

# Daughters Support the Elderly in Rural Families in the New Era from the Perspective of Gender

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**Abstract:** *With the in-depth development of population aging, the situation of old-age care in rural areas in China is becoming more and more severe, and the problem of rural old-age care has received extensive attention from all walks of life. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of daughters in the family supporting system, which has gradually broken the traditional family pension model of "raise children to provide against old age" in rural areas of China. The daughter has played an important role in providing financial support, life care, and spiritual comfort to the elderly. The gender differences in rural family supporting are affected by factors such as family structure and size, social structure, the improvement of women's status, and the impact of modernity. Daughter's participation helps to consolidate the role of family supporting, relieve the pressure of rural pension, promote the change of the concept of fertility, improve the status of women and build an equal, healthy and harmonious relationship between the sexes.*

**Keywords:** *the elderly; daughters; gender difference; gender equality*

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, with the aging of the rural population in China and the rapid changes in social and family structures, the issue of rural pensions has received widespread attention. There is still a problem of insufficient supply of social and community-based pensions for the elderly in the vast rural areas of our country. Family retirement will remain the dominant form of retirement in China's rural areas for a long time. According to relevant data studies, 98.1% of the elderly in China rely on their families to take care of them in their old age. With China's ageing population increasing year by year, the pressure of modern life increasing and children, especially in rural areas, need to invest huge financial and time costs to support their parents. The long-standing family model of elderly care in rural areas is facing many problems. At present, there have been many related studies on intergenerational relationships and family care in academic circles, but in these numerous studies, "sons" are often mentioned and "daughters" are rarely involved. The role of daughters in family care is often overlooked. "Raising sons for old age" is the traditional Chinese model of old age, and studies have focused on the status and role of sons, with daughters remaining on the periphery. With the in-depth study of rural pensions in recent years, we have found that daughter pensions have become a very common phenomenon in rural societies. Entering the new era, the gender division of labour in traditional rural society has changed, and a new order of rural old-age care has been quietly formed with the addition of the new component of daughter old-age care, which will not only impact the traditional model of son old-age care and relieve the pressure of rural old-age care, but also promote the new development of rural gender relations to a certain extent, showing us the possibility and feasibility of daughters old-age care. The research on the phenomenon of daughters old-age care is not only a new focus of pension research but also a new aspect of gender research. How to understand the generation of daughter old-age care phenomenon in the new era is the main purpose of this research.

## 2. Daughters support the elderly reflected in the rural family pension

### 2.1. Provide financial support

Some data show that the proportion of rural elderly receiving regular cash from their sons and daughters is 72.4%. However, for a long time, the actual situation of daughters in terms of financial support for the elderly has been largely underestimated or even ignored artificially. There are actually

obvious gender differences and gender division of labour between sons and daughters in terms of financial support for the elderly, and the exclusion of daughters from the conceptual paradigm and explanatory framework of the rural old-age problem is no longer in line with the actual rural old-age situation in the new era.

In the pre-reform rural society, sons did have a slight advantage over daughters in terms of financial support. However, with the rapid economic and social development of rural China and the promotion of the basic state policy of gender equality, the financial support of daughters, especially adult daughters, for their parents' old age has begun to rise, and their contribution has become increasingly significant. Nowadays, during traditional major festivals in rural areas such as the Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival, major family expenses such as parents' birthdays, serious illnesses and funerals, providing living expenses, medical expenses and buying household items, sons and daughters have to bear part of the costs, and daughters' financial support has taken up a certain proportion and is showing an increasing trend. All these phenomena show that the economic support of daughters cannot be ignored. In contrast to traditional rural societies where the responsibility and obligation to provide for parents' old age is almost non-existent, the role and status of daughters have undergone a radical change, with daughters playing an increasingly important role.

## ***2.2. Provide living care***

In traditional Chinese society, women are often the main providers of daily care and emotional communication for older people, influenced by the deep-rooted gender division of labour between men and women. This is also true in Western society, where daughters are often the primary caregivers for the basics of daily life outside of accompanying spouses. In the new era, the mass exodus of labour from the countryside and the widening geographical distances have further restricted sons' access to care for the elderly. Daughters, on the other hand, regularly return home to care for their parents in their daily lives or choose to bring them home to live with them, and in some areas, there is even a tendency for the family to be "bi-lineage" (sons and daughters jointly supporting elderly).

The amount of daily care provided is often closely related to the mode of residence. In the context of the general outflow of the rural labour force, the son's life care for the elderly is more limited. The daughter, on the other hand, plays a more important role in buying clothes, food and hospital care for the elderly. Professor Yi Zeng of Peking University, who has studied the factors that influence the health and longevity of older people across the country, found that: "In old age, the long-term rewards of raising daughters are much higher than those of raising sons, and this difference in long-term rewards is more pronounced in rural areas." The study showed that sons were more likely than daughters to give material security, but daughters were more likely than sons to provide life care and emotional support. The importance of daughter support increases significantly.<sup>[1]</sup>

## ***2.3. Provide spiritual comfort***

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, human needs increase from the lowest level of physiological and security needs to the higher levels of social, respect and self-actualization needs. After the elderly meet their lower-level material needs, such as financial support and basic life care, their higher-level spiritual and emotional needs need to be met. The most important part is the need for emotional communication and spiritual satisfaction. As they enter old age, the old people living in rural areas need more communication and companionship due to various reasons such as geographical closure and single life, so they will have more spiritual needs. For the elderly in rural areas, children are undoubtedly a very important spiritual comfort and emotional communicator. In the new era, with the continuous reform and development of social security in rural areas and years of poverty alleviation, the lowest level of material needs of the elderly in rural areas has basically been solved, and the higher level of spiritual and emotional needs has gradually begun to emerge. The Party and the government have also long proposed that the current main contradiction in our society is between the people's growing need for a better life and the unbalanced and insufficient social development. Therefore, the key to rural elderly care in the new era is how to improve the emotional support and spiritual comfort for the rural elderly on the basis of providing economic support.

In general, sons are usually busy at work and spend less time at home, while men are not delicate enough to meet the emotional needs of the elderly; daughters-in-law, who are outsiders, have a weaker emotional base with the elderly and are prone to conflicts with the elderly and may even be reluctant to support them in the process of integration. Therefore, compared to sons and daughters-in-law,

daughters are emotionally closer and more patient with the elderly and more likely to understand their parents due to their blood ties, so they often have an advantage over sons and daughters-in-law in terms of spiritual comfort and emotional support.[2]

### **3. Reasons for the change of gender differences of aged-supporting in rural areas**

#### ***3.1. Changes in family size and family structure***

Due to the long-term implementation of the family planning policy, the fertility rate in our country has been declining, and the number of children in the family has been decreasing. The size of the family in rural areas of our country has gradually decreased. There are more and more nuclear families and families with only one daughter. The "4-2-1" family structure has emerged in many families. The nucleation of family structures and the smaller family size puts greater pressure and burden on young rural couples to support the elderly. The number and gender structure of children affect the subjective will of the elderly, which provides the demographic conditions that allow daughters to provide for the elderly. At the same time, the increase in the number of "one-daughter family" has made daughters to support the elderly, and to a certain extent, it has played a role in boosting the trend of daughters to support the elderly.

#### ***3.2. Labour emigration and changes in social structure***

While the emigration of labour weakens the ability and willingness of sons to support the elderly, it also provides an incentive for daughters to participate, further increasing their ability and willingness to support the elderly. The rural male population far outweighs the female population in the labour force, resulting in a large number of women being left behind in rural areas. This, on the one hand, reduces the ability and willingness of sons to take care of parents, but on the other hand, it also increases the opportunities for daughters to support the elderly.

Firstly, as a result of the unequal employment market system and traditional attitudes, the proportion of women working outside the home in rural areas is lower than that of men, leaving daughters with relatively more time and opportunities to care for the elderly than sons. The previous advantage of sons in caring for the elderly becomes a disadvantage of the increased geographical distance of sons going out, while the geographical disadvantage of the relatively distant and inaccessible distance of married daughters from their parents becomes an advantage and the actual dependence of the elderly on the care of their daughters' increases. Secondly, as a large number of rural men go out to work, the women who remain at home begin to participate more in family affairs and even play a leading role, creating a situation in rural areas where men are absent and women are in charge of the household. Women, on the other hand, are more inclined to support their parents than their in-laws because of their different emotional basis with them, resulting in a situation where daughters are more involved, and sons are absent in elderly care activities. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the analysis of the data, with outgoing sons are less likely to increase their care for their elderly parents, while outgoing daughters are more likely to increase their financial and emotional support for their elderly parents, thus the gender gap in intergenerational support for children in family ageing is actually narrowing. At the same time, as men enter urban life, modern civilization in the city continues to impact on and even dismantle their traditional notions of filial piety, and men's willingness to support parents is weakened in the process of urban-rural mobility, which to some extent directly or indirectly results in men who work outside is neither able nor willing to support the elderly, and this provides objective conditions for daughters to support the elderly.

#### ***3.3. Gradual improvement of women's socioeconomic status***

On the one hand, the socioeconomic status of women has gradually improved in recent years. The implementation of the basic state policy of equality between men and women and the practice of gender equality awareness has broken the traditional patriarchal system of male subjugation and domination of women. Women no longer occupy a subordinate position and are no longer entirely subservient to their husbands in their daily lives, and their improved economic status, in particular, has given women a greater say in the distribution of family property, thus enabling them to give more support to their parents in their old age. Women's economic independence and improved family status are important forces that enable them to play a role in the maintenance of their own parents. On the other hand, the transfer of power to women in the family, coupled with the increase in women's income

as the rural economy develops, provides more resources and support for the maternal family.[3] The direct beneficiaries of these changes are the relatives who are most closely related to those who control the resources, so maternal parents and in-laws are the beneficiaries of the change in power relations in rural families.

### ***3.4. The impact of modernity, filial piety culture indifferent***

Along with the opening up and development of the rural economy and the penetration of the commodity economy into the countryside, modern civilization has impacted the traditional culture of the countryside, and personal egoism, consumerism and hedonism have begun to proliferate in the pragmatic and traditional rural areas. In addition, the decline of traditional patriarchy, the increased power status of the offspring and the increased autonomy and independence of the individual have weakened the emotional and material basis of sons to support the elderly.

In the course of the gradual penetration of modernity, family relations began to rationalize, and the reality of traditional paternity became increasingly unsuited to the intergenerational weighing of interests in the family, a reality of rural social development, and daughters became involved in the process of support parents as a real need for the continuation of family supporting. The rationalization of family relations in rural society has led to a shift away from the ethical value of filial piety and to a contest of interests between the elderly and their sons. The instrumental value of daughters is on the rise. In addition to this, the increased sense of modernity in rural areas is also contributing to daughters to provide for the elderly. The modern consciousness of openness and equality is widely spread in rural society, which makes the social acceptability of daughters to support the elderly become higher and higher. The rise of modernity has heavily impacted the traditional social norms and pressures of raising children to provide against old age, thus effectively releasing the potential for daughters to support the elderly.

## **4. The practical significance of daughters support the elderly in rural families from the perspective of gender**

### ***4.1. Consolidate the role of family supporting and ease the pressure on aged-supporting in rural areas***

The continuous advancement of urbanization, the gradual nucleation of family structures, and the miniaturization of family size have made the function of traditional family supporting increasingly weakened, and the traditional rural family model of relying on sons to support the elderly has become increasingly problematic in the new era. Therefore, the traditional family supporting model urgently needs to be reformed, and a new family supporting order needs to be established urgently. It is necessary to raise the status of daughters in family supporting so that the fundamental role of daughters to support the elderly can be continued.

In the specific practice process, daughters are more and more involved in elderly care activities, which relieves the pressure of rural elderly care to a large extent. On the one hand, the participation of daughters in the elderly care is very beneficial to the functioning of rural families. Daughters can provide economic support to their parents, which can not only relieve their sons' economic pressure to a certain extent, but also meet the elderly's higher old-age needs and improve their quality of life by providing spiritual comfort. On the other hand, in the maintenance of the traditional rural family supporting system, daughters also play an increasingly important and indispensable role, which is crucial to improving the quality of life and happiness of the elderly in their later years.

### ***4.2. Promoting the change in the concept of fertility and elderly care***

To some extent, there is a two-way interaction between changes in rural retirement practices and changes in rural attitudes to retirement and fertility. Changes in rural retirement practices will promote changes in people's perceptions of old age and fertility, while changes in perceptions of old age and fertility will also have a negative impact on changes in retirement practices. Numerous studies have shown that in a post-rural society with rapid population movements, the concept of "raising children to provide against old age" is no longer appropriate to the actual situation in rural society and has lost its basis for continuation. At the same time, the reduction in resources and support due to the rural labour exodus has led to a gradual decline in the expectations of rural elders for their sons and a shift in

expectations for their daughters. The status and role of daughters have changed considerably compared to traditional societies, where the responsibility and obligation to support parents was almost non-existent, and the importance of daughters as caregivers has increased significantly. This new change has brought about a shock to the traditional notion of "raising children to provide against old age" and "boy preference", as sons are clearly not or not the only force, or even the main force, in the old age care of the rural elderly. The seemingly inevitable link between "raising children" and "provide for the elderly" is gradually weakening in the practical support relationships in rural areas.

At the same time, the gender change in rural old age is increasingly reflected in fertility attitudes, with daughters to support the elderly a countervailing effect, reversing the fertility preferences of rural society and further improving the gender inequality that is particularly pronounced in rural society. The widespread popularity of folk sayings such as "a son is happy for a while, a daughter is happy for a generation" is an important reflection of the change in fertility attitudes in rural areas. This will, to varying degrees, discourage people from deliberately pursuing the gender of their children for old age reasons and improve the quality of fertility and life.[4]

#### **4.3. Promoting gender equality and improving the status of women**

The gender differences in the traditional supporting culture are constructed in the long-term development process of history, and it reflects the concept of fertility and certain interests. [5]Under the background of the new era, traditional gender supporting ethics is gradually disintegrating, and the binding force on daughters is weakening. Daughters to support the elderly have greatly alleviated the supporting pressure brought about by the development of modern society. The improvement in the quality of life, life happiness and satisfaction of the elderly all show the real need for the new supporting model of daughters' participation.

The appearance of daughters to support the elderly will not only not harm the interests of men but also can share men's supporting obligations. The addition of the emerging force of daughters to support the elderly can make up for the lack of traditional gender culture and the disability caused by family planning. The joint participation of both genders in the elderly can show women's economic status, independent personality, and right to speak, improve women's lower status, show their true selves, and promote the harmonious and healthy development of gender equality. [6]In a sense, daughters to support the elderly is one of the driving forces to promote the realization of equality between men and women, and the positive image of women can contribute to the improvement and development of the entire social supporting system.

### **5. Conclusion**

Daughters play an increasingly important and integral role in the aged-supporting in rural areas. Actively encouraging daughters to participate in supporting the elderly and perfecting the policy is crucial to improving the quality of life of the elderly in their later years. In the future development, through the concerted efforts of the state and all sectors of society, the concept of gender mainstreaming should be incorporated into policy formulation and implementation process as much as possible so as to continuously promote the improvement of rural old-age security undertakings, and promote family-based old-age care. The realization of gender equality, and ultimately the elimination of social exclusion of women, will further promote the development of rural old-age security.

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