

# Asia Pacific

## I S S U E S

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**SUMMARY** Ever since the Chinese Communists promised to make women equal partners in the revolution, the country has been closely watched for its record on women's status. China's accomplishments are notable. After centuries of discrimination against them, women are now virtually equal under the law, have a prominent role in the work force, and are increasingly well educated. Yet women, especially in rural areas, remain subordinate to men in nearly all aspects of their lives. They are segregated in the work force, dominated by patriarchal families, and are more likely than males to remain illiterate and undereducated. Moreover, China's economic deregulation is exposing women to additional job discrimination, and the country's growing affluence has reintroduced such Communist scourges as prostitution and the abduction and sale of women. In response, the government has announced a five-year plan to improve women's status and stop abuses, including a significant and growing incidence of female infanticide. But to be successful, the plan must move beyond rhetoric, and address the fundamental Chinese ambivalence about the value of women.

When a son is born  
 Let him sleep on the bed,  
 Clothe him with fine clothes,  
 And give him jade to play with.  
 How lordly his cry is!  
 May he grow up to wear crimson  
 And be the lord of the clan and the tribe.

When a daughter is born,  
 Let her sleep on the ground,  
 Wrap her in common wrappings,  
 And give her broken tiles for playthings.  
 May she have no faults, no merits of her own  
 May she well attend to food and wine,  
 And bring no discredit to her parents.

ancient text from the Chinese *Book of Odes*<sup>1</sup>

Nearly 50 years after the Chinese Communists came to power vowing to fundamentally change the lives of all Chinese, the birth of a girl baby is not simply a “small happiness” to her family (as compared to the “big happiness” of a son)—sometimes it can seem a calamity. Dependent upon their children for support throughout their lives, and restricted by state family planning policy to one or two children, Chinese parents often feel they cannot afford to have a daughter. For despite a half-century of government rhetoric that “women hold up half the sky,” the extension to them of legal rights, and the introduction of huge numbers of women into the work force, women in China continue to receive less education, earn less money and fewer benefits, and leave their own families for those of their husbands’. Thus, even today a woman is sometimes considered “spilled milk,” a person that uses up family resources but contributes little before moving on.

There is no clearer indication of women’s persistent low economic and social status than the phenomenon of China’s “missing girls”—the thousands of girls who, based on the normal ratio of male-to-female births, ought to have been born but seem not to have been (at least they aren’t showing up in the census counts). Many inside and outside of China allege that these “missing girls” are aborted female fetuses, detected by sonograms and rejected by parents desperate for a boy. Other explanations are that the girls are abandoned or murdered by their families, or simply not reported by their

parents, who are still trying for a boy. The phenomenon is acknowledged by the Chinese government, which earlier this year made it illegal for doctors to inform parents of the sex of a fetus. But the practice continues, as do others that reveal much about the lives of women: The government just this spring announced a new five-year plan to raise women’s status and to reduce some of the most obvious forms of oppression, including job discrimination, infant-icide, and the buying and selling of girls and women.

### The Persistence of Male Privilege

Why does male privilege and advantage continue in China despite years of much-trumpeted efforts to wipe it out? Some argue that today’s problems are simply a “feudal remnant” (*fengjian canyu*) or cultural lag and require only time to change. But that ignores the many and continuing influences on inequality between women and men. These include the long history of female oppression; legislation that, although purporting to change women’s situation, actually has embedded in it long-held notions of male superiority and often serves to bolster inequality; and, economic changes—those wrought by the Communists that raised overall standards of living but left a persistent gap between men’s and women’s status and expectations, and newer changes produced by economic liberalization that put women at a disadvantage.

**A woman’s lot.** No discussion of women’s condition in China can ignore the past, when foot-binding and other patriarchal abuses made Chinese treatment of women infamous. Today, older Chinese women are quick to couch discussion of current conditions in terms of what they remember as the greater hardship and deprivations of the past.

As recently as the mid-twentieth century, a woman—especially a young woman—lived her life at the bottom of a rigid Confucian-based hierarchy of age, gender, and generation, and had little say in major decisions in her life. Matters involving education, marriage, whether and where she worked, and where she lived were all decided by those above her—primarily older men—in the family hierarchy.

**There is no clearer indication of women’s status in China than the phenomenon of the “missing girls”**

**Older Chinese women are quick to recall the greater hardship and deprivation of the past**

Considered only a "small happiness," her birth was not celebrated. Because she would move out of her household and into her husband's family at marriage, a daughter was not considered a full member of her own family.

A woman usually married into a household in another village, and so her new life meant separation from all that was familiar. The poor treatment of many a new bride by a mother-in-law is legendary, but the bride was also subject to the wishes and whims of all those above her in her husband's family. The birth of a child, especially a male, improved her status in the household. Bearing a son was fulfillment of her primary obligation to her husband's family: providing heirs. Children also improved her own lot because they were the basis of her "uterine family," a group of people within the household who were closely aligned with her, and who could provide her with emotional and, eventually, financial, security.

As a woman grew older, her lot improved because age gave her some status and some power, especially over younger women. But until the mid-twentieth century, only a very rare woman was independent of her family. How could she be? She had no rights to land, little ability to divorce or leave her husband,

and few opportunities for education, training, or paid work. Worse, say today's older women, was that when economic instability or crisis hit, it was the female who suffered. She might be simply shortchanged (in everything from food to dowry payments) or even sold or killed.

### Two Steps Forward

Efforts to change women's lives began early in the twentieth century, although most of the activism was limited to urban and intellectual groups. The Chinese Communists, even before they came to national power, made changes in women's position an important goal of the revolution. Inspired by the writings of Marx and Engels in Europe, they believed that through employment women would become equal members of society, increasing their visibility, freedom, and power both in the public arena and at home. In the ensuing years government efforts have had some notable successes. China fares relatively well in many of the measures often used to assess women's status.

One of the most cited measures of women's status is their level of participation in the labor force, and here, China stands out among nations across the globe. In urban areas, 90 percent of

### Indicators of women's status in nine countries

	China	South Korea	India	Sri Lanka	Philippines	Thailand	Italy	Sweden	U.S.
% of females in labor force (ages 15+)	90 <sup>a</sup>	47	23	37	48	76	36	61	56
% literate (ages 15+)									
Female	68	95	34	85	93	91	96	na	99
Male	87	99	62	93	94	86	98	na	99
Females as % of males in post-secondary schools	52	60	51	68	147	111	106	na	124
% females in parliament	21	1	7	5	11	4	13	34	10
% females in ministry positions	6	4	6	3	8	0	12	35	15
Total fertility rate	2.0	1.6	3.4	2.3	4.1	2.2	1.2	2.0	1.7
% married women contracepting	70	79	41	66	40	66	na	78	71
Maternal mortality ratio <sup>b</sup>	95	26	460	80	100	50	4	5	8
Life expectancy									
Female	72	75	60	75	66	72	80	80	79
Male	69	67	60	70	63	67	74	75	72
Sex ratio at birth <sup>c</sup>	113.8	113.1	na	104.3	109.3	105.5	106.4	105.3	105.0
Per capita income (\$)	490	7,670	290	600	830	2,040	19,620	24,830	24,750

Sources: Population Reference Bureau, *World Population Data Sheet* (1995); Population Reference Bureau, *World's Women* (1995); *United Nations Demographic Yearbook* (1992). na: Not available. a. Bauer et al. (1992). b. Maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. c. Males per 100 females.

women of working ages are currently employed. In rural areas too, nearly all women are working.

Chinese women also rank fairly high when their participation in public arenas is compared with women in other societies: Over 30 percent of government officials are women. But the lower representation of women in China is still a cause of concern, and was one of the key points in the Chinese government's newly announced five-year plan to raise women's status; only about 10 percent of officials above the county level are women, and there are even fewer women at the very top levels of government.

Women's access to health care is better in China than in other developing countries: nearly all births (94 percent) are now attended by medical personnel; female life expectancy (72 years, compared to men's 69 years) continues to rise; and maternal mortality (95 deaths per 100,000 births), while greater than in many western countries, is much lower than in many other developing countries.

**One step back.** Despite these significant accomplishments, the goal of equality has not been met. By the admission of most within and outside China's borders, it has not been enough to get women into the labor force, or even to make them equal under the law. These were necessary, but, as it turns out, not sufficient steps. Though the country is diverse and significant differences exist between urban and rural experiences, for example, it is fair to say that throughout China great inequities exist between the lives of women and men.

Within the labor force, in fact, women are clearly subordinate to men, in ways that are similar to those in most societies. In urban areas, women tend to be clustered in certain segments of the labor force, such as textiles and in service jobs while men tend to work in heavy industry. In rural areas, women are likely to hold the less prestigious and lower-paying jobs, and are often tied to agricultural labor where they are better able to combine work and childcare. In both rural and urban settings, men are more likely to hold positions of leadership and responsibility. Women are less likely to be promoted than their male peers and are also subject to a mandatory

retirement age five years younger than male retirement age. Female college graduates frequently complain of experiencing discrimination when applying for jobs, and negative attitudes toward them are frequently heard: A man who does much of the hiring at a large hospital in Beijing admitted that he would be reluctant to hire a woman into a leadership position, arguing that "women make terrible leaders, and men do not like to have to listen to women bosses."

Men are also far more likely than women to be hired into lucrative jobs in state-owned, rather than collective, enterprises. (In Tianjin, for example, 60 percent of the workers in state but only 36 percent of workers in collective enterprises were male<sup>2</sup>). Workers in the state sector, which includes industries and workplaces considered top priority by the government, receive higher salaries, better benefits in health and child care, and higher bonuses than do those working in collectives. In China, where wages range less widely than in most societies, benefits are often worth more than higher salaries, making men's higher employment rate in state enterprises a significant economic advantage.

Women are being educated at vastly greater rates than they were in the past: in 1987, 88 percent of rural women over the age of 45 were illiterate, while only 6 percent of the 15-to-19-year-olds were illiterate. Yet among young people, women have much higher rates of illiteracy than do men: recent census data indicates that more than 70 percent of the 15-19 years olds who are illiterate<sup>3</sup> or semi-literate are women. Among high-school graduates, males have a better chance of entering a university than do females, and this gender gap has not decreased significantly since the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> The causes are several: within schools, girls are treated differently than boys, given less encouragement, and steered toward certain professions and away from others.<sup>5</sup>

Families also limit girls' education. Parents tend to pull daughters from school at earlier ages than their brothers, and put them to work in or outside the household. Studies have shown that parents—both mothers and fathers—believe that boys should receive more education than girls. In rural Shan-

**The Communists believed that women would become equal members of society through wage labor**

**Parents tend to pull daughters from school at earlier ages than brothers, and put them to work**

dong province, for example, over 70 percent of married women said sons should receive at least a high-school education, but only 46 percent believed daughters should.<sup>6</sup> Because daughters still marry away from their families, especially in rural areas, educating daughters is considered an unwise investment, one that will be transferred to their husbands' families. Many parents feel strongly that their daughters should contribute to the family before leaving for marriage, through turning over earned wages, doing house work, or caring for family members. Their lower educational achievements disadvantage women in many ways, including handicapping them in job placement and promotion.

**Women's double burden.** Women's extensive participation but subordinate position in the labor force is mirrored in their role in families. The "double day" of women is nearly universally acknowledged in China; women put in a full day at their paid jobs and come home to near-total responsibility for household and childcare tasks. In urban Shandong province, for example, women tend to be responsible for such tasks as cooking, laundry, housecleaning, and childcare, tasks that require daily care; men are likely to take responsibility for tasks that are done less frequently, such as the purchase of fuel or grain.<sup>7</sup> Although the government broadcasts regular admonitions to men to help their wives at home, and reports suggest that some men have begun to contribute at home, women continue to be seen as the primary (and often only) person taking care of home and family. Women in both rural and urban areas report that they put in longer hours of work and have fewer hours of leisure than do their male counterparts. It is not surprising that women are much more likely than men to complain of exhaustion.

Women's contributions to the household purse do give them more control at home and they are likely to have some say in important decisions involving household purchases or decisions. In a study done in Shanghai and urban Shandong province, most female respondents report that the family budget is controlled by husband and wife together. Still, husbands are more likely than wives

to initiate and give final approval for many large consumer purchases.<sup>8</sup>

A variety of Chinese government policies continue to be flawed by assumptions that, to an important extent, biology is destiny. Women—but not men—are restricted from some occupations for fear that such work might damage their reproductive capacity. Maternity benefits are much more widely given and taken than are paternity benefits. Women's earlier retirement age (at age 55 as against men's at age 60) is supported with arguments that women are "too tired" to continue working beyond the age of 55 (or are needed to care for their grandchildren).

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### **Perpetuating the Past While Inventing the Future**

Why haven't the seemingly good intentions of the Chinese state, reflected in its strong rhetoric, been enough to make women and men equal in Chinese society? One explanation lies in how old notions of women's and men's place have been a part of—indeed have been re-inscribed through—the many social, political, and economic changes that China has undergone, many of which have been engineered by the state (deliberately or inadvertently).

The supposedly radical changes that China has made are actually built on long-held notions of gender. China scholars have often described the gender revolution as "unfinished," "postponed," or "missing," indicating how the kind of scrutiny the state has applied to other social inequalities, such as class, has been missing in the area of male-female relations. Even those government acts that have specifically targeted sexual inequality in Chinese society have often favored the interests and rights of males over females, or their effectiveness has been gutted by half-hearted enforcement. For example, the 1950 Marriage Law was aimed at changing women's very subordinate position in the family. Among its tenets were prohibitions against arranged marriage and concubinage and the legalization of women's initiation of divorce. But enforcement of this law was often lax; the state, seeking the support of male peasants, was concerned that giving women full rights in these areas of their lives would alienate

males and be damaging to the overall work of the party. Of those state policies that have had unintended negative consequences for women, the “one-child” family planning policy has been by far the most important.

**The impact of the one-child policy.** Possibly no state action has more directly affected women’s lives than has the “one-child” policy that limits urban families to a single child (though allowing as many as two or three to rural families). Limiting the size of families in a society with a traditional preference for sons inevitably increases pressures for that one child to be a boy. The result has been the phenomenon of the “missing girls:” a significant imbalance in the number of girls and female infants relative to males that has been noticeable for some years and that has been increasing. A normal ratio would be 105 to 106 boys born for every 100 girls (a natural imbalance that compensates for higher male mortality); in China the births of 113.8 boys are reported for every 100 girls,<sup>9</sup> and in some provinces, the sex ratio is well over 115 to 100.<sup>10</sup> Some 12 percent of baby girls are unaccounted for each year, the victims of some combination of sex-selective abortion, abandonment, infanticide, or even under-reporting.

It is unlikely that the government could have foreseen such an outcome when it began the program in 1979. In fact, given that in times of economic crisis it is girls and women who are most likely to receive fewer resources such as food or education, the phenomenal drop in fertility rates and resulting slower population growth that resulted from the “one-child” policy arguably benefit females as much as males. And women themselves point to the liberating effects of fewer births and shorter periods of time spent in child raising.

But the evidence is clear that the family planning program has resulted in the elimination and abuse of great numbers of baby girls at the hands—all too often—of their desperate mothers. For another result of the state’s family planning program—which punishes women but not men for out-of-quota births and subjects women to the “three surgeries” (abortion, IUD insertion, and sterilization) while male contraceptive use lags far behind—

has been to reinforce long-held attitudes that women are responsible for reproduction.<sup>11</sup> The state blames them for not producing the desired number of children, and their families blame them for producing children of the wrong sex.

Women who resist either state or family pressures do so at the risk of their own health, community pressure, or actual punishment if caught violating the laws. Ultrasound technology capable of detecting the sex of a fetus is increasingly available even in rural areas. Although the government has outlawed ultrasound for sex detection, privately owned machines are doing a good business in this market. Sex detection is more accurate later in a pregnancy, so women who undergo this procedure and find out they are carrying a female must go through a difficult abortion in the second or even third trimester of pregnancy. There are stories of pregnant women in rural areas who are instructed by their (husbands’) families to go to the city for the birth of their child and to return only with a boy. When these women are carrying females, their choices are often limited to abandoning a female infant after birth (or before—through abortion) or to risking their own and their daughters’ safety by returning home not just without a son, but with a girl.

No single fact of Chinese life better illustrates the precarious position of women in China than the anxiety parents feel about the sex of their baby. Parents—especially mothers—are caught between the family planning restrictions of the government and a society that values males over females, and provides males with the education, employment, and freedom to demonstrate their worth to their parents. Even when daughters want to support their parents, the discrimination against them in education and the labor force means that they are unlikely to be able to provide their parents with the same level of return on investment that a son might. In this situation, women themselves desire sons, since they are often more dependent on sons for financial support than are men, who have better access to the labor market. One scholar has argued that women’s resistance to the one-child policy and their demand for sons reflects how “acting as agents for the patri-

***Possibly no state action has more directly affected women’s lives than the ‘one-child’ policy***

**Even when daughters want to support their parents, they are rarely able to do so as well as sons**

archal family and themselves, women etched their own inferiority into the birth policy, with worrying consequences for the future.”<sup>12</sup> A reporter in China described childbirth under these circumstances as “life’s most important exam, a pass-fail test in which half the people fail.” She goes on, “infanticide and ultrasound sex selection appall me, but I can understand how—when faced with such an important exam—people feel the urge to cheat.”<sup>13</sup>

What is the Chinese government’s responsibility for the “missing girls”? It cannot be accused of overtly promoting discrimination against girls. Rather, its fault lies in its failure to respond *effectively* to the phenomenon once it became evident. The government does oppose female infanticide and sex-selective abortion, but the most commonly heard argument against them, both inside and outside China—that before long there won’t be enough wives to go around—seems to miss the real point. Whether the government should abandon the present form of its population control program is a controversial issue. But many inside and outside China have argued that other social changes, including the creation of a pension system in rural areas and the promotion of higher levels of education for girls, might decrease both sex ratios and fertility levels, and make girls more acceptable to their families. Indeed, the government’s recent five-year plan has acknowledged the effect that some of these kinds of reforms might have on reducing female infanticide.

#### **Changing the Economics of Women’s Lives**

Economic changes in China are likely to play a crucial role in future measures of a woman’s worth. Recent changes, especially the movement toward privatization in urban areas, the infusion of foreign capital and establishment of multinational companies, and the dismantling of collectives in rural areas, seem to have actually increased inequalities between women and men.

Chinese urban factories and other places of employment previously controlled by the state are now freer to hire, promote, and fire without government interference. In this new relaxed environment,

women sometimes fare even worse than they did before. With company profits now closely tied to production output, employers are reluctant to hire women, with their needs for maternity benefits and childcare provisions. Foreign factories, though offering access to both cash and cosmopolitan values, may be even more concerned with the bottom line. Thus, women in China are increasingly exposed to the low wages, poor working conditions, and discrimination based on sex, age, and marital status that women face in most capitalist-based economies.

In rural areas, the break up of state-run collectives began in the early 1980s and is now nearly completed. Agricultural labor is now organized through the family. Here again, women appear to be losing ground. Redistribution of land from collective to family is often done through a system that automatically awards men more land than women. Agricultural production is once again organized through the family, and women are once again subject to patriarchal family controls.

Even China’s growing economy has brought with it increased dangers for women. General economic stability and higher standards of living for most mean that few families face the kinds of financial crises that forced families in the past to relinquish, sell, or kill their girls. But these positive economic changes have been accompanied by the increasing availability of cash and the growing interest in making money that are behind the enormous rise in the abduction and sale of women for prostitution, marriage, and slavery. Ironically, today’s relative affluence has revived practices that were rife in pre-Communist China, when it was economic crises that put women’s lives and safety at risk.

Perhaps the clearest lesson China has to offer is the way that ideas about male and female roles—in China, as in any society—remain embedded, sometimes strengthened, in changing economies, political systems, and family structures. It is notable that in a country with such a recent history of vast social changes and some of the strongest rhetoric about the importance of sexual equality ever heard, discrimination and inequities remain strong. State

**State policies must have as their goal enhancing the worth of women**

rhetoric in this area has not been matched by actual changes. That sexual inequality remains deeply embedded in China is not only about the role of the state, of course, because the state is not all-powerful but just one (albeit very powerful) social institution among many. Nevertheless, state policies are deeply involved in many of the difficulties that women face in China, whether through measures that encourage capitalist development and ignore discrimination in hiring, or policies like those controlling population that have a more immediate effect on girls' lives. For real change to come, state policies must move beyond promoting equal access and equal rights. They must have as their ultimate goal enhancing the worth of women, both to families and to the state. Perhaps China's new five-year plan will make a difference; it is too early to tell. But without such an effort it is hard to imagine what will put an end to the "missing girls," or to the lost opportunities that living women endure.

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