China's recent, rapid economic growth has created new opportunities and new challenges for women. While the rise of the industrial sector has given millions of women the opportunity to earn a living wage, women frequently must migrate to industrial centers to seek these job opportunities. Coming from rural or less developed areas, these migrant women workers often lack formal higher education or professional experiences and are thus susceptible to labor exploitation. Meanwhile, rural women who stay in their hometowns remain vulnerable to economic hardships, particularly in the aftermath of natural disasters.

The Asia Foundation’s Women’s Empowerment Program works closely with our local partners to address these challenges and ensure that women are a key contributor to development in China. The program advances women’s empowerment through education, increases their economic opportunities, mitigates the effects of natural disasters, and helps women access their legal rights.

The Asia Foundation has supported programs in China since 1979, related to legal and economic development, disaster management, and constructive U.S.-China relations.

**MIGRANT WOMEN WORKERS**

Each year, millions of rural Chinese migrate to China’s major manufacturing hubs in search of employment and a better life. Half of these migrants are young women. Most are in their 20s, have limited education or work experience, have little knowledge of their rights under China’s existing labor laws, and are unaware of the existing social services and networks available to them. The combination of these conditions makes migrant women workers vulnerable to labor exploitation and potential abuse by their employers.

Since 1999, The Asia Foundation has implemented groundbreaking programs in China to support and protect migrant workers (particularly women) through: increasing labor rights and occupational safety awareness; providing legal aid; strengthening enforcement of existing labor laws to increase protection of workers; facilitating integration of migrant women into their new communities; and giving women the opportunity to enhance their professional skills and continue their education. To date, our programs have reached more than one million migrant workers in more than 20 provinces/municipalities across China.

**ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**

Recognizing that economic empowerment is key to poverty alleviation, our women’s empowerment program in China also supports women and other disadvantaged groups to explore new economic opportunities, improve their livelihoods, and identify and address issues related to poverty and long-term development in their own communities.

For example, The Asia Foundation piloted a project to assist rural ethnic minority women in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region to become more financially secure by enhancing the quality and marketing of their products, forming or strengthening professional cooperatives, and leveraging microloans. In addition, The
Asia Foundation is fostering entrepreneurship among migrant workers and supporting them to start or improve small businesses, by providing training, mentoring, and micro-credit. Through pilot projects with local partners such as the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA), we are supporting women like Qu Hongru.

**Natural Disaster Recovery**

Natural disasters strike indiscriminately and frequently; those with the least stand to lose the most. The 2008 earthquake that struck Sichuan province killed at least 69,000 people, injured hundreds of thousands, and left 15 million homeless. Women are often the pillars of these earthquake-affected communities, responsible not only for income-generation, but also for the care of the community’s children and elderly. The earthquake exacerbated the challenges that these women face, including heightened stress and isolation. To address the distinct needs of these women, The Asia Foundation worked with local partners to meet the immediate needs of rural women, ranging from psychosocial counseling to housing repair; as well as to provide longer-term assistance to improve women’s livelihoods and ensure that their voices are heard throughout the recovery and rebuilding process. Despite the devastation of the earthquake, women from affected communities are now rebuilding their lives and communities to be stronger than they were before with support from The Asia Foundation.

**Beneficiary Highlight**

**10 YEARS AGO, AT AGE 21, QU HONGRU LEFT HER HOMETOWN** in Hunan Province for Beijing. She worked at a laundry facility, a clothing store, a beauty salon, and finally a home furnishings shop, with two years in between as a full-time mother. Depending on her sales performance, Qu Hongru’s monthly salary at these jobs ranged between US$150–300. In 2009, having gained valuable experience in sales and business operations, Qu Hongru decided to start her own business. She bought the home furnishings shop from her employer, steered it through a 2010 market downturn, and finally broke even in late 2011. Then, just as her family prepared for a reunion in Hunan for the Chinese New Year, Qu Hongru encountered a challenge. Her landlord asked that her shop’s annual rent be paid three months earlier than usual, leaving the business with a sudden, unexpected drop in working capital. Qu Hongru needed a loan, but a loan from a traditional bank involves a long waiting process and high costs, and it’s not always a viable option for a migrant like Qu Hongru, given her residency status. Qu Hongru turned to the microfinance program for migrant women run by CFPA with support from The Asia Foundation. She received a twelve-month loan of RM850,000 (US$88,000), enough for her to keep her location in a high-traffic market visited frequently by potential clients. Qu Hongru’s business is growing, and now earns approximately US$1,000 per month. She has become the major income earner of her family.

**Our Donors Make Our Programs Possible**

With contributions from individuals, corporations, foundations, and public funders, The Asia Foundation is able to create and expand successful programs that make a significant difference in the lives of girls and women across the Asia-Pacific region. To support our programs, or to learn more about us, please visit the Women’s Empowerment Program page at: www.asiafoundation.org.

The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 17 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.