




Women Leaders in the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Sector

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Although women face many common challenges and barriers to leadership positions globally, China presents a distinct case. Chinese women are significantly underrepresented in leadership positions (World Economic Forum, 2021). The reasons for the gap between men and women in leadership include cultural impact, discrimination policies, and the difficulties of feminism development in China (Adnane, 2012; Sun, 2017; Zhao & Jones, 2017). Since the Han Dynasty (B.C. 207–A.D. 202), social and official ideology was influenced by Confucianism, which is said to have attributed to the subordination of women (Mak, 2013). Traditionally, under this regime, a woman was required to obey her father

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before marriage, her husband during married life, and her sons in widowhood (Cheng, 2008). Therefore, with the historical and cultural impacts, leadership is viewed as male-gendered while the idealized image of women is caring and assisting men (Zhao & Jones, 2017).

According to the current retirement policy, there is a gap in the mandatory retirement age between males and females in public service (Sun, 2017). For public servants, including those at state-owned enterprises, men are required to retire at the age of 60, while women retire at 50 (for female workers) or 55 (for female cadres). Therefore, women have shorter life at work to achieve leadership positions compared to men. Moreover, young women are usually considered inexperienced and unprepared for leadership roles, while middle-aged women are perceived as “tied down by family demands” (Tsang et al., 2011, p. 315). The age of Chinese women is used as a reason to obstruct them from achieving leadership positions (Tsang et al., 2011).

Chinese women’s leadership development is also influenced by feminist development. The goal of post-2000 feminism is to “change perceptions, create public attention, and put pressure on government policies using the leverage of public attention” (Wang, 2018, p. 13). However, the current status of feminism in China reflects “its precariousness as a school of thought, and activist practice, and a topic of study” (Liao, 2020, p. 259). The mere concept of feminism is not supported by the mainstream in China (Sun, 2017).

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter focuses on exploring women leaders in Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to contribute to the research of Chinese women in leadership. While a growing body of work is building around women’s leadership development, there are still many questions that need to be addressed (Jennings, 2018). Women are still underrepresented in both the public and private sectors globally. Although a few studies have been conducted regarding women’s leadership development in China, there is very limited research focused on the NGO sector, and knowledge of women’s roles in NGOs is scarce in China. It is important to understand the factors that influence women leaders’ success in Chinese NGOs and highlight their roles. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to provide a comprehensive understanding of NGO women leaders’ lived experiences in China. In the following sections, we discuss (1) gender

issues in Chinese NGOs, (2) women leadership and women NGOs development, and (3) women leaders' experience in Chinese NGOs. At the end of this chapter, we provide recommendations for practice, policymakers, and future research to enhance women's leadership development in the NGOs sector in China.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CHINESE NGOS

In the Chinese context, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operate within restricted political environments (Lu et al., 2021). The NGOs cover areas of education, poverty alleviation, community development, environment, and health (Corsetti, 2019). The term NGO was introduced to China when Beijing was preparing to host the United Nations' 4th World Congress on Women in 1995 (Hsiung, 2021). And, research on NGOs in China has examined their development in the context of state and civil society. There are various definitions and categories of the term "NGO." For example, He and Wang (2008) stated that the Domestic Chinese NGOs were developed into four categories: mass organizations, quasi-governmental organizations, registered groups, and grassroots social groups. China's mass organizations were established by the "incumbent regime...to augment [its] control over the rest of society" (Kasza, 1995, p. 8); "execute the various policies and orders of the [Communist Party of China (CPC) and the state]"; and "understand and collect the opinions, perspectives and interests of the masses" (He & Wang, 2008, p. 135). Both mass organizations and quasi-governmental organizations have Communist affiliations. Quasi-governmental organizations are started by the Chinese government and have more limited political autonomy than mass organizations while assisting relevant government agencies. Registered groups include social groups, non-state non-commercial groups, and foundations. The majority of these registered groups were found and limited in daily operations by government or CPC agencies. Grassroots social groups were created by individuals, also including state officials who fund their own NGOs and operate the organizations by using power but not be influenced by the state.

More recently, Lu and Li (2020) noted that there are two types of NGOs in China: civic NGOs and government-organized NGOs. While Chinese civic NGOs are initiated by private citizens, which are similar to

western NGOs, government-organized NGOs are funded by the government and assist relevant government agencies in daily operations (Lu & Li, 2020). Civic NGOs are allowed to fulfill social welfare needs (Hsu & Hasmath, 2014). For example, they utilize local knowledge to identify and flexibly implement sources provided by the government to meet the community's needs (Xu et al., 2018). Also, civic NGOs provide programs that focus on building community capacity and individuals' confidence to improve their lives sustainably (Lu & Li, 2020). However, there is limited space for civic NGOs in China because of China's authoritarian political structure. Civic NGOs are limited in their advocacy, which could be seen as a challenge to government policies and result in political risks (Hsu & Hasmath, 2014; Li et al., 2017). For example, the NGOs work on the frontline with communities and advocate on behalf of the communities to represent their rights and opinions, so they work with the government to provide equitable social services and help the communities comprehend government policies (Lu & Li, 2020).

It is difficult to find the total number of domestic NGOs in Mainland China because of the various definitions of the term NGO in China. Previous scholars or observers tend to estimate the numbers of NGOs in China based on the number of "social organizations" that have officially registered with the country's Civil Affairs (Corsetti, 2019). According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2020), by the end of 2019, there were over 860,000 registered social organizations. However, there are more non-registered NGOs. Chinese NGOs were born, socialized, and evolved in an authoritarian institutional environment with tight government supervision and limitations (Hasmath, 2016). It is difficult to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs for many Chinese grassroots NGOs because of burdensome requirements, such as the need to find a government sponsor.

In the early years of NGO development in China, many organizations depended on universities and colleges to survive because they provided both a legal, organizational form and a talent pool (Cao, 2016). Then, in order to control the NGOs, the Chinese government requested all Chinese NGOs to register with the government to meet the legal requirement (Tai, 2015). The Civil Affairs agencies take responsibility for registering and managing NGOs, and they are legally empowered to evaluate and make decisions for denying or accepting the applications for registration. Also, they tend to create and support NGOs that are more controllable, while they limit the political influence of NGOs and take

precautions to manage less trustworthy NGOs (Cai, 2017). Moreover, the government controls the NGOs through the management of sources of funding. Therefore, NGOs have to develop good relations with the government to ensure both the operations and financial support sustainably. In 2016, China implemented a new Charity Law, which changed the ways domestic charitable organizations can register and fundraise (China File, 2017). Then, the government took a more cautious approach to manage overseas NGOs operated in China through implementing a new law, “Management of Foreign Non-Government Organizations Activities in China,” in 2017 (Corsetti, 2019). All foreign NGOs must find approved Chinese sponsors and register with public security bureaus for authorization to conduct their activities. About 10,000 overseas NGOs in China were impacted by the new law because it is hard for them to find government agencies or public institutions as their sponsors due to the political responsibilities involved (Cai, 2017).

China’s government, as a one-party authoritarian regime, dominates the development of the NGO sector. The government recognizes that the contributing role of NGOs in social governance, as well as understand that NGOs have help to reduce the state’s burden of social service provision and address a variety of issues (e.g., poverty, public health, environmental protection, rural development, education, children, women, legal aid, community issues, migrant workers, and disaster relief) arising from the fast-socio-economic changes in China (Cai, 2017). Therefore, the government becomes tolerant of NGOs, which leads to their proliferation. As a result, the number of registered NGOs has increased from just over 4000 in 1988 (Fang, 2019), around 200 times. However, the central government still has a concern about the potential political threat arising from NGOs independent of the state’s control, while the local government is worried about the political responsibilities related to the management of NGOs (Cai, 2017). Currently, the development of NGOs is still at a very young age and has a unique path in the Chinese context.

GENDER ISSUES IN NGOS

In 1976, Xiaoping Deng launched the “open-door” and reform policies. Chinese economics has transitioned “from a centrally planned economy based mainly on import substitution to a guided market economy open to foreign investment in the late 1970s” (Frenkel & Kuruvilla, 2002, p. 398). It brought many benefits and opportunities to Chinese women in the

labor force (Edwards, 2000). However, at the same time, women also faced many problems in society. By 2021, according to World Economic Forum (2021):

Ranking 107th overall, China has closed 68.2% of its gender gap to date, improving by 0.6 percentage points over last year's edition. This progress can be attributed to improving its Economic Participation and Opportunity pillar, where the gap has been closed by five percentage points this year, passing the 70% milestone (70.1%, 69th globally). Notably, wage and income gaps between women and men have been reduced: 80.6% of the wage gap and 61.2% of the income gaps are now closed. However, large gaps remain in terms of labor force participation (82.9% closed so far) as well as in terms of senior roles, where only 11.4% of board members are women, and 16.7% of senior managers are women, corresponding to a gender gap of 80%. The limited presence of women in leadership positions is also reflected in large Political Empowerment gaps. Only 11.8% of this gap has closed so far, ranking China 118th globally. Only 24.9% of parliamentarians and 3.2% of ministers are women, and a woman has been in a head-of-state position for less than one year in the past 50. (p. 36)

Women in NGOs in China are highly represented as employees, but there are fewer women than men in leadership positions (IFeng News, 2018). Women continue to experience gender discrimination, stereotyping, and lack of leadership development in NGOs in China. In the Chinese context, women are forced to take more family caring responsibilities than men, which is a barrier to women's career development (IFeng News, 2018). However, men are expected to support their families financially, so men are preferred to have more opportunities for promotion and increased salaries. Yang (2015) investigated 37 NGOs in China and indicated that 25 (67.5%) of the 37 NGOs had women employees. In the results, six of 37 NGOs reported that they prefer to hire male applicants when both male and female applicants have the same qualities in recruitment advertisements. They provided reasons, such as the position requires employees to travel or heavy labor; women employees' work may be influenced by absence during childbirth or taking responsibilities for their family; the position requires employees to network with other male leaders. Women are perceived to be deficient in leadership and managerial characteristics, which are the qualities required for success in upper-level positions in Asian culture (Chao & Ha, 2019). There is a huge need

for gender equality education in the workplace of NGOs (IFeng News, 2018). Also, there is a lack of empirical research to investigate the gender issues in NGOs.

WOMEN LEADERSHIP AND NGOS DEVELOPMENT

In NGOs, women volunteers, employees, and leaders make important contributions. Empowering more women and providing them with equal resources and opportunities can attract more women to participate in and donate to NGOs, as well as make the organizations more professional, diverse, and sustainable (Shanxi Association of Women Marriage and Family Studies, 2015). It is no secret that there is a lack of gender diversity in leadership within Chinese NGOs, and there are still a lot of challenges and barriers for Chinese women in the NGOs to overcome. However, in some NGOs, Chinese women are breaking barriers and leading with innovative ideas regarding the lives of Chinese people while they are achieving their own career success. Many Chinese women are doing remarkable work in NGOs, from youth leadership development to women's empowerment.

The founders of many NGOs that support women and children are women in China. Chinese women participate in NGOs and even establish NGOs because of their experiences in daily life (Shen, 2019). They want to help others with the same problems while they overcome their personal difficulties. For example, the founder of an NGO, Angel House, Wang Fang, is a mother of a child with cerebral palsy, and the experience of supporting her child inspired her to create this NGO (Wang, 2014). Angel House was established in 2002 and provides rehabilitation therapy and online consulting service to help cerebral palsy children recover (Angel House, 2018a). Also, they provide career counseling and vocational training to youths with disabilities (Angel House, 2018b). Fang Wang has become the most influential leader in this field. In 2019, Angel House helped 145 children or youths who had cerebral palsy (Angel House, 2020).

Tian Huiping is another mother who decided to participate in the NGO sector because of her child. In 1993, she founded Beijing Stars and Rain, which is China's first educational NGO to serve children with autism (Xin, n.d.). The organization is dedicated to helping children with autism by providing special education. It offers education programs to

both children and parents to understand autism and increase the professional treatment of autism. Specifically, Tian led Stars and Rain to focus on the therapy of Applied Behavior Analysis and provide training about this therapy so parents can then continue working with their children more effectively. In February 2010, Tian joined the board and became its president, and she kept in constant communication with the council members.

Although open-door and reform policies brought many benefits and opportunities to Chinese women, they still have many barriers in the workplace and life. Under this context, in 1988, Wang Xingjuan established China's first women's studies NGO, which is the predecessor of the Beijing Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center, Beijing (Guo, 2015). In past years, Wang has devoted her life to the center that focuses on helping disadvantaged women and children to care for their physical and psychological health by providing psychological consultations and other social services. Her work has contributed to protecting human rights, promoting gender equality, strengthening democracy, increasing economic opportunities, and making a difference for thousands of Chinese women's lives.

Gao Xiaoxian is another outstanding woman who worked on women's issues following the economic reform in China. In the 1980s, she established the Shaanxi Research Association of Marriage and Family (Hsiung, 2021). Gao is a pioneer who studied the issues of women's unemployment, being laid off, employment discrimination, and women's poverty in rural areas. In addition, she produced seminars on the law of protecting women's rights. Therefore, she led the organization to promote research on women's theories and enlightened a group of women to enhance their gender awareness.

Since the 1980s, rural women have also been influenced by China's economic reform, and more and more rural women became workers in urban areas (Hsiung, 2021). Xie Lihua established the Rural Women magazine and a comprehensive NGO, the Home for Women Migrant Workers and School for Rural Women, which focuses on rural women's issues (Tai, 2015). Xie led the organization to promote and protect "the interests and rights of women in China's rural areas, which has included helping female migrant workers in urban areas to acquire the necessary skills and awareness to transition successfully to urban life" (Tai, 2015, p. 33). Several programs were developed to teach illiterate women to read and reduce their suicide rates. In 2001, Xie established the Cultural

and Development Center for Rural Women, a Beijing-based organization committed to the development of Chinese women.

Guo Jianmei was the first public interest lawyer working full-time in legal aid to assist thousands of disadvantaged women in getting access to justice in China (Right Livelihood, 2019). She and several faculty members from Peking University founded the Center for Women's Law Studies and Services of Peking University that was the predecessor of Beijing Zhongze Women's Legal Counseling Service Center (Cao, 2016). Also, she has founded and directed several other organizations for the protection of women's rights. Since 1995, she and her teams have offered free legal counseling to over 120,000 women and have been involved in over 4000 lawsuits to enforce women's rights and advance gender equality all over China (Right Livelihood, 2019). She consistently addressed gender bias in the justice system and helped raise gender awareness in China. She led her teams to guide women through lawsuits and carries out legal advocacy at a national level on issues like unequal pay, sexual harassment, women's land rights in rural China, work contracts that prohibit pregnancies, and forced early retirement without compensation.

Women are not only leading women's NGOs but are also making significant contributions to other fields in the NGO sector. Liao Xiao founded the Global Village of Beijing (GVB), which became China's first environmental protection NGO (Zhou, 2010). In past years, Liao traveled to many places to present her studies to increase public and government awareness of environmental protection. To advocate for an eco-friendly lifestyle, she led GVB to issue two guidebooks for the public. In addition, she created models for green neighborhood complexes and rural communities, as well as organized many social movements regarding pollution, recycling, and consumption reduction. In 2008, she also led her team to Sichuan Province, which was destroyed by a strong earthquake, to help with reconstruction efforts.

Zhang Ying founded China's first anti-AIDS NGO, Fuyang AIDS Orphan Salvation Association, in 2003 (Xu, 2010). Zhang led the organization to help Chinese children who are infected with HIV as well as poverty-stricken children without HIV but who have family members who died from AIDS. She worked closely with these children and provided financial support for their lives and education.

Yang Xueqin worked as a teacher at the program "Teach for China" in Yunnan from 2012 to 2014, and she witnessed the lack of vocational and

career education resources for students in rural areas (China Development Brief, 2018). Therefore, she established Shenzhen Tomorrow Education and Public Welfare Development Centre in 2016. While the organization still faces many challenges as an online platform, the aim of this organization is to provide 40 million rural middle-school students and 30 million urban middle-school students with career development education through online courses and learning. Yang wants to find a more sustainable way to provide free career development education for students in rural areas through exploring revenue options for businesses.

Wang Juan established iHEARu Charity Fund in 2016. She and her team provide professional support to hearing-impaired children. By 2021 April, the organization had provided financial aids to 19,000 hearing-impaired children and families. Among them, 1758 hearing-impaired children and adolescents were implanted with cochlear implants, and 3393 hearing-impaired children were funded for rehabilitation training (iHEARu Charity Fund, n.d.). Also, the organization provided training to 1673 parents of hearing-impaired children. More than 1000 volunteers (including voluntary organizations and individuals) participated in the training, visits, and charity activities supported by iHEARu Charity Fund.

WOMEN LEADERS' EXPERIENCE IN NGOS

There is a gap in the literature focused on women leaders' experiences and perceptions regarding the challenges faced and support received for their leadership development. Therefore, the authors conducted in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with six NGO women leaders to understand their experience of being women leaders in NGOs in China. A purposeful sampling strategy was utilized to recruit potential participants on the research topic and the availability of resources. To ensure diverse samples, we recruited women leaders in different types of NGOs (e.g., grassroots NGOs, International NGOs, and Foundations). Their work has made significant contributions to gender equity, human rights, health, environment protection, etc. The selection criteria for participants included: (1) worked or have worked in a leadership position in an NGO in China, (2) being a woman, and (3) willing to share their experiences and perceptions of the challenges they faced and support they received for their leadership development. We contacted participants who met the selection criteria through personal connections via WeChat in China. A

snowball approach was then used to recruit additional potential participants. Six NGO women leaders participated in the interviews online during June and July 2021. The age of participants ranged from 29 to 51. The major interview questions were:

1. What challenges have you faced as a leader?
2. How have you addressed these challenges?
3. What support have you received for leadership development?

All participants were provided the informed consent request form prior to the interview, and they gave their permission to audio record the conversations. Each interview was conducted in Mandarin Chinese and lasted approximately 1 h. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized before data analysis. The Mandarin Chinese transcripts were translated into English for data analysis. To decrease translation bias, the researcher used the translation-back-translation approach. A thematic approach was applied for data analysis. The authors used *Nvivo* 12 to code the interview transcripts. The findings are presented as themes that were generated in the following sections. These include *gender impact, support, and strategies for leadership development*, and *women leaders' efforts on gender equity and equality*.

Gender Impact

During the interviews, these leaders talked about the impact of gender in their work and leadership development. Different views were reported by the women leaders. They seem to oscillate from negating and to admitting the gender impact. For example, NGO04, 32 years old, has worked in the NGOs sector for four years. Currently, she is the Secretary-General in an Environmental Protection NGO. She said that “to be honest, I rarely see gender discrimination in NGO sectors...Maybe the reason is that my organization emphasizes the value of gender equality, so no one practices gender discrimination” (NGO04). Also, another women leader, NGO06, 30 years old, established an NGO that provides psychological healing and community support to women with disabilities in 2019. She said that “I do not believe gender is a big issue to influence my work. I think the personality or resources are more important to my work. Also, maybe the disability is another bigger problem than gender for

me” (NGO06). However, some of them then contradicted themselves by sharing examples of issues regarding gender discrimination in NGO sectors.

Gender Discrimination

Most of the women leaders shared their experiences of gender discrimination in NGO sectors. They experienced issues of gender stereotyping, unequal pay, poor working conditions, fewer opportunities, lookism, and childbirth responsibilities. For example, NGO01, 38 years old with 11 years experience in NGOs, the founder of an NGO that assists sexual minority women, said:

In fact, most of the practitioners in NGOs in China are women, but the leaders are men. Why are most of the practitioners women? Because the income in this industry is low, and social workers are viewed as a female-type occupation. However, the leaders in these social organizations are men because the position of the person in charge actually has power, including higher salaries. (NGO01)

NGO02, 36 years old with seven years of work experience in NGOs, is the founder of an NGO working on quality education issues among ethnic minority adolescents. She also explained:

The pay and compensations are very low in our grassroots NGO. The work condition is not good. We work in rural areas. In Chinese society, men are expected to provide financial support to their families. Our NGO position is not attractive to young men or graduates because of the low pay and poor work condition in the rural area. This is not a competitive occupation. Also, this job does not have high social status. However, if you work in Foundations, there will be good pay and compensation. Foundations could provide better opportunities. And men are more likely to work in Foundations compared to the grassroots NGOs like ours. (NGO02)

And NGO05, 29 years old, with three years of work experience in NGOs, works in the NGO to address the issues regarding business and human rights area. She explained:

When I went to a meeting with my male assistant, others think my assistant is the leader or the person they should communicate with rather than me

because he is a male...Also, in some public speaking, most speakers are males. (NGO05)

Unequal pay between genders is another issue to show gender discrimination exists in NGOs. NGO03, 51 years old, has worked in NGOs for 13 years. She was the office head of an NGO for addressing gender issues. Her current position is the program policy officer in an international organization addressing agriculture issues. She said:

I experienced a problem that men and women are not given equal pay for equal work in my previous organization. I was in the same position as a male colleague. I found his salary was higher than mine, and it is not based on work abilities or work performance...Therefore, I reported this problem to HR. Then, they increased my salary, but it was still lower than the male colleague. (NGO03)

Besides less pay, women leaders also experienced fewer opportunities. For example, NGO01 said:

There was a one-year leadership development program. There were eight participants only including two females. In another leadership development program for sexual minorities, all of the participants were males in the very beginning. Latterly, there were not enough male applicants, and then they accept female applicants to participate in the program...One year, someone said it is not fair to women, then the program intentionally recruited female applicants...I think maybe there are two reasons. One reason is that there were fewer lesbian NGOs, fewer women might apply for the program. The other reason is that the leaders of the leadership development program were all men at the time, so women were not paid much attention to in leadership training. (NGO01)

Furthermore, women experienced gender-based lookism, which is physical appearance discrimination. Youthful looks are a negative factor for women leaders in the workplace.

Women's physical appearance is more likely to be judged. The problem exists not just in the NGOs sector but also in other industries...I am not tall. Although I am 37 years old, my face looks younger than my age, so my appearance is a problem at work. People think I am too young to carry out the project well, and they do not trust I have sufficient management capabilities. (NGO02)

Marriage and childbirth responsibilities are other barriers to women's career development. Women are discriminated against based on their marital status and childbearing potential.

In some NGOs, male leaders worry about women's marriage and childbirth. After a woman gives birth and takes her maternity leave, she will be dismissed or assigned to another position with lower pay but less workload. They think taking care of a baby will decrease job performance. For some grassroots NGOs, they do not have enough money to guarantee women's rights and benefits...However, I think society should take the responsibility and work with the organizations together to address the problem. (NGO06)

Work Context

It is important to understand work contextual factors when discussing gender issues in NGOs sections. Women leaders feel more challenges when they work in a male-dominated environment.

Our organization actually has to work with foundations and the government. Most of the heads of foundations or the government are mainly men. No matter what, you are naturally separated from them. For example, there is a grant United Nations agency, and the project officer is a male. If a man deals with him, it will definitely be easier. If a woman deals with him, he prefers to give the funding to the male.... Therefore, there are fewer women in the decision-making level positions, so there are actually restrictions for female practitioners in NGOs, and sometimes they are excluded. (NGO01)

And

I attended a conference a few days ago, and the challenge is very obvious. It is more like a middle-aged man who is a leader of an NGO in some fields or topics. At the conference, they call me a "young girl". It is very unprofessional. (NGO05)

And

In women NGOs, there are more women leaders. In fact, I haven't seen a male leader in the women NGOs. However, in the organizations in which I worked previously if they are not in the women issues field, then the

leaders are all males...However, in my current organization, I am the only female who works as a senior professional. (NGO03)

Support and Strategies for Leadership Development

All these women leaders shared their experience and perceptions of seeking support and strategies for their career success and leadership development.

Role Model

The women used role models in their workplaces as their emotional and professional support.

It is important to have women role models in the NGOs sector. They can send a very powerful signal to other women and make other women feel like it is possible to be a leader...There were some opportunities I can visit them one-on-one, so I asked questions related to working and learned from them. (NGO05)

Mentorship

Establishing a mentorship with an experienced professional was an important strategy to receive advice and support.

I have a mentor, and she provides me a lot of professional support. She taught me how to write a proposal. She leads me to write project proposals, project reports and helped me review and revised the proposals and reports. (NGO01)

And

There are a lot of women leaders in my family. They work in different fields with me, and they have many years of leadership experience. They taught me how to manage an organization, how to be a leader, how to address some complicated problems in the workplace, and how to communicate with people internally and externally. (NGO06)

And

I prefer to communicate with experienced professionals in the NGOs sector to learn from them and improve my abilities. When I worked in my last

position, I needed to work with different NGOs, so I have a lot of opportunities to communicate with some experts in the NGOs sector. I learn a lot through asking questions and practicing in the process. (NGO04)

Self-Efficacy

It was important for the participants to establish women's confidence in their ability to succeed. To overcome the challenges faced on their path to leadership positions, women leaders recognized the significance of self-efficacy.

I think that sometimes we women should not give ourselves such thoughts that I am a female, and I cannot do the same job and compete with men. Because I went out to work when I was 13 years old, and I have been working hard and improving myself...If you believe in yourself, you can actually show your abilities and talents, and you can do it...I do not care about others' opinions, and I don't think there is any difference between them and me. I believe I can do anything whatever men do... I think we should help women establish their confidence through making policies and education. (NGO02)

Leadership Development Training and Programs

Pursuing leadership development training and programs is another common strategy that helped the women expand their knowledge and skills and get ready for leadership positions.

When I started to prepare for a full-time position in the NGO, I participated in a program of team leadership. They provide one-year training in leadership development. The topics covered leadership models, project management, volunteer management, fundraising, strategic planning, etc. Then, I participated in another leadership development program for sexual minorities. I went to a queer center in Los Angeles for an internship for two months. I learned about how they operate and how they carry out the projects. They are very useful. (NGO01)

And

There is a lot of training, so I participated in a few training camps...Also, I meet and communicate with organizations related to capacity building. We learn from them. (NGO05)

And

I prefer to participate in leadership training provided by the business industry rather than the NGO sector. I can learn more from large companies...so I think it is important to go outside of the NGOs sector when you want to improve the leadership to see more possibilities. (NGO06)

Self-Directed Learning

Besides attending formal training, most women leaders mentioned they are self-directed learners. They keep learning to improve their leadership skills and professional knowledge. NGO06 said that “based on my experience, I improve myself through self-directed learning. I read a lot of books about sociology.” Also, NGO02 said that “I learned professional knowledge through taking some certification exams. I learn knowledge of marketing, management, and psychology through reading and online platform.” And another participant added:

First, I reviewed many cases in our database to learn negotiation skills and strategies. Then, I practice the skills at work. Also, I search for articles or video clips online to learn how to improve my negotiation skills. Second, I observe others in the workplace and immediately use what I learned to see if it works in my workplace. Third, since I do not have any educational background in management, so I have to improve my management skills through learning by doing. (NGO05)

Women Leaders' Efforts on Gender Equity and Equality

Several women leaders expressed they made efforts to improve gender equity and equality in NGOs. They provided training to their own employees and other organizations. For example, NGO05 said that “In our organization, we have training about gender equity and anti-sexual harassment...We also communicate with our employees to ask for feedback.”

NGO01 stated:

We provide gender equality education to many young people. We bring it to different fields, such as the disability field and environmental protection field. At least, it increases the awareness [of gender issues]. And young people will give us some feedback. Even a few words, we that at least there are still some changes, and the future can always be expected.

Women leaders would like to provide more opportunities to women in employment, development, and empowerment. For example, NGO06 said “I prefer to hire a woman in the recruitment, especially a woman with disabilities.” Another participant said:

In my team, I receive enough space and opportunities for career development and leadership development. However, for the NGOs sector, we are the generation who establish gender equity...In my organization, we prefer to provide opportunities for public speaking in conferences to female employees. We intentionally provide them more opportunities. (NGO05)

And

Most of our community is actually women. Generally speaking, women are not encouraged to express themselves and become leaders in China. In our own community, we often organize salons and gatherings among lesbians. Our salons and gatherings enhance women’s empowerment. The women, who have frequently participated in our activities, feel like easier for her to express her opinions...As a result, women in our community are particularly willing to express and refute some of the men’s views. Therefore, I think if we want to enhance the leadership of women. We can use our community’s story as an example. We should give women the opportunity to exercise or train this kind of expression, which may include empowerment, and let them know that they can express and have the right to express. We often have some gender equality discussions and salons in the community, and then they will realize this problem. (NGO01)

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Practice

Although NGOs in China have improved in past years, more effort is needed to develop work environments that increase women employees’ participation in leadership roles, improve opportunities for leadership development, and engender equality and equality (Gao, 2014). Therefore, it is important and necessary for NGOs to provide diversity and inclusion training that explores gender issues, discrimination, and stereotypes for their leaders and workers. NGOs should also establish a system or a mechanism that encourages and supports women to become leaders. Initiatives can include mentoring programs, women’s resource groups,

establishing more women leader role models, and special recruitment events that target women specific roles.

Feminist-inspired NGO activism is another mechanism that can be utilized to empower women in Chinese NGOs. Hsiung (2021) analyzed feminist praxis and NGO activism that was utilized to increase women's political participation in rural governance and found that there are some empowering practices for women. These include offering gender training workshops "to encourage women to step forward as candidates and succeed once they were elected" (p. 10). This type of training would be devoted to women to boost their confidence, assess their job competence and leadership qualities, and promote upward mobility as an aspirational goal.

It is necessary to increase communication between feminist NGOs and other NGOs to understand the importance of women's contributions and leadership in NGOs. Moreover, NGOs should increase the awareness of women's leadership and invest in management and leadership programs to help women develop and achieve their career goals. These programs can help women build their skills in managing complexity and encourage a cross-section of women in management and other executive positions.

For Policymakers

There are several ways that policymakers can address the lack of women leaders in NGOs in China. In order to ensure equity and inclusion, policies that promote the recruitment and promotion of Chinese women into leadership roles are needed. Organizations should be held accountable for implementing initiatives that create opportunities for women to secure positions and advance to higher levels with NGOs. Policies that consider work-life balance are also needed. Since women in China are still heavily responsible for rearing their children, there is a need for policies that ensure women are not penalized or overlooked due to family obligations. Women should be allowed the flexibility and freedom to pursue their career goals without fear of being stigmatized or stifled.

More government funding should be allocated to organizations that promote and support the empowerment of women leaders in China. This financial support will allow them to provide resources to enhance women's professional and career development, preparing them for roles that require higher-level skills and knowledge. The gender index should be used as a criterion to evaluate an NGO when the organization is funded or applies for funding.

For Future Research

With fewer women occupying leadership positions, most leadership studies reflect men's perspectives (McLean & Beigi, 2016). Also, the majority of previous studies focused on political issues of NGOs and the development of NGOs. There is very little research that studies women's leadership in the NGOs sector in China. Therefore, more empirical studies should be conducted to fill the gap in the research.

More research is needed to explore women's experiences in Chinese NGOs. This topic is an emerging area of interest as global diversity and inclusion efforts are being implemented in non-profit and non-governmental organizations. A larger sample of NGOs and more women within these organizations should be surveyed to learn of their intentions to pursue leadership roles, their opportunities, challenges, and support of their leadership development.

It is also important to research the impact of cultural factors on women's leadership development. For example, Chinese culture and society are influenced by Confucianism and collectivism. Therefore, future research questions may include: What is the role of Confucianism in women's leadership development in China? What is the role of collectivism in women's leadership development in China? How do women develop their leadership in the Chinese cultural context?

Finally, future research should explore the contextual factors that influence women's leadership development. For example, a study could be conducted to investigate the difference in the opportunities for women's leadership development in male-dominated organizations and female-dominated organizations.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we discussed the experiences of women leaders in Chinese NGOs, which included gender discrimination and a lack of opportunities, as well as their self-empowerment and self-efficacy. To increase women's participation in leadership positions in NGOs, it is important to establish gender equality and equity in workplaces via diversity training and initiatives. Education is always the sustainable way to empower women, increase awareness of gender issues, and improve women leaders' opportunities.

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