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Research on Poverty Alleviation of Chinese Women in New Era

NIE Changhong

Institute of Zoology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100101, China

See next page for additional authors

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Abstract
Women's poverty alleviation is an indispensable part of poverty alleviation, and it plays a vital role in blocking the intergenerational transmission of poverty, improving women's well-being, and building a harmonious and happy family. 2020 is the key node for poverty alleviation to rejuvenation in poverty-stricken areas across the country. In this context, it is of great significance to in-depth study of women's poverty alleviation in the new era. This article first points out the 4 problems that women face in poverty alleviation: gender bias in the countryside, the digital divide, the absence of non-governmental organizations, and the lack of gender awareness in poverty alleviation practices. Next, it introduces the theoretical foundation, international women's poverty alleviation experience and typical scenarios of Chinese women's poverty alleviation. On the basis of these, four suggestions are put forward: one is to internalize gender equality as a rural social code of conduct; the second is to increase training to eliminate the digital divide; the third is to increase the level of socialization of family labor; the fourth is to build an inclusive, flexible and sustainable mechanism for women's poverty alleviation. We hope this paper could provide a reference for women's poverty alleviation in the future.

Keywords
women's poverty alleviation; rural revitalization; gender bias; digital divide

Authors
NIE Changhong, CHEN Tong, WANG Huangang, and WANG Lei

Corresponding Author(s)
NIE Changhong 1*

1 Institute of Zoology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100101, China

NIE Changhong Deputy Director of Institute of Zoology (IOZ), Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), Researcher and Ph.D.Supervisor at University of Chinese Academy of Sciences (UCAS), Deputy Chair of Academic Committee of Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) Research Center, UCAS, Consultant Expert of National Commission of the People's Republic of China for UNESCO, member of the National Knowledge Management Standardization Technical Committee, and Deputy Chair of Writers Association, CAS.She is mainly engaged in the research of science and technology finance, transformation of scientific and technological achievements, macroeconomics, and industrial policies.She has presided over several projects of the Ministry of Finance, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the National Natural Science Foundation of China.More than 10 of her papers or official documents have won the first prize or second prize of Ministry level, more than 50 of her academic papers have been published in SCI indexed journals or core journals such as Xinhua Digest, People's Daily, Management Review, Macroeconomics Research, Public Finance Research, and Journal of Systems Science and Complexity.She has also authored 2 monographs and co-authored 4 other monographs. E-mail: chnie@ioz.ac.cn

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Research on Poverty Alleviation of Chinese Women in New Era

NIE Changhong¹, CHEN Tong², WANG Huangang², WANG Lei³,⁴

¹. Institute of Zoology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100101, China;
². School of Economics and Management, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100190, China;
³. Guanghua School of Management, Peking University, Beijing 100871, China;
⁴. Harvest Fund Management Co., Ltd., Beijing 100020, China

Abstract: Women’s poverty alleviation is an indispensable part of poverty alleviation, and it plays a vital role in blocking the intergenerational transmission of poverty, improving women’s well-being, and building a harmonious and happy family. 2020 is the critical juncture for poverty-stricken areas in China to complete poverty alleviation and achieve rejuvenation. In this context, it is of great significance to carry out in-depth study on women’s poverty alleviation in the new era. This article first pointed out the four problems that women face in poverty alleviation: gender bias in the countryside, the digital divide, the absence of non-governmental organizations, and the lack of gender awareness in poverty alleviation practices. Then, we introduced the theoretical foundation, international women’s poverty alleviation experience and typical scenarios of Chinese women’s poverty alleviation. On this basis, we put forward the following suggestions: internalizing gender equality as a rural social code of conduct, enhancing training to eliminate the digital divide, increasing the level of socialization of family labor, and building an inclusive, flexible, and sustainable mechanism for women’s poverty alleviation. We hope this paper can provide a reference for women’s poverty alleviation in the future. DOI: 10.16418/j.issn.1000-3045.20201007003-en

Keywords: women’s poverty alleviation; rural revitalization; gender bias; digital divide

Women’s poverty has attracted much concern since the proposal of “feminization of poverty,” and it is necessary to take gender awareness into consideration in women’s poverty analysis. For a long time, various implicit and explicit gender inequalities in the society and family add to the hard life of poverty-stricken women. In addition, the conventional family collaboration model of “men going out to work while and women looking after the house” still dominates the rural areas in China and thus women are busy with the free daily household labor. Compared with men, poverty-stricken women suffer from the lack of discourse power and understanding despite the heavy household labor and mental pressure. Facing unfair treatments in all walks of life, they take them for granted. It is difficult for poverty-stricken women to get rid of poverty due to their high vulnerability and the widespread neglect of women’s needs in rural areas. Women’s poverty, a common phenomenon all over the world, is a stubborn stumbling block to women’s liberation and the progress of human civilization. Poverty alleviation of women is not only important for the survival and development of poverty-stricken women but also an essential channel to fight against poverty, block intergenerational transmission of poverty, and build happy families.

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the Central Committee of the CPC with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core has attached great importance to poverty alleviation, formulating the comprehensive multilevel targeted policy to help people lift themselves out of poverty and bringing together the efforts of all parties to eradicate poverty in rural areas. By doing this, we have made unprecedented achievements, which are of historic significance to human development. Poverty alleviation of women is not only an important part of targeted poverty alleviation, but also an indispensable step in eradicating poverty in China. China’s rural poverty-stricken women enjoy significantly higher living standard, more accesses to social services, and wealthier life by virtue of a series of poverty alleviation practices such as the “Women’s Poverty Alleviation Initiative,” which has laid an important material basis for their liberation and all-round development. By the end of 2020, women’s economic poverty will have been gradually alleviated with the poverty eradication. However, we should release systematic policies and take firm actions to relieve the poverty of women in psychology, family, social rights, and other aspects.

Given the above background, focusing on the poverty alleviation of women to enhance rural revitalization, we first introduced main problems and theories of poverty alleviation of women in China and then described the international women’s poverty alleviation experience and typical scenarios of Chinese women’s poverty alleviation. On this basis, we put forward suggestions to promote the poverty alleviation of women.

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1 Main problems in poverty alleviation of women in China

Women’s poverty includes material poverty and human poverty. Material poverty is described by job opportunity, income, property, health resources, etc. Human poverty is mainly characterized by family status, social participation, social relations, etc. [1]. Women’s poverty is special and hidden. Uneasy to be observed as it is, human poverty poses great negative impact on women’s survival and development.

Under the guidance of policies for targeted poverty alleviation, the material poverty of women in China has been effectively relieved. However, the following four problems still need to be solved in women’s poverty alleviation. (1) Gender bias: The awareness of gender equality in rural areas lags behind the legal construction; although gender equality has been a basic state policy since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, implicit or explicit gender bias is still frequently seen in rural areas, which is one of the difficulties in women’s poverty alleviation. (2) Digital divide: Gender bias in rural areas has rooted the feudal thought that “the lack of knowledge is a virtue in women”; in addition, lacking education services, poverty-stricken women in impoverished areas are generally undereducated (most only received primary school education); as a result, with poor learning ability and cognitive ability, they can not adapt to the digital society; moreover, information infrastructure deficiency is a common problem in poverty-stricken areas. The factors above have spawned the digital divide; thus, the poverty-stricken women rarely have the opportunity to participate in the information-based economic activities and enjoy the conveniences brought by digital economy, such as online education, training, shopping, and entertainment. (3) Absence of non-governmental organizations: There are still no or insufficient non-governmental organizations in rural areas and it is difficult for poverty-stricken women to get timely and effective social support by only relying on the community-level workers for women [2]. (4) Lack of gender awareness in poverty alleviation practices: At present, there is still a lack of gender-based statistical monitoring data in China to support women’s poverty alleviation policies; moreover, some regulations on poverty-stricken women in the poverty alleviation policies are infeasible [2].

2 Theoretical foundation for women’s poverty alleviation

The guiding theories for women’s poverty alleviation are the poverty theories, poverty alleviation theories, gender equality and women’s empowerment theories.

2.1 Poverty theories

Poverty is one of the core issues in development economics. The opinions on poverty are as follows: (1) income poverty, which means that the total income can not afford the daily necessities, including food, housing, and clothing [3], (2) poverty of rights, which suggests that the root cause of poverty is the lack of rights or the deficiency of other conditions, rather than low income (the manifestation of poverty) [4], (3) capacity poverty, which implies that poverty is caused by the deprivation of basic capacity [5], (4) psychological poverty, which refers to the psychological and behavioral pattern hindering poverty alleviation [6] caused by material poverty and is independent of the external environment [7], (5) multidimensional poverty, which means that poverty should be defined from the income, health, education, living conditions, and other dimensions (the method for defining poverty from multiple dimensions is available).

2.2 Poverty alleviation theories

Poverty alleviation theories are proposed to find effective poverty-alleviating approaches. The existing poverty alleviation theories can be roughly classified into the four categories: (1) poverty alleviation theories with economic development as the core, which suggest that economic development is the primary driving force for poverty alleviation (such as the “trickle-down effect” [8]), (2) poverty alleviation theories with institution building as the core, which implies that institution building is the key to poverty alleviation (such as the Marxist theory of poverty alleviation by system and “income distribution” theory [9]), (3) poverty alleviation theories with empowerment as the core, which aims to achieve the poverty alleviation by providing equal development opportunities for the poor (empowerment is to create more equitable relationships between individuals or social groups and transformed the relationships into expected actions and outcomes [10]), (4) poverty alleviation theories with improving human capital as the core, which is to enhance the viable capacity of the poor through human capital investment [8].

2.3 Theories of gender equality and women’s empowerment

Gender equality was first proposed in the field of feminism. According to the research on feminism, gender can be defined from physiological sex and social gender. In general, gender equality mainly means social gender equality. Social gender, determined by culture, refers to the roles, psychological and behavioral patterns, resource ratio, and value evaluation of women and men in the society and family [11]. Studies on gender equality mainly focus on the causes and effects of gender inequality. For example, He [12] believes that the root of gender inequality lies in the unequal rights between men and women. In addition, gender inequality brings about huge negative impact as it hinders the survival and development of women and results in the low human capital, gender imbalance, and decline in economic growth [12].

Women’s empowerment, developed on the basis of empowerment theory, is regarded as one of the effective ways to
tackle gender inequality. Empowerment theory first appeared in the field of social work [8]. The empowered are usually the disadvantaged group in the society and empowerment is to strengthen the control of decision-making and resources [8]. Malhotra and Schuler argued that women’s empowerment should be explained on the basis of empowerment’s definition and the special characteristics of women [13]. Women suffer from various kinds of disempowerment and family relationship is the most important cause of women’s disempowerment. Women’s empowerment is a systematic work that involves many areas in social life. As women are not only the object but also the subject of empowerment, external empowerment and women’s self-empowerment are both important for the survival and development of women.

3 International practices on women’s poverty alleviation

3.1 Employment-purposed American family assistance program

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a typical poverty alleviation program in the US. The program is to (1) provide assistance to needy families so that the children can be cared for in their own homes or in their relatives’ homes, (2) lower the dependence of poor parents on the government through employment training and interventions on work and marriage, (3) prevent and reduce the incidence of unmarried pregnancy, and (4) encourage the creation and maintenance of two-parent families [14].

TANF is essentially a conditional cash transfer and service delivery program and families can receive assistance for no more than 60 months if the recipients work with standard performance. Otherwise, the assistance will be suspended. Since the implementation of TANF, employment rate and average income of low-income single mothers in the United States have increased. However, punishment mechanism of TANF is also controversial because families that cannot meet the performance standard are difficult to be employed again and thus suffer from deep poverty [15].

3.2 Human capital development-characterized Brazilian mode

One of the most typical poverty alleviation programs in Brazil is Programa Bolsa Familia (PBF). Aiming to promote social inclusion, eliminate poverty and starvation, and stop intergenerational transmission of poverty, PBF is recognized as the largest conditional cash transfer program in the developing countries. Families can obtain cash assistance if they have (1) children of 6–15 years old (attendance rate ≥ 85%) or 16–17 years old (attendance rate ≥ 75%) being educated at school, and (2) children and pregnant women receiving periodic physical examination [16]. Taking gender into consideration, PBF is to provide subsidies to women of each family as they tend to use the subsidy for their children’s education and the improvement of the family life. PBF plays a positive role in raising women’s income, increasing the students’ attendance, and improving children’s nutrition [17,18]. In addition, PBF enhances women’s control of resources and decision-making power in the family [19].

3.3 Progressive social assistance-featured Chilean model

As the most typical poverty alleviation program in Chile, Chile Solidario (CS) aims to provide “a package of social protections” for families living in extreme poverty. Families participating in CS must sign a “family agreement” which stipulates that families should make full use of a series of services and resources provided by the government to shake off poverty. CS is realized in the following two stages. (1) “Bridge project” (24 months): This stage is mainly the psychological support activities and subsidy granting; families need to abide by the agreement; otherwise, they will be forced to quit but can receive all the assistances for three years and can reapply for participation in CS three years later. (2) Achievement consolidation (36 months): This stage is mainly the granting of subsidies to support the poverty-stricken families to start up business or be employed, with the amount the same as than in “bridge project.” Featuring progressive implementation and mild punishment mechanism, CS has gained remarkable achievements. Mar-torano and Sanfilippo [20] found that CS assisted households in terms of extreme poverty reduction, labour market participation, and access to public resources. In addition, they also discovered that it had a positive impact on children’s well-being through both a high rate of participation in schooling and more regular attendance at health care facilities.

4 Typical scenarios of Chinese women’s poverty alleviation

Since the release of targeted poverty alleviation policies in China, all regions and departments at all levels have made concerted efforts to relieve poverty and proposed a series of innovative methods for women’s poverty alleviation. In this paper, we took the typical “Benevolence Supermarket” in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, “Jinxiu Plan” in Guizhou Province and “Hui Guniang” agritainment in Anhui Province to introduce the women’s poverty alleviation practices. These practices are site-specific and demand-oriented, which have gained remarkable achievements in income increase and poverty alleviation of women.

4.1 “Benevolence Supermarket”—good health habits empower women to shake off poverty

Our research group found the “Benevolence Supermarket,” as a typical poverty alleviation practice, had been
actively promoted in Inner Mongolia and won good comments from poverty-stricken households with file cards (hereinafter referred to as “poverty-stricken households”) in the investigation in July 2019. The “Benevolence Supermarket,” dominated by local government, encourages poverty-stricken households to develop good health habits, strengthen self-discipline, and stimulate the inner motivation with the method of “earning points via good sanitary environment and exchanging points for articles of daily use” following the principle of “arousing the fighting spirit before poverty alleviation.”

Each village in the research area has a “Benevolence Supermarket,” in which all the goods including food and daily necessities are donated by the local government and society. Village committee grades the poverty-stricken households every month according to the family environmental health and their understanding of poverty alleviation policies. The full score is 100 points, and 1 point is worth 1 CNY. Poverty-stricken households can exchange the score for goods of the corresponding value in “Benevolence Supermarket” each month. “Benevolence Supermarket” can help poverty-stricken households to develop good health habits and stimulate their motivation of shaking off poverty. Moreover, it is of great significance for publicizing poverty alleviation policies and promoting the implementation of poverty alleviation.

From the perspective of organization and management methods, the keys to the continuity and effectiveness of “Benevolence Supermarket” are as follows. (1) The appeal and compelling force of local government: The local government provides goods for supermarkets as an activity leader and resource raiser, and evaluates the poverty-stricken households as a supervisor, thereby providing goods of equal value for the poverty-stricken households. (2) The effectiveness of incentive with goods: The participation and cooperation of poverty-stricken households as the motivated are the determinants for the success of this activity. However, the operation mode of “Benevolence Supermarket,” the continuous attraction of goods in the market to the poverty-stricken households, and the credibility of grading process need to be further discussed.

4.2 “Jinxiu Plan”—national handicraft empowers women to get rid of poverty

In 2013, Guizhou issued the Opinions on Implementing the Jinxiu Plan for Special Women Handicraft Industry, aiming at promoting the entrepreneurship and employment for the poverty-stricken women with the characteristic handicraft industries through the “Jinxiu Plan” and increasing their income. Women of ethnic minorities in Guizhou learn the Miao embroidery, horsetail-based embroidery, batik and other handicrafts since childhood, which have been listed as national intangible cultural heritages. “Jinxiu Plan” is mainly implemented in two modes.

(1) “Enterprise + farmer household + female embroider” mode: (1) The Women’s Federation and enterprises organize the embroidery training of the poverty-stricken women and excellent female embroiders in the local ethnic handicraft association trained them; (2) the trained women get the original materials for embroidery tasks from enterprises, complete embroidery in their spare time, and then bring the finished products to the enterprises for remuneration; (3) enterprises sell embroidery products through e-commerce platforms or offline sales to make a profit.

(2) Building ethical brands with the help of “famous and craftsmen”: (1) Veteran craftsmen and folk artists are invited each year for on-the-spot training; (2) On the basis of traditional and modern aesthetics and market demand, handicrafts move toward the market and develop into unique brands; (3) villages characterized by traditional ethical handicrafts are constructed to promote the industrial transformation of ethnic handicrafts.

The “Jinxiu Plan” has achieved good results in women’s poverty alleviation: Through the three years (2013–2016) of implementation of “Jinxiu Plan,” more than 1 million poverty-stricken women have got rid of poverty. As of March 2019, 1,354 special women handicraft enterprises and cooperatives in Guizhou run well, employing about 500,000 women, and the output value of special women handicraft industry in Guizhou Province had reached 6 billion CNY.

4.3 “Hui Guniang” agritainment—regional resource advantage empowers women to overcome poverty

“Hui Guniang” agritainment is actually the entity of agritainment which provides sightseeing, leisure, catering, entertainment and other services relying on the local natural ecological landscape, folk customs and special industries such as agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, and fishery.

“Hui Guniang” agritainment is a key project launched by Women’s Federation and Department of Culture and Tourism of Anhui Province in 2013, aiming at enhancing entrepreneurship, employment, and income elevation of farmers.

The “Hui Guniang” agritainment project is voluntarily applied by farmers. After the application, Women’s Federation and Department of Culture and Tourism of Anhui Province will uniformly name the entities “Hui Guniang” agritainment demonstration base and demonstration...
household for tourism service, allocate a certain amount of support funds according to the scale of operation, and trains the operators of market operation, cooking techniques, and service specifications. After years of management and development, “Hui Guniang” agritainment has become a well-known brand in rural tourism in Anhui Province, gaining remarkable achievements in women’s poverty alleviation. In 2019, the Women’s Federation of a city in Anhui province allocated start-up capital to support five provincial “Hui Guniang” cooperatives and agritainment projects and one municipal “Hui Guniang” cooperative, and provided jobs and industrial dividends for poverty-stricken women. Some cooperatives have also purchased insurance for poverty-stricken women and signed long-term labor contracts. In 2019, “Hui Guniang” agritainment helped 572 poverty-stricken women, 97 of whom got rid of poverty, with a maximum per monthly capita income of 3 000 CNY.

5 Policy recommendations

The year 2020 marks the crucial moment for poverty-stricken areas in China to shake off poverty and seek revitalization. As the number of poverty-stricken population in China decreases, poverty alleviation is drawing to a close. At the new historical stage, the goals of poverty governance have gradually changed into “ensuring the stable poverty alleviation of the poor” and “preventing any relapse into poverty” and the focuses of poverty governance have turned into “effectively connecting targeted poverty alleviation with rural revitalization” and “establishing a long-term mechanism for poverty governance.” With the above background and above content, we put forward the following four suggestions.

(1) Internalizing gender equality into a code of conduct in rural areas to create a good atmosphere for equal rights between men and women Although gender equality is a basic national policy in China and many laws and regulations clearly stipulate to protect the rights and interests of women, gender inequality is common in social life and family life. Recommendations: Firstly, we should strongly advocate gender equality to create a good atmosphere of equal rights between men and women and internalize gender equality into social code of conduct in rural areas; secondly, all branches of the government should strengthen the awareness of gender equality in the policy decision and continue implementing the policy of “stimulating the motivation and spreading knowledge” and “changing the existing habits and traditions” in rural areas; thirdly, we should enhance the social awareness of gender equality in rural areas to improve the weak position of women in all aspects of rural social life.

(2) Strengthening training and narrowing the “digital divide” to construct the inclusive digital villages Digital technology has profoundly changed all walks of life, making the work and life of people more convenient. However, the accesses to digital technology are uneven among regions and populations as most underdeveloped areas, elder and unskilled populations cannot enjoy the digital dividends. Recommendations: We should relevant skill training for women in rural areas should be strengthened, which can not only help them to adapt to the rapidly changing digital society and prevent the “digital divide,” but also improves their skills and helps them seize opportunities brought by the digital economy, thereby gradually narrowing the “digital divide” and building the inclusive digital village.

(3) Increasing the services of childcare and old-age care to enhance the labor-market participation of rural women According to the “China Family Panel Studies” (CFPS) released by the Institute of Social Science Survey, the employment rate of poverty-stricken rural women in China was only 33.4% in 2018 (according to the poverty standard in 2018). A total of 28.6% of the unemployed poverty-stricken women were fettered by the family as they had to bear a child, look after children, or do housework, and the value was 28.4% nationwide. Thus, nearly 1/3 of the women in rural areas have the employment potential. Recommendations: Conforming to the rural revitalization strategy, we should increase the services of childcare and old-age care in rural areas to improve the socialization level of housework basing on the actual situation. This can solve the employment problem of rural women and create more jobs.

(4) Establishing a long-term mechanism for women’s poverty alleviation and building an inclusive, flexible and sustainable social safety network Recommendations: Relevant departments should establish a universal and interconnected social safety network in China so that they can combine different policies to formulate targeted flexible support policies with different deadlines and different funding methods in response to the income interruption and failing to afford basic needs in rural areas. For the setting of various thresholds in policies, randomized controlled trial can be adopted for scientific evaluation with reference to cutting-edge academic achievements. At the same time, considering the “welfare dependence” and “bounded rationality” of individuals, positive and negative incentive mechanisms should be included in the policies.

References


NIE Changhong, corresponding author, Deputy Director of Institute of Zoology (IOZ), Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), professor and PhD Supervisor at University of Chinese Academy of Sciences (UCAS), Deputy Chair of Academic Committee of Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) Research Center, UCAS, Consultant Expert of National Commission of the People’s Republic of China for UNESCO, member of the National Knowledge Management Standardization Technical Committee, and Deputy Chair of Writers Association, CAS. She is mainly engaged in the research of science and technology finance, transformation of scientific and technological achievements, macroeconomics, and industrial policies. She has presided over several projects of the Ministry of Finance, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the National Natural Science Foundation of China. More than 10 of her papers or official documents have won the first prize or second prize of Ministry level. More than 50 of her academic papers have been published in SCI-indexed journals or core journals such as Xinhua Digest, People’s Daily, Management Review, Macroeconomics Research, Public Finance Research, and Journal of Systems Science and Complexity. She has also authored 2 monographs and co-authored 4 other monographs. E-mail: chnie@ioz.ac.cn