

# **Women in Contemporary China: Work, Family and Well-being**

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## **The Research Problem**

Throughout the world, women's labor force participation has increased, and an ever-growing proportion of women combine full-time employment with motherhood and childbearing. One of the most active areas of research in the social sciences today is how women successfully combine employment and family life responsibilities (Kahne & Giele 1992). Related to this kind of inquiry is the question about the relationship between women's employment, emancipation and empowerment: to what extent does female employment contribute to the goals of equality and women's empowerment, to higher social status for women, and to women's own sense of self-respect and satisfaction? (Moghadam 1990).

In the face of rapidly changing circumstances the problem also is how to define the complex issues of women's empowerment, female emancipation and equality. These are vital issues to be investigated in the field of women and development (WID) or women in transition (WIT), and more scientific research is needed to clarify these questions. Research evidence has proven the connection between women's employment and women's status to be complicated. In the past, experts on women in development and transition believed that if women could find jobs outside the home, they would be able to escape patriarchal control and gain greater access to formal education, fertility control and equal rights of citizenship. The connection, however, is more complicated, and the debate on women and employment continues.

More scientific research in the form of empirical studies and fieldwork is needed to resolve the debate especially in societies where the developing and modernization process is just beginning. How do the changing circumstances affect women's objective position and subjective well-being, and how are the changes reflected in the family? According to several investigations carried out in different developing countries, women typically use a greater part of their income for family needs, whereas men generally reserve more for their own use. It is women's higher income particularly that benefits the health and well-being of their children (Blumberg 1991).

Many industrial societies have seen remarkable improvements in women's pay, occupational distribution and education, which, in turn has been positively manifested in the rise in women's individualism, autonomy and well-being in these countries (Kauppinen-Toropainen et al 1993, OECD 1993). But a darker picture of women's overburdening and continued lag behind men in sharing the fruits of development, transition and modernization has emerged from developing and transitional societies. (Gallin et al 1989, Haavio-Mannila & Kauppinen 1994).

Many researchers use the term "*women's status*", but often do not have a clear definition of what such a term encompasses. Some of the issues that immediately come to mind are the *public* roles women play in the society, their participation in the labor force, or their educational achievements. These are important aspects of women's situation in any society. However, these measures do not give sufficient information on women's lives. Equally important aspects are women's *private* roles — that is, their roles in the family and the gender ideology that underpins the role of women and attitudes about women and men in any society. (Xiong & Riley 1993).

### **Women in China**

China presents a case of a rapidly changing society where the modernization process has dynamically started. This process af-

fects women at all levels of the society. Today, a growing number of women are entering the labor force with better education and higher aspirations for self-fulfillment at work.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the number of working women has greatly increased. It has grown from 600 thousand in 1949 to 55,860 thousand in 1992, making up 38% of the total number of staff and workers. Recently, the number of working women has been growing by about one million per year. (Bao Yu-Shy et al 1994).

Typical to Chinese society has been that women combine full-time employment with motherhood and family responsibilities; China has one of the highest economic activity rates for women in the world. The normal pattern has been for all women, including the mothers of young children, to engage in full-time paid work. Part-time work is scarcely known in urban China, and thus it is not an option for mothers of young children or for anyone else. It is typical for Chinese women to believe that it is their right and obligation to combine paid work with marriage and bringing up children. (Stockman et al 1992, Xuewen et al 1992).

In China, women are often referred to as "half of the sky", since women represent nearly half of the working population, and thus play a significant role in all walks of life in the society. After the founding of New China, in 1949, the position of women has changed, resulting in a marked raise in women's social status. Since 1979, when China launched its reform and opening-up policy, women's status in political, economic, and family life has significantly improved.

Despite great improvement and progress, the objective and subjective status of women still lags far behind that of men. In family life, this is reflected in the practice which continues to prefer boys over girls; and this preference is stronger in rural than in urban areas (Zhang Juwei 1993). In the working life, this takes the form in which the 'work-units', in the spirit of heightened economic competition, do not willingly recruit women and set higher

standards for women than for men. A study shows that women in China have less power than men to realize their aspirations at work. Women also have lower educational attainment (Xiong & Riley 1993).

Also, women's working conditions are often unsatisfactory exposing them to various health hazards and problems. The research results show that several chemicals and physical factors could produce menstrual disturbances, pregnancy complications and spontaneous abortion. Because the research on occupational health for women in China has begun relatively late, many problems need to be studied. For example, the problems concerning physiology and ergonomics for women's mental health; the problem of women engaged in night shift work; the problem of double burden; and the problem of reproductive health. (Bao Yu-Shu et al 1994).

Experts say that partly due to the long male-oriented cultural tradition in Chinese society, women have to struggle hard in order to benefit from the fast growing modernization process and the economic transformation towards the market economy. If women are not active in shaping the transformation process according to their demands and needs, the result may be a deterioration in their status and role in the society. This may in turn be reflected in a deterioration in their health situation and well-being; this has been the case in the countries of the Former Soviet Union (FSU).

For example, in St. Petersburg, women's average life expectancy has declined, and other health indicators point to the same direction: the quality of life gap between East and West is widening. Despite this, the new policy has created more flexibility and freedom in the sense that it has awakened women's sense for entrepreneurship and new initiative.

A research of women's work and lives in China, Japan and Great Britain showed that there is greater equality at work between the sexes in China than in Britain or Japan (Stockman & al 1992). Significant improvement in women's health and well-being implies

a shift in the relationship between men and women. (Haavio-Mannila & Kauppinen 1994). The question also is about emerging gender ideology that underpins the role of women and attitudes about women and men.

### **Changing family structure**

According to a 1988 sample survey representing one percent of the total population, the divorce rate was very low in China (0.69%). Recent studies conducted at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences indicate that this situation is rapidly changing. An interview study conducted by Dr. Wang, a social scientist at CASS (the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), showed that among married couples there is today more readiness than before for a divorce if the marital relationship is not satisfactory.

There is also a new tendency that a growing number of women above the normal marriageable age (around 22-25 years) remain unmarried. When a young Chinese woman stays single, the situation is apt to create embarrassment and questions. There is strong social pressure for women to get married. In addition, there is much public debate about the role of well-educated professional women (Rong 1987).

These women are often characterized as '*non-feminine*' and '*over-emancipated*'. The argument goes that young men do not want to marry these women because they are pictured as over-emancipated and too independent. For women, the problem of being stigmatized as '*over-emancipated*' or '*non-feminine*' or '*too independent*' presents a psychological barrier, which may hinder many women from realizing their aspirations at work. Professional and well-educated women need much support and encouragement which should be provided both informally (women's networks) and formally by counseling and training.

These questions can be explored in "*The Survey on Women's Status in Contemporary China*". The survey contains several questions regarding the balance between women's and men's work as-

pirations, family roles and their impact on family dynamics and happiness.

The preliminary results show that gender roles and the power of both sexes occupy a central position including attitudes towards work and career, marriage and family, fertility control, gender-preference, and social customs. The preliminary results indicate a clear shifting from traditional gender norms towards more modern ones. The transition is faster in urban areas than in rural areas. Gender norms in China are strongly affected by both old Chinese traditions and new policies. (Sha Jicai 1993).

### **Conclusion**

All these questions, important for both women and men but especially for women, are to be explored. The broad definition of health, which encompasses physical, social and psychological well-being are to be applied and further developed. Also, self-esteem or self-respect are to be seen as one of the indicators of psychological well-being. Good self-esteem means that the person (woman) is satisfied with herself and can cope with changes in her circumstances. It is to be critically explored how culture-bound the indicators of self-esteem are. It is likely that Chinese culture has supported a self-image which is more collectively anchored and liable to social relations than European or American culture. Accordingly, more culture-sensitive measures must be created.

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