

## **Gender Issues in Agriculture and Rural Employment in Wenchuan: The Place of Women**

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### **Abstract**

*With a growing disparity in wealth in China, peasant farmers are left behind while the rest of the nation economically progresses. Rural folk, particularly men and young people are forced to migrate away from their villages to work for better salary in the main agglomerations such as Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, etc. These facts further destabilize farm resources and family structures and force women to bear the brunt of labour demands at home including household demands and farm labour. New strategies and efforts are required to create effective sustainable rural development models to respond to their problems and needs. However, in order to overcome those gaps and challenges, women of rural areas are playing a pivotal role and their contribution should be deemed decisive to the overall success of rural development and employment.*

**Keywords:** Rural Employment; Gender Disparity; Peasant Farmers; Household Economy, Rural Agriculture

### **Introduction**

The foundation of agricultural development is based on rural development and without him the agricultural success may be futile. In the 1920s and 1930s Chinese interest in social programs through reproductive control, including eugenics was intensified and in 1979, the government implemented the stringent one-child policy. China has successfully achieved its goal of a more stable and much-reduced fertility rate. According to the census of 2010, women gave birth to an average of 1.54 children vs. an estimation of 5.4 children in 1971. However, the accomplishment of this program considerably varies from place to place.

Therefore, in order to stimulate economic growth, the efforts of the Chinese government have been largely focused on boosting the productivity of the country's enormous rural population by adopting a series of economic reforms that have guided China's transition from a planned to a market-oriented economy. Household Responsibility System (HRS) is a major shift away from a collective system towards one in which individual households had greater control and decision-making powers over the land and other resources they used. Unfortunately, the government has gradually relaxed its control over markets and prices in rural areas. To correct this trend, the government has taken strong measures by increasing investment in rural areas, especially in infrastructure, irrigation, education and health systems as well as for tax exemptions of some products. Nevertheless, these reforms show different socio-economic impacts on different groups of people depending on their productivity sector, geographical location, and other factors such as gender and age. However, they revealed negative impact on the most vulnerable groups, such as poor farmers, especially female farmers. Many of them lost their purchasing power and became unable to deal with the daily fundamental expenses.

By 2006, the total Chinese employed female population officially accounted for 45.4% of the total employed population and approximately 63% of all Chinese women were employed (Xiong, Z. et al., 2007). With a growing disparity in wealth in China, peasant farmers are left behind while the nation economically progresses. Low commodity prices caused by the globalization of grain markets and the high rural population, have created intensive demands on the land to meet the livelihood requirements of small farmers, resulting in a high incidence of poverty.

Rural folk, particularly men and young people are forced to migrate away (rural exodus) from their villages to work for better income or salaries in the major agglomerations such as Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, etc. This transmigration is destabilizing farm labour and family structure; and forces women to bear the major burden of labour demands at home including household and farm labour. In fact, the quality of life of women in rural areas is poor as their workload is heavy, decision-making and education is limited and they rarely leave their villages. New strategies and efforts are required to create effective sustainable developmental models to respond to these rural issues. Thus, women are playing a pivotal role, and their place is crucial to the overall success of efforts to ameliorate the conditions in rural areas.

It is obvious that household food and nutrition security heavily relies on rural food production and this contributes substantially to poverty alleviation (Odurukwe et al. 2006). Chinese women are playing a significant role in the challenge of agricultural production and as well as in dealing with employment issues in these areas. It is undeniably evident that rural development, food security and poverty alleviation will not be truly achieved without rapid agricultural growth. Assisting the poor population of rural areas to enhance their livelihoods and food security in a sustainable manner is therefore a big assignment to take in consideration. The current study has examined these partialities among rural women in the county of Wenchuan. Even though China has one of the highest female employment rates among the BRIC countries (the world's fastest growing and potentially largest economies, Wang Yuxia, (2010)), many women have found themselves "left behind" in the countryside and excluded from the economic growth of the country. The Sichuan province earthquake 2008, particularly in the city of Wenchuan has further aggravated the employment problems of many women. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the complex factors, which shape gender relations and employment issues in the countryside and consider the obstruction from women in rural areas to access to the labour market and its policies.

### Methodology and Sichuan Statistics

The paper presents a case study of gender issues conducted in Wenchuan. An empirical study was carried out including interviews and discussions with Wenchuanese and neighbourhoods hit by the earthquake during the post-period of the earthquake 2008, which devastated this region, as well as completed by documentary analysis and other publications related to gender issues in rural areas. The case study was conducted over a period of six months involving a total of six people. The population statistics of Sichuan province before the earthquake are reported on the table 1.

**Table 1: Permanent Registered Population of Sichuan (1953~2006)**

Year	Population (10000 persons)			Sex Ratio
	Total	F	M	
1953	4667.0	2265.0	2402.0	105.6
1964	4912.0	2405.0	2507.0	104.1
1982	7265.0	3517.0	3748.0	106.6
1990	7835.0	3780.0	4055.0	107.3
2000	8235.0	3979.0	4256.0	107.0
2005	8212.0	4009.0	4226.0	105.4
2006	8169.0	4020.0	4149.0	103.2

*Source:* Data from annual survey on population change, 2006

### Legal Reforms toward Women and Employment Issues

During the Maoist period, the rural population was organized in the so-called People's Communes, which also provided basic social security. In the communes, labour was generally performed collectively in production brigades and little attention was paid to a division of labour according to age and gender. However, by introducing the HRS and reemphasizing the household as the unit of production in the post-Mao era, peasants were now allowed to allocate labour themselves and most of them returned to a "traditional" household division of labour that allocated different types of work to men and women (Delia Davin, 1988). This change has not always been positive with regard to women's entitlements and power. Moreover, as discussed in the following paragraphs, the newly created off-farm work opportunities in Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) were primarily reserved for men.

The primary concern has been to promote equality between men and women. After the foundation of Socialist China in 1949, 'freeing' women from 'unproductive' housework and bringing them into the productive sphere was seen as an essential means for realizing general equality, even though during the Maoist period there have been ups and downs in enhancing women's participation in production; China has the highest women employment rate in the world (Chen JJ. and Summerfield G., 2007) resulting a series of laws and policies that have been enacted since the late 1980s, some of which pointed directly towards gender discrimination in employment. Laws are backed-up by the ratification of international labour conventions, policies, government white paper and local initiatives.

Apart from questions concerning the general fairness and effectiveness of the enforcement of the laws, state labour protections and benefits are difficult to enact if it is considered that most rural women do not work in the more formal urban sector (Cooke 2001; Bulger 2000; Wang 2003). Certainly, different reforms and policies have been conducted in the Chinese villages, along with the re-emergence of 'traditional' practices and beliefs, which had a greater impact on gender relations and working lives in rural areas. Except for the population of young, unmarried women who increasingly tend to migrate, most middle-aged and elder women work in the agricultural sector and there are few off-farm labour opportunities for these women.

The implementation of reforms and policies, which shape working lives in the countryside, has not been gender neutral and affects men and women in different ways. The most influential reforms and policies that shape rural women's working conditions were introduced after 1978, such as *Household Responsibility System (HRS)*, the implementation of policies regarding land use, the population control policies, the "inadequate" social security system in rural areas, the loosening of population mobility control and government policies that allowed the establishment of TVEs (Fleisher and Yang 2003; MacPhail and Dong 2007).

### **Land Use and Social Security Rights**

Along with the introduction of the HRS, questions of land rights have re-emerged. Since 1993, the land contract duration has been extended to thirty years; however, the thirty-year-system does not entail provision for interim adjustments; for instance in the case of daughters who married "out" into their husband's villages. Even if women's land use rights are protected by law, in practice retaining land use rights after marriage is often difficult or almost impossible, especially in cases of divorce or widowhood. Furthermore, the conception of the daughter as a "temporary family member" does not only affect gender relations within the household, but also questions of inheritance, access to resources and means of production, the transfer of investment into the daughter's education and skills (Cai, F. and Wang D.W., 2007). In combination with the so-called one-child policy (implemented in the 1980s), land rights policies gained a special dynamic. Before 1993, when interim land re-allocations were still practiced, the two policies actually worked against each other—having more sons meant being eligible to more land. Later the policies seemed to reinforce each other, leaving an impact on women's scope of action within the household, exacerbating gender disparities, reinforcing inherent gender biases and influencing the gendered division of labour.

Although in 2002, the Chinese government called for a change in national welfare policy, unfortunately the rural social benefit system still lags greatly behind in terms of coverage and benefit levels. Migrant workers are largely excluded from benefits. The majority of the policies have yet to be fully implemented and their impact is still open to future evaluation (Gao, 2010). The fact that welfare policy has been almost exclusively targeted at the urban population is also due to the generally accepted notion that Chinese peasants are self-sufficient. The underlying logic is that peasants own land, a resource from which they can live and that grants security. They therefore do not need additional supporting schemes. This conception, although currently undergoing a change, still needs to be overcome in practice and is reflected in the insufficient rural social security system. Traditional security arrangements in which sons are expected to care for their aged parents have regained importance (Wolf, M., 1985). This gender preference is still prevalent especially in rural areas. The son is expected to care for his parents and this typically means supporting them financially (see Table 1). With regard to employment, this arrangement is continuously affecting women in rural areas at various levels. One issue is the bias of parents' investments into their sons' and daughters' education and careers, which influences status within the family and employment prospects.

On the one hand, this obligation pushes young men to work in better remunerated jobs than women; on the other hand, the person who actually does the everyday care work of the elderly parents-in-law is the daughter-in-law, confining them to a type of work that is difficult to combine with wage work and under some circumstances results in a double burden. If taking into account that the “ageing” of the society in which the proportion of elderly is constantly growing, this burden is likely to increase even more in future. However, it is also important to note, with reference to Shi Lihong (2009) in *The China Quarterly*, the preference of sons in rural families is slightly declining.

### **The “Hukou” System and its Impact on Mobility**

Another policy arrangement in rural areas which affects men’s as well as women’s working lives and prospects for work substantively is the Household Registration System (“户口制度=*hukou zhidu*”). Established in the 1950s, this policy has greatly affected mobility as well as access to social welfare and the non-agricultural and urban labour market. The *hukou*-system, by drawing a strict line between urban and rural as well as agricultural and non-agricultural households, has strictly limited rural-to-urban mobility for decades. At the same time the system stood for two different systems of social welfare. Where urban dwellers have enjoyed social benefits such as retirement payments, health care and education, the rural collectives were considered self-reliant in their ability to produce their own grain (cf. Cheng and Selden 1994). More recently, there has been a stepwise loosening and decentralization of the system. Even though the rural/urban divide is still clearly visible, the move towards more permissiveness and encouragement of labour migration along with the growing “superfluous” rural labour force and the emergent economic opportunities in the cities has contributed to massive rural-urban migration.

From a gender perspective, there are great differences in migration patterns and practices. When looking for off-farm work opportunities, women are often confronted with stereotypes and expectations about their “proper” role in the household on the one hand, and with discriminatory practices with regard to non-agricultural job opportunities, lower wages, chances of promotion, family status, working sectors etc. on the other. Because of these facts, there are statistically more men who migrate than women. Furthermore, migrant women are usually young and unmarried and return to the countryside upon marriage.

It becomes clear that the reforms and shifts in policies after 1978 have influenced men and women in different ways leaving a negative impact on the expected role of women inside the household of rural areas as well as on women’s actual working lives and livelihood opportunities. Upon taking a closer look at women’s work in the countryside today it becomes even more obvious. In general, above and below mentioned developments play a significant role in shaping gender and work relations in rural China and lead to the narrow livelihood and income generation opportunities of women.

### **Rural Labour Allocation and Employment**

In terms of rural employment structure in 2007, 31.68% of the total Chinese rural labour forces worked in TVEs, 5.60% in private enterprises, 4.60% were self-employed individuals and 58.12% worked in other fields (Cai F. and Wang D.W., 2010). In the Sichuan Province, the official female labour force participation rate was 57.3% in 2005 (13.9 percentage points lower than for men). The participation rate results partly from the lower educational level of women: Even if the discrepancies are far from being as distinct with regard to young men and women, the literacy rate for adult Sichuanese women is only 76.9% compared with 90.2% for men. In terms of employment structure, women in Sichuan work mainly in farming, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery, wholesale and retail sale trade, manufacturing and catering (Section of Social, 2007).

However, these statistics do not show the status connected with different types of occupation. They also do not properly account for the entity of women’s work, as women often perform a combination of different tasks. For instance, a survey conducted by the Office for Post-disaster Reconstruction in Poor Villages in some earthquake-affected villages found that the majority of women held multiple occupations (Huang and Bonschab, 2010). Generally labour allocation is not gender neutral and women’s work is lower remunerated and has a lower status than men’s work. Usually rural Chinese women work in the following fields: *Domestic work, agricultural sector, non-agricultural sector within the village, and off-farm employment beyond the village.*

While agricultural work (together with domestic work) is still the main field of occupation for women, off-farm opportunities have grown significantly.

Mounting to more than 75%, the off-farm employment of 16-20 years old women is about equal to the number of men and often results in the deskilling of the younger population with regard to farm work. Migration is the most significant and fastest growing segment of the off-farm work sector (Zhang et al. 2004: 232, 245). In 2008 about 48.7 million young women were working as migrants, which present more than one third of the total estimated migrant labour force (ACWF and CWRS, 2010).

### **Feminization of Agriculture and Women Involvement**

Analyzing the work and gender relations in the Chinese countryside, the most inevitably phenomenon that attracts attention is the ‘feminization of agriculture’. The term refers to a trend in which (mostly married) women are increasingly taking over agricultural work, while their husbands migrate to work in off-farm sectors. This trend is also accompanied by the above-mentioned ‘ageing’ (*laohua*) of the rural population. By the end of 2006, approximately 47 million women were left behind in rural areas (ACWF and CWRS, 2009) and in many parts of China women comprised almost 75% of the total agricultural labour force (Song et al., 2009). In order to better understand the phenomenon and find out why women are mainly constrained to agricultural work, it is necessary to look at the cause of the feminization of agriculture and pay particular attention on its impact on the female population.

The feminization of agriculture is a common phenomenon in many parts of the world and has generally been associated with industrialization. Looking closely at this phenomenon in China, it is undeniable that the trend of the feminization of agricultural labour is related to multiple complex and interrelated causes. Women in rural areas are left behind for a number of reasons (Jacka T., 1997): *Reasons connected to rural household registration, ensuring land rights, discrimination against women in non-agricultural jobs, lack of capital and skills, and women’s role in childcare.*

Moreover, there are at least two reasons why agriculture remains important for the family economy and why it is important to keep at least one family member at home to work in agriculture: Financial reasons and food security and risk reduction and old-age security (Judd, Ellen R., 2007).

The fact that women are left behind and have to take over agricultural work—work that was traditionally attributed to men in pre-Maoist times—has led to shifts in the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ spheres: According to Tamara Jacka (1997), women’s ‘inside’ work today has seen an extension from domestic work towards the entire sphere of agriculture. This is also a result of the downgrading of agricultural work in the light of more remunerative off-farm jobs. Chen Feinian (2004) has observed that nowadays mothers-in-law seem to be ‘filling in’ for daughters-in-law by taking over domestic sideline activities, while daughters-in-law are ‘filling in’ for men by engaging in field work, or in off-farm work if opportunities arise.

### **Women’s Groups and Organizations**

The role of national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women associations has increasingly expanded in China; and these latter vary from one city to another or from one county to another. In order to overcome these gaps between men and women in Sichuan Province, various organizations with different attempts have emerged. Among all of them, All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF) seems to be one the most active in implementing income-generating measures for women. The Federation has no doubt benefited from its organizational structure that both reaches down to the village level and draws from the funding and support of Women’s Federations in richer provinces. ACWF also cooperates with LGOP and UNDP and has been generally supporting the Central Government in its reconstruction efforts.

Besides, the Women’s Federation is also operating in various reconstruction activities, mainly focusing on women or on women and children. Their support has been officially formulated in the Women’s Federation’s *Post-Earthquake Participation in Counterpart Support of Reconstruction* and the *One Thousand Women Homeland Reconstruction Plan*.

The activities were connected with collecting donations, mobilizing funds, infrastructure investments and financially supporting different projects. The support included psychological assistance and health checks for women, financial aid for poor students as well as the construction of kindergartens, orphanages and Spring Bud Schools. Thus, a clear focus is placed on livelihood reconstruction and employment of women.

The associated activities mainly provided are the training in different fields: *The Mary Kay Sichuan Women's Entrepreneurship and Employment Training Program* allocates funds to be spent and helps women developing entrepreneurial skills and the organization of vocational skills training over 3000 women in nursery, teaching, domestic work, traditional Chinese massage and other fields.

The local Women's Federations also undertook particular measures in the field of women and employment: Shortly after the earthquake, the Women's Federation of Deyang City developed training classes and taught knot artwork, home economics, embroidery, sewing and other skills to over 2300 women in disaster areas and Baihua Village of Tiaoyuan Town of Luojiang County formulated an employment policy for women under the age of 40, arranging work for them at a local electronic factory.

In addition, to above-mentioned associations, several NGOs are actively involved on the rural development such as:

- The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and in particular the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC) launched their Livelihood Program on 23 March 2010. The program focuses on training, micro-finance activities and on organizational development. The training courses included training in farmer's restaurant operation and management, kiwi fruit cultivation, business start-up, New Year picture arts, basic computer training, walnut and bamboo cultivation, cooking, construction, sewing, mining, and embroidery.
- Besides, delivering emergency relief, offering training sessions in participatory planning for the reconstruction of homes as well as training in financial management for local officials, Oxfam, in cooperation with the Chengdu Women's Federation, has provided livelihood and micro-credit opportunities to women (Oxfam, 2009).
- Pursuing the overall goal of working for gender equality and women's empowerment, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) aims at the economic and social empowerment of more than 1000 women in an earthquake-hit county in Shaanxi Province. These micro-credit activities are accompanied by practical, ecology-friendly skills training in the raising of pigs. Part of the project's activities is the establishment of women's groups through which women receive training in leadership skills.

Moreover, there are also other Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have adopted measures in the field of income generation for women. The Beijing based NGO Rural Women for example has done some small-scale activities in the course of its Sichuan Earthquake Post-disaster Reconstruction Project. The project activities include among others: Support in animal husbandry, training courses and village centre activities.

### ***Conclusion and Recommendations***

In summary, we can observe that women in rural areas often face manifold constraints in the field of employment and income generation. As mentioned above, the constraints include, among others, discrimination in the off-farm labour market, traditional conceptions of women's 'proper' work places and role in the household, as well as a lack of assets such as education, technical skills, market information, technology, social networks, and natural and economic resources. In the context of an inadequate social security system in these constraints are even more complex.

This situation has been aggravated by the earthquake occurred in 2008; families have spent all their savings in the course of the reconstruction process and must repay high debts. Due to the loss of capital, the inability to obtain a second loan while struggling to repay the first loan, the obligations in taking care of children, elderly and/or disabled persons, many women previously working 'outside' have returned home while losing their jobs and prospects for off-farm employment. Therefore after the earthquake, the female employment rate in the quake affected areas dropped to about 30-40%. With regard to the governmental side, the only measure that was explicitly directed at women in the Overall Reconstruction Plan was concerned with reproductive health. Policies focusing on employment such as the post-disaster Employment Security Policy, did not take gender into consideration. As described-above there has been a strong recession of women in activities in the village.

In fact, after the earthquake, the livelihoods of the local people have not yet been restored to the pre-quake level, hence demonstrating the importance of adopting further measures for the further generations, especially for women. Further measures should follow a participatory approach, operating on different levels and combining gender mainstreaming with proactive actions. On the one hand, gender perspectives should be included in all project activities including those not specifically targeting women. On the other hand, combining different measures (e.g. participatory training measures, setting up cooperatives, following a value chain approach that incorporates women into all levels, linking women to markets through information services and specific skills, measures in the field of migration management) could create opportunities for specific female target groups as well as facilitating the credit access to women on competitive terms to invest in their agricultural and/or off-farm income-generating activities, and to promote women education and training by sending motivated teachers to work in rural areas, especially in remote locations.

Therefore, upon this approach and operating on different levels at the same time, and combining various measures according to the needs of particular target groups, it may be possible to enhance the employment situation for women and their families, not only in the Sichuan province, but also in other parts of China.

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