

The Diversification of Responsibilities for Women from Migrant Worker Families: The Continuation of Rural Gender Expectations in Childbearing

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Abstract. The gender performances and responsibilities of women within families are often associated with terms such as childbearing and maternity. With the ongoing urbanization, there has been an increase in the number of families migrating to cities for work. Having lived in rural areas for extended periods before migrating, these families are influenced by rural community relations, leading to a diversification in gender performances upon their arrival in cities. The previously singular responsibility of rural women for childbearing becomes multifaceted and complex after moving to the city. Their gender performance is no longer confined to the "family" aspect, subtly contributing to a transformation in gender discourse. This research will examine an interview with mothers from Shenzhen and a scholarly article describing the plight of mothers working at Foxconn. By integrating the concept of "Doing" with Fei Xiaotong's explanations on rural family gender divisions, this study aims to clarify the extension of gender responsibilities for women from migrant worker families and the connection to rural gender expectations for women. Furthermore, it explores how the extension of these gender expectations presents new challenges for migrant working women. Thus, the findings of this study emphasize the importance of diversifying and alleviating the dual dilemmas faced by migrant working women concerning gender expectations.

Keywords: Gender, female labor, gender display, rural family.

1. Introduction

In October 1984, the State Council issued the "Notice on the Issue of Farmers Moving into Towns and Settlements" which began to loosen the strict household registration system. This initiated an increase in the rural population migrating to cities, and according to the sixth national census in 2020, the migrant population had risen to 375.82 million [1]. As urbanization deepened, more and more rural labor forces flooded into cities seeking employment opportunities, forming a vast group of migrant worker families.

Migrant worker families, specifically, refer to those who move from rural areas to urban centers in search of better economic opportunities, improved living conditions, and access to urban amenities. Before migrating to cities, they had been deeply influenced by rural family structures and close-knit community relationships. Moreover, facing the pressures of urban life and lack of technical advantages, many families opt for both spouses to work. Women in these dual-income migrant families often bear greater family responsibilities and stress. They are required not only to work but also to take care of children and elderly family members and manage household chores. This extension of traditional female responsibilities seemingly makes women the backbone of the family, yet it essentially continues the rural structure of childbearing and rearing.

Societal gender expectations and norms also impact the roles and responsibilities of women in migrant worker families. Traditionally, women were expected to take on singular family duties, such as child-rearing and household management. However, with the process of urbanization, previous gender expectations have gradually diversified, and women often have to work outside the home to support their families financially. Women in urban contexts face the dual dilemma of survival pressures and family responsibilities, requiring them to continually adjust their roles and duties to

adapt to new environments and lifestyles. As their gender performance becomes internalized, they are increasingly assumed to bear more responsibilities in the urban context.

Migrants female workers are commonly described as a particularly vulnerable group, and even be viewed as a monolithic underclass [2]. Moreover, this invisible increase in gender expectations undoubtedly exacerbates the predicament faced by women in migrant worker families. Therefore, this article focuses on the extension and expansion of traditional responsibilities among women in migrant worker families, exploring their connection to rural gender expectations for women and the impact of these extended responsibilities on women.

2. Literature Review

West and Zimmerman articulate that gender is not a set of characteristics, nor a variable, nor a role, but rather a product of social behavior [3]. Most importantly, "doing gender" is something a person does, repeatedly emerging in interactions with others. Thus, West and Zimmerman define gender as a product of social behavior, formed through the interaction between the individual and society, rather than determined by an individual's physiological traits. In the process of doing gender, individuals internalize their behaviors, thereby forming their gender identity and behavior patterns. Yet, the rural intimate relationships represent a distinction between genders, where men are responsible for providing for the family, and women for childbearing and rearing—a career-based intimate community. The discipline of rural relationships does not require psychological agreement but operates on behavior following certain rules for economic and procreative collaboration [4]. So that according to the theory of doing gender in rural contexts, gender roles should embody maternal roles focused on bearing and rearing children. In their cumulative daily interactions with family, they should be classified within traditional conservative female roles. However, gender is continually reconstructed by society, which constantly imposes expectations regarding gender. For rural career communities, traditional expectations placed on women often manifest in family care and submission to patriarchy. Yet, as they join the urban migration, their gender performance continues to reflect rural gender expectations and is internalized in their behavior. Moreover, since most migrant worker families have both spouses working, women also assume responsibilities beyond their gender expectations. This means that not only do their "inherent gender expectations" remain unchanged, but they also invisibly take on more responsibilities not traditionally expected of their gender performance.

3. Doing Gender to Bearing Multiple Responsibilities

Doing gender specifically refers to the expression of one's gender through verbal, behavioral, and appearance-based means as constructed by socio-cultural norms, thereby continuously shaping and expressing gender in social interactions [3]. Traditionally in China, women are often associated with childbirth and rearing. In rural settings, while men typically took on the economic support and maintenance of social status for the family, women were primarily responsible for childbirth and rearing [4]. After researching urban dual-income families, Zhang Lixi believes that the main conflict arises between irreconcilable family and social roles. The increasing responsibilities of women's roles blur the traditional gender division where men are the breadwinners and women the homemakers [5]. This increase in social role responsibilities is not an instance of undoing gender but, in fact, migrant women in reality have surpassed the gender responsibilities traditionally assigned to them, moving towards multiple responsibilities. As rural women, they are imbued with traditional gender expectations by their native culture and, as laborers, they bear additional gender responsibilities externally. The limitation of dual identity makes them move from doing traditional gender behavior to bear multiple responsibilities.

According to an interview by Beiqing Shenyidu (the depth reporting column of Beijing Youth Daily), Huang Meifang, from a dual-income migrating family, moved from Guangxi to Shenzhen for

work [6]. She faced the challenge of her child needing a Shenzhen hukou (household registration) to attend high school in Shenzhen. With her husband being a truck driver with only a junior high school education, he could not navigate Shenzhen's complex residency policies. Their combined income was insufficient to afford Shenzhen's high housing prices, so Huang had to supplement the family income and also find ways to gain residency points through means such as improving educational qualifications and paying social security, thereby obtaining a Shenzhen hukou [6].

Furthermore, according to research by Dong, the "mothers" at Foxconn face dual pressures: they are still seen as primary caregivers within patriarchal families and also face the urban survival pressures and the desire to change their lives [7]. They encounter conflicts between exceeding role expectations and lacking corresponding abilities, indicating that while they take on more than their traditional role responsibilities, they are still expected to fulfill traditional gender responsibilities [8].

4. The Essence of Traditional Gender Expectations Serving the Family

Doing gender is a dynamic, interactive display of gender. Traditional expectations of behavior, especially for women, undeniably focus on family care and meticulous attention to children. Such gender performances are influenced by rural civilization's expectations of women's responsibilities in childbirth and rearing. Therefore, the starting point for these groups remains the continuation of serving the family. Dong mentioned in interviews that even when these mothers work at Foxconn, their working age is limited to a short window, and after their twenties, they usually return to the countryside to take on the roles of caring for children and the elderly [7]. Contrarily, migrating to the city for work does not change these female workers' disadvantaged status, nor does it detach them from family obligations. Instead, it somehow continues the rural patriarchal structure, with women's primary focus still being the family. Among the Foxconn mothers, care groups have been established to address the dilemma of being unable to care for children due to high-intensity work. This organized, disciplined care for the children brings these women peace of mind. Most of them do not fully trust grandparents or informal care services, nor can they afford expensive boarding schools, thus leading to their seasonal wandering between factory and family [7].

In reality, the more they do, the more they align with tradition, and the higher society values them. According to West and Zimmerman, their gender presentation is often scrutinized, and their actions are frequently judged based on societal expectations, as they are perceived to conform to cultural norms [3]. In Dong's survey of Foxconn female workers, the Foxconn mothers are actively interpreting their dual identities, both as breadwinners and as caregivers, thereby gaining moral authority in their families and with their children [7]. In other words, the mothers' starting point is still to serve the family and to educate their children through this role. For example, in an interview with Shuna, a woman from rural Henan, she scrimps and saves for her children and hopes to use moral authority to correct their attitudes. This undoubtedly leads them to pursue a better gender evaluation implicitly.

5. Dependence on Rural Relations and the Dual Dilemma of Economic Hardship

Undoubtedly, these women migrating to cities for work come from rural areas. Regrettably, in migrant families, women are often constrained by their education level and traditional beliefs. Furthermore, before moving to the city, such groups typically fail to recognize changes in family structure, often retaining traces of rural relationships in their behavior and thoughts. This gender expectation, undeniably stemming from traditional rural notions, likely keeps them close to their original gender role assignments. This is inextricably linked to their gender display, continually internalized and difficult to detach from. According to an interview by Beiying Shenyi, Mei Fang did not see any issue with the expansion of these responsibilities. On the contrary, she not only strived to secure household registration but also felt anxious about her children's future. Even if her husband

was puzzled by Mei Fang's actions, she remained deeply concerned for her family and children [6]. This influence is even more evident among the mothers at Foxconn. Most of them, despite working in cities, still support their rural families and maintain close ties with their rural roots.

Moreover, economic hardships also restrict these migrant women from escaping family responsibilities. In poor families, the division of responsibilities between partners is often unclear, with women unable to focus solely on domestic chores and spending significant time on family matters. Additionally, due to their educational background, they lack bargaining power in the market. In dual-income families, although both men and women bear economic burdens, their financial condition often teeters on the edge [9]. For instance, Mei Fang never considered buying a house in Shenzhen, deterred by the city's high housing prices. Economic constraints also limit individuals like Mei Fang and the mothers at Foxconn. In a labor market dominated by capital and patriarchy, they earn lower wages for jobs traditionally held by men. The intense workload prevents them from pursuing rights beyond family and work. According to research by Chen and Ge, compared to male migrants, female migrants have a lower rate of employment participation and potential to earn wages [10]. For career groups, a significant part of internal discourse power is determined by economic status, meaning that although female workers bear more responsibilities, their income remains lower than that of males. This inevitably results in working women remaining in a passive position within their professional communities.

6. Conclusion

The predicament of women in dual-income migrant families largely stems from the inheritance of rural relationships in parenting and childbearing. Their doing gender has transcended tradition, and the expanded responsibilities have invisibly become new societal expectations for them. At the same time, it is crucial not to overlook that in rural communities, often considered career communities, the division of gender responsibilities is ambiguous and typically depends on the actual impact each partner has on the family. Thus, women from migrant worker families, like Meifang and the mothers at Foxconn, do not deliberately pursue gender expression and responsibility division. They are more concerned with family harmony and the future development of their children. Furthermore, with the increase in nuclear family units and women's participation in economic labor, it is beneficial for career communities to elevate women's discourse. This helps women reconstruct gender discourse, though most may not notice this subtle shift in discourse power. Moreover, the family composition after moving to the city is still based on rural relationships, and the lower wages compared to men make it hard to change the entrenched rural family structure. Rural social relationships are robust and cannot be easily disrupted by a few decades of urbanization in China. In the modern context, possessing labor tools signifies greater discourse power. However, for the entire group of migrant workers, women, harboring hopes for a better life, paradoxically bear more expectations in gender discourse. As seen with the mothers at Foxconn, the awkward burden of production and reproduction in these gender dynamics forces them into dilemmas: either work during their prime years to support the family or return to the village to care for the children. Only by paying closer attention to gender relations in the micro-context of gender can one avoid passively accepting gender expectations and circumvent the hierarchical rural patriarchal relationships.

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