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## Women in China's Leadership

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### Key Findings

- According to China's National Bureau of Statistics data from 2022, China's population comprises approximately 689.69 million females and 722.06 million males.<sup>1</sup> Although women represent roughly 48.9 percent of the population, they occupy less than 8 percent of senior leadership positions.\*
- Leadership turnover following the 20th Party Congress in October 2022 resulted in no women in the Politburo for the first time in 25 years.<sup>2</sup>
- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership has a stated commitment to equal opportunity but has recently shifted rhetorical focus toward traditional gender norms.<sup>3</sup>
- The absence of women in Party leadership parallels low female representation within the group of Chinese nationals holding leadership positions in international organizations. Of the 39 Chinese nationals serving in top leadership positions in key international organizations, only eight are women.<sup>4</sup> (For more on Chinese leadership in international organizations, see "[PRC Representation in International Organizations](#).")

### Women in China's Party, State, and Military

Women make up almost half of China's 1.4 billion population.<sup>5</sup> Of the approximately 98 million CCP members, there are about 29 million women, or roughly 30 percent of the CCP's total.<sup>6</sup> Women have limited representation and voice across the top echelons of China's political system:<sup>7</sup>

- *Chinese Communist Party*: No woman has ever served on the Politburo Standing Committee or held any of the top three positions in China's political system: CCP general secretary, chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), and state president. Only six women have ever served in the 25-member Politburo, three of whom were wives of other top leaders.<sup>8</sup> Following the leadership turnover at the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, there were no female leaders on the Politburo for the first time in 25 years.<sup>9</sup>

\* "Senior leadership" of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is defined in this report as the CCP Central Committee (including the general secretary, other Politburo Standing Committee members, other Politburo members, and other members and alternate members of the Central Committee). "Senior leadership" of the state is defined in this report as the state president, the State Council leadership (including the premier, vice premiers, other state councilors, and the secretary general), and ministers. "Senior leadership" of the military is defined in this report as the Central Military Commission (CMC) (including the CMC chairman, CMC vice chairmen, and other CMC members), plus the heads of the CMC's 15 major subordinate organizations.

Historically, female representatives have rarely constituted more than 10 percent of the roughly 300-member CCP Central Committee.<sup>10</sup>

- *National Government and Provinces:* Female representation is also extremely low in key government roles such as ministries and in provincial leadership; currently, there are no women serving among the 31 provincial-level Party secretaries, and only two out of the 31 governors.<sup>11</sup>
- *Military:* According to 2020 data from China’s National Bureau of Statistics, women make up approximately 4 percent of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) servicemembers.<sup>12</sup> Currently, no women hold senior command or political commissar positions.<sup>13</sup> The highest rank a woman in the PLA has ever achieved is lieutenant general, with one woman promoted to lieutenant general in 1993 and a second in 2010.\*<sup>14</sup>

People’s Republic of China (PRC) law on the protection of women’s rights states that “women shall enjoy equal rights with men in all aspects of political ... life.”<sup>15</sup> China has also espoused a commitment to “strengthen[ing] the work of training and selecting women cadres” and instituted quotas for female representation in certain positions in the CCP.<sup>16</sup> Women remain a minority of recruits entering the Party, and there is currently no program aimed at increasing their rate of promotion at the national level.<sup>17</sup> Some analysts believe that the tendency of women cadres to work in “soft” policy areas like education and healthcare, as well as their earlier retirement age, are hurdles to promotion.<sup>18</sup> The Chinese government appears to be shifting its focus toward encouraging childbearing rather than increasing equality in the workforce.<sup>19</sup>

## Female Representation in China’s Leadership Positions

**Table 1: Female Representation in Chinese Communist Party Leadership**

Leadership Position	Total Positions	Positions Held by Women	Approximate Percentage
Politburo Standing Committee	7	0	-
Politburo	24	0	-
Central Committee	376	33	9%
▪ <i>Full Members</i>	205	11	5%
▪ <i>Alternate Members</i>	171	22	13%
Central Military Commission	7	0	-
Central Commission for Discipline Inspection	133	9	7%
Provincial-Level Party Secretaries	31	0	-

\* Xu Lili, who was promoted to the rank of vice admiral (lieutenant general in the PLA Navy) at the Deputy Theater grade in 2010, was only the second female officer to achieve the rank of lieutenant general across all services of the PLA. Nie Li, daughter of Marshal Nie Rongzhen, attained the rank of lieutenant general in 1993. United States Department of Defense. United States Department of Defense. Defense Intelligence Agency. Directory of PRC Military Personalities. Washington DC, 2022; All China Women’s Federation, “The First Female Admiral of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy – Xu Lili” (中国人民解放军海军第一位女将军——徐莉莉), August 29, 2019. Translation. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220325160837/http://cnwomen.com.cn/2019/08/29/99170465.html>; *Motherland*, “Nie Li, China’s First Female Lieutenant General” (聂力：中国第一位女中将), August 2, 2018. Translation. <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:TQ3u7e1Swq4J:https://www.zgzs.com.cn/index.php/Article/detail/id/21555.html+%&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>; Elsa Kania, “Holding Up Half the Sky? (Party 1)—The Evolution of Women’s Roles in the PLA,” *China Brief*, October 4, 2016. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/57f4ef2e4.html>.

National Party Congress (20th)*	2,296	619	27%
Chinese Communist Party	~98 million	~29 million	30%

Note: “Politburo Standing Committee” includes the general secretary and six other Politburo Standing Committee members. “Provincial-Level” administrative units of the PRC include 22 provinces, five autonomous regions, and four directly administered municipalities (e.g., Tianjin).

Source: Various.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 2: Female Representation in Government Leadership**

Leadership Position	Total Positions	Positions Held by Women	Approximate Percentage
State President	1	0	-
State Council Leaders	11	1	9%
Ministers	26	2	8%
Provincial-Level Governors	31	2	6%
National People’s Congress (NPC)	2,977	790	27%
▪ NPC Chairman	1	0	-
▪ NPC Vice Chairmen	14	1	7%
▪ NPC Standing Committee	175	23	13%
Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)	2,172	487	22%
▪ CPPCC Chairman	1	0	-
▪ CPPCC Vice Chairmen	23	4	17%
▪ CPPCC Standing Committee	299	48	16%
Supreme People’s Court	12	3	25%

Note: “State Council Leaders” includes the premier, four vice premiers, five state councilors, and the secretary general (who is also a state councilor). “Provincial-Level” administrative units of the PRC include 22 provinces, five autonomous regions, and four directly administered municipalities (e.g., Tianjin). Position totals for “State Council Leaders” and “Ministers” reflect the number of positions originally filled at the 14th National People’s Congress in March 2023. †

Source: Various.<sup>21</sup>

\* Delegates to the CCP’s National Party Congress are voting members who are tasked with selecting the membership of the CCP Central Committee once every five years. The numbers provided represent delegates to the 20th National Party Congress, which convened in 2022 to select the current 20th Central Committee. James Gethyn Evans and Yuanzhuo Wang, “Infographic: China’s New Leaders after the 20th Party Congress,” *Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies*, November 6, 2022. <https://fairbank.fas.harvard.edu/research/blog/infographic-chinas-new-leaders-after-the-20th-party-congress/>; Yu Jie, “A Guide to the Chinese Communist Party’s National Congress,” *Chatham House*, September 2, 2022. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2022-08/guide-chinese-communist-partys-national-congress>.

† Five state councilors were selected at the National People’s Congress in March 2023. In October 2023, two of the five were removed from their posts on the State Council: General Li Shangfu, who had also been selected as the minister of national defense, and Qin Gang, who had also been selected as the minister of foreign affairs. At the time of writing, Qin Gang’s predecessor and the current Director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Wang Yi has been reappointed as minister of foreign affairs to replace Qin Gang, the position of minister of national defense remains vacant, and China’s government lists only three state councilors rather than five. For more on the removal of these and other high-ranking officials in 2023, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 1, Section 2: “U.S.-China Security and Foreign Affairs,” in *2023 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2023. *China Daily*, “State Councilors Removed from Posts,” October 24, 2023. <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:a59z8RSVA4cJ:https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202310/24/WS6537ae65a31090682a5ea76b.html&hl=en&gl=us>; Yew Lun Tian and Zhiyi Tang, “China’s New Line-Up of Top Government Leaders,” *Reuters*, March 11, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-new-line-up-top-government-leaders-2023-03-12/>; *People’s Daily*, “China’s Important Leaders: State Council” (中国政要：国务院), 2023. Translation. <https://web.archive.org/web/20231121132844/http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/394696/index.html>; People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China, *State Council Organizational Structure* (国务院组织机构), 2023. Translation. <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:ZifqVG28-JYJ:https://www.gov.cn/gwyzjg/zuzhi/&hl=en&gl=us>.

**Table 3: Female Representation in Military Leadership**

Leadership Position	Total Positions	Positions Held by Women	Approximate Percentage
Central Military Commission (CMC)			
▪ Members	7	0	-
▪ Heads of major offices, departments, commissions, bureaus, and agencies of the CMC*†	15	0	-
Theater Commands			-
▪ Leaders	5	0	-
▪ Political Commissars	5	0	-
▪ Chiefs of Staff‡	5	0	-
People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Service Branches			
▪ Commanders	5	0	-
▪ Political Commissars	5	0	-

Note: “Central Military Commission” includes the CMC chairman, two CMC vice chairmen, and four other CMC members.  
Source: Various.<sup>22</sup>

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\* The CMC has 15 major subordinate organizations, which replaced the previous four general departments as part of the ongoing PLA reforms in 2016. They include the General Office, Joint Staff Department, Political Work Department, Logistics Support Department, Equipment Development Department, Training Management Department, National Defense Mobilization Department, Discipline Inspection Commission, Political and Legal Affairs Commission, Science and Technology Commission, Strategic Planning Office, Reform and Organization Office, International Military Cooperation Office, Audit Bureau, and Organ Affairs General Management Bureau. Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, “Introduction,” in Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, National Defense University, February 22, 2019, 6–7.

† Data presented is from 2022, the most recent year for which it could be consistently verified.

‡ Data presented is from 2022, the most recent year for which it could be consistently verified.

## Endnotes

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