

East Asian Women in Politics

Promoting Gender-Responsive Governance and Transformative Leadership

Equal Participation in Political and Public Life

China Rights Forum Spring 1999

While, as the government's report states, there are no legislative or constitutional barriers to women's participation in political and public life, a combination of lack of representation of women in the highest organs of power in the state, political controls over association and the low priority given to women's needs and concerns means that in reality women's representation does not comply with the standards set out in the Convention. As China scholar Stanley Rosen put it in a 1995 article for *Pacific Affairs*, "[T]he official release of partial data... tends to highlight the positive aspects of women's political participation, while avoiding more uncomfortable data or interpretations."

Article 7 of CEDAW requires that states eliminate discrimination against women in public and political life, and that women are ensured the right to vote in elections, be involved in formulating government policy and hold public office and participate in NGOS and associations "concerned with the public and political life of the country."

No substantial increase in participation

The vague statistics in the official report on election of women deputies to the National People's Congress (NPC) and other bodies do not present a full picture of women's participation at the highest levels of decision-making. In fact, women's participation has grown very slowly in the history of the PRC, as the UNDP's 1998 China Human development Report makes clear. The highest levels of participation were recorded during the Cultural Revolution, and there has been little progress since then. For example, in 1978 women constituted 21 percent of the Fourth NPC's Standing Committee but this had dropped to 9 percent by the Sixth NPC in 1983 and stood at 12.69 percent in 1993.

Although the government report indicates that 33 percent of cadres are female, a survey by the official *China Daily* found that very few hold high-level posts, with the vast majority being local-level officials. At county level and above, only 14 percent of officials are women and just three members of the 39-member State Council are women. As an All-China Women's Federation (CWF) study put it, the situation of women in politics is "one low, three small," meaning that the overall number is low, while women at higher levels in top positions and key sectors is small.

Representation is even lower in the top levels of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which leads the Chinese state in all its endeavors and is effectively the supreme decision-making institution. In the 1992 CCP Central Committee, women made up only 6.35 percent of full members, and 9.3 percent of alternate members. In the Central Committee elected by the 1997 CCP Congress, the proportion of female full members actually declined, making up 4.14 percent of the total, while female alternates rose slightly at 11.25 percent. The proportion of women has changed little since China acceded to the Convention, with full female members and alternate members respectively making up 5.24 percent and 9.42 percent in 1982, and 5.71 percent and 10.91 percent in 1987. The 24-member 1997 CCP Politburo, the most important decision-making body in the PRC, contains only one woman, Wu Yi, who is one of two alternates, while its seven-member Standing Committee has no women at all, and never has done since the founding of the PRC.

Official studies have shown that most women cadres in leadership positions are involved with “women’s work” through the ACWF and its local branches. For example, more than 80 percent of women delegates to township-level people’s congresses are directors or committee members of village women’s congresses. This means that women are essentially confined to a particular sphere of work, and have few opportunities to gain experience in broader political issues, and thus to get promoted into higher-level posts.

Women’s federation bows to party priorities

The ACWF is one of eight “mass organizations” set up soon after the CCP came to power in 1949. According to the government’s report, the ACWF is “widely regarded as by the government and the people as the bridge bringing China’s women’s population together.” Official documents state that the primary task of the organization is “to implement government policies at all levels of society, from working women upwards.” As the General Principles of the ACWF Charter, revised in 1998, puts it:

The All-China Women’s Federation is a mass organization of society which links together women across the country of all minority nationalities and from all walks of life under the leadership of the CCP to achieve further liberation, and a bridge and a transmission belt linking the masses of women with the CCP and the government.

The ACWF is an important force in building socialism with Chinese characteristics. The ACWF takes Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory as guides for its action. During the primary stage of socialism, the ACWF plays an active role in uniting and educating women on a broad scale to implement the Party’s basic line and build socialist material and spiritual civilization. The ACWF’s basic function is to represent and protect the rights and interests of women, and to promote equality between men and women.

The report states that the ACWF is “China’s largest NGO” which can “articulate in a timely fashion the views and aspirations of women.” Yet both official and scholarly publications repeatedly stress that China’s social organizations are not pressure groups, as their interests are “identical” to those of the authorities. A prime example of this is the fact that the ACWF was responsible for drafting the government’s report to CEDAW currently under review. Furthermore, ACWF officials are considered “state cadres.”

Problems arising from the dual and contradictory roles of representation and implementation of state policy are manifested in the ACWF's actual work. For example, there is no doubt that the organization contains many dedicated local cadres who work hard to protect women's rights. But at the same time, their primary role in enforcing the state's population policy means that ACWF cadres are often unpopular figures in their communities.

The majority of ACWF officials are party members. For example, a survey reported in China Women's News in 1991 found that 78 percent of 196 leading women's federation officials at county level in Suzhou were party members. As one moves up the hierarchy of the ACWF this percentage increases.

The last 20 years of economic reform have clarified the often-conflicting interests of women from different classes and sectors in Chinese society. However, the ACWF still tends to ignore these divisions and regards all women as having basically the same interests. All women are automatically members of the organization, thus negating the need for it to recruit actively.

Furthermore, unfortunately the ACWF has not challenged the misconception that it is somehow the "quality" of Chinese women that lies behind continuing discrimination and low levels of participation. The government report appears to go along with this stereotype stating that, "Belittlement of and discrimination against women, even violation of their rights and interests, are not uncommon, and their quality as a whole needs further improvement."

Restrictions on association affect women

The strength of the CCP's hold over women's representation has been formalized by laws and regulations restricting the formation of associations. Although China's 1982 Constitution states that Chinese citizens enjoy freedom of association, by requiring all groups to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs prior to operation, the Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Groups (1998) aim to control all social groups. (See p.26 for more details.) The presumption of these regulations is, in fact, against freedom of association, since there may be no activities of a group without registration.

The ACWF's monopoly is institutionalized by a provision of the 1998 Regulations which states that "identical or similar social groups cannot be set up within the same administrative area," effectively giving the department in charge of a particular issue a monopoly over any activities in its field carried out by social groups, even those connected to other mass organizations or government departments.

Detailed regulations from the Ministry of Civil Affairs also strictly forbid all new groups from being organized around gender. Although women's organizations already in existence before 1989, when the first regulations on the registration were enacted, have been allowed to continue to operate, new women's groups must be registered as "second-level" organizations within larger associations, as well as being group members of the ACWF.

Independent women's groups

Although there has undoubtedly been an increase in the number of women's groups legally registered as "secondary organizations" this has only served to further reduce the space for women's groups which have not been able to register or who would rather operate outside these parameters.

Yet there have been numerous examples of women's organizations trying to operate in a non-registered or partially registered limbo, but many have ended up being closed down. The following are a few examples:

- In the early 1990s an informal women's salon of 20 people met regularly at the Beijing Institute of Geology until the police closed it down. A similar women's salon at the Beijing Languages Institute had to stop inviting outside guests after warnings from the police.
- In 1996 a privately financed shelter for battered women in Shanghai was closed down soon after it opened. An investigation team which included ACWF representatives justified the shutdown on account of unspecified "financial irregularities," the international media attention the shelter had attracted, and that it was "inappropriate" for such a center to be run by private individuals.
- In 1993 an application from a social group seeking to lobby the Japanese government for compensation for Chinese "comfort women" in World War II was rejected with no reason given.
- In 1995 the Zhengzhou International Women's College—the first women's studies centre in China—was shut down for undisclosed reasons. The Chinese Women's Museum associated with the college had been closed the previous year on the grounds that the museum's presentation of women's history was not in keeping with the CCP interpretation of women's history.

The continuing efforts of women to organize independently and escape the control of official organizations such as the ACWF indicate that there is significant dissatisfaction with the work and policies of the ACWF.

A compliant union

Although the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) is not directly mentioned in the government's report, it is considered by the Chinese government as a major organization for representing the interests of women in the work place.

The ACFTU is a profoundly hierarchical and undemocratic organization which operates under the direct leadership of the CCP. Key officials, especially at the provincial and national levels, are appointed by the party and, according to an official ACFTU document, their work must always: "Resolutely uphold the unitary leadership of the CCP."

The 1992 Trade Union Law ensures that the ACFTU enjoys a strict legal monopoly on organizing in the workplace. Articles 12 and 13 stipulate that the formation of any new union branch or organization requires the prior approval of the higher-level trade union organization. This, as the imprisonment of many who have tried testifies, effectively rules out any union organization—representing female or male workers—that attempts to operate outside the parameters of the ACFTU and independent of the CCP leadership.

Throughout the 1990s there has been a huge ground swell of general dissatisfaction with the ACFTU and its ability to defend its members. Spearheaded by the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation (BWAFF), the 1989 Democracy Movement saw nationwide attempts to set up an alternative union. The BWAFF and its sister organizations met with fierce opposition from the official union. After the clampdown, many of its members and leaders received heavy prison sentences. Despite the continuous harassment and repression of all labor activists since, disenchantment with the ACFTU has grown rather than diminished.

Thus there are serious questions about the ability of the organization to provide adequate representation for any workers, including women. As women are disproportionately affected by employment-related problems, the lack of an independent union which can reflect their concerns and defend their interests has a particular impact on them, exacerbating the discrimination they face.

In 1994 the chair of the ACFTU's Women Workers' Committee, Xue Zhaojun, pointed out: "The specific needs of trade union work concerning women workers should be carried out in the context of the overall need of the party and the state."

Most workers are fully aware of this conflict in roles, and many believe that the union fails to represent their interests. A spontaneous street survey organized by students in a city in south China, conducted after they had listened to a labor rights programme broadcast from Hong Kong (and published in China Labour Bulletin), revealed the extent of the dissatisfaction:

Ms. You, 30, pharmaceutical worker:

Interviewer: What do you think about our trade unions?

Ms. You: I have worked at the factory for more than ten years. When the factory is doing well, the union issues some safety equipment or some souvenir presents on festivals and public holidays. When times are hard, the union is hard put even to look after itself. Basically the union can't look after our interests. In my experience, the union has never helped us or spoken out for workers.

Ms. Xiao, 28, accountant, eight years' work experience:

Interviewer: If your rights have been violated, would you think of going to the union for help?

Ms. Xiao: No way.

Interviewer: Can you tell us why?

Ms. Xiao: If we have a problem, it's best to go direct to the boss, and if he's no good then ask the government department responsible for the enterprise. If I am still not getting anywhere, then I'll rely on my own connections to get the problem sorted out. It would really be pointless asking the union to help. All they do is issue a few souvenirs on holidays and organize leisure events. They don't really have much to do with us and certainly are not the people to ask if you've got problems at work.

Interviewer: Have you joined the union?

Ms. Xiao: Yes, but it's more or less mandatory and I only found out from the union dues deducted from my wages. Otherwise I wouldn't even know it existed and certainly have never thought of asking them to help with a problem.

Ms Li, 35

Interviewer: If your rights were ignored by the enterprise, would you go to the union?

Ms. Li: I've never heard of the union solving workers' problems. I've been working for a long time and I've never heard of anything like that. In fact I've heard that the ACWF is better at looking after the interests of women workers and their children. It seems like the union just takes our dues but doesn't do anything else. The thing is that looking after workers' rights is a sensitive issue at the moment and the union can't do anything to protect us.

Weak and ineffectual state machinery

According to the government report, the main central government body responsible for policy on women is the Working Committee on Women and Children under the State Council, which plays a coordinating role between different departments. However, there is little evidence the institution has much impact on government policy. The Working Committee is reportedly not considered very important in the hierarchy of departments, and its regular meetings are rarely attended by any official above vice-ministerial rank.

The involvement of the ACWF in the Working Committee does provide some limited channels for input into government decision-making, but the latter has not been entrusted with tasks such as law drafting, and its (and the ACWF's, by extension) influence on such processes has thus only been indirect.

Furthermore, the scope of the "undertakings" and "services" the government's report claims this body provides is doubtful considering its annual budget of 4 million yuan (US\$500,000) and the number of women and children in China. Most of this budget is reportedly spent on maintaining the Working Committee's office.

Counterparts of the Working Committee, variously named the Commission for the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women and the Women and Children Work Commission, have been set up in all province-level government departments. Most such departments are located in the provincial women's federation, although in a few cases they are situated in the main office of the local government. Only three such provincial commissions have any full-time government staff, while the rest have to rely on staff seconded from the women's federation or other departments. These mechanisms are also generally short of funds, with some receiving no government allocation at all.

Source: http://www.hrichina.org/crf/english/99spring/e14_equal.htm

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