

The Impact of Social Inequality and Gender Inequality on Rural-to-urban Migrant Workers in China

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Abstract. With the rapid urbanization and the increasing willingness of Chinese people to pursue higher wages and better living standards, there has been a significant increase in the rural-to-urban migration population since 1980s. However, the process was not as smooth as people previously expected. Migrant workers face challenges and inequalities in both daily lives and workplaces. This review paper explores the impact of social inequality and gender inequality on migrant workers, focusing on access to health services, social integration and female migrant workers' experience. Migrant workers suffer from unequal access to medical services due to Hukou registration system, lack of information about healthcare services and rural-urban disparities in medical services quality. Regarding social integration, they also encounter inequalities and challenges in the divisions of labor and compensation, legal protection and their children's development. Finally, this paper reviews the impact of gender inequalities on female migrants' lives, emphasizing income disparities, discriminations in the workplace and mental health issues. It also touches upon positive trends facilitated by migration including increasing level of independence and growing opportunities in the workplace. This review paper provides more perspectives for academic community and readers, promoting social equality and gender equality for migrant workers in China. While this paper has not discussed every aspect regarding the inequalities faced by rural-to-urban migrant workers, the discussion may be broadened with future academic research and studies.

Keywords: Rural-to-urban migrant workers; healthcare services; social integration; gender inequality; China.

1. Introduction

Rural-to-urban migrant workers in China are those who have rural household registration (also known as rural hukou status) and move to cities for work. The hukou registration system in China is a population registration system in which residents are categorized into "agricultural household registration" and "non-agricultural household registration." From the countrysides to cities, migrant workers gain more opportunities in receiving higher wages, having better living conditions, and even switching their household registration from rural to urban status. The overall population of migrant workers has shown an increasing trend, from 176.58 million in 2023 to 178.71 million in 2024 [1]. This shows the high geographical mobility of Chinese residents and the willingness to pursue better lives. The government has also made efforts to create a better working and living environment for workers, such as increasing construction of city parks and providing easier access to rental housing in urban communities. In 2022, 189,000 houses in Shenzhen were provided by the government to workers as talent housing with lower rent than general rental houses, and they assisted more than 130,000 migrant families and migrant workers [2]. However, migrant workers still face considerable challenges in their daily lives and workplaces. The Hukou policy creates apparent disparities in the equal distribution of social security. Studies have shown that the difference in education level contributes to income disparities, and even ethnicity plays a role in the social integration process [3]. In terms of gender, more female migrant workers are participating in the labor market. Women have accounted for 43.0% of all local migrant workers in 2023 and account for 30.5% of migrants who go to other cities or provinces. The proportion of women among all migrant workers increased by 0.7 percentage points compared with the year 2022 [4]. Nevertheless, the existing social bias becomes a barrier for female migrants to have the same opportunity as male migrants in many social aspects [5].

Thus, the paper intends to expand the multiple perspectives of this discussion by reviewing literature written by different scholars.

The objectives of this study are to review some of the significant issues pertinent to the rural-to-urban migration, including social securities, social integration, and gender inequality. To be more specific, these aspects of rural-to-urban migrant workers include the access to medical services, the working pattern, and the influence of migration background on their children. Additionally, as females move to urban areas, they experience not only economic pressure and lack of labor protection but also challenges from traditional Chinese culture, inequalities in the workplace and health issues [6]. Although gender inequality still exists, the positive changes of female workers cannot be neglected [6, 7]. The objectives of this paper are to present the current studies about social inequality, review the gender inequality faced by rural-to-urban migrant workers, and explore positive trends driven by migration.

2. Health Services Distribution

When native urban residents find themselves sick, their first reaction is usually to seek medical treatment. Many workers with rural status do not seek medical treatment in the early stages of the disease but wait until the disease begins to worsen. The availability of receiving health services, such as health checks, is crucial for migrant workers to ensure their ability to continue participating in the production process. Several structural reasons contribute to unequal access to medical service for migrant workers. One of the primary reasons is the establishment of the Hukou registration system in the 1950s in China. The regulations on Hukou Registration of the People's Republic of China divided urban and rural residents' household registration into "agricultural" and "non-agricultural" status. Laws and regulations restrict the free migration of urban and rural populations. Meanwhile, the Hukou system was connected to residents' rights to public services, such as healthcare and elderly care services [8]. Researchers revealed that the increasing disparities in healthcare and high burden of medical expenditure result in lower hospital visits for rural-urban workers. Li suggested that workers would have a more optimistic attitude towards hospital visits if they were covered with medical insurance and maternity pay [9]. Xu further pointed out that the level of self-rated health will be improved when migrant populations have certain awareness of public health services [10]. However, a study showed that more than 40% of Chinese migrants had never heard of the national essential public health services, while only 30.01% of them had created health records [11]. It consequently shows that many migrants are not paying attention to healthcare services. This phenomenon can be illustrated further using the case of malaria in Jiangsu province from 1 June 2012 through 31 December 2019. Migrant workers accounted for 96.8% of the total patients. From the perspective of migrant workers, they do not realize the seriousness of malaria and just regard this symptom as an ordinary disease [12]. A further reason for unequal access to medical services lies in the different qualities of healthcare: rural clinics have significantly lower quality in healthcare facilities than those in urban regions. In villages, doctors previously specialized in other sectors, such as farming and manufacturing. They rarely receive formal medical training [13]. Therefore, there is still a significant unequal distribution of health services between rural and urban medical institutions.

3. Social Integration

Migrant workers are continuously facing challenges and inequalities during social integration, including divisions of labor and compensation and legal protection. Division of labor differs between migrants and local urban workers. Research showed that migrants are mainly allocated as blue-collar workers (transportation, manufacturing, etc.) rather than white-collar workers that local urban residents tend to specialize in (finance, education, etc.) [14]. Yang's study indicated that although rural-to-urban migrant workers work harder than local urban workers, they receive lower wages and benefits and suffer from social discrimination and unfairness [15]. In terms of legal protection, Chen

found that the labor relationship and legitimacy of migrants are normally ambiguous; even if migrant workers have made contracts with their employers, they still take up a weak status in protecting their rights [16]. Working hours of male and female migrants both exceed 60 hours per week, which is higher than that of urban residents [17]. As the Labor Law of the People's Republic of China outlined, a work-hour regulation is enforced by the state, limiting employees' daily work time to 8 hours and their average weekly work time to 44 hours [18]. However, looking at the average weekly working hours of migrant workers, it has significantly exceeded the legal limit. This has seriously infringed upon the legitimate rights and interests of the Chinese working people, which reflects insufficient legal protection for migrant workers and lack of law implementation.

Moreover, migrant children in China confront challenges regarding social integration. Children of migrants with rural hukou status do not have the same opportunity as children of local urban residents. They go to special schools specializing for non-local residents. While they still have the chance to have access to normal school, an expense of "support and donation" needs to be paid, which is normally not affordable to migrant parents. Some children cannot live with their migrant parents in cities but stay in villages and countrysides with the elderly. Subsequently, with limited social resources and health support, the consequences can be pessimistic. Studies found that many left-behind children have mental issues, such as anxiety and lack of security [19]. Ren and Ma found that the acculturation stress was negatively associated with need satisfaction but positively related to depression [20, 21]. Children who participated in the research showed similar results in both need satisfaction and need frustration, which might be the results of multiple factors. Parental education and the effects from surroundings are in indispensable positions in children's mental growth.

4. Gender Inequality

Although the migration population of women has taken up half of the total by 2020 and maintains an increasing trend, social inequality regarding income, gender stereotypes in the workplace, and living quality between migrants and female migrants persist. Tong suggested that the ideology of gender rules in the traditional Chinese culture disturbed the mental growth of females, as they were expected to focus on the responsibilities as domestic managers [6]. Until now there are institutions and companies using the ideology to restrict females from promoting and receiving higher wages. The wages received by male and female migrants have a significant difference of 16%. On an hourly basis, male migrants receive 30.2% higher wages than female migrants [17]. With the increase in the gender differential gap, gender stereotypes, and unequal wage distribution, the phrase "Glass Ceiling Effect" is used to describe the invisible barriers for female migrant workers in reality [22, 23]. Subsequently, female migrant workers are often described as having low wages and low job status.

Meanwhile, male migrants and female migrants tend to experience differences in living condition, income and risks of having mental problems. In terms of living conditions, scholars revealed that male migrants usually had a higher expense on renting but also earned a higher income to cover the renting expenditure. Compared with men, female migrants living at their workplaces are more likely to receive lower wages [17, 24]. On the other hand, the mental states of female migrants and male migrants differ. Although female migrants are found to have significantly higher happiness levels than male migrants, their mental health issues are higher at the same time [6]. Female migrants are discovered to have a higher potential of depression (31.3%) than that of male migrants (31.1%) [15, 25]. As women bear the pressure from traditional Chinese thinking and family culture, the low social support is a severe factor of the depressive system [15]. The first generation of female migrant workers in China endured a lot of moral pressure from the public.

Nevertheless, recent decades have shown positive trends and optimistic outlook for female migrants in Chinese society. Women have higher awareness of autonomy as they migrate to cities [6]. It is highly suggested that migrant women can use social resources and internal power to achieve a higher level of autonomy. The independence of women was never purely a construction by a woman herself but through actively seeking for rational social agency instead of treating associations as

opponents to expand their social connections and integration. Scholars subsequently found that the new generation of female migrants are using multiple ways, such as participating in sports and social associations, to solidify their sense of independence and individualistic spirit [5]. At the same time, religion acts as a powerful tool to empower, reinforce, and reconstruct gender expectations, also providing association support and moral legitimacy [26]. These actions expand women's discourses, and innovative attitudes are facilitated. Children of female migrants can further benefit from this since the maternal experiences are improved as women realize the importance of autonomy. Therefore, female migrants can apply the knowledge they have learned to get a higher discourse in the family, which challenges the traditional gender hierarchies [27]. More importantly, optimistic outcomes on employment are showcased in the competitive labor markets. Previously, the market power or economic concentration provided harbor for those discriminating employers; however, the growing competition weakened the ability of employers to classify the applicants by level. This market structure forces the discriminating employers to alter their means of selecting employees. Ultimately, gender segregation will fade over time due to the action of competitive forces, and females are spreading more equally across different sectors [28]. Although the progress was only made in a limited number of occupations, it propelled the working spirits of more female workers and showed a bright future of achieving gender equality in China with the powerful economic growth.

5. Conclusion

This review paper discusses the impact of social inequality and gender inequality on migrant workers, from the perspectives of health services, social integration and female migrant workers' experience. Firstly, the paper focus on the public healthcare service. It is found that the Hukou policy is essential for accessing the public healthcare system. Migrant workers are found to have lower hospital visits and higher medical expenditure than native urban residents. As for social integration, migrant workers encounter unfairness in divisions of labor and compensation. Migrant workers are found to have lower discourse and insufficient legitimacy in the workplace, and unclear labor relationships with their employers. Some children of migrant families are left in the countryside and seldom meet their parents. Some of them cannot study in public schools due to the rural Hukou status. They are found to have complicated mentalities towards urban life. Meanwhile, male and female migrants experience significant differences in the process of social integration regarding living conditions, income and risk of having mental issues. Under social norms, female migrants are expected to take on more domestic responsibilities. They receive lower hourly wages than male migrants but have higher potential and prevalence rates of mental health issues such as depression. However, as female migrants leave their previous environment and move into the cities, they also experience a growing sense of independence and enjoy more opportunities in the workplace.

This study raises public awareness on the issue of social inequality and gender inequality that persists in Chinese society and encourage people to address these issues. As for policy making, this study provides insights for establishing more comprehensive labor protection laws as well as gender equity policies, which can further drive balanced development of both rural and urban areas in China.

Future studies on rural-to-urban migrant workers in China could explore perspectives such as the promotion of female migrant workers' occupations and the impact of self-awareness on the higher discourse for female migrant workers. The influence of migration background on children can also be examined in future academic research regarding rural-to-urban migration. Additionally, the positive effects of migration on female migrant workers can be discussed further in the context of gender equality in Chinese society. The study can also be expanded to analyze the positive or negative impacts of migration from the perspectives of migrant workers themselves.

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