Gender equality and poverty reduction in China: issues for development policy and practice

Du Jie and Nazneen Kanji, August 2003
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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

- ACWF         All China Women’s Federation
- CCP          Chinese Communist Party
- CPPCC        Chinese People’s Political and Consultative Congress
- CEDAW        Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- DFID         Department for International Development
- NBS          National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China
- NGO          Non-governmental Organization
- NPC          National People’s Congress
- NWCWC        National Working Committee on Women and Children
- PRC          People’s Republic of China
- SOE          State-owned Enterprise
- TVE          Township and Village Enterprises
- UNDP         United Nations Development Program
- WHO          World Health Organization
- WTO          World Trade Organization
Abstract

There is no doubt that the status of Chinese women - both in absolute and relative terms - has improved in many ways since 1949. However, there is significant evidence that progress toward gender equality is threatened by many of the economic and social currents in contemporary China. This paper provides a gender-disaggregated overview of current trends in the areas of human development, livelihoods and employment as well as decision making. It also identifies challenges in the policy and institutional environment which have to be addressed, to make further progress towards the development goals of poverty reduction and gender equality.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of gender issues which is relevant to development organizations working in China. It has been produced to assist DFID staff in country programming and project design and implementation. It draws significantly on the recent Country Gender Review produced by the World Bank as well as other published and unpublished research and analysis. It provides an overview of the present situation and emerging issues related to gender equality and poverty reduction in China.

1.1. Basic indicators

With a population of 1.27627 billion people at the end of 2001, and a land area of 9.6 million square kilometers, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is the largest country in the world in population and the third largest in area. Chinese women account for 48.37% of the PRC’s total population in 2000 (NBS, 2001). As the majority of the population is of the Han ethnic group (accounting for 91.6 percent of the national total population), China’s other 55 ethnic groups are customarily referred to as the national minorities. Most of China’s 55 ethnic minorities inhabit in the country’s economically backward western region and have a high proportion of male and female poor when compared to the dominant Han (China Daily, Nov. 8, 2002).

By 2000, China’s family planning policies reduced the population growth rate to 1.07% (NBS, 2001). However, reports show that the sex imbalance in China has been worsening over recent decades. During most of the 1960s and 1970s, the sex ratio remained around 106 males per 100 females. Recently, China’s fifth national census (based on data from year 2000) revealed that the sex ratio at birth was around 116.86 males per 100 females (CIIC, 2002), as compared to 111:100 in 1990. A ratio of 106:100 is considered the norm (World Bank, 2002). The Chinese government cites selective abortion and under-reporting of female births as the main cause for the imbalance, but it is probable that infanticide and abandonment also play a part.

According to official figures, approximately 70 percent of the Chinese population resides in rural areas. Of the 866 million rural residents in 1997, 445 million or 51.4% were male and 421 million or 48.6% were female (National Bureau of Statistics, 1999). These figures do not take into account rural-urban migrants, the vast majority of whom retain their rural registration. By
the 1990s, close to 70 million rural people had migrated to the cities for jobs, about two-thirds of them men and one-third women (World Bank, 2002). Today, the estimated migrant population is 105 million (Rural Women Knowing All, 2000). The recent rate of increase of female out-migration has surpassed that of males, although the absolute number of male migrants still exceeds that of females (Nyberg and Rozelle, 1999, cited in World Bank, 2002).

Graph 1. Rural Labour Migration to Cities and Male-Female Composition (millions)

During the 1980s and 1990s, China experienced rapid economic growth and a huge decline in overall poverty. People living under the official poverty line (one-third of US$1) declined from 250 million in 1978 (China Internet Information Center, 2002) to 30 million at the end of 2001 (China Daily, September 29, 2002). However, using the United Nations Development Programme data (UNDP, 2001) and the international poverty line of the equivalent of US$1 per day, the population living on less than US$1 per day declined from 80% in 1978 to 18.5% in 1999. Taking into account the total population of 1,264.8 million in 1999 (UNDP, 2001), 18.5% represents 233.988 million people. Economic growth has been accompanied by growing disparities – the Gini co-efficient is 0.45 which indicates significant income inequality (DFID, 2002).

Studies concur that poverty is concentrated in the Western provinces and that ethnic minorities constitute a disproportionate number of poor people. Although income data is not disaggregated by sex, Chinese researchers and scholars argue that there has been a feminisation of poverty, related firstly to the feminisation of agriculture in poorer areas of the country and secondly, to the loss of employment brought about by the restructuring of state owned enterprises, which has disproportionately affected women.

Female life expectancy (72 years) is higher than men’s (69 years), which is a common phenomenon worldwide. However, women’s healthy life expectancy is lower than men’s, which means that women on average suffer ill health longer and have a lower quality of life than men (World Bank, 2002:17). Considering the challenge of a rapidly aging population (the proportion of the population aged over 60 now stands at 10 percent with projections for this to reach 12.5 percent by 2015) (Cook, S., Kabeer, N., & Suwannarat, G., 2003), elderly women
are particularly vulnerable to poverty. Illiteracy and lack of education are concentrated among women and girls. 55 million women constitute 65% of China’s 85 million illiterate or semi-illiterate people. Besides, 90 percent of illiterate people live in rural areas, and half in western regions. The problem of girl dropouts remains serious in these areas (People’s Daily, September 9, 2002).

Table 1. Sex-disaggregated Health and Education Indicators

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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>6.62 years</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>8.1 years</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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1.2. Historical overview of women’s liberation in China

Chinese women’s journey over the last hundred years from feudalism to emancipation, to full equality under the law has engendered great pride in China. The history of gender equality in China is more complex than is often portrayed.

Patriarchy was one of the defining features of traditional Chinese society. It imposed profound oppression on Chinese women and deprived them their rights in politics, economy, social and family life. Economically dependent, women did not have property and inheritance rights and possessed no independent source of income. Family succession and inheritance passed through the male line. They enjoyed no freedom in marriage but had to obey the dictates of their parents, and were not allowed to remarry if their spouse died. Women married out of their natal families and into their husband’s household - often in a distant village - where they became subordinate to their mothers-in-law as well as male family members, and where domestic power came only gradually with age and the birth of sons. Male children were valued over girls. Remnants of this system persist today and in some aspects are experiencing revival, especially in rural areas. In general, Chinese women were subjected to physical and mental torture, being harassed by systems of polygamy and prostitution, the overwhelming majority of them forced to bind their

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1 Source: GenderStats, http://genderstats.worldbank.org
4 Source: GenderStats, http://genderstats.worldbank.org
feet from childhood in the feudal patriarchal system. For centuries, "women with bound feet" was a synonym for the female gender in China. Women were called “neiren” or inside people, signifying that their roles were primarily and ideally within the realm of the household. However, poorer women of necessity participated actively in farming, manufacturing and trade. Still, they were deprived of the right to receive an education and take part in social activities.

However, as early as the 16th century female education began to be common, first for the upper classes but eventually for girls throughout society. Significant numbers of women evaded traditional marriage practices and created non-kin institutions. In the southeast where male migration overseas was common, local economies would have collapsed without the work of women. Women played active roles in the various cultural and political movements of the first half of the 20th century, developing a potent women’s movement in the process. The Reform Movement of 1898 advocated and ignited the wave to ban feet binding and establish schools for women. The 1911 Revolution kindled a feminist movement which focused on equal rights for men and women and participation by women in political affairs. These movements promoted the awakening of Chinese women.

For many women, the Chinese Communist Party was a vehicle to fight for their own emancipation as well as the liberation of the nation. Ever since its birth, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made the achievement of female emancipation one of its goals and motivated women into its course of revolution. Attracted by the principle of equality between men and women, many women joined the Chinese revolution led by the CCP and tied their women’s liberation movements closely to national or class liberation in hope of gaining their rights during this process. Women’s organizations and networks established during this period formed the foundation of the All China Women’s Federation (ACWF) and women’s departments in the trade unions.

After 1949, the Communist government solemnly declared the toppling of the feudal system which fettered women and stated that women enjoyed equal rights with men in the political, economic, cultural and educational fields and in other aspects of social life. New rights for women were entrenched in legislation, beginning with the Marriage Law of 1950. Women were exhort ed to enter the labour force, education was made accessible at all levels, and prostitution was largely eliminated. The orthodox path to liberation was believed to be full participation in the paid workforce. Some women’s studies scholars called this process a “top down” liberation of women (World Bank, 2002). However, considering women’s active involvement in the course of Chinese revolution led by the CCP, the guarantee of women’s rights once in power represented fulfillment of a promise to women by the Communist Party.

Along with the nation’s economic rehabilitation and development after 1949, there appeared a nationwide upsurge of women stepping out of their homes to take part in social production. In 1957, around 70% of rural women engaged in agricultural work, and the number of urban women employed reached 3.286 million, representing a 5.5-fold increase over 1949. This thoroughly transformed the situation in which women were excluded from social productive labour, providing them with an independent source of income (China Internet Information Center, 2002(b)).
However, the goal of women’s liberation was not fulfilled after the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. Women’s issues were still subordinated to larger political movements. In rural areas, the majority of rural women participated in collective farming and female model workers were held up for emulation under the rural commune system since 1958. Yet apart from brief experiments such as rural communal kitchens, the traditional division of labour and family structures persisted. Women’s labour was compensated through the workpoint system but was valued lower than men’s work, women were still responsible for domestic work, and they lacked economic independence and autonomous control over land and resources. The custom of women marrying into the husband’s household and village remained unchanged, thus compromising their *de jure* inheritance and land rights.

In the cities, women’s almost universal participation in the paid workforce was achieved largely through the creation of small neighborhood workshops and collectives rather than through jobs in state-owned enterprises, thus placing them at the lower end of the economic hierarchy. Women were under-represented compared to men in the state sector, which employed the majority of the workforce and provided comprehensive benefits and lifetime job security. For most women, access to the “iron rice bowl”, a term used to describe this state social security system, was gained through their husbands.

Thus in the late 1970s, on the eve of the reform era, women played an essential but subordinate role in production and the principal role in domestic work. The prevailing ideology was technically gender blind: women were the same as men in everything but biology, therefore not in need of special consideration apart from protective legislation, for example on maternity leave. Moreover, as important as the social changes after 1949 were for Chinese women, women’s issues were still subordinated to larger political movements. Chinese women, according to many scholars, were still dependent on the male-dominated government and Communist party to define their identity and their interests for them.

### 1.3. The impacts of economic growth and social change on women

Economic reform has irreversibly transformed the Chinese economic and social landscape. Reform has created new prosperity and many new opportunities for both women and men. However, the benefits of the reform have been unevenly distributed throughout Chinese society, widening the already-existing gaps between urban and rural China, and between the more-developed east and the less-developed west. It has also raised new constraints and barriers for women to participate as equal partners in society, politics and the economy. Chinese scholars and activists believe that in some very significant ways, the relative position of women has been deteriorating over the last several years as a result of shifts in policy, in the economy and in society.

Several factors related to the changing role of the State in citizens’ lives have affected, and will continue to affect, gender equality:

1) the gradual decentralization of central government powers and responsibilities and the extent to which fiscal and sector policies benefit poorer areas and groups;
2) the movement of the Chinese government towards adoption of the rule of law and the opportunities to strengthen legislation promoting gender equality and women’s rights
3) the emergence of civil society including autonomous women’s organizations;
4) the movement towards a market economy, the reform of the State Owned Enterprise (SOE) sector and the extent to which retrenchments, labour and employment policies are pro-poor and gender-equitable;
5) the gradual disappearance of the “danwei” (work unit) system and the challenges of developing a social security system which responds to women and men’s needs;
6) the “marketization” of health care and education and the shifting of costs to households which research has shown impacts negatively on poor groups and on poor women in particular;
7) changes in the rules governing rural-urban migration and policy responses to the rapid urbanization of China;
8) the continued effects of the family planning policy, which has had complex impacts on society for the past 20 years; for example, the “aging” of the Chinese population;
9) China’s accession to the WTO which will accelerate the restructuring of China’s economy, with different potential impacts on men and women.

The rest of this paper expands on these issues, but it is important to note that underlying these changes - and affecting the direction of the various modernizations in China - are some deeply rooted beliefs and attitudes that are socialized and institutionalized. They are especially prevalent in rural areas. They must be kept in mind in order to understand the barriers to gender equality in China:

1) The traditional preference of boy child over girl child (sons carry on the family name, inherit the land, are responsible for the care of their aging parents and observe filial funeral rites);
2) The continuing belief that men take care of “big important outside” things while women take care of “smaller, less important inside” things - meaning that women usually do not have a strong voice in community and public affairs;
3) Women’s continuing responsibility for household duties, child care and care of elderly people;

While these socially constructed attitudes generally negatively impact on women, there can be negative effects for men, even in the short term, such as the pressure and responsibility that eldest sons bear for supporting their parents.
2. Human development

2.1. Privatization of education and its impact on gender inequalities

While the current policy of nine-year compulsory education applies to both boys and girls, and while the overall gap between male and female education levels is diminishing, gender differences in rural school enrolment at all levels tend to be greater than in urban areas. An underlying cause is the belief that any investment in a daughter’s education is much less useful than a son’s education because it will only benefit her husband’s family. Rising costs of education and the need for children’s labour in agricultural households, often means that female children are withdrawn from school earlier than boys, especially in poorer rural households. Most discrimination occurs in multi-child families, where girls are withdrawn in favour of boys.

Greater gender discrimination also takes place in ethnic minority groups, which are also over-represented among poor groups in China. In Muslim communities, the belief that women’s place is in the home is still strong, despite the fact that women are involved in productive, remunerative work in poor households. A recent survey on disability in primary school children in four counties in Gansu province showed a much higher proportion of disabled boys than girls in school, although the possible causes for this imbalance have not yet been investigated (Cambridge Education Consultants, 2002). In some communities, however, boys may not have equal opportunities for education. For example, in Buddhist communities, boys may be withdrawn from school to enter religious institutions. In herder communities, girls’ enrolment in schools may exceed boys’, because boys may have an important role in caring for animals.

The statistics on illiteracy reflect the rural-urban gap: for rural residents in 1995, 31% of women and 12% of men over the age of 15 were illiterate, while the comparable figures for urban women and men were 16% and 5% respectively (National Bureau of Statistics, 1999). The Chinese government has adopted programs to eliminate illiteracy focused on rural areas, and there has been some progress in shrinking the gender gap, but it recognizes that for women and girls, particularly in remote regions, the challenges are formidable (People’s Republic of China, 2000).
High illiteracy rates for women and lower educational levels for girls in rural areas have obvious negative impacts on their economic opportunities and social status. However, in most urban areas, girls enjoy almost the same opportunities as boys in education. This is partly because the One Child Family Planning policy, introduced in the late 1970s, allows parents no opportunity to prioritize inputs on children’s education based on gender.

Gender inequality in access to education is one problem; gender stereotypes in teaching materials and pedagogy is another issue in education in China. According to some studies (Fang, 2001, Shi, 2001), traditional gender roles are reinforced in text books for primary and middle school students. There are few positive and important images of female roles compared to male ones. Even though some women appear in text books, they usually serve as assistants to men. Furthermore, gender stereotypes in education are manifested in the gender division of subjects where boys and young men dominate in natural science subject whereas girls and young women are concentrated in social sciences and arts.

There is also a positive indicator of decreasing gender gap among school teachers. In 2000, female teachers comprised 50 percent of primary and 45 percent of secondary school teachers compared to 37 percent and 25 percent respectively in 1980 (World Bank, 2000). It is hoped that female teachers can provide a role model for young girls, encouraging them to stay in school and raising their expectations of what they can achieve in their lives.
2.2. Gender effects of “marketization” of health

Decreasing access to public health care

The Chinese government has made public health a priority since 1949 through a massive health programme which dispatched physicians and “barefoot doctors” to remote rural areas and provided national health insurance. However, during the transition to a market economy, effective health insurance has become rare. With the dismantling of rural communes in the 1980s and the closure and downsizing of SOEs in urban areas, individuals in both rural and urban areas now share a much higher proportion of health care expenditures. Basic Medical Insurance (BMI) for urban employees only benefits the worker and not his or her family. As men are disproportionately represented in the types of enterprises that sign up to BMI, they are more likely to be covered by this type of insurance.

This “marketization” of health care has made health services prohibitive for many rural households, particularly in poor areas. Access to trained medical personnel becomes more difficult in remote, mountainous and sparsely populated regions. In large part due to their reproductive role, women tend to be heavier users of health care services. Their ability to access services is now dependent on income levels and decision-making on how to allocate resources at the household level. Some studies have found that rural families tend to spend scarce resources on men and boy’s health care rather than on women and girls (Zia, 2000, Pearson, 1995, cited in World Bank, 2002). Gender-equitable access to health care is directly threatened by cutbacks in public health care expenditure.

Reproductive health and family planning

Health indicators overall are worse for rural women than for urban women. Just one indicator, access to trained assistance during childbirth, speaks volumes. In cities, 93% of births are assisted by some form of medical personnel. In villages, only 27% receive such assistance, with a further 48% assisted by some a trained birth attendant, usually a midwife with minimal training. In cities, 97% of births take place in hospitals, while in villages 71% of births take place at home, with obvious dangers for mother and child (National Bureau of Statistics, 1999). The maternal mortality rate (1985-99) is 55 per 100,000 live births (UNDP, 2002) but figures in poorer regions are reported to be much higher.

The family planning programme and one-child policy in place since the late 1970s has had a profound impact on Chinese society, both urban and rural. In urban areas the one-child policy has become well enshrined in practice, and multiple-child families are now a rarity. In rural areas the policy has been much more unevenly applied. Multiple children are the norm rather than the exception. Instances of coerced abortion are much more rarely reported, and there is more of an emphasis on client service - as opposed to enforcement - among medical personnel and family planning staff.
Nevertheless, the continued cultural preference for boys, especially in the absence of old-age security programmes, has combined with the family planning policy to disadvantage girl children particularly in rural areas. The 1999 child mortality rate (for children under 5) was 40 per 1,000 females and 35 per 1,000 males, reflecting the better level of health care often provided to sons, especially in poorer regions where overall access to health care is more difficult. One study found that the presence of a young son was associated with as much as 50% more spending on health care than a daughter (Khan & Riskin, 2001).

**Suicide rates**

One cause for grave concern is the very high suicide rate among young rural women. China’s overall suicide rate is the highest in the world, and three times higher for women than for men. In all other countries but China, the male suicide rate exceeds that for females. According to the first national survey on suicide by The Beijing Suicide Research and Prevention Center, the nation’s first suicide prevention organization, the rate in female suicides is 25 percent higher than male ones. *(China Daily, April 12, 2002)* This is a pattern unlike any other country in the world where overall rates are lower and the majority of suicides are men. Ninety percent of these deaths occur in the countryside. Each year between 1990 and 1994, suicides accounted on average for 5.1% of all deaths among rural women, and 3.4% of deaths of rural men. This compares to 1.8% for urban women and 1.5% for urban men, respectively. Chinese officials are especially concerned by the fact that suicide is the number one cause of death in persons aged 15 to 34, and fourth in the 35-44 age group *(Rural Women Knowing All, 1999)*.

While the underlying causes are complex, ongoing research indicates that most of these rural suicides seem to be impulsive acts linked to family problems or immediate events rather than underlying mental illness or other factors more common outside China. The most common method is ingestion of pesticides, and because of the widespread availability of very potent pesticides, most rural suicide attempts are now successful. Women’s organizations and mental health professionals are now engaged in programmes to reduce the number of rural suicides, particularly among women, by decreasing the accessibility and potency of pesticides, through publicity (in the forefront is the rural women’s magazine *Rural Women Knowing All*), by creating social support networks, as well as by addressing the underlying social and economic factors.

**Gender and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS*7*

Another health problem with gender implications is the rising incidence of HIV/AIDS. By the end of 2001, between 850,000 and 1.5 million people were estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS *(UN theme group on HIV/AIDS in China, 2001)*. So far the predominant group affected is male drug users but the incidence of female infection is rising in recent years, following global patterns of increasing rates of infection among women. From 1990-95, the ratio was 1 woman to 9 men but by 2001, this had risen to 1 woman to 3.4 men (Jolly and Wang, 2002).

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*7 This section on HIV/AIDS draws on the comprehensive report by Susie Jolly and Wang Ying, January 2003.*
Currently, specific groups are considered most vulnerable: intravenous drug users, those who have sold blood and received blood products, female sex workers, men who have sex with men and the mobile population; however, the risk of widespread dissemination is imminent (ibid).

Gender stereotypes and the knowledge gap between women and men obstruct education about HIV/AIDS prevention. Gender stereotypes encourage women to be passive and innocent regarding sex while encouraging men to take on risk-taking and controlling roles, so that opportunities are lost for seeking information about safer sex. A wide range of power imbalances between women and men put women in a difficult position to negotiate safer sex. The marginalisation of men and women who have same sex relationships may particularly discourage them from seeking medical care. Men are disproportionately vulnerable to drug use due to gender norms which encourage risk-taking and higher income levels. Overall, larger numbers of men have sold blood but in some communities, women have been the primary blood sellers, due to a perception that they are physically better able to cope and because their work burden is perceived to be lighter than men's.

Poor reproductive health in women increases their susceptibility to sexual transmission of HIV. Reproductive tract infections are widespread in rural China and rates are higher in migrant women as compared to urban women in the same age group. The household division of labour and continued perception of women as carers means that the burden of care is likely to fall on women. Much important work on prevention and control of HIV/AIDS has begun. However, greater links need to be made between HIV/Aids prevention and care issues and gender equality policies.

2.3. Violence against women and trafficking in women

National data on domestic violence are scarce but provincial data indicate that domestic violence was reported in close to 30 percent of Fujian households in 1999 (Graph, 3). Some 25% of divorces in 1994 were attribute to domestic violence. Two national surveys on the status of women have also shown that 25% of urban women and 33% of rural women have suffered from occasional to repeated abuse from their spouse (Wang, 1999). It is the gradual increase in media reports on domestic violence following the 1995 World Conference on Women, and the open debate during the process leading to the amendments to the Marriage Law in 2001, which have created a growing social awareness of the issue.
Graph 3. Household-Level Violence in Fujian Province, 1999

<table>
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<th>% of Households Suffering from Household Violence and Reasons in Fujian Province, 1999</th>
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<tr>
<td>% not suffer from household violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% suffer from household violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>due to husband gambling, alcoholism or bad temper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>due to extramarital affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>due to arranged marriages or wife fails to give birth to boys</td>
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Source: Fujian Daily, May 17, 2000, China

Trafficking in women and children also threatens women personal security. The 1992 Women’s Law and other legislation explicitly prohibit trafficking; yet it seems to have reappeared and grown since market liberalization in the early 1980s. (Zhuang, 1993). Although data on female abductions are not available, there are some reports on the number of women rescued. Police rescued 10,000 women in 1999, but this figure was only part of the total and kidnappings are increasing at 30% per year (Rosenthal, 2001). During five weeks in 2000, over 10,000 females were freed from their abductors. There are indications that some communities are reluctant to report cases of trafficking in their midst. There is a flow pattern from the poor south-eastern provinces (Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Guangxi, and Hunan) to the northeastern and coastal provinces (Shandong, the south part of Hebei, the northern part of Jiangsu, Fujian and Henan). There is also a flow from mountainous and border regions to the inland regions (Zhuang, 1993). Some of the trafficking is trans-border, involving neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam. Research carried out within the ILO International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour found that since 1990, 80,000 women and children had been trafficked to Thailand for prostitution, the majority being girls. The highest number came from Myanmar, followed by Yunnan province and Laos.  

3. Livelihoods and Employment

3.1. Feminization of agriculture and women’s access to productive resources

Most of the population of rural China are farmers. However, the gradual industrialization of the countryside (especially in the form of township and village enterprises or TVEs), the increasing

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availability of jobs in urban areas for rural migrants (combined with the increasing rural labour surplus), and the progressive diversification and market orientation of rural production have transformed the character of rural life since the mid-1980s. These developments have affected women and men differently, and as a whole, have contributed to a phenomenon now termed the “feminization of agriculture”:

1) The majority of off-farm rural jobs have gone to men, leaving rural women with fewer employment options apart from farming;
2) The majority of migrants (short-term, seasonal or permanent) are men, although the rate of growth of female out-migration is increasing more rapidly than that of men, these tend to be young unmarried women;
3) In rural households which are less than 100% agricultural, the bulk of the agricultural work is done by women;
4) In many parts of the country, the majority of full-time farmers are women;
5) Studies have shown that as the proportion of rural household income derived from sources other than farming increases, the proportion of female labour in agriculture also increases.

The trend toward feminization of agriculture is difficult to support with reliable nationwide statistics, although many local studies have been conducted (Lin Zhibin, 2001). However it is officially acknowledged that in wide swaths of the Chinese countryside, the lion’s share of the farm work is done by women. This is especially true in farming areas where men are engaged in off-farm labour. This has wide implications for women’s health, women’s income, the reliance on children’s labour and the subsequent impact on girls’ education, women’s social isolation, mobility and their ability to exercise their rights. The feminization of agriculture is in many parts of the country linked to the feminization of poverty.

In the hard-core poverty areas, women are particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to health care and education. So far, poverty alleviation policies have not taken into account the international lessons about the important role of women in rural development and the need for policies and programmes, for example on micro-credit, which facilitate their participation. There is concern that the new poverty alleviation strategy due to be announced soon will be equally “gender-blind.”

Access to and control over productive resources

Women and men have equal legal rights to land and other productive resources as well as equal inheritance rights, but in practice it is more difficult for rural women to exercise these rights, compared either to rural men or urban women. The property rights of women and how to enforce them are key issues in the countryside. Land was redistributed to households some 20 years ago under the rural household responsibility system, with the government’s commitment that there would be no reallocation for 30 years. Subsequent land reallocation has been delegated to village committees and requires the approval of two-thirds of the village population. Women often lose their access to the family’s land after marriage, and lose access
to their “married” land after divorce. Without land, rural women are destitute. Because of laws relating to village autonomy, unless village heads are sympathetic to their situation, women have no way to access land to which they are legally entitled. Some cases have been taken to court, notably in Shaanxi, but the lack of policy direction with respect to the primacy of rights (the right to village self-determination, versus the right to equal access to land for women and men) has made favourable rulings on behalf of these women unenforceable.

Rural women’s access to land is further compromised when they marry urban residents. This situation is becoming increasingly common, and means that these women lose the right to land in their home village but are not allocated land in their husband’s home village (because he is no longer a resident, and land is scarce). If they follow their husbands to the city, they are not eligible for urban status, restricting their and their children’s access to various services and to formal employment.

**Women and the rural environment**

Rural environmental degradation - land degradation, water availability, water pollution, forest degradation - can exacerbate rural gender inequalities, especially when combined with poverty and with the trend towards the feminization of agriculture. In many areas women are now responsible for all aspects of rural production in addition to their traditional roles. Where clean water is scarce or distant, where land productivity is deteriorating due to erosion, where fuel sources become increasingly harder to find, the burden of women tends to increase. However, women are also key change agents in efforts to reverse rural environmental degradation, and are increasingly recognized as such by the Chinese government, foreign donors and Chinese and international NGOs. There has been a growing emphasis on engaging women’s participation in rural extension, environmental protection and sustainable development programmes - including a number of programmes under the ACWF (People’s Republic of China, 2000). Bottom-up participatory approaches are relatively new in China and there is a need to emphasise the involvement of women and men in decision making, rather than only expecting labour contributions in programmes that are designed elsewhere.

**3.2. SOEs, laid-off workers and unemployment**

Women’s labour rights are equal in law to men’s, e.g. in the 1991 Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women. In general, structural reform has created a rising standard of living in the cities and new opportunities for women in the labour market and as entrepreneurs. However many current factors such as SOE reform, WTO accession, and the over-riding emphasis on competition and efficiency in the economy have undermined many of the elements contributing to equity. There are several areas of persistent inequality between men and women in the urban labour force, as well as some newly emerging issues which threaten to erode gender equality still further.
Persistent and growing gender inequalities in employment

A significant wage gap exists between men and women in formal employment, even when controlled for education, location, and type of enterprise. Women receive an average of 77% of male earnings (ACWF, 2001). Furthermore, the gender wage gap has increased since the mid-1980s. This wage gap is not explained by gaps in education or location, but is largely accounted for by the fact that women are concentrated in low-paying sectors of the economy.

The process of SOE reform is probably exacerbating the wage gap, since lay-offs have disproportionately affected women workers. Although reliable sex-disaggregated national statistics are not available to date, it appears that women comprise over one-half and perhaps 60% of layoffs despite representing only 39% of formal employment in urban areas (China Information News, February 2, 2000). Assistance for laid-off women workers now emphasizes self employment rather than re-employment, however most self-employed women work in the “informal sector” with low earnings and little security. The government is promoting the growth of the service sector as a potential source of work for laid off women workers, particularly new types of “community service” i.e. janitorial work, child care, care of the elderly- jobs with low pay and low status, which are an extension of activities which women undertake in the home.

Women find it hard to compete in the new competitive labour market, where employers can demand younger, more educated employees and will often specify males in order to avoid the potential costs of employing women in their child-bearing years - a practice which is in direct violation of the Labour Law and the Women’s Law. Female university graduates are openly discriminated against during recruitment drives.

Well established policies of equal work for equal pay and equal access to jobs for men and women have been de-emphasized in the market economy. Economic units are now responsible for their own profits and losses; the imperative of competition takes precedence over the protection of equality rights. Women workers are seen as weaker, less capable and more costly to the enterprise. The workforce is segregated in that women are more often found in lower paid occupations, working in units that are less profitable and where wage rates, benefits and working conditions are poorer. Labour code provisions exist to protect women workers, for example, from arbitrary firing during pregnancy, but they harder to enforce in the new economy. Trade unions tend to be weak and male dominated and there is an absence of effective workplace representation.

Various measures have been proposed to reduce the labour supply by targeting women. These include the promotion of the principle of “periodic employment” (whereby workers would be entitled to a number of years off work without pay to attend to family duties). While this provision, floated before the National People’s Congress (NPC) earlier this year, did not specifically target women workers, it was widely understood to be the intent. The subsequent debate in the media and at the NPC and Chinese People’s Political and Consultative Congress (CPPCC) highlighted this aspect. In the end, the leadership of the ACWF and delegates
succeeded in getting the notion struck from the Premier’s work report to the NPC. However, the concept of periodic employment is covered in the government policy statement allowing for “multiple forms of employment”. The role the ACWF has taken in this debate is increasingly one of advocacy - even going so far as to suggest that if women are sidelined, they should be compensated for fulfilling this reproductive role which is unpaid but necessary for the family and society.

Another labour supply reduction strategy involves the early retirement of workers by enterprises (nei tui). The mandatory retirement age is already five years earlier for women than men (the standard varies in different jobs; for public servants the retirement age is 55 for women and 60 for men). In early retirement schemes women are typically asked to retire even earlier than the 5 years’ differential with men. This practice has negative impacts on women’s lifelong earnings and pension incomes, promotion potential, professional development and equitable participation as decision makers.

The rise of urban poverty and the feminization of poverty are two related trends. The layoffs following SOE reforms are a major contributor to urban poverty - with women being more vulnerable to lay-offs, having more difficulty finding new jobs, and some survey findings indicating that lay-offs contribute to family instability and the rise of divorce rates among urban couples (Tao & Fan, 2001).

There has seen an increased participation of women in Small and Medium enterprises (SME). Although there has been no comprehensive data at national level, some investigations at local level have indicated that women working in SMEs and Non-state/Private sector had faced problems of working long hours, low wages, harmful working conditions, and even sexual harassment. Many women dare not to report the violation of their rights for fear that they might loss their jobs once they reveal the problems (Peng, 2002).

3.3. Rural-urban migration and gender differences

Since the 1980s, rural-urban migration - in response to the push-pull of labour surpluses in the countryside and increasing job opportunities in the cities - has grown exponentially, despite the continued existence of the household registration system which makes it difficult if not impossible for most rural residents to formally change their residency status. The exact number of rural-urban migrants is unknown, but informed estimates put the current number at 120 million (People’s Daily, March 11, 2002). Rural out-migration is not likely to be stemmed in the near future and may in fact be accelerated by accession to the WTO.

There are complex differences in the patterns of female and male migration, but the basic characteristics are as follows:

1) More men than women migrate, but the proportion of female migrants is increasing; according to a study by researchers from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, currently about one-third of the rural-urban migrant population are women (Tan Shen, n.d.)
and the proportion of female migrants rose steadily throughout the 1990s.

2) Female migrants tend to be young and unmarried, and are mainly recruited to work in the commercial and service sectors, although in some regions they go predominantly to factory jobs, mainly in private, foreign-owned or joint-venture factories in export-oriented industries. Recently, however, an increasing number of female migrants are married women (World Bank, 2002).

3) Many women who migrate with their families work as agricultural labourers in urban suburbs. The majority work in service industries or as domestic workers.

4) Rural migrant women, as compared with urban residents, are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse - they do not benefit from protection under the Labour Law, are vulnerable to abuse with no recourse to administrative or legal remedies, have no access to services such as health care or education for themselves and their children, and have little knowledge of their rights. Access to health care is particularly important with respect to reproductive health issues, as well as the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.

5) A large number of the women who are kidnapped for trafficking are abducted while en route to work or in labour markets seeking work.

A number of Chinese organizations, including NGOs and organizations in the ACWF network, have targeted migrant women for programmes such as basic literacy, small-business development, vocational training, and legal counselling.

3.4. WTO: Gender impacts and opportunities

Chinese accession to the WTO has important implications for economic and social development in China. A recent series of studies supported by the World Bank and DFID focusing on economic effects concludes that accession needs to be followed up by sound supporting policies, otherwise the bulk of households could lose from accession (Winters, 2002). One economic modelling study suggests that 87% of farm households and half of urban households could experience income loss (Chen and Ravallion, cited in Winters, 2002). In poorer and more remote provinces poverty and inequality could increase significantly.

There is particular concern about the vulnerability of farmers to the impacts of globalization in general and WTO accession in particular and their ability to compete with cheaper imported agricultural commodities. Although different agricultural crops will experience different impacts, the net impact appears to be a small decline in farm wages and land rents, which would exacerbate poverty in the absence of compensatory policies. Declining incomes for farmers may or may not be compensated for by possible decreases in the costs of inputs and some consumption goods.

Although there have not yet been any significant studies on the social and gender impacts of WTO accession, we can draw out implications from the findings of the above cited economic studies. The feminisation of agriculture discussed in this paper means that women will be particularly affected by the possible decline in farm incomes. Declining economic status will
reinforce the relatively low social status of women in the countryside (Lin, 2000). In addition, a combination of the rising divorce rate and the difficulties encountered in land redistribution post-divorce may make women even more economically vulnerable since land is still the lifeline for most rural residents. Declines in the wages of unskilled farm workers will be greatest and women are over represented in this category.

Migration for urban job opportunities is seen to permit adjustments to the ‘WTO shock’ and to boost farm incomes, particularly if the constraints on migration caused by household registration systems (hukou) are further reformed. However, migration as a coping strategy is gendered since women have greater constraints on their mobility than men. There is also likely to be a generational effect as young women are more likely to seek and obtain employment in new economic (export) zones while older women, and to some extent older men, are left in rural areas. At the same time, women’s concentration in the urban ‘informal sector’ may mean that they benefit less from anticipated rises in urban wages.

On the positive side, specialization and crop diversification may create opportunities for women farmers to engage in new, higher-value production. Women may also increase their participation in village affairs.

Technical advice in agriculture to search for new products and higher quality outputs, rural health care and education and the provision of safety nets are seen as important poverty-reducing interventions. To be effective, these must employ a gender perspective and address the particular problems faced by women. For example, educational qualifications for participation in agricultural training may have to be lowered to involve women and in general, approaches and methods for rural development adapted for less literate people.

4. Women in decision-making

There are relatively high participation rates for women in government, public administration, and the Communist Party compared to governing bodies in many other countries. In the National People’s Congress, there are rules stipulating that the proportion of women deputies is not allowed to decline from session to session. The proportion of women deputies in the ninth session of National People’s Congress (NPC) stands at about 21.8%. However, the number has dropped to 20.24% in the tenth session in 2003. Although the proportion of women deputies in the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) has increased from 15.5% (China Women’s Daily, March 9, 2002) in the ninth session to 16.7% in the tenth session in 2003, women are far less visible in the more powerful governing bodies and the proportion of women members had decreased by 2003. In ninth sessions from 1998 about 12% of the 9th NPC Standing Committee and 9% of the 9th CPPCC Standing Committee members were women. However, the number of women members dropped to 10% in the 10th NPC Standing Committee and to 8% in the 10th CPPCC Standing Committee. The former figure represents a steep decline from over 20% in the mid-1970s (PRC, 2000).
Few women participate in high-level leadership in public administration. Of more than 600 cities, only 6 have women mayors (CIIC, 2003).

Women’s share of seats in the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) peaked at 10 percent in 1973 but fell back to about 5 percent by 1997, and 4% in the 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 2002 (CIIC, 2002(d)). Since the late 1980s women have held no seats on the all-important Politbureau of the CCP. The proportion of women Communist Party members is 7 percent. The member of women attending the courses of the Central Party School is of one tenth that of men. This directly influences the choosing of high level state leaders (CIIC, 2003).

At the village level, the introduction of direct elections since 1989 has apparently had the effect of reducing female representation. Although there are no national data to show women's presence in village committees, data from many provinces show a decrease in the number of women elected to decision-making bodies at village level. A survey of Shandong province villages in 1999 indicated a significant drop in female representation among the leadership (UN Task Force on Gender, 1999). There have also been reports that many villages have opted to eliminate the position of a women’s representative in village government, previously held by a local representative of the ACWF.

Although there are many high-ranking women in China’s civil service, and about one-third of all government cadres are women, there is some concern among women’s groups that the proportion of women in senior positions will decline as these women retire, since over the last fifteen years there have been few efforts to promote women to the middle ranks of the bureaucracy. Although measures are now being taken to reverse this trend, there still appears to be entrenched discrimination against women in government, so that even where affirmative policies exist, they are not enforced.

5. Policy and Institutional Environment

5.1. Commitment of the State/Party and its understanding of gender

Following the 1949 Revolution, equality for women in the PRC was officially viewed as a legitimate and achievable aim which was complementary of the goals of socialism. The Communist Party espoused the position that women were the equals of men. In the words of Mao Zedong, women were not only entitled to "half of heaven", but were also responsible for shouldering "half the sky". Recent leaders carry on this tradition and make efforts to realize equality between men and women. As President Jiang Zemin stated in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing: “Attaching great importance to the development and advancement of women, we in China have made equality between men and women a basic state policy in promoting social development. We are resolutely against any forms of discrimination against women and have taken concrete steps to maintain and protect the equal status and rights of women in the country’s political, economic and social life.”
The "equality between men and women" espoused by the mainstream of the Chinese state and party is different from the concept of "gender equality" used by many western organisations. They hold that "equality between men and women" should rest on Marxist theory and analysis of women's issues and that should be the sole principle to guide the course of Chinese women's liberation. The main strategy for equality is economic development and modernisation. The main focus is on women: only when women participate in socialist development, and furthermore, raise their own "poor qualities" during their participation, can they really compete with men. This can be clearly seen from the All China Women's Federation's call for women all over the country to raise "Four Selves": Self Respect, Self Confidence, Self Reliance, and Self Strengthening. However, this strategy overlooks institutionalised gender inequalities and this principle of "equality between men and women" has used men as a standard to aspire to for equality. The implication is that institutional rules and norms do not need to change nor the attitudes and behaviour of men, a view which is contested by many women researchers and activists in China, for example, those working on issues of domestic violence.

5.2. Regulatory Frameworks and legislation

Equality between men and women is reflected in the Chinese Constitution and in many of the policies and legislative measures adopted by the Chinese government since 1949, especially in the 1990s. China ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1980 and reports periodically to the UN on its progress in implementing CEDAW stipulations. More recently, a spate of legislation from the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women ("the Women’s Law"), promulgated in 1992, to the revised Marriage Law, passed in 2001, have enshrined both the general principle of legal equality and special measures to promote gender equity by focusing on areas where women are disadvantaged.

Following the 4th World Conference on Women in 1995, the Chinese government signed the Beijing Declaration and endorsed the Platform for Action. It’s commitment to gender equality is expressed in the government’s “Programme for the Development of Chinese Women”, 1995-2000 and 2001-2010. The government created the National Working Committee on Women and Children (NWCWC) in 1992. However, this national machinery does not have the power and resources to really implement the plan and would have to work much more closely with a range of other institutions to do so.

One very significant recent step forward for women was the inclusion of domestic violence as a crime in the revised Marriage Law. This is significant both for its content and for the process by which it came about. Chinese women’s groups cite the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women for first raising the awareness of domestic violence as an issue in China. Following the Beijing conference, the ACWF, women’s groups, and feminist scholars around the country began to research the extent of the problem, raise awareness and promote public debate, and to formulate policy and legal measures to address it. These groups were consulted in the formulation of the Marriage Law revisions, and given the opportunity to comment on early drafts. Thus the inclusion of domestic violence is seen as a major advance in the ability of
women’s groups and civil society in general to influence the policy process and the shape of new legislation.

As in many areas of Chinese law, however, there are significant gaps between legislation affecting women’s rights and implementation or enforcement, caused by many factors including inadequate information and understanding among the public, police, the judiciary and other stakeholders; limited access to legal assistance; inadequate legal channels to pursue offences in court or with the police; problems with enforcing legal judgments passed by the courts, etc. Many cases have been reported of judgments in favour of women (e.g. over land rights) which have not been enforced because of resistance from local officials.

Another factor which affects legal equality is conflict or contradiction between legislation guaranteeing equality, and other legislation or policy which inhibits it in practice. One example is the rule on village autonomy and guaranteed stability of land distribution, which often constrains rural women’s access to land. Another is the enterprise responsibility system which causes the profit motive to override basic equality requirements and encourages discrimination against female employees. In cases where the courts rule in favour of equality, it is often impossible to have these judgments enforced. Women’s organizations have identified a need for research to identify these contradictions in legislation and formulate and advocate remedial action.

5.3. Women’s Organizations, Civil Society and Gender Equality

The role of civil society - specifically women’s groups - in the policy process affecting gender equality, in mobilizing public opinion, and in providing direct services to women, has expanded and matured markedly since 1995. The Fourth World Conference on Women and the NGO Forum, held in Beijing in 1995, proved to be a catalyst for Chinese women’s rights activists, scholars working with the ACWF, universities, government and non-governmental organizations. The two years leading to the 1995 events saw the creation and growth of dozens of women’s NGOs; while some of these organizations have withered, most have matured and expanded since then. In terms of institutional affiliation, there is a spectrum of such groups, ranging from those that have sprung from the ACWF and its local branches, from research institutions or from government organizations, but which have now become independent of the parent organization, to truly “popular” organizations. They focus on a very broad range of issues, and are increasingly able to form strategic coalitions with each other, with ACWF and with government to affect policy.

The role of the All China Women’s Federation in promoting gender equality has also undergone considerable change since 1995. The ACWF now identifies itself as a non-governmental organization rather than a “mass organization” under the Communist Party. It has a very extensive network of staff from the central level down through provinces and cities to rural townships and villages, conducting research, increasing public awareness on gender issues and providing direct services to women. It has cooperated with government at various levels to conduct investigations on such issues as trafficking of women and children, women’s
labour rights, and the re-employment of laid-off workers. The ACWF at the central level is increasingly effective as an advocate for women’s rights and gender equality. It has overlapping leadership with the State Council National Working Committee on Women and Children, and thus a direct line to policy-making and legislation. In this and other ways the Federation is increasingly acting as a channel for policy and legislative advocacy-sometimes representing women’s interests rather than interests of the government on some key policy issues. For example, ACWF delegates played a prominent role in the most recent session of the National People’s Congress (NPC) where they spoke out against the concept of “periodic employment” which was to be introduced in the Premier’s work report and which was widely seen to discriminate against women. However, at county and local levels in many parts of China, ACWF staff still tend to see themselves as government employees and significant challenges still remain to transform the organization, at all levels, into one which represents women’s interests.

There is an active and committed women’s movement in China-a movement that has its roots in the work of women activists. In the first part of the 20th century, many of them were Communist Party members, who combined women’s liberation with the national revolution. Over the past 20 years, however, women activists, most of whom are scholars working in universities and research institutes, people involved in NGOs and cadres who work within governmental or mass organizations such as the ACWF, have taken initiatives to prioritize women’s interests and to advance gender equality rights in China (Gao, 1999). Increasingly linked to international women’s networks, they have conducted research, built networking, disseminated information, raised public awareness and advocated for gender equality policies.

To use domestic violence as an example, women’s groups - with limited resources and sometimes with support from foreign donors - continue to monitor domestic violence, hold campaigns to raise public awareness, provide training to police and health care workers, and set up telephone hotlines for victims of domestic violence. However, these and other services for victims (such as legal aid, shelters and counseling) are still very limited in scope and distribution, largely urban and largely dependent on voluntary labour and on donations from individuals and foundations.
6. Conclusions

There is no doubt that the status of Chinese women - both in absolute and relative terms - has improved in many ways since 1949. However, we can be far from complacent about the relative status of women today or about where current trends are leading. There is ample evidence that progress toward gender equality is threatened by many of the economic and social currents in contemporary China.

The challenge for the Chinese government, international donor agencies, NGOs and women’s groups is to consolidate the gains in progress toward gender equality, and to ensure that ground is not lost as China continues down the road of globalization and reform. Economic development does not automatically translate into improvements in women’s social status. For example, trafficking in women, female infanticide and female suicide have increased over the past 20 years.

While there have been enormous gains in reducing poverty over the last 20 years, continuing market-led growth, without policies which directly address the causes of poverty and of gender inequality, is likely to increase inequalities between regions and groups. Opportunities to increase income vary greatly in relation to people’s initial assets, location, skills and access to markets. The gap between a rural, semi-literate woman living in a remote area and a well educated young woman in a city is likely to widen without the redistributive function of the state.

With WTO accession, further dismantling of publicly-owned enterprises, a yet-to-be revealed new strategy for poverty alleviation, and the promise of further legislative and administrative reform, it will be necessary to continually assess and monitor the differential impacts on women and men, boys and girls, identify areas where gender equality is undermined, and devise a range of measures to address these issues as they arise.
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