

## **Gender egalitarianism in a changing society**

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### **Abstract**

The political uncertainties surrounding Taiwan's identity as a sovereign state make among other things, the gender politics and equality in Taiwan an undoubtedly unique topic. Taiwan has undergone in the latter half of the twentieth century a drastic industrialization and democratization process, a process which has been describe by many as nothing short of an "economic miracle". Economic restructuring in Taiwan has not occurred in a vacuum but has brought with it important ideological changes, some the most important aspects of which are those surrounding gender, gender roles and egalitarianism. The essay below aims to delineate the evolvement of women's rights in light of Taiwan's progressive industrialization, in order to critically evaluate the current state of gender equality within both the public and private spheres. The concept of gender mainstreaming is discussed in order to examine some of the institutional and legal mandates that have been put forth as a part of Taiwan's democratization process. The paper concludes by asserting that although progressive changes have been made through the introduction of gender neutral policies within the public sphere. However, the traditional Confucian gender roles still prevail within the conjugal relationships and the domestic sphere, which are inevitably more resistant to ideological changes.

## **Introduction**

“Taiwan Economic Miracle” is a term that one frequently encounters when reading about Taiwan’s rapid industrialization within the past five decades. Although startled by the incredible pace of Taiwan’s economic growth, my first reaction had little to do with Taiwan’s economy. As a young feminist, my first instinct was to ponder what this “miracle” meant for women. Wanting to delineate the evolution of the gender equality in relation to Taiwan’s rapid economic growth, I participated in a 9 day delegation trip to Taiwan, where I had the chance to discuss the very tenants of this essay with some the pioneers of women’s right movements in Taiwan. This essay will discuss the way in which industrialization has altered Taiwan’s traditional Confucian conceptions of gender roles, by examining the successes and short comings of several “gender mainstreaming” policies in Taiwan. This essay will argue that despite the narrowing of the gender gap through the introduction of gender neutral policies within the public sphere; gender egalitarianism has not yet fully transcended the domestic sphere.

## **Gender mainstreaming and the Labour market**

The concept of gender mainstreaming was first proposed by at the 1985 Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi. The idea has been developed in the United Nations and was formally presented in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1). Gender mainstreaming refers to the process of assessing the implications of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels for both women and men (1). Ever since the conception of women’s right movement in Taiwan in the early 1970s, Gender mainstreaming, or the institutionalization of gender equality principles, has been used as a strategic tool by the feminist organizations and other women’s right advocates in Taiwan (2).

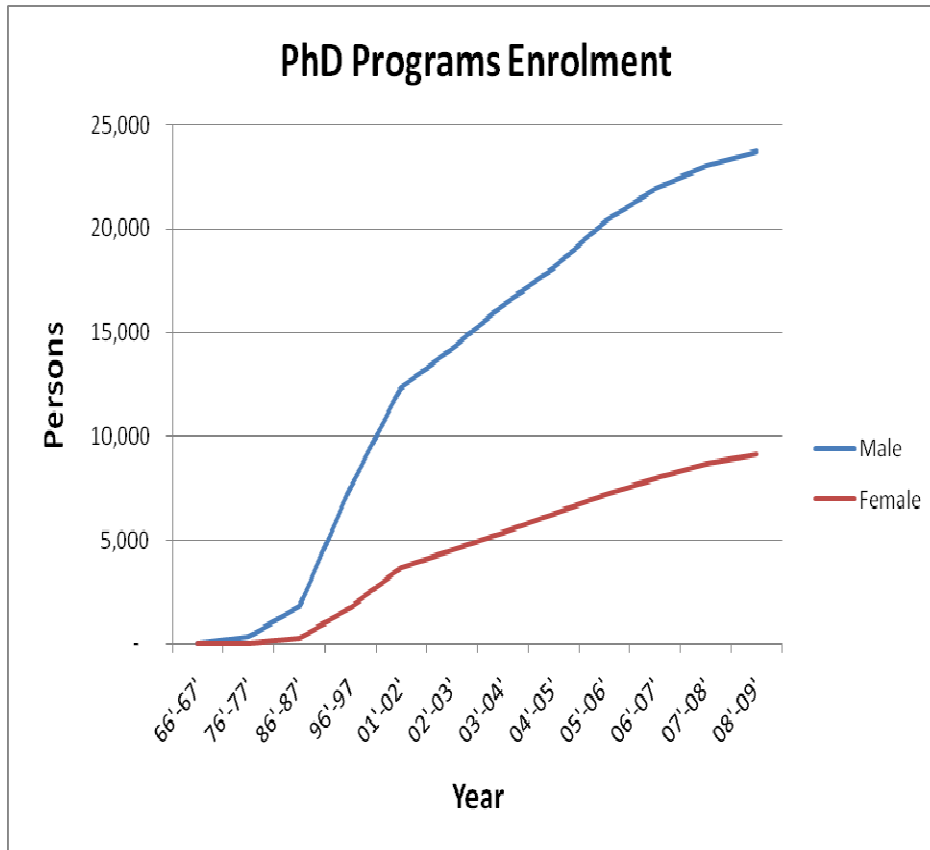
Historically, the participation of women in the labor market is of crucial importance, as it has been among the first facets of the public domain to have been mandated by gender neutral or 'gender mainstreamed' policies. Discussions about the labour market have been central to Taiwan's economic debates. The participation of women in labour market however the crucial roles of within Taiwan's labour-intensive industries are often understated. In Taiwan, the female labour force participation has increased steadily over the last three decades (2). This trend is believed to have started in the mid 1960s when the demand for female labour by export processing manufacturers brought unmarried women from rural areas to join the labour intensive factories (2). During the same time period, the launch of small business sector- especially home-based businesses, took place in Taiwan (2). Unpaid work by females, whether for their husbands or fathers, has been crucial for the maintenance of family enterprises. The women therefore, have not been passive bystanders in relation to Taiwan's progressive industrialization, but have been an essential force behind Taiwan's economic growth both at the domestic and national levels.

### **Provisioned laws: analysis and implications**

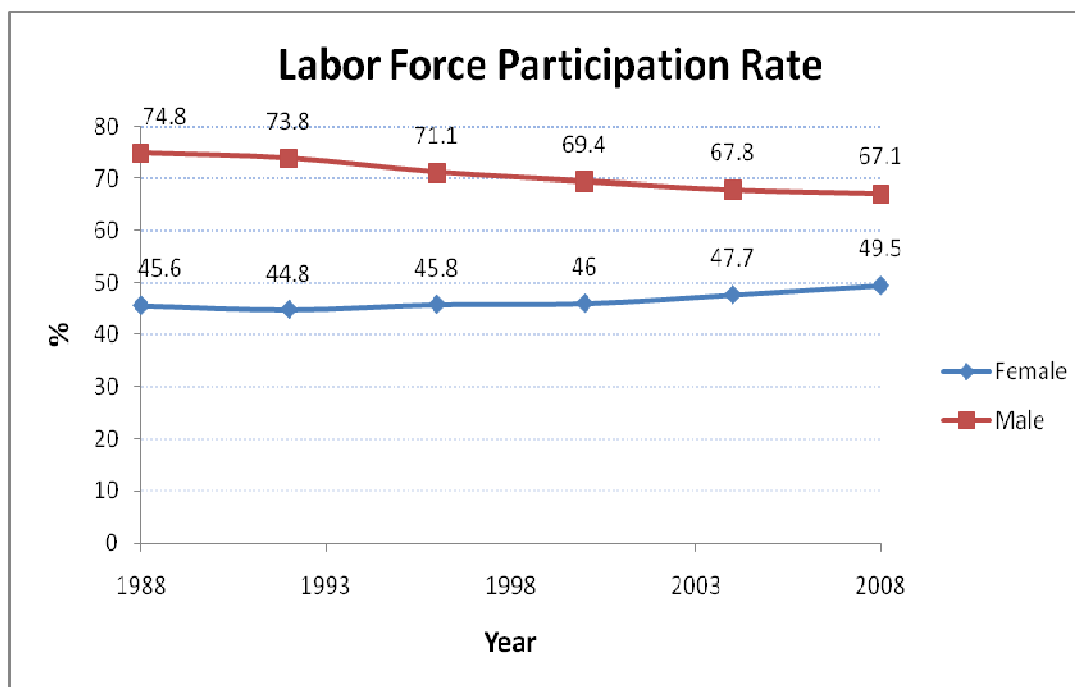
The emergence of women studies as distinct discipline has been proposed to be a solidifying force behind feminist movements and the promotion of women's rights. The first women's research centre in Taiwan, the Women's Research Program (WRP) was established at the National Taiwan University in 1985 (1). Coincidentally, 1985 is also the year in which the Taiwan's divorce law was revised. Prior to the revision of the divorce law, men had exclusive right to their wives' properties including her personal belongings as well as child custody. As a society that has long placed a great importance on marriage, it is interesting to note the divorce rate in Taiwan has been estimated to have increased by about 80% in the early 2000s compared with the 1970s (2). After South Korea, Taiwan now has the highest divorce rate in Asia, with

about 25 percent to 30 percent of marriages in Taiwan ending in divorce (3). Although it is difficult to pin point the precise cause, alterations of traditional gender roles within both the public and domestic spheres appear to underlay women's decision to end their conjugal relationships. An example maybe that changes in the social norms is allowing women to question Confucian gender ideologies and their limited traditional roles as caregivers within the domestic sphere. While, in addition, through participation in the labour market, women are becoming increasingly financially independent from their husbands, thus affording to both financially and ideologically end unhappy and unhealthy marriages.

Education serves an important human capital and personal resource and employment prospects. The overall progress towards higher education and higher employment has become the primary indicators of women's status enhancement. Overall, at all educational levels up to and including Masters degrees gap between the genders have drastically decreased in Taiwan. Although the enrolment of women in PhD programs have seen a steady increase, as shown in Figure1. , it is still significantly lagging behind in comparison to men (4).

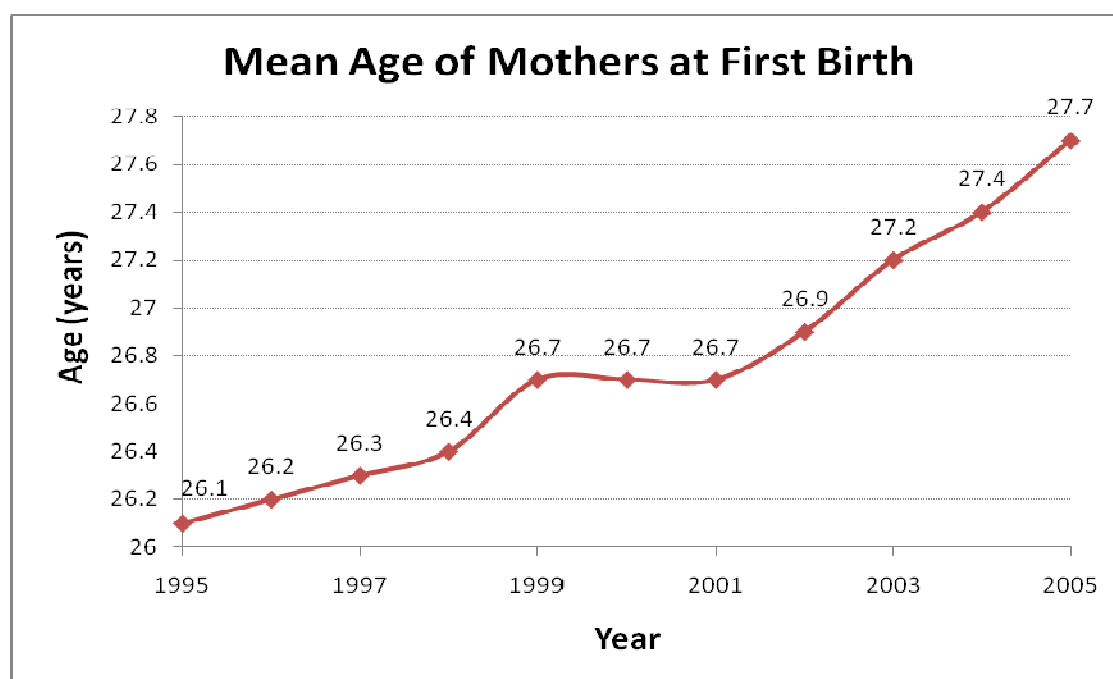


Overall, the narrowing of the gender gap within Taiwan's educational system reflects, at least in part, the success of political policies such as the Gender Equity Education Act. An important practical implication of providing women with an equitable access to education is reflected in women's employment prospects and labour force participation. Understandably, the labour force participation for Taiwanese women has followed a similar trend, having increased from 45.6% to 49.5% from 1988 to 2008, Figure 2 (4).



Aside the rate of women's participation in the labour market, a key measure of women's economic success, is the compensation they receive in comparison to men. Whether considering Scandinavian countries, EU, and North America separately or as a group such as OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), women almost universally earn less than men. In OECD countries the average gender pay gap is 15%, in Taiwan this pay gap is higher and is estimated to be 22% (3). This gap in financial compensation does not only hinder women's financial independence but also influences marital power relations. For example, Taiwan's Gender Equal Employment Law in 2002 has given right to parental leave on a gender neutral basis (3). However, due to better financial prospects of male work, husband's employment is likely to be prioritized when contemplating child care decisions. Similarly, Taiwan's 1996 Child Custody Law, provisions to dismantle the traditional automatic custodial right of the husband (3). This law now aims to base its rulings on the best interest of the child. However, as long as women are discriminated against in the labour market they may be at a

disadvantage at custody hearings. It may be argued in custodial hearings for instance, that financially maternal custody is not in the best interest of the child. Women may choose to stay in unhealthy conjugal relationships due to fears surrounding loss of custodial rights. Other women may decide to enter conjugal relationships and have children at a later age in order to delay the prioritization of their domestic chores over their careers which they are likely to face as wives and mothers. As shown in Figure 3 may choose to enter conjugal relationship and have children at a later age (4) Thus when looking at the female labour participation as indicator of women's status in Taiwan, the compensatory mechanisms that act to legitimize female work as equal to that of males, must also be considered.



### **Civil Code Amendment Bill: a contentious proposal**

Taiwan's Civil Code Amendment Bill is arguably among the most radical pieces of social legislation ever drafted. To my knowledge this bill (although legally it remains an unbinding agreement) is the first legislation in the world to suggest cash payment in return for housework.

Although, has not been specifically targeted to women, given that the idea of a househusband is far from being common in Taiwan (as it is in the western societies), in practice the bill's provision is aimed at women. There have been interesting debates in favour of and in opposition to this bill. Proponents of the bill argue the status of at-home women, who often have no source of income, could be improved by the allowance. While of many of the opponents point out that the attachment of monetary price to household chores, in fact functions to devalue women's work at home. Opponents of the bill also argue that the government has no right to be meddling with the division of household labour within conjugal relationships. Having no knowledge about the success of this bill to date and without closer analysis of the implications of this law in practice, I refrain from formulating an opinion with regards to it. However, the mere act of devising a bill to regulate marital division of labour within conjugal relationships once again implies that the gender roles as understood traditionally within the Taiwanese domestic sphere are more resistant to ideological changes than is the public sphere.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the past three decades of have marked massive modernization process among the East Asian countries. Taiwan undoubtedly takes the leading role in this emerging flow. Industrialization has not only had fundamental influences on Taiwan's economic structure, but has also brought with it changes in social norms and gender ideologies. The change in status of women is an interesting topic in relation to Taiwan's rapid economic growth. Several important legislative pieces such as Revised Divorce and Child Custody Laws, and Gender Equity Education and Work Place Laws have aimed to narrow down the gender gap within the public sphere. Although societal changes have markedly enhanced the status of women, the domestic power structure has not echoed enhancement in gender equality that has been achieved

within the public sphere. Thus, although within reach, gender egalitarianism in Taiwan, has not yet been fully entrenched within the domestic sphere.

## References

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