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In my opinion

Equaling the ranks



JENNIFER MCBRIDE
QUASHING DISSENT

The Chinese government has decided to pursue an unusual policy in order to redress the imbalance between men and women in Chinese society: pay families for their decision to have daughters.

After decades of the one child per family policy, China has been left with a large gender imbalance. There are 12.7 million more boys than girls younger than nine. This discrepancy seems to be accelerating. For every 100 girls, there are roughly 117 boys born annually, though in some regions, that figure varies up to 160 boys for 100 female counterparts. This disproportion has demographers predicting that by 2020 China will be left with 40 million eligible bachelors.

The problem has already manifested — men unable to find brides sometimes resort to black markets, where the average price is \$600 for a woman's freedom. The Chinese government, under the cover of pronouncing universal gender equality, has largely ignored the problems of inequity and sex trafficking until recently. Some promising steps have already been taken, such as cracking down on sex-selective abortions. Because families can only have one child, many parents abort female fetuses. Though this practice is banned, it is also easily circumvented by doctors accepting bribes. At most, a doctor faced a fine of \$30 for violating the law, until a few years ago, when the government increasingly cracked down on the illegal procedure.

Another significant issue in Chinese gender inequity is education. Women are less likely to enroll in higher level schools. The result is that many uneducated women are unemployed, and while looking for work are kidnapped and forced into prostitution. To help these women obtain both education and work, the government offers tuition-free

education programs; however, these plans are limited in scope, existing in only 24 cities. The budget is unlikely to be increased in the future.

Less promising steps include the billboards put up in a campaign suggesting boys should respect girls. Exhibits intended to raise girls' self-esteem adorn schools, though such presentations are probably calculated attempts to impress visitors. To me, posters touting women's usefulness seem to be ironic statements of a government that hopes throwing money at an issue will make it go away.

If the Chinese government wants to change the discrepancy in birthrate, it has to change the culture. Girls are valued less, especially in rural areas, because they are considered physically inferior and unable to contribute as much labor to family farms. Additionally, social expectations are such that sons are assumed to be responsible for the care of their parents in their old age. In contrast, daughters are expected to help support their parents-in-law. In a country with almost no social safety net, it is no wonder that some families see their children as pension funds. In response to this mindset, the government is testing programs giving 300,000 elderly people who have one child, or only daughters, monthly allowances of \$180.

However, financial incentives do not reduce societal stigma. Instead, they legitimize it — implying families who have daughters need more assistance than their estrogen-challenged

counterparts. Furthermore, profit-motives do nothing but encourage the illegal sale of daughters by farmers looking for a quick buck. Monetary inducements do not make parents take their daughters to the hospital (boys are more likely to be taken to the doctor when ill, but girls are expected to recover on their own). The message is clear: Women are dispensable, men are not. As long as women are seen as inferior and less than human, there will be black market brides and sex slaves.

Even educated women working in urban areas are unprotected by the legal system. In many cases, the government has failed to act to preserve basic human rights and human dignity when it comes to gender. Over 80 percent of women have been sexually harassed at their jobs, but very few bring actual cases to court and fewer still are able to obtain convictions because laws are vague to the point of unenforceability. It was only recently that the issue was raised at all. The first litigant brought suit against her supervisor in 2001.

President Bush in his State of the Union address will probably point to the women of Afghanistan as an example of how the United States has aided international women's rights. However, it is unlikely that gender inequity plays even a minimal role in U.S. discussions with China. Minor pressure and attention paid to this problem could influence the Chinese government to take stronger measures to enforce equality, rather than continue the slap on the wrist approach they have been practicing.

The bottom line is this: No billboards declaring how important women are can change a mindset ingrained for centuries. China should concentrate less on propaganda and more on propagating true reform.

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Editorial

Companies fight back in the carb-control war

No wonder America is getting fatter.

In a bid to take back the bread and grains industry, the Grain Foods Foundation has kicked off an East Coast advertising campaign designed to woo carbophobes back to the bread aisle. The New York Times reported on Tuesday that the foundation, which represents companies such as General Mills and Sara Lee, has "had enough."

Bread is fighting to gain back its piece of the American waistline, and it's fighting against companies that have grown adept at pushing the agendas of their low-carb diet products.

Americans have traditionally allowed their diets to be held hostage by fads with empty promises, so much that understanding proper eating habits is in itself a hefty endeavor — the federal government can't even make up its mind. On Jan. 12, a new "food pyramid" was issued that reflects, you guessed it, a need for more whole grains.

Spokeswomen and spokesmen for the Atkins and South Beach diets, which promote the elimination of pasta and bread, among other things, have issued pro-carb statements in reaction to the new federal guidelines.

Hasn't America "had enough?"

The real problem with America's overeating is advertising. If the government is going to create new rules to guide healthy eating, it needs to start putting some serious funding behind getting the word out. If it doesn't, its nutrition guidelines are nothing but empty recommendations.

By the numbers

8 million: Number of Iraqis who are thought to have voted in Sunday's historic elections.

Tens of thousands: Number of Iraqis officials say might have been denied the right to vote due to lack of ballots and polling stations, mostly in Sunni areas.

70,000: Number of people killed in Darfur, which, according to a U.N. report, does not constitute genocide by the Sudanese government and allied militias, even though the crimes are "no less heinous." Parsing the legal definition of genocide while people are being raped and tortured will probably not help the United Nations' image as an ineffective lumbering bureaucracy that cannot deal with serious world issues. Two million have also been displaced in the fighting.

13,000: Number of jobs SBC Communications anticipates eliminating after its \$16 billion acquisition of AT&T.

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