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The Complex Realities of Empowerment and Vulnerability of Chinese Female Factory Workers: A literature review on the impact of migration on Chinese female factory workers

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Abstract:

This article explores the complex realities of empowerment and vulnerability among Chinese female factory workers in the context of rural-to-urban migration. The study focuses on female migrants who embody the identities of laborers, rural migrants, and daughters, each of which presents unique challenges in their integration into urban society. Methodologically, the study relies on a comprehensive literature review of existing ethnographies, case studies, and comparative research to understand these women's lived experiences. It examines the dual impact of migration on these women. On one hand, migration offers opportunities for economic independence, enhanced agency, and the possibility of escaping patriarchal control. On the other hand, it exposes them to new forms of exploitation and marginalization within both the capitalist labor system and the urban social structure. The literature review also informs the future research to consider emerging industries and the self-perceptions of marginalization among female migrant workers and sheds light on policies that better support their integration and empowerment.

Keywords: Rural-urban Migration; Feminism; Capitalism; Post-socialist Society.

1. Introduction

Since the late 20th century, China's rapid economic development has led to significant economic disparities, with cities surging ahead and leaving rural areas behind. This gap has fueled an unprecedented wave of rural-to-urban migration, as ample job opportunities have been created in cities, particularly in manufacturing industries. Hukou system is a household registration system, which defines the citizenship as well as the eligibility for social resources. Rural migrant workers refer to migrants with rural Hukou who live and work in the city. Consequently, they are often described as "marginalized group", who are

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excluded from the public service system, including social security, education, housing, health care, etc. The focus of this article, female factory workers, falls into this broad category.

To understand the female factory workers, it is crucial to recognize their unique positionality in contemporary society. They embody three identities simultaneously, with each representing distinct integration obstacles. First, as rural migrants in large metropolis, they are often systematically excluded from accessing social services and socially excluded by local residents [1]. Second, as women in a patriarchal society, their gender identity affects both their roles in the workplace and their expected social roles as daughters and wives [2,3]. Finally, their identity as labors adds a capitalist dimension to the analysis, with studies often highlighting how they are regulated to facilitate management and increase productivity [4,5].

Many existing studies on rural-urban migration focus on its consequences, specifically the social and economic integration of newly arrived migrants [2,6-8]. Pun's ethnography was groundbreaking in exploring the migration experiences of female factory workers [5]. More recent research has expanded to explore other career paths for female migrants, including livestreaming, nail salons, and other emerging industries [9].

Some studies suggest that the migration has benefitted female factory workers by liberating them from patriarchal families, enhancing their individual agency, and giving them autonomy to choose their own marital partners [9,10]. However, some others argue that female factory workers remain victims of capitalism and patriarchy, with their life choices confined by these overall structures [5,11]. This article will be a literature review on the current academic debate: whether becoming migrant factory workers empowers the female factory workers or exploits them.

By examining the debate surrounding their lived experiences, this study will explore the structural challenges they face. Looking at societal and institutional factors, it also aims to inform public policy reform that advocates for a more inclusive environment for these workers.

2. Emergence of the Issue and Socio-economic Context

2.1 The Emerging Research Focus

Research on female factory workers has evolved over time. Most studies fall into two categories: the push-and-pull factors of migration and the consequences of migration.

Regarding reasons for migration, Pun suggested that unmarried females in rural areas often migrate to escape marriage within patriarchal families [1]. Other scholars, such as Wright, analyzed the economic conditions and shifting feminist perspectives that push women to migrate [12]. Once migration occurs, the lived experiences of female migrant workers become an interest for many researchers. A recurring theme is the difficulty of integration, with the "Hukou" system acting as a major barrier, leading to their economic, social, and cultural exclusion from urban residents. Simultaneously, female migrants actively adapt to urban environments using various techniques. Wang & Fan found that those who speak the local dialect and possess financial resources for self-employment are more likely to adapt socially and culturally and develop a sense of belongingness in the city [7].

Migration has also exposed rural female migrants to more life choices and economic independence. Their lifestyles and values often shift, with some constructing new identities and viewing themselves as "modern girls". As they internalize the urban culture, their familial and marital perspectives also evolve, in a way that challenges the traditional patriarchal views held by their parents. Both the urban environment and their own active self-transformation make migration a liberating process that opens new opportunities [9].

However, there is a more critical perspective that challenges the positive view of migration. Rather than escaping patriarchy, female migrants find themselves trapped in a system where capitalism and patriarchy are deeply intertwined, exploiting them. Pun's ethnography, grounded in both feminist and capitalist perspectives, provides a vital empirical foundation for this argument [1].

In cities, exclusion and discrimination have undermined the mental health of female migrants [7,13,14]. Systematic exclusion from state policies denies them access to social services and implicitly defines their inferior citizen status. Inferiority can be perceived in each aspect of their daily life. It forces them to accept lower-paying jobs without social security [11]. Additionally, in the marriage market, they may seek local partners for housing security but face disadvantages [9]. What's more, social exclusion plays a significant role in various aspects of their life, from workplace interactions to shopping or socializing in public spaces [15]. In factories, managers often label them as lazy, incompetent, or unfit for modern technology. In their everyday lives, they face prejudice from local residents, who tend to view them as troublemakers.

Moreover, many female migrants are expected to return home after marriage, and researchers have investigated the increasing dropout rate among factory workers. It can be attributed this to the inability of factory work to provide stability and a permanent settlement. Chuang, however,

argued that while female workers are needed for global production, families often still prioritize sending high-income men into migration, while daughters are expected to return home to care for their parents [11].

2.2 Social Transformation in Post-socialist China

All of this unfolds amid broader social changes in contemporary China. Chinese society is transitioning from "a socialist state to a developmentalist state" [6], a shift driven primarily by economic growth. Following the Maoist era, the state adopted an open-door policy, embracing an export-oriented economic strategy. This policy involved reducing trade barriers in southern coastal cities, such as Shenzhen, and designating them as special economic zones (SEZs). The focus shifted from self-sustained agriculture to labor-intensive industrial production. By leveraging globalization and attracting foreign investment, the state invited global capitalist modes of production, which, in turn, created a demand for a large supply of inexpensive labor in these zones.

Rural-to-urban migration has transformed the nature of labor in China, shifting from socialist labor to rural migrant labor [16]. During the Maoist period, job assignments were centrally planned, with people allocated to specific positions upon graduating from school, and job mobility was limited. This low level of geographic mobility minimized migration within the country. In the 1950s, the hukou (household registration) system was implemented to further restrict mobility. However, with rapid economic growth and social change, a massive influx of rural labor has migrated to cities, typically without obtaining urban hukou. This registration status excludes them from all types of social services that are enjoyed by local residents, including health care, social security, and housing [6].

Such marginalized status is highly attractive to multinational companies. Because of the significant labor surplus, disadvantaged education background, and strong willingness to earn money, migrants are more than willing to tolerate the "jobs that are dirty, dangerous, exploitative, physically demanding, and requiring long hours" [17]. Thus, by maintaining an institutional order, the state facilitates labor-intensive industrialization and urban development at a low cost [6].

2.3 Feminism in China

Simultaneously, there is also a shift in state's attitudes towards gender equality agenda. During the Maoist era (1949-1976), the slogan "Women hold up half of the sky" reflects the ideology which values women as a key labor force. The women labor force participation rate was unprecedently high during that period, though they remained at lower status in the cultural traditions. When Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came into power in 1949, it sought to create a classless and egalitarian society by abolishing the private capital. This social context motivates the gender equality agenda [17]. All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) was founded to promote women's political, legal, and economic rights.

However, the post-Mao state seemed to retreat from such agenda [6]. In 1978, the CCP and the state has decided to shift focus to economic modernization and marketization, moving away from Maoist policies of public ownership and centralized job assignments. Class egalitarianism gave way to national development, often at the expense of increasing class stratification [17]. Deng Xiaoping's statement, "Let some people get rich first", encapsulated this new direction.

On the gender front, marketization and reform have led to a sexualization of public discourse, characterized by the naturalization of gender differences. Global capitalist forces manipulate female bodies to fit labor demands, reinforcing patriarchal structures. The production process thrives on such a system, which positions women as lower-paid workers suited for delicate, repetitive tasks over long hours, with patriarchal management ensuring control. This results in a highly gendered division of labor.

3. Empowerment of Female Factory Workers

Some studies argue that internal migration from rural to urban areas has benefited young female factory workers. While acknowledging certain constraints related to their rural origins, low socio-economic status, and lack of education, these studies have highlighted the positive effects of migration, mainly stemming from escaping from patriarchal control in the original families. I have categorized the advantages of migration into three major themes, which I will explore separately.

3.1 Choosing Career Paths and Gaining Economic Independence

First of all, in terms of their work as labors, working in a factor allows these women to develop a new sense of individual agency, which refers to the ability to act according to one's own willingness. Specifically, pursing their own career has helped them gain economic independence and expanding their labor market choices, which helped to maintain their livelihood. This sense of agency is especially evident among the new generations of female workers, usually in their 20s, who migrated to urban centers

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more recently. Younger generation has more access to the external information and are exposed to a wider range of life choices compared with older generations. Instead of working in the factory, they also dive into service industries, like clerical and retails, and even the newly emerged livestreaming industry to become microcelebrities. Nonetheless, these jobs may also require them to capitalize their sexuality, femininity, and vitality [18].

This better-informed perspective can potentially change the way they approach their jobs. Lang Ma & Jacobs analyzed from developmental system perspective, which argues that individuals are not passive recipients of the environmental changes, but rather they actively respond to them by creating changes to their own life trajectories [10]. Working towards well-being of their family and career expectations, the participants are portrayed as more "ambitious, aspirational and optimistic" than their previous counterparts. They manifest their personal agency through "selecting work in particular factories, optimizing their employment experiences, and compensating for losses". However, To & Tam conducted quantitative research about generational differences on work values, and it was found there are no generational differences in work values (relative importance assigned to different aspect of the work) between younger and older generations [19]. They also found that older generations felt more satisfied with the job rewards that they received. In conclusion, while, admittedly, there is transition in some aspects of attitudes across generations, the portrayal of younger generation as more ambitious and aspiration is still under debate.

3.2 Construction of Urban Identities

Second, migrating from rural origins to urban environment, their identity also shifts as a result of social construct and their own willingness to re-shape a new identity. They are indeed not only excluded from the social services available to local residents, but also experience social exclusion. Socially considered by local residents of the cities as rural labors who are under-paid, outsiders, less-educated, and low "suzhi" (less civilized). However, they actively reshape their identity through various strategies, hoping to transition from rural peasants to modern girls. From their observation of the media, their peers, and urban girls, they have learned how to dress fashionably in certain style and erase the visual markers of rusticity. Such signs of rusticity are not only written on body, but are also practiced in language, behaviors, and values [9].

One approach adopted to construct their new identity and is changing their outlook through consumption in the urban field. Pun (2005) specified two different social identities inside and outside the workplace: "Within the production field, they are constructed as cheap, demeaned, inferior 'producing subject'". Simultaneously, they strive to reconstruct their identity as respected and valuable "consuming subject" in the consumption field. By purchasing all kinds of fashionable clothes, cosmetics, and accessories, they want to re-invent themselves and escape from the labelled identity of rural migrants. Gaetano also pointed out that they reject rural identity and its implications by embracing a much more urbanized outlook [9]. By doing so, the female workers can avoid the overt judgement that are expressed explicitly in public as well as experience enhanced level of self-esteem and confidence. This clearly manifests their strong desire for respect, as well as their efforts to achieve the imagined change.

3.3 Autonomy in Family Relationships and Marital Choices

Finally, in terms of family dynamics, the girls are able to distance themselves from their original families. Patriarchal families often impose filial piety on daughters, including "providing material and emotional support to parents, and remaining obedient even when they are wrong" [3]. This obedience extends to major life decisions, applying to the choice of marital partners and engagement in courtship.

When it comes to selecting marital partners, traditional patriarchal families often expect daughters to marry someone geographically close, while disapproving of partners from outside the province. This preference is driven by the desire to maintain a close-knit kinship social network and daughters' personal care to aging parents. Unmarried youths in rural areas are usually introduced to one another by relatives or matchmakers. This form of introduction often prioritizes parental approval rather than romantic feelings. Marriage is more of a commitment, "an institution of economic and social partnership between families and kinship groups" [2], rather than a romantic relationship centered on personal desires. After marriage, the expectation of filial responsibility continues. Financially, this obligation is met through dowries exchanged and subsequent remittances sent from the daughter's in-laws. Plus, married daughters are often seen as vital sources of caregiving for their parents, both physically and emotionally [9].

However, by leaving rural areas, female factory workers can temporarily escape the patriarchal networks that have long constrained them, gaining more autonomy in their marital choices. For unmarried females, exposure to a broader pool of men and urban marriage values expands their options.

First, while geographic proximity to their hometown remains a consideration when choosing partners, it is no

longer a primary constraint. According to Gaetano, two key factors influence their choices: "conditions" and "feelings" [9]. "Conditions" typically refer to socio-economic background, family origins, savings, household registration status, occupation, etc. A man with favorable "conditions" is seen as better at fulfilling the role of family provider. As a result, female workers naturally rule out rural men lacking migration experience or non-agricultural employment as potential partners. In addition to that, women also prioritize romantic "feelings", a factor traditionally overlooked in rural marriages. This demonstrates their desire for both emotional and pragmatic fulfillment in a future husband. In this way, exposure to the urban environment reshapes their choices, allowing them to challenge parental authority by removing geographical restrictions and emphasizing personal choice over family approval. The shift in marriage value illustrates a growing sense of self-worth and aspirations for a higher quality of life post-marriage. After marriage, women who freely choose their spouses bypass the customary exchange of betrothal money and gifts. They are also found to have greater control over important family decisions and receive more respect from their husbands' families [9].

4. Vulnerability of Female Factory Workers

4.1 Exploitation of the Capitalist Factory

While female workers have gained some economic independence through factory work, their autonomy remains limited. Pun describes them as trapped in a web that intertwines capitalist forces, transnational capital, and patriarchal systems [15].

Speaking of career opportunities, a Marxist feminist explanation of gender inequality suggests that by demeaning women's abilities and excluding them from learning skills and technology, bosses maintain them as a cheap, exploitable reserve of labor force. In the factory, jobs are highly gendered. Most managerial positions are held by men, while women are relegated to the factory floor [4]. The work is divided into repetitive, meaningless tasks, so that it is impossible for female workers to acquire new skills or technical knowledge.

Conducted through everyday work, capitalist factories seek to transform rural female bodies into highly controllable, productive machines that fit the capitalist model. As Pun suggests, transnational factories expect the same characteristics from female workers that Chinese patriarchal culture does: a homogeneous construction of slim bodies, nimble fingers, shy demeanor, and a hardworking nature [15]. In the capitalist system, workers are expected to be competitive and achievement-oriented, which drives their self-discipline. The ideology of global capitalism is that hard work is the only way to make money. Workers internalize the idea that "time is money, efficiency is life. [16]" Incentives like bonuses and overtime pay push female workers to meticulously manage their time, as their primary short-term goal in the city is to exchange labor for money.

However, rebellion emerges alongside this oppression. Feminist view argues that female workers often resist informally and develop subtle, everyday strategies of resistance. For example, they may collectively slow down the production line, letting goods to pile up to gain brief moments of rest. Another form of rebellion is playing radio broadcasts, which are typically forbidden by rules, to relieve the stress of monotonous work. Pun identifies such collective violations of rules as a form of collective rebellion, as they leave management powerless and represent the workers' greatest form of control within the factory system [5]. Yet, despite these small acts of defiance, the limited control over their work and bodies can hardly be considered liberating.

In the power dynamics of the factory, labor is always subject to exploitation by capitalists. Factories not only reshape female bodies to suit production processes but also deliberately exclude them from managerial or technical roles, reducing their identities to mere labor forces.

4.2 Rural Migrant Identity: Marginalization due to Rural Origin

Identity differences among female migrant workers are perceived both inside the workplace and in their social lives outside of it. Within the workplace, the identity of being a former farmer is seen as incompatible with the demands of a capitalist society. Rural youth are often perceived as remnants of a socialist past and are stereotyped as lazy and unmotivated. Factories actively engage in transforming their identities from former farmers to productive capitalist workers.

Femininity and rurality are also deeply intertwined. Lee compares how two factories in Shenzhen and Hong Kong construct and exploit the femininity of female workers. In Shenzhen, localistic despotism constructs the identity of "maiden workers", emphasizing their "single status, immaturity, imminent marriage, and consequent short-term commitment to the factory" [4]. This identity enables foremen from the same areas to exert kin-based control and also legitimizes lower pay and lower positions for women due to their anticipated departure after marriage [11]. Another approach is through familial hegemony,

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where the identity of "matron workers" is constructed to prioritize family responsibilities, thereby denying their individuality. By allowing some flexibility for matron workers to attend to family matters, factories motivate them to self-police and adhere to factory rules. In both cases, a gendered organizational hierarchy is evident, with managers using different gendered management strategies to target either maiden or matron workers.

Outside the workplace, female migrant workers face social exclusion. Many attempt to construct a new identity through consumer behavior to shed their rural markers. However, it is questionable whether one can achieve equality, freedom, and respect merely by altering physical appearances and indulging in consumerism. These attempts often fail to fundamentally change the realities of inequality and discrimination, nor can they completely conceal their rural origins. For young female migrants, their consumption is limited by their low income and the perception of others, who often see their tastes as cheap and awkward imitations of urban trends [5]. Furthermore, they are likely to become ensnared by the consumerist culture of the metropolis. Neoliberal discourse tells them they are incomplete without certain products, and that through purchasing behaviors, they can transform into "modern girls" and integrate into urban culture. The result is often an "in-between" identity, where they must constantly negotiate between their desire to fit into urban environments and the inescapable reality of their rural heritage [20].

4.3 Filial Responsibility

The romantic ideal of marriage often meets the harsh realities of a highly commercialized marriage market, resulting in a form of marriage segregation. When it comes to choosing marital partners, unmarried female workers often focus on "conditions". Many aim to marry local city residents with stable jobs, as this promises a more secure future, encompassing house purchasing permits, children's education, and overall life stability. This aspiration is often referred to as "marrying up", a strategy for achieving upward mobility through marriage. However, the ideal of "marrying up" is rarely realized. In reality, marriages between rural migrants are far more common than those between rural women and local men [21]. A significant barrier is the discrimination faced due to their rural backgrounds. When local families learn of a rural bride's humble origins, they often suspect her of having mercenary motives, such as securing a house or bridal gifts. This prejudice severely limits rural brides' choices in the urban marriage market, often leading them to partner with men who are older, disabled, unemployed, or otherwise disadvantaged [9].

In response to parental control, two common strategies emerge among these women: elopement and pregnancy. Elopement is often chosen when a woman is determined to stay with her boyfriend or spouse to compel her parents' consent. However, by doing so, she also experiences heightened pressure from both her family and her boyfriend and makes herself more isolated from original social networks and more dependent on man, thus more vulnerable. Pregnancy is a more complex case. It is used both as a means to secure parental consent and as a tool in negotiating betrothal gifts between families. Interestingly, in some cases, women choose to become pregnant to force their parents to approve the marriage; in other instances, they might threaten abortion to pressure their spouse into providing sufficient bridal gifts. Thus, the decision of whether or not to give birth becomes less about personal choice and more about utilizing it as a tool to gain permission, secure marriage, or obtain bridal money.

Shortly after marrying, women who migrate before marriage are expected to withdraw from the workforce, a process Chuang describes as the domestication of women [11]. Additionally, these women find themselves in a challenging situation, as they are required to serve their husband's family while also fulfilling their filial duties to their own parents. This dual expectation often leaves them feeling like "double-outsiders", fully belonging to neither family.

5. Conclusion

This literature review on the influence of migration on female factory workers examined three key identities--labors, rural migrants, and daughters. Scholars who highlight the positive aspects of migration often argue that migration empowers them by providing employment opportunities, increasing bargaining powers within family, and fostering a stronger sense of individuality through constructing new identities. Migration allows these women to escape from patriarchal control and experience a greater sense of self-worth and autonomy. On the other hand, counterarguments perceive migration as another form of exploitation, one that intertwines capitalism and feminism. Nevertheless, while these perspectives may differ, it is rare for scholars to entirely reject the opposing view. Most acknowledge that migration has both empowering and exploitative elements to varying degrees.

To further explore the experiences of new generations of female migrant workers, future research could focus on those employed in emerging industries. The rapid development of the internet and the expansion of the service sector have created new job opportunities that differ significantly from those in traditional manufacturing. Addi-

tionally, the concept of marginalization is largely defined by academics, yet the self-perception of marginalization among female workers themselves is underrepresented. Future studies could investigate how female workers perceive their own experiences of marginalization.

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