CHAPTER NINE

WOMEN’S DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION IN WESTERN CHINA

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Abstract

Both women’s development and environmental conservation are important topics in the process of development in Western China. They have been treated as separate subjects into academic research and practice. However, there is a strong connection between these two topics. Women’s development, originally a concept from the Western world which has taken much time and energy for people involved in Western China development to understand its significance, is more complex than environmental conservation.

In practice, there is a lack of a comprehensive and feasible model on how theory can be used to direct real activities. The relationship between providing solutions for real problems and continuing to support women’s development in Western China is still rather vague. Fortunately, however, a lot of development organizations have emerged to focus on female issues. In the process of protecting the environment in Western China, two things are often ignored. One is the unique connection between women and the natural environment. The other is the impact that the environment has on women’s development. Consequently, we need to place emphasis on women’s development at the same time as stressing environmental conservation rather than neglecting women’s characteristics and functions, their position in modern societies, and their political structures and knowledge systems. Overlooking these aspects will minimize women’s future development opportunities. Meanwhile, women’s development in Western China has attracted interest from developmental sponsors, which should help focus the objectives and process of development in Western China. This is the true reflection of a “people-centered” strategic policy on a community basis.

1. Gender and Its Development in Western China

1.1. Concept and Content of Gender

The concept of gender emerged during second wave feminism in the Western world. In the late 1970s, the concept of gender was proposed by European and American academics to analyze and explain the phenomenon of inequality between men and women which was ubiq-
uitous throughout human history. It was believed that human societies were not only made up of systems of economy, politics, and culture, but also a system of gender. This gender system is the result of certain social and cultural processes and exists alongside other social systems. Founded on these basic ideas, theories, and strategies, women’s development in Western countries experienced an evolution from Women in Development (WID) in early 1970s to Women and Development (WAD) and Gender and Development (GAD) in mid-to-late 1980s. In 1970s, the formation of WID theory was triggered by the exclusion of women from developing countries in the United Nations Ten Year Development Plan, which commenced in 1961. It mainly concentrated on the unequal social roles of women and men in development. It did not only advocate improving women’s physical conditions, such as through education, technology, and health care, but also their social status. Approaching the second half of the 1980s, the majority of development theorists, policy planners, and international development organizations, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, started to shift from WID to GAD. This development concept and theory was introduced to China during the reform and opening, and has been applied in several community development projects.

To accept and apply the concept of gender and GAD in China, a process of acceptance is needed. Compared to the concept of gender, “equality between men and women” is actually more understandable and acceptable in the course of furthering women’s development in China. However, Western governments and international development organizations consider “gender” to be the concept that ensures accurate analysis of women’s situations and promotes women’s development. In truth, the concepts coincide with one another—they both focus on pursuing equality and freedom for both genders in their political status and social status. Nevertheless, “equality between men and women” emphasizes more in the awareness of ideology and the final outcome of women’s development, and it has been included as one of China’s primary national policies, but it lacks practical analysis and theoretical conclusions on how to realize standards of equality and freedom. The concept of gender, on the other hand, focuses more on the methods and process of realizing equality, on how to find out the impact of current social systems on men and women and on how to use tools and methods to resolve such problems. Thus, gender is a concept, a comprehensive analytical tool, and a guide. In practice,