

Female Agency in Rural Public Participation: Actions and Strategies for Empowering Social Organizations in Dilemmas

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Abstract: Current grassroots social governance in China advocates the participation of multiple entities, represented by social organizations. However, social organizations often face mismatches between supply and demand, low levels of specialization, and a lack of resources and talent when providing services. Given previous research exploring the institutional environment of social organizations, this paper focuses on the agency of actors within these organizations and their interactive relationship with the organization. It finds that rural women can become enablers of the growth of social organizations in distress and intermediary roles for promoting local social operations, which contests the stereotype about women's vulnerability. This article compares, inducts and analyzes six empirical cases based on the "Role-Agency" framework, and categorizes rural women's roles and agencies in empowering social organizations in distress into four groups. The analysis of these action strategies will provide social organizations with more paths to improve service models and promote social advocacy.

Keywords: Rural female, Social organizations, Agency, Empowerment, Grassroots social governance.

1. Introduction

With the advancement of modernization, social problems such as the widening wealth gap and deepening aging population are becoming increasingly prominent, drawing high attention from the central government to grassroots social governance. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China points out the need to "improve the system of social governance based on collaboration, participation, and common interests to enhance social governance effectiveness." Social organizations, as providers of social services and undertakers of public management functions, play an important role in this process. However, in practice, social organizations, distinct from government and for-profit organizations, often face numerous challenges such as resource scarcity, limited influence, and low levels of specialization, especially emerging grassroots social organizations.

To support the survival and growth of social organizations in distress, previous research has examined the institutional environment and government-society interaction under the national and social framework, exploring paths for social organizations to gain legitimacy and survival resources. However, such research has somewhat overlooked the role of social actors within organizations, suggesting that social organizations need to resiliently survive in narrow survival spaces while

maintaining a certain degree of independence and flexibly acquire resources from internal or external elite authorities [1-2]. This paper focuses on rural women, who are often regarded as vulnerable groups and public service beneficiaries yet underappreciated for their active participation and contribution. , Through empirical research, case studies show that many rural female become active social actors within social organizations, emerging as leaders or joining social support networks, thereby empowering social organizations in distress, showcasing their agency and subject status.

This research has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it enriches the research perspective on women's empowerment. This paper highlights typical cases of rural women empowering social organizations in distress, emphasizing the non-vulnerable and non-fragile nature of the female group and their inherent ability and agency to participate in public life, supplementing the perspective of women as leaders and contributors. Practically, it aims to enhance the capacity of social organizations to participate in social governance. Addressing the short-term or long-term challenges faced by social organizations, this paper discusses localized empowerment paths where social actors promote the growth of social organizations, seeking strategies for the survival of social organizations in distress.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Public Action in Social Governance

Constructing publicness is an important proposition to enhance the effectiveness of social governance. Regarding the connection between individuals and public life, publicness means people stepping out of the private sphere to discuss and act on issues of common concern [3] . The pursuit of autonomy by social organizations as actors requires a high degree of integration between organizational discourse and action power. In new organizational models, the organization and its individual members present "wholeness" characteristics, consistent with the "symbiotic coexistence" model of social relations [4].

Whether at the individual level of rural women or at the organizational level of rural social organizations, there is the potential to become public actors, expressing public opinions and contributing to grassroots social governance. Qiu Yu studied the discursive function of social organizations in the public sphere, finding that based on survival rationality, the discursive function of social organizations should be present but is absent [5]. For civil organizations to maintain their characteristics as public spheres, attention should be paid to their non-governmental nature, diversity, and grounding in the living world [6]. Some scholars have noticed the possibility of rural vulnerable groups creating rural public value. In the process of the third distribution entering villages, rural women, as service objects and family communicators of public welfare concepts, can achieve public value co-production on a larger scale [7].

2.2. Female Agency in Empowering Social Organizations

Various scholars define empowerment differently, but it is certain that empowerment is not only a result but also a process. Through formal organizational practices and informal skills, this process can help remove situations that contribute to a sense of powerlessness and enhance self-efficacy [8]. Some scholars propose that the ideal type of rural women's subjectivity construction is a non-dependent inclusive gender order, characterized by reproductive autonomy, diverse marriage, negotiable family power, undifferentiated public life, and equal political participation rights [9]. Many rural social organizations are committed to empowering rural women to improve their economic and social status. Additionally, social work can integrate the strengths of women's federations and professional social workers to mobilize rural women's organizational construction from an advantage perspective, enhancing their political status [10].

Previous research has already noted the participatory development of rural women, i.e., using the power of social organizations to build platforms, link resources, and provide opportunities, stimulating endogenous motivation and empowerment paths. Further research needs to focus on the self-development of rural women, where individuals optimize themselves, adapt to the social environment, and then gain autonomy in life. The self-development capabilities of rural women can be divided into basic abilities, production abilities, coordination abilities, and development abilities [11]. Furthermore, the empowerment perspective needs to pay attention to the understanding of "vulnerability" and "agency" and the focus shift from vulnerability to agency. The productive contribution of rural women to society should be acknowledged, highlighting their status as social actors and their abilities and actions in public life.

3. Research and Case Studies

3.1. Data Collection

This study focuses on cases involving rural women closely engaged with social organizations, where these organizations are led by or deeply involve rural women, ultimately empowering them as active agents and supporting the development of these social organizations. First, extensive online searches were conducted to gather such cases, including project promotions, interviews, media reports, and comments, to examine the action strategies of rural women. Many of these sources contain firsthand accounts and life stories shared by rural women, forming the primary content for subsequent case analysis and providing valuable insights to substantiate the study's arguments. Additionally, the study used the Chinese Social Organization Government Service Platform to gather basic information about the organizations mentioned in the reports, selecting those currently operating normally. Finally, relevant sociological theories were applied to the secondary literature collected to explore the activation of rural women's agency.

3.2. Case Selection

Based on the data collection, the study considers several aspects for case selection. First, the selected organization must involve the participation and empowerment of rural women. Second, the organizations must be currently operational and participating in social activities. Third, the organization must ultimately benefit from rural females' empowering activities and participation. Considering these factors, six social organization cases were selected. It is noteworthy that the choice of social organizations is primarily for providing clues, ensuring that the project information gathered is relatively concentrated and accessible.

The "dilemma" in these six organizations manifests in two ways: one is the difficulty of development in general, typically found in organizations established more recently with limited registration funds, resources, and professional staff. The other is the dilemma in project promotion, more commonly seen in more established organizations with significant influence, mature operating models, and abundant resources but reliant on rural women for specific projects. The basic information of the six selected cases is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Case Study of a Social Organization.

Organization Name	Type	Established	Location	Empowerment Project
Z Women's Development Foundation	Foundation	1988	Beijing	Her Entrepreneurship
Y Entrepreneurs Rural Development Foundation	Foundation	2007	Beijing	Orange Mom
L Rural Women's Development Foundation	Foundation	2013	Guangzhou	Rural Partner Plan
M Social Work Service Center	Non-Governmental Unit	2016	Beijing	Cultural Activities
D Rural Women Book Club Federation	Social Group	2016	Fuyang	Cultural Performances
Y Social Welfare Service Center	Non-Governmental Unit	2022	Baoshan	Care for Rural Elderly

4. Empirical Analysis of Social Organizations Empowering Rural Women

4.1. Rural Females' Role in Empowerment

Interviews with rural women in the cases reveal that almost all female members had value orientations when they initially joined the organization. These value orientations include self-identity and alignment with the values of the social organization. The founder of M Social Work Service Center, QLX, stated, "Being a left-behind woman is not my life choice; women's self-awareness is essential, and a mother's role needs capable women to undertake." This self-awareness is closely related to personal interests, life experiences, and significant events, such as noticing the conditions of similar backgrounds, attending training sessions, and enjoying reading, rather than being a direct result of empowerment. Social organizations often carry the pursuit of progress for female members, where publicization, politicization, and technologization of oneself allow more women to step out of their homes into public life, forming the ethical essence for the organization's sustainability [12].

Based on solid identity construction, the action strategies of rural women entering social organizations also reflect the differences in their roles. Some rural women act as leaders in empowerment actions, typically as founders or leaders of a grassroots social organization. The founders of the last three social organizations in the study exhibit typical leadership characteristics. For example, LQY, the founder of D Rural Women Book Club Federation, was inspired by her love for reading and interactions with magazine editors to create a reading space in her village. These grassroots organizations, although surviving with difficulty, rely heavily on the leader's belief and persistence. As QLX from M organization said, "This growth comes from one's internal motivation and social opportunities, which are actually irreplaceable."

Another group of rural women join the empowerment efforts as participants, often reflecting collective synergy. The Rural Partner Plan by L Rural Women's Development Foundation has developed many rural women's self-organizations, such as village square dance teams supported by small practical projects, which have created many skits advocating gender equality. These skits subtly

promote the organization's value concepts and facilitate the intervention and advancement of various support projects locally.

4.2. A Typology of Rural Females' Strategies of Empowerment

The empowering roles of rural women reflect their agency and identity basis. Their agency is a significant manifestation of their empowerment ability. Agency, as an empowerment process, means individuals can set goals and control their lives based on existing resources. Therefore, this process should not only focus on the outcomes of the empowered but also examine the sources of the empowerer's agency. The strength of rural women's agency can be a key indicator in assessing their action strategies for empowering social organizations.

From another perspective, the empowerment process is also the transmission of agency between subjects. The measure of rural women's agency is the extent and degree to which they can radiate their empowerment to struggling social organizations. This study categorizes and compares the aforementioned cases, and based on the analysis of rural women's roles and agency, it identifies four types of action strategies for empowering social organizations, as illustrated in Figure 1:

Leader-Strong Agency Type: Rural women with high ideals and supportive social conditions, exhibiting proactive and pioneering enthusiasm.

Leader-Weak Agency Type: Rural women leading organizations or projects with evident regional and group characteristics, dedicated to meeting local people's needs and maintaining daily operations.

Participant-Strong Agency Type: Rural women integrating into the collective, sharing their experiences to promote the organization and expand its support network.

Participant-Weak Agency Type: Rural women fostering collective honor, often forming mutual support platforms as part of empowerment projects, enhancing the organization's reputation and cohesion.

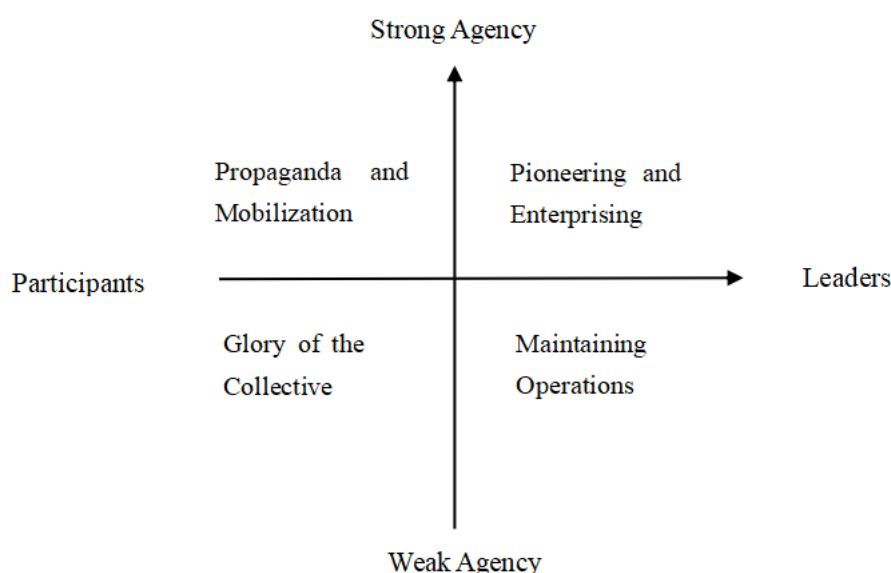


Figure 1: Typology of Rural Females' Strategies of Empowering Social Organizations.

When rural women have high expectations for the organizations or projects they lead, they hope their efforts will benefit a broader group. QLX from the M Social Work Service Center once said, "Community service is our main approach, empowerment and voice are our goals. We innovate activity content based on available resources at different times, hoping grassroots migrant women can

discover themselves, achieve equality in the family, and have better development opportunities in society." As the founder, Ms. Q and her team conducted social surveys at the beginning and decided to focus on cultural and artistic activities. Choosing cultural and artistic expression demonstrates the leader's grand vision, addressing deeper social issues like the integration of rural migrant workers into urban areas due to the urban-rural dual household registration system and policy gaps. YJY, the director of the Y Social Public Welfare Service Center, was a rural woman who needed to care for her family. She managed to lead the organization's survival and development, benefiting from C Foundation's subsequent support, such as learning how to operate the organization and apply for projects. Additionally, YJY noted, "Although it's tiring, fortunately, my children are very understanding, and my husband helps a lot with household chores, allowing me to focus." External assistance and family support enable female leaders to reduce worries, empowering social organizations and public welfare projects with proactive, innovative, and pioneering actions.

Women leaders with weaker agency tend to focus on maintaining the daily operations of social organization, aiming to meet the needs of local villagers and contribute to the construction of their hometowns. Since registering the Rural Women's Book Club, LQY has faced various difficulties: lack of understanding from family, simple venues, few books, and insufficient funds and volunteers. Ms. G, who sponsored the book club, recalled, "When a woman wants to do something, it's like everyone is waiting to see her fail, and it's even harder for rural women. Two of the three partners withdrew under pressure, but LQY persevered." Rural women leaders often face material scarcity and ethical criticism, affecting their initiative and actions to some extent. After the Rural Women's Book Club started operating, its main function was to provide villagers with a reading place and entertainment activities. LQY mentioned, "Many left-behind women in the village have improved family relationships, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships, and neighbor relationships through reading and learning here."

Rural females as participants with stronger agency, compared to leaders, often take collective action, sharing their experiences and attracting more participants or investment support. The Y Entrepreneur Rural Development Foundation, initiated by a famous entrepreneur, has the "Orange Mom" project as a key initiative, forming a comprehensive training system through years of practice and continuous optimization, with thousands of participants. After being selected as a representative speaker, participant WXY said, "I shared my experience and expressed my desire to bring the knowledge I learned back to the village to lead women out of poverty." These rural women benefit greatly from the project in terms of cognition and skills, and their empowerment actions are reflected in their proactive feedback. By sharing their life events, they not only inspire and encourage others but also aim to change the stereotypical image in public narratives, presenting themselves as proactive individuals rather than vulnerable groups needing social sympathy and help.

Another group of rural female participants engage with the empowering activities as members of a collective, , focusing on achieving collective honor and mutual support. Supported by the Z Women's Development Foundation's Entrepreneurial Revolving Fund Project, the FG Farm values the collective strength of women, providing varying degrees of care for rural women facing family difficulties or raising children alone. Members who persevere realize, "Women must be independent, relying on oneself is better than relying on others, and sisters helping each other makes things less difficult." Additionally, when these rural women receive awards and honors, it helps enhance the reputation and influence of the organization. SMY, who participated in the D Rural Women's Book Club activities, won an award in a recitation competition organized by a foundation, saying, "I never thought being a full-time mom could win an award." For well-established social organizations, the growth stories of outstanding women help obtain government-purchased services and resource support.

5. Conclusion

This paper categorizes the action strategies for empowering rural women in social organizations facing difficulties into "role- agency" types and attempts to demonstrate the subject status of women in this process. Empowerment is a process, and resources are the prerequisite for empowerment, so most studies tend to explore the mechanisms and outcomes of resource advantage holders empowering resource disadvantage holders. The role of social organizations in helping disadvantaged groups achieve better lives is unquestionable, especially well-operated organizations that can receive donations from large enterprises and have opportunities to cooperate with universities and research institutes. For rural women with relatively weak agency, the first thing they gain is funding and knowledge. However, service users do not simply receive these resources and skills passively; the qualities and experiences they possess provide conditions for them to take proactive empowerment actions. In this sense, there is a two-way empowerment mechanism between rural women and social organizations. To emphasize the agency of rural women, this paper highlights their action strategies.

There are other possible creative solutions outside the government-social system. Rural women and many other stigmatized disadvantaged groups live and grow in grassroots societies in China. Their "rustic" characteristics and long-standing life experiences and personal feelings are advantages that other groups do not have. If social organizations or their projects can find a localized path suitable for their development, it will help discover accurate information, gain the trust of service targets, and obtain a voice in cooperation with the government, thereby demonstrating stronger vitality.

The issues discussed in this paper still need further improvement. Compared with highly professional organizations, this paper hopes to observe more growth opportunities for grassroots social organizations. However, due to the difficulties in the development of these organizations, there are problems in the case search process, such as unregistered or hard-to-retrieve cases. Additionally, the classification in this paper does not fully correspond to individual cases. The empowerment actions of rural women are a dynamic process, and individuals with initiative will make different choices at different times and under social conditions. Future research can explore more diverse dimensions.

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