

## A Rational Pondering on Women's Human Poverty

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### Abstract

With the emphasis placed on humanistic values and reasonable demands in the current era, women's human poverty has gradually become a hot spot of social attention. A systematic analysis of a two-dimensional rational perspective, a philosophical perspective and a cultural perspective, reveals that obstacles to the attainment of freedom created by the loss of ontological rationality are the fundamental causes of women's human poverty. In addition, in the multicultural and multi-perspective landscape of human survival, the multi-dimensional influence of culture presents a major predicament for research on the issue of women's human poverty. The key to resolving this issue is philosophical concerns for women's human poverty and discussions of anti-poverty measures in cultural construction.

**Key words:** Women's human poverty; Ontology; Cultural battle against poverty

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### INTRODUCTION

The concept of "human poverty" was proposed in the 1997 *Human Development Report* issued by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): "Human poverty is the limitation of choices resulting from failure to satisfy the need for basic living conditions such as life

expectancy, health, housing, knowledge and participation, individual security, and living environment." The problem of human poverty is particularly prominent in China; further, in the gender-based classification of populations suffering from human poverty, the rate of women's human poverty is disproportionately higher than that of men's. The issue of women's human poverty has gradually become a hot spot of social attention in the contemporary Chinese society; its prominence and seriousness deserve the utmost attention from all sectors of society.

### 1. ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATE OF WOMEN'S HUMAN POVERTY

#### 1.1 Interpretation of Women as a Gender-Based Social Construct

We need to first point out here that in our discussion of human poverty, the word "women" does not refer to the biological sex; instead, it should be interpreted as a gender-based social construct. As a key concept in western feminism, the social construct of gender is people's understanding of the differences between men and women in ways of speaking and acting as well as in their character traits that has developed in accordance with the development and transformation of society. Thus, gender is not an innate quality that women are born with (Feng, 2010).

The gender role of women as a gender-based social construction to some extent varies in different societies and even during different historical periods of the same society. In contemporary societies, women wish to live and work in a way completely different from that of their feudalist predecessors. They are not content with playing the role of a housewife taking care of her husband and raising kids. One after another, they go out to work; many of them even become part of the social elite. All these should be attributed to the modern-day changes

in the views on women and the burgeoning of feminist movements. Feminists adhere to the ideology of and belief in the equality between men and women; they reject all forms of gender inequality. In addition, multicultural permeation boosted by information and communication technologies, particularly the popularization of the Internet, has also changed the traditional lifestyle of women (Yao et al., 2012).

## 1.2 Prominence and Seriousness of the Issue of Women's Human Poverty

What is worthy of attention, however, is that although women's gender role in modern societies has changed to some extent and their social status has improved to some degree, the issue of women's human poverty is still much more prominent than that of men's.

Firstly, I'll start with an analysis of the practical problem of women's deficiency of knowledge. Since the turn of the century, women's level of knowledge has experienced obvious and significant growth. However, the population of women living with a deficiency of knowledge remains considerably large. Compared with men, the degree of popularization of education and the level of vocational training among women are relatively low. In addition, there are many urgent problems in the acquisition of information resources and information and communication technologies that require immediate action. It may be said that the current state of women's human poverty is far from enabling women to satisfy the demands of social development on women in level of knowledge and competency.

Secondly, in terms of employment discrimination, the threshold for employment of women is apparently higher than that of men. It is roughly estimated that 67% of the prospective employers have specific gender requirements for applicants. They would include in their job advertisements such explicit wording as "women are not eligible to apply", "male applicants preferred" and so forth, or they would put it down in writing that for female employees, pregnancy and child birth are not allowed in the duration of their employment. In many regions, female college students experienced gender discrimination in job-seeking after graduation (He & Wang, 2010). Some prospective employers are concerned that the need for female college students to deal with such issues as marriage and child birth shortly after graduation will hinder normal business operations<sup>1</sup>. In addition, when it comes to political participation, individual security, and other similar issues, women face bigger problems than men do.

Thirdly, humanistic construction is an important part

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<sup>1</sup>Do Chinese women still need to safeguard their rights. (2007, March 5). *China Network*.

of the overall construction of society; human poverty is a practical problem requiring immediate action. Attacking women's human poverty is a top priority. This is because in the household and in society alike, women play a very significant role; they are important participants in the construction and development of society. Developing women's humanistic qualities is the only road to women's emancipation and development; such an endeavor would also bring a promise of hope for changing the entire human race.

In fact, the issue of women's human poverty has already drawn a great deal of attention from all sectors of society.

## 1.3 Attention to the Issue of Women's Human Poverty From All Sectors of Society

Sociologists believe that women's human poverty is an important social problem. Whether we can solve this problem or not would have some bearing on the coordination of social relations and the great process of the overall development of society. Feminists reject unreasonable gender discrimination and exploitation; they actively fight for equal social status and rights for women especially in education and employment. Under the influence of feminism, a large majority of women have gained more opportunities for development. Feminist writers, who advocate the promotion of feminine consciousness, are paying equal attention to the issue of women's human poverty. Having seen the spiritual predicament of women in a patriarchal society, they are fighting actively in their effort to help women get out of the predicament and start a new life. In their interpretation of the issue of women's poverty, economists mostly focus their attention on its relationship to material poverty; they tend to analyze the issue from the perspectives of economic growth and social development. They point out that countries should make adjustments in accordance with the current state of women's human poverty and with policies concerning international development in order to alleviate the problem so that it may subside gradually; in this process, a shift of the focus of research from the material dimension of poverty to the human dimension of poverty is also needed.

A review of these scholars' research on the issue of women's human poverty reveals that despite the discussions offered by numerous scholars from various disciplinary perspectives, there hasn't been much published research that analyzes this issue from philosophical and cultural perspectives. Thus, analyzing the issue of women's human poverty in the contemporary Chinese society from a two-dimensional rational perspective has significant and profound practical implications.

## 2. PHILOSOPHICAL CONCERNS FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN POVERTY

### 2.1 Interpreting Women's Human Poverty From an Ontological Perspective

According to theories of ontological philosophy, being is the existence that can become all existences. Compared with other existences, it is the substance of all existences and can become any existence, yet other existences cannot become a being as the substance of being. Being is a necessary existence, an eternal existence, and the first existence; other existences come into existence because of its operation. Because being is the first existence and the origin of the human being, in order to know its own origin, the human being must understand being<sup>2</sup>. Ontological theories also clearly point out that "I" is the transcendental ego, the absolute subject, the creator of non-being into being. In *Protagoras*, Plato made a clear distinction between "to be a noble man" and being a noble man". The ontological "I" should be understood as "being" and not "to be".

That being said, what does the ontological "I" have to do with women's human poverty?

Women's human poverty describes a spiritual impasse of women, which is opposite to the pursuit of the freedom of the ontological "I". Women in human poverty do not have the concept of ontological rationality, hence no conscious intention of pursuing such freedom; this lack of conscious intention in turn aggravates the problem of women's human poverty. On the topic of the ontological "I", "know thyself" was an important proposition in ancient Greek rationalism. In *The Symposium*, Plato stated as follows: "If our loves were perfectly accomplished, and each one returning to his primeval nature had his original true love, then our race would be happy." The so-called "primeval nature" here refers precisely to the ontological "I", the free "I".

How do we achieve the ideal of "know thyself" in the social practices of the life- world? The famous *Allegory of the Cave* by Plato offered a profound answer. Plato explicitly states that the prisoners in the cave are like us; that is, the state of them being imprisoned in the cave represents the unfree state of human beings. The process of the prisoners being dragged out of the cave then is similar to the process of the freed prisoner returning to the cave to enlighten and rescue his fellow cave dwellers, who were unconscious of their own suffering and were then enlightened through education. What we can learn from this metaphor is that it takes a process of enlightening for women to know themselves in social practice and human poverty is the biggest obstacle in this process. This is because a certain level of knowledge, a

high sense and degree of social participation, favorable living environments and the like is all undoubtedly conducive to this process of enlightening. However, the great majority of women in human poverty are often in a state of ignorance and are even unconscious of their own suffering. They do not have the concept of ontological rationality and are not conscious of the existence of the free ontological "I", not to mention to pursue it. In the practical progress of social development, the loss of subjectivity exemplified by women's own lack of humanistic literacy and ontological rationality often results in their inability to develop a comprehensive and appropriate understanding of issues that conflict with the comprehensive development of women.

### 2.2 Philosophical Concerns for Women's Human Poverty

Viewed from a philosophical perspective, the key to resolving the issue of women's human poverty is to raise women's awareness of their own ontological rationality and humanistic consciousness through the awakening of their consciousness of freedom. Specifically, we should focus our attention on human development and regard it as our ultimate concern in the comprehensive development of women.

Marxism focuses on the comprehensive development and complete emancipation of humans, especially the emancipation of women. In his *Anti-Duhring*, Engels pointed out that "in any society, the degree of emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation." The essence of the Marxist human-centered philosophy is its explanation of the substance of the human being and the overall development of humans (Wang et al., 2014). Marx noted that in contrast with social development, individual development refers to the development of "each", that is, of each individual member of society. Specifically, individual development can be assessed in three aspects: Comprehensive development, free development, and full development. Here we will discuss the issue of women's human poverty with relation to each of these three aspects.

Firstly, the comprehensive development of an individual is development in a broad sense. Marx stated that the "comprehensive development" of an individual is "for an individual to grasp the comprehensive essence of oneself in a comprehensive manner, that is, as a complete being" (Chinese Communist Party Central Committee's, para.8, 2002). Thus, in the process of lifting themselves out of human poverty and achieving comprehensive individual development, there is an urgent need for women to comprehensively develop their own innate qualities, namely, their individual talents, potentialities, and capabilities. In other words, women's needs in various hierarchical levels including the needs for existence, relatedness, and self-actualization should be satisfied. This is precisely an important dimension of what the issue of

<sup>2</sup>What is ontology? <http://wenda.haosou.com/q/1369513912067968>.

women's human poverty entails. Marx further pointed out that the comprehensive development of an individual would promote the comprehensive development of a society and vice versa. Therefore, vigorous efforts to improve social productivity, to ameliorate the social system, and to promote in a comprehensive manner the development of social sciences and humanities would contribute to the comprehensive development of women and would in turn aid the cultural battle against women's poverty.

Secondly, the free development of individuality requires an effort to free oneself from one's own shackles. What we mean by one's own shackles here is, on the one hand, the lack of an independent personality and individual character and, on the other, the abnormal and partial development of individual capabilities. The free development of individuality refers to the individual act of developing a thorough understanding of individual freedom and actively creating conditions conducive to the conscious demonstration of one's individuality (Sun, 2011). In order to free themselves from their own shackles, women must develop their own independent personalities and individual characters on the premise and condition of free will, independence of personality, and emancipation of individuality. Only by so doing can be the issue of women's human poverty be truly resolved.

Thirdly, full individual development is inseparable from the development of an individual's social nature. It entails actualization of the innate potentialities and satisfaction of the active, multi-faceted needs of an individual so that one can actively exercise one's full range of capabilities and power. In reality, an individual exists in specific social relations. Constant improvement of one's abilities for social practice is a necessary means by which full individual development can be achieved; such improvement relies on the increase in the degree of participation in social activities and the level of practical abilities. Accordingly, increasing the degree of women's participation in social activities and improving their practical abilities are important measures to promote the full development of women.

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### **3. CULTURAL BATTLE AGAINST WOMEN'S HUMAN POVERTY**

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In the multicultural and multi-perspective landscape of human survival, we need to explore the deep cultural roots of the emergence of the issue of women's human poverty. Culture is a product of human civilization with immense connotations. A socio-cultural system typically encompasses many aspects of society and culture such as common sense knowledge of everyday life, technical expertise, world views and beliefs, cognitive categories and classifications of reality, codes of conduct, values, and collective tacit knowledge (Hu, 2012).

#### **3.1 Women's Human Poverty Under the Influence of Modern Culture**

The American philosopher White argued that "culture is a continuous unity; every stage of its development emerges from an earlier cultural environment...current cultures depend on past cultures, and future cultures are just trajectories of current cultural trends." The concept of modern culture, which emerged in industrial societies, is relative to the concept of traditional culture. Modern culture is based on and coexists with traditional culture. The culture of every ethnic group has both traditional and modern elements. Since modern times, the global culture has explicitly shown an inclination toward the modern and alienation from the traditional; social forms are also stumbling forward between pursuit of modern culture and abandonment of traditional cultural heritage.

The issue of women's human poverty is a predicament of human survival that emerged accompanying the historical process of the development of modern culture. Therefore, in order to vigorously expose the causes of women's human poverty, we must start by analyzing the fundamental spirit of modern culture. Freedom, equality, human rights and other fundamental concepts of modern culture were also developed in this historical process. It is precisely these concepts of freedom, equality, human rights and the like, which emerged in the formation of modern culture, that presented a predicament to research on women's human poverty. Such modern concepts in fact take double forms; that is, they encourage a pursuit of women's rights in real life on the theoretical foundation of the abstract concept of human established in the formation of modern culture, thereby causing research on women's human poverty to be stuck in an unsolvable paradox (Guo, 2012).

#### **3.2 Cultural Battle Against Women's Human Poverty**

Under the dual influence of traditional culture and modern culture, the issue of women's poverty has existed for a long time; it also takes a long time for it to be properly resolved. To resolve the issue of human poverty particularly women's human poverty, the most effective measure is to vigorously promote cultural construction and to fight a cultural battle against poverty. In the contemporary world, much importance is attached to the soft power of culture; a cultural battle against poverty deserves attention and should be added to our agenda.

A fierce cultural battle against poverty should be accompanied by the construction of civilization in society as well as cultural prosperity and development so as to satisfy the increasing spiritual and cultural needs of the Chinese people. Accordingly, fighting a cultural battle against poverty requires strong support of the growth of cultural institutions and cultural enterprises as well as implementation of cultural education and the organization of cultural promotion activities. The educational



development and reform deserve particular attention. Education is part of the big plan of national development. In the cultural battle against poverty, it is of utmost importance that we devote major efforts to developing education, particularly to enhance the ideological and moral development of citizens, especially of women in human poverty, as well as to facilitate their acquisition of scientific and cultural knowledge. In addition, we should also pay great attention to the vocational training of women in human poverty, particularly those suffering from a deficiency of knowledge.

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## CONCLUSION

As one of the issues in the course of the development of human society that is worth noting, women's human poverty has been receiving increasing attention and been widely researched by experts and scholars alike. Through a two-dimensional rational pondering from a philosophical and cultural perspective on the issue, this exploration of promoting philosophical concerns for women's human poverty and fighting a cultural battle against women's human poverty in real life has positive and practical implications. Further, in order to achieve the effective integration of theory and practice, we should pay close attention to the historical causes and future trajectory of women's human poverty.

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