

# **Women's Roles in the Construction of New Fishing Villages in China, as Shown from Surveys in Zhejiang Province**

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## **Abstract**

With the continuous economic development of China, including in fisheries, the position of women in fisheries has undergone great changes. Under the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, which aims to construct a new socialism in the countryside, the importance of women in the construction of New Fishing Villages is becoming gradually evident. This essay analyses women's roles in the construction of New Fishing Villages, based on research in some typical fishery villages in Zhejiang province. The results show that women have gradually become the main force of production and development, the safeguard of community and family well-being and the advocates of civilisation in the countryside. They have dominated clean and tidy village movements and are viewed as being at the forefront of democratic management in the fishing villages. Some factors, however, hinder women's opportunities and contributions. These factors are: many grassroots women's organisations need improving, many women are not aware of available jobs or how to start their own businesses, or are not interested in starting their own business. Strategies have been suggested to further enhance women's roles in the construction of New Fishing Villages under the countryside reform programme.

## **Introduction**

In 2005, in approving its 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, the Fifth Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee Meeting of the Communist Party of China spelled out the conditions for constructing a new comprehensive socialism in the countryside, including fishing towns and villages. These were: improving production, improving people's wellbeing, civilising local customs, making villages neat and tidy, and creating democratic administration. China faces a major historic task to promote and create such a new paradigm in fishing towns, based on the long-term policy guidance of the Central Committee.

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As China's social conditions and the economic power of its workforce have improved, the status of women also has improved gradually. Currently, women account for 60% of the total rural workforce, making rural women the mainstay of agricultural production. Women are also considered the builders and creators of spiritual life, civilisation and of harmonious families and society. As rural women play important roles in both economic production and family life, the status of women during the construction of the new socialist countryside should not be ignored.

In the fishing villages and towns of China, the status of women also is changing. By organising and mobilising women to actively participate in the construction of the new countryside, women can become construction practitioners, facilitators and beneficiaries. The focus on rural change provides opportunities for large numbers of rural women to use their skills and talents. Women's benefits from the social change must be realised, maintained and developed during the process of constructing the New Fishing Villages.

Along with the fast changes in industrial and labour structures in fishing villages, women are playing greater roles, changing their functions and positions, especially in the formation of material and spiritual civilisation. From the perspective of social development, can women's "sky" role, i.e., that of "holding up half the sky", be maximised or not? In the transformation, what problems will they face and what obstacles will they meet?

### ***Evolution in the status of women in fishing village development***

Soon after China was liberated in 1949, as in most rural societies, the social conditions in fishing villages were still like those of feudal societies. Women faced serious traditional forms of bondage to males. Women undertook housework, and provided auxiliary labour in fisheries production, such as making, cleaning and mending nets and peeling shrimps. In addition, as men stayed away fishing at sea for long periods, most of the agricultural labour also fell on the shoulders of the fishing village women. As many fishing villagers lacked sufficient arable land for their crops, their agriculture income was low and so women's labour showed only small apparent returns. Moreover, in the society of that time, family economies were managed overall by older parents to whom personal incomes were handed over. The division of housework between women and men was clearly demarcated. Women did the cooking, laundry and stayed home with the children; men never participated in household work but were responsible only for fishing and fisheries work, such as preparing for and following up on fish catching. In the family income, because women's labour was only in unpaid housework, women had no obvious income and therefore, in the fishing villages, their positions were very weak.

As the new China developed, fisheries productivity also improved. Traditional marine fisheries production developed from primarily nearshore operations to offshore production; production tools developed from wooden junks to mechanised vessels; and inland fisheries productivity was also improved. Despite the development of production methods, fishermen's outputs still failed to meet the growing demand for aquatic products, raising questions of how to further increase production. In an historic move in 1958, the State removed the prohibition on women going to sea in order to overcome the constraints of restricting women and men to only their traditional production roles.

In addition, as a large number of women joined the fisheries workforce for the first time, this freed the special skills of men and increased their productivity and further promoted other industries to develop in fishing villages. The new industries provided opportunities for additional paid work for women. As women's functions in production changed, the sexual division of labour within families changed and women's economic status also changed. Women also gradually became more educated. Overall, the status of women improved.

Since the late 1970s and following China's reform and the opening of the economy, the stimulation created by the market economy drove further fisheries development with fisheries productivity given an unprecedented release. Fish processing, transportation, retail, catering and other industries often led to fisheries becoming dominated by other industries in fishing villages. In addition, since the end of 1990s, fisheries resources have been protected by fishing industry restructuring that caused many fishermen to transfer to other industries. With additional economic development, recreational fisheries developed rapidly. Diversification of the Chinese economy has greatly increased the incomes of the average household and people now want not only to meet basic sustenance needs but also purchase other consumer goods. Women are expected to play wider roles in the new economy.

In recent years, with reduced fisheries resources, men's fishing incomes have become unstable and women's incomes have increased and improved the stability of family incomes.

### ***The function of women in the construction of New Fishing Villages***

With the deepening of the reform of villages and the expansion of industrial development around fishing villages, women have become more pivotal in developing fishing village economies, and could play a vital role in the new social and economic transformation.

In order to better understand the changing roles of women under the rural transformation, a survey questionnaire was administered in 2009 in four locations in Zhejiang Province. Investigators recorded the location and conditions of each fishing village, including the basic layout of all industries, fishing ancillary industries, fish cultivation activities, sea ranching,

fisheries supplies traded, fish processing raw materials, catering and retail, hotel, fishery management and public service details for fisheries production activities.

Women's participation. Women's opportunities for participating in fish production activities have greatly improved, according to Zhejiang provincial statistics. They actively participate in fisheries production, although as yet few women go to sea to fish. Most women, especially in inland fishing villages, are active in aquaculture. In coastal areas, marine aquaculture now exceeds marine fisheries production and women's participation in aquaculture is, on average, 60% of total participation. In some villages, women constitute up to 90% of participants. Aquaculture is the most important fish production industry in inland fishing villages and in these, women make up 50% of participants. Women have advantages in agriculture, aquatic products processing and trading, recreational fishing, and fishing materials trade. In addition, in fisheries-related fields, women also occupy important roles, such as in transportation, catering, clothing, etc.

More women than men are engaged in industry in fishing villages, as illustrated by the case of Chinese Wolfberry Island mussel production in Sheng Si town, Zhou Shan Island in Zhejiang Province. In the fishing village of Sheng Si town, the survey found that, apart from production from the nearby sea, the main local aquatic production was mussel breeding. Nearly 65% of Island women took part in mussel production, 25% of women were engaged in fisheries support such as selling wholesale materials, trade in aquatic products, hotel accommodation and catering. The survey also showed that village women provided 70% of the local productive labour and, even during the annual fishing moratorium, women made up as much as 45% of the work force.

On Lycium island, Zhejiang Province, in the three fishing villages of "Big King", Longquan and "Temple Dry", a total of 300 questionnaires were issued to equal numbers of women and men. Among the women, the age range was 19-52, with an average age of 32 years; men's ages were from 18-58, with average age of 38 years.

The data from Zhou Shan Dinghai district found that women's fishing labour had risen gradually as a proportion of total labour. In 2009, in NongYu village of Dinghai, the female labour force grew 4.1% over that of the previous year and the proportion of women increased from 43.8% in 2008 to 44.9% in 2009.

Women's income has increased. In recent years, China's inshore fishing pressure has increased and off-shore resources have dropped sharply. Some fisheries resources show large year-to-year fluctuations. Inland aquaculture space is shrinking, and water quality is deteriorating. These production stresses result in apparent lower and less stable male labour productivity. At the same

time, the fishing villages are fundamentally changing. Since the 11<sup>th</sup> five-year plan period (2006-2011), China's coastal fishing villages have been applying the "professional" policy which supports diversified industries, aquatic products processing and trade, recreational fishing, environmentally friendly aquaculture, and public service secondary and tertiary industries. Inland fishing villages have been transforming traditional cultivation modes to fish farms for recreational fisheries. The historic transformation has offered opportunities for women in all these industries and their incomes have increased more smoothly than has been the case for male workers. This result, for example, was shown from the results of a questionnaire administered to 80 women in 2009 in four fishing villages in Ru Dong town of Nantong, Zhejiang Province.

Ants Island in Zhou Shan, Zhejiang Province is another example. In recent years fisheries tourism has relied mainly on women's labour. The island opened 20 new fishermen's leisure inns, almost all managed and staffed by women. The island's seafood processing for tourist consumption is also predominantly based on women's labour and management. The share of family income coming from women's labour has increased gradually from about 10% to about 35% in the last five years. Therefore, the economic status of women has strengthened, and the women have gradually become the underwriters of a better life in the New Fishing Villages.

*Women become the New Fishing Village promoters.* Fishing villages are distinguished from other types of rural villages in that men are more involved in fish production activities offshore, often for months at a time, or on lakes and rivers. Thus, the burden of upholding local customs, culture and the construction of civilisation has fallen on the women.

This social building work could include moulding civilised families, discarding feudal and foolish customs, boycotting gambling activities, promoting family virtues and social morality, and advocating a healthy and civilised scientific way of life. From our interviews, the women reported a strong sense of responsibility; they participated strongly in social and public affairs, public welfare undertakings, maintained social stability, helped disadvantaged groups and undertook social services. They actively participated in local civic morality education and juvenile moral education activities, made optimal use of education and demonstrated care for teenagers' growth. Their tasks also included consciously resisting social evils, actively building unity and friendships and ensuring harmonious progress in carrying forward the spirit of the era to build a good social environment, and maintain social stability.

For example, Dai Shan town, Zhejiang Province has 7 townships, 39 communities and 86 villages. It established more than 70 teams of amateur art and health groups, more than 95% of whose members were women. They were very active and carried "culture into the community". In China in recent years, village cultural construction has actively mobilised and organised broad women's participation in community cultural and social activities. Annually, community-based

amateur art teams participate in county-wide mass theatrical performances. Literacy teams participate in provincial and municipal level stylistic events and guide women in mutual exchanges. Women gain skills, enjoy the events and make common progress towards a better spiritual and cultural life.

*Women as the New Village environmental and neatness pioneers.* Throughout China, women's groups have taken up the cause of creating "clean and green" local living spaces. For example, in the August 2009 survey conducted in Xiang Shan town, Ningbo, Zhejiang, the county Party committee and the Women's Federation in Shi Pu town hosted a symposium in East Village on "Constructing neat and beautiful courtyards inside homes"; more than 20 East village women's representatives attended. The FuDaiHui East village county Party committee and the Women's Federation joined with the county Party committee and the Women's Federation of Shi Pu town women's federation to establish several teams, led by the team for "neat courtyard inside and outside, to build a better homeland". Other teams included: "propaganda education team", "cleaning protection green team", "supervision and evaluation team", and three teams of female volunteers. The women's teams worked out of East village to create a "beautiful courtyard" and "clean courtyard" approach for Zhejiang's fishing industry.

*Women managers become the New Village "management democracy" practitioners.* "Democratic administration" is an important New Village construction standard. Women are participating in greater numbers in New Village democracy management and their management is seen as more democratic than that of the men.

In recent years, women's efforts have been appreciated as they are noted for earnestly studying the new policies of the State and local laws and regulations, enhancing their political consciousness, and enthusiastically taking a larger part in grass-roots democracy. In their host villages, the women's active participation in building socialist democracy, raising democratic consciousness and participating more actively in politics is important to constructing a harmonious society and the New Fishing Villages,

In a survey of 98 women in the village of ZhiWei, one of the 86 administrative villages of Dai Shan town, Zhou Shan, Zhejiang, women accounted for 24% of the officials and in another village with 103 officials, women accounted for 28%, including eight Seat directors and three village party secretaries. In the survey, women were asked if they would stand for election as cadres when the chance arose. Most answered that they were willing. When asked what they considered the public affairs issues of greatest concern in the village, more than ten selected medical and health as their first concern, followed by villagers' electoral problems, then collective welfare. In fishing village rural elections, women's turnout reached 95%.

A batch of able women leaders has begun to emerge to represent and safeguard women's interests and serve as the women's "spokesperson".

***Women in New Villages play important roles in finding the problems and solutions***

Although the New Village construction should benefit women and increase their rate of participation, during our surveys we still noted that women's achievements were lower than expected and that women's development still faced many problems. Therefore, further efforts are needed to fully utilise woman's contributions in the service of New Village construction. Three areas were identified, namely: strengthening women's grassroots organisations, improving women's career and economic development opportunities, promoting the role and opportunities for women in New Village construction.

*Strengthening women's grassroots organisations.* "Women hold up half of the sky" and women's grassroots-level organisations are the cornerstone of the New Village construction work because, if given full effect, they can help guide fishing village women towards greater workforce participation, greater income and participation in grass-roots democratic management. The New Village construction process still has some women's organisational issues, such as inadequate women's organisations, lack of organisations in some areas, and the limited ability of women in New Village construction approaches. To overcome these problems, the Party organisation can assist by helping improve grassroots women's organisations and their understanding of issues and solutions, thus expanding the outreach to women. To adapt to the needs for constructing New Socialist Fishing Villages, grassroots women's organisations need to be promoted as a basic building block of all the New Village standards.

*Improve women's employment and career development support.* Fishing village industrial structures are changing constantly, potentially giving more employment opportunities to women and strengthening their contributions to New Village construction. But the study found that many women in fishing villages still are not employed and have not mastered the skills required for jobs, do not have sufficient training and are not sufficiently aware of employment opportunities.

Active measures are needed to maximise women's entrepreneurship. One measure could be to construct a fishing village women's employment information network platform. This could provide in-depth information on labour availability such as unemployed personnel, laid-off workers and family members seeking work, employment information, such as unemployed women's ages, educational levels, special skills, and details of jobs available, employment, social security and other service assistance available.

A second measure could be to improve women's job skills through relevant and effective training aimed at different ages and cultures, technical skills and at training for different periods. A third measure could be to improve women's entrepreneurship. As the State encourages the development of the private sector, it assists start-ups through helping match technologies, career development, seminars, etc.

Outstanding entrepreneurial women could be publicised to promote opportunities to New Fishing Villages to create more self-employed women.

*Promote roles and opportunities for women in New Village construction.* The atmosphere of New Village construction can influence women. Propaganda can be used to create a good social environment. The women's federation could publicise the roles of women in construction of New Fishing Villages, find out women's concerns in the reforms, support women to participate in the construction of New Fishing Villages, and enhance public perceptions of New Village construction. Grassroots women's organisations can be strengthened to assist the construction. Fishing village grassroots women's organisations are directly connected to the fishing village women and their public works. They are the key to mobilising fishing village women to participate in the construction of New Fishing Villages.

## **Conclusion**

China is undergoing an historic rural transformation in which the construction of New Fishing Villages is a challenging long-term historical task. Given women's increasing dominance of the rural labour force, their greater social and economic roles, skills and education levels, along with related organisations, fishing village women have the opportunity to lead the construction. Guided by the scientific development concept, they can change the path of development, be innovative and actively develop the working mechanisms for urban and rural harmonious development inherent in building New Socialist Fishing Villages.