

RESEARCH ON OFF-SITE ELDERLY CARE OF RURAL ELDERLY MIGRANTS: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE L COMMUNITY IN XI'AN, CHINA

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Abstract: As China's urbanization process accelerates, the rural elderly migrants have gradually become a special social group. They move to cities to take care of their grandchildren or to facilitate their children's support, and face unique challenges of elderly care in other places. The study takes the rural elderly migrants in L Community of Xi'an as a case study, and through in-depth interviews and field research, analyzes the current situation of elderly care for this group in the city and the main problems they face. The results show that the rural elderly migrants face multiple difficulties in urban life, such as insufficient economic support, difficulty in social integration, and lack of elderly care resources. In addition, the dual urban-rural social security system has further aggravated the elderly care pressure of this group. Therefore, this study suggests intervention from multiple dimensions such as policy, community support, and family relationships to improve the current situation of rural elderly people living in other places and enhance their quality of life.

Keywords: Off-site elderly care; Rural elderly migrants; Urbanization; Social security; Family relationship; Community support

1 INTRODUCTION

At present, China is in a critical period of social transformation, and the population mobility pattern is gradually changing from individual independent mobility to family overall mobility. In this context, rural elderly migrants as a special group are gradually playing an important role. The elderly migrant refers to rural elderly people who have moved to cities with their children. They have played a key role in supporting their children's work and raising their grandchildren, demonstrating the paternal sense of responsibility in traditional Chinese family ethics. So far, many elderly people have to move to cities with their children and become part of the elderly migrants. However, due to the imbalance of the urban-rural dual household registration system and social welfare security policies, rural elderly migrants face greater pressure to provide for their old age [1]. This not only brings many inconveniences to their lives in the city, but also gradually becomes a social problem. With the increase in the number of "elderly migrants" from rural areas, the issue of basic pension security for this group in cities has become increasingly prominent, directly affecting their urban integration and quality of life.

In the context of the aging population, how to choose appropriate elderly care methods and change traditional elderly care concepts have become urgent issues to be solved. How the country and society can provide better quality elderly care services and how commercial elderly care security and elderly care institutions can balance economic interests and social responsibilities are issues that need to be discussed in depth. Therefore, this article will explore how to improve the urban elderly care support and service system for rural elderly migrants from the perspectives of multiple responsible parties such as the state, society, and the community, and provide reference for policies and practices.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Research on Rural Elderly Migrants

As a growing vulnerable group, the elderly migrants have received extensive media attention and coverage in recent years. In China, there is no unified academic consensus on the definition of elderly migrants. However, many scholars have discussed the definition of elderly migrants, such as Li [1], Sun and Zheng [2] and Wang [3]. For example, Sun and Zheng [2] defines the "elderly migrants" from the spatial and temporal dimensions, emphasizing that the elderly live with their children for a long time to take care of their grandchildren, and distinguishes between phased and long-term living patterns. This study pays special attention to the medical security issues, and therefore believes that the rural elderly migrants refer to the elderly group aged 55 and above who have moved to cities due to the pressure of their children and whose medical security coverage is still in their original place of residence.

So far, there are relatively few studies on the elderly care issues of the rural elderly migrants, mainly focusing on two aspects: First, study on the factors affecting the quality of elderly care for rural elderly migrants. For instance, Sun and Zheng [2] demonstrated that social support, family factors and personal factors are the main factors affecting their quality of elderly care in other places. Secondly, study on the willingness of rural elderly migrants to settle down in new cities for care. Zhu and Jing [4] found that the factors that influence the willingness of rural elderly migrants in Xi'an to settle down in cities include age, whether their spouses move with them, health status, relationship with cohabiting

children, housing conditions, living patterns, and social participation.

2.2 Research on Remote Elderly Care

Elderly care refers to the process in which people enter old age and spend their later years happily through the necessary guarantees, care and comfort in material and spiritual life. It is a responsibility and obligation that society and families should fulfill [5]. Essentially, the elderly care of the rural elderly migrants is a special type of elderly care in a different place. Off-site elderly care means that the elderly choose to leave their original place of residence and live somewhere else and enjoy the support and security provided by the government, community and family [6]. As an important means to cope with population aging and urbanization, off-site elderly care has gradually attracted widespread attention from the academic community in recent years.

The research has mainly focused on the types, current status, problems faced and coping measures of off-site elderly care [2-3]. Scholars have explored various forms of off-site elderly care, such as tourism retirement, vacation retirement and returning to hometown for retirement, as well as the difficulties caused by the inconsistency of relevant policies, including identity discrimination, lack of spiritual comfort and differences in service quality. [7-8] In addition, the development of off-site elderly care also faces challenges such as an imperfect elderly care security system, an incomplete medical security reimbursement service system, and a lack of professional service personnel. In response to these problems, the study proposed countermeasures and suggestions to strengthen government policy support, improve the social security system and promote the integration of elderly care resources to promote the healthy development of off-site elderly care, and to change the elderly's elderly care concepts through education and publicity, and promote the construction of a community culture of respecting and honoring the elderly [9-10].

In general, there is a relative lack of research on elderly migrants, especially rural elderly migrants, in the field of elderly care and security, especially a lack of detailed analysis of the current non-local elderly care security system. Therefore, this study will be based on the perspective of social security, comprehensively explore the difficulties faced by the rural elderly migrants in relocating to other places for care, and put forward corresponding policy recommendations.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

The in-depth interview method is flexible and in-depth, and can obtain rich qualitative data through interaction with interviewees [11]. Therefore, the study mainly used in-depth interviews to obtain detailed data and personal experiences of rural elderly migrants in the process of urban retirement.

This study paid special attention to the representative area of L community in Xi'an, China, and selected rural elderly migrants and their children as the main research subjects. In total, 14 people were interviewed. The real names and identity information of the interviewees were kept strictly confidential, and all personal information was anonymized. The researchers used a numbering system to identify each interviewee with codes such as "interview 1, interview 2,interview 14". The outline of the in-depth interview mainly revolves around the basic characteristics of the "old migrant group", life adaptation after migration, family relationships and support, elderly care needs and social support, etc.

Thematic analysis is a commonly used qualitative data analysis method that aims to identify, analyze and report patterns in the data [12]. Therefore, this study used the method of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke [12] to analyze the collected data. The research results are as follows:

4 THE DILEMMA OF RURAL ELDERLY MIGRANTS IN RELOCATION

4.1 Lack of Necessary Financial Support

4.1.1 Weak family financial support

The study found that the motivations of the rural elderly migrants do not obtain better economic benefits, but to take care of their grandchildren, reduce the living burden of their children. Although on the surface, migration to cities may improve their living standards, the reality is often the opposite - after the elderly leave their original place of residence, their economic source may be further damaged. Several interviewees clearly stated that they mainly depend on the financial support of their children. In cities, these elderly people focus on caring for their grandchildren and handling household chores, leaving them with no time to engage in other economic activities, further exacerbating their economic dependence. Another Interviewee 8, who used to be a village secretary, said: *"I came to Xi'an from the countryside. My son started a business here and his life started to improve, but I still didn't want to add to his burden."* This reflects a common problem among rural migrant elderly people: although they hope to reduce the burden on their children by taking care of their grandchildren, in practice, the imbalance between supply and demand of economic support still exists.

4.1.2 The pension insurance dilemma faced by rural elderly migrants

The payment levels of urban and rural residents' pension insurance are divided into multiple levels. The principle is that the more you pay, the more you get. However, most of the rural elderly migrants often choose the lowest payment standard, resulting in lower accumulation of pension in their personal accounts and thus less amount of pension received each month.

The results illustrated that most rural elderly migrants have insufficient understanding of urban and rural residents' pension insurance and are not willing to participate in it. For example, Interviewee 7 said, *"I seem to get a few dozen RMB every month... but I don't feel secure, I still think the money is safest in my own hands."* This dissatisfaction and suspicion about the low returns of pension insurance has made their attitude towards participating in the insurance even more negative, and they believe that the money will do little to alleviate their financial pressure in the city. In addition, the procedures and standards for urban and rural residents' pension insurance are relatively complicated, and many elderly people find it difficult to understand. For example, Interviewee 5 mentioned that *she did not know how much pension insurance she paid every month, nor did she know who would pay it.*

4.1.3 Weak purchasing power of rural elderly migrants for commercial pension insurance

Commercial pension insurance aims to ease the fiscal pressure caused by the expansion of public pension payments [13]. However, the development of commercial pension insurance in China is not ideal, especially among the rural elderly migrants, whose purchasing power and coverage are significantly insufficient. The research results show that many rural migrant elderly people have a clear resistance and distrust towards commercial pension insurance. For example, Interview 3 mentioned: *"I haven't heard of it. Is it from the insurance company? Oh, they have advertised it...it's all a scam."* An important finding is that all the interviewees stated that none of them had ever purchased commercial pension insurance, which directly indicates that commercial pension insurance has not played its due role in pension security for this group. The lack of commercial pension insurance among the rural elderly migrant population reflects the vulnerability of this group in terms of economic security for retirement, and also reveals the shortcomings of commercial pension insurance in terms of popularization and trust building.

4.2 Poor Connection Between Welfare Systems for the Elderly in Different Places

4.2.1 The dilemma of the cross-region medical treatment system

Although China launched a cross-region medical treatment settlement system in September 2017, the results show that the elderly migrants still face multiple challenges in actual operation in the non-local medical treatment process. A major problem is insufficient policy publicity. Most of the interviewed elderly migrants only have primary school education or have never received formal education. They have limited knowledge of the policy on medical treatment in other places. For example, Interviewee 6 said: *"I don't know. There are reimbursements and subsidies... I don't really understand."* Another important obstacle is the limitation of reimbursement scope. The settlement of medical expenses in different provinces is mainly for hospitalization expenses, while outpatient expenses and drug purchase expenses are not included in the reimbursement scope in different provinces and cities. For example, Interview 9 mentioned: *"Medical treatment is covered, but medicine is not."*

In addition, differences in medical insurance catalogs also bring difficulties to medical treatment in other places. The regulations on medical insurance drug lists, medical treatment items and medical service facilities are not unified in each province, resulting in insured persons encountering a situation where drugs that can be reimbursed in their registered place of residence cannot be reimbursed in other places when seeking medical treatment in other places. Interviewee 4 mentioned: *"I have rheumatism...I can't get my medicine reimbursed here."* Finally, the difference in reimbursement rates is also an issue that cannot be ignored. When rural elderly migrants seek medical treatment in cities, the reimbursement rate for medical treatment in other places is usually lower than that in the place where they participate in the insurance. For example, when Interviewee 5 said: *"It's much more expensive here in Xi'an... The subsidies are small and expensive."*

4.2.2 Difficulties in receiving pensions in other places

In China, urban and rural residents aged 60 or above can receive a basic pension. However, in practice, it is still difficult for rural elderly migrants to receive pensions in other places. The requirements for elderly people to "verify their identity" in receiving pensions vary in different regions. Some regions require elderly people to provide photos of themselves holding the latest publications every year to confirm their eligibility to receive them; Other regions have regulations that require rural elderly migrants to return to their place of origin for identity verification before they can continue to receive their pensions. For elderly people who have moved to cities and have limited mobility, this requirement means high costs and time burdens of long-distance travel, which may even exceed the amount of pension they receive. In addition, the cumbersome and inconvenient verification procedures further aggravate the plight of these elderly people. For example, Interviewee 5 mentioned that she and her husband had moved to a new place five years ago, but they had not yet received their pension due to complicated procedures.

4.2.3 Regional differences in welfare policies for elderly people living in different places

The study found that due to differences in social welfare policies and insufficient information sharing in various regions, rural elderly migrants cannot enjoy social welfare benefits in the places where they move to due to household registration restrictions. For rural elderly migrants who are not familiar with the policy in Xi'an, the process of applying for senior citizen discount cards is fraught with obstacles. For example, Interviewee 6 stated: *"When I first came to Xi'an, I didn't know about this... I thought it was only for locals and it cost money, so I never applied for it."* This lack of policy information has caused many elderly migrants to miss out on the benefits they should have enjoyed. In addition, the senior citizen cards are not universally accepted nationwide. For example, when Interviewee 8 was using her Hunan senior citizen card, she was forced to get off the bus because it could not be used on a Xi'an bus. This experience not only prevented her from enjoying the benefits she deserved, but also made her subjectively feel the difference in her identity.

4.3 Insufficient Resources for Elderly Care in Other Places

4.3.1 Limited elderly care resources available to families

The elderly care resources available to the families of rural migrant elderly people in cities are relatively limited. Although they can enjoy high-quality elderly care resources in cities to a certain extent, they still rely mainly on their children. However, the shrinking family size and the decrease in the number of children in cities, coupled with the fact that their children are busy pursuing economic and material resources, often have no time to take care of the needs of the elderly. Most of the elderly interviewed said that they are more responsible for housework and taking care of grandchildren in the city rather than enjoying a real retirement life. This reflects the serious lack of care provided by families to the elderly, further limiting their access to elderly care resources in the city.

4.3.2 Insufficient quality of community elderly care services

There are very limited specialized community services for rural elderly migrants, and the formal support they can get from the community is also extremely scarce. For example, Interviewee 8 mentioned, *"The community only organized some square dance activities, and we had to pay money to them...."* In addition, although the government allows market forces to intervene in community activities, many communities simply rent out houses to open entertainment venues such as chess and card rooms and supermarkets, and the elderly have not really benefited from them. What is more serious is that some communities sell inferior health products to the elderly, taking advantage of their health anxieties to defraud money. For example, Interviewee 7 mentioned: *"My wife used to love buying health supplements. After using them for several years, they didn't help at all... We are already poor, and they still want to cheat us out of our money."* Although the community provides public service places and facilities such as senior citizen universities and senior citizen activity centers, the users of these resources are mainly retired local faculty and staff. Some migrant elderly people believe that these services are for local residents, and they cannot enjoy these free services because they are not registered in the local area.

4.3.3 Insufficient supply of urban elderly care public goods

Since the total amount of urban public goods is limited, the rural "elderly migrants" will inevitably share these resources with urban elderly people after entering the city. This leads to a decrease in the number of public goods enjoyed by each elderly person, an increase in the cost of using public resources, an increase in the load, and a decline in service quality. Results show that many rural elderly migrants lack convenient medical facilities in their communities, and nearby large hospitals have a large number of patients, which leads to the elderly often choosing to endure when they are sick, increasing the risk of the disease worsening. In addition, services such as psychological counseling and legal aid are seriously inadequate, and the opportunities for health checkups for the elderly are extremely limited. In terms of spiritual and cultural life, public parks and squares are crowded due to the large number of people, and elderly activity rooms are incomplete and non-existent. For example, Interviewee 6 mentioned: *"The senior activity room is now a chess and card room. They play mahjong and cards there every day, nothing else."*

5 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOLVING THE DILEMMA OF RURAL ELDERLY MIGRANTS IN URBAN AREAS

5.1 Accelerate the Reform of the Household Registration System

The key to solving the pension dilemma of the rural elderly migrants is to deepen the reform of the household registration system. The current social welfare system is closely linked to the household registration system, which results in the rural elderly migrants being unable to enjoy equal social welfare benefits in cities. Therefore, the government should promote the reform of the residence permit system, simplify the settlement policy, promote the universalization and standardization of pension resources and policies across the country, and gradually eliminate the welfare differences caused by unbalanced regional development.

5.2 Improve the System of Elderly Care and Medical Care in Other Places

The government should innovate and adjust relevant policies so that the elderly migrants can equally enjoy the social security of their place of residence and achieve welfare equity for the permanent population. The government should establish a cross-regional welfare policy sharing platform so that rural elderly migrants can enjoy the same public services in other places. Moreover, in terms of medical care, it is necessary to gradually implement cross-provincial coordination of fee settlement and medical funds, adjust the medical insurance fund management system, and ultimately form a nationwide coordinated urban and rural medical insurance system. In addition, it is necessary to establish a unified medical insurance network settlement platform, and realize remote instant settlement through the "one-card pass", which simplifies the pension collection process for the elderly migrants. The country should also introduce relevant subsidy policies to alleviate the economic pressure on their children, increase the pension level of the elderly migrants, and enhance their ability to protect themselves financially.

5.3 Adjusting the Rural Pension Security System

After rural elderly migrants moved to cities, they lost their agricultural income and relied on meager pension insurance to make a living. However, despite the merger of urban and rural residents' pension insurance in 2014, there is still a

large gap in the level of pension security between urban and rural areas. To solve this problem, the government should increase investment in urban and rural residents' pension insurance, gradually increase pension levels, and ensure social equity. At the same time, the government should strengthen coordination among various departments, improve the efficiency of pension security, and reduce the fragmentation of the system. A unified national pension insurance big data platform should be established to facilitate the handling of relevant procedures in different places and improve management efficiency and convenience.

5.4 Strengthen the Construction of Childcare Service System

In response to the problem of rural elderly migrants moving to cities to look after their grandchildren, the country should strengthen the construction of childcare service systems and provide more diversified and professional infant and child care services. The country should vigorously develop socialized childcare institutions to reduce the pressure on the elderly in caring for their grandchildren in cities. The government has introduced relevant laws and regulations to regulate childcare services and ensure their safety and reliability. By strengthening socialized childcare services, the country can reduce the burden on the elderly as "temporary babysitters" and allow the elderly migrants to no longer drift between rural and urban areas and enjoy their later years with peace of mind.

5.5 Community Integration and Optimization of Elderly Care Resources

As the entity that residents have most frequent contact with in daily life, the community is an important part of social organization. Communities should leverage their unique advantages to help rural elderly migrants escape poverty by integrating and optimizing elderly care resources and promote equalization of basic public services in the community. First, communities should strengthen infrastructure construction for the elderly, plan special leisure activity areas, and improve the facilities and equipment for elderly exercise. Secondly, the community should open various interest classes based on the interests and needs of the elderly to increase contact and interaction between the rural elderly migrants and local elderly people. Thirdly, communities can work with businesses to increase the supply of public elderly care resources and improve the diversity and quality of elderly care services. Finally, the community should help the rural elderly migrants establish and reconstruct their interpersonal networks.

6 CONCLUSION

This study explores the multiple difficulties faced by rural elderly migrants in the process of urban retirement, and puts forward targeted policy recommendations from the national, community and societal levels. Research shows that this special group of rural elderly migrants finds it difficult to fully enjoy the elderly care resources and services they deserve in urban life due to restrictions in the household registration system, social security policies, community resource allocation, and other aspects. This phenomenon not only affects their quality of life, but also challenges the fairness of China's social security system. The dilemma faced by rural elderly migrants in urban retirement is the result of the combined effect of multi-level and multi-faceted factors. Solving this problem requires the joint efforts of the state, community and society. The living conditions of the rural elderly migrants can be effectively improved by deepening policy reforms, optimizing resource allocation, and strengthening community support. This will enhance their sense of happiness and quality of life. This will not only help achieve social equity and harmony, but also provide a powerful response strategy for China's increasingly severe aging problem.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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