

A REVIEW OF THE SOCIAL

STATUS OF

WOMEN

IN CHINA

**Women's Studies Institute of
All-China Women's Federation**

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**A Review of the Social Status of
Women in China**

*Women's Studies Institute of
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Foreword

A Review of the Social Status of Women in China lists the preliminary results of the first nationwide survey on the social status of women.

Women's issues are an important problem in social development, and the social status of women constitutes the focus around which women's issues revolve. It is the chief index by which women's progress and development can be measured, as well as being an important indication of the level of social development of the country as a whole. Since the 1980s, with the adoption of reform and opening-to-the-world policy in China, people have started to be sensitive to the reform in the economic system and that in other areas like the economic base and superstructure. On the one hand, these provide Chinese women with favorable circumstances for development; the majority of urban and rural women take part enthusiastically in the reform and opening up program, helping to construct a spiritual and material civilization in China, fully developing their role as "holding up half of the sky" and receiving widespread respect from society. Indeed, the status and function of women have undergone great historical changes. On the other hand, these deep social changes also present new challenges to women. In some areas and work units, many female employees are laid off, finding jobs is more difficult for women, the job assignment of female university graduates is also troublesome and enterprises neglect to provide labor protection for women. Furthermore cases of women whose family rights, marriage rights and human rights have been violated also exist. Therefore, attitudes towards the social status of Chinese women and appraisals of their present status are sharply opposed; some people think that following the development of society, Chinese women have made unprecedented progress and development, others believe that the status of women has

dropped regrettably.

Since the beginning of the reform and opening-up program, the reasons behind these widely differing appraisals of Chinese women's status are extremely complicated, including problems in observation and analysis, as well as in the methods of choosing indexes and discrepancies in statistical scope and standards. At the same time, the lack of gender-based statistics on China and the only partially typical nature of the survey have proved to be obstacles to an objective, scientific and correct analysis of the status of Chinese women.

Based on these circumstances, after approval from the Secretariat of the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) and the State Statistical Bureau (SSB), the survey on the social status of Chinese women was formally declared underway in 1990, then in 1991 it was granted a subsidy by China Social Sciences Fund. Those in charge of this survey worked conscientiously and meticulously to gain satisfactory results, taking Deng Xiaoping's socialism with Chinese characteristics as their guiding line and receiving strong support at every level of government and from every relevant government department. Now, the research team has compiled the results of their survey and research into *A Review of the Social Status of Women in China*.

Not only is this publication extremely significant for the development of the Chinese women's movement, it also signals an important breakthrough in the field of women's studies. Firstly, the accurate statistics of the survey show that at the same time as bringing China prosperity, the reform and opening-up program has led to great advances for Chinese women. They have seen an improvement in their status, whilst making valuable contributions towards the development of society's productive forces. This survey researches and analyses the factors influencing the social status of women and their patterns of occurrence, as well as putting forward some beneficial suggestions for the formulation of policies for women, in order that a systematic understanding of the situation of women under socialism with Chinese characteristics can be gained. Secondly, it provides the scientific basis for a preliminary attempt to probe deeper into the theories of women's studies

and to fill in the gaps existing in gender-based statistics. Thirdly, it provides reliable statistics and scientific proof to strengthen the direction that the Women's Federations should take when participating in policy making. Finally, this survey shows the international community the actual situation with regard to the social status of Chinese women, demonstrating the way in which socialist society protects women's rights and interests, and its superior nature in improving the status of women. Thus this survey also serves to facilitate the comparison of the social status of women in China and elsewhere in the world.

The Fourth World Conference on Women will be held in Beijing in 1995. Governmental representatives from every country in the world attending the conference and participants at the non-governmental organizations (NGO) forum held concurrently will exchange ideas and examine ways in which women's status can be improved. *A Review of the Social Status of Women in China* should undoubtedly be seen as an offering to this conference. We hope that through our work the international community will be able to gain a thorough, honest and impartial understanding of the actual situation with regard to Chinese women, allowing them to appraise the status of Chinese women properly. We also hope that our work will help Chinese women to advance and develop their status and to achieve greater equality with men.

Guan Tao

Secretary of the Secretariat
of the All-China Women's
Federation

Introduction

The present book is based on the preliminary analysis of sample data collected from the main questionnaire on the social status of China's women. The chief aim of this survey was to gather first-hand information in order to give an exact and systematic description of the social status of women in China, and our findings will be presented in this book.

The main task of the Women's Studies Institute (WSI) under the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) is to research the theory and the history of the emancipation of women, as well as the current situation in this respect. At present, the development of Chinese society is undergoing a period of transition, and all sorts of changes are taking place in many areas including the social structure, social interaction, social systems and social issues. All these changes will surely lead to the polarization of women who account for half of the total population in China, and to a shift towards their interests. The primary work of researchers who specialize in the study of women's issues is to monitor the condition of women, study the changing laws on the social status of women and work towards raising their social status. As the initiator and organizer of this survey, the WSI was responsible for the form of the questionnaire, the organization of the survey and the analysis of the results under the guidance of the ACWF and the State Statistical Bureau (SSB). We have tried our utmost to conduct the survey in a scientific and rigorous manner, aiming for consistency in the descriptions of the present conditions and the study of the theory. The indexes of the survey and the plans for sampling were discussed many times, the sampling was carried out by professionals, and the design of the questionnaire was revised several times. Furthermore facilitators and interviewers were trained, the criteria for testing survey quality were worked out four separate times, and five seminars were

held to coordinate the survey with the research work. Learning about the conditions of women in China is one of our goals, but what we hope to achieve through the survey is to make a breakthrough in the theoretical research of women's issues. We hope to put forward some new ideas and points of view regarding the theory and laws of women's social status, thus laying the foundations for the development of research into women's issues on the part of the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government, and allowing them to plan new developmental strategies for women.

The national report on the social status of China's women is the result of hard work and knowledge contributed by many people. We would like to thank the SSB Social Affairs Department, the experts and scholars working at the Social Survey Center of the People's University of China, our colleagues working in various research institutions, and the leading officials of the Women's Federation in various parts of the country, especially the Baotou City Women's Federation in Inner Mongolia who carried out trial runs for us. In addition, we would like to express our gratitude to the 2,000-odd interviewers who did much to make the survey successful and to the people at the Chinese Women's Press and the New World Press who offered help and support when this book was taking shape.

A Review of the Social Status of Women in China mainly deals with the same questions as those in the questionnaire, and consists of the text and several appendices. The first chapter of the book is a preliminary investigation into the theory of the social status of China's women. The second chapter describes the methods adopted in the survey, providing the reader with some technical information on the form of the questionnaire, the survey itself and the methods of testing used. The rest of the text is about the conditions and development of the social status of women, the differences between the sexes and the difference of status between women grouped according to age, schooling and occupation in terms of social mobility, political participation, social interaction, utilization of time, family rights and interests, family relationships, childbearing, self-recognition and social identity. The appendices at the end of the book include the statistical data arranged according to

place and the original questionnaire providing the reader with sources of information for further research.

This was the first survey of the social status of women on a national scale in China, and thus shortcomings and defects are inevitable in the form of the questionnaire, the actual survey and the methods of expressing the results. However, we hope that this book will inspire experts and scholars, women colleagues and their male friends who are interested in women's issues. We will feel that we have achieved something if this book helps to raise the reader's concern about women's issues and makes more people work towards improving the social status of women and promoting their development.

Thank you for reading the book. Any suggestions you may have would be welcomed.

Tao Chunfang

Director of

The ACWF Women's Studies Institute

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Chapter I

A Theoretical Discussion on Women's Social Status in China

Karl Marx said, "Anyone who has some knowledge of history knows that without the agitation of women, none of the great social changes could have taken place. Social progress can be measured against the yardstick of the social status of women." At present, as China is undergoing a period of reform and opening up to the outside world while perfecting the socialist system, the social status of women and their role in society are directly linked to the success of the government's strategy towards social development and to the consolidation of the progress that has been made in the emancipation of women.

The first national survey of the social status of women was sponsored by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and the State Statistical Bureau (SSB) to reflect the general condition of women's social status in China. It aims to analyze the laws and factors governing the change in their status and provide a scientific basis for the formulation of policies on women's issues allowing the social status of women to develop at the same pace as other forms of social development. In examining the status of women in China, we discovered that no description of women's status or analysis of the causes contributing to their social status could be made without reference to the relevant theory. The general study of the social status of women is just beginning in China, so there did not exist any complete theoretical systems for testing the survey results. That is why the survey of the social status of China's women is first and foremost an inquiry into the theory of women's social status.

The Concept of the Social Status of Women

What is "the social status of women"? To be clear about this, it is necessary to understand what is meant by the basic concept of "social status." In sociological terms, social status refers to the position of an individual or a group of people in the hierarchical structure of society. Then is it possible to define the social status of women as "the position of women as a special social group in the social hierarchy"? Before answering this question, it is necessary to clarify two theoretical points. The first is an explanation of the social hierarchy, the core of social structure, which means that those making up society are divided into overlapping strata according to one or several criteria. Social class is determined by the ownership of the means of production whilst each class is further divided into social strata, whose membership is determined by various criteria. Special interest groups also exist. Members of one particular class, social stratum or special interest group are likely to share the same interests, or lifestyle. However, one class, social stratum or interest group is quite different from another, given their different interests as described above. Can we say that women belong to a particular class, social stratum or interest group? That is the second question to be dealt with, namely the characteristic features of women as a social group. Women, in our opinion, are a special social group whose members belong to various classes and social strata, but have common circumstances and interests because of their gender-based identity. A special social group is generally defined as a group of people that can be differentiated from others living in the same society because of certain physiological or cultural traits common to this group. They receive different or unequal treatment from others because of this, but characterized by their common interests and, furthermore, are restricted by their own conditions. For example, youth and old age can be regarded as two special social groups, because each has characteristic physical features. This is also true of women. A woman is part of a particular class and a particular social stratum, and her fundamental interests are in conformity with

those of that class and social stratum. Nevertheless, she and other women have common interests, for they suffer from sexual discrimination as a result of class oppression contrasting greatly to the opposite sex whose conditions provide a frame of reference for comparison with the conditions of women. Sex differentiation plays a unique role in social differentiation, thus many researchers at home and abroad usually view sex differentiation as a specific indication of the social status of the individual. They are particularly concerned about the effect of sex differentiation on social differentiation and their interaction.

For the above reasons, women's social status may be defined as the rights and opportunities available to women as a special group in social life and social relationships, as well as the extent to which they gain general recognition. The reason that we use the term "social life and social relationships" instead of "social hierarchy" is that the social status of women is not only significant with regard to the social hierarchy but it is also significant in examining the development of man and society in the wider domain of social life and relationships. As Marx said, the male-female relationship is the most basic and natural relationship among human relations, and it helps one judge what level human civilization has attained and what level mankind believes himself to have attained.

Women's social status is a concept containing many implications, and this makes sex differentiation quite complex. In our opinion, the social status of women is a collective concept consisting of the following basic elements.

1) The legal status of women. Law, which reflects the will of the ruling class in a country, is the standard of conduct to be enforced by the power of the state. The legal status of women refers to the delineation and consolidation of the position of women within social relationships as stipulated by the state and realized through legislation and jurisdiction. Legislation means the establishment of lawful rights, while jurisdiction refers to the possession of lawful rights and the form of possession. The legal status of women requires comprehensive investigation before it can be reflected fully.

Of the elements affecting women's social status, the most important is their legal status because of the coercive nature of

the law. In other words, women's legal status is not only a basic element contributing to women's social status but a guarantee that the social status of women will attain a certain level.

2) The economic status of women. This refers to the position of women in socio-economic terms. The economic status of women is determined by the basic economic system of society—the ownership of the means of production. In the economic relations characteristic of private ownership, women lose their rights to possess or control the means of production, thus losing their independence in socio-economic terms. On the contrary, in a society where the means of production are publicly owned, women have the same rights as men to possess, control and employ the means of production, and their basic economic status is more or less the same. Nevertheless, there are some differences between men and women and even among women themselves, which depend mainly upon their position in the production system and their role in the distribution system. To be more specific, attention should be paid to the following points. The first is the proportion of women employed in the work force, the second is their level of participation or the position held by women in labor organizations, and the third is the quantity of income and material benefit, or the place occupied by an individual or a group in the distribution of wealth and resources.

In the conditions typical of a commodity economy, an individual “only exists when he or she acts as a producer [of goods] of commercial value.” In the final analysis, an individual's position in society and the family depends upon their position in social production. Thus the socio-economic position of women provides a material basis for measuring their social status and indeed plays a central part in determining the social status of women.

3) The political status of women. This refers to the position of women in the political life of a nation. The political status of women is determined by their political rights and powers. The right to take part in politics is the most important requirement in determining the political status of women, and the political power they hold is symbolic of their political status. A survey of women's political position should examine