

The Status of Women in the Workforce in China

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Abstract. With the progress and development of the times, women's status and living conditions are undeniably getting better. However, gender discrimination still exists in the workplace, which disturbs many women and hinders their development. To help improve this social phenomenon to promote the development of the society, it is necessary to study the historical development of women's status and current national data, but there are not many essays related to this topic. I will examine the fertility of Chinese women, their current state of family life and workplace, accompanied by changes in the status of women throughout history, using a large body of data in the essay. The conclusion is that the current situation of Chinese women in the workplace still needs to be improved, which should combine means in different aspects, such as social ideology promotion, government policy making and the economic development.

Keywords: Women Status; Workforce; Child-bearing; Policies.

1. Introduction

What is life like for Chinese women today? How has it changed over the last three or four generations, as Chinese society went from a long-term traditional structure under the Emperor, to revolutionary under Mao, and then under forms of capitalism from Deng to the present? This paper will explore the entry of Chinese women into the workplace, the tension between the insistence that they stay at home and manage family – children and parents. I will also explore the relation between this underrepresentation and the difficulties that women have experienced in their struggle to achieve job equality.

2. Historical Background of Women's Working Participation

Traditional Gender roles in China before the Revolution was fixed. The late imperial injunctions of “separate the sexes” (nan nu you bie) continually referred to men and women as two categories of people, playing complementary but separate roles in the family and society. The “inner” sphere of confining women to the family was seen as a necessary counterpart to the “outer” sphere of men's free movement. Other gendered terms pointed to the familial roles played by women at different points in the life cycle: hence, nuzi (girl, meaning unmarried woman) and fu (wife, or married woman). As detailed prescriptions for taijiao (fetal instruction) show, a mother's moral character and education shaped her ability to conceive and raise a child. In this sense, a woman's loyalty to her husband's family was an integral part of her oath of loyalty to the government, binding her to bear and raise the next generation, to carry on the family line, and to keep her subjects loyal to the state.

A great number of women were not able to receive high quality of education as other males at that time since the society, since many women got married at an early age and needed to take care of the family at home, which means they had no time to receive education. Although during that period, girls' schools had sprung up to provide inexpensive education for women, in practice, many families, bound by feudal ideology, were reluctant to send their daughters away for fear of being judged. In addition, these schools were organized most by people with advanced ideas instead of the governments, since the Nanking Nationalist government and the Beiyang government were too weak to enforce a law throughout the country. Consequently, many women were not able to compete with males in the labor market because of lack of professional knowledge resulted in being isolated from education.

During the first four decades of the Revolution, traditional gender roles began to shift. The Republican government took action to create new laws that would relax the control of lineage elders and local custom over women. As women began to search for work and education outside of home, the government started to enact legislation to support these new social roles. For instance, the Marriage Law of 1930 was the first step of eliminating the local structures that sustained old family values. This shift was complex. For example, foreign and Chinese prostitutes made Shanghai a “paradise of adventurers” during the first decades of the twentieth century. The Communist revolution in 1949 closed down Shanghai’s brothels and sent prostitutes into rehabilitation programs, which called to all women to become productive workers who would “hold up half the sky.” The massive entry of women into school, work, politics and intellectual life outside the home marked a shift in gender relations that raised questions about the relationship between mothers and the “new woman.” Supported by the new programs designed to educate elite women abroad and promote their leadership at home, they became professionals in many fields. Women workers who migrated from rural areas were brought into urban job markets under labor contracts, filled the light industrial factories, especially in Shanghai. All of these women became parts of an emerging modern urban culture that produced new values. In the early years of the People’s Republic, the new government moved aggressively to eliminate vestiges of footbinding, promote women’s rights to divorce and remarry, and eradicate the residual foundations of the old sex-gender system based on cloistered women.

However, although the Maoist Chinese Communist government brought women fully into the productive labor force alongside men, it did not markedly shift gender roles surrounding childbirth, what Marx called reproductive labor. Family production remained based on a division of labor by sex and age; patrilocal marriage and household production secured male rights to land and women, which means women were responsible for the work of reproduction alone. In 1978, the proportion of female deputies to the National People’s Congress was only 21.2 percent, and even dropped to 21.1 percent in 1983. Although Reform and Opening Up in 1978 offered people more various jobs and vocations which caused a need for more labor force, women’s work participation rate at that time was still lower than that of males, since many women of working age during that period didn’t receive education in 1950s when they were youngsters because most parents would prefer to invest on their sons rather than daughters to seek for higher economic returns when they had many kids as most of them still held the feudal thought that daughters would eventually get married and leave them. In addition, many women were getting used of staying at home instead of going out searching for work, therefore, many of them were not able to fit into the atmosphere of working place.

3. The Development of Social Status of the Women Today

In the 21st century, women's rights in all aspects of society were gradually guaranteed in law. The Chinese educational system was premised on the equality between the sexes. Since the implementation of the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2011-2020), the opportunities for Chinese women to receive higher education have increased continuously. Financial aid was provided through various channels and in various forms to poor and disabled female college students, ensuring women's equal access to higher education. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics released on December 21, 2021, there are 1.599 million female postgraduates in higher education, accounting for 50.9 percent of all postgraduates. Female students accounted for 51.0 percent and 58.0 percent of undergraduate studying at all sorts of universities and colleges and adult college students, respectively.

In terms of one-child policy, many families only had one daughter, which made some parents with advanced ideas to invest more on girls’ education to help them be more competitive in the job market, since their rest of lives were bounded with their daughters instead of sons. Therefore, the number of women who received good education increased, which promoted the equality between the two genders.

4. The Current Child Bearing Situation

The improvement of women's status in society changes with pregnancy in the context of marriage: many women stay home and look after children for almost 5 years, until day school begins. According to the 2019 data survey, 82 percent of the post-1995 generation mothers are full-time mothers, and 45.5 percent of post-1995 generation mothers have no intention of working. In other words, eighty-two percent of mothers aged 24 to 28 are full-time mothers. As mothers get older and their children grow up, they return to the workforce, which means that they are not lifetime full-time mothers. According to 2019 statistics, 12.6 percent of all mothers have returned to work and 9.4 percent of mothers are taking maternity leave and are preparing for returning to work. In addition, seventy-seven percent of mothers said that they were worried about returning to work. Young children require constant care and cannot go to school before certain age. Therefore, mothers must care for their children if they are to survive.

The reason why modern women stay at home and do most of the childcare at home dates back to ancient China. Chinese ancient ideologists had a theory about gender: although a yin person has excellence, he effaces it in order to attend to his sovereign's business and does not dare take credit for its success. This is the the Dao of the wife. ("The movements of qian [yang] create the male, and the movements of kun [yin] complete the female") Besides, women are confined to the domestic space of the house and its gardens, while the men work outside in the fields in the third century B.C.E in China. This kind of ideology is seen as the root of the condition of some Chinese women are forced to take the responsibility of staying at home and taking care of the kids and their husbands, which is beneficial and easier for men to have success in the workforce. No matter how excellently a woman can perform in the job market, she should avoid doing so in order to make her husband become successful.

4.1 Protections and Obstacles for Women in Workforce Today in China

There are some protections for women in workforce in China in order to reduce the child caring burden of working women. In terms of the national laws, according to Article 13 of the Labor Law, when women choose employment, employers shall not refuse employment or raise employment standards on the grounds of gender, except for fixed types or positions unsuitable for women. Besides, according to the provisions of Article 23 of the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, female workers and male workers enjoy equal pay for equal work and equal wage and welfare treatment. Local governments are allowed to make changes to this according to their own circumstances. For instance, the female worker that accord with legal regulation to bear is during maternity leave, the man still can enjoy 15 days of newborn care, according to 26th article of Regulations of Chongqing municipality on population and Family Planning. Some companies have welfare policies for women as well. According to a survey in 2021, 42.8 percent of companies provide exclusive maternity leave and breast-feeding leave for women.

4.2 Negative Impacts of Reproduction on Women in Workforce

Reproduction makes women less competitive in the workforce and men are more likely to get promotion. According to a survey in 2021, 11.4 percent of working women were denied promotions because they were in the child-bearing stage, while only 2.1 percent of working men had the same problem. In addition, 14.4 percent of working women are unable to get promotions because they are distracted by caring for a family, while only 7.8 percent of working men have the same problem. 18.2 percent of working women are forced to give up the career due to taking care of the families, while only 11.8 percent of men face the same problem. One significant aspect of this childcare "disappearance" forms the work-force is a long-term reduction in earnings. Women are taken from the workforce at a vital moment in their careers and on returning find their job prospects limited: they have been left behind by the men who continue working. Moreover, since the burden of childcare falls unequally on them, continuing challenges in raising children continues to impact them.

One reason for this is that women who bear the burden of reproduction are more likely to harm the companies' profits. Because offering pregnant women vacations and salaries at the same time can only harm the development of companies as a whole, which causes many companies deny to recruit women to avoid this kind of situation. While 55.8 percent of women were asked about marriage and childbearing during job hunting, only 23.9 percent of men were asked about marriage and childbearing. When applying for a job, 29.6 percent of women said they were faced with gender restrictions. In addition, 7.8 percent of women had their wages cut while they were having children, while only 2.1 percent of men suffered the same. And 9.1 percent of women were denied promotion due to gender discrimination, while only 1.3 percent of men were. As a result, offering males compulsory parental leave has significant meaning in women's working participation.

4.3 The Lack of Fathers in Child Bearing Process

The division between men and women, husbands and wives around childcare is significant. Men are much less likely to take childcare than women. In 2020, 58.7 percent of the primary caregivers in China's first-tier cities were mothers, while fathers accounted for only 15.9 percent, according to statistics.

One good explanation for low participation in child bearing process for fathers is the Maternal Gatekeeping, which means many mothers tend to think that fathers are not able to take good care of their children to avoid fathers participating in the process of child bearing. It is defined as having three dimensions: mothers' reluctance to relinquish responsibility over family matters by setting rigid standards, external validation of a mothering identity, and differentiated conceptions of family roles. This is a reflection of gender stereotyping that can confuse and trouble mothers themselves while choosing between caring for kids or entering job market.

4.4 The Lack of Other Means of Child Caring

4.4.1 Intergenerational Co-Parenting and Nanny Industry

Grandparents can lend a hand of child caring. According to a survey report on Grandparents' Participation in Chinese Urban Family Education released by the Chinese Society of Family Association in 2017, 79.7 percent of urban families have intergenerational co-parenting. In other words, most of Chinese families require grandparents to take care of children to ease the burden of parenting.

Part of the reason is that the expense of nannies is too expensive for the average Chinese families. The average monthly salary of domestic workers in China is 7,489 yuan, but the average annual disposable income of Chinese residents in 2020 is 32,189 yuan, which means most Chinese families cannot afford to pay such a high price to recruit nannies to take care of their children. According to the 2018 survey, the average monthly income of Chinese women is 6,589 yuan, and the average monthly income of Chinese men is 8,006 yuan. Even working full-time, a woman does not make enough to fully pay for nanny. We can draw a conclusion from this, the average monthly income of parents would be around 14,000, which means hiring a nanny can account for 50 percent of a family's monthly income.

Nonetheless, the problem of grandparents and in-laws is severe in most of the families, as well as tensions between mothers and mothers in law. In a survey done in 2013, only 30 percent of respondents described their relationship with their spouse's parents as "very good", and only 23.8 percent of the primary caregivers in China's first-tier cities are grandparents. Therefore, the primary caregivers are still parents and especially mothers.

4.4.2 The Lack of Day-care Industry in China

Another reason is that the daycare industry in China is not as prosperous in other developed countries like France or the United Kingdom. The daycare enrollment rates of children under 3 years old of France and the United Kingdom are respectively 60.4 percent and 45.1 percent. However, at a press conference held by The State Council Information Office on July 21, 2021, Yang Wenzhuang,

director of the Department of Population and Family of the National Health Commission, announced that currently the daycare enrollment rate of China's 42 million infants and young children under the age of 3 is only 5.5 percent. From 2017 to 2020, the daycare enrollment rate of children under the age of 3 increased from 4.10% to 5.50%, with a small increase in the three years.

5. Conclusion

Throughout Chinese history, women's work participation has changed at different stages for various reasons.

Before the Revolution, traditional gender roles in China was fixed. A woman's highest accomplishment throughout her life was to take good care of the husband and kids at that time. Most of them were not able to receive education because of the feudal ideology of "Virtue is in a woman without talent" and relatively poor living condition. In addition, most families believe that women should not leave their house before the marriage. As a result, most of them were not able to gain necessary knowledge to enter the workforce and compete with males.

During the first four decades of the Revolution, traditional gender roles began to shift. As women started to search for work, education, and leisure, the government began to enact legislation to support these new social roles. For instance, the Marriage Law of 1930 was the first step of dismantling the local structures that sustained old family values. The Communist revolution in 1949 called to all women to become productive workers who would "hold up half the sky." In the early years of the People's Republic, the new government tried their best to eliminate footbinding and promote divorce and remarriage rights for women.

Although the Maoist government promote women's social status to some extent, it didn't fully shift women's social roles. Reform and Opening Up in 1978 offered people more various jobs and vocations which caused a need for more labor force, but women's work participation rate at that time was still lower than that of males, since many women of working age during that period didn't receive education in 1950s when they were youngsters. Because most parents would prefer to invest on their sons rather than daughters. In addition, many women were not adapted to work outside of the family. As a result, to promote women's status to the next level, encouraging people to believe that daughters can take the same responsibility of taking care of the elders as males is very important.

Consequently, promoting women's status in workforce should combine means in different aspects, such as social ideology promotion, government policy making and the economic development.

In modern China, women's right to education continues to expand, and women's right to education is guaranteed. The graduation rate of higher education even exceeds that of men. However, when women enter the marriage and childbearing stage, they are likely to be forced to stay at home to take care of the children. Although grandparents can help take care of children, and most Chinese families have intergenerational parenting, there are conflicts between grandparents and the non-biological partner in the couple. In addition, the development of China's daycare industry is not perfect, and the nanny charge is high, many families cannot afford to hire a nanny to take care of their children, so the burden of taking care of children eventually falls on parents, especially mothers. Due to the traditional Chinese idea that men should take care of the outside world and women should take care of the home, as well as certain degree of gender stereotyping and discrimination against women in the male-dominated society, many women have to give up their careers so that they can devote more energy to taking care of their families.

In order to protect the rights of women who give birth in the workplace, the Chinese government has introduced various laws and policies, such as compulsory parental leave and equal pay for equal work. Some companies have similar policies. But compared with Germany and Sweden, China still has a long way to go, since China hasn't popularized the idea of parental leave for males to the whole country. Because of women's biology, childbearing makes them less competitive in the workplace and much less likely to be promoted than men. There are two reasons. First, gender discrimination in

the workplace. Companies deliberately eliminate women because they consider their reproductive characteristics when hiring employees.

5.1 Need for changing the current job participation situation of women in China

Women should be encouraged to enter the workforce in order to relieve the impact brought by the low birth rate and aging society. As China announced on January 17th, 2022, its birthrate has declined for a fifth straight year in 2021, which accelerates a demographic crisis that could undermine its economic and even political stability. The falling birthrate, coupled with an increase in life expectancy that has accompanied China's economic reforms over the last four decades, means the number of people of working age has continued to decline, which could lead to labor shortages that could hamper economic growth, and reduce the tax revenue needed to support an aging society.

The falling birthrate can be read as a response, indeed a refusal, by women, to the burden of raising children and pausing their careers during this time period. Until the gender imbalance is addressed, women will become increasingly hesitant about damaging their long-term economic interests, especially given the growing costs associated with child raising and especially education.

Women provide strong expertise in workforce which helps improve the company's performance. According to a Pew Research Center survey on women and leadership, most Americans see no difference between women and men on key leadership traits such as intelligence and the ability to innovate, with many saying they're stronger than men in terms of being compassionate and organized leaders. In addition, women enter the workforce with stronger academic skills and advanced school degrees. In 2016-2017, women earned 59% of all master's degrees and 53% of all doctorates. Besides, organizations with women in senior leadership roles tend to perform better than companies with fewer or no women, and teams with lower percentages of women also have lower sales and profits than teams with a balanced gender mix. In a global study, 75% of respondents said that gender diversity initiatives improved business outcomes, and nearly three-quarters of companies that track gender diversity in their management saw profits increase by 5% to 20%.

The importance of women entering the workplace is obvious. Therefore, Chinese enterprises and the government should protect women's employment rights, and say no to gender discrimination in the workplace.

5.2 Ways to guarantee parents' reproductive welfare by enterprises and the government

Guaranteeing males' parental leave to avoid the situation of refusal of recruiting women at first is in a hurry nowadays, which can help fathers gain an equal role in the family as mothers. This is beneficial for companies to eliminate the recruiting concerns. From 2021 to now, the state has made policy provisions on male parental leave. Although the situation varies from province to province, both parents of children under the age of three are provided with an average of 10 days of parental leave per year.

However, there is still a gap between the mature child-rearing policy systems of other developed countries. The parental welfare policies of Germany and Sweden are quite different from those of China and the United States. In today's Germany, employed women have six weeks off before giving birth and eight weeks off after. In addition, women currently receive an earnings substitution of 100% based on the average net income earned during the 13 weeks (or three months) before the maternity protection period starts in Germany. Pregnant women in physically demanding jobs and mothers who are breastfeeding are protected under the labor law. In Sweden, parents have the right to take full-time leave until the child turns 18 months and parental benefits are paid out for 480 days (approximately 16 months) for one child. In China, after female worker bears, they can enjoy not less than 98 days maternity leave. According to the Social Insurance Law the 56th regulation, birth allowance is in unit of choose and employ persons according to the worker on year worker monthly average salary plan hair. Namely the birth allowance standard that female worker gets during bearing and enterprise go up year average monthly wage standard hook up. However, 4.1 percent of working women said they did not take enough time off when they were having children and 7.8 percent had

their pay cut. Under the law of 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act, legal parents are protected for up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave (per year) in the United States. Therefore, there is still a long way to go to improve China's welfare policies for women who give birth.

In addition, building a birth-friendly society and city has significant meaning in promoting people's fertility intentions. For example, ShenZhen is promoting the construction of a child-friendly city, encouraging kindergartens (child care centers) to open nursery classes, encouraging employers to provide welfare infant care services for employees, and strengthening policy support to promote the construction of universal childcare institutions and enterprises' own childcare parks. At the same time, they will continue to promote the construction and management of maternity and infant care rooms, improve the quality and level of maternal and infant care services, and promote mobile maternity and infant care rooms. Although it still takes time for ShenZhen to fully turn into a birth-friendly city, cities across the country should follow the model to aid parents in child bearing process.

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