

## **NATIONAL ACTION FOR WOMEN TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA**

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### **Summary**

The All China Women's Federation is an influential organization, which helps Chinese women to “hold up half the sky”. The Federation has a structured and well-linked system from top to bottom, the latter being the Village Women's Committee. The success and sustainability of China's development and population policies depend on Chinese women. The government accepts women's right to universal, comprehensive reproductive health care including family planning, and considers that education of women and access to resources are essential as the basis for empowerment of women. Integrating women's equality with family planning is regarded as an important prerequisite to the emancipation of Chinese women. Medical and health service to women is gradually improving and strengthening. The family planning service network under the management of China's Family Planning Commission, has solidified its role of service provision to women. In Chinese tradition, women are valued only in their reproductive and family role.

In rural areas in 1997, women earned 81% of what men earned, and women in urban areas receive 77% of the pay given to men. Fertility desire and the status of women's employment are closely linked. Rural women in the labor force become increasingly specialized, socialized, and market-oriented. This has played a decisive role in reshaping women's employment in rural China. Protecting women in labor force is the essence of many Chinese regulations. The dual burden of Chinese women is a reality. The rights of Chinese women consists of legal rights, their interests, and individual preferences. In 1998, 94.6% women in urban areas and 79.0% women in rural areas decide their marriages by themselves. Rural women have higher percentage of marriages arranged by their parents. Chinese men have a slightly higher divorce rate

than Chinese women, although the magnitude of the divorce rate is very low. Chinese women today no longer listen totally to their parents and parents-in-law. In the most developed areas, women have higher decision-making power in matters of reproduction, and in less developed areas, women have less power. Women's right to manage and to decide the use of family income are influenced by the traditional notion of "earning men and housekeeping women" in China. Women generally shoulder more responsibilities and duties in managing the family income.

The right of self development and education for women greatly improved in China between 1950 and 2000. Educational attainment also has significant effects on women's status in the family. In pre-revolutionary China, most women did not enjoy the right to education. In 1949, 90% of Chinese women were illiterate; by 1992, the illiteracy rate for women had dropped to 32% and the rate of girls aged 7-11 attending school rose to 96%. The higher the education of women, the greater their power in family decision-making. The economic income of women is another important factor influencing women's status in the family. Urban women enjoy quite a high level of independence in the self development decision, with small differences between sexes. Men are superior to women in enjoying more development opportunities. Urban women, however, feel less satisfied with health than rural women. About 99% of urban women never smoke and 33% occasionally drink alcohol, compared to 94% and 10% respectively for rural women. About 13% of urban women reported inadequate sleep, and 9% of rural women. 77% of urban women said that they ate on time regularly, compared with 69% for rural women. Fewer urban women suffer from obesity and high blood pressure than rural women. On the education of children by family and parents, 59% of urban women said that they were satisfied, compared with 74% for rural women. As far as employment is concerned, 23% of urban married women were satisfied and 17% dissatisfied, compared with 33% and 8% respectively for rural women. Only 19% of urban women are satisfied with their financial situation, compared with 28% for rural women. The government is now actively trying to reduce pressures on women at the workplace. The abnormally high sex ratio at birth has significant implications for women.

### **1. Chinese Women Bear Half the Weight of the Sky**

China's National People's Congress adopted a comprehensive law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women in 1992. This Law includes specific articles providing for equal education and employment opportunities and for safeguards outlawing discrimination against women. In 1995, a five-year Program for the Development of Chinese Women was promoted. This plan continues the government's efforts on behalf of women's equality, development and participation in decision-making at all levels of administration.

Under the government's long-avowed state doctrine advocating "self-respect", "self-confidence", "self-reliance", and "self-improvement" among women, China has made impressive gains in raising the social and economic status of women. Chinese women and girls continue not only to bear "half the weight of the sky", but also to raise most of the food and children under the sky. It is called for by the Chinese government that party committees and all levels of government as well as the whole society should show more concern for women's issues and pay more attention to work on behalf of women.

The All China Women's Federation is an influential organization, which helps Chinese women to hold up half the sky. It has a structured and well-linked system from the top to the bottom—e.g. Village Women's Committees. Developing from the time of China's civil war in the 1940s, the Federation helped the communist party to take power in 1949. Because of this historical significance, the Federation is also a politically powerful organization. It addresses the needs of poor women and provides skills (such as methods to combat postpartum depression), literacy and numerical training, and basic health, hygiene and child care issues like immunization, the use of oral dehydration therapy and dietary iodine.

Chinese women can now acquire more knowledge and appropriately handle the relation between national interests and personal interests, consequently gaining a suitable balance between one's individual rights and one's due social responsibility. For example, Chinese women can gain full access to information on modern contraceptive methods, knowledge about healthier births and better childbearing as well as maternal and child health care.

Despite increasing opportunities for women, old attitudes, norms, and practices persist to some degree. A 1990 national survey conducted by the All China Women's Federation and the State Statistical Bureau showed that 50% of men and women questioned still believed in the superiority of men.

The success and sustainability of China's development and population policies depend on Chinese women. Chinese national policy recognizes that improvements in the social status of women and gender equality are essential to sustainable development. Women at the grassroots, whether in the remote countryside or in urban communities, are assuming 85% of the responsibility for family planning as part of the effort to implement development. Women leaders at all governmental levels are sparking efforts to move China from an administrative to a service approach to family planning and population regulation.

Success in balancing resource availability and population size affects every woman. It is women in China who have provided and continue to provide leadership and who have taken much of the responsibility for this balancing task, particularly in family planning. From the household level to the national level, women in every Chinese village play crucial roles in creating conditions for sustainable development. Of the more than 0.3 million family planning staff above the township level, 62% are women, and 0.4 million family planning grass-root workers in the countryside are women.

The first national policy document produced in response to the Global Agenda 21 agreed upon at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 identified the status of women as an important issue in policies for sustainable development. This national policy calls for eliminating illiteracy among young and middle aged women by the year 2000. It also calls for combining family planning services with health services that meet the needs of women and their families, and for improving the quality of these services. It also makes explicit that men should bear greater responsibility for family affairs, including for family planning and child education.

Women are providing the leadership for change and development in China. Key leaders in the 1980s and 1990s include Mme. Peng Pei Yun, State Councilor and Vice Chairman of China's National People's Congress; Mme. Chen Mu Hua, now Chairman of the All China Women's Federation; and Li Xiu Zhen, Wu Jin Chun and Peng Yu, at ministerial level. Xiao Bi Lian, former Director of the National Research Institute for Family Planning and Zhang De Wei, recipient of the first China Population Award represent outstanding scientists. Xu Ai Guang and Zhou Hai Zhen are well known for their work in the provinces.

Empowering women in China is an important end in itself, as well as a key to improve the quality of life for everyone. Chinese people know that without the full and equal participation of women, there can be no sustainable human development. The Chinese government accepts women's right to universal, comprehensive reproductive health care including family planning, and regards women's education and access to resources as essential for empowerment of Chinese women. Investing actively in women's activities, the Chinese government is broadening women's opportunities, enabling them to realize their potential as human beings, and is regarding empowerment of women as the key to sustained economic growth, as well as to balanced sustainable population growth.

Son preference is typical of Chinese tradition. As a traditional norm and a status symbol, a son in a Chinese family will carry forward the family name and ultimately the family line, and a son will look after parents in their old age. These traditional and practical concerns remain so powerful in some places of China, that a wife or daughter-in-law is highly valued for her capacity to bear a son. This means that in these areas women have low status if they only produce a daughter. Women are forced to have unwanted pregnancies in order to have a son. In many field investigations, women respondents tell researchers that they value daughters, saying "daughters are more loving than sons and come to the rescue of parents in every emergency". It is the tradition of son preference, rooted in many people's minds, however, that most impacts on women's reproductive behavior and status.

The empty nest is a serious issue for Chinese women in their life cycle. Life expectancy is increasing, and women live longer than their husbands. More important, children are leaving home at a progressively younger age.

In China's long history, Empress Wu Zetian was the only woman who claimed herself as the "Emperor". She was active in the Tang Dynasty and ruled the country with an iron hand. The height of Tang Dynasty was between 626 A.D. and 755 A.D., and Empress Wu's active years were between 657 A.D. and 706 A.D. She was a capable woman who rose to power through her marriage with the emperor and secured her authority by brutally murdering several thousand officials and relatives, including her own son. She initiated several significant reforms that had and have great impacts on the lives of the Chinese people such as the system of political recruitment through examination, control of the country through religion and ideology, and land and ownership equalization. More importantly, Empress Wu's success has set a good example for today's Chinese women in a male dominated society that women are able to involve in Chinese politics.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

Born in 1963, **Li Yong-Ping** obtained his degrees of M.A. in Statistics and Ph.D. in Demography at the University of California at Berkeley in 1986 and 1990 respectively. He was once a visiting professor at the University of Chicago in 1994 and in Indiana University in 1997. He is now a professor in Peking University.