

The Dual Burden of Farm Work and Childcare: A Study on the Stress of Grandparents in Rural Grandparenting——A Case Study of S Village in Chuxiong Prefecture

Liyun Yang*, Wanfeng He, Shaomin Jiang

Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, 730070, China

*Corresponding author: yangly@nwnu.edu.cn

Abstract: With the progress of urbanisation, more and more young rural workers have been moving to the cities. As a result of this migration, grandparents have been left to look after their children, and thus the demand on rural grandparenting families has risen. Village S in Chuxiong Prefecture has many migrant workers, and grandparenting is a typical way of life. During the busy farming season, grandparents have the dual responsibility of agricultural production and childcare and are thus under great pressure. Through fieldwork, many problems in the care of children by grandparents during the busy farming season have been identified, and these will be discussed in this paper. The group is under all sorts of pressure from physical, mental and social sides. As it is a multi-ethnic village, the problems mentioned above are even more severe.

Keywords: Rural Area, Grandparenting, Grandparental Stress

1. Introduction of the Problem

The older age group and young children are relatively large parts of China's population, and they are at the core of people's livelihood security and social governance. With the trend of joint rural revitalisation and urbanisation, China has begun to pay more attention to the problems faced by older people and young children and is strengthening support for them at the family level. It does not address the actual issue of intergenerational support inversion caused by the mobility of urban-rural populations. Rural grandparents are busy with the heavy work of agricultural production and have to take the lead in caring for their grandchildren; thus, they fall into a policy-practice fault zone where family responsibility for elder care conflicts with the intergenerational transfer of childcare functions. Therefore, we must deal with this problem promptly in the course of carrying out the national strategy.

Scholars have begun to study grandparenting, and the existing research can be divided into three types. First, there is an exploration of the reasons for grandparenting^[1] and the pressure on grandparents due to rural-urban migration^[2]. Second, all the effects of grandparenting, both positive and negative, on the physical and mental health of grandparents, as well as problems in the discipline, academic performance and behaviour of grandchildren during their growing years have been studied^[1-3]. Thirdly, in the cooperative framework of family emotional support, community service and strong policy guarantees have been put forward, intervention plans for grandparenting have also been put forward, along with the values of family-oriented intervention models and social support networks^[1-4]. There are still some shortcomings, however. First, they focus too much on the mental health of left-behind children and the quality of intergenerational education, and neglect other problems that grandparents with the dual burden of farm work and childcare face directly. Second, they do not address the symbiotic contradiction of agricultural production and family life, and they fail to consider the additional burden of labour exhaustion and childcare during the busy farming season. Third, they fail to consider the culture of ethnic minorities and are unaware of the specific difficulties faced by people in ethnic areas after the breakdown of traditional kinship support.

Village S is a community of the Bai and Yi ethnic groups in Chuxiong Prefecture, Yunnan Province. In the south of the county and its townships, there are a total of 434 households and 1,828 people in the village, and among them, 1,140 are employed. The village has a problem of an aging population, and most of the young people have left to find work in other places. It is common for couples to move for

work together, and their destinations are mainly concentrated in economically developed areas such as the Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta, where they are mainly employed in labour-intensive sectors of manufacturing and services. Most of these young people only go back to their hometowns for special occasions, such as the start of the school year or important holidays like the Spring Festival; some have been away for several years. Therefore, the family lives apart for a long time, and the elderly and children are left in the village while the middle-aged generation works outside. Therefore, grandparenting is now considered a type of care for young children. Therefore, S Village is a multi-ethnic area that falls under the general form of rural grandparenting.

According to the first-hand research data obtained from the extended field study in S village, this paper presents the analysis. There were 12 grandparenting caregivers in S Village, and all of them were middle-aged or older people aged 50-64. The group had 10 women and 2 men, 10 of whom were from the Yi ethnic group and 2 were from the Bai ethnic group. They make a living by growing corn, peppers and tobacco, and most of them have only been educated to the sixth grade of primary school. Among them, 9 people have one grandchild and 3 people have two grandchildren. Ten of these caregivers have adult children who work out of town, and the children of the other two caregivers live in the village and are engaged in farming. The two periods of the survey are July-August 2024 and January-February 2025. Based on the above investigation, there has been a considerable outflow of the young and middle-aged working population from the village, and as a result, grandparents have taken on the responsibility of childcare and become the main support for the continuous development of the family^[5]. During the busy farming season in the village (April to September), there is a large amount of sowing and harvesting work, and villagers need to work for 8-10 hours a day; at the same time, grandparents have to meet the high demands of agricultural production and also take care of and educate their grandchildren. The absence of village-level services and changes in the culture of ethnic minority family life have also increased the difficulties for these grandparents. The three structural tensions in this village are obstacles to policy implementation, a conflict between production and childcare, and the effect of cultural traits; thus, it is a good research object for studying the dual burden of farm work and childcare on grandparents. This case study will be used as a reference for the next round of research in this field and offer some ideas on how to build and carry out related policies.

2. Physical Stress Faced by Grandparents in Grandparenting in S Village

The grandparents' main source of stress is physical strain from the intense work required during the busy farming season and the demands of caring for children. The farming season is busy, and a lot of work needs to be done outdoors, such as planting, fertilising and picking crops. Grandparents need to work long hours in the fields and take good care of young children at the same time. The time for farm work and childcare are often the same. At dawn, after the sun rises, grandparents go to the fields early in the morning to start working. By now, their grandchildren have woken up and need to be fed and looked after during play. To avoid delaying farm work, many grandparents have no choice but to bring their young grandchildren to the fields. As villager Liu Xiu put it, "It is the rainy season in Yunnan; at this time, mushrooms grow well." Many people in our village go to the mountains to pick mushrooms and sell them. But we have to get up and leave the house around 6:30 a.m. By the time we get up, the children are also awake, so we have no choice but to take them to the mountains to pick mushrooms. The forest is too thick; we cannot go around the children in it. This will reduce the efficiency of our mushroom picking work, and we will not have enough time to look after the children; it is also physically too strenuous for us.

Grandparents are too tired from doing hard labour at the farm and taking care of their children. Prolonged bending, lifting heavy objects and other farm work put a great deal of stress on the lower back, shoulders and other parts of the body. At the same time, caring for young children requires frequent standing, crouching and lifting, which is also physically demanding. Prolonged physical exhaustion is detrimental to the health of older people and can weaken their immune systems, making them more vulnerable to illness. Villager Li Li's story is consistent with the above; "Because of the complex mountainous terrain in our village, the farmland is quite far from our homes." As we cannot operate farm machinery or motorcycles, we have to rely on our own strength to carry agricultural supplies back and forth to the fields. Our grandchildren are still very young and get tired easily from walking on uneven ground. We have no choice but to carry the tools on our backs and hold the children in our arms. Gradually, there were problems with my lower back. The county hospital diagnosed me with a lumbar disc herniation. Acupuncture and drugs are only short-term solutions. I cannot do the heavy labour, but I still have to look after my grandson. Over the long run, the physical stress on me will be very high.

3. Psychological Stress Faced by Grandparents in Grandparenting in S Village

The main reason for the anxiety of grandparents is their concern for the safety of their children. Grandparents are busy with farm work during the busy farming season and often leave the children unsupervised or under-supervised. As children have formed a regular habit of taking a long afternoon nap, it is difficult for grandparents busy with agricultural work to stay with them all day. If they go out to the fields, the children who wake up early may start crying, and leaving them alone at home is not safe due to falls or electric shock. Young children are naturally curious and do not know what is dangerous. There are many risks of accidents in farming, such as falling and getting injured, being tripped by crops, and ingesting pesticides and suffering from poisoning. The villager Zi Ying told the author that during the busy farming season, they take the children to the fields. When we are spraying pesticides or adding fertilisers, as the children do not know the harm of such chemicals, they may accidentally ingest them. This is bad for the children and will cause us some anxiety too. There are also other dangerous places in the countryside, such as rivers and ponds. If the children are left alone and go to these places by themselves, there will be a risk of drowning. Wu Jun, the villager, said that there were many water reservoirs next to the fields. Children are naturally fond of playing with water. We are busy with our farm work, so if we are momentarily distracted and fail to supervise the children properly, they may run over to play near the water and be in danger of death. At the same time, we need to pay attention to what the children are doing in our fieldwork, and it is very difficult to do both well. The children's parents have given them to us. If there had been an accident, we would not have to bear the blame. Grandparents are well-aware of the above safety risks. At work, they are always thinking about the safety of their grandchildren and are constantly in a state of anxiety and worry. It is becoming increasingly burdensome for people. When a child is involved in an accident, grandparents often blame themselves and feel guilty; as a result, they are under considerable psychological pressure and suffer in daily life.

Secondly, grandparents feel guilty that they are uneducated. During the busy farming season, grandparents have to spend most of their time and energy on farm work, so they do not have the time or energy to help their grandchildren with their homework, study, or solve any problems in their studies. Given that many grandparents have relatively low levels of education, even if they had the time and energy, it would be difficult for them to effectively help the children with their schoolwork. Villager Liu Qin said: "I once told the parents of the child that, as an ethnic minority, the child should learn our ethnic language when they are young; it will be difficult to learn later in life." However, the parents are only concerned about us teaching the child Mandarin, and they are worried that the child will have problems in kindergarten later. They had us make flashcards and taught the child to recognize the characters with them. But we haven't been to school much ourselves, and we don't speak standard Mandarin either. Most of the time, we just don't know how to teach, and this is very difficult for us. Seeing that their grandchildren's study life will be negatively affected by us, the grandparents feel very guilty. They hope that their grandchildren will be able to study well and live a good life, but due to the demands of the farming season, they are unable to provide full educational support. A feeling of powerlessness and guilt gradually increase and lead to serious mental illness. At the same time, they are also worried that their style of intergenerational co-parenting does not meet the children's development needs and fear falling behind the others in learning and growth. With the rise of educational competition and the increasing pressure on grandchildren's studies, many grandparents find it difficult to keep up. They find that they cannot provide the tutoring support required by modern education, cannot learn the new teaching content and methods easily, and often feel left behind by the times. Fully aware of the need for education but constrained by their own circumstances, grandparents feel both a sense of responsibility and guilt for not being able to provide education and are thus under considerable mental pressure^[6].

Third, grandparents are concerned about conflicts between generations in parenting ideas. Grandparents and parents have grown up in different environments and been raised differently, so there are many differences in areas such as young children's food, clothing, sleep, play, behaviour, etc.^[7] With the double burden of caring for grandchildren and working on the farm, grandparents in S Village often face psychological distress due to these differences in views on childcare. On the one hand, the traditional way of parenting they have always followed is out of touch with the needs of their children in the modern era. For example, their adult children may blame them for not being clean because they take the grandchildren to the fields where there is soil, or they may complain that the homemade complementary foods have not been cooked to perfection. The grandparents are unhappy because the old way of life is no longer popular with their children. We can see this from the case of the villager He Xi: "The child's parents frequently call and urge us to change the child's clothes." We know this is how

they show care for the child, but we do not know the real circumstances of life in the countryside. When we take the child out to the field, it is unavoidable that they will dig in the soil and make some holes; it is very difficult to observe every moment closely. Even at home, the child plays on the ground, so their clothes will naturally get dirty. Given the poor conditions in the countryside, we cannot change clothes immediately after getting dirty. The child's parents do not know the difficulties we face in caring for the child at home, and we feel very helpless. Another villager, Guo Jia, said that the child's parents always have us add eight scoops of formula when making milk. However, they do not know that after eating and drinking fruit, a child should not drink too much milk. When I talked to them about it, they still said it was a fixed amount. I couldn't put it into words, so I will have to adjust the amount according to the actual circumstances. At the same time, their adult children live far away from home and frequently contact their parents via phone or view the details of care through home surveillance cameras. Grandparents are tired from working in the fields and caring for their children, and they are also worried about being blamed for not meeting their children's high expectations for care. This is particularly true if the children have developed picky eating habits or sustained minor injuries due to less careful attention during the busy farming season; in such cases, grandparents are more likely to feel self-reproach and guilt for failing to live up to the responsibility given to them by their children.

4. Social Pressure Faced by Grandparents in Grandparenting in S Village

On the one hand, the origin of social pressure is the demand for family responsibility in traditional ideas. According to traditional views, it is considered a natural responsibility of grandparents to help care for their grandchildren; that is to say, "the grandparental generation's participation in raising grandchildren is based on helping their children and supporting the younger generation's family"^[1]. During the busy farming season, adult children are often away working as migrant labourers or are busy with their own jobs and cannot get home to help with childcare or farm management. Therefore, grandparents need to bear the responsibility of both. Society generally does not appreciate the contribution of grandparents and pays little attention to their circumstances and emotions. Grandparents have different expectations of their families and society. They believe that they should take good care of the children and properly manage the farmland; otherwise, it will be considered that they have failed in their duties. The burden of this traditional responsibility leaves them no room to breathe, and they have to keep going stubbornly even though their bodies and minds are already exhausted. They believe that the responsibility their children have given them is an unavoidable task, and they wish to continue the family's glory through the upbringing of their grandchildren. If a child has health or behavioural problems, the first assumption of outsiders is often that the grandparents have been neglectful; they do not consider the actual difficulties in their daily lives. Single-dimensional attribution of responsibility has increased the psychological pressure on grandparents, and due to their irreplaceable position, they have been in a state of chronic anxiety and self-doubt.

At the same time, there is also the pressure of public opinion and social comparison in the acquaintance society. Panoptic surveillance of the rural community has brought the grandparents' childcare activities into the public eye. If a grandchild is disheveled, performs poorly in school, or behaves rudely, they may attract the attention of neighbours and be the subject of negative talk about the family's failure to properly educate the child. In the close-knit social network of S Village's acquaintance society, due to the limited space in the village and frequent contact among villagers, there is an effective system of supervision for individual behaviour; any change in family childcare practices can quickly become a public issue through chains of word-of-mouth communication. During my fieldwork in S Village, I observed that when a young child used coarse language and behaved aggressively, their caregiver would immediately face extended negative collective evaluation and be labelled by the villagers as undisciplined in their parenting and a representative of a family with undesirable values. To some extent, this is because the community wants to have orderly public behaviour and has a low tolerance for disorder. Therefore, other grandparents are also more reluctant to raise their children. Most of the respondents also thought that, due to the pressure of public opinion, they had begun to regulate the children's behaviour more strictly out of fear of criticism from the public if there were any flaws in childcare. As a type of psychological defence mechanism, it can be regarded as an invisible regulation of people's behaviour by the culture of rural society.

5. Conclusion

In short, it can be seen that grandparents in S Village have to bear the double burden of agricultural

production and childcare during the busy farming season, and are thus facing all kinds of pressure, such as physical exhaustion, mental stress and lack of social support. It is to be expected that the urban-rural economic gap will continue to narrow, and rural public services and traditional family responsibilities will be reduced. The living conditions of grandparents in S Village are not an isolated problem but rather a microcosm of the issues in supporting "the elderly and the young" in rural areas during the process of urbanization. Therefore, we must address the problems in their lives. Therefore, more effort should be made to build a "family-community-society" support system in rural areas to help ease the double burden of grandparenting. Thus, grandparents will receive social care and respect while being able to take care of their families; at the same time, it can help build a talent pool in rural areas and support the construction and implementation of the rural revitalization strategy.

References

- [1] Li Yongping. *Intergenerational Cooperative Parenting: Adaptation and Reflection on Child-Rearing Models of Peasant Families in Transitional Period*. Inner Mongolia Social Sciences, 2025, 46(03): 171-180.
- [2] Zhu Shuting. *A Case Study on Intervention in the Caregiving Stress of Grandparents Engaged in Rural Grandparenting*[D]. Master's Thesis, Jilin Agricultural University, 2024.
- [3] Li Yisi, Zhao Hong. *Research Hotspots and Visual Analysis of Health Problems in Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Domestically and Internationally*. Journal of Community Medicine, 2025, 23(05): 171-176.
- [4] Gu Chaofan, Zhang Ruixing, Wang Fangjie, Cheng Mengyin. *Research progress on mental health and nursing interventions for grandparents in grandparenting*. Chinese Journal of Nursing Education, 2018, 15(12): 940-943.
- [5] Zhang Baoyuan, Huang Caiwen. *A Study on Rural Early Childhood Grandparenting in the Process of Chinese-style Modernization: An Anthropological Investigation Based on Xinjie Town, Yuanyang County, Yunnan*. Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 16.
- [6] Li Yongping. *Problematization of Rural Family Grandparenting: Formation Mechanism and Adjustment Strategies: From the Perspective of Social System Theory*. Journal of Nanjing Agricultural University (Social Sciences Edition), 2024, 24(05): 100.
- [7] Zhang Yangbo. *Intergenerational Conflict and Cooperation: An Analysis of Types of Childcare Arrangements in Families*. Academic Forum, 2018, 41(05): 125-133.