

“From Embroidery to Empowerment”: Exploring Barriers to Shui Women’s Economic Mobility

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Abstract

This study explores the socio-economic challenges faced by Shui women, mainly residing in Guizhou Province, China. Despite their rich cultural heritage and traditional skills, Shui women still encounter systemic obstacles in education, employment, and legal rights. Based on thematic analysis of field interviews, policy documents, and academic literature, this study reveals how cultural expectations, insufficient institutional support, and discriminatory labor practices work together to hinder the career development of Shui women. The findings highlight the need for intersectional feminist approaches in rural development policies, and they recommend targeted educational and legal reforms to enhance the empowerment of ethnic minority women. This study enriches the literature on gender and ethnic inequality in China, providing new theoretical insights and practical suggestions for promoting inclusive socio-economic development.

Keywords: exploring barriers to Shui Women’s economic mobility

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Shui ethnic group in China is a minority with a long history spanning millennia. Their unique language, writing system, and cultural traditions constitute a precious intangible cultural heritage (Ding, 2005a; Zhou & Wei, 2021). Members of this ethnic group are mainly found in Guizhou Province in southern China, especially concentrated in Sandu Shui Autonomous County. The female members of the group are renowned for their exquisite embroidery skills, professional expertise in rice farming, and continuous inheritance of the Shui script and traditional festivals such as the “Duanjie” (Xie, 2021). Although Shui women

have rich cultural capital, they face multiple structural predicaments in the real-world society. Traditional gender norms and cultural expectations generally emphasize domestic roles, thereby systematically limiting their access to education and career development (Li et al., 2018). Furthermore, as ethnic minority groups, they also face institutional marginalization, such as insufficient legal protection and uneven access to public resources (Guizhou Provincial Women’s Federation, 2019).

The inequality of educational resources is an important obstacle to the development of Shui women. Due to factors such as poverty and parental conservatism, many girls are forced to drop out of school prematurely, thus missing the key path to gaining social capital and economic

independence (Ding, 2005b; Zhao, 2019). They also face discrimination in employment and career choices. They are mainly concentrated in low-income industries such as agriculture and domestic services, making it difficult to achieve upward mobility (Li et al., 2018; Song, 2016). These problems not only reflect gender inequality but also reveal the vulnerable position of ethnic minorities in rural areas within the social structure.

Based on this, this paper aims to (1) systematically examine the key structural barriers to the career advancement and income growth of Shui women and (2) explore potential strategies, particularly institutional and societal interventions, that may promote their financial stability and socio-economic empowerment.

2. Justification

Shui women face unique cultural and economic obstacles in their career development. In addition to experiencing a demographic decline, they have historically had a low social status, with limited educational access and restricted avenues for economic advancement. Despite playing a crucial role in preserving and transmitting traditional culture, their contributions are often undervalued.

In Shui society, women have historically been vital participants in economic activities, particularly domestic labor and crafts like horsetail embroidery. Nevertheless, deeply ingrained patriarchal norms frequently lead to undervalue their contributions. Research by Li et al. (2018) on gendered labor roles in Chinese ethnic minority communities indicates that over 70% of Shui women are engaged in agricultural labor, yet their work receives minimal recognition in economic assessments. Furthermore, the *Guizhou Ethnic Economy Report* (2021) reveals that while female artisans contribute significantly to the local economy, their income is, on average, 35% lower than that of male artisans.

An investigation of the economic status of Shui women not only illuminates the difficulties faced by this specific group but it also sheds light on similar issues confronting marginalized women globally. Many women, including Adivasi women in India, Indigenous women in Australia, and indigenous women in Canada and the United States, navigate economic and social constraints shaped by traditional gender roles, limited educational opportunities, and

inadequate access to resources. By examining the situation of Shui women, we gain valuable insights into global inequalities and the systemic barriers that perpetuate gender-based economic disadvantage. This study emphasizes the necessity of policies and interventions that promote women's economic independence while respecting cultural identity and advocating for the economic autonomy of women from diverse backgrounds worldwide.

2.1 A Unique Moment

In today's rapidly digitalized world, Shui women stand at the crossroads of tradition and innovation. For Shui women who have long relied on cultural customs such as embroidery and agriculture for a living, this is not a simple transition. They lack adequate education, digital literacy, and institutional support. Many Shui women still run the risk of being left behind by rapid technological and socioeconomic change. As e-commerce, digital platforms, and cultural tourism reshape the global economy, the value of intangible cultural heritage is being rediscovered. Therefore, by integrating the power of technology and youth entrepreneurship, as well as government policy reforms, this unique moment can become a turning point, empowering Shui women and enabling them to regain economic initiative while retaining their cultural identities.

2.2 A Unique Voice

The unique insights I contribute to this research stem from both personal experience and a broader socio-cultural perspective. Growing up in a patriarchal family environment gave me a deep understanding of the gender-based challenges women encounter in society. This personal history has shaped my awareness of systemic gender inequality and heightened my understanding of the struggles faced by Shui women. In addition to my personal background, my identity as a Han researcher offers an additional dimension. As a member of China's ethnic majority, I am cognizant of the various inequalities that ethnic minorities, including the Shui, face in society. This awareness allows me to critically examine how gender and ethnic identity intersect to influence women's economic opportunities and social roles. My research is motivated not only by a personal resonance with gender inequality but also by a deep understanding of how historical, cultural, and institutional factors collectively shape the lives

of women in marginalized communities. These multifaceted perspectives have fueled my interest in gender equality, particularly in social settings where traditional norms continue to restrict women's autonomy and economic independence.

As a high school student, I offer a fresh perspective on the dynamics of digital globalization and the evolution of emerging economic trends. With support by a team of high school students with diverse specializations, I analyzed the impact of contemporary short video platforms and the internet celebrity economy on the promotion of horsetail embroidery, proposing marketing strategies adapted to the modern digital environment. Based on their skills, some of the team members focused on data collection and field interviews, others on brand image design, and still others on website creation and maintenance and this ultimately yielded a very effective collaboration. Some members concentrated on analyzing digital platform trends, while others focused on creating visual content and online platforms that authentically represent Shui culture. Each member participated equally, and through open discussion, critical thinking, and practical fieldwork, we ensured that our research outcomes were both robust and innovative. This combination of traditional fieldwork with a youth-driven, twenty-first-century perspective has enabled me to provide a unique and forward-looking viewpoint on the changing career trajectories of minority women.

3. Theory

3.1 Intersectionality, Minority Studies, and Women's Education

Fraser's (1997) theory of redistribution and recognition critiques the systemic undervaluation of women's labor in capitalist and patriarchal societies. It highlights a "double injustice" where women earn less and lack social recognition. This aligns with the reality of Shui women, whose labor in agriculture, handicrafts (e.g., horsetail embroidery), and domestic work remains economically invisible. Her later work (2009) on participatory equality argues that economic dependence restricts women's autonomy and full societal participation, a concept relevant in Shui communities where women's decision-making power is often subordinate to male relatives.

Bell hooks (1984) introduces cross-feminism, highlighting the interlocking nature of patriarchy, capitalism, and racism. For Shui women, this framework is critical as they face dual marginalization due to both gender and ethnic identity. Their economic exclusion cannot be understood without considering how cultural and state policies compound their subordination. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory further demonstrates how overlapping identities (gender, ethnicity, class) create compounded barriers. Shui women's geographic remoteness, minority status, and patriarchal traditions intersect to restrict their access to education, healthcare, and formal employment, reinforcing cyclical poverty.

Craft's (2006) gender education access theory posits that structural underinvestment in women's education perpetuates economic dependence. Historically, Shui women had limited access to education, with formal education typically prioritized for boys. According to the *Education Statistics of Ethnic Minorities in Guizhou* (2020), the literacy rate of Shui women is 62%, significantly lower than the 85% of Shui men. Furthermore, Zhao's (2019) study found that only 18% of Shui women completed secondary education, compared to 42% of men, reflecting the long-term effects of historical gender bias.

Shui families traditionally emphasize women's roles as caregivers and cultural bearers; however, this role often limits women's personal autonomy. A survey by the Guizhou Provincial Women's Federation (2019) found that 84% of Shui families still adhere to a patriarchal structure where men are the primary family decision-makers while women are responsible for housework and child-rearing.

3.2 Focus on Culture and Challenges for Shui Men

Focusing on the culture of ethnic minorities like the Shui is essential today to preserve cultural diversity, given their unique traditions and historical backgrounds. Furthermore, considering the socioeconomic development gap between minority regions and others, a focus on culture can promote national identity and create economic opportunities for local women through traditional skills such as horsetail embroidery, thereby fostering social equity and sustainable development. However, the Shui, like many other ethnic minorities, have faced numerous challenges in recent years. While the

gender division of labor in Shui society primarily limits the social mobility of women, Shui men also encounter obstacles due to the marginalization of their culture and the difficulties within their communities' economic structure.

Shui men have also experienced setbacks in recent decades. As economic development has concentrated in urban centers, many Shui men have migrated to cities for low-paying, labor-intensive jobs, often facing discrimination and limited upward mobility. This migration has led to a loss of connection with their native culture and community, further intensifying the challenges faced by the ethnic group as a whole. The erosion of traditional livelihoods and the lack of inclusive policies have hindered both Shui men and women in distinct yet interconnected ways.

3.3 Literature Review

Existing studies on the economic status of Shui women address the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and rural marginalization. Although relatively limited in number, studies published between 2004 and 2023, mainly in Chinese ethnological, cultural, and regional journals, highlight the impact of gender roles, property inheritance norms, and limited educational and employment access on Shui women's economic autonomy. These works, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, reveal that despite women's central role in traditional practices such as horsetail embroidery, they often lack decision-making power and access to broader markets. However, few studies explore the potential of cultural heritage as a tool for women's empowerment in the digital economy, revealing a gap that this research aims to address.

3.4 Themes in the Literature

Existing literature consistently demonstrates that Shui women face significant economic marginalization stemming from a combination of cultural norms, gender roles, and structural inequalities. Research indicates that traditional expectations restrict their participation in formal employment, entrepreneurship, and financial decision-making, reinforcing dependence on male family members (Liu et al., 2023). These constraints are further exacerbated by inheritance customs, educational disparities, and weak enforcement of gender equality policies, perpetuating cycles of economic instability

(Zhou & Wei, 2021; Pan, 2012; Ding, 2005).

3.5 Cultural and Gender Norms Limiting Economic Participation

Liu et al. (2023) found that Shui women are predominantly engaged in subsistence agriculture and domestic labor, with limited access to formal employment or business opportunities. This economic marginalization is reinforced by deeply ingrained gender roles that prioritize male financial authority. Similarly, Xie (2021) observed that despite modernization, Shui women remain confined to traditional duties, restricting their ability to pursue higher-paying jobs or leadership positions. These cultural expectations discourage financial independence, as women's economic contributions are often undervalued (Kawulich, 2005).

3.6 Structural Barriers: Inheritance, Education, and Legal Enforcement

Zhou and Wei (2021) examined property inheritance practices in Shui communities, revealing a strong male preference that systematically disadvantages women. Without secure land or asset ownership, Shui women lack financial stability and remain economically vulnerable. Additionally, Ding (2005) highlighted how traditional gender roles devalue female education, leading to lower literacy rates and fewer employment opportunities. This educational disparity limits upward mobility, trapping women in low-income roles.

Although legal frameworks exist to promote gender equality, Pan (2012) found weak policy enforcement, allowing discrimination in wages, land rights, and career advancement to persist.

Ding Yueya (2005) further emphasized that Shui women experience dual marginalization—both as an ethnic minority and as women—facing compounded barriers in education, employment, and social mobility.

3.7 Potential Pathways for Economic Empowerment

Some studies suggest that digital platforms and new technologies could offer alternative income opportunities, but rural Shui women often lack access to these resources (International Conference on Education, Management, and Computing Technology 2014). Historical analyses, such as those by the Hubei Institute for Nationalities (2004), indicate that despite gradual modernization, patriarchal traditions

continue to hinder women's economic agency. The limitations acknowledged in the existing literature primarily focus on three areas. First, limited access to digital technology—including poor internet infrastructure, lack of digital literacy, and unaffordable devices—remains a significant issue. While digital platforms offer potential for empowering Shui women, limited technological access in rural areas restricts their economic opportunities and ability to fully utilize these tools for financial independence. Second, weak law enforcement is frequently cited. Despite the existence of policies promoting gender equality in some regions, an inadequate implementation leads to persistent discrimination against women in land ownership, wages, and career advancement, hindering their access to economic opportunities. Finally, deep-seated cultural and institutional barriers persist. While modernization has created some opportunities, entrenched gender norms and patriarchal systems continue to constrain women's economic independence and reinforce their subordination within society.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data Collection

To gain a deeper, firsthand understanding of the Shui women's daily lives and economic roles, I employed participant observation as one of the core ethnographic methods. This immersive approach allowed me to engage directly with the community and witness the realities often hidden behind statistics or secondhand accounts.

4.2 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes in the interviews. Interview responses were categorized according to major topics such as economic roles, employment challenges, and generational perceptions of gender expectations. Thematic analysis allowed me to examine the frequency and significance of certain topics emerging from the interviews. Additionally, I cross-referenced the interview data with my participant observations to ensure consistency and to deepen the interpretation of the findings. This approach not only enhanced the validity of the results, but it also deepened understanding of the cultural and structural factors influencing the economic independence of Shui women. By analyzing these diverse data sources, I gained a

comprehensive understanding of how traditional gender roles and modern influences intertwine to shape the economic status of Shui women.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and report on patterns within datasets. In this study, the six-step thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilized to systematically classify the experiences of Shui women in the domains of economy, education, and family. These six steps include familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This method facilitates the systematic revelation of the gender inequality faced by Shui women in the context of modernization.

5. Participant Observation

Participant observation is a valuable research method for understanding the nuanced culture of the Shui women. It enables researchers to directly observe the actors in their daily environment and interactions, thereby providing rich descriptions of participants' behaviors, intentions, situations, and events, and offering an opportunity to observe and engage in unscheduled occurrences (Kawulich, 2005). A key advantage of this approach is its ability to capture the subtle dynamics of everyday life, providing researchers with a deeper understanding of the social and cultural context. By directly participating in daily activities with participants, researchers can observe behaviors, interactions, and mannerisms that may not be articulated in direct interviews or surveys. This method can also facilitate a more authentic and nuanced interpretation of participants' perspectives.

5.1 Observation: Community Life and Economic Roles of Shui Women

For this research on the Shui women, I conducted participant observation in Sandu Shui Autonomous County, Guizhou Province, where I resided with a local Shui family for a day. The household comprised a grandmother and two sisters; other family members were absent. I fully immersed myself in their daily activities, beginning in the morning by assisting them in harvesting corn in the fields. At noon, I participated in cooking and preparing meals at home, gaining firsthand experience of their traditional lifestyle and the gendered division of

labor. In addition to my host family, I observed interactions among neighbors who visited throughout the day. Some gathered to converse, highlighting the importance of community relations in Shui society. Children also played on the hill, illustrating how daily life in this rural setting is deeply intertwined with nature and informal social gatherings.

During this field visit, our team conducted a structured analysis of the local horsetail embroidery industry, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of different business categories. We observed that Shui women of varying ages fulfill distinct roles within their families and the embroidery trade. Older women often serve as custodians of embroidery techniques, while younger women are more receptive to innovation and marketing strategies, viewing embroidery not merely as a tradition but also as a means of financial independence.

We also visited local businesses, such as the Fengzhu horsetail embroidery company. While the company shows potential, we identified clear challenges, most notably a lack of a defined brand identity. Even the embroiderers were unable to articulate the brand story. To address this, our team proposed shaping the brand around the theme of “collective female identity,” drawing from the tradition of embroidery being passed down from mother to daughter. The objective is to highlight women’s empowerment and bridge tradition with modern consumer expectations.

Further analysis revealed deeper systemic issues within the embroidery business: high labor costs, overhead expenses like rent and utilities, limited marketing channels, and traditional designs lacking modern appeal. In response, we proposed detailed strategies: target audience research to clarify buyer preferences, product development including modern cultural and creative goods, and marketing strategies combining online methods (social media positioning, influencer collaborations) with offline initiatives (interactive experience stores, brand events).

This immersive observation provided me with a clearer understanding of the economic and domestic roles of Shui women and underscored the broader cultural and structural constraints they navigate. By actively participating in their routines and engaging with local artisans and business leaders, I gained a comprehensive,

lived perspective of the tensions and possibilities surrounding gender, tradition, and development in Shui communities.

I also immersed myself in the community, engaging directly with local artisans and business leaders. My research specifically focused on horsetail embroidery, a traditional craft unique to Shui women. I interviewed the head of an embroidery company and non-genetic heirs, compiling firsthand accounts that offer an insider perspective often absent in existing literature.

5.2 Key Informant Interview

Key informant interviews represent another method employed in this research, facilitating the direct collection of detailed and rich data. This approach allowed me to establish trust with the interviewees. For my interviews with the Shui women, I interviewed local elders, female community leaders, and educators in Sandu Shui Autonomous County, Guizhou Province. These interviews were conducted in community centers, respondents’ homes, and informal settings, fostering a more comfortable and open environment for discussion. The flexibility of interviews permits both structured questioning and open dialogue, enabling respondents to share personal stories, experiences, and perspectives beyond the confines of pre-set questions.

The interviews focused on the historical and cultural factors that have shaped the economic status of Shui women, the challenges they face in employment and education, and the impact of modernization on traditional gender roles. Through these interviews, I gathered diverse perspectives revealing deep-seated cultural norms and societal expectations that continue to limit the economic independence of Shui women. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, yielding a wealth of data for in-depth analysis of the structural and cultural barriers confronting Shui women.

The interviews also revealed generational shifts in attitudes toward gender roles, with younger women expressing a desire for greater economic autonomy while still influenced by traditional expectations. The interviews centered on several key themes: historical and cultural influences on the economic roles of Shui women, barriers to employment and education, and the effects of modernization on traditional gender expectations. A recurring insight from the

interviews was the generational shift in attitudes toward gender roles. Younger Shui women articulated a growing desire for economic independence, hope to gain more opportunities for self-control through education and work yet many felt constrained by traditional expectations regarding family and household duties. It is particularly worth mentioning that a relatively open and trusting relationship has been established between me and the shui people interviewed. Perhaps it's because I'm an outsider and also a woman that they seem particularly candid and sincere when they talking about their personal dreams. Some people even say that this is the first time they have truly thought about themselves, such as "working in the city", "earning money to support themselves" or "postponing marriage". For them, such conversations are not only a form of sharing but also a psychological release. In the process of being listened to and understood, they also gained a certain temporary freedom. This generational tension highlights the ongoing challenges Shui women face as they navigate their cultural heritage and evolving societal expectations.

5.3 Thematic Analysis

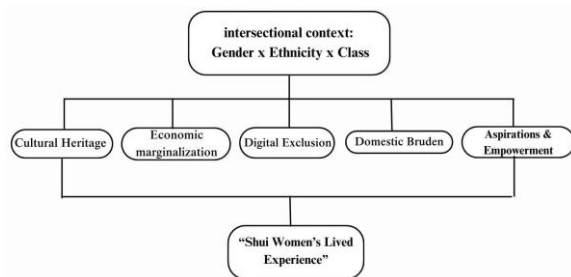


Figure 1.

6. Key Findings

6.1 Ethnic Minority and Cultural Heritage Challenges

The research confirms that that Shui women occupy a vulnerable position in Chinese society, because of gender, ethnic, and economic marginalization. Although they play a vital role in preserving traditional culture, particularly through horsetail embroidery, their contributions are often undervalued and overlooked. Most Shui women are constrained by traditional gender roles and limited educational opportunities, which consequently restrict their access to stable employment and legal protection. Through field interviews and

direct conversations with female embroidery artisans, I discovered that while many possess exceptional craftsmanship, they face significant challenges in monetizing their work. The lack of digital literacy, marketing knowledge, and access to broader sales networks prevents them from participating effectively in the digital economy.

Furthermore, the research highlights a significant gap in cultural inheritance between generations. Influenced by modernization and opportunities for work outside the community, the younger generation of Shui women rarely learn horsetail embroidery, posing a threat to the future of this intangible cultural heritage. The decline of intergenerational knowledge transfer not only endangers the continuation of horsetail embroidery but also weakens the cultural identity and cohesion of the Shui ethnic community. Another important finding is that for Shui women, embroidery is not merely a means of livelihood or a traditional skill but also a form of emotional expression and self-expression, symbolizing their resilience and pride in the face of marginalization. This underscores the necessity of integrating cultural understanding and respect into any economic or policy initiatives designed to support them.

Further investigations reveal that many Shui women bear heavy responsibilities in child-rearing, elder care, and household chores, significantly reducing their time and capacity for self-development, training, or business activities. Moreover, due to language barriers and limited access to policy information, they often fail to fully access government subsidies or women's support programs. This information barrier further exacerbates their unequal position in the distribution of social resources. Through on-site interviews and direct communication with female embroidery artisans, I found that many women possess outstanding manual skills but face numerous difficulties in commercializing their work. For instance, an embroiderer in her fifties mentioned learning horsetail embroidery from her mother since childhood and accumulating over thirty years of experience. Currently, while caring for her children at home, she continues to embroider in her spare time. She has no other sources of income, and the family's livelihood primarily depends on her husband's casual labor. She stated, "All the capable young people in the village have gone out to work. Those of us

who stayed behind can only make ends meet by embroidering some things.” However, her life was challenging; her husband often subjected her to domestic abuse, causing her significant mental and financial distress. She admitted that although she desired to improve her embroidery skills, these difficulties limited her opportunities for development and creativity.

Another woman attempted to promote her work on WeChat Moments to attract buyers but discontinued her efforts due to a lack of response. She confessed, “I don’t know how to write those attractive titles, nor can I take good-looking photos like young people.” She added that there are not many young people in the village who know how to take photos or do marketing, but the artisans desperately need such assistance. She also expressed that despite her passion for embroidery; she felt uncertain about the future given market competition and the absence of necessary technical support. She sighed, “If these handicrafts we make could be seen by more people, perhaps they could bring in more income. Unfortunately, we have no platform and no marketing skills.” She believes that while demand for traditional handicrafts exists in modern society, the lack of effective promotion and connection methods marginalizes artisans like her in a highly competitive market.

These conversations highlight their deficiencies in digital skills and market awareness and underscore the significant gap between them and the modern digital economy. Despite possessing profound manual skills, they struggle to overcome their predicament through traditional means. Therefore, providing digital skills training and marketing support is particularly urgent to help them establish a foothold in the new economic environment.

Despite these challenges, many expressed enthusiasm about using online platforms to promote and sell their embroidery, demonstrating both their entrepreneurial spirit and the untapped economic potential of Shui women. These findings suggest a pressing need for structural support and targeted initiatives to empower these women and sustain their cultural heritage.

Further observations also indicate that while striving to promote cultural inheritance, Shui women face challenges posed by modernization. With societal changes and shifts in the labor

market, many younger women choose to seek employment outside their communities, resulting in a disruption of the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and skills related to traditional handicrafts. Furthermore, the disconnect between the supply of handicrafts and modern market demand makes it difficult for the labor of these women to receive appropriate value recognition and compensation. Consequently, finding effective ways to promote the traditional cultural works of Shui women to a broader market through modern channels and platforms has become a critical issue for research to address.

6.2 Women’s Socioeconomic Conditions and Challenges

The research indicates that Shui women occupy a vulnerable position at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and economic marginalization. Although they play a vital role in preserving traditional culture, particularly through horsetail embroidery, their contributions are often undervalued and overlooked. Most Shui women are constrained by traditional gender roles and limited educational opportunities, which consequently restrict their access to stable employment and legal protection.

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for structural support and targeted initiatives to empower these women and sustain their cultural heritage. Among these challenges, it is particularly worth noting the signs of change shown by the younger generation of Shui people. They not only expressed a strong desire for economic independence but also showed a great enthusiasm for promoting embroidery products through online platforms. Despite the still limited practical conditions, young women have gradually broken through the traditional framework in both thought and action.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, my research on the current situation of women in the Shui ethnic group reveals the complex interplay of gender, ethnic identity, and economic marginalization within rural Chinese society. Although highly skilled in the traditional horsetail embroidery technique, deeply rooted in the Shui ethnic group's cultural identity, they face numerous limitations in achieving self-empowerment. The root causes lie in deeply ingrained gender norms, cultural expectations, and their ethnic minority identity, leading to a pervasive lack of quality educational opportunities, legal protection, and formal employment channels for Shui women. During my interactions with embroidery artisans, many expressed a strong desire to sell their work online. However, due to insufficient digital skills and market support, they found it challenging to transform embroidery into a sustainable income source. This situation underscores the urgent need for targeted support measures, such as providing digital skills training, establishing e-commerce collaboration channels, and promoting the formation of local women's cooperatives. However, this study also has its limitations. Due to time and resource constraints, the research was conducted within a limited geographical area and sample size, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of Shui women in other regions. Additionally, linguistic and cultural barriers occasionally posed challenges in communication, potentially affecting the depth of some interviews and observations. Future research could benefit from broader regional coverage and interdisciplinary collaboration to provide a more comprehensive understanding. These initiatives can not only safeguard the valuable intangible cultural heritage of horsetail embroidery but also pave a realistic path toward the economic

empowerment and gender equality of Shui women. This study aims to offer valuable insights for exploring how to promote the coordinated development of cultural inheritance and women's rights in ethnic minority communities by highlighting the structural inequalities and potential contributions of these women.

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