

ARTICLE

Feminist Metaphors of Force and Obstacle: Constructing Empowerment and Inhibition in American and Chinese Magazines

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Abstract

Cross-cultural analyses of feminist issues in magazines remain scarce. Metaphorical use influences societal attitudes toward gender equality and resistance. This study investigates the feminist metaphors of force and obstacle in American magazines *Ms.* and *Bust* (1,617 articles; 2.13 million words) and Chinese magazines *Women of China* and *Marriage and Family* (5,182 articles; 3.63 million words), using corpus tools, the Metaphor Identification Procedure, and an inter-coder reliability check, revealing how cultural and ideological contexts construct narratives of empowerment and inhibition. Results show that, after normalization per 100,000 words, force metaphors are nearly three times more frequent in the Chinese corpus (194.8 per 100,000 words) than in the American corpus (69.8 per 100,000 words), whereas obstacle metaphors show the reverse pattern (35.0 versus 3.6 per 100,000 words). American discourse pairs force with repeated, adversarial talk of barriers to be broken, removed, or dismantled, reflecting liberal individualism and often critiquing structural inequities. Chinese discourse is saturated with collective force metaphors of solidarity and institutional coordination, yet rarely frames women's progress as obstructed, instead emphasizing coordinated agency and top-down synergy. These distinctions illustrate how sociopolitical ideologies shape the conceptualization of gender equality, positioning feminism as both a transformative force and a movement constrained by cultural narratives.

Keywords: feminist metaphors; empowerment; inhibition; American and Chinese magazines; sociopolitical ideologies

1. INTRODUCTION

Metaphors serve as cognitive and ideological tools that shape public perceptions of feminism. The movement advocating for gender equality and social justice continues to be a significant global force, though its interpretation and portrayal are heavily influenced by cultural and linguistic contexts [1]. Metaphors, as linguistic devices deeply rooted in cognition, are instrumental in shaping how society views this movement, often depicting it as a battle, a voyage, or even a disease, depending on the surrounding ideological and situational factors [2,3].

In Western settings, research underscores the dual nature of metaphors as both empowering and divisive tools. Janusz explored feminist poetry and historical documents, uncovering how metaphors once used to belittle women (such as equating femininity with “emotionality”) were reclaimed by poets like Audre Lorde to contest patriarchal worldviews [4]. Nicholson criticized the wave metaphor in feminist history for its oversimplification and proposed a “kaleidoscope” model to better represent the multifaceted and intersectional nature of feminist activism [5]. Experiments with Spanish news show that war metaphors (e.g., “struggle for autonomy”) bolstered the perception of feminism [6]. Comparing U.S. and U.K. newspapers, Rub observed that American media favored war metaphors (e.g., “combating systemic oppression”), while British outlets leaned towards journey metaphors (e.g., “road to equality”), reflecting cultural emphases on conflict versus gradual progress [7]. Batterson analyzed

Emma Watson's UN address, noting how metaphors like "imprisonment" redefined gender stereotypes as societal ills but unintentionally perpetuated negative stereotypes by avoiding the term "feminism" [8]. Recent corpus-based feminist critical discourse studies extend this picture to other underrepresented groups and regions. For example, a feminist critical discourse analysis of English-language outlets (The Independent and BBC News) shows how Muslim women are represented as symbolic subjects through whom ideological debates about modernity, morality and security are negotiated—even when the discourse producers themselves identify as Muslim [9]. Likewise, a corpus-based feminist framing analysis of 1,191 news articles on violence against women in Egyptian media (2020–2024) reveals that, despite growing coverage, reporting remains shaped by victim-blaming and episodic frames grounded in patriarchal sociocultural norms [10]. Overall, studies indicate that metaphors in poetry, news, feminist history, newspapers, and speeches generally portray feminism positively, though some usages cast women and their struggles in a negative light.

Conversely, research in Asian contexts shows the negativity of metaphors for portraying feminist issues. Ahmed applied Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis to Nigerian newspapers, revealing that metaphors like "Women Are Commodities" (25.66%) reinforced patriarchal objectification, even when female writers attempted to subvert these narratives [11]. Analyzing Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles*, Yang highlighted how spatial metaphors (e.g., the kitchen as a "confined female space") critiqued gendered power dynamics in early 20th-century America [12]. In Chinese contexts, metaphors in state-aligned magazines and social platforms frame feminism in ways that reinforce traditional norms or state agenda, often depicting it as disruptive or incompatible with societal harmony. The evolution of metaphors in *Women of China* magazine shows a shift from "Women Are Warriors" (1950s–1960s) to "Women Are Flowers" (1990s), aligning with state narratives that favored harmony over conflict [13]. Bao analyzed over 200,000 Weibo posts, identifying six metaphor categories, war (62.2%), business (15.6%), disease (14.2%), animal (3.1%), religion (3.1%), and others (1.7%) [14]. War metaphors depicted feminism as a "destructive force" (e.g., "feminist terrorism"), while business metaphors framed it as a "commercial enterprise" (e.g., "feminist profiteers"). Disease metaphors likened feminism to a "social cancer", and animal metaphors dehumanized feminists as "mad dogs" or "parasites". In contrast, metaphors describing the feminist identity among South Koreans are more positive. Studies on South Korean female university students show that feminist identity emerges as a collective "awakening", fueled by shared learning and dialogue, and framed as a "light" against systemic inequality and anti-feminist stigma [15].

Studies in both Western [4–8] and Asian contexts [11–15], as well as recent corpus-based feminist critical discourse studies in English-language, Middle-Eastern media [9,10], demonstrate that metaphors shape feminist discourse through varied frameworks, ranging from conflict-driven to culturally constrained. Recent corpus-assisted critical discourse research also highlights how national ideologies condition the lexical and metaphorical representation of gender. A corpus-based comparison of LGBTQ+ related opinion discourse in Nigerian and South African newspapers (2014–2024) documents stark divergences, with Nigerian media framing queer identities through moral panic, criminalisation and religious deviance, whereas South African opinion discourse foregrounds rights, visibility and advocacy [16]. Such findings reinforce the argument that framing choices are products of distinct ideological systems rather than deviations from a Western standard. However, these studies often fall short by failing to integrate cognitive and cultural analyses. Most rely solely on Conceptual Metaphor Theory or framing theory, neglecting the interplay between hierarchical structures like image schemas, domains, and frames with cultural ideologies. Li's comparative study of anger metaphors in English and Chinese highlights this gap [17]. While Chinese metaphors emphasized "qi" (energy) influenced by traditional medicine, English metaphors relied on "dangerous animals" to conceptualize anger. Yet, such analyses rarely extend to feminist discourse or magazine corpora, leaving unexplored how cognitive hierarchies interact with cultural ideologies to shape gendered representations. Additionally, systematic cross-cultural comparisons between Western and Asian contexts, particularly those examining how cultural ideologies like individualism versus collectivism influence metaphorical representations, are lacking. This oversight perpetuates a fragmented understanding of global feminism, where Western metaphors are often seen as the standard, while non-Western contexts are treated as deviations rather than products of distinct ideological systems.

Magazines, as platforms for sustained ideological engagement, remain understudied. Unlike newspapers, which prioritize brevity, or social media, which is characterized by fragmented content, magazines provide in-depth exploration of gender issues through editorials, interviews, and features. This narrative depth allows magazines to construct and reinforce ideological narratives over time [18].

This study addresses these gaps by examining metaphorical representations of feminism in U.S. (*Ms.*, *Bust*) and Chinese (*Women of China* and *Marriage and Family*) magazines through Kövecses' Multilevel View of Conceptual Metaphors [19]. The research questions are as follows: How do these magazines employ metaphors to frame feminism as a force for empowerment or an inhibitory obstacle? What cultural, political, and ideological distinctions underlie these framings?

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1. Corpus Source

The data for analyzing feminist metaphorical expressions in American and Chinese contexts were drawn from four online-accessible women's magazines without subscription. The American dataset was compiled from two influential feminist magazines. The first is *Ms.* [20], which is a feminist magazine founded in 1972 by American feminist Gloria Steinem and others. The magazine is known for its exploration and advocacy of women's rights, gender equality and feminist issues. It covers not only the achievements and challenges of women in the political, economic, cultural and social spheres, but also all aspects of women's lives, including health, education, career and family [21]. *Ms.* magazine has influenced generations of women and men, becoming one of the important voices of the feminist movement [22]. The second American source is *Bust* [23], founded in 1993, an American cultural magazine centered on feminism. *Bust* is dedicated to exploring and promoting the independent spirit and diverse interests of women in art, music, fashion, film, literature and more. Known for its non-commercial, iconoclastic editorial style and independent spirit, *Bust* addresses young women and feminists [24]. According to Groeneveld, *Bust* showcases the creativity, achievements and social roles of women in contemporary society through in-depth feature stories and commentaries [24]. For the Chinese dataset, two online feminist magazines were selected. The first is *Women of China* [25], which is a monthly magazine published by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF). Founded in 1939, *Women of China* is the longest-running women's magazine in Chinese history. The magazine covers a wide range of topics, including women's health, rights, education, employment, entrepreneurship and the environment [26]. The magazine holds a significant position in the history of women's magazines in China. In the 1950s, it not only fulfilled the tasks of disseminating national policies and shaping new female images, but also broadened the horizons of women through daily life guidance and discussions on female topics, providing practical assistance to the lives of women at that time [27]. The second is *Marriage and Family* [28], an academic magazine co-sponsored by China Marriage and Family Research Association and China Women's Magazine, focusing on marriage and family issues. Since its inception in 1985, *Marriage and Family* has exerted a wide influence in China and even around the world with its rich and touching content, authoritative and authentic reports and rigorous and pragmatic spirit [29]. These four outlets differ in institutional affiliation. *Ms.* and *Bust* operate independently of state sponsorship, whereas *Women of China* is issued by the ACWF and *Marriage and Family* is sponsored by national academic associations. This asymmetry was treated as part of the sociopolitical landscape under comparison rather than as a confound to be eliminated. The criteria for selecting articles from these magazines were as follows. Firstly, only articles authored by the magazines' editors or contributors were considered, with third-party reprints and advertisements excluded. Secondly, the articles are on women issues and accessible online, with paywalls or subscriptions excluded. Finally, the selected magazines should be published between July 1, 2023 and June 30, 2024, a full year span covering the publishing cycles of the four magazines. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the American and Chinese corpora.

Table 1. Comparative Table of American and Chinese Corpus

Data Category	Number of Articles	Number of Words
Articles in American magazine <i>Ms.</i>	1, 041	1,613,274
Articles in American magazine <i>Bust</i>	576	514,596

Total American articles	1,617	2,127,870
Articles in Chinese magazine <i>Women of China</i>	3,837	3,159,025
Articles in Chinese magazine <i>Marriage and Family</i>	1,345	472,320
Total Chinese articles	5,182	3,631,345

2.2. Data Analysis

With methodological grounding in existing research on frequency- and collocation-based metaphor analysis [30], the analytical process for the American magazine data commenced by importing the text corpora from *Ms.* and *Bust* into AntConc 4.2.4 to conduct a word frequency analysis. Words appearing 100 times or more were prioritized, while function words were filtered out. This step generated a list of 62 substantive terms, predominantly nouns and verbs, which formed the foundation for the subsequent metaphor analysis. Following this, significant collocates of 24 feminism-related keywords, such as “struggle”, “advancement”, and “equality”, were identified using the Collocate function, with a minimum MI-Score of 3.0. These collocations provided critical insights into central feminist ideas and their socio-cultural underpinnings. The Keyword in Context (KWIC) function was then utilized to explore the contextual usage of these metaphorical collocates, revealing cultural values and historical influences. Additionally, the Pragglejaz Group’s Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) was applied to detect metaphorical uses of feminism-related terms [31]. For instance, the phrase “forging a stronger alliance for inclusive governance through our latest campaign” exemplifies the “battle” metaphor framing activism as a coordinated and strategic endeavor. For the Chinese magazine data, the process began by uploading the corpora from *Women of China* and *Marriage and Family* into SegmentAnt 1.0.0 for word segmentation. The segmented texts were then analyzed using AntConc 4.2.4 to perform a word frequency analysis. High-frequency words with 100 or more occurrences were extracted after excluding function words, resulting in a list of 77 meaningful terms, primarily nouns and verbs, which were used for metaphor analysis. Significant collocates of 32 feminism-related keywords, such as “发展 (development)”, “平等 (equality)”, and “奋斗 (struggle)”, were identified using the Collocate function with an MI-Score of at least 3.0. These collocations illuminated key feminist concepts and their socio-cultural contexts within Chinese discourse. The KWIC function was further employed to examine the contextual usage of these metaphorical collocates, uncovering cultural values and historical influences embedded in the texts. The MIP, based on the Pragglejaz Group methodology, was also applied [31]. For example, the phrase “突破传统束缚 (break through traditional constraints)” was identified as representing the obstacle metaphor, emphasizing the societal and cultural obstacles women face in their pursuit of equality. A comparative analysis was then conducted to explore the similarities and differences in feminist conceptual metaphors across the American and Chinese magazine corpora. Metaphorical expressions identified through the KWIC and MIP [31] were categorized to uncover their cognitive and social functions. By comparing the types, frequencies, distributions, and meanings of these metaphors, both shared patterns and distinct linguistic and cultural variations in the portrayal of feminism were revealed. This phase of the analysis examined how these similarities and differences in metaphorical expressions reflect diverse conceptions of gender and cognitive frameworks, while also assessing their impact on public perceptions of feminism across different linguistic and cultural contexts. To safeguard the reliability of metaphor identification, a second trained coder independently coded a randomly selected 20 percent of the MIP-identified concordance lines, blind to the first coder’s annotations. Inter-coder agreement reached 91 percent, with Cohen’s κ of 0.86 [32]; disagreements, mostly involving borderline literal uses of push and 推动, were resolved through discussion. Because the two corpora differ in size (2,127,870 versus 3,631,345 words; Table 1), raw counts were normalized to occurrences per 100,000 words before cross-cultural comparison. The lexical realizations compared emerged from each corpus’s own high-frequency list rather than being imposed a priori, which is why the American side comprises three lemmas (power, powerful, push) while the Chinese side comprises five (力量, 聚力, 推动, 赋能, 能量).

3. RESULTS

The American corpus yielded 1,486 force-metaphor tokens (power, powerful, push) and 745 obstacle-metaphor tokens (barriers, challenges), whereas the Chinese corpus yielded 7,073

force-metaphor tokens (力量, 聚力, 推动, 赋能, 能量) and 130 obstacle-metaphor tokens (挑战). Normalized per 100,000 words, these counts become 69.8 and 35.0 for the American corpus and 194.8 and 3.6 for the Chinese corpus. In this paper, the manifestations and comparison of the two feminist conceptual metaphors in the corpus of American and Chinese magazines will be examined.

3.1. The Force and Obstacle Metaphors in the Corpus of American Magazines

Table 2 shows the example of force metaphors with the lexical realizations of “power (powerful, push)” in *Ms.* and *Bust.*

Table 2. Feminist Force Metaphors with the Lexical Realizations of “power (powerful, push)”

Lexical Realizations	Frequency	Collocate	MI-Score	Example
power	1054	political	6.106	1. Ensuring that women have political power and are equally represented in decision-making is not only morally right; it also yields practical benefits.
powerful	271	most	6.897	2. Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, is one of the most powerful anti-abortion lobbying groups in the country.
push	161	for	4.04	3. Women were excluded from our founding documents, but the push for gender equality has been taken up by successive generations of women.

The feminist force metaphor constructs feminism as a dynamic, transformative power that drives societal change. This conceptual framing emerges through lexical choices such as power, powerful, and push, which collectively map physical and social force onto feminist activism.

In Example 1, the phrase “political power” illustrates how force metaphors position feminism as a catalyst for structural change. The collocation of “power” with “political” (MI-Score=6.106) underscores the prioritization of institutional influence, framing women’s representation in decision-making as both a moral imperative and a pragmatic strategy. This aligns with Kövecses’ multilevel framework [19]. At the image-schema level, power evokes physical dominance. At the domain level, it signifies political agency; and at the frame level, it situates feminism within historical struggles for equity, such as court battles over funding for Black women entrepreneurs or electoral breakthroughs in Mexico and Iceland. The Pragglejazz Method [31] confirms that power transcends literal governance, metaphorically amplifying feminism’s role in reshaping hierarchies. Yet this very framing exposes a paradox. While power suggests efficacy, its frequent pairing with political hints at the precarity of feminist gains, often contingent on volatile policy landscapes.

Example 2 further complicates this narrative. Describing Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America as “one of the most powerful anti-abortion lobbying groups” juxtaposes feminist force with its opposition. The superlative “most powerful” (MI-Score=6.897) intensifies the metaphor and reveals how anti-feminist movements co-opt the language of strength to legitimize regressive agendas. The feminist force metaphor operates dialectically. It celebrates feminist resilience while inadvertently validating adversaries who mirror its rhetorical strategies. Kövecses’ domain-level analysis clarifies this tension. The metaphor’s focus on powerful as a neutral attribute (force) obscures its ideological valence, allowing both progressive and conservative actors to weaponize it. This duality mirrors the broader cultural ambivalence toward feminism, where its perceived “force” is celebrated as empowerment by supporters yet vilified as aggression by detractors.

Example 3’s use of “push for gender equality” shifts the metaphor toward motion and momentum. The collocation of “push” with “for” (MI-Score=4.04) frames feminism as a sustained, collective effort rather than a static achievement. At the image-schema level, push evokes physical propulsion, mapping onto grassroots activism and legislative advocacy. At the domain level, it aligns with narratives of incremental progress, such as the decades-long fight for reproductive rights or workplace equity. However, this forward motion is not frictionless. The metaphor implicitly acknowledges resistance, every push implies an opposing force, whether societal inertia, institutionalized misogyny, or economic disparities.

Collectively, these force metaphors construct feminism as both an agent of change and a contested terrain. They reflect a cultural tension, feminism’s “force” is celebrated as a driver of progress yet constrained by the very systems it seeks to transform. While these metaphors emphasize empowerment,

their usage also reveals tensions between feminism’s perceived agency and the systemic barriers it confronts, a duality that mirrors the perpetual negotiation between feminist ambition and structural resistance. Table 3 presents feminist Obstacle Metaphors with the Lexical Realizations of “barriers (challenges)”.

Table 3. Feminist Obstacle Metaphors with the Lexical Realizations of “barriers (challenges)”

Lexical Realizations	Frequency	Collocate	MI-Score	Example
barriers	427	removes	10.459	4. The results of that election reinforced our findings that RCV removes barriers for diverse women to run and win.
		breaking	9.542	5. Women in Liberia are breaking barriers by taking on roles in fields traditionally dominated by men.
		dismantling	8.173	6. We believe dismantling barriers to equality for women of all backgrounds will spark widespread social progress.
challenges	318	face	5.025	7. Women still face challenges in achieving equal representation in government, despite making “historic” gains in elected office in recent years.

The feminist obstacle metaphor frames gender equality as a journey marked by systemic resistance. Terms like barriers and challenges construct a spatial and ideological landscape where feminism must navigate, dismantle, or transcend institutional and cultural blockages. This metaphorical framing mirrors the dual reality of feminist movements, celebrated for their resilience yet perpetually constrained by the very structures they contest.

In Example 4, the phrase “removes barriers” situates feminism within electoral politics, where ranked-choice voting (RCV) is portrayed as a tool to disrupt patriarchal gatekeeping. The collocation of “barriers” with “removes” (MI-Score=10.459) underscores a narrative of institutional reform, positioning feminism as an active force eroding structural inequities. At the image-schema level, barriers evoke physical walls, mapping onto exclusionary policies that limit women’s political access. At the domain level, this metaphor critiques gendered power dynamics, framing electoral systems as contested terrain. At the frame level, it aligns with historical struggles, such as suffrage movements, where procedural changes like RCV symbolize incremental victories. Yet, the metaphor’s emphasis on removal subtly acknowledges the persistence of these barriers, suggesting that progress is conditional and reversible. Barriers metaphorically distance women from full political agency, framing equality as a destination yet to be reached.

Example 5’s “breaking barriers” shifts the metaphor toward confrontation. The collocation of “barriers” with “breaking” (MI-Score=9.542) conjures images of shattering glass ceilings, a common trope in narratives of women entering male-dominated fields. The image schema of fragmentation (breaking) maps onto societal disruption, the domain ties to labor and leadership inequities, and the frame situates feminism within broader social transformation, such as Liberia’s post-war reconstruction. However, the metaphor’s celebratory tone, which emphasizes triumph, risks obscuring the ongoing labor required to sustain such breakthroughs. It requires continual spiritual effort, breaking barriers implies a cyclical struggle where each shattered obstacle reveals new layers of resistance.

Example 6’s “dismantling barriers” introduces a more systematic approach to feminist activism. The pairing of “dismantling” with “barriers” (MI-Score=8.173) evokes architectural deconstruction, framing gender inequality as a structural edifice requiring deliberate disassembly. At the image-schema level, this metaphor draws from mechanical disassembly, suggesting precision and intentionality. At the domain level, it critiques legal and economic systems that perpetuate inequity, while the frame connects to global movements like #MeToo, where systemic change is demanded. Yet, dismantling also implies incompleteness, a project never fully realized. The metaphor thus encapsulates feminism’s dual role, both critic and architect of social order.

Finally, Example 7’s “face challenges” encapsulates the existential friction of feminist labor. The collocation of “challenges” with “face” (MI-Score=5.025) frames gender equality as a confrontation, where obstacles are not passive but actively resisted. At the image-schema level, facing evokes bodily orientation toward adversity. At the domain level, it critiques political underrepresentation. At the frame level, it connects to historical milestones like the Seneca Falls Convention, where confrontation

with societal norms became a catalyst for change. However, facing challenges also implies endurance, a metaphor not of victory but of survival.

These obstacle metaphors collectively construct feminism as a dialectic of resistance and resilience. They do not merely list hindrances but map a relational geography where barriers define the contours of feminist possibility. This spatial framing also risks reifying obstacles as immutable, casting feminism as eternally reactive rather than transformative. Crucially, these metaphors intersect with earlier force metaphors (power, push), creating a dynamic interplay where feminism is both the force that dismantles barriers and the movement constrained by them. By embedding feminist discourse within this tension, the metaphors reveal a deeper truth, gender equality is not a static achievement but a continuous negotiation, where every dismantled barrier unveils new frontiers of struggle.

3.2. The Force and Obstacle Metaphors in the Corpus of Chinese Magazines

Table 4 shows feminist force metaphors with the lexical realizations “力量 (power) (聚力 (collective power))”.

Table 4. Feminist Force Metaphors with the Lexical Realizations “力量 (power) (聚力 (collective power))”

Lexical Realizations	Frequency	Collocate	MI-Score	Example
力量 (power)	3,086	磅礴 (great)	7.808	8. 唐昕表示，奋力开创现代化新南岸建设新局面，需要凝聚包括广大女同胞在内的磅礴力量。(Tang Xin said that striving to create a new situation in the construction of the new modern south bank, we need to gather the great power including the majority of female compatriots.)
聚力 (collective power)	219	开创 (pioneer)	7.824	9. 提高妇女健康权益保障，踔厉奋发、勇毅前行，凝心聚力开创关爱女性健康工作新局面。(Strengthening the protection of women’s health rights, forging ahead with determination, and harnessing collective power to pioneer a new chapter in advancing women’s health and well-being.)

A dynamic and multifaceted force driving social progress is portrayed in Chinese magazines. This metaphorical construction, encapsulated in the overarching theme, “force metaphors,” integrates diverse lexical expressions to emphasize collective agency, institutional support, and collaborative action. The metaphors interlock to shape a narrative of empowerment that positions women as active contributors to national development and social transformation.

Central to this metaphor is the notion of collective strength, exemplified by terms like “磅礴力量 (great power)” and “聚力 (collective power)”. Example 8 illustrates how women’s federations mobilize “great power” to advance modernization, framing feminist efforts as an unstoppable social current. This aligns with Kövecses’ image schema of energy diffusion, where aggregated force symbolizes the pervasive influence of women’s roles in societal change [19]. Similarly, Example 9 employs “凝心聚力 (harnessing collective power)” to depict women’s health advocacy as a unified endeavor, reinforcing the idea that progress relies on communal resolve. These metaphors collectively underscore the societal expectation for women to act as cohesive agents of change with their strength magnified through solidarity.

Table 5 shows feminist force metaphors with the lexical realization “推动 (promote)”. The analysis of force-related metaphors in Chinese feminist discourse reveals a nuanced conceptual ecosystem where terms like “推动 (promote)” frame feminism as a dynamic, goal-oriented force. Rather than isolated linguistic choices, these metaphors interlock to construct a narrative of empowerment that is both collectively driven and institutionally sanctioned. Feminist progress is portrayed not merely as individual agency but as a coordinated societal endeavor, one embedded in China’s socio-political ethos.

Table 5. Feminist Force Metaphors with the Lexical Realization “推动 (promote)”

Conceptual Metaphor	Frequency	Lexical Realization	Collocate	MI-Score	Example
Force metaphors	2,833	推动 (promote)	通武廊 (Tongzhou, Wuqing, and Langfang)	6.775	10. 在深化区域协作上找抓手、求突破， 推动 通武廊妇女领域协同发展不断迈上新台阶。(Identify key areas and breakthroughs to deepen regional cooperation, promoting the coordinated development of women's affairs in the Tongzhou-Wuqing-Langfang region to new heights.)

In Example 10, “推动 (promote)” is used to describe regional collaboration among women’s federations in the Tongzhou-Wuqing-Langfang area. The metaphor operates on multiple levels. At the image-schema level, it evokes the physical act of pushing an object forward, aligning with Kövecses’ notion of force as directional energy [19]. This is not a passive process but an intentional exertion, mirrored in the MI-Score of 6.775 between “推动 (promote)” and “通武廊 (Tongzhou-Wuqing-Langfang)”, which underscores regional coordination as a strategic lever for feminist progress. The domain-level focus on “social collaborative development” positions feminism as a catalyst for structural change, while the frame-level emphasis on “progress and transformation” ties women’s advancement to broader national goals like regional integration. This metaphor thus transcends mere policy jargon. It frames feminist action as a synergistic force that aligns local initiatives with macro-level modernization agenda.

Table 6 shows feminist force metaphors with the lexical realization “赋能 (empowered)”.

Table 6. Feminist Force Metaphors with the Lexical Realization “赋能 (empowered)”

Conceptual Metaphor	Frequency	Lexical Realization	Collocate	MI-Score	Example
Force metaphors	677	赋能 (empowered)	蓄力 (build up momentum)	9.139	11. 以巾帼家政技能培训为千名“好宁嫂” 赋能 蓄力，举办 200 场“巾帼健康行动”大宣讲为妇女健康保驾护航。(It also empowered and built up momentum for thousands of “Good Ning Sisters” through training in housekeeping skills for women, and organized 200 large-scale lectures of the “Women’s Health Action” to protect women’s health.)

Example 11 is about the collaborative efforts between Fujian and Ningxia Women’s Federations, involving cross-regional assistance, empowerment initiatives, health and education support, economic empowerment through skill training and e-commerce, and fostering a deep sisterhood between women across mountains and seas. The words “赋能 (empowered)” and “蓄力 (build up momentum)” show the force metaphor. “赋能 (empowered)” means giving power, while “蓄力 (build up momentum)” emphasizes accumulating energy in preparation for future action. The metaphor embodies the accumulation and release of energy at the image schemas level, involves vocational training and health security at the domain level, and highlights women’s social recognition through skill improvement at the frame level. Collocation analysis shows that “赋能 (empowered)” and “蓄力 (build up momentum)” co-occur, with an MI-Score of 9.139, indicating that the two are highly correlated. The MIP method confirms that “赋能 (empowered)” is metaphorical, indicating that feminism is constructed in the social context as a driving force to promote the improvement of women’s ability and the accumulation of development potential energy. Yet this metaphor also implies dependency. Empowerment becomes a resource distributed by institutional actors rather than an inherent right. The “force” of feminism is not self-generated but pipelined through top-down initiatives, framing women as beneficiaries of systemic largesse rather than architects of their own liberation.

Table 7 shows feminist force metaphors with the lexical realization “能量 (energy)”.

Table 7. Feminist Force Metaphors with the Lexical Realization “能量 (energy)”

Conceptual Metaphor	Frequency	Lexical Realization	Collocate	MI-Score	Example
Force metaphors	258	能量 (energy)	大大的 (大) (great)	9.946 (6.234)	12. 小小的她，蓄积着大大的 能量 ，她创建的清凉山茶电商团队，积累粉丝 4 万余人，成交 3 万余单，销售额达 500 余万，间接带动 1.65 万农户近 6 万人受益，户均增收 3000 余元。(...Small she, accumulated great energy , the cool camellia e-commerce team she created, accumulated more than 40,000 fans, sold more than 30,000 orders, and reached more than 5 million sales. Indirectly, 16,500 rural households benefited nearly 60,000 people, and the average household income increased by more than 3,000 yuan.)

Example 12 highlights how the “Qingliang Mountain” tea company, led by a mother-daughter duo, uses its success to promote women’s entrepreneurship and boost rural income through a combined focus on product quality, technological advancement, and community development. The “能量 (energy)” reflects the force metaphor. The image schemas level reflects the accumulation and release of energy, the domain level involves economic entrepreneurship and social empowerment, and the frame level shows the process of women’s economic independence through e-commerce entrepreneurship. The collocation with “大大的 (great)” (MI-Score=9.946) portrays women’s entrepreneurial efforts as dynamic, even explosive forces, “小小的她 (small she)” generating outsized impact. The story of the “Qingliang Mountain” tea team exemplifies how rural women harness e-commerce to uplift entire communities. Force is decentralized, emanating from grassroots initiatives rather than institutional mandates. Yet the metaphor’s emphasis on economic metrics (“sales”, “income growth”) reduces feminist progress to market success, aligning women’s empowerment with neoliberal ideals of productivity. Energy, in this framing, is valuable insofar as it fuels economic engines, a transactional view that risks equating empowerment with profit.

Table 8 shows feminist obstacle metaphors with the lexical realization “挑战 (challenges)”.

Table 8. Feminist Obstacle Metaphors with the Lexical Realization “挑战 (challenges)”

Conceptual Metaphors	Frequency	Lexical Realization	Collocate	MI-Score	Example
Obstacle metaphors	130	挑战 (challenges)	各种 (various)	7.325	13.她们以“乘风破浪”的姿态，迎接工作中的各种 挑战 和困难。(With the attitude of “riding the wind and waves”, they meet various challenges and difficulties in their work.)

Example 13 describes the achievements of women in Tongliao, Inner Mongolia, during the city’s first Women’s Workers Sports Meet, using the obstacle metaphor. The lexical realization “挑战 (challenges)” maps to the target domain “obstacles,” reflecting life’s challenges as barriers to feminist progress. Obstacles, as an image schema, highlight the dynamic between barriers and breakthroughs, concretizing workplace dilemmas as hurdles to overcome. At the domain level, obstacles shift from the physical world to professional and social contexts, illustrating structural barriers to women’s equality. Framing feminism as an ongoing process of resisting and overcoming obstacles emphasizes female subjectivity and resilience. In mental spaces, the metaphor fosters a positive attitude toward overcoming difficulties. The collocation with “各种 (various)” (MI-Score=7.325) frames barriers as omnipresent yet surmountable through resilience (“riding the wind and waves”). This metaphor introduces friction into the narrative. Feminist force is no longer a smooth trajectory but a struggle against resistance. At the domain level, obstacles like workplace discrimination or social norms are recast as trials to be conquered, reinforcing a teleological view where progress is inevitable but arduous.

However, this framing risks romanticizing struggle, portraying systemic inequities as individual challenges to “overcome” rather than structures to dismantle.

4. DISCUSSION

The feminist metaphors of force and obstacle emerge as central frameworks through which empowerment and inhibition are constructed in American and Chinese magazines. This study produces three findings. Firstly, in American magazines, the feminist force metaphor constructs feminist activism as a dynamic struggle against systemic barriers but risks legitimizing adversarialism and co-optation by anti-feminist movements. Secondly, the obstacle metaphor is far more prominent in American discourse (35.0 per 100,000 words) than in Chinese discourse (3.6 per 100,000 words); treating inequality as something that can be overcome, it overlooks deeper, interconnected forms of discrimination. Thirdly, although force metaphors are in both raw and normalized terms more frequent in Chinese magazines, Chinese magazines frame feminism through collectivist “force” aligned with state-driven modernization, whereas American force metaphors, though less frequent, collocate with frequent obstacle talk and take an adversarial stance. Chinese obstacle metaphors, where they occur, individualize structural issues, reflecting neoliberal ideologies.

Firstly, in American magazines, the force metaphor presents feminist activism as a fight against systemic barriers, but it may also encourage conflict and allow anti-feminist groups to take control of the movement. The use of force-related terms (power, push, fight) in American discourse constructs feminism as an active, collective struggle against systemic barriers. This framing avoids the linearity of the “wave” metaphor criticized by Nicholson, which reduces feminist history to discrete phases (first, second, third waves) [5]. Instead, “force” accommodates overlapping efforts (e.g., grassroots mobilization, legal battles) and acknowledges the persistence of patriarchy. The metaphor’s emphasis on dynamism aligns with Janusz’s argument that repurposed metaphors can destabilize patriarchal epistemologies [4]. However, the adversarial tone of “force” risks conflating feminist agency with confrontation, a tension evident when anti-abortion groups co-opt terms like “powerful” to legitimize regressive agendas. However, this framing also exposes tensions. The term powerful exemplifies the dual-edged nature of force metaphors. While it celebrates feminist resilience (e.g., “most powerful anti-abortion lobbying groups”), it inadvertently validates oppositional rhetoric by framing strength as a neutral attribute. This mirrors Ahmed’s analysis of Nigerian newspapers, where metaphors like “Women are a Force” paradoxically reinforce gendered roles by reducing women’s agency to supportive functions [11]. The contradiction underscores the need for intentional metaphorical framing, metaphors must be strategically anchored to feminist goals to avoid co-option by patriarchal systems.

Secondly, the obstacle metaphor is present in both American and Chinese magazines and frames inequality as a challenge to be overcome while ignoring complex, interconnected forms of discrimination such as women from minority groups facing racism and sexism, low-income women experiencing class and gender bias, and disabled women encountering discrimination based on both gender and disability. Obstacle metaphors (barriers, challenges) spatialize feminist struggles, positioning inequality as a navigable landscape. This aligns with Hewitt’s “radio wave” model, which rejects linear progression (waves) in favor of intersecting, simultaneous efforts (e.g., suffrage movements intersecting with labor rights) [33]. However, the metaphor risks naturalizing resistance by portraying barriers as inherent to societal structures. For example, framing electoral reforms as “removing barriers” implies systemic inequities are fixable anomalies, obscuring their deep-rooted, intersectional origins (e.g., racism, classism). This tension reflects Rub’s observation that war metaphors in U.S. media frame feminism as a perpetual battle, legitimizing patriarchal resistance as a “natural” adversary [7]. However, the obstacle metaphor also risks naturalizing resistance. By portraying barriers as immutable features of the sociopolitical landscape, it may inadvertently legitimize the very hierarchies it seeks to critique.

Thirdly, Chinese magazines portray feminism through collectivist “force” metaphors linked to state-led progress, in stark contrast to American individualism. Meanwhile, obstacle metaphors in China personalize systemic problems, reflecting neoliberal views. In Chinese magazines, force metaphors (力量 (power), 推动 (promote)) emphasize state-institutional collaboration and national

development. For instance, “磅礴力量 (great power)” positions feminist progress as a collective endeavor aligned with modernization goals [13]. This contrasts with the U.S. focus on individual activism (push, fight). However, terms like “赋能 (empowered)” often depict women as beneficiaries of top-down policies rather than autonomous agents, echoing Batterson’s critique of Emma Watson’s “HeForShe” campaign, which positions men as saviors [8]. The collectivist framing risks obscuring grassroots dissent, as seen in Bao’s analysis of Weibo, where feminism is stigmatized as “disruptive” [14].

Two caveats qualify this contrast. First, the two corpora differ in institutional affiliation as well as national context. *Ms.* and *Bust* are independent feminist outlets, whereas *Women of China* is All-China Women’s Federation-affiliated and *Marriage and Family* is sponsored by national academic associations. Part of the observed difference may therefore reflect editorial tradition rather than national culture alone. Second, the lexical coverage of force metaphors is wider on the Chinese side (five lemmas) than on the American side (three lemmas), so cross-cultural frequency comparison is approximate rather than exact. We therefore rest the contrast on normalized rates and, more importantly, on collocational style. American force collocates with barrier removal and references to anti-feminist opponents, while Chinese force collocates with regional coordination and top-down empowerment.

Chinese obstacle metaphors (e.g., 挑战 (challenges)) frame barriers as trials to be overcome through resilience. While this celebrates perseverance, it individualizes systemic issues (e.g., workplace discrimination) as personal hurdles, akin to Cinderella-style narratives. Such narratives deflect accountability from structural patriarchy, echoing Yang’s analysis of Trifles, where women’s labor is invisibilized [12]. The emphasis on “endurance” also resonates with neoliberal ideologies that equate empowerment with personal grit, sidelining demands for institutional reform.

The interplay between force and obstacle metaphors reflects feminism’s dual identity: it critiques existing power structures while advocating for new ones. In the U.S., war metaphors (fight, attack) position feminists as challengers of patriarchy, whereas Chinese “collective force” metaphors (聚力 (collective power)) frame feminism as a state-aligned builder of national progress. This duality mirrors Alexander et al.’s “unhappy marriage” metaphor, where feminist solidarity with broader movements (e.g., leftist politics) is both empowering and precarious [34]. The tension highlights the cultural specificity of metaphorical framing and its implications for feminist praxis.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the intricate ways in which conceptual metaphors shape perceptions of feminism in American and Chinese magazines, offering a nuanced understanding of how empowerment and inhibition are linguistically constructed across cultural contexts. By analyzing the feminist metaphors of force and obstacle, the research reveals that these frameworks are not mere rhetorical devices but cognitive tools embedded in sociocultural ideologies. The findings demonstrate that American discourse often frames feminism as a dynamic, adversarial force confronting systemic barriers, while Chinese narratives emphasize collective momentum and institutional synergy, aligning feminist progress with broader national goals. These distinctions underscore the role of cultural context in shaping metaphorical representations of gender equality.

This study demonstrates how conceptual metaphors operate as both mirrors and engines of sociocultural ideologies, offering insights into the interplay between language and power in feminist discourse. Unlike prior works that treat metaphors as static rhetorical tools, this research empirically reveals their dynamic role in shaping, and sometimes constraining, narratives of gender equality. By bridging linguistic analysis with feminist theory, the study challenges linear models of feminist progress, such as the wave metaphor, and instead positions struggles for equality as overlapping, context-dependent processes. For instance, the finding that American “force” metaphors inadvertently validate adversarialism while Chinese “collective power” narratives risk top-down co-optation complicates simplistic notions of empowerment. These insights urge scholars to critically reassess how metaphors are deployed in feminist advocacy, emphasizing the need for intentional, culturally grounded frameworks that resist patriarchal reinterpretation. In doing so, the study not only answers

longstanding calls for interdisciplinary dialogue but also provides a blueprint for analyzing metaphor's dual capacity to liberate or limit social change.

Methodologically, the study combines quantitative metrics like MI-Scores with qualitative frameworks such as Kövecses' Multilevel View of Conceptual Metaphors and MIP Method, and reports an inter-coder reliability check (Cohen's $\kappa=0.86$) [19]. This mixed-methods approach, as advocated by Rub, enhances rigor in identifying and interpreting metaphorical patterns across large datasets, offering a replicable model for future sociolinguistic inquiries [7].

Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for feminist advocacy and magazine strategies. Recognizing how force metaphors in American contexts mobilize grassroots activism or how Chinese "collective power" narratives align with institutional goals can inform culturally resonant messaging. The study also cautions against the unintended consequences of metaphors, such as romanticizing struggle through "obstacle" frameworks or reducing empowerment to neoliberal productivity metrics, urging advocates to reframe systemic barriers as collective responsibilities rather than individual trials.

Future research could expand this work by exploring digital platforms, as suggested by Bao's analysis of social media, to capture evolving discourses in an increasingly interconnected world [35]. Longitudinal studies might track how metaphors shift alongside sociopolitical changes, while cross-cultural comparisons could further unravel the interplay of global and local ideologies in feminist movements to achieve a better understanding of how cultural specificity and temporal dynamics reconfigure the power and limitations of metaphorical framing in advancing gender equality.

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