Empowering Women in Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China

In a remote minority region of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), all-female maintenance crews are doing more than keeping the roads in order—they are banding together and taking on bigger roles in their communities.

Fast Facts

15.0% (2008)  
Dehong prefecture official poverty incidence rate

4.2% (2008)  
National average official poverty incidence rate

165km  
Length of roads initially maintained by women’s employment pilot project

650km  
Length of roads now maintained by
Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan Province - Just 13 kilometers (km) north of Dehong Prefecture's sleepy, subtropical seat of Mangshi - a city of around 130,000 people - Chen Fengxiang clears a drainage ditch at the side of the road. Five other women work alongside the 47-year-old, ensuring that rainy season spillover is discharged through the valley without damaging the road that connects their village with the nearest city.

"It's been a big help," says Chen, an ethnic Han Chinese who lives and works alongside Jingpo (Kachin) and Dai (Shan) minorities. "Life feels more stable with the guaranteed income from the road works."

Chen makes an average of around CNY50 ($8) a day, and works 10-15 days a month maintaining a stretch of the 17.8 km county road between Longling and Mangshi.

Chen says that the income has helped at home and for her two children, one of whom is studying law in the provincial capital of Kunming. The other has graduated from a vocational college and is still looking for work. Most of her neighbors make their living from agriculture - increasingly from Yunnan's most recent boom crop, coffee beans, and rice and orchids. But Chen has only 1 mu (666.7 square meters) - of land, just enough to grow vegetables for the family's meals. She needs the extra income from the road work.

Generating jobs

Chen and women like her benefit from a $200,000 technical assistance grant from ADB's Gender and Development Cooperation Fund, with counterpart funding by the Dehong Prefecture Communications Bureau and the communications bureaus of Luxi and Lianghe counties.

This pilot project, which focuses on employing women, is a small component of a larger project to rebuild national and provincial roads throughout Yunnan. In 2010, ADB approved the $250 million Yunnan Integrated Road Network Development Project to complete the National Expressway Network Plan in Yunnan, and a highway from Kunming to Myanmar, to be completed in 2016.

In Dehong in 2008, the official poverty incidence rate was 15.0% - considerably higher than the national average of 4.2%. Nearly half the population is composed of ethnic minorities. In the past, the poor condition of rural roads offered limited opportunities.

The pilot phase of the project in Dehong aimed to provide employment and incomes for women in the prefecture while facilitating easy travel from village to village across the county.

The first phase of the Dehong pilot project was launched in March 2010 and ran through March of the following year, encompassing 165 km of roads - 113 km in Mangshi City, and 52 km in Lianghe County. Since then, the scope of the rural roads project has been expanded to include 650 km in the same areas.

"The program aims to make poor, minority women able road workers, and have them form into teams and elect team leaders," says Jin Chu, director of the Dehong Prefecture Communications Bureau. Women receive training and tools, inspectors assess the work, and once the quality is approved, the women get paid.

He adds that, on average, village women make around CNY2,500 (about $400) for every km of road that they maintain, and that they carry out work on around 2 km of road each year. The total, CNY5,000 (about $800), is a sizable sum given that per capita income from wages was CNY2,963 (about $470) in 2011, according to the PRC's National Bureau of Statistics.

Women step up

In Mangpai, a village of just 120 members of the Dai minority, 47-year-old crew team leader, Jin Xiaojie, says that before this project, the road was in such poor condition it could only be used by tractors. It was also generally closed for the duration of the rainy season until major repairs were carried out in 2009.

"When we maintain the road, it brings benefits to us because we're the ones who use it and depend on it."
- Jin Xiaojie, road maintenance crew team leader
because we couldn't carry it to market fast enough. Now it's an all-season road, guaranteed not to close during the rains, and that means we see the full value of our sugarcane crops."

While the salary is useful, it is not the only reason Jin Xiaojie maintains the road. "When we maintain the road, it brings benefits to us because we're the ones who use it and depend on it," she says.

"It's not hard work," says Qian Anxiang, 30. "And it's good to acquire skills through the training we get from the government [in Mangshi], and practical field lessons here on the roads."

"The fact that the women are earning their own incomes and making visible improvements to the road has increased their status," says ADB project officer Xiaohong Yang. "They have more decision-making power within their households, and they are receiving more respect from other community members, boosting their status and confidence."

**Getting organized**

As the project brings women together in road maintenance teams, it is empowering them in their communities, and raising awareness of issues such as family planning, AIDS, and drug abuse.

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This has made work easier for the PRC's Women's Federation in the region. The federation has been promoting the establishment of "Women's Homes" - often referred to in the PRC as the grassroots arm of the federation - in rural villages for more than a decade. Here in Dehong, spreading the word about Women's Homes and inspiring women to band together has been made easier by the fact that the women are already working together.

Take Sun Jiali, a 49-year-old member of the Achang minority - one of the PRC's smallest, numbering less than 28,000. She lives in the village of Zuxiang, Lianghe County - around 60 km north of Mangshi. When the road needs it, she and her team of five work 20 days a month.

Every worker makes a periodic donation of CNY300 from their salaries to support the activities of their Women's Home group, says Sun, head of her village's road maintenance team and of the Women's Home group there.

In addition to holding lessons on family planning, she says her group has focused on educating the young people about the dangers of drug abuse.

"Women's Home is voluntary in the villages," says Zhao Yijuan, 44, the chair of the Women's Federation in Lianghe County. "The Women's Federation interacts with village women who belong to a Women's Home and directs our communications at them."

In her county alone, 154 Women's Home groups have already formed, providing an important educational and support function as once isolated communities are exposed to broader society through the improvements to travel infrastructure.

"We've never had a drug problem here," she says. "But young people today are more likely to go far away, where there are temptations and dangers."

Meanwhile, in the Dai minority village of Mangpai, the local Women's Home has extended its activities to teaching everyone in the village the cursive script of their local language.

"We can all read now," says road maintenance team leader Jin proudly.

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