

## ***“Grassroots women’s leadership in China”***

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I was in development practice for years, working as a UNIFEM gender advisor in northeast Asia for four and a half years, based in Beijing. During the last year and a half, I retreated into my study to reflect upon the process of development practice I was involved with. I’m going to present to you some of the thinking which has developed as the result of that research.

One can talk about women’s grassroots leadership in many different areas. One could talk about women exercising leadership in the areas of poverty alleviation efforts, cooperative movements, community organizing, and the preservation of farmland from further development, among others. However, I want to talk about women’s participation and perhaps an opportunity to exercise their leadership in the process of grassroots governance, especially grassroots elections in China. Or, maybe we should talk about the lack of women’s leadership. What kind of strategies do we want to propose for women to be able to exercise leadership in the area of elections? Women’s participation or women’s leadership in grassroots elections is the most important area and also the direct route for them to be in the decision-making process.

When I mention grassroots elections, I’m only looking at rural elections simply because village elections started over a decade ago, prior to the adoption of the Village Organization Act in 1998. Since then, elections have been taking place all across China in villages, and there are villages that have gone through third, fourth, and fifth rounds of elections. We can learn a lot more about women’s participation in village elections than in urban grassroots elections, which is still a recent phenomenon. The first one in Beijing took place only in 2002, so there are still a few years before we can learn about the experience of women in that respect.

I also want to clarify that China is huge but unevenly developed. Mostly, we talk about China in terms of economic development in the coastal regions versus western interior. Today I’m talking in terms of the diversified level of development in political areas. Although it’s not exactly following on the lines economists have drawn between the coastal areas and western interior, we can certainly see there are provinces and regions in China that are more open and participatory versus other provinces and regions that are less open and participatory. Therefore, I would talk in abstract terms. I would talk about a society which is less open and participatory where the government refuses people both inside and outside to inquire about issues, including the spread of AIDS, versus a society which is more open and participatory where the government would like to consult the public on policy issues through holding hearings. This is how I see the difference between a society that is more open and participatory versus a society that is less open and participatory.

Another line I’d like to draw is that women in China are still under the influence of the traditional culture. Women are taught from a young age that they should not speak in public and that they should not mingle with men. Therefore, they are uninformed and inexperienced. Once women are married, they move into the husband’s family, into the husband’s village, so they are uprooted from their native village. In that process, they lose their entitlement to all benefits including land, although that is changing. Once women move into the husband’s village, they are only known as so and so’s wife. Therefore, wives do not even have names. What would women experience in the village election in a less open and participatory society? Society is less open and participatory because there has been a strong influence of lineages. Lineages are defined by the surname of the male descendants, so women are very suppressed within this system. The lineage system is correlated to the official formal structure of the head of the household system. Under that system, the husband as the head of the household has the right to sign contracts and is also given the right by the family as well as fellow villagers to vote on behalf of the family.

In a less open and participatory society, women are suppressed. The township government, which is the lowest level of government, exercises influence on villages and also implements village election processes and establishes local rules, in adaptation to the national law, i.e., the Village Organization Act. Quite often, the township government exercises its influence on villagers to elect their candidate, so there is a relationship between the village government and the township government in the areas of tax collection and land-use decisions, etc. Under these circumstances, women are pushed to the side, because you have a township government exercising influence on the electoral process. With these two influences, i.e., the lineage system and the township government, women are often not viewed as independent voters.

When I was with UNIFEM based in Beijing, we created a project in a province to work with village women on the development of leadership, especially in the process of village elections. I traveled to villages during elections, and in my interviews of villagers I often heard villagers say that the husband's vote represents the wife's vote as well as the vote of the whole family. Often, women are not allowed to leave the household at the time of voting. There is the practice of the floating ballot box, which is used because some villagers are disabled or old are restricted to their households. The ballot box would be carried to their house to collect their votes. In the less open and participatory society, wives are advised to stay at home and cast their vote into the floating ballot box. In this situation, the wife's vote can be influenced by her husband to elect his candidate.

Moreover, women candidates are discriminated against, not only by male villagers but by women themselves. Women often do not vote for women candidates, simply because they don't believe they can be leaders. In addition, the electoral system can be biased. For instance, the time of voting is at lunchtime, when women have to go home to prepare lunch for the kids. Therefore, women candidates lose the votes of their constituency. When a society is more open and participatory, with elections at the village level and also at the township and county levels, women and men can nominate themselves or be nominated by others, especially in elections of the people's delegates to the county people's congresses and even elections of local township governors. It's a common practice to invite candidates to take a written test first, and then they go to villages to give speeches. In the end, the township government invites village leaders to come together. This is the second process of publicly selecting candidates. Those who come out of the two processes, the written test and also the public selection, again visit each village to meet with the villagers, and then there is a direct election for the candidates.

I witnessed examples where women, especially educated women and women who had acquired knowledge and skills in farming or the processing of agricultural and animal products, became interested in the operation of the government simply because the government policies at the township and county levels could create a more favorable environment for them to access production resources, such as credit or land or additional markets. They wanted to be part of the decision-making process and to take advantage of such election processes. In response to the question of how women travel from a less open and participatory society to a more open and participatory society or how women who are already in an environment that is open and participatory to move even more forward, I developed a project on the issue of transformational leadership. I learned two lessons. One is for women leaders to extend their understanding and service to grassroots women through stronger grassroots organizing. Most importantly, they should develop skills to reform the existing systems in order to create mechanisms for grassroots women to express themselves, such as public hearings where grassroots women can meet with local decision makers.