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**From Beijing 1995 to Beijing+30:
A Critical Reflection on UN Women and
China's Role in Shaping Global Gender Policy**

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From Beijing 1995 to Beijing+30: A Critical Reflection on UN Women and China's Role in Shaping Global Gender Policy

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TFG Abstract

In October 1945, the United Nations (UN) was established under the leadership of Chinese Nationalist, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and, most prominently, the United States. The principle of gender equality was first explicitly recognized as part of international human rights law with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN General Assembly in December 1948. Since 1975, the UN has organized a series of World Conferences on Women, but it was the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, that marked a decisive moment in shaping the global agenda for gender equality. This TFG aims to explore the role of UN Women in advancing the global movement for the rights of women and girls. Secondly, it seeks to examine the influence of the People's Republic of China on UN Women, particularly in relation to China's aspirations for global leadership and the contradictions between its international advocacy for gender equality and its domestic restrictions on feminist activism. The main objective of this paper is to critically reflect on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and assess its contributions and relevance on its 30th anniversary.

De Beijing 1995 a Beijing+30: una reflexió crítica sobre ONU Dones i el paper de la Xina en la configuració de la política global de gènere

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Paraules clau

ONU Dones, Igualtat de Gènere, Declaració i Plataforma d'Acció de Beijing, Lideratge Global de la Xina, Moviment Feminista

Resum del TFG

L'octubre de 1945, es van establir les Nacions Unides (ONU) sota el lideratge dels nacionalistes xinesos, França, la Unió Soviètica, el Regne Unit i, sobretot, els Estats Units. El principi d'igualtat de gènere es va reconèixer explícitament per primera vegada com a part del dret internacional dels drets humans amb l'adopció de la Declaració Universal dels Drets Humans per part de l'Assemblea General de les Nacions Unides el desembre de 1948. Des de 1975, l'ONU ha organitzat una sèrie de Conferències Mundials sobre la Dona, però va ser la Quarta Conferència Mundial sobre la Dona, celebrada a Beijing el 1995, la que va marcar un moment decisiu en la configuració de l'agenda global per a la igualtat de gènere. Aquest TFG pretén explorar el paper de l'ONU Dones en l'avanç del moviment global pels drets de les dones i les nenes. En segon lloc, pretén examinar la influència de la República Popular de la Xina en ONU Dones, particularment en relació amb les aspiracions de la Xina al lideratge global i les contradiccions entre la seva defensa internacional de la igualtat de gènere i les seves restriccions nacionals a l'activisme feminista. L'objectiu principal d'aquest article és reflexionar críticament sobre la Declaració i Plataforma d'Acció de Beijing i avaluar les seves contribucions i rellevància en el seu 30è aniversari.

De Beijing 1995 a Beijing+30: Una reflexión crítica sobre ONU Mujeres y el papel de China en la definición de la política global de género

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Curso académico: 2025/2026

Palabras clave

ONU Mujeres, Igualdad de género, Declaración y Plataforma de Acción de Beijing, Liderazgo global de China, Movimiento feminista

Resumen del TFG

En octubre de 1945, se fundó la Organización de las Naciones Unidas (ONU) bajo el liderazgo de los nacionalistas chinos, Francia, la Unión Soviética, el Reino Unido y, de forma destacada, Estados Unidos. El principio de igualdad de género se reconoció explícitamente por primera vez como parte del derecho internacional de los derechos humanos con la adopción de la Declaración Universal de Derechos Humanos por la Asamblea General de la ONU en diciembre de 1948. Desde 1975, la ONU ha organizado una serie de Conferencias Mundiales sobre la Mujer, pero fue la Cuarta Conferencia Mundial sobre la Mujer, celebrada en Beijing en 1995, la que marcó un momento decisivo en la definición de la agenda global para la igualdad de género. Este TFG busca explorar el papel de ONU Mujeres en el avance del movimiento global por los derechos de las mujeres y las niñas. En segundo lugar, se busca examinar la influencia de la República Popular China en ONU Mujeres, en particular en relación con las aspiraciones de China al liderazgo global y las contradicciones entre su defensa internacional de la igualdad de género y sus restricciones internas al activismo feminista. El objetivo principal de este trabajo es reflexionar críticamente sobre la Declaración y Plataforma de Acción de Beijing y evaluar sus contribuciones y relevancia en su 30.º aniversario.

Abbreviations

ACWF: All-China Women's Federation

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CSW: Commission on the Status of Women

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

PRC: People's Republic of China

SDG: Sustainable Development Goals

UDHR: Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UN: United Nations

US: United States of America

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Use of IA

In the preparation of this final degree project, two main artificial intelligence tools were used as support throughout different stages of the research and writing process, ChatGPT and Google Gemini.

These tools were mainly useful in four areas. First, they helped with the organisation and structuring of ideas, allowing for better planning of the content. Second, as support for grammatical and spelling correction of the text, to improve clarity and coherence in writing. Third, it facilitated the search for specific documents, articles and books related to the topic of the project. Finally, they were used to organise and structure the bibliography, however, errors were detected in dates or citation formats, which required correction.

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Introduction

The question of gender equality has progressively become one of the most important and complex issues within global governance, reflecting wider transformations in international relations, human rights debates, and social movements. This paper seeks to engage with this evolution by examining the role of the UN as the international institution in shaping the global agenda on women's rights while analyzing the influence of major actor states such as the PRC. 2025 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, situating this research at a crucial historical moment that invites reflection on the achievements of the past three decades but also on the limitations and future challenges of global gender policy.

The establishment of the UN in October 1945 was a turning point in the organization of international politics after the devastation of the Second World War. It introduced a new vision of global cooperation grounded in peace and security and promoting human rights. Within this context, the principle of gender equality was mentioned as part of international human rights law with its incorporation in the adoption of the UDHR in December 1948. This recognition marked a significant transition from previous historical periods, where women's rights were largely restricted to national contexts and often influenced by economic, cultural, or political considerations. By rooting gender equality within a universal normative framework, the UN contributed to redefining women's rights as a global concern, allowing international advocacy, institutional development, and global feminist collaboration. Over the following decades, the UN consolidated its role as a central actor in advancing women's rights, expanding its agenda and structure. The creation of organizations such as the CSW gave a space for addressing gender-related issues at the international level, while different conventions and treaties tried to regulate legal protections for women across different national contexts. However, the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War influenced the development of a comprehensive gender agenda, particularly in relation to economic and social rights, which were commonly related to ideological confrontations between capitalist and socialist blocs. Despite these limitations, during the latter decades of the twentieth century, there was a significant shift due to the emergence of the Global South with decolonization processes and feminist movements, which reshaped the priorities of the international community. This transformation reached a critical point in 1975 with the organization of the World Conferences on Women. These provided a global platform for agenda-setting, dialogue, and negotiations, bringing together governments, international organizations, and civil society actors. While each conference contributed to advancing the global conversation on gender equality, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 represented a decisive point for the establishment of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as a comprehensive and ambitious project that addressed a wide range of issues, including poverty, education, health, violence against women, and political participation. Later on, UN Women plays a role in supporting national policies and

coordinating international efforts. However, its effectiveness and impact remain subjects of debate, particularly in the area of the challenges related to implementing global norms in diverse political and cultural contexts.

At the same time, the project pays attention to the role of China, whose rise as a global power has reshaped the landscape of international relations. China's engagement with global gender governance offers an interesting case study for understanding how international norms are negotiated and adapted. On the one hand, China has actively participated in UN initiatives, supported development-oriented approaches to gender equality and positioned itself as a responsible global actor. On the other hand, its domestic policies show important contradictions, particularly in relation to restrictions on feminist activism and the limited space for civil society. This tension between international advocacy and domestic practice highlights questions about the effect and credibility of global gender policy, as well as the relationship between state sovereignty and human rights.

The motivation for this project arises from the recognition of the role that international organizations have in shaping social change, which remains insufficient and often difficult to evaluate. They tend to influence through more abstract mechanisms such as agenda-setting and the construction of global discourses. Their power often lies in their ability to define what is considered legitimate or universal, rather than in their capacity to impose clear outcomes. As a consequence, their impact is often seen in long-term periods, and it's difficult to quantify, which has generated constant debates about their effectiveness in producing social transformation. Within gender studies, there is a need for a more critical look at the work of such organizations, considering their limitations, internal dynamics, and the broader political contexts in which they operate. Despite decades of international efforts, important inequalities persist in education, economic participation, political representation, and protection from violence, which are highlighted by emerging global crises, including climate change or economic instability, that often affect women and girls disproportionately. This conflict becomes visible when studying the role of China as a major global actor, which illustrates the possibilities and limitations of international norms.

At the center of this research lies the hypothesis that, even though there have been continued UN efforts to universalize women's rights, these norms have had limited transformative impact in each context. While significant progress has been made in terms of policy development and legal recognition, the actual implementation of these norms often remains uneven and followed by cultural and structural inequalities and political and economic interests. This hypothesis does not look for rejecting the achievements of the UN and other international actors but rather focuses on the gap between normative aspirations and practical realities. Therefore, by examining the global level and the case of China, this research aims to provide a more complex understanding of the contradictions.

The methodology of this study is based on a combination of primary and secondary sources, allowing for an extensive and comprehensive analysis. Primary sources include official UN documents such as reports, resolutions, and publications related to the World Conferences on Women and the work of UN Women. These documents provide direct information on the institutional and policy discourse surrounding global gender equality. Secondary sources consist of academic literature, including books and scholarly articles that offer historical and theoretical perspectives on the development and influence of international organizations, feminist movements, and China's role in international governance. However, the process of looking for information has been met with certain limitations, particularly in areas of analysis focusing on the relationship between China and the UN. These difficulties underscore the originality and relevance of the present study while also pointing to the need for further research in this area.

The structure of this project shows its analytical objectives and is organized into three main parts, each divided into three sections. The first chapter, "The UN and the Global Feminist Movement," explains the historical evolution of the UN as a key actor in promoting women's rights. It explores the incorporation of gender equality into the international agenda, the role of early female delegates, and the development of institutional mechanisms such as the CSW. It also considers the impact of global political dynamics, including the Cold War and decolonization, on the advancement of gender equality, ending with the importance of the 1995 Beijing Conference. The second chapter, "The evolution of China's role in the UN World Conferences on Women," examines China's increasing engagement with global gender governance. It follows China's transition from a passive participant to an influential actor, highlighting its strategies, its cooperation with UN agencies, and its growing role in shaping international discourse. Also, its integration of gender equality into its development agenda, especially in the context of the SDG. The third chapter, "The Chinese Feminist Movement: Between State Control and Social Resistance," analyzes the domestic dimension, exploring the evolution of feminism within China and the tensions between state-led policies and grassroots activism. It examines the historical foundations of gender equality in the socialist project, the impact of economic reforms, and the emergence of new forms of feminist activism in the digital age. This chapter highlights the contradictions that characterize gender politics in China, where official commitments to equality coexist with persistent inequalities and restrictions on activism.

By combining these different levels of analysis, this research wants to provide a comprehensive and critical reflection on global gender policy from Beijing 1995 to Beijing+30. It emphasizes the contradictions and complexities that define the debates about gender equality in a changing world. Ultimately, its objective is to understand how global norms are constructed, negotiated, and implemented, offering perspective into the possibilities and limitations of international efforts to promote social change, specifically related to gender policy.

1. The UN and the Global Feminist Movement

1.1 The UN and Women's Rights in the Early Post-War Era (1945-1960)

With the end of the Second World War, a profound transformation in international political institutions and in global understanding of human rights started. As a consequence of the devastation of the war and the atrocities committed against civilian populations, the international community had the idea of establishing new mechanisms to assure peace, democracy, and human dignity. Within this context, the foundation of the UN in 1945 created an unprecedented space for redefining citizenship and equality at the global level. Therefore, for the first time, women's rights began to be articulated not just as domestic or national concerns, but as important components of an emerging international human rights framework (United Nations 1945, 2). Between 1945 and 1960, the UN had a foundational role in institutionalising women's rights through legal norms, international conventions, and specialised bodies. Women delegates from different regions and backgrounds, especially from Latin America and other parts of the Global South, had an impact in ensuring that gender equality was mentioned in the UN Charter and later implemented in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Their activism challenged historical exclusion inside international organisations and law, with the idea that women's rights were an essential part of universal human rights (Ortega López and Moreno Seco 2017, 18-21). At the same time, the early post-war period was shaped by growing Cold War tensions, which influenced debates within the UN and constrained efforts to link civil and political rights with economic and social justice. The ideological rivalry between the US and USSR affected the link between political rights and economic, social and cultural rights. Advocacy for equality and justice was interpreted by Western governments, such as the United States, as an ideology related to communism, even when it was mentioned by women not connected to socialist states (Hanhimäki 2015, 17-20). Nonetheless, the victory of democratic values and defeat of fascism encouraged the discourse on equality and the claim of civil, political and social rights. For the first time, women's rights started to emerge as a global concern, becoming important in the postwar international institutions (Pietilä 2007, 10-12).

Following the creation of the UN in 1945, gender equality was established for the first time in the foundations of international governance. The San Francisco Conference marked a decisive moment in this process, as, especially, Latin American women delegates successfully intervened to ensure that equality between men and women was explicitly affirmed in the UN Charter. Women such as Minerva Bernardino, Amalia de Castillo Ledón, and Bertha Lutz insisted that women's rights had to be clearly mentioned in the UN Charter, rather than implied through generic language with references like "the rights of man", arguing it could perpetuate women's exclusion from legal and historical recognition (Marino 2005, 198-199). Their activism and persistence succeeded in implementing the "equal rights of men and women" into the Charter, together with commitments to non-discrimination based on race,

language, or religion (United Nations 1945, art. 1). This achievement represented a historic step from earlier international agreements that either ignored women or framed their rights as secondary or domestic concerns (Adami and Plesch 2021, 126-127). Moreover, it had political implications, shifting the idea that gender equality was essential to international peace and democratic reconstruction. It reflected broader debates about citizenship, social inclusion, and states' responsibility towards their populations (Pietilä 2007, 77). Their participation in wartime economies and resistance movements strengthened claims that equality was a right earned through constant contribution and sacrifice. Nevertheless, the increase in women's activism happened at the same time as the political environment was dominated by the strategic priorities of major powers, focusing on national security, sovereignty, and post-war stability rather than social transformation and women's rights (Hanhimäki 2015, 111-134). The principles of the UN Charter were further developed and consolidated with the creation of the UDHR in 1948. Eleanor Roosevelt, as chair of the Commission on Human Rights, and Hansa Mehta were key in ensuring that it had explicitly inclusive language, most notably replacing "all men" with "all human beings". This linguistic change followed the idea of showing how women were not secondary within human rights (United Nations 1945, Preamble). The participation of women from Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the Global South challenged Western-centric analysis of human rights and reinforced the idea that gender equality was a universal principle, rather than culturally specific. Despite challenges, the UDHR affirmed that discrimination on the basis of sex was incompatible with universal human rights (UDHR 1948, art. 2).

However, it was quickly recognised that there was a lack of commitment to address gender inequality; consequently, women delegates pushed for the creation of an institution dedicated to women's rights, which led to the establishment of CSW as a full commission in 1947. It reflected the determination of feminist delegates to ensure that women's rights remained a permanent and visible priority within the UN system (UN Economic and Social Council 1946, 525). However, due to Cold War tension, US and British women's organisations were against the formation of a separate women's commission, fearing it a possible influence on domestic political strategies. They also preferred labour concerns to be addressed through the International Labour Organisation, despite it being a male-dominated structure (Adami and Plesch 2021, 55-56). In contrast, non-Western delegates argued that women's rights needed an independent platform to address legal, political, and social discrimination. Their success showed the influence of transnational feminism activism and the important role played by non-Western women in shaping early UN institutions. Yet its work was influenced by Cold War politics, as their proposals related to economy, welfare protections, and labour equality were met with ideological uncertainty (Ortega López and Moreno Seco 2017, 26-27). Between 1949 and 1960, the CSW entered a "treaty-making" phase, shifting its focus from broad normative commitments to the creation of international law. This era marked the first real institutionalisation of women's rights, establishing a legal framework for equality. Key achievements during this decade included the Equal

Remuneration Convention (1951), with the principle of equal pay, and the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1953), which affirmed women's rights to vote and hold public office. By targeting legal barriers in nationality, marriage, and family law, the CSW secured women's autonomy in public and private spheres (UN Women 2019, 5-6). The institutional progress of this period was deeply constrained by the ideological complexity of the Cold War. While there was broad consensus on formal civil and political rights, efforts to address deeper economic and social inequities faced significant opposition. Advocates from the Global South and international labour movements, who pushed for social welfare and economic redistribution, were often delegitimised (Hanhimäki 2015, 91-92). As a result, the UN's early gender agenda succeeded in authorising women the right to exist as legal equals, but it left untouched the dominant economic structures of inequality (Adami and Plesch 2021, 71-74).

1.2 The Evolution of the UN Gender Agenda During the 1970s-1980s

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, it became evident that the formal legal equality achieved in the post-war period had not had an effect on the improvements in women's everyday lives. Many states had eliminated discriminatory laws and had extended political rights to women; however, there were still inequalities in education, employment, healthcare, political participation, and access to economic resources (UN Women 2019, 5-7). The global context, marked by decolonisation, shifting Cold War dynamics, economic crises, and the rise of transnational feminist movements, created new pressures and opportunities for rethinking the UN gender agenda. Women's rights were no longer framed only in terms of legal status but were more linked to development, social justice, and global power relations. During this period, the UN became a central place for debates about the relationship between gender, development, and inequality (Pietilä 2006, 37-38).

This shift was influenced by a global transformation in the international system, most importantly the wave of decolonisation that reshaped the composition of the UN. Therefore, new independent states had their priorities centred on economic development, social welfare, and national sovereignty, and women delegates from these countries emphasised the importance of gender equality in order to separate from historical patterns of colonial exploitation, patriarchal structures, and global economic dependency (Jain 2005, 51). Women's rights were mostly framed in relation to development policy, agricultural labour, community organisation, education, and access to healthcare. The UN started to move away from a focus on legal reform and toward an understanding of gender equality that needed material conditions and social structures. Within this evolution, the CSW played a central role in promoting what had been described as international welfare feminism (Adami and Plesch 2021, 55-58). Feminist actors inside the UN emphasised labour equality, equal pay, childcare, social security, and the recognition of women's unpaid labour, arguing how

genuine equality required active state intervention (UN Women, 9). Women from the Global South and labour-orientated movements promoted these new policies and advancements and often had confrontations with Western liberal feminist approaches, which prioritised individual rights and legal equality. The global politics and tensions of the Cold War intensified these conflicts, as welfare-orientated proposals were frequently viewed with caution by Western states and associated with socialist ideology. Despite its resistance, these debates expanded the areas of the UN gender agenda and laid the groundwork for more comprehensive and open policy initiatives in the 1970s (Ortega López and Moreno Seco 2017, 33-35).

The proclamation of the year 1975 as International Women's Year and the launch of the UN Decade for Women marked a turning point in the institutional recognition of these expanded concerns. Both focused on the interconnected goals of equality, development, and peace (UN General Assembly 1972, 66-67). On the one hand, the Decade represents the most ambitious effort at the moment to coordinate global action on women's rights (UN Women, 8). On the other hand, the First World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City in 1975, adopted a World Plan of Action which emphasised women's integration into development processes and highlighted the global effect of gender inequality (United Nations 1976, 2-3). Mid-decade, the Second World Conference on Women in Copenhagen in 1980 focused on the persistent gap between legislative commitment in countries and women's lived realities (United Nations 1980, 4-6). The Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985 marked a further shift by emphasising women's agency and participation in decision-making, peace-building, and development (United Nations 1985, 8). Together with these conferences, during the 1970s and 1980s there was the consolidation of women's rights through the legalisation of international norms and institutional mechanisms, and as a response to a growing feminist movement. In 1979, there was the adoption of the CEDAW within the UN system, which included the discrimination of both public and private spheres, addressing cultural practices, social norms, and stereotypes as sources of inequality (United Nations 1979, art. 1-5). Moreover, the CSW showed its engagement with global feminist movements while keeping contributing to the standardisation of gender policy frameworks. Both developments helped for the consolidation of institutional feminism within the UN; even though policy implementation still was unequal, it created a base for women's rights to become a permanent topic of international governance (Adami and Plesch 2021, 111-118).

Despite these advances, political and social tensions and feminist diversity continued to shape and influence the UN gender agenda. Cold War divisions, inequalities between the North and the South, and different national priorities affected debates over the meaning of women's rights and equality, together with the role of the state (Hanhimäki 2015, 114-119). Western liberal feminists mostly emphasised legal equality and individual rights, while feminists from the Global South focused on economic justice, social welfare, and the impact of colonialism. These opposite perspectives were the consequence of ideological differences but also of historical and social experiences (Jain 2005, 70-72). Through this complex process

of discussion and institutionalisation, the UN of the 1970s and 1980s transformed women's rights from a marginal concern into a central pillar of international governance (Ortega López and Moreno Seco 2017, 39).

1.3 The UN World Conferences on Women (1975-1995) and the Limits of Institutional Feminism

The UN declared 1975 the International Women's Year and launched the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985), with the willingness to institutionalise gender equality within global development agendas and to coordinate international action on the persistent inequalities (United Nations 1975, 35). The UN Decade for Women hosted three major world conferences, Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985), in which they identified old and new challenges and manifested the political tools needed to advance women's rights globally. This evolution marked the beginning of the Beijing conference's (1995) impact (Chen 1995, 477-480).

The First World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975¹ represented a historic moment in the process of institutionalisation of gender equality. It was organised to commemorate the UN International Women's Year, as the conference sought to address the gathered evidence of legal, social, and economic discrimination against women (Zinsser 2002, 140-144). It also marked the beginning of the UN Decade for Women, showing the organisation's commitment to a long-term agenda for advancing women's rights (United Nations 1975, 35). At the centre of it was the theme "Equality, Development and Peace", reflecting the UN's intention to situate women at the core of global political, economic, and social debates. It brought together governments and NGOs from around the world with the objective of defining priorities and setting a long-term strategy for gender equality for the next decade (Pathania 2001, 785-786). A key outcome of it was the adoption of the World Plan of Action, which established the first structure to regulate international and national policies relating to women (United Nations 1975, 3). The plan identified challenges facing women globally, like limited access to education, healthcare, and employment, under-representation in political life, and legal discrimination in family and proprietary rights (United Nations 1975, 11-13). Its aim was for states to adopt new policies in order to guarantee equal access to education, promote women's participation in economic development activities, and remove legal barriers restricting women's freedom and autonomy (Pathania 2001, 786). The conference talked about the interconnection between women's role in society, socioeconomic development and international peace, mentioning how the full participation of women is necessary for political decision-making and conflict resolution (United Nations 1975, 138-139). The Mexico conference introduced the foundations for a decade of constant international action on women's rights by establishing

¹ See *Image 1* for a picture from the conference.

common priorities and a clear approach to equality. It marked the beginning of the UN Decade for Women, which would hold the following conferences of Copenhagen and Nairobi (Zinsser 2002, 148).

The Second World Conference on Women, held in Copenhagen in 1980², was used as a midterm assessment of the UN Decade for Women. The main objective of the conference was to evaluate the progress made since Mexico City and to identify the difficulties which continued to prevent the full achievement of gender equality (Pathania 2001, 790). Even though many states had adopted new legislation promoting women's rights, the conference arrived at the conclusion that the legal reforms applied were not sufficient, due to not having translated into real improvements in women's daily lives (United Nations 1980, 8-12). For this reason, the emerging concern of the conference was the gap between legally recognised equality and the real and effective consequences of these legal rights (United Nations 1980, 4-7). Copenhagen focused on three priority areas where inequality persisted most visibly: access to education, employment and health (Chen 1995, 479). Delegates emphasised that women continued to face unequal access to schooling, continued discrimination in the labour market and limited adequate healthcare services, especially those related to reproductive health (Zinsser 2002, 153-155). Through the conference, states were pushed to adopt concrete measures, such as an improvement of social services and targeted policies, to transform equality of rights into equality of opportunity in the different areas (United Nations 1980, 44-45). Furthermore, a central topic throughout it was the need to end gender stereotypes, arguing how discriminatory norms surrounding women's and men's roles in the workplace, family, and public sphere were obstructing women's advancement (United Nations 1980, 8-10). These stereotypes continued to influence laws on property, child custody, inheritance, and nationality and were often used to justify the unequal distribution of responsibilities and tasks (Ortega López and Moreno Seco 2017, 41-42). They called for the state to take action in order to eliminate these cultural and social barriers, recognising that without their effort, legal equality would remain ineffective and not enough (United Nations 1980, 77). The conference exposed a lack of political will among the states and male policymakers, manifested in the insufficient political commitment to implement the objectives set in Mexico City and the limited resources dedicated to advancing women's equality (United Nations 1980, 8). The Copenhagen conference demand for policies capable of improving women's lives paved the way for a more action-orientated approach, which would define the Nairobi conference five years later (Pathania 2001, 799).

The Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985³ marked the end of the UN Decade for Women (Kelly 1996, 29). While Mexico City had established the agenda and clear objectives, and Copenhagen had exposed the gap between legal equality and real opportunity, Nairobi changed the discussion toward the empowerment of women as a

² See *Image 2* for a picture from the conference.

³ See *Image 3* for a picture from the conference.

different approach to overcome the persistent barriers (Pathania 2001, 802). The conference recognised how inequalities remained and how many goals set in Mexico City and Copenhagen had not been completed due to cultural, economical, and political obstacles (United Nations 1985, 11-12). The principle outcome of it was the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (1985-2000), a detailed document setting out specific measures to accelerate the progress toward gender equality (United Nations 1985, 6). It not only emphasised equal access and opportunities but also the need to transform the conditions and environments that limited women's ability to exercise their rights (Pathania 2001, 799-800). During the conference, delegates argued that in order to achieve equality, it required expanding women's capacity to participate in all spheres of society. Their willingness was to focus on empowering women by increasing their participation in decision-making positions, strengthening their roles in public life, and ensuring their participation in development initiatives (United Nations 1985, 8). This new perspective helped to move global gender policy and perspective, acknowledging women as key agents of change, as well as introducing the idea that the participation of women represents a wealth to society (Zinsser 2002, 160-161). Moreover, the conference followed the recognition of the effects of stereotypes on Copenhagen, highlighting the idea that development and peace could not be fully achieved without women's integration in national and international policies (United Nations 1985, 19). Nairobi 1985 represented an advancement through empowerment and the action-orientated plan, establishing the bases for the Beijing conference (Pathania 2001, 802).

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995⁴, stands as the most influential and highest-impact conference of global gender governance (Adami and Plesch 2021, 98). As a result of two decades of international debates and policy development, it marked a significant shift from previous approaches centred on legal equality, equal opportunities and women's empowerment (Kelly 1996, 29). An important contribution of Beijing was the recognition of gender as a key concept, separate from women (United Nations 1995, 218). Unlike the previous conference, which focused primarily on women, Beijing introduced a new perspective that examined the socially constructed roles, expectations, and power relations between men and women, acknowledging that these structures highlight inequality (United Nations 1995, 14). The conference recognised the diversity among women, giving space to new perspectives of women from different ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic classes and national contexts (United Nations 1995, 2). The central outcome was the Beijing Platform for Action, which identified twelve critical areas of concern, including poverty, education, health, violence against women, the economy, political participation, the media, institutional mechanisms, human rights and the situation of the girl child (Dierks 1996, 86-89). Beijing 1995 and the Platform for Action established global objectives, which continue to be measured through periodic reviews such as Beijing +5, +10, +15, +20, +25 and +30. Its influence provided the base for later initiatives, such as

⁴ See *Image 4* for a picture from the conference.

the creation of UN Women or the integration of gender goals into the Sustainable Development Goals (UN Women 2025).

2. The evolution of China's role in the UN World Conferences on Women

2.1 The Legacy of the Fourth World Conference on Women

The Beijing Conference on Women of 1995 marked a decisive moment in the evolution of global gender governance. It represented the consolidation of women's rights as an undisputable part of the international human rights normative framework, while previous world conferences were more a diplomatic gathering and had advanced in relation to the recognition of women's rights (Chen 2010, 490). The Conference concluded with the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which established a comprehensive and useful agenda structure around twelve critical areas of concern, going from poverty and education to violence against women and girls, and political participation. In doing so, it transformed gender equality from an ambitious and idealistic principle to an institutionalised and structures global commitment in side the UN system (Dierks 1996, 86-89). Beijing was the end of two decades of advocacy for women within the UN organization, beginning with the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) (Chen 1995, 477-480). However, unlike previous world conferences, Beijing achieved a degree of normative clarity and integration of women's rights and the concept of gender in the broader human rights regime, reinforcing the principle that women's rights are human rights. This shift strengthened the legal and political legitimacy of gender equality within international institutions (Pietilä 2007, 17-19). The conference also introduced review mechanisms every five years to ensure its long-term effect. The Beijing+5, +10, +15, +20, +25 and +30 review processes, transformed the Platform for Action into a constant process and living framework rather than a punctual declaration. These constant evaluations guaranteed that gender equality would remain on the agenda rather than being a symbolic moment. Review reports reinforced the expectations that member states would have to report on progress made related to the different areas and their need to take responsibility (de Silva de Alwis 2021, 21-22). By acknowledging the Platform for Action, governments publicly committed themselves to the objectives and, although implementation was different across states, the formal commitment itself had an effect in the global diplomatic discourse (Pietilä 2007, 72-75).

The decision to hold the Conference of 1995 in Beijing was key for the global advancement of gender governance, but also for China's position within the international system. Hosting one of the biggest UN conferences of the 1990s at an early post-Cold War period and the consequences that it had, represented a moment of diplomatic recognition and

reintegration of China in the world framework, with the opportunity to consolidate its legitimacy as a global actor (Haug, Foot and Baumann 2024, 5-6).

After the end of the Cold War, China was under a period of economic transformation and increasing its participation in international institutions. However, its international role and reputation was complex and, in some Western areas, controversial. For that reason, successfully hosting a large UN convention with global diplomatic participation, demonstrated China's diplomatic competence, organisational capacity and willingness to take part in international agreed norms (Haug, Foot and Baumann 2024, 5-6). Moreover, the conference was not only intergovernmental but hardly shaped by transnational civil society. The ongoing NGO Forum in Huairou in 1995⁵ brought together lots of activists, with the objective of strengthening global feminism networks and facilitating the spread of norms across countries. The logistical and political management of such an unprecedented event showed how China was capable of operating at the centre of multilateral diplomacy (Hsiung and Wong 1998, 470-471). From UN perspective, the selection of Beijing as host meant the willingness of their inclusion in geopolitics and the recognition of Asia's growing global importance. Also, the idea and message that gender equality was not only a Western agenda matter, but a universal concern requiring the participation of diverse cultural and political agents, with the globalization of gender governance (Pietilä 2007, 82-87). At a strategic level, the conference contributed with the new China goal of portraying itself as a state-led development and viewing it as a stakeholder in global gender policy with further international visibility (Lam & Fung 2025, 1156-1157). The objectives marked in the Beijing conference were linked to women's poverty reduction, education and economic growth, connecting women's empowerment with state development, areas where China's domestic reform agenda focused. Therefore, by hosting the conference, it could present its own modernization policies within an international recognized framework, constructing the narrative in which China's model was compatible with global objectives (Turkington 2023, 853-855).

2.2 China's Expanding Influence within the United Nations Women's Agenda (1995-2015)

After the Fourth Worlds Conference on Women in 1995, China's role in global gender governance was linked to the role of host and norm-taker. They formally accepted the Beijing Platform for Action and got involved in associated UN processes, showing its willingness to take part in global expectations for women's empowerment and gender equality (Turkington 2023, 853-855). This initial period marked the early stages of a strategic evolution with further domestic interests in which China would transition from

⁵ The NGO Forum on Women, held in Huairou, approximately 50 kilometres from Beijing, was parallel to the official UN conference and gathered more than 50,000 activists, scholars and representatives of civil society organisations. It was a space for networking among global feminist movements for the debate of gender equality norms across different regions (Pietilä 2007, 49-50). See *Image 5* for a picture from the forum.

implementing externally proposed norms to becoming an institutionally engaged actor within the UN organization and its new policies and areas of action (Lam and Fung 2025, 1154-1156). The Beijing+5 review in 2000 marked the origin of a more structured pattern of compromise. Throughout the review cycle, states who signed in favour of the Beijing Platform for Action were required to report progress made on the twelve critical areas of concern, institutionalizing gender equality within national policy frameworks (de Silva de Alwis 2021, 21-22). By documenting its progress within these institutional review mechanisms, China reinforced its image as a realistic contributor to global gender governance. Such approach allowed to increase its institutional credibility while slowly changing international discussion towards its preferred areas on development and technical cooperation, and consolidate China's influence within UN institutions. Gender equality became a recurring element of China's multilateral diplomacy, moving from one conference commitment towards a consistent institutional presence (Lam and Fung 2025, 1157-1160).

During this period, China's interaction with UN gender institutions expanded. Cooperation with UN Women increased through partnership in different programs and financial contributions, even though it did not rank among the bigger Western donors, it supported initiatives related to development, such as economic empowerment programs, capacity-building project and vocational training. This engagement showed a further foreign policy strategy, with its willingness to strengthen its role and profile within UN agencies and specialized bodies while, simultaneously, upholding its commitment to global development objectives (Haug, Foot and Baumann 2024, 9-10). Analyses of China's evolving role in UN institutions reveal a constant increase in Chinese representation, leadership roles and agenda-setting capacity across the UN during the 2000s and early 2010s. Through this process, China worked with established frameworks, modifying priorities towards development, state sovereignty and cooperation with other non-Western countries, rather than questioning existing norms (Lam and Fung 2025, 1158-1161). Such approach synchronized with an important reframing of gender equality within the Chinese official discourse. Gender issues were less related to human rights concerns and more as components of socio-economic development, such as women's empowerment was linked to poverty reduction, social stability and national modernization (People's Republic of China 2019, 2). The characteristic framing allowed China to adjust its policies related to gender with broader UN development agendas while avoiding more politically sensitive discussions concerning civil society or feminist advocacy, which might have conflicted social response regarding the interpretation of women's rights and domestic political priorities (de Silva de Alwis 2021, 17-19). This strategic prioritization of state development over women's rights, permitted China to continue to support global gender initiatives without adopting the more controversial aspects of international feminism or human rights frameworks (Lam and Fung 2025, 1171). Moreover, China contributed to an increase of South-South cooperations, with the promotion of knowledge transfers, technical assistance and capacity-building for women in developing countries. This engagement allowed China to indirectly influence women's

empowerment advancements and policies globally. The ability to support development initiatives, influenced over UN gender policy without directly confronting the normative framework established by the Beijing Platform for Action (Lam and Fung 2025, 1155-1156).

By 2015, China had transitioned from being a passive recipient and follower of norms to an organized and strategic actor in the UN women's agenda thanks to its regular involvement in review procedures, increased cooperation with UN organizations and growing power within international institutions. The change of its role, laid the base for the more agenda-shaping role China would have after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Haug, Foot and Baumann 2024, 10-11).

China's increasing consolidation of influence within the UN was evident in several areas. Diplomats and technical experts from China began leading committees, participating in working groups and contributing constantly to agenda-setting processes, meaning an increase of Chinese representation in leadership roles across UN institutions related to development and gender (Lam and Fung 2025, 1163). Over the twenty-years period following the Fourth World Conference on Women, China's compromise with the UN evolved from formal obedience with international norms to proactive institutional participation, securing a growing role in shaping discussion on development and gender. This evolution highlights China's broader approach to global influence using its constant participation in reviewing cycles, state support and narrative framing to secure incremental and durable gains within international institutions, and allowed China to shape international discourse while preserving domestic policy coherence (Haug, Foot and Baumann 2024, 11-13). Therefore, by 2015, China had established itself as a structured and influential actor within the UN women's agenda, which emphasized institutional credibility, long-term influence and practical outcomes, laying the foundation for a more decisive role in global gender governance beyond 2015.

2.3 China and Global Gender Policy since 2015

The approval of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 marked the beginning of a new phase in China's engagement with global gender governance. Its evolution of the previous decades on the institutional presence it had consolidated, entering the post-2015 period as a more confident participant in international policy processes. The inclusion of particular objectives on gender equality within the new global framework, SDG 5, provided an institutional link between original gender commitments during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 and the new contemporary gender policy (People's Republic of China 2019, 55). At the same time, the 2030 Agenda encouraged states to implement gender equality within other development strategies. In the case of China, this idea aligned closely with the approach that they had already put in practice since Platform of

Action of Beijing 1995, incorporating women's empowerment and rights as part of socioeconomic development rather than a separate rights agenda (Haug, Foot and Baumann 2024, 10).

The Agenda differentiated from previous frameworks introducing a universal system in which all UN member states had to commit in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals while they contributed to collective progress (United Nations General Assembly 2015, 1). Therefore, China's role involved reporting on their national achievements and progress, and participating in international cooperation mechanism created to support implementation. Within this new framework, gender equality was part though two different positions. It was put as an independent objective in SDG 5, but it also appeared as a principle in other goals related to health, poverty reduction, education, employment and inequality (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2016). This integration of gender equality in multiple development centered goals, reinforced the gender policy that China had been promoting in UN institutions. By linking women's empowerment and rights to other indicators of socioeconomic development, China could present gender equality as a domestic policy priority and a component of global development governance (Haug, Foot and Baumann 2024, 10). During the early years since the adaption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, China's influence within global gender agenda placed a strong importance on quantifiable development achievements. UN reports highlighted progress in areas like female educational success, maternal health services and women's employment (People's Republic of China 2019, 1-5). For its improvements and large development initiatives, China positioned itself as an agent capable of transforming international commitments into measurable outcomes. The presentation of such outcomes not only strengthen the country's domestic policy narrative, but also increased its credibility within multilateral reporting mechanisms (Haug, Foot and Baumann 2024, 11-13).

Pragmatic collaboration also grew after 2015, especially through collaborations centered on economic empowerment and capacity-building. Within the UN institutions, cooperation with UN Women increased via financial contributions, technical cooperation and joint initiatives in developing states (Lam and Fung 2025, 1154-1157). In addition, China's post-2015 strategy involved expanding cooperation with Global South countries through development partnerships and technical exchanges. Chinese institutions promoted infrastructure development projects, training programs and knowledge-sharing initiatives which incorporated women's participation and employment opportunities. Such activities were related to the broader framework of South-South cooperation, which China mostly presented as a complementary pillar of international development (Haug, Foot and Baumann 2024, 11). In this context of gender governance, these initiatives and development partnerships influenced the image of China as an agent of practical solutions and proposals, rather than only a recipient of international norms. It also reinforced China's global diplomatic narrative of shared progress among developing countries (Lam and Fung 2025,

1161). This period also had a shift toward an influence in UN agenda, as China's economic and diplomatic weight increased along with its institutional presence across UN agencies and committees, working within existing frameworks while shaping the interpretation and implementation of priorities and goals. Chinese diplomats and policy specialists have held an increasing number of positions within UN committees, administrative structures and working groups. Having such roles provides the opportunity to shape early debates on new global policies, priorities and control indicators. The possibility of participating in these processes allows states to influence which topics receive attention and how gender equality is related to broader development objectives. Through sustained participation in these institutional spaces, China has strengthened its capacity to guide and influence discussions on gender and development (Haug, Foot and Baumann 2024, 10). Coalition-building with developing countries increased China's influence within UN negotiations, coordinating with other groups which gave importance to national sovereignty and development-centred approaches to global governance. These alliances can affect the content and tone of negotiation texts and policy proposals, particularly when referring to language related to rights and gender equality with links to development cooperation and national circumstances. In the context of gender governance, such negotiations do not end with a decisive victory for any single group, but repeated discussion of the topic over time, shapes international discourse, adjusting different aspects of women's empowerment and rights (Lam and Fung 2025, 1155-1157). Another way in which China has shaped global gender policy is through financial engagement, increasing economic contributions to UN development programs. It has permitted them to support initiatives aligned with its priorities. The decision to fund the project increased its received visibility, application and support within the UN institution. Although China's economic contributions are smaller compared to those established donors, they strengthen its credibility as a collaborator invested in gender-related development goals (People's Republic of China 2019, 38-39). Debates intensify regarding broader geopolitical context and the balance of influence within global institutions, where China has challenged some concepts emphasized by the UN system and the UN Charter principles (Haug, Foot and Baumann 2024, 12-13).

By the mid-2020s, halfway through the SDG implementation timeline, reviews indicate mixed results in advancing gender equality. Socioeconomic inequalities and institutional challenges continue to affect progress in many states (Sachs et al. 2025, 11-14). In this context, China occupies a complex position, remaining a large developing country addressing internal imbalances and an influential actor in international policy. China's trajectory shows the evolution of rising powers within global governance, moving from a position of normative adoption to one of institutional participation and, recently, to an agenda-shaping actor within international frameworks.

3. The Chinese Feminist Movement: Between State Control and Social Resistance

3.1 Institutionalizing Gender: Women and the Chinese Socialist Project

The institutionalization of gender in the PRC represents an ambitious state-led effort to redefine women's roles within a socialist framework. Since its founding in 1949, the CCP has needed to integrate gender equality into its border political and economic project, combining ideological mobilization, legal reform and mass participation. However, this process has been marked by tensions between emancipatory goals and consistent patriarchal norms, showing the complexity of what scholars have described as "state feminism" (Wang 2009, 519-521). The Chinese political system has been characterized by a centralized one-party socialist state in which the CCP exercises the ultimate authority over governance. The structure includes a hierarchical bureaucracy extending from the central government to local levels, with mass organizations such as the ACWF functioning as intermediaries between the state and society. These organizations played a role in the implementation of gender policies and mobilization of women but, due to being a part of the party-state apparatus, it limits their autonomy and order of priorities with broader political objectives (Wang 2018, 74-75).

One of the earliest and most significant legal frameworks shaping gender in the PRC was in 1950 the Marriage Law (Wang 2009, 541). This aimed to dismantle traditional Confucian family⁶ structures by abolishing arranged marriages and child betrothal, and wanted to promote free choice in marriage and equal rights for both men and women. The law meant a radical change from prerevolutionary norms, where women were subordinated within patriarchal systems (People's Republic of China 1950, 37-41). However, its implementation was uneven and often met with resistance in rural areas where traditional practices remained deeply rooted (People's Republic of China 1950, 15-17). The Marriage Law was not merely a legal reform, but a part of a broader ideological project to redefine the category of "women" within socialist modernity. During the Maoist period, other state led policies also encouraged women's participation in the workforce and public life. Labour was framed as a right and a duty, and women were mobilized into industrial and agricultural production as part of the socialist transformation (Wu, Feng, and Lansdowne 2019, 21). Public campaigns emphasized the importance of women's economic independence as a foundation for gender equality. This mobilization significantly increased participation of female labour force and challenged traditional gender division of labour. Therefore, discourse and propaganda played a central role in shaping public perceptions of gender during this period. The famous slogan attributed to Mao Zedong, "women hold up half the sky", summarized the state's

⁶ Refers to a patriarchal and hierarchical system rooted in Confucian philosophy, where authority is centered on the male head of the household and women are expected to follow the roles of obedience, chastity and domestic responsibility (Barlow 2004, 22-23).

commitment to gender equality (Du 2022). Visual propaganda often showed women as strong, industrious and capable, adopting masculinized symbolism that emphasized physical strength and collective identity over femininity, known as “iron women”⁷. This masculinization hides the specific experiences and needs of women, subordinating gender issues to border political goals and combining it with class struggle and national development (Yang 2022, 3-4).

Women’s rights and gender equality policies in China have evolved over time, particularly in the post-Mao reform era. In the late 1970s, the economic reforms introduced new market mechanisms which transformed social relations, including gender dynamics. While opportunities grew for women in urban areas, the pullback of welfare state provisions and the revival of market competition, worsened gender inequalities (Yang 2022, 4-5). The concept of “state feminism” became highly debatable, as the state’s commitment to gender equality weakened for prioritizing economic aspects. Nevertheless, legal reforms continued, including the revision of the Marriage Law in 1980 and other amendments addressing issues such as domestic violence and property rights (Congressional-Executive Commission on China 1980, Art.3). At the same time, ACWF had to navigate the tension between representing women’s interests and maintaining its position within the party-state structure, leading to a complex exchange between emerging forms of feminist activism and state-led initiatives (Wang 2018, 75-76). Recent family laws and policies illustrate this new dynamic to strengthen women’s rights within the family. Since the 2000s, China introduced more explicit legal protections for women, including the 2015 Anti-Domestic Violence Law, which for the first time provided a national legal framework for state intervention in case of abuse (Wu, Feng, and Lansdowne 2019, 196-197). Amendments to the Marriage Law and related judicial interpretations have also addressed property rights, but these have sometimes disadvantaged women, particularly in cases where housing is registered in the husband’s name (Wu, Feng, and Lansdowne 2019, 99). But, policy discourse has also emphasized traditional family values and social harmony, reinforcing normative gender roles. This reflects a broader shift in state priorities, as concerns about demographic change, ageing populations, and social stability shape policy directions. The change of the one-child policy into a two-child policy in 2016, and subsequently a three-child policy in 2021, has been followed by state rhetoric encouraging women to embrace motherhood as a civic duty tied to national development. Such shifts show the evolution in which women’s roles are rearticulated to accomplish new socio-economic goals (Yang 2022, 6-7).

⁷ Refers to a Mao-era cultural and political ideal that celebrated women who performed physically demanding labor traditionally associated with men. These figures were promoted through propaganda as symbols of gender equality achieved through socialist labor, often emphasizing strength, endurance and desexualized presentation. Find the image in Annex, Illustration 6-8.

3.2 Contemporary Feminist Movement Since 2012

Since 2012, feminist activist in China has entered a new and more visible phase marked by public actions, digital mobilization and increased state security. This contemporary movement reflects continuity with earlier forms of state-linked feminism and a departure towards resistance by younger generations. It represents a turning point in which feminist activism became more publicly engaged and confrontational, even as it encounters within an increasingly restrictive political environment. The challenges facing women must be understood through the interrelation of activism, state control and structural contradictions rooted in China's socioeconomic model (Sáiz Lopez 2022, 14-18). One of the most important features of this contemporary period is the emergence of a new feminist generation that uses public performance and digital platforms to raise awareness of gender inequality. Activists organized attention-grabbing campaigns addressing issues such as sexual harassment, domestic violence and gender discrimination in workforce (Wang 2019, 59). A pivotal moment in this trajectory was the 2015 detention of the "Feminist Five", a group of activists arrested for planning a campaign against sexual harassment on public transportation. This incident showed the state control over civil society and demonstrated the limits of public activism. While the Chinese state historically promoted gender equality as part of its socialist legacy, contemporary feminist activism that challenges social norms is often perceived as a threat to social stability (Wang 2015, 480-482). Women's representation and gender discourse are closely tied to state ideology, leaving little space for independent feminist expression (Whyke 2023, 378-379).

This tension is linked with contradictions between China's economic and political systems. Since the late twentieth century, China has pursued a market-oriented model characterized by rapid economic growth, privatization and integration into global capitalism. However, this economic transformation has not been followed by a parallel shift toward political liberalization or social equality (Wang 2019, 61-62). The persistence of patriarchal norms has limited the potential for feminist growth, even though economic modernization has created new opportunities for women. Therefore, women are increasingly visible in the workforce and consumer economy but remain repressed by institutional and cultural inequalities (Song and Wesoky 2023, 4-5). It is particularly evident in the labour market, where gender discrimination had become more clear in the post-socialist era. While women's participation in economic activities remains high, they often encounter hiring biases, wage gaps and limited career advancement. Market reforms have shifted the burden of social reproduction into families, reinforcing traditional gender roles, and giving a double burden to women who are expected to balance professional responsibilities with unpaid domestic labour. At the same time, state discourse increasingly emphasizes women's roles as wives and mothers, as seen in campaigns promoting "leftover women"⁸ narratives that stigmatize

⁸ Refers to unmarried, educated urban women stigmatized for delaying marriage. This label reflects persistent patriarchal expectations that conflict with women's rising educational and economic status (To 2013, 10-11).

unmarried, career-oriented women (To 2013, 11-13). The gap between economic modernization and gender equality is further intensified by uneven access to resources and opportunities. For example, urban and educated women may benefit from new economic possibilities, but rural and migrant women face disadvantages. Despite legal frameworks which guarantee equality, implementation remain inconsistent and social attitudes continue to limit women's autonomy (Wang 2019, 62). This difference between formal rights and lived realities shows the limitations of economic development as a driver of gender equality.

In this context, digital activist has emerged as a crucial new area for feminist engagement. The rise of social media platforms has helped activists to spread information, mobilize support and challenge dominant narratives (Wang 2018, 9). The #MeToo movement in China began in 2018 when survivors of sexual harassment used digital platforms to share their experiences and demand responsibility, particularly within universities. The movement gain significant power, leading to public debates and some institutional responses. Despite these challenges, #MeToo demonstrated the capacity of digital networks to amplify marginalized voices and foster collective action (Liao and Luqiu 2022, 743, 751). Therefore, the state adapted new governance strategies to manage this new form of activism such as digital surveillance, legal restrictions and content moderation which have been used to restrict feminist discourse and prevent large-scale mobilizations. The state wants to maintain control over gender narratives by promoting official forms of feminism that align with national priorities. This creates a complex environment in which activists often have the need to use coded language and decentralized networks to avoid government repression (Whyke 2023, 376-380). The 2016 Domestic Violence Law was a significant step forward, but its application has been uneven and many victims continue to face barriers in finding justice (Lu 2018). Debates over reproductive rights, workplace discrimination and sexual harassment remain highly sensitive and often subject to censorship. These incidents reveal both the growing awareness of gender issues and the persistent structural obstacles to meaningful change. The contemporary feminist movement in China is characterized by a dynamic of resistance and adaptation. On the one hand, activists have developed new strategies to challenge inequality and raise public consciousness. On the other hand, they deal with a system that limits their capacity for sustained and institutionalized change. By using both online and offline spaces, they continue to push the boundaries of what is possible within the existing political framework.

3.3 Contradictions of Gender Modernity in China: A Critical Perspective

The concept of gender in contemporary China is marked by a series of contradictions which show a gap between official narratives of equality and the lived realities of women. While the state promotes an image of progress, emphasizing women's participation in economic development and their formal legal equality, everyday experiences suggest a more complex

and uneven situation. Such tensions call for a critical analysis of how gender roles are constructed, represented and lived, as well as how political and economic priorities shape the possibilities and limits of women's empowerment.

At the official discourse, it presents as having achieved gender equality, due to establishing legal frameworks against discrimination and political ideas consistently giving importance to women's rights and participation. This narrative aligns with international expectations, particularly those promoted by the UN, that puts gender equality as a driver of development and a moral obligation. China's participation in global initiatives, especially since the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, has reinforced the idea that the country is committed in advancing women's status, but as the way they need. In this context, women are often portrayed as key contributors to national progress, where their integration into the workforce reflects empowerment and modernization however, this hides important discrepancies. In reality, discrimination persists across both public and private spheres, challenging the claim that equality has been achieved. In the workforce, women face structural barriers that limit their opportunities. These patterns indicate that, despite formal protections, gender inequality remains rooted in institutional practices. At the same time, it has not transformed expectations regarding their domestic roles. They contribute economically, working as much as men, but also taking the primary responsibility for household labour, childcare and elder care. These contradictions are even more highlighted in regional differences, particularly between urban and rural areas, where traditional norms tend to be more deeply rooted and access to education and employment opportunities is more limited. While urban women may experience greater opportunities and autonomy, the uneven distribution of progress shows the fragmented nature of gender modernity across the country. Related to the international dimension, the UN and other global actors promote a vision of gender equality that seems idealistic. These frameworks suggest that countries can achieve progress within relatively short period, by integrating women into economic activities. China has engaged with this discourse, presenting its high rates of female labour participation as evidence of success. The link established between women's empowerment and economic growth, especially since the 1995 conference, has allowed China to position itself as aligned with global standards. However, the assumption that economic participation leads to equality and empowerment, leaves the cultural and structural dimensions of inequality. The global discourse contributes to an unrealistic understanding of progress, one that prioritizes measurable outcomes rather than social transformation. From national development, these contradictions can be understood as a result of strategic priorities. China's rapid economic growth required the mobilization of a large labour force, including women. Encouraging women to work has been economically beneficial and policies have supported their integration into different sectors but, without changing, the structures that define their position in public and private life. This approach reflects a broader pattern in which gender policies are shaped by economic and political ideas rather than by a commitment to feminist ideals.

It is clear that the feminist ideas promoted in global forums have been partially introduced in China. Even though progress has been made in terms of education and employment, important obstacles remain. Social expectations, institutional barriers and policy limitations contribute to a situation in which equality is more unrealistic. Therefore, these contradictions raise significant doubts about how progress is defined and measured, and the real power of international organizations in this area. Can high levels of labour participation truly be taken as evidence of empowerment? To what extent do global frameworks, such as those promoted by the UN, capture the complexities of local realities? Can equality be declared from above, or must it be experienced in everyday life to be meaningful? A more complex approach is needed, one that considers the lived realities of women in different contexts.

Conclusion

This project has followed the evolution of global gender governance through three interconnected areas: the development of the United Nations' gender agenda, China's changing role within that international framework, and the trajectory of feminist movements within China itself. These perspectives reveal not a linear progression toward gender equality, but a contradictory and complex process influenced by geopolitical interests, institutional limitations, and structural inequalities. Rather than demonstrating a clear achievement of women's rights, the analysis highlights constant tensions between normative commitments and lived realities and between global frameworks and national interpretations.

The first chapter has shown that the UN played a foundational role in establishing women's rights as part of the international human rights system by constructing a global framework for addressing gender inequality. Its initiations ranged from the inclusion of gender equality in the UN Charter to the adoption of international conventions and the organization of world conferences on women. Over time, it evolved toward global concepts such as development, empowerment, and gender mainstreaming. However, the institutional expansion did not translate into consistent nor significant improvements in women's everyday lives. The gap between formal recognition and its implementation remained an important feature of the UN's gender agenda. While the organization succeeded in universalizing the language of women's rights and integrating it within international norms, it also lacked the tools and political support to ensure that these rights were put into practice, therefore revealing key tensions of the UN system. On the one hand, it has been effective as a norm-setting institution, shaping global discourse and establishing accepted standards. On the other hand, it depends on each state for implementation, limiting the UN's ability to challenge economic, social and political structures that sustain gender inequalities. The UN's role can be understood as a platform to legitimize ongoing struggles for gender equality, rather than a direct agent for change. The continued inequality despite decades of international commitments shows how global frameworks alone are insufficient to have a transformation. Following this global context, the second chapter explored how China has contributed to the UN gender agenda since the 1995 Beijing Conference. Its trajectory illustrated the international dynamics of rising power through global norms while advancing its own strategic national priorities. Initially positioned as a host, China increased its involvement in UN processes, strengthened its institutional presence and expanded its influence in shaping the discourse on gender and development. At the same time, China's expanding role shows significant tensions within global gender governance. While contributing to UN initiatives and supporting the language of gender equality, it has constantly related these commitments through a development-oriented perspective, focusing on domestic economic growth, poverty reduction, and social stability. In doing so, China has reinterpreted global norms to prioritize state sovereignty and socioeconomic outcomes over rights-based

approaches, allowing it to align itself with international expectations while maintaining control over the implementation and interpretation of gender policies at a national level. China's role demonstrates how emerging powers can influence international agendas without fundamentally challenging their structure.

The third chapter has shifted the focus to the domestic level, following the evolution of feminist movements in China and the contradictions that characterize gender relations in a transforming society. Since the mid-1990s, China has experienced important economic growth and increased integration into the global system, creating new opportunities for women in employment, education and public life. Also, the state has maintained a central role in shaping gender policy, promoting a "state feminism" that aligns women's advancements with development goals. Legal reforms have contributed to improvements in different areas, but they have not eliminated structural inequalities. Moreover, contemporary feminist activism in China reflects this reality. While earlier forms of gender policy were closely tied to state structures, new activists have adopted more independent strategies through digital platforms and public campaigns, bringing more visibility to issues such as sexual harassment and domestic violence. However, they act within a restrictive environment that limits collective action and the development of independent feminist movements.

These three chapters highlight how the advancements of women's rights cannot be understood as a constantly increasing process driven by international institutions, national policies, or economic development alone, but as an interaction of these factors where each of them introduces its own priorities and contradictions. The UN gives a global framework that defines norms and legitimizes struggles, but it lacks the capacity to ensure their implementation. States such as China engage with these norms, adapting them to fit national priorities and contributing to their empowerment at the international level. At the same time, social movements operate within and against these structures, pushing for change while adapting to political and institutional limitations.

Each layer of analysis demonstrated that advances in gender equality are often met with new limitations such as cultural, institutional, or political. Recognizing these challenges is essential for moving beyond basic narratives of success and for engaging with the complex realities of gender governance in the contemporary world.

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Appendix

Chronology

Events and organizations which shaped the international agenda for women's rights since 1945:

1945 (Feb-Mar): Chapultepec Conference (Mexico). Protection of human rights; principle of non-discrimination and equality between races and sexes.

1945 (Apr-Jun): San Francisco Conference. UN Charter: equality of men and women recognized as a fundamental right.

1945 (Oct 24): Establishment of the United Nations

1946 (Jan 10): First UN General Assembly (London). Women's rights placed on the international agenda.

1946 (Jun 21): Creation of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Promotion of gender equality and women's rights.

1948 (Dec 10): Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Paris). All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

1949: Third CSW Session (Beirut). Emergence of international welfare feminism and inclusion of non-Western perspectives.

1951: International Labour Organization Convention on Equal Remuneration

1953: Convention on the Political Rights of Women

1957: Convention on the Nationality of Married Women

1962: Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages.

1963: World Congress of Women (Moscow). Global discussion on women's status.

1967: Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

1975: International Women's Year and beginning of the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985)

1975: First World Conference on Women (Mexico City)

1976: Establishment of INSTRAW and UNIFEM. Advancement and support of women's development.

1979: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Comprehensive framework for eliminating discrimination

1980: Second World Conference on Women (Copenhagen)

1985: Third World Conference on Women (Nairobi)

1993: Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women

1995: Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing). Adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action.

2010: Creation of UN Women. Central body for gender equality.

2015: Adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Includes Goal 5 on gender equality.

China evolution, Institutional sphere:

1992: Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests. The first comprehensive law to guarantee equal rights in politics, education, and labor, marking a legal commitment in the post-Mao era.

1995: UN World Conference on Women (Beijing). The Chinese State adopts the global commitment to gender "mainstreaming," turning equality into an official national policy.

1995: National Program for Women's Development. The first state document to explicitly recognize domestic violence as a priority social problem.

2001: Revision of the Marriage Law. Includes for the first time an explicit prohibition of domestic violence as a grounds for divorce and compensation.

2005: Reform of the Law on Women's Rights. Sexual harassment is defined for the first time as a legal offense within the revision of the Law on the Protection of Women.

2011: Interpretation III of the Marriage Law. A controversial Supreme Court ruling stating that property in a divorce belongs to the person whose name is on the deed, harming many women who were not listed on the titles.

2012: Reform of the Civil Procedure Law. Introduces legal mechanisms such as personal protection orders for victims of domestic violence.

2016: Anti-Domestic Violence Law. The first specific law allowing for protection orders and requiring police to intervene in "family matters."

2018: Censorship of Digital Feminist Movements. The shutdown of platforms like Feminist Voices shows the tensions between feminist activism and state control.

2021: Civil Code and the "Cooling-off Period". A mandatory one-month waiting period for divorce is imposed, a measure criticized for making it harder for women in abusive situations to leave.

2021: Three-Child Policy. The State allows couples to have three children and begins promoting a pro-natalist culture, often pushing women to return to the domestic sphere.

2023: Major Revision of the Law on Women's Rights. The 1992 law is updated to include protections against labor discrimination during job interviews (such as asking if candidates intend to become mothers).

China evolution, Social sphere:

1995-2005: The Era of NGOs (Post-Beijing). The emergence of gender studies centers and helplines like the Maple Leaf Center, focusing on education and direct support.

1995: NGO Forum parallel to the UN Conference.

1995: Social Impact of the Beijing Conference. Major mobilization of women and NGOs; public awareness regarding women's rights and feminism increases.

1996: Women's Media Watch Network. An organization dedicated to monitoring and denouncing discriminatory messages in the media, offering alternative narratives to expand gender consciousness.

2009: Feminist Voices. Launch of a weekly digital magazine that reported on the work of NGOs and analyzed current events from a women's rights perspective.

2012: The "Bloody Brides". Young activists dress as brides in blood-stained wedding dresses in Beijing to protest against domestic violence, marking the beginning of "action feminism." Key figures: Li Tingting (Maizi), Xiao Meili, Wei Tingting.

2012: "Naked bodies against domestic violence". An action with high visual impact in public spaces to denounce physical aggression toward women and break the taboo surrounding domestic violence.

2012: "Occupy Men's Toilets". A creative protest to demand a proportional increase in women's public restrooms, pointing out inequality in urban design and infrastructure.

2015: Detention of the "Feminist Five". The arrest of five activists planning to protest sexual harassment on public transport sparks a wave of international solidarity.

2017: Expansion of Digital Feminism. Social networks become key for sharing experiences and denouncing discrimination and abuse.

2018: The #MeToo Movement in China. The outbreak of digital accusations (initiated by Luo Qianqian) breaks the silence on sexual harassment in universities and major tech companies.

2020: The Case of Xianzi vs. Zhu Jun. A landmark trial where a young woman accused a famous state television presenter, becoming the face of the fight against impunity.

2020: Debate on "Leftover Women" (Sheng Nü). Reappropriation of the term to claim autonomy and reject social pressure to marry.

2021: Mass Shutdown of Feminist Accounts. Coordinated censorship on Weibo and Douban against feminist groups, accused by nationalist sectors of being harmful foreign influences.

2021: Social Pressure regarding Divorce and Family. The "cooling-off period" sparks public debate on female autonomy and rights within marriage.

2022: The "Chained Woman" Case. The discovery of a human trafficking victim chained in a rural village generates unprecedented digital outrage against local corruption.

2024: Sentencing of Sophia Huang Xueqin. The prison sentence for the key #MeToo journalist symbolizes the severity of state control over organized independent activism.

2025: The "Four Noes" Movement. Young women adopt the rejection of dating, sex, marriage, and children as a method of peaceful resistance against the state's pro-natalist pressure.

2026: Digital Protests for "Care Work". Massive online demands for economic independence and the valuation of domestic labor, challenging the return to traditional gender roles.

Illustrations



Image 1: The opening of the World Conference of the International Women's Year at the Juan de la Barrera Gymnasium in Mexico City on 19 June 1975. United Nations. "First World Conference on Women." n.d. <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/women/mexico-city1975>.



Image 2: Lucille Mair, Secretary-General of the Conference, speaking at the opening ceremony of the conference on 14 July 1980. United Nations. "Second World Conference on Women." n.d. <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/women/copenhagen1980>.



Image 3: President of the Conference, Mrs. Margaret Kenyatta of Kenya speaking at the Conference. Secretary-General of the Conference, Ms. Leticia Shahani to the left and Ms. Pilar Santander-Downing, Secretary of the Conference at right, 1985. United Nations. “Third World Conference on Women.” n.d. <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/women/nairobi1985>.



Image 4: The opening session of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, 4 September 1995. United Nations. “Fourth World Conference on Women.” n.d. <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/women/beijing1995>.



Image 5: Women gather at the forum for NGO in Huairou, China, part of the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. United Methodist News Service. "Assessing Key Women's Conference, 20 Years Later." February 12, 2015. <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/assessing-key-womens-conference-20-years-later>.



Image 6: Poster of the iron women. "Study the battle spirit of the Red Army during the Long March, conquer nature, build up our nation", 1953. Zhou, Lingzhao. *Study the battle spirit of the Red Army during the Long March, conquer nature, build up our nation*. Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1953. <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e15-832>.



Image 7: Poster of the iron women. "We are proud to participate in the industrialization of the nation", 1954. Ding, Hao. *We are proud of participating in the founding of our country's industrialisation*. Shanghai: Huadong renmin meishu chubanshe, 1954. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e16-17..>



Image 8: Poster of the iron women. "Strive for an abundant harvest, amass grain", 1973. Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House Propaganda Poster Group. *Strive for an abundant harvest, amass grain*. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1973. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/g2-49>.