

Women's Political Participation in China

GUO Xiajuan and ZHAO Litao*

China began to promote gender equality in the 1950s. It made a renewed effort after 1995 when the country hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women.

The new initiatives focus more on action and implementation, with new approaches to train and promote woman cadres. A most recent action plan came in April 2009 when China decided to promote human rights, including women's rights to political participation. These initiatives help to provide a stable institutional environment for advancing women's political participation.

CHINA BEGAN TO promote gender equality in the area of education, access to work, marriage and family, and political participation in the 1950s. It sought to illegalise various forms of gender discrimination to create a society in which women can “hold up half the sky”. Into the reform period, China’s rapid economic development has created favourable conditions for women to enjoy greater access to education and non-farm employment.

In politics, China has no lack of high-profile woman leaders. In 2007, then Chinese Vice Premier Wu Yi was ranked No. 2 on the annual list of the World’s 100 Most

* GUO Xiajuan is a Professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Zhejiang University, China. ZHAO Litao is a Research Fellow at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.

Powerful Women compiled by US-based *Forbes* magazine. That was a significant indicator of the influence of women in Chinese political affairs. Indeed, women's political participation in China has gained new momentum after the country hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. China has made substantial progress in widening women's political participation, though at a much lower level than that in many other countries, especially those in the democratic West.

The progress in the level of women's political participation can be attributed to the economic reform and open door policy introduced in China in 1978. Women's political inclusion has greatly benefited from various gender-related institutions and policies such as the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests* (1992, 2005), the *Programme for Women Development in China (1995-2000, 2001-2010)* and specific rules spelt out in various documents relating to personnel appointments by the Central Organisation Department (COD) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (e.g., *the Programme on Deepening the Reform of Cadre and Personnel System from 2001 to 2010*).

The market-oriented reform has greatly facilitated the engagement of women in free market competition. As women's awareness of individual rights develops, the granting of political rights becomes inevitable as it serves as an extension of their material interests under the free market system. In addition, the open-door policy has accelerated the alignment of Chinese women's pursuit of equal opportunity and favourable gender policy with international norms.

The advancement of women's participation in politics would not have come about without the development of many institutional factors over the past decades. Since the 1990s, the Chinese Communist Party has put in place various policies, or affirmative action, to enhance gender equality. Female representation in different political bodies has increased significantly. To encourage women's participation, the party-state has explored different approaches such as combining multi-candidate elections with mandatory quotas. The quota system at every level has guaranteed the presence of women in political bodies.

Since the late 1990s, the COD has enacted several decisions on training and selecting women cadres. Promoted by the All China Women's Federation (ACWF), women's participation has become an index used in evaluating officials' performances, which represents a substantial leap from the initial definition in 1982 to actual implementation. These institutional initiatives have provided a stable institutional environment for advancing women's participation.

From a comparative perspective, China still lags far behind many other countries in terms of increasing women's representation in powerful political bodies. Though a few Chinese women are perceived as politically influential worldwide, the reality is, the gap

Since the 1990s, the Chinese Communist Party has put in place various policies, or affirmative action, to enhance gender equality.

between women's participation in different political power structures in China and in other countries has widened in recent decades despite China's achievement of faster economic growth compared with most other countries today.

The international ranking of female deputies of People's Congress (equivalent to Congresspersons or Parliament members in other countries) decreased from 12th in 1994 to 42nd in 2005. The low women's representation can also be seen in the central power structure as the proportion of females in the Central Committee of the CCP declined to 7.6% in 2002 compared with a steady increase from five percent to 13% in the period between the 1950s and 1970s. Women face enormous challenges in terms of political participation in the largely male-dominated society of China.

The Rise of Affirmative Action

Equal opportunity between men and women has been a principal policy of the Party and government ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China. During the era of Mao Zedong, China's gender policy was to achieve Mao's ambitious goal of "women holding up half the sky." Until today, Mao was regarded more liberal towards woman participation in politics than any other leaders, including the current leadership. In fact, Mao's wife Jiang Qing was able to turn off many male Chinese politicians.

However, most of the provisions under this policy were too general and had no substantial impact on women's rights. China's hosting of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was a key turning point. This event served as a catalyst in boosting women's political involvement, resulting in various gender-oriented regulations. In the closing address of the 1995 world women conference, then-President Jiang Zemin once again emphasised that "the equality between men and women is the fundamental policy of China." Following the 1995 conference, the Chinese government has been systematically supporting women's political rights.

As a primary provision in the 1954 Constitution, gender equality is protected constitutionally in China. The Constitution states that "all citizens of the People's Republic of China have the right to vote and stand for election." Another article states that "women in the People's Republic of China have equal rights with men in all spheres of life including the political, economic, cultural, social and family spheres". Women's rights are also stated in all subsequent constitutions.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, women's rights were realised and protected by China's cadre management system under which all Party cadres and government officials were appointed by the party-state. This system took gender factors into consideration when appointments were decided, leading to a great increase in the proportion of female cadres. The female proportion reached its peak in the 1970s, representing a milestone in the history of women's political inclusion in China.

The 1982 Constitution substantially advanced women's political rights. Article 48 of the 1982 Constitution states that "the state.....trains and selects women cadres." In September 1982, the 12th Party Congress, which was held in Beijing, revised the Party Constitution. Article 34 of the Party Constitution states that "the Party selects women cadres according to the criteria of integrity and ability... The Party should pay great

attention to cultivating and selecting women cadres as well as minority cadres”. Both the State Constitution and Party Constitution facilitated the rise of affirmative action, in terms of promoting women’s political participation and increasing the proportion of females in different power structures. In other words, the new emphasis on women’s rights made it mandatory to realise women’s inclusion.

Since 1982, a number of party documents and state policies have focussed on female cadres’ training and selection. Various state personnel reforms have also emphasised women’s capacity building and their sharing of power in different government departments and organisations, providing women with special protection and benefits. The party has also made efforts to recruit women to meet the target of training and selecting women cadres.

In 1992, the first law on women’s rights, *The PRC Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights*, was enacted. It was amended in 2005. The law reiterated that “the state should actively train and select female cadres. The state organs, civil organisations, enterprises and institutions must insist on the principle of gender equality in the appointment of cadres and they are to foster and promote female cadres to leadership positions. The state pays attention to training and selecting minority woman cadres as well.” These provisions have generated a positive impact on women’s political participation.

According to these policy initiatives, the government should play a leading role in policy implementation and bear full responsibility for it. In 1995, China’s first gender equality programme – *Programme of China Women’s Development (1995-2000)* – was enacted.

A second version (2001-2010) of the programme was developed in 2000, indicating that women’s political participation has become a part of governmental actions. Various concrete objectives established in the programme have advanced the goals of women’s political participation.

In April 2009, the Information Office of the State Council published National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2009-2010). This action plan pays much heed to women’s political participation. In particular, people’s congresses, political consultative conferences and governments at all levels should have at least one female member in their leadership. Moreover, at least half of the agencies in central government ministries, provincial governments and city governments should have a female member in their leadership, and women should make up at least 20% of the reserve cadres at provincial, city and county levels. The action plan represents a new effort to guarantee women’s rights to political participation.

In the closing address of the 1995 world women conference, then-President Jiang Zemin once again emphasised that “the equality between men and women is the fundamental policy of China.”

Benefits from the Affirmative Action

Progress in women's political participation achieved since 1949 can be divided into three stages. The first stage began in 1949 with the establishment of the People's Republic, lasting until the mid-1960s during which affirmative action and other mandatory measures enabled women to take up a relatively high proportion in political power structures. The top-down appointment system, especially its quota measures, guaranteed women's political inclusion. Consequently, women's representation in party and government organs at all levels expanded considerably.

Various indicators point to achievements in terms of women's political participation, which ranges from women occupying leadership positions in top offices to those in grassroots bodies. The proportion of women in the National People's Congress (NPC) and Chinese People's Political Consultant Conference (CPPCC) has increased over time. The first NPC (1954) had 147 female representatives, accounting for 12% of the total number of representatives. The second NPC (1959) had 150, accounting for 12.2%. The third NPC (1964) had 542, accounting for 17.9%. The first CPPCC (1954) had 12 female representatives, accounting for 6.6%. The second CPPCC (1959) had 83, accounting for 11.4%. The third CPPCC (1964) had 87, accounting for 8.1%. That time, there were two women in various committees of the Central Government, accounting for 3.1% of the total number of members. Out of a total of six vice presidents, there was only one female. There were 20 women in positions at or above the vice ministerial level, accounting for four percent of the total. In the 1950s, local governments at all levels had female cadres. Nationwide, about 70% of townships had female directors or deputy directors.

During the second stage in the 1970s, women's political participation reached its peak. Due to the implementation of affirmative action and mandatory measures, the 1970s became the most remarkable era for women's political participation in contemporary China. In 1975, at the Fourth NPC, woman representatives accounted for 22.6% of the total. About one in four Standing Committee members was female, indicating that female cadres made up a high proportion of government officials at all levels, since members of the Standing Committees of NPC were usually selected from among key position holders in various functional departments of the government.

After a decline between the 1980s and the early 1990s, the third stage of progress in women's political participation took place in the mid-1990s. Affirmative action was re-established and effectively implemented as China responded to the international community before and after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, as well as four meetings held by the COD and the ACWF which discussed issues related to women's political participation. Various programmes on training and selecting women cadres followed. Since then, the compulsory quota system has played a crucial role in increasing the proportion of females in party and government bodies. Overall, women's political participation during this period was spurred by international factors and intervention in the forms of women-oriented strategies and policies by the party-state.

In the 1990s, the quota of woman cadres saw a steady increase. Statistics show there were 10 million female governmental officials across the country in 1991, accounting

for 31.2% of the total. The figure rose to 12.4 million (32.5%) in 1994, 13.8 million (34.4%) in 1997, 14.9 million (36.2%) in 2000 and 15.0 million (38.9%) in 2005. Women also appeared in senior official positions. In 1994, there were one woman vice premier in the State Council, 16 female ministers and deputy ministers, more than 300 female mayors and deputy majors and 21,012 woman judges in the country.

Meanwhile, the proportion of female party members also saw a slow but steady increase. The number of female party members reached 8.2 million by the end of 1993, accounting for 15.13% of total party membership. That increased to 8.9 million in 1994, accounting for 15.6% of the total; 11.2 million in 2000, or 17.4%; 11.6 million in 2002, or 17.5%; 13.6 million at the end of 2005, or 19.2% of the total.

The share of women among NPC representatives also expanded. There were 626 woman representatives at the Eighth NPC in 1993, accounting for 21% of the total, and 19 female Standing Committee members, making up 12.3%, two percentage points higher than the previous committee. There were 650 female representatives at the Ninth NPC in 1998, accounting for 21.8% of the total 2,979. The State Council had one female vice premier and one female state councilor.

There were 193 female committee members at the Eighth CPPCC in 1993, accounting for 9.2% of the total; 341 female committee members at the Ninth CPPCC in 1998, accounting for 15.5%, and 27 female Standing Committee members, accounting for nine percent representing 12 more, or 3.1 percentage points more than at the Eighth CPPCC and 375 female members at the Tenth CPPCC in 2003, accounting for 16.8%.

The key to the progress was affirmative action and its implementation on the part of the party and the state. The state, together with the Women's Federation, explored diverse approaches, including combining multi-candidate elections with mandatory quotas, to promote women's political participation. The government established regulations to guarantee women's representatives in government organisations. More importantly, the COD enacted a series of policies on women's political participation and initiated regular programmes to train and select women. The establishment of an index of women's participation among the officials' evaluation criteria provided a strong incentive for policy implementation.

Implementation Problems and Policy Retreats

The development of the party-state-led programme of women's participation has been to a large degree determined by general policy orientation in different eras. Despite enormous efforts to promote women's political participation by the party-state, the affirmative action policies encounter strong resistance from time to time. For example,

The establishment of an index of women's participation among the officials' evaluation criteria provided a strong incentive for policy implementation.

when government policies are focussed on achieving planned targets such as economic growth and material prosperity, the goals of gender equity would be subordinated and become poorly implemented. The gendered effects of economic restructuring in turn are reflected in the political sphere. As a result, the number of woman representatives in party-state hierarchies at all levels declines from time to time.

The first decline occurred after the mid-1970s. The proportion of female NPC representatives decreased sharply in 1978. The lowest point was in 1983. In the 20 years from 1978 to 1998, the proportion of females in the NPC stood at about 21%, representing an increase of 0.78 percentage point in 1998 from 1993, but a drop of 0.79 percentage point after five years (2003). Table 1 shows this trend.

Year	1954	1959	1964	1975	1978	1983	1988	1993	1998	2003	2008
Woman Representatives	12	12.3	17.8	22.6	21.2	21.1	21.3	21.0	21.8	20.2	21.3
Women in Standing Committee	5	6.3	17.4	25.1	21.0	9.0	11.9	12.3	12.7	13.2	16.6

Source: For data from 1954 to 2003, see Ling Tan, Yongping Jiang and Xiuhua Jiang, eds., Green Book of Women: Report on Gender Equality and Women Development in China (1995-2005), Beijing: China Academic of Social Sciences Press, 2005, p.56. For data of 2008, see <http://www.cntheory.com/news/2008lianghcz/2008/229/0822993151ECG78AF4BKDK5IB67KG9.html> and http://news.xinhuanet.com/misc/2008-03/15/content_7794828.htm

The low level of women's participation was also reflected in the leadership of the ruling party. Female members (including reserve members) in the Central Committee of the CCP accounted for only 7.6% in 2002, only higher than the 4.7 percent of the 1950s. There was actually an increase from 4.7% in the 1950s to 12.9% in the 1970s, but an apparent decline took place after 1977, reaching a lowest point of 4.1% in 1982. Since 1982, the level has increased though it still has not yet risen to the level of the late 1950s, as shown in Table 2.

Women's political participation shrank not only in the CCP and NPC, but also in all other areas. The comprehensive indexes of women's participation in the party, government, legislature (NPC), CPPCC and grassroots leaderships show the same trend. Based on data from 1995 to 2004, Table 3 shows the development of women's inclusion in the political and decision making processes.

Table 3 shows an increase of 3.13% in the integrated index between 1995 and 2004. However, that happened mainly during the first five years (1995-2000), after which the index was seen to hover around 40%. This demonstrates the trend of women's representation at different levels of the party-state's leading decision making bodies. The low representation of women was prevalent at all levels.

TABLE 2 MALE AND FEMALE MEMBERS OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEES OF THE CCP

The Party Congress (Year)	Numbers	Percentage of Female
8 th (1956)	170	4.7
9 th (1959)	279	8.2
10 th (1973)	319	12.9
11 th (1977)	333	11.4
12 th (1982)	338	4.1
13 th (1987)	285	7.7
14 th (1992)	319	7.5
15 th (1997)	349	7.3
16 th (2002)	356	7.6
17 th (2007)	371	10.0

Source: Department of Population, Society, Science and Technology of the State Statistical Bureau of China, ed., Women and Men in China: Figures and Facts, Beijing: China Statistics Publishing House, 2004, p.83. For 2007, see http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2007-10/21/content_6917500.htm

TABLE 3 ASSESSED RESULTS OF NATIONAL GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT IN POLITICS AND DECISION MAKING IN CHINA (1995-2004)

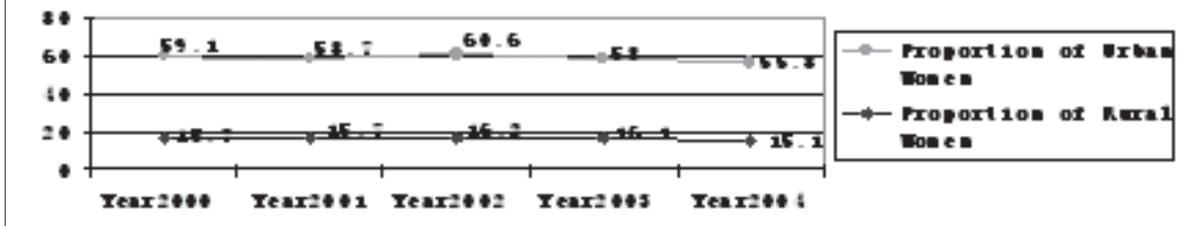
Years	Integrated Index	Party-state	Legislature	CPPCC	Grassroots
1995	37.53	24.02	35.30	22.07	—
2000	40.08	27.74	36.34	29.52	65.70
2001	40.15	28.14	36.34	29.52	65.50
2002	40.80	29.19	34.34	30.61	66.20
2003	40.69	29.51	34.84	32.43	66.10
2004	40.66	30.21	34.84	32.43	65.10

Source: Jiang Yongping, Jiang Xiuhua and Jiayun, 2007, Report on Gender Equality and Women's Development in China (in Chinese). See, <http://www.studa.net/tongjixue/070521/15232668.html>

In general, women's political participation at grassroots levels was more extensive than at higher levels, meaning that urban community committees saw a higher proportion of women. However, even at this level, a similar trend of decline occurred after 2000, as shown in Figure 1.

The low level of women's representation in leading positions is also seen at the county level. A White Paper of the Chinese government (2005) proclaimed that the state has clearly defined the objective for training and selecting woman cadres, and has strengthened the work of training and selecting woman cadres. Furthermore, a general target to have at least one female cadre in each "leading group" at the county level had been set out in a 2001 document titled "Opinions on taking further measures to do well

FIGURE 1 WOMAN PROPORTION IN RURAL AND URBAN COMMUNITIES (2000-2004) (%)



Source: Department of Population, Society, Science and Technology of the State Statistical Bureau of China, ed., *Women and Men in China: Figures and Facts*, Beijing: China Statistics Publishing House, 2004.

in works to train and select female cadres and to develop female Party members.” Apparently, the party-state had not been able to meet its targets of promoting women to leading government and Party positions. Males accounted for an overwhelming proportion of government leaders at the local level. Data collected from 11 autonomous counties show that woman leaders roughly accounted for five percent, while men accounted for 95%.

Policy Remedy and Prospects of Improvement

One of the deeper and major causes for the low level of women’s participation in Party and government bodies is that the existing gender policy or affirmative action merely covers the “four leading bodies”(si tao ban zi) which refer to the Party, government, NPC and CPPCC. The affirmative policy provides only a general guideline for women’s representation while no other quantitative index exists to measure female participation in various Party and government committees, including standing committees. Affirmative action remains to a large extent at a superficial level and has fallen short of bringing a substantial improvement to women’s inclusion in power structures.

The policy wording on women’s inclusion in power structures is often vague. The inexplicit phrase “should” has usually been used to define women’s participation. For example, Article 3 of the third amended *Law of Elections for NPC and Provincial People’s Congress* in 1995 specifies that “the NPC and provincial People’s Congress at all levels should have an appropriate woman number, and gradually advance women’s proportion.” Article 9 of the *Organic Law of China Village Election* in 1998 defines that “there should be an appropriate number of women in each village committee.” In practice, “an appropriate number” has become the operating concept in China’s gender policy on women’s political inclusion since the 1990s. Such policy discourse has failed to substantially advance women’s share in decision making bodies in China.

This non-scientific description of women’s share has made it difficult to achieve substantial progress. The current widely used definition is “at least one woman or more,” instead of the quantitative index in percentage terms used internationally. Put into practice, “one woman or more” has often been translated into a figure of around 10% of a given Party and government body at the provincial level or higher, with the percentage hardly

reaching 30% of the total at the township and lower levels. This regulation has thus actually restrained women's participation.

This in turn has resulted in ineffective implementation of the gender policy. The concept of "at least one woman" has gradually been transformed into "only one woman" during the policy implementation process over time, often leading to fierce competition among competent and talented women, rather than fair competition between men and women.

Furthermore, the lack of a system of policy supervision and assessment has resulted in inadequate implementation of affirmative action. Many laws and policies associated with women's participation are formalistic and largely symbolic, barely exerting any concrete policy pressure on the male-dominated Party and government organisations. The rise and fall of women's participation over the past decades demonstrates the frequently interrupted process of policy implementation at different times when policy priorities are adjusted.

In response to the decline in female representation, the ACWF has continuously made efforts to promote and reemphasise affirmative action since the 1990s. Several specific policy documents which the ACWF helped to formulate successfully translated mandatory indexes of women's political inclusion into practical actions, consequently ending the trend of decline after the 1994 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The affirmative action began to take effect, leading to the enactment of the Programme on China Women's Development (2001-2010) and two additional meetings on selection and cultivation of women's cadres in 2001 and 2002, which re-focussed political attention on issues concerning women's inclusion.

The decline in women's participation has also attracted the Chinese government's attention, leading to efforts to supervise and assess the process of implementing the gender policy. The Women Work Committee under the State Council organised 15 groups of national policy assessment and supervision led by 29 leaders of the provinces and ministries. The aim was to make a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the Programme on Women Development. Such supervision and assessment will help to continuously realise the indexes proposed in the Programme.

China's first *Green Book on Women* prepared by scholars and practitioners was published in 2006. The research team was organised by the ACWF and sponsored by the government. The Report titled "Gender Equality and Women Development in China"

The concept of "at least one woman" has gradually been transformed into "only one woman" during the policy implementation process over time, often leading to fierce competition among competent and talented women, rather than fair competition between men and women.

not only collected different policy ideas and proposals, but it also provided a comprehensive evaluation of the situation of Chinese women following the programme's implementation. The report provided the public, the party and the government with factual figures and the status of women's lives from every aspect, including political participation.

More recently, the decision on women's representation made by the NPC in March 2007 explicitly defined that the percentage of females, rather than female quotas, must reach no less than 22% of the total number of representatives of the 11th plenum of the NPC in 2008. This is a significant turning point as it is the first explicit regulation on women's participation since the reform and open-door policy was introduced in 1978. This regulation clarified the previously ambiguous phrasing of women's participation by using numerical terms. Again, this regulation can be regarded as part of the party-state efforts to boost women's participation.

Indicators show an upward trend in women's shares coinciding with these efforts. Statistics show that the number of female cadres accounts for close to 40% of the total cadres in China. A 17% increase took place at all levels, which included leadership positions taken up by women at the provincial, prefecture, county and township levels. The 17th Party Congress in 2007 had 445 woman representatives, 63 more than the previous session, representing a 20.1% increase. The Central Committee of the CCP had 371 members, among which 37 were women, accounting for about 10% of the total, and more than the 7.6 percent at the 16th Party Congress in 2002. With Wu Yi's retirement from the Political Bureau, Liu Yandong, Head of the Party's United Front Department, was appointed a new member. One can assume that not only are the party and government aware of the importance of women's participation, but they have also taken different approaches to improve women's political participation. Substantial progress can be made in small steps if China maintains the momentum gained from the hosting of the World Conference on Women in 1995. Nevertheless, it is not an easy task to achieve equality for women in the male-dominated Chinese society. ■