

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here and to share with you the challenges and successes of women in China. China has the largest rural female population of any country.

Many of these women cannot read or write. This limitation, combined with thick layers of feudal tradition, make a formidable obstacle to attaining goals related to improving their quality of life.

OUR ORGANIZATION AND ITS GROWTH

In 1993, three women who shared the mission of helping rural women in China began a magazine called "Rural Women Knowing All." That year China held the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, an exciting year for us. Like a well-nourished seed, our magazine has grown. We have become an NGO/NPT and we are now known as the Beijing Cultural Development Center for Rural Women. The monthly magazine now has 60,000 readers and is our main communication vehicle. New seeds have been sown; our group of three women has grown to 42 women and men. We manage projects and coordinate with (1) the Practical Skills Training Center for Rural Women (set up in 1998 to empower rural women instead of training for a diploma) and (2) the Migrant Women's Club. Our target groups are grassroots women, female leaders at village, township, and county levels and girls who have dropped out of junior high due to poverty. Our courses are designed to tap their potential, increase their self-esteem, and help them become responsible citizens. We also offer skill building in the use of computers, in hairdressing, and learning waitress work and domestic work. This helps girls between 16 and 18 to find employment after training. When they are earning money and feeling empowered,

they are able to help their families get out of poverty and help their siblings to continue their education.

The Migrant Women's Club was established in April of 1996, with the purpose of empowering migrant women who come to Beijing to look for employment. After the opening-up of 1979, more and more women and girls migrated to the cities to better themselves and to look for opportunities. We now have 700 members in this Club. We have held classes on Labor Law, Marriage and Family Law, Gender and Citizenship, social values, city life, and so on. We have set up a "Legal Aid Group" in 2002 and "Emergency Relief Fund for Migrant Women" in 2003 to follow proper legal process for these women to protect their rights and interests. We have helped 17 sisters since the founding of the group and the fund. We gave a dinner to raise funds in 2003. From their requests, we added classes in Chinese, Mathematics, computer literacy and English classes to help them improve their job possibilities.

Additionally, we publish books to communicate our goals to a wider audience, and to share success stories to inspire those who are uncertain. We have three sets of textbooks for literacy classes as well as books directed toward specific groups of girls and women, such as "The Chinese Registration System and Migrant Women."

OUR MISSION AND BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR WORK

Our mission is to advance women's human rights. Finding ways to provide services for women (especially rural women) regarding education, health, employment, social and public services became our first priority. We must help rural women become literate! We set the stage by first emphasizing to women that they

are human beings first and women second. Women should not be constrained by stereotyped gender roles and longstanding traditions.

During the Fourth World Conference on Women, we participated in workshops and had in-depth discussions with women from different continents. We all face the same issues: feminization of agriculture, poverty, and migration. We established training about gender, citizenship, democracy, and equality. We use participatory methodology in all our training, which helps form the foundation for a democratic approach to our society. Participants became independent and self-reliant, and they began to voice their needs and demands. We do recognize that it is a new Long March for us, especially since we have the largest female population in the world with strong traditions. It will be one step at a time, and we need to have a down-to-earth work style, always ready to listen, learn, and offer our love to the women we serve.

SUCCESS STORIES

China's success stories begin in 1979 when China opened up to the modern world and began to search for China's place in that world. In our organization, socially committed editors with gender awareness have gone to the grassroots, listened to the stories of rural women, learned about their lives, their struggles, and the challenges they face. Then they wrote about them in our magazine, thereby encouraging readers to feel empowered by the success stories of other women like them. Like a seed, they grow and form circles. We feel the circle represents the ideal management of our organization because in a circle no one is in charge.

Women who can read have begun to read stories to those who cannot read, hopefully stimulating them to learn to read for themselves. An example of a success is Wang Shuxia who obtained one of the first copies of our magazine in 1994, and has been reading it ever since. She has also attended many of our empowerment training workshops. Her mindset changed. She has encouraged others to subscribe to the magazine. She has become a trainer at a Peasant School, teaching gender and empowerment. She is a seed and is forming many new circles of women who are empowered and committing themselves to action in achieving gender equality.

Some of the stories of women who could not read or write are quite touching. Imagine being afraid to go to the local market because you cannot read the place names at the bus stops. Imagine not knowing the character for “Female,” and being afraid of entering the men’s toilet! Many of them could not write their names when their children brought school reports to be signed.

One woman from Hubei Province came to a literacy class with dull eyes and messy hair. After only two weeks, she began to change. Her eyes radiated confidence, and she took pride in making her hair attractive. She also began to participate openly in the class.

A woman from Zhang County, Gansu Province, influenced her entire family. The mother could not read or write. Every time one of her little boys brought home a school report, if the Dad was away, he would ask his older brother to sign the report. When the teacher learned of this, she criticized the boy and shamed him. After the mother came to our literacy classes, very soon with her hard work she could write her

own name. Imagine the little boy's pride when he announced to his teacher, "My mother signed it!"

Another mother relied on her fifth grade son to help her learn the characters. He began to concentrate in class and worked hard at school because he knew he had to be a "teacher" to his mother. He wanted to be good!

There are many stories like these. A seed has become circles. People are changing, families are changing, communities are changing. We begin to see that our goals are attainable. There is much to be done; this we know. Our sisters need better medical services, and we have begun to help village medical workers from the Southern part of China to upgrade their knowledge and skills so they could better serve the community. One pregnant woman insisted on joining this project in spite of her condition because she did not want to miss the learning opportunity. To remember her experience, she named her baby boy

"An Guo," the place where she had the training.

DESIRED OUTCOMES FOR THE WOMEN

We know that in the final analysis, the most important goal is to empower women to have a strong sense of citizenship, to speak up, to be a part of the decision-making process so that their needs are reflected in laws and policies. We need both male and female voices in all decisions. We want to dare to speak out when there is violation of the Constitution. We want to push for transparency, democracy, and the rule of law in the People's Republic of China. Our literacy training covers these subjects, so that the women are learning content that will help them become active participants in the political process as part of the process of learning to read and write.

MY BACKGROUND, BRIEFLY

I have been actively pushing the idea of “rule of law” in China and putting the Constitution into action since 1984 when I first became a People’s Deputy to the Haidian District People’s Congress, a special district, considered as the cradle of all the students’ democratic movements. I have been through many political movements since 1952, especially the “Cultural Revolution,” a nightmare to everyone. I feel we have had enough nonsense, so I determined to change the system. I have a dream bigger than anything on earth: I want everyone to be educated to become responsible global citizens, who know their rights and respect the rights of others. All citizens of different nations can enjoy the rights clearly stated in their Constitutions and in the United Nations Human Rights charter.

But first I want China to be a country ruled by law, not by man. I wanted to become a people’s deputy to the People’s Congress, which has the power to make law and to supervise all administrative, judicial, and procuratorial organs at the four different levels (state, provincial/municipality, county/district, township). I was nominated and elected in 1984. The first action I took was to study the Constitution. I think no rights are granted or given, but must be claimed. I put the Constitution into action. I am the first deputy in China to use the Constitution to protect citizen rights, to hold public meetings to report to my constituents and to set aside time every week to meet and listen to those constituents because I believe strongly in transparency, democracy, accountability, and supervision by those I am representing. I am now serving my sixth term at the district and my fourth term at the municipal People’s

Congress. Support from my constituents, including party and government officials, increases daily, as does the publicity I receive, demonstrating the support of people in the media.

Beginning in the mid nineties, I have trained rural women and female cadres to learn to use the Constitution, not only to protect their own rights, but also to use it to supervise the work of government officials. I have also been invited to speak on university campuses and in factories in different parts of China about gender and citizenship issues.

AND NOW THE CHALLENGES: LONG STANDING TRADITIONS AND FUNDING

Since 2001, our organization has used our own resources to hold symposia on Women's Political Participation to encourage rural women to get into the decision-making process, to voice rural women's needs, and try to make changes in their own geographical areas to show both the citizens and government servants the importance of supervision.

In the Chinese traditional culture, there has never been supervision, democracy, and the rule of law, so this means a major change in thinking and acting. The first symposium we held in 2001 was for village level party secretaries and heads of villages from the northern part of China. More than 130 women gathered to share their experiences, lessons, and how to face and overcome common difficulties. Our second was held in 2003 with more than 100 participants.

These were very successful. For example, in 1994 Jia Junqiao was the head of a small mountainous village in ManCheng County, Hebei Province. After our

workshops, with her vision broadened, her knowledge updated, and her workstyle improved, she knows about sustainable development. With her leadership and the support of the villagers, the incomes of the villagers have increased from 200 yuan in 1994 to 2,000 yuan in 2004, a tenfold increase. She now has a strong urge to become a People's Deputy. In 1998 she was elected as deputy to the Hebei Provincial People's Congress; she is serving her second term. Now she hopes to become a deputy to the National People's Congress. She has encouraged eleven women from her village to attend our workshops on political participation; three of the eleven were elected to the township People's Congress.

China has had two thousand and four hundred years of feudalism. It may take centuries to change those deeply embedded traditional ideas. Nevertheless, we are working hard to change the mindset of our people. We are confident of attaining gender equality in China and throughout the world.

One final success story: We recently sponsored a five -day workshop on Suicide Intervention. Forty people attended, seventeen of whom had attempted suicide. Six women from Donghao Village, Qinglong County, Hebei Province, went home changed women. They acquired a new perspective and learned ways to deal with frustration. The villagers told us, "You have not only changed six people but six families and a village of 600!" This domino effect has given us increased confidence and resolve.

MEETING FUNDING CHALLENGES

Lack of funding has been the crucial problem. But so far we have been extremely lucky. Many foundations are supporting us because they think we are

trying to be an NGO that is democratic, transparent, accountable, and truly serve the target groups. To help us better manage our organization and all our projects, the Ford Foundation, Beijing Office, and Winrock International Institute for Agriculture Development have offered two capacity building workshops which are very helpful.

Things have changed gradually both nationally and internationally, especially after the Fourth World Conference on Women. We are an NGO which has been getting help from international and national institutions. I want to thank the Ford Foundation, Asia Foundation, Netaid, UNESCO, Proliteracy, CIDA Fund, HONGKONG OXFAM, UNDP, Global Fund for Women, Shaler Adams Foundation, the Tides Foundation, the International Republican Institute, the Peony TV Plant, the Beijing Municipal Government, Changping District Government, Embassies of Ireland, Japan, Canada, America and many individuals who have given of their time and their money. We are a seed in a circle of friends of donors.

Sustainable development is vital to an NGO. Through the Capacity Building workshops, we have learned to raise our own funding by giving fundraising lunches and dinners.

We believe in every seed. We know that if a seed is strong and healthy, it will send its roots deeper into the soil to absorb nourishment, it will have a strong stem to stand straight, to blossom, to bear flowers or fruits and to produce good seeds. Seeds grow and form circles. We are a seed in a circle, the circle of sharing, equality, empowerment, and solidarity. We are both a seed and a circle, because only seeds of sharing can form circles. Every global citizen is a seed, and we form circles of

equality, peace, and development to make this world a better place for us and for the generations to come.

Thank you.