

THE FIRST LADY

Hillary Clinton Discovers How Chinese Women Fare

By ELISABETH ROSENTHAL

BEIJING, June 27 — Hillary Rodham Clinton met today with some of the best and brightest of Beijing's vibrant women's movement, discussing a wide range of sometimes sensitive issues from domestic violence to unemployment to China's high rates of female suicide.

Mrs. Clinton mostly sat back and listened as the panel of seven Chinese women told of the multitude of problems women in this country still face and of their work to solve them.

Although many of the panelists have long been outspoken on women's issues in front of small groups, such frank discussion in a public international forum was unusual. And the light atmosphere was in marked contrast to the tension surrounding the International Women's Conference that Mrs. Clinton attended in Beijing in 1995.

The panelists included Xie Lihua, a journalist who has championed the cause of China's rural women, and Liu Bohong of the official All-China Women's Federation, who displayed the newly published Chinese translation of the American women's medical work "Our Bodies, Ourselves" (Touchstone, 1996).

At the end, a clearly appreciative Mrs. Clinton said, "I don't think I've ever been in a more lively, energetic, and informed discussion than this one today."

The panelists described the many projects under way to improve the status of women, but their remarks were filled with reminders that deep-rooted cultural discrimination persists, particularly in the countryside. Ms. Xie likes to remind people that if you knock at a door in rural China, women are likely to answer, "Nobody's home," if there are no men inside.

Three years ago, she founded the magazine Rural Women Knowing All to give women in the countryside a voice. At today's forum, she described how the magazine had published self-help articles on reproductive health, set up programs for women who are migrant workers in Beijing and helped organize small loans for women to start cottage industries.

But she and other panelists described with bittersweet smiles the biases that such women's programs must overcome.

Ge Youli of the United Nation's Development Program in Beijing told of organizing meetings in the countryside to explain loan programs for women and having only husbands turn up.

"We say 'Where are your wives?'" Ms. Ge said. "They say, 'At home cooking, of course.'" She described how the men are then instructed to play a game of what Americans call "Telephone," where the first is given a message which is passed down a line of 10. By the end, she said, the message had changed.

"That's why your wives should be here," she told them.

But the panelists also told of poor rural women who with the help of such loans had escaped dreary lives by setting up prosperous businesses, like tofu shops and pig farms, and of how the traditional notion that "only men are important" was changing.

Another panelist, Chen Mingxia, who is a lawyer at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, described work in educating women about their legal rights. Although China has a fairly comprehensive women's rights law on paper, discrimination against women is common in areas like hiring and allocating housing.

At Beijing's prestigious universities there is a saying to describe the hiring hierarchy on graduation: first men with a Beijing residency permit, then men without a Beijing residency permit, only then the women.

Ms. Chen described how a rural legal aid center helped a woman who wanted to divorce her abusive husband but had neither the money nor the know-how to proceed.

The panelists excitedly described a wide range of ambitious projects to improve the status of women, from Zheng Bichuan efforts to improve the high drop-out rate among rural girls to Liu Bohong's research on images of women in the media. Some are conducted under the auspices of the Chinese Government and others receive financing from foreign organizations, like the Ford Foundation.

Perhaps most revealing about how far the discussion has come since 1995 was the moment when Ms. Liu produced the bright red-covered "American Our Bodies, Ourselves," a translation project that at times had been stalled by political debates about what could and could not be said in China. No matter that the final product was missing the American edition's sections on lesbianism and masturbation or that a number of pictures were not reproduced. At last, the book was out.