

CHINA: UNEVEN PROGRESS

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On the one hand, urban and rural women's living conditions, protection and development conditions have improved significantly in China in these fifteen years elapsed in the Beijing Conference, particularly with respect to urban women's political participation, employment, education, health care, marriage and family rights.

Public awareness of the need to promote the advancement of women and gender equality improved. State, local governments and NGOs are actively involved in programs such as skills training programs, expanding micro-credit and export of labor services to help rural women out of poverty in many areas.

From 1994 to 2002, the Chinese government paid a good deal of the total micro-credit to poor households under the provision that those loans were designed primarily for women. In 2003, the National Bureau published a Rural Poverty Monitoring Report integrating gender equality as an aspect of the project's impact assessment on poverty reduction and began to develop gender-disaggregated indicators. The social environment for women's development has improved in many areas.

On the other hand, China's rapid social and economic transformation together with the impact of global economic integration has strengthened the existence of a dual system based on an urban-rural dichotomy in which social development and in particular women's rights show unequal progress. In some remote rural areas, mountain areas and ethnic minority areas, the status of women has not made significant progress.

Internal migration is on the rise; rural women, specially the young, have flocked into urban areas to work in factories for low wages or are employed in the informal sector. Their living, working, and social protection conditions have hardly changed.

Governmental initiatives on gender equality

The Chinese Central Government established the National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council to improve the status of women. In addition and following the mandates in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, the Government developed a series of laws and polices to promote gender equality such as the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women.

Thirdly, the Government was amongst the few countries to acknowledge publicly that "promoting equality between the sexes is a basic state policy to achieve China's social development".

The Government also promulgated and executed Programs for the Development of Chinese Women (1995-2000, 2001-2010), and integrated these into the national economy and social development plans. Furthermore, there were several partnerships set up with local organizations and NGOs to promote gender equality.

The case of internal women migrants

According to statistics, there are over 150 million rural migrants in the urban areas. The proportion of women in the formal labor force shifted from less than 1/3 to 40% in the last 30 years. In the most economically developed zone and the coastal areas of China, the proportion of migrant women workers, in general, accounts for 70% in the electronics, textile and light industries. There are no independent trade unions within the industrial sector.

Large segments of the internal female migrants' population are located in the informal sector mainly as domestic workers or sex workers. There is lack of statistics as to the amount of sex workers in China but their living conditions and social protection are far below other women workers in the informal sector.

Many labor NGOs have worked hard to promote the rights and interests of migrant women workers for years. But the local governments of the economically developed zone often prefer to support large business in order to secure company revenue.

Overall the advances made in increasing awareness of women's rights and improvements in the social environment for women's development are significant steps forward. However, rapid growth and rapid global economic integration have created a dichotomy between the rural and urban populations which requires immediate action and is compounded by the existing inequities for the status of women. ■