

9 Gender and reproductive rights: synergies and contradictions in China's national and global development agendas

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This chapter draws on recent literature to outline the trajectory of China's national development in the fields of gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), as well as its global engagement in these fields. By highlighting how Chinese national and global development agendas speak to and depart from each other, it attempts to identify potential synergies and contradictions that are important to understand when Sweden and other like-minded actors engage with China as an international development cooperation partner in the fields of gender equality and SRHR.

Introduction

A substantial amount of research has been devoted to China's growing role in international development, not least through the Belt and Road Initiative (DAWN, 2024). How Chinese development cooperation impacts issues related to gender and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), however, remains understudied (Jolly, 2016; Cai, 2021; DAWN, 2024). This chapter aims at remedying this gap. It rests on the assumptions that principles, ideals and policy goals travel within and across local, national and global levels, where development agendas at various levels meet and influence one another. Therefore, to comprehend China as an international development actor in the fields of gender and SRHR, it is imperative to understand how China's global and national development agendas relate.

The analysis is based on previous research, media reports and Chinese official policy documents and speeches. It starts by analysing China's national development agenda, recognising progress as well as persistent inequalities, and drawing attention to the "domestic gender inequality paradox". It then accounts for China's global engagement in the fields of gender and SRHR and how it relates to the national agenda. Before concluding with implications for cooperation and global partnerships, the chapter discusses "Gender and SRHR at a crossroad", arguing that the future trajectory of China's national development agenda will influence not only China's global engagement, but global agendas on gender and SRHR more broadly.

The Chinese story of women's advancement

The advancement of women and gender equality have been core components of China's national development strategy and modernisation project throughout China's modern history. Equality between women and men was a key component of the quest for democratisation and the advancement of a modern and strong China during the Fourth of May movement in 1919 and was part of the founding principles when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was established in 1921. After the es-

establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the CCP launched major laws and reforms to advance the status of women in terms of health, education and labour force participation. Women's position in the family was protected through the 1950 Marriage Law which established equality between women and men as a core principle, banned polygamy and child marriage, and granted the right to divorce. Equality between men and women was later enshrined in China's constitution in 1954. The idea of women's important role in public life and their revolutionary potential in breaking down old, traditional Confucian culture was captured in the slogan "Women hold up half the sky", popularised by Mao Zedong in 1968, the early phase of the Cultural Revolution. During the Reform and Opening Up Era, starting in 1978, gender equality remained a core principle. Along with Sweden and a handful of other countries, China was one of the first countries to sign and ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1980. Since then, the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests was promulgated in 1992 and equality between men and women was subsequently declared a basic national policy by President Jiang Zemin at the welcoming ceremony of the Fourth World Conference on Women (4WCW) held in Beijing in 1995.

Government reforms calling for gender equality have always had the dual goal of advancing the status of women for both intrinsic and instrumental reasons, with gender equality as a means of building a stronger and more modern China. This is important to acknowledge. Many observers would argue that instrumental goals have always overridden intrinsic goals, and that women's rights are only promoted when protecting such rights serves the greater purpose of the nation and the legitimacy of the CCP (Lo and van de Pas, 2023). The most blatant example of this is the draconian one-child policy (1979–2015), which was launched with modernisation and development of the nation as a goal, severely undermining sexual and reproductive rights.

Notwithstanding the instrumental logic, the promotion of gender equality has had real and long-lasting positive implications for women. Today, China prides itself on gender parity in education.

Part of the reason for this advancement is the new generation of singleton daughters who have grown up without brothers and who have received unprecedented love, support and educational investment by their parents.

Table 1. Key gender and SRHR indicators over time, China and Sweden*

Indicator	Year	China	Sweden
Gender parity in education	1971	0.73	1
	2018	1	1
Female labour force participation rate (%)	1990	73	63
	2024	60	62
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	1970	120	14
	2023	6	3
Birth attended by skilled health staff (%)	1987	94	100
	2023	100	100
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	2000	30	4
	2023	5	2
Adolescence fertility rate (per 1,000 women aged 15-19)	1990	31	14
	2021	11	3
Abortion rate (per 1,000 women aged 15-49)**	2015–2019	49	17
Unmet need for modern contraceptive methods (%)	2024	8.7	N/A
Intimate partner violence – women ever experienced (%)	2018	18.5	20.5
Proportion of women in ministerial level positions (%)	2005	6.3	52.4
	2022	4.2	47.8

* Years of comparison are selected based on earliest and most recent year where data for both countries are available. All data are from World Bank data except when indicated.

** Concerns the 2015-2019 average.

Source: Guttmacher (2025) Data on China: <https://www.guttmacher.org/regions/asia/china>, Data on Sweden: <https://www.guttmacher.org/regions/europe/sweden>

China is also proud of having one of the highest female labour force participation rates in the world, and similar rates of maternal and infant mortality and births attended by skilled health staff as OECD countries, as reflected in Table 1 where China is compared with Sweden.

This story of women’s advancement in education, paid work and maternal health is a story that China is proud of and happy to share, to boost its soft power, to gain legitimacy as an actor in global governance, and to offer a blueprint for other developing nations.

However, in terms of political participation, gender equality has deteriorated, and there are persistent challenges concerning SRHR (see Table 1). There is a need to look beyond “telling good Chinese stories” (Cai, 2021) and to incorporate trends and challenges beyond the state narrative. Doing so reveals several contradictions that are important to recognise in order to understand China’s global role related to gender equality and SRHR.

Persistent inequalities

There are several challenges to gender equality and SRHR that do not fit neatly into the idea of China as a role model. In 2025, China ranked 103 in the Global Gender Gap Index developed by the World Economic Forum, a significant drop compared to the 2008 ranking of 57.¹ The main reasons for the drop are women’s low political participation and the persistently abnormal sex ratio at birth (SRB), outlined below, along with other areas of concern.

Women’s political representation

Despite major advancements in education and paid employment, women’s role in the public sphere has only to a limited extent translated into increased power in the political sphere. The higher the level of decision-making, the fewer women in power. In recent years, women have constituted about 25 per cent of the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Women hold a minority of ministerial -level positions (see Table 1) and none of the 24 members of the CCP Politburo are women.

¹ Global Gender Gap Reports of 2008 and 2025 can be accessed here: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/series/global-gender-gap-report/>

Women and work

In spite of higher female labour force participation than the global average, discrimination against women is increasing. This is exacerbated by the recent three-child policy which has increased discrimination against women (Attané, 2026; Cai and Liu, 2024). Women are twice as often as men asked about their childbearing plans during recruitment, and employers are reluctant to employ young women for fear of escalating maternity leave costs (Wang, 2025). Among women with a graduate degree, unemployment is 1.8 times higher than for men with a graduate degree (Wang, 2025). Moreover, depending on sector, the retirement age of women is 5–10 years below the retirement age of men. The low retirement age for women severely hampers their advancement into senior management and leadership positions.

A single carer model

Although China loosely fits with the notion of a dual-earner model, the same cannot be said about care work. Childcare and household work are still considered women's responsibility, with women spending on average 2.8 times more time than men on domestic duties (Wang, 2025). The 'single carer model' is also reflected in parental leave policies. Only maternity leave is mandated at the national level, granting 98 days, while paternity leave is regulated at the provincial level, typically permitting 15 days (Li and Eklund, 2022). The expectation that women are the primary carers creates a double burden, and may force women to withdraw from the labour market unless childcare services are available. Alternatively, grandmothers are commonly mobilised as carers. The pivotal role for middle-aged women as carers for both grandchildren, ageing parents and parents-in-law helps justify the low retirement age of women (Eklund, 2016).

Skewed sex ratio at birth

Even though daughters today are increasingly valued in China, the historical and cultural heritage of a deeply rooted patrilineal and patrilocal family system still shapes the urge for some to have at least one

son. The one-child policy meant not only severe fertility restrictions, but also that medical technology was made available to detect unauthorised births and to monitor contraceptive use. Such technology also enabled foetal sex detection, a prerequisite for sex-selective abortions (Eklund, 2011). Due to a combination of son preference, restricted fertility and access to technology, the SRB started to become skewed by the mid-1980s. SRB peaked at 121 in 2004, and has since then fallen to 110 – 111, which is still higher than normal (≈ 105). Recent figures on SRB translate to about 100,000 ‘missing girls’ per year, despite legislative measures against sex-selection and campaigns to promote the value of daughters (Eklund and Purewal, 2025). A lasting impact of SRB imbalance is fewer women of childbearing age, a factor contributing to the current low birth rate (Attané, 2026).

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)

China has made substantive progress in legislation concerning SGBV through the Anti-Domestic Violence Law (2016), partly thanks to the mobilisation of women’s rights advocates and civil society groups (Feng and Hao, 2026). While the law in principle turned domestic violence into a public matter, its implementation needs to be strengthened (UNFPA, 2020). Despite some awareness-raising efforts, SGBV is still often regarded as a private problem where interference threatens family harmony. Similarly, sexual harassment at work is often silenced. SGBV is poorly covered in media, and though frequently appearing in social media, such postings are typically subject to censorship.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights

China has been successful in reducing maternal and infant mortality and making contraceptives widely available, but a range of challenges remain (see Table 1). In 2015–2019, 58 percent of all pregnancies were unintended, and 78 percent of those ended with an abortion (same rates for Sweden were 42 and 48 percent), despite a low rate of unmet need for contraception (8.7 percent). This translates to a

relatively high abortion rate in China at 49 per 1,000 women aged 15–49 (17 in Sweden).² Although unmarried mothers are not punished as they were during the one-child policy era, they are still subject to stigma and may have fewer entitlements to antenatal care, maternity benefits and job protection (Guardian, 2023). Since only heterosexual marriage is legal, SRHR is of particular concern for the LGBTQ+ community (Liu, 2021).

Unpacking the domestic gender inequality paradox

The strong commitment to gender equality in principle but to a limited degree in practice represents a paradox. Unpacking this paradox is important for understanding China's global development agenda. Below, three interrelated explanations will be advanced: the logic of an authoritarian gender regime, lack of a structural analysis and compromised institutional mandates.

An authoritarian gender regime

Commitment to gender equality in principle but not always in practice is typical of authoritarian gender regimes (Walby, 2023). In authoritarian gender regimes, women tend to be educated and in paid work, though this only marginally translates into real political power. Moreover, political decisions and state activities are guided by the overall aim to strengthen the polity, be it the state or the party, and not the rights and freedoms of individuals. Consequently, women are granted “fewer freedoms concerning intimacy, reproduction and sexuality” (Walby, 2023: 6). The one-child policy is a blatant example of this logic. Under authoritarianism, the reach of the state is broad, freedom of expression and association restricted, and civil society thin.

The notion of an authoritarian gender regime sits well with the Confucian moral order, which emphasises harmony and hierarchy, where

² Guttmacher <https://www.guttmacher.org/global/abortion>

women are subordinated to men, young to old, younger brothers to older brothers, ordinary people to the ruler, with only the relationship between friends being equal.

With the (re)turn to Confucian family values during the Xi era³, women have become further squeezed between the competing injunctions of family and work (Attané, 2026). In official rhetoric, women's rights and women's role in society are increasingly confined by ideas about what constitutes a good and virtuous mother and wife (Xinhua, 2023). This turn represents a different ideological underpinning compared to the gender equality rhetoric during the Cultural revolution when the slogan 'Women hold up half the sky' was associated with 'iron girls' who joined the revolution against Confucian values.

Lack of a structural analysis

In Chinese plans and policies aimed at advancing gender equality, the reasons behind persistent gender inequalities are rarely accompanied by a thorough analysis. Women are often presented as a 'vulnerable group' lumped together with other groups understood to be vulnerable, like children and older persons, without due attention to uncovering wherein such vulnerabilities lie.

Gender equality as a term (*xingbie pingdeng*) was introduced to China at the time of the 4WCW in 1995. As opposed to the notion 'equality between men and women' (*nannv pingdeng*), gender equality offers a broader understanding of gender, beyond binary notions of women and men (Cai, 2021). Yet, gender equality in official rhetoric is often understood in narrow terms and confined to 'women's issues', 'women affairs', and 'women's advancement' (Liu, 2021). Such a narrow focus rests on an essentialist view, where women are understood to have innate capacities to care, and where womanhood is intimately linked to motherhood (Jung, 2024), taking focus away from structural inequalities generating discrimination. When China speaks of gender equality or women's empowerment, interventions

³ The Xi era started in 2012, when Xi Jinping became the General Secretary of the CCP.

that are gender transformative and challenge deeply entrenched patriarchal norms are not typically what is considered. On the contrary, feminism is a laden word, and feminist activists are frequently censored, placed under surveillance and imprisoned (Brooks, 2025).

Different from gender equality policy documents in Sweden and the EU, references to men and boys are missing in Chinese gender equality policy documents and official speeches. Instead, the analysis of harmful gender norms and practices is confined to vague references to 'feudalism' or 'lack of civilisation'. As such, a "crucial gap remains between Chinese and international understandings of gender" (Liu, 2021: 363).

Compromised institutional mandates

A major impediment to advancing gender equality in practice is lack of mechanisms and procedures to implement equal rights and opportunities. The responsible agency for the national policy on gender equality is the Working Committee on Women and Children under the State Council, and the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF). As a mass organisation, the ACWF is positioned between the government and the grassroots, represented on all administrative levels. However, it is a marginalised organisation at the fringe of China's political system, with poor resources and a weak mandate to make a difference (Zhou- 2019). In recent years, it has increasingly become a mouthpiece of the CCP at the expense of safeguarding women's interests, as reflected in a recent speech by President Xi:

Women's federations must tell good stories of family traditions, guide women to play their unique roles in promoting traditional virtues and cultivating good family values, and foster a new culture of family civility. They should actively cultivate new marriage and childbearing norms, guide young people on views of love, marriage, childbirth, and family, improve and implement childbearing support policies" (Xinhua, 2023: no page).

ACWF is further constrained by the prevailing narrative that Chinese women were liberated by the CCP in 1949, making interventions that challenge structural gender inequality politically sensitive (Zhou, 2019).

Moreover, activists working on gender-related issues continue to face state surveillance and harassment (Brooks, 2025). State control and restrictions make civil society weak and prevent decision-makers from being held accountable. This points to another paradox. It is puzzling that China wants to enhance gender equality but prevents key actors from joining that pursuit. Yet, it is important to note that civil society used to be more vibrant. As the state withdrew some of its control in the 1980s, women's rights activists and feminists started to organise (Liu, 2021). During the 1995 4WCW, the NGO forum held in parallel in Huairou inspired and triggered a new generation of women's rights advocates and NGOs, boosted by the idea that civil society can be a government partner (Feng and Hao, 2026). Many projects and activities in China were made possible through multilateral and bilateral international aid. However, as of 2016, a new law severely restricts foreign funding of domestic NGOs. This has limited but not dispelled women's rights advocates and organisations.

Running across the three strands of conditions underpinning the Chinese domestic gender inequality paradox is a division between social and economic rights, and civic and political rights. The general lack of civic and political rights translates into restrictions on actors that promote gender equality. The gender inequality paradox also resonates with the contradiction that stems from the different logics of intrinsic and instrumental values. The right to 'survive' and to development overrides the right to 'thrive', which is limited to the priorities defined by the CCP and does not extend to the right of women to shape their own destinies politically. This gender inequality paradox also shapes China's global engagement.

China's global commitment

Despite a contradictory national development agenda, China expresses a strong commitment to gender equality at the global level. One indicator of this is that gender equality is included in the 2021 white paper *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era* (State Council, 2021) as one of eight core areas. Another recent sign is the 2025 white paper *China's Achievements in Women's Well-Rounded Development in the New Era*, where China positions itself as a global actor and team player for gender equality:

China supports the United Nations in prioritizing women's development, promotes cooperation with the rest of the world in relevant fields, and builds international consensus on gender equality through extensive exchanges and mutual learning. Together with all other countries, China works to shape a global environment conducive to women's development, to safeguard international fairness and justice, and to make its due contribution to moving the world to a bright future of peace, security, prosperity and progress. (State Council, 2025: no page)

China has persistently aligned with the language of gender equality and women's empowerment as outlined in CEDAW and the outcome document of the 4WCW, Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA). Though China's foreign policy since the 1950s is guided by the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence where 'mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs' is one of five principles, this principle is left uninvoked when global consensus exists. This means that, contrary to countries like Russia and the USA, China does not oppose wording on gender equality as long as there is global consensus (Cai, 2021).

However, when international consensus is lacking, China does not hesitate to object. An example concerns the *Asia Pacific Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*, where China voted in favour (as opposed to the US), but with a reservation about the

term “women human rights defenders”, evoking the lack of international consensus on what constitutes a women human rights defender (Cai, 2021). The weight given to internationally agreed treaties and definitions is important to note, as it means that areas where there is no international consensus are areas where it is plausible that China will invoke the principle of ‘mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs’ and go its own way or side with countries that pursue more conservative and authoritarian agendas where women’s sexual and reproductive rights are neglected.

The increasing emphasis on gender equality in China’s global development agenda has been understood as a way to counteract criticism that China’s global expansion both as a donor and investor constitutes neocolonialism (Cai, 2021). While some see China’s endorsement of gender equality as a means to justify its leadership in the Global South (Liu, 2021), others are more optimistic, seeing China’s increasing commitment to gender equality as a chance to forge new alliances and advance gender equality both at national and global levels (Cai and Li, 2021). One can say that while the national agenda on gender equality is instrumental in the sense that it wants women to help advance the nation, the global development agenda on gender equality is instrumental because it wants to gain legitimacy for China.

When reviewing China’s role as an international aid actor in the fields of gender and SRHR, four areas stand out:

- Beijing Platform for Action
- South-South Cooperation
- Population and Reproductive Health
- Women, Peace and Security

Beijing Platform for Action

Commemorating the BPfA of 1995 through various ‘Beijing+’ activities has been an integral part of Beijing’s effort to position itself as a global actor committed to gender equality and multilateralism, not

least since Xi Jinping took office. During both Beijing+20 and Beijing+30, China and UN Women have co-hosted 'global leaders' meetings'. China has attached much importance to commemorating the BPfA, even though naming the meeting a 'meeting' instead of a 'summit' can be seen as degrading the importance of the event. Also, despite the active role of women activists and women's NGOs at the time of the 4WCW in 1995, there were no publicly organised civil society commemorations of Beijing+30 held in China in 2025. Moreover, it is worth noting that in 2015, the meeting was named *Global Leaders' Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*, while in 2025, it was named *Global Leaders' Meeting on Women*. At both Beijing+20 and Beijing+30, China donated USD 10 million to UN Women, a sum worth much less in 2025 than in 2015. Despite the somewhat watered-out content both in wording and financially, the donations and the pledge that China has committed for the purpose of benefitting women and girls have been celebrated in China, with intense coverage in national media. This suggests that China's global development agenda in the field of gender equality is important for legitimising the leadership of Xi Jinping domestically. Yet, it is also important for setting national agendas. As an example, there is anecdotal evidence that President Xi's recent emphasis on gender equality during Beijing+30 has elevated the status of gender as a research topic worthy of external funding in China.

South-south cooperation

China channels substantive resources into South-South Cooperation (SSC) (State Council, 2021). Most recently, and as part of commemorating Beijing+30, USD 100 million was earmarked for China's Global Development and SSC Fund for development cooperation projects for women and girls in collaboration with international organizations. Apart from the pledged funding, there are (to my knowledge) no available data revealing how much China spends in the fields of gender equality and SRHR. However, it is safe to assume that China's ODA in these realms is dwarfed in comparison to investments made in infrastructure.

Similar to the national development agenda, China tends to reduce the meaning of “gender” to women and girls in SSC. Moreover, “gender equality” is confined to women and girls’ rights to education, health and livelihoods. Commemorating Beijing+20 in 2015, China pledged to build one hundred health initiatives for women and children, to send medical experts, and to implement ‘one hundred happy campus projects’ for schooling of poor girls in developing countries. As part of its SSC, China also committed to hosting training programmes for 30,000 women from developing countries and to provide 100,000 local training opportunities in developing countries.

Since 2018, China has implemented over 100 programmes on ‘women and children’ within its SSC, including the Seminar on Promoting Maternal and Child Health Under Global Development Initiative, and the Seminar on Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Developing Countries – Women and Children (State Council, 2025). Maternal health is a key focus area for Chinese aid, both in Asia and Africa (see Hu (2020) for details on specific countries).

Expanding the earlier focus on health and education, at Beijing+30 in 2025, China pledged to offer development assistance for 1,000 “small and beautiful” livelihood programmes with women and girls as main beneficiaries. It also committed to establish a Global Center for Women’s Capacity Building and to invite 50,000 women to China for exchange and training programmes. Evidently, these initiatives largely fall within education, health, and income generation, aligning with China’s national development agenda on gender equality.

Population and reproductive health – without rights?

Sexual and reproductive health and rights is not a distinct field in itself in Chinese development cooperation. Rather, China is more prone to talking about “population and reproductive health” with less focus on “sexual” and “rights”.

Apart from the support to maternal health within SSC, China has helped countries of the Global South with reproductive health

“commodity security” by donating medical equipment and supplies (Hu, 2020), including advanced male contraceptive technology (Gao and Xu, 2023). China has also donated medical supplies and equipment for maternal and child health. It also supplies contraceptives, such as Mifepristone, Misoprostol and Levoplant/Sino-implant (II), to other countries (Hu, 2020).

Beyond commodity security and maternal health, other core groups of concern for SRHR, including adolescents, the unmarried or LGTB+ population, male involvement and male responsibility in SRHR, and focus on SGBV are to my knowledge largely absent from development cooperation projects. In this regard, China's global development agenda represents a somewhat less ambitious agenda than the national one where China since the late 1990s has collaborated with the international development community to expand SRHR beyond married couples, although a bias in this regard still exists.

The close link between population and reproductive health is evident through training on population and reproductive health offered to policy makers, programme managers and service providers from other developing countries, as part of SSC (Hu, 2020). China has also developed and shared web-based population project software (Hu, 2020), to aid monitoring population targets. The intimate link between population issues and reproductive health was also a key message in the report South-South Cooperation in catalyzing achievement of ICPD and SDGs 2030 Agenda issued by Partners in Population and Development and UNFPA in 2019:

Governments and international organisations should consider making more commitment to SSC in field of population and development, particularly emerging issues of low fertility and ageing, youth development for harnessing the demographic dividend, SRH & FP [Sexual and Reproductive Health and Family Planning] services in hard-to-reach areas, humanitarian and conflict situation and big data utilisation (SSC, 2019: XVIII).

Seeing low fertility and ageing as emerging development issues is a view China subscribes to (Hu, 2020). Given how closely low fertility relates to gender and SRHR, this view is worth taking note of. Importantly, it risks reducing SRHR to instrumental goals, zooming in on macro goals at the population level without due attention to reproductive justice and reproductive agency, which includes the right to not have children (UNFPA, 2025).

Despite the principle of ‘mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs’, China occasionally takes a stance on reproductive rights to brand itself (mostly domestically) as an international champion of gender equality. In 2022, the Chinese foreign ministry’s then-spokesperson Zhao Lijian commented on the US Supreme Court’s decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* saying that “(t)he conditions of women’s rights in the U.S. indicates [sic] once again that the country is in no position to claim itself as a ‘human rights defender’” (Zhang, 2023: no page). In 2023, in the policy report “U.S. Hegemony and Its Perils,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticised the US decision in 2017 to withdraw funding for UNFPA on abortion-related grounds, stating that Washington “[puts] its domestic law above international law” (Zhang, 2023). Importantly, such statements did not translate into China advocating for abortion rights at the multilateral level, nor did they serve as a safeguard for abortion rights domestically, as discussed later. However, they do offer opportunities for pro-choice actors to consolidate advocacy agendas both globally and nationally.

Women, peace and security

While the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the doctrine of peaceful co-rise are not new (Liu, 2021), the central role of women for peace was first mentioned by a Chinese leader (President Xi) in 2015. As the second largest contributor to UN peacekeepers, China is positioning itself as a peace-loving and responsible member of the international community (Cai, 2021). In 2016, the United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund was established after the pledge by the Chinese government of USD 200 million for peace-keeping

and security activities. Even though China has not crafted its own National Action Plan to implement the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325)⁴, peace and security is a field in which China is eager to advance a gender perspective globally. China prides itself on women peacekeepers and women police officers, and a Chinese mine expert was rewarded the UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award in 2020 (State Council, 2025). By 2022, China initiated a training programme for 'senior female talents' to promote gender equality in high-level positions within UN peacekeeping operations.

China's approach to peacebuilding has been described as an agenda for 'developmental peace' or 'peace through development' (Jung, 2024), to be understood differently from liberal peace agendas, where democracy, rule of law and liberal market reforms are key. Developmental peace is characterised by a focus on development, SSC and a deliberate silence on the political. Questions of gender power relations which marginalise and render women vulnerable both in conflict and in peacebuilding are largely absent (Jung, 2024).

Though China has been criticised for not incorporating SGBV in its peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts, it is interesting to note that President Xi in his address at Beijing+30 in October 2025 stated that:

We need to enhance the protection of women and girls in regions struck by war, conflict, poverty or natural disaster, and support the vital role of women in preventing conflict and rebuilding their homes. We should improve mechanisms against violence and resolutely crack down on all forms of violence against women (Xi 2025, no page)

The increased attention to women, peace and security is an area where there is scope for China's global development agenda to influence the national agenda by providing arguments for China to de-

⁴ Such a National Action Plan is not compulsory but strongly recommended and a common praxis.

velop its own UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan, and possibly giving more attention to addressing SGBV, creating synergies between global and national levels.

The lack of a gender perspective

Despite a strong and clear rhetoric around gender equality and women's empowerment at the global level, gender is often a missing perspective when it comes to concrete programming, according to the few studies and reviews made (Cai, 2021, DAWN, 2024, Jung, 2024). China refrains from funding projects that can be seen as interfering with the principle of 'mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs'. This gives rise to a contradiction where China positions itself as a model for gender equality, but in practice does little to address gender inequalities. Because gender relations are seen as reflecting a country's cultural heritage, and gender issues are considered a national matter, China has not integrated gender in its foreign policy (Zhang and Huang, 2023). Reviewing China's role in various international fora, Cai (2021) finds that "gender equality and women's rights can be watered down or compromised as China negotiates instead for political and economic benefits and other priority issues" (Cai, 2021: 457). The stance of no interference means that China is reluctant to fund projects involving advocacy, for example against SGBV, considered to be related to the cultural fabric of a community or country.

A set of gender impact analyses of China's engagement in the Global South of projects in agriculture, infrastructure and mining commissioned by DAWN (2024) confirms that there is limited attention to gender. When women are positively affected, for example by gaining more access to employment opportunities, these seem to be unintentional.

Another line of critique is that Chinese firms create employment opportunities for women in sectors which are gender segregated, and where work is low skilled and low paid, potentially reinforcing women's subordinate role and strengthening gender power hierar-

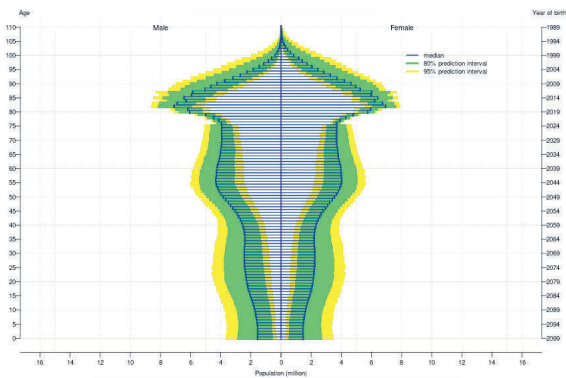
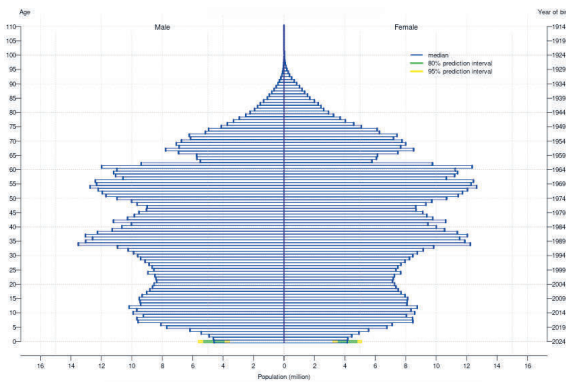
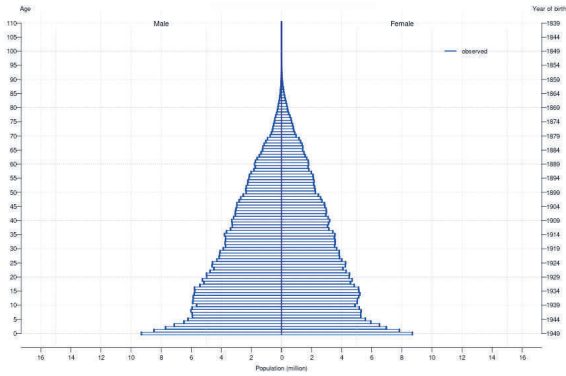
chies (Oya and Schaefer, 2021). Attention to gendered needs, such as the dual roles of women as carers and workers, is left unattended, and problematising women's care burden and the call for sharing household and care work is absent. There is a sentiment that China needs to translate its commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment into concrete action with procedures and guidelines that enable the involvement of women in planning, monitoring and evaluating development assistance projects.

All in all, China's principle of non-interference – together with the national gender equality agenda – sets the boundaries for how China prioritises its international development aid, centring social and economic development and rights, and decentring the political, including SGBV.

Gender and SRHR at a crossroad

Authoritarian forces are winning ground in many countries that have been known for protecting human rights, gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights. This is at least partly driven by concerns over low fertility rates. With population projections suggesting that China's population will halve in 75 years, China shares the ambition to increase its birth rate with many countries. This represents a remarkable shift, in a short time span, where China abandoned its antinatalist stance in favour of a pronatalist agenda with the two-child policy in 2016 and a three-child policy in 2021. Despite a modest increase in the birth rate after the introduction of the two-child policy, the birth rate has continued to fall, generating a skewed population pyramid, projected to become inverted by 2100 (See Figure 1–6).

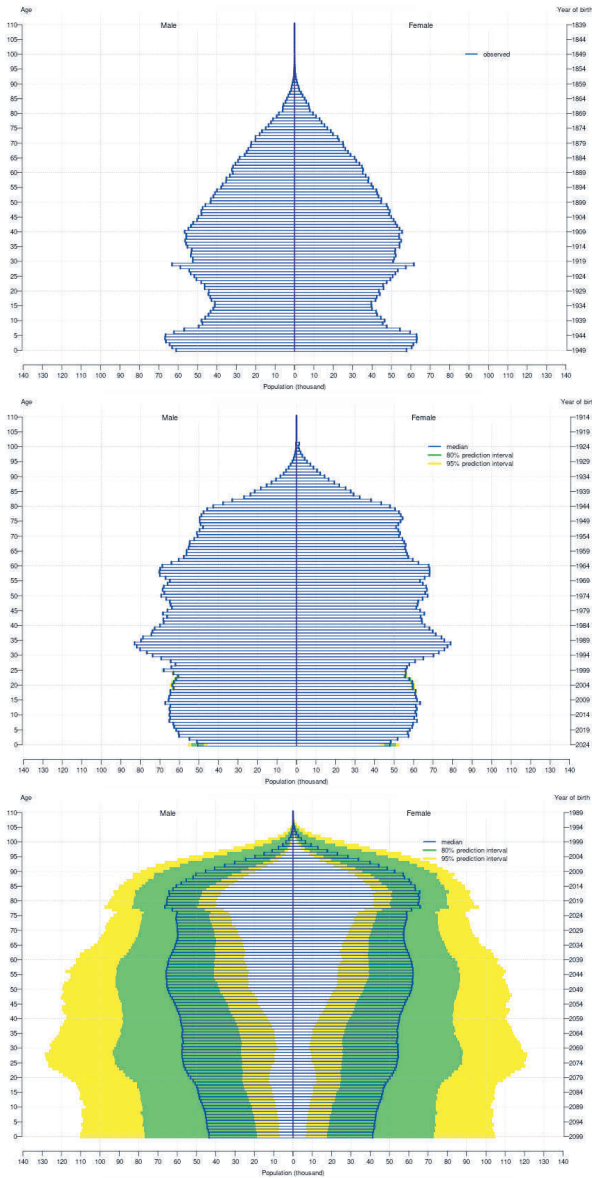
Figures 1–3. China’s population by age and sex in 1950, 2025 and 2100 (projected*)



* Green colour indicates 80% prediction interval. Yellow colour indicates 95% prediction interval.

Source: World Population Prospects 2024. United Nations, DESA, Population Division, Licensed under Creative Commonc license CC BY 3.0 IGO.

Figures 4–6. Sweden's population by age and sex in 1950, 2025 and 2100 (projected*)



* Green colour indicates 80% prediction interval. Yellow colour indicates 95% prediction interval.

Source: World Population Prospects 2024. United Nations, DESA, Population Division, Licensed under Creative Commons license CC BY 3.0 IGO.

To be able to address low fertility, will China move closer towards a woman-friendly welfare state where women's labour rights and reproductive rights are protected, and promote a dual-earner, dual-carer model? Or will China embark on a conservative route, limiting women's space in the public sphere and continue a path of "familialism" (Li and Eklund, 2022), where the family continues to constitute the basic unit of care across generations?

So far, the three-child policy is voluntary, and the government is promoting childbearing by trying to create a child-friendly society, expanding early childhood education etc. Other efforts include more generous parental leave, tax cuts and better work protection (Attané, 2026). In many ways, this strategy resembles the family policies that have evolved in Nordic welfare states, and which (at least until recently) have been associated with relatively high fertility rates.

However, as outlined in this chapter, women increasingly experience unequal opportunities at work in China and discrimination has increased since the three-child policy (Cai and Li, 2021; Attané, 2026). Even though equality between women and men is part of the Chinese constitution, and though gender equality is a recurring emphasis in speeches by President Xi, women's roles as wives and mothers are repeatedly emphasised. As an indication that such propaganda has effect, the last couple of years, marriage rates have gone up and divorce rates down, albeit without an impact on fertility rates (Attané, 2026). Moreover, an ageing population in combination with a familialistic welfare model and feminised care norms and practices further place old age care responsibilities disproportionately on middle-aged women, compromising their ability to combine family and work and reach senior management positions at work, perpetuating gender inequality.

Whether China will deepen its work to promote gender equality or continue to advocate for the traditional, Confucian family model is a big question that will impact not only gender equality and SRHR in China, but most likely also China's global ambitions.

In terms of SRHR, the strong emphasis on heteronormativity may loosen in light of the pronatalist agenda, which may result in the LGBTQ+ community having their SRHR expanded. Likewise, being a single parent may become easier for women. Recent amendments to The Law on the Protection of Women's Rights, which is decentering marital status to make for a more inclusive approach to reproductive rights, have been discerned, supporting this trend (Cai and Liu, 2024).

At the same time, pronatalist agendas may trigger a direction that curtails SRHR. Several recent developments point in this direction. In 2021, China declared that it wants to reduce the number of abortions for non-medical purposes (State Council, 2021) and some provinces are reducing the time during which abortion is available upon request by the pregnant woman (Purewal and Eklund, 2023). Moreover, in 2022, two abortion pills were banned from being sold online, and in 2023, a Chengdu court ruled that abortion without the husband's consent or 'legitimate reasons' constitutes a violation of men's reproduction rights (Zhang, 2023). As of 1 January 2026, the VAT exception on contraceptives was removed. These developments can be understood as part of the pronatalist agenda, compromising SRHR. The fact that China's abortion rate is relatively high might increase the risk of restricted abortion rights further to boost birth rates.

These different trends and scenarios indicate that China is at a crossroad with regards to gender and SRHR. The question is whether China will expand gender equality efforts and SRHR or curtail them. Here, the international development cooperation community has a role to play in engaging with China, both for the sake of promoting gender equality and SRHR within China, but also to ensure that the blueprint China represents and shares with other nations of the Global South is one that promotes gender equality and SRHR.

Implications for cooperation and global partnerships

This chapter has shed light on how China's national and global development agendas on gender and SRHR relate, calling for the need to understand national context to comprehend global ambitions. The analysis reveals several implications for the international development community.

China is proud of its history of the advancement of women and sees itself as a role model for gender equality and maternal and child health. However, China typically does not refer to unequal power relations between women and men and structural gender inequalities when talking about gender (in)equality and reproductive rights.

There are contradictions in China's national and global development agendas rooted in tensions between instrumental vs intrinsic values and social and economic rights vs civic and political rights. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that also a country like Sweden sees gender equality as having an instrumental value.

The political landscape in China is constantly changing. How notions of gender equality, reproductive rights and the role of civil society keep shifting over time. Therefore, dialogue and positive engagement matters. As an authoritarian country, civil society is limited but not non-existing. Chinese non-state actors are important to consider as partners in development.

Inconsistencies between the national and global agendas offer room for synergies. There are instances where the national agenda reaches further than the global one, including expanding SRHR beyond maternal and child health, and addressing SGBV through legislation and awareness-raising. Likewise, China's global engagement involves commitments that can fuel national development trajectories, such as further deepening the work against SGBV through UNSCR 1325 and implementing BPfA more fully.

Due to China's pronatalist agenda, gender and SRHR are at a cross-road. How this plays out will impact not only China's national tra-

jectory, but its global engagement, and the future global agenda on gender and SRHR more broadly. Therefore, collaborating with China and engaging in dialogues is as important as ever. More concretely, there is scope for cooperation and partnerships on gender and SRHR within SSC, through UN Women and UNFPA and in the context of Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

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