

Women in China

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First of all, I would like to thank FES for giving me the opportunity to attend this meeting. It is a good idea to hold a meeting like this, because women's issues have begun to draw the world's attention. On the eve of mankind embracing the new century, it is significant that we will discuss and exchange views on this issue. We hope women will have a brighter future in the coming century. I wish to brief you on what is happening in China regarding this issue.

The Chinese government's policies on women and the social status of Chinese women.

In 1995, after the Fourth World Conference on Women and the NGO forum, the Chinese government formulated the program for the development of Chinese Women 1995-2000 (hereafter referred to as the "Development Program"). The Development Program is the first government program in Chinese history on women's development.

To ensure the full implementation of the Development Program, the Chinese government has furthered strengthened the national machinery for the advancement of women. The constituents of the National Working Committee on Women and Children under the state Council has increased from 19 to 29 since the Fourth World Conference on Women, among which 24 are government departments and five non-governmental organizations. The Committee gives guidance to the work concerning all women's development issues, coordinates the work of governmental organizations and that of NGOs, and promotes government at all levels to make further efforts to develop the potential of women and solve the problems faced by them because of economic reforms.

Chinese women participate equally in the decision-making process, and the number of female officials in leading bodies at various levels has been growing gradually. There were 650 women deputies to the Ninth National People's Congress (NPC) in 1998, which amounts to 21.8% of the total number of deputies. There were 341 women deputies to the Ninth Chinese People's Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which amounts to 15.54% of the total number of deputies. The percentage increased by 0.78% and 2.02% over those to the Eighth NPC and the Eighth CPPCC respectively. Currently, there are four female state leaders, two female ministers and 16 female vice ministers among the 29 ministries of China.

All the provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the central government of China have female leaders, and 11 provinces have more than one female provincial leader, an increase by 46.5% compared to the figure five years ago. Nearly 400 cities among the over 680 cities have elected female city leaders. Since 1991, the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) and its subsidiary organs have set up information networks on women of talent to be recommended for government positions. Upon the recommendations, some of them have been promoted to prominent posts, for example, a deputy minister of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the

Deputy Governors of Shandong Province, Liaoning Province, Jiangsu Province, the vice mayors of Guangzhou City, Dalian city were recommended by ACWF. As for the subsidiaries of ACWF, they have also played very positive roles in this regard, for example, during the period from 1992 to 1997 the ACWF subsidiaries in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region recommended 1,710 women cadres and 714 of them have been accepted.

China has steadily formed a working pattern to push forward the development of women's cause in society, with actions by the government as the main force, with assistance and coordination by NGOs as a supplementary force. It has also established working systems from central government to local departments promoting the advancement of women. All this has indicated that only by close cooperation with NGOs and overall participation of the whole society can we create a favorable social atmosphere for the development of women. China has established a basically complete legal system for the protection of rights and interests of women and children. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China is the core of the system. Other laws include the Law on the Protection of Rights of Women, the Law on the Protection of Rights of Minors, the Law on Marriage, the Law on Labor, education, on the health of mothers and infants, etc. The human rights of Chinese women are guaranteed by the law. Having rid themselves of the shackles of thousands of years of feudalism during which they were oppressed, humiliated, beaten down today Chinese women are contributing tremendously to the development of industry, agriculture, science, culture, education, public health and other sectors. In China, "half the sky" is the most vivid description of women's role in society.

The Chinese trade unions pay great attention to the work on female workers.

With China's economy developing rapidly, the number of female workers has steadily risen. In 1999, female workers made up 46.5% of the total number of people employed, one percentage point higher than that in 1995, with more than 17.7 million women workers joining the labor force. Accordingly, unionized women workers are over 40% and quite a number of them are elected into the leaderships of local trade unions at various levels. In 1997, there were 1,954 women officials who assumed chairs or vice-chairs of trade unions. Currently there are over 85,000 full time female trade union officials. Chinese trade unions attach great importance to the protection of female workers' rights of work and of their special interests. All China Federation of Trade Union (ACFTU) thus established a women's worker's commission in February 1991. By the end of 1996, all provincial federations of trade unions had set up such a commission, 90% of grassroots unions also had formed a women workers' commission. The current work of the trade union concerning female workers is mainly as follows:

1. Participating in the formulation of laws and regulations related to female workers' rights and interests, and monitoring their implementation. Over the last seven years, the women workers' department of ACFTU and trade unions at all levels have reflected women's opinions by participating in the formulation and revision of dozens of laws and regulations related to women's interests, such as law on protecting women's rights and interests, labor law, regulation on labor protection for women workers, regulation on work areas prohibited for female workers, regulation on health work of women workers, Chinese women's development program and experimental rule on child bearing insurance of workers.
2. Helping laid off women get re-employed. As China is developing a socialist market economy and readjusting its industrial structure, layoffs and unemployment have happened in enterprises with female workers bearing the brunt. It is difficult for them to find new jobs due to social inequalities, as well as other reasons. This problem caught the attention of the ACFTU. Female workers' commissions at all levels make proposals to local governments, people's congresses and political consultants' conferences on how to bring about reemployment by considering their needs and requirements. At the same time, they provide unemployed women with skills training to improve their employability

and competitiveness. Toward this end, local federations make full use of worker's schools and cultural palaces and even build special training bases. According to statistics in 15 provinces, 21.35 million women have attended the training. In addition, trade unions call for an increase in areas which women are suitable for, for example, accounting and services. They also establish job service centers and files to offer job information for unemployed women. In the meantime, they've requested that the government reduce taxation in order to make it easier for unemployed women to find a way out of their dilemma.

3. Strengthening labor protection for women to defend their special interests. Special protection is given to women based on their physiological needs, even though they enjoy the same labor protection as men, with a view toward protecting their right to work and their safety and health in production.

Problems facing the Chinese women

1. Poverty: China is a developing country with a population of 1.2 billion. There are still 34 million rural people facing the problem of shortages of food and clothing by the end of 1999. In China, poverty, especially the poverty of women is a complex and multidimensional problem. Due to difficult living environments, underdevelopment, lack of information and poor education conditions many are still struggling to afford food and clothing. Women especially are more vulnerable due to high illiteracy (40 to 70%). Unbalanced resource and economic development is also the major obstacle for impoverished people.
2. Issues on protection of female workers: Sample statistics of basic information on female workers done by trade unions across the country in September 1999 showed that great problems still existed in all industrial sectors and units that are related to the provision of regular physical check-ups for female workers and the establishment of clinics and facilities for pregnant women. These problems were more severe in non-public owned factories.
3. Issues on re-employment and living standards of female workers: In reality, sexual discrimination is still common in the workplace, the system on child-bearing insurance incomplete and the re-employment policy not fully implemented in some regions. In addition, many unemployed women still lack the skills required to be productive workers. All this makes it difficult for them to find new jobs. In some privately owned and foreign ventures where the management does not sign labor contracts with women, female workers lack labor protection facilities and suffer from poor working conditions. At the same time there are some other factories that delay payment of wages to female workers.
4. Violence against women: Violence against women has affected women's development by limiting their access to resources and their participation in social activities. Women's comparatively low social and economic status make them easy targets for violence. In China, violence and abuse against women especially trafficking in women and girls and domestic violence, has yet to be effectively controlled and the law against domestic violence is not strong enough.

With the development of social affairs and increased attention to women, I have no doubt that women will display the qualities of love, patience and wisdom as well as engage broadly in the affairs of state, politics, economics, environmental protection, education, and public health. Women will demand the same rights as men and will not be satisfied with being a supplement to social development. Outstanding women set a good example for their sisters in all sectors.

Having the future in their own hands, women must develop the self-respect and self-confidence necessary to improve themselves. The future belongs to, and depends on, the youth, and it needs to be created by the youth. Young women will always occupy “half the sky”, but it will require a sustained effort by the government and society to improve the status of women and bring about true equality between the sexes.

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