

Main issues for discussion on difficulties faced by women in China.

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I Historical Overview

1) Events relating to gender equality in the two decades following the first Chinese Constitution in 1954:

1. Promotion of schooling and access to education for girls.
2. Mobilisation of women to join the labour force. At the time, the means and conditions for women to get paid employment were as follows:
 - a. Implementation of an employment plan,
 - b. Reaffirmation of women's right to take part in the collective paid work of production units in rural communities.
3. Broadening of the range of decision making positions in society accessible to women.
4. Improvement in women's contribution to and social recognition in society.
5. Establishment and development of feminist associations.

The Chinese Women's Association was set up in 1949 and built a 5-tier network (for the purposes of administrative authority *Translator's note*) extending from Government to urban quarters and rural villages. Committees and divisions of the Chinese Women's Association were also set up in the mining industry and in specialised units for teaching and research.

2) Following this period, China went through thirty years of gradual reform and economic opening. The economy took off and living conditions improved.

During this period the domestic market remained vibrant, household consumption continued to grow.

1. As China entered the 21st century the state of social development in Chinese society underwent several upheavals that had a complex impact on the way equality between the sexes evolved.
2. After thirty years of reforms and opening up, the Chinese economy and its social structures were subjected to massive change while clearly making progress. Chinese women took an active role in this change and benefited from the situation.
3. After emerging from the era of a planned economy China is inexorably moving towards becoming a globalised market economy. This, for Chinese women has both positive and negative implications
 - i. Thanks to rapid economic growth, women have ever improving employment prospects with higher earnings potential. Women with sought-after high level skills and training can use these abilities in a context that encourages efficiency and competition.
 - ii. Because of changes in society, the traditional systems that offered some guarantee of

protection of women's rights and interests have been challenged by the market economy, and are no longer applicable.

4. The 4th World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 was an unprecedented opportunity for Chinese women to make their voices heard in the tumult of social change and reform going on at the time:
 - i. At this 4th UN World Conference on Women, the Chinese Government declared "our goal is to place gender equality at the heart of the promotion of social development in China".
 - ii. Holding this conference in Beijing provided a new window of opportunity for the Chinese public to become more familiar with the idea of gender equality and increasing involvement of women.
 - iii. In August 1995, China launched a new government action plan for promoting gender equality and improving living conditions for women: 'The life improvement plan for Chinese women 1995/2000' hereafter referred to as the '1995 plan'. Another one was launched in 2001: 'the life improvement plan for Chinese women 2001/2010' referred to later as the '2001 plan'
 - iv. A decade after the conference, an amendment to the PRC's legislation relating to the guarantee on women's rights is adopted.

II Important points relating to the current position of women.

1. It is imperative that peasant women lift themselves out of poverty

- 1.1 Peasant women still live in poverty today.
- 1.2 Inequality still clearly exists judging by the largely female rural workforce.
- 1.3 Peasant women are usually left behind in the migration process to urban areas.
- 1.4 The three elements these women need most: finance, technical wherewithal, a means to earn a better living.
- 1.5 Peasant women need confidence in their future.

2. Employment and reorientation of women in towns and cities.

- 2.1 The negative impact of deeper labour reform and regulation of economic structures became increasingly apparent after 1995.
- 2.2 Academia in China has traditionally viewed women as being a marginal work force in its employment theories.
- 2.3 The employment situation of women in China clearly reflects marginalisation.

3. It is essential that the women take a greater role in the political and social decision-making process.

Even though Chinese women are increasingly becoming involved in politics, a great deal remains to be done and the current situation is not optimistic.

3.1 Whereas the percentage of women in national assemblies around the globe is on the rise, in China female representation to the people's assembly is dropping in national assembly and international organisation rankings. Domestically, female representation in village committees has

been poor since 2000, the year when records began, with scores hitting a low in 2004 with only 15% participation from women.

3.2 A fact that should not be overlooked is that women who hold decision-making positions are more often than not deputies or working in divisions that are unrelated to the economy. As a result they are sidelined from power.

3.3 In 2008, China underwent various changes in government, presenting a new challenge to women's participation in politics.

4. Women and consumer rights

4.1 Women are increasingly becoming targets for marketing campaigns and there are still problems in the field of the protection of women's consumer rights and interests.

4.2 It is necessary to pay particular attention to women's rights as consumers, so that they can consume safely. Women should be encouraged and taught how to be more discerning, healthy and reasonable consumers. At the same time, the consumption environment needs to be improved as well. Attempts to reduce the female body to being a vulgar consumer product should be strongly discouraged.

4.3 Women-oriented consumer surveys and the creation of a female consumer forum would encourage companies to be more socially responsible as well as provide guidelines on women's consumption.

III Difficult to resolve issues

1. Promotion of society that respects equality between men and women through legislative and policy leadership.

According to the spirit of the constitution, sexual discrimination is never intended in the establishment and implementation of laws. Nevertheless, sexual discrimination is common both in the drawing up and implementation of supposedly gender-neutral measures, due to lack of awareness of the principle of gender equality. Measures relating to gender equality and equal rights face many obstacles from an objective point of view. These are the main problems China faces in establishing a system that respects gender equality.

Amending or repealing social policies that go against the principle of gender equality, taking decisive measures to put an end to the above mentioned issues – in other words transforming discriminatory measure into egalitarian ones – are just some of the ways in which China could build a national policy for gender equality. At the same time it should provide a response to the urgent problems relating to equality between the sexes – a response that any society claiming to protect gender equality must provide.

2. Emphasising the importance of training and education in order to raise the general level of education in women. The difference in status between men and women compounded by old traditions means that access to education is generally more difficult for women. Less educated women face a higher risk of being marginalised in the increasingly competitive climate in China resulting from its adhesion to the WTO. In addition to this many women deliberately pass up opportunities to get technical training because of lack of understanding of the advantages such training could bring or because they are too burdened by responsibilities in the home. Most women cruelly lack knowledge and experience in how to set up and run a small company.

In a system that is based on a market economy, making profits is of primary concern. As a result, women's lack of education can seriously damage their chances of getting a job in a highly competitive labour environment.

3. Setting up financial systems that favour entrepreneurship in women. Women suffer from insecurity in the job market because of sexual discrimination. Women's associations play an important role in the promotion and support of female enterprise. The main obstacle faced by women today in finding a job or setting up a small business is obtaining financial backing. Micro credit programs don't take sexual inequality sufficiently into account and tend to lack in flexibility as a result. Loans are generally requested and granted to household units. Since men are usually considered to be the head of a household, they are naturally given the right to request such loans, depriving women of the support to which they should be entitled.

4. Protecting human and health rights. Threats to the right to life and women's right to health should be recognised, against a background of an imbalance in the ratio of girl/boy births (more boys than girls). Firm measures must be taken to guarantee the health of newborn and young girls in order to give them the same chances as boys with regards to proper nutrition and health care. Furthermore, attention needs to be paid to the issue of elderly women who are ill or living below the poverty line in towns and villages. Society should offer help to elderly women who do not have health insurance or a pension. It is also important to be aware of the ravages caused by domestic violence. The complexity of the issues involved should be apprehended in order to guarantee proper protection of women's rights in the home and in their private lives. Preventive measures should therefore be taken to put an end to violence against women and sexual harassment. Gender should be taken into account when analysing data relating to trends in the spread and means of transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (STD) – especially AIDS. It is vital to produce gender-based statistics and data in order to ensure sexual equality in STD prevention measures, given that women are more affected than men. Equality between the sexes is a principal that should be taught from as young an age as possible, in order to instil the younger generation with the idea of sexual equality and mutual respect. This is conducive to better understanding of the importance of responsible sexual behaviour and responsible behaviour in the home.

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