

A Study About Chinese Women's Development Foundation (CWDF)

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Abstract: The Chinese Women's Development Foundation (CWDF) is a leading social organization in the field of Chinese women's public welfare. It strengthens the "South-South Cooperation" civil power in global gender equality governance. Based on the history and the practice of the organization, this study systematically explores how it participates in global women's development as well as its achievements, effects, mechanisms, and limitations. This study finds that CWDF shows its unique value through project output, experience sharing, and multilateral cooperation. It not only makes China's gender equality experience more international, but also fills the gap in civil attendance in global gender governance. Though it provides precious experience for women's development in developing countries, it faces problems like uneven regional coverage, a lack of multiple funding mechanisms, and insufficient localization. The conclusion of this study can provide practical reference for China's social organizations to participate in global governance. In the meantime, it also helps enrich the perspective of the multi-subject synergy theory of global gender governance.

Keywords: Chinese Women's Development Foundation (CWDF); Global gender equality governance; South-South Cooperation; Women's empowerment; Chinese civil society power

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background information

The Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development have reached an agreement that gender equality has already become a common goal that is pursued by mankind^[1]. Global gender equality needs the joint effort from multiple subjects, including governments, international organizations, and social organizations. With the rising status of developing countries, social organizations from them are becoming an important civil power to promote gender equality^[2].

China, as the largest developing country in the world, has always actively practiced the idea of a community with a shared future for mankind. And CWDF is one of the social organizations to "go out" and

participate in global gender equality governance. CWDF, founded in 1988, is the most influential public foundation in the field of women's development in China. Its business covers many crucial areas like women's poverty reduction, health support, as well as entrepreneurship and employment. Its brand projects, such as "Mother Water Cellar" and "Mother's Health Express", have been listed in the white paper "Poverty Alleviation: China's Experience and Contribution."

1.2. Research context and position

Current research on global gender equality governance is dominated by two perspectives: one focuses on the macro policy and agenda setting of international organizations such as UN Women, the other concentrates on the practice mode of Western women's NGOs with financial and technical advantages^[3-4]. However, existing studies lack basic introductory and analytical research on the participation of women's public welfare organizations from developing countries, especially Chinese ones, in global gender governance.

As a representative Chinese women's social organization, CWDF's practice in global gender governance has not been systematically introduced in international academic circles. This paper takes CWDF as the research object, systematically introduces its development process, practice fields, and operation effects in global gender governance, and fills the basic gap of the introduction of Chinese women's public welfare organizations in the international research of global gender governance.

2. History and development

2.1. Foundation

In 1988, the China Women's Development Foundation was established in response to the diversified needs of women's development with the progress of reform and opening up. The business supervisor of it was the All-China Women's Federation. Since its foundation, it has undertaken the public welfare service functions for women's development transferred by the government. Its core mission is to "safeguard women's rights, improve women's quality and foster the development of women and women's undertakings." This not only demonstrates its strong characteristic of local services, but also lays the foundation for policy linkage and resource integration in the subsequent international progress.

2.2. Development stages and adjustments

The development process of CWDF shows the trajectory from domestic affairs to international practice. And its adjustments in key stages meet the demands of national development strategies and global governance needs.

2.2.1. Domestic focus

From 1988 to 2010, it mainly focused on domestic affairs. Its core focus was on the protection of the interests and rights of China's women. It constructed many projects to help women; two of the most representative ones are "Mother Water Cellar" and "Mother's Health Express." These projects accurately dealt with the issues many women suffer from, including drinking water safety in the western arid areas and women's medical security in undeveloped areas. These projects greatly accumulated relevant experience in program management, fundraising, and multi-party collaboration. And in the meantime, CWDF formed a unique public welfare project operation mode with Chinese characteristics.

2.2.2. Initial internationalization

From 2011 to 2015, CWDF actively responded to China's strategy of "going out" and stepped into the stage of initial internationalization. It launched cross-border public welfare cooperation with neighboring countries through women's health training, public welfare project experience exchange, and other activities. Also, during this stage, CWDF started to pay attention to global gender equality affairs. It actively participated in regional gender equality forums held by the UN and learned operational experience from international organizations' projects. This undoubtedly showed its ambitious goal to deeply participate in global governance. For example, CWDF has carried out women's health training programs with women's organizations in Vietnam, Myanmar, and other neighboring countries, and shared the experience of domestic maternal and child health care and women's disease prevention with them. At the same time, CWDF sent professional project teams to participate in the regional gender equality forums organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, learning from the project operation modes, resource mobilization methods, and effect evaluation systems of international women's organizations. This stage of exploration not only made CWDF accumulate preliminary experience in cross-border public welfare cooperation, but also laid a solid foundation for its subsequent systematic participation in global gender governance and the formulation of internationalization development strategies.

2.2.3. Systematic internationalization

From 2016 up to now, the internationalization process of CWDF has reached a more standardized and systematic stage. In 2016, it obtained the special consultative status of the United Nations Economic and Social Council. And this became a turning point in its participation in global governance. CWDF defined its strategies as "China's experience export" and "South-South cooperation." Therefore, its international business changed from pilot projects to a systematic layout. By linking to the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, CWDF carries out inclusive work in fields of poverty reduction, gender equality promotion, and women's health improvement^[1, 3]. These projects increase their international influence significantly.

2.3. Important turning points in the international process

There are three key turning points in the internationalization process of CWDF. The first one is definitely its obtaining of special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This established an official platform for CWDF to participate in global gender equality governance. The second one is that it launched "Global Women's Development Partnership", in conjunction with women's organizations in more than 10 countries. This marks that CWDF's international business has entered the stage of large-scale development. The third one is, in 2023, CWDF jointly started the plan of "Women's Digital Empowerment" with the United Nations Women's Office in China. This expanded its cooperation field into emerging fields like the digital economy, further broadening its breadth and depth of global governance participation.

3. Core focused areas and activities

3.1. Core focused areas

CWDF's participation in global gender equality governance, focusing on the key needs of women's development, has formulated a multi-field collaboration business pattern.

3.1.1. Sustainable development

CWDF has devoted itself to improving the sustainable development of women and kids. For instance, in the field of women's empowerment, CWDF paid attention to the entrepreneurship and employment needs of the women in less developed areas like Africa and Southeast Asia. It constructed a model of a well-rounded helping mechanism — “training + capital + market.” Through the experience from “@Her Entrepreneurship Plan” gained in China, it helped women in multiple ways. In Cambodia and Nigeria, in order to assist local women in getting rid of poverty, it provided guidance for them to plant agricultural products and make handicrafts. Also, it made a joint effort with local social organizations to build sales channels for these products to ensure they truly benefit these women.

3.1.2. Financial and health aid

CWDF makes efforts to improve women's and children's health by investing in and providing medical help. For example, the program “Mother Smile Action” offered free treatment surgeries and postoperative counselling for children with cleft lips and palates in poor families. This not only improves children's health directly, but also relieves the burden on their mothers. Meanwhile, to promote women's health protection, CWDF relies on the mature experience of domestic “Mother's Health Express” and “Two Cancers Relief” to implement the “Cross-border Mother's Health Express” project overseas. By donating medical equipment, training local female medical staff, and implementing cervical cancer screening, CWDF met the desperate health demands from women in less developed countries ^[3].

3.1.3. Advocacy and promotion

CWDF actively participated in international platforms like the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and the South-South Cooperation Forum. In these platforms, CWDF shared China's women's development policies and practical experience, trying to make global gender governance more in line with the actual needs of developing countries. At the same time, it trained women's organizations in developing countries to acquire the abilities of program management, fundraising, as well as right advocating. Through the international extension of the program “Super Benevolent Mother” (超 仁 妈 妈), it built a women's public welfare partner exchange network, stimulating the inner power of local civil power.

3.2. Typical program analysis

“Genius Mother Friendship Workshop” is one of CWDF's flagship projects for internationalization. It is a project of women's cooperation between China and Laos. Started on August 19th in Vientiane, this project mainly includes hand-in-hand teaching about Guangxi rattan knitting and Guizhou bamboo knitting. By teaching Lao women these non-heritage skills, this project not only provides employment opportunities for Lao women but also promotes cultural exchanges. And the Lao Women's Federation highly praised the project as “a vivid practice of building a community of shared future in China and Laos. In all, projects like this bring development opportunities for women from developing countries while contributing Chinese wisdom to women's development in the world. Up to 2025, the “Genius Mother Friendship Workshop” has trained more than 500 Lao women in rattan and bamboo weaving skills, and the handwoven products have been sold in both Laos and China through cross-border e-commerce platforms and offline cultural and trade fairs, bringing a stable income increase of 30% for the participating women. In addition, the project has also set up a long-term technical exchange mechanism between Chinese and Lao craftsmen, and compiled

a bilingual teaching manual of rattan and bamboo weaving skills, which has realized the inheritance and innovation of traditional handicrafts while promoting women's employment. This project has become a model of South-South Cooperation in the field of women's development and has been highly recognized by the United Nations Women's Office and other international organizations.

4. Achievements, effects, mechanisms, and limitations in the field of gender equality governance

4.1. Achievements

To start with real statistics, by 2023, CWDF's international projects have covered 12 countries in Africa and Southeast Asia, forming a large-scale cooperation pattern. In projects helping women's employment, more than 50,000 women were trained, driving the employment of more than 30,000 women. As for women's health projects, more than 300 sets of medical equipment were donated, more than 80,000 women received women-related cancer screening, and the average cervical cancer screening rate of women in targeted areas increased by 40%. Compared with other similar international public welfare projects, these statistics show a higher input-output ratio.

These projects also show qualitative characteristics. For women, the projects enhanced women's social status in partner countries by training their skills for living. For these less developed areas, the concept of gender equality had been widely spread, and some partner countries even started to include women's health security and women's employment into regional development planning. At the global level, China's women development experience is widely recognized through international projects, thus significantly improving China's right to speak in global gender governance ^[5].

4.2. Effects

As a representative civil power in global gender equality, CWDF has played a significant role with multiple effects.

Firstly, it empowers the rights and interests of women. CWDF's international projects have always emphasized the desperate needs of women from less developed areas. In the health field, CWDF solves the problem that women are facing by implementing cervical cancer screening in underdeveloped countries. In the economic field, CWDF focuses on improving women's skills for employment, fostering their awareness of self-development, and public affairs attendance. Helping women realize the transition from "passive acceptance" to "active participation."

Secondly, it contributes a significant power to South-South cooperation. Unlike assistance models from similar Western organizations, CWDF provides more practical plans for developing countries, which are low-cost, repeatable, and localized ^[6]. They do not attach political conditions and are more in line with the actual needs of these less developed countries. projects like "Genius Mother Friendship Workshop" take non-heritage as the starting point and solve local women's employment problem while cultural exchange, providing a vivid sample for South-South cooperation. Thus, these CWDF projects compensate for the problem that international organizations' projects are more focused on macroscopic problems rather than minor problems.

Thirdly, it also acts as an invisible bridge for private diplomacy. The projects it holds are accurate about the issues women around the world really care about: women's health, women's employment, and income increase. They are actually non-official communicators of China's gender equality concept and women's

development experience. Therefore, they are able to improve the friendship between China and partner countries effectively, providing China with civil power for country relationships.

4.3. Mechanism

The effects of CWDF on global gender equality governance are realized through step-by-step promotion and multi-channel efforts, which can be concluded into 4 key paths.

Firstly, CWDF directly copies successful domestic projects to less developed countries. Projects like “Cross-border Mother Health Express” can directly solve problems encountered by local women and, at the same time, form successful international samples for other organizations to learn from.

Secondly, CWDF expands its influence by sharing experience through multiple platforms. CWDF shared experience about how to manage multiple power and how to localize projects on platforms like the United Nations Women and the South-South Cooperation Forum. This makes China’s gender equality experience change from a “single case” to a “popularized model.”

Thirdly, CWDF cooperates with multiple powers. On the one hand, it offers training for local women’s organizations to help them improve their ability to organize gender equality activities. On the other hand, it combines the power from China, the local government, and local organizations, making gender equality governance more widely covered and long-lasting.

Fourthly, CWDF cleverly uses the experience gained from target countries. In terms of gender equality governance, China promotes international rules to consider the needs of developing countries more. At the same time, feedback about the problems found overseas can benefit domestic gender equality governance. This forms a virtuous cycle of “overseas practice—domestic optimization—overseas promotion”, continuously improving the overall effect of global gender governance.

This multi-dimensional operation mechanism of CWDF fully combines China’s development experience with the actual needs of developing countries, forming a unique path of “localization adaptation on the basis of experience output.” It not only realizes the effective transmission of China’s gender equality governance experience but also respects the regional cultural and social characteristics of partner countries, which is the key to the effective implementation of its international projects.

4.4. Limitations

Though successful in many aspects, CWDF’s participation in global gender equality governance still faces many realistic limitations.

First of all, there is an obvious shortage in regional coverage. Most international projects of it are mainly concentrated in Africa and Southeast Asia, lacking coverage for Latin America, Central Asia, and other countries with outstanding gender equality needs. This makes its influence on global gender equality governance quite limited and restricts the balance of governance participation.

Moreover, there is a structural defect in its funding mechanism. Most of its international project funds are from government support and domestic donations. And in 2022, the proportion of funds used for international projects is less than 10%. Its overseas independent fundraising ability is quite weak, threatening the long-term progress of international projects.

Additionally, there is a balance between standardization and localization need to be reached. CWDF’s international projects mostly copy domestic mature models. Although the total cost is reduced, there is a

problem of not being acclimatized. For instance, the standards for screening are not fully combined with the characteristics of a high incidence of local disease, which may affect the accuracy of the results.

5. Conclusion and future outlook

5.1. Conclusion

Based on domestic mature public welfare projects, CWDF has played a unique role in global gender equality governance through South-South cooperation. Its “low-cost, repeatable and localized” model has provided differentiated contribution for women’s development in less developed countries. It definitely shows China’s unique power in gender equality governance. However, the problems it faces, such as regional coverage, capital mechanism, and localization adaptation, are common challenges for the internationalization of Chinese social organizations, which need to be solved ^[6].

5.2. Future outlook

CWDF needs to improve its practice in three ways. First, strategic expansion is desperately needed; it ought to expand the cooperation region to Latin America and Central Asia to strengthen its influence. Second, fundraising innovation is also significant. Building a dual-channel fundraising mechanism of “domestic + overseas” helps the long-term progress of its international projects. Lastly, ability improvement is essential for enhancing its international influence. It should build a more professional team and establish a long-term evaluation mechanism. Only in this way can it become a more important power in global gender equality governance and contribute Chinese civil wisdom to the world.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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