

The Research on the Marital Dilemmas and Ways of Coping with Gender Stereotypes of Highly Educated Women

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Abstract. In the context of the modernization process and in particular, the expansion of higher education, the proportion of women among postgraduate students is on the rise and exceeds that of men. The opportunity cost of higher education for highly educated women is their late entry into society, which has resulted in many highly educated women not being able to marry or find a suitable partner at a marriageable age. Based on socialization theory and gender theory, this paper explores and analyzes the gender stereotypes and marital dilemmas faced by highly educated women and their ways of coping with them based on interviews and literature research, and learns about the gender stereotypes faced by highly educated women and their responses to the threat of stereotypes. The study also explores the links between the marital behaviour of highly educated women and gender stereotypes, and proposes policy implications for the marriage of highly educated women, starting with individual psychological counselling, and then improving social policies and laws and creating a favourable cultural atmosphere, in order to provide a theoretical basis and practical support for society to correctly understand the marriage of highly educated women and reduce gender stereotypes.

Keywords: Higher Education; Gender Stereotypes; Women; Coping Styles; Marriage.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the development of society and the growing awareness of gender equality, the number of women in higher education in China has also increased significantly, and in the context of the modernization process and the expansion of higher education in particular, the proportion of women among postgraduate students is on the rise and has surpassed that of men. At the same time, the age of first marriage in China has been significantly delayed. Data show that in 2020 the average age of first marriage in China was 28.67 years, with the average age of first marriage for men being 29.38 years and for women 27.95 years, an increase of 3.78 years from the average age of first marriage in 2010, which was 24.89 years. The available literature shows that higher education has indeed improved women's social status and human resource potential, and provided a large pool of talent for society, but under the traditional gender stereotype, having higher education is not a comparative advantage for women in the marriage market, but rather increases the difficulty of choosing a spouse for women with higher education.

On the one hand, due to traditional gender stereotypes, society believes that higher education means that women will delay marriage and thus miss the “best time to have children”, and the higher the education, the later they enter marriage and the later they have children. On the other hand, traditional Chinese social culture and gender stereotypes suggest that women have a greater educational or financial advantage over men in marriage, and that men cannot accept that their wives have advantages that they have not gained, and therefore have difficulty 'mastering' their wives. At the same time, traditional social culture suggests that men should be more “downward” compatible with their other half, while women need to find men who are 'stronger' than they are to marry. As traditional gender stereotypes continue to influence, the need for women to be relatively weaker than men in marriage becomes the natural “norm”, which to some extent limits and reduces the choice of partners for highly educated women. In an era of gender equality, highly educated women, as one of the best groups of women in society, are in sharp contrast to the traditional image of the “weaker woman”, and as society recognizes that highly educated women can make a positive contribution to society and have the potential for continued development, the marriage of highly educated women

has become a focus of public opinion, and is also a major issue of concern. The reason why the marriage of highly educated women has been widely discussed in society is that the rising social value of highly educated women is in contradiction with the traditional social culture and stereotypes of women serving the family, such as “men are the mainstay and women are the mainstay”. The reason for this is that the rising social value of highly educated women is at odds with the traditional social culture and stereotype of women serving the family. Taking into account our current reality, traditional cultural background and gender stereotypes of women, some scholars believe that highly educated women are more inclined to choose men with comparable education or higher education than themselves as their partners. However, in today's society, due to the number of highly educated men and the trend of women's education gradually catching up with men's, the range of choices for highly educated women will be much smaller than that of women who have not received higher education. At the same time, highly educated women are more likely to be financially advantaged, have a higher proportion of financial independence, and have richer and better social resources, and therefore have a higher chance of continuing to find a suitable partner. Highly educated women are less likely to compromise on social conventions and have the ability to choose to remain single for long periods of time and resist social risks on their own.

Based on the above-mentioned traditional stereotypes that highly educated women are subjected to, this paper uses interview studies, case studies and literature research to understand the gender stereotypes faced by highly educated women and the marital dilemmas faced by highly educated women, and to understand their ways of coping through stereotype threat theory.

2. Gender Stereotype Factors in Marriage Difficulties of Highly Educated Women

2.1 Overview of Gender Stereotypes

Stereotypes are a collection of perceptions, ideas and expectations that individuals build up about a particular group during social interactions. They are relatively solid cognitive structures that are referred to when evaluating and judging members of the corresponding group [1]. Gender stereotypes are an important part of stereotypes, and have been the focus of researchers in the fields of sociology and psychology, and are fixed perceptions or beliefs about the activities, roles and personality traits of men and women. The traditional societal perceptions can create a perception of gender roles [2].

In the modern era of gender equality, traditional gender stereotypes of women still exist in contemporary society, and these traditional gender stereotypes are transmitted through society, requiring highly educated women to conform to established social roles to regulate their own views on mate selection and marriage choices. When the marital dilemma of highly educated women under the traditional gender stereotype conflicts with the personal traits of high knowledge, the stereotype will produce biased judgments and behaviors towards the cognitive target, i.e., the stereotype will eventually lead to inevitable prejudice and discriminatory behaviors, thus causing social injustice and cluster conflicts.

2.2 Definition of a Highly Educated Woman

The term “highly educated” among highly educated women is a demand for literacy that is constantly evolving and updating as society progresses. The author combines the views of several scholars and believes that highly educated women should be those who are studying for a master's degree or have obtained a master's degree or higher [3]. The reasons for this are as follows: with the continuous expansion of universities, undergraduate degrees are becoming more common and do not allow for a better classification of women in terms of academic qualifications.

At the same time, literature research and interview studies have revealed that, compared to non-highly educated women, highly educated women are more independent and autonomous, and are more likely to break free from traditional social stereotypes and have more innovative ideas about

marriage and relationships. However, there is a conflict between the social contribution capacity and career development prospects of highly educated women and their marital and family roles. On the one hand, highly educated women have better cultural connotation and professionalism and are more competitive in society, but on the other hand, when facing marriage issues, they are more vulnerable to hidden discrimination in the marriage market due to their social roles under the traditional female stereotype. Highly educated women receive and react to traditional social stereotypes in comparison to non-highly educated women or highly educated men. The label of highly educated women is a challenge to traditional social stereotypes of gender. However, in their deeper consciousness, many highly educated women still have the shadow of the traditional concept of marriage due to the influence of the environment they grew up in. In the midst of self-contradictions, they seek to balance and break through [4].

2.3 Factors of Gender Stereotypes in Marital Dilemmas

According to literature studies and existing research, gender stereotypes have an impact on women of different age groups. Among the group of highly educated women, there are three stereotypes related to education and marriage, according to the author.

The first stereotype is that women's higher education and achievements are due to women's efforts rather than their personal talents, and society more often believes that men have inherent advantages in obtaining higher education [5]. Development and participation in higher academic fields, so that women pay a relatively higher price than men for getting the same academic qualifications as men and women. At the same time, the traditional stereotype is that men can generally accept "downward" compatibility with women, while women can hardly accept "downward" compatibility with men. "As a result, highly educated women are more likely to become the target of the marriage market".

The second gender stereotype is that although highly educated women have higher levels of education and personal skills, taking care of the family is usually considered a woman's responsibility [6], while men can ignore household chores. Married highly educated women are asked to devote part of their time and energy to taking care of their families. For unmarried highly educated women who are not married and have children or who cannot take care of their families, they are not considered to be a "complete" woman, even if they are successful in their careers and studies. Women in almost all fields, whether they are highly educated or in other groups, experience similar problems.

The third stereotype is that highly educated women are older and more demanding, and that highly educated women have difficulty choosing a spouse because they don't put themselves down and demand too much from the male population. A documentary film "Leftover Women in China" directed by an Israeli director records the story of 35-year-old Huamei, a lawyer working in Beijing with a high education and high income, who was asked by a matchmaker about her criteria for choosing a spouse. These are only two conditions, but the marriage intermediary thinks Huamei's standards are too high, and says Huamei is not good-looking and hard-headed enough to have a man in his 30s. This case is easy to see that highly educated women are not always too demanding, but some social individuals' gender stereotypes of women are stuck in the perspective of "women are the suppliers of marriage and men are the demanders of marriage" [7], taking women's appearance, character and age as important indicators in marriage beyond their personal abilities. In contrast, highly educated women are in the group with solid development driving force in the society, and they are more likely to be exposed to the public view and accept the traditional gender stereotypes of the public, and this group of highly educated women has their own specific ways to cope with the influence of traditional gender stereotypes.

3. Responses to marital dilemmas under gender stereotypes of highly educated women

Stereotype threat is a common mechanism by which stereotypes work against stigmatized groups, as each person has one or more social identities that can be targeted by stereotypes in certain specific

situations [8]. In the case of highly educated women, the group has at least two labels, highly educated and female, and when compared separately, the group's gender is the main reason for the stereotype relative to the group of highly educated men, or non-highly educated women. Together with the label of high education, which is contrary to the traditional stereotypical image of women, the combination of the labels of high education and female becomes a stigmatized group. Stereotype threat works when the stigmatized group fears negative evaluation or differential treatment due to stereotypes. This is because concerns about stereotypes can in turn lead to the stigmatized group not performing at their original level. Stereotype threat can work by exerting pressure and threatening the self-integrity of the target group. That is, the way highly educated women respond to traditional stereotypes in the face of marital dilemmas [9].

3.1 Compromise or Fight Against Gender Stereotypes

Stereotype threats can add additional pressure on success from the stigmatized group [9]. Women in stereotype-threatening situations develop doubts about their abilities, which leads to concerns about their performance and additional pressure on their perceptions of mate selection and marriage. These pressures negatively affect the academic and career performance of highly educated women themselves, prompting highly educated women to further doubt their abilities, creating a vicious cycle. Highly educated women do not even need to identify with these gender stereotypes; they only need to be aware of the existence of gender stereotypes to have the possibility of being negatively affected by them [5]. In a stereotype-threatening situation, women form the perception that most people have already made assumptions for them about their impracticality in choosing a spouse or their inferiority in the marriage market [12], and thus compromise for fear of malicious criticism and choose a marriage that does not match them.

In the group of highly educated women, they show more education and social contribution ability. Under the traditional gender stereotype, such highly educated women are not popular in the marriage market due to their social power. Both women who are studying in school and those who have graduated and entered the workplace with high education are under more pressure because they are aware of the existence of gender stereotypes and are worried about being treated differently or maliciously evaluated, thus showing more concern for their own ability development. Under these additional pressures, some highly educated women will try to prove that their performance is not related to their biological sex by their academic performance or finding a marriage partner who is “compatible” with them, and prove that they can still perform as well or even better than men in the academic performance or marriage market. They can prove that they can still perform as well or even better than men in the academic or dating market, turning the label of “highly educated” from a disadvantage in the dating market to an advantage in the general environment. At the same time, women with high education who are fighting against gender stereotypes are willing to take the path of not getting married and not having children, from competing in the marriage market to withdrawing from the marriage market and choosing to pursue their own development path.

However, it is worth noting that self-vigilance generated by the stigmatized group due to stereotypes can take up working memory, and when highly educated women focus too much on how to fight traditional gender stereotypes and reverse the marital dilemma of highly educated women among stereotypes [13], it will instead affect their own academic and career performance, resulting in poor performance. According to the study, some women have less activity in computational and learning-related areas of the brain when answering math questions under stereotype threat. This means that women who face and fight gender stereotypes tend to reduce their academic careers that should occupy their time, resulting in a decrease in their ability to perform at their jobs [14].

3.2 Ignoring and Disagreeing with Gender Stereotypes

Stereotype threat, in addition to adding additional pressure on the stigmatized group to succeed, can also damage their self-integrity [8]. Self-integrity refers to a person's self-assurance that the individual believes he or she is competent and effective. Because in a stereotype-threatening scenario,

the stigmatized group's self-integrity may be compromised by its fear of fitting the characteristics described by the stereotype [16]. However, as long as the target group does not agree that the stereotype is true, they will not fear that they have the negative characteristics described by the stereotype and will be protected from the negative effects of the stereotype. That is, as long as highly educated women believe that gender stereotypes are unreasonable and untrue, their self-integrity will not be damaged by gender stereotypes. Therefore, these highly educated women will show that they do not recognize the gender stereotypes imposed by the outside world and are firm in their own choices and paths, with their own feelings as the most important base. However, it is important to note that when the self-integrity of the stigmatized group is threatened, their subconscious of self-protection will be triggered, resulting in self-limitation. For example, when highly educated women encounter gender stereotypes such as “they can't find a partner because they study too much and are too strong”, some women may deliberately perform less academically and reduce their efforts. In this way, if they are criticized for being at a disadvantage in the marriage market because they study too much or have a strong personality, they can use “it's not because they study too much or have a strong personality” as an excuse to comfort themselves, thus reducing the traditional gender stereotypes they receive in the marriage market. Therefore, highly educated women who are too concerned about the impact of gender stereotypes on their marital difficulties are likely to underperform in their academic performance and career because of their compromised self-integrity.

4. Suggestions for countermeasures to improve gender stereotypes of highly educated women

The level of education is always a necessary criterion for women in choosing a spouse. Educational attainment is not only closely related to future economic strength and to quality of life, but also profoundly affects one's outlook on life, values and worldview, which are all important factors affecting future family harmony. Therefore, how to solve the problem of unbalanced educational gender structure and promote their smooth marriage is an issue that needs the attention of academic and governmental departments. In order to reduce the pressure of marriage on highly educated women, we must first eliminate the oppression of gender stereotypes against women. In reality, it is difficult to eradicate gender stereotypes because of the traditional social and cultural influences. Expressly, firstly, interventions can be provided for the group of highly educated women to cope with the momentary stereotype of marriage problems; secondly, policy guidance can be delivered to improve laws and regulations and strengthen social security; and finally, it is to help build a social culture of gender equality.

4.1 Provide Psychological Intervention

Providing psychological interventions for women can somewhat curb the negative effects of gender stereotypes on them. A professional mental health practitioner can guide highly educated women to attribute all their anxieties to external irrational gender stereotypes and face the negative effects caused by stereotype threat to be improved. Other places where highly educated women gather, such as universities and research institutes, can provide more psychosexual support activities for women, such as counselors, psychological support activities, and psychological groups. Also, for some highly educated women who urgently need to solve their marital problems, they can provide group activities for fellowship, etc.

4.2 Improve laws and Regulations and Strengthen Social Security

4.2.1. Improve the Security System and Medical Protection for Senior Births

One of the stereotypes suffered by highly educated women is that they are older and give birth late. Since highly educated women have a significant personal investment in education upfront, some of them will choose to marry later and give birth later, but the risk of advanced maternity is relatively high, so the preconception and prenatal protection work for highly educated women can be included

in the routine birth testing and the preconception and prenatal risk assessment can be actively carried out. It should also thoroughly implement the requirements related to medical measures for childbirth, deepen the maternal and child protection system, provide better environment and equipment for women to give birth, and strive to improve the well-being of highly educated women and promote reproductive health.

4.2.2. Improve Employment Policies that Match the Maternity System

In order to reduce the economic pressure that highly educated women face when they enter marriage, it is especially important to increase social policy support, supervision of non-compliant enterprises and social value guidance. Reducing discrimination in the workplace against childbirth and providing a good guarantee for the re-employment of highly educated women after childbirth will not only benefit the highly educated women group, but also provide more talent motivation for the development of society. At present, married women with high education also face gender discrimination in maternity, and some enterprises refuse to recruit married women with no children, partly because maternity insurance needs to be covered by the enterprise, which increases the labor cost of the enterprise. In order to protect the rights and interests of highly educated women, it is necessary to refine the subject of maternity insurance, build a pattern of social, unit, family and individual commitment, and make the system of social insurance payment more reasonable.

4.2.3. Clarify Family Division of Labor and Improve the Family Pillar System

The government and community should create a service system more suitable for maternal and child protection, improve community day care services, standardize the market for domestic and childcare nannies, or the government can compensate for the lack of costly care by purchasing the services of social organizations to provide high-quality, low-cost services for dual-income families in need of childcare. At a large level, guide men to return to the family, and guide spouses of highly educated women to take on family care responsibilities to promote a more nuanced division of labor in the family and reduce the impact of gender stereotypes on childcare.

4.3 Build a Social and Cultural Atmosphere of Gender Equality

4.3.1. Integrate Gender Perspective into Education

Parents should raise awareness of gender education when educating their children, educate them on more scientific gender awareness and gender roles from birth, reduce gender stereotypes with practical actions, and help children establish scientific gender concepts from an early age. For example, fathers can be more involved in housework and childcare, and mothers can work outside the home and acquire more knowledge to reduce the stereotype that "men work outside the home and women do housework at home. Starting with the new generation, traditional social stereotypes can be reduced to create good gender awareness dissemination and promote sustainable gender equality.

4.3.2. Construct a Cultural Atmosphere of Gender Equality

Mass media and society can promote more the social value and external image of the group of highly educated women, reduce the propagation of traditional solidified marriage concepts, encourage the spread of new fertility concepts, strengthen the propagation and recognition of highly educated women's free choice of marriage and fertility, and encourage the need for both men and women to give equally in the birth and raising of offspring. The above measures are conducive to reducing the marital dilemmas and pressure of highly educated women, as well as reducing the traditional gender stereotypes of women, which is conducive to highly educated women creating greater value for society and promoting harmonious social development.

5. Conclusion

With the deepening of China's education construction, more women have received higher education, and the marriage concept of this group differs greatly from the traditional marriage concept

of the society, while the traditional gender stereotypes have become more and more obvious in restricting this group in marriage issues. Based on the above findings, this paper argues that the domestic media and society must recognize the contribution of highly educated women to the society and the driving force of development, and need to give a more relaxed public opinion environment to highly educated women to reduce the intergenerational transmission of gender stereotypes. At the same time, marriage is not the ultimate goal of life, nor can it be used as a criterion to evaluate the quality of life of individuals. Whether women with higher education are willing to enter marriage or choose to be single, this is a personal choice and a reflection of social progress, which should be respected enough and should not be regarded as an alternative or even discriminatory. In addition, society at large needs to take a long-term view of the marriage problem of highly educated women, especially the elders of this group, who are overly worried about the marriage problem of highly educated women, which may cause additional pressure on women. At the same time, laws and regulations should protect their rights and interests in childbirth and reduce workplace discrimination for entering marriage or childbirth; in terms of social security, more should be done to improve the medical system for childbirth of senior mothers and reduce the risks of senior childbirth so that highly educated women can better balance and reconcile childbirth and academic career. In terms of social culture, it is necessary to actively create a social atmosphere of gender equality, and gender education should be strengthened from an early age to provide better public opinion conditions for the marriage and childbirth of highly educated women. Paying attention to the gender stereotypes and marriage difficulties suffered by the group of highly educated women is not only a concern for the group of highly educated women itself, but also a test of the achievements of China's higher education and a promotion of the future development of gender education in society. As the society continues to develop, the concern and responsibility for the marriage of highly educated women also increases. The author will continue to closely understand the social practice implementation of theories related to women, and future scholars in this direction can continue to further explore other stereotypes of highly educated women, such as academic and work difficulties, as well as pay more attention to the relationship between fertility rate and the improvement of women's education. Likewise, we need to continue to focus on whether women are truly participating as equals in various social activities, women's fertility intentions and body dominance based on gender equality, and the progress and limitations of women's career development in recent years, in order to promote more thoughts on gender equality.

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