

The Corners of Megacities: A Study on Women's Employment Pathways in Marginal Urban Villages

-- An Empirical Analysis based on Jiangcun, Jianggao Town, Guangzhou

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the employment situation of women in Jiangcun, Guangzhou City. It aims to gain an in-depth understanding of their occupational distribution, work conditions, challenges, and needs across different industries, age groups, and educational levels. The team conducted in-depth interviews with 65 individuals, and conducted a questionnaire survey among 175 people, covering professional women in Jianggao, human resource representatives at job fairs, men, and other groups. This research obtained rich and authentic first-hand data. Through field visits and data analysis, this study provides a foundation for exploring strategies to promote female employment. The research found that married women in the local area face many challenges in the employment field, such as transportation difficulties, post-childbirth employment barriers, and the struggle to balance family and career. Specific countermeasures were proposed to address these issues, providing specific case studies and data support for the study of women's job-seeking problems in marginal urban villages.

Keywords

Women; Employment; Marginal Urban Villages; Guangzhou; Jianggao.

1. Introduction

In contemporary Chinese society, the issue of women's employment has received increasing attention. The state has implemented a series of policies and laws, including the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests and the China Women's Development Outline (2021-2030), to eliminate gender discrimination and safeguard equal employment rights. During the wave of reform and opening up, Guangdong, as an economic frontier, has maintained the highest GDP for many consecutive years, accounting for 1/8 of the national total. The female population in Guangdong accounts for 46.93% of the total population.[1] Women have made irreplaceable contributions to Guangdong's economic development.

The "Vegetable Basket Project" of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area is centered around Guangzhou, forming a production and distribution service system for the "vegetable basket" in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area.[2] As an international metropolis, Guangzhou provides opportunities for women to transition from household roles to independent career choices. Jianggao Town, a key component of Guangzhou's "vegetable basket" initiative, has developed renowned agricultural brands

centered on the pre-cooked meal industry chain, aquaculture, and vegetable cultivation. Jiangcun, due to its geographical location and historical changes, is regarded as a typical peripheral urban village.

However, research reveals that women in Jiangcun exhibit limited diversity in their choice of employment positions and geographic locations, which is the result of the combined effect of various factors such as social and economic attributes, educational level, family responsibilities, information acquisition channels, and informal economy. This study focuses on the issue of the single employment pattern of women in Jiangcun, deeply analyze the multiple factors influencing the employment choices of women in Jiangcun, explore women's agency within the labor process, aiming to provide theoretical references and practical inspirations for optimizing the career development path of women, promoting gender equality, and social economic development.

The research on the theory of labor process originated with Karl Marx's "Das Kapital"[3]. The development of postmodernist theories such as Foucauldianism and feminism in the 1990s reignited critical discourse on Marxist labor process theory. Blovius integrated the workers' subjective consciousness into his theoretical system in "Manufacturing Consent", [4] added the perspective of workers' subjectivity to the study of labor process, like other Marxists, all advocating analyzing labor-capital relations from a class perspective. Here, the worker image is abstract and collective, devoid of gender, racial, or other distinctions. In traditional Marxist theories of labor process, the subject initiative of the worker is absent, and the internal differences of the worker are overlooked.

China's labor research lags behind that of the West, which is closely related to practical realities. After the reform and opening up, the influx of migrant workers into cities and the restructuring of state-owned enterprises spurred a wave of outstanding labor research in the 1990s. Pan Yi, Li Jingjun, Chen Peihua, and others, using ethnographic methods, described, summarized, and discussed the labor-capital ecology of factories in southern China. Xiang Bai and others conducted interdisciplinary discussions on issues related to migrant workers in "Zhejiang cun" and "Jiangsu Village" and other urban villages. At this stage, research on China's labor groups primarily focused on industrial manufacturing production processes, with little attention given to workers in urban leisure and entertainment industries-the tertiary sector. However, after the turn of the millennium, the rapid development of the service industry worldwide led to the transition of industrial society to a consumption society, and the new economic form shifted the academic focus from industrial manufacturing to service practitioners.

Since the new century, domestic research on female workers has gradually become more abundant. Terms such as female workers, female laborers, working women, and female factory workers have all become frequent terms in gender research. Pan Yi's research found that "migrant girls" faced the triple pressure of capital globalization, the household registration system, and traditional patriarchy, [5]concluded that the changes in women's roles are characterized by a lag. Lin Nan's research indicates that female workers' lack of social capital originates from family-centered initial socialization processes. The preference for males over females leads Chinese parents to differentiate and transfer social resources based on gender. [6]Cheng Cheng and Liu Xinghua both analyze the reasons for constructing the identity of workers from a family perspective.[7] However, these studies mostly focus on secondary industries like manufacturing, rarely touching on the service sector. Within service sector research on female workers, many scholars have conducted occupational group-based surveys to explain class identity disparities among female laborers within China's unique gendered cultural context. Some domestic scholars have conducted emotional labor analysis in industries such as hotel catering services, domestic services, aviation, and beauty. Jin Yihong argues that domestic workers' labor exhibits invisibility and informality, rendering it incompatible with existing labor laws and thus depriving them of corresponding rights protections.[8]

Additionally, Guo Huimin also takes the female domestic worker group as an example to analyze the phenomenon of power coexistence, arguing that under the influence of gender division of labor, women are expected to do work related to household chores, while excluded women in the labor market can only passively choose informal employment.[9] Women are generally perceived as investing more emotions in emotional labor than men. Wang Bin contends that the concept of emotional labor reveals the covert exploitation of the emotional system of female workers in the highly developed service industry. [10]

Women, especially those in urban villages in the urban areas, continue to face a severe employment environment. The marginalization predicament encountered by urban village women in employment is related to the realization of individual development rights and also to the deep structural contradictions in the allocation of social resources and the rights guarantee system. This research fundamentally resonates with the deep needs of national governance modernization and has far-reaching strategic value. In the new journey of comprehensively building a modern socialist country, optimizing the employment path for women is both a vivid practice of the “people-centered” development ideology and a strategic fulcrum for building a new development pattern.

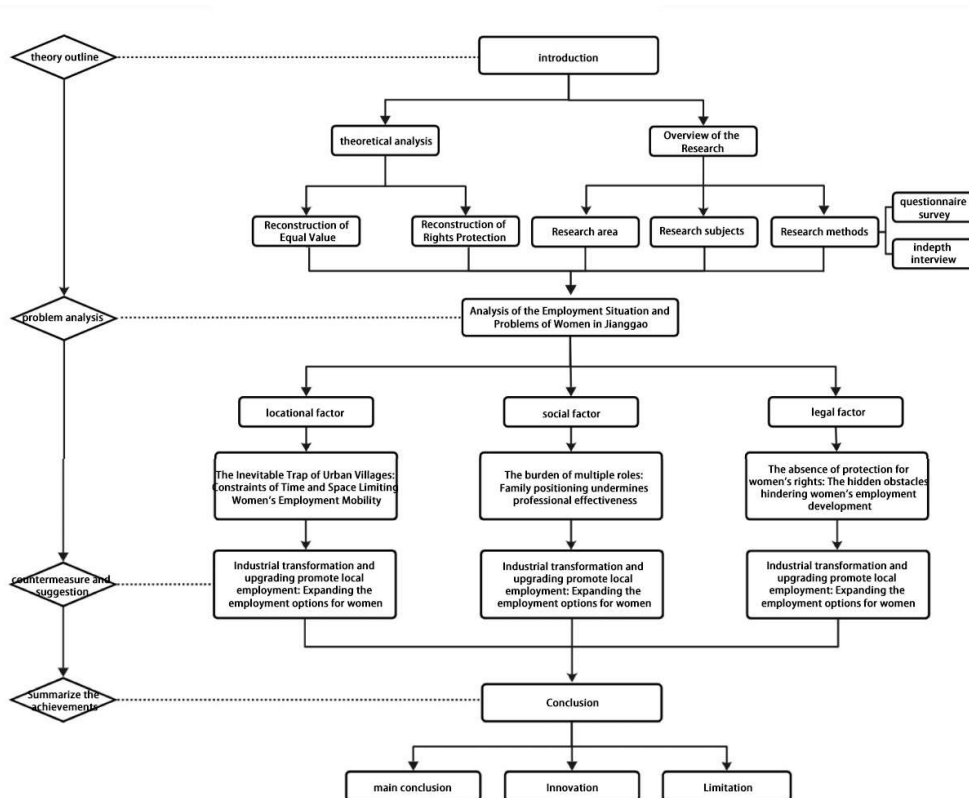


Figure 1. Research Thought Map

2. Theoretical Analysis of Employment and Women

2.1. Reshaping the Value of Equality: The Equal Foundation and Legal Connotation of Employment in Urban Villages in Megacities

Urban villages, as unique spatial carriers in the process of urbanization[11], embody an employment ecosystem that carries the core value of achieving social fairness and justice-employment equality. This value reformation needs to be carried out from three dimensions: its functional positioning in urban development, the legal core of equal employment rights, and its special significance within the context of megacities.

With their low living costs and relatively dense employment opportunities, urban villages serve as crucial arenas absorbing large numbers of new urban residents, particularly middle- and low-income groups and migrant workers, providing the city with a stable and flexible labor supply.[12] As a transitional space in the process of urbanization, urban villages to some extent alleviated the population and housing pressure in the city center.[13] The rich and diverse informal and formal economic activities within them[14], as pointed out by Wan Chengwei and Long Xiaolu, have not only directly created a significant number of jobs, especially for villagers and migrant populations, but also through the expansion of the consumption market, industrial support, and promotion of market renewal, injected key impetus into the diversity and vitality of the city's overall economy. The continuous optimization and upgrading of their industrial economy is an inevitable path for adapting to urban development and enhancing employment quality.[15]

Employment equality is the foundation for the efficient operation of modern market economy, ensuring the fair distribution of social resources, providing impetus for long-term stable economic growth, and being a core element for promoting social harmony and progress. It emphasizes eliminating discrimination in job access and opportunity based on irrelevant factors such as gender, pursuing "gender neutrality" and safeguarding women's freedom of equal occupational choice, such as by abolishing explicit discriminatory clauses.[16] Acknowledging the objective differences between male and female workers in terms of physiology, social roles, and historical accumulation disadvantages, such as the more severe wage gap expansion trend faced by women under the "queue effect" in recent times[17], Dhar and Thuppilikkat (2022) revealed that women face salary cuts, lack of safety guarantees, and imbalance between work and life in the platform economy. It advocates for differential treatment and special protective measures-such as anti-discrimination laws, equal pay guarantees, maternity protection, family-friendly policies, and targeted vocational training-to address initial inequalities at the legislative, administrative, and judicial levels, pursue substantive fairness in outcomes, and correct institutional discrimination. This is the advanced form and ultimate goal of the right to equal employment in the labor field.

In megacities with a large population and dense economy, achieving employment equality is of extreme importance, especially gender equality, as it concerns fully releasing the potential of the labor force, promoting the optimal allocation of talents in different industries and regions, significantly improving labor productivity, and injecting innovative vitality into the city's economy. Liu Heran's research reveals the widespread issues faced by women in urban villages, such as lack of labor contracts, low social insurance coverage, wage arrears, and unpaid overtime, highlighting the urgency of equal protection. Against the backdrop of intensified global talent competition, building an equal and inclusive employment environment is an inevitable requirement for megacities to attract and retain talents, stimulate innovation, and maintain crucial competitiveness. Li Mengqing et al.'s research indicates that gender equality awareness has a long-term complexity on the influence on women's employment, highlighting the necessity of fostering advanced gender culture in megacities.[18]

2.2. Reconstructing Rights Safeguards: Strengthening Employment Rights for Women in Megacity Urban Villages

In response to the unique challenges faced by women in urban villages in the employment field, it is necessary to restructure their rights protection system. The core lies in bridging the gap between legal policy commitments and reality, challenging traditional constraints, and empowering the female subject. This is specifically manifested in three aspects: institutional guarantee, conceptual transformation, and the manifestation of subjectivity.

China has established a protection framework centered on laws like the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, enshrining fundamental principles such as gender equality in

employment, equal pay for equal work, and anti-discrimination. However, the implementation of these legal principles in the complex field of urban villages faces severe challenges. As demonstrated by Liu Heshan's empirical research, the low rate of labor contract signing, low rate of social insurance participation, being prone to unpaid wages, and unpaid overtime are examples of unfair treatment. The rise of new economic forms,[19] such as the classification of a large number of female workers (such as domestic workers[20], gig workers) as "independent contractors" in the United States, has excluded them from the protection scope of traditional labor law, depriving them of job security, social insurance, and bargaining power, exacerbating their vulnerability and exploitation risks.[21] At the institutional level, it is necessary to tailor rules, strengthen supervision, and innovate protection models, such as exploring platform responsibilities and improving the connection between non-formal employment and social security.[22]

The gender role division concept of "men outside the house, women inside the house" confines women mainly to the domestic domain, resulting in their marginalization in the social and economic sphere, restricting their range of employment choices, career development space, and income potential.[23] Unpaid household chores such as childbearing, parenting, and care are mainly borne by women, as confirmed by Shi Kaixiang's research. Having a second child, having infants at home, and job interruption due to childbirth have significantly negative impacts on women's employment status.[24] Economic pressure forces women to work, but due to family responsibilities, they find it difficult to obtain stable and high-quality employment, as shown in the case of women in slums in India: low income, low savings, lack of economic support from a spouse, and difficulty in obtaining formal finance.[25] This requires promoting the socialization of household chores, advocating equal sharing of responsibilities by men, and developing inclusive childcare service systems as supporting measures.

Despite multiple challenges, the practical actions of women actively engaging in employment to improve family livelihoods and achieve personal value are themselves a vivid manifestation of "women's power". Their participation, resistance, and adaptation in the employment market, such as starting businesses or engaging in flexible employment by taking advantage of the low costs in urban villages, not only contribute economically to families and communities but also quietly promote the transformation of gender concepts and the enhancement of women's subject status in society and culture.[26] Empowering women, guaranteeing their equal employment rights, acknowledging and supporting their economic contributions, is the key to stimulating their potential and unleashing "women's power", and has far-reaching significance for promoting the overall progress of society and achieving true gender equality. This requires skills training, entrepreneurial support, inclusive financial services, and smooth channels for rights protection, implemented through multiple measures.

3. Overview of the Jiangcun Field Research in an Urban Village

3.1. Research Area

Located in Guangzhou's northern suburbs, Jiangcun is a typical Pearl River Delta peri-urban community. It retains traditional rural social textures while integrating into Guangzhou's metropolitan economy. During its transformation from traditional agricultural production to diversified industries,[27] it has retained some of the traditional rural social textures, such as family clustering and land connections, while closely integrating into the economic system of the Guangzhou metropolitan area, surrounded by industrial parks, logistics centers, and rapidly developing commercial service districts.

Jiangcun was selected for three reasons. First, its economy is diverse-combining traditional crafts, small manufacturing, migrant-driven services, and some agriculture-theoretically offering varied employment for women. Yet actual employment remains concentrated in low-

level jobs, highlighting socio-cultural influences on women's choices. Second, its strong community atmosphere, family values, and gender norms shape women's professional experiences, offering a window into cultural impact. Third, as Guangzhou expands, Jiangcun undergoes rapid social transformation, providing a perspective on how such changes affect women's labor status and roles.

To examine employment quality and rights protection, 167 valid questionnaires and 46 qualified semi-structured interviews were analyzed. Interviewees included local women from various sectors, HR representatives from job fairs, and male residents, ensuring multi-perspective and objective insights.

3.2. Survey Methods and Subjects

To further explore the employment quality and rights protection status of the female population in Jiangcun, our team distributed 175 questionnaires to women in Jiangcun and conducted semi-structured interviews with 65 local residents. From these, 167 valid questionnaires and 46 qualified interview cases were used as the basis for analysis.

The interview sample covered a relatively wide range of demographic categories, including professional women from different industries and sectors within Jiangcun. Additionally, human resources representatives from job fairs were one of the key interview groups, aimed at understanding companies' standards and demands regarding female employees during the recruitment process, as well as their attitudes and policies towards job applicants of different genders. At the same time, male residents were also included in the interview scope. As important members of society and the family, their perspectives and attitudes are indispensable for understanding female employment issues. By interviewing subjects from different levels and perspectives, the comprehensiveness and objectivity of the research results are ensured.

Table 1. Coding Table for Interviewees

Number	Gender	Age	Educational Level	Occupation	Interview Date
M1	Female	40+	High School	Running a small store with her husband	2024.03.09
M2	Female	35+	Bachelor's Degree	Not employed, full-time mother	2024.03.09
M3	Female	49	Junior High School	Refueling at a private gas station	2024.03.09
M4	Female	33	Junior college	Automobile industry clerk	2024.03.12
M5	Female	30	Junior college	Customer service and clerk in private enterprises	2024.03.12
M6	Female	28	Junior college	Private enterprise logistics and land approval, tried new media	2024.03.12
M7	Female	26	Bachelor's Degree	Not employed, previously worked on land approval	2024.03.12
M8	Female	around23	Bachelor's Degree	Not employed, had internship experience in human resources management	2024.03.12
M9	Female	22	Technical secondary school	Internship experience in pharmacy and shopping mall sales	2024.03.12
M10	Female	40+	High School	Waitress in a restaurant	2024.03.12
M11	Female	33	Estimated Bachelor's Degree Junior college	Full-time mother	2024.03.12

M12	Female	around22	Estimated Junior college	Running a noodle shop from home	2024.03.12
M13	Female	28-29	Estimated Junior college	Beauty salon consultant	2024.03.13
M14	Female	27	Bachelor's Degree	Partner in a media company, currently on break	2024.03.13
M15	Female	58	High School	Running a hair salon independently	2024.03.13
M16	Female	35	Estimated Junior college	Previously in a factory	2024.03.13
M17	Female	40+	Not clear	Once ran a steel factory, worked at a friend's beauty salon	2024.03.13
M18	Female	41	Not clear	Previously worked as a customer service representative in a leather factory, now unemployed	2024.03.13
M19	Female	47	High School	Full-time mother, previously worked in the government	2024.03.13
M20	Female	33	Junior college	Currently working in a hardware factory	2024.03.16
M21	Female	around35	Not clear	Resigned before the year-end, started looking for a job in March of the following year	2024.03.16
M22	Female	Above 35	Technical School	Worked in a factory before having children	2024.03.16
M23	Female	18	Technical School after graduating from junior high school	Beauty therapist	2024.03.16
M24	Female	33	Junior college	Left the job after having a child, currently unemployed	2024.03.16
M25	Female	60+	Junior high school	Full-time mother, taking care of two grandchildren	2024.03.16
M26	Female	48	Junior college	Running her own moxibustion clinic	2024.03.16
M27	Female	36	Junior high school	Full-time mother	2024.03.16
M28	Female	around45	Bachelor's Degree	School principal, teacher	2024.03.16
M29	Female	27	Junior high school	Working in a beauty salon in Wuhan before, working in a clothing store in Guangzhou, earning a little commission by doing short TikTok dramas part-time after giving birth	2024.03.16
M30	Female	23	Junior college	Working as a clerk in a private company in Shenzhen, currently selling vegetables at a market	2024.03.16
M31	Female	41	High School Graduation	Working as a finance officer in a local company in Jiangcun	2024.04.01
M32	Female	40	Technical secondary school	Financial statistics	2024.04.01
M33	Female	34	Junior college	Administrative and management position	2024.04.01

M34	Female	30	Bachelor's Degree	Clerk	2024.04.01
M35	Female	40	Bachelor's Degree (Self-study)	Management Position Clerk	2024.04.01
M36	Female	50	Technical secondary school	Self-owned Bakery	2024.04.01
M37	Female	39	Junior college	Logistics at a Large Company	2024.04.01
M38	Female	/	/	HR at an Oreo Factory	2024.04.01
M39	Female	/	/	HR at a Beauty Company	2024.04.01
M40	Female	/	/	HR at a Live Streaming Company	2024.04.01
M41	Female	33	Bachelor's Degree	Worked at a Shenzhen Law Firm before giving birth and then became unemployed	2024.04.01
M42	Male	20	Undergraduate Studies	Guangdong Technical Normal University	2024.03.16
M43	Male	19	Undergraduate Studies	Guangdong Technical Normal University	2024.03.16
M44	Male	42	/	From Henan Province, came to Guangzhou to work	2024.03.16
M45	Male	52	/	Factory piecework job, eldest daughter works in Coal Industry Chemical Company, youngest daughter teaches in the countryside	2024.03.16
M46	Male	37	/	Logistics at a Midea Company, wife works in personnel	2024.03.16

4. Problem Analysis

4.1. The Inevitable Stagnation of Urban Villages: Constraints on Female Employment Mobility Due to Spatial Conditions

4.1.1. Marginalized Location Disadvantages

Jiangcun is the largest and most populous village within Jianggao Town. In the past, it benefited from its waterway advantage along the Liuxi River and the old National Highway 107, making transportation and economic exchanges relatively convenient.

In recent years, the rapid expansion of the subway network has made it one of the important transportation methods for daily travel. Baiyun District, serving as Guangzhou's transportation hub, boasts an extensive subway network with multiple interconnected lines. However, Jianggao Town is located in the northern edge of Guangzhou and the subway planning has long lagged behind the core urban area. The planned extension of Line 8 in the north still passes through Jianggao, but the geological conditions in this area are special and the construction progress is slow, resulting in an ineffective coverage.

As of today, residents of Jiangcun Village in Jianggao Township continue to face transportation challenges. In the questionnaire, when asked about the "special features of Jiangcun compared to other urban villages", "transportation" was the most frequently used word. Cross-analysis of question 5 "Do you work in Jianggao Village or near Jianggao Village?" and question 9 "Your commuting time" (see Table 2) showed that the p-value was less than 0.01, indicating a significant difference. The commuting time of Jianggao Village residents working outside notably increased.

"But for us here, it's only convenient when we take the subway and arrive here. But now? It takes over an hour to get downtown, sometimes even two hours."(Interviewee M2)

Table 2. Results of Cross (Chi-square) Analysis

Title	Name	Do you work in or near		Total	χ^2	p
		Jiangcun (%)				
		No	Yes			
Commuting time	0h<0.5h	3(8.11)	71(54.62)	74(44.31)	25.796	0.000**
	0.5h<1h	11(29.73)	23(17.69)	34(20.36)		
	>1h	23(62.16)	36(27.69)	59(35.33)		
Total		37	130	167		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

The urban villages located at the outskirts of cities have an impact on the female employment mobility due to their unique geographical location. The residents of these urban villages, mainly composed of migrant workers, are mostly low-income urban poor people and are more sensitive to changes in housing costs and commuting costs. [27] However, urban village redevelopment in China generally fails to account for residents’ short-distance commuting and local employment patterns, causing many to lose their jobs.[28] By treating the 18th question as a dummy variable, it can be concluded that women in Jiangcun prefer to stay and work locally (see Figure 2). Transportation accessibility serves as the key link connecting the geographical space and the social space. The public transportation system in Jiangcun is inadequate, failing to effectively connect employment sites within and outside the village and thus unable to meet the diverse work needs of Jiangcun women. Local women, considering factors such as saving commuting time and economic costs, as well as convenience for taking care of their families, generally choose to work in Jiangcun and its surrounding areas, sacrificing the freedom to choose the employment location and job position.

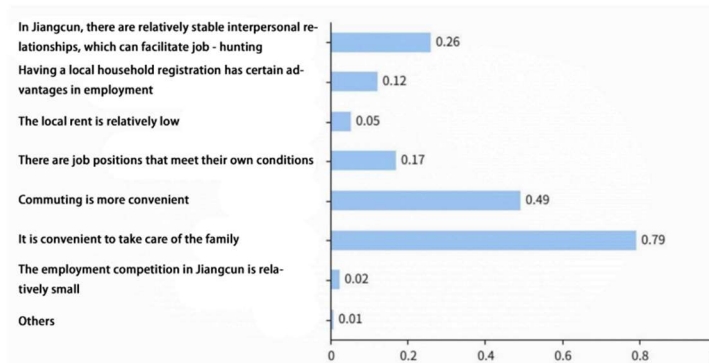


Figure 2. Average Reasons for Staying in Jiangcun (or Nearby) for Work

4.1.2. Employment Mobility Constraints in the Context of Industrial Prosperity

The economic development of Jianggao Town mainly relies on industry and agriculture. Jiangcun pioneered the nationally renowned “Jianggao Model” - a new type of group-based agricultural economy that integrates production, supply, and sales through a multi-level joint venture of “leading enterprises” + base + farmers. Later, the Jianggao Model evolved from the technical improvement of “Jiangcun Chicken Farm” to the “New Jianggao Model” of “company + base + farmers + standards”.[29] Jianggao Town gradually shifted its focus from being “Guangzhou’s vegetable basket” to industrial development. Today, Jianggao Town is a nationally designated key town, known as the “ballast stone” of Baiyun’s industrial sector.

The area is still in the transitional period from an agricultural society to a non-agricultural society. Field research revealed that some Jiangcun residents still rely on farming for livelihood, with agricultural workers commonly experiencing conflicts with village committees over land allocation and management. As shown in Figure 3, more than half of the respondents were

engaged in the tertiary industry, namely the service industry, and company clerks became the most popular choice for women. One tenth of the people were unemployed.

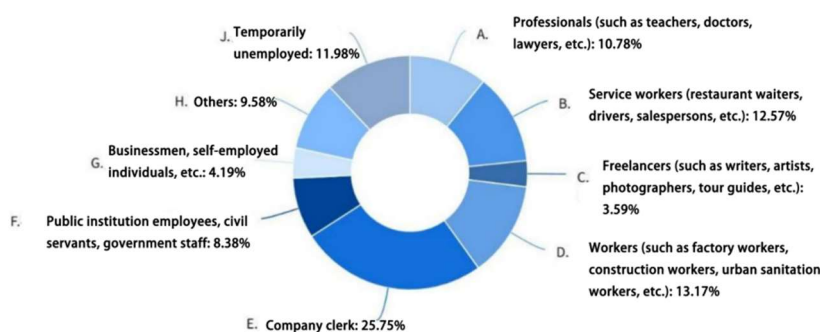


Figure 3. Proportion of Respondents by Occupational Type

Although Jianggao Town has a relatively developed industrial economy, this industrial prosperity has not fully translated into employment advantages for women in Jiangcun. The mobility of women's employment in Jiangcun is still constrained. First, Jiangcun's industrial structure predominantly offers labor-intensive positions. Industrial jobs typically demand significant physical strength and specialized technical skills, coupled with demanding work schedules and intensity, often excluding women at the recruitment stage. The gender employment structure in China is still deeply influenced by traditional gender division of labor concepts.[30] Through interviews, it was found that in the "Spring Breeze Campaign" large-scale offline job fairs in Jianggao Town in the past two years, most recruitment booth staff clearly stated that they only needed male workers, only a few positions such as makeup quality inspectors, housekeeping services, live-streamers, and clerks were more welcoming to women. When job fairs introduced "mothers' positions," these were concentrated in domestic service sectors like childcare workers, elderly care attendants, and professional organizers. Secondly, the insufficient education level and concentrated work experience of female workers also reduced their possibility of cross-industry job hunting. The employment stability of female migrant workers has a dual negative effect of both household registration and gender, but the dual negative effect is still lower than the impact of the gap in human capital such as education level and work experience.[31] The job openings at Jianggao Town's "Spring Breeze Action" job fair also required certain levels of education, technical skills, certifications, and relevant work experience. The vast majority of female respondents in the field survey lacked the corresponding experience and advantages, making it difficult for them to meet the requirements of high-skill positions.

4.1.3. Lack of Resources in the Local Information Bubble

In China, particularly in regions with less accessible information, the strong relationships of women are more composed of women themselves, thus filled with homogeneous information, and more related to family and kinship.[32] The registered women in Jiangcun, constrained by transportation difficulties in their residential areas, have limited external information exchange. Offline social networks often limit themselves to residents within the same village and lack connections with a broader society.

This limitation in interpersonal communication also restricts the ability of local women to obtain external employment information and opportunities. The information in the urban employment market is often concentrated in the central urban area. The urban village is located in a remote area, with limited information acquisition channels, and Jiangcun women have difficulty promptly learning about employment opportunities in the core area of the city. Consequently, their employment options become fixed and restricted, leading them to rely on

strong ties for job searches and resulting in narrow career choices. Many respondents indicated that their current jobs were introduced by acquaintances or passed down by their parents, and the dissemination of employment information was closely related to blood relations and geographical relations. Spatial distance limited the ability of Jiangcun women to obtain employment information.

"I only heard from my friend that there's a job here where you can pick up and drop off kids." (Interviewee M16)

"Because I didn't want to work over there (in Shenzhen) anymore, I wanted to help my parents (run their market stall)." (Interviewee M30)

4.2. Burden of Multiple Roles: Family Position Weakens Professional Efficiency

4.2.1. The Solidification of Female Roles by Clan Cultural Traditions

The research team discovered through in-depth interviews that many women often felt isolated when facing employment difficulties. A significant reason being the lack of understanding from their parents and husbands.

Local people believe that the name "Jiangcun" originated because the Jiang family established the village here. To this day, the Jiang family remains the main surname in Jiangcun, and at the same time, the strong clan traditions and concepts have been passed down along with the surname. Jiangcun, as a relatively typical urban-rural integration area in Guangdong, is deeply influenced by traditional gender role concepts. There is a prevalent belief that a woman's primary duty is to care for the family, support her husband, and raise children; working outside the home is not considered a woman's primary task.[33] In the era when education was not widespread, many farmers had a low level of education and generally believed that women did not need to strive in the cities and that life in Jiangcun was more stable. This concept undoubtedly created a great obstacle to women's career development.

"At the vegetable market, of course, there are more women, and the men go out to make a living. Go out to work." (Interviewee M25)

"She didn't go because the things she learned weren't favored and weren't very good. So she didn't go. She worked for me. At the technical school, she spent several thousand yuan on tuition, and after spending time working, she only earned 1,800 yuan. I said you don't need to go. Just stay at home and cook." (Interviewee M12's father)

Marx pointed out in "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State"[34] that the emergence of private ownership turned the family into an economic unit, leading to the alienation of domestic labor from a public affair into private service. In primitive society, men and women were based on natural needs to divide labor, and domestic labor had public nature; but private ownership made women become "household slaves" and excluded from public production, losing their economic status. Engels further emphasized that this privatized unpaid labor prevented women from achieving economic independence and made them dependent. Under the capitalist system, the family became a microcosm of class oppression.

Under the traditional family division of labor model, the husband is often seen as the primary economic provider, while the woman is primarily responsible for housework and childcare. This concept still persists in the minds of some men, causing them to lack sufficient understanding and support for the difficulties and challenges faced by women in the employment process, making women unable to receive support and help from their families when facing employment difficulties, and having to bear the pressure alone, thus falling into a more isolated and helpless situation, further exacerbating their employment difficulties.

4.2.2. Voluntary Resignation Rooted in Family-Centric Values

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, under the political call for gender equality, the social status of Chinese women significantly improved. Building upon the popularization of

basic education and the expansion of higher education, opportunities for women in higher education grew rapidly.[35] Women's aspirations for their own education and careers has increased.

However, simultaneously, the traditional family thinking and the constraints of motherhood identity led women to have multiple roles in society, facing responsibilities and pressures stemming from these different identities. From a value perspective, the vast majority of women adhere to the core concept that family interests supersede individual interests. Most interviewees believe that they are first and foremost mothers and wives in the family, and then workers. The importance of their family identity far outweighed the construction of their identity at work, and they are not concerned about whether they get promoted at work or improve their social status, only focusing on whether the income from work can support their small family. Especially during pregnancy and after childbirth, many women experience conflicts between work and family, leading to a complex psychological dilemma and thereby triggering the behavior of active resignation.

"I once had a senior colleague who was fired as soon as she had a child. She couldn't get justice. You haven't passed the probation period, that's it. If you have children, it won't work. There are plenty of cases like this. Enterprises are afraid that you will constantly seek redress. Some of them resign later themselves because they have to look after the child." (Interviewee M20)

When a woman is pregnant, due to the physiological changes in her body and the discomfort during pregnancy, her work efficiency may be affected to some extent, making it difficult for them to devote themselves to work as usual. In such cases, some women may feel guilty because they cannot meet the efficiency standards expected by themselves or their work units. Concurrently, after giving birth, children require more time and energy for care, and women's attention to and investment of time in the family are constantly increasing, making it difficult for women to balance family and work. Interviewees reported conflicts between work hours and the need to care for sick children or seek immediate medical attention; during the breastfeeding stage, workplaces often lacked corresponding support facilities and time arrangements. Under such contradictions, many women, based on the emphasis on family and the sense of responsibility for their children's growth, ultimately choose to voluntarily resign from their jobs. The research found that this phenomenon is to some extent reflected in women of different industries and career backgrounds, reflecting that the issue of balancing family and work is a widespread and urgently needed social issue.

"Once married and has a child, they stop working. Most friends around me stopped working after getting married." (Interviewee M41)

4.2.3. Challenges in Returning to the Workplace Due to Age Barriers

In the era of individualization in Chinese society, family patterns have been impacted and restructured. The fulfillment of motherhood has become more diverse. The societal call, coupled with increasing demands on the skills, social capital, and energy investment required for motherhood, often forces women to relegate intimate relationships and career development to second place. Middle-aged rural women lacking labor skills, after completing the childcare work as housewives, choose to redevelop their careers. Motherhood performance transitions from companionship and nurturing to economic support, and going out to work becomes the second stage of fulfilling the maternal role.

In today's employment market, age discrimination has become a problem that cannot be ignored, especially for female job seekers over 35 years old. In the employment environment of megacities, this age barrier phenomenon is particularly obvious and has a certain radiation effect on the urban-rural integration areas around them.

"The 35-year-old threshold" originated from the 35-year age limit set in the civil service examination. Originally, it was based on considerations of the required qualities and experience

for that profession. However, over time, this standard has gradually been emulated by many enterprises and has become a common recruitment “hidden rule”. This is a problem faced by both men and women in the workplace, but for many women, the challenges this rule poses to their career paths are undoubtedly greater. Due to reasons such as giving birth and taking care of children, they return to the workplace relatively late. At this time, many women have already exceeded 35 years old. In the recruitment process, by which time many are already over 35. Employers, during the recruitment process, tend to prefer younger candidates, leaving many female job seekers over 35 facing immense competitive pressure and unfair treatment in the job market, and being forced into unemployment.

“Now it’s not a matter of whether I choose or not, but because I’m 35 years old, I really have no choice. The government’s public institution has recruitment conditions of under 35 years old. The government doesn’t support it, and do they support the ones below? At that time, I also wanted to apply, but 35 years old was a hurdle. Some were not even recruiting at 30 years old.” (Interviewee M27)

Recently, the 2025 National Civil Service Exam announcement’s provision to “relax the age limit to under 40 for master’s and doctoral graduates of 2025” has garnered widespread attention. Mengman believes that in the future, restrictions should be appropriately relaxed again. In the civil service industry, eliminating the “red line” of 35 years old for application first can indeed allow young people to make their career plans more calmly. However, civil service exams primarily target knowledge-based groups with college education or above. Lü Guoquan further suggested that employers should continuously improve employee training mechanisms, expand educational resource provision for middle-aged and older workers, and offer more targeted services like job skills and re-employment training to enhance their employment rate and competitiveness.[36] He stated: “Especially for middle-aged and elderly unemployed people with low education levels and single skills, more assistance measures should be introduced, and experts should provide career guidance, promotion of training programs, and consultation on employment and entrepreneurship policies”

However, the age predicament not only exists in the so-called high-end employment market, but will be even more serious in the low-end physical labor market. Young people can rely on their physical capital to engage in higher-paying jobs, but these “quality” jobs often set invisible thresholds for middle-aged female workers. Simultaneously, 35-year-old women possess inescapable multiple family roles that inevitably constrain them.

“35 years old in the family, we face the situation where there are elderly and children at home, and it needs to be balanced. When you reach 35 years old, basically the elderly at home have become old. Your children are probably at a rebellious stage then, so you can’t take on high-intensity work because you must come home to cook in the evening, and also you can’t work overtime. Then you cannot fully devote yourself to work, but your salary is still like this.” (Interviewee M11)

4.3. The Absence of Women’s Rights Protection: Hidden Barriers to Women’s Employment Development

4.3.1. The Pervasiveness of Gender Discrimination Related to Childbearing

The discriminatory economic theory suggests that part of the reason for the gender differences in the labor market can be attributed to the differences in educational level and work experience between men and women. However, these factors account for only a small portion of the observed differences. Disparities beyond the scope of education and experience are typically defined as gender wage discrimination. Survey data reveals that approximately 30% of female respondents reported experiencing a salary decrease, career obstruction, or disguised layoffs after childbirth. Although some women have higher educational qualifications, their

career development is still significantly restricted after childbirth, even if their educational levels are similar, childbearing still subjects women to a “wage penalty”.

Labor market segmentation theory emphasizes the existence of significant gender segregation in occupational choices and sectoral distribution. This segregation, partly driven by discriminatory attitudes and practices toward women in the labor market, resulting in unequal distribution of gender in occupations and departments. Women are mostly concentrated in positions such as clerks, customer service, and sales, which are flexible but have limited promotion opportunities, while men have a higher proportion in management and technical positions.

Gender discrimination and segmentation are pervasive in the labor market, with childbearing viewed as a factor exacerbating these disparities: women are often forced into low-barrier positions due to childcare responsibilities, creating a vicious cycle of “childbirth → career downgrade → income decline.” Nearly 40% of the respondents resigned or were forced to interrupt their careers due to childbirth. Women who return to the workplace after childbirth generally face “age discrimination” and “skill mismatch”. This interruption directly reduces female labor participation rates and undermines their long-term competitiveness.

“I worked at a garment factory until the month before giving birth. Since I hadn’t signed a contract beforehand, the boss didn’t rehire me after I had the baby.” (Interviewee M26)

“Age matters-older people are not as flexible as young people, and enterprises also require employees to be under 35 years old.” (Interviewee M33)

The survey frequently highlighted issues like “inadequate social insurance and housing fund contributions,” “lack of maternity/menstrual leave”, and “unimplemented maternity benefits”. Even though policies clearly stipulate this, enterprises still evade responsibilities through “dual contracts” and “traps in probation periods”. This institutional deficiency exacerbates the economic vulnerability of women, forcing some women to accept low-quality employment.

“My company deducts pay for prenatal check-up leave. There’s no maternity leave or menstrual leave, and social insurance contributions are insufficient.” (Interviewee M4)

“Having a job is very satisfying.” (Interviewee M3)

Childbearing not only impacts objective career conditions but also reinforces societal stereotypes about women’s roles. This culture places sole responsibility for childbearing on women, leading companies to view them as “high-risk labor”, further compressing their career space.

4.3.2. Weak Awareness of Rights Leads to Inadequate Protection

In the current labor market, many women have shown varying degrees of neglect and lack of understanding of employment protection policies. Field research data shows that fewer than 30% of respondents could clearly list the specifics of basic entitlements like maternity allowances and breastfeeding leave. This lack of knowledge often leaves them ill-equipped with the necessary sensitivity and coping strategies when facing gender discrimination in the workplace.

“Maternity leave and menstruation leave are recognized as personal leave, and I was deducted salary for three days.” (Interviewee M20)

“Good bosses are hard to find. Company benefits depend entirely on the employer’s goodwill, with no contractual or legal safeguards.” (Interviewee M21)

Specifically, when women encounter unfair treatment in the labor market, they may fail to recognize that they are suffering from discrimination, or they may have become accustomed to such discrimination, thus failing to take timely action to protect their legitimate rights. Over 60% of cases in the survey mentioned experiencing hidden discrimination after giving birth, including issues such as “deceptive salary cuts” and “not renewing contracts upon expiration”.

Yet only 8 individuals attempted to defend their rights or negotiate. More concerning is that some women even view inadequate policy enforcement as the norm, a perception that further weakens their motivation to proactively defend their rights.

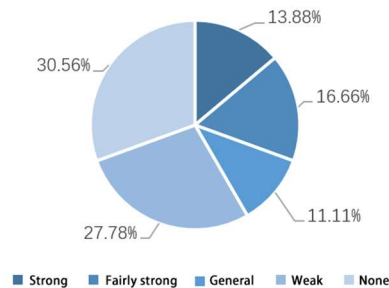


Figure 4. Proportion of Respondents (excluding HR) by Awareness Level of Rights Protection

“I don’t want to strain my relationship with my employer, and the phenomenon of ‘policies being circumvented’ is actually quite common.” (Interviewee M2)

The existence of this phenomenon not only affects women’s competitiveness and development opportunities in the workplace, but also weakens the implementation effect of employment protection policies. In the interviews, only 5 respondents reported that their employers fully implemented maternity-related benefits. Issues like “non-payment of social insurance and housing fund” and “lack of childcare leave” affected as many as 75% of women with lower education levels and in entry-level positions. Women failed to fully recognize the importance of the policies and did not actively participate in them, and the implementation environment of the policies was not effectively optimized, have resulted in the enforcement strength and effectiveness falling short of expectations.

4.3.3. Insufficient Legal and Policy Support Exacerbates Employment Inequality

The root cause of reproductive gender discrimination lies in a policy system that “prioritizes principles over implementation”. Qualified cases in the survey reveal that despite the Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests explicitly prohibiting gender discrimination, enterprises often circumvent responsibilities through covert means. This reflects the lack of detailed implementation rules for principled provisions such as “not refusing to hire women on the basis of gender”, leading enterprises to avoid legal risks through inquiries about marital and childbearing status, shortening maternity leave, and canceling benefits, etc., “soft discrimination”. Furthermore, only 13% of respondents demonstrated strong awareness of their rights. Most remain silent due to high advocacy costs and unclear channels, further weakening the law’s practical enforceability.

The Special Provisions on Labor Protection for Female Employees partially shifts maternity costs to enterprises but lacks a complementary social burden-sharing mechanism, exacerbating corporate exclusion of women. Field research data reveals that 76% of women over 30 believe their career advancement is restricted after childbirth, with re-employment becoming increasingly difficult with age. Policy design has failed to fully consider the balance between enterprise cost pressure and social responsibility, resulting in enterprises systematically preferring male employees to reduce labor costs. This creates a vicious cycle of “childbirth-unemployment-re-employment discrimination”.

The 2019 joint notice from nine ministries, “On Further Regulating Recruitment Practices to Promote Women’s Employment”, stipulated fines ranging from 10,000 to 50,000 yuan for employers publishing gender-discriminatory job postings and refusing to rectify them. Serious violations would also face credit punishment under the law. However, only four respondents in

the survey were aware of this policy, and none had successfully enforced their rights through this channel. This means that the policy's restraint on employers is insufficient, meaning that even when companies engage in discriminatory practices against women, the cost of non-compliance remains relatively low.

At the same time, respondents' core demands to the government centered on specific measures such as "creating mother-friendly positions" (68%) and "extending breastfeeding leave" (52%). These needs expose gaps in current policies in flexible employment and anti-age discrimination, rendering the goal of "protecting women's rights" largely symbolic.

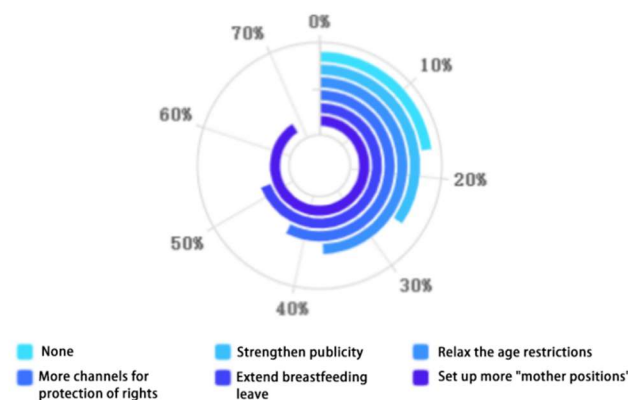


Figure 5. Core Demands of Survey Participants (Non-HR)

5. Policy Recommendations

5.1. Promoting Local Employment through Industrial Transformation and Upgrading to Expand Women's Career Options

5.1.1. Improve the Regional Transportation Network to Alleviate Women's Commuting Constraints

Jiangcun's geographical disadvantages and resource issues force women to choose between jobs and high commuting costs. To address this, accelerate the Metro Line 8 Jianggao section using advanced technologies to overcome geological challenges for early completion. Simultaneously, enhance buses by increasing frequency, optimizing routes to employment zones, and introducing flexible shuttles to meet diverse and off-peak needs, reducing time and costs for female commuters.

5.1.2. Promote Industrial Diversification to Enhance Compatibility with Women's Employment Needs

To counter Jianggao's industrial monoculture, concrete actions are needed. Firstly, guide traditional manufacturing upgrades to increase demand for multi-skilled roles in management and data analysis, reducing physical labor reliance. Secondly, incentivize enterprises, especially those employing many women, to adopt flexible work arrangements like remote options. Finally, the government should provide financial subsidies to firms meeting female-employment benchmarks, directly enhancing job gender-friendliness and broadening women's employment choices.

5.1.3. Building Diverse Support Networks to Optimize Women's Employment Development Environment

To expand information access, establish a localized employment service platform for Jiangcun women, integrating online and offline channels to disseminate job information. Village committees should proactively push targeted job listings. At the interpersonal level, women's

federations should organize regular sharing sessions and establish peer-support partnerships, enabling experienced women to assist those facing difficulties. This community-based mutual aid system effectively breaks down information barriers.

5.2. Strengthen Community Service Functions to Alleviate Family Pressure on Female Workers

5.2.1. Enhance Support for Women's Employment Policies to Boost Employment Rates

To boost women's employment rates, enhance policy support by expanding vocational training beyond current programs like "Nanyue Home Services". Introduce free courses in high-demand skills such as e-commerce, beauty, and baking. Leverage local agricultural and ecological resources to develop women-friendly sectors like homestay management and wellness services. For aspiring entrepreneurs, organize regular policy briefings and provide one-stop services including project evaluation, venue rental consultations, and loan application guidance to lower entry barriers and simplify startup processes.

5.2.2. Community Participation in Elder Care and Childcare to Share Family Responsibilities

To share family responsibilities, promote community participation in elder care and childcare. For childcare, communities should collaborate with schools to introduce quality after-school services in childcare centers. For eldercare, establish volunteer teams-engaging retirees like teachers and medical workers-to integrate day care, meal delivery, and medical support into community elder care stations, creating a socialized support system.

5.2.3. Strengthen Support for Vulnerable Groups and Improve Employment Safety Nets

To strengthen support for vulnerable women (e.g., those with disabilities, widowhood, or serious illnesses), establish dynamic monitoring files and develop tailored "one-household-one-plan" assistance strategies. Create dedicated funds to subsidize essential costs like medical care and children's education. Provide emotional support through professional counselor and social worker teams for regular psychological services. Foster mutual support platforms for women to share experiences. Expand public welfare positions beyond care roles to include community-based jobs in convenience services, facility maintenance, and cultural activities, offering livelihood support and self-worth through labor.

"When my husband first passed away, my son received government assistance a couple of times for his schooling-just a few hundred yuan. Now, residents in their fifties and sixties are really struggling. I was born in the 1960s, finished high school but couldn't get into college. I married here, my husband died, and now I can only rely on myself." (Interviewee M15)

5.3. Implement Measures to Safeguard Women's Rights and Ensure Their Continuous Employment Development

5.3.1. Establish a Source Reduction System for Rights Protection, Focusing on the Sharing of Fertility Costs and the Expansion of Opportunities

Integrate and optimize the maternity insurance system by establishing a unified national framework to clarify funding standards, benefit levels, and coverage scope. Extend insurance to 200 million flexible workers, migrants, and new-economy employees. Implement tax reduction policies to alleviate corporate burdens and enhance hiring incentives for women of childbearing age. Introduce universal childcare allowances funded by the national treasury, with financing shared across government levels and no contributions from enterprises or families. Decouple benefits from household registration to cover migrants, set a unified national base amount, and provide differentiated subsidies based on family income and number of children to ensure equitable resource distribution.

5.3.2. Establish a Process Balance System for Rights Protection, Build a Protection Network and Enhance the Effectiveness of Rights Protection

Mandate enterprises to establish anti-harassment policies and anonymous complaint mechanisms, providing psychological and legal support to reduce complaint rates. Collaborate with NGOs and media to conduct gender equality education, expose typical cases, and strengthen public supervision. Introduce a "Gender Equality Certification" system coupled with tax incentives, inspired by Sweden's Gender Pay Audit, to narrow the gender income gap. Promote women's leadership programs, offer flexible work arrangements, and expand childcare services, following initiatives like Microsoft's "Return to Work Program" that helped postpartum women re-enter the workforce. Establish tripartite mediation mechanisms involving enterprises, unions, and judicial bodies, as exemplified by Shenzhen's "Women Workers' Special Window", which shortened the protection cycle to 30 days.

5.3.3. Establish an End-optimization System for Rights Protection, Improve the Legal System and Strengthen Relief

To enhance the legal framework, enact a dedicated Anti-Employment Discrimination Law to clearly define prohibitions and remedies. Revise laws like the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests to specify employer obligations and introduce case guidelines to ease the burden of proof. Establish a robust supervision mechanism utilizing public reporting, policy incentives, and regular assessments to ensure compliance. Improve relief mechanisms by strengthening legal liability for discriminators and leveraging the litigation support role of women's federations. Simplify procedures, provide legal aid, and explore non-litigation approaches like mediation and public interest litigation to make justice more accessible and efficient.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the employment pathways of women in Jiangcun, Jianggao Town, Guangzhou, as a case study of women in urban villages on the periphery of megacities. The research shows that women in Jiangcun Village encounter multiple difficulties in their employment process. Their marginalized geographical location hinders their access to high-quality jobs. Excessive family responsibilities become heavy shackles on women's career development. And inadequate rights protection mechanisms puts them in a disadvantaged position in the job market. To address these issues, this study proposes corresponding countermeasures: Strengthen transportation and information infrastructure to expand employment opportunities. Build a collaborative support system involving families, communities, and governments to reduce women's household burdens; and improve legal supervision and rights protection assistance mechanisms to ensure that women's employment rights are implemented.

The innovation of this study lies in its focus on marginalized women in urban villages-an often-overlooked group within megacity development-providing new perspectives through empirical analysis for research in this field. Future research may consider expanding sample sizes and integrating multidisciplinary theories and methods to deepen understanding of this group's employment challenges, thereby providing support for the development of more targeted and effective policies.

The solution to the employment problem of women in peripheral urban villages of megacities not only concerns the development and rights of women themselves, but also relates to the balance and sustainability of urban development. It is hoped that this study will inform policy formulation and practice, fostering collaborative efforts among stakeholders to provide a more robust theoretical basis and policy reference for achieving equality and advancement in women's employment in the process of China's modernization process.

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