

Empowering Women in Rural China: Redefining Roles and Reducing Gender Divides Through Online Selling in Family Farming

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Abstract: This research investigates the emerging role of women in online selling for family farming in rural China, examining their contributions, the challenges they face, and the societal perceptions surrounding their involvement. Existing research has revealed the negative impact of gender stereotypes on women's involvement in agriculture and has also predicted the potential of e-commerce to disrupt traditional gender roles. However, it highlights that the impact of e-commerce on women's labor in rural areas may not automatically alter the existing power dynamics. Through nine interviews, the study reveals that women actively generate and implement the idea of online selling for their families, resulting in improved commercial success for their farms. However, their participation requires significant effort and dedication as they juggle online selling alongside their existing full-time jobs. The mental strain of this additional workload, combined with the demanding nature of the online selling platform, underscores the resilience and determination of these women. Despite their valuable contributions, family members often disregard personal gains and downplay their involvement as a family benefit rather than an individual pursuit, prioritizing traditional agricultural activities like planting. Moreover, they perceive success in online selling as an inherent quality of being a woman, rather than recognizing the acquired skills and expertise necessary for effective marketing and sales.

Keywords: women empowerment, family farming, rural China, traditional gender roles, gender inequality

1. Introduction

With the emergence and rapid development of digital technology, a fundamental change has occurred around the world in agriculture. Digital agriculture solutions, including prescriptive fertilizer programs and e-commerce, help struggling farmers, improve economic situations, and benefit the planet [1]. From a macro perspective, researchers have examined the financial impact of e-commerce on agricultural firms and markets. For example, it has been posited that e-commerce can help agricultural firms integrate the production, supply, and marketing of agricultural products, shorten the circulation link, expand the agricultural chain's value, and increase market competitiveness [2].

However, the impact of e-commerce on the minority group of farming categories, family farms, has been neglected. Although family farms account for only 0.2% of China's total agricultural households [3], they have proven to be the most efficient mode of agricultural production [4][5]. Additionally, 35% of China's population depends on agriculture for a living [6]. As of April 2020, rural China had over 13 million online shops, with live streaming farm product sales surpassing 4 million sessions. The increasing availability of online shops and live streaming has resulted in a 31% increase in farm product sales, indicating that more families are turning to e-commerce as a means of selling their products [7]. This shift may also be changing the traditional dynamics within families, as members may take on new roles in managing and promoting the online business.

Importantly, e-commerce could potentially impact the gender dynamics and roles of women within family farming. In the past three decades, the female share of the agricultural labor force has increased in China. Moreover, rural women take on a larger labor burden than men in unpaid household responsibilities, including preparing food and collecting fuel and water. Despite the increasing participation of women in agriculture in China, female farmers face several limitations [8]. They are often excluded from financial decisions, denied opportunities for education, and face challenges in balancing agricultural work with family caretaking [9]. Women's exclusion from farming can have real consequences for the overall economy and social well-being, such as lower productivity and reduced agricultural output, which in turn can have negative impacts on food security [10].

Therefore, the adoption of e-commerce on family farms could potentially provide women with new income-generating opportunities and increase their participation in agriculture. For this reason, it is vital to understand whether and how e-commerce is reshaping women's roles in farming, not only to reduce the potential impact on global food security but also to provide women with new income-generating opportunities and increase their participation in agriculture. Consequently, research is needed to explore the different impacts of e-commerce adoption characterized by online purchases and sales on women's roles in family farming in China. Thus, this study uses interviews with female family farm members to explore the impact and change of e-commerce on their lives, status, and power.

The methodology employed in this qualitative study involved conducting online interviews with eight daughters from eight different family farming households in China. These interviews were analyzed using a comparative approach to identify similarities and differences in the participants' responses. The participants were identified through an extensive search on China's social media platform Xiaohongshu, focusing on those who were involved in assisting their parents in selling self-planted fruits. While acknowledging the limited sample size, this research offers valuable insights into the experiences of women in family farming and the potential impact of e-commerce on gender dynamics in this domain.

The research findings demonstrate the transformative role of women in online selling for their families and its impact on farm success. These women actively initiated the idea of online selling, with one person overseeing the process, resulting in improved sales. However, their involvement in this demanding work, alongside full-time jobs, highlights their dedication and the mental strain they endure. Nevertheless, their increased involvement in online selling has not translated into enhanced decision-making or a change in perceived status within the family. Despite women's efforts, family members often undervalue their contributions, prioritizing planting over selling. The participants themselves perceive their work as a family benefit rather than a personal one, finding the notion of personal gain amusing as they consider it their duty to contribute without expecting individual rewards. They attribute their success in selling to their gender, viewing women as naturally skilled in this domain. Women's contributions are downplayed, and traditional agricultural activities remain the focus. These findings emphasize the need for a comprehensive understanding of

women's roles and challenges to empower them and foster recognition within family farming contexts.

2. Literature Review

In family farms, family dynamics and gender roles have a significant impact on women's participation. The issue of gender roles and power dynamics in family farms is a complex one, and it has important implications for women's participation in agriculture and their overall well-being. As Whatmore argues, gender dynamics are not only shaped by social norms and cultural values but are also reproduced through everyday practices in the family. This means that women's subordination in family farms is not only a result of gender stereotypes but also of power relations that are in favor of men [11]. For example, if men in the family make decisions about farming practices without consulting women, this reinforces the power dynamic in which men have control over decision-making and women's contributions are undervalued.

Moreover, research studies have shown that gender norms and stereotypes often limit women's participation in agriculture training programs, which can have a negative impact on their livelihoods and their ability to contribute to the family's income. For example, the study conducted in Malawi highlights the fact that men's perceptions of themselves as household heads and primary providers may act as barriers to women's participation in training programs [11]. This reinforces the traditional gender roles and reinforces women's subordination, as women are limited to secondary roles such as housekeeping and childcare, while men take on primary roles in farming activities.

In order to address the issues related to gender roles and power dynamics in family farms, it is necessary to challenge traditional gender norms and power relations within the family [12]. Scholars have pointed out that e-commerce has the potential to disrupt traditional gender roles and provide opportunities for women in agriculture. According to Supra Singh, female members of farming families have a higher level of education compared to men; however, due to gender norms in agriculture, women are often burdened with more household responsibilities. This situation has inadvertently led to women in family farms becoming pioneers in internet usage, developing more fluent skills in the process [13]. These women are therefore in a unique position to leverage e-commerce platforms and participate in agricultural trade, potentially leading to greater economic empowerment and gender equality, suggesting that e-commerce can serve as a powerful tool to challenge gender inequality in agriculture and promote women's economic empowerment. In particular, Yu and Cui found that in China, e-commerce platforms provided rural women with greater access to markets, enabling them to expand their businesses beyond their local communities [14]. This in turn generated income and contributed to the economic development of their regions. Additionally, research highlighted that e-commerce can provide women with greater control over their businesses and finances, which can enhance their decision-making power and improve their bargaining position [15].

However, the impact of ecommerce on women's labor in rural areas may not necessarily change the power dynamics, Yan has shown that female farmers are currently less aware of their economic rights in rural China than male farmers. This lack of awareness may lead to situations where women are doing more work but not receiving credit, highlighting the need for education, policy propaganda, and economic and social development to enhance their awareness of women's rights [13]. Therefore, it is important to explore how ecommerce centered on platforms such as Xiaohongshu can reduce gender divides and empower women in family farms, especially discovering how the power dynamic of daughters from such families can get improved.

3. Methods

This research project aims to investigate the potential of digital farming in reducing gender divides in agriculture by examining the effects of e-commerce adoption on women's roles in family farming in China. A qualitative research design was utilized to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of female family farmers. Participants were identified through a rigorous search on Xiaohongshu, a popular social media platform in China. The search was conducted by identifying posts where individuals mentioned assisting their parents in selling self-planted fruits. Participants were then invited via direct messaging, and their willingness to participate in an interview was sought. 24 qualified people were messaged and 9 participants from 8 family farming families agreed to participate. The sample size was determined based on the availability of participants and the feasibility of conducting the interviews within the time frame of the study.

The recruitment of participants through Xiaohongshu was a suitable approach for this study due to the platform's user demographics. The majority of Xiaohongshu's active users are within the younger age range of 18 to 34 years old, accounting for 83.31% of the user base, which perfectly matches with the researcher's age range of the subjects. Furthermore, a high percentage of users on this platform are female, making up 90.41% of the user base, while males account for 9.59% [16]. Additionally, the sense of community and organic engagement announced by the official advertisement of Xiaohongshu made it an ideal platform for recruitment [17]. As a result, this approach resulted in a higher acceptance rate among potential participants. While Tiktok is the most widely used social media platform in China, with 72% of the population using it, it was not selected for recruitment in this study [18]. This is because most of the agricultural creators on TikTok are between 31 and 40 years old, and the researcher targeted a younger age group for this study [19]. Thus, the use of Xiaohongshu was deemed more effective in recruiting participants for this study.

To collect the data for this study, online phone interviews were conducted with participants who provided informed consent before the interviews began. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to facilitate analysis. The decision to use phone interviews as the mode of data collection was based on the benefits that they offer, such as the ability to establish a closer relationship between the interviewer and participant. This can lead to the development of positive relationships between researchers and participants, which can improve the quality of data collection [20].

The use of phone interviews was carefully chosen for this study, as it provided a suitable means of collecting detailed and comprehensive data to meet the study's objectives. The interview content specifically focused on the present division of labor within the plantation, selling, and packaging aspects among family members. Additionally, the interview aimed to assess the satisfaction levels of family members on a scale of 0-10 compared to the past. The questions were designed to obtain comprehensive information about the roles and responsibilities of family members in agriculture activities, particularly concerning the use of e-commerce platforms. The participants were invited to share their personal experiences and perspectives on these matters.

The data collected through the online phone interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Each interview transcript was compared with the others to draw conclusions about the impact of e-commerce adoption on women's role in family farming in China. Similarities and differences in responses were carefully examined to identify common patterns and themes that emerged across the interviews. These patterns and themes were then organized into categories and analyzed in depth to generate meaningful insights into the research question. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times to identify patterns and themes related to the research question. For example, the researcher identified the theme of family discourse, which consisted of times the participants talked about experiencing family conflict when pricing the fruits they are selling. By analyzing the tone and the

words they used when describing these conflicts, the researcher identified several factors that contributed to family discourse, including differences in opinion on pricing strategy, lack of communication, and varying levels of involvement in the farming operation.

One limitation of the study is the small sample size, which may not be representative of the larger population. Additionally, the study only focused on daughters from family farming families, which may not capture the full picture of gender divides which more female members are included in agriculture in China. The study also only focused on the impact of e-commerce adoption on women's role in family farming, and did not explore other factors that may contribute to gender divides in agriculture.

Overall, the methodology employed for this study aimed to address the research question by utilizing a sampling strategy that was relevant to the population of interest and collecting data through interviews that allowed for an in-depth exploration of the research topic. The data collected was analyzed using a rigorous and systematic approach to draw conclusions that contribute to the existing literature on gender divides in agriculture in China.

4. Findings

The rise of online sales has led to an overall increase in women's involvement and labor for their family farms as they take charge of online selling and facilitate greater commercial success. As Qiao, a junior college student who is helping her grandfather sell yellow peaches, noted, "Before participating in online selling, we [my grandpa and I] only contacted each other a few times a year... I'm now living with my grandpa and selling peaches together." However, their involvement in family farms isn't changing their status in their families as the work they do isn't seen as skilled or important by both themselves and their family members.

On the positive side, the interviews highlight the significant role that women play in taking charge of online selling for their families and facilitating greater commercial success for their farms. This can be seen from three points. Firstly, 7 out of 9 respondents mentioned that they actively came up with the idea of selling fruits on social media for their families and participated in the whole process. For example, Li, a recent graduate who is helping her grandparents sell yellow peaches, pointed out, "This [selling on Xiaohongshu and WeChat] is my idea because I'm a Generation Z, and I'm familiar with social media... I saw many people using Xiaohongshu to sell fruits."

Li's idea to sell fruits on social media reflects the increasing role of women in utilizing modern technology to market and sell their products. Her familiarity with social media, as a member of Generation Z, allowed her to recognize the potential of online platforms and effectively implement them for her family's business. Therefore, by acting as the originator of this online selling idea, these women's roles in their families have shifted from being mere assistants or spectators during the traditional selling process to being the dominators of the entire online selling procedure.

Moreover, online selling has brought greater income to these participants and their families compared to traditional sales methods, a point that is acknowledged by all participants. Xiang, a middle-aged woman who helps her father sell yellow peaches in her spare time, mentioned that "Wholesalers used to take away all the peaches from the orchard on a single truck, which resulted in very low prices, around 1 RMB per kilogram, or even less. But through online sales, prices can reach up to 7 or 8 RMB per kilogram. So online sales have a significant impact on the income of orchard farmers." Meanwhile, similar benefits, such as a reduction in loss and labor intensity, of online selling have been mentioned by other participants. Liao, a mother of a boy who is helping her parents sell yellow peaches, mentioned the increase in her income from online sales. "In the past, the money we earned from selling a truckload of peaches was not as much as what we now earn from doing an online group purchase once. Now online customers buy in smaller quantities, so the

prices are relatively higher.” The experience of Xiang and Liao illustrates how women are leading the shift towards online sales and how this change is having a positive impact on their families' income. By actively participating in the online selling process, these women can negotiate better prices for their produce, leading to greater profits for their families.

It is important to note that these large contributions to their family's farms come at a price. Four respondents mentioned the difficulties they encountered when communicating with customers. Niu, a sophomore student who helps her parents sell fruits on WeChat during summer vacation, mentioned that "compared to the physical exhaustion of offline sales, dealing with logistics issues in online sales is more tiring... One customer asked for a refund after receiving the goods. She used a 10 RMB coupon when she made the purchase, but when requesting a refund, she wanted us to cash out the coupon money for her, which was too unreasonable, but I could only try my best to meet their demands." Another woman, Bao, who just gave birth and is on maternity leave, helps her grandparents sell peaches and roses. She also mentioned similar but more serious problems: "Once a customer came to buy peaches from me but cursed me for no reason due to some misunderstandings. I suspect there may be some issues with his character. I'm not saying anything else, but I think there might be a problem. He said he used to buy peaches from another place where the price would increase every year by a lot. I told him that my prices are relatively stable and don't increase much. He got angry and started yelling at me, saying that the previous place raised their prices for a reason. I couldn't do anything about it, but he still scolded me. I was very speechless... I didn't even have postpartum depression after giving birth, but this incident made me depressed."

This example of the customer's unreasonable behavior highlights the challenges that women face in the online sales industry. Women face demanding customers and challenging situations, which often lead to mental exhaustion. This indicates that the mental stress endured by these women is no less physically exhausting than conventional farming.

However, women's increased involvement in selling does not necessarily change their overall role in their families' farms. The vast majority of respondents mentioned that they were not more involved in overall decision-making. Instead, they were assigned the power specifically to handle online sales and excluded from other decisions. Xiang mentioned this specific division of labor, "Since we started selling peaches on social media, I have been mainly responsible for online sales, including posting notes on Xiaohongshu and WeChat Moments,... After completing the sale, I will send the delivery address to my sister, who is responsible for packaging and shipping. But I am not very familiar with offline wholesale and other related processes, so my sister and father have been fully in charge, and I don't interfere at all." Qiao also mentioned, "I have zero knowledge of offline sales. I don't have experience in it, so I have no speaking right when it comes to this part... I am responsible for the entire process of online sales." Despite their increased involvement in online sales, Xiang and Qiao still lack control in other areas of the farm business, such as offline sales or overall decision-making. Their roles are still confined to specific tasks, and their participation in online sales is mainly to support the family business financially.

Additionally, the contributions made by women to their families' farms did not lead to an increase in their social status within the household. In fact, family members and themselves do not necessarily recognize their work as important or as a skill, as it is often considered a "female thing."

A small number of respondents mentioned that their family members showed a dismissive attitude toward their achievements in online sales. Among them, Xiang's father, during the interview, made a comment about his daughter's sales achievements, stating, "Phew, this sales aspect doesn't require much technical expertise. The most important thing for fruits is to have good quality. If the peaches are delicious, people will come back to buy." The response from Xiang's father reflects a dismissive attitude toward her accomplishments in online sales. This attitude implies a lack of recognition or appreciation for Xiang's efforts and the role she plays in generating

income for the family through online sales. The dismissive attitude displayed by Xiang's father is indicative of a larger pattern where family members undermine or undervalue the contributions of women in online sales. It suggests a gendered perception that devalues women's work in this domain and reinforces traditional gender roles where women's contributions are seen as less important or skillful compared to other aspects of the farming business.

More surprisingly, a small number of participants agreed with their families and discounted what they did. For example, when Niu was asked to evaluate her own contributions, she responded, "It's nothing special. In our village, most people help their families sell things. It's common practice, and I don't think it's a difficult task. The main reason for our success is that my parents grow good quality peaches." This dismissive attitude toward their own achievements in online sales reflects the internalization of societal gender norms and expectations, where women's contributions are undervalued by themselves.

Similarly, Xiang, Li, and Niu explained their performance by stating, "We women are naturally good at this," "We have better interpersonal skills," "I'm good at selling because I'm a woman." This statement reflects a common stereotype that women perceive themselves in the same way that there are certain unique traits of women that make them more suited for the selling process. However, the interview shows that these respondents, to varying degrees, have undergone training related to pre-sales, which has enabled them to achieve success in online sales. For example, Xiang's primary job is as a writer, and Qiao serves as the president of a school art club and also works as an editor for the school magazine. Their familiarity with writing skills has allowed them to excel in creating compelling descriptions and marketing content for their peach sales. Another example is Xiang, who graduated with a degree in fine arts and used her skills to design the packaging for the peaches. This demonstrates that it is not solely the inherent qualities of being women that have led to their success in sales, but rather the skills they have acquired through learning and training.

Lastly, most participants saw their contributions as primarily benefiting their families rather than offering any personal benefit. When asked if their contributions to the family have resulted in various forms of benefits, participants saw the question as amusing. They saw it as their job to contribute to their families and considered the question of whether they personally benefited as irrelevant. Participants displayed facial expressions of amusement and even slight ridicule. Their reactions varied, ranging from chuckles to smirks. For example, Liao explained, "As children, it's our duty to do something for our families. How can we expect anything in return?" All of the participants framed their work as a family contribution. For example, they all mentioned that their involvement in online sales has brought their families closer and led to an increase in household income. For instance, Liang said, "We (Liang and her parents) send messages to each other almost every day, talking about things of selling peaches...and of course, this increased our income." This highlights a potential disconnect between women's economic contributions and their empowerment. Despite their active involvement in income generation, the participants still adhere to traditional gender norms that prioritize family obligations and benefits over personal advancements.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study shed light on the complex dynamics of women's involvement in online selling and its impact on their empowerment within the context of family farming. While online selling is changing women's participation in family farming, women's increased participation is not accompanied by increased involvement in decision-making or a change in their perceived status in the family. Instead, women and their families downplay their contributions, framing planting as more important than selling and seeing online selling, in particular, as something that women are "naturally" good at, rather than skilled labor. This highlights the prevailing gender norms and

expectations that shape women's roles in family farming, where their contributions are often undervalued or seen as part of their expected familial duties. These gendered perceptions not only affect women's own perspectives on their involvement but also influence how their families perceive and evaluate their contributions.

Scholarly research, such as Yu and Cui's study on e-commerce platforms in rural China, has shown that online platforms can provide rural women with greater access to markets and expand their businesses beyond local communities. This aligns with the findings of this study, where participants mentioned the positive impact of online selling on their families' income. However, while scholars are focused on women's empowerment, women themselves see their involvement in farming through the lens of the family, perceiving their involvement in farming from a collective perspective, prioritizing the family unit over individual gains. In her interviews with rural farmers, Shi S. Liu similarly found that women's contribution to farming is often framed within the context of family welfare rather than personal achievement, further emphasizing the collective nature of their perspectives.

Yan has also highlighted the limited awareness of economic rights among female farmers in rural China compared to their male counterparts. This underscores the need for comprehensive empowerment programs that go beyond economic considerations and address the structural and societal barriers that hinder women's full participation and recognition in family farming. Such programs should recognize and address the multifaceted structural and societal barriers that hinder women's full participation and recognition in family farming. These barriers include deeply ingrained gender norms, discriminatory practices, limited access to resources and information, and unequal power dynamics within rural communities.

The participants in this study emphasized the collective nature of their contributions to the family and viewed their involvement in farming through the lens of family welfare. They prioritize the well-being of the entire family rather than individual gains. Therefore, to achieve meaningful change, programs that are trying to increase women's involvement in farming and empower them must take into account the collective nature of women's contributions and their focus on family welfare. Consequently, initiatives solely focused on enhancing individual capacities may not garner the support and participation of these female members. Conversely, projects that aim to promote overall family benefits and harmony are more likely to resonate with and receive support from women.

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