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Governing Women's Capabilities in China's Urban Expansion

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Abstract

By the middle of the twenty-first century, China's urban population is likely to have grown by about 500 million, to more than 1.1 billion people. This article applies Amartya Sen's concept of capabilities to explore how the government of urban expansion is affecting the generation of rural women whose villages currently are being enclosed by cities and towns. Drawing on interviews, press reports and government and Women's Federation documents from Zhejiang province, it illustrates how local governments' economic growth strategies hinge, in part, on reconstructing gendered relations in the spatial organization, civic management, production and social reproduction in new metropolitan sites. The article concludes, first, that unless China's leaders commit to involving rural women's representatives in urban planning and management, enforcing women's rights to property and enabling women to decide whether and when to work and retire, the capabilities of this generation of rural women will expand little; and, second, that Sen's concept overlooks organizational and material conditions that are necessary for women to enhance their capabilities.

Keywords
capabilities, China, urban expansion, women, employment, neighbourhood management, property, urban planning, welfare

INTRODUCTION

China's leaders view cities as 'symbols of advanced productive forces and modern civilization' (*People's Daily* 2003a; see also 2003b). Urbanization¹ currently is being accelerated as part of a national strategy to restructure production, enhance China's global economic competitiveness and establish a 'modern civilization'. The State Development Planning Commission has

directed that the proportion of the urban population increase from the current level of 41 per cent to 70 per cent by 2050. If that goal is achieved, by the middle of this century the number of people living in China's cities will have grown by about 500 million, to more than 1.1 billion people (*People's Daily* 2002; *Zhongguo tongji nianjian* 2004: 95).

There is a large volume of literature examining factors affecting urbanization in China, much of which focuses on rural–urban migration. Considerably less attention has been directed towards investigating how the spatial growth of cities affects villagers on the urban periphery, though recently researchers have begun investigating 'urban villages' and farmers' resistance to expropriation of their land (Zhu 2004; Liao 2005; Xie 2005). Yet the gender dimensions of urban expansion have been largely overlooked (see, however, Jin 2001; Lou 2007). Most studies in both English and Chinese assume that urban expansion is a gender-neutral process in which men and women enjoy equal assets, opportunities and voice. That assumption is untenable. Compared to men, as well as to urban women, China's rural women have poorer health, lower literacy levels, own less, earn less and are overrepresented among the underemployed and underrepresented in leadership positions (Ying 2005). According to some metrics, their relative disadvantage is becoming more severe. For example, a survey by the All-China Women's Federation (hereafter, WF) found that in the province that is the focus of my research, Zhejiang, income disparities between urban men and women grew from 1.2:1 to 1.39:1 between 1990 and 2000, but the comparable gap between rural men and women yawned from 1.2:1 to 1.9:1 (J. Wang 2004: 54–8). How are these gender disparities affected when rural women are encompassed by urban growth?

The aim of this article is to explore how the Chinese government's ambitious programme of urban expansion affects the generation of rural women whose villages currently are being enclosed by cities and towns. This exercise is intended not simply to recuperate women from their invisibility in policy debates and scholarly literature on urbanization. Rather, what is at issue is how government policies, procedures and discourses affect what rural women are able to 'do and be' in the city. Specifically, how is the government of urban expansion influencing the conditions under which women participate in China's new metropolitan spaces, and thereby altering the gender divisions of power and labour in the world's fastest growing political economy?

My inquiry utilizes the concept of capabilities developed by Amartya Sen (1983; see also 1992, 1993, 1999) to survey different ways in which women's 'doings and beings' are affected by the government of urban growth. I begin by reviewing the capabilities concept then, drawing on literature in feminist political science, development sociology and urban studies, I survey how the government of growth has the potential to transform women's capabilities in complex, contradictory ways. My empirical analysis of rural women's experience of urban growth is based on government and WF documents, press reports and interviews with officials and ninety-two

women whose homes have been newly encompassed by districts, county cities and towns in Jiaxing, Jinhua and Ningbo prefectures in Zhejiang province.² My study suggests that local governments' implementation of scalar competitive strategies of urban growth hinges, in part, on their reconstruction of gendered relations in civic management, production and social reproduction in new suburban sites. The final section of the article draws out the implications of these findings for former rural women in urban China, and for future applications of the capabilities concept.

CONCEPTUALIZING CAPABILITIES

Since publication of Boserup's classic *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970), feminists have criticized development policies that deliver improvements in aggregate welfare while ignoring women's disempowerment and gender inequality (Parpart *et al.* 2000). Yet although the quantitative indices favoured by the architects of economic development policy often prove inadequate to the task of addressing feminist concerns with issues such as empowerment and gender equity, some of the frameworks designed to evaluate women's empowerment and gender equity gloss cultural, contextual and individual differences in the values women place on those goals and the ways in which they pursue and enjoy them (Kabeer 1999: 436; Nussbaum 2000; Robeyns 2003).

It precisely is because it focuses on the extent to which development programmes affect individuals' ability to determine and achieve their own goals that Sen's concept of capabilities has attracted attention from practitioners and scholars of development. Sen (1993: 31) uses the term 'capability' to refer to:

the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection. The concept of capabilities conveys the ideas that living is a combination of various 'doings and beings', and quality of life should be assessed in terms of people's capability to achieve valued functionings.

Functionings include three dimensions: well-being, agency and achievement. Well-being refers not only to welfare indices such as shelter, freedom of movement and personal security, but also to the enjoyment of respect and social inclusion. Sen conceptualizes agency in terms of positive freedoms, including choice of one's own value objects and the ability to effect change in pursuit of those objects. Thus, women's participation in public decision making is recognized as both a means to, and end of, capabilities enhancement (Sen 1999). Achievement connotes accomplishment of the freedom to function as one chooses.

The capabilities concept has obvious appeal for neoliberal policy-makers. It is, as Robeyns (2003: 65) points out, 'an ethically (or normatively)

individualistic theory'. Because Sen argues that inequality in resource holdings is of less consequence to individuals' capabilities than their ability to convert resources into valued functions, the concept meets the rigorous neo-liberal criterion of accommodating respect for diversity and support for equity without requiring a redistribution of wealth and income (Lewis and Giullari 2005). And while the capabilities concept is by no means directed solely towards enhancing market 'doings and beings', it none the less offers a principled foundation for promoting the economic freedoms neo-liberal theorists argue are necessary for the achievement of market efficiencies and optimal welfare (Bergeron 2003). Thus, the concept has become embedded in development programmes, including those in China, that aim to facilitate self-help through 'social capital formation', 'asset building' and 'empowerment' (UNDP 2003).

Indeed, it partly is because of similarities between the strategies operationalized in capabilities-enhancing development programmes and the methods used by Chinese governments to foster modern, market-conforming types of behaviour in the urban political economy that I regard the capabilities concept as a useful framework through which to explore how governments mediate what rural women can 'do and be' in the city. For while China's leaders condemn ethical individualism, their pursuit of the macro-aims of modernity and global competitiveness means they are increasing positive economic freedoms, creating regulatory regimes that incentivize rational individual optimization, and cultivating discourses in which success and failure are rationalized in narratives of personal acumen, and agency expressed through competition and consumption (Keane 2001). These initiatives have had effect: Wylie (2004: 52) describes Chinese women's appreciation of the high incomes, choice, mobility and fulfilment they gain in entrepreneurship and private sector employment.

The capabilities concept is not without its critics, however. While feminist scholars of development have applauded Sen for contributing a conceptual tool that is sensitive to gendered and individual differences in values, goals and practices, a growing body of work expresses scepticism about his conceptualization of freedom as the means to, and end of, capabilities achievement. One problem noted by Gasper and van Staveren (2003) is that Sen's elaboration of capabilities as freedom accords universal status and importance to an historically and culturally unique conception of autonomous, individual agency. They argue that if priority is given to the evaluation and facilitation of individualistic freedoms, women's efforts to enhance their well-being and functionings in social, familial and caring relationships might be overlooked or even de-legitimized.

A second, closely related problem, identified by Hill (2003: 121; see also Hamilton 1999), is that the capabilities concept appears to presuppose 'true interests' that can be ascertained by subjective and objective evaluation, and which should guide women's choice of valued functionings. Efforts to identify 'true interests' are, of course, epistemologically problematic, not least because

they are likely to understate differences in culture, gender and context. Indeed, Sen's own research in south Asia illustrates how gender ideologies limit not only the options actually available to some women, but also their confidence in their ability to choose and the criteria they use to choose. To eliminate the presumption of 'true interests', Peter (2003) recommends that capabilities research must acknowledge conditional choices and situated, restricted expressions of agency.

Of particular relevance to my analysis, though, is that the emphasis on individuals' freedom and assumption of 'true interests' contained in the capabilities concept deflects analytical attention from the pliability of our goals, and the roles played by governments in mediating subject positions, choices and functionings. This is not meant to impute unity and determinism to government. As post-structural interpreters have argued, we might anticipate that even when governments intentionally embark on systemic change, their fragmented structures, shifting alignments, conflicted interests, imperfect procedures and always-emerging discourses would exert what Kantola and Dahl (2005: 51) refer to as 'contradictory effects' on women's capabilities, improving some dimensions of their well-being but compromising others, empowering them in some roles but disempowering them in others. In China, for example, Jacka (2006) has shown how contemporary modes of governmentality simultaneously promote rural women's acquisition of the vocational skills demanded by employers, and feed anxieties that their relative *inabilities*, encapsulated in the expression *suzhi di* ('low quality'), are impeding the country's modernization.

The methodological insights I draw out of these critiques are, first, that it is necessary to attend to expressions of agency that are contingent, relational and situated. Particularly in China, where ideology and customary practice reward the performance of patriarchal collectivism, women may well choose to pursue personal goals through co-operation with family and community, rather than through individualistic actions. I therefore follow Kabeer (1999) and interpret agency enhancement as an expansion of women's *achievable* choices and subject positions. I similarly assume that women's choice of 'valued functionings' might be influenced by governments' valorization of particular subject positions, and promotion of those positions through policies, procedures and discourses. In addition, governments' management of urban expansion might mediate women's capabilities in paradoxical ways. As it is impossible to explore all arenas in which women's capabilities might be transformed, I focus my empirical analysis on three issues that are valued by the women I interviewed: urban planning and management that creates a safe, clean, attractive environment in which they can combine work, care for family and home, sociability and leisure; property ownership, opportunities to decide on the purchase and use of housing and the ability to raise capital to invest in business ventures; and access to employment and the social security entitlements institutionalized in China's residential registration system.

At the outset, it is imperative to consider the mutually interactive dynamics of state-guided decentralization, market transition and urban expansion in China. Over the past quarter-century, the central government in Beijing has propelled economic restructuring, improved the country's global competitiveness and sped urbanization by creating incentives for governments at the provincial, municipal, county and town levels to compete in marketing local comparative advantages. Intent on creating regional growth poles, these local governments contend to win quotas to requisition and develop land, thereby capturing sources of revenue and market opportunities (Sargeson 2004). This decentralizing strategy has complicated the centre's ability to force local governments to implement policies that might adversely affect community business.

The local politics of urban expansion could have contradictory implications for women's capabilities. On the one hand, it is China's central government that historically has championed gender equity. Spatially concentrating population, organizational resources, investment and infrastructure in urban centres could enhance the centre's capacity to implement gender equity laws and policies. As Abrar *et al.* (1998) point out, it might also provide women with more opportunities to join and influence state agencies. Empirical research suggests that, internationally, urbanization correlates with an intensification of women's demands for state support for gender equity (Walby 2002: 543). Urban women also tend to have higher rates of participation in local politics. One therefore might expect the expansion of urban boundaries to present new political opportunities for rural women.

On the other hand, local governments' direct involvement in the processes that Marx (1977) described as 'so-called primitive accumulation' could have pernicious consequences for women. Local governments are forcibly dispossessing villagers of their land, allocating the space to modern industries and services and facilitating villagers' transformation into a wage-dependent workforce (Xin 1998; Guo and Yuan 2004: 25). In industrialized areas, governments are developing knowledge- and capital-intensive industries that generate 'jobless growth'. Women are poorly represented in the local government agencies that profit from urban growth, but overrepresented in labour-intensive industries and among the unemployed (Tong 2003). This could have implications for what governments encourage women to 'do and be'. It is possible, for example, that local governments might externalize the social welfare costs of urban transition onto the default providers of care, women.

The physical planning and management of urban spaces also has the potential to affect women's capabilities in complex ways. Obviously, women's well-being could be improved by the provision of transport, infrastructure and services that meet their needs and wants. Less obvious, but no less significant, would be the opportunity for women to contribute to spatial policy and the design of urban environments in which gender relations will be lived. The benefits potentially

flowing from such changes are implied by Appleton's (1995) comparative study of US cities. Juxtaposing the 'private patriarchy' of suburbs with the 'public patriarchy' of city centres, Appleton points out that the dense infrastructure found in urban centres enables women to shed domestic workload and increase their participation in economic, social, political and cultural activities (see also Robeyns 2003: 81). Other dimensions of women's capabilities might be improved if governments assist women to market goods and services required in new suburbs (Wong 2002).

Yet even in the EU where treaties require gender to be mainstreamed in urban planning, the emancipatory possibilities latent in planning processes are rarely realized (Greed 2005). In China, there is no requirement for planners to consider women's needs. Instead, economic productivity and environmental sustainability serve as key performance indicators. Pre-existing gender divisions of labour could be intensified if businesses are located far from dormitory suburbs and if goods and services that substitute for what is viewed as 'women's work' are priced by markets. Nor is planning a participatory process in China. On the contrary, as Ma (2004: 250) remarks, 'a city's current developmental projects and its future growth patterns are determined essentially by those with financial or political power without consulting citizens'. To be sure, new subject positions and political opportunities might still be opened up by women's participation in suburban management and self-help programmes. But research by Martin (2002) and Jaggar (2005) suggests that this simultaneously could facilitate the extension of women's unpaid labour from the home to the neighbourhood, and greater government surveillance of the home.

The unusual property transformations and transfers that accompany urban expansion in China comprise another arena in which government might affect rural women's capabilities. To accommodate growth, urban governments requisition villagers' collectively owned land, convert it to state ownership and pay villagers compensation for the loss of all collective, household and individual assets. Governments might take this opportunity to challenge customary institutions that make women's rights to real property contingent on their positions in male-headed households by paying individual compensation to women. Recent legislation that clarifies and strengthens property rights might enable women to control and manage newly acquired capital. There are empirical and theoretical grounds for assuming that this could have far-reaching effects on women's well-being, agency and achievements. Agarwal's (1994; Panda and Agarwal 2005) research in south Asia demonstrates that women's ownership of land and housing improves multiple dimensions of well-being. Sen (1999) stresses the agency effects that might be produced by ownership, particularly through the conversion of assets into valued functionings. Other potential second-order effects are suggested by liberal theorists who, following Loch and Madison (Dorn 2003), argue that the acquisition of assets inspires individuals to engage in activism to defend and extend their property rights (Dickenson 1997). Hence, we might suppose that women encompassed by urban expansion

in China would take advantage of government protection and the more robust legal institutions operating in cities to transform their assets into some of the entrepreneurial 'doings and beings' prized in Chinese visions of modernity, and to organize to protect their gains.

However, cross-national studies show that privatization and individual titling of collective and communal property often endows male household heads with sole ownership of resources to which women once had rights (Lastarria-Cornhiel 1997; Li 1998; Deere and Leon 2003). Similarly, in China there is evidence that notwithstanding national legislation granting women equal rights to public, collective and family property, the Government's property reforms have exacerbated gender inequalities in asset distribution. For example, since land-use rights were contracted to households in the early 1980s, the great majority of contracts have been registered under the name of the household head (Li and Bruce 2005), around 84 per cent of whom are male (*Zhongguo tongji nianjian* 2004: 111). Transformation of rural collective enterprises into private and shareholding firms in the mid-1990s resulted in men acquiring disproportionate ownership of enterprises (Dong *et al.* 2004). And the privatization of urban public housing has been associated with a restoration of patrilineal inheritance practices (Davis 2000).³ Propertyless, women in the cities might be not only unable to take advantage of business opportunities, but also socially marginalized.

Finally, as Connell (1990: 529) has remarked, 'the state's power to regulate reacts on the categories that make up the structure being regulated'. In China, laws and policies direct that when local governments requisition land for urban expansion, they must register affected villagers as urban residents. The significance of the residential registration system is waning as China integrates local, national and global markets. Nevertheless, rural residents continue to suffer discrimination and exploitation in urban labour markets and exclusion from welfare systems. Thus, urban registration might improve women's access to formal-sector jobs and pensions. Paid employment outside the household also could place women in a stronger subject position from which to press demands on governments, employers and family members (Bergeron 2003). Yet as I have noted earlier, if urban governments are creating labour regimes that are based, in part, on women's dispossession, exploitation and transformation into a 'reserve army of labour', then rural women's incorporation into urban areas might not enhance their well-being, agency and range of functionings. My study of three prefectures in Zhejiang province suggests that local governments' management of urban expansion does indeed rely upon the maintenance of such gendered co-ordinates of capability.

WOMEN'S CAPABILITIES IN ZHEJIANG'S URBAN EXPANSION

Urban expansion in Zhejiang is being driven by governments' rescaling of local and national political economies. Dilating the margins of cities allows

local governments to achieve centrally designated GDP growth targets, attract investment, increase revenue and boost officials' incomes (Guo and Yuan 2004: 25). The rise of financial and real-estate markets and urban renewal programmes is forcing old industries and poorer residents from city centres. Global demand for new competencies and cheap land and labour is satisfied by governments' requisitioning of farmland and creation of vast technology and manufacturing zones staffed by landless residents and rural immigrants.

The scale and human impacts of this transformation are unprecedented. In 2000 and 2001, local governments in Zhejiang reported requisitioning 38,000 hectares of land, coincidentally displacing 8.7 million villagers (Yang 2003). In 2003, official statistics showed governments requisitioned 48,066 hectares of land. Each of the three case study prefectures recorded expansion: Jiaying, by 6,586 hectares, Ningbo by 6,150 hectares and Jinhua, by 7,866 hectares. Yet official records understate not only the areas of land occupied, but also, and more importantly, the numbers of villagers affected. For example, in 2003 Jinhua municipality reported that land requisitioning had displaced 80,000 villagers, but the actual number dispossessed was almost 150,000. From interviews and unpublished data, I estimate that between 2000 and 2005, more than 1.5 million rural women were affected by urban expansion in the three case study prefectures.

THE PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT OF WOMEN'S CAPABILITIES

Rural women do not participate in the planning of urban expansion in Zhejiang. Governments at county level and above and government-affiliated development corporations that are directed and staffed predominantly by men determine which places will be incorporated into the city and how space will be allocated. Women occupy less than 20 per cent of leadership positions in local authorities, and around 35 per cent of positions in the firms involved in suburban development (*Zhejiang tongji nianjian 2003*), but none of the development zones I visited are headed by women.

Nor are rural women's needs considered by urban planners. None of the prefectures conduct gender impact assessments of proposals for urban expansion.⁴ Planners rejected the suggestion that gender impact assessments might even be appropriate, arguing that men and women equally are affected by urban growth. They thereby ignored obviously gendered usages of both rural and urban space, for rural women derive much more of their income from farming than men, while suburban women spend more time at home than men. Although the central government instructs local governments to consult with villagers who will be affected by urban expansion, local regulations requiring 'uniform planning and management' preclude villagers' participation in the planning process (Ningbo shi 2002; Jiaying shi 2003). Again, planners insisted that these regulations are essential because consultation with villagers is time consuming and could result in an economically

and environmentally sub-optimal allocation of space and capital. Women were said to be particularly obstructive, because they 'irrationally' demand retention of farming plots and low-density housing. Structurally, procedurally and discursively, then, rural women are positioned as the problematic subjects of, rather than participants in, urban growth.

Given women's exclusion from planning processes and planners' refusal to consider women's needs, it is hardly surprising that the urban built environment and infrastructure has quite divergent consequences for women's well-being and range of functionings in the three sites. On the perimeter of Jinhua, the poorest but most rapidly expanding of the prefectures, inadequate investment and planning failures are adversely affecting women's well-being and intensifying gendered divisions of labour. In one street in Jindong district, women whose homes had been demolished to make way for construction in 2001 were still living in temporary shelters and waiting for government re-housing in the spring of 2006. In another three locations, women complained that the lack of basic services and public transport impedes their performance of routine daily tasks, poses health risks and extends commuting time. Commercial service providers have not yet filled the gaps created by the displacement of neighbours and disruption of mutual help arrangements. The intermittent presence of migrant construction workers has triggered concerns about the security of persons and property. Consequently, although loss of farmland and the relocation of factories have deprived most women of opportunities to work locally, they are 'choosing' not to search for work in the city so they can compensate for their families' loss of services and security.

Yet in the suburbs of the wealthy municipalities, Jiaying and Ningbo, similarly gendered divisions of labour are emerging in response to local governments' and developers' meticulous segregation of economic zones, creation of gated residential communities and green belts. The functional differentiation of space necessitates lengthy commuting times. Women who remain in paid jobs are challenged to substitute the neighbourly reciprocal help arrangements that allowed them to juggle double workloads in the village with purchase of dispersed, impersonal market services. These time-consuming arrangements are partly offset by the greater ease of maintaining small apartments, and installation of state-of-the-art communications equipment. But the scarcity of local jobs, complexities of commuting and shift towards capital- and knowledge-intensive production has excluded many women from the paid workforce. Although interviewees said they enjoyed their increased leisure time, the position of housewife has not (yet) been culturally valorized, leaving them susceptible to accusations of indolence.

Increasingly gendered divisions of labour in suburban households facilitate local governments' incorporation of women into neighbourhood management. Participation in neighbourhood management activities does open up new subject positions and opportunities for rural women to interact with lower reaches of the State. Yet none of the women I interviewed had been

recruited into government, elected to neighbourhood office, or were active in civil associations. Moreover, close examination of the terms of their engagement with government suggests that these interactions are shaped not by the women's values and goals, but rather by local officials' aims, belief that rural women are of 'low quality' and attempts to tutor women in gendered practices of urban citizenship. This is apparent in the organization of neighbourhood management in Fuming neighbourhood, Ningbo, a showcase development built to accommodate 1,121 displaced village households in 2003. The district government appointed five young, non-resident urbanites to staff the neighbourhood Residents' Committee. In a written report on her first year in office, the Party Secretary described the Committee members' dismay at meeting the residents:

We found groups of half-dressed villagers sprawled on the grass, pavements and public amenities. These people fundamentally hadn't changed their carefree lifestyle. They aspire to be like us, but lack the ability to behave like urban residents. We had to lead and encourage them, like children.⁵

To achieve their twin goals of improving the neighbourhood environment and the 'quality' of women residents, the Committee launched a school-based anti-litter campaign called 'Little hands holding big hands, walking towards civilization'. Children penned letters instructing their mothers not to compost waste and inviting them to join a neighbourhood clean-up. Local television stations broadcast images of slogan-chanting children showing their mothers how to dispose of garbage. The tactical inversion of mother-child roles not only shamed women into taking responsibility for garbage collection, but also called into question their fitness to parent to urban standards, inspiring even more intrusive efforts to transform women's ways of 'doing and being': urban residents were recruited to teach the women modern parenting, pedagogic and disciplinary practices.

There is little doubt that the planning and management of new urban spaces has transformed women's capabilities in complex, contradictory ways. Underlying these changes is a de-legitimization of the values, subjectivities and functionings that urban governors associate with rurality in general, and with the infantilized, 'low-quality' subject, rural woman, in particular. It is of course possible that women eventually might appropriate the modernizing, paternalistic discourses of government to protest against the planning failures that exclude them from participating in and benefiting from growth; or, from the moral high ground of their government-approved roles as neighbourhood caretaker and solicitous mother, pursue goals they themselves define and which are distinct from or even opposed to the aims of governments. But neither are strong positions from which to challenge governments bent on growing local economies. Moreover, it is by no means certain that the property transfers that attend urban expansion will give women the resources necessary to wield influence and achieve their goals.

Governments' requisitioning of land to accommodate urban expansion dispossesses all villagers, irrespective of gender. In each of the case study sites, villagers are excluded from participating in the valuation of their assets. Governments unilaterally fix compensation for requisitioned land at less than 10 per cent – in some areas, less than 5 per cent – of the eventual market value of the land. Only a fraction of this money eventually trickles down to village households. In some locations around Jinhua, years have lapsed before villagers have received compensation payment for the governments' requisitioning or destruction of their property. Force is sometimes used to wrest land from villagers, and those who protest against either the procedures used or the compensation packages received risk fines, physical harassment or imprisonment.

But it is specifically as a gender that rural women are dispossessed when governments and village committees pay compensation to village residents. This occurs in two ways. First, both governments and village committees treat households as undifferentiated property-holding corporations. Cash payments that, by law, should be paid to individuals are instead given in a lump sum to household heads, the vast majority of whom are male. Women thereby are denied recompense for the loss of their rights not only in collectively owned property such as land, but also in property created through their own labour, such as crops they planted and enterprises they established. Of greater and more enduring impact, though, is that women's rights to housing are ignored. Compensation for demolished housing is paid directly to household heads who use it to rebuild or purchase apartments that they then register in their own names. Although WF officials in the case study sites estimated that women hold title to housing in around 20 per cent of relocated households, among the ninety-two women I interviewed, only nine (9.7 per cent) had either joint or sole title to real property.

Second, women are dispossessed because most village committees link eligibility to receive a share of compensation paid for the loss of collective property to the orthodox custom of exogamous, virilocal marriage (where the wife moves away to live in the husband's family home). Only in households in which there is no able-bodied son will committees allow one uxorilocally married daughter (whose husband has come to live in her family home) to remain registered as a village resident, retain rights in land and other collectively owned assets and thus receive a share of collective compensation. In all other households, when women marry they are expected to transfer their residential registration out of the village. Even women married to urban residents, prohibited by law from moving their registration to their husband's place of residence, are denied equal shares of collective compensation.

Patriarchal collectivism, virilocality and women's underrepresentation in village committees go some way towards explaining gender inequalities in the distribution of compensation payments. Yet we must question why

governments countenance discriminatory transfers. Officials in Yingzhou district, Ningbo, defended their approval of village committees' exclusion of married women by arguing that it encourages villagers' compliance with population planning policies. However, the fact that the female sex of ineligible beneficiaries is specified suggests another possibility: local governments find it politically expedient to allow village committees to limit the number of females receiving compensation, for this maximizes the sum of money received by males and reduces the likelihood that the male-dominated committees will appeal to Beijing for larger compensation packages. Irrespective of governments' motives, however, the outcome of the various compensation payments is that while men usually acquire individual ownership of property in the city, women rarely acquire the same rights.

As Sen (1993, 1999) points out, the subsumption of women's property rights might not prevent them from using men's assets to achieve 'valued functionings'. My interviews suggest that while women's propertyless status does not curtail their capacity to 'be' home-makers, it does appear to affect both the decision-making power they exercise within that role and the extent to which they identify primarily as home-makers. All interviewees said they are responsible for housework and domestic budgets, but only half had played a part in choosing, decorating and allocating space in their houses. One woman scoffed when asked whether women decide how to invest compensation money, 'Men very rarely allow a woman to decide something important. You only need one hand to count the number of households in which a woman is the decision-maker!' But the crux of the issue is not simply that that home-making does not expand the choices and subject-positions available to women. Rather, it is that loss of access to the means of production combined with gender-blind urban planning curtails the range of functioning of many former farmers and micro-entrepreneurs, transforming them primarily into home-makers.

Indeed, in urban areas, women's propertyless status becomes more of an impediment to their participation in business. Without cash compensation or title to property, they cannot secure commercial loans to invest in the more sophisticated technology, leases and licences necessary to relocate and operate urban businesses. Certainly, a handful of the women interviewed had used their husbands as proxy-borrowers, borrowed from kin or taken advantage of the interest-free loans and business training programmes provided to dispossessed villagers by local governments. But capital-dependence combines with masculinist, modernist discourses to circumscribe the choices and subject positions available to aspiring women entrepreneurs. Officials responsible for managing loan disbursement and business training programmes repeatedly described rural women as industrious, but of 'low quality', risk averse and, hence, poorly equipped to compete in markets. As an explanatory narrative, 'low quality' deflects attention away from overt gender discrimination in markets. At the same time, it serves to justify officials' discouragement of female loan-applicants, delivery of training programmes

that transmit the most basic marketing and book-keeping skills and advice to women to enter feminized, labour-intensive industries such as apparel manufacture and commercial cleaning which are susceptible to intense cost competition.

Given their capital-dependence and stereotypes about their *inabilities* as businesswomen, it is hardly surprising that women tend to register their husbands as either owners or directors of the firms they establish. This strategically gendered organizational structuring accounts for the very low proportion of newly urbanized women who are registered as business owners in the case study sites. For example, in the commercially and industrially developed district of Jiangdong, Ningbo, only 3 per cent of former rural women are listed as business owners. The proportion in Xiuzhou district, Jiaying, is as low as 0.8 per cent. Yet the strategy also imposes legal constraints on women's ability to control and manage the firms they establish, and obscures the presence of women entrepreneurs in the urban political economy.

The property changes precipitated by urban expansion have become a focus for women's struggle. Contrary to the predictions of liberal theorists of property, however, in many cases women are organizing to defend patriarchal collective and household property regimes, rather than to assert or advance their rights as individual owners. For example, a group of women near Jinhua had appealed to higher state authorities, courts and the media for the restoration of collectively owned farmland. Their activism was prompted, they said, by fears that the dismantling of collective ownership would eliminate the capacity of village and household to provide intergenerational care and welfare. By counterposing the welfare-enhancing effects of 'togetherness' and co-operation with the potentially adverse consequences on kin and community of property privatization, the women avoided government suppression and family censure. The experiences of the few women who had protested against individual dispossession underscore the difficulties faced by those who press their legal rights as individuals against customary practice: not only were they opposed by local government and ostracized by their neighbours, but even spokespeople for the WF condemned their motives as 'greed', their actions as 'trouble-making'. Activists said they had felt empowered by their new-found understanding of state structures, legal processes and communications strategies. But as Kabeer (1999: 457) remarks, without shifts in the government policies, procedures and discourses that are limiting women's ownership and utilization of property in urban markets, individuals' empowerment is unlikely to trigger far-reaching change.

URBAN EMPLOYMENT, WELFARE AND WOMEN'S CAPABILITIES

Hill (2003: 120) argues that governments promoting capabilities would 'not perpetuate the dependency of the poor on state programs, but rather seek to eliminate such dependency'. Women I interviewed regard both secure

employment and membership of social insurance schemes as desirable alternatives to dependency on family. Yet local governments view women's flexible presence in the workforce as a means of easing contradictions between urban labour supply and demand, a resource attractive to mobile capital and a strategy for providing low-cost welfare for dispossessed villagers.

Sex and age are key determinants of villagers' presence in the urban workforce. Less than half the women of working age affected by growth in the three case study prefectures are in paid employment. In Jiangdong district, Ningbo, the proportion is less than one-third. Whereas most women under 35 are in paid work, the majority over 35 are not. In comparison, almost all men under 50 are employed.

Government spokespeople again referred to women's 'low quality' when explaining both the high unemployment rate among newly urbanized women over 35, and the content of government programmes to increase women's employment. It is apparent, though, that all the nominated programmes focus on attracting investment and sustaining the wage-competitiveness of local economies, rather than assisting women to achieve their vocational goals. Indeed, officials repeatedly described women's training and employment preferences as 'unrealistic'. Government-funded short courses transmit skills required by local employers. Governments also host 'job fairs' and subsidize the wages paid to former villagers recruited by local firms, thereby lowering employers' recruitment costs. The most striking example of local governments' deployment of newly urbanized women's labour in strategies of scalar competition, however, is their recruitment of women to perform the home-based assembly work that underpins many international commodity production chains. Glossy government-printed pamphlets extol home-based assembly as a 'new platform for re-employment of landless villagers, and a bridge to cast off poverty and become prosperous' (Jinhua shi Wucheng qu 2004: 1). In addition to alleviating poverty, the promotion of home-based assembly has obvious utility for governments, not least of which is that it facilitates industrial restructuring without intensifying labour market competition. It also 'frees' women to provide community and domestic services (Pearson 2004), as one WF official acknowledged: 'Home-based assembly allows [women] to earn a little money without neglecting farming, child-care and housework.' On the other hand, women complained that participation in home-based assembly does not generate a secure income, protect their health or equip them with transferable skills, much less enable them to negotiate a fairer distribution of domestic and care work.

To alleviate competition in urban labour markets and mitigate the effects of villagers' dispossession, municipal governments have created social insurance funds financed by joint contributions from governments, villagers' committees and individuals. Although the local nature of the funds produces significant intra-regional disparities in entitlements, all facilitate women's early retirement from the workforce. In the wealthy cities of Jiaying and Ningbo, women are eligible to draw pensions ten years earlier than men, at ages 35

and 45 respectively. Depending on the amount accrued in their funds,⁶ pension payments ranging between 25 and 60 per cent of the average per capita urban income are made directly into accounts registered in their own names. In contrast, Jinhua government has limited the city's fund deficit by the simple expedient of not registering all landless villagers as urban residents, thereby excluding them from receiving pensions. Women struggle to survive on village pensions of less than 20 per cent the average urban income.

The strategy of encouraging women's early retirement on minimal pensions has important implications for their capabilities. As Estes (2004) argues, reducing females' potential life earnings might discourage families from investing in their education and training, and reinforce stereotypes about rural women's 'low quality'. Gender discrimination in retirement accommodates gender discrimination in recruitment, and further masculinization of the formal workforce. A related consequence is that, excluded from the workforce precisely at a point in their life cycle when children's educational fees escalate and elderly parents require medical attention, women are driven to supplement pensions with earnings from informal or self-employment. In other words, their pensions underwrite low labour costs. Admittedly, pensions do provide women with an independent, if meagre, income. Yet given the Chinese governments' valorization of accumulation and entrepreneurship, it is paradoxical that villagers are denied the opportunity to manage their own retirement funds. A final consequence, then, is that rather than being perceived as fund-owners and investors, rural women incorporated into cities commonly are viewed as leeches on the State, community and family (Y. Wang 2004). Thus, the local government of urban expansion repositions women as wage- and welfare-dependants.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have sought to explore how the administration of urban expansion in China affects rural women's capabilities. My findings are relevant both to feminist research on the gender differentiating impacts of government in China and to scholarship on the concept of capabilities.

First, focusing on capabilities illuminates how the government of urban expansion is affecting what women can 'do and be' in the world's fastest growing political economy. It is true that some dimensions of women's physical well-being are improved by their incorporation into wealthy cities, despite the fact that gender-blind planning intensifies gender divisions of labour in and beyond the household. However, where poor planning combines with underinvestment, women's physical security, amenity, employment opportunities and welfare are seriously compromised.

Less sanguine conclusions must be drawn about the effects of urban expansion on women's agency and achievements. Rural women are excluded from planning the spaces in which they will live. Nor can they participate in creating

the cultural standards, governance procedures and citizenship practices that characterize their neighbourhoods. The property transfers that deliver revenue to governments and individual ownership of what once was collective and family property to men give very few women ownership, control or managerial authority over assets. This is not to deny that some exceptional individuals are using property owned by others to engage in entrepreneurship. And, within the cultural constraints delimited by patriarchal collectivism, women are attempting to use new legal institutions to press their welfare claims on governments, communities and families. Yet their actions are not expanding the choices and subject positions available to most women. Instead, government employment programmes encourage young women's participation in low-cost manufacture, while early retirement and social insurance schemes 'free' middle-aged women to perform socially reproductive tasks. Hence, newly urbanized women continue to try to achieve their goals through recourse to family and networks, rather than by attempting to exercise the types of individual freedoms evoked in the capability concept.

Application of the capabilities concept thus illuminates the utilitarian logic that underpins governments' reconstruction of gender divisions of power and labour in China's expanding urban political economies. That logic, in turn, explains the contradictory and rather limited transformations that are occurring in women's capabilities. Local governments are enhancing rural women's capabilities in so far as those capabilities contribute to achieving their goals of enhancing local competitiveness and economic growth. There is little evidence that they are assisting women to define their goals, exercise agency or function in ways of their own choosing. Rather, while propagating the idea that freedoms, local competitiveness and modern civilization are underpinned by rational individual optimization, local governments are implementing policies, procedures and discourses that reconfigure gender disparities in neighbourhood management, production and social reproduction. Unless China's leaders commit to gender equity-enhancing urbanization by involving rural women's representatives in urban planning and management, enforcing women's rights to property and enabling women to decide whether and when to work and retire, this generation of rural women might not experience an expansion of achievable choices and subject positions.

My second finding is that the analysis exposes contradictions implicit in the concept of capabilities. Freedom, for Sen, is both the means and end of capabilities empowerment. But in defining capabilities primarily in terms of various *individual* freedoms such as choice and autonomy in action, Sen overlooks broader structural conditions that would enable women to develop their capabilities. Foremost among these conditions is women's representation and influence at all levels of the state. The central government's commitment to gender equality carries little weight, in decentralized processes of 'primitive accumulation' and local strategies to integrate with global markets. And without adequate representation in local policy, decision-making and development agencies, rural women cannot meet the challenges outlined by

Pearson (2004: 616–18) of specifying their disparate goals and drawing on fiscal resources to invest in capabilities-enhancing programmes.

A second minimum condition necessary for capabilities enhancement is material. Sen suggests that while ownership of goods and resources provide the means for individuals to 'do and to be', it is of less significance than the freedoms that individuals enjoy to convert goods and resources into valued functionings. This proposition resonates with the neoliberal rejection of redistributive policies and support for approaches that protect individuals' property rights, encourage property trading and celebrate 'self-actualisation through the process of consumption' (Gill 1995: 401). But it errs in implying that ownership is not, to an ever-greater extent, a key determinant of individuals' ability to convert resources to valued ends. In China, as in many developing countries, the privatization of a vast array of public and collective goods, strengthening of legal institutions and regulatory mechanisms and liberalization of markets, has increased, not decreased, the significance of property ownership as a requirement for exercising agency and choosing what to 'do and be'. I therefore conclude that analysts of capabilities need to be particularly attentive to the effect of property rights changes on women's well-being, agency and functionings.

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Notes

- 1 In this article, urbanization refers not only to population concentration and intensified land use, economic activities, communications and technological development, but also to the transformation of the administrative status of places, people and land ownership.
- 2 Interviews were conducted in summer 2004 and spring 2006 with officials employed in Zhejiang Land and Resources Office, each prefecture's Agricultural Work Committee and Bureaux of Land Management, Employment and Social Security, street committees, municipal and district offices of the All China Women's Federation, neighbourhood committees and village Party branches. To identify the effects on local women of governments' management of urban growth, rather than migration, only non-migrant women whose land had been requisitioned since 2000 were included in the study. Research was funded by the University of Nottingham's Research Strategy Committee, and British Academy Small Grant 40650.
- 3 In cities, gender bias in inheritance is relatively rare because of the prevalence of single-child families.

- 4 Chinese development projects funded by international donors routinely incorporate gender impact assessment into project design.
- 5 Author's translation from written report.
- 6 Hangzhou city social insurance bureau estimated that each individual required at least 60,000¥ in their social insurance account to generate an adequate retirement income, but village committees and individuals rarely receive enough compensation from land requisitioning to accrue this amount (Guo and Yuan 2004: 25).

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