

Implementation Challenges in Vocational Education for Rural Women in China: Institutional Design and Structural Constraints

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Abstract

Vocational education is widely regarded as an important tool for China's poverty alleviation efforts and rural revitalization. Relevant policies emphasize employment orientation and gender equality, but their actual effectiveness varies notably in practice. This paper examines issues in the design and implementation of vocational education policies for rural women and explores the reasons behind the gap between policy objectives and real-world outcomes. This study adopts a qualitative policy analysis approach. It constructs an analytical framework involving policy design, implementation processes, and outcome performance. By examining policy documents at both national and local levels and integrating existing research with relevant reports, the study analyzes institutional arrangements and implementation mechanisms. It focuses on structural factors, including gender norms, care responsibilities, curriculum design, and access to information. Findings show that while relevant policies have made some progress in resource allocation and training coverage, their underlying logic often maintains traditional gender divisions of labor. They pay insufficient attention to practical obstacles, such as caregiving burdens. At the implementation level, fixed training models, quantity-driven mobilization mechanisms, and unequal access to information limit rural women's participation depth and agency. This hinders the stable conversion of training outcomes into employment and upward mobility. This paper argues that vocational education cannot truly promote the development of rural women until policy design systematically responds to structural gender constraints.

Keywords

Vocational education; Rural women; Policy implementation; Gender inequality; Structural constraints

1. Introduction

China has successfully implemented a large-scale poverty alleviation strategy and eradicated rural poverty for 98.99 million people by 2020 (State Council Information Office, 2021). As an important component of the poor population, rural women have also received widespread attention. However, imbalances in women's development across urban and rural areas, regions, and groups remain prominent. According to a 2014 survey by the All-China Women's Federation of contiguous poverty-stricken areas, only 43.2% of rural poor women had received primary education, over 60% needed to care for children (61.5%), and nearly a quarter needed to care for sick or disabled family members (24.9%) (All-China Women's Federation, 2014, as cited in Sun & Sun, 2022). The heavy burden of household chores and caregiving responsibilities severely limited their opportunities to participate in education and training or pursue career development.

Under the national poverty alleviation and rural revitalization strategies, vocational education, due to its employment-oriented and flexible structure, is seen as a key pathway for rural women to escape poverty and improve mobility. Women's equal access to all types of vocational education continues to be consolidated. In 2023, women made up 42.2% of

secondary and 47.4% of higher vocational education enrollments, totaling 7.331 and 8.247 million students (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025). Although the policy was well-intentioned, problems such as care burdens, limited access, and gendered training reflect a gap between policy design and real-world implementation.

This study focuses on three key questions: What are the objectives and assumptions behind vocational education policies for rural women? What problems have emerged during implementation, and what institutional causes underlie them? How can existing policies be optimized to address these issues?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Current Status of Vocational Education Research

Chinese research has widely affirmed the role of vocational education in rural poverty reduction. Zhu (2019), using CGSS data, showed that vocational education significantly increased rural incomes. Wang et al. (2017) also emphasized its importance for rural girls. Liu (2017) found that 60% of girls believed their vocational skills had improved after receiving the training, and nearly 80% believed that the training had helped them in finding employment.

International studies offer a more critical lens. Hartl (2009) indicated that although policies support women's participation, training often fails to match women's needs and job market realities. The UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (2020) highlights that even as STEM subjects and skills are becoming more essential in today's world, gender disparities are prevalent in these fields. Ebrahimi et al. (2022) found that women faced a lot of challenges within the education system, and VET has provided a way for women to empower themselves. Chakravarty et al. (2019) showed women face difficulties entering the non-farm sector or finding paid employment, and found localized training boosted women's employment, even under cultural constraints.

While Chinese research emphasizes policy results, international literature highlights structural gender barriers. However, both lack sufficient analysis of how policies respond to women's needs during implementation. This study seeks to address that gap by focusing on mid-level mechanisms and structural constraints in practice.

2.2 Analytical Framework

This study uses a practical policy analysis framework with three levels: policy design, implementation, and outcomes. At the design stage, it looks at goals, tools, and the gender logic behind the policies. The implementation part focuses on real-world barriers, including family duties, course content, and limited access to information. Finally, the outcome layer examines whether the policies have helped rural women improve employment. By using this structure, the study shows how gender ideas are included in the policy, what limits its impact in practice, and why results sometimes fall short. These findings offer ideas for improving the system. In this study, "structural constraints" refer to both formal institutional arrangements (e.g., policy tools, access rules) and informal mechanisms (e.g., gender norms, social expectations) that shape rural women's participation and outcomes in vocational education.

3. Analysis & Discussion

The evolution of vocational education in China has reflected national development needs. In the 1950s-1970s, it focused on supplying labor for industrial growth, with minimal female participation. During the 1980s-1990s, it became marginalized, and rural women were often funneled into vocational education with limited choices. The 2022 Vocational Education Law marked a shift by granting it equal legal status with general education.

3.1 Institutional Analysis: The Tension Between Goal Design and Gender Logic

This section reviews key vocational education policies for rural women and examines their design logic, including objectives, tools, and assumptions.

3.2 Policy Overview

Since 2000, China has launched vocational education policies to support the employment of poor rural women. These policies aim to enhance the employability of rural youth through vocational skills training and targeted subsidies. As part of China's Women's Action for Rural Revitalization, the All-China Women's Federation has launched training programs aimed at enhancing e-commerce, handicraft, and domestic service skills among rural women. These initiatives are designed to promote local job creation and entrepreneurship within women's own communities (Sun & Sun, 2022). Furthermore, the latest Outline of Women's Development in China (2021-2030) also emphasizes employment capacity and economic independence for rural women (State Council of the PRC, 2021).

3.3 Policy Orientation and Institutional Design

At the national level, China's vocational education aims to support economic growth, help people find jobs, and reduce inequality. The *National Plan for Vocational Education Reform* (2019) says that vocational training should serve development and promote employment, especially for rural and poor groups (State Council of the PRC, 2019). The *Action Plan for Improving Vocational Education Quality (2020-2023)* adds that more support should be given to students from low-income families (Ministry of Education et al., 2020).

From a gender point of view, the Outline of Women's Development in China (2021-2030) clearly states that we should support rural and low-income women through industry projects, capacity building, and local employment support, to increase their income (State Council of the PRC, 2021). Some local governments have followed these goals. For example, many regions have prioritized rural female students as a vulnerable group. Local policies in provinces such as Guizhou, Guangxi, and Sichuan explicitly state preferential support for women from poor households. In Qijiang District, local implementation of the Yulu Plan in 2025 provided a subsidy of 1,500 yuan per disbursement to eligible students from registered low-income households (Qijiang District People's Government, 2025). Rural women are also the beneficiary group. Some local programs adopted flexible schedules and childcare support, but deep-rooted gender norms still limit women's participation.

3.4 The Implicit Logic and Limitations of Policy Design

Despite supportive intentions, many programs reinforce stereotypes by focusing on domestic, childcare, and handicraft skills. This reinforces the belief that women should stay within caregiving or service roles. While the policy promotes women's participation in vocational education, its content tends to preserve the existing gendered division of labor rather than challenge it. Another issue lies in the weak support for caregiving. Many women in training still carry the burden of family care. Some programs offer childcare, but these are scattered and small in scale. There is no strong nationwide system to help women manage both study and caregiving duties. In summary, while the policy allocates resources with clear goals, it also carries deep-rooted assumptions and overlooks many real-life barriers. These gaps in design often lead to problems in practice and make it harder for the policy to empower women truly.

4. Analysis of Implementation Dilemmas and Structural Constraints

4.1 The Dual Oppression of Family Responsibilities and Cultural Norms

Policies offer clear support and vision for rural women's vocational education, but their implementation faces many structural obstacles that reduce their actual effectiveness. The primary educational barrier for rural women stems from deeply ingrained cultural norms and daily realities about gender roles. Girls from the poorest households, those living in rural areas, and girls with disabilities are consistently left furthest behind (UN Women, 2022). This notion strongly influences family decisions, especially after junior high graduation. Although gender parity in enrollment rates has generally been achieved during compulsory education, economic pressures and traditional beliefs still force many rural girls to leave school at that stage. Consequently, the rate of junior high school girls progressing to high school remains low in certain regions.

In addition to cultural expectations, women's heavy family care responsibilities form another major practical obstacle. Rural women generally bear heavy family care obligations, which constitute one of the major practical obstacles to their participation in continued education and employment. This factor is often underestimated or even ignored in policy implementation. Many vocational training programs require participants to be fully engaged for several weeks to months, which is virtually impossible for women who need to care for young children or the elderly. Even if women obtain training opportunities and skill certifications, family responsibilities may still block their ability to convert training into employment. Currently, only a few local women's federations are piloting support mechanisms such as childcare, transportation subsidies, and flexible courses. However, overall, such supporting arrangements still lack institutional and large-scale guarantees, resulting in training programs losing their structural appeal to the target population. Policies view this as an individual or family issue and fail to institutionalize care support systems, reflecting design-level limitations, and creating a critical implementation gap. UN Women & ILO (2023) report that women's heavy and unequal unpaid care responsibilities are a major barrier to their labor force participation and educational attainment.

4.2 Gender Stereotypes in Professional Settings and Course Differentiation

Vocational education policies are often implemented in the form of specific training programs for women, but these training programs are highly concentrated in traditional female fields, leading to the continuation of gender segregation in courses. Take Guizhou's "San Nv" program, which trains "chijia women", "jiazheng women", and "jinxiu women" (China Liangdu Weekly, 2020), as an example. The training targets are divided into housewives, domestic workers, and embroiderers, and training is conducted in areas such as domestic services, handicraft skills, and rural financial management. Although training helps some women find jobs, it often reinforces labor market segregation and limits women's career goals. These problems reflect biases from policy design that persist in implementation.

4.3 The Alienation of Organizational Mobilization and Participation Models

Rural vocational training in China commonly involves mobilizing local grassroots institutions, such as the Women's Federation branches, village committees, and local social security or human resources departments, to promote and deliver training opportunities. However, in some areas, organizational mobilization mechanisms have also exhibited tendencies toward distortion. Many localities have adopted a task-based quota system, requiring rural officials to mobilize women to participate in training programs according to a set proportion, and even listing ensuring that every household has at least one member participate in training as a performance evaluation target. While this top-down mobilization did indeed increase female

participation rates in the early stages, it also led to a problem: grassroots implementation became focused on quantity over quality, with more attention paid to the number of people who signed up than to the effectiveness of the training. As a result, some participants lack motivation, go through the motions, or even drop out midway, creating a clear mismatch between policy objectives and individual needs. Such mechanical mobilization, lacking a deep understanding of women's real needs and challenges, easily devolves into technical operations, thereby reinforcing women's passive role in training and transforming policies intended to support them into new disciplinary mechanisms. This dynamic reflects a form of disciplinary power, in which administrative routines produce conformity through visibility, ranking, and target-setting, rather than enabling genuine agency. In short, the organizational design at the implementation level prioritizes targets over substance, leading to formal inclusion without real agency. This reflects a constraint in the policy's implementation process.

4. 4 Information Accessibility and Social Capital Disadvantages

Rural women also face structural disadvantages in accessing training information and opportunities. Although local governments and social organizations have made efforts to expand training coverage, participation pathways remain limited. Many rural women rely on informal sources, such as family members or local leaders, to obtain information about training opportunities, due to the limited availability of formal communication channels. Moreover, the burden of family care makes it harder for them to devote time and energy to searching for and using training information. This suggests that there are obvious gaps in the publicity and dissemination mechanisms of the policy, and that the information gap has prevented many poor women who are most in need of training from participating. The underlying reasons lie in the limited social interaction and social capital of rural women, which results in fewer channels for them to obtain policy information. This disparity in access to information has led to uneven distribution of the resources provided by the system among women, reinforcing the tendency for empowerment to be class-based.

4.5 The Dual Barriers of Educational Promotion Structures and Market Discrimination

Even if rural women successfully enter vocational education, and although the new Vocational Education Law (2022) emphasizes the equal status of vocational and general education, they still face dual barriers, limited educational advancement pathways and labor market biases. On the one hand, rural women have limited access to high-quality programs. This is attributed to factors such as insufficient foundational academic proficiency, limited family support, and the absence of clear career development pathways. On the other hand, employers still hold biases against the vocational school background label, particularly toward women, because hiring decisions may be shaped by expectations related to marriage and childbearing. This gendered path discrimination suppresses women's potential to improve their socioeconomic status through education.

The current outcomes of vocational education for rural women reveal both implementation gaps and the absence of a gender-sensitive support system. Performance evaluations overemphasize short-term targets while neglecting women's long-term employment and advancement needs. Meanwhile, the lack of gender-disaggregated tracking and follow-up mechanisms weakens sustained empowerment. Outcome disparities further reflect structural inequalities in access to information, social capital, and geography. To enable real empowerment, future policies must embed structural and equity-oriented support mechanisms into their design.

5. Conclusion & Recommendations

This study applies a “design-implementation-outcome” framework to examine vocational education policies for rural women. At the design level, although the policies allocate resources, they often *implicitly* reinforce gender stereotypes and overlook care-related support. During implementation, gendered responsibility structures, rigid curricula, mobilization models, and information gaps jointly form structural barriers. In the outcome phase, labor market discrimination and limited advancement pathways hinder the conversion of training into skill capital. Therefore, current policies have failed to address structural gender barriers and, in some cases, have reinforced women’s marginalization. Genuine empowerment requires careful rethinking of these institutional arrangements.

First, to promote gender balance in vocational education, admissions and training should follow clear guidelines. Policies can set minimum targets for women’s participation in high-demand and high-paying fields, such as information technology, advanced manufacturing, and engineering. Institutions that actively recruit or train women in these areas can receive additional funding or public recognition. Female students who choose non-traditional fields may also be supported through scholarships, internships, or job connections. At the same time, new majors and course modules should be developed based on regional industry needs. These programs should be suitable and offer good job prospects, such as in agricultural technology, e-commerce, or renewable energy. Teaching materials should also be revised to avoid gender bias and present male and female roles in a balanced way.

Second, to help more women join training programs, childcare support should be included in major national and provincial projects. Affordable or free childcare centers can be set up at training sites such as vocational schools. Local communities can also help by offering childcare during class hours. These initiatives may be supported through public-private partnerships or community-based funding schemes. Flexible training models are equally important. Many women prefer weekend or evening classes, short modules, or online learning. And these models should be promoted and linked to a credit system. At the same time, the government can reduce women’s costs by offering living allowances or travel subsidies, especially for those in full-time, longer training programs.

Third, digital tools should be used to make training programs easier to access. A public online account can be created by local women’s federations or human resources departments. This account should share news about training, certificates, and jobs. It can also answer questions online. Local peer groups, both online and offline, can support rural women emotionally and facilitate knowledge exchange.

A quality evaluation system should be set up to improve the effectiveness of training. It should look at employment rates, job quality, and how satisfied trainees are. Results can be used to decide how funding is given to schools and programs. For better outcomes, full support should be offered from training to work. This includes job advice, internship help, and support for starting small businesses. Courses should also match what companies need. Furthermore, schools and firms can work together to design programs, with jobs offered after graduation. A database of skilled rural women can help match them to employers. At the same time, the government must fight job market bias. It should stop unfair questions about marriage or childbirth during hiring, and the rules should be clear, with ways to report and punish companies that break them.

Policy language should reflect women’s active roles, showing their choices and voices rather than portraying them as passive recipients. Women should participate in shaping programs and giving feedback. Meanwhile, gender equality should be promoted through public campaigns and official training, encouraging men to share domestic responsibilities and challenging outdated gender norms.

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