

The Role of the All China Women's Federation in China

Abstract: The All China Women's Federation (ACWF) has established a systematic organizational method from the central to the local level and has long been supported by the Communist Party and the government in terms of staffing and financing. As a mass organization, the ACWF represents women's federations (WFs) at all levels, protects women's interests, and promotes women's development. It constitutes a bridge between the Communist Party, the government, and women. WFs have played an important role in promoting women's participation in the construction of the New China as well as its production, reform, and growth. They also have contributed to the advancement of women's status in the country. Due to the expansion and complexity of women's issues and the diversification of women's groups and their needs, the forms, functions, and roles of WFs are also going through a process of change and transformation. Based on the existing research, this article reviews the development of the ACWF's role from the perspectives of rural and urban women and their rights and interests.

As a mass organization, the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) represents women's interests, promotes their development, and plays the role of a bridge linking the Communist Party, the government, and the female citizens in the country. Since its founding in 1949, the ACWF has been leading women to play an important role as Half the Sky in the revolution, construction, and reform undertaken under the strong leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). This article mainly reviews the growth and development history of the ACWF and describes its role in representing women's work and experience. It will provide a reference point for understanding the organization's part in women's development in China, especially within the new social and political climate.

The Establishment of the All China Women's Federation and the New Beginning of Women's Work

In order to meet the needs of the successful development of the national revolution and the women's movement, the First National Congress of Chinese Women was held in Peiping from March 24 to April 3, 1949. The Congress summed up the great role of Chinese women under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1931-1945) and the War of Chinese Liberation. It worked as a platform to exchange experiences related to women's work in various localities, and to formulate the principles and tasks of the Chinese women's movement. The Congress decided to establish the All-China Democratic Women's Federation (ACDWF) and adopted the Constitution of the ACDWF, which stipulated its purposes as the following: (i) to unite women at all levels, (ii) to strive to abolish all feudal traditions and customs

against women, (iii) to protect the rights and interests of women and the welfare of children, and (iv) to actively organize women to participate in various construction undertakings to help achieve equality between men and women.

The ACDWF assumed the National Women's Congress as the supreme organ of power, and the Executive Committee (EC) as the body to represent that power between sessions of the Congress. It elected and formed a Standing Committee to implement the resolutions of EC meetings and handle the daily business of these meetings. The Standing Committee consisted of spokespersons from the Organization Department, the Ministry of Publicity, the Ministry of Production, the Ministry of Women and Children's Welfare, the Kuomintang District Work Department, the International Work Department, and the Secretariat.

The practical experience of women's activities in this period showed that the development of women's organizing must focus on the central task of serving the interests and situations of all women, and such a realization has been the vital force of women's federations for a long time. The development of women's work must have a solid and profound organizational foundation and a high-quality and energetic team of WFs as well as sufficient mobilization and appeal. Women's work must be rationally carried out in accordance with urban, rural, and regional characteristics to meet the needs of women and provide targeted services and aid. Such work has not only learned from the experience of the international women's movement, but has also raised and learned from the voices of Chinese women. An Historical Review of the Promotion of Rural Women's Work by the Women's Federation is presented below.

Mobilizing rural women to fight for the construction of socialism

After founding the People's Republic of China, the Party and the state liberated rural women so they were able to become leaders of the state and society through a series of key measures such as land reform, democratic elections, promulgation and implementation of marriage law, and elimination of illiteracy. WFs organized women to participate in agricultural production and national construction and become an important force in socialist construction. In June 1950, the *land reform law* was promulgated, and women's federations adhered to the principle of "men and women jointly launch" to mobilize women to participate in land reform. In the same year, the *marriage law* was promulgated to publicize the new marriage system establishing freedom of marriage with monogamy and equality between men and women and opposing arranged marriage. Rural women gained the rights to marriage autonomy and equal status with men in marriage and family. The *electoral law* of 1953 mobilized rural women to participate in general elections. A large number of small-scale WFs were set up in rural areas, a process which decentralized women's literacy classes and empowered women's groups to carry out cultural education for rural women and improve their quality, awareness, ability, and confidence to rebuild the country.

Mobilizing rural women to engage in agricultural production

The First Women's Congress established the new concept of "labor glory" and the strategy of "organizing qualified women to work on the production front." WFs embraced

the issues of labor and production as the central features of rural women's work and demanded that the vast number of rural women change their old ideas and stop feeling ashamed of labor. In the meanwhile, WFs fully equipped rural women to participate in agricultural and sideline production by launching patriotic and productive campaigns and agricultural production competitions and by organizing and selecting rural women's agricultural labor models. As a result of increasing agricultural production in the whole country, the magnitude and scope of rural women's participation in agricultural production have reached unprecedented levels.

Promoting policy implementation to protect the rights and interests of rural women

After the land reform had taken place, rural women joined agricultural cooperatives with the provision of land shares. They participated in agricultural labor and were paid for their work in the form of grading and remuneration. The central government formulated policies to protect the economic interests of these women and stipulated very clearly that equal pay for equal work should be implemented unconditionally among men and women. Local WFs made every effort to implement the policy and ensure equal pay for equal work by both men and women. They also paid attention to the inequality between men and women in the distribution of agricultural labor income and earnestly safeguarded women's labor and economic rights. At the same time, WFs worked hard to improve the protection of rural women's labor. In 1961, after much investigation and research, the ACWF pointed out that it was necessary to recognize the division of labor between men and women in agricultural production and to arrange women's labor forces rationally. The system of labor protection for rural women has gradually been formed since then. General participation of women in production in rural areas created new difficulties including lack of childcare, which was urgently needed. In response, various forms of childcare have been developed for the mutual benefit of individuals and organizations in rural areas, largely through the efforts of WFs. Rural women's participation in agricultural labor was thus facilitated and guaranteed.

Leading rural women's role as half the sky in the reform and expansion of socialist modernization

After the third plenary session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, various reform practices within the Party created unprecedented opportunities for rural women's development. WFs launched in-depth and ongoing economic activities such as "double-learning and double-comparison" that encouraged women to devote themselves to agricultural production and rural construction in order to improve the quality of their lives. Such activities also encouraged women to push for major reforms and socialist modernization within the Party. Since the mid-1980s, WFs have taken many important steps to help women in poverty-stricken areas get out of poverty. Local WFs have established poverty alleviation centers and household affiliation systems to explore innovative poverty alleviation models such as mutual poverty alleviation assistance. Public welfare assistance projects such as the "Happiness Project" and "Mother's Water Cellar" have been implemented, and small guaranteed loans for women have been launched to help women living in poverty. During the 1980s, the ACWF undertook the fundamental task of improving rural women's quality of life by training them to work and use their talents in the field of modern agriculture. In 1988, the Sixth

National Congress of Chinese Women issued a call to all women, including those in rural areas, to better their circumstances in an all-round way—to become new women through cultivating self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement—and thus enhance their competitiveness in the reform. Furthermore, efforts have been made to solve the major problems restricting these women’s development, such as the registration and certification of rights to land contracting in rural areas to safeguard women’s rights and interests. Examples of other such efforts include encouraging women’s participation in the practice of villagers’ autonomy, expanding the scope of screenings for cervical and breast cancers, and caring for marginalized and left-behind women and children in rural areas.

An Historical Review of WFs’ Role in Promoting Urban Women’s Work

In order to achieve economic reconstruction, ensure social stability, and support women’s development, the ACWF has remained committed to improving the quality of urban women’s lives, promoting their employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, and solving the contradiction between employment and family responsibilities to effectively guarantee and safeguard the rights and interests of female workers.

Organizing urban women’s participation in national economic recovery and industrialization

Promoting urban women’s participation in paid work was achieved in two phases. During the first phase (1950s–1980s), urban women were organized to actively take part in productive labor for the restoration and development of the national economy. WFs established various types of projects and production cooperatives to organize urban housewives to actively carry out handicrafts production. Thus, they promoted the recovery of urban economy and solved the employment problem of urban women. During the second phase (1990s onwards), through launching the female meritorious service activity, the ACWF has been encouraging women to compete with men in terms of achievements and contributions towards the country’s economic and social development, and to strive for excellence and success in their jobs and professions. Over the past 20 years, in response to the reform of the urban economic system and the requirements of women’s development, the female meritorious service activity has been adjusted and enhanced constantly. As the problem of female workers being laid off and unemployed became more and more serious, helping urban women to find jobs and start their own businesses has gradually become the main objective of the female meritorious service activity. Since 1995, the ACWF has established information and guidance centers for women’s employment as well as re-employment training bases throughout the country.

Promoting women’s work in cities and resolving the contradiction between productive and reproductive work

Since the founding time of the People’s Republic of China, urban women have stepped out of their familial households and participated in outside work. The contradiction between employment and housework became prominent as a result. Concerns over childcare mainly kept urban housewives away from outside employment; therefore, WFs promoted the development of childcare centers and kindergartens in various neighborhoods in the cities. With the reform and expansion of economic activities, the need for infant nurseries in cities became very prominent. The ACWF has actively

carried out nursery work and promoted the development of nursery organizations through various channels at the state, collective, and individual levels, and advocated the restoration and establishment of nursing rooms, nurseries, and kindergartens by government organizations, military units, schools, and industrial and mining enterprises.

Safeguarding urban women's right to development

Childbearing responsibilities have always constituted a significant barrier to women's employment. Since the mid-1980s, with the deepening of enterprise reforms, childbearing has become the main reason for some enterprises to reduce and refuse recruitment of women or to lay off female workers. This has seriously damaged women's rights and interests when it comes to participating equally in paid employment. Having completed in-depth research and discussion, the ACWF pioneered the pilot project of social pooling of women's maternity expenses, proposed the formulation of social pooling measures for female workers' maternity funds, and promoted the establishment of a reproductive social security system. All these measures and steps culminated in the promulgation of the *trial measures of enterprise workers' maternity insurance* in 1994.

Expanding the coverage of urban women's work

After the New China had been founded, urban women—including retired female workers and housewives—practiced housework as their main job. Urban women's federations at the grassroots level mainly set up women's congresses within the jurisdictions of police stations. With the establishment of neighborhood committees, women's organizations were set up in various neighborhoods and communities, and since the economic reform and expansion, urban women have been widely employed. Professional women now make up a major force of female urban employees. In view of continuous changes in the employment sector, living patterns, and lifestyles of women, WFs have actively explored and promoted building women's organizations in new fields, new forms of business, new social strata, and new groups, and have thus expanded the scope of women's work in urban areas.

Establishing women's colleges and vocational schools to train women's talents

To increase the number and proportion of women at decision-making and management levels, WFs actively promoted education, training, and selection of female cadres. In the late 1990s, the ACWF implemented the "women's quality project" to help female workers improve their competitiveness for professional positions and increase their participation in the fields of scientific and technological innovation. Since 2009, the ACWF has continued to promote the improvement and implementation of policies for the development of high-level female talents. It has also increased the retirement age of female cadres at or above the department level, which could now be delayed to 60 years.

Protecting and realizing the legitimate rights and interests of urban women

WFs have been earnestly performing the duties involved in safeguarding women's legitimate rights and interests to address gender discrimination in employment. They have been paying attention to the formulation of policies at the source and the introduction of relevant laws and policies conducive to the development of urban women. Examples of such initiatives include the *law on the protection of women's rights and interests*, the

provisions on the protection of female workers, the law on employment promotion, and the labor contract law. Since the implementation of the universal two-child policy, women's equality in employment has been confronted with new challenges. The ACWF has taken active measures to address these challenges. For example, the ACWF urged nine departments including the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security to issue the *notice on further standardizing recruitment practices to promote women's employment* in February 2019 with a view to addressing gender discrimination in employment.

The Role of the ACWF in Safeguarding Women's Rights and Interests

The ACWF has effectively performed the basic functions of defining women's rights protection work accurately, representing and safeguarding women's rights and interests, and promoting equality between men and women. Parallel to the country's efforts to improve the rule of law, remarkable progress has been made in safeguarding and serving women's rights in accordance with the law.

Focusing on the protection of rights at the source and ensuring more women can benefit from legal policies

Over the past 70 years, by consistently incorporating rights protection work into legislation, law enforcement, judicial work, and the popularization of law, the ACWF has worked to promote gender equality in the formulation and implementation of laws and policies. The ACWF participated in the formulation and revision of the fundamental law of the country and ensure that the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Constitution. Especially since the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the ACWF has closely followed the national legislative process and has actively promoted the improvement of the legal system for protecting the rights and interests of women and children. By participating in the formulation and revision of more than 100 laws, regulations, and policies and submitting more than 300 proposals, the ACWF has played an important role in the promulgation of laws, regulations, and policies concerning the vital interests of women and children.

Formulation and revision of the "law on the protection of women's rights and interests"

The ACWF was entrusted by the legislature to draft the *law on the protection of women's rights and interests* in 1992, and to amend it in 2005. As the first specialized, comprehensive law protecting women's rights and welfare in China, this law and its amendments clearly state in legal form that "equality between men and women is the basic state policy," strengthening the principal position of the government in law enforcement.

Participation in the formulation and revision of laws and regulations concerning women's rights and interests

The ACWF drafted or participated in drafting laws and regulations along with amendments closely related to women's rights and welfare, such as the *marriage law* and its amendments, the *anti-domestic violence law*, the *female workers' labor protection provisions*, and so on. As an entrusted women's rights agency, the ACWF undertook the main task of drafting the *anti-domestic violence law*. It organized many field investigations and discussion forums over a period of three years and provided the government with

hundreds of thousands of words' worth of research reports on anti-domestic violence legislation. The ACWF made important contributions to the promulgation of the *anti-domestic violence law* by including the mandatory reporting system and the habeas corpus protection order system in the law. It also took the initiative to make suggestions regarding the formulation and revision of laws controlling inheritance, land contracts and property, labor contracts and employment promotion, and criminal and other laws and regulations ensuring women's rights and welfare. In addition, the ACWF has actively promoted local legislation protecting women's rights. For example, 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities have formulated and revised measures for the implementation of the *law on the protection of women's rights and interests*, while 28 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities have enacted local regulations preventing and stopping domestic violence, and some have enacted laws and regulations on gender equality in consultation with the ACWF.

Participation in the enforcement and inspection of laws concerning the protection of women's rights and interests

The ACWF has participated in several inspections of the implementation process of the *law on the protection of women's rights and interests*; it has also discovered and analyzed existing problems and barriers regarding its enforcement and put forward specific counter-measures and suggestions for proper implementation. Working together with other government departments, the ACWF has established coordination mechanisms, jointly issued documents for law enforcement deployment, and initiated cooperative law enforcement mechanisms. For example, in 2002, the general office of the ACWF and the general office of the Ministry of Labor and Social Security jointly issued the *notice on the employment of legal supervisors of labor and social security in the women's association system*. This stipulates that administrative departments of labor and social security at or above the county level should employ women's federation personnel at the same level to engage in the work of safeguarding women's rights and supervising the implementation of labor and social security laws.

Establishing a standardized mechanism for safeguarding women's rights

To educate women about the legal system and provide them with legal assistance, the ACWF established a Legal Advisory Office in July 1983. In the second half of the same year, the Women's Rights and Interests Department was established along the lines of the Legal Advisory Office. It was developed as a functional department responsible for the protection and oversight of women's rights and issues. In November 2001, in order to coordinate the communications and activities among the different departments to jointly protect and solve major issues related to the infringement of women's and children's rights and interests, the ACWF led the establishment of a National Coordination Group composed of 17 ministries and commissions. In 2005, the ACWF set up a legal aid center and created public service hotlines and anti-domestic violence hotlines across the country for the protection of women's rights. To guarantee the effective implementation of basic national policies on gender equality, the ACWF has actively aided various localities in exploring the establishment of an evaluation mechanism to reflect gender equality in laws and policies. By the end of 2018, such a mechanism was being established in 30 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities across the country, and the advisory recommendations from

many local evaluation committees had been adopted and successfully incorporated into local regulations and policies.

In conclusion, the ACWF is a mass organization that serves the masses, serving as a bridge between the Party, the government, and women. As has been shown, women's federations have long played an important role in protecting women's status and enhancing women's participation in production, economic reform and expansion, and in the construction of the New China.

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