

Research on the Intervention of Social Organizations in the Governance of “Service Poverty” for Rural Empty-nest Elderly: A Case Study of County S in Jiangxi Province

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Abstract. There are multiple dimensions of deficiencies in elderly care services for rural empty-nest elderly in China, necessitating the intervention of social organizations. Social organizations possess various advantages in participating in rural elderly care services, reflecting their importance and necessity in the governance of “service poverty” from the perspectives of governance concepts, governance subjects, and governance mechanisms. Combining the theory of collaborative governance and based on service cases of a social work agency in County S, Jiangxi Province, this study explores the collaborative mechanisms and governance effectiveness of the government, social organizations, villages, and social forces in the governance of “service poverty” for empty-nest elderly. It summarizes shortcomings, proposes countermeasures, and improves the multi-subject collaborative governance model for rural empty-nest elderly care services, which consists of government leadership, social organizations as operating entities, villages, volunteers, and other forces, aiming to promote the experience of the case to other underdeveloped areas.

Keywords: social organizations, rural empty-nest elderly, service poverty, multiple subjects, collaborative governance

1. Introduction

The “Fourth National Survey on the Living Conditions of Elderly People in Urban and Rural China” revealed that in 2020, the number of empty-nest and solitary elderly in China reached 118 million, with rural empty-nest elderly accounting for the vast majority. Rural empty-nest elderly face various challenges in terms of economics, mental health, daily care, and social support. Their elderly care has always been a difficult issue in China’s elderly care sector. However, for a long time, the construction of China’s elderly care service system has been biased towards urban areas, neglecting rural areas. Except for a few developed regions where urban and rural integration has been achieved, rural elderly care public services are severely inadequate. Against the backdrop of an increasingly severe aging population, the contradiction between supply and demand for elderly care among rural empty-nest elderly in China has become more prominent, with many deficiencies and challenges in their elderly care services.

1.1. The Highlighted Issue of “Service Poverty” Among Rural Empty-nest Elderly

Different from economic poverty, “service poverty” mainly refers to the lack of services in aspects such as daily care, healthcare, psychological needs, education, and cultural services [1]. Li Rui (2022) pointed out that “the elderly in rural areas have limited access to public elderly care services, mainly providing simple services such as errands, dining, and daily care, while the development of ‘soft’ services such as medical care, health monitoring, nursing rehabilitation, and social participation lags behind, especially in terms of spiritual comfort and care [2].”

Currently, due to the development of China’s economy and effective poverty alleviation practices, most empty-nest elderly do not need to worry too much about material life security, basically alleviating the situation where their basic survival needs cannot be met economically. However, rural empty-nest and solitary elderly often live alone or as a couple, facing the situation where there is no one to provide daily care, and they commonly experience loneliness and helplessness, which exacerbates the issue of “emptiness” [3]. (Kang & Luo, 2022) “Service poverty” triggers phenomena such as “empty-nest syndrome,” “lonely death,” and

“suicide,” easily becoming a serious social problem and a stubborn obstacle to achieving high-quality “care for the elderly.”

1.2. Urgent Need for Research on the Involvement of Social Organizations in Governing “Service Poverty”

Western scholars have long been concerned with the significant role of social organizations in providing elderly care services for rural empty-nest elderly. They have conducted extensive and in-depth research on this topic both theoretically and practically. In 1981, Lester M. Salamon proposed the “third-party government” governance model, which pointed out that government and non-profit organizations can complement each other in welfare provision [4]. Evens (1996), based on the perspective of welfare pluralism, emphasized the special role of grassroots organizations in social welfare [5].

In the domestic academic community, research on the long-term mechanism of providing rural elderly care services from a pluralistic perspective is relatively abundant. In the study of constructing a pluralistic subject system for providing rural elderly care services, many scholars have pointed out that social organizations are the key forces in providing rural elderly care services.

From the perspective of the government, most scholars believe that the model of social organizations leading elderly care services can alleviate government pressure, promote the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity, and help establish a basic public service system led by the government, coordinated by society, involving public participation, and sustainable. (Shuang, 2020[6]; Zhang, 2017[7]) From the perspective of rural empty-nest elderly, the vast majority of scholars believe that social organizations, with their professionalism and public welfare nature, can better meet the diverse elderly care needs of empty-nest elderly. (Fu, 2022[8]; Wang, 2022[9]; Shuang, 2023[10]; Yang & Lv, 2020[11])

Although the above-mentioned research involves the involvement of social organizations in addressing the issue of rural empty-nest elderly care, there is little mention of the term “service poverty.” Moreover, most studies still focus on the aspect of social organizations’ involvement in material assistance, while other types of service provision are mentioned but not in detail or depth. In 2017, Wang Zuobao discussed the concept and implications of “service poverty” concerning minors and its governance issues. Subsequently, Fan Zhuosi and Yang Shengyong (2020) based on this, pioneered the research on the issue of “service poverty” among empty-nest elderly and its governance, advocating for the involvement of social work in the governance process [12].

Overall, research on the governance of “service poverty” among rural empty-nest elderly and the involvement of social organizations in China’s academic community is relatively insufficient. Therefore, based on relevant research and qualitative interview data from the Director of the Finance Bureau of S County, the head of Y organization, 15 empty-nest elderly from M village, 2 village cadres, and 1 village doctor, this paper analyzes and explores the space, paths, advantages, and shortcomings of social organizations’ involvement in governing “service poverty” among rural empty-nest elderly.

2. Challenges and Analysis of the Causes of “Service Poverty” Governance

2.1. Multi-dimensional “Service Poverty” Issues Exist Among Rural Empty-nest Elderly

Poverty implies a lack of material and spiritual resources and signifies a state of relative deprivation and social exclusion. “Service poverty” refers to the scarcity and absence of material assistance, caregiving systems, and caring services. The issue of “service poverty” among rural empty-nest elderly manifests in various dimensions such as daily care and emotional comfort.

Service Poverty in Daily Care: Rural empty-nest elderly primarily rely on self-care methods or mutual assistance with their spouses for daily living. While there are some social care services available in rural areas, they primarily target widowed, solitary, orphaned, disabled individuals, making it difficult for empty-nest elderly with children to access social services. Moreover, neighbors, fellow villagers, or nearby relatives can only provide marginal care, while the role of village committees is minimal and often negligible.

Service Poverty in Healthcare: Rural empty-nest elderly, especially those of advanced age, are generally in poor health. As they age and become increasingly aware of health care, their demand for medical services also rises. Medical care services include regular physical examinations, home doctors, rehabilitation nursing, health education, and counseling. However, the actual medical resources within villages are extremely limited, and transportation to county towns is not always convenient. Consequently, many of the healthcare needs of rural empty-nest elderly remain unmet, with a considerable number of them only seeking medical attention when severely ill or suffering from serious ailments.

Service Poverty in Emotional Comfort: The majority of the children of rural empty-nest elderly work in cities or elsewhere, visiting home only during holidays or important occasions. For many elderly individuals, the greatest emotional comfort comes from occasional phone calls with their children. However, most rural empty-nest elderly are unfamiliar with electronic devices, and due to their children’s busy schedules, these phone calls are often brief. Some elderly individuals with hearing impairments are unable to communicate with their children via phone and can only pass the time by chatting with neighbors. Overall, the lives of rural empty-nest elderly are characterized by monotony and loneliness, leading to feelings of melancholy and isolation.

Language and Information “Service Poverty”: Rural empty-nest elderly often struggle with communication and have limited access to information, yet most of them have a strong demand for language and information activities. In terms of language needs, elderly individuals tend to express themselves, participate in collective activities, seek recognition from others, and understand the external environment. Regarding information content, they require information about relatives, especially their children, as well as national policies, social welfare, particularly healthcare policies. Wang Ling and Tan Yuxin (2022) pointed out that the

construction of language services for rural empty-nest elderly holds significant practical significance, and services can include chatting, emotional comfort, information consultation, language technology, and language education [13]. These language services help meet the diverse and multi-faceted spiritual and cultural needs of empty-nest elderly and should become an essential part of the “aging-friendly” public services in rural areas.

Cultural and Entertainment “Service Poverty”: The lonely and isolated psychological state of rural empty-nest elderly leads to a considerable demand for cultural and entertainment services. However, in reality, their cultural and recreational activities are few and far between, with watching television, playing cards (mahjong), and chess being the most common. Watching television is the primary form of entertainment for almost all empty-nest elderly individuals in M village.

Popularization of Intelligent Technology and “Service Poverty”: Despite the rapid development and widespread use of modern intelligent technology and the internet, many elderly people, especially rural empty-nest elderly, are unfamiliar with smartphones, and some cannot even operate basic feature phones designed for the elderly. In surveys, most elderly individuals use their phones only for answering calls, while a significant portion expressed a willingness to learn how to use smartphones. The most common reason cited for this desire is the hope to make phone calls independently and even engage in remote video calls with their children.

2.2. Analysis of the Causes of “Service Poverty” Among Rural Empty-nest Elderly

The issue of “service poverty” among rural empty-nest elderly has persisted for a long time and continues to exist due to various factors.

At the Government and Social Level: Insufficient provision of public services is a significant contributing factor. China’s dual urban-rural system has long skewed elderly care resources towards urban areas, leaving rural areas underserved in terms of public goods and services. Village committees often have limited funds, primarily ensuring the basic needs of the most impoverished individuals, lacking manpower and material support for public service provision. The relative scarcity of donations and service provision from compassionate individuals in society means more opportunities are provided to left-behind children. Consequently, rural empty-nest elderly often do not receive the social welfare they are entitled to, leading to “service poverty.”

At the Family Level: Low economic status is another factor. The income of rural empty-nest elderly mainly comes from support from their children, basic pensions, and personal income. Currently, the level of pensions for rural empty-nest elderly remains relatively low, and the income of their children is often insufficient to support a higher standard of elderly care. Regardless of age, most rural empty-nest elderly engage in various levels of agricultural labor to achieve self-sufficiency and lead a simple life.

At the Individual Level: Insufficient education and outdated cultural perspectives also contribute to “service poverty.” The educational level and cultural views of elderly individuals to some extent influence their experience of “service poverty.” Research suggests that elderly individuals with higher education levels are less likely to fall into multidimensional poverty, while the opposite holds true [14]. (Ma et al., 2016) Presently, a significant portion of rural empty-nest elderly have primary school education or lower, with few having completed junior high school or above. These individuals often adhere to traditional views such as the belief in “raising children to support oneself in old age,” leading to a lack of understanding of social services and resistance to intervention in their established way of life.

3. The Possibility of Social Organizations’ Involvement in Governing Service Poverty

3.1. Governance Concept: Urgent Need to Update Traditional Service Concepts

Traditional service concepts often prioritize medical care over elderly care and prioritize emergency response over regular assistance. This inertia in Chinese cultural concepts often leads children in rural families to neglect their parents’ psychological or emotional needs. Social attitudes also tend to prioritize medical care over elderly care, with children often “forced” to take care of and support their parents only when they are seriously ill or disabled. Local government elderly care policies mostly follow a “deficiency-based” approach, where attention and assistance are provided only when the elderly encounter significant difficulties. Village committees often overlook the daily care and communication needs of the elderly, only engaging in activities during special occasions such as traditional festivals. Social organizations tend to focus more on offering condolences to the needy or extremely impoverished elderly individuals, neglecting to provide regular services to other empty-nest elderly. Traditional concepts of governing “service poverty” urgently need policy reinforcement to enhance execution and to inject new ideas for governance.

3.2. Governance Entities: Social Organizations Possess Multiple Advantages

In the provision of elderly care services for rural empty-nest elderly, there are multiple entities such as families, governments, village committees, social work agencies, foundations, and mutual aid groups. However, families, governments, and rural grassroots autonomous organizations often face varying degrees of incapacity and absence [15]. (Shuang, 2020) In this context, social organizations, acting as the “vitality of society,” possess advantages such as professionalism, flexibility, precision, ample information, and volunteer strength. They can collaborate with the government to provide elderly care services for rural empty-nest elderly, thereby addressing the deficiencies in elderly care services and alleviating “service poverty” among rural empty-nest

elderly. Social organizations, characterized by independence, non-profitability, and less administrative intervention, exhibit strong autonomy and can adopt more flexible and diverse service contents and forms to better meet the diversified elderly care needs of empty-nest elderly. With their professionalism, they can actively respond to the spiritual needs of rural empty-nest elderly, playing a crucial role in the field of elderly care services. For instance, professional social work organizations can intervene in the elderly care needs of rural empty-nest elderly using scientifically effective methods such as individual cases, groups, and community interventions, employing professional knowledge and intervention methods to assist empty-nest elderly in need.

3.3. Governance Mechanism: Promoting Multi-Entity Collaborative Participation

The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China stated the importance of “guiding and supporting willing and capable enterprises, social organizations, and individuals to actively participate in philanthropy and charity.” In recent years, the participation of social organizations in grassroots governance, social construction, and public services has gradually increased, contributing significantly to China’s socialist modernization. By introducing social organizations to participate in rural elderly care services, the government, with a mindset of coordination and cooperation, connects local governments, social organizations, rural autonomous organizations, and grassroots organizations to realize the complementary advantages and collaborative provision of multiple entities. This approach aims to better tap into rural elderly care resources and create a multi-entity collaborative system for rural elderly care services. In a harmonious cultural atmosphere, the government, social forces, and rural local forces understand each other, unite, and cooperate to integrate interests and services, establish a cooperative partnership model for multi-entity collaborative provision of rural elderly care services, jointly address the difficulties in governing “service poverty,” and promote the long-term development of rural social elderly care.

4. Social Organization Intervention in Governance of Service Poverty: A Case Study

4.1. Case Description

S County, Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province, located in the mountainous area of southern Jiangxi, was a former national-level poverty-stricken county officially lifted out of poverty in 2019. According to the data from the Seventh National Population Census, the total resident population of S County is 283,182, with 147,228 living in rural areas, accounting for 51.99% of the total population. The population aged 60 and above accounts for 16.34% of the total population, while those aged 65 and above account for 11.49%. Due to the backward local economic level, young people generally migrate out for work. Consequently, rural empty-nest and hollowing phenomena are severe in S County, with a large number of rural empty-nest elderly facing low economic status and feelings of loneliness and helplessness, as well as diverse elderly care service needs.

Y Social Work Organization (referred to as Y Institution), established in March 2019, is the first professional social work institution in the entire county. Y Institution aims to “help others help themselves” and strives for “professionalism, standardization, efficiency, and transparency,” intending to provide assistance to vulnerable groups and empower everyone with the ability to grow. With the support and guidance of the government, Y Institution operates civil affairs service stations, maintains close ties with grassroots autonomous organizations, and integrates into the rural service network. It primarily provides three major service projects for rural empty-nest elderly, including the government’s purchased service project “Five Social Collaborations, Warm Sunset” respecting the elderly project, foundation project “Hundred Virtues to Support the Elderly Plan,” and jointly initiated project “Filial Piety and Laughter” respecting the elderly project with other public welfare organizations. These projects and activities for rural empty-nest elderly provide personalized companionship, conversation, information transmission, spiritual comfort, and hygiene cleaning, meeting the vast majority of the needs of empty-nest elderly in rural areas.

Y Institution currently has 38 professional certified social workers and over 400 registered volunteers, connecting volunteer associations, elderly associations, and other social organizations, adopting a team structure of “professional social workers + volunteers” for service activities. In response to the loneliness experienced by rural empty-nest elderly, Y Institution focuses on spiritual comfort activities and has explored the establishment of a “Shared Children” volunteer service team in practice. It utilizes both “fixed” and “order-based” home visit services, combining routine service projects with personalized service needs of the elderly. Presently, as the first professional social work institution in S County, Y Institution is actively promoting the development of voluntary public welfare undertakings in S County, embodying a benchmark of professionalism and public welfare among the county’s public welfare organizations.

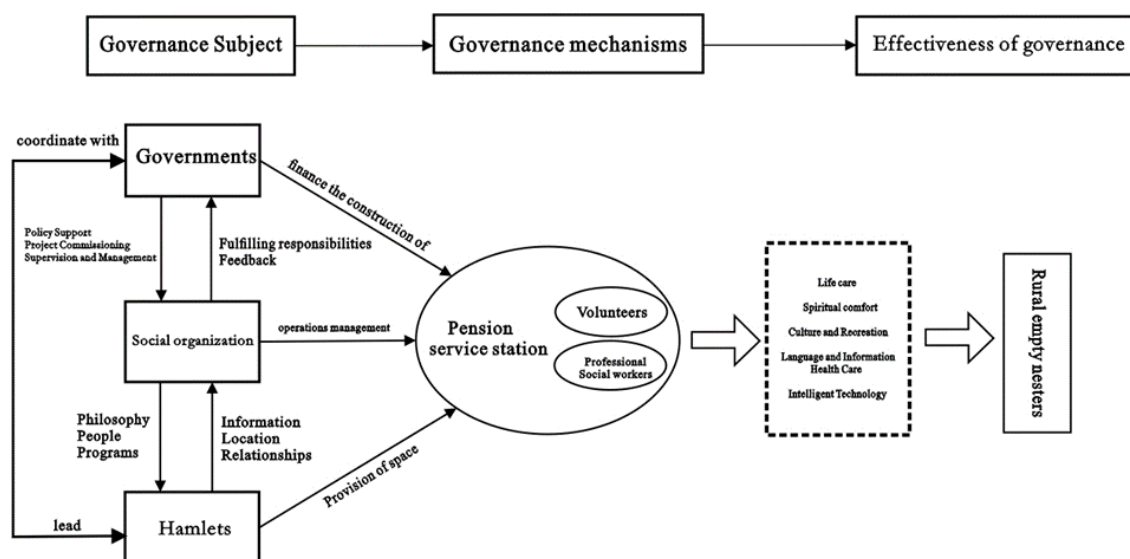


Figure 1. Multi-Subject Collaborative Participation in the Governance of “Service Poverty” Among Rural Empty-Nest Elderly

4.2. Case Analysis

Taking Y Social Work Institution in S County, Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province, as the research object, this paper adopts the theory of collaborative governance to analyze the specific practices of Y Institution in providing elderly care services for empty-nest elderly. Firstly, the theory of collaborative governance suggests that complex social problems cannot be controlled by a single subject unilaterally but require a multilateral governance model that connects different interest subjects to achieve effective management. The essence of the discussion in this paper is essentially the issue of rural public service supply, where the leading role of the government plays a crucial role, while also emphasizing the critical role of social organizations in the collaborative governance of “service poverty” among rural empty-nest elderly. Based on the theory of collaborative governance, the analysis framework of this case is established. In the governance of “service poverty” among rural empty-nest elderly, each subject should have clear division of responsibilities and work together. In this case, the two important subjects involved in social organizations participating in rural elderly care services are the government and villages. The government determines whether social organizations are eligible to enter villages and affects their ability to access information and resources. Villages, to a certain extent, influence whether social organizations can intervene in the rural elderly care network. In addition, enterprises, other volunteer organizations, and even individual citizens possess abundant service resources and capabilities. Therefore, harnessing the participation of social forces is of great significance for the governance of “service poverty.”

4.3. Governance Entities: Government, Social Organizations, Villages, and Social Forces

4.3.1. Government Leadership: Focusing on Rural Public Services, Supporting the Development of Social Organizations

In this case, the government acts as the guide for social organizations participating in elderly care services, a supporter of their establishment and development, and also the guarantor of the long-term operation of projects for empty-nest elderly individuals. The government’s guidance is mainly reflected in policy arrangements, project construction, and performance supervision. Since 2019, in response to the increasingly severe aging situation, S County has implemented the “Three-Year Action Plan for the Construction and Development of Elderly Care Service Systems (2019-2021),” emphasizing government support for the development of elderly care social organizations and the establishment of a cooperation mechanism between the government and elderly care social organizations. At the same time, it began to establish comprehensive civil affairs service sites, including civil affairs service centers and township civil affairs service stations, continuously cultivating and employing professional social work personnel. Currently, there is one civil affairs service center, 12 township (urban community) civil affairs service stations, and 156 village (residential) civil affairs service points in the county, achieving full coverage of civil affairs services in the county, and the operation system of “civil affairs service center + township service stations + village (residential) service points” has been fully established.

Relying on civil affairs service sites, S County has established standardized service sites under unified management, focusing on special groups such as the elderly, children, and the needy. Based on demand identification and fund assessment, the county has expanded service projects. In practice, S County has gradually established a government-purchasing social work service mechanism with multi-departmental participation and multi-level investment, and constructed a diversified funding guarantee mechanism including “government finance + social assistance funds + welfare lottery public welfare funds + charitable funds + social funds.”

Regarding government supervision, S County has issued the “Service Content and Assessment Measures for Township Social Work Stations,” which quantifies the daily work of service stations from nine aspects and 31 indicators, and allocates purchasing service funds based on the assessment scores. The government stipulates the frequency of monthly home visits, adopts telephone inquiries, conducts annual assessment evaluations of service quality, and supervises service implementation to ensure the effectiveness of social organization services.

4.3.2. Social Organization Entities: Precisely Meeting Needs, Embedding Service Depth

As the leading actors in collaborative governance, social organizations not only directly provide elderly care services but also serve as connectors of elderly care resources, assuming the crucial responsibility of linking various entities. The professionalism, flexibility, and public welfare nature of social organizations give them unique advantages in governing the “service poverty” of empty-nest elderly individuals. On one hand, the precise methods of social workers correspond accurately to the individualized needs of the elderly, often employing case work methods for personalized care services. On the other hand, social organizations maintain considerable autonomy in coordinating with other entities, allowing them to flexibly arrange service modes and projects according to actual conditions. Additionally, the voluntary nature of social organizations aligns with mainstream guidance and values, reducing cooperation barriers among different entities and facilitating the connection of human and material resources.

4.3.3. Villages and Other Social Groups: Internal and External Linkages, Collaborative Services

Apart from the government and primary social organizations, all non-family internal entities that can provide services for rural empty-nest elderly individuals, as practiced in S County, can be categorized as villages and the vast voluntary forces.

Chinese rural society remains a hierarchical “acquaintance society,” where besides neighbors and other relatives, village committees play a significant role in governing the “service poverty” of empty-nest elderly individuals in rural areas. On one hand, village committees assist township governments in grassroots affairs management and the implementation of public services; on the other hand, their autonomy in self-governance empowers them to play a critical role in the rural home-based elderly care service system.

Other social groups such as charitable organizations, caring enterprises, volunteer organizations, elderly associations, and women’s associations also possess rich human resources and can collaborate with social work institutions to provide elderly care services. In S County, the main participants in elderly care activities are students, women, and some other individuals enthusiastic about public welfare. With the development of public welfare education and the requirements of university student social practice, students’ enthusiasm for participating in volunteer services has increased significantly. University students, with relatively high cognitive levels and enthusiastic about volunteer services, are patient, attentive, understanding, and effective in responding to the “emptiness” issue faced by empty-nest elderly individuals.

4.4. Governance Mechanism: A Multilateral Collaborative Governance System with Social Organizations as the Main Body

When the goals of various entities are coupled, values are aligned, and interests are consistent, a collaborative governance system is formed. In the governance process of poverty alleviation services in S County, firstly, the Y organization maintains close cooperation with the government, communicates promptly, and adjusts action methods and approaches. In this process, social organizations, with the support and guidance of the government, fully connect various entities, utilize their flexibility, autonomy, and public welfare nature, and extensively mobilize social forces to participate. The government provides funds and service projects, playing a role in guiding and supervising; meanwhile, social organizations provide professional social workers and recruit volunteers from society, establishing specialized volunteer teams, attracting attention from caring businesses and individuals, and connecting resources to serve rural empty-nest elderly individuals.

Secondly, the Y social work organization maintains close contact with the village committees where services are located. The villages cooperate by providing idle resources and collaborating with social organizations to build elderly care service stations, bridging the gap between social organizations and the elderly. The Y organization provides professional guidance and material support, while the villages provide relevant information about the elderly’s lives and health. Through publicity, mobilization, and the establishment of incentive mechanisms, other villagers and volunteers are encouraged to actively participate in serving empty-nest elderly individuals.

Elderly care service stations have become platforms for various entities to exchange information, organize activities, and collaborate. Leveraging these stations, various service brands have been established, such as the “Hundred Goodness Elderly Support Plan,” “Sincere Assistance” project, and “Five-Social Collaboration, Warm Sunset” project, among others. In addition, in response to the special psychological needs of rural empty-nest and solitary elderly individuals, the Y organization has established a dedicated “shared volunteer” team. Based on previous household surveys and volunteer service practices, a list of elderly individuals in need of “spiritual comfort” is compiled. The organization adopts a “1+2+N” service mechanism, with one social worker and two volunteers serving multiple empty-nest and solitary elderly individuals in the form of small groups. These “shared volunteers,” also known as “shared children,” provide services such as purchasing daily necessities, providing life care, engaging

in home visits and conversations, offering emotional support, and providing companionship, akin to the care provided by children to their parents.

“Not children, but surpassing children. They come to my house every now and then to chat with me and help clean the house. Every time I encounter a problem, as long as I mention it, they take care of it within a few days.” (E, Male, Elderly, 82 years old, 2023-07-09)

4.5. Governance Results

Adhering to the concept of respecting, assisting, and loving the elderly, and promoting the spirit of “filial piety,” most of the elderly living alone or empty-nest elderly in County S enjoy home visit services provided by Organization Y, and highly evaluate the services of social workers and volunteers. As of June 2023, Organization Y has conducted over 21,000 home visits, provided case services for 113 individuals, and established 4,332 service records. Specifically targeting empty-nest elderly, the “Sincere Assistance” - Hundred Good Deeds for the Elderly project has been implemented, providing services such as home-based elderly care, “shared children” assistance, and medical assistance for serious illnesses. Currently, medical assistance totaling 333,500 RMB has been provided to 120 difficult empty-nest elderly individuals, home adaptation renovations have been implemented for 150 households of needy elderly, and caring companionship services have been provided to solitary elderly individuals 2,960 times.

In terms of daily care, village cadres and volunteers are paired to assist, paying attention to the daily needs of the elderly and providing services such as “proxy purchases” of goods, “delivery” of meals from elderly canteens, and “proxy handling” of affairs. In terms of psychological comfort, observations of the elderly’s psychological state during home visits are conducted, and professional interventions are provided as needed, with listening and comforting during service providing solace to the lonely hearts of the elderly.

For health care services, medical health and seeking treatment are the most urgent needs of the elderly. Organization Y provides basic services such as home-based hygiene and blood pressure measurement, and mobilizes compassionate businesses such as village clinics, barber shops, and law firms to provide free basic medical care, haircuts, legal consultations, etc., to the elderly.

In terms of language and information, the broad category of language services includes spiritual comfort, information consultation, and teaching of modern media technology, which play an important role in meeting the needs of rural empty-nest elderly. Each elderly person’s needs are different, and the setting of service groups for “shared volunteers” should be flexible. In practice, categories of services such as home chatting, policy information lectures, teaching the use of smart devices, and Mandarin teaching are summarized, providing sympathy and support to the elderly and increasing their social integration ability.

In terms of cultural and entertainment activities, Organization Y adopts “fixed” project activities, holding collective activities at village service sites once a month, often involving the making of traditional delicacies, arranging local opera performances, and screening classic old films, among others. During special occasions such as festivals, activities related to the festival theme are often held.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In practice, S County has actively explored a path for providing elderly care services for rural empty-nesters. Under the guidance of the government, social organizations mobilize various forces including grassroots autonomous organizations, other volunteer organizations, and individuals, fully leveraging diverse resources and harnessing the collaborative efforts of government departments, social organizations, and individual citizens. However, in reality, social organizations often face challenges such as “lack of access to external aid” and “having good intentions but insufficient capabilities”.

Firstly, social organizations often struggle with positioning themselves accurately when cooperating with the government, leading to unequal relationships and loose cooperation, making it difficult for social organizations to obtain timely information from the government and increasing the difficulty of obtaining funding and subsidies. Secondly, in practice, social organizations and village committees often face communication and negotiation barriers, directly affecting the implementation of social organization projects and services. Thirdly, the underdeveloped manufacturing industry in rural areas lags behind, local enterprises are small in scale, and funds are limited, resulting in few enterprises willing to invest in the elderly care service industry, with relatively limited support from businesses. Fourthly, inadequate communication with the elderly population, cognitive gaps, and psychological barriers results in some elderly people rejecting social services and preferring to maintain the status quo, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of “service poverty” governance. These various constraints result in insufficient participation of diverse entities and decreased collaborative capacity, affecting the effectiveness of social organization intervention in addressing service poverty.

Based on the above analysis, the following recommendations are summarized to provide reference for addressing the issue of “service poverty” governance for rural empty-nesters in other underdeveloped areas:

5.1. At the Governance Mechanism Level, Leverage the Government’s Role as A “Supporting Force”

As the primary stakeholder responsible for elderly care services, the government plays a significant role in the work of social organizations. To truly achieve “delegation of power,” the government needs to strongly support the work of social organizations

and provide them with guidance from a top-down perspective. Firstly, the government should implement specific policies, including tax, land use, and funding guarantees, to strengthen the recognition of the role and function of social organizations in providing elderly care services. Secondly, the government should further improve the governance and compensation mechanisms for social organizations, enabling them to become a strong force in providing elderly care services for rural empty-nesters. Government support and cooperation will provide a guarantee of strength for social organizations involved in elderly care services, promoting the optimal development of elderly care services for rural empty-nesters.

5.2. At the Governance Entity Level, Enhance the Proactive Capabilities of Social Organizations

From the perspective of social organizations themselves, social organizations in China have a strong dependence on the government and relatively weak autonomy and independence. To better participate in rural elderly care services, social organizations can take the following measures: Firstly, expand diversified financing channels. In addition to relying on government funds, social organizations can raise funds through cooperation with charitable organizations and accepting social donations, striving to improve their own management level and service quality. Secondly, utilize the brand effect, make rational use of new media platforms such as WeChat public accounts and Bilibili to showcase specific interventions in rural elderly care services to the public, which helps attract more attention and support from the society. Finally, actively develop external resources, proactively collaborate with charitable organizations, social institutions, medical institutions, social enterprises, and other diverse entities, attract advantageous resources to tilt towards rural areas, and enhance their own autonomous service capabilities.

5.3. At the Governance Concept Level, Empower the Concept of “Helping Oneself by Helping Others” for the Elderly

Social organizations not only need to provide direct services to address the poverty of elderly care for empty-nesters in several dimensions but also need to convey the concept and value of “helping oneself by helping others” to the elderly. On the one hand, through legal and policy publicity, raise the awareness of rights among rural empty-nesters, enhance their sense of value and influence; on the other hand, actively promote the management of activities by capable elderly individuals, enabling the elderly to become decision-makers and participants in elderly care services, actively leading healthy elderly individuals to participate in volunteer activities, and enhancing their own empowerment capabilities.

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