

January 31, 2024

# EXPERTS TAKE

## China's Approach to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda

*An Interview with*  
**YEONJU JUNG**

*In the current landscape of global politics, China's rise and its foreign policy are frequent topics of discussion. Simultaneously, there's a growing interest in studying gender and women's issues within the Chinese context. Surprisingly, the intersections of these two areas have been largely overlooked. To explore this knowledge gap, Clara Stähler and Tove Jalmerud, interns of the Asia Program and the Stockholm China Center at ISDP, sat down with Yeonju Jung, a PhD scholar researching this often-overlooked juncture in international politics. They discuss various aspects of China's approach to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda in the international arena.*

*Yeonju Jung is a PhD Candidate in International Relations at Stockholm University and an Associate Fellow in the Asia Program, Swedish Institute of Foreign Affairs, mainly researching gender in security and development with a focus on East Asia. Her PhD examines China's engagements in conflict-affected countries and its approach to peacebuilding from a gender perspective. Jung has previously worked for the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), and she holds a master's degree in Social Anthropology of Development from SOAS, University of London.*



**Tove Jalmerud:** To set the stage for this interview, we would first like to ask you to give us a brief overview on China's approach to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda?

**Yeonju Jung:** I think that one of the key characteristics of China's approach to the WPS agenda is their understanding of this issue solely as a foreign policy matter rather than a domestic issue. This is not only true for China, but a problem among most major donors as they often confine the WPS agenda to foreign assistance activities in conflict-affected countries. Major donors do not regard WPS as applicable to their domestic issues, but rather exclusively focus on integrating WPS principles into their foreign policy which makes it tied to foreign aid and development cooperation projects. China is one of them and has not adopted a National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS either. This is in contrast to its neighboring countries like South Korea and Japan. They treat the WPS agenda as both a domestic and a foreign aid issue, which is evident in their NAPs on WPS. The cases of Japan

and South Korea are quite unique, which is in part due to their unresolved historical issues that still affect women and gender relations in the respective countries such as comfort women issues. However, China appears to frame the WPS agenda solely as a foreign policy issue, and as far as I know, there have not really been any discussions on the WPS agenda in domestic politics.

**Jalmerud:** Could you explain how China understands and frames issues of gender equality and the WPS agenda in the international sphere?

**Jung:** China sees the promotion of gender equality on the global stage as part of a broader picture. From my research, it becomes apparent that China's interest in working on this issue is mainly in line with their interest in increasing their own visibility in the international sphere, especially within the UN system.

For example, for one of my research articles I went through Chinese foreign policy documents and leadership statements on security cooperation,

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted **Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda**. On the international stage, the WPS agenda aims to address the distinct impact of conflict on women and promote their active participation in peace processes. It underscores the importance of women's participation in peace negotiations, peacekeeping missions, and conflict resolution efforts and recognizes that sustainable peace requires the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences, with women playing key roles in shaping policies that address the root causes of conflict. Gender equality and gender mainstreaming are integral components of the WPS agenda, advocating for the fair and equal treatment of all genders across all aspects of peace and security initiatives. This is why, in domestic settings, the WPS agenda guides efforts to integrate gender perspectives into peace and security related policies through National Action Plans (NAPs). By incorporating these principles, the WPS agenda strives to create more inclusive, resilient, and just societies.

**National Action Plans on Women, Peace, and Security** are policy documents where states outline their national-level strategy to implement the WPS agenda on a domestic and international level, charting strategies for promoting women's empowerment, protecting their rights, and ensuring their meaningful involvement in decision-making processes. Since the adoption of Resolution 1325 in 2000, 55 percent of UN member-states have formulated National Action Plans on how they will implement the resolution.

development cooperation and different sorts of multilateral and bilateral cooperation, trying to see whether gender equality issues were presented in them, and how they were framed. One thing that caught my attention is that gender equality issues only appear in the context of UN cooperation. There are no mentions of gender issues or women's rights issues in the context of bilateral cooperation or China's independent initiatives, like the Belt and Road Initiative. Seemingly, they do not work on gender equality issues in those contexts—but only in the context of the UN-led policies or initiatives, such as the WPS agenda and women's participation in UN peacekeeping operations. China seems to engage with the issues of gender in the foreign policy sphere solely in relation to the context of the UN, which is where they want to play a greater role. It aligns with their ambition of taking on a leading role in the UN system, and the WPS agenda serves as a good tool for this objective. It is also quite interesting to see how China frames gender equality issues within the UN system. While they're aiming to promote and actively engage with the issue, they take on a less political tone. For example, they focus extensively on areas like women's economic empowerment, but steer clear of delving into political issues like the political participation of women.

Also, China's stance on gender equality appears somewhat contradictory, as they maintain two divergent positions on the global stage. To begin

with, China wants to promote itself as a global model for gender equality—as shown for example by its host of the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, which resulted in one of the most important global policy frameworks on gender equality. In the contemporary international system, they are willing to play a role within the existing order, but at the same time, they want to promote a new norm. They are actively participating within the current system and following existing norms, while also wanting to promote their own understanding of gender equality. There are also other occasions that show this dual approach where China seeks to assert its influence, yet occasionally adopts a low-key role, sometimes leading to some contradictory positions.

But there is this other side to it, that I find a significant hurdle in regard to gender equality issues. China's priorities still seem to tilt toward power politics rather than a genuine commitment to advancing gender equality. Despite their apparent desire to champion these issues on the international stage, power politics tend to end up overshadowing their ambitions to make meaningful strides in the realm of gender equality. Take, for instance, when Russia proposed a new WPS agenda resolution in 2020. It stirred up quite a controversy, drawing criticism from numerous feminist groups and even other states who saw it as a rather weak proposal, almost like a setback to the WPS agenda. Despite this, China was one of the few states who voted in

**“It is also quite interesting to see how China frames gender equality issues within the UN system. While they're aiming to promote and actively engage with the issue, they take on a less political tone. For example, they focus extensively on areas like women's economic empowerment, but steer clear of delving into political issues like the political participation of women.”**

favor of Russia's proposal. Although the resolution ultimately didn't pass, China's vote showcased their positioning. On the one hand, there seems to be a desire to align with the mainstream UN system, but on the other hand, they appear constrained, prioritizing power politics and geopolitics. This, in my view, poses a major obstacle for China in making substantial progress on this issue in the long term.

**Jalmerud:** *Moving on to the domestic side, how is gender equality understood and framed within China?*

**Jung:** To begin, there is a very clear understanding of gender equality in a binary sense. The concept of gender equality is usually translated in Chinese as *nan-nü pingdeng* 男女平等 [equality between men and women] rather than *xingbie pingdeng* 性别平等 [gender equality]. This binary perspective prevails, so issues related to LGBTQIA+ and sexual and gender minorities are not really regarded as issues of gender equality. Accordingly, those issues are not really evident in China's foreign policy or in their approach to the WPS agenda in general, which is a point I found quite distinct from other actors.

In China, gender equality is usually framed less as a political or rights-based issue but rather as a humanitarian issue. This is exemplified by China's First Lady, Peng Liyuan, who actively engages in diplomatic initiatives. Serving as a UNESCO Special Envoy for the Promotion of Girls' and Women's Education, she positions herself as a humanitarian advocate. Given that gender equality is often understood as a humanitarian issue in China, Peng Liyuan is extensively involved in related initiatives, extending even to Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects. This also positions gender equality as an issue of the first lady, rather than a direct concern of the top leadership of the country. So in that context, it can be understood as a less political concept that is easily approached. But on the other hand, there is this duality, because sometimes it

can be perceived as a potential threatening ideology coupled with radical and extremism-related issues. This has been well shown in the multiple occasions where the Chinese government cracked down on feminist movements.

Even when it comes to the Chinese academic sphere, gender equality is often not understood as a topic of relevance to international relations or political science research. During a work trip with SIPRI to Beijing in December 2019, I had the opportunity to conduct interviews with prominent scholars—around four or five experts renowned for their work in international politics, peace, and security issues. Interestingly, it became very clear that they didn't perceive gender issues or the WPS agenda as issues in the realm of international politics. In our request to interview an expert on gender in international relations, they invited a sociology scholar specializing in gender equality in domestic China, despite her work not falling within the domain of international relations. This experience made me understand that, for them, gender isn't considered within the scope of their specialties, particularly in the context of international politics. They made it clear that questions related to gender, women's issues, and the like fall outside their primary focus but into the realm of sociology. It was quite interesting to see that even among Chinese experts who might be familiar with the WPS agenda, a distinct boundary is still drawn.

**Clara Stähler:** *How does China's domestic approach to gender equality and the WPS agenda translate into the international arena?*

**Jung:** I believe that their understanding of gender equality in the domestic sphere significantly influences their approach to foreign policy. As I discussed earlier, how they understand gender and gender equality is very much reflected in their foreign policy. How China approaches gender equality in foreign policy seems to mirror its own way of dealing

with issues of gender equality and women's rights within domestic politics, with instruments of state feminism, i.e. feminism that is either established or endorsed by a state. State feminism can be comprehended as the understanding or utilization of gender equality as a tool or means for state building or achieving state interests. This concept originated from Scandinavian countries, but China as a socialist communist country also practiced it. In China's case, it's been more about economic development. Under Mao Zedong's proclamation of "Women hold up half the sky", women's participation in the labor market has been actively promoted in domestic China, with a background of the need for a female workforce in the national economy. China embraced the principle of gender equality, advocating for equal opportunities for both women and men. This approach aimed to enable women to secure employment and actively engage in the economic sphere. This is a representative example of how they approach gender equality within the domestic sphere – an understanding of gender equality that is also reflected in their foreign aid and foreign assistance, and even in their approach to the WPS agenda. In their engagement with the UN system, their emphasis leans heavily towards promoting women's economic empowerment. This manifests through numerous ODA projects that focus on women's capacity building and economic empowerment. It's noteworthy that this differs from the approach of major players in the WPS agenda, whose focus often revolves around the four pillars of Resolution 1325: participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery. While mainstream liberal democracies or Western actors tend to prioritize issues like women's political participation and gender-based violence, China takes a different route. They do not really address or work on those particular issues; instead, they focus on and champion economic development and women's economic empowerment.

## The four pillars of Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security

1. **Participation:** "Calls for increased participation of women at all levels of decision-making, including in national, regional, and international institutions; in mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict; in peace negotiations; in peace operations, as soldiers, police, and civilians; and as Special Representatives of the U.N. Secretary-General."<sup>1</sup>
2. **Protection:** "Calls specifically for the protection of women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence, including in emergency and humanitarian situations, such as in refugee camps."<sup>2</sup>
3. **Prevention:** "Calls for improving intervention strategies in the prevention of violence against women, including by prosecuting those responsible for violations of international law; strengthening women's rights under national law; and supporting local women's peace initiatives and conflict resolution processes."<sup>3</sup>
4. **Relief and recovery:** "Calls for advancement of relief and recovery measures to address international crises through a gendered lens, including by respecting the civilian and humanitarian nature of refugee camps, and considering the needs of women and girls in the design of refugee camps and settlements."<sup>4</sup>

**Stähler:** How does this manifest in Chinese foreign development assistance?

**Jung:** Something that falls under this international sphere is development and peacebuilding in general, aligning with the state feminism that I mentioned earlier. Within China, there is a government-sponsored organization, although framed as civil society organization, called the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF). They oversee most gender issues within China and partake in aid giving projects, but the projects they undertake are still part of the Chinese ODA. I went through the details of the ODA projects that they've implemented abroad, and the findings were quite interesting. Thirteen out of the twenty-one ODA projects by the ACWF, or two-thirds, focused on providing vocational training for women. Once again, they emphasize promoting women's participation in the labor force. Eleven out of the twenty-one ODA projects, so a little bit more than half, focus on providing sewing equipment and training for sewing skills. This approach has faced criticism from feminists in the past, who highlight the historical gender-segregated nature of labor. In many societies, women, especially those with limited education, are often directed towards low-paid and low-skilled sectors like the garment industry. This trend, prevalent in various countries all over the world, exposes women to labor-intensive conditions with meager economic gains, which increases their vulnerability to poverty. It's interesting to note that China, having grappled with similar issues in its history, now exports and promotes this approach in

its ODA projects. Despite objections from feminist scholars, China seems to persist in advancing the notion of gender equality by encouraging women to engage more in the low-paid sewing sector of the garment industry. It's a fascinating, albeit problematic, aspect that I've looked at for my PhD thesis, including it as evidence to further illuminate China's understanding and practices related to gender equality.

**Stähler:** Something that stands out with China's engagement with the WPS agenda abroad, is how they highlight their commitment to raising women's participation in peacekeeping missions. For example, they first deployed an all-women's troop of peacekeepers to South Sudan in 2014. How do you view China's contribution to women's participation in peacekeeping missions?

**Jung:** Although I can't dive too deep into it, there's one thing I want to touch briefly upon about Chinese women in peacekeeping missions. I stumbled upon one empirical example I found particularly intriguing, aligning with my research question about how China perceives gender equality in the foreign sphere and how it differs from existing actors' approaches. In a document that celebrates China's participation in UN peacekeeping operations, there is a section highlighting and promoting the involvement of their female peacekeepers.<sup>5</sup> What caught my attention was a paragraph specifically focusing on their female peacekeepers in a medical unit in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

“While not actively challenging the entire system, China is trying to bring its own unique perspectives on development, peace, and gender equality to the table. But at the same time, they are refusing to fully participate in institutions led by existing, usually European or American powers.”

(DRC). It includes a sentence “[...]Touched by the love and care from the units, children in the village called the female members their Chinese mothers. [...]”

I found this so interesting because it really shows how China perceives and frames women and gender equality. It reveals a somewhat essentialist view, depicting women primarily as caregivers, with a conservative stance on gender equality. Although they actively participate in peacekeeping and emphasize their promotion of gender issues in these operations, their actual practices align more with a conservative and essentialist perspective. Moreover, it is also very clear that there is an attempt to establish a hierarchy, positioning those (the peacekeepers) who give care, akin to parents, and those who receive, like children in the DRC. This hierarchy extends beyond gender dynamics; it's also evident in racial terms. This paragraph stood out to me because it vividly illustrates how China approaches this issue, incorporating both gendered and racial hierarchies into their practices.

**Stähler:** Given China's aspiration to be perceived as a responsible and progressive actor in development assistance, some may find it puzzling that other countries in East Asia, like South Korea and Japan, have a National Action Plan on WPS while China does not. Considering China's aspiration and the positive effects a NAP could have on the image of China as a responsible actor, why do you think China still has not formulated a NAP?

**Jung:** My assumption is that the difference is made mainly because Japan and South Korea are more in line with and part of many international institutions that are led by liberal democracies. In the realm of aid architecture, China is not engaged in the OECD DAC group and do not follow the policies or guidelines of current global aid architecture. A nuanced dynamic is at play; on one hand, there is a degree of resistance, yet simultaneously, there is a

visible effort to demonstrate alignment. I think there is some sort of nuanced interplay or tension here in navigating the intricacies of finding the right balance in this context. While not actively challenging the entire system, China is trying to bring its own unique perspectives on development, peace, and gender equality to the table. But at the same time, they are refusing to fully participate in institutions led by existing, usually European or American powers. From their perspective, I think the NAP seems to be perceived as part of traditional powers' play. Also, producing another document, although not really legally binding, might be seen as a potential inconvenience or additional administrative burden. The absence of a NAP aligns with their global governance approach as they are trying to increase their visibility while not fully integrating into the existing system.

**Stähler:** Looking forward, what do you think the challenges and opportunities regarding China's stance on the WPS agenda are and where do you see China going in the future?

**Jung:** I think one of the major challenges for China, and maybe for other countries as well, is that issues of gender equality, particularly within the foreign policy sphere, are not regarded as top priorities. They are easily overshadowed by other political issues. Take Russia's proposal for the 1325 Resolution as an example. When faced with decision-making, China, among other countries, tends to prioritize geopolitics and other political matters over issues of gender equality and women's rights, because they're regarded by the leadership as less important. It's something that they can compromise on easily, which in my view, constitutes one of the biggest challenges in addressing these issues.

On the flip side, there could be opportunities emerging, particularly as China's interest in participating in various global governance initiatives

continues to grow. While some might argue that China holds a revisionist view, I am somewhat skeptical about that. Many of their actions are actually in line with what has already been done by other established global actors, particularly regarding issues of gender equality. I do not foresee them attempting a complete overhaul of the existing work on gender equality issues. Instead, there's a chance they might continue along established lines and even enhance their engagement, especially if there is pressure from external actors. For instance, if there's a call for integrating gender equality into

initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, they might consider incorporating these concerns.

In the broader context, China's overarching ambition to assume a more prominent role in the international community and take on a leading role could be considered as an opportunity in the field of WPS. WPS does not appear to be perceived as a threat to them, so there's potential for increased financial and other forms of support. Personally, I tend to be optimistic about the potential for China to contribute positively to these issues.

## Endnotes

- 1 United Nations, "The Four Pillars of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325," <https://www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/content/four-pillars-united-nations-security-council-resolution-1325>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations," *Xinhua*, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/18/c\\_139376725.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/18/c_139376725.htm).