

Part I: Women in Historical Review

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Mongolian women, since the ancient times have played a vital role in all spheres of nomadic life whether economic, social or political when compared to other Asian countries. According to the Secret History of Mongolia, during the Chinggis khaan's period, women's opinion in the royal court was greatly valued. She was the advisor and her influence in the court was tremendous. Her intelligence was appreciated and respected. The history also tells us how women were actively participating in war and were given military training. It was considered wiser for a man to marry an older woman, as it was believed that she as an intelligent person could guide him better in everyday affairs.

To mention a few of the outstanding women during those times, the first is Chinggis Khaan's mother Hulan who made the way for Chinggis to become a ruler and then Borte the wife of Chinggis. Chinggis respected and trusted her advised. Next is the Kublai khan's mother Sorghagtani Beki and wife Chabi, who had great influence on administrative policies of Mongols. Borji and Khutulun were also prominent and helped their men in administrative skills such as dealing with the people of conquered countries. Khutulun was famous not only for her beauty but for her tremendous strength. She did not marry as she thought that there was no man worthy of her strength. There are many stories written about her by Maroco Polo. The Great granddaughter of Kublai khaan, Princess Sengge was a collector of art specially Chinese Art. It was not only the royal females who played a great role but there were women among the common people too, who were also active. Guan Daosheng was a renowned painter of her times during the Kublia khaan's rule.¹⁾ In the nomadic economy the duties and responsibilities of woman were very demanding. They have to look after the herds and make the dairy products for the family to survive the cold winters. These duties and responsibilities in the nomadic life of women are same even now.

With the decline of Mongolian Empire, the position and role of Mongolian women deteriorated. During the Manchurian period (late seventeenth century) women lost all their rights and were treated like chattels. After the revolution of 1921 and the establishment of socialism, the condition of women started improving. The education for all policy of Socialist Era elevated the position of women and she became a full-fledged member of the society. As her literacy level rose so did her role in the society. Her role expanded and was not limited to the economic sphere only, in which she was always active, whether literate, or illiterate. By the late 1980s she was actively participating in politics, trade, medicine, information technology and education.

1. The socialist period

Under the communist system, basic amenities and requirements of life were almost ensured even if minimally. At least the classical struggle for survival was over and the dignity of labour was ensured. In so far as women's rights were concerned, The Revolutionary Party of Mongolian Peoples Republic adopted its first constitution in 1924 where it established women's rights to be equal to men in education and employment. The Party and State devoted particular attention to make education and culture accessible to women.²⁾ From the very beginning they aimed to arm women with the powerful instrument of education. Their participation in politics and decision-making was encouraged. Co-education became normal practice and the pedagogical principles for both boys and girls were the same from the kindergarten up. In the same year 1924, the women's organization committee was founded, which promoted the wide participation of women in political, social and labor activities while the constitution granted them the right to participate in elections. Participation in social life greatly changed their outlook, their way of life and thinking. Professionally, they became more politically aware. During the 1930's enormous gains were made by and for women: 16 women ministers, deputy ministers and agency heads, 35 percent of judges were women, 40 women headed cooperatives and 14 women out of 35 were in the *Khural* (legislative body) by 1940.³⁾

Government took many measures to build a large work force. Between 1960-1970 focus was directed towards the social welfare, health care, and pension benefits and establishing of professional training centers where women could get training and utilize her knowledge to serve the society. The custom of forcibly marrying off women was legislatively done away with in 1925. Abortion was illegal although not uncommon and contraceptives were mostly unavailable. Total fertility rate reached 7.53 in early 1970 and population growth rate peaked in a few years. Efforts were made to provide many maternity homes with qualified medical personnel, free medical care and meals. Large families were recommended and mothers of such large families were awarded the "Order of Mothers Glory," which entitled them to annual cash award or free stay in a rest home (sanatorium) for a period of 14-21 days.⁴⁾ Working mothers also had the right to take maternity leave of six months following childbirth. This act was enforced since 1977. The upbringing of the children was the common task for both the parents. All the family members shared the household chores. Their role in the society and in the family changed. Mother and child protection laws ensured that women were not interrupted in their work as deputies in the ministries, doctors, engineers, writers and industrial workers.

More than half of the population engaged in national productive labor included

women. The establishment of cooperative movements in rural areas gave a lot of help to women and freed them from the burden of much of their work. In the urban areas also many kindergartens looked after the interests of mother and child thereby giving women further chance to utilize her time in other types of work in a comfortable way.⁵⁾

The rights of women to work, to rest, to educate and receive equal pay were guaranteed. During the socialist regime the majority of women constituted the work force.⁶⁾ On an equal footing with men, one finds majority of women working as herders, in factories, State farms agricultural associations and in other enterprises. With the development of economy and culture, women have acquired higher merited work in all fields of society. However, this emancipation in the socio-economic sphere was at the cost of freedom of expression.

Notes

- 1) Women in medieval China, http://web.clark.edu/afisher/HIST252/lectures_text/women_medieval_china.pdf
- 2) *Mongolia*, 1977, No.2.
- 3) *Socialist Mongolia*, 1981, p.100
- 4) *The 60th anniversary of peoples Mongolia*, p. 101.
- 5) *Mongolia*, 1972, No.2.
- 6) *Socialist Mongolia*, 1981, p.100.

2. Post-transition period

With the collapse of Soviet Union and undoing of communist ideology, countries like Mongolia came face to face with an economic crash. In 1990, most subsidies were withdrawn and many economic entities had to manage without it, hence a lot public and private business entities preferred to survive by reducing the number of staff. As a result, number of pensioners increased four folds. No pension was given to the single women and widows if the husband died outside their place of work. Even when pension was granted, it was often not enough to feed the family and there were no adequate supports for the education of the children. Widows were and are still not in a position to buy daily commodities, as they could not work full time. Women between the ages of 38 to 55 with more than four children were forced into early retirement. Women who were rewarded to have many children and were called the “glorious mothers” during the socialist period were now pushed into poverty. Consequently, these same women who contributed to over half of the labor productivity were almost ignored in all spheres of country’s life and were relegated to social and economic backwaters and marginalized.

The Government was unable to do much as it tried to reshape its whole structure politically, economically and socially from a centrally planned economy to a free market economy. To take the path towards democracy with diminished subsidies from socialist block was a tough challenge not only to the government but also to its citizens. The issues were many. Therefore, the Mongolian government had to turn to the International community for help. The International organizations like Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund and such aid organizations as the Japan International Cooperation Agency, Japan Foundation and the US Agency for International Development all came forward to assist the newly established democratic government. To prepare the government for the market economy many measures were taken with the help of the foreign institutions. Privatization of state assets, elimination of government subsidies affected all segments but its worse impact was on women of Mongolia who had to bear and bring up children, run the household, fend for large family and do odd chores just to keep two ends together. Their unemployment besides the unemployment of the male members led to the alcohol, abuse, domestic violence and finally to divorces that increased the number of female single headed families. These single headed families who were most vulnerable were those who were below the poverty line. In the rural areas her burden was more as she had to look after the herds, make the daily dairy products, construct the fence, which was done previously by the collective farms. Due to this hard labor many families abandoned the herding and migrated to the urban cities especially Ulaanbaatar. Some had the relatives in the cities but some were new to the city. Without a job,

they are forced to use illegal means to earn money. During the transition period prostitution, trafficking of women, street children were the new grave social issues that emerged which the society and government had to deal with. On the one hand they got freedom and opportunities but at the same time they were the ones who had to struggle to grab the new opportunities to overcome the poverty during the early years of transition. The unemployment of both, men and women, the huge migration from rural to cities in search of better life led to the imbalance and a huge gap between the haves and have-not's.

3. Democracy and market economy

United-States of America, came forward with their experts to help Mongolian government in creating a true democratic set-up. Knowing the special strategic and economic importance of Mongolia, United-States of America, made sure that Mongolia does not go back to the rigid method.

The National Parliament “Ikh Khural” (The State Great Khural) adopted a new constitution in 1992. It was amended in 1999 and 2001. The women were given equal rights. In article 16.11 of the constitution, it was stated, “Men and women enjoy equal rights in political, economic, social and cultural field and in marriage.” In the same year 1992, women started mobilizing together for their political, social, and economic status. There was a great response from the women belonging to nook and corner of Mongolia. They proved their potential to the world. These women courageously overcame the hurdles and participated in political, social and economic changes. They emerged with many ideas and activities. They created a network, which helped to promote their interests.

Government of Mongolia put their efforts to reduce the poverty. From 1990-1994 several major changes were introduced to amend the basic pension scale. Due to the concomitant increases in the prices and tariffs on consumer commodities, basic goods and all types of public service, the purchasing capacity of the income remained unchanged despite the increase in the amount of the pension payments. As of 1995, about one quarter of the population was estimated to be living in poverty and women headed over 20 percent of all the poor households. The rise in the number of female headed house-holds inevitably increased unemployment among women with low levels of education and skills, while low wages for those in employment were the major cause for the prevailing trend towards the feminization of poverty as it happened in other post-Soviet countries.

To address such issues, in 1994 the government of Mongolia approved a “Poverty Alleviation Programmer” which is currently being implemented with the international assistance. Subsequently, in 1995 another resolution was passed. Under the resolution number 104 and 105 the scope of the pensions was increased; however, it was applied only to veterans over 70 years old, creating unfavorable conditions for old women who retired on privileged terms because they were mothers of many children.

“The National Poverty Alleviation Programmer” along with the support of the donor countries and UN, the Asian Development Bank and Japanese TASMS tried to create jobs. Priority was given to the *aimags*. *Aimags* governments along with the *soums* had to show the ability to generate employment for women by providing credit for small-scale business. They had to compete with each other for start-up credit funds and involve the local financial community, local women’s networks

and NGO's. By doing so, the visibility of such groups increased and so is the status of women.

In 1996, the Government of Mongolia declared "The National Program of Action" for the advancement of women. In the declaration it was mentioned that, women of Mongolia have been always a sustaining force behind the nation's progress throughout the annals of its history. The advantages and disadvantages of nomadic and sedentary life style of Mongolia had brought them both opportunities and constraints. The Mongolian culture and traditions, which has both European and Asian influence, also affected the role of its women.¹⁾

To implement the laws on National program of Action, Ministry of Health and social policy from 1997-1999 tried to give a budget of 30 million *tugrugs* (Mongolian currency) but not whole was spent for the program.

According to the report of NSO (women and men in Mongolia) in 1998, "Women's political, social and economic participation is much lower than men's. The women constitute only 10.5 percent of current parliament members, 11 percent of government (Cabinet) members, 0 percent of *aimag* and capital city governors, 2.4 percent of *soum* and district governors, 6-13 percent of citizens' representatives of the Khurals (local legislature) at all levels, 0 percent of the heads of the citizens' representatives of the Khurals and 3-8 percent of Presidium members. Even in the judicial branch, despite women constituting about 70 percent of all legal professionals, only 23.5 percent of the Supreme Court members are women."

According to the research of LEOS of 1998, there were 21 political parties of which four have seats in the parliament. Mongolian National Democratic Party also took some steps to appoint some women as senior advisors. As per the report, "An important indicator of progress in the political life of Mongolia is the fact that over the last few years these parties that had been concentrated in the Capital city only have reached out into rural areas establishing local branches and intensifying party work in the country side." Health law was passed in 1998 (it was updated in 2010) and Family law came into force in 1999 with which women were given equal right to inheritance, land and ownership of livestock and other property. In 2006 to improve the condition and health of women, law on Monetary Assistance to the child and family was passed.

Note

1) *The National Program of Action for the advancement of women*, Ulaanbaatar, 1996, p.4.

4. National program on gender equality

In 1995, The Information and Research Centre (WIRC) NGO was established. Their main work is to uplift for the cause of women in Mongolia. Under their various objectives on women's issues, one of the objectives is to collect the information on gender issues, educate the public on such issues, involve the government in policy makers, collect the data on problems confronting by the women in different areas do the research and work for the empowerment of women through educational and professional training. They work with other domestic and international NGOs.

In 2002, the Government of Mongolia adopted the "National Program on Gender Equality" the aim of which was to improve the living standards of its people. By creating a favorable environment in which both men and women could participate equally for the development of their country and benefit equally by the progress. Many NGO like National Center against Violence, Mongolian women's Federation and Democratic women's Association has been taken into confidence by the government in order to achieve its program goals. With the collaboration of UNDP Mongolian office, Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Finance and Economy, in 2003-2004, implemented a project on "Developing Capacity for Gender-sensitive Budgeting." Japanese Women's Development Fund funded this project. According to the Japanese women's development, Mongolia, so far, has been successful in implementing the gender sensitive budgeting, the main aim of which is to make public aware about the gender issues. In order to train and educate the community on gender issue program workshops were set up. In order to change the mindset of the people on the traditional role of gender, seminars were organized in all the four regions, Khangai, Western, Eastern, and Central and in Ulaanbaatar.¹⁾ To make public aware media and press was involved in the training process. In 2005, participation of women in decision-making was included in the Mongolian Millennium Development Goals. This was a big step to ensure the gender equality. But this did not last long. In 2007, State Great Khural removed the Article 28-2 on election law. The law was about the participation of minimum 30 percent of women candidates in the Parliament. The cancellation of law by the Parliament was strongly criticized by many NGO's. The NGO for human rights and development demonstrated a fervent distress. They appealed to the President to show the respect for the international treaties on human rights.

It was only in February 2011 that State Great Khural approved the law on promotion gender equality. The chair person of the UN Gender theme Group Mrs. Rana Flowers while praising the significant steps of Mongolian Government on gender issues showed some concern on the low participation of Mongolian women in decision-making. While emphasizing on the balance of power in the political

sphere between men and women she mentioned that the Government of Mongolia accepted the fact in the Millennium Development Goals progress report of 2010, that it has very low percentage of women in the parliament that needs to be taken care of. Mrs. Rana also mentioned that omitting quota means putting the MDG commitment and its target at risk. This was put in the parliament in 2005 but took a bit of time in the parliament to get the legislation passed on 2011, 14th February. Ms. Sezin Sinanoglu, UNDP Resident Representative in Mongolia, in her opening statement commended Mongolia for its new election law, which introduced the proportional representation of women and includes at least 20 percent of women candidates on each party list.

Michelle Bachelet, Executive director of the UN entity for gender equality and empowerment of women talking on the role of quota in accomplishing the women political Participation, said on March 2012, “Today I call for stronger commitment by the leaders to increase women’s participation in politics. I encourage countries to use quota to expand women’s participation in parliament. It is also good to open public debate about the right of women to take part in government and to hold public office. Democracy grows stronger with the full and equal participation of women.”²⁾ Quotas have a positive effect on increasing women’s involvement in politics. Those countries that have adopted quota system according to the IPU report have gained 27 percent of parliamentary seats compared to those who did not apply quota.

According to the National Statistics of Mongolia, the Mongolian population increased by 1.9 in 2009. The average size of the family is 3.8. Out of 716.5 thousand households, 38.5 percent live in rural areas and remaining 61.5 percent live in urban areas. With regard to number of marriages these increased by 3.3 percent and divorces increased by 26.2 percent in 2009. Number of female headed households is estimated at 8.2 thousand in 2009, increased by 12.4 percent compared to 2006, 12.6 percent compared to 2007 and 5.8 percent compared to 2008. The 42.0 thousand of 51.7 percent of total number of female headed household have up to 3 members. In 2009, number of households with 4 and more children aged below 16 reached at 27.0 thousand, representing 1.0 percent of the total population. The number of single women with children aged below 16 reached at 42.3 thousand in 2009.³⁾

Also according to the National Statistics, females make up 50.4 percent of the country’s population and represent 43 percent of all highly educated people, 70 percent of lawyers and 36.8 percent of state employees in education, health trade and financial sectors. Of the female population, 43.2 percent are below the age of 16, 47.4 percent are aged 16-54 and 9.4 percent are 55 years old and above. By the year 2020, the female population is expected to number 1,730,600, of whom 33.9 percent will be under 16, 54.1 percent will be working age and 12 percent will be

aged 55 and over.⁴⁾

Notes

- 1) November 2005 International Monetary Fund, Country Report, No. 05/405. (Mongolia: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper Progress Report)
- 2) <http://www.unwomen.org/2012/03/michelle-bachelet-highlights-quotas-to-accelerate-womens-political-participation/>
- 3) National Statics office Mongolia. 2009.
- 4) Ibid.

5. Women's labor force

Results from the LFS shows that economically active population in 2009 was 1137.9 thousand of which 1006.3 thousand or 88.4 percent were employed and 131.6 thousand or 11.6 percent were unemployed people. The male and female shares of the economically active population in terms of percentages employed and unemployed people have been close.

According to the document of the European Bank for reconstruction and development in Mongolia compared to many other countries, 51.3 per cent of the employed women play a big role in the Mongolian economy. Women are as educated as men. There are no significant differences in unemployment figures by gender (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1 Differences by gender in Mongolia

	Male	Female
Life expectancy at birth (years)	62.6	69.4
Adult literacy rate (%)	98.0	97.5
Economically active population (%)	48.6	51.4
Employment (%)	48.7	51.3
Unemployment rate (%)	14.1	14.2
Poverty headcount (%)	34.8	43.8
GDP per capita (PPP US\$)	3,046	2,611

Source Document of the European bank for reconstruction and development

6. NGOs led by women

Prior to 1990, Mongolia had one effective Association, the Mongolian Women's Federation. This Organization during the Socialist period was a State Organization and exercised both government and non-government functions, but now is working as an NGO with diminished state resources and with the support of foreign donor countries. I have the privilege to meet its presidents like Ms. Dashaa, Ms Gerelsuren and now Erdenchimegee. Ms. Dashaa told me that they did need money but want to have some tools, which will provide employment to its women. Ms Gerelsuren, a very intelligent and skillful head of her organization was working hard to bring her women colleagues back on the equal footing in all sphere of life. Ms Erdenchimegee introduced me to some of the wonderful women who have been very successful in their ventures.

Apart from these Organizations, there are many others such as the Federation of Mongolian Democratic Women's Association, Mongolian Business Women's Federation, and Women for Social Progress, Lawyer Women's Association, Liberal Women's Brain Pool, Mongolian Consultative Committee, Women Information and Research Centre and Women against Violence, which are active in the field.

These organization have broad agendas including equal rights, access to work, housing and credit, women's legal issues, employment generation and vocational crisis intervention, health care for mothers and infants, promotion of the women's movements and establishment of an independent database. During the transitional economic crisis these were the issues that became the causes of the deterioration of status of women in Mongolia. In addition, the indifference of the government towards the elevation of the economic status of the women had been alarming. Despite the fact that there were a lot of educated, intelligent and talented women working for the advancement to management, the men were not interested in sharing the power. The women are a great power who could be used in the development of the country.

The deterioration of women's status has economic, social, and political dimensions especially in the absence of a clear government policy and participatory mechanisms for the women. On the political front these NGO's have demanded their active participation in the political affairs of the country. Seeing Politics as an effective way to solve their problems, women across the country united to form a coalition of Women's Organization in preparation for parliamentary election. The oldest organization, the Mongolian women's Federation, appealed to the public to support female candidates.

As mentioned above, these NGO's with the assistance of different international women's' organization and with the financial assistance of Australia have established a centre for the victims of different kinds of violence, which has been

operational for quite some time where they provide medical as well as moral support to such destitute people. The violence in the family affecting women and children has become the order of these days, and mostly people prefer to hide such shameful acts sometimes for reputation's sake and sometimes simply not knowing it as a crime. Hence, priority should be given to the women's problems and their basic civil rights. A service to support single mothers was established in Ulaanbaatar at the initiative of the women's Democracy Movement and the Single Mother Society. The Centre aims to help youth and single mothers in securing employment.

The International NGOs in association with the local NGOs have stepped in to alleviate the status of women folk and bring them back on the pedestal that they were standing upon. They are making use of their expertise in their new endeavors mainly in the small-scale trade and commerce as the structure of female employment also underwent a considerable change.

The Mongolian Business Women's Federation was established in 1992, under whose guidance many women led enterprises emerged and they utilized their experience in various fields of business. And some of them have succeeded in establishing their own successful businesses.

Through the authors' observations, the women who worked previously in state run canteens became at first street peddlers of baked items. There are many Mukhlag (small convenience store) run by men, women and even children in Ulaanbaatar. Many women also entered in private sector as canteen operators and restaurant owners. For instance, a lady who was an interpreter in the Academy of Science started her own restaurant serving Indian food, and has 6 other members working as staff. Another woman who was working as a kindergarten teacher established her garment business and is now exporting to the USA. She has more than 20 staff members who are all young women. A dentist opened a private dental clinic with the help of a small loan from special credit line for women. A former state truck mechanic out of work received a loan and put herself and her brother to work on repairing trucks and now she has a registered business and is looking for the tire supplier and a larger workshop. Another woman along with her husband started a business of importing used cars from Japan. Some outstanding women did wonderful jobs of not merely getting a job for herself, but employed all other women co-workers in her factory, which was established with a small loan under a UNIFEM¹⁾ Credit Scheme Project. She started her business at home by making sausages to sell in the street and she could do this as she had the experience of making sausages in her meat factory where she was working during the socialist period. Within six months, she obtained loan and soon repaid it with an additional contribution to the fund so that more women could profit. A year later, she leased production space and hired 14 more employees from the factory where she had

once worked and obtained quality, imported equipment from Germany, which she financed through another loan.

Many NGOs like the Mongolian women's Federation with the help of UNIFEM provided loans to the women. The Federation put an extraordinary effort to encourage women even in remote areas by visiting Gers (Tent) or apartments to provide advise on how to start their own manufacturing units and make use of the funds and grants.

The financial assistance provided by the donor organizations like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, United Nations Development Program, TACIS, World Health Organization, United Nations Population Fund and the Japanese government was in a hope to achieve the goals of the National Action Program such as poverty alleviation program, projects for improving the access to health and education for the vulnerable groups. UNICEF and NGO from United States, Japan and Australia also implemented 6 projects with which thousands of women in the rural and urban areas will receive soft loans, grant aid and free machines and technology so that they can produce garments and grow vegetables which can help alleviate poverty and address some of the problems confronting women.

Likewise, the government of Mongolia is also trying to solve the problems of women with the help and assistance of different International Organizations who are ready to invest in this field. A national program on women's issues for the period up to 2020 was discussed by the congress Labor Minister, E. Gombojav, who stated, "By 2000 the government will make every effort to decrease the poverty and the death rate of the mother. As per his statement, by 2000-2010, priority will be given to the economic and social development of women by creating employment schemes. By 2010-2020, foreign and domestic financial fund will be used for poverty alleviation program to assist poor and female-headed families with low income. Rural women with few animals will be provided part time jobs through income generating projects. Besides they will be provided land for cultivation and restocking, low cost housing, priority health care and vocational education for their children."²⁾

Mongolian women have shown great wisdom and courage while managing their political and economic rights. To ensure rights and freedoms they wish to pursue positive roles in the political and economic spheres of their country more effectively than during the days of regimentation. Their efforts, and the help of international agencies, have been quite gratifying. These powerful women have had a tough time dealing with new emerging issues as well as traditional social and cultural taboos but have shown their capabilities slowly but surely. They are recognizing the importance of democracy and greater market freedom, and have made good use of freedom of thought and freedom of movement. With the freedom of movement they are able to interact with the outside world. With this

interaction, educated women are challenging traditional power bases. Communication technology is a big tool, which has connected them and their country with the world outside. Some smart women took to business because the arrival of multi-national companies opened opportunities for those wishing to build new enterprises. With the passage of time, the Mongol women found favorable connections that gradually helped them change their life style.

Notes

- 1) UNIFEM is the United Nation's fund for women's empowerment strategies. It works with governments and nongovernmental organizations to promote women's political, social and economic rights. With this Fund women are getting financial and technical assistance.
- 2) <http://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/conf/gov/950906230321.txt>