

Empowering women: China

ABSTRACT

Regional disparities in levels of development throughout China have significant implications for women living in poor areas, who easily become victims of poverty in many aspects of their lives, especially maternal and child health and family planning (MCH/FP). Improving the economic situation of poor women is an important step towards improving their position – but an improved economic situation cannot be viable without improving women’s health conditions and social attitudes towards women in general.

The Women, Population and Development (WPD) programme described here comprised several United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) projects implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Experience of the programme, which was an attempt to empower women, shows how interrelated components affected targeted women in terms of improving their earning capacity, social status and health care conditions, particularly regarding increased information and improved MCH/FP services.

Through the programme, a revolving fund mechanism made it possible to extend benefits to a large number of women and a social development fund paid special attention to women’s social needs. The formation of women’s groups played a key role in uniting women in their activities and, as groups gained strength, permitted women to become more independent. At the same time, the establishment of a county governing body in each county secured the commitment of local leadership to the programme. This in turn became a channel for the advocacy of women’s empowerment.

Towards the end of the programme, which had a comprehensive approach and many goals, the following improvements had been noted:

- increased decision-making power of women in both the household and the community;
- greater economic dynamism;
- better social skills;
- improved gender relations within the household;
- greater community cohesion;
- improved health care and family planning services.

INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have witnessed rapid economic development in China through policy reform and opening up to the outside world. Despite this development, however, about 80 million people were estimated to be living in poverty in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At about the time China began adopting reform and opening up, the government launched a family planning programme to cope with its increasingly serious population situation. With the understanding and support of the Chinese people, the family planning programme has met with substantial success – to date, an estimated 300 million births have been averted. Although China's birth rate is one of the lowest in the developing world, the country still has an additional 13 million mouths to feed every year. In some rural areas the family planning programme has not met with the desired results because of poverty, lack of a social security system, inadequate health services and the persistence of traditional values and practices among the general population, who continue to prefer sons and believe that more wealth is generated by more children.

The status of women is closely linked to their decision-making capacity in all aspects of their lives, including reproductive health. In poor rural areas in China, this status is heavily constrained by unfavourable economic conditions and limited access to credit compared with men. As a result, the social status of women remains low. In the third UNFPA/China country programme cycle (1990-93), the WPD programme was set up to address this issue in a number of areas, with the objective of producing multiple impacts for replication in other parts of China. The programme was launched in 34 of the country's 328 counties classified by the State Council as the poorest in China. Average annual per capita income is US\$40-80; families are often unable to achieve basic food security and lack the resources to break out of their subsistence pattern of agricultural production. It was under these conditions that the WPD programme provided:

- inputs to awaken women's sense of their own power;
 - funds to augment their resources;
- training;
- improved delivery of health care;
- literacy services.

Mobilization of these basic services aimed to respond to the multiple roles of women as the main producers of the household and as mothers and wives.

The programme approach was to provide the means for the rural population – especially women – to increase and foster self-reliance through self-help groups. Women's groups were formed with the assistance of field workers; participation was voluntary. After a period of approximately six months of training and saving,

women were given a modest amount of credit to run small businesses. In general, the women were successful in their income-generating activities and their economic situation improved. As a result, women were able to attain a higher level of autonomy because of greater access to and control of resources and increased knowledge and skills. They were thus able to address their basic needs in relation to their dual roles.

When women are lifted out of the cycle of poverty and dependence, a change occurs. They move from dependence and low self-esteem towards independence and greater control of their own destinies and they participate more in the development of their communities. With their self-confidence boosted by their success in small enterprises, women became aware of their strengths and began to change their views about family size as they perceived that their potential could be better developed by having fewer children. Knowledge of family planning and maternal and child health issues gained during group activities made it easier for women to fulfil their wish to exercise family planning.

PRE-INNOVATION

The poverty of the counties in which the programme was implemented exists largely because they are located in remote arid regions where access to transport, markets and services is very limited and communities face harsh climatic conditions, with long hard winters and very hot summers.

Water is one of the chief constraints to development in these communities. Women are often prevented from developing their skills and activities because much of their time is taken up in procuring water and in household tasks such as cooking and washing clothes, which are dependent on the supply of water.

In some poor rural areas, as the men migrate to the cities in search of better-paid work, women becoming increasingly responsible for farm work, which adds to the already heavy burden of managing households with limited resources.

Illiteracy rates for older women in the programme areas were high, sometimes 70-80 percent. Despite the campaign launched in 1949 to eliminate illiteracy in China, over 200 million people, about 20 percent of the population, are illiterate. Three-quarters of these people are women. Following the introduction of a household contract responsibility system in China's rural areas in 1978, many

⁶⁰ The household contract responsibility system is designed to encourage farm households to increase productivity. It replaces the previous commune system, under which all goods produced by a person were given to the commune in return for work points that determined the share of the produce each member of the commune could receive. Under the new system, individual households are free to sell their produce through the market, after giving a share of their produce to the local council under the terms of the household contract. The principle is to integrate market and personal income objectives among farmers in order to increase productivity and support a market economy.

young girls have been kept away from school to help with agricultural work. The migration of men to the cities for wage labour means that more young girls drop out of school, mainly because of feudalistic beliefs discouraging women from being educated. In poor areas, families cannot afford to send children to school, with the result that poverty plays a role in perpetuating illiteracy.

In remote underdeveloped villages, technology is simple because of isolation and lack of capital. People work very hard, however, for example drawing carts by themselves to take goods to market in distant towns. The provision of skill training and loans through the programme was intended to help improve household and processing technologies and to permit investment in improved transport facilities.

In the remote areas covered by the programme, maternal and child health was in a poor state and the government had recognized difficulties in the delivery of contraception to women, which hampered the implementation of family planning. Programme aims included improving the training of midwives and health workers, providing medical supplies and creating voluntary demand for health services by women beneficiaries.

The profile of the village women in programme areas was generally the following:

- married before the age of 22;
- low literacy levels;
- desire for two or more children, preferring sons to *carry* the family name;
- expectation to rely on their children for support in old age.

Women do most of the household chores and men generally earn a wage: significant reasons for women's low status. Women have few social activities, reinforcing their low self-esteem. The prevalence of contraceptive use in these areas was high, around 90 percent, although the choice of contraceptives was limited and there were supply problems, referred to above. Births mainly took place at home, indicating the need for trained midwives or birth attendants. Almost all households were engaged in crop cultivation. Few households or women were engaged in income-generating activities, apart from crop planting and animal husbandry. The main problems faced by households in crop cultivation were shortage of funds and a lack of technology. The facilities most needed by communities were primary and secondary schools, general health clinics **and** centres for women's activities. In some areas, women showed their preference for kindergartens and **MCH** service sites.

INTRODUCING INNOVATION

The objective of the programme was to promote the advancement of women and their families in poor communities by improving their participation in and increas-

ing their benefits from development, ensuring that such improvements would lead to women's empowerment and responsible practices in bearing and raising children. The programme comprised three major components:

- an income-generating component;
- a social development component;
- a training component.

These components were linked in an integrated approach at grassroots level.

Income-generating component

The first component was implemented through a revolving fund to finance income-generating activities for women, identified on the basis of the following considerations:

Training. As far as possible, women should be carrying out activities on a subsistence scale or on experimental farms after training. Technical competence to carry out activities was to be evident.

Gender. Women should have more direct access to and control over resources, with production benefits going directly to women as the principal beneficiaries. Activities should involve women at household level, in particular those with few or no economic activities.

Health. There should be a potential for increasing the economic productivity of women without adversely affecting their health or responsibilities or unduly increasing their workloads.

Local situation. Local raw materials should be available and there should be no adverse environmental effects.

Economic. Upstream and downstream links should exist, widening the multiplier effect and creating potential for reprogramming the revolving fund into the expansion of related economic activities for women. There should be market potential, so that increased production would not adversely affect prices or costs; marketing channels should be assured. There should be financial soundness and viability of loan repayments to the revolving fund for reprogramming to other beneficiaries.

Institutional. The intended women beneficiaries should be able to obtain the necessary technical advice and backup services such as the supply of young animals, disease prevention, etc. for economic activities.

Family planning. The beneficiaries of the revolving fund should be selected from women of reproductive age, preferably young married women who do not yet have children or have one child. Since the revolving fund would only cover part of the total investment required in the various income-generating activities, county administrations should be responsible for providing the remaining funds required.

Social development component

To address the economic, social and demographic needs of women and their families and to extend the benefits of the programme beyond the women involved in income-generating activities, each beneficiary would make an annual contribution to a social development fund. This contribution would be equivalent to 4 percent of the loan from the revolving fund. The contribution would come from beneficiaries' increased earnings. This sum would be used for social development activities such as upgrading MCH/FP clinics in remote areas, including promoting more efficient contraceptive methods such as copper intra-uterine devices (IUDs) and training to improve women's skills in income-generation and functional literacy. The governing body of the programme in each county would decide how the social development fund would be used.

Training component

Training plays an important role in changing women's traditional attitudes, increasing information on MCH/FP and improving income-generating skills. Specifically, it served to ensure that the intended women beneficiaries had the necessary skills to:

- embark on income-generating activities, with the support of the revolving fund;
- train women in new skills and business management so that they can make effective use of the second-generation fund
- teach women group skills, including organization for savings and credit mobilization and microenterprise development;
- help ensure that income opportunities for women are translated into improved knowledge of family planning, family health and nutrition and more effective management of savings and household income;
- improve literacy levels in poor communities;
- improve the overall status of women in the communities and influence attitudes towards gender roles.

The five main types of training are listed below.

- Technical training. All women beneficiaries received technical training in income-generating activities.
- Literacy classes. Support was given to literacy classes and examinations in conjunction with the Department of Education, so that those trained received an official certificate.

⁶¹ The initial release of funds is referred to as the "first generation" of the revolving loan, while the funds recovered in scheduled instalments are named "second generation" funds.

- Group mobilization. This was a very important component of the training programme, teaching women to establish effective group structures for savings and credit mobilization, microenterprise development and self-help/support for innovative activities.
- Gender/community awareness. An information/training module was developed to influence the attitudes of both men and women about gender roles in the family and community. The aim was to encourage a greater decision-making role for women, more equal sharing of responsibilities, more enlightened attitudes towards female children and the merits of delaying marriage until a later age. The programme also provided information for community members on environmental protection, occupational safety and health measures and a better working environment.
- Family planning/maternal child health. FP/MCH workers at village level were trained under the programme, especially in broad choices of contraceptives and information on women's health care. Special attention was given to encouraging women to use copper IUDs. Nutritional and health programmes on children were also provided. Members of women's groups were constantly reminded of the importance of responsible choice in child-bearing and were able to improve their own health and that of their children as a result of regular training.

The revolving fund and the social development fund were two important means for achieving the objectives of the programme. Proper use of them in the process of implementation relied mainly on organizations at two levels: governing bodies at county level and village women's groups at grassroots level. Both were the actual implementers and beneficiaries.

Revolving fund

The revolving fund was used to provide financial assistance for investments in economic activities selected on the basis of specified criteria to benefit poor women from the programme counties. These economic activities were pre-assessed, principally in terms of their potential for increasing women's incomes and giving women greater access to and control over resources. It was intended that the amount of the revolving fund invested would be recovered in accordance with the schedule of repayments. In most cases, the repayment of each women's group was made over a three-year period, with 30 percent the first year, 40 percent the second and 30 percent the third. Repayments were rescheduled for investment in other economic activities benefiting women, so that access to the fund could become available to the largest number of beneficiaries.

Social development funds

Over and above the first and second generation funds, which constituted the revolving fund, each county programme placed 4 percent of the first generation fund, calculated on the face value of the fund at the date of initial release to the designated accounts, in a social development fund bank account. This was separate from the revolving fund account. The social development fund was paid at the beginning of the second and third year of the programme period. It was used to extend the benefits beyond the women directly benefiting from the first- and second-generation funds to their families and communities, with priority given to MCH/FP activities, including more efficient methods of contraception. The governing body decided how the fund would be used for social development activities in each county.

Governing bodies

A governing body was set up in each county to act as the policy-making authority for the revolving fund and the social development fund and to be directly responsible at local level for the day-to-day operations of the programme. It comprised the county governor (or deputy governor) as ex-officio member, the Women's Federation and representatives from the bank or finance bureau, the Bureau of Public Health, the County Family Planning Commission and the appropriate technical departments responsible for implementation of the programme. The governing bodies were specifically responsible for:

- activities and payments related to the revolving fund and the social development fund;
- approving individual women beneficiaries recommended by each village on the basis of specified criteria and signing legal contracts with them for recovery of the loans;
- organizing and mobilizing women for activities related to the programme;
- income-generating activities, including technical advice and support, e.g. representatives of the county economic cooperation bureaux and husbandry bureaux were involved;
- social development programmes, with technical contributions from the county bureaux of public health, the Family Planning Commission and the Women's Federation;
- training programmes coordinated and organized by the Women's Federation;
- financial matters, including appointing and overseeing an operations manager in charge of the day-to-day operations of auditing and the income-generating component;

- monitoring and guaranteeing repayment to the revolving fund according to the agreed schedule of repayments;
- fulfilling reporting requirements.

Formation of women's groups and activities

Participation in women's groups was voluntary. Field workers held meetings in villages to explain the programme and if there were around 15-30 women willing and eligible to participate, groups were formed, assisted by trained field workers. All group members were trained in community organization and financial management skills. Each group elected its own officials. Group members defined rules and regulations and within the group responsibilities were designated by the members, thus avoiding conflict.

The basic purpose of group formation was to promote mobilization and use of savings by village women. A group of women can agree to save a fixed amount every month. As a group, they can more effectively build up a pool of money to enable them to start economic activities on a viable scale and facilitate credit mobilization. It is easier to obtain a loan as a group than as an individual, because of the possibility of a group guarantee, in order to facilitate microenterprise development. Together, a group of women can learn to assess business opportunities and jointly apply for a loan, thus developing entrepreneurial and business skills and increasing their bargaining power for procuring raw materials and marketing products. Experience has shown that **group** processes can be very effective for enhancing the social and economic status of poor uneducated or poorly educated women. It is easier for women to gain a voice in community decision-making through groups. Groups can also be actively involved in raising awareness on gender issues or drawing attention to gender concerns at community level; group structures and dynamics are intended to organize women to help themselves. The mutual-support function of groups is important in that members of a group can help each other out in production activities, for example carrying out agricultural tasks requiring heavy manual labour. Household women can also receive support from other local women for innovative activities, whether in terms of going into new types of economic venture or breaking away from superstitious beliefs or traditional cultural practices.

Women's groups conducted situation analyses of their villages, identifying the problems and constraints to development and then programming the objectives they wished to achieve. An important aspect of group formation is the development of an action plan, whereby the group develops targets for itself in various spheres of activity, such as functional literacy, savings mobilization, family planning and community activities. The action plans were placed on the wall of the

centre where the groups met, so that all members could see them. Action plans were also reviewed to monitor the progress of the group and revised regularly, because group activities are an ongoing rather than a fixed process.

Following the formation of the group, its members started a savings programme in order to gain savings skills and experience in managing funds before they received a loan from the programme. In the beginning, savings may have been small but as the women gained experience and became more confident about the group and the economic prospects, savings increased. This money was then loaned out to group members for microenterprise activities. In addition, the group used its savings for emergencies.

Group members supported one another in microenterprise feasibility studies, which had to be approved by the group loan committee, thus helping to reduce risk in selecting investments. They learned various skills in order to start their own microenterprises, either with other members or on their own, using loans from the group's savings and the programme loans. These loans were managed as a revolving fund so that more people could use the funds.

Seminars on family planning, women's health care and nutrition were conducted regularly. Healthcare workers could bring the service to more people by holding a seminar for a group than by visiting a village household by household. At the seminars, skills training was provided through local extension stations, so that women could learn new farming techniques. Women also participated in literacy classes to improve their access to information and technical training.

POST-INNOVATION

The impact of the programme was dramatic in that it affected community and household relations and improved women's self-perception and productive capacities. The major aspects of the impact are described below.

Increased decision-making power

Economic activities brought women enhanced status in the village and in the household, allowing them to become more vocal in decision-making in all spheres of life. Their increased self-confidence allowed them to speak up about issues they had previously only listened to in silence. With more input from women, the village was enriched and could better meet the needs of all its inhabitants.

Increased economic dynamism

Women's economic activities have brought a new dynamism to village economics. An outstanding example shows how women's creativity and initiative can lead to a spin-off effect. An enterprising woman in Longxi county in Gansu

province noticed that the township enterprise, which produced noodles, had a by-product that could be turned into hog feed. She suggested that the group form a joint venture with the enterprise. The group was both assured of an economic activity and had a secure supply of hog feed. Furthermore, pollution of the only water source in the village ceased, because the by-product was now being used and not dumped.

Increased social skills

Through engaging in microenterprises, women's spatial and social mobility increased. Through training and activities such as marketing their products and procuring raw materials, women broadened their worldview and were better able to deal with buyers, banks and government agencies. Self-confidence and negotiating skills improved. Many women said that the emotional support they received from the group was just as important as their improved financial and community status.

Improved gender relations within the household

Gender relations in the household appear to have improved. Men saw their wives transform within the context of the group to become more self-confident and productive and, as a result, were more supportive and willing to help with household chores. Women began to participate more actively in decision-making within the household.

Improved community cohesion

Groups became models for building community values. They spread the benefits of their economic success, contributing to the community by setting an example or providing services such as day care, improved clinics and tree planting. Through these community programmes and activities such as folk media, communities came together at social events, which helped cement community relationships for more difficult times. Communities drew closer together in trying to accomplish their common goals. In addition, villages became more dynamic as they realized that there was much they could do to help themselves instead of waiting for outside assistance.

Improved health care and family planning services

These aspects of women's lives improved in various ways. Delivery of maternal and child health care was enhanced by the programme and health care workers could also reach more families by conducting their seminars during group meetings rather than making individual household visits, which made for more effective

delivery of information. Through the programme, the financing of clinics and supplies improved, which led to women becoming more confident in their approach to their health and aware of the importance of good care and preventive practices. In addition, as women's incomes increased, the nutritional level of households improved.

Desire for smaller family size

Women were able to prove themselves capable in business and realized that they could manage and save their money, so they would not need the support of many children in old age. Because rural areas provide few social security systems, people tend to rely on their children in old age and sons are desired because they can help with hard agricultural labour. As women earned more money, however, they recognized the benefits of smaller family size for their health, their time and their future. Women are now planning for the years ahead and for the education of their children. There has also been a shift in attitudes: instead of having more children, women now wish to provide a better quality of life for the children they already have.

General Information

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