

URBAN WORKING WOMEN'S CONCERNS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Mukesh Kumar Khatwani*

Abstract

Women in general and working women in particular are living under heavy pressures in-home as well out-home because of changes in their traditional roles in China. The traditional extended family structure has further added more to the concerns and apprehensions of working women. Confucianism has also played very significant role in development of submissive and sub-ordinate characteristics in women's personality in China. Though Cultural Revolution (1967-77), economic reforms, industrialization and pro-women legislations and policies have encouraged women to participate in labour force, but they are not still enjoying equal rights and benefits what they should have.

This paper puts light on the shifting roles of women from house chores to paid job both public and private sector; and what are their concerns and apprehensions regarding their work nature, what types of problems they face. Through this paper it has also been tried to find out the relation between gender role sensitization theory and working women. Why women workers are paid less than that of men workers? Why women employees are given lower ranks? Is this all because of women's inefficiency, less educated, unskilled or the social environment and social structure in which women are brought up? This paper also overviews the legislation and policies for promotion of women's equal rights, equal opportunities and gender equality. Finally the paper also suggests some recommendations to overcome the working women's concerns and promotion of their equal rights and interests in the Chinese Society.

* Lecturer, Area Study Centre, Far East and South East Asia, University of Sindh, Jamshoro

Introduction

With the beginning of twenty first century, world has seen many positive changes of both material as well as non- material. The most important positive change occurred in developing countries is the change in mind set (not fully) and peoples' attitude regarding employment and involvement of women in labour force. No doubt women's entry into labour force has been socially accepted (upto some extent) and was also considered an important development in nation building; but still in many corners of developing countries women are not equally treated and employed in occupation like men. Inequality with women in all walks of life has been practiced frequently in developing and under developed countries. According to Swedish scholar Gustar Geigor, the dignity of women in society provides an exact measure of the development of the society.¹ China is a developing country with the largest population of (1.3 billion) in the world. Of its total population, women account is for about half. Family being a first institute of child, traditionally, has been important social as well as economic unit of society and that is still true in the today's world of information technology. Therefore, family plays an important role in socialization and constructing the gender roles and responsibilities. The deprivation or underestimation of women is mostly because of family and societal structure. China is a very much complex and traditional society with strong influences of Confucius' philosophy and teachings, wherein women are given secondary position and their role and status in all walks of life have highly been undermined.

The Communist government introduced a series of laws, policies, and regulations for promotion and protection of women. China's Marriage Law eliminated arranged marriages, and widows were allowed to remarry. The Inheritance Law recognized the equal rights of women to inherit family property. On 3rd April 1992, the Law on Protection of Rights and Interests of Women was passed by the

National People's Congress (NPC), providing a legal basis for women's awareness of their rights, operation organizations devoted to protection of women's rights and interests and social efforts in this regard.² No doubt after 1949, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the status of women has been changed dramatically, but because of strong historical legacy of Confucius, traditional norms and values still have a great significance in the Chinese society. These traditional values and social norms have undermined the social status of women and have restricted the opportunities for Chinese women. Thus Chinese women in general and working women in particular are highly victimized and deprived of their basic rights and the desired dignity in the society.

According to All China Women's Federation the number of working women in China has reached 330 to million, accounting for 46.7 percent of the total working population, the number of female scientists and researchers accounts for 36.9 percent of the country's total. Chinese working women are facing many problems such as gender based discrimination, low wages and benefits, inequality in promotion, and sexual harassment.

Confucius Ideology and Women

The Confucius ideology has significant influence over the Chinese society. Confucius' (551-479 BC) teachings and thoughts turned to be a code of social and political matters in China. Confucian philosophy preached women's inferiority to men. The male dominancy in Chinese society traced in The Book of Rites "A woman is to obey her father before marriage, her husband during married life and son in widowhood" ³. The idea of *Nauzunubei* (women are inferior to men) served as the code for women's conduct ⁴. Binding the feet of women and young girls in order to control their frequent physical mobility is one of the features of the Confucian patriarchal society in China. From very young age girls were socialized to be obedient and loyal to their male members. Girls were groomed to be ladies by

binding feet at a young age for better marriage proposals.⁵ Five Classics (Confucius was believed to be the author of that book) defined the qualities of the so-called "superior man", and the qualities of the "ideal woman"⁶. According to Confucian ideals, "good" women limit their interactions with people outside the family, especially men⁷

The inferiority and subordination of women in Chinese ancient traditional society is given recognition and acceptance as part of the law of nature. As Guisso quoted from the most influential philosophers, Tung Chung-shu (179? - 104? B.C.), *"The ruler is yang, the subject yin; the father is yang, the son yin; the husband is yang, the wife yin."*⁸ As the word *yang* refers to heaven while *yin* to earth. It means heaven is superior to earth, and man as *yan* should rule over woman (*yin*).

Gender Role Sensitization Theory and Working Women

Gender role sensitization theory defines roles fixed by family, society and institutions such as educational and political to boys and girls. These roles highly affect the personality development of the both boys and girls. The most of sociologists agree that individual's behaviour does not merely reflect his/her personality but it presents the picture of society where he/she has grown up. Thus what society transfers to individual in very young age categorically that plays an important role in his/her personality development. Boys are taught that a man's role is that of the breadwinner outside the family, while girls are taught that a woman's role is largely domestic as a mother, wife and homemaker⁹. Understanding the gender role sensitization theory, there are two types of roles (1) paid work role and (2) family role. First one refers to man and gives him authority of decision making, dominancy over women, and all other privileges, while later one refers to woman and emphasizes her to be innocent, devotee, obedient, respectful and submissive to male family members. The

emergence of such tendency and mentality in the society largely affects women career choices and opportunities, enforces to select some stereotype professions like secretary, nurse, teacher, receptionist, computer operator and office assistant etc.

According to gender role sensitization theory being female can have a negative affect on women's employment in several ways. First paid work role and unpaid family work roles affect each other, second devotion to family roles may increase her time spent out of the labour force, and third gender role sensitization affects job opportunity available for women.¹⁰

Concerns of Urban Working Women

Problems are everywhere and in this materialistic world no one could keep himself/herself far away from pressures and tensions of daily life, but the women in general and urban working women in particular are facing more or less the same problems through out world. In China, work is perceived as an important means and force to liberate women from their traditional roles and their domestic domains. Mao Zedong believed that women were important to the economic reforms of China and he had encouraged equality for both men and women after 1949. However; the slogan of Mao Zedong "women are half of sky" could not be accomplished and women are still seeking step forward to liberation from legacy of Confucius. As Chinese society is more traditional and centralized that contributes to creating many problems for working women in China. Laswood and Gutek (1987) identified five concerns to take into consideration in the pattern of career development of women. They are preparedness, opportunities available in the society, the influence of marriage, pregnancy and childbirth; age and timing ¹¹. These identified concerns/factors not only restrict career opportunities for women but also mount pressure over employer and multinational companies to prefer male employees as majority of women have to give up their jobs for sake of marriage, childbirth and caring of

elders at the peak time of their career. This is why the women are not offered equal job opportunities and also majority of women workers is seen working on lower positions rather than on executive or managerial positions.

Pressure and Stress

In the surveys conducted on the families in Beijing, ratio of incomes between men and women at the time of their marriage was 100:45 between 1949 to 1957; increasing to 100: 92 between 1979 and 1984)¹². The entry of women in work force has improved women living standard but also added in extra burden and worries. Chinese urban working women do not only bear the burden of double responsibilities, but they are living under the great pressures of many kinds mounted on by family and colleagues at work place and also from society. The pressures placed on women vary from economic burdens and conflicts between their job and family life to problems in their marriage, children's education and health.¹³ A survey covering 2,250 working Chinese women shows that 77 percent of the respondents are under heavy pressures from their career. Twenty-one percent of the respondents complain about the pressures from income, 41 percent worry about future development and the other 38 percent feel their environment depressing. The bad relationship between their bosses and them contribute quite a lot to the pressures of future development.¹⁴

Difference in Wages and Benefits

Gender and work based discrimination is being practiced throughout world but the discrimination in terms of wages, benefits and job opportunities is prevailing in all developing countries including the most populous socialist country China, whose great leader always encouraged women to take part in work force. But the monopoly of multinational companies and mindset of Chinese people regarding women have undermined the role of women in

betterment of society and women are denied equal rights and opportunities in all walks of life.

Although the Chinese constitution and law guarantee equal employment right, the official retirement age is 60 for men, 50 for women and 55 for female cadres and officers ¹⁵. The huge difference in the age of retirement indicates the existence of Confucianism legacy and women are considered weaker as compared to men. Besides it, women workers are entitled with low wages and benefits, offered lower ranks. Generally women are getting 30-40 per cent less than what men earn. There are reasons of low wages and benefits, i.e low education, low skills, long leave (maternity), caring for children and elders, etc. but the root cause is social structure and centuries old traditions as well as the lack of implementation over existing state laws.

Re-employment of Women

Generally, Chinese women prefer to family over career/work and are very much loyal to their families because of Confucius legacy and traditional family structure. Thus, majority of urban working women in China has to give up their jobs for marrying and rearing of children; again after the passing of some years they seek to enter workforce, and this is a critical stage of their life where they hardly found suitable job because of age factor and motherhood. Thus, they have not only to sacrifice their jobs but also career development opportunities and are given low wages and low ranks. The Chinese government has adopted active measures to support the reemployment of laid-off women. From 1998 to 2003, of a total of 13.36 million laid-off and unemployed women, 9.72 million started their own businesses or found new jobs. "Labour departments of the country have helped more than 376,000 laid-off women reemployed and put 103,000 women on public service posts during recent years," said Huang Qingyi, Vice Director of the women and children affairs committee of the State Council, China's cabinet.¹⁶

Sexual Harassment at Workplace

Sexual discrimination was supposed to have been abolished in 1949, when great leader Mao Zedong announced that 'women hold up half the sky' but sexual harassment has been a growing problem having deep roots in country's social and cultural structures, and it certifies the woman's a lower position in 21st century's China. Sexual harassment is behaviour of a sexual nature that can be physical, verbal or written. It affects woman's self esteem, dignity, self confidence and restricts career development opportunities to women. Generally, women are sexually harassed in shopping halls, markets, sub way trains, on roads, but the two centre places are the public transportation and the workplace. Sexual harassment in workplace mainly contains two types: the "transaction" harassment and "hostile work environment created" harassment. Transaction refers to harassment in the enterprise else to give or maintain a certain work of benefits, including pay, promotion, and providing training opportunities to the staff requirements. Create hostile work environment refers to unwelcome sexual harassment attacks, sexual or with other colours of the language or physical behaviour.¹⁷

In China sexual harassment is generally regarded as an invasion of personal space and an affront to dignity, taking the forms of sexual insinuations and jokes, offensively intimates physical contact, and sexual demands.¹⁸ An investigation by one of the Chinese scholars found that 84 per cent of the women surveyed had experienced some form of sexual harassment, 47.9 per cent reported that they had been the subject of sexual jokes, discussions, or insults by male colleagues of superiors at work, while the men had offered some sort of professional advantages in exchange for sexual favour over to 13 percent of the respondents¹⁹. The most of the cases are not reported and women prefer to be silent because of having no specific laws on sexual harassment, no clear definition, and no difference between sexual harassment and sexual crime. The one of the main reason of

women's silence is lack of evidence and publicly defame in the society. Even if victims have some evidence of sexual harassment in form of audio or video footage recorded secretly; are deemed against the legal procedure and thrown out of court.

Mate Selection

The most common system of marriage in China is "arranged marriage" also known as feudal marriage system based on arbitrary and compulsory arrangements and the supremacy of man over woman, however; it is decreasing and the preference to love-marriage is getting social acceptance particularly in educated and urban based families. It is a ground fact that the change in material culture is widely accepted but change in non material culture takes much time to have social acceptance and recognition in society which is more traditional and conventional. There is a wider gap and lack of understanding between the thinking of working women and their family regarding the mate selection and family. Due to the traditional system men's parents prefer to a traditional bride who should be loyal with family members not with her career while working woman's thinking is categorically its opposite. She wants to have a balance in family work and her profession. As it is very much difficult to re-enter into workforce, working women are avoiding to get married.

Increasing Divorce and Trend to be Single

The Cultural Revolution, economic reforms and women's entry into labour force in China have brought changes in the mentality and priorities of Chinese women. Remaining single and concealing their marriage is a topic of discussion among white-collar women, some married women concealed their marriage. An online survey showed that nearly 37 percent of those women surveyed concealed marriage because they were worried that exposing their marriage would make their employers or clients lose confidence in them. Most of the

women are between 25 and 35 years old.²⁰

The divorce rate in Beijing leapt to 24.4 percent in 1994, more than double the 12 percent rate just four years ago.²¹ The divorce rate is faster in cities than in rural areas that indicates the double responsibilities of urban women and change in the nature of women's work in cities. There are many reasons for women workers not to marry or give divorce i.e. fear of restriction in career opportunities, fear of negligence by multinational companies, retaining their jobs, fear of discrimination by employers, and colleagues, escaping from family responsibilities such as rearing and caring of children and older people. The liberal law imposed in 1980 with the hope of giving women equal status in marriage and family has also been the stimulating factor for divorce in China.

Pro-women Legislation and Administrative Measures

The Chinese Communist party (CCP) followed the Soviet approach and believed that the emancipation of women was possible only when women were enabled to take part in production at a large social scale and domestic duties required their attention only to a minor degree.²² All China Women's Democratic Federation was established to mobilize mass support for CCP policies.

The marriage law promulgated in 1950 abolished feudalism marriage system based on arbitrary and compulsory arrangements and the supremacy of man over woman. Article 2 of this law prohibited bigamy, concubinage, child betrothal, interference in the remarriage of widows, and the exaction of money or gifts in connection with marriages. Article 9 gives both husband and wife the right to free choice of occupation and free participation in work or in social activities. The marriage law gave women choice in marriage, divorce, remarriage, selection of occupation and participation in social activities. This law was known as "Divorce

law" in rural areas of China because it reduced the male dominance over female and gave equal right to women in society. The number of divorce increased rapidly from 186,167 cases in 1950 to 398,243 cases in first half of 1952.²³

The Cultural Revolution (1966-76) was one of the good initiatives of Mao Zedong to liberate women. The main purpose of this campaign was to empower the women and eliminate the gender difference, difference between rural and urban areas. During this decade women were highly encouraged to adopt the men's work and dress and given first time place in political parties. Health Care Regulations and Labour Protection Regulations were promulgated by ministry of public health and ministry of labour laws respectively in 1986 and 1988. These laws protect the reproductive health under labour force and working women were granted with special treatment during five special reproductive stages of menstruation, pregnancy, delivery, nursing and menopause. under these five special stages women are not assigned work at high altitudes, overtime work, and night shifts.²⁴ The Constitution 1982 granted women equal rights with men in all walks of life including equal pay for equal work. The Women Rights Protection Law 1992 further assured the protection of women rights and interests, however; it also restricts women from some categories of work which are not suitable for them in the protection of their health and reproductivity. The Labour Act passed in 1994 ensures the physical safety and protection of working women and entitles female workers with paid maternity leave of ninety days. In May 2001, the Chinese Government promulgated "The Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2001-2010)," which set the goal of promoting women's employment. In 2005 China made amendment in Law on Rights and Interests of women and prohibited sexual harassment but having no clear definition of sexual harassment, difficult to provide evidence in case to court and defame in public harassed women do not access to court for justice but prefer to be silent.

No doubt Chinese Governments since very beginning have given priority to equality of women and taken concrete measures but due to the lack of implementation over state laws and negative societal response regarding women's equality women are not enjoying with equal rights and opportunities what are granted in Chinese laws and international charters and conventions.

Recommendations / Suggestions:

- First and foremost, the implementation over the existing laws must be ensured;
- The government should take strong action against the multinational companies and industries which are doing discrimination in employment and wages on the basis of gender;
- There is a dire need to create awareness among the masses regarding the women's rights as well as the significance of their role in nation building, it is the prime responsibility of civil society organizations;
- Girls secondary education should be made compulsory
- Access to education should be ensured and women in general and mothers in particular be mobilized and sensitized regarding the role of educated mother in development and prosperity of nation
- Majority of career women chooses to conceal their marriages for sake of their career should need to consult about their career with husband and family as their professional work could not affect harmonious family bond; and
- Government should prepare sexual harassment policy and strictly be implemented in public and private sectors particularly in multinational companies where the high

number of sexual harassment is reported ;

Conclusion

Chinese working women are not equally treated by their male colleagues and bosses in public and private sectors because of male dominance and Confucius' philosophy, which emphasizes upon women's submission, obedience and loyalty to men. Entry of women in labour force provided Chinese women with some economic benefits and social mobility, but unfriendly and inadequate environment for women at work places and outside increased worries and concerns of women. Mostly in private sector women are not paid equally for their work but they are also humiliated and degraded by their bosses and colleagues. Having no specific law on such humiliation (sexual harassment) and difficult to prove it with evidence majority of women prefers to remain silent.

Working women's concerns are genuine and it is responsibility of government to ensure the conducive and healthy environment for working women with equal rights, opportunities and respect. It could only be possible, if government ensures implementation over existing women friendly laws, make legislation regarding sexual harassment at work places; and civil society plays its crucial role to bring changes in perceptions and attitudes of common people regarding women's employment and freedom through mobilization and advocacy campaigns.

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