

Deliberative Democracy: A Probe into Female Interests Demands and Response Mechanism in Shanghai

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Abstract

Last year, deliberative democracy in mass organization gained great importance in China, which made new demands on the All-China Women's Federation in representing and integrating the female interests, and also provided it new opportunities to strengthen its function in community governance. Facing the new characteristics, the authors analyze how the Shanghai Women's Federation develops the response route and mechanism of female interests from the perspective of deliberative body, content and approach.

Keywords

Mass Organization Deliberative Democracy, Megacity Community, Interests Demands, Response Mechanism

1. Framing the Issue

With the quickening society transition and profound interests structure adjustment, more and more social conflicts have arisen in China. As it proves, how to coordinate society members' multi-interest demands and re-achieve basic agreements at the social level has become a prominent issue both for the Communist Party of China in leading social development, for the government in improving the governance ability and for the development of various organizations.

This year, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China has explicitly expressed its support for the engagement of the All-China Women's Federation (abbreviated to the ACWF) in the social governance innovation and social stability maintenance in order to promote the reform of the mass organizations and increase their vitality.

In Shanghai, typical of megacities where economy is developing rapidly, the interests demands of social groups are various and the community governance is faced with quite a few difficulties. From the perspective of gender, the female interests demands, despite their similarity to the male's, are unique psychologically and physiologically. Under the background of the megacity, the female interests demands show their new characteristics in the new era, which need timely response from the organization concerned. The ACWF, as the only legitimate ideology of women's organizations, is further encouraged participating in deliberative democracy in hopes of affording new approaches to community governance improvement or mass organizations' working mechanism exploration. Its participation has proven to be a task of great significance and how to effectively conduct women's work in communities has become an urgent topic for discussion.

Deliberative democracy (Bohman & Rehg, 1997) emerging in the 1990s was ushered in at the "governing" layer, which was then interpreted from different perspectives by successive scholars. Be it "the democratic government" by Cooke (Cooke, 2000), "the community" by Cohen (Cohen, 1997), "a form of democratic governance" by Miller (Miller, 2002) or "a form of governance" by Valadez (Valadez, 2001), all of them cover citizens of equal rights, value appeal with public interests in common, rational public negotiation and legalization of law and decision making.

While the western deliberative democracy theories are developing, more weight is given to the building of the Chinese society and the governance of urban and rural communities is becoming a spotlight among policy makers and scholars. Relevant researches in China, in agreement with China's economic and social development, focus first on the organizational functions of sub-district offices and neighborhood committees, then on the interaction between the government and the society and the public, and now on the consultation and involvement. Currently, the optimal public affairs management and control are not centralized any longer but diversified, decentralized and network-based, which cover multi-layer right and benefit coordination. With this in view, researches into Chinese community democracy tend to be conducted in terms of the following: First, how to comprehend the significance of urban community deliberative democracy; Second, how to realize residents' effective involvement; Lastly, how to deal with the relation among the community governing body. These studies are conducive to the probe into community deliberative democracy.

China's urban and rural community deliberative democracy has two tendencies. Corresponding with the Party's desire to strengthen political power construction at the basic level, the first one is to attach importance to political power construction at the basic level and community governance power transfer to the lower level, which expands the function of basic level governments, especially the leading role of basic-level organizations in the building of the Party. Corresponding with the demand of "small government, big society", the second is to place emphasis on community mobilization, residents' involvement and community autonomy, which requires raising the awareness of community affairs involvement and changing redundant management and low efficiency of the government. Restricted to the macro analysis of "how to do"—theoretical countermeasures for the building of China's urban and rural community deli-

berative democracy, most studies available have failed to deal with the dilemma of “what to do”. For the ACWF, how to create an operational path of conducting deliberative democracy in community governance and strengthen the discourse power in the deliberative democracy mechanism turns out to be an issue to be analyzed at length.

2. New Opportunities for the ACWF and Other Women’s Organizations to Strengthen Their Functions in Community Governance

In China, by mass organization is generally meant a NGO, especially the eight people’s organizations that attend the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. They are involved in the national policy making, national construction and mass work, which proves of great importance to the Communist Party of China (abbreviated to the CPC). As one of the eight organizations and representation of the female “half sky”, the ACWF gains new chances to better adapt to the social changes and make improvements thanks to the mass organizations’ engagement in deliberative democracy.

2.1. One Main Body in Deliberative Democracy

According to the requirements, the ACWF should conduct deliberative democracy in mass work of the CPC, organize and attend public affairs on behalf of women and reflect women’s volition and interests, thereby becoming a bridge and bond between the CPC and the female group. More specific are what follow. First, mechanisms should be built for the ACWF to participate in deliberative democracy over all channels, especially on issues concerning female rights and interests protection. The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference is expected to have the ACWF carry on consultation, inspection and investigation so as to enhance its relation to other committees. Second, it is desirable that women should be guided by the ACWF to perform deliberative democracy especially on issues concerning their interests. Contacting channels and working fields should be extended to include the new emerging women in the service, for instance. What’s more, the ACWF is supposed to play a leading role in guiding the related social organizations in order to build a platform where these organizations communicate with the Party committee and government (People’s Daily, 2015-02-10).

2.2. Main Body in Deliberative Democracy at the Basic Level

The basic units are where the most decisions on the mass interests are made. Deliberative democracy at the basic level is carried out mainly in blocks, towns and villages; the ACWF has some advantages in doing this because of its organization network (Chen, 2011).

At the block and town level, the ACWF branches promote social harmony and stability through deliberative democracy, with emphasis on the town and country planning, construction projects, land expropriation and housing demolition as well as other female issues. They help rural women unions perform deliberative democracy on important decision making. In addition, they struggle to make sound the mechanism to link related social women’s organizations, leading them to make effective deliberative democracy in hopes of affording better society services.

At the village level, a variety of women conferences and organizations reflect the interests demands of the village women and submit to the ACWF branch of higher hierarchy the issues that cannot be solved by means of deliberative democracy or that are in dispute. At the same time, deliberative democracy is achieved horizontally by virtue of various villagers' conferences.

3. A Case Study: The Characteristics of ACWF from the Perspective of Deliberative Democracy

By a quantitative analysis of 452 questionnaires as well as a qualitative analysis of 5 ACWF branches at the block and town level and interviews in 9 Women's Congresses at the village level, it is revealed that female residents' interests demands in Shanghai communities are complex and the corresponding channels are diverse.

3.1. Characteristics of Female Interests Demands in Shanghai Communities

3.1.1. Complexity

There exist a number of female residents' interests demands in Shanghai communities, among which the top three are the medical condition, pension service and employment opportunity. This relates closely to the aging and higher proportion of women among the senior citizens in Shanghai and indicates some problems in the process of Shanghai's urbanization, such as urban planning deficiency. In particular, demands on spiritual satisfaction, female health, marriage and family, family education and family service appear intense. The most urgent demand is on cultural and sports activities, free investigation of gynecology and mastopathy, lectures on health, family education guidance and reliable hourly workers.

The research in this paper covers blocks and communities in Shanghai central urban area, suburbs and exurbs and it is shown that women in these different communities have unique interests demands.

In Tianshan community, Changning district, where there are a large number of aged people, the most urgent demand is on pension services and community culture and sports activities. In some new commodity housing communities, where a large number of young white collars live, family education is in urgent need. In Xinjiayuan community, Gucun Town, Baoshan district, mostly composed of security housing, women there cry for immediate employment. In Dongjing town, Songjiang district, where the villages are transformed to communities, a lot of residents hope for an increase in women's pension.

It is also worth noting that demands for the second child maternity insurance optimization and women's return to work become prominent in the rural exurbs. At the same time, the non-local female residents there fail to benefit from some government projects, like two diseases investigation and therefore expect a lower welfare policy threshold.

3.1.2. Diversity

Women in basic level communities, if they need help, can turn not only to the ACWF institutions, but also to other units in the community network, such as the Family

Planning Commission and Social Security Department.

They can safeguard rights with the support of such ACWF services as Shanghai Women's Rights Hotline, Shanghai Women's Legal Aid Center, Shanghai Women's Federation Petition Reception Room, Female Lawyer Consultation Service, Legal Advisory Services Division Shanghai Judges Association, and Shanghai Anti Domestic Violence Shelter Assistance Center as well as diverse women's community institutions.

3.2. Status Quo of the Response Mechanism in Shanghai Communities

The women council system in Shanghai communities is the most extensive way in which the female participate in deliberative democracy. According to this system, the female representatives and the general public discuss the national affairs, collective affairs, family affairs and things around to achieve self management. The system members include the female representatives of the National People's Congress at all levels, committeewomen of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference at all levels, female representatives of The National Party Congress at all levels, committee members of the ACWF at all levels and outstanding women in the masses. Under the guidance of the women council system, some communities have advanced some more specific means, "One Society Three Meetings" for instance, for women to join deliberative democracy.

In view of the multiple women's demands, Shanghai Women's Federation makes effective responses by providing various channels, integrating resources and conducting consultation in communities. With the economic and social development of Shanghai, some women's issues become more and more prominent. Through a series of projects, the organization responds effectively to the hot and difficult problems concerned with family education, career development, marriage and family conflict and so on.

In terms of family education, the "Summer Vacation Children Care Program" plays a very important role in defusing women's pressure and helping them balance work with family.

In terms of family conflicts, Shanghai Women's Federation ushers in the organizations specializing in social work and mental health service, which give lectures in communities.

In terms of women's career development, the communities offer a range of training to boost their quality and help them be confident in work.

Diverse forms of conducting deliberative democracy are adopted in response to women's interests demands. Accounts are established to ensure efficient preparation before consultation, recording during consultation and feedback after consultation. The ACWF branches at the district and county level have female representatives make regular consultation, at least twice annually, collect their suggestions and demands, report timely to the Party and government departments involved or the senior ACWF branch or advance bills to Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. The ACWF branches at the town level have female representatives make regular consultation, at least once every quarter and report timely to the Party committee and government at the same level and the senior ACWF branch. The women's institutions at the village level have female representatives make regular consultation, at least once every month

and report timely to the village principal and the ACWF branch at the town level.

3.3. Problems in Shanghai Women's Federation in Exercising Deliberative Democracy

Shanghai Women's Federation has gained experience in carrying on deliberative democracy; however, questions still exist in its content and way.

3.3.1. More Connection between Deliberative Democracy and New Demands

According to the investigation, with the transformation and innovation of Shanghai, there appear new female interests demands, which the conventional working approach cannot satisfy. As a result, it is necessary, on the one hand, to improve the summarization and analysis of the traditional female interests demands; on the other hand, dynamic mastery of and research on the new demands are of great significance.

As for the retiring age delay and same retiring age, Shanghai Women's Federation should clarify the female demands to the related institution, with female peculiarities in mind in policy making. In the second place, publicity on preferential policies regarding women's starting a business is deficient, which make the related requirements and means unavailable to the female residents eager to do so. The third question lies in women's low economic and social status due to their low career reputation since a majority of them engage in China's tertiary industry, like catering and home services. Finally, family policy shortage prevents women's career development, thus retarding social progress. For the benefits of the family on the whole, the female tend to compromise and opt for doing housework and fostering and educating children at home. This sacrifice deserves due respect and understanding and these women's rights and interests should be protected. In contrast, there are a larger number of full-time working women now. But, the government and society has not provided strong support for professional home services institutions or family development, for instance.

3.3.2. Obstacles to the Establishment of the ACWF's Deliberative Democracy Network

Social development makes it necessary for the ACWF to transform and reinforce its socialized mode of operation. But a few obstacles are in the way.

The first obstacle is how to establish a normalized deliberative democracy network between the Party, the government and the society. It is desired that the ACWF fulfill the tasks assigned by the Party and government, represent and safeguard women's rights, utter its own voice and promote equality between men and women. In practice, some ACWF employees are busy with "central task" but ignore the fundamental function of the organization while others have little desire to speak on behalf of women for lack of resources although they keep the fundamental function in mind (Ma, 2009).

Secondly, the ACWF is not a NGO since the basic national policy of gender equality is still included in government functions and it acquires administrative resources not through commission or government purchase. Then, how to work out the rules and approaches in conducting deliberative democracy with NGOs? More specifically, does the ACWF possess managerial dominance over NGOs? If yes, what mechanism can ensure the dominance? That is, how to improve its pivotal role in negotiation and service (Yang, 2004)?

3.3.3. Deficiency in the ACWF's Motivation and Initiative to Engage in Deliberative Democracy

Resources, in terms of labor and fund, are liable to be not enough in the basic level women's organizations. The ACWF branches at the town and village levels, in particular, have to be occupied with quite a few other things, like family planning. Under such circumstances, they cannot focus on women's work or be well informed of the female community members' demands, not to mention, make response to them. Therefore, they lack motivation in carrying on deliberative democracy.

By the existing law and regulations of China, the ACWF can only assist in protecting women's rights and has no coercive force. This exerts a negative effect on the ACWF organizations' working efficiency and deprives them of equality in deliberative democracy, hence their low initiative.

4. Conclusion and Countermeasures Concerning Female Interests Demands and Response Mechanism in Deliberative Democracy

By analyzing key problems in the female interests demands and response mechanism in Shanghai communities, we put forward countermeasures for the ACWF to integrate female residents' interests and smooth the response mechanism.

4.1. Amplifying the ACWF's Social Functions and Expanding Community Service and Consultation

Investigation and research into women's unique interests demands in newly emerging communities, such as economically affordable housing community, prove necessary. More attention should be paid to special women groups, such as those taking drugs.

Platforms oriented to the community, the reality and the group should be created for various women activities to lift up spirits and consolidate unity. Women's organizations should improve their quality and ability, utilize social resources and put themselves under the supervision of the public, for example, publicize the fund raised to ensure high utilization efficiency and enhance credibility. In addition, women's organizations could learn more from NGOs abroad and cooperate with them.

4.2. Clarifying the ACWF's Position in Deliberative Democracy and Expressing Women's Demands

The ACWF must carry on deliberative democracy under the leadership of the Communist Party of China and make innovation in correspondence with government function transformation and society changes. The Party and government should first make deployment and reach a consensus on the way the ACWF participates in deliberative democracy, then give guidance and finally advance the working mechanism.

Exploration should be made to build a pivotal system of women's organizations, including both top-down and down-top schemes, to make it cover all levels and fields. Integration into the community co-governance pattern is also expected for the resources to be available to the basic level organizations and make their setup sound. And online communication means, like Wechat and QQ can be used to gather more women into community activities. Programs for public good should be advocated among the female, too.

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