

Research on the Pathway for Rural Left-behind Women's Participation in Rural Governance in the Context of Rural Revitalization

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Abstract

With the in-depth implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, the role of rural left-behind women as an important force in rural society has become increasingly prominent in participating in rural governance. Based on field research in Zhejiang Province, this paper analyzes the current situation and obstacles of rural left-behind women's participation in rural governance, and proposes multi-dimensional empowerment paths such as policy guarantees, economic empowerment, community support, and digital technology empowerment. Research indicates that through comprehensive policy measures, the participation and voice of rural left-behind women in rural governance can be effectively enhanced, injecting new impetus into rural revitalization.

Keywords

Rural Revitalization; Rural Left-behind Women; Rural Governance; Empowerment Path.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

With the continuous development of China's economy, the problem of the gap between urban and rural areas has become increasingly prominent. To narrow this gap and achieve rural modernization and the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects, since the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed the rural revitalization strategy in 2017, the Chinese government has continuously advanced the process of rural revitalization. The 2024 "Implementation Plan for Comprehensively Promoting the Rural Revitalization Strategy" particularly emphasizes the need to fully leverage the participation role of rural left-behind women and incorporate them into the rural grassroots governance system. Therefore, exploring the realization path for rural left-behind women to participate in rural governance under the rural revitalization strategy not only conforms to the requirements of national policies but also has extremely high practical value.

In recent years, with the advancement of the rural revitalization strategy, various regions have begun to explore different development paths. Among them, the issue of rural grassroots social governance has become a focus, especially the governance participation and social role of the special group of rural left-behind women have gradually attracted attention. As the main bearers of rural families and society, rural left-behind women are not only responsible for daily household chores and agricultural production, but also an important factor for rural social stability. How to fully stimulate the potential of this group and grant them more rights and opportunities to participate in rural governance has become an important issue in promoting the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy.

As one of the most economically developed provinces in China, Zhejiang Province is also at the forefront of the country in terms of its policies and practices for rural revitalization. The "Zhejiang Province's Plan for Implementing the Rural Revitalization Strategy (2018-2022)" clearly states that measures such as "developing villages through industries, strengthening villages with talents, invigorating villages with culture, beautifying villages with ecology, and strengthening villages with organizations" should be taken to comprehensively promote the economic and social development of rural areas. Among them, the development of the digital economy in Zhejiang Province has provided an important opportunity for empowering rural left-behind women. For instance, the popularization of new technologies such as e-commerce platforms and social media has enabled rural women to gain more economic autonomy and social discourse power. Against this backdrop, rural areas in Zhejiang Province are confronted with problems such as the outflow of rural population and a large number of left-behind women. By exploring how rural left-behind women can participate in rural governance and proposing targeted empowerment paths, it has significant practical significance for promoting the rural revitalization strategy in Zhejiang Province.

1.2. Research Significance

1.2.1. Theoretical Significance

This study constructs a theoretical framework for empowering rural revitalization with "her power" by analyzing the experiences of rural women participating in rural governance. It explores the role transformation of rural left-behind women in rural governance and its implementation path from a gender perspective. This theoretical framework examines the implementation path of the role transformation of rural left-behind women. At the policy support level, it emphasizes that the government should introduce a series of targeted policies to provide institutional guarantees and resource tilting for left-behind women's participation in rural governance. At the social organization level, it points out that various rural social organizations should play a bridging and bonding role, building platforms for left-behind women to participate in governance and enhancing their degree of organization. At the individual ability level, it proposes to enhance the knowledge skills and participation awareness of left-behind women through training, education, and other activities, stimulating their intrinsic motivation to participate in rural governance.

This study fills the research gap in China regarding the empowerment and participation of rural left-behind women in governance pathways. Previous studies have mostly focused on the overall participation of rural women or on a specific aspect of their participation, while systematic research on this special group of rural left-behind women in rural governance is relatively scarce. This study fills this gap and provides a solid theoretical foundation and a rich analytical framework for subsequent related research. Furthermore, it promotes the development of gender equality and rural governance research. Introducing a gender perspective into rural governance research breaks the neglect of gender factors in traditional research, helps to more comprehensively and deeply understand the complexity and diversity of rural governance, promotes the implementation of gender equality concepts in rural governance, and provides theoretical support for building a more fair and harmonious rural society.

1.2.2. Practical Significance

Empowering rural left-behind women to participate in rural governance is not only an important measure to facilitate the smooth implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, but also an important way to improve rural social governance capabilities and achieve gender equality. By exploring the participation patterns of rural left-behind women in Zhejiang Province.

This study provides targeted and actionable policy recommendations for local governments and relevant organizations. For example, in terms of policy formulation, it is recommended that local governments issue specific policy documents to clarify the status and role of rural left-behind women in rural governance, providing policy guarantees and financial support for their participation in governance. In terms of organizational construction, it is recommended that relevant organizations strengthen training and guidance for rural left-behind women, improve their participation ability and organizational level, and build a more comprehensive participation platform. In terms of resource integration, it is recommended that local governments and relevant organizations integrate various resources to provide necessary technical, informational, and market support for rural left-behind women to participate in rural governance. These policy recommendations are conducive to promoting the extensive participation of left-behind women in public affairs, enhancing the efficiency and fairness of rural governance, and providing useful references and insights for other regions.

2. Literature References

Globally, empowering rural women and promoting gender equality and social governance have become important topics for academia and policymakers [1]. The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identifies gender equality and women's empowerment as one of the core goals of global development, especially in rural development and governance, where women's participation is seen as a key factor in achieving sustainable development. International scholars generally believe that women's participation in rural governance can bring about more inclusive and sustainable governance models.

Countries such as India and Bangladesh have successfully enhanced the economic autonomy of rural women and facilitated their participation in public affairs and rural governance through the implementation of Self Help Groups (SHGs) and microfinance projects. Kabeer proposed that women's political empowerment can greatly promote the overall welfare of the community and help form more inclusive local governance structures. Women have not only achieved remarkable results in enhancing women's economic independence but also strengthened their decision-making power and governance discourse in the community through collective action [2]. This experience demonstrates that women's participation can effectively enhance the transparency and efficiency of local governance, promoting stability and development in rural society.

In China, with the advancement of the rural revitalization strategy, the academic community has increasingly emphasized the role and function of rural women in rural society. Gender equality awareness should be incorporated into the mainstream of decision-making in rural political development, gradually enhancing their principal status in rural self-governance [3]. Enhancing the enthusiasm of rural women to participate in rural governance is not only conducive to promoting their own development, but also affects the quality and effectiveness of the implementation of China's rural revitalization strategy [4].

In recent years, domestic research has gradually focused on how to enhance rural women's social participation and governance capabilities through economic and social empowerment. Xu Huanke et al. analyzed the barriers to rural women's participation in rural governance from the perspective of empowerment and enhancement. Factors such as gender bias, lack of economic dominance, and absence of discourse rights constitute multidimensional obstacles to rural women's participation in rural governance. They proposed improvement strategies to promote the sustainable development of rural women's participation in rural governance [5]. Zhang Qinghe et al. found through the investigation of the "Gannan New Women" movement that constructing a diversified governance mechanism involving women's participation can empower and enhance rural governance[6].

Many scholars believe that the social participation of rural women is closely related to their economic empowerment. Nie Zhaoying et al. found that the economic model of rural e-commerce provides women with more opportunities to participate. Rural women have achieved economic autonomy through e-commerce platforms, which to some extent enhances their social participation ability [7]. Wang Chenyuan pointed out that with the rapid development of the digital economy, rural women can achieve income growth through e-commerce and live streaming sales, enhancing their decision-making power in the family and community, and realizing the innovative development of female power in the rural revitalization strategy[8].

Although existing research has revealed the potential role of rural women in rural governance, systematic studies on how rural left-behind women achieve governance participation through empowerment paths are still insufficiently deep. Especially in the context of rural revitalization, empirical research on how the left-behind women group in typical agricultural areas participate in rural governance is relatively scarce. Most existing literature focuses on phenomenon description, lacking path analysis and actionable policy recommendations for rural left-behind women's participation in rural governance.

3. Field Research Situation

This study relies on field research to systematically analyze the roles and dilemmas of rural left-behind women in rural governance, and designs specific empowerment pathways. During the field research, multiple typical villages were selected in Zhejiang Province for field research, and questionnaire surveys and interview outlines were designed to collect data on the current situation of left-behind women in rural governance.

3.1. Selection of Research Samples

As a relatively economically developed coastal province in China, Zhejiang Province has achieved remarkable results in rural revitalization. At the same time, there is a certain number of left-behind women groups in its rural areas, which are representative to some extent. In the selection of specific research locations, multiple villages with typical characteristics were chosen as research samples, taking into account factors such as the level of economic development, rural governance models, and cultural traditions in different regions of Zhejiang Province. This study selected six typical rural areas within Zhejiang Province as research samples, covering different levels of economic development, sizes, and socio-cultural backgrounds to ensure the breadth and representativeness of the research. A village was selected from each of the cities of Hangzhou, Ningbo, Shaoxing, Jinhua, Quzhou, and Lishui within Zhejiang Province for research.

3.2. Research Process

To comprehensively collect data on the current situation of left-behind women in rural governance, the research team designed a scientifically sound and reasonable questionnaire survey and interview outline. The questionnaire survey primarily focuses on aspects such as the basic information of left-behind women, their willingness to participate in rural governance, the methods and frequency of their participation, as well as the difficulties and needs they face. It employs a combination of closed and open-ended questions, which not only facilitates data statistics and analysis but also allows for the acquisition of the true thoughts and feelings of left-behind women. The interview outline places greater emphasis on gaining a deeper understanding of left-behind women's personal experiences, family backgrounds, and community environments. Through face-to-face communication with left-behind women, it explores their potential needs and unmet expectations in rural governance.

During the field research process, members of the research team delved into the villages, engaging in cordial conversations with left-behind women, patiently answering their questions, and ensuring the smooth progress of questionnaire surveys and interviews. At the same time, team members also actively communicated with local village committee cadres, villager representatives, and others to understand the overall situation of rural governance and the participation of left-behind women in it, obtaining comprehensive and objective information from multiple perspectives. By sorting out and analyzing the data collected from field research, the research team was able to accurately grasp the current situation and existing problems of rural left-behind women in rural governance, providing strong data support for proposing targeted empowerment paths in the future. Field research was conducted in typical rural areas of Zhejiang Province, collecting data through questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews.

3.3. Field Research Results

The research team distributed a total of 400 questionnaires and collected 385 valid responses, achieving an effective response rate of 96.25%. Simultaneously, in-depth interviews were conducted with 50 left-behind women and 20 village cadres to gather more detailed information. The collected questionnaires and interview data were organized and analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Through in-depth research in multiple rural areas, it was found that the left-behind women in the research sample exhibited distinct characteristics.

From the perspective of age structure, they are primarily concentrated in the 35-55 age group. Women in this age bracket are in the prime of their lives, shouldering the heavy responsibilities of caring for the elderly and raising children, while also dealing with various trivial matters in life. Due to being trapped in household chores for a long time, their communication and contact with the outside world are relatively limited, and their own development is also restricted to some extent.

In terms of educational level, rural left-behind women generally have a lower level of education, with most having only completed junior high school. In the past rural educational environment, influenced by various factors such as economic conditions and family values, many girls had to drop out of school after completing junior high school to help their parents with household chores or engage in agricultural production. The lower level of education has made it difficult for them to acquire information, master new skills, and improve their own qualities. It has also limited their development opportunities in society and their ability to participate in rural governance to a certain extent.

In terms of participation in rural governance, the current situation of left-behind women in rural areas is not optimistic. Their participation in rural governance is generally low, mainly concentrated in voting at formal occasions such as village committee elections and village council meetings. During elections, they choose candidates they deem suitable according to their own wishes, but their voice and influence in subsequent decision-making processes are very limited. Many left-behind women have expressed that at village council meetings, they often just sit quietly on the sidelines, rarely taking the initiative to express their opinions and views, and even if they have ideas, they are worried that they will not be taken seriously or will be opposed.

Current situation of participation in rural governance: The participation of rural left-behind women in rural governance is generally low, mainly concentrated in voting in formal occasions such as village committee elections and village council meetings, but their voice and influence in the decision-making process are limited. Their participation in cooperatives and community services is also low. As an important organizational form for rural economic development, cooperatives could provide more employment opportunities and development space for left-behind women. However, due to the lack of effective organization and guidance, their

understanding and participation in cooperatives are not high. In terms of community services, although there are some voluntary service activities, left-behind women find it difficult to fully engage in them due to heavy family burdens and limited time and energy, lacking effective organization and collective action.

4. Obstacles and Challenges for Rural left-behind Women to Participate in Rural governance

4.1. Gender Discrimination and Cultural Constraints

During field research, we found that gender discrimination and cultural constraints are significant obstacles for rural left-behind women to participate in rural governance. Despite the continuous emphasis on gender equality in national policies, there is still a relatively serious phenomenon of gender discrimination in rural areas in practical operations. Many left-behind women have reflected that their opinions and suggestions are often ignored in rural governance, and they lack substantive decision-making power. Cultural constraints are also an important factor restricting the participation of left-behind women in rural governance. Influenced by traditional gender role positioning, many left-behind women believe that they "should prioritize their families," lacking enthusiasm and initiative to participate in rural governance. In addition, some village cadres and villagers also have certain prejudices and concerns about the participation of left-behind women in rural governance, believing that they lack relevant knowledge and experience and are difficult to be competent in governance work.

4.2. Lack of Economic Resources and Insufficient Decision-making Power

The scarcity of economic resources poses another significant obstacle for rural left-behind women in participating in village governance. Due to the limited economic conditions of most left-behind women's families, they often lack the time and energy required to engage in village governance. In surveys, many left-behind women expressed that they need to spend a considerable amount of time on agricultural production and household chores, making it difficult for them to spare time for village governance activities. Insufficient decision-making power is also a crucial issue faced by left-behind women in village governance. In many villages, the decision-making processes of village committees and village councils often lack transparency, making it difficult for left-behind women to obtain sufficient information and participation opportunities. Furthermore, due to the absence of effective organizations and platforms, the voices and demands of left-behind women in village governance are often difficult to effectively convey and respond to.

4.3. Lack of Skills in Digital Technology Application and Digital Divide

With the development of digital technology, its application in rural governance has become increasingly widespread. However, during field research, we found that rural left-behind women face significant skill gaps and digital divides in the application of digital technology. Many left-behind women have a low level of understanding and mastery of digital technologies such as e-commerce platforms and social media, making it difficult for them to fully utilize these platforms to participate in rural governance and economic activities. In addition, due to the low penetration rate of digital devices and the incomplete network infrastructure in some villages, the application of digital technology by left-behind women is also limited.

5. The Realization Path of Rural Left-behind Women's Participation in Rural Governance

5.1. Policy Guarantee Path

Policy guarantees serve as the foundation and prerequisite for empowering rural left-behind women to participate in rural governance. Local governments should introduce clear policies and regulations to ensure the equal participation rights of rural left-behind women in village-level decision-making. Specific measures include: First, improving laws and regulations: Formulate and refine relevant laws and regulations that safeguard women's participation in rural governance, clarifying women's status and rights in village committee elections, village councils, and other organizations. Strengthen policy publicity and training; second, publicize the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment through various channels, enhancing the awareness and participation consciousness of rural left-behind women in rural governance. At the same time, carry out training activities for village cadres and left-behind women to improve their governance capabilities and qualities.

5.2. Economic Empowerment Path

Economic empowerment is a crucial means of enhancing the ability of rural left-behind women to participate in rural governance. By elevating their economic status, their social participation and governance discourse power can be strengthened. Specific measures include: First, developing rural cooperatives and collective economies: Encourage and support rural left-behind women to participate in cooperatives and collective economic organizations, enhancing their economic participation and decision-making power through cooperative management and collective action. At the same time, provide technical training, market information, and financial services to cooperatives and collective economic organizations, helping left-behind women improve their production skills and market competitiveness. Second, promoting rural e-commerce and digital technology: Leverage the opportunity presented by the development of the digital economy in Zhejiang Province, encouraging and supporting rural left-behind women to participate in the application of digital technologies such as e-commerce platforms and social media. By providing digital technology training and equipment support, help them explore new economic participation channels and governance methods.

5.3. Community Support and Social Collaboration Path

Community support and social collaboration are crucial guarantees for enhancing the participation of rural left-behind women in rural governance. By strengthening the construction of community women's organizations and providing a platform for left-behind women to communicate and help each other, their sense of social belonging and willingness to participate can be enhanced. Specific measures include: First, establishing women's organizations and mutual aid mechanisms: Establish organizations such as women's centers and mutual aid groups for left-behind women in villages, providing a platform for them to communicate, help each other, and cooperate. Through organizing activities and collective actions, the cohesion and influence of left-behind women can be enhanced. Second, promoting social collaboration and pluralistic co-governance: Encourage and support cooperation and collaboration between village cadres, enterprises, and social organizations with left-behind women, jointly promoting rural governance and development projects. Through the participation and collaboration of multiple stakeholders, the efficiency and quality of rural governance can be improved.

5.4. Digital Technology Empowerment Path

Digital technology provides new opportunities and means for empowering rural left-behind women. Drawing on the experience of digital economy development in Zhejiang Province, this

study explores the role of digital technology in empowering left-behind women and examines how emerging technologies such as e-commerce and social media can provide women with more opportunities to participate in rural governance. Specific measures include: First, conducting digital skills training: Targeted digital skills training for rural left-behind women to enhance their mastery and application of digital technology. Through cooperation between the government, enterprises, and social organizations, establish digital skills training bases and online learning platforms to provide convenient learning paths for left-behind women. Second, promoting the application of digital platforms: Encourage and support rural left-behind women to utilize digital platforms such as e-commerce and social media to participate in rural governance and economic activities. Through digital platforms, left-behind women can more easily access information, express their demands, and participate in decision-making, enhancing their voice and influence in rural governance.

6. Summary

This study explores the implementation pathways for rural left-behind women to participate in rural governance under the background of rural revitalization through field research and data analysis. The study finds that the participation of rural left-behind women in rural governance is relatively low, mainly due to factors such as gender discrimination, cultural beliefs, lack of economic resources, and insufficient decision-making power. Rural left-behind women are an important force in rural revitalization. Addressing the issues they face in participating in rural governance and exploring effective implementation pathways are of great significance for promoting the modernization of rural governance systems and capabilities, and achieving the strategic goals of rural revitalization. We should attach great importance to the group of rural left-behind women and take practical measures to stimulate their enthusiasm and initiative to participate in rural governance.

Through multi-dimensional empowerment paths such as policy guarantees, economic empowerment, community support, and digital technology empowerment, the participation and discourse power of rural left-behind women in rural governance can be effectively enhanced. Future research can further explore the differences and characteristics of left-behind women's participation in rural governance across different regions and types of villages, providing more precise policy recommendations and practical paths for the in-depth implementation of the rural revitalization strategy.

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