

Gender Equity and the Role of Women in China

In fall 2012, a delegation of 24 American Association of University Women (AAUW) members, donors, supporters, and staff traveled to China for 9 days of research, dialogue, cultural events, and educational experiences. From October 9 to October 18, the AAUW Women in Society Delegation visited sites around Beijing, Xi'an, and Kunming, including Tian'anmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, and the Terra Cotta Warriors. The highlight of their visit was their many meetings with leaders in education, politics, and direct services for women.

The trip provided delegates with a rare opportunity to research gender equity in China and meet with citizens to gain firsthand understanding of the status of Chinese women. The delegates hoped to answer these questions and more during their visit: What role do women play in contemporary Chinese society? What challenges do they face that are unique to their culture, and what challenges do we share? How do their education systems compare with ours?

Presented here is a summary of the findings of the delegation. Unless otherwise noted, statistics and statements cited in this paper are based on delegation member notes from the discussions and cannot be verified by public data.

I. The status of women in China

During the trip, the AAUW delegates met with leaders in a number of different fields, including:

- Eight members of the All China Women's Federation (ACWF), the largest women's nongovernmental organization in China. The ACWF represents and protects the rights and welfare of women and promotes equality.
- The vice president, six faculty members, and eight students at the China Women's University (CWU), the only state-financed institute of higher learning exclusively for women in China.
- Mrs. Fan Jing (Acting Deputy Director), Professor Yang Gud Cai, and 30 students at Yunnan University of Nationalities.
- Leaders at the Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization focused on rural community and women's development; women's rights and legal aid; social gender advocacy and training; and domestic violence.

Under China's constitution, "women enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life." The country's Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests further provides for equality in ownership of property, inheritance rights, and access to education.ⁱ Nonetheless, as delegates discovered in their meetings with these leaders, Chinese women and girls still have a long way to go before they achieve true equity.

Delegates found that perhaps one of the greatest hurdles to equality lies in overcoming deep-rooted, centuries-old thinking about gender roles. Chinese men continue to be seen as the breadwinners, property holders, and members of the public sphere. Meanwhile, women continue to be relegated to the private sphere—they are expected to look after the home and family and care for elderly parents and relatives, regardless of whether they hold a job outside the home.

Delegates also learned about several factors currently at play in China's economy, including the government's increased investment in property development and a heavy reliance on foreign investment. Midway through 2012, the Chinese government revised its GDP target downward, potentially reflecting an overall cooling down of its economy.

Mao Zedong famously said that "women hold up half the sky." And women's role in Chinese society is, in some ways, changing for the better. Young Chinese women are increasingly moving away from the countryside and piling into urban areas, where they earn more money than their parents ever dreamed of. Others are pouring into universities, where they consistently outperform their male colleagues.ⁱⁱ

But, as delegates learned, Chinese women continue to suffer discrimination in the workplace, sexual harassment, wage discrepancies, and domestic violence, among other things. During their trip, delegates met with several groups that are using outreach, education, counseling, and advocacy to break through these formidable barriers. One group, the ACWF, is even trying to re-educate men about domestic division of labor.

"Our AAUW delegations keep hearing the same thing over and over again," says Linda Hallman, AAUW Executive Director. "No matter the country or political landscape, you can codify gender equality all you want, but it does little to guarantee it. Just like we have here in the United States, you need these groups and their vigilance to ensure equity laws are implemented and upheld."

II. Employment

Women account for 49 percent of China's population and 46 percent of its labor force.ⁱⁱⁱ The country's labor and employment promotion laws mandate equality in employment and occupation.^{iv} Yet as delegates discovered during their visit, in practice, Chinese women continue to face significant challenges in achieving true equity in the workplace.

Complicating matters are the highly conservative attitudes that permeate Chinese society—and that seem to be on the rise. A 2010 survey by the ACWF found that about 62 percent of men and 55 percent of women agreed with this statement: “Men should mainly focus on career and women should be family oriented.” The number of men in agreement increased by 7.7 percent and the number of women by 4.4 compared with views in 2000.^v

Women face discrimination in the workplace. The delegates met with members of the ACWF, who told them that women still face discrimination in hiring, promotion, and training opportunities and that management jobs are less accessible to women. In fact, the U.S. State Department reports that many employers prefer to hire men to avoid the expense of maternity leave and childcare. Some job advertisements go so far as to specify height and age requirements for women.^{vi}

Faculty at CWU told delegates that pregnant women are likely to lose their jobs and that some careers in which women outnumber men (such as social work and teaching) are low paying.

The delegates also learned, however, that China is working to promote women's work-life balance by opening more state-owned kindergartens and nursery schools and encouraging more flex time at work. Some private companies even offer in-house childcare. And the state and some private companies provide reimbursement or insurance for childbirth and maternity leave.

Women earn less than men earn. AAUW delegations to Cuba, India, and South Africa consistently heard the same theme—women in those countries continue to earn less than men earn for equal work performed. China is no exception. According to the ACWF, women in cities earn 67 percent as much as men earn. In rural areas, that number drops to just 56 percent.^{vii}

Delegates met with ACWF representatives, who confirmed that a large gender pay gap exists in China. The gender pay gap is larger among wholesale, accommodation, agricultural, and manual laborers, they explained.

Delegates learned that a main challenge to closing the pay gap is the disparity between the number of men and women working in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. China currently has a growing technology economy, and the demand for knowledgeable technology workers is increasing. Increased employment opportunities and demand for STEM workers prompt employers to offer better salaries and working conditions to attract workers. Better working conditions might draw more female workers to these fields.

Retirement policies promote gender inequality. Delegates learned that China has different retirement ages for men and women: The official retirement age for men in China is 60 and for women 55.^{viii} The U.S. State Department has found, however, that some employers have set the retirement age for female workers even lower—to age 50. Lower retirement ages could reduce pensions, which are generally based on the number of years worked.^{ix} This can present long-term financial problems for women, who have longer life expectancies.

Women’s political participation is low. The Chinese constitution states that “all power in the People’s Republic of China belongs to the people” and that the people exercise this power through the National People’s Congress and congresses at provincial, district, and local levels.^x According to the ACWF, women make up approximately 23 percent of provincial government representatives; female representation is lower in rural areas.

Yet, in reality, true governing authority in the country rests in the firm hands of the 25-member Political Bureau (Politburo) of the Chinese Communist Party and its nine-member Standing Committee.^{xi} And as one goes up the party ranks, the number of women shrinks: No woman has ever held a post in the elite Standing Committee, and the Politburo currently has only one female member (Liu Yandong).^{xii}

AAUW delegates met with leaders at the Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family, who believe the key to promoting gender equality particularly in rural areas is to encourage more women to run for local government and rural management entities. The association discussed its initiative to help female candidates run for local office and to provide leadership training once the women are elected. The program has been successful: Since its launch, the number of women in rural local government has

significantly increased (but still remains relatively low). Several of these elected officials have been selected to serve as representatives to the National People's Congress.

III. Education

Access to primary education is codified, but questions abound. Chinese law provides for nine years of compulsory education for children.^{xiii} The ACWF told delegates that the gender gap in primary education in China ended in 2005.

However, delegates noted that the Chinese leaders they met with during their visit were reluctant to provide any statistics on the percentage of girls and boys who complete the mandatory nine years of education. Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department has found that in economically disadvantaged rural areas, many children do not attend school for the required nine years, and some never attend. According to a 2008 U.N. Development Programme report, only 61 percent of boys and 43 percent of girls in rural areas completed education higher than lower middle school.^{xiv}

During their meeting with AAUW delegates, faculty from Yunnan University of Nationalities described a dropout phenomenon among girls in primary education. They discussed how culture and history often drive poorer families to favor boys' education over girls, even if the girl outperforms her brother. Girls are therefore pushed toward vocational education and then immediate entry into the workforce.

Meanwhile, state-run public schools are not allowed to charge tuition, but many continue to charge miscellaneous fees.^{xv} Stories have emerged of parents being asked for "sponsorship" of up to 200,000 yuan (\$32,000) to get their children into these schools;^{xvi} AAUW delegates heard similar extraordinary tales during their visit. These types of expenses make it difficult for poorer families and migrant workers to send their children to school.

Questions surround equal access to higher education. In 1949, China's constitution mandated gender equality in education. According to Ministry of Education statistics, women accounted for 50 percent of undergraduate students in 2012 and 50 percent of master's students in 2010.^{xvii} Yet when it comes to doctoral candidates, the number of women notably decreases—just over 35 percent of candidates in 2012 were women.^{xviii} Studies show that female students outperform their male colleagues in universities and on master's and doctoral examinations.

Delegates learned about the country's efforts to encourage more women to complete graduate studies. For example, to ensure college is affordable for Chinese women, the state has established a special fund that offers no-interest government loans that do not have to be repaid until the graduate gets a job. The state also offers subsidized living expenses and free workshops/tutoring for remedial studies.

Chinese universities offer narrowly focused curriculum. To delegates, it appeared that the two Chinese universities they visited offered narrowly focused curricula. Students choose a major and take the majority of their courses in that one area. For instance, the current CWU curriculum remains focused on Chinese social and economic development. Unlike the United States, the schools do not offer a liberal arts curriculum, though there are a few courses in literature, fine arts, and philosophy. And up until recently, a student was not allowed to change her field of study.

Delegates learned that education leaders are grappling with the competing needs of instilling in students flexibility and creativity and preparing them for the workforce. Some reform leaders are seeking to integrate more electives, foster research skills, and incorporate liberal arts courses into higher education.

Women are underrepresented in STEM fields. Similar to the United States, high school girls in China have better grades in STEM fields, but it is strongly "hinted" that they should consider the social sciences.

Delegates learned that the percentage of female students in STEM programs remains relatively low throughout China, mostly due to traditional stereotyping that says females are weak in STEM competencies. Parents tend to steer their daughters toward the social sciences. The students themselves exhibit low self-perceptions: Several CWU students told delegates, "Boys are better at physics, so I don't pursue those studies." Those few who do pursue STEM studies are often stigmatized.

It is interesting to note that at CWU—where the mission, in part, is to promote gender equality in China—delegates found that the only STEM-related program offered is the university's relatively new computer science program.

College women feel pressure, but see education as a path to independence. During their meeting with the AAUW delegates, the CWU students spoke of college as a way to gain self-confidence and independence. As only children due to the country's one-child policy, the women felt their parents were over-protective.

They also felt extreme pressure from their parents to pursue economically sensible majors—ones that will lead to lucrative careers after graduation. This will enable the students to take care of themselves and provide for their parents financially in their old age (per the long-held, traditional Confucian virtue of filial piety).

IV. Violence against women

Domestic violence remains a significant problem. According to reports, 30 to 37 percent of families in China suffer from domestic violence, and more than 90 percent of the victims are women.^{xxix} The ACWF reported in 2010 that it receives 50,000 domestic violence complaints annually. But such abuse typically goes unreported, especially in rural areas: The ACWF found that only 7 percent of rural women who suffered domestic violence sought help from police.^{xxx}

Rape is illegal in China, but the law does not specifically recognize or exclude spousal rape. Both the country's Marriage Law and the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests include stipulations prohibiting domestic violence. However, according to the U.S. State Department, some experts find that these stipulations are too general, fail to define domestic violence, and are difficult to implement.^{xxxi} Delegates learned that anti-domestic violence legislation was on the agenda for the 18th National People's Congress (held in November).

Delegates met with groups working to provide services to victims of domestic violence. For example, the Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family connects women with social services for self-sufficiency, provides social work advocates at courts, and organizes peer support groups. The association has also designated anti-domestic violence hospitals as hubs for multi-agency intervention for victims.

Sexual harassment pervades the workplace. In 2005, China's Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests was amended to include a ban on sexual harassment. And although the number of sexual harassment complaints has significantly increased since that time,^{xxxi} enforcement has been lax. To help combat the problem, the government issued a new regulation in May 2012 that requires employers to protect female employees from sexual harassment in the workplace.^{xxiii}

A 2009 Harvard University study found that 80 percent of working women in China suffered sexual harassment during some point in their career. The study further found that only 30 percent of women's sexual harassment claims succeeded.^{xxiv}

V. Reproductive rights

China's strict one-child policy has significant consequences for women. The Chinese government restricts the number of children parents may have. The National Population and Family-Planning Law (2002) grants married couples the right to have one birth and allows eligible couples to apply for permission to have a second child.^{xxv} Delegates learned that in some rural areas, the one-child limit is more relaxed and couples may be allowed to have a second child when their first is a girl.

Chinese law prohibits using physical coercion to force someone to have an abortion or undergo sterilization. However, the U.S. State Department reports that some provinces require women who violate the family-planning policy to terminate their pregnancies. In other provinces, couples with an "unapproved" child must pay a "social compensation fee," which can total 10 times a person's annual disposable income. In almost all provinces, it is illegal for a single woman to have a child; some local governments levy fines for violations, others mandate abortions. There have also been reports of mothers being forced to use birth control.^{xxvi}

These policies and practices are troubling to young Chinese women. During the delegates' visit to Yunnan University of Nationalities, one student expressed her deep concern about the ill effects of abortions on women.

Regarding the one-child policy, faculty at CWU highlighted the other side of the coin for delegates. They explained that in a nation with more than 1.3 billion people, the one-child policy means a greater amount of resources for that child.

Delegates did hear some good news related to women's reproductive health: Maternal and infant mortality have declined. Chinese women now benefit from more health and pregnancy screenings.

Questions for further discussion

This paper presents major findings from the delegates' visit to China. The discussion does not end with the delegates' return to the United States.

A main goal of the delegation was to bring these research findings home to help seed further dialogue about the barriers facing women and girls in China. Some key questions will guide further discussion of issues that impact achievement of a global community of women:

- How can women and girls break down traditional gender roles that seem to be on the rise in China?
- What impact will mandated early retirement have on Chinese women in the coming years?
- What long-term effects will China's one-child policy have on women and girls?
- What steps can be taken to help protect Chinese women from domestic violence and sexual harassment?

ⁱ U.S. State Department. (n.d.) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in 2011: China*, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>.

ⁱⁱ (N.A.) (Nov. 11, 2011). "Women in China: The sky's the limit, but it's not exactly heaven," [Special report], *The Economist*, available at <http://www.economist.com/node/21539931>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} U.S. State Department. (n.d.) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in 2011: China*, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>.

^v Park, M. (Nov. 11, 2012). "Woman could break Chinese political glass ceiling," CNN.com, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/08/world/asia/china-women-politics/index.html>.

^{vi} U.S. State Department. (n.d.) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in 2011: China*, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>.

^{vii} Park, M. (Nov. 11, 2012). "Woman could break Chinese political glass ceiling," CNN.com, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/08/world/asia/china-women-politics/index.html>.

^{viii} For men and women involved in physically demanding jobs, retirement age is 55 and 45, respectively.

^{ix} U.S. State Department. (n.d.) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in 2011: China*, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} U.S. State Department. (n.d.) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in 2011: China*, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>.

^{xii} Park, M. (Nov. 11, 2012). "Woman could break Chinese political glass ceiling," CNN.com, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/08/world/asia/china-women-politics/index.html>.

^{xiii} U.S. State Department. (n.d.) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in 2011: China*, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} (N.A.) (Nov. 11, 2011). "Women in China: The sky's the limit, but it's not exactly heaven," [Special report], *The Economist*, available at <http://www.economist.com/node/21539931>.

^{xvii} Tatlow, D.K. (Oct. 7, 2012). "Women in China face rising university entry barriers," *New York Times*, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/08/world/asia/08iht-educlde08.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

^{xviii} Ibid.

^{xix} U.S. State Department. (n.d.) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in 2011: China*, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>.

^{xx} Ibid.

^{xxi} Ibid.

^{xxii} Ibid.

^{xxiii} (N.A.) (May 9, 2012). “New rule to prevent sexual harassment,” ChinaDaily.com.cn, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-05/09/content_15252278.htm, and (N.A.) (May 17, 2012). “Women call for tougher measures against workplace harassment,” China.org.cn, available at http://www.china.org.cn/china/2012-05/17/content_25402666.htm.

^{xxiv} U.S. State Department. (n.d.) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in 2011: China*, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>.

^{xxv} *Ibid.*

^{xxvi} *Ibid.*