**Revision Notes: Changing status of Women:**

**Example Questions:**

1. How far did the role and status of women change in the period 1949-65?

2. ‘The position of women in China improved radically in the years 1950-1976. ‘How far do you agree with this statement?

**Suggested paragraph themes:**

* **Marriage Law 1950 (How much did it change/improve women’s lives)**
* **Communes during GLF**
* **Effects of the Famine on women**
* **Political role of women**

**Before the formation of the PRC (Background info):**

Traditionally women were discriminated against in China and expected to play a subordinate role. 1930s-40/s - In areas under Communist control Mao insisted that women were the equal of men. Footbinding was outlawed by the Communists.

**Developments during the PRC:**

Mao Zedong declared that 'women hold up half the sky'.

**Marriage Law 1950:**

New Marriage Law 1950 – Concubinage (The practice of men keeping women not as wives but as mistresses) was abolished; Arranged marriages were to be discontinued; the paying of the bride price was forbidden; Women who had been previously forced to marry were entitled to divorce their partners.

Many women used the new freedom to divorce and re marry.

The rate of forced marriages dropped from 30% of all marriages in the 40s before Mao came to power to less than 1% by 1976

In some areas Party cadres refused to uphold the law fearing resistance and unrest.

**In non – Han Chinese areas such as Xinjiang, far from Beijing life for women in many rural communities continued largely unchanged.**

However a special clause was added to PLA regulations giving soldiers the legal right to overrule their wives plea’ for a divorce.

(Possible however point in a paragraph on the marriage law: So many women asked for a divorce that Party officials started refusing permission, despite a re-issuing of the Marriage Law in 1953)

**Agriculture and Communes:**

Early agricultural reforms passed in the early 50s gave women the right to own land and property. This was a major advance since it broke the tradition whereby all property dealings had been controlled by the men of the family. However much of this gain was undermined by the GLF whose collectivisation programme ended the holding of private property by either men or women and required people to live in communes.

Life in communes did bring one advantage – women no longer had the daily task of finding and preparing food for the family as meals were now eaten in huge communal dining rooms. However women were likely to receive less than women.

However now women were the official equals of men, they could be called on to do the work of men. Those women who matched men in their productivity were lauded in communist propaganda as labour heroines, the so called ‘Iron Women’.

In Communes kindergartens were provided for children. However women became distressed as they often had to leave their children for weeks at a time. Standards of care in many of the kindergartens were very poor. By the end of the GLF the kindergartens had collapsed forcing starving women to care for their children as well as work.

Between 49-66, the proportion of women in the workforce rose form 8% to 29%. Much of this work was heavy or dangerous physical labour.

It was difficult to undo traditional ingrained prejudice against women. China was by deep seated tradition a male dominated society. This was clearly evident in the common prejudice against women babies.

Collectivisation entailed a direct and deliberate assault on the traditional Chinese family.

No matter how much women wanted emancipation, few of them felt happy that their roles as mothers and raisers of families was now to be written off.

In many communes women had to live in separate quarters.

**Women during the Famine:**

Under the pressure of the Famine of 1959-61, women lost many of the social advances they had made; men sold their wives to be servants, and their daughters as prostitutes

Women suffered most in the famine between 58 – 62. Divorce rates rose during the famine in Gansu province rose by 60%. Often when food ran out the wife left to look for a husband elsewhere. Her starving family would then have one less mouth to feed.

Wife selling also became common during the famine. Many children during the famine were left motherless.

Prostitution increased as women offered sex in return for food. Dikotter observed that ‘rape spread like a contagion through a distressed moral landscape’

**Political role of Women:**

Women denied a fuller political role in the higher ranks of the CCP

In the CCP women had a subordinate position. During Mao’s time women made up only 13% of the membership of the CCP.

The number of women who became members of the National People’s Congress did rise during Mao’s rule but never on such a scale as to suggest that the CCP had made a priority of promoting females within its ranks.

The Communists did create mass organisations like the Women’s Association to encourage political activism.

The Women’s association set up ploughing lessons for women, organised classes to improve literacy and organised mass campaigns. Official membership of 76 million.

Women became more politically active in the CCP. 20% of all party cadres were women by 1974.

**Extra information which might be of use in a conclusion:**

Definitive judgements regarding the extent of change in woman’s lives after 1949 are problematic. This is particularly so with peasant women. For all the campaigns and propaganda it was clear that women still held less influential jobs and still were expected to undertake most of the household chores.

Even though life in the communes promised greater equality, women were never alleviated of the double burden of increased demands for economic productivity alongside domestic roles and childcare.

However, Mao gave young Chinese, particularly women a sense of personal identity and emancipation and equality

Changing attitudes towards women was more difficult in some of China’s rural areas especially in areas such as Xinjiang province where families in accordance with Muslim teaching, were tightly controlled by men.