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A Gender Perspective upon the Social Security of the 'Floating Population' of China

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Foreword

This paper, “A Study on the Floating Population’s Social Security from Gender Perspective”, was presented by Dr. Yang Hui to the Fourth Sino-Nordic Gender and Women’s Studies Conference held at FREIA, Aalborg University, October 25-27, 2011. The conference was titled: *Travelling Theories within the Context of Globalisation, Transnational Feminism and Knowledge Production*, and it was hosted by the Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University and the Confucius Institute, Aalborg Denmark.

Yang Hui is a doctor in Gerontology and a research assistant at the Women's Studies Institute of China under the All-China Women's Federation. Her research interests are in the areas of population studies, aging, social security and gender related issues, and she has published widely in China on these topics.

There were six different workshops during the conference. This paper was one of the six presentations presented and discussed under the second workshop titled, “Women’s empowerment in urban and rural areas”. Among the six papers, two deal with social security and welfare issues pertaining to China’s “floating population”, two dwell on love marriage and spouse-choosing criteria, one studies the remaking of Middle Class Families in China, one on patriarchy in India and one on women’s voice in the Arab Spring.

FREIA, the Feminist and Gender Research Centre in Aalborg, is delighted to present Dr. Yang Hui’s research to the scholarly community in Denmark through this paper series. We hope that the paper will be of great interest to a wide range of research fields, such as China studies, gender studies and social welfare studies, and that it will serve as a source of inspiration for further scholarly discussion and dialogue in or cross these fields.

On behalf of FREIA

Qi Wang

Workshop leader

Assistant Professor, Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University

*This foreword was written during the time I worked at FREIA (April 2012-August 2012). I moved to University of Southern Denmark in August 2012 and I am now Associate Professor at the Department of Design and Communication, SDU. Email: qi.wang@sitkom.sdu.dk

A Gender Perspective upon the Social Security of the 'Floating Population' of China

Yang Hui

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Leaving aside differences between welfare states, basically there are two kinds of insurance in Europe: public (social) insurance and private insurance. Social insurance is publicly financed by means of taxes and also the dominant form of insurance in the Nordic countries, while private insurance is privately financed and here plays only a supplementary role on the insurance market. Taking health insurance as an example: Nordic citizens are basically covered by the public health insurance program which entitles them to medical treatment and other forms of health-care services. On top of that, they can subscribe to private health insurance which will allow them to greater choices and shorter waiting lists than the public health insurance sometimes can provide.

The Chinese social security system is mainly based on public insurance. People seldom join private insurances. Social insurance in China embraces the following five categories: 1. Endowment insurance; 2. Medical insurance; 3. Unemployment insurance; 4. Maternity insurance; 5. Occupational injury insurance. The first three insurances (pension, medical insurance and unemployment insurance) are financed by both employers and employees, whereas employers are the sole contributor to the remaining two insurances (maternity insurance and occupational injury insurance). Since social security is tightly attached to both *Hukou* (residence registration) and regular workplaces, the insurance coverage rate among urban citizens has been and still is higher than that among the rural population.

Rural-to-urban migrant workers in China are termed as the "floating population", and many of the social security related problems they are facing derive right from this "floating" status. Since they have a residence registration at their home village but work in cities, they could not benefit from the insurance that is attached to their rural residence registration (if they had one). Moreover, migrant workers often change job and place of residence many times during the period of migration. In case they joined a public insurance while working in one city, it is difficult to take the insurance with them when they

change the job and move to another city. It is also difficult to obtain a new public insurance when they have just moved to a new city and a new workplace. For example for maternity insurance and work-related injury insurance, they should be financed by employers alone. But most of the enterprises which hire migrant workers are privately owned, and it is widespread that employers "neglect" their obligation to provide these insurances for the workers. To certain extent, migrant workers themselves are also much lesser motivated than urban citizens to join the insurances to which they co-finance. Many do not consider it worthy spending their hard-earned money on insurance which they may or may not benefit from. Thus, although the government over the years has called to improve social security for migrant workers, the coverage rate among the "floating population" is still low.

I. Background

Social security is not only a right which shall be enjoyed by each and every social member, but also an important component in the building of a harmonious society. Generally speaking, social security is known as the stabilizer of economic development and the safety net of society^{[i][ii]}. The so called 'floating population' of China consists of rural migrant workers. They are generally referred to as a floating population because their official household registration is in their home village yet they work in the city, constantly travelling back and forth. In cities they are employed in strenuous and dangerous work which urban residents are reluctant to do. Although the floating population in China has now reached 225 million, the ratio of them joining basic endowment insurance, medical insurance, unemployment insurance and work-related injury insurance is respectively 9.5%, 18.9%, 6.9% and 21.9%,^[iii] which is very low and has become a bottleneck for the construction of a harmonious society^[iv]. In addition, along with the increase of female migrant workers in China, the gender composition of the migrant workers exhibits a balancing feature. In 2005, the number of female migrant workers has reached 73.25 million, which is about 49.71% of the total floating population^[v]. In order to build up and improve the social security system, it is vital to study social security issues related to migrant women and to ensure that they enjoy equal social security rights with men and with urban citizens.

Previous studies of social security in China often looked at migrant workers in general and hence ignored gender-based differentiation in social security and social security participation among them. Starting from the perspective of gender, this paper examines both the state of social security of the 'floating population' in general and the differences between the female and the male segment of the 'floating population' in particular. In the context of this paper migrant workers are equated with members of the 'floating population'.

II. Literature review

With the increasing scale of the migrant workers across the country and the steady improvement of China's social security system, problems related to social security of migrant workers have attracted widespread attention and stimulated extensive studies. Scholars have so far made a great deal of findings about the status quo of social security among the migrant workers, including various explaining factors and further policy proposals. Since unemployment and health problems are the most prominent concerns of migrant workers in Shenzhen, Suzhou and Changchun city, are unemployment insurance, basic endowment insurance and medical insurance the most necessary insurances for the migrant workers of these cities.^[vi] You Chun (2009) discussed the overall design of the medical insurance system for migrant workers and came with some advices as to how to solve some of its problems.^[vii] Fan Xiaoyan (2010) found, in her study, that factors such as educational level, expenditure level, job-change frequency, long-term plans and expectations for future life all are having an effect on the migrants' participation in the unemployment insurance.^[viii] Mi Hong et. al. (2005) believed that if the migrant workers should be incorporated into the basic endowment system for urban citizens, it would have an impact on the rural social endowment insurance system so that the system loses its support.^[ix] Zheng Bingwen(2008) provides an overview of the migrant workers' position in the national social security scheme over 30 years and noted amongst others that the pension rights of the floating population are infringed.^[x] Other scholars pointed out the urgent need to provide a well-functioning social security to migrant workers, in order to obtain economic efficiency, social equity^[xi] and stability.

Scholars also mapped out the participation rate of the migrant workers in various types of social insurances. In Beijing, for example, only 16% of the migrant workers participated in social insurance.^{xii} In Shenyang, the capital of Liaoning Province, about 19.3% of the respondents participated in social insurance, which is slightly higher than that of Beijing.^[xiii] In Jiangsu and Guangxi province, however, social insurance rate among the migrant workers is very low.^{[10] [xiv] [xv]} Nationwide, about 72.82% of China's migrant workers did not have any insurance at all. Only 10.70% participated in basic endowment insurance, medical insurance and unemployment insurance schemes, 9.41% participated in one of them, and only 7.07% participated in two of them.^[5]

Scholars found out that factors such as gender, education, type of labor contracts^[12], employment stability^[xviii], professional qualifications^[xix] etc. all have an impact on migrant workers' decision to join a social security scheme or not. In addition, some scholars found that payment delay, fund-raising difficulties and lack of trust to insurance have contributed to the low social security participation

among the migrant workers^[xx]. Only few studies have ever considered gender as a variable, even though it is statistically clear that the percentage of men participating in social insurance is 98% higher than that of women,^[12] and that the participating rate of migrant women in health insurance is 10% lower than that of the entire floating population.^[xxi]

In this study, data from the 2009 Chinese floating population survey are analyzed, gender-based difference in social security is illuminated, and the main causes of gender difference are investigated. In the end, the study also put forward some policy suggestions for how to advance gender equality in the process of improving social security for the floating population in general.

III . Gender Difference in Insurance Coverage Rate

In 2009, the research group for the Study of Floating Population Issues, which is a major breakthrough project of the Ministry of Education, conducted a questionnaire survey of China's floating population. Because more than one third of the migrant workers in China is concentrated in Guangdong, Zhejiang province and Beijing, the survey was conducted in these three areas. Altogether, 1800 migrant workers were interviewed in Beijing, Zhuji city of Zhejiang province, and Dongguan city of Guangdong province. 1682 questionnaires are valid, and the questionnaire-reclaiming efficiency is 93.44%. Male migrants count for 59.51 percent and female 40.49 percent of the total respondents in this survey. The average age of these respondents is 31.99 years old. Those with primary and middle school education make up 79.61 percent, those with senior middle school education or higher 16.90 percent. 67.14 percent of them are married, against 31.15 percent unmarried. 89.95 percent of the respondents are in employment at the time of investigation. All quantitative data is analyzed by the SPSS (version 15.0) statistical package program.

This study regards the respondent who participates in any of five insurances, such as endowment insurance, medical insurance, work-related injury insurance, unemployment insurance and maternity insurance, as one who has participated in social security insurance. "Coverage rate" is meant the ratio of those having joined insurance against the total respondents. As the survey shows, the rate of joining one or more insurance among all respondents is 71.34 percent, but when counting females alone the coverage rate is only 65.05%, which is more than 10percentpoints lower than that among males. This means that less than 2/3 of the female migrant workers takes part in one or more of the five insurances, so there is a statistically significant gender-based difference ($\chi^2=22.16$, $p=0.00$). To measure the scale of gender difference among the three cities, Beijing is up to 15.84percentpoints, the highest, Dongguan City is 3.50percentpoints, the lowest, and Zhuji City is 6.13percentpoints which is between Beijing and Dongguan.

There is not only a statistically significant gender-based difference in the coverage rate of social security insurance, but also a statistically significant difference among females in the three cities ($\chi^2=5.97$, $p<0.05$). The coverage rate of social insurance among female migrant workers in Dongguan city is the lowest, and that of Zhuji city is the highest. In Beijing, the capital of China, both the insurance coverage rate of the entire migrant workers and that of the male migrant workers rank highest among the three cities. However, when it comes to gender equity in social security, Beijing ranks only second of the three. This does not match Beijing's social and economic positions.

Table 1 Social security insurance rate of different cities

	Total		Dongguan city		Zhuji city		Beijing city		Chi-test	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	χ^2	p
Male	757	75.62	165	64.71	247	77.43	345	80.79	23.25	.000
Female	443	65.05	213	61.21	154	71.30	76	64.96	5.97	.050
Total	1200	71.34	378	62.69	401	74.95	421	77.39	35.24	.000

Source: Research of Floating population Issues' survey.

In order to further analyze gender-based differences in insurance participation, it is necessary to examine the coverage rate of different insurances and the coverage rate of males and females one by one.

First of all, the survey shows a significant difference in the coverage rate of all five insurances. Among the respondents, the coverage rate of medical insurance is the highest (65.81%), and that of maternity insurance is the lowest (1.37%), differing by approximately 50percentpoints. For medical insurance, endowment insurance and work-related injury insurance together, the male coverage rate is all remarkably higher than that of female, exceeding by 0.36-11.86percentpoints. Although the coverage rate of unemployment insurance and maternity insurance among the female migrant workers is slightly higher than that of the male, the difference is not so significant since the coverage rate is all lower than 3%.

Table 2. The coverage rate of the five insurances

	Medical insurance		Endowment Insurance		Work-related injury insurance		Unemployment insurance		Maternity insurance	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	707	70.63	102	10.18	198	19.76	24	2.40	0	0.00
Female	400	58.74	67	9.82	105	15.40	22	3.23	23	3.37
Total	1107	65.81	169	10.04	303	17.99	46	2.73	23	1.37
χ^2	25.48		0.06		5.24		1.05		34.26	
p	0.00		0.81		0.02		0.31		0.00	

Source: Research of Floating population Issues' survey.

1. The coverage rate of medical insurance

In a society where medical insurance rate is high, citizens will find themselves in safe hands, for the insurance builds a safety net around them, fulfilling their basic medical needs without causing a great drain of their economy in case of bad health. However, as the survey shows, the medical insurance coverage rate among female migrant workers is 11percentpoints lower than that among males, and the difference is the greatest among the five insurances. The low coverage rate of medical insurance among migrant women will not only restrain them from obtaining equal healthcare resources, but will also increase their medical expenses, which in turn will have a negative impact on both the current health conditions of migrant women and their health many years later.

2. The coverage rate of endowment insurance

Along with the continuation of family planning and urbanization, the conventional rural practice of bringing up sons to support aging parents and the family-based “pension” security are facing serious challenges. In the process of promoting a new rural endowment insurance system, the participation of migrant workers is vital, for the insurance will secure the later-year living of the insured and relieve the pressure on family for elder care and welfare. However, the survey found that the coverage rate of the migrant workers in endowment insurance is generally low, with only 10.04% participated. The coverage rate among males is slightly higher than that among females, which is 10.18% against 9.82%. Such low rate participation in endowment insurance poses a great potential challenge to the later-year supporting of female migrants.

3. The coverage rate of work-related injury insurance

Employment injury (occupational disease) is the biggest risk faced by the migrant population.^[xxii] Most migrant workers are engaged in dangerous jobs, where accidents and occupational disease could easily happen due to the lack of production safety and protection procedures. To join the work-related injury insurance will entitle migrant workers the necessary economic compensation when employment injury did occur and at the same time compel the employers to reduce the likelihood of work injury or accidents through proper labor protection measures. However, the survey shows that the coverage rate of the migrant workers in work-related injury insurance remains as low as under 18.0%, and for the female part the rate is only 15.4%, which is 4.36percentpoints lower than that of the male. The exceptional low coverage rate of this insurance, especially in the nanny profession which is mostly occupied by females, does not only affect migrant women's employment safety but will also cause them unaffordable economic losses in case of injury.

4. The coverage rate of unemployment insurance

Previous research indicates that more than half of the migrant workers have been unemployed once or several times during their work life. When unemployed, most of them lived on their savings or depended on the financial help provided by relatives and friends.^[xxiii] The lack of living security, in a way, is a big hidden danger to social stability^[8]. Unemployment insurance, as a guarantee system, will provide economic help to the laborers when they lost their source of living due to unemployment. However, the study found that only 2.73% of the respondents have participated in the unemployment insurance and the rate of enlisting the insurance among females is only slightly higher than that of males. Gender-based difference in this regard is thus statistically insignificant. In the market environment with high unemployment risk as it is in China today, low rate participation in unemployment insurance might prevent the floating population from maintaining their basic living and from seeking further occupational development as well.

5. The coverage rate of maternity insurance

Maternity insurance plays an important role in safeguarding the basic rights and interest of female migrant workers. It guarantees the necessary economic income and medical care during pregnancy and abortion, and helps them to recover and return to their job positions. In 2005, the number of female at bearing age among the migrant workers has reached 56.56 million. According to the 2009 survey, however, there are only 23 respondents participated in maternity insurance, the rate of enlisting insurance is only 1.73%, which is the

lowest among all five social insurances. In order to reduce maternity-related expenses, migrant women often select cheap underground clinics or give birth at home, which increases death risk significantly. In Guangdong Province, for example, the ratio of maternal mortality among the migrant workers is about 1 time higher than that among the local permanent residents^[xxiv], and in Beijing it is 2 to 4 times higher than that among the local population with permanent urban-registration^[xxv].

IV. Gender difference in the coverage rate of all five insurances: an analysis

1. Gender difference in employment situation

The employment situation of the female migrant workers has an important role to play in the coverage rate of social insurance. Generally speaking, the present social insurance system in China is extremely prone to exclude irregularly employed and unemployed females. Although nearly 90% of the respondents are having a job at the time of the investigation, the employment rate of the female migrant workers is only 84.73%, 8.68percentpoints lesser than that of male and Pearson Chi-Square=33.60, p=0.00. So there is a statistically significant difference between males and females concerning employment. Moreover, more than half of the working migrant women are engaging in odd jobs or other low-paid, unskilled jobs, while the percentage for the same job categories is only 23.96% among males. Among the female migrant workers, those working as technical worker or skilled workers count only 14.91% and those as managers only 1.39%, whereas the percentage of the same job categories among male is respectively 45.67% and 4.71%, about 3percentpoints higher than that of the females. Also the average wage level of female migrant workers is lower than that of male migrant workers. Due to these multiple factors, the insurance coverage rate among the female migrant workers is also correspondingly lower.

2. Insurance premium and related issues

It is commonly believed among the respondents that the causes behind their low rate participation in social security insurances should include: high insurance premium, the employers' unwillingness to apply for insurance, lack of knowledge about insurance and the impossibility of transferring insurance to another place in case of job change. Among the female migrant workers the percentage of those who feel the insurance premium is too high is 1.29percentpoints of that among males, while the percentage of those who feel that they don't know much about the social security system is more than 10percentpoints higher than that among the male migrant workers. This result is mainly due to the fact that most migrant women migrate to follow their spouse. They often engage in odd jobs, work as nanny or are employed in small

individually-driven business, where information about social insurance and necessary guidance for how to participate is often lacking. The employers' unwillingness to apply insurance for the employed is also a very important reason for why the coverage rate of social security in these three cities is so low.

3. Issues related to policy design

The problem at this level is that the overall design of the insurance system does not take into account the special needs of female migrant workers. Whether it is the *Social Insurance Law* or the *Opinions of the State Council*, neither of them have incorporated a gender perspective in its' overall design. Therefore, during the policy formulation and implementation phases, neither the interests nor the special needs of the female migrant population were adequately considered, and there is no mechanism within the current social security policy framework to deal with the unfavorable conditions of social insurance and the impact of these conditions on female migrant workers. To the extent that self-employed migrant women are not provided with corresponding channels to participate in, for example, maternity insurance, a large segment of the female migrant workers is actually excluded from the social insurance scope.

4. The impact of traditional social values

It seems that traditional social values also in a way influence people's attitude towards social insurance. According to these traditional values, fertility is a woman's own responsibility. Prior to the promulgation of the "social insurance law", maternity insurance was luxury social goods only available for urban workers and state employees. In addition, compared with other types of insurance such as medical insurance, endowment insurance, and work-related injury insurance, maternity insurance pertains only to females and is thus a relatively small-scaled insurance, which can be easily ignored or down prioritized. In order to reduce production costs, it is not uncommon that enterprises hiring migrant workers circumvent maternity insurance by avoiding paying the premium for their employees.

V Conclusion and discussion

The study found a significant difference in the coverage rate of all five insurances, and the coverage rate of female migrant workers is more than 10 percent lower than that of male. Specifically, gender-based difference in the coverage rate of medical insurance is evident; the coverage rate of endowment insurance is low among both male and female; the coverage rate of work-related injury insurance is generally low, but with certain degree of gender difference;

the coverage rate of unemployment insurance is low for both females and males; and the coverage rate of maternity insurance is the lowest. Further, the survey and this study found that gender differentiation in employment situation, insurance premium related issues, the overall design of the insurance system, and traditional social values are the main factors affecting the level of the migrant workers' participation in various social insurances.

The so-called "floating population" has been the main force of economic and city development in China. As a consequence of the fact that the available social insurance does not work have social problems emerged. These will continue to emerge, having a negative effect upon social stability and long-term economic development. Also, if gender-based difference in insurance coverage rate among the migrant workers is not timely eliminated, it will hinder the personal development of female migrant workers and obstruct the improvement of their social status, which will in turn be detrimental to social stability and harmony.

This article suggests the following as a countermeasure to the existing problems: firstly, to raise the gender consciousness of policy makers and implementers in order to ensure that both male and female migrant workers enjoy equal social security. It is necessary to mainstream gender in policy formulation and implementation through, for example, gender consciousness training. The effects of each social insurance policy upon the wellbeing of men and women should be carefully considered. Appropriate measures should be taken to eliminate the adverse effects on the female migrant workers. Secondly, the implementation of the social insurance law and insurance related policies should be strengthened. For the most urgent need of the migrant workers such as work related injury insurance, catastrophic medical insurance and endowment insurance, the State Council's guideline for "fair treatment, equal treatment," should be effectively enacted. The legal rights of the female migrant workers should be properly protected despite the low coverage rate of social security among them, and members of the floating population should play an important monitoring role in the implementation of various social security policies. Last but not least, economic devices such as gender budget and tax subsidies should be employed to raise the coverage rate of social insurance among the migrant workers. Governments at all levels should increase gender budget, especially individual contribution subsidies to endowment insurance and medical insurance. Governments at all levels should also provide tax exemption, subsidies or other preferential policies to small and medium enterprises and see to it that employers pay the social security premiums for their employees. And companies evading from their social security obligations should meet with strong administrative and economic sanctions from the government side.

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