

From individual to community - women's semi self help groups as a pathway toward gender equality in the politics of difference

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Women's needs are prioritized in China's political and social welfare agenda, and governments at different levels invest a great deal to raise people's awareness of gender equality and build up women's capability. In Guangzhou, South China, special gender programs are designed and targeted for social services in this field. Yet it's very common in practices that a gap exists between women's actual needs and feminist advocates that inform the services. The former usually consists of everyday needs such as housework and care for the family that are largely influenced by gender stereotypes, while the latter points to more emancipated and radical goals, challenging existing institutions and conditions. How should we understand such conflicts? How should we design services that are reflective of women's everyday needs while heading to a more equal gender environment? How should we respond to the multiple realities women face and how is 'sisterhood' among different individuals possible? This research intends to elaborate on these issues using a case of a special service program for women and children in Haizhu District, Guangzhou. The author collects analytical materials through her day to day contact with the social workers, managing staff, government officials and service users. Interviews, documents reading as well as daily interactions provide good resources for us to understand these questions. I argue that a 'middle level' is needed to fill the gap - women should be mobilized to form semi-self help groups and work toward self help groups, in which process the individual subject is turning into 'community subject', hence the 'community solidarity', and may gradually transform into historical subject in the long way to gender equality. This is a way using collective strength to solve individual problems, to face the politics of difference while creating possibility for dialogues.