



# Study on the Plight of the Widowed Elderly Women Living Alone in Rural Areas of Shandong Province, China: A Case Study of L Village

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**Abstract:** The aging of the population in China is becoming increasingly severe. Due to the survival advantages of women, the number of widowed elderly women living alone is increasing. Taking L village in Shandong Province of China as an example, this study mainly uses the methods of questionnaire and interview to research the living conditions of the rural widowed elderly women living alone. It is found that the elderly widows living alone in rural areas are mainly in economic distress: the source of income is single and the level is low; the life plight: the elderly have poor daily self-care and rely heavily on their daughters when they are ill; Mental distress: Being widowed elderly women living alone can lead to high levels of loneliness. Medical plight: the burden of medical expenses for chronic diseases is large. The reasons for their predicament are as follows: low level of basic security, high threshold for reimbursement of medical expenses for chronic diseases, and gender awareness not yet incorporated into the mainstream of national decision-making; Community level: the absence of grassroots social organizations in rural pension; Family level: the weakening of family support function and the embarrassing situation of daughter support. Therefore, in order to improve the quality of life of the rural widowed elderly women living alone, the corresponding countermeasures and suggestions are that the country needs to assume the main responsibility of the disadvantaged groups for the elderly; Establish pension system with gender perspective; Give play to the role of rural community grassroots organizations in old-age services; Carry forward the culture of filial piety, let the intergenerational relationship between families to fit; Advocate for the elderly care of daughters.

**Keywords:** China, Rural, Widowed Elderly Women, Living Alone, Plight

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## 1. Introduction

Since China entered the aging population in 1999, the aging trend has been accelerating. The seventh national population census shows that the elderly aged 65 and above in China account for 13.5% of the total population [1]. At the same time, with the accelerated aging process in China, the widowed elderly population has become a huge group. In 2010, the number of male and female widows in China was 14.19 million and 33.45 million respectively. Research predicts that by 2050, the number of widowed elderly will reach 118.4 million, of which the total number of female widowed elderly will reach 94.49 million, accounting for more than 80% of the widowed elderly [2]. Because of

China's traditional "big men and small women" marriage mode and women's survival advantages, the widowhood rate of elderly women is far higher than that of men of the same age. At the same time, there is a significant difference between urban and rural areas among elderly women. In 2010, the widowhood rate of rural elderly women was 38.6%, 5.4 percentage points higher than that of urban elderly women [3]. It can be predicted that the issue of widowed elderly women in China will be very prominent in the future. Due to the strong self-care ability of women themselves, in China, the majority of widowed elderly women will choose to live alone. Therefore, this study selects the special elderly group of widowed elderly women living alone in rural areas under the triple disadvantage of region, age and gender as the

research object to study their life plight.

Widowing is one of the most stressful events in people's life course [4, 5]. This change in marital status brings great challenges to the life of the elderly and seriously affects the quality of life of the elderly [6]. At present, the research on widowed elderly women living alone mainly focuses on three aspects: economic status, mental status and psychological status. Research shows that widowhood has an important impact on the economic welfare of elderly women, and widowhood will lead to higher poverty risk for elderly women [7]. The income of widowed female elderly population is low, and two-thirds of widowed female elderly are mainly supported by other family members [8]; Compared with male elderly men, China's widowed elderly women generally have the characteristics of low economic income, poor security level, and difficult self assessment of economic conditions [9, 10]; The poverty level of widowed elderly women in rural areas is higher than that of men [11]. The rural widowed elderly women lack spiritual comfort [12], and loneliness is the main problem faced by the rural widowed elderly women [13].

This study selected the special elderly group of widowed elderly women living alone in rural areas under the triple disadvantage of region, age and gender as the research object. The specific research object is 67 widowed elderly women living alone in L Village, Shandong Province, China. The questionnaire and interview are used to study their living conditions. The content focuses on the four aspects of old-age care, including economic supply, life care, mental status and medical status. Clarify the plight and mechanism of widowed elderly women living alone in rural areas, and then put forward countermeasures and suggestions.

Among 67 rural widowed elderly women living alone, 20.9% were aged 60 to 69, 62.7% were aged 70 to 79, and 16.4% were aged 80 or above. In terms of education level: 91.0% are illiterate or rarely literate, 7.5% are primary school educated, and 1.5% are junior high school educated or above. Health: 83.6% of the patients suffered from various diseases, and 16.4% of the patients without diseases (table 1).

**Table 1.** Basic information of the respondents.

Variable	Groups	Percent
Age	60-69years	20.9
	70-79years	62.7
	More than 80years	16.4
Education level	Illiteracy or rarely literate	91.0
	Primary school	7.5
	Junior high school or above	1.5
Health status	Good	16.4
	Various disease	83.6

## 2. The Plight of Rural Widowed Elderly Women Living Alone

### 2.1. Economic Plight: Single Source of Income and Low Level

In this study, the main sources of rural widowed elderly

women living alone are divided into five categories: basic pension, provision of children, labor income, survivor subsidies and social assistance. The survey shows that 49 (73.1%) of the elderly are completely dependent on basic pension in their daily life; 7 children (10.4%); The labor income was 6 (9.0%). There were 3 survivors (4.5%) receiving subsidies. social assistance were 2 (3.0%) (table 2).

The income source determines the income level. Among 67 rural widowed elderly women living alone, 4.5% have an average monthly income of more than 500 yuan, and 6.0% have an average monthly income of 400~500 yuan; The average monthly income is 300~400 yuan, accounting for 7.5%; 8.9% had an average monthly income of 200~300 yuan; 73.1% of them had an average monthly income of 200 yuan (table 3). The survey results show that the monthly income of rural widowed elderly women living alone is generally low and their dependence on pension is high.

**Table 2.** Economic income source.

Economic income source	Percent
Basic pension	73.1
Provision of children	10.4
Labor income	9.0
Survivor subsidies	4.5
Social assistance	3.0

**Table 3.** Income level.

Income level	Percent
More than 500yuan	4.5
400-500yuan	6.0
300-400yuan	7.5
200-300yuan	8.9
Below 200yuan	73.1

### 2.2. Plight in Life Care: Poor Level of Daily Self-care and Great Dependence on Daughter in Case of Illness

The daily care of the rural widowed elderly women living alone is mainly self-care, which is not a problem for the middle-aged and young people in good health. For the elderly, the level of self-care is low. Some old people are not able to cook well. Daughters, sons and daughter-in-law account for a large proportion of caregivers of rural widowed elderly women living alone when they are ill. Daughters accounted for 86.7% of the total, followed by daughter-in-law (28.4%) and son (26.9%). As long as the elderly have daughters, the main responsibility of caring for them when they are ill is mostly borne by their daughters. It can be seen from the survey results that when the widowed and alone elderly are sick, the caregivers are mainly daughters.

### 2.3. Mental Plight: Widowhood and Living Alone Lead to a Strong Sense of Loneliness

Some studies have found that, the widowed elderly women who live alone, cannot support themselves economically and cannot access medical services are prone to often feel lonely [14]. Due to the dual influence of widowhood and living alone, the mental predicament of rural elderly women who choose to live alone after their

widowhood is slightly different in different time periods and ages. For women who lived alone and had a good relationship with their spouse, they felt more lonely in the first few years of their spouse's death. The living state of widowed women living alone is a test of their spirit. In rural areas, elderly widowed women who are extroverted and in good health are usually close to their neighbors, so their mental state is good. However, for those elderly people who are introverted or have poor legs and feet, they do not have much contact with their neighbors and relatives. Most of the time, they are alone at home, and have a strong sense of loneliness. It has been found that the loneliness of elderly women living alone by widows in rural areas is far higher than that of young and middle-aged people [15].

#### **2.4. Medical Plight: High Burden of Medical Expenses for Chronic Diseases**

Since the implementation of the basic medical insurance for urban and rural residents, the proportion of reimbursement of hospitalization expenses for the elderly in rural areas has been relatively high, easing the medical burden on families. The survey shows that the medical expenses for chronic diseases are a heavy burden for rural widowed elderly women living alone. The threshold for reimbursement of chronic diseases is high. Therefore, reimbursement of these expenses is often limited, and a large part of the elderly are difficult to obtain the quota for reimbursement of chronic diseases. As time goes on, the health of the elderly will gradually become worse than before. Chronic diseases may accompany them to the end of their lives. Therefore, medical difficulties are faced by almost every elderly, Especially the middle-aged and elderly.

### **3. Occurrence Mechanism of Rural Widowed Elderly Women's Life Plight Living Alone**

#### **3.1. Government Level: Low Social Security Level and Gender Awareness Not Being Mainstreamed into National Decision-Making**

On the one hand, the basic security level is low, and the medical expenses for chronic diseases are not included in the relief scope. The payment of basic pension partly alleviates the difficulties of the economic life of elderly women living alone in rural areas, but does not help them improve their quality of life. At present, the security level of basic pension is still low. It is mainly manifested in three aspects. First, the basic pension level is low. In 2021, the pension will be about 180 yuan per month. In today's rising prices, the pension level is relatively low; Secondly, it is difficult to obtain the qualification of rural subsistence allowances. Generally, only the childless old men, the disabled and those suffering from serious and serious diseases are eligible for subsistence allowances. For some rural widowed elderly women living alone, although their life is also very difficult, because they have children, they do not qualify for the rural minimum

living allowance; Thirdly, due to the high threshold for reimbursement of chronic diseases, medical expenses for chronic diseases are a heavy economic burden for the rural widowed elderly women living alone.

On the other hand, gender awareness has not yet been mainstreamed into national decision-making. Although the important basic theoretical principles of gender equality have been involved in national decision-making, they have not been really implemented in practical operation. Some developed countries have been inclined in terms of policies. Although it has long been argued in China, there is no unified opinion and decision. When it comes to the rural widowed elderly women living alone, if the current situation of the plight of them is not analyzed from the perspective of gender, from the perspective of gender, it is likely that all the elderly will be regarded as a whole, and it is difficult to deeply analyze the gender differences and urban-rural differences in rural elderly. The rural widowed elderly women living alone are isolated from the marginal status of national policies and social security, and are prone to be in the dilemma of old-age care.

#### **3.2. Community Level: Absence of Grassroots Social Organizations in Rural Elderly Care**

Through investigation and analysis, it is not difficult to see that the grass-roots organizations of the village where the rural widowed elderly women living alone, are absent from all aspects of their plight. The role of the village committee in providing for the elderly is mainly reflected in helping the single male elderly who have no children, providing them with minimum living allowances and five guarantees, and after obtaining the consent of these elderly people, the village pays to send them to the township nursing home to live out their old age. However, there are few favorable policies for rural widowed elderly women living alone,. In short, at the current community level, the elderly support for widowed elderly women living alone in rural areas is absent.

#### **3.3. Family Level: The Weakening of the Function of Family Support for the Aged and the Embarrassment of Daughter Support**

First of all, the function of family support for the aged is weakened. With the gradual advancement of industrialization and urbanization in China, more and more rural labor force is constantly transferring to cities and towns, and it is difficult to achieve the elderly care support. With the development of market economy, family economic pressure is increasing. Therefore, at present, the filial piety and fraternity in rural areas are weakened, and the sense of responsibility and moral consciousness of supporting the elderly are much lower than before. Secondly, the awkward position of the daughter in the elderly care. As the saying goes, "Daughter is the mother's sweet little cotton padded jacket", but in the local countryside, in terms of economy, daughters are often excluded from the scope of family support. A daughter's financial support to her parents is always different from that of her son. In short, the essence reflected here is the social reality of gender inequality.

## 4. Conclusion and Discussion

Through this study, it is found that the economic plight of rural widowed elderly women living alone: the source of income is single and the level is low; Difficulties in life care: poor level of daily self-care and great dependence on daughter in case of illness; Mental dilemma: widowhood and living alone lead to a strong sense of loneliness; Medical dilemma: the burden of medical expenses for chronic diseases is large. The reason is that at the government level, the social security level is low and gender awareness has not been mainstreamed into national decision-making; Community level: the absence of grassroots social organizations in rural elderly care; Family level; The weakening of family support function and the embarrassing situation of daughter support. Therefore, to solve the plight of rural widowed elderly women living alone, it is necessary need to put forward corresponding countermeasures and suggestions from the government, community, family and other aspects.

The state needs to assume the main responsibility for the elderly care of vulnerable groups. The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China pointed out that improving the care and service system for rural women and the elderly should echo each other, adhere to ensuring and improving the people's livelihood in the process of development, complement the shortcomings of the people's livelihood in the process of development, promote social fairness and justice, and constantly make new progress in providing for the elderly and helping the weak, so as to ensure that the whole people have more sense of gain in building and sharing development. As for the special vulnerable group of rural widowed elderly women living alone, the country should also assume the main responsibility of providing for the elderly. It is mainly reflected in two aspects: improving the basic old-age security level of the rural elderly and reducing the threshold for reimbursement of chronic diseases, which requires more responsibility.

Establish a pension system with a gender perspective. The rural widowed elderly women living alone, are the most vulnerable part of the elderly group, and also a group that has made important contributions to the country and family. The country should pay special attention to this group. To take full account of the special needs of rural widowed elderly women living alone, and the special social background of these needs, and recognize that their needs in all aspects are not only a personal need, but also a social right. To effectively protect their various legitimate needs and meet their needs for survival and development. With the rapid development of population aging, building a policy support system with a gender perspective is the key to solving the problem of rural widowed elderly women living alone. For example, when formulating social policies for the elderly and their social welfare policies, it is necessary to clearly formulate provisions to protect and support elderly women. In the vast rural areas, the concept of gender discrimination is usually included in the main social settings. Top level policy makers need to have age awareness and gender awareness, and priority should be given

to solving the institutional problems involving the rights and interests of older women.

Give play to the role of rural community grassroots organizations in providing elderly care services. At present, the rural community grassroots organizations are almost absent from the whole process of rural widowed elderly women living alone,. Therefore, in the context of vigorously promoting the rural revitalization strategy, rural community grassroots organizations need to play a real role in elderly care services. For example, in the face of the fact that the cultural level of rural widowed elderly women living alone is low, the medical and health care conditions are poor, and the overall health status is poor, rural community grassroots organizations actively contact medical institutions to go to the countryside regularly for free clinics, free physical examination, especially gynaecological examination, establishment of rural community service sites, regular invitation of relevant experts to carry out community psychological counseling and psychological lectures and other activities, as well as providing elderly care services to the majority of rural elderly, including the rural widowed elderly women living alone, by means of government purchase of services led by community grassroots organizations. Integrate community resources to build a social support system, meet the diverse needs of rural widowed elderly women living alone, achieve a sense of security and action for the elderly, and improve their quality of life.

Carry forward the culture of filial piety, and make the family intergenerational relationship fit. Filial piety is an important part of China's excellent traditional culture, which affects people's family life and personal happiness. Filial piety has a significant positive impact on economic support, life support and emotional support [16]. Filial piety plays an obvious role in improving the intergenerational tension of rural families and consolidating the function of family support for the elderly. The revival of filial piety culture can be achieved by strengthening publicity and education, establishing a model of filial piety, shaping public opinion, and strengthening law enforcement.

Advocate equality between men and women, and vigorously promote the elderly care of daughters. Under China's traditional family pension model and gender system, the son pension is the core family pension order [17]. With the changes of society and family, daughters began to participate in the elderly care of their parents, but the degree of participation was limited. They mainly provided spiritual comfort and appropriate economic support, which was an informal and auxiliary support for the elderly. Therefore, when further implementing family support, it is critical to highlight the important role of daughters in the process of providing for the elderly. The daughter not only has the same responsibility in supporting the elderly, but also has the same decision-making rights as the son. The daughter pension is as legal, reasonable and reasonable as the son pension [18]. Vigorously promoting the elderly care of daughters is essentially an important idea of equality between men and women.

As a special group in the elderly group, the rural widowed

elderly women living alone have the right to share the fruits of reform and opening up. The attention to this disadvantaged group is also the due meaning of the development of a harmonious society in the course of China's progress towards common prosperity.

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