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11

WOMEN AND PATRIARCHY IN RURAL CHINA

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"While the policy of equality has been advocated in China for half a century, patriarchal ideology is still sustained in many aspects of social and family life. Men play the dominant public roles, while women are taught to be virtuous wives and good mothers" (Liu, 2001, 87-88)

INTRODUCTION

China was under Communist rule since 1949 with a centralized and planned economy. Land was collectivized. Despite a number of land reforms during the 1950s, the establishment of commune system in 1958, and radical production policies during the Great Leap Forward, China was unable to increase its economic productivity. In 1978, leader Deng Xiao Ping decided to change course and embarked on economic reform by introducing market mechanisms, privatizing state owned enterprises and dissolving rural collectives. Since implementation of the reforms, China's economy grew over

three fold (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2001). From 2006 to 2007, its average economic growth was over 10% (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2006, 2007). In the era of economic growth, have rural women enjoyed benefits similar to other groups in society? Has China achieved more gender equality in rural areas? In this chapter, we employ a gender lens to analyze inequality between women and men in China and examine institutional barriers, such as the household responsibility, household registration (*hukou*) and political systems and traditional cultural values. The complex interplay of economic, political, social, and cultural forces will be addressed in analyzing the marginalization of rural women in China.

The majority (approximately 60%) of the Chinese population remain rural (United Nations, 2005). Some authors (Gupta, Lee, Uberoi, Wang, Wang, & Zhang, 2000; Coady, Dai & Wang, 2001) have argued that the economic reforms have brought about substantial benefits to China's rural areas. On one hand, the standard of living of rural women has been raised. On the other hand, the reforms have deeply divided the urban and rural sectors of China, creating a greater dichotomy between the rural and urban, and coastal and inner regions. Attane (2002) explains, "there are in fact at least two Chinas, one urban and one rural" (p.150). Rural women occupy the lowest social and economic status in society (Xu, 2004). Between urban men and women and rural men and women, rural women remain at the bottom of the social strata. During the commune period from the late 1950s to 1960s, men earned more than women despite their similar participation in economic production. After economic reform, rural women's marginality was further intensified by the economic discrepancy between urban and rural areas. Despite the significant contributions of rural women in the rural economy, they are still seen as a pool of reserve labour and a dispensable group in the economy.

Since the mid-1980s, women have become the main productive force in agriculture. With the rapid economic growth in cities, rural men serve as a steady supply of cheap

labour to perform work that city residents refuse to take up, such as construction and garbage collection. With rural to urban migration, agricultural work once performed primarily by men is now carried out by women, especially middle-aged women. Furthermore, the process of women's marginalization is aggravated by the regional discrepancy between coastal and inland provinces. Many rural women in the poorer Western regions are locked in the cycle of poverty as a result of the feminization of agriculture (Jacka, 1997; Rempel, 2002). In some of these provinces such as Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan and Inner Mongolia, women make up 80% of agricultural work force (Song, 1999). In these poorer and more remote regions, women are confronted with poor arable lands, limited infrastructure, and a lack of access to loans, technology, knowledge and training.

Many programs providing social security and public provision aimed at fostering women's rights were reversed after economic reform. Universal health care and other elements of the social safety net have been dissolved. The Communist Party came into power mainly through the support of the peasantry during the civil war in China. However, once the Party consolidated its power, the government shifted its attention from reducing rural poverty to alleviating urban poverty (Tian, Wang, & Ke, 2003). The government has perceived that urban poverty poses a political risk to the ruling Chinese Communist Party. Many benefits, such as Minimum Living Allowance and Old Age Security have been established in cities but not in rural areas. After economic reform, the reversal of welfare policies in rural areas greatly increased gender inequality in rural China. Under the current market economy, Chinese rural women's marginality continues to be reinforced by perpetuation of the patriarchal social structure in rural areas and revival of patriarchal values after the economic reforms. The household responsibility system, household registration system, and the monolithic political system pose fundamental structural barriers for rural women's advancement..

PATRIARCHAL SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND VALUES

Gender relationships and family structures in rural China have been shaped by Confucian values which embody a rigidly patrilineal kinship system that has existed for the past three thousand years. It emphasized the subordination of women to men where patrilineality was characterized by the passing of social-economic membership through the male line. Records of lineage were only documented along the male line. Access to key economic and social assets depended on men's position in the lineage. Families without sons were seen as dying out. Only men constituted and reproduced the social order (Gupta et. al., 2000). Daughters and wives were regarded as dependents and sometimes even property of the family (Liu, 2002). Traditional Chinese cultural values did not regard a married daughter as part of the household. Rather, she was considered as belonging to her husband's family.

Patriarchal values emphasize male superiority versus female inferiority. The patriarchal Chinese culture sees the family as a hierarchy and expects women to subordinate to man (Murphy, 2004). The three cultural principles for the role of a woman are: (1) obedience to the father before marriage, (2) obedience to the husband after marriage and (3) obedience to the son when widowed. It has also been observed that in villages, there is a strong prohibition discouraging women's expression when it could be construed as competing with male prerogatives. Women who are active in the village avoid placing themselves in competition with men.

Gender relationships between men and women have been primarily traditional in rural areas and this has not changed significantly even after the introduction of Communist rule (Friedman, Pickowicz, Sheldon & Johnson, 1991). Women have never enjoyed equal rights with men especially in rural areas. Despite the Communist revolution and subsequent social and land reforms and pronouncements about women holding up half the sky, rural Chinese society remains a patriarchal and patrilineal social network. Despite the state's attempt to eliminate feudalistic cultural values during the collectivization of land, Chinese rural communities maintained traditional

values rather than embracing the ideology of the state (Friedman et. al., 1991; Chang 2000). It is reported that even during the collectivist era, discrimination against women's labour existed. The work points assigned by work units to men were always higher than those accorded to women (Judd, 1994, Jacka, 1997).

As gender policies benefiting women receded after economic reform, traditional Chinese gender values have re-emerged as a dominant force in Chinese village life. Growing inequality especially in access to resources and opportunities reinforces women's traditionally lower social status (World Bank, 2002). The re-emergence of traditional culture marginalize rural women significantly and deepen gender inequality. After decollectivization, agricultural production shifts back to rely on the family as the main production unit and the work points system no longer exists. The labour of women became less visible.

The recent migration of men working in urban centres has led to a new pattern of gender relations in rural China. The gender division of labour reflects a change in the cultural dichotomy in men's and women's work. In Chinese patrilineal society, men were responsible for the 'outside realm' of the family and the women the 'inside realm'. It is a common expression in Chinese that "men rule outside and women rule inside" (*nan zhu wai, nv zhu nei*). Although the content of women's work and men's work is changing, the division remains, as does the secondary value placed on women's work relative to men's. The traditional proverb, "men plough and women weave" has now been replaced by "men work and women plow" (Judd, 2002, p. 34). The feminization of agriculture has redefined agricultural production as 'inside work' (Jacka, 1997), meaning that such work that is carried out in the household domain. When more village men go to work in urban centres for a prolonged period, they leave their spouses to manage the household. A wife has more control over daily household decision making as well as how to use the income remitted home by the husband (Mathews & Nee, 2000). However, Jacka (1997) found that important decisions

are still made by men in the household. Women's low status and lack of power in the patriarchal social arrangement in rural China is sustained by three major institutional barriers in society, namely: (1) land right issues of the household responsibility system, (2) household registration (*hukou*) system, and (3) lack of women's participation in the political process.

HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITY SYSTEM

Tinker and Summerfield (1999) underscored that "until women possess a safe shelter for themselves and their families, they will continue to be the poorest in the world" (p.6). Constitutional rights granted in the 1950s on equality of rights between women and men in terms of land and inheriting and possessing property, have not been enforced in rural areas. The Communist government started rural land collectivization in 1952 and established the rural commune system across the country side in 1958. After twenty years of operation, it was acknowledged in the late 1970s that the commune system was a failure. It neither helped to increase agricultural productivity nor improved the living standard of peasants. In 1978, the Chinese government started to dismantle the commune system and replaced it with the Household Responsibility System (HRS).

Under the HRS, plots of land were contracted to rural household for an extended period. The allocated size of the land to households was based on the number of members and labourers in the household. The household entered into an agreement with the government which typically required the household to meet mandatory procurement criteria by selling a fixed amount of food grains or cash crops at below-market prices and paying tax to the government. After fulfilling the above, the household was entitled to the rest of the income earned from what they produced on their land. Anything produced above the government quotas could be sold at higher prices to other buyers. The agreement may have further restricted the household in the ways it could use the land. The right to reallocate land is typically vested in the village (Brandt,

Rozelle & Turner, 2002). In 2002, the Rural Land Contracting Law was adopted to reinforce this change. Peasants did not have property rights over the land but had land use rights instead (Li, 2003). Land use rights are not allocated to the individual but to the household. There is no provision to clarify the land use rights of the individuals within the household. Very often the head of a household, either as a father or a husband, signed the contract. He was therefore considered as the person who held the land use rights.

Even till today, while theoretically women enjoy the same legal rights with men in land contracting, the patrilineal values and social arrangement dominate land contracting at the village level. Women in such social environments only have the rights of maintenance as daughters in their natal home, as wives in their husbands' home, but no rights to lay claim to key productive assets such as land. Rural women as daughters or wives are not regarded as persons who share the land use rights (Jacka, 1997; Li, 2003). This tends to marginalize rural women.

Another issue that put rural women in disadvantage is that villagers are fast to take away the land rights of a newly-wed bride and slow to re-adjust land rights for divorced women and widows (Li, 2003; Liu & Chan, 1999). It is common that rural women married to men outside her village. If the maiden village of a woman married to another village carries out land adjustment, it is very likely that her land rights within her father's household will be taken away. On the other hand, if the village where she married into does not carry out any land rights adjustments, she will not have any entitlement of land use rights in the husband's village. The same problem exists when a woman is divorced or widowed and returns to her native village. Her land use rights under her ex-husband or late husband's household may be taken away and re-allocate to other households while her maiden village have already taken away her land use rights after she was married to another village. A substantial number of rural women lost their land rights as a result of marriage, divorce or widowhood (Li, 2003).

Many rural women felt trapped in a destructive marriage or when domestic violence and abuse occur. The incidence of domestic violence against women is higher in rural and remote areas than in urban and more developed regions (Liu, 2003). Due to the lack of land use rights, the rural women felt dependent financially on the husband's family. In rural China, typical domestic violence includes husband inducing harm to the wife, and in-law abuses especially between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. It is still common for young couples to live with the husband's parents in rural areas. In such circumstances, the daughter-in-law is expected to be subservient to the mother-in-law and to take over most of the burden of domestic chores. According to Liu's study (2002), the sources of conflict centred around family issues such as disagreements over limited household resources, and competition for love and attention from the husband/son.

Rural women in China have a high rate of suicide, three times greater than that of their urban counterparts (Phillips, Li, & Zhang, 2002). China has one of the highest female suicide rates in the world and is among the few countries where there is a higher suicide rate for women than men (World Health Organization, 2004). According to Phillips, Li and Zhang's study (2002), China has a particularly alarming suicide rate among young rural women who are between 25 to 34 years of age; it is the leading cause of death for this age cohort. There is also a surge in completed suicides among elderly rural women. After the age of 65, the suicide rate of rural women (and men) increases dramatically. Family conflict is a more prominent factor, rather than depression, which accounts for suicide of rural women in China. In a detailed case analysis of suicide triggered by family conflict, Liu (2002) explained how a daughter-in-law's suicide is an act of ultimate revenge against the husband's extended family when a woman perceived that her in-laws mistreated her and her husband failed to protect her.

HOUSEHOLD REGISTRATION (*HUKOU*) SYSTEM

While urban-rural disparity is a common phenomenon in many developing countries, seldom is it caused by deliberate policies

that maintain and reinforce such disparities. In China, differential wealth between urban and rural areas is sustained by the Household Registration (*hukou*) System in China. This is because the migration of rural people to cities does not involve a simple transfer of household registration to the city area and concomitant access to the social welfare resources located there. Poor people from rural areas tend to become poor migrant workers when they relocate to cities.

Various governments of different dynasties throughout Chinese history adopted some sort of household registration system mainly for taxation purposes and to keep track of changes in local population numbers. There was no law to restrict the mobility of people between urban and rural areas. Shortly after 1949 when the Communist Party took power, the government introduced a *hukou* system as an administrative device to control rural to urban migration. The influx of millions of peasants who worked in the burgeoning state industrial enterprises in urban areas was perceived as undermining the nation's political and social stability. The *hukou* system was then established to; (1) prevent rural migration to urban areas, and (2) increase political control of the Party at the grassroots level (Cheng & Selden, 1994).

The *hukou* system classified the population into two categories: "agricultural" (rural) and "non-agricultural" (urban). At the beginning of its implementation, the *hukou* system is akin to a serf system in which the peasants were tied to the land (Judd, 1994). Between 1961 and 1963, about 18 million migrant workers in cities were deported back to their villages of origin (Wu & Treiman, 2004). Peasants were confined to reside in their own villages and were prohibited to move to or reside in the cities. The *hukou* system also resembles a caste system where household status is inherited. Children inherit their household registration classification from their mother (Judd, 1994; Chan & Li, 1998). In its early years of implementation, the household registration derived its power through the rationing system. The ration of staple food and various essential items was provided to registered households. People who resided outside their original residence could not receive any rations.

This classification system defines the socio-economic and political eligibility and the status of rural dwellers. It also gives rise to profound urban-rural inequalities in many areas, such as incomes, job opportunities, education, social services, health care and physical infrastructure. Gender inequality in rural China is in part reinforced by a structural barrier maintained by the government's policy of *hukou*. This quasi-caste system also marginalizes marriageable rural women because men with urban registration are very reluctant to marry women with rural registration as their children will automatically inherit rural residence status. When rural men move to work in the cities, they would likely leave their families behind as they are not entitled to basic social services such as health care, social insurance and education.

It has been difficult to change rural registration status to an urban one. The most common ways for a rural dweller to change his or her registration classification are through admission to a university, joining the army or becoming a government cadre. Only a small number of rural residents succeed in acquiring urban resident status. Under restrictive quotas, some rural households have been able to obtain forms of temporary urban residential permits either by buying expensive housing units or investing in major urban centres (Wong & Huen, 1998).

Since the introduction of economic reforms, the *hukou* system has been relaxed. The local authorities could no longer hold back rural people on the land through provision of rations as the better opportunities in urban centres appealed to poor rural dwellers. Migration has been considered legal since 1984 (Poncet & Zhu, 2005). However, the *hukou* system has not changed. Urban workers from rural areas can only obtain a work permit. It is therefore very difficult to have the whole family reside in the city as they are not entitled to the social service benefits and privileges enjoyed by their urban counterparts. Migrant workers tend to work at jobs that no urban dwellers want to take. The change in rural migration only aggravates the urban-rural disparity. This further marginalizes rural women because married and older women

(and elderly men) and children are left in villages without the agricultural labour previously contributed by the migrant. In interior and Western provinces the feminization of agriculture has become a common phenomenon. The young rural women, who are the second largest population migrating to work in urban centres, are exposed to risks of abuse and harassment once there (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004). Even though young rural women face similar segregation in urban employment as most rural men do, they are usually required to return to marry in the village and remain there while their male counterparts still go back to work in the city after they got married. In order to improve the conditions of rural women, the *hukou* system needs to be reformed to eliminate the inherent inequalities imposed on rural women, and the rural population as a whole.

Although the *hukou* system makes it almost impossible for rural people to migrate to cities in family groups, there are families who do so. These families tend to live in extremely poor conditions. They are not entitled to any of the benefits to which urban residents are entitled. They have to pay extra tuition for their children to attend sub-standard schools. They are second-class citizens who constantly face discrimination in the work environment and in the neighbourhood. Women face yet a greater burden because of gender inequality in the work place and at home (Fan, 2003).

LIMITED PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Apart from socio-economic and cultural factors, women's limited political participation is another significant factor which can lead to the subjugation of rural women in a patriarchal society. This is because women leaders can better ensure that women's voices and interests remain on the political agenda. Under the present system, there are few appropriate channels for women to express their needs. Very few women's organizations advocate for rural women's interests in China. While the Women's Federation is active in providing a range of services to rural women, there is a need for enhanced awareness of grassroots women's interests and

needs rather than a focus only on the implementation of Party policies. Establishment of more women's NGOs could be helpful in providing specialized services that are geared to the diverse needs of rural women. A social and political environment of openness to welcome the ideas of women at the grassroots level is needed.

In 1989, the Chinese government initiated a system of village management committees whose members are, in principle, elected by all villagers. The function of the village management committee is to deal with issues and matters that affect the village. However, open nomination has not been widely adopted (Zhong, 2004). In many cases, the nomination of candidates is still controlled by the township government and the village Communist Party branch. The work of the village committees is governed by the village Communist Party branch. The village committee chair is usually the Deputy Party Secretary. All major decisions have to be approved by the Party branch before adoption and implementation by the village committee. Moreover, township governments can veto decisions made by the village committees.

The monolithic political structure of the communist state prioritizes those who are members of the Communist Party to form the local political leadership. Female representation in the local village level political structure has been constrained by the patrilocal post-marital residence which restricts women from becoming Party members, a prerequisite for holding political and administrative office in China. Membership in the Party is usually granted after a considerable period of observation and consideration. It may take several years for a person to become trusted and respected by local leaders. By then, rural women may be too preoccupied with family responsibilities (Judd, 1994). Low educational level also directly affects rural women's level of community and political participation (Alpermann, 2003).

After the economic reforms took effect, women's representation in public office declined significantly (Howell, 2001). A survey conducted in 1999 by the UN Task Force on Gender in Shandong Province indicated a significant drop in

female representation among the leadership (World Bank, 2002). At most of the county and township levels of government, 95% of office holders are male. Only one per cent of all village management committee chairs and 20% of all village committee members are women, and these are usually local women leaders of the Women's Federation (Howell, 2001). Without adequate representation in political decision-making processes, rural women have limited influence in the resource distribution and policy-making that affect their daily lives.

IMPACT OF GENDER INEQUALITY ON RURAL WOMEN

The above-mentioned patriarchal structure and institutional barriers created by socio-economic and cultural forces have strong impact on rural women's survival in an often-harsh countryside environment. The marginalization of rural women can be traced through all their life stages (Cheung, Heinonen, & Liu, in press). Prior to birth, a female fetus carried by a rural woman faces more risks from targeted abortion as parents tend to prefer to have a boy rather than a girl. This is due to traditional beliefs and practical needs for survival and maintenance of the family line. The state policy of one child per family (in rural areas two children are mostly allowed), when enforced at the village level, is a causal factor (Li & Lavelly, 2003). Shortly after birth, a baby girl may face a risk of infanticide should her parents determine that they cannot accept a girl child (Chang, 2000). A female child's medical care may be prioritized lower than a male child's as nearly all medical services have been privatized in rural areas and seeing a doctor is expensive for poor peasant families (Li, Zhu & Feldman, 2004). While attending elementary school, a girl has a high chance of being kept at home to help with household chores or agricultural tasks (Murphy, 2004). It is mainly due to family poverty or because the family views girl's education as less important than boy's. Her chance of receiving education beyond the compulsory nine years is lower than her male counterpart. In rural areas, only about 40% of females complete high school as contrasted with 60% of rural males who do so (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2001).

The Chinese government has extracted resources but invested little in rural areas (Fan, 2003), at least until recent years. Economic diversification, providing greater employment opportunities in the industrial and service sectors, draws workers away from rural areas to the cities and rural towns of China. Because of the higher income generated through off-farm work by males, men are the first to leave rural villages to seek better work opportunities (Judd, 1994). Due to expansion of the service sector and light industries in towns and urban centres, young female workers were drawn to work in these areas in unskilled low-wage jobs. They earn less than men because of their lower educational levels. They do not enjoy the same benefits as their urban counterparts due to the disadvantage of rural residence status they carry with them. Further, many return to villages to marry and settle on land that often produces poorly.

The influx of rural men and young women to urban centres means that married and older women (and men) remain in villages to farm the land and raise animals. The low profit margin of agricultural products traps them in a cycle of poverty, especially in the interior regions where land is mostly unproductive, and characterized by harsh climate, and poor infrastructure. As a means to counter the harsh environment, villagers in areas such as Inner Mongolia have initiated planting activities to encourage once-productive land to return to its former state (personal conversation with villagers in Balinyouqi, November 25, 2005).

After China's accession to the World Trade Organization, market information and technological skills have become especially important factors for small farmers so they could compete in the market. Support in terms of credit, information resources, infrastructure development and relevant training are paramount. Due to the lack of education and social status, rural women have less access to these supportive mechanisms than do men (Rempel, 2002). Although women's involvement in agricultural work has increased in interior and remote areas of China, the lack of infrastructure and resources (land, loans, information and training) disadvantages women, perpetuating

the feminization of poverty in these areas. The breakdown of the collective welfare system after the economic reforms, together with the feminization of agriculture, often involves a triple burden for younger married women who need to perform agricultural work, care for children and household chores, and at the same time, take care of the needs of aging parents-in-law. Performing all these tasks are both physically and psychologically taxing (Chang, 2003). In recent years, there has been an increase in married women migrating to work in city centres (Pan & Huang, 2005). However, their success is limited by reduced job opportunities. Often they are found in domestic work in wealthier people's homes where they are engaged in domestic work.

As women generally live longer than men, they face hardship if they become ill or frail (Zhu & Xiao, 1991). The concept of retirement is nonexistent in rural China. Elderly rural residents do not enjoy the same old age security as do their urban counterparts. Further, agricultural seasons with long hours of physically demanding work is a feature of rural life. Older people continue farming as long as they are physically able.

With the privatization of medical care after economic reform, the rudimentary social security schemes under the commune system were abolished with no replacement. Although elderly women may become too frail to perform agricultural tasks, they do help take care of grandchildren and perform other household chores. It could be said that they work until they drop (Pang, de Brauw, & Rozelle, 2004). The lack of financial security causes elderly parents to be dependent on their adult children. Confronted with ailing health and without strong religious or cultural taboos against suicide in China, older women may seek an alternative to their hardship. Evidence can be seen in the sharp increase in the suicide rate for women (and men) over sixty-four years of age (Phillips, Li & Zhang, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Rural women constitute 31% of the total population in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2001). The majority of

them who reside in the interior and Western provinces find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty. While the living conditions of some rural women in coastal regions have improved after economic reform, a large proportion in the interior and remote areas have experienced no improvement or deterioration of their situation. In rural China, women still belong to the lowest social strata. Although women's situation may improve with greater economic activity and income, there remain traditional beliefs and institutional barriers that deter women's full participation in society. In patriarchal Chinese society, rural women continue to have less influence than rural men in the family and in the community in which they live, as well as in the wider socio-political sphere.

In rural areas, having land is important in reducing poverty and enhancing food security (Agarwal, 2001). The feminization of agriculture and the fact that most women do not have land use rights perpetuate women's poverty and hence marginalization. In the interior and remote areas, it is not only that women cannot generate sufficient income from increasingly barren land, but also an insufficient infrastructure of roads and transport, training and agricultural extension programs, and credit access to support women's agricultural work (personal communication, village women in Kalaqinqi, Inner Mongolia, November, 2004). Rural women in China face multi-faceted challenges throughout their life cycle, from education, health and social security, and from traditional gender values and social exclusion.

In many rural regions in different parts of the world, patriarchy is interwoven into social, economic, political and cultural forces to construct rural women's marginality. The feminization of poverty is perpetuated by gender inequalities in the distribution of income and resources. Rural women in China, especially those who are married and older women, are systematically excluded from more profitable non-agricultural labour market and political institutions which could improve their economic and social situations. They face more constraints and fewer opportunities than men in access to higher education, quality health care and employment, in

effect, to improve their lives. Traditional patriarchal values still run deep in Chinese society, especially in rural areas.

Gender awareness initiatives could help to highlight and promote the contributions of rural women. Such programs could involve educational, artistic or dramatic activities and discussions of gender relations and issues grounded in the cultural experiences of the respective communities. Education is a key factor in empowerment of rural women. More education is needed to understand the way patriarchal attitudes and social values affect gender relations at the village level and shape change. The central government's declared policy to foster education at the village level needs to be realized through transferring adequate resources to rural education, especially in the poorer and remote areas. Employing positive measures to encourage parents to send their daughters to school is important to ensure rural girls receive same level of education as boys.

A greater focus on gender in rural policy-making and programs to cater for the needs of rural women is needed. To alleviate rural women's poverty, there is a need for governments at different levels to eliminate institutional barriers that prevent women from full participation in society; such measures would enhance gender equality. Recently the central government has announced a series of new rural policies such as the cooperative medical insurance scheme, abolition of agricultural taxes and fees for the nine years of basic education. As helpful as these initiatives can be for rural women, attention also needs to be paid to land rights for women, especially in situations of divorce or widowhood. The *hukou* system also poses a barrier for women's empowerment because it can aggravate rural women's disadvantaged position. An examination of the way this policy affects rural women (and men) would provide needed information that could effect change that would benefit rural women and men. The new cooperative medical insurance scheme mainly covers acute medical conditions that would require hospitalization. As important as such coverage is for rural people, the scheme needs to extend the coverage for non-acute illnesses as well.

Addressing the redistributive function of the scheme will be a future important strategy to narrow the gap between urban and rural areas. In order to encourage the voices of rural women and reflect them in policy-making, a more participatory environment is called for, whether at the local community level or at the macro policy decision-making level. Grassroots self-help organizations that help rural women to express their needs could be fostered so that women would have spaces to meet and consider their needs and interest together.

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