindness" and "attention".<sup>5</sup> The nature of the ACWF – dependent on and controlled by the CCP, as well as the recent changes – make it unable to speak up for women's rights. Only when the party central committee focuses on women's rights, would the ACWF have the chance to follow suit.

### **Myth of women "holding up half the sky"**

The CCP has been touting the banner of Gender Equality for years. In the 1950s, Mao Zedong famously proclaimed that women can "hold up half the sky" and the CCP included gender equality in the constitution in 1954, clearly stating that women "enjoy equal rights with men in terms of politics, economy, culture,

4. All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) Charter, *Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China*, August 26, 2003, <https://reurl.cc/oQDqxq>.

5. "The All-China Women's Federation Convened a Party Group Meeting and a General Meeting of Its Cadres to Convey the Spirit of Xi Jinping's Important Speech and National Two Sessions," *China Women's Daily*, March 11, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/aG17N9>.

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and social and family life". In 1992, the National People's Congress passed the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, again stressing the importance of gender equality and protecting women's rights. Based on the analysis above, it is clear that the political status and influence of Chinese women are not in line with China's gender ratio. Qualitatively, the system and actions of the ACWF show that there is no strong organization that can voice women's needs and concerns; even women's legal rights are not protected. When a regime is dominated by male

leaders for a long time with no influential women's representation, it is easy to understand why there has been a series of infringements, at times outright violation, of women's rights in recent years. From the Disappearance of Peng Shuai, the Xuzhou Chained Mother of Eight Incident, and the Tangshan Restaurant Attack to the most recent Chinese Nth Room Incident<sup>6</sup>, these incidents spotlight the problems that Chinese women have been suffering for a long time, which has enraged Chinese society. In China, "women can hold up half the sky" is nothing but a slogan.

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6. The Nth Room Case is large-scale exploitation of women that happened in South Korea between 2018 and 2020. The perpetrator started an encrypted chat room and spread sexually exploitative videos and live streaming via the app. In recent years, the same thing happened in China, many young girls, some as young as 2, were victims. Shen Jung-Yu, "The Nth Room Case Happened in China. Enraged Internet Celebrity: The Website is still There after 15 Years of the Report," March 11, 2022, <https://reurl.cc/eO5ZEK>.



**Figure 1: Women's political participation in leading organizations after the 19th Congress of the CCP**

Leading organizations	Committee Members/Total Number of Party Members	Female Committee Members/Party Members	Women's Percentage
Politburo Standing Committee	7	0	--
Politburo	25	1	4%
Central Committee	371	30	8%
▶ Official Members	203	10	5%
▶ Alternate Members	168	20	12%
Central Military Commission	7	0	--
Central Commission for Discipline Inspection	133	9	7%
Provincial Leaders	31	1	3%
The 19 <sup>th</sup> National Congress	2280	550	24%
The CCP	Around 92 million	Around 28 million	30%

Resources: Information compiled by Christina Chen based on Sierra Janik, Daniel Blaugher, and Jonathan Ray, "Women in China's Leadership," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 30, 2022.

Explanation: The Politburo Standing Committee consists of the General Secretary of the Central Committee and six members of the Politburo Standing Committee; the Provincial Leaders govern 22 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, and the 4 municipalities: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing.

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