

**Document 18.13: “Governing Gender” by Lan Xinzhen in *Beijing Review*, March 23, 2006**

*According to Chinese laws, every 240,000 city residents, or every 960,000 rural residents, can elect one delegate to the People’s Congress. In the example described in the article, that of Duan Liqing’s Shanxi Province, 70 delegates took part in the 2006 National People’s Congress session. Among them were 17 female delegates, or 24 percent of the total. Overall, women have made up 20 percent of the representatives in the People’s Congress.*

***Chinese women are starting to have a stronger voice in politics, but the female leadership gap might widen in the years ahead***

When Duan Liqing, a female member of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPC), China’s top legislature, walked into Beijing’s Great Hall of the People for the annual congress this year, on her mind was a proposal to equalize the retirement age between men and women.

There exists a gap of between five and ten years for the age at which men and women retire in different areas of China, with women often forced to retire early, Duan said. Although Chinese law states that the legal retirement age is sixty for male workers, fifty-five for female government officials and fifty for female workers, in some places, female cadres are told to retire in their forties.

One of the 608 women parliament members, Duan, a representative from Shanxi Province, brought up her proposal to be submitted to relevant government departments for further discussion and possible implementation.

“More and more women are coming to the national political sphere, and more are willing to express their own political ideas,” she said....

Gu said it is a basic right for women to participate in the deliberation and administration of state affairs. The work to cultivate female cadres has made progress and more and more women are beginning to assume leadership. The total number of female Chinese cadres has reached 15 million, comprising nearly 40 percent of the total.

Nine females hold positions in top party and administrative bodies. One is member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, one is member of the State Council, three are vice chairpersons in the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and four are vice presidents of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

There are 25 female ministers and deputy ministers holding positions in the Supreme People's Court, the Supreme People's Procuratorate and state ministries. About 5,000 females are in leadership positions in the provincial and municipal governments, 56 of whom are leading provincial cadres and 500 of whom are mayors and deputy mayors. There are more females working as leaders in grassroots government positions, such as village head or director of a neighborhood committee....

### **Difficulties ahead**

On March 1, the research institution under the All-China Women's Federation published a green paper on Chinese women, the nation's first-ever paper by a research institution on the advancement of Chinese women and situation of gender equality in China.

The paper is a collection of research results, ideas and practical experiences from experts, scholars and people working in fields related to women. It provides a general overview of the situation of women in China, and offers references for enhancing work on their advancement.

The paper points out that despite the increasing influence women have in politics, challenges are ahead. For example, the proportion of female cadres, especially in top

government leadership, is still relatively small and most female cadres hold only deputy positions. The paper also notes that the proportion of female members of villagers' affairs committees is dropping.

Apart from the above-mentioned challenges, the shortage of female cadres poses a significant problem. Many female government officials are approaching retirement age, but the next generation of female cadres hasn't yet grown up. "Even organizations which are most obviously suitable for women, such as the All-China Women's Federation and Family Planning Office, face a shortage of female officials," Duan said.

In China's vast rural areas, women receive less education than rural men and urban women. The majority of them have an education level of only primary school, or even below. They lack both the knowledge and awareness of women's suffrage. When there is a local election, they just give away their votes. Some of them have no idea of what an election is.

The Chinese Government says that in the next five years, it will enhance and hasten its work to nurture female cadres, and expects that females will comprise some 50 percent of all high-level government officials by 2010.

Gu Xiuliu also said that in the next five years, in rural areas, 50,000 enterprising rural women, 10,000 farmer's brokers, 20,000 business entrepreneurs and 3,100 female officials in the local women's federation will be trained. The training will help them establish new ways of thinking, living and producing. This training is expected to be of great help to their economic situation, and further boost initiatives in participation in public affairs.

## **Enhancing political awareness**

Statistics from the ACWF show that the proportion of people who cast votes in deputy elections is 73.4 percent for women and 77.6 percent for men. The gender difference is relatively small.

According to Duan, women used to be passive in public affairs meetings, but in recent years they have taken a more active role. “Today’s women are increasingly engaged in political affairs,” she said. Duan said she has devoted 15 years to woman-related work, and through her efforts, witnessed the advancement of Chinese women.

The Chinese Government made equality between the sexes a national policy the moment the government was founded. Women began receiving the same education as men. The population flow to the cities that has accompanied China’s economic development is also opening eyes of some rural women to a new world of active political involvement.

The government is welcoming women into the decision-making process and management of state and social affairs. The Outline for the Development of Chinese Women 2001-2010 states that the leadership of governments of all levels should include at least one female cadre, and the number of females assuming important positions should increase. The law governing the organization of villagers’ affairs committees, which took effect in 1998, says that members of the village committee should include females.

Various measures have been taken to implement these regulations, such as loosening the age restrictions on promoting female officials. Females are given priority in promotion when they share the same qualifications with male cadres, and certain positions are exclusively for women. The State Ethnic Affairs Commission orders local governments to pay more attention to nurturing female cadres of ethnic minorities. Every two years, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and ACWF jointly start classes to train female cadres of ethnic minorities in order to enhance their ability to be engaged in public affairs.

The development of female-oriented nongovernmental organizations is also responsible for the change in the political situation of women. Since the 1980s, a variety of these organizations have sprung up in China, including the China Association of Women Entrepreneurs and China Medical Women's Association.

The blossom of female-oriented media since China's reform and opening-up serves as a catalyst for women's participation in the public sphere. So far there are more than 100 publications targeted at women. China Central Television, *People's Daily* and China Radio International have all offered columns about women. Such programs help advocate equality between the sexes, protecting the rights of women and their influence in public affairs.

"With the advancement of our society, the better that women are educated, the stronger awareness of political participation they will have," concluded Duan Liqing.

Source: Lan Xinzhen. "Governing Gender." *Beijing Review*, March 23, 2006.