Women Leading in the Margins: Gender, Structure, and Strategy in Chinese Environmental NGOs

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This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the Master of Science degree awarded as a result of successful completion of the Erasmus Mundus Masters course in Environmental Sciences, Policy and Management (MESPOM) jointly operated by the University of the Aegean (Greece), Central European University (Hungary), Lund University (Sweden) and the University of Manchester (United Kingdom).

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This thesis grew out of the everyday realities of the incredible women I had the chance to work alongside in China's environmental NGOs. Watching how they navigated the pressures of their work, balancing social expectations, family responsibilities, emotional labour, limited funding, and political oversight, sparked the idea for this research. Whether as team members or leaders, they showed remarkable resilience. I saw them hold their teams together, build trust with communities and government officials, and push forward environmental work with determination and care, often in the face of enormous challenges. This thesis is, in part, a tribute to their agency and professionalism. I hope it brings visibility to their challenges, honours their contributions, and provides grounded insights for future improvements in gender equity and organisational practice. If this work can in any way capture the spirit and reality of their efforts and offer encouragement to others committed to sustainability and inclusion, then it will have served its purpose. Thank all the participants for their time and sharing.

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Abstract

While women comprise the majority of employees in Chinese Environmental NGOs (ENGOs), little is understood about how they navigate leadership within gendered and politically constrained organisational structures. The gap in understanding gendered dynamics in environmental organisations persists, particularly in non-Western contexts such as China.

This study focuses on female leaders in Chinese ENGOs, who face challenges as women, employees, and managers in their environmental practices. It investigates how female ENGO leaders experience and respond to gendered barriers at both individual and organisational levels, aiming to contribute to managerial and environmental outcomes.

Drawing on 14 semi-structured interviews with 11 female leaders from grassroots ENGOs and three experienced facilitators, the paper adopts a qualitative method to identify their barriers and agency. The findings reveal that female leaders engage in multi-layered agency to challenge structural inequalities; however, they are sometimes constrained by broader socio-political and organisational conditions. Using Ackers' concept of the gendered organisation (1996; 2008), it argues that ENGOs in China continue to perpetuate gender inequalities and reinforce the regime of gender inequality, even with women occupying the majority in number. Nonetheless, it offers female leaders a space to dismantle gendered practices.

By linking the agency of grassroots female leaders with gendered organisational change, this research contributes to feminist organisational theory with empirical insights from China and calls for a robust framework to guide the undoing gendered processes in practice. This paper also provides practical suggestions for leaders within ENGOs in China.

Keywords: gendered organisation, undoing gender, leadership, ENGO, China

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Gaohan Deng, candidate for the MSc degree in Environmental Sciences, Policy and Management declare herewith that the present thesis titled "Women Leading in the Margins: Gender, Sturcture, and Strategy in Chinese Environmental NGOs" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography.

I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree, except as part of the co-tutelle agreement between Central European University Private University and Lund University.

Vienna, 15.06.2025

Gaohan Deng

Executive Abstract

Women have long played vital roles in environmental protection, as resource users, defenders, carers, and advocates. While the gender-environment nexus has been extensively studied in global environmental movements, women's experiences as professionals and leaders within Environmental NGOs (ENGOs) remain underexplored, particularly in non-Western contexts. In China, ENGOs are uniquely characterised by high female representation among staff, but, not in leadership roles.

Female leaders in Chinese ENGOs face multiple levels of challenges rooted in societal culture, gender norms, and political constraints when they explore their careers as environmental professionals, organisational managers, and working women. The gap in understanding their personal and structural challenges underscores their management and environmental practices. This paper investigates how female leaders experience and respond to gendered dynamics in ENGOs' management, illuminating how they exercise personal or collective agency to achieve structural change in a sector dominated by female labour but not female power. Two primary research questions guide the study:

What challenges and barriers do female leaders encounter in their roles?

What strategies do they employ to respond to such challenges?

The research uses qualitative methods, including a purposive sampling strategy, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, and qualitative content analysis, to identify common problems, characteristics, and agency in female leaders as a gendered group (however, not as a homogenous or victimised group). Ten female leaders from active Chinese grassroots ENGOs who range in age and marital and parenting status were selected as participants.

These ENGOs cover diverse environmental issues to represent a more general situation. Three additional mentors who work closely with them, including one male, were interviewed to add triangulation and an external perspective.

Interview questions focus on three areas: their career path (the journey from involvement in environmental work to leadership), leadership experiences (current challenges, obstacles, and strengths with a particular emphasis on a gender lens), and their self-evaluation/reflection on leadership and management (both environmental and organisational). Interview data is analysed through qualitative content analysis, informed by feminist organisational theories, particularly Joan Acker's concept of gendered organisation (Acker, 1990; 2006). Using leaders' perspectives as a lens, the paper explores how ENGOs both reproduce and challenge gendered hierarchies, offering a structural and systematic examination of how gender interacts with organisational management and environmental practices.

The analysis challenges the assumption that high women's representation in sectors automatically ensures gender equality. Female leaders frequently confront overlapping barriers stemming from gendered expectations in work and leadership, limited access to power and resources, and the additional burden of traditional family roles. In response, they exhibit multi-layered forms of agency to navigate these challenges. At the individual level, they adapt management training and strive for work-life balance; collectively, they enhance organisational culture and promote environmental efforts by exploring gender-sensitive leadership and participatory work methods. Every small, strategic act fosters an agency that facilitates gender equality at the managerial level (Meyerson & Kolb, 2009; Martin, 2003). However, attention must be paid to the limitations of such agency: some leaders internalise structural constraints and adopt coping strategies that do not lead to profound change. For example, female leaders implement flexible work hours that benefit many female employees

who are mothers or caretakers, while neglecting the structural reasons contributing to their dual burden; consequently, this undermines systematic thinking that benefits gender equality, organisational development, and environmental initiatives.

Another key finding illustrates how ENGOs, as a gendered organisation, reinforce the regime of gender inequality by associating women with ‘caring nature’ roles and emotional labour and rationalising gender segregation within environmental non-profit sectors; at the same time, it also provides limited but valuable space for women, particularly those in leadership roles, to challenge gender norms and pursue environmental objectives.

This study contributes to feminist organisational literature by offering empirical insights from the underexplored context of Chinese ENGOs. It reveals how female leaders engage in challenges that can be described as a process of "undoing gender". Following the profound theory of gendered organisations, there are discussions on the organisational processes involved in undoing gender (Bates, 2022; Benschop & Van Den Brink, 2019; Stainback et al., 2016), yet lacking a practical framework. The research underscores the importance of examining how gendered practices are upheld and resisted within the daily operations of organisations and calls for a robust theoretical and practical framework for ‘undoing gender’ within organisational structures. It also suggests future research to further explore the influence of cultural ideologies, such as Confucian gender roles and collectivism, on organisational life and gender norms in China.

The paper’s mind map is shown below:

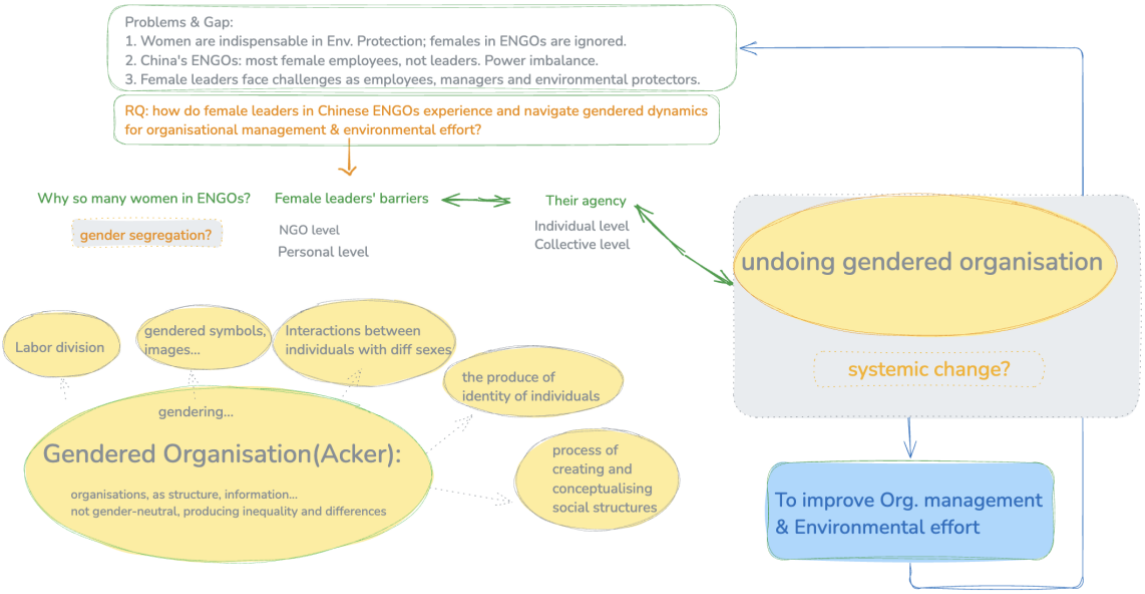

Figure 0-1 'Thesis mind map'

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1 Introduction

Females' indispensable roles in environmental protection have been widely discussed in academia and practice. As social engagement grows, women have become increasingly active as environmental defenders, activists, and advocates. Studies, primarily focusing on women or women's groups from Indigenous communities, have left the relationship between female employees in ENGOs, especially in urban or professionalised contexts, and their environmental practice underexplored.

In China, ENGOs represent a highly gendered work sector where women make up the majority of employees, yet continue to face challenges rooted in gender norms, societal expectations, and political pressures specific to the Chinese context.

This study explores how female leaders in Chinese ENGOs navigate the intersection of gender, organisational management, and environmental governance. Female leaders face multiple scenarios when navigating their environmental and career practices both as women and employees. By examining how they develop and enact strategies, as women embedded in cultural norms, and as leaders balancing institutional responsibilities, this research identifies common barriers they face and highlights the forms of agency they employ. In doing so, the study seeks to deepen understanding of gendered leadership in China's civil society and offer insights for fostering more inclusive and effective environmental governance. Using the experiences of female leaders as an analytical lens, this paper answers how ENGOs in China function as a gendered organisation, and how these women enact or resist those structures.

1.1 Problem Definition

1.1.1 Gender Representation in China's ENGOs

In China, women constitute most employees in ENGOs; however, not leaders, while their work partners, often from government sectors, funding bodies, and councils, are predominantly male. Such gender representation of power dynamics in leadership is a universal problem.

The number of female employees' proportions differ in governmental and non-governmental data. This requires detailed definitions and explanations in China's context. China's official data reveals gradual improvements in female representation across multiple sectors; in 2023, women comprised 26.5% of deputies in the 14th National People's Congress; within Social Organisations (shehui zuzhi), women accounted for 26.3% occupying leadership positions such as directors or senior managers and 21.9% of them are employees (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025).

NGO is not a term used by the Chinese government. Instead, the law term "Social Organisations" (shehui zuzhi, non-profitable organisations or non-governmental organisations) is used, indicating three categories which are defined during registration: social associations (shehui tuanti), civil non-enterprise units (minban feiqiye), and foundations (jijinhui). Categorification is crucial for this thesis research. Even using the same terms and identifications, social organisations with a government background generally have more sustainable funding from policies, subsidies, service procurement, or enterprises. In contrast, grassroots organisations require multiple self-funding sources from the public, foundations, and the government. This paper focuses on grassroots NGOs, namely **civil non-enterprise units** (minban feiqiye), organised and led by citizens, without the initiative of governmental or state support. This aligns with scholars' definition of

Citizen-Organised ENGOs: organised, private institutions, self-governing, nonprofit, socially oriented, and voluntary (Ru & Ortolano, 2009; Schwartz, 2004).

Among three categories, Civil non-enterprise units—entities comparable to nonprofit or public welfare NGOs—exhibit higher female participation rates than other categories. Official data from 2020 shows that women accounted for 21.9% of members in general social organisations (shehui zuzhi), with even lower participation in foundations (jijinhui) at 17.1%. In contrast, civil non-enterprise units (minban feiqiye), showed a relatively higher proportion of female members at 43.2% (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025).

Reports from non-governmental sectors have higher numbers with NGOs' female proportion. A research report examined 37 NGOs and found that women made up 67.5% of the 1,187 full-time employees (China Development Brief, 2015), highlighting their significant presence in the sector. Stakeholders, such as volunteers and donors, share the exact gender representation: since 2018, Chinese volunteers have consistently shown a significant female majority. Data from 2024 indicates that women account for 65.64% of volunteers. The number of female monthly donors is overall higher than that of male monthly donors, accounting for approximately 59% of the total, 18% more than male donors. Due to this numerical advantage, the total cumulative monthly donation amount from female donors exceeds that of male donors by 22%, creating an even greater disparity compared to the difference in donor numbers (CVIO 2024, Lingxi 2021).

While women highly represent NGOs in China as employees, the leadership positions show differently: men still dominate (Ke & McLean, 2023). Environmental organisations share similar high proportions (Zhang & Feng, 2025), and it aligns with interview materials and research results. The above numbers seem to indicate that ENGOs has a higher female

proportion than other sectors. The Findings and Analysis part discusses the reasons behind it and whether it means higher gender equality.

1.1.2 Gaps Between Gender and ENGOs Efforts

Gender has been widely discussed in environmental issues due to women's crucial role in environmental protection. Women have a closer connection with natural resources on the family or community level, especially women from the global south, who are most affected by environmental crises (Gunwal & Mago, 2019). Gender roles and responsibilities shaped by social culture influence the gendered patterns of resource use and divisions of labour, and limited legal rights to land and other resources lead to silent women's voices in environmental decision-making (Fortnam et al., 2019). Studies examining gender in natural resource management, biodiversity conservation, and human-wildlife conflicts in different areas show that gender does matter in understanding and promoting environmental issues (Alexander et al., 2023; Banerjee & Sharma, 2022; Goldman et al., 2021; Gore & Kahler, 2012). For example, they emphasise the key role of context-specific approaches to engage High Asia women in biodiversity conservation, which could protect their rights and improve conservation efforts and community resilience in the face of climate risk (Alexander et al., 2023).

Social and cultural norms, including power asymmetries, hinder women's involvement in environmental participation and decision-making. Women lose further opportunities when excluded from traditional environmental management (James et al., 2021). Gaps remain between gender and environmental effort from ENGOs, especially with such a female majority section. Understanding such barriers in such a professional environmental sector

will help stop the perpetuation of existing inequities and positively impact ecological governance.

1.1.3 Special Context of China's ENGOs

ENGOs in China, which primarily employ women, attract individuals with strong intrinsic environmental motivation, professional skills, and a willingness to make financial sacrifices (e.g., lower income and less welfare). This dynamic creates and reinforces gender segregation, as Chinese society typically perceives men as breadwinners. Academia recognises organisations as a gendered process since they produce and reproduce inequalities through structure and daily interactions, and feminine organisations, like ENGOs, can empower women while simultaneously confining them to the social norms as lower-paying roles (Liu et al., 2024). Meanwhile, women in this sector actively advance gender equality, demonstrating agency and advocacy.

Beyond gendered representation, NGOS in China share a similar political work environment characterised by high compliance requirements with government and policies, the crucial role of government relationships in their activities (including difficulties registering and remaining registered), and fundraising and program opportunities (Tai, 2012; Schwartz, 2004). Additionally, there is an increasing trend of reduced funding, unsustainable employment, and pressures for self-censorship and moral adaptation (Liu et al., 2024).

Yet ENGOs in China play a crucial role as a BRIDGE (Ma, 2020), connecting government policies with local environmental practitioners (e.g., communities and ecological problem solvers), communicating scientific knowledge to the public, and channelling funding from industries, foundations, government bodies, and the public into tangible environmental outcomes. At the same time, ENGOs navigate environmental workspaces under strict governmental supervision and state scrutiny. These challenges and their gendered

characteristics have shaped ENGOs in a specific Chinese social-political context into a space marked by professional dedication and gendered representation.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

This study answers how female leaders in ENGOS apply strategies within the organisational management context in environmental practice. It examines what challenges they face from different levels, such as gender stereotypes and political constraints, how they strategise in their roles, and how gender dynamics influence their environmental work.

1. How do female leaders in Chinese ENGOs experience and navigate gendered dynamics in organisational management?

    1.1 What challenges and barriers do female leaders experience in their roles?

    1.2 What are female leaders' strategies towards such challenges?

1.3 Scope and Delimitations

Using qualitative methods, the study highlights the common problems, characteristics, and strategies of female ENGO leaders as a gendered group. It includes 11 samplings currently active in environmental protection from the Chinese grassroots organisations, covering different ages, marital and parenting statuses, areas and ecological focus, and three experienced facilitators/mentors who have close work relationships with ENGOs. While the sampling does not represent the entire group of ENGO leaders in China, it provides valuable insights into their own individual experiences, challenges, and strategies that may resonate in similar settings. Foundations and organisations with governmental backgrounds are excluded due to different fundraising strategies, policies, regulations and compliance requirements.

11 female leaders were born in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, with an average age of 39. Their marriage status and parenting situation are diverse: single with no offspring, married with no offspring, or married with one child or children. Educational background is not a criterion for sampling selection; however, the majority have bachelor's degrees, with the highest being a PhD. Three facilitators/mentors respectively have over 10, 20, and 30 years of NGO experience and all work closely with the ENGO sector.

14 interviewees might be inefficient, as thousands of ENGOs are already officially registered under the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China. An in-depth interview and a qualifying method will help. This paper does not aim at a whole group's statistical analysis; instead, it investigates their personal politics, such as how female professionals build and utilise leadership strategies to manage organisations and boost environmental efforts.

These organisations have diverse focuses on a wide range of environmental issues, including environmental litigation, pollution prevention, nature education, wildlife conservation, sustainable fisheries, plastic reduction advocacy, promotion of low-carbon lifestyles, volunteer platform development, and youth engagement in climate change topics. The following map shows their primary work area:

The environmental focus and area give a relatively solid representation in China. The primary provinces where the 11 ENGOs operate are shown in the map below (dark blue section). These organisations have relatively limited overlap in their work areas and are mainly concentrated in the southern regions of China, including the southwest and southeast.

Figure 1-0-1 Primary work areas of interviewees' organisations (darker blue area). The map was created by the author using the official mapping tool "Tianditu" (tianditu.gov.cn). Map Review Number: GS (2024) 0650.

Another limitation is ignoring other parameters that may influence results, together with gender. Research has explored China's NGO strategies in different regions, implying they're developing strategies for fundraising and other activities accordingly (Hsu et al., 2017). We could assume that even with similar gender situations, female leaders face varied challenges in their work, partially depending on their cultural area, geographic information, policies, and so on. Even identifying their personal politics with quality methods under organisations' environmental goals cannot show every aspect of their situation and reasons behind it; their gender perspective would provide more detailed and descriptive information about women leaders in ENGOs, China.

1.4 Ethical Considerations

Previous work experience might bias my judgment before and during the research. Work and academic study demand different ethical procedures; therefore, I am mindful of potential biases and avoid them with strict academic ethical rules, such as using self-reflection to check my thoughts and findings with interviewees for triangulation.

Moreover, this research involves sensitive information, such as narratives on the #MeToo event in China and opinions about governmental relationships; protecting interviewees' information is essential. This paper ensures the identities of every participant are protected, anonymises data, and uses pseudonyms and vague identities to disguise information that may trace back to interviewees where needed. Leading questions related to political position or statements during interviews are avoided. Considering China's regulatory environment, framing questions or conclusions that could be interpreted as politically sensitive or oppositional is also avoided. This creates a safer interview atmosphere for participants. Interviews and recordings are all with their consent. AI transcriber is not used due to the consideration of private data protection.

All data collected during the research is solely used for thesis analysis and writing. No external organisation or funding can influence the integrity of the research.

1.5 Audience

This paper is for all ENGOs employees in China. I have nearly five years of experience working in that area. Shortly after transitioning from a media career, a moment at a workshop stood out to me. Before the session began, the host asked a male volunteer to move a large table. My then-leader, the organisation's funder, stepped forward, pushed the table herself,

and said: ‘You don’t have to be male to move it.’ Her words remain vivid, as do other moments that challenged stereotypes throughout my ENGO career. That moment has planted a seed in my thesis, from which I wish to provide more realistic support for ENGOs management.

Two years later, this leader stepped down as executive director for her daughter’s education and a more balanced family life, and I took on the role. This experience gave me deeper insights into female leadership in China’s ENGOs. I observed the unique challenges faced by female staff and leaders: societal pressure from family expectations, the undervalued emotional labour involved in engaging with local communities and governmental relationships, the struggle with constrained resources, and political stress from navigating government scrutiny and administrative demands. Nevertheless, I have witnessed these incredible women’s agency and resilience during their professional practices. I aim to address their obstacles and provide suggestions for future work through academic study. It would also be an honour if my thesis depicted a female group dedicated to environmental protection and offered realistic inspiration and motivation.

It is also for academics who are studying relevant topics about ENGOs and gender, especially those who are interested in building a de-gendered organisation theory with the empirical case, which is significant for future practice to make organisations more gender-neutral and provide fair opportunities for all of us.

1.6 Disposition

Chapter 1 presents the primary problem focus of this research, which is to explore female leaders’ challenges and agency in the highly gender-represented sector of ENGOs in China.

It reveals numbers that address the gender imbalance phenomenon and its gap in academic and practical fields, suggesting the significant meaning of environmental governance if appropriately answered.

Chapter 2 is the literature review, describing how academia thinks about and discusses relevant issues. It includes two parts: first, current knowledge on the relationships between women and the environment, ENGOs in China's context, and gender and leadership; then, the conceptual framework this paper is using—from ecofeminism to Feminist Political Ecology with a special focus on gendered organisation proposed by Acker.

Research design and methods are introduced in Chapter 3. The study uses qualitative methods, mainly semi-structured interviews, for collecting and analysing data.

Chapter 4 focuses on the main findings related to female leaders' barriers and agency within and behind their organisations. As a main finding, it sees ENGOs as a gendered organisation, while also providing space for their de-gendered agency.

Chapter 5 discusses this paper's theoretical and practical meanings by building a conversation with existing literature.

The last chapter summarises this study and provides future recommendations.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Current Knowledge

2.1.1 Women and Environment

Gender has been widely discussed in environmental issues due to women's crucial role in environmental protection. Women have a closer connection with natural resources on the family or community level (especially women from the global south) and are most affected by environmental crises (Gunwal & Mago, 2019). Gender roles and responsibilities shaped by social culture influence the gendered patterns of resource use and divisions of labour, and limited legal rights to land and other resources lead to silent women's voices in environmental decision-making (Fortnam et al., 2019). Studies examining gender in natural resource management, biodiversity conservation, and human-wildlife conflicts in different areas show that gender does matter in understanding and promoting environmental issues(Alexander et al., 2023; Banerjee & Sharma, 2022; Goldman et al., 2021; Gore & Kahler, 2012). For example, they emphasise the key role of context-specific approaches to engage High Asia women in biodiversity conservation, which could protect their rights and improve conservation efforts and community resilience in the climate risk (Alexander et al., 2023); in terms of the circular economy, women worry about the environment more and often act more sustainably compared to men but are usually undermined in decision-making (Palm et al., 2024).

Social and cultural norms, including power asymmetries, hinder women's involvement in environmental participation and decision-making. Women lose further opportunities when excluded from traditional environmental management (James et al., 2021). Understanding

such barriers in the detailed environmental sector will help stop the perpetuation of existing inequities and positively impact environmental issues.

2.1.2 Gender and Leadership

Dominated by men, the world of management and leadership has created challenges for women, as traditional management roles and styles are shaped according to male norms. This has created obstacles for women to navigate due to societal stereotypes and expectations, and such exclusion has reinforced the bias that females are not suitable for leadership and led to unequal opportunities (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Eddy & Cox, 2008; Kyriakidou, 2011).

Research has confirmed that there are specific gender differences between male and female leadership styles; for example, women are socially conditioned to adopt collaborative and nurturing roles as their response to culture's reservations or bias, while men lead in an autocratic and nonparticipative manner because they are not constrained in this way. However, such consistent trends among organisational studies, experiments, and leadership assessments reflect gender stereotypes (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Eagly & Johnson, 1990). 'Gender stereotypes of emotion present a fundamental barrier to women's ability to ascend to and succeed in leadership roles,' Victoria L. Brescoll's study on the relationship between emotion and evaluations of female leaders reveals that female leaders can be penalised for minor or too much emotion display (2016); being too cold or emotional. Women leaders face extra challenges because they are expected to balance the emotional norms and are more subject to greater judgment when they are in high-status positions, in other words, more visible.

Such obstacles come not only from societal culture or stereotypes but also from multiple levels, including personal aspects. Diehl and Dzubinski summarised the challenges women

face in leadership into three levels: macro (societal), meso (organisational, workplace and institutions), and micro (individual and psychological) (2016), including gender stereotypes, discrimination, lack of sponsorship, male gatekeeping, work-life conflict and so on. Their study categorised 27 gender-based leadership barriers, interacting with others at different levels and deeply embedded in organisational structures and functions. Border and holistic strategies are recommended rather than only aiming at solving a few barriers. This barrier matrix serves as a reference during the data collection and analysis phases to help identify any potential gaps or omissions, or, in the Chinese study background, to identify new non-Western context materials.

In management theory, transformational leadership was developed to inspire followers to achieve more by fostering motivation, morality, and performance (Burns, 1978). Transformational leadership style is believed to be the most effective one in contemporary organisations, and it involves establishing oneself as a role model by gaining the trust and confidence of followers (Lopez-Zafra et al., 2012). After examining gendered leadership differences in mixed, diverse groups of managers and leaders, their traits are closer to feminine gender characteristics, and females generally have more transformational and emotional intelligence than men. Transformational and transformative leadership are interchangeable in some studies. However, Shields challenged that idea by defining transformative as it 'begins with questions of justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices, and addresses both individual and public good,' which, in their opinion, is distinct from transformational leadership (2010). That is to say, transformational focuses on the means of leading, while transformative focuses on the ends. Based on these, scholars connected to gender and transformative leadership: leadership that seeks to address the biases and discriminatory practices that perpetuate deep-rooted structure of inequality, and the main characteristics are empathy, shaped by altruism, social justice, equality, and working with dedication, passion, and commitment (Gonzalez et al., 2022).

In conclusion, leadership differences between sexes indeed exist based on societal culture, social expectations and gender stereotypes, and women are easily exposed to critiques and barriers to promotion or more opportunities. Within the group of Chinese female leaders in ENGOs, it is essential to explore their specific challenges and problems which are related to gender and how they recognise, build and emphasise their strategies as women professionals and also as organisational leaders to undo such stereotypes and then build new order against traditional gender norm and work norm with daily practice.

2.1.3 ENGOs in China

There are many studies related to NGOs in China's political context. In China, the Civil Affairs Agencies register and manage NGOs administratively and through the management of funding sources. Facing unsupportive and even hostile state attitudes, NGOs need to negotiate in a cultural environment lacking both a contemporary tradition of non-state voluntary organisations and a strong culture of charitable donations (Hsu et al., 2017). Tai described China's NGOS as embedded in civil society, finding their own place (not independently) between compliance with state and local regulations and fulfilling their missions. At the same time, leaders from NGOs must have political acumen, negotiating skills, and the ability to cultivate governmental relationships to ensure the organisation's survival and efficacy (2012).

ENGOs fit the frame perfectly. Since the mid-1990s, the number of ENGOs in China has been on the rise rapidly. Ru and Ortolano claimed the three pillars behind the boom with the Political Process Models theory: individuals' cognition of the environment and politics, the ability to mobilize resources, and political opportunities (2009). This newly emerged institutional field is the response to political and external opportunities (Yang, 2005).

Yang explored ENGOs' special socio-political status in China; namely, they adapt to political constraints while using media and digital tools to expand their influence and help to open up the political field and expand civil society (2005). Nevertheless, with the increasing constraints from policy and regulations (such as the restriction of using foreign funding after the Overseas NGO Management Law in 2015 (Liu et al., 2024)), ideas from nearly twenty years ago should be reviewed under the current political background and atmosphere, especially after the pandemic.

One study examines the inner connection between Chinese women and nature by exploring female environmental employees and their green identities (Zhang & Feng, 2025). It argues that, unlike Western ecofeminism, Chinese tradition shows subtle nuance when dealing with dual comparison 'man & women' vs 'technology & nature'. In Chinese traditional culture, the natural power is not exclusive to women/goddesses, and men do not solely control technology. Women of different generations in China apply distinct gendered practices during modernisation. They construct diverse forms of self and collective identity in interacting with professional lives, motherhood, leisure activities, consumption patterns, and social media interactions. As for ENGO workers, the primary reason they choose such a career is the common interest in environmental protection; secondly, the core value of the public good aligns with their values. Meanwhile, the ENGOs' limitations constrain their career development: insufficient funding, unclear career paths, and limited support for parenting and family roles; however, certain work traits also provide a supportive community and space for motherhood, which benefits their work-life balance to some extent.

Interviews with six Chinese female leaders in grassroots and international NGOS and from foundations (Niu & Sims, 2022) showed that women face more challenges when in a male-dominated environment, and they try to improve gender equity in NGOS. However, the

research gap between female leadership in environmental practices still remains and is worth taking a deep look at.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

2.1.4 From Ecofeminism to Feminist-Political-Ecology

The ecofeminism theory largely explains why females care more about nature and is one mainstream theory representing the relationship between the environment and gender. The concept of ecofeminism has been developing since the 1970s. It identified the same oppressions in men-women and culture-nature, as "Ecofeminism stresses the connections between woman and nature because nature, in our distanced, masculine-scientific culture, has also been made 'other,' something essentially different from the dominant human male who has an unlimited right to exploit 'mother' earth" (Primavesi 1991).

At first sight, it might be suitable for giving female ENGO leaders a conceptual framework. However, it leads to critiques such as ecofeminism, which focuses on dualisms, simplifying and homogenising women's relationships and experiences with nature while mainly ignoring economic and structural factors (Buckingham, 2020; Mellor, 2006.; Mohanty, 1988; Plumwood, 1991). Scholars have been developing Feminist-Political-Ecology (FPE) based on these critiques. Instead of focusing on women's nature, FPE put women's position in society, especially in relation to male-dominated economic systems (Mellor, 2006). Duerst-Lahti and Kelly suggest not defining gender only simply with sex as an analytical category because it is doomed to fail to understand gender power dynamics, especially not analysing the way gender is entangled with social resources (institutions, wealth, knowledge, and power) (1995). The need to move beyond the gender binary was emphasised when analysing

the relationship between humans and the environment. Instead, intersectional approaches are needed to understand how identities are shaped by various characteristics (e.g., race, culture, class) that influence human and environmental issues (Buckingham, 2020).

Analysing the gendered leadership within the socio-political context of ENGOs in China is essential for this study. Therefore, feminist political ecology is considered to serve as a conceptual framework for navigating political and cultural backgrounds. Its primary focus on the macro level might be inefficient for explaining organisational mechanisms and individual agency, showing the great potential of combining gendered organisation. In this case, the combination avoids theoretical redundancy, and each theory contributes a unique explanation and support, showing a complete picture when complementing each other.

2.1.5 Gendered Organisation

Organisations are not simply walls and buildings that provide a workplace and content. Hearn and Parkin defined organisation as social collections that result from the acts and processes of social organising, and they are places of discourse, activity, communication, noise, rapidity and speed. What is happening in structuring and practising organisations, meanwhile, also involves what is not happening: silence or unspoken forces, such as gender, sexuality, violence and violation (Hearn & Parkin, 2003). They are constraints as well as opportunities (Pullen & Knights, 2007); they are modes of organising across time and places (Hearn, 2019).

To extend the organisation theory, many scholars reinforced the gender perspective, which was generally neglected before. Rather than gender-neutral, Acker(1990) proved that organisations themselves are integrally gendered, reflecting and reproducing gender differences and inequality, '…advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction

between male and female, masculine and feminine.' She defined five major ways in which the organisation is gendered: the production of gender labour divisions, the construction of gendered symbols, images and forms of consciousness, interactions between individuals within different/same sex, the production of identity of individuals, and finally, the process of creating and conceptualising social structures.

Based on the gendered organisation theory, Acker discusses several boundaries that inspire other research, which is undoubtedly interesting for the thesis as well. Organisations are embedded in larger political and economic systems, and gender does not come alone- it intersects with other identities. Later, Acker extended her theory to race and class, which play an essential role in inequality regimes (Acker, 1998, 2006, 2009). All these are crucial for exploring Chinese female leaders in ENGOs. This significant theory moved beyond an individual-centred approach/dichotomisation of gender and organisation to systematic structural thinking (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019).

This insightful idea on gender and organisation caused theoretical and empirical critiques later. Britton (2000) pointed out two main problems: the theory is untestable and it is impossible to identify organisations less or more gendered - even for bureaucratic organisations, there are factors such as their structure, policies, practices and outcomes, causing less gender pooressively; and the integrally gendered theory which essentialises masculinity limits the potential for futhur social change. How can an organisation or organisations be labelled as gendered? Britton (2000) suggested examining whether they are necessarily oppressive, trying to identify and understand the factors that are less oppressive to gender norms. That is to say, examine 'whether and in what ways' questions with clear analysis instead of 'yes or no' questions.

More than twenty years later, Trudy Bates critiqued the way scholars apply Acker's theory by simply confirming existing assumptions without examination and generating new insights

too deductively. She (2022) proposed an abductive approach, namely a way to discover new concepts, ideas and explanations when pre-existing knowledge failed to explain surprising phenomena or data, instead of thinking about how to use Acker's gendered organisation theory in various ways, which will offer better explanations of data that are outside of its original scope. It essentially resembles a more complicated and critical way using gendered organisation theory; for example, it is necessary to identify any anomalies in Chinese female leaders and grasp the possibilities to develop fresh insights that might develop from a unique social-political background. Rather than assuming they face inherent barriers or limitations due to their gender, it is crucial to identify their ways of gaining authority or applying unexpected strategies to navigate gendered norms or management challenges.

Since organisations are integrally gendered, are there ways to 'undo' or 'ungender' them? Affirmative. Judith Butler's pioneering theory of performativity suggests that gender is something we do through our social actions. Even though it is not explicitly focused on organisations, scholars organically combined these two to understand how workplaces reinforce gender norms (Pullen & Knights, 2007). Gender is continuously created through repeated actions, rather than being a fixed trait. It is also precarious since it is constantly reproduced— it can be disrupted and changed. Following the definiting of 'undoing' as to open, unfasten or untie, to cancel or reverse the doing of something, or its effect or result; to annual 'something that was done', Pullen and Knights claimed undoing gender as breaking down, such as unraveling gender norms, challenging rigid existed structures, and as creating new forms of gender identity and organisational practices emerge.

A study shows that women's access to organisational power helps to undo the gendered organisation (Stainback et al., 2016), with more women in high positions, and more deconstructed in its gendered nature. This paper focuses on organisation-degendered and postgender processes: how organisations carry gender meanings (starting from the

phenomenon of high gender representation in ENGOs, China) and how female leaders manage and live their organisational lives, offering empirical contributions for environmental protection organisations and female professionals' careers. See the discussion chapter for details.

3 Research Design and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The research combines transformative and pragmatic worldviews and employs qualitative methods, mainly semi-structured in-depth interviews. With semi-structured interviews, this paper addresses female leaders' subjective and unique perspectives rather than generalised phenomena (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; McGrath et al., 2019), which helps understand their individual strategies and agency generated and developed from their daily work practice.

A purposive sampling strategy was applied to choose interviewees representing women leaders in ENGOs, China. It is a type of non-probability sampling and is most effective when a particular cultural domain with knowledgeable experts within is needed (Tongco, 2007), in this case, to sample Chinese female leaders most efficiently. This study selected female leaders based on the criteria of those who are currently active in environmental practice, public reports, and ecological communities (conference, workshop, rewards), as it is a so-called qualified **frequency of mention**. The informant's choice and the method's application were described in detail above to ensure its reproducibility.

Scopus Search Engines and Google Scholar were used for the **literature review** with keywords ‘gender’, ‘leadership’, ‘management’, ‘environment’, ‘NGO’, ‘China’, and ‘gendered organisation’. Papers on female and environmental issues, leadership differences between sexes, and NGO management in and out of China have provided background information and relevant theories. Literature review on the relationship between women and environmental protection identified the research gap between female ENGO employees and leaders; varied leadership styles created by sexes illustrated how gender stereotypes influence and shape female leaders, yet reminded me to dig into China’s special context beyond gender; and gendered organisation theory proposed initially by Acker showed a robust framework to help answer the barriers and agency from organisational leaders in a systematic way, that is, how such organisations are gendered in specific political and cultural context, and how women undo gender in practice. With critiques and the development of other scholars’ contributions to gendered organisation theory, more empirical suggestions for female leaders and leaders-to-be are concluded for improving environmental practice in China.

3.2 Data Collection

Primary and secondary data are needed to answer the research questions on their challenges and agency: secondary data from public information, such as reports, news interviews from targeted groups, and relevant areas, provide background information and more balanced material for analysis. In-depth interviews with female leaders and their work partners will give direct information (primary data) to illustrate their work challenges and strategies as group characteristics and help identify barriers, agency, and suggestions.

In-depth and semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allow interviewees to share opinions freely without much limitation, which is suitable for describing individuals' experiences, stories, and understandings (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). To avoid a small sample size, this paper interviews 11 female leaders and 3 leaders' mentors and facilitators (both male and female). Interview sampling is of women leaders in ENGOs in China, mainly from grassroots NGOs, covering different environmental issues to represent a more general situation in ENGOs.

Interview questions focus on their career path (the process of involvement in environmental work to leadership), leadership experiences (current difficulties, obstacles, and strengths with a special focus on gender lens), and their self-evaluation/reflection of leadership and management (both environmental and organisational). I prepared different versions with the same structural key questions based on their organisations and public information, allowing interviews to dig deeper into more specific information that responds to research questions.

One test interview was conducted with my peer, who is also in charge of some Chinese NGOs, to collect her reflections and feedback and adjust later ones, such as changing phrasing to reduce misunderstanding and cancelling leading questions. Interviews were conducted online in Chinese through the Chinese mainstream social APP WeChat and Tencent Meeting. They took an average of two hours, with the shortest one hour, the longest three hours, longer than the original research plan; interviewees, in general, need a certain time to build trust and feel safe to share challenges that occur with detailed examples and scenarios. Check-in questions at the beginning helped open the atmosphere, too. One exception is that an interviewee returned her answers with sentences and a recorded video because we could not find a time slot for months. All interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent.

Following McGrath, Palmgren and Liljedahl's suggestions on conducting qualitative research (2019), more listening than talking was used during interviews. Considering gender-related issues, I prepared myself for sensitive situations such as when interviewees spoke about their MeToo experiences; after each interview, transcription, data check and early analysis were applied as soon as possible to balance workload and make me more aware of emerging categories and themes. Due to the current limited accuracy and data protection, AI transcription was not applied in this paper. Instead, I took quick notes, organised them, then built a coding frame and adjusted it accordingly. Notes are in Chinese, while the coding process and analysis are in English. Such an iterative process also ensures the sample size is sufficient until no new codes or themes (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Tongco, 2007) exist. After 9 interviews, a relatively robust coding frame appeared and remained stable.

3.3 Methods for Data Analysis

After interviews were recorded and transcribed into words, Micro Excel was used for data coding, content, and analysis. Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was conducted for data analysis. It is a method for systematically describing the meaning of materials by classifying them as instances of the categories of a coding frame, especially with less obvious meanings that require interpretation (Schreier, 2012). For interviews and lots of transcript data (each interview note has 3,000 to 7,000 Chinese characters), QCA can 'translate' meanings into a systematic coding frame and vastly reduce data. This study identifies women leaders' challenges and agency with their cases, examples or situations in leadership; coding their descriptions into themes and characteristics provides a reliable and valid frame to examine the most relevant analysis to research questions.

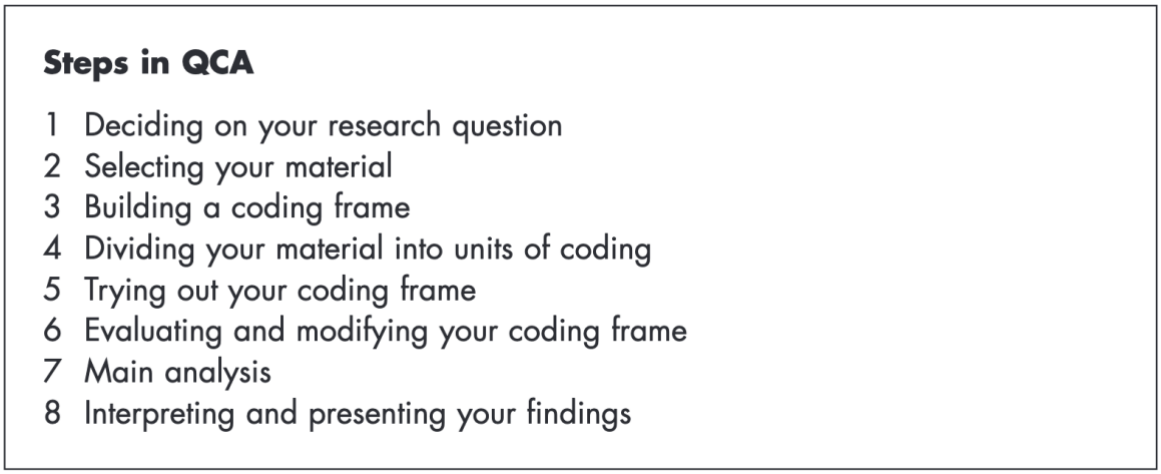

Figure 3-1 Steps in QCA were followed as above. (Schreier, 2012)

This study adopts a predominantly inductive approach to data analysis. Instead of applying a predefined theoretical framework, I developed a coding frame directly from the interview data. The coding frame of the study is coded into 4 main themes: 'struggles', 'traits', 'agency', and 'suggestions', with another 36 keywords, such as 'family role', 'fundraising difficulties' and so on. Some categories emerged through close, iterative reading of transcripts and were refined using thematic analysis. After the initial coding, the emergent themes were compared and interpreted in relation to Joan Acker's gendered organisation theory, see the next chapter. Comparing the emergent themes with existing theory helped connect the data to broader discussions on gendered organisations, while still staying grounded in what participants actually said. This process revealed how gendered dynamics are both present and actively negotiated in the day-to-day experiences of female ENGO leaders in China.

Chinese is the primary language for analysing (however, not for coding); then, the AI tool Chat GPT is used to translate analysed Chinese texts into English, following the guidance of 'be accurate and brief, with academic style'. Human oversight is used for each translation to ensure the English version faithfully reflects the original Chinese intent.

The Grammarly app is used to check grammar and spelling in the final text.

4 Findings and Analysis

This chapter focuses on female leaders' challenges and agency as female employees and managers in their professional and personal lives. 'Practices are what people do in an organisation, being embedded into bundles of both structure and agency in time and space' (Grzelec, 2024). Gender practices are the process and actions learned through repetition; they maintain gendered relationships and reconstitute the gender institutions, intentionally or nonintentionally. By repeating saying and doing, practices create what is said and done (Martin, 2003). Rather than asking what female leaders do based solely on individual intentions or structural forces, it draws extra attention to the interplay between their practice and doing/undoing gender from an organisational level.

This conceptual diagram at next page maps the core analysis of this chapter. Five aspects (yellow parts seen below) of how organisations do gender (Acker, 1990), serving as the primary theoretical framework for this paper, are connected with the practical barriers mentioned during interviews and help identify gendered challenges. Guided by the research questions, this chapter follows three sections: What obstacles do female leaders face? What forms of agency (strategies) do they apply? Surprisingly, from the collected data, a new section emerged regarding why women are overrepresented in ENGOs in China. **It explicitly demonstrates how ENGOs, as organisations, provide the gendered settings in China and interact with female leaders' agency.**

The left section of the diagram addresses the structural reasons behind the high proportion of women in ENGOs, such as gender segregation in labour, lower pay, and internalised social norms related to caretaking roles in Chinese society. The centre highlights the multi-level barriers faced by female leaders, integrating organisational constraints with personal and social dynamics like motherhood, overwork, and gendered power dynamics. The right side

of the diagram visualises the forms of agency women adopt, ranging from collective organising to founding new organisations, and connects to the concepts of "undoing gendered organisation" (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Grzelec, 2024), which discusses whether leaders' strategies can lead to deeper systemic change. For detailed information, see the following sections.

Figure 4-1 Chapter conceptual diagram

4.1 Gendered Barriers in ENGOs

The glass ceiling is a vivid concept that describes women's obstacles during their career promotion. Scholars have criticised its inaccuracy and inadequacy. The Glass ceiling approach sees gender as two fixed categories of persons, biologically men and women, which ignores gender's dynamic system (Connell, 2006). At the same time, it undermines the challenges female professionals face by implying that women only take one invisible step towards management instead of the barriers that exist all the way to a top management career(Acker, 2009). Acker used 'inequality regimes' to emphasise the intersectionality needed to address the ongoing creation of inequalities in work organisations, which includes the mutual reproduction of class, gender, race and so on. The glass ceiling is built during these processes. These critiques accurately describe situations in ENGOs.

According to Facilitator C and some leaders, ENGOs provide a relatively good work environment. Firstly, compared with governmental and business sectors, the organisational structures in ENGOs tend to be more gender inclusive, e.g., recruitment and promotion procedure, humane and flexible work condition; when changing structural system, female leaders also face less power resilience; secondly, the environmental focus priorities professionalism instead of gender, which give female leaders more space to disrupt gendered norms in this sector and enable their agency with leadership; thirdly, like other NGOs, ENGOs emphasises public good with a special focus on talent support, which provides growing opportunities and relatively friendly work environment both for employees and leaders, beneficial for different sexes.

However, it does not mean ENGO is a gender-neutral organisation. Benschop and Doorewaard (2012) offered another aspect of how organisations can look equal but still act

unequal: the gender subtext sustains inequality through subtle, routine actions that hide behind a surface-level commitment to fairness. Three organisational settings with gender subtext are: show pieces (tokens), a few women in top roles are used symbolically to display progress; the mommy track, as mothers are in less prestigious and low-mobility roles; and the importance of being asked, as women are less likely to be 'asked'/invited or noticed under informal, male-dominated networks. Although there is no specific data on the sex ratio of grassroots ENGOs leaders sex ratio, more than half of the interviewees concluded from their observation that female leaders are still a minority despite being a highly female-represented sector. Special attention should be given to the segregation patterns of Chinese ENGOs to tackle inequality regimes.

4.1.1 Labour Division: Social Norms and Family Expectations

This section draws on Acker's concept of labour division as one main factor that gendered organisations to illustrate how caregiving roles, low pay, and flexible job structures channel women disproportionately into ENGOs. Even highly represented by women, this reproduces gendered patterns of undervalued labour (family roles), mirroring broader societal norms in the Chinese background.

China has a high women's contribution to the labour force; 60% of working-age females were employed, compared with 57% in America and the UK, 55% in Japan, and 31% in India (World Bank, 2023). New China's establishment and development have mainly shaped women's workplace participation. A study has summarised its historical path: the Communist Party, in the post-Mao reform era, firmly encouraged women to participate in labour with policies; therefore, urban women's working identity made them less acceptable to be housewives, while rural women also built collective labour social networks that

extended beyond their own families. Empowering it is, to a certain extent, scholars also discussed its adverse effects: while women were facing restricted power and access to resources, gendered discrimination and work development disadvantages, they were still expected to be good wives and mothers, following traditional values. Later, market reform, global capitalism, and education boosted urban professionals in China, with 52% of women professionals and technicians in post-2000 workplaces (Jieyu, 2017). Specific history and culture have shaped Chinese women into dual responsibilities as working employees and primary caregivers in the family.

In this sense, ENGOs have built work characteristics based on gender to exclude men and stable women. This paper agrees that women's dominance, even only in number, would improve gender equality at a certain level; nevertheless, we should notice primarily how gender segregation in ENGOs reinforces the gender stereotype by subtle rationalising women 'deserve' lower salaries, and easier/flexible job because they have to take care of their family at the same time by default. This fits how gender is organised before the entrance to the workplace (Alvesson & Billing, 2009) through China's mainstream social norm on career choices:

> The sex ratio of young people who have just entered ENGO might be 6:4; females are the majority. However, you could see an even higher ratio one or two years later. Men change their career paths quickly to business or other public sectors when they face the pressure of supporting their families and earning more money, while more women stay.
>
> --- Facilitator A, 2025

Leader D oversaw a climate change youth advocacy program; over 70% of the candidates were women. She refused to ascribe to female empathy and caring nature; instead, she emphasised the structural reasons beyond the gender representation:

We have no gender preference in recruitment. Around 70% of the program applicants were women, and an even higher proportion of those selected were female. This highlights the presence of structural issues. The selection process did not favour gender, but the program had limited funding. If it were a financial grant specifically for entrepreneurs, it would likely attract more men.

The program requires a significant time commitment, making it particularly suitable for stay-at-home mothers or individuals in career transitions, such as those who have recently had children. It is also a good fit for teachers, as they naturally focus on children's development and future, which aligns well with the long-term perspective for addressing climate change. In China, the teaching profession is predominantly female, further contributing to the gender distribution. Additionally, the program also values personal disposition and alignment with its core values. Those with a highly utilitarian mindset, often men influenced by traditional notions of success, tend to be filtered out during the selection process.

The proportion of male full-time employees in Leader D's organisation has consistently fluctuated around 20%; in other words, it is a very high gender representation NGO. She believes the high proportion of women in her organisation is also due to structural factors. The NGO sector offers relatively low salaries and fewer opportunities for career advancement compared to the business world. While the pay may not attract top-tier talent, it does appeal to those seeking stability and flexible work arrangements, such as parents who need to pick up their children from school. Additionally, employees can take leave without salary deductions. These factors align closely with the everyday needs of many women in the mainstream workforce in China, leading to a passive but significant absorption of female employees into the NGO sector.

Similarly, Leader I's organisation has more female volunteers online, yet more males for offline fieldwork in the natural environment. During one talk with them, she realised it was

because men partially choose such volunteer work on weekends to 'escape' from family duty while their wives care for children.

Leader F extended the gender representation in ENGO to her family life. She cofounded her organisation with her husband, with her in charge of the NGO, and her husband runs another business organisation to support the whole family financially. At the same time, she mainly takes care of their children. According to her, this plan maximises the entire family's interests: business requires quick response to new pressure and market goals, while NGO's aims and visions require long-term solutions; in this sense, I could pay more attention to my family and give my environmental goals more time. Even though we (my husband and I) have not fully discussed the parenting roles, I would like to take on more responsibilities as a traditional mother. This is my choice.

Facilitator C has one observation: Female leaders in ENGOs always have family support, especially when their sponsors are usually breadwinners. They are not expected to earn big money, which allows them to pursue their environmental goals.

Such labour division based on social reproductivity roles showed how it internalises personal 'choice' into career building and reproduces gender patterns as NGOS embrace female workers to answer their caretaker roles by applying flexible work hours or other mother/daughter-friendly policies. For reason one, female leaders like F feel related and understand female workers' needs, thus providing official and unofficial supportive policies; secondly, due to poor salary attraction ability, ENGOs could only attract employees with a friendly work environment, who happen to be caretakers in their families, as leader D mentioned above.

Interestingly, social norms like family form do not always oppress professional women. The family has also become a resource for women to resist organisational control since the family

remains crucial in social relations in China (Jieyu, 2017). After founding her organisation, leader B went through extremely unbalanced work pressure. She openly shared that what unexpectedly helped her the most was getting married. Once she was married, people around her regularly reminded her to take breaks and ask, “Have you taken any time off lately?” This kind of reminder and the sense of being cared for in her daily life helped her gradually find some balance between work and personal life. In contrast, when she was on her own, she found it difficult to pull herself away from work, often pouring all her energy into it with little awareness of her limits. Similarly, unmarried Leader C believes having a baby in the future will help her achieve a work-life balance, as seen in the Motherhood section.

In another sense, this theme reflects Acker’s idea of gendered organisational structures (1998), where formal policies that are more supportive of female employees than those in other sectors, such as flexible work hours, intersect with informal norms to sustain an ‘inequality regime’. However, these structures also provide entry points for gendered change, which creates a platform for leaders to ‘undo gender’ through institutional and symbolic actions; see details in section 4.2 Agency.

4.1.2 Labour Division: Motherhood

As Acker (1998) argues, organisational structures also influence individuals' understanding of their gendered roles. Interviewees actively reconfigured their identities (including their female employees’) not just as ‘female leaders’, but as ‘mothers’ or ‘potential mothers’, indicating that their identities are constrained and reimagined within organisational life. With below-average income and flexible, however long work hours, female leaders in ENGOs are candles burning on two sides. One is significantly their motherhood, which is connected to the labour division and their gendered identities. It was mentioned with a very

high frequency during interviews; therefore, this section specifically illustrates issues related to motherhood.

Half of the interviewees are mothers; most mentioned the (existing or potential) parenting pressure. Facilitator A helped organise a workshop that aimed at improving ENGO leadership, and they finally selected 29 females, including half of them mothers and one man, for this training program. For the selection interviews, most females mentioned their most significant concern: the lack of family support and having to take care of children during the workshop. Considering leaders' actual needs, the event host allowed six mothers to bring their eight children along to the study with their original demanding workload setting.

Leader A and H worry about their age and being a mother. Finished her PhD and doing postdoctoral work while managing the organisation, Leader H, age 36, claimed she has no time to find a partner to start a family together, which is an obstacle for her because she wants a baby. Leader A is 32 years old and has been married for 2 years. She and her spouse also want to have a baby, but they agree that it might not be a good idea with their current income and time allocated. However, she's constantly anxious about the birthing age-mainstream beliefs that a female over 30 is 'too late', especially when she faces expectations from her partner's parents. On the other side, the environmental colleagues acted in a very supportive way: female leaders, mostly mothers from other ENGOs, told her not to hurry; it was better to have a baby when she was mentally ready, which essentially erased her age and reproduction anxiety.

Leader A offered more inclusive management policies for mothers. For one mother in her organisation, she allows her to leave earlier to pick up her primary school daughter and serve partial work time online. This is not rare in ENGOs; all the leaders mentioned similar

policies, official or unofficial, to support the family's current or future mothers/caretakers. This aligns with ENGOs' positive and passive embrace of women employees.

Leader G's second-in-command, who already had one child, unexpectedly became pregnant soon after joining the organisation. As a woman of her age, she faced a deeply personal dilemma: whether to keep the baby or stay committed to her new role during a pivotal career transition. It was a moment of inner conflict, choosing the pregnancy might mean sacrificing professional momentum, but choosing not to could mean closing the door on a final opportunity to have another child. She confided in Leader G right away. In response, Leader G reassured her that if she chose to have the baby, she didn't need to worry about stepping back temporarily or slowing down—her position would be held for her, and the organisation would wait. To Leader G, this exchange wasn't just about managing logistics; it was an expression of mutual trust and openness about the future. For leader G, an inclusive and supportive workplace means giving every team member the space to navigate life's uncertainties and grow personally and professionally. That trust forms the foundation of her organisation's culture.

Facilitator B's observation suggests ENGOs' less optimistic side of motherhood and leadership: Among the stable female leaders she knows, most fall into two categories: those who are single and have no plans for children and those who already have children. She has rarely seen female leaders who are married but childless. While the topic of childbirth and its impact on women's careers is not openly discussed enough in the sector, it is something that many silently consider and carry concerns about. The role of a leader requires a certain degree of stability, and this expectation subtly influences who gets leadership opportunities. In reality, the sector tends to filter for women whose biological and social clocks align well with its demands—those for whom the question of whether to have children has already been answered.

Echoing facilitator B's experience, leader D, who has no plans for children, openly acknowledged the significant advantages that being single brings to her professional life. She stated frankly: "To be honest, married women who are planning to have or already have children can't compete with me. I've avoided many of the disadvantages women typically face in the workplace. Moving for work is never an issue. I can work in China and abroad, work around the clock when needed, and travel frequently for business. The only constraints I have are my health and personal willingness."

As for Leader C, she is currently in a long-distance relationship and unmarried. She admits that her work efficiency drops significantly when she and her partner are physically together. By contrast, living apart and travelling frequently for work has given her greater flexibility and autonomy in managing her time and career. Consciously, she avoids entering into marriage and the caregiver role, believing that marriage often comes with mainstream societal expectations, not just from the core family, where women are expected to take on caregiving responsibilities, which she sees as inherently unfair. This avoidance isn't just circumstantial but stems from a deliberate personal choice aligned with her values and sense of independence. However, leader C doesn't rule out the possibility of having a child/ren in the future. In her view, raising a child could offer a balance in life. She observes that her needs often take a backseat when deeply immersed in work. A child might help her become more self-aware and create space for personal reflection. She also sees value in the mutual growth that can come from raising a child, believing that growing alongside a child can offer emotional depth and a new rhythm to life.

Leader G, whose children are in university and high school, respectively, offered a similar perspective to that of a mother who had given birth young. She noted that if one does plan to have a child/children, it's best to do so earlier: 'When you're younger, your body handles the physical demands better, and your parents are also younger and more able to help with

caregiving.' Now that her child is grown and independent, she said, "I can go wherever I want and take business trips without worrying." If being a mother is one goal in ones life, then 'solve this problem' first helps with later career development.

Both leaders' reflections highlight how reproductive choices and family responsibilities continue to shape the contours of women's career trajectories, even in sectors that aim to be progressive and flexible. Benschop and Doorewaard used 'The Mommy Track' to address such inequality in workplaces, as mothers are redirected to less prestigious and low-mobility roles, which are justified as flexible or accommodating. Still, in reality, it sidelines their careers (2012).

4.1.3 Gendered Interactions: Power Dynamics with External Stakeholders

Different environmental sections show varied gender characteristics. Such gender division of labour relates to the symbolism or ideology of gender (Connell, 2006). In line with Acker's notion of gendered interactions (1998), participants reported that informal male-dominated networks limited their access to resources and opportunities. Industrial pollution monitoring and prevention, which is made up mostly of men. Leader A, whose organisation aims at Environmental Public Interest Litigation (EPIL), described one industrial pollution experience when she took duty for a male colleague who was on sick leave:

After receiving a tip about river pollution, the provincial Department of Ecology and Environment took the matter seriously and investigated the company alongside representatives from Organisation A. The department's enforcement team was entirely male, except for one woman handling paperwork only at the office.

Upon arriving at the factory, I noticed that the reception staff, security personnel, and local environmental officials from the county and city levels were all men. I felt the tense atmosphere during dinner that evening, surrounded by all men. The men were drinking and toasting each other, hoping to persuade the provincial officials to go easy on the factory. They had arranged a night of entertainment, intending for the team to stay until the next day.

Concerned for my safety, I couldn't help but recall past cases where environmental volunteers and organisation staff had been framed or physically restrained in similar situations. I quietly spoke with the provincial enforcement team, suggesting they leave immediately after dinner to avoid potential trouble. Thanks to my insistence, the group returned to the city late at night, already past 10 p.m.

Industrial pollution supervision in China has a complete background due to the conflicts between companies' and public environmental interests. The danger and risk behind it, as well as the male-dominated work environment, have shown a less welcoming vibe for women joining this sector. Facilitator A added one case related to stakeholders' reactions to an agriculture business trip:

Among all cooperative representatives and agricultural experts, local farmers, who are also mainly men, will only shake males' hands first and intentionally or unintentionally ignore females' opinions when discussing major decisions or agricultural techniques.

Leader G's organisation provides another example of how the gender dynamics of external stakeholders can shape the internal gender composition of an institution. Unusually, her institution has more male than female staff, despite being led by two women in the top leadership roles. This is primarily influenced by the nature of the organisation's work, which involves close engagement with fisheries-related stakeholders—fishermen, feed sellers, aquaculture companies, and local government officials—all predominantly male. When

founding the organisation, Leader G benefited from the trust and flexibility provided by international funders. These funders offered relatively unrestricted project funding, allowing her to offer salaries much higher than the local average and the typical pay in the nonprofit sector. She believes this was a critical factor in attracting male professionals from stakeholders familiar with this section and was also key to the organisation's ability to professionalise its work. In this industry, men dominate the entire value chain, from on-the-ground operations to institutional partners. The relatively high salaries offered further contribute to retaining male employees long-term, making it a rare example of a female-led NGO with a majority male workforce.

Leader G recalled her experience organising her first industry conference: she was the only woman in the room, and at first, no one took her seriously. However, she persisted, engaging others sincerely and patiently, eventually earning their interest and attention. She also shared an illustrative example from the daily life of fishermen. Many spend time shirtless in communal spaces like teahouses and playing cards. If a female staff member were to walk into that space uninvited, the men might become self-conscious or reserved, not because of disrespect, but because it disrupts the natural setting they're used to.

Facilitator C described a key challenge faced by female leaders in this field. When applying for funding or working on government-related projects, women are often at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. Men have access to a wider range of informal social channels, and drinking alcohol is one of the most prominent examples. In one instance in April 2025, a female leader was told by a male government official that she needed to drink three cups of baijiu (a strong distilled spirit, generally between 40 and 60 degree alcohol by volume) before they could begin discussing her project application. Refusing to drink meant the conversation would not proceed. However, drinking that amount exceeded her personal boundaries. Facilitator C saw this as a clear example of the

unhealthy dynamics in the sector, where power structures are tied to gender and pressure is normalised.

Nevertheless, Facilitator C pointed out that ENGOs, compared to other nonprofit sectors, tend to offer more support for female leaders. This field places a strong emphasis on environmental expertise, and many leaders have solid educational and professional backgrounds. This makes it easier for them to gain respect from partners and reduces the likelihood of direct power suppression. He also noted that work environments in ENGOs are generally more humane and rational. Issues such as gender discrimination in hiring or promotion are less prevalent than in the corporate or government sectors. These conditions help explain why there is a relatively higher proportion of women leaders in environmental NGOs than in many other fields.

In conclusion, women in ENGOs face mainstream gendered dynamics, particularly when dealing with male-dominated stakeholders. This situation restricts women, both employees and leaders, from accessing additional resources and opportunities, and in some specific cases, it even impacts their safe working environment.

4.1.4 Gendered Interactions: Power Dynamics among/within ENGOs

Subtle exclusion also happens within ENGOs, namely different power control over different sexes. Acker (2009) argues the apparent progress toward gender equality, such as higher women representation in management roles, might be misleading since there is job title inflation rather than actual leadership power; meanwhile, different management roles or positions suit different sexes, while men occupy core production and strategic decision-making roles, women involve more soft roles as human resources. This is commonly

reflected in the subtle power relationship between female leaders and the council to which they report.

Leader E shared the long-standing tension she experienced with the board of directors. After graduating from university and having already volunteered at the organisation for three years, Leader E proactively applied and eventually became the executive director. She valued the opportunity for growth and saw having mentors on the board as a positive chance to learn and develop. However, her more than ten-year tenure as executive director eventually felt, in her words, like a form of gaslighting.

The board was predominantly male, and most members had little involvement in the organisation's daily operations. Despite lacking an understanding of NGO operations, a few core members with a business background positioned themselves as Leader E's bosses. Under the justification that the executive director should bear the most responsibility, they withheld Leader E's salary to pay other staff during financial difficulties. They frequently interfered with her managing of funder relationships due to their poor understanding of the grant funding cycle. They also criticised her management style as "emotional" and said she didn't behave like a leader, making comments about her clothing, facial expressions, and posture. This reflected a broader problem: unclear boundaries between the roles of the executive director and the board and the misuse of power.

Over the years of this ongoing strain, leader E recognised deeper structural issues within the board. It had been bloated and inefficient from the start, with only a few members contributing meaningfully. Leader E eventually took the lead in organising an expanded board meeting, the most important outcome of which was the decision to dissolve and restructure the board. In the final years before her departure, she worked to reshape the board by carefully selecting new members, balancing power between the chair and vice chair, encouraging a more supportive role from the board, and reforming the budgeting and

meeting processes. The breaking point came when a significant conflict with the board made it clear to Leader E that their main goal was to control her, not to support the organisation's development. This challenging experience with a toxic work environment left long lasting trauma. In recent years, she has been attending therapy regularly to work through the emotional toll and to shed the "emotional" label and other harsh criticisms imposed on her.

Now, Leader E has transitioned to a funder role within a foundation and works under a supportive female leader. With this change, she remains constantly aware of the power dynamics of her new position and reminds herself of the responsibility that power entails.

Leader E's single case cannot conclude fundamental conflicts between two sexes but providing an interesting angle to observe two groups. Several interviewees say certain vibes exist between male-dominated and female-dominated meetings and situations. Facilitator B summarises her observations:

> Women-dominated discussions focus on business matters—identifying project bottlenecks, solving problems, and driving progress. In contrast, men are more likely to emphasise networking, resource exchanges, and mutual praise, often making it difficult to have concrete, action-oriented discussions.

Leader B compared the different atmospheres of regional ENGO conferences. In the past, when men organised these events, the gatherings were brief, as organisers would give short speeches, have a meal, exchange contact information, and then wrap up. However, as women started to organise such events in recent years, the pace has slowed significantly. Activities like hiking up the mountains to dig bamboo shoots have been introduced, shifting the focus from transactional networking to creating space for genuine interaction and deeper connections.

Leader B's unpleasant experience with organisational dynamics may not be universal; however, it illustrates that within Chinese ENGOs, gendered interactions often remain concealed under power structures (here referring to the council that oversees the CEO role), which reproduce subtle or significant power asymmetries. Furthermore, formal authority (as the CEO of the organisation) can be undermined by gendered hierarchies, particularly when overpowered by a male-dominated council, leading to criticism ranging from dressing style to emotional performance. Such dynamics indicate that to neutralise gendered organisations, it is essential to enhance women's visibility and transform the underlying interactional power structures.

4.2 Agency from Female Leaders

Following the note of gender subtext as a hidden layer of organisational practices that reproduces gender inequality, gender inequality can persist as people accept direct, indirect, and internalised power as the way it is (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). However, people are not just passive; they resist, negotiate, or comply strategically. People who interact with organisations could also challenge them subtly from within, and these individuals use micro-resistance tactics, not necessarily conforming to norms and subverting them (Meyerson & Kolb, 2009). While we could identify female leaders' individual agency that draws on past experiences, imagining futures, and making judgements in the present, collective agency is also addressed because all together they lead to further systematic change (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The following part includes female leaders' agency when facing various barriers and challenges.

Moreover, when people almost resist, they sometimes also pull back, which helps explain why gender inequality often remains, even when people recognise it and disagree with it. Kärreman and Alvesson explain how resistance and power work together in an organisational setting. 'Resistance is … not understood as something that is qualitatively

different from power but is an integral part of the exercise of power: it can assume many forms, but always exists within a network of power relations' (2009). According to their theory, resistance happens whenever the power is active and selective, which could create a counter-act and counter-select. Counter-resistance occurs when momentary resistance collapses, when resistance internalises itself into the system, and stabilises inequality, as these moments of hesitation neutralise change efforts and reaffirm the dominant system. In this case, examining female leaders' counter-agency is also essential.

4.2.1 Organisational Responses and Adjustments

Alvesson and Billing suggest fixing structural conditions, here referring to improving income structure associated with social norms and breadwinner stereotypes, for gender changes in organisations with an equal opportunity or liberal structuralism frame (2009) . Management related to these social norms that caused gender segregation in ENGOs helps break structural biases. This section introduces salary improvement and organisation support on relocation for family building or reunion.

Female leaders are trying to break the low-salary myth. The pressure comes from two directions: their financial situation and the further influences on their sustainable employees. The first thing Leader A did in her position was to improve the organisational salary system based on her investigation of other bigger ENGOs. Yet, she felt economic peer pressure when her surroundings, who work for companies and the government, had partially achieved financial freedom, and she was competent for such a job according to her degree, work experience and personality.

Most leaders mentioned salary raises to handle limited human resources. One of the first things Leaders A, C, and D did after they took on the CEO role of their organisations was to

improve the salary structure since they saw it as a substantial recruitment problem. Leader D disagrees with the status quo that working in the nonprofit sector should mean accepting low salaries. Professional work requires professional talent, and fair compensation reflects that expertise. She rejects narratives of sacrifice and passion as justifications for low pay, which is perceived as a typical female character as well, emphasising the need to recognise and acknowledge the value of nonprofit work. Attracting talent is crucial for nonprofit organisations. While salaries don't need to match those in the business sector, they should allow employees to live with dignity. Previously, her organisation struggled to attract top talent due to low pay. Now, they are working to change this, starting with salary adjustments for mid-level leadership—beginning with her own. She believes that local nonprofit organisations' positions should be desirable in the job market.

Leader H has also been working to improve the organisation's salary structure. She believes there has already been some progress, starting salaries have increased, and employee benefits are gradually improving, but she acknowledges there is still room for further improvement. There are two main constraints. First, the organisation faces ongoing fundraising pressure, which is closely tied to the overall state of the economy. Second, there are limitations built into the structure of project-based funding. Most foundations set a cap, typically no more than 10% of total financing, that can be allocated to administrative or operational costs. This low ceiling directly restricts how much staff can be paid.

Another problem that influences sustainable human resources in environmental protection is location. For example, in wildlife conservation, especially work that involves frequent field trips or long-term placements in remote areas, the challenge of balancing personal life and career becomes particularly acute. Leader H refers to this as "eating youth for a living," reflecting how this line of work often relies on the energy and flexibility of youth but is difficult to sustain long-term.

Field stations are rarely suitable for building a stable life. A typical pattern is for conservation workers to leave after two or three years, driven by the need to pursue career development or take on family roles. Many return to school for further education or move to cities to seek other, more promising job opportunities. In Leader H's organisation, only the finance and admin team, based in the city office, tends to have more stable family lives. Most other female colleagues are single or have chosen not to marry. Finding partners at remote project sites or settling in a stable city is difficult for those with such goals.

This leads to talent loss and the erosion of institutional memory and culture for the organisation. In response, Leader H has adopted two main strategies. First, following a mentor's advice, she chose to accept this pattern, understanding that staff turnover in frontline conservation work is a structural reality and part of the cost of the work. Second, the organisation now offers more internal flexibility and support, allowing employees to shift from fieldwork to city-based roles like fundraising or project management. They also provide a certain level of geographical flexibility, allowing colleagues to relocate between cities when needed. These approaches offer space for staff to balance personal life decisions with professional development, which can be seen as an organisational attempt to create sustainability for nature and the people working to protect it.

In the previous Barriers section, this paper argues that the perceived low salary in work environments with a higher presence of female employees serves as evidence of how ENGOs in China rationalise gender segregation according to social norms and labour diversion. Surprisingly, most female leaders strive to improve the salary system and limited resources, aiming to resolve such gender myths, intentionally or unintentionally.

The agency of personal management skill and effort is connected to undoing gender at the organisational level.

4.2.2 #MeToo Movement as Organisational Empowerment

Sexual harassment, which happens in and out of the work environment, is not just about an event that includes victim, violation, misbehaviour or criminal, but also about the power relations that are bought into play in the act of harassing, objectification of women's bodies (statistically women experience a much higher level of harassment than men), and about the impact on women's identities and their behaviour in organisations (Connell, 2006).

Starting in 2017 in the U.S., the #MeToo movement has spread widely to other places, including China. It encourages victims of sexual harassment to voice their experiences on social media. In 2018, spearheaded by university students battling sexual misconduct, it then spread to the media and journalism, religious institutions, and NGOs, the #MeToo movement showed a specific local style despite censorship (Luqiu, 2024). Studies examined its empowerment for Chinese women at both the individual and collective levels. The former involves raising awareness, self-rescuing, and identity reconstructing; the collective one includes online and offline support to make waves that challenge systems of power (Lin & Yang, 2019). Female leaders in ENGOs added extra meaning to this multi-layered empowerment process: as the leader's identity and as an organisation's will.

After graduating, Leader B began working in a local ENGO. During a training program within the nonprofit sector, a traumatic incident occurred: one night, a male leader from a local organisation obtained a hotel room key without her consent and entered her room while she was sleeping, intending to assault her. Leader B awoke in time and managed to force him out. The next day, she proactively changed rooms and reported the incident to her female

supervisor, but unfortunately, no further action was taken. This experience left Leader B deeply wary of the local environmental sector, and she started her own organisation. In the following years, a wave of #MeToo revelations emerged within the local ENGO community, exposing several well-known male leaders. Despite these exposures, many in the local circle continued to support the men involved, even promoting their 'comeback' plans. Recognising a fundamental difference in values between herself and the local environmental scene, Leader B refused to associate with these individuals or participate in the local environmental annual gathering, as a clear stance against sexual misconduct and complicity. This decision came at a cost: she lost valuable networks and opportunities. "I'd rather walk a narrower road. It's fine if my organisation always stays poor." she said.

While her organisation does not yet have a formal anti-sexual harassment policy, Leader B ensures that all interns and full-time hires go through conversations on basic gender awareness. She emphasises the importance of not idolising male figures or unquestioningly trusting those in positions of authority, which could happen easily in the environment and NGO sectors. Beyond her core work in environmental protection, Leader B has also taken the initiative to create dedicated spaces for women's learning and empowerment. She organises women-only reading groups and film screenings, mainly inviting mothers from the community to participate. These gatherings go beyond casual socialising and are designed to be educational and transformative. During these sessions, participants engage in gender-themed board games, fostering dialogue and reflection on social roles and power dynamics. Leader B also regularly recommends books and resources, encouraging women to reflect on their identities and position themselves as independent individuals, rather than being defined solely by familial or societal expectations. She aims to create a safe, supportive space where women can grow intellectually and emotionally together.

Leaders C, F, H and K have strict and transparent anti-sexual harassment policies to provide a safe workplace. Because Leader F's organisation works closely with remote Indigenous communities, some young female staff members have occasionally found themselves in uncomfortable interpersonal situations: they may feel conflicted—hesitant to assert boundaries out of concern for the organisation's local reputation, or for fear of jeopardising established partnerships with community members, especially when those individuals are seen as valued "insiders" or collaborators. Leader F has recognised this dilemma and emphasised that institutional reputation should never come at the cost of personal safety or dignity. She explicitly stated in a regular staff meeting: "In these situations, you do not need to prioritise the organisation's image. Your safety and comfort come first. Unacceptable behaviour must be called out, regardless of who it involves."

Beyond verbal support, Leader F also began integrating case-specific discussions into the organisation's internal processes. She worked with staff to break down real scenarios, exploring where boundaries should be drawn in different cultural and professional contexts. These discussions help clarify when individual staff members should assert themselves, and when the organisation will step in formally to provide backup or mediate. In parallel with formal anti-harassment policies, Leader F's approach emphasises proactive support, open dialogue, and a workplace culture where young women are empowered to speak up without fear of institutional backlash or being left to navigate challenging situations alone.

Leader C's organisation has taken a significant and proactive step in institutionalising anti-sexual harassment measures. Rather than stopping at internal policies, she helped initiate a broader collaborative support network, partnering with gender studies scholars, legal professionals, and leaders of other nonprofit organisations. Together, they formed an anti-sexual harassment support group aimed at both assisting victims and helping other NGOs

develop prevention frameworks, training programs, and formal protocols at the institutional level.

Interestingly, this initiative from female leaders was not just professional but deeply personal. Leader C was profoundly affected by a wave of #MeToo revelations within the environmental NGO sector, many of which involved individuals she knew well. The shock and pain she experienced stemmed from a haunting question: How could these acts of harm remain hidden for so long? It drove her to ask: What can be done to protect victims now, and how do we prevent future damage from happening again? Leader C believes many women who enter the environmental nonprofit space do so with sincere hope and a deep desire to contribute meaningfully. She also points out that these women often admire or look up to their colleagues, viewing them through shared values and idealism. That makes abuse within these spaces even more devastating; it shatters trust in individuals and the values these organisations claim to uphold.

She has consistently spoken out about the silence many survivors maintain out of fear that exposing abuse would damage the reputation of their organisations. However, to Leader C, the message is clear: "Institutions exist to serve people, not the other way around. A person's safety and dignity must always come before organisational reputation." In addition to supporting victims, her group has published public-facing articles offering detailed guidance on conducting practical anti-harassment training, aiming to transform institutional culture across the nonprofit sector, not just in her own organisation.

Here, it is obvious how female leaders react to the #MeToo movement with different identities. As the victim, they try to rescue themselves and look for further help (even not with promising support in Leader B's case); as ENGO leaders, some of them set strict boundaries with #MeToo movement accusators and their supporters in organisational cooperation, building their ideal institutions; some build transparent policies and rules to

shape a safer and more healthy work environment for the whole sector, benifiting both female and male participants. It shows how female leaders' collective action becomes an opportunity for loosening the organisation's gender structure within a social movement context, generated from empathy for the victim's perspective as women, aiming for structural change as leaders.

4.2.3 Challenge Power Dynamics: Speak up and 'Shut up!'

In management theory, power is seen as an essential and positive motive for exercising influence, linked to controlling resources, structures, behaviours, agendas, ideologies, and cultures (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). Choosing to break the longstanding silence or even attempting to alter who has the right to speak is a powerful agency that female leaders in ENGOs employ. It reflects their initiatives during gendered interactions with the opposite sex, who mainly control power over women in organisations.

Leader B's experience reflects how female leaders navigate the tensions between gender and ideals, that female leaders are more easily exposed to judgmental opinions and critiques. After founding her organisation, Leader B received a comment from a male colleague: "B is full of passion and has a strong sense of mission, but working with her can be challenging and disappointing." The comment troubled her for years. Years later, she finally had the courage to talk with the man about his critique, but he no longer remembered saying it. That moment made her realise that men can pass judgment easily, while those words can weigh on women for years. Leader K also received comments of being' too bossy and aggressive' from a male work partner. This is unfair to her because the same traits are used to emphasise the assertiveness and decisiveness of male leaders while unfairly attacking female leaders without factual basis.

Initially, during the #MeToo wave in the environmental field, Leader B chose a silent approach to express her stance. Later, she began actively engaging with supporters of the accused, no longer avoiding confrontation but clearly pointing out the issues. She said:

"I'll push back directly when facing unfair situations. We only live once. I've chosen to fight for my environmental goals and ideals, and how can I give up on the bottom line of fairness and justice? Aren't our environmental ideals and our pursuit of justice equally important?"

Leader B's shift from initial silence strategy to open confrontation marks personal growth and signals a broader cultural change within the sector. Influenced by other role models, more female environmental leaders are beginning to speak up within their career paths, not only for nature but also for themselves and others. This evolution is personal and part of a more significant transformation in the field's values.

Leader D shared a personal experience of encountering gender-based hostility related to power controling and claiming in a professional setting. It happened during an external collaboration meeting where multiple environmental organisations had gathered to develop a joint strategy for an upcoming action. Leader D felt that the group's existing decision-making process was inefficient and primarily controlled by men who held most of the speaking power. She hoped to introduce a new method that could inject more vitality and create more opportunities for participation.

During the discussion, she interrupted one of the male participants to express her opinion. The man, annoyed by such an interruption, immediately responded by accusing her of being overly aggressive. He looked at her and asked, "Don't you think you're being too confident?"

This moment made Leader D deeply aware of the room's unspoken codes and double standards. When men spoke with boldness, it was seen as ambitious or assertive. But when a woman did the same, it was considered impolite or even hostile. She also noticed how

other women in the room responded. Some instinctively aligned themselves with the male leaders, showing agreement or deference. Others stayed silent or chose to abstain, perhaps out of concern for their safety or standing within the group.

Even so, Leader D said she had no regrets about speaking up. For her, this incident was not just a moment of personal confrontation, but a wake-up call about power dynamics. She believes that women often grow through such uncomfortable moments that breaking free from the constraints placed on them by social norms frequently involves pain. She sees these experiences as part of a necessary process of awakening and growth, contributing to a more power-balanced working environment.

As for Leader K, speaking out and expressing oneself are active personal politics, for herself, for the groups she self-identifies with. Leader K was inspired by the story of a senior female predecessor who became the first woman to chair an alliance, standing publicly as a voice and representative for women. Motivated by that example, Leader K also seizes opportunities to speak up and share her views, particularly within the communities she is part of, such as youth environmental activists and women's groups. In her role as a leader, she has realised that voicing her thoughts brings with it a more profound sense of responsibility and more opportunities for reflection and practice. By articulating her experiences and observations, she leaves a record of her thinking and growth for later comers.

Personal is political. Breaking gendered dynamics of silence or taking the power to speak out demonstrates how personal strategies can be recognised as collective ones. It is never just about one woman's voice being heard; it inspires, encourages, and plants seeds in followers.

4.2.4 Emotional Labour as a Source of Strength

While working women are often subject to criticism that is labelled as overly emotional or too aggressive, female leaders in Chinese ENGOs actively use emotional labour not as a burden, but as a form of agency. This section explores how they strategically employ emotional labour as part of their professional leadership practice.

Leader I values emotion in her work. According to her, managing and working with emotions is a key aspect of both personal growth as a leader and achieving effectiveness in environmental work. She emphasises the importance of respecting each individual's values and identifying their strengths, allowing people to do what they are good at and placing them in roles where they can thrive, rather than focusing solely on fixing weaknesses. Her strong listening skills help her better understand her colleagues' needs and talents. From her experience, sometimes, what a colleague says may not fully reflect what they truly mean. In such cases, she takes the time to clarify and confirm their intentions with patience. Only after gradually unpacking the emotions and reaching mutual understanding can the work move forward effectively. Especially when working with highly sensitive colleagues, stepping into their shoes and consciously avoiding expressions that might cause confusion or discomfort is essential. This process also makes it easier to recognise the areas where each person excels and can contribute most meaningfully as a team.

Leader H's strategy also reflects how she navigates the various identities in her personal and professional lives. She perceives herself as gentle, easygoing, and approachable—qualities that do not conform to the typical images of mainstream managers. Since assuming the role of organisational head, she states that she has been continually engaged in emotional labour

to address her personality drawbacks. She asserts that, during different phases, the nature of the emotional labour has evolved over time.

At the beginning of her manager role, the biggest challenge was adjusting to her new identity while transitioning into leadership. Previously, she had been on equal footing with her colleagues and had close, friendly relationships. After becoming the leader, she was reluctant to create conflict or criticise anyone when they went beyond the schedule or had unpleasant work results. But the role demanded that she maintain a certain level of distance, speak up when needed, and make tough decisions, which did not come naturally to her.

Over time, she began to see this process as an opportunity to explore her personality and better understand her colleagues' traits. In her work, she learned to separate personal feelings from professional responsibility, critiquing someone's work doesn't mean rejecting them as a person or damaging the relationship. By learning to "play the role" of a leader, she could separate her professional persona from her personal one. This helped her manage leadership demands while maintaining a sense of ease and authenticity in daily life. Gradually, she became more comfortable inhabiting the role of a leader.

In Leader J's view, emotional labour helps with organisational management, especially the supportive atmosphere built on an emotional level. It enables deeper mutual understanding and helps individuals gain more apparent self-awareness. Through years of working in this space, she has learned to become someone who supports others, assisting colleagues to recognise their strengths and limitations, and understanding the underlying reasons behind their struggles. To do this, she frequently draws on participatory and nonviolent communication methods. When a colleague resists a task, it may seem like disengagement on the surface. But often, the root cause is far more complex, ranging from lack of confidence and burnout to deeper psychological pressures. Creating space to acknowledge these nuances has become part of her leadership practice.

Another strategy employed by Leader B fits another frame from Meyerson and Kolb, which aims to see women as having differences and potential advantages instead of negative problems. They are solutions themselves and a source of added value (2000). Leader B internalised this idea and proved how crucial the emotion is in female leaders' interactions.

In her local nonprofit circle, Leader B rarely felt emotional support or a sense of being understood. The atmosphere often lacked warmth, especially for women showing vulnerability. However, she found a different energy in leadership trainings and cross-regional gatherings, as well as genuine care and encouragement from fellow female leaders who did not judge her emotions but offered validation, positive feedback, and constructive suggestions. From these experiences, she began to embrace the so-called "mother's wisdom" strategy. Many of the people she works with are mothers, and they've shown her that inner balance isn't about doing everything perfectly, but about accepting oneself and cultivating emotional steadiness. These women gave her honest, direct feedback, often just by looking her in the eye, which helped her grow as a leader and communicator. Their way of being taught her to speak more openly, express her feelings, and support others with the same grounded care. Now she always looks her colleagues in the eye with a supportive tone, a better communication way she learnt from mothers surrunding her.

With shared personal experience, it is not rare for female leaders in ENGOs to express private topics openly and freely. Official occasions, such as female leader workshops, and less official communication or gatherings offer them a chance to share everyday life experiences. Both create a safe and open-minded atmosphere for them. One recent study on female leaders in energy section shows that even facing similar gendered barriers, namely absence of gender-disaggregated data, weak policy support on gender inclusion, under-recognized and unpaid care work, deep-seated stereotypes from sociocultural gender norms,

male-dominated company culture and so on, women use mentorship and networking to enhances career advancement, help with solidarity (Lazoroska et al., 2024).

4.2.5 Beyond Organisational Management: Reaching Environmental Effort

Leaders C, F, H, J, and I address human resource pressure on their environmental goals and elaborate on team building and management as crucial parts of achieving organisational aims. In other words, they are environmentalists' protectors, supporters and servicers.

Leader C's most considerable pressure comes from the conservation challenges they face in the current political and economic environment. She faced significant external pressures as her organisation gradually progressed toward greater professionalisation. According to her observations, the broader environmental protection space was deteriorating. With the economic downturn, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the push for domestic demand through new energy infrastructure, there has been an increasing strain on mountainous ecosystems and biodiversity. In her view, these large-scale developments may benefit the economy but potentially harm conservation efforts.

One of the examples of conservation's urgency is the lack of third-round national land survey (三调, "sandiao" in Chinese) data, which would otherwise help provide solid arguments for forest and land protection. Without such data, conservation areas often become the first to be sacrificed for economic development. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions on international collaboration in its aftermath further fragmented ecological habitats, intensifying the urgency of conservation work. Meanwhile, the public consensus around biodiversity conservation has been slow to form; on the other hand, the resources

available to support their organisational work are still insufficient. This dual pressure places high demands on the managerial team. In response, Leader C's organisation is actively working to build internal systems, develop technical expertise, and pass on its core cultural values, so that the team can grow and mature as quickly as possible in front of multiple challenges.

Moreover, as the organisation's leader, Leader C is constantly faced with decisions: what to prioritise, what resources or strategies are needed to match those priorities, and how to allocate time between strategy and team-building. She emphasises that growing a team does not happen overnight; it requires time, resources, patience, and deep engagement. She describes her current approach as developing a "gut for conservation", an intuitive strategy grounded in lived experience. Based on her analysis, this includes identifying the core conservation issues, having the decision-making ability to prioritise them, and building the capacities needed to act effectively. Mapping out feasible pathways, determining how much information is required, what route to take, and how to construct it all relies on thoughtful observation and understanding of the issues, the team's abilities, and the stakeholders' dynamics. When setting environmental goals, the team collectively analyses what each unit can realistically achieve. In doing so, they are learning to set more grounded, achievable objectives that align with the mission and the team's capacity.

Leader J also has a similar strategy connecting team building and environmental efforts. She believes that interpersonal relationships are a core pillar in nonprofit organisations that aim to achieve environmental goals. Unlike corporate structures, nonprofits often operate with flat hierarchies, where collaboration is based not on authority, salary, or status, but on shared goals and mutual trust. Many people choose to join and stay not because of material incentives, but because of the supportive, friendly atmosphere that the organisation cultivates, and the sense of achievement from environmental goals.

According to Leader J, leading an organisation aligns with involving more generations in environmental practice. It is about nurturing people and creating pathways for more young professionals to engage in environmental work. She is clear that the organisation does not exist for her or belong to her. It is a tool for achieving environmental outcomes. What matters most, she says, is seeing each individual's value and providing the space and support for them to realise their potential along the way. Her leadership philosophy reflects a collective, long-term vision, which is centred on empowerment and continuity, reinforcing the ENGO's role as both a workplace and a vehicle for environmental change.

This research mentions how NGOs in China work as bridges to connect environmental issues/solutions to stakeholders, such as local communities, governmental sections, research institutions and the public. By stating female leaders' strategies, we could also see them as bridges connecting environmental efforts to their colleagues and teams. Through practices such as inclusive leadership, emotional resilience, and participatory decision-making, they foster a work culture that sustains internal operations and strengthens the ENGO's external impact.

4.3 Conclusion: ENGOs as Barriers and Carriers Itself

This chapter analysed interview materials from grassroots ENGOs female leaders in China, summarising their challenges and agency developed from daily organisational management with a specific gender perspective.

It applied Joan Acker's 'gendered organisation' theory to interpret female leaders' experiences in Chinese ENGOs. Five interrelated dimensions (1998) of how organisations are gendered through labour division, symbols and images, social interaction between different sexes, internal mental work (identity construction) and finally, organisational logic:

traditional care taker roles in Chinese society and low salaries channel women into ENGOs, patially rationalising their undervalued labor and stressing them with family expections; furthermore, motherhood adds extra burden on their professional career while with policies like flexible hours inadvertently reinforcing gendered caregiving norms…

One key analytical finding illustrates how ENGOs, as gendered organisations, both reinforce the gender inequality regime, at the same time, also provide space to protect females as shelter from gender discrimination and a platform to undo gender. Environmental organisations come with different goals and issues. For certain types within male-dominated stakeholder environments, for example, industrial pollution, or agriculture, fishing, their masculine-coded stakeholder environments hinder women from having a safe work environment, accessing resources and opportunities, and participating in leadership roles. For other types, ENGOs attract more females because social-culturally, women are perceived as more empathetic about environmental problems and future generations, therefore their giving nature would like to participate in such careers. On the other hand, with resource scarcity in finance and human resources, ENGOs passively embrace these phenomena by providing soft welfare benefits, such as flexible work hours and a humane work environment, which are the urgent needs of working mothers or daughters who are the main caretakers in their families.

Meanwhile, according to traditional social norms, males in Chinese society are seen as breadwinners, and they 'luckily' avoid low-paid jobs; this rationalises the fact that ENGOs females' burden is from both family and career. These resonate with Acker's notion of gendered organisations, as organisations do a gendering process through labour division based on biological sexes, gendered symbols and images, interactions between individuals with different sexes, and the production of identity of individuals. Altogether, it's the process of creating and conceptualising social structures (Acker, 2006; Acker, 1990; Bates, 2022).

The results expand our understanding of gendered organisations by showing how gender inequality can be sustained within Chinese ENGOs.

While facing multiple challenges as women, employees and managers, female leaders have shown great agency in dealing with such difficulties. They leverage empathy and participatory management with emotional labour, transforming perceived weaknesses into leadership strengths; they disrupt male-dominated power dynamics by speaking up and voicing their opinions, redefining leadership norms between different sexes; they improve salary structure to break the low-income myth in ENGO sectors and build safe work environment for all employees, connecting the crutial role of sustainable human resources and the environmental efforts; they transform trick encounters such as #MeToo Movement into oppotunities to develop their ideal organisations and set their own collaborating rules in ENGOs. Gendered experiences from female leaders provide a comprehensive understanding of how gender is embedded and potentially undone within female leaders' daily practices.

In addition to personal and collective agency, this study also highlights how ENGOs, either intentionally or incidentally, provide space and opportunities for female leaders to undo gendered processes. This aligns with a study on female employees in China's ENGOs (Zhang & Feng, 2025): the structure and nature of environmental organisations have made them more attractive to women, leading to a high rate of female participation. Although environmental work provides valuable opportunities for women to demonstrate their capabilities, it also has clear limitations in career advancement. Female practitioners still confront the pressures of balancing family and career, but the flexible structures and value orientation of environmental work provide alternative pathways for women to navigate family-career conflicts.

In summary, based on those leaders' narratives, it explains the process, how ENGOs, as organisations, reinforce gender inequality regimes by abiding by traditional Chinese

mainstream social gender roles and rationalising such phenomena, such as the association of women with caregiving, emotional labour, and support positions. Nevertheless, itself, as a space with most female employees, also enables and encourages much agency against gendered biases and injustice happening. During this complex process, female leaders have shown amazing structural and personal agency to build a more gender neutral work environment.

5 Discussion: Reframing Gender, Leadership, and Organisational Change in ENGOs, China

Building upon the findings chapter, which summarises barriers and agency from Chinese female ENGO leaders, this section engages critically with the empirical findings in light of existing theoretical frameworks, especially concepts on 'undoing gender' (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000; Martin, 2003), discussing the theoretical and practical implications.

Section 5.1 focuses on the general situation at the organisational level. Women's high representation in Chinese ENGOs does not lead to gender equality or guarantee environmental improvement. Resonating with scholars' input on 'undoing gender,' section 5.2 discusses the agency of female leaders applied, whether or how to lead to systemic change, and current limitations. Section 5.3 focuses on methodological reflection and theoretical contribution, with the final part, Section 5.4, offering practical suggestions.

5.1 Rethinking Gendered Organisation: When Representation ≠ Equality

This study reveals that gendered barriers female employees encounter in Chinese ENGOs, ranging from an exclusive work atmosphere, male-dominated power dynamics, traditional gender labour division, to personal life experiences such as motherhood and caretaker role. **One of the central insights of this study is that while women dominate the workforce as staff, structural gender inequalities persist within ENGOs in China.** It contributes new empirical evidence on how gendered organisational structures manifest within female-majority sectors in China. Aligning with prior literature (Agarwal, 2009; Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012; Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013; Meyerson, 2000; Saraite-Sariene et al.,

2022), high representation in numbers does not necessarily lead to gender equality, and it also does not uniformly improve environmental outcomes. Subordinate groups (which can also happen in a significant number of representations) do not challenge the existing system because they have been socialised into accepting the status quo (Buchanan & Badham, 1998).

Meaningful challenges to the system are likely only when women are involved in decision-making roles, not when their participation is symbolic. Rather than assuming the glass ceiling as a single and final obstacle, the paper suggests gendered barriers are continuous and contextually embedded, from low hiring salary to stakeholder engagement and daily operations.

5.2 Chinese Female Leaders' Undoing Gender: Agency and Its Limits

The concept of 'undoing gender' from feminist scholars provides a useful lens to interpret the practices observed among Chinese female ENGO leaders. **This research addresses this gap by illustrating how female leaders in Chinese ENGOs engage in what can be described as "undoing gender" in an empirical study.** These acts from female leaders of restructuring work routines reflect an emergent form of leadership that destabilises the gendered logic of care and authority though not always consciously framed as such. Many participants exercised what Martin (2003) calls 'gender agency without intent', namely, they reconfigure gender norms through strategic, everyday actions, even when not explicitly frames as feminist, political, or gender-related. Next question is, how efficient they are to lead systematic change?

Gender-equality organisational change does not require a revolution; it can happen through small, strategic acts in the long term (Meyerson & Kolb, 2009). Transformative change emerges not only from policy reform but also from shifts in daily routines, meanings, and behaviours (Martin, 2003). This paper sees female leaders from ENGOs both applying individual and collective agency to reach further structural change. **They demonstrate multi-layered forms of agency in response to structural barriers, gradually undoing gender through micro-level daily practices.** All these practices are deployed from their managerial roles to improve environmental efforts.

However, we could also identify their limitations beyond such agency: some of them internalise current situation and conditions and develop 'accepting' strategy, e.g., maximising human resources when they face limited choices; even exercising relevant straties towards sexual harassment in professional environment, full power chain with stakeholders is missing; and it in return, damages their systematic thinking regarding to gender equality, organisational development and environmental efforts and so on.

5.3 Methodological Reflection and Theoretical Contribution

Gender opens a unique window for us to examine female leaders' barriers and agency in organisational and environmental management. This study treats gender not as an essential or pre-structured category, but as a multidimensional, dynamic and relational force embedded in everyday organisational practices (Connell, 2006). Following Alvesson & Billing (2009), the findings support the view that gender is not the sole organising principle in NGOS, but one of several interwoven factors, alongside policy structures, resource limitations, and stakeholder expectations that shape leadership experiences. Female leaders in this study did not present themselves as a homogenous group nor as passive victims of

gendered oppression. Instead, they negotiated their roles differently, depending on their organisational context, issue area (e.g., pollution vs. community conservation), and individual life stage. Their strategies, ranging from modifying internal policies to drawing on emotional labour in leadership, illustrate how gender both constrains and enables agency. Thus, rather than assuming gender as the foundation of organisational structure, this research asks how and when gender becomes salient in shaping ENGO practice and leadership, and how it is actively undone, reshaped, or reimagined through daily actions.

Moreover, it also aligns with the contextual framework, from ecofeminism to feminist political ecology, which suggests examining women's positions in socio-cultural background, instead of solely gender. This paper explores factors such as gender, leadership, and management in the context of Chinese ENGOs as well as their dynamics when interacting with each other. Nevertheless, it should not be overemphasised at the expense of other intersecting factors such as class, region, political environment, and organisational scale or development phases. Future research would benefit from a more intersectional analysis that situates gender within a broader constellation of power relations and institutional dynamics.

Acker's theory of 'gendered organisation' powerfully illustrates how organisational processes embed and reproduce gender inequality. This paper benefits from its thematic analysis structure, identifying Chinese female leaders' barriers at personal and organisational levels. At the same time, semi-structured interviews enable participants to share nuanced reflections that reveal their individual, organisational, and managerial challenges in the current social-political context. As a researcher with prior ENGO experience, my positionality influenced the openness of the interviews. It helped build trust and collect more detailed data that might be easily missed in other situations, while it may have shaped which narratives were emphasised and how some practices were interpreted. Future studies might

benefit from a mixed-methods design or comparative data to explore how representative these findings are across different organisational types and regions.

On the other hand, the theory offers less conceptual space for understanding how these processes might be disrupted or 'undoing' in a detailed manner (Bates, 2022; Benschop & Van Den Brink, 2019; Stainback et al., 2016). There have been theories on approaches to undoing gender from an organisational perspective (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Benschop & Verloo, 2011; Grzelec, 2024; Martin, 2003) , yet with practical difficulties such as limited systemic change. The theoretical framework with practical guidance for undoing gender remains missing. This paper calls for a robust theory framework to better capture the structural undoing and guide further empirical practices.

In summary, Acker's theory of 'gendered organisation' provides a solid analytical framework to examine Chinese ENGOs' gendered contexts. Even though it has been criticised as untestable and lacking classification (Bates, 2021), the theory indicates challenges and barriers that female leaders encounter in their daily practices. Grounded in qualitative interview data, the study further demonstrates how these lived experiences can retrospectively illuminate potential pathways for addressing embedded gendered constraints within organisational settings.

5.4 Practical Suggestions for ENGOs in China

Several practical recommendations emerge for fostering gender-inclusive leadership in ENGOs based on the supports that female leaders address.

Intra-organisational

These findings indicate the urgent need for ENGOs management systems to recognise and support women's leadership through more sustainable workload design and recognition. Almost all interviewees underscored the urgent need for increased resources and support for environmental NGOs, particularly in areas such as personnel development and institutional capacity building. Niu and Sims (2022) recommended that NGOS provide gender-related diversity and inclusion training for both leaders and employees and establish a mechanism that encourages females to become leaders in their positions.

At the individual and institutional levels, many interviewees stressed the value of establishing stronger support networks to enhance personal resilience and professional collaboration. Grassroots support networks among women leaders may serve as an informal mechanism for organisational resilience, as most leaders and facilitators have addressed.

Inter-organisational

Communication between gender NGOS and other NGOS is necessary to understand gender issues among and beyond the working environment, such as being aware of women's contribution, career discrimination and gender stereotypes (Ke & McLean, 2023). Facilitator C and Leader H mentioned the importance of learning from other gender-related NGOS, not just the combination of climate change and gender issues, but also from the managerial and organisational perspectives.

Aim for Systemic Change

While helpful, the things mentioned above, such as leadership networking, female groups and networking, cannot replace structural reforms. This addresses the risk of framing women as individually responsible for navigating systemic inequality. Instead, more substantial institutional commitment, data collection, and other policy reforms are needed to push for systemic change, not just symbolic representation (Lazoroska et al., 2024).

More than gender

Last but not least, this is not strictly speaking a gender-related issue, but it very much addresses the question of the organisation-government relationship, as many interviewees pointed out. Although regional conditions vary, most interviewees agreed that there is already a substantial framework of policies related to their environmental issues- low-carbon lifestyle, environmental lawsuit, biodiversity conservation, recycling, and the dual carbon goals. However, they emphasised that the effectiveness of policy implementation largely depends on the degree of administrative flexibility at the local level and the discretion exercised by responsible officials. A significant gap remains in the interpretation and practical application of policies, leading to inconsistencies in execution. Many interviewees expressed the need for more precise policy guidance and greater operational autonomy to facilitate their work. A few participants further noted the importance of policies that directly support community-level to open more doors for collaboration.

6 Conclusion

This paper describes female leaders from grassroots ENGOs in China, aiming to explore their challenges and agencies when facing gender dynamics in their organisational leadership and environmental management. Drawing on Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations, and building on the perspective that gender is a socially constructed, relational, and contextually embedded process (Connell, 2006), the research reveals that gender remains a potent structuring force within ENGOs, despite women constituting the majority of employees. Leadership opportunities for women continue to be shaped by gendered role expectations, stakeholder dynamics, and organisational limitations such as resource scarcity and informal power hierarchies. By exploring the reasons behind its high

representation, this paper has shown how ENGOs, as organisations, have reinforced and maintained gender segregation through social norms, gender stereotypes and the dynamics with stakeholders, constraining women's professional development within this sector.

Rather than treating gender as an essential or static category, the study frames it as a dynamic set of relations that interact with environmental management and social culture practice. Semi-structured interviews on female leaders' personal and professional experiences described how women not only navigate but also actively reshape gendered practices inside and outside their organisations. Their collective or individual actions become opportunities to loosen the organisations' gender structure through efforts such as salary restructuring, flexible work arrangements, gender-related organisational culture building, engaging in 'undoing gender' (Bates, 2022; Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012; Benschop & Van Den Brink, 2019; Stainback et al., 2016) and providing a more supportive and inclusive work culture to boost organisational sustainability and environmental governance. This study avoids presenting female leaders as a homogenous or victimised group, illustrating their diverse strategies in navigating complex organisational and political landscapes.

Notably, the study challenges assumptions that female-dominated sectors automatically imply gender equality. It demonstrates how systemic barriers persist and how agency must be understood as situated, collective, and ongoing. Facing all possible obstacles as female employees, leaders have more tension from inside and outside their organisations. Even with a slightly higher proportion of female leaders than in other governmental or business sectors, we should be aware that different sexes hold actual power. Men commonly have most leadership positions, while women comprise support positions (Eagly and Fischer, 2009). It can be misleading that more women leaders do not mean real empowerment, since the existence of job title inflation and women usually get soft roles in administrative and human resources. At the same time, men could lead strategy roles (Acker, 2009). In their daily

practice, some face judgmental comments and critiques based on gender biases from council members or colleagues; some have limited social support as working mothers and are punished by their career paths when being mothers or planning to be mothers. While the study draws on a purposive sample and is limited to grassroots ENGOs in China, its insights offer broader implications for leadership studies, gender and organisation theory, and NGO management.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The use of purposive sampling, while appropriate for qualitative inquiry, limits generalizability in representing the whole ENGOs in China. The sample is also restricted to 11 grassroots ENGOs, which may differ from international or non-registered organisations. In addition, even with one experienced male mentor as an interviewee, this research focused primarily on women's perspectives, with limited attention to male leaders or intersectional differences such as region and ethnicity. Moreover, including younger female leaders, for example, who were born in the 21st century, in sampling may lead to surprising results regarding gender perspective.

Future research could further explore comparative dynamics across ENGO types (in which the gender representation level should be different and male-dominated environmental sectors, e.g., industrial pollusion may reveal additional dimensions of gendered organisational practices); between governmental relationship and ENGO management; moreover, study built on the differences between female- and male-led ENGOs could provide insight into how leadership styles and gendered experiences differ within similar organisational context. Moreover, certain cultural factors shaping Chinese and organisational life, such as collectivism and Confucian gender roles, as an ideological background, can be explored in depth in future study. These dimensions may offer another insight into how gender is reproduced or resisted under a political background and deserve further investigation. Finally, quantitative studies on examining whether gender differences

exist in environmental efforts led by female and male leaders and how much female leaders contribute to sustainability should be academically and practically interesting.

Overall, this research provides a grounded, context-sensitive understanding of how gender is enacted, negotiated, and potentially undone in the everyday leadership practices within China's civil society. It calls for academic and organisational recognition of the multifaceted barriers and creative capacities of female leaders working for environmental justice.

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