



**Why Gender and Sexuality Continue to Matter in China's Relationships with
the Global South**

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As the world's second largest economy, China is playing an increasingly robust role on many global issues, from economics and trade, peace and security, climate change, and social development. In this past year alone China hosted the BRICS summit, and the Belt and Road Forum. President Xi Jinping's World Social Forum speech last year made clear that China is demonstrating leadership in the global south. At the 2015 UN General Assembly meeting, President Xi pledge US\$ 2 billion to establish a fund for south-south cooperation to assist developing countries. China has also set up a South-South Fund under its Ministry of Commerce to support development aid projects in the global south and is encouraging its NGOs to "go out" alongside development aid and investment.

With China's rise as a major global player, there has also arisen increased discussion about the importance of focusing on the gender and sexuality impacts of China's infrastructure development, trade and multilateral investments with countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This past fall, the Ford Foundation supported a second workshop on this subject, held in Beijing with the Institute for Sexuality and Gender, Renmin University and the Center for Emerging Worlds, University of California, Santa Cruz. The workshop brought together experts from China, Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia and the U.S., who work on gender and sexuality, as well as on security, migration, environmental, economic, and social issues. The workshop created a dialogue between those in China who work on the international dimensions of economic and social issues and those who have a great deal of knowledge about gender and sexual politics, either in their own country or transnationally.

WHY GENDER AND SEXUALITY MATTER

Food insecurity has reached crisis levels around the world. The vast inequalities in wealth distribution, climate change, and access to land all contribute to exacerbating this problem. Land in Africa, for example, is being taken over by foreign companies to grow not only food but also biofuel production, which is seen as good for the environment. But biofuel production often means taking away marginal lands that women used to have access to. And women are the ones mainly responsible for feeding families. China's presence in African countries has grown considerably over the past two decades, as it searches for access to natural resources. The way China addresses climate change and the way it engages in using land in other continents will have a huge impact on food insecurity and thus on women's abilities to make sure their families survive.

Another example of why gender and sexuality matter pertains to mining. Evidence increasingly demonstrates that in general women are more vulnerable to the risks of extractive industries, with little access to the benefits. Women are actually at the center of much mining activity, even if they do not go down into the mining pits. They are crucial to the life that sustains the mining, including commercial activity in the mines. They also are exposed to the same dangers as men from the mining, like toxicity and environmental degradation. We need policies addressing women's employment in mining and the effects on their families and their health. With mining in their areas, women's role has shifted from that of cultivators to landless, migrant and casual labour as women and their communities are displaced by mining activities. China has a large presence in mining activities in African, Latin American and Southeast Asian countries. We must press China to explicitly address the effect of their activities on gender inequalities.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF CHINA'S FOREIGN AID AND INVESTMENT

Since the 1949 socialist revolution, the Chinese government has made gender equality a basic state policy. China has made impressive progress in promoting gender equality in terms of education, labour participation and health status, including marked success in alleviating maternal and child mortality and health. Yet scholars and activists have also pointed out the many contradictions and unfinished revolution for women in China. Last year, the Chinese government arrested five feminists rather than allow them to protest pervasive sexual harassment. China does not allow the depiction of homosexuality in any mainstream media culture. Yet China funds and supports HIV/AIDS education through the Ministry of Health.

China is signatory of the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action at the 1995 UN Beijing conference. In a meeting China co-hosted with UN Women to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Beijing conference, President Xi pledged US\$10 million to UN Women for their work on peace and development. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals, (SDG) which China has signed onto, mean that reproductive health and rights should include a safe and satisfying sexual life. Freedom to express sexual and gender identity lie at the heart of sexual and reproductive health. It is only when people have access to quality services, and are empowered to realize their sexual and reproductive rights that societies prosper. In its growing role as a global leader, will China allow UN Women and the implementation of SDG to include issues of sexuality?

The funding China has pledged will support women and girls in other developing countries by providing health care, vocational training, financing for education and other assistance. For example, China Women's University has established a training and research centre for women from developing countries. At the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), hosted in Johannesburg in December 2015, China pledged \$60 billion to African states in loans, export credits, and grants including among this 200 happy-life poverty alleviation projects for women and children, and 200 cooperation projects which among other things share expertise on maternal and child health care. However, this kind of aid targeted specifically at women or specifically on gender issues is a tiny proportion of the whole.

Recently, China voted against establishing the UN Human Rights Council post of independent monitor of LGBT rights, and supported the effort by Russia, Middle East and African nations to get the UN General Assembly to postpone the establishment of this post. Yet, it is important to note that in both cases, Chinese civil society played a progressive role. In 2014 for the first time a mainland LGBT organization submitted a shadow report to the CEDAW committee which prompted the question. Participants in an LGBT gathering in Beijing were urged by the organizers to sign an online petition supporting the post of UN independent monitor for LGBT rights. As civil society groups gain leverage, they might well tip China's international stances on sexuality.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN CHINA'S SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

China is now the largest South-South collaboration provider. Some of the resources are explicitly targeted at women.

One way that gender and sexuality feature in international relations is to signal that the country is civilized enlightened and respects international norms such as gender equality. You can see this happening with China for example at the Beijing +20 Summit, where China took a public and leading role affirming commitments to gender equality.

Yao Graham and Hibist Wendemu Kassa¹ have argued that the shifts between North and South actually decentre the world in a new way that creates fresh opportunities. They describe China as a hub with spokes that link African and other countries as suppliers that can be offered preferential treatment. The West criticizes China as having a low standard for the environment and for how to treat workers. There is evidence on both sides that China is no better nor worse than the West. But China should still take the opportunity to be better!

There is much discussion and dispute these days about the concept of **Beijing Consensus**. This concept indicates a new hegemony. It is clear there is a chance here to do something different in pressing for progressive policies on gender and sexuality. It is important for civil society in China and internationally to advocate for a different approach to the global south.

One arena for intervention is in the realm of cultural production, where the depiction of China's role in the global south is increasing. Recently, China produced a series of films called *Wolf Warrior*. Participants in our workshops on gender and sexuality in China's presence in the global south have recently begun a cultural commentary series; the first is on *Wolf Warrior II* (in Chinese at : <http://routerjcs.nctu.edu.tw/router>; coming soon in English at u.osu.edu/mclc/). Our next commentary series will be on films from Latin America that address China in Latin America.

Another concrete action to press for more attention to gender and sexuality is to attend the civil society planning sessions in May in Johannesburg in preparation for the next BRICS meeting there in September. Gender and development have dropped out of the BRICS discussions. The larger the collective presence in May, the more possible impact on BRICS future direction.

To join our network, please contact Lisa Rofel: LROFEL@ucsc.edu

¹ Yao Graham and Hibist Wendemu Kassa, "New Poles of Accumulation and Realignment of Power in the Twenty-first Century." *The Remaking of Social Contracts: Global Feminists in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Gita Sen and Marina Durano (London: Zed Books, 2014).