

Where Women

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

With its phenomenal emergence as an economic powerhouse that has managed to retain its communist ideology, China has become the most intriguing country for the world. Not only has it taken over a good share of the global market, in terms of development no other country has done it so well and so fast. But what is most remarkable about China is that it has shown itself as a leader in terms of gender equality in the field of employment and political participation. Today around 46% of the labour force comprise of women. Among the 16 trades listed in the national economy, 10 hire more women than the others. In government, there are about 16 women ministers and 29 deputy ministers.

The high rate of women's employment and involvement in every aspect of development indicates China's maturity in recognising the essential role that women play in nation building. This in spite of the fact that China, being part of the Asian community has its own history of feudalism and chauvinism where women's feet were once bound up to keep them looking small and dainty- a reflection of how they were perceived.

Even after China's adoption of a policy of reform and opening up and its transition from a planned economy to a market economic system, the presence of women in every aspect of the country's progress, has remained prominent and in some cases more visible.

A recent visit to Dhaka of a delegation of All-China Women's Federation organised by Bangladesh-China People's Friendship (ACWF) Society provided the opportunity to get a glimpse of China's remarkable success in creating a society where the importance of women's participation in economic, political and social arenas is acknowledged and promoted.

Zhang Shiping, a key member of the ACWF and leader of the delegation says, that a large part of the present increase in women's participation in society, can be credited to the opportunities women can take advantage of as a result of China's opening up policy. "The Chinese government and many NGOs have done a lot to help women," says Zhang, "especially with the difficulties in employment during the economic transition."

Women now make up 43% of employment in education, culture and arts, broadcasting, television and films. In finance and insurance, this figure is 41% while in wel-



Zhang Shiping

fare and sports it is as high as 57.5%. Another important sector where Chinese women are making significant inroads is business. Women entrepreneurs make up 20% of the total Chinese entrepreneurial population. Women's business ventures moreover have created more jobs for women. In most enterprises run by women entrepreneurs, female employees make up more than half of the total employees.

In rural areas too, women play a significant role. Over 60% of labour engaged in horticulture, livestock breeding, processing and farming, are female. Of this 60%, about 50 million women work in local township enterprises. "This progressive scenario has been largely possible," says Zhang, "because of China's state policy on gender equality and laws to protect the rights and interests of women."

Article 96 of the Chinese constitution for example, stipulates that "Women in the People's Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of political, economic, cultural and family life. Marriage, the family, and mother and children are protected by the state." Article 48 of the constitution stipulates "equal pay for equal work for men and women alike and trains and selects cadres from among women."