

How does international aid foster women's political participation?

A critical comment on the role of UNDP and other UN organizations in China

By
*Dr. Kerstin Leitner*¹

Introduction:

The success of international aid interventions are determined by two factors: a. the situation in the country and the priority the government addresses to a particular development challenge, b. the interest and competency of the aid organization to offer solutions and to assist national partners in the implementation of these solutions so that they are accepted in the country and at the same time respect the norms and standards articulated in international conventions, programmes of action and similar international platforms and agreements. Therefore I shall first provide a brief overview over the situation of women during the reform era.

1. Main characteristics of women's situation in China since 1978:

As radical as Mao's policy after 1949 was about women's equal status in the society, in political and social life it glossed over traditional gender differences. The policy that women hold up half of the sky, catapulted China's women into the 20th century. As in other countries they now had to struggle to overcome the traditional role of women in the family and society, which in China, based on Confucian ideals, is marked by the cultural understanding that women are subordinate to men and older women in the family.² Although Mao's policy gave women unprecedented opportunities in occupying non-traditional positions in the work place, this changed little in terms of their status in the family. Most women faced the dual burden of a long workday and running the household.

After 1978, the official policy remained in place, but many traditional attitudes and behaviour re-emerged, which had been held in check by the importance which the administration of communes in the rural areas and of neighbourhoods and enterprises held for people's personal life. This was particularly apparent in the now more openly displayed preference for the boy child. No amount of political and administrative measures has succeeded in overcoming the situation that a boy rather than a girl is the desired child. In rural areas, even the official family planning of the One Child Family³ could be circumvented by a couple whose first child was a girl. If

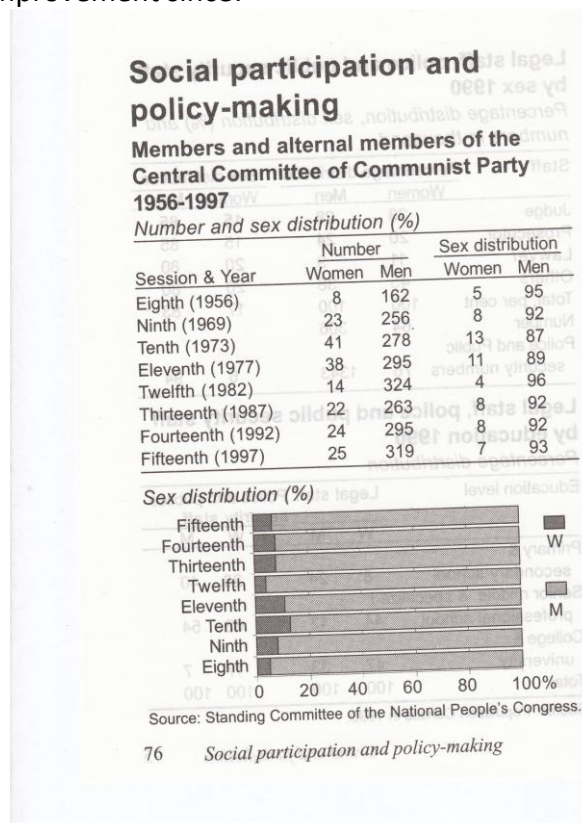
¹ I worked for UNDP in China from 1980 – 83 as part of the first UN team stationed in Beijing to run technical cooperation programs. I returned to China in March 1998 to lead the UN country team until July 2003. Afterwards I followed events for the WHO from Geneva between 2003 and 2005. Since then I am travelling to China periodically. I am teaching at the Freie Universität, Berlin as a political scientist, among others, about China's political evolution since 1949.

² See Thomas O. Höllermann (2008) *Das alte China. Eine Kulturgeschichte* pages 79 - 85

³ UNFPA was from the very beginning of this policy supporting those scientists and politicians who were pointing out the negative effects of the One Child Policy. UNFPA's programme was instrumental in making the family planning system in China since the late 1990s more of a counseling service and an administratively policy

the administrative quotas permitted they would be granted to have a second child in the hope of a son. The current and long-term ill effects of this gender preference on the demographic composition of the Chinese society are well known.⁴ In a strange way this might eventually lead to an improvement in the societal status of Chinese women. Their scarcity might gain them greater recognition than they are experiencing now. But in the meantime the situation may well get worse. The trading of girls and women is on the rise, and the Chinese police with some support from a consortium of UN organizations (UNICEF, UNDP, ILO, UNIFEM) are fighting a losing battle against these criminal activities often across borders to neighbouring countries such as Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.⁵

With regard to equal opportunities in reaching social, political or managerial leadership positions little was achieved after 1978. The political participation of women in the Chinese political decision-making bodies has only marginally improved over the last 60 years. The following graph shows the situation with regard to the members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party up to 1997⁶. There has been no dramatic improvement since:



enforcing organization. UNFPA also succeeded in having the family planning organization deal head on with the gender preference after they were made aware that this was not a consequence of the One Child Policy, but had different roots, although the policy in many ways reinforced the trend to abortions and the killing of baby girls. For further details see the country programme of UNFPA on their website.

⁴ Bettina Gransow (2008) *Zu viel, zu alt, zu männlich? Demographie und Bevölkerungspolitik*

⁵ See www.un.org.cn

⁶ Women and Men in China (1999) page 76. These statistics were published with the financial support from UNIFEM. By and large it is very difficult to obtain gender disaggregated statistics in China.

Most Chinese women still live in the rural areas. The safest route for these women to escape from their restricted social and political status is the migration to an urban setting. There they find employment and try, if at all possible, to gain access to education or to succeed in their own small business. However, only a relatively small number of women have been able to achieve this advancement.

The vast majority of women are still excluded from active participation in social and economic, but especially in political affairs of the society. The low representation in provincial People's Congresses is a reflection of this marginalization as the following chart shows⁷. Particularly telling is the comment which highlights the enormous differentiation between Chinese provinces, a fact which often is overlooked by external observers of China. The UNDP Human Development Index for China which is broken down by provinces reveals that the coastal provinces and the municipalities of Beijing and Tianjin are at the same level as Spain or Portugal. A great many of the inland provinces are at the level of threshold economies (Brazil, Tunisia) while the large provinces in the West are still at a level comparable to Sub Saharan Africa. While the number of provinces in the latter category has been reduced, and most provinces now are in the middle category, there is more to the Chinese government's statement than political tactics that China is a developing country.⁸

Deputies of Provincial People's Congress 1954-1998

Sex distribution (%)

Year	Average		Largest share		Smallest share	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
1954	15	85	22	78	2	98
1964	19	81	27	73	14	86
1983	22	78	26	74	18	82
1993	22	78	29	71	16	84
1998	22	78	27	73	17	83

Note: The holding-year of congress may vary from province to province, consequently, the "year" refers to the time when most provincial congresses were held.

Source: The National People's Congress, Provincial Statistical Bureau.

Women deputies of National and Provincial People's Congress accounted for only about one-fifth of delegates, although the proportion has increased over the years. The proportion of women has remained at 21% of the total since 1978. However, there are big differences among the provinces, the highest proportion being 10 percentage points more than the lowest in 1998.

⁷ Women and Men in China (1999) page 79

⁸ See China HDI for 2000 and for 2005 in the China Human Development Reports of 2001 and 2006/7.

2. *Women in rural areas:*

Since 1978, many younger women find themselves in the household of their parents-in-law, with an absentee husband (migrant worker), and one or two children to care for. Cultural barriers limit them to a very small radius beyond their home. Often they are engaged in subsistence agricultural activities, producing at a higher cost than what they would have to pay for such crops or products in the market place. A lack of disposable cash income forces them to continue such uneconomical production. Among these women the suicide rate is very high. In fact, according to WHO it is one of the highest in the world.⁹

Unmarried rural women often migrate to urban areas along the Eastern coast and into Special Economic Zones (e.g. Shenzhen). They work as unskilled labourers in factories or as household help in better off urban households. They suffer from the legally ambiguous status of migrant workers. Particularly vulnerable are those girls and women who become lured into urban jobs and end up as sex workers. Often they are arrested by the police; many are infected with HIV/AIDS. When the police try to return these girls and women to their families, they are not taken back, and remain in the custody of the police of up to two years. After that, they are off on their own and often find themselves back where they came from. As the number of civil society organizations is very small in China, there are no alternatives for these women than to return to their illicit behaviour, once the police release them.

Even those women who have a stable and functioning family often find it difficult to make ends meet for themselves and their children or to participate in the affairs of the community. Their husbands occupy the space of bringing in money, often spending it for themselves. Men have much easier access to public office and to run businesses and community affairs. An exception to this rule: village elections. In many provinces quotas have been established. Even in villages where candidates can freely run for office, women are being elected into the committees and even as village heads. However, elected office at the village level is not the normal entry point to a party or government career.

Access to primary education has been achieved less for girls in the rural areas than for boys. The record is particularly bad in many national minority areas, although the government attempts to overcome such exclusion through special programs. Primary education in practice is no longer free of charge. Therefore families tend to give preference to the schooling of their sons. The results of the 1% Population Sample Survey of 1995 show these trends: Summarizing the statisticians said: 'Compared with 1982, illiterate rates obviously dropped down, however, the proportion of women among illiterates increased.'¹⁰

⁹ www.who.int/suicide/countryreports

¹⁰ Women and Men in China (1999) page 55

Education as a means to achieve social upward mobility still works in China, but boys rather than girls are benefitting from this opportunity.

3. *Women in urban areas:*

The situation is generally better than in rural areas. Most girls attend school, many women work outside the home, securing a double income for the family. The typical middle class, urban family in China today: *she* works in business (income); *he* works for the government (status and perks). Those who do not work are often retirees and are engaged in one way or the other on a volunteer basis in the neighbourhood or attend to their grandchild. The percentage of women with a higher education is also much higher (teachers, doctors) in urban areas, allowing them to pursue many different avenues in their work and free time. However, access to leading positions is still very limited. Looking at the membership of the State Council (Chinese government) and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and other bodies at that level, the absence of women is striking.¹¹ Even at the level of the provincial government or party women mostly occupy the # 2 slot (deputy). In other fields like the media, academia or corporate management the situation is no better. The only exception is the small and medium size business world, where some Chinese women have gained prominence through running very successfully their own business.

4. *International aid - what and where:*

Since the mid- 1990s UNDP began a whole range of poverty alleviation projects in particular in rural and national minority areas of China. The core element of these projects was micro-lending to poor households. Having persuaded the Chinese authorities to accept these household-oriented lending operations was a major achievement. Chinese funds for poverty alleviation were passed down the administrative chain and bypassed the poorest of the poor. Less by design than by default UNDP's micro-credit schemes for the alleviation of rural poverty¹² helped in particular women. The main reason was that the credits were too small to attract the interest of men. However, the men wanted to participate for their wives in training activities in order to travel and collect the daily subsistence allowance. Men also occupied the few paid administrative positions in the UNDP assisted programme. The former practice was stopped by UNDP, the latter was more difficult to address, as personnel decisions were made by the local Chinese authorities. UNDP therefore influenced decisions through the management of specifically created NGOs which were running the extension services to the credit takers. These poverty alleviation projects which UNDP supported began in Sichuan province, where often pioneering pilot activities were initiated since the reform era started. These projects were replicated all over China, but most specifically in national minority areas such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Yunnan and Inner Mongolia. But they were also initiated in central provinces such as Anhui and Jiangxi, where poverty stricken rural communities can

¹¹ See statistics quoted above.

¹² UNDP Country cooperation frameworks for China 1996 – 2000 and 2001 – 2006 see under www.undp.org.cn

be found with a high proportion of households which remain with their annual income below the Chinese poverty line. The poverty line then was defined as 800 Yuan a year (roughly US \$ 100). Often these households were headed by a widow who had to raise her children on her own, as men in the community were not interested in marrying her. Many of these women were illiterate, but given the chance, showed their incredible entrepreneurial talent and made the credits they received multiply their annual household income sometimes by 400 percent. Needless to say, when these women experienced economic success, marriage became for them only a marginally attractive proposition. They rather invested in the education of their children and some began to show interest in political participation.

UNDP had been one of the early supporters of the Chinese experiment in democratic village elections. Again these had begun in Sichuan, but over the years spread all over China, until these elections were made a legal requirement in 1998.¹³ UNDP, apart from assisting to introduce reliable procedures for the correct running of these elections, also took a special interest in supporting the Chinese government's intention in increasing the participation of women in rural elections. In the first round of village elections UNDP assisted the supervising ministry in the introduction of targets for the number of female candidates.¹⁴ The measure was greatly successfully and it helped to increase the number of women elected into village committees.

In urban areas, UNDP pioneered the introduction of a national program to help laid off women workers to get back on their feet.¹⁵ Together with the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) of Tianjin a project began in 1998. Tianjin's industry was in full restructuring in the late 1990s. The dominant textile industry was closing down, and was replaced by high tech industries. The textile industry which had a high share of women in their workforce, was laying large numbers of women off, who were not finding employment in the emerging industry, largely because their skill levels were not sufficient. Upon the request of the Tianjin branch of the ACWF, UNDP financially and technically assisted in developing measures which aimed at making these women succeed in small businesses. The measures included the provision of small credits, the creation of a business incubator, where the women would acquire knowledge about product development, marketing, labour and other relevant legislation and accounting. The success rate of the women who participated in this project was extremely high. The project became a model for other municipalities in China to address the rising unemployment among laid off workers. Beyond Tianjin UNDP got involved in Xiamen and Henan. There the projects were run by the All China Trade Union Federation (ACTUF).

Some of the more successful women became engaged in the local political structures. They proved that in the China of the reform era, economic success was a solid

¹³ See Kerstin Leitner (2009) *Aspekte der politischen Beteiligung im heutigen China* under www.kerstinleitner.net

¹⁴ United Nations Development Programme in China: Sustainable Human Development (1999)

¹⁵ China Human Development Report 1999, pages 58 - 60

platform from which to launch political participation for underrepresented groups in the society.

As encouraging as the results of these projects were, there was no mistaking that they would not suffice to overcome the cultural barriers to women's participation in social and political affairs. Therefore senior staff of UNDP and other UN organizations engaged in advocacy. The UN enjoys a high public profile in China, and senior officials are often invited to speak at high level public function, for instance, at the national meeting celebrating the International Women's Day on 8 March. It was a golden opportunity to speak critically of and against the preference of the boy-child. According to Chinese tradition the son or in case of several sons the youngest son has to care for the parents in their old age. Consequently couples tend to prefer sons, often under the pressure of the older generation in their families. In spite of the fact that it was mostly the daughters-in-law who cared for their parents-in-law, the tradition prevailed unabated, especially in rural areas. At such national level meetings we ran in open doors with our advocacy to abolish the age old practice. Nevertheless, the suggestions we made to entice people to drop the old behaviour would be heard by those who had the power to introduce such changes¹⁶, and some of our suggestions were in fact picked up, as I shall show later.

It was infinitely more difficult to deliver our messages in the rural areas convincingly. While the political power is firmly vested in the bodies of the Communist Party of China, the forces influencing the party officials at that level are not always visible to an outsider. Besides, the highly centralized operating mode of the party, which regards to this very day economic growth as the ultimate success criteria, does not make cultural change and gender equality an attractive topic for much discussion.

We therefore decided to go to the people directly concerned and used our rural poverty alleviation projects as a vehicle to carry the message. When credit takers came together to repay their loans they used these gatherings to discuss issues of mutual concern. These meetings thus offered the chance to discuss the anachronism of the preference of the boy child and the ill effects that the selection had on the population structure. Parents of boys on the lookout for wives were obviously more sensitized than those still having small children. But it remained an uphill struggle to reach beyond the view of "political correctness". In public, most men and women would agree that traditional preferences were old fashioned and should be abandoned, but in their families they changed their view and attitude less willingly.

On another cultural barrier we were more successful. In 2000, the mandatory retirement age for female civil servants was 55. Between the 'lost' time due to maternity leave and this early retirement requirement women lost out in the competition with their male colleagues and did not make it into the leading rank (ministers, state councillors, directors etc). Through the cooperation with the

¹⁶ For instance we suggested that parents of a girl child should receive preferential treatment with regard to the allocation of land for the construction of a family home.

ACWF¹⁷, we took the issue up as a human rights violation. As a result the rule was changed to a voluntary choice equally applicable to men and women.¹⁸

Other UN organizations also addressed the cultural and economic barriers to women's political participation in China. UNIFEM, for instance, a fund set up for the advancement of women with close affiliation to UNDP, devoted its efforts to promote women's participation in economic and political processes through initiatives to combat women's poverty, violence against women and gender-based discrimination. It created a project to pilot strategies to promote women's participation in village elections at the opening of the new century as a follow up to a project which addressed women's poverty in Shandong back in the 1990s. Though the second project achieved moderate results, it has generated much learning in overcoming discriminative cultural barriers.¹⁹

What are more noted international efforts on promoting women's political participation are events and actions taken jointly between UN organizations and other bilateral agencies in Beijing and national organizations of the host country, especially through the coordination mechanism of the UN Theme Group on Gender. One such effort is a public campaign against violence against women in a number of years at the start of the 21st Century until domestic violence as a crime was written into law and other types of gender-based violence and harassment have entered public awareness.²⁰ A further joint effort that has achieved profound influence on women's political participation has been the consultation on the design of the updated Programme for the Development of Chinese Women 2001-2010 between the Office of the National Working Committee on Women and Children and the UN Theme Group on Gender with member agencies from the UN and bilateral agencies. At the end of this consultation, this Programme was adopted as the national action plan to implement the Beijing Platform for Action.

WHO focused its attention on making medical care more gender-sensitive. In China similar misconceptions exist as in other countries, which, for instance, often lead to a misdiagnosis of heart ailments. In another field, namely environmental health, WHO worked with several ministries to reduce indoor air pollution. Primarily women in rural areas were affected through their cooking in smoke-filled kitchens.²¹

In addition, both WHO as well as UNDP supported the work of several Chinese NGOs and local authorities to work with HIV/AIDS victims, many of whom were women, who had been drawn into providing commercial sexual services in coastal urban centres, as already mentioned earlier. This cooperation was certainly an uphill struggle, because prostitution, in spite of its widespread existence, is illegal in China,

¹⁷ China Human Development Report 1997, pages 46 - 54

¹⁸ See Kerstin Leitner, *When only the Sky is the Limit*, chapter 6, pages 22-24

¹⁹ Lanyan Chen, *Gender and Chinese Development: Towards an Equitable Society*, Routledge, 2008, pp: 101-110.)

²⁰ Lanyan Chen, *Gender and Chinese Development : Towards an Equitable Society*, Routledge, 2008, pp: 91-95

²¹ See www.who.int under health topic *environmental health*

and HIV/AIDS was not recognized as a public health threat in China until a few years ago. The government only started to deal with these issues in earnest after Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao took over the reins of leadership in March 2003.

Of all UN organizations, UNIFEM was, of course, the one which had the most focused intervention. But even their international programme which aimed at fostering greater political representation of women in political parties and bodies did not take hold in China.

Between honouring the right of the national authorities to set the priorities for international cooperation and the obligation of UN development organizations to uphold the protection of human rights there is not much room left for active cooperation in a field which is multifaceted and thus complex in dealing with. Especially as the PR China has not yet ratified the Covenant on Political and Civil Rights, there are not many avenues left to open a dialogue and initiate pilot projects aimed at raising the profile of women in the Chinese political system.

5. *Limits of and for international aid organizations:*

Aid organizations work in China, as in principle everywhere else, on the invitation of the national government. Politically, they are thus dependent on the priorities which the national authorities set. Gender balance is not a national priority in today's China in spite of the fact that the *Programme for the Development of Chinese Women 1995 – 2000* formulated just prior to the Beijing International Women's Conference stated as the first goal the enhancement of women's participation in decision-making and the management of state and social affairs.²² Nobody among the top leaders is really concerned about the small number of female leaders at the national and provincial level. Even in the academic institutions and professions requiring academic training, female scientists are under-represented, except in disciplines which have witnessed a feminization.²³ In small and medium sized Chinese businesses, women can be very successful; in corporate China, however, they are less well represented. In rural areas: cultural traditions can only slowly be overcome through the improvement of women's economic situation, through better education, higher visibility in community affairs and a strengthening of their legal rights.²⁴ In fact, in today's China it is in this order. Economic advancement has to proceed first, if progress can be made on the other fronts. The biggest challenge is not to remain stuck at the economic level, but to give equal attention to the other aspects.

For international aid organizations to get involved in fostering these changes they need to find committed national partners who are willing to take on the conservative conceptualize and carry forward so that these changes truly take hold. The funds and

²² Country Evaluation: China Assessment of Development Results, UNDP New York 2005 pages 39 -43 as well as Women and Men in China (1999) page 8

²³ See Women and Men in China, 1999 pages 46, 60 - 62

²⁴ There are a number of Chinese NGOs active in all of these fields. They receive financial and technical support from both UN organizations and bilateral donor agencies, such as e.g. the Ford Foundation.

outreach of aid programs, UN or otherwise, are far too small in such a vast country like China to achieve a noticeable difference on their own. Yet, the moral standing of the UN, the letter and spirit of international conventions which China has ratified can help spread the word and strengthen the voice and the activities of national actors forces in the Chinese society and who are intelligent enough to make such efforts part of the overall economic reform agenda.²⁵ This is a tall order and not an easy one to engage in. The current focus on *good governance* of many aid programmes reflects this commitment to foster change in the social, political and cultural life of China.

However, as the economic success makes China increasingly to a major player in global affairs, the country is graduating from aid recipient status. At the same time, China as a developing country is disappearing in the global perception. Consequently several aid organizations are beginning to scale back their programmes and some even plan to phase out their assistance under the pressure of their parliaments and public opinion. Chinese who are engaged in improving the standing of women in the society will soon be left without external partners, who are willing to finance with grant funds their endeavours for improving the situation of women in China, not least of which is the advancement of women into the political decision-making bodies.

Quoted literature:

Lanyan Chen (2008) *Gender and Chinese Development: Towards an Equitable Society*, Routledge

China Human Development Report 1997 (1999) Hong Kong: Oxford University Press

China Human Development Report 1999: Transition and the State (2000) Hong Kong Oxford University Press

China Human Development Report 2002 (2002) *Making Green Development a Choice* Hong Kong Oxford University Press

China Human Development Report 2005 (2005) *Development with Equity* under www.undp.org.cn

Bettina Gransow (2008) *Zu viel, zu alt, zu männlich? Demographie und Bevölkerung in Der Bürger im Staat* Heft 3/4 – 2008 58. Jahrgang ISSN 0007 -3121 Stuttgart

Thomas O. Höllmann (2008) *Das alte China Eine Kulturgeschichte* München C.H. Beck

²⁵ UNDP therefore reached out to the CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) the quasi Upper House of the Chinese parliamentary system. Although mostly retired politicians, bureaucrats, scientists and professionals sit in this body, they tend to be very open-minded and ready to deal with the "overlooked" aspects of China's reforms. As they serve the highest level of the government and CPC leadership in an advisory capacity, the CPPCC was a fruitful contact for raising critical issues with part of the political elite.

Leitner, Kerstin (2008) *When only the Sky is the Limit*, web publication, under:
www.kerstinleitner.net

National Bureau of Statistics, P.R. China (1999) *Women and Men in China Facts and Figures* Beijing: China Statistics Press

UNDP

Country cooperation frameworks for China 1996 – 2000 and 2001 – 2006 under:
www.undp.org.cn

Country Evaluation: China Assessment of Development Results (2005) New York

United Nations Development Programme in China: Sustainable Human Development (1999) Beijing

WHO

Environment and People's Health in China (2001) under:

www.wpro.int/health_topics/environmental_health/publications

Suicide Prevention under:

www.who.int/health_topics/suicide see country reports