

The Other Half of the Sky

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Over thousands of years of feudal society, China was dominated by men while women were relegated to the bottom rung of the social ladder. Women were deprived of the right to politics, education, social life and even the right to choose a husband. A pair of tightly bound small feet became the typical image of oppressed Chinese women in the past.

It was not until the end of the 19th century when the Western concept of feminism found its way into China that organizations working toward eliminating the binding feet practice and emancipating women began to appear around the country. Many women were then able to go to school and enjoy the right to education. More progressive women began to embrace the freedom of choosing husbands by themselves, instead of unconditionally accepting their families' choice and the social environment was irrevocably changed. This all launched the era of the emancipation for women's campaign in China.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, it was written into the country's Constitution, "Women in the People's Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life, political, economic, cultural and social, and family life." Since then, the fate of Chinese women, who make up half of the nation's population, has fundamentally changed.

The women's progressive cause is making great headway in China. In 2005, Chinese President Hu Jintao made a commitment that China will persist in the basic national policy of equality between males and females and make unremitting efforts to promote gender equality and harmony between men and women. The Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, which was amended in early 2005, has become the most powerful legal weapon to overcome gender discrimination in various areas.

Latest statistics from the All-China Women's Federation show: 230 women are in the position of provincial and ministerial leadership, and over 40 percent of civil servants are women. In the National People's Congress and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, female deputies and female members respectively account for 21.33 percent and 17.7 percent.

Chinese women have achieved a lot in self-development. In today's China, women make up 45.4 percent of the nation's employed population. Rural women account for over 65 percent of the agricultural workforce. Female entrepreneurs who are mainly engaged in small and medium-sized enterprises account for about 20 percent of the country's total entrepreneurs. The gap between male and female's average education is further narrowing.

However, the concept of men being superior to women is still deeply rooted in some parts of China. In rural areas, female babies sometimes are abandoned by their parents, and in poor families, it is girls who are forced to quit school. In factories, female workers' rights and interests are not fully respected and in the job market, females are often blocked by the glass ceiling when there is recruitment or promotion opportunities. The existence of all these problems implies that the emancipation of women in China still has some way to go and the country has much to do before it develops into a modern and harmonious society in the real sense. ■