

[Sowing Seeds of Mobility: the Gendered Impact of Land Reform](#)

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The Big Question

In the early stages of economic development, women transition out of agriculture and into non-agricultural employment more slowly than men. While previous research has often attributed this gap to gender-specific factors, this paper uncovers a new explanation: insecure land rights. Even when land policies apply de jure equally to everyone, they can hold men and women back differently de facto.

In many developing countries, farming families do not actually own their land; they only have the right to use it as long as they actively farm it. If the land sits idle, the village can take it back and give it to someone else. This forces families to leave some member behind to “guard” the land while other members move away from farming.

This paper asks: who ends up staying behind? And what happens when governments reform these policies, allowing families to rent out their land with more secure rights?

Why Women Stay Behind

The answer, documented for rural China, is that it is overwhelmingly women who are left behind to guard the land. This is not because the rules say so, as the land policies studied in this paper are strictly gender-neutral on paper. Instead, it comes down to how households divide up work. Non-agricultural jobs, especially in factories and cities, have historically suited men better due to physical demands and prevailing social norms. Farm work, which functions as an early form of “working from home,” is more compatible with women’s heavier domestic responsibilities, such as childcare and eldercare.

When a family needs to send one member to the city and keep one on the farm, the logic of intrahousehold comparative advantage almost always points to the wife staying behind. In practice, insecure land rights act as a barrier that disproportionately traps women in agriculture.

Effects of Land Reform

Between 2003 and 2019, China carried out two major land reforms that progressively strengthened farmers' rights to rent out their land and formally title their holdings. When land can be safely rented out, a family no longer needs to post a physical guard. This frees rural women to move to non-farm work alongside their husbands, shifting the migration pattern from "husband-only" to couples moving together. In regions that adopted these reforms, female non-agricultural employment rose significantly faster than male non-agricultural employment.

However, the story does not end there. As more rural women moved to cities, the supply of female labor in urban markets surged. This influx specifically increased competition among women. As a result, the reforms put downward pressure on wages and employment rates for urban women, particularly those of low skill levels.

To uncover how these policies causally impacted the labor market outcomes of women and men, we tracked the rollout of the two land reforms across roughly 2,000 Chinese counties over a 20-year period. We built a novel county-level reform index, using large language models to screen millions of government policy documents. We then combined this index with large household surveys, allowing us to compare employment and migration in counties that adopted the reforms early versus those that adopted them later. Throughout this process, we took careful steps to ensure our comparisons were fair and not skewed by pre-existing differences between the counties.

We then develop a multi-sector model incorporating couples' labor allocation, featuring reform and non-reform rural regions, and calibrate key elasticity parameters to match the predicted cross-regional differences with our empirical estimates. This allows us to quantify the contribution of land reform operating through the guard labor mechanism. The effects are gendered and quantitatively important: land reform accounts for 31% of rural women's transition out of agriculture, compared to 11% for men.

The Main Takeaway

The most profound lesson from this research is that institutions appearing completely gender-neutral on paper can have deeply gendered consequences in the real world. This happens because they interact with the way families divide work among members. Because insecure land rights were the hidden barrier holding women back, securing rental rights in rural China had greatly benefited women in their transition out of agriculture. Furthermore, this research highlights a rural-urban ripple effect. The influx of rural women moving into cities helps explain why gender gaps widened in urban labor markets during this same period.

Ultimately, these findings carry major implications for future policymaking. Reforming land rights is a proven, powerful tool for closing the gender gap as economies transition out of agriculture. This research reinforces a growing global consensus: secure land institutions are not just about property ownership—they are essential for fostering resilient and equitable economic growth for both women and men.