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GLOBAL OPINION | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

China's Entrenched Gender Gap

By LETA HONG FINCHER MAY 20, 2013

BEIJING — Lately, a stream of rosy media accounts has been telling the world to look to China as a model of gender equality in the workplace. “China Dominates List of Female Billionaires” and “Women in China: the Sky’s the Limit” are some recent examples from the international press.

But the cascade of optimistic portraits detracts from what is really happening to women in China’s fast-growing urban work force. They are losing ground fast.

The 2010 census put the percentage of working-age women in the work force at 74. The figure stacks up well against other countries such as the United States and Australia, where about 75 percent of working-age women were employed in 2010. In Sweden, the female labor force participation for 2010 was 87.5 percent; France, 84 percent; Britain, 79 percent.

But China’s figure is high because it includes women working in the countryside, and unlike developed countries, nearly half of China’s population is still rural. The picture for *urban* women is very different.

China’s urban employment rate for working-age women fell to a new low of 60.8 percent in 2010, down from 77.4 percent 20 years earlier, according to census figures. The 2010 rate was 20.3 percentage points lower than that of men.

This troubling trend matters because the effort to move people from the countryside to the cities is a top policy priority of China’s new leaders — one that

they see as crucial to boosting economic growth.

China's urbanization rate is expected to rise to 53.37 percent this year, and Chinese state media say that 60 percent of China's population of nearly 1.4 billion will likely be urban by 2020. Yet the presumed economic benefits of urbanization cannot be realized if the talents of half the country's population — women — are squandered in the process.

The decline in urban women's labor participation looks even worse if you go further back, to the end of the 1970s, when studies show that over 90 percent of working-age women in the cities were employed.

That resulted from the Communist Party's mass mobilization of its people to bolster the nation's productivity. Mao declared his commitment to gender equality through his famous saying that "women hold up half the sky." But the state-imposed equal employment of women and men failed to transform underlying gender relations.

Behind the public celebration of gender equality in the Communist workplace, women continued to shoulder the heavy burdens of childcare, housework and cooking at home.

The decline in urban women's labor force participation started to become apparent when China fired tens of millions of workers at state-owned enterprises in the 1990s as part of a reorganization of the national economy. Women were fired disproportionately over men. Many of the women were rehired later at much lower rates than men who were fired.

Around the same time, a "Women Return to the Home" movement emerged, calling on women to quit their jobs to make way for men in a time of rising unemployment. Over the years, these attitudes have taken hold: There has been a resurgence of belief in traditional gender roles.

Most Chinese men and women still believe in the saying that "men belong in public, women belong at home" (nanzhuwai, nüzhunei). The number of men and women who think this way has increased by eight percentage points and four percentage points respectively over the past decade, according to a 2010 survey by the All-China Women's Federation and National Bureau of Statistics.

One advertising art director I interviewed in Beijing was successful in her field until she had a child at the age of 33. She thought she could afford to leave her job for a couple of years to look after her baby without hurting her career. She was wrong. Now 37 years old, she has had no luck getting rehired. "I am very worried about my future because it is so difficult for a woman of my age to find work," she says.

To make matters worse, since 2007 the central government has conducted a propaganda media campaign on "leftover" women (sheng nü), stigmatizing urban, educated women over the age of 27 who are still single. The barrage of insults has intensified pressure on urban, educated women to abandon their efforts to pursue higher education and to focus instead on getting married before they become "too old" to find a husband.

Nowadays, if a Chinese woman succeeds in going to college and has the resourcefulness to finish a master's degree as well, she is likely around 25 by the time she graduates. According to the official Xinhua News Agency, women aged 25 to 27 fall within the first category of "leftover warriors" (sheng doushi) who "still have the courage to fight to find a partner."

There are some encouraging developments. Record numbers of women in China are receiving a college education and taking the GMAT entrance test for business schools worldwide, for example. But many of these women are anxious to leave China precisely because they face so much gender discrimination at home.

If the Chinese government wants to halt the trend of declining female participation in the labor force in its cities, it must start tackling the problem of entrenched gender inequality.

End the state media campaign against "leftover" women. Stop imposing gender-based quotas that favor the admission of men over women in many university programs. Enforce laws against gender discrimination in hiring and compensation. Introduce and enforce a law against sexual harassment in the workplace. Introduce and enforce a law to punish perpetrators of domestic violence. Reverse the erosion of government subsidized childcare, which forces many mothers out of paid work. Reverse the 2011 Supreme Court amendment to

the Marriage Law, which dealt a severe blow to the property rights of married women. Appoint more women to political office.

All of these policy changes have to start at the top. The new leadership, first and foremost, has to declare publicly a firm commitment to raising the status of the nation's women.

China's economy may manage to keep growing while urban women are dropping out of the work force, but at the cost of extreme, deepening and potentially destabilizing inequality.

In the meantime, some educated women are behaving like one young Beijinger I met, who wanted to make herself a more attractive marriage candidate, less intimidating to suitors. "My most important duty is to find a good man to marry," she said. How did she fulfill that duty? By dropping out of the work force.

Leta Hong Fincher, a doctoral candidate in sociology at Tsinghua University in Beijing, is the author of a forthcoming book on "leftover" women and gender inequality in China.

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