CHAPTER TWO

WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT IN REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN CHINA—SEARCHING AND PRACTICE

Zheng Zhenzhen
Institute of Population and Labor Economics
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Beijing 100732

While reproductive health is an important component of women’s health, women’s health is largely hindered by inadequate capacity and rights. WHO stated that promotion of women’s health would be rendered useless by lack of empowerment, as sustainable development is only possible when women have the right to make voluntary, informed and responsible decisions, and are aware of how their rights are protected within the social context. Women’s health is key to world health.¹ Issues regarding women’s empowerment have been mentioned frequently and on various occasions in recent years, especially after the United Nations defined “promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment” as their third goal of development in the new millennium. However, there has always been discussion and debate about the precise definition of “empowerment”. The early Chinese translations are especially confusing, as it strongly implies an act of “giving” from the top down. “Empowerment” has been translated differently by various fields of activity in China, according to understanding, application, or even preference. Nevertheless, “empowerment” is rather vague even in English, where some argue that its very haziness enables a broader scope of action, thus making the concept all the more valuable.

This paper intends to review women’s empowerment in reproductive health in China according to facts and statistical data under a relatively more operational framework of empowerment. This framework

is adapted from the dimensions of “resources-agency-achievements”, where empowerment is a process by which the resource of reproductive health service supply and distribution is the precondition, and should be ensured by institution or policy; the voluntary choice of acquiring and controlling the resources should depend on the individual’s desire and ability within a supportive social environment. The process of choosing and seizing opportunity is empowerment, and the goal of empowerment is realizing the individual’s goal of development.

In this paper, the development of reproductive health relating to women’s empowerment in China will be reviewed within the “resources-agency-achievements” framework through various phases since reform and opening-up, in order to examine the adequacy of reproductive health resources or opportunities provided, the relative equality of distribution to all groups, the amount of focus on the enhancement of women’s health awareness and their capacity for decision-making, the monitoring and protection of their rights to choose, and finally, the continuity in improvement of women’s reproductive health status.

After reviewing literature and analyzing facts and statistical data, the author concludes that there have been in-depth theoretical approaches to reproductive health and women’s empowerment in China, as well as numerous research findings; furthermore, a variety of pilot projects and programs have been implemented to explore good practices, resulting in some successful experiences. The challenges that lie ahead are realizing gender mainstreaming in national decision-making and project designing, paying more attention to women’s empowerment in policy development and research, and transforming the research results and pilot experience into institutionalized and standardized, sustainable practice.

1. Reconsideration of Reproductive Health and Women’s Rights

1.1 Questions Initiated

The reconsideration of women’s rights in the fields of population, family planning and reproductive health initiated the empowerment of

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