

Gender Inequality and Economic Growth in Rural China

Rebecca Matthews

Department of Sociology, University of Iowa

and

Victor Nee

Cornell University

This article joins the debate over the effect of market-driven economic development on women's work opportunities and household gender inequalities. It assesses women's opportunities for off-farm employment, the relative contributions of female off-farm workers to household income, and the distribution of power in families whose male members have left for off-farm jobs, leaving women behind in agricultural work. We find that women are not uniformly excluded from opportunities for off-farm employment and that economic development does not uniformly increase gender inequalities within Chinese households. Although men are more likely than women to obtain off-farm employment in China, women's opportunities for off-farm work improve significantly when the coexistence of local and regional marketization creates a shortage of male workers and compels employers to hire women. The relative size of contributions to household income for male and female nonfarm workers also narrows incrementally with increased marketization. In addition, women who are left in agricultural work are more likely to become heads of household, a position which brings greater household decision-making power to female family members. © 2000 Academic Press

In developing societies the rising tide lifting millions of households out of poverty has been sustained economic growth. Households have experienced gains in income when opportunities for nonfarm employment expand and rural

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Address correspondence to Rebecca Matthews, Department of Sociology, University of Iowa, W140 Seashore Hall, Iowa City, IA 52242. E-mail: rebecca-matthews@uiowa.edu.

residents leave subsistence agriculture. This pattern has also characterized the Chinese transition from state socialism. Growth in rural industry has raised household incomes among rural Chinese (Griffin and Zhao, 1993). Yet research on women and rural development has shown that, within households, male family members disproportionately reap the benefits of opportunities for nonagricultural employment (Boserup, 1970 [1986]; Standing, 1978; Anker and Hein, 1986). These studies focus our attention on a central paradox in economic development: that the life conditions of women may deteriorate even while households benefit in the aggregate. Because of employers' preferences for male workers and because of women's child-care obligations, more men than women leave subsistence agriculture for wage employment. Subsistence agriculture soon becomes feminized. As female family members earn less and less money relative to male household members, their power and influence within the family also fade.

Does economic development uniformly exclude women from off-farm work opportunities and increase gender inequalities within households? Or are there settings in which detrimental effects on women are mitigated somewhat? We are here primarily concerned with gender inequalities in household power—defined as the degree to which a family member can influence important decisions within the family, including decisions about the use of household income. In research on household power within both industrialized and developing countries, wage income and family influence are closely linked, thus pointing to the importance of assessing women's opportunities for nonfarm work (England and Farkas, 1986; Blumberg, 1995). We first explore whether, in particular kinds of economic settings, rural Chinese women have significant opportunities for such employment and whether male and female off-farm workers make comparable contributions to household income. Yet focus on female off-farm employment alone is too narrow. It may not be the case that all (or even most) women who miss out on opportunities for off-farm employment see their household status deteriorate. Thus we also examine the distribution of power within Chinese families whose male members obtain wage employment, leaving female family members in agricultural work.

OFF-FARM EMPLOYMENT AND RURAL HOUSEHOLD MOBILITY

Following the shift to household-based farming in 1978, economic growth and rural industrialization in China proceeded at a rapid pace, especially in the southeastern maritime provinces which made the shift to greater reliance on markets earlier. Despite the income gains made through private businesses and commercial agriculture, the broadest base for rural income mobility stemmed from the rapid growth of rural industry (Knight and Song, 1993). Fiscal reforms conferred well-defined property rights over collective enterprises on local governments, strengthening thereby the incentives for political actors to encourage growth in these rural industries (Byrd and Gelb, 1990; Oi, 1992). Prior to market

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