

I Quit It Because I Wanted to: Ambitions and Aspirations of Women from Rural China Who Did Not Finish Compulsory Education and Became Migrant Workers

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Abstract: In China, compulsory education extends to grade 9 and is mandated by law. However, there are still significant number of rural girls who choose to dropout of school and become migrant workers in coastal cities. This research contributes to existing literature by exploring why rural girls drop out and become migrant workers through two aspects. The former focuses on the 'forced' perspective, in which economic and gender norms play a role in pressuring girls to drop out of school. On the other hand, some researchers point out that girls may exert their agency and autonomously decide to drop out and become migrant workers. This can be because of their internal motivations and life goals, such as the desire to contribute financially to the family, lack of interest in academics, academic difficulties, peer influence, aspirations for a better life in rural areas, etc. In today's world, rural girls' agency and autonomy are increasingly important, therefore, this study examines the interplay of forced aspect and voluntary aspect from a rural girl's narrative to fill the gap that previous studies have missed.

Keywords: female migrant workers, compulsory education, rural girls, early dropout

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the debate surrounding high drop-out rates among rural girls in China has caught scholars' attention. At the centre of the debate, scholars ask whether women in rural China are forced to forgo nine years of compulsory (primary and lower-secondary) education and opt for migrant work due to socioeconomic factors and family influences. Or if they made this choice willingly, driven by their ambitions and aspirations?

On the one hand, research has identified various factors that contribute to rural girls' dropout rate in China. One of the prominent driving factors is economics, which derives from the high costs of schooling and other school-related expenses that impose significant burdens on poor families [1]. There are also gender differences in family educational opportunities [2], which forces girls to compete with and often be in line behind their brothers in education [3]. This gender difference in opportunities derives from deeply entrenched traditional concepts of gender roles in rural areas, leading to preferences for boys and low expectations for girls' education [4]. These factors influence families to allocate their resources towards male children's education, ultimately reinforcing a vicious

cycle where girls gain less access to education and thus can only find reasonably paid jobs for survival [2].

On the other hand, some scholars argue that by dropping out of school and becoming migrant workers, women voluntarily choose to embark on this path [5, 6, 7]. Rural women may exert their agency and autonomously drop out of school and become migrant workers due to lack of interest in school as girls perceive no value in education and peer influence [8]. Some may also perceive migration as a way that offers a better life than in the village, a better future for self and children, personal aspirations and achievements and more economic and material gains [7]. Consequently, this erosion of motivation prompts girls in rural areas to drop out of school and become migrant workers [9,10].

In both perspectives, there is a dichotomy between 'forced' situations and 'voluntary' choices to drop out of school. The former centers on socio-economic forces encompassing family situations and economic development disparities between rural and urban areas in China. The second highlights the motivations, life aspirations, and narratives of rural females that shape their decision to drop out and transition into migrants. The two perspectives are not mutually exclusive and in fact, intertwined to influence the choices made by rural girls. The interplay becomes apparent when rural girls' aspirations are shaped by realistic considerations regarding their socio-economic background, such as family income, the need to support a large number of family members, and the low employment opportunities available for rural females. However, it is crucial to recognize that individuals still can maneuver and express their agency. Nonetheless, existing empirical research has largely paid attention to gender inequality in rural education in China and the structural determinants of migrant workers' dropout from compulsory education. Even research that has identified the coexistence of the two perspectives fails to capture female migrant workers' narratives or reveal their autonomy.

This study argues for the need to transcend the dichotomy between "forced into" and "choose voluntarily" by introducing and examining these women's narratives, through which we reveal their autonomy. This research will explore the ambitions and aspirations of women from rural China who did not finish 9 years of compulsory education and became migrant workers. Through in-depth interviews with three factories in Dongguan, we can explore the decision-making mechanisms and resistance of what these migrant women are fighting against in society, gaining a deeper understanding of their motivations, challenges, and hopes for the future. The following sections are arranged to start with a background/literature review of previous research on the factors for early dropouts among female migrants in China, contextualizing female migrant workers in China by focusing on their personal lives, education level, ambitions and aspirations in life, followed by an account of methods, research plan and goal.

2. Background/Literature Review

2.1. 'Force' Factors for Early Dropouts among Female Migrant Workers in China

In China, the government enforced a law mandating all children of school age to complete nine years of compulsory education for free at both primary school (grades 1 to 6) and junior secondary school (grades 7 to 9). The goal of nine-year compulsory education is to provide equal opportunities for all children to receive education [11]. Yet, many females in rural areas of China do not have the chance to receive nine-year compulsory education. Data released by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2015 showed that the average number of years of education for rural Chinese women was 7.3 years compared to 8.1 years for men [12]. This discrepancy underlines the challenges and barriers that hinder rural females from fully benefiting from nine-year compulsory education that could help them achieve social mobility. Despite the intention to provide equal opportunities, various socio-economic factors contribute to early dropouts among female migrant workers in China.

2.1.1. Economic Development

As a result of the disparity in economic development between urban and rural areas, girls in rural areas have lacked equal access to opportunities and a lack of resources for education, making it a barrier for girls to gain education. In the decades following economic reforms and opening up (1980-2000), China's economy has prospered, enhancing the lives of its citizens. During this period, China's educational opportunities have changed significantly, resulting in the comprehensive development of education. Despite China's rapid economic growth and educational improvements, income inequality between rural and urban areas is widening [13]. This educational inequality in rural China is affected by the Hukou system, also known as the household registration system. This system assigns individuals to two groups- urban or rural areas- where many public policies are city-center and act as a standard to measure individuals' actual status [14]. Over time this system has led to a sharp difference in individuals' aspects of life- health, housing, employment, social security, etc [15].

The Hukou system restricts the mobility of the rural population and their access to public services (including education) and benefits particularly for their children [16, 17]. In a study, results have shown that returns to education in urban China have been consistently higher than in rural China. In addition, the educational level in rural areas has always been lower than in urban areas [18]. This disparity in return and educational level reflects the increase in labour income brought about by higher educational attainment. The systematic difference stemming from the Hukou system leads to unequal educational opportunities between urban residents and rural migrants. This makes it harder for girls in rural areas to access quality education and increases the likelihood of dropping out. The unequal resource allocation has caused a disparity in the fiscal resources available for local governments to fund school infrastructure [19]. The lack of resources leads to a lack of qualified teachers, updated facilities, and learning materials in rural education [20, 21]. The poor funding inequality further exacerbates educational disparities and contributes to higher dropout rates among girls in rural areas as rural parents are discouraged from investing in their daughter's education.

2.1.2. Gender Perspective

Traditional gender norms and son preference within both family and society compel rural females to drop out of school and become migrant workers. Imperial China's social tradition and state administration were profoundly shaped by Confucianism, a philosophical belief system. Confucianism emphasizes hierarchical and social structures that form the foundation of the family system and prevail in modern China, especially in rural areas [22]. Its teachings reinforced the idea of a patriarchal society where men hold positions of authority and women are expected to fulfil domestic roles [23].

In rural areas of China, where traditional values persist, Confucian principles have contributed to gender norms that prioritize male education and career pursuits over females. For instance, the traditional gender role concept of "Men take care of external affairs, while women handle domestic affairs" is still widespread in rural areas [4]. This concept emphasizes the vital role of men working outside to earn money for the family, while women's role is to take care of children and do household chores [24]. Confucianism's impact in China further instilled the concept of male superiority over women, reinforcing the traditional belief that sons are essential for elderly care [25, 4]. This preference for sons is perpetuated, driven by various factors- such as a strong labour supply and the continuation of the family name in coastal regions. As a result, families might allocate limited resources and support to their daughter's education. This is based on the idea that women should focus on domestic responsibilities.

Based on resource dilution theory, a family's allocation of educational resources to their children is limited [26]. As such, the number of siblings within a family influences the extent of educational

investment each child receives. A questionnaire interviewing 400 families in rural Suizhou, Hubei, found that there was a significant gender preference in rural families' education investment. Furthermore, children from homes with more sons tend to commence school earlier than children from families with more daughters [27]. This indicates that rural parents tend to prioritize boys' education over girls which causes girls to have less access to educational opportunities and drop out of school once their parents decide not to support them anymore. It's in fact common for rural women in poor areas to drop out of school at early ages, to do agricultural work when they are still teenagers, and then get married and give birth to kids after growing up [10].

Moreover, the low employment rates and job returns of females discourage rural parents from sending their girls to school because of limited prospects for further schooling. The job market has changed in China but it continues to favor males over females, even though men and women have the same level of education [28]. The study of rural industries in rural North China and women migrant workers found that rural women have relatively unskilled, temporary, and dead-end work [29, 30]. Hence, the lower return to female education tends to make parents feel education is meaningless for girls. In today's society, where sex discrimination still exists, families believe that sons are more worthy of gaining an education since they earn higher wages.

2.2. Rural Girls' Autonomy and Factors Motivating Their Decisions

Previous research has failed to systematically capture the intricate perspective and decision-making processes of rural girls who choose to discontinue their nine-year compulsory education. Within this context, it's crucial to recognize that girls still have room to manoeuvre or change their circumstances, potentially altering their lives. Differing from the 'forced' factors that cause rural girls to drop out of school with no choice, some research has noticed the significance of girls' autonomy by examining the factors that motivate their decision-making process [8, 31, 32]. These factors revolve around family, economic prospects, personal aspirations, peer influences, and academic outlook. Such volitional reasons reflect a complex interplay of individual autonomy, socio-economic considerations, and perceived opportunities.

For some rural girls, one of the decisions to drop out is motivated by a strong desire to contribute to the family's financial stability coupled with a lack of academic interest in education. Previous research has shed light on how poverty in rural families [33] and the family's financial constraints caused rural girls to be more susceptible to discontinuing their education [32, 34]. The reasons why rural girls drop out were examined in a study, and one girl responded by describing her family situation, as she had five siblings and parents who worked all day to earn money, she felt she did not receive much love from her parents and that she could earn money for her family through working. Additionally, some of her classmates around her chose to drop out of school to work part-time as well [5]. From the response, it can be seen that rural girls have the desire to help their own families. In some cases, they are also influenced by their peers. Along with family and economic prospects, girls' lack of academic interest also acts as a motivator for them in their decision-making process to drop out.

However, there is a lack of research focusing from the perspective of rural girls on their lack of academic interest that causes them to drop out. In interviews with primary students who drop out of primary school, it was indicated that girls' lack of interest in school and motivation to study was a factor in causing girls to drop out [5, 8]. Participants revealed how most of the girls in the community do not care about school, and despite their parents' encouragement they still choose to drop out. In some cases, girls' lack of interest in academics was triggered by their peers quitting and seeing no value in attending school [8]. Findings from the REAP survey reveal that 30 per cent of respondents cited that they chose to opt out of school because "everyone else is doing it" [6]. It creates a sense of desire for girls to want to do the same thing when they observe their peers or friends discontinuing

their education because of academic difficulties or lack of academic interest, to earn money to contribute to their family's financial stability, and to pursue their own life ambitions. This phenomenon is a manifestation of peer pressure on individuals to conform to prevailing norms. The influence of peers can overshadow individual aspirations, leading girls to believe that leaving school to become migrant workers is not only acceptable but also the expected path. Rural girls may discontinue their education due to a lack of academic interest when observing how their peers take the same course of action.

Previous studies tend to attribute the educational curriculum and teaching methods employed in rural schools, which often fail to align with the realities and aspirations of rural girls [35, 36]. This leads to a lack of motivation for learning. However, educational quality does not necessarily lead to interest and learning capability. The assumption that rural girls form their interests and difficulties due to a lack of quality education overlooks their intrinsic characteristics and autonomy in decision-making. Among the reasons for these academic difficulties are the presence of weak foundation knowledge and a lack of understanding of the class content, which contributes to a strong reluctance to classroom learning [5]. Moreover, the lack of female role models who have pursued higher education and succeeded professionally and the lack of female teachers in rural schools can limit girls' ambitions [37]. This is because for rural girls the absence of such influential figures hampers the development of an image of independent and empowered women. Ultimately, the lack of attention and assistance provided by both the school and teachers can foster scepticism and resistance among girls towards classroom learning, eventually eroding their motivation to pursue further education [10]. These voluntary factors highlight how economic pressure, and academic outlook, coupled with peer influences can overshadow and perceive the long-term benefits of education.

Limited attention has been devoted to comprehensively grasping the entire narrative surrounding rural girls – the reasons underpinning their decisions to drop out of school, their feelings, and their life ambitions. This gap in research is concerning, as it overlooks the autonomy of female migrant workers, a crucial aspect that could potentially motivate girls to drop out of education and transition into factory work. Some studies indicate that rural girls hold aspirations for a better life in urban areas. This is often stemming from their belief that employment in urban factories can fulfil these ambitions. Some scholarly indicates that a primary reason behind becoming migrant workers is the pursuit of increased financial resources, material gains, and personal achievements and aspirations [7]. This insight underscores the necessity of understanding girls' voices.

2.3. Importance of Understanding Female Migrants' Voices

The study believe it is necessary to understand female migrants' own voice for three reasons:

Firstly, dropping out of school cannot be a completely voluntary decision, and numerous social constraints play a social role in this process. These constraints include government policies that often prioritize resource allocation in urban areas leading to disparity in education, financial situations in families that force parents to favor economic needs over their daughters' education, as well as gender norms in rural areas, preference for boys, which can lead families to view investing in girls' education as less valuable. In addition, the influence of peers dropping out of school to work can also motivate girls' lack of academic interest and trigger them to drop out. These constraints from government, families, schools, gender perspectives, and peers demonstrate that girls' decisions to discontinue their education cannot be labeled as a matter of free will. Their decision-making process of opting are impacted by these constraint factors.

Next, it's critical to recognize that being "forced" to drop out of school does not necessarily mean girls cannot meet their life goals and ambitions. Despite the worst circumstances, there are still alternatives girls can pursue in order to achieve their goals. In fact, under certain circumstances, the decision to discontinue education might even serve as a strategic maneuver towards attaining specific

life goals. Girls can strategize about how best to navigate their own situations. This could mean working towards skill acquisition, vocational training, or entering the workforce earlier than anticipated. Such decisions may be aligned with girls' personal goals that are better served by education.

Women's voices are often ignored because they are a marginalized group in society. It's important for society to listen to them. In this context, intersectionality theory is critical for understanding female migrant workers. This theory recognizes that a person's identity is shaped by a combination of factors, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. These factors intersect and create a complex web of privilege and disadvantage. For example, when a rural girl drops out of school, it's not just because she's a girl. Her decision is also influenced by her socioeconomic background, cultural norms, geographical location etc. Rural girls' identities are a combination of these interconnected factors. A rural girl's identity is not singular but rather an amalgamation of these interconnected facets.

2.4. Contextualizing Female Migrant Workers in China

'Dagongmei' are Chinese female migrant workers who contribute significantly to the country's manufacturing sector and economic development. Around 36.6 percent of migrant workers in China were female [38] who migrated from rural areas to cities and worked in factories. Women are encouraged to work on assembly lines in factories. As daughters are viewed by their families as disposable labor, they are able to start new lives in the cities, which can be more challenging [39]. Female migrant workers represent a marginalized group in China, they have a lack of voice in society yet play a vital role in sustaining China's economic growth by taking up low-skilled and labour-intensive jobs in urban areas [40]. In a survey of 15 out of 30 female migrant worker age group, 68.3 percent had finished junior secondary schooling, 20.4 percent had only completed primary school and 1.1 percent were illiterate [41]. With a lack of education than their male counterparts, rural migrant women perpetuate their ability to find only employment in the poorly paid jobs requiring fewer qualifications in manufacturing and service industries in the urban areas [42].

Female migrant workers in China often work for long hours in poor or unsafe working conditions and are owed back wages by employers [41]. Even under these poor working conditions, rural female migrant workers continue to do their jobs, as they have their own goals in their lives. Some life aspirations include contributing to financial stability for the family and supporting siblings [33], ensuring their children receive a high-quality education [1], improving their living conditions [37] such as healthcare and sanitation, setting up their own business in the future, etc.

Numerous studies have highlighted the vulnerability of female migrant workers compared to their male counterparts. Women between the ages of 18 and 22 are often perceived as more vulnerable to control and have little understanding of their labor rights [41], which is one reason why factories offer more positions to women. Moreover, gender disparities are evident in migrant workers' wages, with men generally earning more than women [40]. A significant difference in health levels between female migrant workers and male migrant workers may be attributed to lower education levels and social insurance [43]. These challenges migrant women encounter make it difficult for them to access the necessary resources and support.

3. Research Questions

3.1. Why Did Rural Girls Quit Compulsory Education?

This research question delves into the core motivations and factors that prompt rural girls to step away from compulsory education. Through the lens of the rural girls, this question seeks to understand the rationale behind their decisions through looking at family dynamics, school environment, peer

influence, and personal narratives. This research question holds substantial value as it lays the foundation for unearthing the motivations behind the choices and hearing the voices of the girls.

1-1: How did family contribute to rural girls' decision-making process?

1-1-1: What are the pressure family exert on rural girls?

1-1-2: How do rural girls perceive their family situation?

This research question aims to understand how family pressure and situations affect rural girls' educational decisions to quit compulsory education. By understanding the interplay of family and societal influences, the study will be able to view the relationship between the "forced" factors and "voluntary" reasons that influenced girls to make the decision.

1-2: How did the school environment and peers affect rural girls' decisions?

This research question aims to comprehend the role played by school environments and peer relationships in influencing girls' education. It explores the external forces and girls' autonomy that shape their decisions. This question is vital because it identifies the issues facing rural education and what improvements could be made to improve the situation for rural girls. The purpose of this is to ensure that girls receive a higher quality education and realize the value of education.

1-3: How did girls understand withdrawing from compulsory education?

This question delves into rural girls' personal interpretations and perceptions regarding their choice to discontinue their education. It is important to capture these individuals' emotions and viewpoints in order to provide a deeper understanding of this significant life decision. Furthermore, it aids in gaining a deeper understanding of their thoughts, motivations and aspirations, which are behind their voluntary choices.

1-4: How do rural girls interpret their own experience of dropping out?

1-4-1: How do rural girls feel about it?

1-4-2: What are some experiences and stories?

This question explores the girls' perceptions of their own experiences of dropping out, their emotions, and whether it was a worthwhile or a regrettable decision. Would they consider this experience to be beneficial to their future or was it forced upon them and they had no choice? A deeper insight is gained into what influences their decision to dropout.

1-5: What did rural girls do to drop out?

1-5-1: What are the strategies that rural girls implemented?

1-5-2: What was the situations when the rural girls dropout?

This question delves into the strategies the girls used when deciding to drop out, as well as whether their family or life goals played a role in their decision. By investigating, the study gains insight into the specific actions the rural girls took to drop out, which includes potential challenges they faced and the alternatives they considered. There are several strategies that can be used, ranging from managing family expectations to seeking guidance from peers in order to make informed decisions based on their aspirations.

3.2. Why Did Rural Girls Become Migrant Workers?

The purpose of this research question is to determine the reasons why rural girls transition from being students without completing compulsory education to becoming migrant workers at a young age. Through this research question, the study hopes to gain a better understanding of what migrant workers mean to rural girls, their perceptions of their jobs in factories, and the benefits of working as migrant workers.

2-1: How did rural girls form the idea of becoming migrant workers?

Specifically, this question examines how rural girls come to develop the idea of becoming migrant workers, which is strongly related to socioeconomic factors and their own perspectives. This question

is important because it assists in understanding whether becoming a migrant worker is seen as a voluntary decision, as an external force, or as a result of the interplay between both.

2-2: Before embarking on the path to become migrant workers, what perceptions did you hold about girls who had already become migrant workers?

This question provides valuable insight into the preconceptions and beliefs held by rural girls before becoming migrant workers. Understanding these beliefs is crucial, as girls' insights and preconceptions can influence their own decision-making processes, such as girls may view migrant work as a positive or negative experience.

2-3: Why did rural girls choose to prioritize working over education?

This question looks into rural girls' decision-making process and helps uncover why they choose employment as a priority over continuing their education. Researchers can study the factors and motivations that lead rural girls to enrol in compulsory school through this research question.

2-4: How do rural girls interpret their experience of being a migrant worker?

This question delves into the individual perspectives and subjective experiences of rural girls who become migrant workers. Through it, they can express their own feelings and their interpretation of their own journey. Having this insight enables a deeper exploration of the motivations, aspirations, and resilience of female migrant workers.

2-5: What steps did rural girls took to transition from being a student to a role of migrant worker?

This question delves into the specific steps and processes rural girls experience when transitioning from students to migrant workers. It provides a detailed account of the practical aspects of this transition, shedding light on the logistical and emotional journey they undertake.

4. Data and Methods

The research aims to reveal the autonomy of female migrant workers' decision to drop out of school and transition into factory work. As such, the research will utilize a qualitative approach to examine the factors that motivate rural girls to drop out of school and become migrant workers from their own perspectives. First, 3 factories in Dongguan will be selected. These factories come from an oral "herstory" project that my teammates and I have been working on. In this project, we interviewed 13 female migrant workers in Dongguan, Guangdong. The project aims to record the life stories of female migrant workers who have been silently contributing to the city's economy and development.

Table 1: Background and Characteristics of Three Factories in Dongguan.

Factory	Company A	Company B	Company C
Size	98 employees	1000-4999 employees	500 employees
Industry	Mainly engaged in manufacturing of computers, communications and other electronics	Packaging and printing enterprise	Research and development, production and sales in electronic products

Female migrant workers who drop out of compulsory education will be selected according to the ratio of each factory with a total of 30 interviewees for this study. This would allow a more comprehensive overview of the female migrant workers' autonomy and voices heard. Interviewees will be selected through the snowballing method, by asking the Industrial Dongguan Oral Herstory project interviewees for other female workers' contact.

4.1. Factors for Selecting Interviewees

This study's approach to selecting interviewees prioritizes diversity through multiple aspects. First, it is hoped that interviewees will come from various ethnic backgrounds and rural regions across China. Diversity will enable the interviews to capture various local gender perspectives, cultures and customs. Furthermore, the study seeks diversity in occupation roles held by different interviewees, from assembly line workers to small and medium-level managers. It will reflect the different perspectives that emerge as a result of women dropping out of compulsory education and the growth of female migrant workers in this industry. Finally, the study aims to select women of diverse ages, this diverse ages would represent different eras and life experiences of women. This would give insight into how different generations of women view their roles and experiences in the workplace. The different interviewees will encompass a broad age spectrum, ranging from as young as 16 years old to as old as 60. By taking into consideration these factors when selecting interviewees, it will allow the study to capture the unique perspectives of women migrant workers and give the study a more comprehensive understanding of women migrants' experience.

4.2. Interview Process

Initially, around 3-5 pilot interview will be conducted. After reviewing the results of these pilot interviews, the study will make necessary adjustments to the interview questions or structure to ensure smoother interviews in the future. In-depth semi-structured will be conducted with the interviewees. The questions will revolve around 6 sections: background of interviewee (hometown, family dynamics, family financial situation), school life (teachers, peers, distance from home, support from school, educational achievement, aspirations for education, view of nine year compulsory education), process and personal opinion from dropping out of school and becoming migrant workers, industry work/ working experiences, marriage and family after migrating, future hopes and reflection on the decision.

The interviewer will explain to the interviewee the purpose of the study, inform the rights and interests associated with the interview, understand the basic background of the interviewee and reach a common understanding of the questions of the interview. The interviewer will also inform the interviewee how the interview will be conducted, what equipment will be used such as recordings and how the transcript from the interview will be managed. The interview will be conducted in a quiet, small area without echoes or other noises. Afterwards, the interviewer will edit the text material of the interview, during which the interviewee may be contacted by WeChat to confirm details.

4.3. Ethical Concerns

In this study, several crucial ethical principles would guide the research approach to participant engagement, privacy and confidentiality, communication and data management. The study should ensure that all selected interviewees are fully informed of the study's purpose. This includes the reason for their participation, their rights, and the potential benefits and risks associated with participation. Before conducting interviews, it is necessary to obtain informed consent from each interviewee to ensure their voluntary participation. Researchers must maintain clear and open communication with interviewees throughout the research process.

Moreover, privacy and confidentiality measures will be followed to protect the identities and personal information of the participants. After each interview, the researcher pseudonymizes and numbers all participants' identifying information. None of the real names and personal data of participants will appear in the research product. Only the researcher will have access to participants' personal data. Protecting the confidentiality and privacy of collected data requires proper data

management practices. All research data will be securely stored and only accessible to authorized researchers. These ethical and confidentiality protocols serve to maintain the integrity and credibility of our research.

4.4. Potential Problems and Limitations

Some potential problems and limitations the research method will encounter may include sampling bias, limited sample size, interviewee recall bias and hidden information in the interview. Firstly, the study employs a snowball sampling method, which may result in sampling bias. Interviewees introduced by the initial participants may share similar characteristics or experiences, potentially limiting perspectives. In addition, the small sample size of 30 interviewees is still relatively small, which makes it difficult to generalize to a larger population. Due to this, the conclusions drawn from the interviews cannot be applied to all rural female migrant workers who have not completed the nine-year compulsory education requirement.

Furthermore, during the interviews, the interviewees may have difficulty accurately recalling and describing the factors that led to their decision to drop out of school, especially if some time has passed since their decision. This would lead to inaccurate interviewee responses and may not fully reflect the actual situation of rural female decision-making process perspectives back then. Interviewees may also be hesitant to share certain information if they don't feel at ease with the interviewer. In order to address this issue, it is crucial to create a safe, welcoming environment in which interviewees feel comfortable sharing their experiences and opinions. A comfortable atmosphere can be created by being open, non-judgmental, and actively listening to what the interviewee has to say. Addressing these potential problems and limitation is essential to ensure the reliability of the study.

5. Conclusion

The issue of rural girls dropping out of compulsory education in China and becoming migrant workers is an interplay of external constraints and individual agency. This paper identifies socio-economic factors and rural gender norms as contributing factors to the 'forced' aspect, while girls' individual motivations and life aspirations coupled with peer influence drive the 'voluntary' aspect.

Identifying socio-economic factors is complicated due to several endogeneity problems, including economic disparities between rural and urban areas, the hukou system, and limited education resources in rural areas. Additionally, deeply ingrained gender norms and son preference perpetuate families' prioritization of boys' education over girls', further limiting opportunities for rural girls. Conversely, the 'voluntary' aspect highlights rural girls' agency in making decisions, which is influenced by factors such as their desire to contribute financially to their families, lack of interest in academics, academic difficulties, peer influence, and aspirations for a better life in urban areas. The study concludes that rural females' decision to dropout is not completely 'voluntary' and numerous socioeconomic factors also play a role in the process.

This research provides new insight into female migrant workers' autonomy in dropping out of school and transitioning into factory work. Understanding female migrant workers' experiences and aspirations is crucial because their contributions to society's manufacturing sector and economic growth are significant. This research can help inform policymakers and stakeholders to address rural girls' dropout issues and female migrant workers. This includes addressing the structural constraints that limit rural girls' educational opportunities, as well as recognizing and supporting their agency in pursuing their life ambitions.

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