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## Women's Labor Activism in China

Tong Xin

**C**hinese women laborers have not returned to their roles as housewives in the process of China's rapid industrialization and globalization following the transformation from a planned economy to a market economy that has been underway since the end of the 1970s. Instead, more women have entered the labor market, as is shown in two respects: first, since many women have been laid off from state-owned enterprises, more urban women laborers are employed in the informal sector, where they can find only temporary or part-time work and where there is low pay and no security for their work. This kind of labor cannot be incorporated into state statistics and therefore effectively becomes invisible. Second, rural women laborers, especially young unmarried ones, have swarmed into urban areas to become the main laborers in China's manufacturing industry. Statistics show that the number of women laborers in manufacturing positions in China reached 31.921 million in 2000, accounting for 85.7 percent of the total number of women laborers in China (Li 2004). Among them, those with registered permanent residence

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in rural areas account for 63.3 percent, meaning that the majority of women employed in the manufacturing industry are migrant laborers. These figures keep growing, especially in shoe-making, apparel-making, and electronics processing industries.

In the view of neoliberal economics, women laborers are docile, cheap, and young. According to statistics, migrant workers in China had a monthly income of 710 yuan in 2004, 45 percent of the average income for an urban full-time worker. Thanks to the government's incessant emphasis on increasing migrant workers' income, male migrant workers received an average monthly income of 1,068 yuan in 2006, but women workers received a raise to only 777 yuan, which kept their wages at 45 percent of what full-time urban employees make. And migrant women's average salary is only 72 percent of men's (Zhu 2006).

Gender inequality, which has maintained its existence during the transformation from the planned economy to the market economy in China, has provoked some women scholars' academic reflection and activism, showing their strong sense of feminism and civil rights. They have criticized gender inequality in the labor market and tried to improve women's present status through their activism.

On April 7, 1996, the Home of Migrant Women Workers was founded in Beijing by the deputy editor in chief of *China Women's News*, who was also the initiator of the magazine *Rural Women*. This was China's first organization providing services for migrant women workers. Its goals were to safeguard the legal rights and interests of migrant women workers, improve their quality of life, and enhance their skills. For example, the Home provided literacy and computer training and set up a home service workers group to help the migrant women support one another. The founding of this organization indicates that some women scholars represented by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) have become a very important part of the movement to support migrant workers. Similar organizations now exist in all provinces and municipalities of China. However, women's federations at different levels have encountered severe challenges. Given the diversity among women, how can the women's federations safeguard all women's legal rights and interests? In addition, women's federations often play the role of speaking on behalf of working-class women, but this is not what these women want. Although in international and national affairs women's federations keep improving their political capacity and have acquired strong social mobilizing capability, it appears inevitable that a relationship of control and being controlled will form between women scholars or women engaged in politics, on the one

hand, and women laborers, on the other. If women laborers are being spoken for, their initiatives are likely to be obscured and even suppressed.

The Center for Women's Law and Legal Services at Beijing University, founded in December 1995, was the first civic organization of the social commonweal that specialized in women's legal studies and services. Dedicated to safeguarding women's rights, the center tries to remove difficulties for the poor; protect their legal rights and interests concerning society, politics, and the economy; and improve their awareness of rights and laws. The center provided more than six thousand instances of law and legal services, including consultations on marriage rights, labor rights, property rights for women, and so on, from 1996 to 2006. Such organizations are able to have their voice heard in society and can exercise considerable social influence, but their voice is inevitably academic when they seek to speak for poor and working-class women.

Are there any real grassroots organizations in women's labor activism in China? Yes, there are, but not many. Since there are great political risks and few laws to protect them, these organizations tend to be covert, and there is little data available about them. I once participated in a study of the collective activism of a traditional state-owned enterprise against business mergers. One of the activist leaders was the trade union chairwoman, whose dedication and organization exemplified the Chinese socialist proverb that "women hold up half the sky." The group's success in resisting private mergers owed much to the active participation of women, who were more courageous than the men (Tong 2005). A survey of a Taiwan-funded shoe-making enterprise with primarily migrant women employees also shows that women have a strong sense of resistance (Zhu 2005). The research has shown that women workers' participation in the union election was subject to a variety of forces, that the workers made full use of the opportunity to express their own rights and interests, and that these interests reflected their experience of being oppressed, exploited, and discriminated against. Additionally, in Guangzhou and Shenzhen women have been a major force behind labor activism. However, when politically mobilized women demonstrate strong intentions and initiatives, such activism may be controlled and suppressed by the government once it expands from factories to society.

Despite the important successes of female labor activists, these victories have been few because of the lack of solid organizational resources. There are three reasons for this absence. First, traditional trade unions that date from the times of the planned economy have been increasingly weakened. They cannot represent women workers' interests because they cannot

speak for all these scattered, mobile, and temporary women laborers, not to mention safeguard their rights. Second, self-sponsored organizations, especially those working in the name of labor, are subject to the control of the state. Small-scale protests are often labeled “factors for social instability” and are therefore suppressed. This is the major reason for the weakening of women’s labor organizations. And, third, there has been little room for political mobilization in China. Women workers still lack any discourse through which to express their resistance, and society in general lacks class awareness and civil rights awareness. Therefore, women workers’ experiences of exploitation cannot be translated into a common awareness, let alone a common resistance, with other workers. Although some scholars have realized the importance of civic awareness and class mobilization, there is no political ground for solidarity between scholars and laborers. In the face of a powerful state and the discourse of a harmonious society, even scholars do not have the courage for political mobilization.

In conclusion, during China’s globalization, which was guided by the principle of neoliberalism, women laborers were incorporated into industrialization as atomized individuals. However, I believe that women workers’ twenty-plus years of marginal and exploited work experience is an important social resource. Once called on and politically mobilized, these women workers will show their great capacity for political activism.

*Department of Sociology  
Peking University*

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