

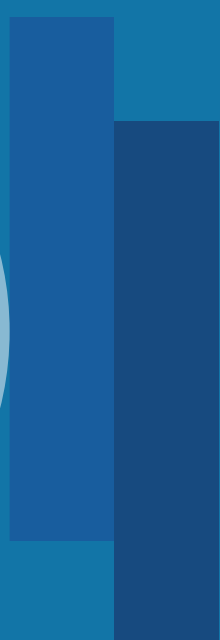
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# Democracy in Hong Kong: The Benefit of a Gender Mainstreaming Approach

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## Abstract

In June 2019, millions of Hong Kong citizens marched in opposition of an extradition bill, spearheading a movement that evolved into a broader campaign for a more democratic government and autonomy from the PRC. Among policymakers, the movement also became representative of the global fight against authoritarianism and a key focal point of the US government's efforts to support democratic movements around the world. Historically, this movement is the most recent example of a long history of Hong Kong's democracy movement, which began in earnest during the colonial period. And while the world has long paid attention to Hong Kong's struggle for democracy, we have often paid little attention to the significance of women to its goals, tactics, and achievements. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of women to the fight for democracy in greater China, with a particular focus on Hong Kong's democracy movement of the 1980s. This focus on gender will not only reveal a more complete picture of Hong Kong's fight for democracy, but also give a new understanding to how a democratic society—one in which political power, broadly imagined, is truly shared among citizens—can be built and sustained, not just in present-day Hong Kong, but in the broader Sinosphere.

## Policy Implications and Key Takeaways

recently, most Hong Kong people believed it was not incompatible for Hong Kong to both belong to the PRC and be a full- edged democratic territory with universal su rage and protected rights. e belief is just as important, if not more important, than powerful people in Beijing who claim that democracy cannot survive in a Chinese-led space.



tenance of non-democratic governments.<sup>4</sup> is can certainly be seen in the  
PRC. From the marriage law in the 1950s that, while claiming to empow.3 (. F)u5.1 (r)





In this paper, I do not mean to neglect the question of elections. Indeed, the Hong Kong democracy movement I will cover here is primarily about efforts to introduce universal suffrage and direct elections into Hong Kong's governing system. Yet, I also take seriously the idea of democracy as a social form rather than just a political system. When we do, we can more clearly center the questions of how citizenship is defined and how political power is shared, rather than simply checking a box when elections exist. It is, to me, a much better way to consider how and in what ways people of all genders maintain equal citizenship during the process of democratization.

### **The Democracy Movement in Hong Kong**

Despite contestations over definitions of democracies, it is difficult to argue that Hong Kong has ever been one. For most of its history, the Hong Kong British colonial government was overseen by the British government in London. Key government positions were appointed by the Hong Kong governor who, himself, was appointed by the British monarch, and .9 (s)1.4 (t)8.2 (o)9



Yet, Hong Kong has a long tradition of democracy movements defined here as grassroots-led movements to push for democratic governance and institutions. Historians frequently point to the 1980s as the birth of Hong Kong's democracy movement.<sup>18</sup> In 1982, with the looming end of Britain's 99-year lease



through grassroots activism. By refocusing our attention on activism and protest, we can better spotlight neglected voices in the quest for a more democratic society while also emphasizing how structural power inequities made activism an important avenue underrepresented groups, like women, to make their voices heard.

## **II. Women in Hong Kong's Democracy Movement**

### **Waiting for Gender Equality**

Ms. A sat at a table listening to a man give a speech. A prominent democratic activist, he spoke to a room full of representatives of civil society organizations involved in Hong Kong's democracy movement, brought together to craft a manifesto on human rights and democratic governance at their next event. Her attention was drawn to one line: that they would seek first direct elections, and then pursue equal rights and people's livelihood. As one of the

abbreviated as 民陣 (Mincuhj) is organization and the groups that constituted its membership formed the heart of Hong Kong's democracy movement—they were the most influential grassroots organizations able

or upper-class women.<sup>33</sup> Yet by the 1980s, many women involved in Student Unions, Christian organizations, political activist movements, and labor unions—spaces where they were often minoritized—began to realize that the solution for their marginalization was to create organizations specifically dedicated to their goals. The first women's advocacy group created entirely by local women was the Association for the Advancement of Feminism (AAF • 女性进步会, xìn fùnǚ xiéjìn huì) in 1984, though they were quickly followed by organizations such as Harmony House, the Hong Kong Federation





work gendered as masculine.<sup>42</sup> Women's domestic labor around the world is also rarely considered economic output.<sup>43</sup> While the cooking, cleaning, and childcare work women perform in their own homes certainly contributes to a capitalist society—indeed, that work creates the labor conditions that make a capitalist economy possible—it remains unpaid and ineligible for a whole host of other material benefits attached to paid work, from insurance to government benefits to inclusion in national and regional economic data. These facts are as true in Hm (-)Tj E36.1 (n)tote7Pic dstu27 (. n)-5.5 ((e)-8.1 (s)51 (f o)7 (t)-1o r)3.2



## **Hong Kong's Democratization Today and Recommendations for Policymakers**

Since the 2020 National Security Law, Hong Kong has seen civil society or-

policymakers who are considering support of particular organizations dedicated to democratization should consider how and why gender mainstreaming is critical to any democratization movement. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, women's organizations highlighted roadblocks to broader democratization that were often unnoticed or ignored by male organizers since the primary victims of those roadblocks were women. As United States policymakers, global NGOs, or citizens around the world imagine how and what democracy means, it is critical that we engage in gender mainstreaming to ensure that we are considering the impacts of policies on those citizens that society frequently marginalizes.

Similarly, policymakers should also consider how a lack of women's leadership in democracy organizations reflects upon the priorities of any democratization movement. The history of the 1980s in Hong Kong shows how powerful democracy organizations thought little about the gender dynamics of not just the policies they promoted but also their day-to-day functioning. While it is impossible to prove direct causality, the women dedicated to Hong Kong's democratization clearly believed the lack of female leadership contributed to why women's concerns were often ignored. As such, government-funded programs, international NGOs, and civil society organizations might begin by prioritizing relationships with female-led NGOs, platforming women as speakers in events pertaining to democracy, or emphasizing gender mainstreaming as a focus in international events and summits. The 2021 Summit for Democracy included a panel on women's rights and democracy, but integrating this throughout more sessions would be a better way to emphasize how gender mainstreaming is inherent to all questions pertaining to democracy's success. In practice, structural gender inequality is difficult to solve solely through a focus on representation or through speeches or events, but it is a start.

With both of these recommendations, it is worth noting that today, foreign aid for civil society organizations often comes with certain risks for those organizations. This, however, should not inhibit us from offering support, financial or otherwise. In all cases, we should listen to and privilege the voices of NGO and CSO leaders on how support would be most helpful.

Finally, this history tells us that there is not something intrinsic to China or Chinese-ness that is antithetical to democracy. It is common today to claim

that democratic values are incompatible with China, its governing structure, or its core cultural values. This is a claim not only repeated by Western policy-makers, journalists, and academics, but also by powerful leaders in Asia. Yet, at the heart of democratic values is the contention that it is the people who decide if their government, society, or culture can or should be more democratic, not foreign actors who look at that society as alien or foreign, nor its most powerful players who benefit from a non-democratic system with stark

## Notes

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Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991),

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- Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2000); 55–90.
22. Edmund Cheng, "Loyalist, Dissenter and Cosmopolite: The Sociocultural Origins of a Counter-public Sphere in Colonial Hong Kong," *The China Quarterly*, 246 (2021), 374–39; Joseph Y. S. Cheng, "The Democracy Movement in Hong Kong," *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944–) 65, no. 3 (1989): 443–62; 445–6. This was also confirmed with interviews with members of the Observers and members of other organizations active in the 1970s such as the Revolutionary Marxist League.
  23. Gary Ka-Wai Cheung has coined the term "watershed" for this movement in his book *Hong Kong's Watershed: The 1967 Riots* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009).
  24. Cheung, 132–138.
  25. S. Laurel Weldon, *When Protest Makes Policy: How Social Movements Represent Disadvantaged Groups*.
  26. Interview with Ms. A, 2023.
  27. Pik Wan Wong 王婉嫻, "Mincuhui nei de nujidutu" (Women Christians in the Joint Committee on the Promotion of Democratic Government" in Ma Ngok, ed., *Xianggang 80 niandai minzhu yundong koushu lishi* (Oral Histories of Hong Kong's 1980s Democracy Movement) (Hong Kong: City University Press, 2012), 96–112.
  28. Pik Wan Wang, "Mincuhui,"
  29. Interview with Ho Chi Kwan.
  30. Interviews with Ms. B and Ho Chi Kwan.
  31. Leung Laiching, "Funü yundong jiushi minzhu yundong" (The Women's Movement is the Democracy Movement," in Ma Ngok, ed., *Xianggang 80 niandai minzhu yundong koushu lishi* (Oral Histories of Hong Kong's 1980s Democracy Movement) (Hong Kong: City University Press, 2012), 112–126; 121.
  32. Wong discusses how one of their most popular songs asked everyone to sing in support of "good men (z A) rather than just good citizens" Pik Wan Wong, "Mincuhui," 104. This story was also mentioned to me in my interview with Ms. A, who recalls being frustrated by the song.
  33. For some summaries of the women's movement in Hong Kong, see Pik Wan Wong, *Negotiating Gender: The Women's Movement for Legal Reform in Colonial Hong Kong* (PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2000); Adelyn Lim, *Transnational feminism and women's movements in post-1997 Hong Kong: Solidarity beyond the state* (PhD dissertation, Hong Kong University Press, 2015); Wai-Man Lam and Irene LK Tong, "Political change and the women's movement in Hong Kong and Macau," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* (2008).

34. Interview with Ho Chi Kwan, March, 2023.
35. Wong, "Mincuhui," 107
36. • 新婦女協進會調查組, Xin Funü xiejienhui diaocha zu (Survey group of the Association of the Advancement of Feminism). "P Ö o Ÿ Z"; ?7 Y!©"8Ð Æ ° 8 á!< Xianggang nvxing canyu gongzhong shiwu zhuangkuang diaocha baogaoshu" (Report from the Survey on Hong Kong women's participation in public affairs). Hong Kong: Association for the Advancement of Feminism (1984).
37. Interview with Ms. C.
38. Leung Laiching, "Funü Yundong"
39. is was bluntly given to me as an example of (c) 47 (m) 30 (f) 8-24 (S) 11-6.5 (b)-3.o (m)-f (e)-19017-1 (o)

