Academic Journal of Management and Social Sciences
ISSN: 2958-4396 | Vol. 8, No. 3, 2024

Research on the Changes in Living Conditions and Women's Labor Participation in Rural China

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Abstract: Since the reform and opening up, the overall labor participation rate in China has shown a downward trend, and the rural labor participation rate has also generally decreased. There is a significant difference in labor participation rates between urban and rural areas, with the urban labor force increasing in the past decade while the rural labor force has rapidly decreased, especially the labor participation rate of rural women which has been declining year by year. This article organizes and analyzes relevant literature, explores the inherent connection between rural living conditions and the changes in female labor participation in rural areas from aspects such as the current situation of female labor participation in rural areas, rural living conditions and changes, and intergenerational differences in labor participation. It analyzes the reasons for the changes in the contemporary rural female labor participation rate and proposes feasible suggestions.

Keywords: Rural China; Living Conditions; Female Labor; Changes in Labor Participation.

1. Introduction

Common prosperity is the essential requirement of socialism with Chinese characteristics, aiming to address the issues of imbalanced and insufficient development, ensuring that the benefits of development are more fairly distributed among all people, thus promoting the common development and prosperity of the entire population. In the process of advancing the construction of socialist new rural areas, achieving common prosperity is a necessary path, and rural areas are key to achieving this goal.

Currently, the overall labor force participation rate in China is showing a downward trend, with a particularly significant decrease in the labor force participation rate in rural areas. There is a large disparity in labor force participation rates between urban and rural areas. It is worth noting that while facing a widening income gap with urban women, the labor force participation rate of rural women continues to decline, and is even lower than that of urban women. Currently, the main population engaged in agricultural labor is the elderly, as the younger generation of rural women have low interest in agricultural labor, with some even having already exited the labor market.

Research has found that the improvement of harsh agricultural working conditions and rural living conditions has to some extent suppressed the enthusiasm of rural women to participate in agricultural labor. In addition, differences in preferences for working conditions have also led to increasing demands for wage levels among young rural women. These issues are of great significance for safeguarding the labor rights of rural women, promoting economic development in rural areas, and achieving the goal of shared prosperity.

2. Changes in Rural Living Conditions

2.1. Substantial Progress Towards Common Prosperity

1. The infrastructure in rural areas is gradually being improved

The construction of rural infrastructure is the cornerstone of improving the quality of rural life. In recent years, China has been committed to the comprehensive construction of rural infrastructure, continuously increasing investment in areas such as roads, water and electricity, and communication. The improvement of these infrastructure has greatly improved the transportation conditions in rural areas, increased the stability and reliability of water and electricity supply, and also accelerated the speed of rural information transmission.

2. Agricultural economy is developing rapidly

The pace of agricultural development in our country is accelerating, and the economy has achieved tremendous leaps. In 2020, the contribution rate of agricultural scientific and technological progress in our country has exceeded 60%, and the mechanization rate of cultivation and harvesting of major crops has also risen to over 70%. The per unit yield of grain crops nationwide has reached 382 kilograms, and the per capita grain possession is as high as 470 kilograms, far exceeding the internationally recognized safety standard of 400 kilograms. These remarkable achievements fully demonstrate that our economy is steadily moving towards pursuing higher quality. Agriculture, as the economic backbone of the country, its prosperity and progress undoubtedly inject powerful momentum into the future development of the entire country.

3. Farmers' income continues to increase

According to the latest data released by the National Development and Reform Commission, from 2017 to 2021, the per capita disposable income of rural residents in China has shown a continuous and steady growth trend. During this period, the real growth rate of per capita disposable income of rural residents reached 28.9%, a figure that fully demonstrates the vigorous vitality and development momentum of China's rural economy. In addition, the income gap between urban and rural residents is gradually narrowing, decreasing from the original 2.71 times to 2.5 times. At the same time, the specific value of per capita disposable income of rural residents nationwide has also achieved significant growth, rising from 13,432 yuan to 18,931 yuan. This change not only reflects the improvement in the living standards of rural residents, but also signifies that the development of

China's rural economy is entering a new stage.

2.2. Improvement of Rural Living Conditions

1. Quantity of durable consumer goods

The holding of durable consumer goods in rural households is showing a steady increase. With the deepening implementation of consumption policies such as "appliances to the countryside" and "trade-in old for new", the consumption potential of the rural market has been effectively stimulated, greatly satisfying the rural residents' pursuit of a high-quality life. According to a series of reports on economic and social development achievements since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China released by the National Bureau of Statistics, by 2022, on average, every 100 rural households owned 32.4 household cars, 92.2 air conditioners, 109.9 refrigerators, and 96.8 washing machines, achieving significant growth of 324.0%, 263.6%, 63.3%, and 44% respectively compared to 2012.

2. Living environment

In recent years, in order to improve the living environment in rural areas and the happiness index of farmers, the country has continuously increased investment in rural infrastructure construction. Through the implementation of the "Five Connectivity" project, the level of infrastructure in rural areas has been significantly improved. In 2022, the average power supply reliability rate for rural electricity users reached 99.883%, an increase of 0.044% compared to 2012. At the same time, the internet penetration rate in rural areas also reached 61.9%, an increase of 38.2% compared to 2012. Building on the comprehensive achievement of the "Five Connectivity", China's rural areas will further launch the "New Four Connectivity" project to further optimize rural infrastructure and promote the prosperous development of the rural economy.

3. Medical and educational levels

In rural areas, the improvement of medical and educational conditions is particularly significant. With the deepening implementation of the policy of integrating urban and rural medical insurance and the comprehensive promotion of the Healthy China strategy, the level of public medical services that urban and rural residents can enjoy is gradually increasing. In 2021, 94.8% of households in rural areas had health stations in their natural villages, 90.1% of households in natural villages had convenient access to kindergartens or preschool classes, and 91.3% of households in natural villages had convenient access to primary schools. Compared with 2013, these numbers have increased by 13.2, 14.4, and 10.5 percentage points, respectively.

2.3. The Impact of Changes in Living Conditions

1. Improve the quality of life for the public

With the gradual narrowing of the urban-rural economic gap, the living standards of rural residents have significantly improved. Optimizing housing environments, providing clean drinking water, improving transportation networks, convenient medical and educational resources, not only meet the basic living needs of rural residents, but also enhance their sense of happiness and life satisfaction. For example, convenient transportation conditions allow farmers to more easily go out to work or sell agricultural products, thereby expanding their sources of income; the popularity of household appliances and communication networks in rural areas enables farmers to enjoy a similar quality of life as urban residents, further improving the living standards of rural residents.

2. Promote the modernization of agricultural production

The introduction of modern agricultural technology has not only improved the efficiency of agricultural production, but also promoted the transformation of agriculture from traditional to modern. This transformation has reduced the labor intensity of farmers, increased production efficiency, and improved the quality of agricultural technology. The adjustment of agricultural structure has also brought farmers more diverse sources of economic income. The traditional planting structure is gradually transitioning to diversification, and new agricultural models such as characteristic agriculture and ecological agriculture are gradually emerging. This transformation not only enhances the benefits of agriculture, but also brings more economic benefits to farmers.

3. Create more job opportunities

The improvement of living conditions for farmers has also promoted the process of rural urbanization and the return of migrant workers to start businesses in their hometowns. With the improvement of rural living conditions, more and more job opportunities have emerged, allowing rural residents to find stable jobs in their hometowns and reducing the phenomenon of migrating for work. This not only enables rural residents to live and work in their own hometowns, but also better balances the needs of their families and farmland. At the same time, with the upgrading of industries in rural areas and the vigorous development of rural e-commerce, new employment and entrepreneurial opportunities have been created for rural labor, driving the continuous prosperity of the rural economy.

3. Changes in Rural Women's Labor Participation

3.1. Current Situation of Rural Women's Labor Participation

Currently, rural women are still mainly engaged in agricultural labor, accounting for 60.5% of the total. Most rural women are involved in agricultural production as individual smallholders. However, the proportion of non-agricultural employment is also increasing, with 39.5% of rural women now engaged in non-agricultural employment, an increase of 15.4 percentage points from 2010. At the same time, 37.8% of rural women have experience working outside their hometowns, with 52.6% of them engaging in non-agricultural labor upon returning home. Currently, the majority of women engaged in agricultural labor are elderly women over 60 years old, while younger women show relatively lower interest and participation in agricultural labor. In addition, some rural women not only work hard in agriculture and non-agricultural sectors, but also take on household chores.

The transfer of farmers from agriculture to non-agriculture, and from rural areas to cities, is an inevitable stage in the urbanization process of various countries. With the gradual advancement of urban-rural integration in China, male laborers are the first to flock to urban areas, leaving the heavy burden of agricultural labor to women at home. Therefore, the proportion of women in agricultural production continues to rise, leading to the feminization of agricultural labor. With a large number of young and educated laborers moving out, this phenomenon has to some extent accelerated the trend of feminization and aging of agricultural labor in rural areas.

3.2. Intergenerational Differences in the Labor Characteristics of Rural Women

1.Young rural women have a higher level of education than middle-aged and elderly rural women

The desire of the new generation of labor force to integrate into the urban economy is increasing, and they pay more attention to career choices and job opportunities, thus tending to move away from agriculture and shift towards urban employment (Duan Chengrong, Ma Xueyang, 2011). In addition, with the increase in educational opportunities, people are paying more attention to education and skills enhancement, which may lead to a delay in entering the labor market after completing their studies, or facing a longer job search period when looking for jobs that match their education level. Li Min, Tan Hongbo (2006) conducted a survey on the educational level of rural women and found that there are significant differences in the educational level of rural women under two employment models. Under the natural employment model, the educational level of rural women is generally low, mainly concentrated in primary and junior high school stages, with only 6% of rural women able to complete high school (secondary vocational school), and a high illiteracy rate of 3%. However, under the current employment model, the educational status of rural women has significantly improved. Although junior high school education still accounts for a large proportion, the number of rural women graduating from primary school has significantly decreased. At the same time, the proportion of high school (secondary vocational school) graduates has significantly increased, and the illiteracy rate has dropped to zero, indicating that the educational level of rural women is gradually improving.

2. Young rural women have less farming experience than middle-aged and elderly rural women

There are significant differences between the new and old generations of labor force in terms of their growth background, social environment, and family structure. The older generation of labor force, born before 1980, mostly grew up in large families and were deeply influenced by traditional agricultural society. In contrast, the new generation of labor force, born after 1980, grew up in the new context of reform and opening up, as well as in single-child or two-child families, and generally lack experience in farming, with a weakened sense of dependence on rural land. According to relevant survey data, the average farming time of the new generation of migrant workers is only 2.15 years, much lower than the 11.94 years of the older generation of migrant workers. More worryingly, as high as 37.9% of the new generation of migrant workers have never been involved in agricultural production. In contrast, older women, due to their long-term involvement in agricultural labor, have accumulated rich knowledge and skills in farming. They are better able to adapt to rural production environments and improve agricultural production efficiency. However, with the continuous improvement of the education system, many rural parents place their hopes on their children's academic achievements, leading to a lack of farming knowledge and experience among the younger generation of rural women.

3.3. Intergenerational Differences in Rural Women's Labor Participation

1. Work preferences vary across generations

Research has found that rural women of different age groups have different priorities. The younger generation of women are more focused on personal career development and growth, while the older generation of women tend to follow traditional livelihood methods. Additionally, according to research by Pang Lihua (2003) and others, the labor force participation rate of people aged 50 and above in rural China is relatively high. Wu Haisheng (2008) also found that in Jiangsu province, nearly half of the elderly population aged 60 and above are still engaged in agricultural labor.

With the continuous improvement of rural living conditions, the problems of relatively poor working environment and conditions in agricultural work are becoming more prominent. The increase in income and the popularity of household appliances have also changed the labor choices of the rural population. The younger generation of women tend to choose more comfortable and cozy working environments, avoiding hard and harsh labor. For example, in areas with a high prevalence of air conditioning, the popularity of indoor work exceeds that of outdoor work, which has also led to higher wages for outdoor labor compared to indoor labor. This phenomenon indicates that rural women's pursuit of work environment and quality of life is gradually increasing, while also reflecting changes in their work preferences.

2. Compensate for intergenerational wage differences

Firstly, the level of education and skills difference are important factors affecting wage levels. With the increase in education levels, the gap in skills and knowledge levels among different age groups becomes more significant. This difference leads to younger generations in some industries or professions enjoying higher wage levels due to possessing more advanced skills and professional knowledge. In contrast, older generations may have relatively lower wage levels due to outdated skills or lack of opportunities for training in new skills.

Secondly, differences in work experience and qualifications also have an impact on wages. The older generation typically has more extensive work experience and qualifications, making them more competitive in certain industries or professions, and therefore more likely to receive higher wages. However, in some emerging industries or fields, the younger generation may receive higher compensation due to their familiarity and adaptability with new technologies and work methods.

4. Mechanisms for Rural Women's Labor Participation

4.1. Mechanisms for the Participation of Rural Women in Agricultural Labor

Rural women play a crucial role in agricultural labor. In some traditional rural areas, women's participation in agricultural labor is seen as an indispensable part of family division of labor. In these places, agriculture is often the mainstay of the family economy, and women contribute additional income to the family by participating in labor, effectively strengthening the family's economic power. However, women's participation in agricultural labor is not only out of economic necessity, they also bear the heavy responsibility of caring for the family and ensuring the needs of family life are met. Especially when men are working outside or unable to participate in agricultural labor for other reasons, women become the main force in family agricultural production.

It is worth mentioning that the participation of rural women

in agricultural labor is not only based on traditional beliefs or family responsibilities. With the advancement of agricultural modernization, the demand for technology and professional knowledge in agricultural production is increasing. Many rural women have mastered core knowledge such as agricultural production management, pest control, and planting techniques through training and learning, and have excelled in areas such as agricultural product processing and agricultural technology promotion. In addition, women in rural areas often face limited employment opportunities. Therefore, participating in agricultural labor is not only a way for them to make a living, but also a life choice. Through labor, they can not only realize their own value, bring more income to the family, ensure the happiness and stability of the family, but also make indispensable contributions to the development and progress of agriculture.

4.2. Negative Effects of Agricultural Labor Participation and Explanations

The reluctance of young rural women towards agricultural labor is largely due to the harsh working environment in agriculture. With the gradual improvement of rural living conditions, the relative disadvantages of agricultural labor become more prominent. In the eyes of many, agricultural life is depicted as "steaming hot soil underfoot, scorching sunlight on the back", both heavy and long, while also having to endure the uncertain impact of natural factors. Despite the hard work, the instability and relatively meager income make many young people hesitant to engage in agricultural labor.

In contrast, going to the city for work has become a more relaxed and attractive way to make money. Young people can earn a stable and decent income as long as they put in the corresponding effort. At the same time, the career development paths in the city appear to be much broader and clearer. In comparison, without the support of technical skills and business acumen, the growth path of agricultural production may hit a development "ceiling" early on and be difficult to break through.

At the same time, the negative effects of labor participation may also stem from the rapid increase in compensatory wages required for agricultural labor or non-agricultural work with poor working conditions. Compared to non-agricultural labor, the working environment in agriculture is usually poor, lacking comfortable and clean surroundings, and is also susceptible to extreme weather conditions such as high temperatures and severe cold. With the increasing demand for appliances such as air conditioning and refrigerators among the rural population, their preferences for leisure and comfortable environments have also increased. This further highlights the hardships of agricultural labor, leading to a general aversion among young people to such working conditions. Therefore, the compensatory wages required for agricultural labor are higher, and the compensatory wages required for non-agricultural labor with poor conditions also increase accordingly. For example, wages in agriculture or construction are often higher than positions in other jobs in the same area, making the tendency for rural women to leave agriculture more pronounced.

4.3. Negative Effects and Performance of Non-agricultural Labor Participation

Non-agricultural labor is a key channel for rural women to escape poverty and achieve economic independence, but it also comes with a series of challenges. With the transformation and upgrading of the rural economic structure, many rural women have entered the non-agricultural labor market in the hope of seeking broader development opportunities and sources of income in the economic tide. However, this transition may also bring them significant negative impacts that cannot be ignored.

First of all, the harsh working environment is a common issue for rural women in non-agricultural labor. Due to the lack of vocational skills and resources, they have to choose to engage in some high-intensity, low-paying jobs, such as physical labor in factories or rural domestic services. These jobs not only pose potential threats to their physical health, but the low wage levels often result in significant economic pressure for them.

In addition, gender discrimination and occupational restrictions for rural women in non-agricultural labor paths cannot be ignored. In the job market, they often face gender bias and occupational barriers, especially in high-paying and managerial positions. This not only limits their personal development space, but also sets insurmountable obstacles for their career paths.

At the same time, rural women face dual pressures of agricultural labor and family responsibilities when participating in non-agricultural labor. In rural society, they often shoulder the dual responsibilities of caring for the family and working in the fields. However, when they enter the non-agricultural labor market, the division of time and energy makes it difficult for them to balance work and family, undoubtedly bringing them a heavy workload and psychological pressure.

5. Research Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Research Conclusion

Research findings show that: 1. The harsh working conditions in agriculture and improvements in rural living conditions to some extent reduce the tendency of rural women to participate in agricultural labor. High temperatures and air conditioning have a greater negative impact on the participation of young women in agricultural labor compared to middle-aged and elderly women, and the widespread use of household appliances has reduced the tolerance of young laborers, especially young women, to high temperatures. 2. Differences in preferences for working conditions lead young rural women to have higher wage demands. The new generation of rural population is more sensitive to harsh working conditions compared to the older generation, specifically in terms of the negative impact of summer temperatures and air conditioning on the participation of young and middle-aged rural populations in agricultural labor.

5.2. Policy Recommendations

First, ensure basic income security to eliminate worries. In order to stimulate agricultural vitality and change the current situation where young people are unwilling to work in agriculture, it is necessary to first establish a basic income security system. For example, expanding the coverage of agricultural insurance can reduce the instability caused by relying on the weather for food, thus stabilizing farmers' income expectations. Based on the characteristics of each region, strong support should be given to the development of specialty agricultural projects. By providing subsidies and other policy measures, these projects can be guided onto the

right track, attracting more young people to engage in agriculture. Additionally, attention should be paid to compensating wages for agricultural work and other non-agricultural labor that may be relatively difficult and harsh, as well as increasing the wage levels of rural female workers to encourage more rural women to enter the labor market.

Secondly, increase support and create a good farming environment. The government should encourage improving working conditions in agriculture to promote agricultural labor participation. According to regional temperature and climate characteristics, optimize the agricultural working environment, promote modern agricultural machinery, reduce farmers' labor intensity, improve the performance of agricultural machinery and enhance the comfort of operators, such as installing air conditioning in large tractors, accelerate infrastructure construction and improve agricultural production environment, such as protective measures against intense sun exposure during busy farming seasons, create a good farming environment to enhance the enthusiasm of rural women in agricultural labor.

Third, strengthen training and education to meet market demands. Targeted vocational skills training should be carried out for rural women to enhance their employment capabilities and competitiveness. By improving skills training and education, rural women can acquire specialized skills, helping them to find better job opportunities. Additionally, training in mechanization technology for farmers can enable them to operate agricultural machinery proficiently, thus improving agricultural production levels. Cultivating the spirit of hard work and perseverance in the younger generation, and enhancing the professional skills and creativity of the new generation of rural women talent.

Conflicts of Interest

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China for its support (Project No. 23YJC790035), Jiangsu Education Department for its support (Project No. C-c/2021/01/46), National Social Science Fund of China for its support (Project No. BJA210096). The authors are also grateful to China Education Panel Survey (CEPS) for its project data provided by National Survey Research Center at Renmin University of China.

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