

Research on poverty control of rural women in Northwest China

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Abstract: This thesis focuses on the poverty issues of rural women in Northwest China. It first investigates the overview and characteristics of poverty in Northwest China. Then it analyses the current situation of rural women's poverty from four dimensions: economic poverty, poverty in social security, poverty in culture and education, and poverty in rights. After that, it explores the causes of rural women's poverty from economic, rights, social security, and institutional aspects. Finally, it summarizes four main ways of poverty control for rural women: poverty alleviation through economic development, advocating the rise of women's consciousness, paying attention to ensuring women's social welfare and livelihood, and improving relevant laws and regulations and giving full play to the role of women's federations and NGOs. The study indicates that we should adopt a multi-dimensional perspective and take targeted measures in economy, society, culture, rights, laws and institutions to help rural women in Northwest China get rid of poverty in a sustainable way.

1. Introduction

Situated in northwestern China, the Northwest region is characterized by agricultural production. With a complex topography filled with ravines and gullies, the ecological environment is fragile, water resources are scarce, and droughts, cold waves, frosts, hail and other abnormal climatic and meteorological disasters occur frequently. Owing to these factors, the Northwest region has been identified by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as one of the least suitable areas for human survival globally.

2. Overview and characteristics of poverty in Northwest China

2.1. The poverty is large and the poverty level is deep

This region is located in the Loess Plateau, perennial drought and little rain, frequent natural disasters, serious soil erosion, ecological environment is very fragile, the land is mostly slope and mountain, the soil is poor, agricultural production conditions are relatively harsh. At the same time, this area is located in the mountainous area, the transportation is inconvenient, and the development of the second and third industries is relatively backward. Limited by natural and geographical

conditions, as well as insufficient national social welfare and social security policies, the cultural level and vocational skills of the labor force in this region are poor, resulting in the poor ability of the labor force to go out to work, resulting in the low economic income of the labor force in this region and the serious lack of self-development ability. In particular, some special groups such as the elderly, people with disabilities and intellectual disabilities can't rely on their own to get out of poverty.

2.2. The long-term existence of absolute poverty

Due to historical and geographical reasons, absolute poverty has always existed in this region and has never been eradicated. As the problem of food and clothing for most rural residents in China has been solved, the number of absolute poor people has decreased significantly every year. However, owing to the phenomenon of income imbalance and widening income distribution gap, the number of relatively poor people in urban and rural areas has increased. Although the phenomenon of absolute poverty in this region has not been completely eliminated, and the issue of food and clothing for the people has not been fully addressed, the phenomenon of relative poverty has begun to emerge again.^[1] This has exacerbated the difficulty of poverty alleviation in this region and led to the protracted nature of absolute poverty.

2.3. The poverty return rate is high

Due to the unfavorable natural ecological conditions in this region, characterized by predominantly mountainous and sloping terrain with infertile soil, the economic returns from agricultural production are limited. Concurrently, this region has yet to develop a pillar industry with robust economic driving capacity. When local residents face illnesses, natural disasters, and require financial resources for their children's education, the poverty reduction rate spikes sharply. Numerous families recently lifted above the poverty line in this region have only fulfilled basic food and clothing needs, with household incomes barely exceeding the poverty threshold. Lacking adequate savings or resilience, these families easily slide "back into poverty" when struck by natural or human-induced calamities.

3. The poverty situation of rural women in Northwest China

3.1. Economic poverty

Rural women in the region are economically disadvantaged for various reasons, principally reflected in the low and precarious income of rural women in the region.

3.1.1. The income of rural women is low

The author consulted pertinent statistical data and discovered that the disposable income of farmers in this area remains substantially lower than in other regions of China. Based on relevant surveys, apart from agricultural income, other earnings in rural households are primarily generated by male family members. Given the relatively underdeveloped secondary and tertiary industries in this region, it can be inferred that rural women have extremely limited non-agricultural occupational remuneration, resulting in highly constrained sources of economic income. Concurrently, rural women are often unpaid for domestic labor and agricultural production.

3.1.2. The income of rural women is unstable

Agricultural income constitutes the sole source of revenue for most rural women residing in this geographic region. However, the returns and profits obtained from agricultural production are highly

volatile and unstable, with harvest yields and outputs susceptible to unpredictable shifts in natural forces and environmental conditions. In years with auspicious weather patterns of abundant rainfall and minimal natural or human-induced disasters, agricultural yields can be relatively high and bountiful. Conversely, in difficult periods marked by drought, floods, pestilence, or other calamities, crops often fail entirely, fully eliminating this crucial economic resource and imperiling the basic subsistence and livelihoods of rural farming households and families. Moreover, the onset of illness or disability afflicting any individual family member invariably plunges the entire household into financial destitution and poverty, with rural women being affected equally regardless of gender. Upon examination of the available evidence, rural women confronted with these myriad interconnected factors face consistent income instability and possess limited capability to accrue financial savings or capital. This renders the rural female population acutely vulnerable to sliding into poverty or becoming impoverished from even minor environmental or personal challenges.

3.2. Social security level poverty

3.2.1. Social medical and health security is weak

Women are generally more susceptible to inadequate healthcare access compared to men, an inequity further pronounced in rural locales. Moreover, under enduring traditional concepts of "rearing children for old age" and "bearing abundant offspring as fortune's blessing," families frequently contain four or five children. When coupled with substandard local medical infrastructure, recurrent pregnancies engender health complications for women. Statistics show that in 2018, the maternal mortality rate was 10.9 per 100,000 in eastern China and 25.2 per 100,000 in western China, 2.3 times that of eastern China.^[2]

3.2.2. Rural women themselves are in poor health

As young and middle-aged male family members migrated for work, an increasing number of women assumed responsibility for agricultural production. During daylight hours, these women labored arduously in the fields. Upon returning home, they were further encumbered with domestic duties including cooking, child and elder care, and housework, engendering immense hardship. The women were compelled to simultaneously balance both agricultural and domestic work daily. These extensive hours of grueling labor critically impacted their health. Moreover, prolonged absence of the male workforce, at times spanning several years, induced psychological strain on rural women from protracted family separation. Consequently, rural females suffered from deteriorating physical and mental states, hindering productivity and wellbeing. Statistics indicate 14% of rural women confronted health issues, partly attributable to chronic fatigue from labor-intensive work, reluctance to expend limited finances on established illnesses, and negligence of untreated gynecological conditions.^[3]

3.3. Poverty in culture and education.

The main problems rural women face in terms of culture and education are that their right to education is not guaranteed. The specific performance is that rural women have received less professional education since childhood, have very few opportunities to participate in vocational education and technical training, the incidence of illiteracy among rural women is higher than that of urban women and rural men, and the phenomenon of school-age girls dropping out of school is also very common. All these phenomena have affected the development of women themselves.

3.3.1. The illiteracy rate among rural women is relatively high

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Party and the state have attached great importance to women's education, and governments at all levels have increased their investment in education. Women's education has made great progress compared with before, and the overall quality of women has been significantly improved. However, due to the restriction of China's traditional feudal ideology and the overall social and economic development, the education of rural women is far worse than that of men and even urban women.

3.3.2. Rural women have few opportunities for vocational education and training

As the saying goes, "Women hold up half the sky", rural women have played an irreplaceable role in rural development. However, most rural women can only engage in agricultural production activities because of their lack of vocational skills, which affects the process of rural reform and development. Governments at all levels need to vigorously develop women's vocational education and skills training to help women improve their vocational skills and meet their needs for personal development.^[4] Despite the strong policy appeal, but according to the questionnaire survey, most of the rural women have not participated in the so-called vocational skills training, many of them are the "face project" done by the relevant institutions to complete the workload, and few women participate in the training content is relatively low quality, which does not help rural women to improve themselves.

3.4. Poverty at the right level

3.4.1. Women's political rights are not guaranteed

Women's political rights mainly refer to the right of women to participate in politics, and the poverty of women's political rights is mainly reflected in the few opportunities for women to participate in politics. In many developing countries, especially China, the percentage of women in the Politburo, the most important decision-making body of the CPC Central Committee, is almost zero. The voices of rural women are rarely reflected at the decision-making level, and the political rights of most rural women are not fully protected.

3.4.2. Women do not enjoy equal ownership of property in rural households

In rural families, men are generally the masters of the family, and the common property such as land and houses are controlled and distributed by them. Unmarried daughters do not have the status of property distribution in the family. In most cases, rural women are marginalized by property. Traditional thinking tells them that they have nothing to do with the family property after marriage, and they have no right to distribute the family property. But after marriage, their rights are not guaranteed. Although Chinese law stipulates that the property acquired during the marriage is shared by the couple, the dowry brought at the time of marriage should also be counted as shared property. However, due to the traditional patriarchal concept and the influence of women's status, rural women have no right to say over this part of the property after marriage. Before and after marriage, women have no right to distribute and use the family property, and this situation has plunged rural women into poverty.

4. Analysis of the causes of poverty among rural women in Northwest China

4.1. Economic reasons

Also mentioned in the previous article is the low and unstable income of rural women in the region. Agricultural production in this region is faced with a harsh physical and geographical environment, unable to increase agricultural income, and it is very easy to fall into economic poverty.

4.1.1. Poor natural geographical environment

Northwest China is located in the Loess Plateau. At the same time, in order to obtain more economic income, farmers in this area wantonly destroyed forest vegetation and expanded the cultivated area, resulting in serious soil erosion and frequent natural disasters in this area, and the traditional agricultural production gradually failed. At the same time, the transportation in this area is inconvenient, which limits the development of this area, and also limits the development of rural women in this area.

4.1.2. Low non-agricultural income

This is because farmers, including rural women, rely on land for their income in addition to agricultural production, mainly on other occupations, especially non-agricultural occupations. Many of the rural women who have lived in the mountains for generations have not even left the mountains. There are no modern enterprises or factories here, and they have no chance to engage in non-agricultural jobs. They can only barely feed themselves by farming, which means they have no source of income.

4.2. Lack of rights and ideological reasons

4.2.1. Lack of women's rights

Gender theory holds that gender discrimination still exists in today's society, especially in the vast rural areas. Women in rural areas have long been regarded as vassals of men, with no economic independence and low status in the family, which leads to the lack of other rights. The lack of women's rights, especially the lack of economic rights, is one of the important reasons leading to rural women's poverty. Many female scholars regard women as a "powerless" group, "men's control over political, economic and social resources as a social gender practice forms men's control over the distribution of rights". The study found that with the rapid development of China's economy, a large number of young and middle-aged people in rural areas of China go out to work, forming a group of "migrant workers". In the northwest rural areas of China, due to the extremely limited agricultural income, many young and middle-aged people in many families go out to work to earn money, and a large number of rural women are forced to stay at home to farm and take care of their families. Rural women not only have no source of income, but also many of their rights are not guaranteed because of traditional ideology. It is difficult for them to be economically independent and escape from poverty.

4.2.2. Backward traditional ideas and low family status

The theory of social exclusion holds that rural women are excluded from society, which may be external to society or from within the family. The idea of son preference and raising children for old age still has considerable acceptance in the whole rural area, which is the exclusion from the social level. At the family level, many women have a low status in the family, which is largely due to traditional ideas and lack of economic independence. As a result of personal education, vocational

skills and traditional ideas, women are still regarded as vassals of men, and many rights are not guaranteed. These ideas keep rural women in both spiritual and material poverty.

4.2.3. Backward living conditions

Rural living standards in this region have historically lagged regarding basic infrastructure like clean water, toilets and roads. Many rural households still lack access to sanitary toilets, escalating gynecological disease risks for local women. Limited toilet coverage and poor sanitation greatly increase women's susceptibility to reproductive infections. Additionally, insufficient health knowledge exacerbates this public health crisis.

4.3. Social democratic security reasons

4.3.1. Heavy burden of culture and education

Poor basic education facilities and insufficient teachers in rural areas cannot provide a good educational environment for rural children. Due to the small number of students and teachers in some rural primary schools, in order to reduce financial investment and improve the quality of education, a large number of rural schools have been withdrawn from villages and merged into schools. Junior high schools were only opened in the town, and senior high schools had to be studied in the county town. As a result, many rural children even have to rent a house near the school in order to go to school, which aggravates the economic pressure of rural families to a certain extent. Secondly, the traditional belief that boys are better than girls, that studying is useless, and that girls must marry sooner or later still exists. In addition, some families will choose to deprive girls of their right to education, and make them drop out of school to work at home or even go out to work to supplement their families.

4.3.2. Health and medical conditions

The women left behind in rural areas are engaged in heavy production and living labor for many years because of their families, which is harmful to their health. In addition, medical resources in rural areas are poor, many rural areas often have only one medical and health room, slightly larger diseases can only go to the town or county hospital, often cannot seek medical treatment in time. Due to economic reasons and the need for labor at home, many rural women have not formed the habit of seeking medical treatment. When the disease gets serious, spending more money may not be able to cure it, which makes many already poor families worse.

4.4. The obvious constraints of institutional factors have a greater impact on poverty

Most of China's existing social welfare security systems are aimed at all citizens, and there is no unique policy system to protect the needs of special groups such as rural women. Although the implementation of the family planning system has controlled the rapid population growth in the region to a certain extent, it has also intensified discrimination against women and made rural women lose some of their rights. The imperfection of the land system leads to a single source of income for some rural women, making it difficult for them to be economically independent. The backwardness of rural education makes it impossible for rural women to obtain more effective information, which in turn restricts their freedom. As a result, rural women are trapped in poverty and unable to achieve personal development.

5. Discussion on ways of poverty control for Rural women

Rural women groups in Northwest China have played an irreplaceable and important role in the social and economic development of the region. All circles of society have great enthusiasm for the study of social and economic development in Northwest China, but they have paid little attention to the poverty of women in Northwest China. With the Party and the state attaching importance to poverty alleviation work and the deepening of precise poverty alleviation, poverty targeting is becoming more and more important, and the poverty problem of rural women has gradually been paid attention to.

5.1. Poverty alleviation through economic development

5.1.1. Promote poverty alleviation throughout the village under the rural revitalization strategy

Rural revitalization and targeted poverty alleviation are two major strategic decisions put forward in the new era to solve the problems of agriculture, rural areas and farmers. In order to achieve rural revitalization, we must first achieve targeted poverty alleviation. Promoting poverty alleviation in the whole village means that with poor villages as the basic unit, the government uses funds or other resources to help them improve infrastructure construction in a short period of time, improve the living conditions of local residents, promote local economic development, improve the ability of local residents to withstand risks, and lead local residents to collectively lift themselves out of poverty.

5.1.2. Increase government financial support

It is necessary to take into account the actual conditions of the Northwest, choose an anti-poverty path that suits the actual conditions of the region, achieve a combination of development poverty alleviation and relief poverty alleviation, and improve the ability of poor people, especially poor women, to lift themselves out of poverty. In order to achieve these goals, we must give full play to the role of fiscal policy in poverty control in western rural areas and increase national and local financial input.^[5] We will provide loans and funds for rural women to start their own businesses, focusing on helping women in poor villages to develop planting, breeding and service industries, and help those rural women, especially poor women, who are willing to start their own businesses and meet the loan conditions, solve the financing difficulties for starting their own businesses, so as to help them achieve development, production and poverty alleviation.

5.2. Advocate the rise of women's consciousness

In society, the rise of female consciousness can make the whole society aware of the needs of women groups, especially rural women, change the traditional consciousness of rural women, express their reasonable needs, exercise their legal rights, achieve personal development, and get out of poverty.

5.2.1. Grassroots women should be encouraged to participate in politics

We should increase the power of women to play a corresponding role in policy formulation, give full consideration to the voices of women groups in policy formulation, and ensure channels for women groups to express their interests. As can be seen from the above, the proportion of women participating in politics in China is relatively low, and few of them hold full-time positions. Therefore, it is necessary to increase the proportion of women participating in politics and protect women's right to express themselves at the decision-making level. In addition, it is necessary to increase the

proportion of women among grass roots cadres. Grass-roots cadres, to a certain extent, affect the individual development and future of rural women. They are well aware of the hardships and needs of rural women and can help them achieve personal development. Therefore, advocating grassroots women's participation in politics is an important way to control rural poverty.

5.2.2. Empower women in poverty-stricken areas

The endemic poverty, deficient economic incomes, unfulfilled material necessities, and entrenched traditional notions prevalent in rural areas have suppressed rural women's voices and self-expression of their requirements. Consequently, women's federations at all levels must collaborate with village committees to actively conduct educational trainings and raise awareness regarding women's rights, empowering rural women to vocalize their needs, leverage their legal rights, and cultivate self-reliance to escape poverty through their own capabilities. Specifically, interactive workshops, lectures, and discussions facilitated by women's federations can provide rural women knowledge enabling them to make informed choices, access resources, and gain confidence in self-determination. Sustained collaborative efforts between women's federations and village leaders can promote rural women's socioeconomic empowerment and operationalize poverty alleviation schemes.

5.3. Pay attention to ensuring women's social and livelihood

5.3.1. Develop women's education

The development of women's education has played a very important role in alleviating women's poverty and promoting harmonious social development. In China's rural areas, educational resources are scarce and the distribution of educational resources is not reasonable, and many rural women do not receive good education. Therefore, we must vigorously promote rural education and pay attention to ensuring the fairness of the educational rights of school-age girls in rural areas. Women's federations and relevant institutions at all levels should actively organize training lectures on agricultural science and technology, popularize agricultural science knowledge to rural women, and encourage them to apply relevant agriculture to agricultural production.^[6]

5.3.2. Strengthen the construction of basic education facilities

We will strengthen the construction of rural school infrastructure, including preschool education and special education institutions. We will install multimedia teaching equipment in classrooms of primary and secondary schools in rural areas so that rural children can enjoy good educational resources. At the same time, we should increase investment in the education of rural girls, guarantee their right to continue their education, and help them improve their human capital, achieve personal development and escape poverty.

5.4. Improve relevant laws and regulations, and give full play to the role of women's federations and NGOs

5.4.1. Improving existing laws

China's existing policies and regulations on women's poverty management are limited in quantity and low in quality. To help rural women get rid of poverty and get rich, the government should formulate more women-specific policies and extend these policies to more areas. Compared with urban women and rural women in developed areas, rural women in western China enjoy less social welfare in terms of educational resources, medical and health services, employment opportunities and

legal assistance, which results in unfair and inefficient distribution of social welfare. Therefore, the government should improve the existing laws related to women, ensure that the legal rights of rural women are protected, and increase social security for rural women to help them get out of poverty as soon as possible and lead a well-off life.

5.4.2. Give play to the role of women's federations and nongovernmental organizations

At the last moment of poverty alleviation, women's federations at all levels should assist government departments to play a good logistic role in poverty alleviation and development activities, provide loan support for poor women, encourage poor rural women to start their own businesses, provide job opportunities for more poor rural women, organize seminars on agricultural planting and breeding knowledge, and actively guide rural women to get rid of poverty and get rich with their own hard-working hands. Non-governmental organizations of all kinds may, through various forms of poverty alleviation through survival, education, technology, culture, credit and other public welfare projects, make up for the lack of government finance and the gap in the government's charitable projects targeting rural women, improve the living environment of rural poor women, and help them provide assistance in production, health and education. At the same time, it should be noted that ngos are a powerful supplementary means for the government in poverty alleviation, but they also need reasonable supervision by relevant laws to avoid the crisis of trust caused by lax supervision.

6. Conclusions

Poverty constitutes not solely economic privation but also a structural societal affliction. The challenges impoverished women in Northwest China face in escaping destitution stem from intertwined constraints between nature and society, history and present, broad social changes and individual families. If the extent of female emancipation signifies a measure of societal civilization and advancement, women's poverty alleviation remains instrumental to their freedom and liberation. However, reducing poverty among rural women in Northwest China undoubtedly represents a currently formidable and complex systematic endeavor, necessitating collaboration between government, market, and society, alongside instituting enduring poverty reduction and mutual assistance mechanisms. Formulating poverty alleviation strategies demands heeding rural women's appeals and encouraging their active participation and oversight. Meanwhile, all societal sectors must furnish greater resources and reinforcement to promote sustainable development of this cause.

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