

## **Inspiring Women's Rights Leader Wu Qing**

Elaine Zuckerman, Gender Action President, January 6, 2006

Gender Action Board Member Wu Qing's presentations empowering young, poor, vulnerable Chinese migrant women at the rural Center she founded for them can inspire all women's rights activists. That is why I am sharing my impressions from visiting the Center.

During my last visit to Beijing in November 2005, I accompanied Wu Qing to the "Changping Practical Skills Training Center for Rural Women" she co-founded in 1998 with Xie Lihua of Rural Women Knowing All, to empower rural women and young, poor, vulnerable Chinese migrant women. These young migrants arrive at the Center from rural areas around the country. Many of them are junior high drop-outs.

The Center is located in rural Changping County, Beijing Municipality, about a one hour drive from Beijing. The Center teaches livelihood skills to help achieve economic independence including literacy, computer skills, legal training, etc. It is located on a campus containing small plots with fields of crops grown by students and teachers, a small suite of Center offices, and several buildings containing living quarters and classrooms. About 500 students enrolled in 2005 for one, two or three-month training periods before proceeding to cities to seek work. Since establishing the Center, Wu Qing's ceaseless domestic and international fundraising and hard work has grown the nonprofit Center from scratch to a considerably-sized campus. After Luo Zhaohong, the principal, an experienced educator from Jiangxi, gave me a tour around the campus, I joined Wu Qing in a large classroom. Wu Qing leads two-hour empowerment skills session to each new group of students.

During our drive from Beijing to the Center, Wu Qing had suggested that I spend a mere five minutes in the classroom, followed by exploring the campus leisurely. As soon as Wu Qing began presenting, I felt too spellbound to leave the classroom.

The classroom held about one hundred 16-20 year-old female students. All were rural migrants transitioning to unknown urban settings. They would become domestics in households, waitresses in restaurants and hotels, cleaners in hotels, workers in factories etc.

Wu Qing's motivation class cannot help but motivate. Wu Qing teaches platonically, continuously asking the students questions that they answer. Wu Qing adds answers to theirs.

Her focus is on women's rights. Wu Qing weaves in and out of topics such as the history and status of gender inequality, citizen's constitutional rights, and tips on how to behave in urban jobs. I have taken the liberty to organize these topics below.

Wu Qing emphasizes that every citizen has equal rights, regardless of sex. She displays a copy of the Constitution throughout her talk, explaining that this highest national law guarantees the equal rights of every citizen to be treated justly without gender-based

discrimination and to vote – secretly on a paper ballot. From time to time she reads relevant passages of the Constitution stating that every citizen has equal rights. She underlines that the reality is different.

Wu Qing explains that biological and millennia-old gender differences are the roots of inequalities between men and women. Biologically, men are bigger and stronger than women. More women than men die in natural calamities because men are stronger and men's lives are valued more highly than are women's. Just look at the tsunami for a recent example. As for gender roles, from infancy, men and women are trained to have different aspirations and feelings. Men are taught to want boy-children. Worldwide 70 percent of men say they prefer having boys to girls. China's skewed population is 48.5 percent female compared to the worldwide average of 51 percent. This Chinese sex disparity has generated a series of social problems including abduction, trafficking and raping of women and increasing HIV/AIDS. At birth, boys are given names connoting strength and militarism while girls' names connote softness and prettiness. From infancy, parents give Chinese boys, especially in rural areas, more and better food than they give their girl children. State and private institutions provide more toilets for men than for women. Politics is mainly a male domain. China's President and Premier are men. Most elected representatives are men. Prevailing political views are thus male. Men make the most important household decisions such as deciding which kids go to school. Males receive more education than do girls. In the early 1990s boys completed 6.7 years of school; girls only 4.8 years. The disparity seems to persist although solid data are hard to find. Girls are told they are not good enough and that they must serve males. These are serious, unfair gender differences.

Wu Qing emphasizes that the Changping Training Center teaches girls that they are good enough.

To prepare the students for their new jobs, Wu Qing provides a series of tips:

- Maintain a good attitude in all your work.
- Work hard without slacking.
- Be proactive to get things done.
- Persist in the face of difficulties.
- Concentrate fully on whatever you do.
- Develop objectives and ideals for your life.
- Help victims in distress. Citizens should care for each other.
- Study the Constitution that presents your rights.
- Vote. It is every citizen's right and duty to vote, on paper, secretly.
- Use your voice to speak up and say what is right and what is wrong and to state your likes and dislikes.
- Be truthful and admit errors.
- Be a global citizen.
- Don't wear make-up since your natural face is attractive.
- Speak putonghua (the national dialect that every Chinese pupil learns in school rather than rural, local dialects that are unlikely to be understood in the cities).
- Maintain good posture to look and feel empowered.
- Don't spit. (Spitting is very common in China, especially in rural areas).

- Cover your mouth when you cough to prevent spreading germs.
- Use toilets. (Toilets are rare in rural China.)

Wu Qing describes how she was very lucky to obtain a good education. Her mother, China's famous revered author, Bing Xin, taught Wu Qing to always be socially responsible.

Wu Qing shares with the students that she grew up during the anti-Japanese war opposing Japan's occupation and atrocities in China, and the Cultural Revolution when her parents and she herself were persecuted because of their intellectual status. These movements forged her spirit to struggle and stand up for her own and others' rights and to speak her mind.

Wu Qing speaks her mind to the students, telling them that there are always differences between the government and the people. She explains that the government makes mistakes such as killing people during the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. She says that the police should always serve the people. She notes that the government's current extravagant spending on the 2008 Olympics is wasteful when China has many extremely poor peasants. Wu Qing also criticizes official corruption that harms peoples' lives. She points out that it is a crime that drinking and irrigation water in some places is full of chemicals.

Wu Qing mentions that she is a people's representative to both the Haidian District and Beijing Municipal People's congresses. She works tirelessly on behalf of fulfilling women's equal rights and all constituents' full rights. She was the first people's representative to invite constituents to a weekly hearing where she listens and responds to requests and complaints, trying to make China's governance more responsive. She has earned a reputation for getting things done, the basis for her reelection six times at the District level and four times at the Beijing Municipal level.

The Changping Training Center won an award for innovation and excellence from the Beijing Education Bureau in 2005. Wu Qing has won international awards for her many initiatives on behalf women's rights and human rights including founding the Changping Training Center, the Club for the Female Migrants that helps rural migrant women, the Women's Studies Forum in 1985 to identify and address gender gaps, and a hotline to help women with family planning, childcare, sexual harassment, divorce, domestic violence, and other issues. She won the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service, nicknamed the Asian Nobel prize in 2001, and she was chosen as one of the World's Outstanding Social Entrepreneurs by the Schwab Foundation in 2003. Does Wu Qing ever deserve these awards! She gave away her Magsaysay award funds to poor rural women who lack food, clothes, and adequate housing. (If the Schwab award were monetary she no doubt would have distributed its proceeds to the poor too.)