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10. Grassroots Change for Rural Women in China Building Human Capacity

Maria Cheung and Tuula Heinonen

Building Human Capacity: Social Work with Women in Rural China

It is often challenging to go against the grain and try new approaches and methods in a large international project. Social development endeavours like the one described in this chapter involve risk, and those who work toward social development goals, whether in education or in practice at the grassroots, may face some uphill battles. Further, such projects need to attend to national and local social, economic and political contexts to ensure that project work responds to and fits with the needs and interests of partners and their constituents.

Funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), *Building Human Capacity: Social Work with Women in Rural China* set out to build gender equality in rural China through social work training. The project was implemented from 2004 to 2010 by the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba (UM) and the Department of Social Work at China Women's University (CWU), in collaboration with the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) and its regional organizations, known as Women's Federations (WF).

The purpose of the project was to assist cadres (Chinese quasi-government workers who work under the Communist Party) in the ACWF to promote gender equality in rural China by increasing the capacity of rural women to exercise their legal rights and participate more equally in family and community decision making. Five counties were chosen as sites for training WF cadres. Two counties (Kalaquin and Balin) were in Chifeng, Inner Mongolia, another two were in Sichuan (Xichang and Luojiang), and the fifth was in Jiyang, Shandong. One of the Sichuan counties, in a mountainous area, is home to one of China's ethnic minorities — the Yi. The three project sites — Shandong, Sichuan and Inner Mongolia — represent different stages of economic development in China, with coastal Shandong the most affluent and best served by an effective infrastructure. Sichuan, although a rapidly developing province in the west, included areas that were not as economically developed as Shandong. Sites

such as those in Inner Mongolia and Xichang, Sichuan, have a poor infrastructure and standard of living due to the mountainous terrain or inland location. In recent years, China's western development initiatives have brought more resources to the region. Inner Mongolia represents a relatively poor region of China where frequent drought and soil erosion occur. Here we will discuss only two of the project sites, Inner Mongolia and Sichuan, in relation to gender equality-related outcomes.¹

Our project has generated a number of initiatives, but the core activities centred on various cycles of training with the WF cadres in five counties. Of these initiatives, one of the most significant involved three CWU students who graduated with master of social work (MSW) degrees from the UM. The three MSW graduates returned to China to teach at CWU and have taken on leadership roles in our project. During the life of the project, there were numerous faculty and student exchanges between the UM and CWU. Key project stakeholders from the WF had also travelled to Winnipeg to learn about Canadian women's organizations and projects.

All China Women's Federation

The ACWF is a quasi-government body of the Chinese Communist Party that spans national, provincial and grassroots levels. Established in 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party was consolidating its hold over society through key mass organizations (like the ACWF), the ACWF's original purpose was to transmit the Party agenda and policy to women, though it often clashed with women's interests. Although gender-sensitive programs existed during this period, the ACWF mode of operation was mostly ideologically based — driven by the policy directives of the Chinese Communist Party (Jacka 1997). The All China Women's Federation was not accustomed to a service role or to working in partnership with rural women and families. This was evident in activities such as in its top-down dissemination of Communist Party campaigns. A prominent example of this is the ACWF's pivotal role in upholding the one-child policy through the Party slogan, "It is good to have just one child" and enforcing the policy at local levels.

Starting in the 1960s, China went through a period known as the "Cultural Revolution," which consisted of ideological suppression of political opposition launched by Mao Zedong and during which an estimated 100 million lives were destroyed (Hom and Mosher 2007). According to Jacka (1977), the ACWF did not operate during this period, and no work was carried out to address women's issues; at the end of the Cultural Revolution, women's issues regained attention and the ACWF was reborn in 1973. With the onset of the reform period in 1978, China embarked on economic liberalization, which featured the

dismantling of the collective farming system and the introduction of selected market reforms. During this time, the ACWF became one of the main forces to spearhead the Four Modernizations in China, that is, opening China to the outside world, individual effort and stressing the development of agriculture, consumer industries and services.

Through the ACWF's broad-based structure and centre in Beijing and its operation at all provincial, county, township and village levels, the ACWF has delivered a range of Chinese government policy initiatives affecting women across the country (Howell 2005). Women's Federation cadre positions at the county and township levels are centrally assigned through the civil service structure and are determined by passing examinations. Human resources are typically scarce in the ACWF, with high cadre turnover at the county and township levels (Judd 2002). Each of our project counties had four to five WF staff, and each township had only one. In Judd's study (2002: 101), WF staff at the county and township levels said they spent two hundred workdays a year on political and administrative work, such as family planning and tax collection. In rural areas, local women have been held up as leaders to assist with WF work, and have been supervised by the county and township WF. Women receive small honoraria for the work they do. In poorer regions, however, the honorarium is very small.

Since the onset of the reform period, the mandate of the ACWF turned to mobilizing women to promote the policies of the Communist Party in economic development. Although the ACWF has considered the liberation of women to be one of its goals, given the socialist ideology of the Party, its work has focused mainly on fostering women's participation in economic development, as opposed to the specific interests and needs of women. With the state focused on economic growth across the nation, rural men increasingly became migrant urban workers while the majority of women, who are the least educated and skilled in their communities, have little choice but to adopt primary roles in agriculture. To support the economic liberalization of China, the ACWF shaped its role to develop literacy and skills in women so that they could more successfully compete in the marketplace due to their lower "quality" in society (Judd 2002: 2).

The WF developed strategies to increase what it has referred to as the "quality of women," that is, internal strengths and external resources perceived as necessary for women to pursue their own rights and interests and to achieve gender equality (Judd 2002). These strategies have largely been linked to training and skill development in the areas of science and technology as they relate to agriculture. Women's increased status has in turn been linked with economic productivity and the improvement of the quality of women's la-

bour power within rural agriculture. In some cases, women's strategic gender interests (see Chapter 4) are furthered because such initiatives contribute to the enhancement of social and economic status for Chinese women. However, as the ACWF argues, China's agricultural development depends on the effective harnessing of rural women's potential. Thus, it appears that the so-called liberation and empowerment of women is dominated by selective education and skills training and primarily serves the national economic interest, but this empowerment of women does not appear to challenge the current gendered division of labour, in which men work outside the household and women work inside the household. Thus, little improvement in existing gender inequity is achieved (Judd 2002).

Throughout the reform period, the ACWF became more active in promoting policy and legislative changes of benefit to women and in challenging policy implementation that was detrimental to Chinese women. Although the ACWF gained more authority to participate in gender-specific policy and legislative processes, to send representative members to national and state-level committees where they might influence government policy and to call ministerial meetings, the ACWF continues to have no actual ministerial status or power to develop laws or policies. Nevertheless, the organization has increasingly sought to improve the position of women in the economy and polity by organizing training programs to enhance the skills and self-confidence of women and increase women's representation in politics. Independent women's organizations had and continue to have no power at all to influence policy, legislation and regulatory changes, but they do benefit from affiliation and collaboration with the ACWF in order to have some influence (Howell 2005).

There is increased acknowledgement of gender issues in China (Howell 2005) and the limitations of existing institutions like the ACWF to adequately address the needs of women, even women within these institutions. Although the mandate of the ACWF is to promote and protect women's interests and rights and, thus, to advance women's social position in China, there is some concern that the organization has limited power to do so, particularly in the face of the conflicting interests of the Communist Party (Howell 2005).

Prevailing Inequality Between Women and Men

Economic reforms introduced in China since 1978, featuring the opening up of rural markets and privatization of state enterprises, have contributed to gender marginalization across the lifespan for China's rural women. Rural women, especially in the interior and western regions, have experienced the effects of uneven distribution of wealth and state resources and ongoing gender subordination despite national economic growth (Cheung, Heinonen and

Liu 2008). According to Xu (2004), women occupy the lowest economic and social status in China.

Gender inequality and the increased marginalization of rural women has resulted from the interplay of economic, socio-political and cultural forces. Denial of land-use rights, political participation, freedom of movement and social and political voice contribute to women's poverty (Agarwal 2001). The *hukou* system, a residence registration policy, continues to pose barriers for rural women and their children who migrate (Poncet and Zhu 2005), denying rights to basic social provisions that urban residents enjoy, such as education, social services, health care and social security. Thus, women and children tend to stay behind in the villages, while husbands become migrant workers (Cheung et al. 2008). These women are referred to as "left-behind women."

A baseline study regarding gender inequality was conducted within the first eighteen months of the project (Heinonen and Cheung 2008). That study found that a significant number of women (80 percent in some project townships) were left behind by migrating men; the women had taken on the agricultural responsibilities ordinarily performed by their husbands. These women also cared for children and in-laws, performed backyard gardening and carried out household chores. Where men were present in the family, a distinct gender division of labour was evident in which women were responsible for the overall management of the household, including vegetable and livestock production for household consumption, while men performed work outside of the home, such as agriculture. From rural women's reports, it was clear that their workdays were longer and more varied than men's due to their combined reproductive and productive responsibilities, but men made most of the major household decisions and represented the family in village governance. When men worked in wage labour outside the rural area, women took on the men's work in addition to their own, but maintained only a minimal voice in family or village decision making.

Our baseline study found that the migration of men to urban job markets has contributed to the feminization of agriculture (see also Chen 2008). This is most common in poorer and remote areas in the interior and western provinces (Jacka 1997; Rempel 2002). In these areas, 80 percent of the rural labour force is composed of women (Song 1999). The feminization of poverty after economic reform in China is regarded as closely linked to the feminization of agriculture (World Bank 2002). Jacka (1997) suggests that the Chinese government implicitly encourages the feminization of agriculture to ensure the availability of cheap rural male labour for urban economic growth, while also retaining a pool of rural female workers to guarantee food production for the country.

Rural regions, like those in our project, are also characterized by poor infrastructures, limited arable land, underdeveloped social institutions, fragile ecological environments and heavy reliance on agriculture as the main economic activity (World Bank 2001). Inadequate agricultural yields and women's limited access to credit, training and agricultural extension programs perpetuate their poverty, and hence their marginalization (Cheung et al. 2008). Although rural women compose nearly 40 percent of self-employed persons and more than half of full-time farmers, they have much less access to credit than rural men (Rempel 2002).

Traditional notions, such as women's subordination to men and the patrilineal family prescribed by Confucian ideas about gender relations, have re-emerged since economic reforms, exacerbating gender inequality and segregation in rural China and reinforcing the low social status of rural women (Chang 2000). Moreover, patrilocality and sanctions against women's full and equal participation in the social, economic and political life of the community result in the isolation, in particular, of left-behind women. Although the feminization of agriculture makes women's agricultural labour contribution to the household visible, women receive little reward for doing the added heavy labour done previously by their husbands. In Balin County, for example, one WF cadre participating in our study stated that "men felt their status threatened if women were too capable."

According to Chang (2003), the burden of responsibility that has fallen upon rural Chinese women greatly affects their physical and psychological health. Unfortunately, as economic reforms spurred privatization in medical services, health care became available only on a fee-for-service basis and was out of reach for most rural women. Thus, health issues of rural women posed a significant risk factor for the achievement of greater rural economic security and growth. At the outset of our study, it was common for women to struggle through illness and refrain from seeking medical services to save on household expenditures.

Outcomes of the Building Human Capacity Project

Contributions of Social Work Training

With the CWU's leadership and the UM's collaboration and support, social work content and delivery methods were developed and implemented in project sites for WF cadres and village-level women's directors. These women were invited to participate in a program of training in social work values, approaches, practice and skills and gender awareness offered by the CWU and its associates. For rural WF cadres and village women directors (village-level officials working on behalf of the WF), the training content and topics were not only new, but

the methods of delivery comprised highly participatory methods that engaged them in learning and added new dimensions to their work with rural women and communities. The rural women played roles in offering case situations and ideas as the training proceeded, and their contributions were incorporated into the training. The trainees took what they learned in the training sessions and applied them in rural field practice opportunities where they discovered new approaches and greater work satisfaction. For example, trainees learned about active listening so they could engage with rural women and understand their situations, thereby helping rural women to solve problems they experienced themselves, rather than telling them what to do. The trainees discovered that by listening to rural women's accounts of the issues and problems they faced, the trainees learned more about the realities of the everyday lives of rural women, and this enabled better responses to these issues.

Equipped with new knowledge, insights and skills, WF cadres trained through the Building Human Capacity project changed their style of practice with rural women and families from a top-down to a bottom-up approach. As a result of the project's social work training and accompanying practicum placements, many of the WF cadres at county, township and village levels stated that they felt more capable and effective in their jobs. They also found satisfaction in trying out and applying new approaches to engage villagers. WF cadres developed their ability to approach individual and/or community problems by inviting village women to participate in needs assessments, public engagement and educational activities that promoted personal and collective empowerment, capacity building, community development and gender equality.

Gender Equality Outcomes

According to interviews with WF directors and cadres, local women leaders, village women and men connected to the project sites, there has been a change in the status of rural Chinese women involved with the project. At the start of the project, it was a common perception that male villagers made all or most village decisions and that women had no platform upon which to present themselves. With the loss of many of the rural men to the migrant worker movement, many of their spouses found themselves taking on most of the work responsibilities in the household, on the farm and for the family. Women also experienced significant social isolation due to dominant traditional views about gender relations in which women's perspectives were not validated in family and community decision making.

After the start of Building Human Capacity and the introduction of bottom-up social work approaches coupled with gender awareness training, the status of women changed. During the outcome study, many of the village women reported that they felt better heard and more respected by WF cadres,

who had previously merely carried out orders from higher authorities and interacted little with the rural women. As village women were asked to talk about their experiences and concerns with WF cadres, they found that WF cadres gave more credence and actively responded to what they said. The village women's experiences of validation increased their self-esteem, reinforced their ability to articulate their own needs and expanded their vision of life's possibilities. They gained information and technical training through newly established resource centres and public engagement activities collaboratively organized by WF cadres and local village women leaders. Thus, by becoming more attuned to rural women's actual needs through direct interaction with them in their local villages, WF cadres increased the potential for personal and collective agency and change.

The turning point for many village women often came with the simple act of engaging in collective recreational and/or work related activities, facilitated by the WF cadres, which broke the pattern of social isolation reinforced by traditional gender expectations of rural households. In several Sichuan villages, women challenged convention by performing traditional dance in public, an act which was frowned upon by those who strictly adhered to traditional patriarchal values and saw this as morally inappropriate and a shirking of responsibility. However, the women's collective resistance to this dominant belief bolstered their spirits and self-confidence and, over time, enhanced their abilities to take risks in other aspects of their lives, a quality which was later observed and validated by fellow villagers. Moreover, villagers, including men, saw that women's work productivity was not impaired, and more than likely benefited, when they also engaged in collective social and recreational activity. Women also began to establish mutual aid groups, which met regularly to provide social support and practical assistance to one another. This included supporting one another's efforts to establish microenterprises and other economic activities that contributed to sustainable livelihoods. As the networks between village women and WF cadres grew, rural women, armed with technical and gender-awareness training, began to find new ways to mobilize and utilize resources, and these women initiated projects that involved, for example, raising goats, producing electronics, establishing greenhouses and creating embroidery for sale. Including men in gender-awareness training and involving them in some public engagement events helped to foster their support in the project as well.

Over the course of the project, training and public engagement activities have increased rural women's awareness of their own capacity, developed awareness of their own needs and agency, added to their ability to establish sustainable livelihoods, fostered greater decision making in family and village contexts, promoted more community and political participation and enhanced

their family and community status in relation to men's. Although sometimes men were not comfortable with women taking on increased leadership in the community, when they saw tangible results of women's economic activity they became more supportive. In contrast, Tamil Nadu project experiences (Chapter 6) may have paid less attention to engaging men so that they would support the Tamil women's efforts. Thus, rural women in China were increasingly regarded as having gained greater gender equality and having become active participants in the building of a harmonious society and a more sustainable local economy.

Rural Women's Awareness of Their Own Capacity

Our study detected two societal perceptions about women that had initially held them in a position subordinate to that of men and had limited their awareness of their own capacity. The first was the belief that women should restrict themselves to the home and that they had nothing of value to offer in the public domain. Their voices were not to be heard nor should they be too visible in public. This perception had been largely internalized by village women. The second was the perception of men, in some villages, that many women did not satisfactorily fulfil their domestic obligations because of their own laziness or because of gossiping or mistreating their in-laws, for whom they were responsible. This second perception was exemplified by numerous critical comments made by men, particularly in a Sichuan county, that women spent too much of their time playing *mahjong* [a Chinese table game].

The needs-assessment approach promoted by the project and adopted by WF cadres illuminated a tension often experienced by rural women: though rural women were often quite resourceful within the traditional parameters of their rural context, they were, at the same time, greatly challenged by increased family responsibilities (brought on by the loss of men who had become migrant workers). In an environment where women were not to be too visible or have a voice, they were now family heads and doing much of the work to support their families with little public recognition, validation or support. Many women had felt emotionally isolated and trapped by these circumstances.

With the integration of new social work approaches focusing on capacity building, WF cadres had, over time, supported women in breaking the myth that they should not or could not be active in the public domain. One village woman in Inner Mongolia stated: "If it were not for this project, our fellow women would still be as conservative as before." When asked how women, who had previously refrained from even singing or dancing in public, had become actively involved in the policy-making of the village, one WF cadre from Kalaqinqi, Inner Mongolia, replied:

We achieved this step by step, and started ... [by] visiting women's houses

[conducting needs assessments After constructing and providing the platform for those women who enjoyed singing and dancing, [they] became the active core women [lead trainees] of the village. Then they started to work on the project and affect their fellow women around them.

Thus, from a place of personal isolation and independent responsibility, women moved through a series of stages that involved having their individual voices heard and validated by WF cadres, finding that they and other village women had some common concerns and needs, learning to act collectively towards these common goals and recognizing their individual and collective capacity to act on not only social but also economic and political levels.

In regards to core women who are now organizing some events on their own, one WF cadre in Kalaqinqi said, "This sense of initiative also showed their improved capabilities [and] had a big influence on a village or township. In this way, it is easy for the community to be harmonious." The core women of the village were able to conduct a needs assessments on behalf of the WF cadres, thus providing valuable feedback from village women regarding their thoughts and needs. These women also took on leadership roles in many village projects as they gained self-esteem and self-confidence, and this, in turn, had an empowering impact on other village women.

As the village women recognized their own value and capacity to create change, both individually and collectively, and with increased information, women adopted and promoted better self-care practices, whether in the area of personal health or in mutual support to address their common needs and issues. For example, during the outcome study, women of Xichang, Sichuan, reported that attendance of women's health sessions had taught them much about valuing and caring for their own health and had encouraged them to seek help for, rather than ignore or minimize, any health problems that may arise.

Women's Awareness of Their Own Needs and Agency

With the increased respect, education and tools for empowerment offered to rural clients by WF cadres, village women began to regard their own needs and health concerns as important and developed greater self-confidence and agency. One WF cadre from Kalaqinqi asserted:

They trust themselves and care more about the available resources around them. They better understand their real needs to figure out their real problems. Then they coordinate and make use of the available resources to solve the problems on their own ... if some women encounter difficulties, they would sit together and overcome the difficulties collectively instead of relying on the WF's support and help ... when they became a team and every team member exerted herself to help one single member by applying their specific specialty, their collective strength was maximized.

A WF cadre in Xichang, Sichuan, observed, "There has been a great change ... Before the training, [village women] were reserved and unwilling to confide in others. Now, through our group work, they can talk about ... concerns, [such as] women's diseases ... difficulties and ... needs." Other benefits of training and education were mentioned in a Xichang cadre's group discussion: "Village women have changed their old way of life ... owing to the limited living condition[s], they tended to ignore their own health," but with greater education, "people have a higher awareness of their own health and personal hygiene" and are increasingly seeking essential health care. Based on site reports, over 105,000 people have improved their knowledge about health and available services in the project areas, mostly through public education events and written materials such as calendars and leaflets addressing family health issues for rural dwellers.

WF cadres made use of recreation centres and public engagement activity opportunities to share information and mobilize village women to organize projects and events relevant to their needs. For example, cadres in Luojiang, Sichuan, said that villagers were mobilized to take action on environmental issues and participate in earthquake relief and to address such topics as relationship issues between children whose parents had migrated for work and their grandparents. Thus, public engagement activities focused on providing information, skills and hands-on experiences that helped village women "to help themselves." Villagers at the grassroots level were directly engaged in creating events that were meaningful to them.

According to WF cadres in Kalaqinqi and Chifeng, as village women gained valuable information, they developed informal groups around common life issues and concerns. For example, in Kalaqinqi, left-behind women organized a self-help group to support one another "in getting through some tough times when their husbands were not home and they couldn't get the farm work done individually." WF cadres in the Luojiang and Xichang, Sichuan, and in Kalaqinqi, Inner Mongolia, also exchanged knowledge and experience regarding their farming practices. More formal self-help groups were also promoted by cadres and often guided by core village women in project sites for recreational as well as economic development purposes. For example, village women discussed their own preferred solutions, rather than accepting men's ideas with which they disagreed, and resolved matters such as drought and irrigation, the construction of more functional roads to transport goods to market, identifying technologies that would fit with their needs and relevant government policies and/or obtaining funding to support these needs. One WF cadre in Chifeng stated that through the project, women had acquired new information that changed their lifestyles: "They started to seek appropriate paths to wealth and

understood better about women's rights and the related [government] laws. It had never happened to these women prior to this project."

More than 105,000 people, primarily women, in Inner Mongolia and Sichuan have gained access to information regarding their legal and political rights. For example, women are now more aware of the laws against domestic violence, and how to get help if they experience violence at home. As with public education on health issues, written materials and public education events in rural areas were used to reach rural women and families, and services available to women experiencing domestic violence have increased with the formation of mutual help groups in the villages to respond and offer help. Not only have village women learned how to seek out and develop some resources, they have also increased their communication skills, thus facilitating consultation with WF cadres, legal workers and/or other village or county officials.

More Sustainable Livelihoods

Initiatives arranged by trained cadres to build social capital and find new methods of mobilizing resources led to a stronger role for women in the rural economy. Training related to agriculture and finances, with support from the cadres, provided many village women with the impetus to start using their skills and increased technical knowledge to develop viable businesses that contributed to family earnings. Women acquired knowledge from invited experts, discussed this knowledge with their mutual help groups, and launched income-generating projects. These women raised goats, chickens and pigs, started greenhouses for flower, melon and mushroom businesses and sold embroidery and handicrafts. Thus, women in project sites not only gained technical knowledge, such as ways to raise healthy pigs, but they also gained the confidence to take financial risks to start businesses, and many women are succeeding. As a result of training and experience, rural women in one project area learned that the sale of seeds generated more income than planting regular crops. The additional income allowed them to secure more money to purchase food for their households. They have, therefore, increased seed production and established contracts with seed supply companies to increase and support their businesses, which, in turn, enables them to contribute more to their own households. Also, rural women in Luojiang, Sichuan, were able to negotiate with electronics companies in nearby towns to perform processing work in the villages. Women also gained access to credit with help from WF resources in order to start diversified agricultural initiatives such as fish farming. These initiatives allowed them to earn income while remaining in the villages to take care of their families.

Increased Participation in Decision Making

Rural women became more active in making important decisions regarding family issues such as children's education and deciding which crops should be planted. Rural men recognized that, in their absence, the women often become the decision makers as they farm the fields and continue to maintain the household, the children and the elderly. From the project outcome study we learned that most couples now discuss and resolve family issues together and respect one another's differing perspectives.

In Balin County, Inner Mongolia, after participating in project training, rural women were able to plan and budget to improve the financial situation of their family, and thus, they became more active in family decision making, particularly regarding economic issues. One man in an Inner Mongolian county summarized, "I now do [only] 49 percent of the decision making in our home." In Luojiang, Sichuan, during post-earthquake rebuilding, after project participation, rural women and men together discussed how to construct their new homes, marking a change in gender relations, communication and decision making within families and communities.

Women's participation in community decision making and the management of village affairs also increased after the implementation of project initiatives. Not only do rural women now recognize the importance of community participation and feel they have a responsibility and even an obligation to participate in public affairs, they also feel increasingly capable of deciding on local issues in community meetings. Before the project, most women did not attend community events as they bowed to male authority and allowed their husbands to represent their families. At the start of the project, many women said they deferred to their husbands to decide who to vote for in village council elections. But now, as stated by a Kalaqinqi, Inner Mongolia villager, "Women are also present to make women's voices heard. Women now cast their own votes in local elections." Furthermore, said the villager, though village committee members "were used to paying little attention to women's issues," the chairperson of the Kalaqinqi village committee was persuaded to participate in project training, "after which he paid much more attention to benefits for women."

This increased attention is also directly related to the fact that women were increasingly recognized as a growing force in grassroots economic development. A Luojiang, Sichuan, women's director said, "Now, women solve their own problems, because most of the men are migrant workers. ... For our rural women, this is their own business." She also said that all village women had taken part in setting up a pumping station to combat a local water shortage affecting their economic productivity.

On the one hand, the collaboration of the WF and rural women in con-

structing the pumping station might be seen as fulfillment of a practical gender need as it responds to an immediate need of the women (Moser 1993; Kabeer 1994) — to save their time and energy by substituting the physical work of carrying water for growing food with a labour-saving mechanized system. However, as often occurs, the fulfillment of a practical need also contributed to meeting a strategic gender interest where, in the process of building the pump, the women realized their own potential and means to solve problems and take initiative, both as individuals and as a group. In examining the pumping station effort, we can see that the transformative effect (see Chapter 4 and Chen 2008) of the project was very important to the women in this village site. The process of coming together to work on a problem and experiencing the success of their efforts contributed to a sense of empowerment and their capacity to solve problems that improved their own lives.

One hundred and forty primarily male government officials at different levels participated in gender-awareness training sessions organized by our project. As a result, they started to pay more attention to the opinions and suggestions of rural women, most of whom shared similar concerns for better incomes and living conditions. Through the male officials' participation in the training, they have supported women and contributed to their higher social status in relation to men. As others in the community began to take women's individual and/or collective opinions and suggestions more seriously, rural women's confidence and local participation has grown, leading to more equitable household and community decision making. Women from Inner Mongolia illustrated the increasing ability of women to have their voices heard:

Previously, our village didn't agree to install water taps although the government was willing to cover the cost, because the men preferred to dig more wells in the village.... They even preferred to spend more than four thousand or five thousand yuan [\$700 to \$800 Cdn] to dig more wells. However, our fellow women had a different opinion on this and preferred that taps be installed. So we contacted the township government and successfully got the support from the government. Now the tap water will be available to every household of the village. If it weren't for the project, we wouldn't even have the guts to do things like this.

Community Participation

As the rural women learned to engage more in the public social and economic domains of village life, and became increasingly competent and confident in assessing individual and village needs and decision making in both family and community matters, they have also increased their participation in community and political affairs. After participating in gender awareness activities, rural women realized a stronger interest in influencing and maximizing the

social and economic development of their communities and placing more importance on pursuing their strategic interests (see Chapter 4 and Moser 1993). Inspired by the project, rural women developed valuable networks and contacts, neighbourhood relationships became more harmonious, and conflicts that may have caused quarrels in the past were more effectively resolved as village women informally grouped around common life issues and concerns to support one another and increase their collective agency. Through mentorship by trained cadres, some rural women have developed and improved their own community development skills. Thus, women have also become more and more open to participating in political activities at the village and/or township levels.

In all the villages, more women participate in local government elections, and more women vote independently. In the past, men often voted on behalf of all family members as women felt that the political process had very little to do with their lives. Many women had also felt inadequate to the task because of their low level of education, but, after project training, their perceptions changed. Women now realize and claim their own decision-making rights, evidenced by the fact that the majority of voters in many villages are now women. Furthermore, as stated by a male villager from Balin County: "Now, they will discuss at home and won't always agree with their husbands. Therefore, one family may not necessarily vote for the same candidate.... She realizes now that she has her own decision-making right."

In both Inner Mongolia and Sichuan, significantly more women take part in elections for town mayors, local committees, secretaries and directors. A village-level cadre told the story of a woman in Balin County, Inner Mongolia, who was elected as the first and only female member of her village committee. In the past, she would have never considered this possible and would not have had the confidence to take part in the elections. She credited the project's gender-awareness training for helping her to become more aware of her ability and potential. In many project areas, there is an increased presence of female cadres in village- and township-level committees, and gender-awareness training through the project is a factor in this increase. Village women said that they thought that women representatives will better protect their interests. A total of thirty-six trained core cadres were elected as National People's Congress (NPC) deputies or Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) members. This change is significant considering that women's political participation rate has been low (Chen 2008). Their increased political participation demonstrates the increased confidence and skills of women and supports the goal of gender equality. The village women attributed gender representation changes in the village committee to project training. As they became more

capable outside the home, women also gained respect and support from men, as one village woman from Inner Mongolia stated:

Village men used to think that we were just women and all we could do was housework. Even if women were given the opportunity, we probably would not have had the ability to get things done. Since the beginning of the project, village women's capabilities have improved significantly.

Gender Equality for Rural Women

Our study suggests that there is now more equality between rural women and men in the project sites, as demonstrated by shifts in gender roles within the family and changing family and community attitudes towards women. Rural women in project sites have had to overcome negative perceptions of and traditional beliefs about women held by both men and women in the villages. Breaking these often internalized stereotypes has not only been an empowering process for them but has, to some extent, also helped to transform external attitudes and beliefs.

Women have gained respect within their families as they have contributed to more sustainable livelihoods, learned financial management skills and increased their decision-making power. The ability to contribute to the family income has also elicited greater support from husbands and family members. One village woman stated, "Husbands have become quite supportive [and] this kind of relationship is admired by other villagers. ... After gaining more knowledge, my husband ... cares about me more, and our relationship is better than before." More women also recognized the importance of building relationships of mutual respect with their husbands, in-laws and elderly family members. Men reported that the project training benefited their wives and they now acknowledge women's competency to farm the land, raise livestock and contribute to the household income.

There has also been an increase in men's participation in housework in order to support their wives, who may be actively raising a family, managing a family business and/or assuming a leadership role at the village or county level. Some men have also participated in public engagement and training events organized by the WF and core village women by, for example, providing practical help for events the local women organized. In recognizing the improved status and capabilities of rural women and their new values and attitudes, which contributed to more respect for women and more harmonious relations with in-laws and neighbours, men confirmed the value of project training and activities. According to a Kalaqinqi Village women's director, the participation of both women and men in health presentations further improved relationships between men and women. Gender-awareness training and activities in all sites, combined with women's contributions to family income and their acquisition

of new skills, have resulted in greater mutual respect. As a male villager from Xichang, Sichuan, reflected:

I had more power in the past, with a lack of respect for women. It is a traditional Chinese concept that men have the final say on everything, and women just listen to their husbands. My change after the training is that I have learned respect for women, both at home and outside.

Both men and women in Sichuan and Inner Mongolia villages noted a decrease in the occurrence of domestic violence and changing perceptions of women's contributions to and status in the family as a result of ongoing gender equality training. Traditional gender roles no longer clearly divided daily activities. Now, husbands often discuss business matters with their wives and consider their opinions important, and men are increasingly helping with cooking, cleaning and child-rearing. In Sichuan, when women are active in the community, it has become more common for their husbands to take care of the housework in their absence. One woman in Chifeng spoke of a role reversal in her family due to the significance of her role in promoting women's social capital and economic development in her locality:

There are about fifty or sixty core women under me. Many of them said that they wanted to learn from me because I own a pig barn and raise many pigs, which is very profitable. In my family, I am the boss and am in charge of all the family businesses and finances while my husband focuses on the family and housework. Many of the women told me that they wanted to be like me, changing traditional family constraints and becoming more active in the community. Previously, I also believed that I was just a woman and should stay home. Now, I feel very different about myself. I think that I am a good person and an upright and influential member of the village.

The changing role and status of women in both family and community is summed up by a Luojiang village man:

Women don't feel inferior to men now, as compared to before. As far as I am concerned, they are not afraid of anything. They do not easily admit defeat. They believe that if the men can do it, why can't they?

Lessons Learned

During the six years of this project, we witnessed rapid change in China. Changes in the villages, although slower to come and not as pronounced as in urban areas, have indeed taken place. We have seen changes in agriculture, infrastructure and overall economic development. Just as importantly, we heard from the women villagers that relations between women and men changed after the introduction of social work and gender-awareness training. Many villagers

stated that women's social and economic status improved. As important as such changes were to the WF cadres and rural women in our project sites, we hope that they can be sustained.

The role of the CWU's faculty members and students was critical to these successes in the villages. They taught the WF cadres how to use participatory methods and modelled these methods in their teaching sessions and during practicum supervision. The WF cadres learned and applied participatory methods to carry out needs assessments and to develop activities and initiatives with rural women. This was one of the most important achievements of the project because the newly learned skills and knowledge of the WF cadres led to improved morale, professionalism and commitment in their work with rural women and families.

Rural women were increasingly listened to and heard by the trained WF cadres. This was a change from the top-down approach of the past. The WF cadres saw that rural women had skills and ideas that helped them to contribute to their households and communities. For the results of the training to continue, effort will be needed to avoid attrition of learning and its application in the villages. It is possible that the WF will be able to garner financial support from China's government to continue training the WF cadres in meaningful ways when it comes to working with rural women and families.

Supporting capacity building in students and faculty members to provide quality training and field supervision for the WF and government officials was important. Long-term financial commitment will be needed to reinforce learning and to widely disseminate rural social work training focused on gender equality and participatory methods developed by and with WF cadres. We were not successful in acquiring resources to pay for the time of trainers and project staff in our main Chinese partner institution after the fourth year of the project, which increased pressure on the staff of our partner institution.

The changed attitude and methods of the WF cadres corresponded with a greater awareness of rural women's real and potential contributions to rural households and communities. Although many of the project results were practical in nature and aimed to increase income and support local women to help one another, their families and their communities, it is clear that the strategic gender interest of women, to realize equality with men in rural China, is challenged by traditional views about women. These views change slowly. Although our project did appear to make some headway toward this goal, we know that much more remains to be done. Rural Chinese women, it is said, hold up half (or more) of the sky, but in order for them to achieve gender equality with men, women require more supportive structures.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In Chapter 4, there is a definition of strategic gender interests. Consider how rural women living in our project villages in China could have any of their strategic gender interests met through the project outcomes described above. What interests show evidence of being met and which would need more effort?
2. Consider the situation of the Women's Federation employees (cadres) who work with rural women to provide social services for women and rural families. How do you think that our project affected the way they saw and carried out their work with rural women?
3. Referring again to Chapter 4, what practical gender needs of the women were met by our project? Which ones could be met if further work was done, and what strategies or activities work would you recommend if we had another two years with our Chinese colleagues to continue addressing gender equality in rural areas of China?
4. In general, many rural women in our project worked very hard in order to earn recognition for their efforts. What are some conditions that need to be in place so that gender equality can be achieved in rural China?

NOTES

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1. The outcome study data referred to and quoted was collected during focus group and individual interviews held in November and December, 2009.

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Section 3

Conclusion