Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on International Law and Legal Policy
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37433

Moving for Wages, Staying for Care: Rural-Urban Migration and Women's Economic Inequality in China

Hanjiao Wang

The High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, Beijing, China
joycehanjiao2009@outlook.com

Abstract. There have been significant economic opportunities from rural-to-urban migration in China, although these opportunities are unevenly distributed in favor of men or women within households. This structured narrative review evaluates the issue of gender economic inequality in China through four interlinked aspects: wage employment, unpaid work, land and asset ownership, and social protection. In doing so, the paper compares migrant women who move to urban areas for wage employment with those staying behind in rural areas, taking them to be part of a translocal household strategy. From the reviewed literature, it becomes clear that migration allows women migrants to earn wages, expand their social networks, and even acquire bargaining power, but these are limited by hukou discrimination, occupational segregation, low social-insurance coverage, and child-care related employment interruption. Women left behind tend to engage in more farm work, childcare, eldercare, and domestic chores, but increased responsibilities do not lead to increased control over land, income, or decision-making. Thus, migration creates an empowerment vs. burden paradox where increased household income is achieved at the expense of increased workload and insecurity for women. There are wide variations among the outcomes for educational attainment, marital and parental status, regional development, land tenure security, access to public services, and information communication technology (ICT).

Keywords: Gender inequality, Rural-urban migration, Migrant women, Left-behind women, China

1. Introduction

Forty years of structural reforms have put internal migration at the core of China's development process. According to the 2024 Migrant Workers Monitoring Survey, there are 299.73 million migrant workers, with the share of women being 37.6%; the presence of women is higher among local migrant workers compared to those working outside their home regions [1]. These mobility flows have provided additional income and transformed rural livelihoods, but they have also reshaped the division of wage labor, agriculture, childcare, eldercare, and household chores between men and women.

The analysis of economic inequality in China requires the consideration of time and security in addition to money. The Third National Time Use Survey showed that women involved in unpaid

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37433

work spent 3 hours and 29 minutes daily on it, while men spent only 1 hour and 52 minutes; the latter also demonstrated lower rates of participation in paid work [2]. Despite the lack of separate figures regarding the rural sector, the national statistics indicate the broader gender regime that forms the context of migrants' choices.

Current research provides contradictory pictures of migration for rural women. One account sees migration as an opportunity to earn wages, gain more freedom, and get rid of the restrictions of traditional social institutions. Another focuses on gender differences in the labor market and its instability, forced return migration, and heavier burden of care for those women who are left behind in villages. This duality is caused by the separation of the migration experiences of migrant women and left-behind women. Fan showed that gender-based migration and the division of labor in families complement each other, while Jacka later offered the concept of translocality of families whose productive and reproductive processes take place in several locations [3, 4].

This paper addresses three research questions. First, how does the combination of migration choice, urban labor markets, hukou system, and family obligations influence the economic situation of migrant women? Second, what is the impact of agricultural activities, unpaid labor, property ownership, and remittances on women staying in rural areas? Third, how are these economic experiences connected through household-level decisions and exchanges of money, labor, and care? Using a structured narrative review, the paper synthesizes quantitative and qualitative literature alongside official data. The analysis shows that migration does not uniformly benefit or disadvantage women. Instead, it redistributes resources and risks between locations and family members in material, temporal, and institutional dimensions. Whether it contributes to women's empowerment is defined by the interplay of paid work, unpaid work, property, and social protection.

2. Review method and analytical framework

This literature review covers recent and influential English-language studies about gendered internal migration in China in addition to some national-level data. The sources were chosen based on their relation to five themes: migration selection, urban employment, social protection, rural labor reallocation, and household or land-based bargaining. The evidence base includes quantitative analysis of census and surveys, wages decomposition, qualitative study of village-level experiences, and government publications. As methods and results are quite different, interpretation and synthesis are the purposes of the literature review.

This literature review is not meant to be exhaustive. Instead, it employs a clearly defined thematic approach to contrast findings in research designs of different kinds. Quantitative studies are used to show patterns in migration, wages, work allocation, and labor participation, while qualitative studies help to understand women's experiences of family separation, responsibility, and bargaining. Official statistics reveal the scale of migration and time inequality. The synthesis focuses on distinctions between improvement at the household level and individual women's resource control.

The approach to the problem in this paper uses feminist economics theory combined with a translocal household perspective. Four aspects are discussed in this framework: income from paid work; domestic, care, and subsistence work; control over land and assets; and social protection. The household is considered both as a unit that does not automatically have common interests and as a combination of individuals. For example, urban wages may rely on the work of rural relatives who take care of children, elderly family members, and agriculture. In turn, rural families may depend on migrants' remittances while keeping land as insurance in case of an unpredictable urban work situation. Jacka's concept of translocal family reproduction is particularly relevant here because it combines economic production in cities and family reproduction in villages [4].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37433

3. Migrant women in urban markets

3.1. Selective migration and pre-market inequality

Migration is premised on selection. Rural individuals are not equally prepared to join urban labor markets. Their age, educational background, marital status, number of children, family resources, and social networks determine their migratory options and duration. Liang and Chen found that youthfulness and unmarried status increased the likelihood of movement, whereas women's migratory status depended largely on marital status and childbirth [5]. In this regard, gender inequality is established before employment. Women bound by family obligations may neither migrate nor remain in urban areas for long periods of time, or if they migrate, they may have to settle for less attractive jobs.

Networks facilitate the process of movement through reduced costs and risks. However, networks tend to perpetuate occupational segregation as well. For instance, Fan noted that gendered contacts tended to direct women into factory assembly, domestic work, catering, and other traditionally female occupations. While education plays a crucial role in migration decisions, its benefits are conditioned by household obligations. In some cases, even though women possess appropriate skills for migration, they are still identified as family members in charge of taking care of their offspring or elderly relatives [3].

3.2. Hukou, public services, and social protection

Once settled, hukou status as a rural resident limits equal access to urban welfare services and increases the cost of establishing a family unit. Migrants might stay in cities for many years without having equal rights to education, housing, health services, and social security benefits compared with registered urban residents. Goodburn's research on migrant children's schooling in Beijing illustrates the existence of administrative, monetary, and discriminatory barriers to enrollment in public schools. When families cannot afford urban education for their children, separation may occur when one parent migrates and another stays in the village [6].

This cost is gender-specific because responsibilities are not distributed neutrally. Women and grandmothers are more prone to stop working, migrate back to their villages, or stay at home in the first place. Social insurance does not eliminate this problem. According to Nielsen et al., participation in various types of insurance among rural migrants in Chinese cities was inconsistent, depending on employment situation, employer attitudes, and migrants' access to formal programs. Women engaged in informal and short-term employment are especially at risk of missing maternity insurance, pension, accident, and health insurance [7].

3.3. Occupational segregation, wage gaps, and conditional agency

Urban work may lead to increased monetary incomes, yet the labor market is divided based not only on hukou but also on gender lines. Meng and Zhang identified a two-tiered urban labor market in which rural migrants tended to occupy less-stable positions and earn lower pay than urban residents [8]. Among migrants, women are additionally restricted to low-income service and manufacturing sectors. Magnani and Zhu identified a significant gender wage gap between rural-urban migrants, with unequal rewards particularly noticeable among low-wage employees [9].

There are certain aspects of inequality such as differences in education, occupation, labor contract, and work experience that explain the gap, yet these factors are influenced by inequality as

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37433

well. Childbearing, expectations of prioritizing care, and networks referring women to 'suitable' occupations limit choice. Thus, labeling insecure work as a voluntary choice for flexibility is misleading. Flexibility may become a voluntary choice under conditions created by a lack of childcare services, discrimination in hiring, and unequal distribution of household chores.

Nevertheless, migration provides an opportunity for increased agency. Higher incomes may result in greater financial freedom, independence from husbands or parents, and exposure to new social and intellectual spheres. This occurs most often when employment is stable, wage rates are individually determined, and care obligations are shared. Agency is most constrained when women need to remit their income, quit working after marriage or the birth of a child, or return to villages without portable benefits.

4. Left-behind women in rural China

4.1. Agricultural labor reallocation and time poverty

Work does not cease when household members migrate; it gets re-tasked. Mu and van de Walle found that non-migrant women increased their share in agricultural labor when other household members migrated [10]. This illustrates the concept of feminization of agriculture, yet it is more complicated than the mere substitution of men by women. Using several databases, de Brauw et al. demonstrated an increase in the female share of agricultural labor, underlining the importance of variation between households and the distinction between labor input and productivity or agency [11].

More work could generate experience and decision-making responsibilities; however, it could also lead to time poverty. Left-behind women do both farming and housework, including cooking, cleaning, raising children, caring for elderly people, and community engagements. All of these activities compete with local paid work, training, relaxation, and participation in politics. Thus, the out-migration of male household members could bring additional household revenue but, at the same time, extend women's working day. The fundamental inequality here is not just who earns money, but who bears the burden of unpaid labor that makes migration possible.

Responsibilities vary throughout the life course: a younger wife may take care of children and agricultural land, whereas a mother or mother-in-law may care for the children of the younger generation and enable their migration. As Jacka showed in her study of rural Ningxia, the well-being implications of being 'left behind' are heterogeneous depending on family relations and women's interpretations [12]. Being 'left behind' does not have to mean passivity because women run farms, manage family budgets, and solve family crises, but even increased contributions can remain within a system of inequality.

4.2. Land, assets, and the empowerment-burden paradox

Land earns money, provides food security and housing security, and serves as a fallback for urban job insecurity. However, formal household access to land does not ensure equal individual control. Issues such as marriage, patrilocality, village membership criteria, and the names that appear on contracts may undermine women's claims. Hare showed how rural households themselves can contribute to gender inequality in wage employment by affecting women's reservation wages and employment opportunities [13]. In this regard, household assets can protect the household while reinforcing its internal inequalities.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37433

The most recent research indicates that land reforms alone are inadequate. Shi et al. show that enhanced land property rights stimulate transitions from agriculture to other economic activities; however, women's expansion in off-farm labor market participation is much lower than men's [14]. This means that secured land transfer rights allow labor to move out of agriculture only if employment and mobility opportunities are available to women.

The case of remittances is also paradoxical. Remittances can lead to better food consumption, education expenditure, health care, and housing, while at the same time increasing the burden of management and caregiving tasks for women staying in the village. A woman can make more everyday decisions because her husband is away from home but still lack control over capital, land transactions, or remittances. Therefore, empowerment needs to be measured through resource control, choices, and vulnerability reduction.

5. Connecting migrant and left-behind women

5.1. A translocal household strategy

Migration of a woman to the city and the position of a woman staying behind in the village are frequently underpinned by the same household strategy of allocating family members between different spaces in order to take advantage of both urban incomes and rural land, reduce expenditure on accommodation and education, and retain care for children and the elderly. While this might be reasonable at the household level, such a strategy involves a distribution of benefits and risks.

There are three types of transfers that happen between the city and the village. First, money is transferred from the city to the village in the form of remittances. Second, care goes from the village to the city because care provided by women in the village allows migrant women to continue working. Third, risks are distributed unevenly because land and housing in the village act as safety nets when migrants become unemployed, but women who sustain such households have to perform substantial labor. Fan's household approach and Jacka's translocal model [3, 4] demonstrate the mutual dependency between urban production and rural social reproduction.

This theoretical perspective provides an explanation for return migration. A woman's return does not necessarily mean labor market failure; it might be connected with pregnancy, children's schooling, eldercare, insecure contracts, or a decision to preserve land. However, because such factors are gendered, 'family strategy' cannot be considered a gender-neutral choice. A household can maximize its resources by cutting down the employment opportunities of one woman or transferring care responsibilities to another.

5.2. Boundary conditions and the digital economy

Migration impacts are determined by education, age, location, secure land rights, and availability of services. The benefits of education include improved incomes and job opportunities, but the effect is limited where women's care responsibilities affect them negatively. Marriage and children complicate long-distance migration for women. Labor opportunities are abundant in developed and coastal areas, but these areas also have higher housing and education costs. Land tenure provides security but may also trap women in farm management where husbands migrate. Availability of public childcare, schools, and insurance services alters the costs of family migration.

Access to technology is another condition that determines the empowerment of women in rural areas. Internet connection helps rural women access information, marketing services, training, and off-farm jobs. Wang and Zhang found a positive association between internet use and off-farm

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37433

employment among rural women, with the association more pronounced in eastern and central regions than in the west. However, access to the internet does not automatically equate to opportunity [15]. Inadequate skills, poor infrastructure, lack of capital, platform dependency, and combining online work with care responsibilities can generate new informalities [15]. Women's empowerment through technology requires control over bank accounts and earnings, separation of working and care hours, training, and social protection [15].

6. Discussion

There are at least three broad implications supported by the literature. First, the accumulation of household income does not equate to individual empowerment. A family can become wealthier when one woman works in precarious urban employment and another performs unpaid labor in the countryside. Second, increased responsibility does not mean increased authority. Taking care of farms, children, and remittances may enhance women's practical power without increasing their property ownership and decision-making authority. Third, conflicting results related to migration can be explained by different samples used in various studies and different outcome measures.

A multidimensional approach to studying migration also changes how inequality is measured. Wages reflect only those women who are able to find employment. Household income statistics do not show the distribution of income. Labor force statistics do not show whether women farm independently or participate in collective labor. Thus, time-use information, land ownership, social insurance participation, and control of remittances should accompany income statistics.

Individual agency, household well-being, and structural gender equality are three distinct phenomena. Migration can improve the first two while leaving the third untouched. The main process behind such improvements is the interaction between institutions and social norms. The hukou system constrains migrants' settlement in cities. Labor market segmentation structures migrants' employment opportunities. Gender social norms assign care to women.

However, the literature also has limitations. Many studies use provincial-level data or data from older migration waves. Fewer studies follow women through migration, return, marriage, and aging. Most studies measure household-level characteristics rather than individuals' control over money and property. Future research should combine longitudinal and within-household data analysis, paying more attention to older women, unmarried women, and platform work.

7. Conclusions

Rural-urban migration has brought changes to women's economic lives in China, but gender inequality persists. Women migrants are able to gain income, experience, and bargaining power; however, they are constrained by selective migration, occupational segregation, discrimination linked to the hukou system, lack of insurance, and career interruptions caused by care responsibilities. Rural women are responsible for sustaining agriculture, taking care of children and elderly people, and managing household affairs; their roles may expand without corresponding increases in their rights to control land, earnings, or decision-making.

Therefore, it is essential to consider both categories together. Urban earnings are possible because of rural unpaid work, while rural survival is supported by transfers and family-owned land serving as a safety net. Migration reallocates labor and risks rather than merely moving workers. Migration effects are most positive where women have education, secure jobs, portable entitlements, childcare, access to public education for children, secure property rights, and digital access.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37433

Policy should take into account both sides of the process. The main tasks include labor law enforcement, provision of maternity protection, pension and health insurance portability, childcare and eldercare services, removal of barriers for migrant children, protection of women's individual land rights, and provision of digital and financial skills to rural women. Otherwise, migration may increase household income without substantially changing the gender division of labor.

Rrferences

[1] National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2025, April 30). *2024 migrant workers monitoring survey report* [Report in Chinese]. https://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/zxfb/202504/t20250430_1959523.html
[2] National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2024, October 31). Communiqué on China's third national time use survey (No. 3): Time use of participants by urban and rural areas, gender, and age group in primary activity domains. https://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202411/t20241115_1957437.html
[3] Fan, C. C. (2003). Rural-urban migration and gender division of labor in transitional China. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 27*(1), 24–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00429
[4] Jacka, T. (2018). Translocal family reproduction and agrarian change in China: A new analytical framework. *The Journal of Peasant Studies, 45*(7), 1341–1359. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1314267
[5] Liang, Z., & Chen, Y. P. (2004). Migration and gender in China: An origin-destination linked approach. *Economic Development and Cultural Change, 52*(2), 423–443. https://doi.org/10.1086/380594
[6] Goodburn, C. (2009). Learning from migrant education: A case study of the schooling of rural migrant children in Beijing. *International Journal of Educational Development, 29*(5), 495–504. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2009.04.005
[7] Nielsen, I. L., Nyland, C., Smyth, R. L., Zhang, M., & Zhu, J. C. (2005). Which rural migrants receive social insurance in Chinese cities? Evidence from Jiangsu survey data. *Global Social Policy, 5*(3), 353–381. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468018105057416
[8] Meng, X., & Zhang, J. (2001). The two-tier labor market in urban China: Occupational segregation and wage differentials between urban residents and rural migrants in Shanghai. *Journal of Comparative Economics, 29*(3), 485–504. https://doi.org/10.1006/jcec.2001.1730
[9] Magnani, E., & Zhu, R. (2012). Gender wage differentials among rural-urban migrants in China. *Regional Science and Urban Economics, 42*(5), 779–793. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.regsciurbeco.2011.08.001
[10] Mu, R., & van de Walle, D. (2011). Left behind to farm? Women's labor re-allocation in rural China. *Labour Economics, 18*(S1), S83–S97. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2011.01.009
[11] de Brauw, A., Huang, J., Zhang, L., & Rozelle, S. (2013). The feminisation of agriculture with Chinese characteristics. *The Journal of Development Studies, 49*(5), 689–704. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2012.724168
[12] Jacka, T. (2012). Migration, householding and the well-being of left-behind women in rural Ningxia. *The China Journal, 67*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1086/665737
[13] Hare, D. (1999). Women's economic status in rural China: Household contributions to male-female disparities in the wage-labor market. *World Development, 27*(6), 1011–1029. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(99)00034-0
[14] Shi, X., Huangfu, B., Jin, S., & Gao, X. (2024). Property rights, labor reallocation, and gender inequality in rural China. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 220*, 325–342. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2024.02.020
[15] Wang, W., & Zhang, S. (2022). The impact of Internet use on rural women's off-farm work participation: Empirical evidence from China. *Sustainability, 14*(24), 16972. https://doi.org/10.3390/su142416972