

Female Employment in Rural Areas in Western China

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the current situation, causes, and solutions to the employment issues of females in rural areas of Western China. The study begins by illustrating the socio-economic context of Western China, and the current state of human resources respectively for both all people and especially women, then analyzing the effect of the internet and the pandemic on employment conditions. This is then followed by discussing four factors that cause underemployment of females including education attainment, personal willingness, social norm, and industrial restructuring. Finally, we give suggestions on policymaking to increase female labour force participation.

Keywords: Western China; female labour force participation.

1. Introduction

Since the economic reform and opening up in 1978, China has undergone a long process of economic system reform from a planned economy to a market economy, while also gradually becoming more industrialized and urbanized. In 2000, the Chinese government proposed the development of the western region, which advocates using the remaining economic development capacity of the eastern coastal regions to enhance the economic and social development of the western region. With the implementation of development policies, the western region has experienced rapid economic growth. But at the same time, the issue of human resource development, especially female human resource development in the rural west, is becoming increasingly prominent. Women in the rural west, like women in any other part of China, play an important role in the institutional change in the countryside, thus helping women to become better and more fully employed is an essential issue when promoting development in the West.

2. The current employment situation of rural women in the Western region

2.1 The Socio-Economic Context of the Rural West

Western China includes 12 provinces, cities, and autonomous regions: Chongqing, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Inner Mongolia, and Guangxi. The region is sparsely populated. The total area is about 6.86 million square kilometers, accounting for 72% of the country's total area, while the population is 383 million, only accounting for 27.12% of the country's total population. In 2008, the number of poor people in the rural west accounted for 66% of the country's poor rural population. After the development of the West, the incidence of poverty fell from 19.8% in 2001 to 9.3% in 2008, but it is still the region with the highest incidence of poverty in the country.

Poverty in the West is not a coincidence, but a consequence of multiple factors. Firstly, historically, governments have paid little attention to the development of the West, which has been a relatively undeveloped region since ancient times. The East, on the other hand, has seen rapid development as a result of the influence of Western commercial civilization, especially the construction of special economic zones, which are mostly in the East, during the period of economic reform and opening up. This has led to an enlargement in the gap between the economic development of the West and that of the East.

Secondly, the geographical environment of the West has hindered economic development. There are few plains and many highlands and mountains in the West, which is not conducive to agricultural

development, and the large mountains and rivers also block transport, which is not conducive to industrial and commercial development.

Finally, the social human environment in the West has led to the lack of human resources. The geographical uniqueness and isolation of the western region have led to the formation and transmission of diverse ethnic cultures. 75 percent of the country's ethnic minorities live in the western region, either in the scattered among over 80 percent of its land. The ethnicities here are rich in their own history, traditional culture, and distinctive characteristics, but at the same time, the traditional culture means backward mindsets. The deep-rooted backwardness of the culture has inevitably led to ignorance, making them reluctant when receiving new ideas and refusing to make progress, causing a lack of competitiveness in the labour market. This results in a shortage of talent in the western region and hinders economic development. The Tibetan people, for example, spend most of their income on religious activities rather than on expanding production, which is contrary to the goal of economic development.

2.2 Human resources in the western region

The human resources in the western region are abundant and increasing at a relatively fast pace, but the industrial structure is not reasonable, leading to underemployment and mass human resources being unused [1].

In terms of age composition, western China has a very young population. According to the Seventh National Population Census Report released in 2021, people aged 0-14 take up 19.8 percent of the population in the west and people aged 15-59 take up 64.2 percent, both of which are higher than the national average. The children dependency ratio exceeds the national average, while the elderly dependency ratio is lower than the national average. The growth rate of the population in the western region is also higher than the national average. According to the China Statistic Yearbook 2020, the birth rate in the west was 11.69% in 2019, higher than the national birth rate of 10.48%, and the natural growth rate was 5.58%, higher than the national natural growth rate of 3.34%. [2]

The urbanization level and industrial structure of the western region are relatively backward. 46.9% of the population in the western region was rural in 2019, 7.5 percentage points higher than the national average, with a lower level of urbanization. The employment structure of the labour force shows that a large proportion of people are employed in the primary sector, while a small proportion of people are employed in the secondary and tertiary sectors. The backward socio-economic development has led to limited development of talents, so there are more junior and middle-level talents in the west and fewer senior-level talents; there are more talents in traditional industries and fewer talents in high-tech fields. The lack of employment opportunities in the west has led to an increasingly prominent problem of underemployment of labour and a large number of idle human resources.

2.3 Female human resources in the West

Since the reform of the economic system, China's economy focus has shifted from the primary sector to the secondary and tertiary sectors, and the non-agricultural sector began to develop rapidly. A large number of migrant workers moved from rural to urban areas. It was only in the late 1990s that rural women began to join the ranks of those who went out to work. As a result of structural changes in the economy, the employment structure of rural women has continued to change and grow. Rural women's work obligations have undergone a transformation from weaving in the feudal era to farming to working. Women gradually became an increasingly important force in rural economic development.

The West rural female labour mainly contains three groups: firstly, the new labour force under 30 years of age, who have higher education and are mostly concentrated in labor-intensive industries in developed cities. The second group is the 30-45-year-olds, who are mostly junior high school educated, and are divided into two groups: some of them start their own businesses in the countryside and become rural farmers and processors, while others become seasonal workers in their own

neighborhood's, combining farming and work, and are engaged in physical work in nearby counties. The third group is the group over 45 years old, who are less educated and mostly engaged in traditional small farming, they account for over 60% of the rural labour force, forming the basic force of the agriculture production [3].

As the structure of employment changes, more and more women are becoming the main workforce in family farming, but the socio-economic status of rural women is still lower than that of men. Across the country, women are significantly less likely to be heads of households than men of all ages. [4] This means that women are less in control of decision-making and financial power within the household and therefore have a subordinate role in the society which is comprised of the household.

Women in the rural west have unstable work and low incomes. They are concentrated in the low-skilled and low-paid housekeeping and labor-intensive industries [5]. Due to their lower level of education, rural girls have a lower-paying point and a slower moving up the ladder. The average income of female farmers in the Western region is 2,684.6 RMB, while the male's average income is 3,441.4 RMB, which is 1.28 times higher. The "different pay for the same work" phenomenon is serious.

2.4 Changes in the new time

With the development of the Internet in recent years, the new media industry has gradually emerged, bringing more employment opportunities to rural females. The Internet helps to promote the spread of values of gender equality, improves access to education for rural girls, and promotes non-agricultural jobs for rural females more than for men [6]. Females with a high level of literacy can find employment in urban areas through recruitment platforms, or in new media such as e-commerce and online streaming, which are more suitable for females' employment. It can also allow easier local entrepreneurship. For women who are unable to work outside the home due to agricultural production and caring for their families, they can be taking part-time jobs through the internet, as the Internet allows females to choose non-formal part-time employment, which can also increase their family income.

The new Covid-19 pandemic since 2020 has had a major economic and social impact across the country, particularly on migrant workers from rural areas. The most immediate impact has been a decline in the incomes of rural workers who work outside the home, as their social insurance has been weaker, and the epidemic made them even less covered by social insurance. The impact of the new pandemic has had a huge impact on some enterprises, so they were afraid they will lose their jobs if the enterprises close or lay off workers. In addition, some farmers chose to return and stay home due to fears of unsafety. For a short period of time, employment in the vicinity became an important factor in their employment intentions.

3. Causes of employment problems

3.1 Educational attainment

The low socio-economic status of women has led to a generally low level of education and lack of scientific literacy among rural women in the West, which puts women at a disadvantage in the labor market.

The overall education level in the West is lower than the national level due to the lagging social and economic development process, in a sample survey conducted by the China Statistical Yearbook 2019, 36.9% of the total number of people in the western region had never attended school or had a primary school diploma, and 71.8% had a junior secondary school diploma or less.

In the poor western peaks, girls are the first to be sacrificed to their families due to the limited resources and the lack of money. They have to give way to their brothers or siblings in education, taking on the burden of the family at an early age, losing access to education and conditions for their own development. In the Western region, 70.3% of girls aged 6 years and over have never attended school, and 45.4% of girls with a junior or senior secondary school diploma. There is a significant

difference between women and men. The lower level of literacy has led to a lower level of science literacy among girls in the West. The results of the 2020 China Public Science Quality Survey show that the proportion of women with science quality in the west is 8.44%, 4.83 percentage points lower than that in the East, and the proportion of women with science quality is 8.82%, which is 4.3 percentage points lower than that of men.

While the Unacademic rate for girls in rural areas in the West has been decreasing in recent years, the drop-out rate is also increasing. Girls leaving school too early leads to shorter years of schooling, generally lower educational attainment, and the lack of education and scientific literacy limits the scope for employment for girls and leads to underemployment of girls in the labour force. The low quality of education is frightening, but what is even more frightening is that it continues to be the case. In the long term, this will have a negative impact on future economic growth and social progress.

3.2 Personal willingness

Rural women are rational and their willingness to work outside the home depends on the expected income and the cost paid to the employment. The study shows that the willingness of rural women to work outside the home is positively correlated with age, education, expected income, working environment, labour intensity, need for care, and employment security, and is not significantly correlated with proximity to work and working hours. [7]

The two basic characteristics of age and education not only affect objective employment opportunities but also subjectively influence the willingness to work outside the home. The younger a woman is, the more willing she is to work outside the home, as younger women are more receptive to new things, while older women are more accustomed to traditional farming. Highly educated women tend to have higher learning and cognitive abilities, which help them to learn about employment-related information and are therefore more likely to work, they are therefore more motivated to work outside the home. The expected income is also an important factor in working out, which is a direct measure of their returns to work outside the home contrasted with its opportunity costs. For households in a two-oriental urban-rural employment structure, non-farm incomes account for a significant proportion of household income, and wage levels are often indicative of household income levels, therefore, the income from working outside the home is often higher than that from farming. Labor intensity and working environment are the two factors with the highest regression coefficients, and they are important in the context of outworking, most rural females work in labor-intensive jobs that are poor and strenuous, making them more likely to value a good working environment and a relatively easy job. The need for caregiving is a reflection of the burden on the family, and social security can enhance the quality of life of rural women and contribute to the quality of their lives. Research shows that the less the burden of working outside the home and the better the security, the easier it is to work outside the home.

In addition to this, there are factors influencing work migration that has not been included in the study. Some ethnic minorities may prefer to live together, they are more likely to choose nearby towns than to travel to more developed cities. The sense of community and ties to relatives and friends can make rural women feel more dependent on the community and prevent them from leaving the countryside to work in the city. The traditional notion of family job assignment has taught women to be family-centered, and they have developed a weak, submissive attitude under the influence of pervasive social attitudes.

3.3 Social prejudice

China is a country steep in tradition. Thousands of years of feudalism and traditional concepts are deeply rooted in people's mind. Since the founding of the new China, women and men have had the same political, economic and educational rights under the law, and the idea of equality between men and women has been preached. However, in reality, inequality between men and women is still prevalent, especially in the less well-informed rural areas of the West, where most families still maintain traditional attitudes that influence and educate the next generation. The mechanism of

masculinity is more deeply rooted in the rural areas of China. The feudal "ritualistic rigidity" manifests itself in various forms in the unreflective transmission of gender stereotypes. For example, the concept of "men dominating outside and women dominating inside" has been used to model the relationship between men and women in the form of social customs. This has undoubtedly placed invisible mental shackles on rural women.[8] The persistence of traditional family job assignments can lead to a strong sense of family among rural women in the West. The family is the focus of their lives, and their primary role is to raise their children and serve their elders. They are unable to work outside the home due to family constraints and are forced to stay in the countryside to continue farming.

3.4 Industrial restructuring

Since time immemorial, men have had priority in the allocation of resources, so that in the work assignment within the household, whether it is "male farming and female weaving" or "male working and female farming", men have priority to shift to more remunerative sectors, resulting in a disadvantageous position for women in the household and in society. Over the last decade, industries in rural areas have evolved into agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, and the pay differential between the two sectors has widened. This has led to a rapid shift of the labour force to the non-agricultural sector. In the villages, the distribution of resources has always revolved around a priority order of interests for men, who have more information and opportunities than women and thus have priority in going out to work, getting better jobs and higher pay, leaving the less favorable agricultural sectors to women and young people.

Over the last decade, there has been a gradual shift from secondary to tertiary industries in developed regions. The tertiary sector provides a wide range of opportunities for women's development and employment. The tertiary sector offers a wide range of opportunities for women's development and employment. It is undoubtedly beneficial to the development of girls. However, the tertiary sector requires a higher level of education than the first and second sectors, and females are generally more educated than males. This does not take advantage of the comparative advantage of females in tertiary employment, as they generally have fewer years of education than males.

4. Solution measures

4.1 Develop poverty alleviation policies with a clear gender theory

Economic growth cannot automatically benefit the poor through a trickle-down effect, nor can it automatically benefit women and men equally. Any economic structure is inherently gender-specific. Policies cannot be based on the assumption that men and women are homogeneous because in reality men and women belong to different classes and groups. It is an objective fact that women are more vulnerable and needs economic protection. If this gender reality is ignored, social policies that appear to treat women equally may in fact turn out to be unfair. [9] Therefore, a number of experts on rural women's issues have suggested that gender perspectives should be introduced into public policies and that the gender perspective should be incorporated into employment, rights protection, education, training, and action programs. The existing institutional arrangements should be adjusted to properly protect rural females for specific periods of time and to help them adapt to the changing socio-economic situation as soon as possible. [10]

4.2 Enhance the development of female Human resources

The development and exploitation of human resources require the advancement of all sectors of society. Firstly, the Government should increase the level of education for girls in rural west. The government should increase its investment in education in the west, raise the accessibility of education. Guided by a policies of supporting basic education, they should make plans to strengthen rural basic education and improve schooling conditions. In addition to compulsory education, higher education also needs to be developed. This can be done by improving the remuneration of teachers to

attract good teachers, as well as by strengthening teacher training and enhancing teacher competencies. The dropout rate in primary and lower secondary schools can be reduced by providing grants or loans to poor students.

To ensure that women have equal opportunities in the workplace and are not discriminated against, we need to strengthen the implementation of employment equity policies. Although the labour laws state that women have equal employment rights with men and that women cannot be refused employment or have their employment standards raised on the basis of their gender, there is no clear legal definition and implementation procedures, which makes them less operational. This makes it difficult for women to properly defend their rights. The operability of existing policies can be ensured by improving the content of the legislation and strengthening judicial protection, a robust monitoring system can be established to regulate, monitor, and promote equal employment for women.

Finally, industrial development should be accelerated in order to broaden the pathway to employment for rural girls. The West should accelerate the development of rural enterprises, especially those in the tertiary sector, to increase employment opportunities. The development of township enterprises will allow more women to migrate from the countryside to work in towns and cities, increasing the income of rural women. The development of the tertiary sector can create more jobs for women and narrow the gap between women and men in terms of socio-economic status.

5. Conclusions

The gender gap in human resources lags behind that of men due to four factors: educational attainment, personal preference, social prejudice, and industrial restructuring. Through the development of human resources and the updating of poverty alleviation policies, rural girls' human resources can be better developed and utilized.

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