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Research on the problems and countermeasures of education and training of left-behind women in rural areas under the background of rural revitalization

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Abstract: As China's urbanization process accelerates, it has become common for rural men to go out to work and women to stay at home. The implementation of China's rural revitalization strategy is in dire need of a large amount of high-quality human capital, and education and training are an important way to improve human capital and empower left-behind women. Starting from the background of China's rural revitalization, this study focuses on the education and training of rural left-behind women, a topic that has received less attention. Through in-depth interviews and participatory observation, we analyzed the factors affecting rural left-behind women's participation in education and training, as well as the problems that exist in China's rural education and training process, and proposed strategies to solve them. The study found that education level, traditional attitudes, economic income, knowledge of education and training, and mental health are important factors affecting the participation of left-behind women in education and training in rural China. At the same time, there are some problems in the process of education and training, such as a single main body of supply and training methods, a lack of teachers, and a lack of management, etc., which affect the development of education and training, and thus also the promotion of rural revitalization.

Keywords: rural women left behind; education; training; rural revitalization; human capital

1. Introduction

As China's urbanization process accelerates, it has become common for rural adult males to leave their hometowns in search of employment opportunities, and some scholars refer to this form of migration as interprovincial labor migration (Morse and Mudgett, 2017). According to data from the seventh national census of China's National Bureau of Statistics (2022), China's rural female population is about 6% smaller than that of males, but the number of females going out to work is only about 50% of that of males, and the number of rural females employed is much smaller than that of males. When men in rural households leave for employment opportunities, their wives have to stay behind and take on the burden of caring for children and the elderly, and carrying out agricultural production (Chen and Fan, 2016).

In 2017, the Chinese government made a major decision to implement the strategy of rural revitalization and comprehensively promote rural development. In addition to attracting outstanding talents to return to their hometowns for entrepreneurship and employment, rural revitalization also needs to mobilize the enthusiasm and creativity of rural women and enhance their human capital (Unctuous and Perinea, 2015). As the main force to promote the construction of the countryside,

the ideological quality and education level of rural left-behind women determine, to a certain extent, the development of their own resources and the development of the rural economy. However, judging from the current education situation of rural women in China, most of the rural women around 40–50 years old have only elementary school education or below (Unctuous and Perinea, 2015). Their low level of education greatly limits their personal development and makes it difficult for them to contribute to rural revitalization. Therefore, education and training for left-behind women in rural areas is necessary, not only to empower rural women and promote their sustainable personal development, but also to further promote the development of the rural economy and contribute to rural revitalization.

The implementation of training and development strategies in rural areas plays an important role in addressing rural social and economic development. However, in current studies focusing on rural left-behind women, scholars pay more attention to the economic, psychological, and emotional impacts on left-behind women after their husbands migrate or go out to work (Wang and Ye, 2020), and pay less attention to their education and training as well as their personal development. Moreover, the education and training of left-behind women in China still lacks institutionalization, regularization, small audience proportion, and single content (Ji and Cao, 2022). How to establish an effective education and training system that empowers rural left-behind women, enhances their human capital and facilitates their integration into the strategic layout of rural revitalization has become a key concern. Therefore, starting from the background of rural revitalization, this paper analyzes the factors affecting the participation of rural left-behind women in education and training activities through in-depth interviews with them, and explores the problems of education and training of rural left-behind women in China, and then puts forward relevant strategies to improve the effectiveness of rural left-behind women's education and training, and to promote the revitalization of the countryside.

2. Literature review

Rural left-behind women are a socially vulnerable group that has emerged as a result of the accelerating process of urban industrialization and the large-scale transfer of rural male labour to the cities. Studies on rural left-behind women have mainly focused on developing countries, and scholars have paid attention to the impact of husbands working outside the home on left-behind women. For example, Charlotte and Agandin (Wang and Ye, 2020) studied the economic, livelihood, psychological and emotional impacts of husbands going out to work on left-behind women in Builsa district of Ghana. The study showed that left-behind women are required to work, raise children and take care of their families and therefore experience different forms of suffering, especially psychological and emotional, due to their material and social situation, and therefore their psychological and emotional needs should be taken into account in addition to the economic assistance programs given to the left-behind women. Saha et al. (Radović-Marković and Živanović, 2019). analysed the impact of male out-migration on left-behind wives in Nepal, they argued that left-behind women take on additional domestic and social responsibilities when their husbands go out of the home and this increase in responsibilities affects women's participation in different

spheres of the society. Mahapatro (2018) analysed the social impacts of men’s migration on left-behind women in India, he argued that men’s migration is unlikely to improve the status of left-behind women. Das and Prasad (Mukhopadhyay, 2022) similarly analysed the impact of male migration on left-behind women in India and they concluded that husband’s migration not only affects left-behind wives economically, psychologically, and physically, but also influences women’s decision-making process.

As in many developing countries, in China, rural men usually take on the economic responsibility of providing for their families, while women who stay at home take on the domestic responsibility of caring for children and the elderly (Ji et al., 2017), and some of the women who stay at home also take on the task of agricultural production. **Figure 1** shows that the number of women working outside the home in rural China is only about 50 percent of that of men, and the number of women employed is much smaller than that of men (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2022). At the same time, according to the Fourth Survey on the Social Status of Chinese Women (2021), rural women aged 18–64 have a high labour force participation rate of 73.2 percent (6.9 percentage points higher than the labour force participation rate of urban women), but only 39.5 percent of them are in non-agricultural employment. Some scholars have paid attention to the impact of family responsibilities on the employment of rural left-behind females, and believe that caregiving responsibilities, which are closely related to females, are an important constraint on female development (Phala and Mukonza, 2021). In addition, due to the lower levels of education and the lack of highly technical professional skills, rural women in China are more likely to be engaged in part-time jobs with lower levels of professional skills than in full-time jobs with higher levels of skills, which limits the sustainable development of rural women (Gu et al., 2021).

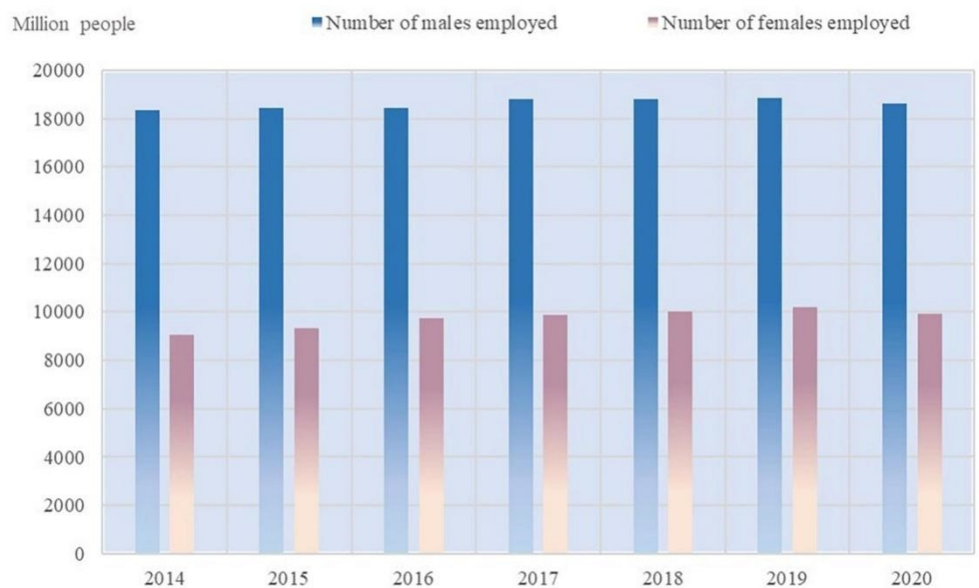


Figure 1. 2014–2020 Rural labor employment in China.

Source: Department of Rural Socio-Economic Survey, National Bureau of Statistics of China (2014–2020).

Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills accumulated by workers in the

process of education, training, practical experience, migration, health care, etc., also known as “non-physical capital” (Wu et al., 2017). Education and training are an important way to enhance the human capital of rural left-behind women, as well as an important form of empowerment for rural left-behind women. With the proposal and implementation of China’s rural revitalization strategy, education and training for rural left-behind women have received more and more attention and emphasis. A number of local governments and organizations have launched relevant education and training projects to improve the quality and capacity of rural women and to promote rural economic development and social progress. These programs usually include skills training, family education, legal literacy, etc., and are designed to help rural left-behind women obtain more employment opportunities, improve the quality of family education, and enhance their legal awareness and self-protection abilities.

Education and training are one of the important ways of empowering women. The goal of empowerment is aimed at trying to help the disadvantaged groups to improve their skills and abilities so that they can take ownership of their own destiny and improve their quality of life (Journal of International Migration and Integration). Currently, research on women’s empowerment is broadly categorized into two types, one is the impact of women’s empowerment on local development, such as the impact of women’s empowerment on local food security (Galiè et al., 2019), and the other is the study of the effectiveness of a particular women’s empowerment measure, i.e., the study of the correlation between the resources and the outcomes, for example, the impact of the development of tourism on women’s empowerment (Qi and Dong, 2018). Academics tend to use quantitative methods to study women’s empowerment, but quantitative methods to study women’s empowerment have drawbacks, such as poor integration of indicators and theories; and a narrow choice of indicators (Gram et al., 2018). In addition, another disadvantage of quantitative research is its inability to explain the process of empowerment and the reasons why resources achieve or fail to achieve the desired outcomes. Therefore, this paper uses the female empowerment theory of Naila Kabeer (1999) (see **Figure 2**) to explore the process of empowering rural left-behind women with education and training through qualitative research.

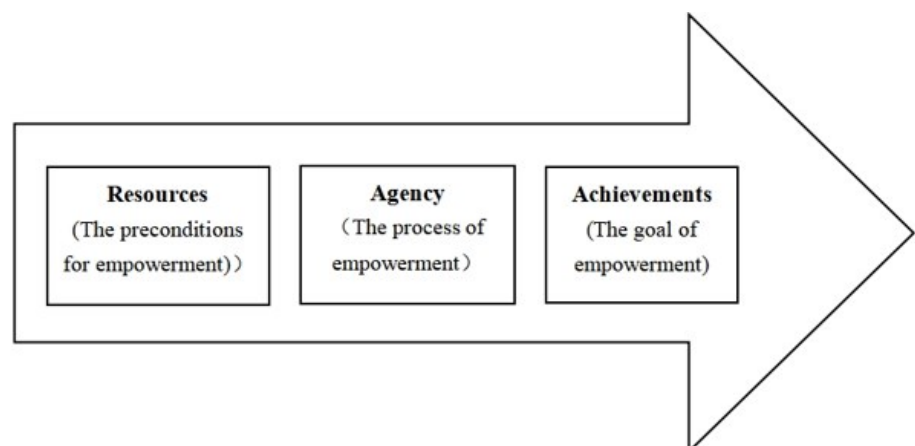


Figure 2. Theoretical model of empowerment.

Lower education and skill levels limit the employment opportunities of rural women who are left behind, so education and training for rural women has become

increasingly important in two main areas: the economic area and family health. In the economic field, rural women's education and training have a significant contribution to the quality and quantity of the women's labour force, the growth of the country's GDP and the growth of national income per capital (Osei and Zhuang, 2020). In the field of family health, the impact of rural women's education is mainly in the areas of reproductive health, mental health, sexual behavioural health and attitudes towards married life (Zubieta et al., 2019).

Despite the obvious benefits of education and training for rural women, researchers have found that there are still some factors that affect the participation of rural left-behind women in education and training programs, such as the level of mental health (Zubieta et al., 2019), and traditional attitudes (Wrigley-Asante and Agandin, 2015). In addition, there are some problems in the education and training process that has been carried out, such as the lack of institutionalization, normalization, small audience proportion, and single content (Ji and Cao, 2022). At present, in the context of rural revitalization, local governments are paying more attention to the education and training of rural left-behind women, but the relevant research is not sufficient, and the research on the influencing factors of rural left-behind women's participation in the education and training programs as well as the problems in the process of education and training is still incomplete. It is therefore necessary to conduct further research and propose targeted improvement strategies to enhance the human capital of rural left-behind women, promote the development of the rural economy and help revitalize the countryside.

3. Research methodology

This is a qualitative study taking place in Henan Province, which is the province with the largest rural population in China. Henan is a large agricultural province in China and also the province with the largest rural population in China, exporting a large amount of labor force, so it is representative for this study. We conducted the study through in-depth interviews and participant observation, with the main target group being rural left-behind women between the ages of 25 and 55. However, in order to fully understand the issue of education and training for rural left-behind women, we interviewed two types of respondents: (1) rural left-behind women who have and have not participated in education and training programs; and (2) village chiefs and education and training program directors.

Table 1 shows the basic information of the three villages studied. The phenomenon of husbands going out to work and wives staying at home is more common in the villages studied, so we interviewed 21 rural left-behind women (17 of whom had participated in the education and training program, and 4 of whom had not) in these three villages. There were three forms of interviews: (1) household interviews led by village chiefs; (2) interviews at the education and training sites; and (3) random interviews in the villages. **Table 2** lists the basic information of the rural left-behind women who participated in the interviews.

Table 1. Basic information of the survey villages.

Village name	Total population	Labour force	Number of floating population	Number of left-behind women
Xinzhuang village	3486	1980	1200	145
Yanglin village	3160	2000+	1000+	100+
Nine du village	2890	1540	1400	80+

Table 2. Basic information on rural left-behind women interviewed.

Number	Age	Level of education	Number of offspring	Annual household income (RMB)	Time of husband leaves (years)	Visits/years	Whether have participated in educational and training programs
1	28	Junior high school	2	80,000	3	5	No
2	34	Junior high school	2	70,000	6	3	Yes
3	36	High school	3	70,000	7	5	No
4	48	Primary school	3	50,000	10	4	Yes
5	44	Primary school	3	50,000	9	3	Yes
6	29	High school	1	90,000	2	6	Yes
7	50	Primary school	3	50,000	15	4	No
8	52	Primary school	3	60,000	10	4	Yes
9	41	Primary school	2	60,000	4	5	Yes
10	32	Junior high school	2	70,000	5	5	No
11	30	Junior high school	2	80,000	3	6	Yes
12	26	High school	1	80,000	2	7	Yes
13	45	Primary school	3	50,000	10	4	No
14	33	Junior high school	2	70,000	5	6	Yes
15	36	Junior high school	2	70,000	4	5	Yes
16	41	Primary school	2	60,000	8	4	Yes
17	48	Primary school	3	90,000	9	5	No
18	45	Primary school	2	60,000	10	6	Yes
19	33	High school	2	90,000	5	7	Yes
20	35	Junior high school	2	100,000	6	6	Yes
21	38	Primary school	2	70,000	9	8	Yes

In order to more accurately explore the problems in the education and training process, we also conducted participatory observation. We participated in the education and training programs in three villages and conducted interviews with program directors and village cadres, aiming to explore the problems in the process of empowering rural left-behind women through education and training programs and to actively explore countermeasures. By improving the human capital of rural left-behind women, this study hopes to contribute to rural economic development and rural revitalization. At the same time, the study also hopes to provide theoretical and practical basis for subsequent research in related fields and to promote the in-depth development of education and training for rural left-behind women.

4. Findings

As the main body of the rural population, the quality of left-behind women affects the overall appearance of the countryside and the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy. Through the thematic analysis of the content of the interviews (**Table 3**), we have further understood the factors affecting the participation of rural left-behind women in education and training programs, as well as the problems that exist in the training process.

Table 3. Thematic analysis.

Category	Theme
Family Responsibility	The factors affecting the participation of women left behind in rural areas in education and training programs
Traditional Concepts	
Economic Income	
Cognition	
Mental health level	
Low level of education	Problems of education and training
Single main body of supply	
Single training method	
Lack of teachers	
Lack of management	
Inadequate teaching facilities	
Mismatch between teaching content and real needs of left-behind women	

Family responsibilities are an important factor limiting the employment and participation in education and training of women left behind in rural areas. Unlike family cultures in Western countries, East Asian family cultures are characterized by strong social ties among family members of multigenerational ancestry (Oh and Lee, 2014). This is especially true in traditional Chinese rural families where three generations often live together. The family relationships resulting from this lifestyle make it inevitable for women to take care of the elderly and children (Ji et al., 2017). Of the 21 rural left-behind women interviewed, 90% of the respondents emphasized that the caregiving responsibility for the family was an important reason for restricting them from going out to work and from participating in education and training programs, which prevented them from being able to escape from the family’s “cage” for a long period of time. This caring responsibility for the family is related to the traditional and unfavourable ideology of the inferiority of women to men. This ideology emphasizes that the main task of women is to raise their children and neglects or even suppresses women’s own development. Men’s social status and level of education are generally higher than women’s, and the lack of investment in women’s human capital is particularly pronounced in rural areas.

Interviewee #13 said: “In our village, especially the older people think that women should stay at home to take care of the children and should not go out to show their faces, husbands work outside to earn money, and wives stay at home to do busy chores is basically a reflection of most of the families in our area.”

Interviewee #10 expressed the same view: “Since I got married I have been staying at home with my children, I see other women working outside and sometimes I want to be like them, but the elders in my family don’t let me go out, they think that women should just do their husband’s logistic work after they get married.”

For those women who have participated in or want to participate in education and training activities, the motivation for participating in or wanting to participate in education and training activities is to obtain higher economic returns in their future development. Due to the backward development of rural areas, the weak industrial base, the weak ability to absorb employment, in order to earn money to support their families, most of the male labour force has to go abroad for employment, women, the elderly, children and some of the old men who are incapable of working or weak working ability to stay in the countryside, in the visits to the three villages can be found in rural youth labour force is scarce, the structure of the family income is single. As a result of these conditions, the economic situation of the families of women left behind in rural areas is generally poor, with their husbands’ incomes from outside work being the main source of family income, and the women left behind usually have no income or only a small portion of their income from low-return agricultural activities. These incomes are mainly used for the family’s daily expenses and for children’s education, and only a small portion of the money is allocated to the left-behind women’s own development.

Interviewee #7: “Although my husband earns quite a lot working outside, he earns money alone and spends it with his family, and in the future he will have to buy a house for his children in the county, so he has to be careful with his budget everywhere. Now that my child is also older, I want to find a job, but I don’t know what I can do.”

Interviewee #3: “I heard that someone in my village is working as a sister-in-law in the city, earning quite a lot a month. She has participated in this training organized by the village committee before, but I didn’t go to the training because my child was too young to be away from me at that time. Now if there are still such trainings, I will go.”

However, there are also some left-behind women who have a wrong perception of education and training, treating it as simple literacy and technical training and believing it to be of little use. Obviously, these perceptions overlook the role of education and training in raising ideological awareness and satisfying spiritual needs, as well as the future benefits of continuing education and the relationship between investment and return. Education and training not only play an important role in the future development of individuals, but also in the strategy of rural revitalization. These misconceptions about education and training are important factors that lead to their lack of participation in education and training activities. In addition, we also analysed that rural left-behind women can be found in the interviews that they generally have some mental health problems and suffer from greater psychological pressure, such as family economic pressure, separation of husband and wife, and children’s education. These pressures may make them resistant and anxious about participating in education and training programs, affecting their willingness to participate.

Through interviews with rural left-behind women who have participated in education and training programs, as well as with relevant officials and village cadres,

and in conjunction with our findings from participatory observation in the field, this paper summarizes the problems in the process of empowering rural left-behind women through education and training. Although women's education has now been prioritized as a global priority for human rights and quality of life improvement, and governments as well as many social activists have made unremitting efforts to this end, women's education in many countries is still lagging far behind men's education, and some of them do not even reach the basic education level (Saha et al., 2018). The lower level of education has also become an obstacle to their participation in education and training programs, making it difficult for them to concentrate and understand what they are being taught during the training process, and many left-behind women have become intimidated.

During our interviews with those responsible for training, we found that at present, education and training programs for left-behind women in China are mainly sponsored by the government, with the collaboration of the relevant government departments, and with little participation by enterprises, schools, social organizations and individual subjects, so that there is a single supplying body. This is because education and training in rural China is a public welfare curriculum activity, which determines the absence of non-profit organizations in rural education and training. At the same time, it is observed that most of the training methods are based on face-to-face lectures by teachers or experts, supplemented by online lectures, which is relatively single and lacks diversified teaching. The single supplying body and training method limit the development of education and training.

The shortage of teachers is also an important problem in the education and training process in rural areas. At present, most of the teachers for the education and training of rural women left behind are selected on an ad hoc basis from government units and departments, with fewer specialists or teachers from vocational and technical schools and colleges and universities participating, and the composition of the teaching staff is unstable. Secondly, the trainers often have more theoretical knowledge but less practical experience; they only give simple theoretical explanations of the content of the training, but do not provide practical guidance. However, most of the rural women have a low level of education, so they can only learn theoretical knowledge by rote, and are unable to realize the breakthrough of learning by example, and thus are unable to better apply the theoretical knowledge they have learned into practice. In addition, due to the lack of management of education and training for rural left-behind women, existing education and training resources have not been effectively integrated, nor have they been able to attract outside resources, resulting in poor education and training results and a lack of systematic and long-term education and training for rural left-behind women.

Education and training for women left behind in rural areas focuses mainly on training in farming skills. Because of the departure of young men, the rural agricultural workforce has been greatly reduced, so the Government's education and training efforts are aimed at training left-behind women in rural areas to become the mainstay of a new type of agriculture and to help revitalize the countryside, and there is a lack of training on other issues of concern to rural women. Of the interviewees, 15 left-behind women have participated in education and training activities organized by the government. The content of the training included agricultural knowledge, cooking and

so on, but it was generally reflected that the proportion of training in agricultural knowledge was heavily weighted. During the interviews, it was found that the proportion of their demand for life-related content such as children's education, health knowledge, legal knowledge, and cooking and nutrition has increased, with children's education and health knowledge in particular being the most important. This indicates that improving the quality of family life will become a new demand for rural women's training in the future.

Respondent #9: "Nowadays, most of the training is about agriculture, which we actually don't want to learn because most of the land is contracted out now and we don't farm. It's more like we want to focus on some other training for employment positions, which is also available, but it's less."

In addition, the current education and training programs are mostly simple, one-time introductory training, so that the rural women who participate in the education and training programs do not learn substantive knowledge, much less practical skills, and even have more experience and knowledge than the education and training programs and are more practical. Moreover, there is a lack of follow-up training and evaluation of learning effects. According to the results of the interviews, the author found that the existing education and training for rural women can seldom provide timely and effective feedback on the learning effect of the learners. As they are unable to detect their own learning effects, rural women's enthusiasm and initiative in participating in education and training are greatly dampened, and they are unable to gain the joy of learning success, thus easily generating negative learning emotions and behaviours, which is not conducive to the maintenance of learning activities.

In terms of hardware facilities, with the modernization of education, textbooks are no longer the only curricular resources, and for rural left-behind women with a weak cultural foundation, it is difficult to achieve ideal teaching results with a single, boring book teaching, but due to the impact of the economic conditions in rural areas, there is a lack of modern teaching equipment such as multimedia and other facilities. The author observed that none of the three villages has a township cultural station or library, and education and training activities are mainly carried out in the village office on an ad hoc basis, with poor equipment. Although in recent years the Chinese government has paid increasing attention to the education and training of rural women, and has implemented various education and training programs as well as supporting promotional programs. However, the promotion of these training programs has not brought about a significant increase in the educational level of rural women, and there are still problems with both the development of rural women and education and training, which need to be addressed by the various departments.

5. Conclusion

In the previous section, we analysed the factors influencing rural left-behind women's participation in education and training in China, as well as the problems that exist. In order to vigorously improve the human capital of rural left-behind women and achieve the goal of empowering left-behind women and helping to revitalize the countryside, we further propose some strategies to address them.

The development of education and training for rural left-behind women requires

that the role of all sectors of society be brought into full play. The restrictions of traditional concepts and ideas are an important obstacle to the advancement of education and training for rural women in China; in order to give full play to the role of rural left-behind women in the revitalization of the countryside, it is essential that they change their concepts and take the initiative to participate in education and training, so that the overall quality of the countryside is qualitatively upgraded. For this reason, the State can establish and improve corresponding laws and regulations, policy documents and other publicity, highlighting the importance of culture and education from a policy perspective; secondly, governments at all levels can link up with village cadres to strengthen the publicity of culture and education, and make full use of television, radio, the Internet and other means to promote the idea of equality between men and women through multiple channels and in many ways, so as to change the traditional gender concepts of the countryside.

The Government should also establish a sound management mechanism for the education and training of rural left-behind women, and set up a new socialized rural left-behind women's training system that is government-led, market-oriented, multifaceted and open to operation. In response to the current situation of left-behind women's training failing to meet actual demand, it should focus on incorporating social skills training institutions into the government's vocational skills training sites, and standardize their training instructors, content and standards. Thus, the scale of training for rural left-behind women will be rapidly expanded, the overall quality of rural areas will be improved, and the role of rural left-behind women in rural revitalization will be better utilized. In terms of the main body of education supply, the Women's Federation can join forces with local governments to actively introduce external resources. For example, they can support the participation of higher vocational schools, scientific research institutions, enterprises and social training institutions in the education and training of rural women, so as to enrich the supply of education and training, broaden the scope of the audience for education and training, and increase the persuasive power and influence of education and training work.

Rural left-behind women have a variety of needs for vocational education and training content, including skills for earning a living outside the home, skills for agricultural production, and the ability to educate their children, etc., so vocational education and training institutions must develop rich training content in accordance with the conditions and different needs of rural left-behind women. At the same time, they should adopt different training methods according to the different ages and cultural levels of the women left behind, and provide diversified training methods, so as to "teach according to the needs of each individual" and improve the effectiveness of education and training. The forms of training should be diversified to meet different needs. On the one hand, the Internet can be used to provide theoretical training to rural women in the interpretation of the policies of the National Rural Revitalization Strategy and family education methods, so that they can learn independently according to their own needs; on the other hand, more on-site observation and on-site learning can be organized in education and training, so that they can see more, do more, and effectively improve the effectiveness of their training and enhance their practical skills.

Left-behind women in rural areas are responsible for agricultural production, family upbringing and support, and their quality of thought and level of education

determine, to a certain extent, the development of their own resources and the development of the rural economy. Increasing the education and training of rural left-behind women has a broad and far-reaching significance for their own development, family harmony and rural social development. Therefore, based on the background of rural revitalization, this paper carries out a research on the education and training of rural left-behind women. However, this paper is a qualitative study, and there are some limitations in the sample size and research methods. In future research, we can combine quantitative research methods to expand the sample size and better utilize relevant theoretical models for further research.

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