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Do you know what I want? : Revisiting women development needs

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Do You Know What I Want?
Revisiting Women Development Needs

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Population Ageing continues to intensify in Hong Kong while the “Feminisation” of elderly population has become a prominent trend. Since an elderly’s quality of life is closely related to his/her life-course experience, Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies of Lingnan University (APIAS) accepted the Hong Kong Women Development Association’s commission to develop the Women Development Index, so as to enable earlier intervention to improve women’s later lives.

Evolution of Women’s Development

Reviewing the development history of women, the emergence of hunting and farming as production means had favoured men for their physical strengths, and has caused gradual deterioration of women’s status. The labour division of “men ploughing and women weaving” between the two genders has evolved into a norm of subordination that “men is responsible for the outer realm of the home while women, the inner.” Nevertheless, as society continues to develop, especially after industrialisation, male’s authority over female is being challenged by the increasing participation of the latter in the workforce.

In order to help women fulfil their life objectives, numerous feminist organisations used to define “women development” as “striving for gender equality”, and advocated that the whole society should empower the same rights to female as what men have enjoyed. However, since the starting points of the genders are different, the interpretation of the ideal state of women development simply as the levelling of treatments received by women to that of men, not only ignores gender differences, such as ability, personality trends, development objectives and needs, but also women’s real thoughts. Furthermore, regarding women’s aspiration as “pursuing equality in treatments with that of men” is actually subjugating women under men’s development definition. If so, then women will never catch up with men, not to say surpassing men or developing themselves according to their wishes.

New Theoretical Framework for Women Development

Based on Bradshaw’s Needs Theory, women development needs can be categorised into three types: 1) Normative Needs, 2) Comparative Needs, and 3) Felt and Expressed Needs.

Normative Needs
Focusing on equality as human and seeming the basic conditions of survival and development of women in a mature society

Comparative Needs
Stressing gender equality and promoting equal treatment between men and women

Felt and Expressed Needs
As per above, the discourse of gender equality dominating the discussions for decades has limited effect to help women’s development, let alone to address and respond the felt and expressed needs of women. Thus, our research has added a new stratum to the aforementioned feminist efforts, so that the personal desire of women to achieve certain goals or to acquire certain roles, i.e. the “Development Needs of Women,” can be discovered and satisfied.

This new theoretical framework pays attention to whether a society can create a suitable environment for the females that sufficient choices are provided for the females to enable their development of potentials, as well as to allow them to live a meaningful life of their own aspirations.

Personal Development Should Be Self-defined by Women

Based on the above theory, the study reveals recent conditions of women’s development while reflecting their real needs through three stages of data collection: desktop review, focus group discussion and survey.

Although gender inequality still persists, it was found in our focus group that women are generally pleased with their current circumstances and received treatments, and the discrepancy of treatments between men and women is not an obstacle to their development. Survey also revealed that female respondents agreed with the traditional female roles as in family, workplace, and society. Although respondents with different backgrounds had different self-expectations, most of them thought it important to fulfil their family roles. If necessary, they are willing to simultaneously take responsibilities from several areas, such as family and workplace, given that sufficient supporting services are provided.

In conclusion, women development is not chasing after what men have achieved. To determine the development needs of women by mere observation of the discrepancy between treatments received by the two sexes as well as to fight for women equality is actually overlooking women’s true feelings, which indirectly deprives their own rights to self-determination and self-control over personal development. Modern women have independent thinking and decisions. We should put aside our stereotypes, hear their wishes, and support their development in all aspects, so that they can eventually develop out of their own volition.