

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

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Abstract: *With the acceleration of urbanization, an increasing number of young rural laborers continuously migrate to cities. This migration results in grandparents primarily shouldering the responsibility of raising children, thereby highlighting the pressures faced by rural grandparenting families. S Village in Chuxiong Prefecture has a large population of migrant workers, making grandparenting a common phenomenon. During the busy farming season, grandparents bear the dual responsibility of agricultural production and childcare, which creates a particularly pronounced burden. Based on meticulous field research, this paper systematically analyzes the practical dilemmas faced by grandparents engaged in childcare during peak farming periods. The study reveals that this group experiences a superposition of physical, psychological, and social pressures. Furthermore, within the context of a multi-ethnic village, these pressures exhibit even more complex characteristics.*

Keywords: *Rural areas; Grandparenting; Grandparental stress*

1. Introduction of the Problem

"The elderly and the young" constitute significant groups within China's demographic structure and are key focuses of people's livelihood security and social governance. Against the backdrop of parallel rural revitalization and urbanization, China places a high priority on the coordinated support of the elderly and the young and clearly supports families in undertaking elderly care functions. However, this approach fails to address the reality of intergenerational support inversion caused by urban-rural population mobility. Specifically, rural grandparents, while undertaking intensive agricultural production, are forced to become the primary caregivers for their grandchildren, placing them in a policy practice fault zone where the familial responsibility for elderly care conflicts with the intergenerational shift of childcare functions. This highlights the importance and urgency of addressing this issue in the implementation of national strategies.

Grandparenting has also attracted academic attention, with existing studies primarily addressing the following aspects: first, analyzing the causes of grandparenting^[1] and the resulting pressure on grandparents in the context of rural population mobility^[2]; second, exploring the multidimensional impacts of grandparenting, with a focus on its dual effects on grandparents' physical and mental health, as well as issues related to the discipline, academic performance, and behavior of grandchildren during their development^[1-3]; and third, discussing intervention approaches for grandparenting by advocating for the construction of a collaborative framework that integrates family emotional support, community service involvement, and robust policy guarantees, emphasizing the value of family-centered intervention models and social support networks^[1-4]. However, limitations remain: first, their focus is excessively centered on the mental health of left-behind children or the quality of intergenerational education, thereby neglecting the multidimensional plight of grandparents who directly bear the dual burden of farm work and childcare; second, they fail to address the symbiotic contradiction between agricultural production and family nurturing, lacking attention to the superimposed effects of labor exhaustion and childcare pressure during the busy farming season; and third, they overlook the perspective of ethnic minority cultures, failing to consider the unique difficulties faced after the disintegration of traditional kinship support networks in ethnic regions.

S Village is a community in Chuxiong Prefecture, Yunnan Province, where the Bai and Yi ethnic

groups live together. Located in the southern part of the county and its townships, the village comprises 434 households and a total population of 1,828, of which 1,140 are part of the labor force. The village exhibits a prominent phenomenon of population outflow, with most young people having experience working away from home. It is common for couples to migrate for work together, with their destinations primarily concentrated in economically developed regions such as the Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta, where they are mainly engaged in labor-intensive sectors like manufacturing and service industries. The majority of these young people only return to their hometowns during important occasions such as the start of the school term or during important holidays such as the Spring Festival; some even remain away for several years. Consequently, families experience a prolonged state of separation, with the elderly and children staying in the village while the intermediate generation works elsewhere. This has led to grandparenting becoming the dominant childcare model. Thus, S Village, as a multi-ethnic settlement, serves as a typical microcosm of rural grandparenting.

This paper conducts its analysis based on firsthand research data obtained from a long-term field study in S Village. The interview subjects were 12 grandparenting caregivers from S Village, all middle-aged and elderly individuals aged between 50 and 64. The group comprised 10 females and 2 males, including 10 from the Yi ethnic group and 2 from the Bai ethnic group. Their livelihoods depend on cultivating corn, peppers, and tobacco, and their education levels are primarily concentrated between the third and sixth grades of primary school. Among them, 9 respondents are raising one grandchild, while 3 are raising two grandchildren. Ten of these caregivers have adult children working away from home, whereas the children of the remaining two caregivers stay in the village and engage in farming. The survey was conducted during two periods: July-August 2024 and January-February 2025. The investigation revealed that the substantial outflow of the young and middle-aged labor force from the village has resulted in "grandparents extending their role from the sphere of production to that of reproduction, becoming a key force in sustaining the sustainable development of the family"^[5]. During the village's busy farming season (referring to the peak period for sowing and harvesting from April to September each year, during which villagers must work 8-10 hours daily, creating a dual-task conflict that overlaps with childcare responsibilities), grandparents must simultaneously cope with the demands of intensive agricultural production and the responsibilities of caring for and educating their grandchildren. This challenge is compounded by inadequate village-level infrastructure and the cultural context of the disintegration of traditional ethnic minority kinship support networks, plunging these grandparents into multiple difficulties. The threefold structural tensions present in this village—namely, obstacles to policy implementation, the conflict between production and childcare, and the influence of cultural characteristics—provide a highly representative research sample for analyzing the dual burden of farm work and childcare faced by grandparents. This case study can contribute to advancing research in related fields and offer a reference for the formulation and implementation of relevant policies.

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

For grandparents, physical stress is primarily manifested in the high-intensity labor resulting from the significant overlap between the busy farming season and childcare responsibilities. During the busy farming season, farm work is arduous, with tasks such as sowing, fertilizing, and harvesting demanding substantial time and physical strength. Grandparents must not only toil in the fields for long hours but also attend to the care of young children. The time required for farm work and childcare often overlaps considerably. At dawn, as the sun rises, grandparents head to the fields early to begin the day's labor. By this time, their grandchildren have also woken up and require feeding and supervision during play. To avoid delaying farm work, many grandparents have no choice but to bring their young grandchildren to the fields. As the villager Liu Xiu explained: "During the rainy season in Yunnan, it's the time when mushrooms grow. Many people in our village go into the mountains to pick mushrooms to sell. But we have to get up and leave home 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 along to the mountains to pick mushrooms. The forests are dense, making it difficult to move around with the children. This not only affects our efficiency in picking mushrooms but also means we cannot take good care of the children; moreover, it is physically too demanding for us."

The simultaneous undertaking of high-intensity farm work and childcare leads to severe physical exhaustion among grandparents. Prolonged periods of bending, lifting heavy objects, and other farm tasks place immense strain on their lower backs, shoulders, and other parts of the body. Meanwhile, caring for young children requires frequent standing up, squatting down, and embracing, which further exacerbates the physical burden. This sustained physical exhaustion poses a serious threat to

grandparents' health, weakening their immune systems and making them more susceptible to illness. The villager Li Li's account corroborates this point: "Due to the complex mountainous terrain in our village, the farmland is quite far from our homes. Lacking the ability to 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 easily get tired walking on the rough terrain. We have no choice but to carry our tools on our backs while holding the children in our arms. Over time, my lower back started having problems. The county hospital diagnosed me with a lumbar disc herniation. Acupuncture and medication only provide temporary relief. I can't do heavy work, yet I still have to look after my grandson. In the long run, the physical strain on me has become extremely severe."

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

The psychological stress experienced by grandparents stems, first and foremost, from anxieties related to safety hazards. During the busy farming season, grandparents are preoccupied with farm work, often leaving children unattended or inadequately supervised. As children have developed a fixed habit of taking long afternoon naps, it is difficult for grandparents, consumed by agricultural tasks, to stay with them throughout. If they leave for the fields, children who wake up early may start crying, and leaving them home alone poses safety risks such as falls or electric shocks. Furthermore, young children are naturally curious and lack awareness of danger. While playing in the fields, accidents can easily occur, such as falling and getting hurt, being tripped by crops, or even ingesting pesticides and suffering from poisoning. The villager Zi Ying told the author: "During the busy farming season, we take the children to the fields. When we are spraying pesticides or applying fertilizer, because the children do not understand the dangers of these chemicals, they might accidentally ingest them. This poses a safety hazard to the children, and it also creates a psychological burden for us." Additionally, rural areas may have hazardous locations such as rivers or ponds. If children are left unsupervised and wander off to these places on their own, accidents like drowning can easily happen. Regarding this, the villager Wu Jun said: "There are many water reservoirs next to the fields. Children are naturally drawn to playing in water. While we are focused on our farm work, if we are momentarily inattentive and fail to supervise them properly, the children will run over to play by the water, which is a major safety risk. We have to keep an eye on what the children are doing while also completing our fieldwork; it is very difficult to do both well. The children's parents have entrusted them to us. If an accident were to happen, we simply could not bear that responsibility." Grandparents are acutely aware of these safety hazards. As they work, their minds are perpetually preoccupied with the safety of their grandchildren, keeping them in a constant state of tension and worry. Over time, this generates immense psychological pressure. Should a child actually encounter an accident, the grandparents often sink into self-blame and guilt, a psychological burden that severely impacts their physical and mental well-being.

Second, grandparents experience guilt stemming from educational absence. During the busy farming season, grandparents devote most of their time and energy to farm work, leaving them with neither the time nor the energy to pay attention to their grandchildren's homework completion, learning progress, or difficulties encountered in their studies. Moreover, due to the generally low level of education among many grandparents, even if they had the time and energy, they would still find it difficult to effectively tutor the children in their schoolwork. The villager Liu Qin stated: "I once mentioned to the child's parents that, since we are from an ethnic minority, the child should learn our ethnic language when young; it becomes difficult to learn it when they grow up. However, the parents are solely focused on us teaching the child Mandarin, worried that the child will have difficulties when starting kindergarten later on. They even asked us to use flash cards to teach the child to read characters. But we haven't been to school much ourselves, and we don't speak Mandarin standardly either. Most of the time, we simply don't know how to teach, and this truly puts us in a difficult position." Seeing that their grandchildren's academic situation might be negatively affected because of them, grandparents feel deeply guilty. They hope their grandchildren can study hard and have a good future, yet they are unable to provide sufficient educational support due to the demands of the farming season. This sense of powerlessness and guilt accumulates continuously, forming tremendous psychological pressure. Simultaneously, they also worry that their style of intergenerational parenting may not meet the children's developmental needs, fearing that their grandchildren might fall behind others in learning and growth. As educational competition intensifies and the learning demands of grandchildren continue to escalate, grandparents increasingly feel incapable of coping. They find themselves unable to provide the tutoring support required by modern education, nor can they easily understand new teaching content and methods, often feeling left behind by the times. Deeply aware of the importance of education yet constrained by their own limitations in providing it, grandparents experience an

intertwining of a sense of responsibility and guilt, which further exacerbates their psychological burden.^[6]

Third, grandparents experience stress arising from intergenerational conflicts in parenting concepts. "Due to the different growth environments and parenting philosophies of the grandparent and parent generations, there are numerous differences in aspects such as young children's diet, clothing, sleep, play, and behavioral habits."^[7] Under the dual burden of grandparenting and farm work, grandparents in S Village frequently find themselves in psychological dilemmas caused by these intergenerational differences in childcare views. On the one hand, the traditional child-rearing methods they adhere to constantly clash with the demands of their children, which are based on modern parenting concepts. For instance, their adult children might criticize them for being unhygienic because they take the grandchildren to the fields where they come into contact with soil, or they might complain that homemade complementary foods are not prepared finely enough. Such disagreements leave grandparents feeling frustrated that their tried-and-true methods are no longer considered acceptable. This is evident from the account of the villager He Xi: "The child's parents often call and urge us to change the child's clothes frequently. We understand that this is their way of showing concern for the child, but they don't consider the actual situation of living in a rural area. When we take the child to the fields, it's inevitable that they will dig in the dirt and make holes; it's very hard to keep a close watch every second. Even at home, the child plays on the ground, so their clothes naturally get dirty. With our limited rural conditions, we simply can't change clothes the moment there's a small stain. The child's parents don't appreciate the difficulties we face looking after the child at home, which leaves us feeling quite helpless." Another villager, Guo Jia, added: "The child's parents always instruct us to add eight scoops of formula when preparing milk. But they aren't fully aware that after meals and fruit, the child simply can't drink that much milk. When I tried to discuss this with them, they insisted that it's the fixed amount. I couldn't explain it clearly, so I just have to adjust the amount based on the actual situation." On the other hand, their adult children working away from home frequently intervene remotely in caregiving details through phone calls or home surveillance cameras. Grandparents must endure the exhaustion of completing both farm work and childcare tasks, all while worrying about being blamed for not meeting their children's expectations regarding care details. This is especially true when children develop picky eating habits or sustain minor injuries due to less meticulous care during the busy farming season; in such situations, grandparents are particularly prone to self-reproach, feeling guilty for not living up to the responsibility their children entrusted to them.

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

On the one hand, social pressure originates from the expectations of family responsibility embedded in traditional concepts. According to traditional views, it is considered a natural duty for grandparents to help care for their grandchildren; that is, "the grandparental generation's participation in raising grandchildren is based on 'helping their children,' namely, supporting the younger generation's family"^[1]. During the busy farming season, adult children are often away working as migrant laborers or are preoccupied with their own jobs, unable to return home to help with childcare or farm management. Consequently, grandparents are compelled to shoulder responsibilities in both areas. Society tends to take this contribution from grandparents for granted, lacking attention to and understanding of their situation. Grandparents face dual expectations from both their families and society. They feel an obligation to take good care of the children and manage the farmland properly; failure to do so would be seen as not fulfilling their duty. The pressure of this traditional responsibility leaves them with no room for slack, compelling them to persevere stubbornly even when both their bodies and minds are already overwhelmed. They regard the responsibility entrusted to them by their children as an unshirkable mission and view the growth of their grandchildren as a continuation of family honor. Should a child encounter health or behavioral problems, external judgment often first questions whether the grandparents' care was negligent, while overlooking the complex practical constraints behind the situation. This one-dimensional attribution of responsibility further intensifies the grandparents' psychological burden, plunging them into persistent anxiety and self-doubt within a role for which there is no substitute.

On the other hand, it stems from the pressure of public opinion and social comparison within the acquaintance society. The panoptic surveillance characteristic of rural communities exposes grandparents' childcare practices to the collective gaze. Should a grandchild appear unkempt, perform poorly in school, or exhibit impolite behavior, it could easily trigger neighborhood gossip and even lead to judgments that the child's parents failed to provide a proper upbringing. Within the densely woven social network of S Village's acquaintance society, the enclosed nature of the village space, combined

with the high frequency of interactions among villagers, creates a powerful monitoring mechanism over individual behavior—any deviation in family childcare practices can rapidly transform into a public topic through chains of verbal communication. During fieldwork in S Village, the author observed that when a young child exhibited crude language and aggressive behavior, their caregiver immediately faced sustained negative collective evaluations and was subsequently labeled by villagers as negligent in discipline and representing a family with undesirable values. To a certain extent, this phenomenon reflects community residents' expectations regarding public behavioral norms and their intolerance towards violations of these norms. Such stigmatization compels other grandparents to adopt overly cautious parenting strategies. The majority of respondents also indicated that this pressure from public opinion leads them to deliberately strengthen behavioral control over the children, aiming to avoid becoming the focus of public criticism due to any lapses in caregiving. This psychological defense mechanism, rooted in social scrutiny, essentially represents the invisible discipline exerted by traditional rural social norms over individual behavior.

5. Conclusion

In summary, it is evident that grandparents in S Village, burdened by the dual responsibilities of agricultural production and childcare during the busy farming season, face multifaceted pressures including physical exhaustion, psychological depletion, and a lack of social support. This phenomenon is an inevitable outcome of the convergence of the urban-rural economic gap, the absence of rural public services, and traditional family responsibilities. The living conditions of grandparents in S Village are not an isolated case but rather a microcosm of the challenges concerning the support of "the elderly and the young" in rural areas amidst the process of urbanization. Therefore, it is imperative to address their difficult situation. Consequently, efforts should be intensified to construct a "family-community-society" support system in rural areas, helping to alleviate the dual burden of grandparenting. This would enable grandparents to receive social care and respect while fulfilling their family responsibilities, thereby promoting the accumulation of human capital in rural areas and contributing to the advancement and implementation of the rural revitalization strategy.

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