

Chapter 1: Women in Mongolia: An Overview

On 27 September 1999, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the Government of Mongolia and the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) for cooperation in the implementation of the National Programme for the Advancement of Women (NPAW). A common concern identified in the process of preparing the MOU was the inadequate information base for understanding the status of women and for developing policy interventions and monitoring outcomes. Thus a first step of the cooperation was to undertake a rapid Situational Analysis to examine the salient aspects of women's experiences in current-day Mongolia and highlight the crucial issues that have emerged and are being articulated by women

This study analyses the status of women in Mongolia, particularly in terms of the challenges facing them as the country undergoes transition. It identifies critical issues affecting women from the perspective of their overall empowerment and prospects for achieving gender equality in the context of Mongolian society. It looks at both positive and negative impacts of the transformation in economic, social and political structures over the last decade on women's economic, social and political status, and highlights the commensurate changes in gender relations and women's participation and influence in these transition processes.

Following a brief overview of Mongolia and its social, political and economic history, this chapter outlines the current status of women and the major issues affecting them. Subsequent chapters look at each of these issues in depth. Thus Chapter 2 examines women's social status in the light of demographic

trends, focusing on education, health and the rise in gender-based violence. Chapter 3 analyses the economic position of women and the impact of the economic transition. Chapter 4 examines women's political status, in terms of political representation as well as their role in decision-making and policy formulation, focusing particularly on the National Programme for the Advancement of Women and its implementation. Chapter 5 pulls together the main issues and includes some recommendations for the empowerment of Mongolian women and the achievement of gender equality.

Mongolia: background and history

Mongolia is located in the centre of Asia and covers an area of 1.5 million square kilometres. It is the 18th largest country in the world in terms of surface area. The total length of its frontiers is 8,153 km, bordering Russia to the north and China to the south. Mongolia is one of 30 landlocked countries and the nearest point to the sea is about 1000 km. The average altitude is 1580 metres above sea level, 700 metres higher than the global average. Mongolia has diverse geographic zones, including the mountains (Altai), tundra, the taiga forest (Siberia), the Central Asian steppe and the Gobi desert. Nearly 90 per cent of the land area is pasture or desert, with 9 per cent under forest and 1 per cent arable. There are substantial reserves of copper, molybdenum, iron, phosphates, tin, nickel, zinc, tungsten, fluorspar and gold. Coal reserves are immense even by world's standards – at least 100 billion tonnes and potentially oil and gas.

Mongolia's climate shows sharp variation. It is

dry continental and has four distinctive seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter. In January, the coldest month of the year, the air temperature sometimes falls to -45°C . In July, the warmest month, air temperature goes up to $+40^{\circ}\text{C}$. The daily temperature fluctuation reaches 30°C . Mongolia has considerable sunshine, averaging 250 days a year.

For thousands of years, the pattern of human settlement in Mongolia has been shaped by these agro-ecological and climatic conditions, giving rise to extensive, pastoral herding. Mongolia has one of the lowest population density in the world, 1.5 people per square kilometre. The total current population of Mongolia is 2.4 million, 50.4 per cent of which are women. There are 535,300 households, 54,530 of which are headed by women (1998 data). Roughly half of the total are herder households.

The present administrative system divides Mongolia into 22 *aimags* (provinces), 342 *soums* (counties) and 1,681 *bags* (rural settlements). The latter are dispersed settlements, many of them very remote. There are three large cities: the capital city Ulaanbaatar, Darkhan and Erdenet, the latter two along the main rail route in the Central region. A third (32.5%) of the population lives in Ulaanbaatar, and over half (51.5%) live in urban settlements, with the rest in rural areas.

The current situation in Mongolia needs to be set in a dynamic context of socio-economic and political transformations. Mongolia's political, economic and social evolution has been influenced by internal dynamics as well as by relations with bordering countries.

A unified Mongolia was forged by 1206 with the creation of the Mongol empire by Chingis Khan. In the 1730s when the Manchus defeated the Mongols, feudal relations were institutionalized. In 1921, with the collapse of the Manchu Qing dynasty and the proclamation of the People's Republic, Mongolia became the first country in Asia and after the Soviet Union to declare itself socialist.

Thereafter, constitutional, social, economic and

political change took place under the influence of the Soviet Union, transforming Mongolia from a nomadic pastoral economy and a feudal theocracy to an urbanized industrial and centrally planned one-party state. Livestock production was collectivized into state farms and mechanized. The state-provided economic and social infrastructure and services in rural areas led to the creation of urban settlements in rural provinces.¹ Civil and political rights as well as economic and social rights were guaranteed by the constitution, and citizens enjoyed extensive state-provided health and education, as well as social and employment protection. These developments led to significant transformations in the economic, social and political status of women and major achievements in human development.

The state-induced industrial transformation was brought about as part of the economic cooperation regime that guaranteed markets in the CMEA countries. A considerable proportion of the resources for state entitlements came from Soviet subsidies, which were estimated as "annually equivalent to 30% of GDP" (UNDP 2000a: 29). The breakdown of the former Soviet Union brought about the abrupt collapse of the system that underpinned Mongolia's social and economic infrastructure and activities. Russian aid was curtailed along with concessional supplies of petroleum and other raw materials. In addition, Mongolia lost its guaranteed markets with the dismantling of CMEA.

The response to this crisis was what has become known as the "shock therapy" of transition (ibid.). The rupture with the regime forged over nearly seven decades (1921-1990) was abrupt, in the economic, the social and political fronts. When production could not be sustained under the new conditions, the formal state sector shrunk dramatically through closures, retrenchment and privatization. The shock therapy consisted of policy measures which triggered a rapid

¹ Before 1921, there were 5 *aimags* and 100 *hushuuns* or administrative units within *aimags*; today there are 21 *aimags* and 342 *soums*. Since Chingis Khan's reign, these local units were responsible for the management of pasture land.

process of market liberalization and privatization of state-held assets—mainly livestock, and state industrial and agricultural enterprises—as well as macroeconomic stabilization measures. Prices were liberalized and a private banking system created, before the achievement of macroeconomic stability (UNDP 2000a). Import liberalization suddenly further exposed hitherto protected industries to the rigours of foreign competition. Mongolia joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1997.

The transition decade has two broad periods: the first between 1990 to 1995, when output, income, employment fell dramatically, with devastating effects on living standards of women, men, girls and boys; and the second from 1995 onwards, when macroeconomic indicators have begun somewhat to improve. Box 1, which presents the major trends since the transition, shows that there has not been a recovery to the pre-1990 situation. Apart from the contraction of the economic base, what is striking is the de-industrialization of the country and the rising share of the primary sector, extractive industries and agriculture, and more recently, trade, transport and services. The other striking feature is the deregulation of the economy and the concomitant growth of the private informal sector—which has not, however, offset the shrinking formal state sector. In the wake of the loss of Soviet assistance, multilateral and bilateral development agencies have stepped in to cover some of the financing gap and provide technical assistance. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has extended two Structural Adjustment Loans to Mongolia.

The collapse of the Soviet system created a moment for fundamental and rapid economic restructuring along the lines of a proactive neo-liberal policy agenda, with a minimal role for the state. It also opened the space for swift political restructuring, which saw the dissolution of the one-party system and the creation of a multiparty parliamentary democracy system, and a national parliament, the *Ikh Khural*.

A new Constitution in 1992 established the basis

for a pluralistic society respectful of human rights and freedoms. The Constitution not only endorsed the rights instruments inherited from the Soviet period and consolidated human rights contained in the international bill of rights, but also, progressively, includes the rights to solidarity and the right to a safe and healthy environment. Administrative controls over the physical movement of persons and goods within and across borders were considerably relaxed. These political reforms were shaped in a context of vigorous participation in debates and consultations by an emergent civil society. They reflect the agenda-setting of active and vibrant NGOs, with active links to regional and global networks, and the growth of an independent and dynamic media. Women's NGOs, who have been particularly active in this process, especially valued the opportunity to create a new system of governance that would promote individual choice, initiative, freedom of expression and of movement.

The transition project has been characterized as the creation of a democratic society underpinned by a market economy. The Constitution of 1992 embraces both economic and social rights as well as civil and political rights and the linking of human rights to human development is increasingly part of the discourse as well as of the agenda for national development and the basis for development cooperation.

An intrinsic part of a rights framework is the concomitant obligations and responsibilities of the parties who have contracted to it to defend, uphold and promote these rights. The 1990s UN Conferences have provided the setting for making commitments for human development and for the upholding of rights which explicitly take into account the context of economic and political restructuring in many states. In the face of an economic climate that has suddenly become very harsh, the dominant approach to economic management so far still seems to be the pursuit of macroeconomic stabilization, structural reform and market-led economic growth. There is no discernible economic and social rights conditionality, beyond a social

Box 1: Mongolia and Core UN Human Rights Instruments

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (adopted in 1966 and ratified in 1974)
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1996/1974)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979/1981)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989/1990)

safety net approach for vulnerable groups. It is this policy agenda and practice that have led to the outcomes detailed in subsequent chapters. How to inflect this development path to create synergies between human rights and human development is a challenge that is just beginning to be tabled in mainstream development.

Human rights before and after 1990

Before 1990, Mongolia became a party to 29 human rights treaties including CEDAW. These treaties and conventions have provided a framework for civic and political rights on the one hand and social and economic rights in the other. The outcomes in relation to civil and political rights for women have included the right to vote, to participate in public life and the setting of quotas for women in parliament.

Social and economic rights improved in the context of a transformation of the country's economic and social structures. Together with industrialization and urbanization, there was extensive provision of state social and economic services in health, education, transport and communications. In the social sector, the notable gains were in housing, social protection and employment rights. As a result, by the end of the 1980s, Mongolia had a high ratio of parliamentary seats for women (20-24%); high literacy rates; high and rising enrolment ratios for both women and men; rising shares of women at all levels, rising levels of educational attainment by women. In addition, employment rates in both gender stereotypical and non-gender stereotypical occupations and sectors were rising while

maternal mortality and infant mortality rates (sex-specific indicators) were falling.

Since the 1990s, Mongolia has endorsed agreements at major international conferences - in particular the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995. Some of the conference commitments have special relevance to the transition period in relation to women's economic and social advancement:

- Commitment to providing secure and sustainable livelihoods;
- Commitment to minimize the negative effects of economic reform programmes;
- Commitment to eradicating poverty;
- Commitment to women's equal access to land and other property;
- Commitment to measuring and valuing unpaid work;
- Commitment to corporate responsibility.

The Conferences have led to the setting of time-bound targets particularly in health and education. While there are no international targets for women in the economic domain, a target of 30 per cent has been set for women's share of seats in national legislatures.

Three core indicators have been identified to monitor progress in meeting commitments to gender equality and the empowerment of women as part of a set of 40 core indicators for the UN Common Country Assessment Indicator Framework, which was adopted in 1999. These core indicators can be taken to be core indicators of social, political and economic status respectively, and constitute the backbone of the situation analysis of women in Mongolia. They include:

- The ratio of girls' secondary school enrolment ratio to boys' secondary school enrolment ratio;

- Women's share of parliamentary representation;
- Women's share of paid employment in industry and services.

An additional commitment is to disaggregate data by sex for all remaining 37 indicators.

The benchmarks of women's equality used in UNIFEM's *Progress of the World's Women 2000* (UNIFEM 2000) are a female/male net secondary school enrolment ratio of 95-105; women's share of parliamentary representation at 50 per cent; and women's share of paid employment in industry and services between 45 per cent and 55 per cent.

The ratio of girls' secondary school enrolment ratio to boys' secondary school enrolment ratio

There is a reverse gender gap in Mongolia, indicating that girls' share is higher than boys' share. Indeed Mongolia's ratio is higher than the target range for gender balance, 95 per cent to 105 per cent. However, the girls' secondary enrolment rate, although high, is still below the target of 95 per cent (80.9% as of 1998). This target in respective enrolment rates in addition to shares is to ensure that gender equality is not achieved at the same time as drops in these capabilities for both men and women. It is to ensure a leveling up of achievements, not a leveling down in the drive to reach equality.

Women's share of parliamentary representation

This share has declined from 23 per cent in 1990 to 3 per cent in 1992 and has risen to 10 per cent in 2000, but it is still half that of 1990 and far from the international benchmark of 30 per cent. The decline is the result of canceling the quota system set up in the Soviet period to ensure some representation by women.

Women's share of paid employment in industry and services

While this indicator is one of the three core indicators under UNDAF, "there are no internationally agreed time bound targets for gender equality and women's

empowerment in employment" (UNIFEM 2000: 71) A range of between 45 and 55 per cent can be taken to mean that equality has been achieved in employment. In Mongolia, women's share is within the range but has fallen since 1989, indicating both the decline of industry and industrial employment, and women's declining share within the sector.

Up to 1990, Mongolian women experienced high levels of achievement in each of the core indicators. Since then, the declining levels or the deteriorating underlying situation are a result of the transition measures, the pace and sequencing of these measures. The analysis and the interpretation of these indicators, their movement over time, the identification of complementary indicators and information gaps yield a more detailed, comprehensive and sobering picture of the situation of women as a result of the transition. The main outcomes and impacts of the transition on the economic, social and political status of women can be summarized as follows.

The social status of women

The interpretation of the reverse gender gap in education as an indicator of women's empowerment and men's disadvantage in education is complex. Education is often seen as an important lever in empowering women and in raising their social status beyond the traditional attributes which ascribe status to women, such as bearing numerous children. The implication of this reverse gender gap in education has to be set in the context of many other social trends, including falling fertility and family size, the rapid rise in female-headed households, which constituted 10 per cent of all households in 1998 (a 24% increase since 1995) and the largely youthful character of the migration towards Ulaanbaatar on the one hand and the *ger* settlements in rural areas, and away from small urban settlements in rural areas.

The critical issues raised during focus group discussions concerned the ability of women to generate and exercise choices in inter-personal gender relations

given the trends in domestic and gender-based violence, abortion, teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The gender imbalance at higher levels of education was also seen as problematic in terms of the social, intellectual and emotional partnerships that educated women could develop with men. The gap between the laws and instruments that establish economic and social rights and the low level of implementation was interpreted as an indicator of the inability and/or reluctance of women to affirm and to claim rights. One pervasive issue was the attitudes towards women's presence in the public arena and women's own sense of their self worth.

In economic and financial terms, despite the existence of a reverse gender gap, the returns to women from education may be lower given women's position in the occupational and decision-making hierarchy in formal employment and the cluster of indicators which point to a much lower share of income for women. The relationship between achievements in education and pay, position and prospects for promotion and advancement in employment and business appear tenuous.

The economic status of women

In the absence of specific targets for economic status, the report examines women's economic status in the light of UN conference commitments (see UNIFEM 2000), which are particularly pertinent to the situation of women in transitional economies.

Commitment to providing secure and sustainable livelihoods and to minimize the negative effects of economic reform programmes

There has been falling output and government expenditure, falling personal income and higher cost of living and women have been affected more adversely than men. The high share of women in industry disguises the fact that women's employment in manufacturing has declined in absolute terms and more sharply than men's.

Women have a precarious foothold in formal private markets, disadvantaged from the start from a very much lower endowment of state-disposed assets than men, as a result of how privatization was conducted, and a much higher and increased burden of domestic sector obligations. Like men, women are exposed to the risks inherent in private markets, without the support of the measures necessary to take up private market opportunities. These measures are the complementary services that the state and private sector organizations can provide, such as economic infrastructure, information, training, marketing, product development and other services, which have been run down in the transition, particularly in the urban settlements.

In addition, there has been a sharp reduction in state child-care provision, which constrains women's ability to enter and compete "freely" in markets. At the same time, women face discrimination in recruitment in private markets because of their child-bearing and child-care obligations.

Women's unemployment and poverty is a new phenomenon, leading to a large-scale shift to the informal sector and to unpaid work in the domestic/household sector. Retrenchment in the public sector has not been accompanied by measures to retrain women. With the shrinking of employment and income in the formal private sector, women and men in urban areas have turned to the informal sector to set up businesses and seek employment. Women make up a majority of the self-employed in the informal sector, where competition drives prices and costs down through lower personal income tax and social fees. The majority of traders do not pay social insurance and health insurance. Precarious present earnings are at the cost of future livelihood security, social and health protection.

At the micro level, the domestic unpaid sector has largely absorbed the shock. There has been a shift into the informal sector and into the domestic sector, much of which unaccounted for and unsupported. The transition has largely depended on intensified, and arguably unsustainable use of both natural resources and women's labour. Women's labour has intensified

with the growth of the livestock economy. It has also intensified through caring for others, as health, education and child-care services have been reduced, particularly at the *aimag* level and user fees have been introduced. Health indicators, in particular maternal mortality rates, have deteriorated over the transition, from 131 per 100,000 live births in 1991 to 158 per 100,000 live births in 1998.

At the same time, concentration on natural resources as the sole means of livelihood has increased the vulnerability and exposure of rural women, men and children to disasters such as severe winter storms (*dzuds*) induced by climate variations and worsened by the degradation of pasture land and the collapse of supporting livestock and services.

Commitment to eradicating poverty

Poverty is a new phenomenon in Mongolia, and it is disproportionately female. The poorer the households, the higher the proportion of female-headed households and there has been a sharp rise in the proportion of female-headed households. Poverty is due both to unemployment and falling incomes, and in female-headed households, loss of income earners in the household, the loss of state entitlements, deteriorating health and education and the erosion of the natural resource base. State social transfers are a minor share of poor household's income. The poverty profile is accompanied by increasing disparities along gender, age and regional lines, as a result of exclusion from market sources of provisioning. There is a poverty alleviation programme with a special component for female-headed households and vulnerable groups. However, the dominant policy approach to poverty in terms of vulnerable groups and safety nets needs to be revisited. This report offers many avenues for revisiting the processes and dimensions of poverty.

Commitment to women's equal access to land and other property

The privatization of herds and housing and state enterprises, the disposal of state assets through direct allo-

cation, vouchers and auctions have overwhelmingly benefited men, as heads of households. This has important consequences for women's ability to mobilize collateral in credit markets. The Family Law does however provide for equal sharing of property acquired in marriage.

Commitment to measuring and valuing unpaid work

The increase in women's time and energy workloads with the shrinking of the formal state sector employment and income, the expansion of the informal sector and domestic sector have been a cause for concern among women's groups and agencies concerned with human development issues. A forthcoming UNDP-supported time-use study, although limited to one time period (spring), will facilitate the illumination of gender differences in time use and activities and the strategies women and men use to sustain livelihoods during the transition.

Commitment to corporate responsibility

Both employment and reproductive rights legislation has been put in place but its implementation seems so far to be avoided by the as yet small corporate sector. In the much larger informal sector, the notion of corporate responsibility does not exist.

The political status of women

The low and declining share of parliamentary seats points on the one hand to the nature of the political machinery, the nature of recruitment and the entire selection process of candidates for political parties. It also highlights the issue of the financial, social and political resources a candidate needs. There is a link between the entry of women and the treatment of women's issues by the political parties, who relegate women's issues to the social sphere and in terms of a vulnerable group in need of protection. Women's perceptions are that they are discriminated against as women, or that they have little legitimacy as leaders in the political sphere. These factors inhibit their choice to

exercise their rights to become candidates and their capability to function as decision-makers.

The dispiriting evolution in the indicator for political status does not however capture some of the gains and the consolidation of civil and political rights since the transition. Nor does it show women's initiatives in key issues and their dynamism in NGOs. The gains are seen in terms of the exercise of more freedom of choice and expression and the open spaces created by institutions such as the media.

While the institutions for governance, the legislature, the judiciary, the executive as well the laws for upholding rights have been put in place and developed, the institutional mechanisms and the capacity for effective implementation have lagged behind. Where policy frameworks exist, such as the National Programme for the Advancement of Women, the institutional machinery is still not functional. The capacity for gender analysis and gender mainstreaming by women actors and advocates and within state mechanisms has yet to be generated and mobilized. Women and the national women's machinery have not been able to mobilize effectively so far to promote and uphold rights and to influence the processes and outcomes of the transition.