China WPSP Institute 2013 at the China Women’s University
Report Summary
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Introduction

The Beijing Women’s Conference in 1995 and its progeny, the Beijing Platform of Action, marked a watershed event in the history of local and global women’s movements. The clarion call to the participants to “take Beijing home,” and bring the lessons learned back to their home countries, resonated worldwide and reverberated in China among women’s rights scholars and practitioners.

Eighteen years after this historic conference, the Women in Public Service Project (WPSP) Institute that took place at the China Women’s University (CWU), July 2013, marked another historic initiative. The WPSP sees the partnerships between academic institutions, global academic institutions, government entities, and private organizations as the cornerstones of nation-building and advancement of women’s leadership. All of these elements were highlighted in the 2013 WPSP Institute at CWU; the first of three summer programs in China funded by the Ford Foundation with technical assistance from the WPSP at the Wilson Center.

The Institute in 2014 will bring together students from universities in Beijing, and the Institute in 2015 will bring together students from Shendong University, Hunan University, and other universities outside of Beijing. At the end of the three-year Institute, CWU hopes to institutionalize a WPSP Institute in order to build on the three Ford Foundation-funded Institutes and to ensure that the work continues after 2015.

The students at the 2013 Institute at the CWU in Beijing amplified the rich legacy of CWU’s engagement with public policy. At the Institute, students learned elements of policymaking in the context of China, aided by a global understanding of international law and policies. The recommendations developed by the students will be submitted to expert groups engaged in law and policy-drafting in China.

The WPSP was founded in 2011 by former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in partnership with the U.S. Department of State and the Seven Sisters Colleges—Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mt. Holyoke, Smith and Wellesley—and expanded to include Mills College, Mount St. Mary’s College, Scripps College, City College of New York, and a public university consortium spearheaded by the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. The WPSP affiliated partnerships around the world have grown to include over 35 academic institutions and 40 government entities committed to meeting the goal of 50x50: fifty percent of public service positions held by women by 2050. The WPSP has become the premier global platform for women in public service and is located at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C.
The 2013 Institute at the CWU in Beijing was created in conjunction with the CWU. The CWU has played an important role in all of the recent gender-based law and policy reform initiatives in China including the revisions to the Marriage Law and the Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests (LPWRI), the Law of Employment Promotion Law, the Labor Contract Law, and the Expert’s Draft on Anti-Violence against Women.

Why China?

China is home to one third of the world’s women, and is the birthplace of the Beijing Platform of Action, which has informed many of the gender-sensitive laws around the world in the last two decades. As the 20th anniversary of the Beijing conference approaches, focusing on the unfinished business of the Beijing Platform of Action is of critical importance. One of the key factors of the platform calls for a critical mass of 30 percent of women’s participation in public and political life, which aligns to the spirit of the WPSP’s 50x50 goal.

China Women’s University

CWU is the premier women’s university in China, and has a rich tradition of engagement with almost all gender-related law and policy-making in China. Working with other well-known gender experts and with other faculty members, the CWU’s Vice President Li Mingshun (former Dean of the Law School) and Dean Li Jianjun (another former Dean of the Law school) have engaged in every major gender-based law reform effort in China in the last decade.

The WPSP’s underlying theory of social change sees academic institutions as fundamental to nation-building. The CWU is a critical space for the development of women’s rights law, policy, and public institutions in China.

Some of the major law revision initiatives include addressing unequal retirement practices which impede women’s equal status in public service. In many cases, female employees are asked to retire five years earlier than their male counterparts, cutting short their ability to contribute and affecting their retirement benefits. Another hurdle that is being addressed is the over-protection in labor laws that disadvantage women in the public sector, and exclude women from many sectors that are considered “hazardous to women’s health and reproductive functions;” thus preventing women from traveling for their work and from holding jobs that require travel. Major revisions include those to height, weight, and appearance-related discrimination that subjugate women and restrict women’s employment in certain public sector jobs. Revisions to the Marriage Law, the Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests (LWPRI), and the draft Domestic Violence Law have also been put forth.

Dean Li Ying, the Executive Vice Dean of the School of Law, is currently engaged in an initiative to broaden women’s access to registration of land tenure. Acknowledging women as heads of households will address long-term problems concerning women’s access to economic resources and the disengagement of women in public life. The WPSP has provided technical assistance to CWU’s law reform efforts and research and builds on a decade-long partnership with Faculty of Law at the CWU.
Central Characteristics of the WPSP Institute

Building partnerships is the cornerstone of the WPSP. The WPSP values its connections with academic, governmental, and non-governmental institutions at the local, national, regional, and international levels. The 2013 Institute at the CWU in Beijing was enriched by the participation of the CWU as well as other experts in the field from China. Rather than duplicating previous efforts, the WPSP complemented and built on existing public policy programming in China. The WPSP brought together experts from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, The All China Women’s Federation, and gender and law scholars in order to highlight diverse and informed perspectives from multiple institutions. The 2013 WPSP Institute faculty included renowned gender experts in China, including Professor Chen Min Xia, Professor Liu Bohong, and Professor Du Jie.

The Institute represented each of the elements of the WPSP: the Seven Sisters Colleges and other U.S. colleges and universities (represented by President McElaney-Johnson of Mount St. Mary’s College); global academic institutions (represented by Professor Mary Althaus, Vice President of Tsuda University in Japan); government entities (represented by Dr. Chow, the Chairperson of the renowned EOC of Hong Kong); and private sector organizations (represented by APCO International’s Vice President, Stephanie Lvovich and Goldman Sachs’ Vice President for Philanthropy, Erin Walsh). The Faculty was drawn from international programs that came together to advance the shared goal of increasing women’s participation in public service.

Student Composition

Forty-four students from 20 academic disciplines, ranging from law to computer science, participated in the 2013 Institute at CWU. The varying academic backgrounds sent a clear message: women from diverse fields all play roles in shaping public policy and engaging in public service.

Building a New Pedagogy

The WPSP’s chief success was in building a new pedagogical approach distinct from rote learning. The Institute emphasized experiential and shared knowledge to create an alternative discourse of learning at CWU, which hopefully will be integrated into the core curriculum. Students were very receptive to this pedagogy, and one student concluded the inauguration proceedings by stating that she looked forward to learning from her peers, which was a new aspect to their expected traditional curriculum.

Through group work and through active learning, the students engaged in policy making, public speaking, critical thinking, argumentation, debate, and negotiation on many areas of national and international political issues. Each day, students debriefed with mentors and facilitators, and at the end of the program they presented individual action plans.

Conclusion
Eighteen years ago, in 1995, Beijing hosted the world’s largest women’s conference. Out of that historic summit grew the global commitments known as the Beijing Platform of Action which called for a critical mass of women in all public service jobs. On July 23, 2013, Beijing once again hosted a landmark initiative, the first of three the WPSP Institutes at the historic CWU. The Institute brought together 44 students from 20 provinces in China and these emerging women leaders pledged to respond to the rallying cry of “50 x50.”

At the 2013 Institute, the Honorable Jane Harman and WPSP Director Rangita de Silva received Honorary Professorships from the CWU in recognition of their contribution to global women’s issues.

It will be through the work of these leaders that the full potential of Beijing Women’s Conference in 1995 will be brought to fruition, guided by the words of WPSP founder Secretary Hillary Clinton, “Women’s Rights are Human Rights, now and for always.”