

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

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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, 102nd out of 146 countries, in 2022. However, in 2006, China ranked 63rd, 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 120th in 2022 and 118th last year. In women's representation in the National People's Congress, China ranked 80th out of 146 countries, falling 4 places compared to 2021. In women's representation in central government, China ranked 139th, falling 8 places compared to last year.¹ This year's Global Gender Gap Report shows

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.

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 9th to the 19th 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 19th 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).² 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 49.³ 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.⁴ 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".⁵ 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>.

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 Incident⁶, 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.

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 th 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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