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Faculty of Political Science and Sociology

Final Bachelor's Thesis

**Unveiling gender disparities in political representation:
an analysis on the evolution of women's political representation in China and
the United States**

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Bachelor's Degree in International Relations

"Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn't be that women are the exception."

Ruth Bader Ginsburg,
Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States

"There is no limit to what we, as women, can accomplish."

Michelle Obama,
Former First Lady of the United States

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1. Introduction

1.1. Motivation and importance of the topic

In recent decades, the issue of gender equality in political representation has gained significant traction on the global stage. The active participation of women in politics is not merely a matter of inclusivity; it is a fundamental principle of democracy and social justice. The engagement of women in politics is essential to guarantee the preservation of women's rights, as well as to ensure the diversification of profiles that occupy political leadership positions and are in charge of decision-making. As nations strive to uphold democratic principles and ensure that governance reflects the diversity of its citizens, the underrepresentation of women in political leadership roles stands as a glaring obstacle. In 2012, there were up to 12 countries that did not have any women serving in their governments, such as, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Papua New Guinea, Saudi Arabia or Thailand (IPU, 2021).

The equal participation of women and men in political decision-making is a key indicator of a just and democratic society. The lack of representation of women can lead to policies and decisions that do not reflect and/or cover the needs and perspectives of the population as a whole. For this reason, accelerating efforts to achieve a full and effective participation of women in positions of power and decision-making, is an urgent matter.

The motivation for researching this topic could be divided into three distinct reasons. The first, comes from the observation of the disparities women face in their representation in political spheres across the world. Women are disproportionately underrepresented in positions of political leadership, even in spite of progress made toward gender equality in a number of fields. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union – UN Women Map of Women in Politics, as of January 1st, 2021, only 21.9% of the minister roles were being held by women (IPU & UN Women, 2021).

The second reason why I chose this topic for my research came when I noticed a lack of quality research in this area, despite its vital significance. As I was working on the topic of my investigation, I repeatedly faced the problem of finding quality references because of the limited prior research done on the subject.

The final motivation to study the topic was my personal interest in the subject. I've always been interested and invested in women's rights and I believe that those rights can only be preserved when there are people in the high political spheres that are committed to safeguarding the existing rights of women and actively endeavoring to broaden these rights further on the way to achieving full social justice.

However, gender equality in political representation is not merely a matter of social justice; it is a prerequisite for effective governance and sustainable development. The lack of diverse perspectives in decision-making processes can lead to policies that fail to address the needs of marginalized communities, perpetuate inequalities, and undermine the principles of democracy. According to UN Women, at the current rate, gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years (UN Women, 2024).

In addition to sustaining structural injustices, this underrepresentation obstructs the creation and execution of inclusive policies that take into account the interests and viewpoints of all citizens. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the UN Women Executive Director even said that “no country prospers without the engagement of women. We need women's representation that reflects all women and girls in all their diversity and abilities and across all cultural, social, economic and political situations. [...] We still need bold decisive action across the world to bring women into the heart of decision-making spaces in large numbers as full partners. [...] It should be done now.” (UN Women, 2021a)

Despite the slight improvement in the numbers that demonstrate a progress in the representation of women in political spheres at a global level, the numbers are not sufficient. And as the IPU Secretary General, Martin Chungong claimed, the “growth in the number of women in political decision-making is just not good enough. [...] It's up to all of us both men and women, to keep pushing for greater representation of women in politics.” He also stated that society is the one that has the tools to make it happen and, it just needs the political will to change the situation once and for all (UN Women, 2021b).

These data demonstrate the need to analyze the causes of low female participation in political positions and analyze possible ways to improve these figures. When

analyzing the numbers of women holding political positions, we need to take into account that it is essential to guarantee a sufficient representation of women at all levels of politics, not only at the highest ones, since a wider representation from the “grassroots [...] is more important and fundamental” (Zeng, 2014, p. 13) to achieve equality.

Choosing to elaborate a comparative study of the evolution of political representation in China and the United States offers a unique perspective, because both countries have opposite political systems, different cultures and historical contexts. These two nations, each with distinct political systems, cultural landscapes, and historical contexts, provide a rich scenario for analyzing the multifaceted factors influencing women's political representation. By juxtaposing the experiences of these nations, this research aims to uncover commonalities, disparities, and underlying dynamics that shape women's involvement in the political sphere. Therefore, analyzing the representation of women in these two states could allow us to observe how factors such as tradition, religion, political ideology, and government policies can influence women's representation in the political sphere.

Furthermore, the role of China and the United States as key actors in the international sphere increases the interest of the study and provides a global and comparative vision of the challenges and advances in gender equality in both countries. A comparative study of women's political engagement in China and the United States has wider ramifications for international attempts to achieve gender parity. Given that they are two of the most powerful countries in the world, their histories may be used as a guide to better understand the potential and problems associated with increasing women's political representation on a global scale.

1.2. Research objectives

Women's political engagement in any nation is shaped by deeply rooted norms and institutions, which may be understood by looking at historical, cultural, and

institutional settings. This research aims to highlight the low numbers of female political representation, not only in the countries under study, but globally.

To analyze the complexities of gender differences in political representation between China and the US, it is essential to elaborate a targeted research question that will guide our investigation.

How has the political female representation evolved in both countries and what are the factors that have shaped this evolution?

This question aims to help with the analytic purposes of this research by further deepening in the reasons that have led each of the countries to their current number of female representations and understand what is the tendency of both countries in the matter of female political representation.

The comparative approach allows us to identify common patterns, as well as significant differences that may be influencing women's political participation. And it seeks to generate knowledge, thus contributing to the advancement of gender equality and strengthening the representation of women in political leadership roles at a global level.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Background and context

The field of International Relations underwent a profound evolution, which spanned almost a century, from the idealistic roots right after the First World War until the present time, where it is distinguished by an array of theoretical approaches and the debates that are in constant flux. Post-2nd World War, the theory of realism, among others, were the main theoretical foundation towards most of the analyses of international politics and the governing mechanisms. Nevertheless, the end of the cold war marked a “distinctly epistemological and intellectual moment” where “there was an explosion of approaches and critical theories in International Relations, including feminist theory” (Abdulsada, 2023, p. 4).

Irene Rodríguez (2017), pointed out several reasons why the integration of feminism into International Relations did not take place until the late 1980s. According to the author, one of these reasons for the late incorporation of this theory into the discipline of international relations was the "selective isolation of the discipline from developments in other areas of the social sciences" (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 246), referring to the recurrent distancing of International Relations from some major areas of social science theory. This, therefore, emphasizes the congruence of feminism emerging at a time when the discipline is actively broadening "its links with other social sciences" (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 247).

Relating to scholars such as Cynthia Enloe, who have dedicated their work to analyze how women have been largely ignored by the discipline, Rodríguez also attributes the delay in the incorporation of theory in the field of International Relations to the "scarce presence of women in academia" (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 248). Sarah Smith, argues that women are hardly considered in the main theory of IR as they are mostly marginalized “from decision-making and from the assumption that the reality of women’s day-to-day lives is not impacted by or important to international relations” (Smith, 2018, p. 1). Feminist perspectives are vital to face and overcome some of these challenges women are facing within the field, such as improving women’s visibility and highlight their absence from the decision-making

and institutional structures as well as expose and deconstruct socially constructed gender norms (Smith, 2018).

Even though the role of women in International Relations has evolved to be a topic of great interest, particularly when it comes to their political participation and feminism has become one of the theories that has contributed most to the reformulation of security studies (Perez, 2017), it is not enough.

The map of Women in Politics (2023), published by UN Women and IPU, show us alarming data on both countries involved in this research. China, according to the map, holds the 95th position in the ranking about the percentage of women in unicameral parliaments or the lower house of parliament with a 24.9%, meaning they don't even reach a 25% of women representation in their parliament. The United States, although they do rank a little bit higher in the classification, they are only 29 positions ahead of China with only 29.4% of women as representatives in their lower chamber. This means that out of the 435 seats the United States Parliament has, only 128 are being held by women politicians (IPU & UN Women, 2023).

3. Methodology

Scholars like Pamela M. Paxton, Melanie M. Hughes and Zhao Litao have conducted research that offers thorough analyses of the opportunities and challenges that women face in both China and the United States.

Xiajuan and Litao, in their research, *Women's Political Participation in China: Institutional Change and Women's Rights*, they explore China's institutional transformation and women's rights movements, shedding insight on how women's political involvement is changing over time. In the article, the authors state that when talking about increasing the number of women in powerful political bodies, China is still behind several countries and, even though "women's political participation in China has gained new momentum after the country hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995", "the rise and fall of women's participation over the past decades demonstrates the frequently interrupted process of policy implementation at different times" (Xiajuan & Litao, 2010, p. 51)

Paxton and Hughes' study provides a worldwide perspective on women's political empowerment by analyzing trends, patterns and obstacles women faced regarding their political engagement.

In addition, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women joined reports, include statistical analysis and factual data regarding the presence of women in political institutions across the world. These studies offer useful comparative information for assessing how far women's political representation has progressed in both China and the United States.

This study will also use databases from UN Women and Pew Research Center, as well as current publications, academic journals and reports to deepen the understanding of the subject. The study intends to identify underlying patterns, differences and opportunities for achieving gender equality in political leadership posts by combining the information from a variety of sources.

These resources will be used to make a descriptive presentation of the political systems of each country and a brief description of the evolution of the political

representation of both countries, which will make up the qualitative analysis of the thesis.

As for the quantitative analysis, this study focuses on the development and analysis of a graphic with the data of the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR). This annual report, first introduced in 2006, aims to point out the current situation of gender parity by comparing the data collected by the World Economic Forum. Given its division in four different dimensions, (economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment), the report provides a holistic view of gender parity.

The graph will compare four different variables (political empowerment, women in parliament, women in ministerial positions and years with female heads of state). To be able to analyse, the evolution over time of these variables in both countries, the table will be elaborated based on the reports of 2006, the first GGG report ever made, 2015 and 2023. Thus, there will be quite a distant range of time to be able to see a development of the different variables on both countries.

The elaboration of this graph will be essential to compare the evolution over time of the political representation parity in both countries and draw some conclusions based on the observations of the graph.

4. Comparative analysis

4.1. Overview of the Chinese Political System

The political system of China is implemented within the socialist framework, which is distinguished by the centralized control and hierarchic political system. At the epicenter of the political structure is the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which is the supreme authority. The CCP's power spills over to all government departments and agencies, dictating policies and approving policies implemented at the administrative level on behalf of top functionaries.

The CCP controls the political life of the country and in turn happens to be the only the ruling party in the People's Republic of China legally operating. Since its beginnings in 1921, the CCP has been, undoubtedly, the main force in the emergence of modern China, leading revolutionary movements, taking power, and founding the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The CCP is the greatest political force in the country and has more than 90 million of members which makes it one of the largest political parties worldwide (Britannica, 2024).

One of the key mechanisms of the CCP's governance is its organizational structure. The country's politics operates through a hierarchy of committees, with the Central Committee at the top of the pyramid. The Central Committee consists of 205 members who have the function to elect The General Secretary, who is already pre-selected, and also select the Politburo, the highest decision-making body in China. The Politburo is composed of 25 senior CCP officials, who are responsible for setting policy directions and overseeing the implementation of state initiatives. At the top of the Politburo stands the Politburo Standing Committee, which currently consists of seven members and is considered the supreme decision-making body in China. The General Secretary of the CCP, who is also the President of China, leads the Politburo Standing Committee.

Below the national level, China's governance structure extends to provincial, municipal, and county-level governments, each with its own administrative and legislative functions. These local governments operate under the guidance and supervision of the CCP, ensuring adherence to central policies and directives.

Finally, the National People's Congress (NPC) serves as China's top legislative body, officially the highest organ of state power. However, its decisions are heavily influenced by the CCP, reflecting the Party's dominance in Chinese politics. The NPC is responsible for enacting laws, amending the constitution, and approving major state appointments.

4.2. Trends in the female political representation in China

Contrary to the majoritarian trend in countries all over the world, the status of female political representation in China has been plunging in recent years causing some academics to go as far as to place women's political participation in China along with other marginalized social groups (Chen, 2022). An example of this degradation could be observed in October 2022 when the 20th CCP National Congress was held and for the first time in 25 years there wasn't any woman as a member (Chen, 2023).

The severe lack of female representation in China can be explained by several factors, one of the main ones being the patriarchal norms ingrained in the country's society that "undoubtedly contribute to Chinese women's underrepresentation in political leadership" (Chen, 2023).

Additionally, in order to understand the role of women in Chinese politics is essential to consult the insight of their Constitution regarding this topic. In the current Chinese Constitution, adopted in 1982, there's only one mention of women's political rights. In the Article 48 of the Second Chapter of the constitution it is vaguely stated that "women in the People's Republic of China shall enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life: political, economic, cultural, social and familial. The state shall protect the rights and interests of women, implement a system of equal pay for equal work, and train and select female officials.¹" The absence of a clear guideline that ensures the protection of women rights, make it easy to understand the low numbers of female representation in China.

¹ Article 48 of the Chinese Constitution.

Furthermore, the Chinese culture has traditionally emphasized the patriarchal social structures that have historically constrained women's roles to the private sphere. Therefore, cultural expectations and social norms continue to influence the extent and also the nature of women's participation in politics.

The underrepresentation of women in Chinese politics is further exacerbated by the lack of access to leadership positions in key sectors. Women's limited presence in the CCP, which comprises more than 70% men (Chen, 2023), diminishes their opportunities for advancement within the party and the broader political system. Additionally, women's exclusion from leadership roles in sectors such as academia, business, and military further restrict their chances of being considered for positions of power. The scholar Minglu Chen, argues in her book *Innocent Young Girls: The Search for Female Provincial Leaders in China*, that “women are so scarce in the political leadership at all levels that they have been largely ignored” (Chen, 2022. P. 753).

4.3. Overview of the US Political System

Contrary to China, the United States political systems functions under the framework of a constitutional federal republic and a presidential system with three different branches that share powers.

The United States President, acts as the head of state and leads the executive branch. The judicial branch is made up by the United States Supreme Court and lower federal courts. And finally, the legislative branch is formed by the United States Congress which is a bicameral legislative body comprising the Senate and the House of Representatives.

This hierarchy is copied in each of the fifty states of the country. This means that in each state there is a state government that has the capacity to make laws under the umbrella of both the United States Constitution as well as each state's own Constitution.

The United States Constitution was written in 1787, which makes it one of the oldest written constitutions in the world. This age of the document may explain why

there is not a direct mention of women in the entire document. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, wrote a paper² acknowledging the fact that women were not included in the US Constitution. She explained “we have a 200-year-old Constitution, the oldest written constitution still in use, but only since 1971 have we had an evolving jurisprudence of equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for women and men. The 1787 notion of We the People, [...] was incomplete - indeed, it left out the majority of the adult population: slaves, debtors, paupers, Indians, and women” (Ginsburg, 1988, p. 17) She further argues that “women's status under the law continued largely unaltered at the Constitution's centennial 100 years ago. In 1887, women were still thirty-three years away from securing the right to vote” (Ginsburg, 1988, p. 18). These words of the jurist point out the delayed integration of women in the political field. They did not enter politics until very late stages which is one of the main reasons that explain the current numbers on women's political representation.

4.4. Trends in the female political representation in the US

Over the past century, the United States, has experienced significant changes regarding women's political representation, reflecting both progress and persistent challenges in achieving gender parity in politics.

As mentioned above, the US Constitution does not explicitly address gender representation, however, some battles have led to its current situation regarding women's rights as a whole.

Since the founding of the country until before the first half of the 20th century, women did not have the right to vote or even sit in parliaments (Herre, 2024). This situation changed in the 1920s when, after many years of the suffragette movement, the passage of the 19th amendment to the constitution gave women the right to vote. The subsequent waves of feminism in the 60s and 70s, further pushed for political and social reforms which led to a greater representation of women in politics. Even with the drastic incorporation of women in politics, the number of elected women

² Ginsburg, R. (1988). “Remarks on Women Becoming Part of the Constitution”.

remained alarmingly low throughout the 20th century and it was not until the 21st century that women have been gaining a notable presence in the country's politics.

This turbulent and difficult path for American women to have their most fundamental and basic rights recognized in their Constitution is one of the main factors that explain the numbers of women's representation in politics. In addition, the decentralized and pluralistic nature of the US political system, as seen before, presents several challenges due to the complexity and variability of a system characterized by multi-levels of government, various political institutions and a wide range of electoral processes.

However, despite the obstacles that hinder the improvement of female representation in the US politics, it is true that, as indicated by the report submitted by the Inter Parliamentary Union and UN Women, the United States holds the 66th position of the women in parliament ranking which is an improvement of almost ten positions regarding the 2010 report. These numbers confirm a steady improvement on the numbers of political representation in the United States and serve as a and serve as an incentive to continue working to achieve total equity. In an article in which she analyzes the position of the United States in relation to gender quotas, Maddie Kane expresses the importance of not remaining stagnant and congratulating ourselves on the years of progress achieved but rather “look at the next twenty years with a mind open to more [...] opportunities for women” (Kane, 2016).

5. Global Gender Gap Report comparison between China and the United States

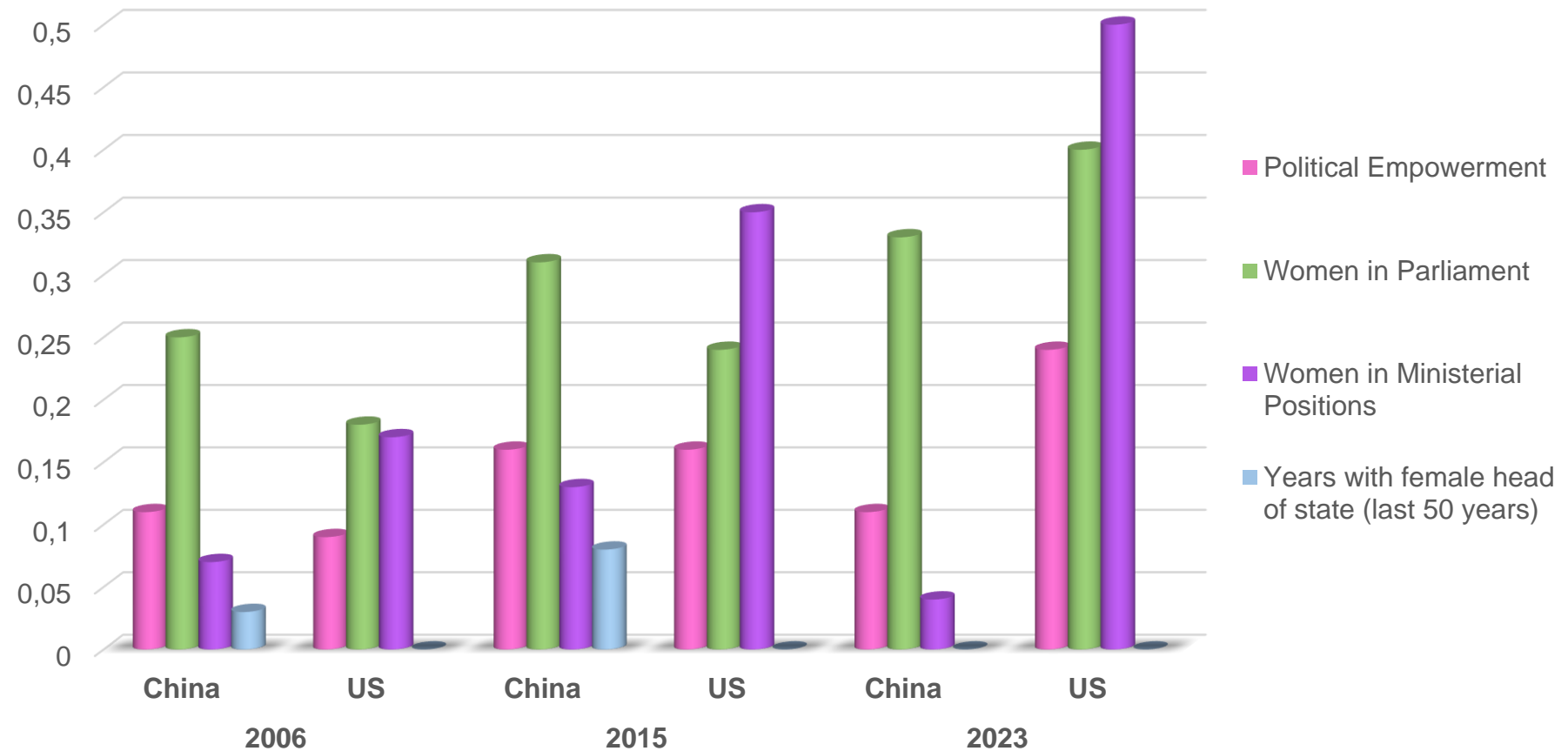


Figure 1: Own creation based on the data presented in the World Economic Forum's, Global Gender Gap Report (2006, 2015 and 2023)

The graph prepared for the comparison of the two countries contains the data from the World Economic Forum's, Global Gender Gap Report 2006, 2015 and 2023.

On the X-axis of the graph there are the different variables selected for the analysis (Political Empowerment, Women in Parliament, Women in Ministerial Positions and Years of female heads of state), differentiated with colors, as well as both of the countries divided into the three years chosen to analyze. On the other hand, in the Y axis there are the values for each variable. These values go from 0 to 1, 0 being inequality and 1 being equality.

To elaborate a fair analysis, the number of countries that each report considered must be taken into account. In the 2006 report, there were 115 countries. In the 2015, they studied 145 countries. And in last year's report there were 146 countries being analyzed.

5.1. Analysis of the graph

The analysis of the representation of women in politics in China and the United States over the years 2006, 2015, and 2023 presents a multifaceted narrative of progress and challenges in achieving gender equality in political leadership roles.

At first glance, there's an obvious difference in the form of the evolution of each country. Whereas in the United States there's a steady improvement in all the variables, in China the evolution is characterized by various ups and downs on the different values of the variables over the years. Furthermore, it is essential to point out that none of the measured variables in this study for either countries have surpassed or even reached the 0.5 mark, which indicates that significant gender disparities remain in all the dimensions analyzed.

Moreover, the table below, provides a comparison over the years of all the variables the Global Gender Gap Report covers (health, economics, education and politics). The figure makes it clear that while the other variables are succeeding in closing the gender gap, the political dimension is, by far, the one that suffers the most in relation to the rest of the variables.

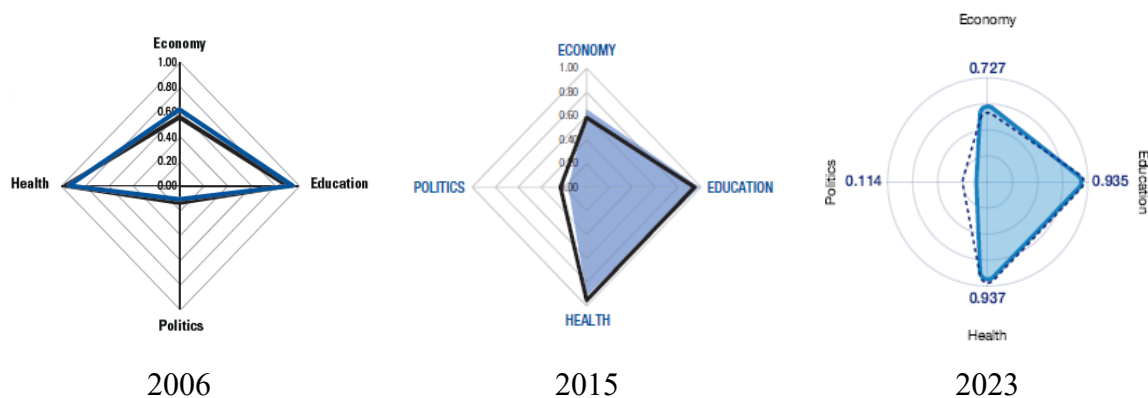


Figure 2: China Scores Compared. *Source World Economic Forum.*

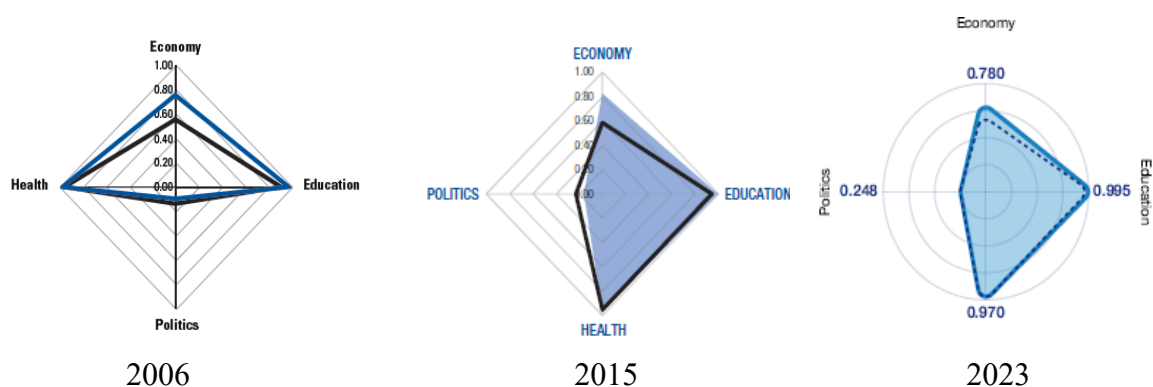


Figure 3: US Scores Compared. *Source World Economic Forum.*

In a more up-close analysis, it can be noticed that in 2006, both countries exhibited relatively low levels of gender equality in politics. Despite China's gender equality scores being marginally higher than those of the United States in terms of women's representation in parliament and ministerial positions, China ranked 63 in the Global Gender Gap Index, whereas the United States held the 23rd position in that classification. This significant distance in the ranking is reflected in the overall political empowerment variable where China scored, 0.11, and the US's score was 0.09, suggesting a marginally better general environment for women's political participation in the United States rather than China at that time. (World Economic Forum, 2006)

Moving to 2015, a modest but steady improvement in women's representation can be observed in both China and the United States. In each of the variables there is a slight improvement, in both countries, which may indicate that in the period from

2006 to 2015, there was a boost in the improvement of women in politics globally. However, the numbers remain low and far from reaching full equality.

Finally, in 2023, China appears to be facing major challenges in advancing gender parity in politics due to China's overall political empowerment score decline, which was notably highlighted in the report's comments. The report mentioned that China ranked 107th globally and achieved a 67.8% gender parity score, which represented a 0.4 percentage-point decline in score and a drop of five positions in rank compared to the previous edition, which indicates a regression in China's progress towards gender equality in politics (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Specifically, China's score for women in ministerial positions dropped to 0.04 in 2023. This decline is consistent with the report's observation that populous countries like China or India have struggled to maintain representation of women in ministerial roles, as it was exemplified in 2022 when, for the first time in over two decades, no women were included as members of the 20th CCP National Congress. The report further highlighted that while some countries in the East Asia and Pacific region showed improvement, others, such as China, experienced regression in the overall gender index. According to the WEF report, at the current rate of progress, it would take at least 189 years to achieve gender parity in the East Asia and Pacific region (World Economic Forum, 2023).

On the other hand, the United States also encountered setbacks in 2023, as indicated by the reduction in its overall gender parity score. Compared to the 2015 ranking where the U.S. held the 28th position, the 2023 ranking represents a major regression in the global index, as the US defends the 43rd position, almost 20 positions lower than in 2015. The report affirms that this decline confirms the difficulty to reach gender parity and suggests that it will take 95 more years to close the gender gap in the North America region (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Finally, one last observation of the graph has to do with the values of both countries in relation to the number of years that a woman has been head of state. Both China and the United States stand out for the almost null presence of a woman holding the office of head of state, which highlights a significant hurdle to achieve gender parity. The report goes further and even mentions that there are only two countries,

Iceland and Bangladesh, where women have held the position of head of state for a higher number of years than men. In addition, they point out that there are 67 countries where a woman has never served as head of state.

6. Final remarks

Through the comparative review of gender equity in political leadership between China and the United States, a complex picture of progress and difficulties in achieving the goal of gender equality arises. While both countries have witnessed extensive social and political changes that have led to the introduction of essential laws, such as the suffrage rights, the struggle for equal representation in politics is still going on nowadays.

In the United States, while there has been a gradual increase in the number of women in political roles, challenges persist, as evidenced by the recent setbacks the GGGR 2023 highlighted. The decline in the overall gender parity score highlights the persistent barriers to achieving gender equality in the political sphere, such as cultural and societal norms. China's trajectory towards gender political parity, on the other hand, has been marked by fluctuations that have led to a critical decline in women's political representation.

The fact that political empowerment is the dimension that is furthest away from achieving equality underlines the importance of continuing the struggle to accelerate the progress towards gender parity in the political sphere.

Overall, the comparative analysis reflects the importance to keep up with the efforts to address gender disparities in political representation. While some progress has been made, particularly regarding legislative reforms and increased global awareness of gender issues, much work remains to be done. The World Economic Forum, has predicted that gender equality will not be reached until the year 2156, which means that moving forward and continuing advocating for gender-inclusive policies and fostering environments that empowers women to participate fully in the political process, is imperative if we want to live in a world where women are included in all areas of the society.

In conclusion, the issue of women's political representation warrants an extended discussion because, enhancing women's presence in politics will serve as a crucial pathway towards full gender equality.

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