

Hold Half the Sky



The five-member delegation (including Zhang its leader) of the All-China Women's Federation on a recent visit to Dhaka

Zhang, who is also a member of the secretariat of the Federation, points out that the legal system, too, provides safeguards for women's rights. Being a signatory to CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women) China has had numerous laws concerning a wide range of areas including marriage, maternity and infant health care and domestic violence. Since women are particularly vulnerable when it comes to taking legal action, the state has come up with 'Regulations of Legal Aid to Women and Protection of Women's Legal Rights and Interests. Their regulations instruct all relevant institutions such as legal aid organisations, law offices, notary departments and grass roots legal service agencies to pay immediate attention to women's claims, appeals and prosecutions when their rights and interests are infringed. The order also says that legal service fees should be reduced or waived for female parties who are unable to pay.

Healthcare for women and children, is also a major priority in China's policy making. Thanks to a huge network of healthcare facilities in the cities and rural areas, women and children have access to hospitals and clinics and health care centres. According to 2003 statistics, the medical network includes over 3000 health care centres and

89,000 hospital beds for women and children and 290,000 midwives in the countryside.

"There are also working committees," Zhang says, "comprising women children and elders to co-ordinate women and children affairs."

Zhang represents an organisation that is the largest women's organisation in all of China. The All-China Women's Federation has over 60,000 full time women workers and almost a million women volunteers. Founded in 1949, it is a huge organisation that aims to represent and protect women's rights interests and to promote equality between women and men. With such an impressive representation, the Federation has considerable influence in policy making, especially in promoting national programmes for women and children's development.

The ACWF motto is to strengthen women's spirit of self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance and self-improvement. This includes improving their technical and professional skills and to enhance their overall competence.

Pro-woman state policy is definitely good news for any country but does it necessarily change age-old chauvinism, which is very much a part and parcel of all Asian nations, including China?

The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 no doubt brought great changes to the social status of Chinese women giving them access to State leadership and important positions at every level of society. The recent opening up of the economy has added increased economic power for the women of China. Zhang, admits that even now, there are instances of discrimination especially in employment and domestic violence is a problem, especially in rural areas. But the great economic boom China has been enjoying for the last ten years and its phenomenal development before that can directly be attributed to equal participation of men and women, has given men more reasons to perceive women as equal partners in nation building.

Zhang gives her characteristically diplomatic answer when asked about the Chinese version of feminism. "We don't want to say that women are superior to men. We accept our mental and physical differences, which means there will be differences in employment choices as well as family responsibilities. We just want equal rights and opportunities."