

Gender Equality Challenges in 'Wolfish' Workplaces: Examining Stereotypes and Biases

Jonathan Zhong^{1,a,*}

¹*Yew Chung International School of Qingdao, Tai Hang Shan Rd., Qingdao, China
a. jonathan.zhong2021@ycis.com*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Despite significant progress in women's education and employment opportunities in contemporary China, gender discrimination and objectification continue subtly impacting women's workplace experiences. This study unveils the hidden facets of this inequality, encompassing wage disparities, stigmatization of female leaders, pregnancy-related recruitment biases, and the intricate and enduring "glass ceiling." Employing a framework of culture, workplace culture, and education, this research delves into the deep-rooted causes of gender discrimination. Subsequently, it seeks to provide relevant strategies and recommendations. Through our investigation, we discover that the roots of gender discrimination are entrenched in various aspects of Chinese society, stemming from multiple factors rather than a single cause (such as traditional Chinese culture). This study offers a comprehensive perspective on the multifaceted nature and origins of gender inequality in the Chinese workplace. It provides valuable insights for academic discourse, facilitating a better understanding of the complexity of gender discrimination issues. Additionally, it serves as a source of inspiration for future research and policy interventions.

Keywords: feminism, cultural norms, gender inequality, gender discrimination

1. Introduction

Since the latter half of the 20th century, the status of women in Chinese society has significantly improved. There have been substantial advancements in employment, rights, personal freedom, and gender equality. According to the Fourth National Survey on the Social Status of Chinese Women conducted recently, the social status of Chinese women has continued to rise, with further expansion in the field of employment. The survey indicates that women's employment levels have increased in recent years, encompassing the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. Specifically, the employment percentages for women in these three sectors are 28.8%, 17.1%, and 54.1%, respectively. Notably, the proportion of women employed in physically demanding jobs in the primary sector has decreased by 16.5 percentage points compared to 2010, while the ratios in the secondary and tertiary sectors have increased by 2.6 and 13.9 percentage points, respectively.

Furthermore, the educational level of Chinese women has shown significant improvement. The survey reveals that the average years of education for women aged 18-24 are 12.81 years, representing an increase of 1.85 years since 2010. Even more remarkable is that, according to this 2021 survey, the proportion of Chinese women receiving high-level education has surpassed that of men, with 18.0% of women obtaining junior college degrees or above, exceeding men by 1.6 percent [1]. These

statistics undoubtedly reflect a trend of improving the status of women in China, where society is becoming increasingly equal, seemingly without any issues.

However, it is worth noting that official information often contains biases and may not fully reflect the actual societal circumstances. Despite the apparent gender equality in areas such as educational attainment and employment opportunities, women in China still face inequalities in less overt aspects, such as employment salaries and workplace discrimination. According to research on gender pay gaps among executives in private companies in China, the disparity in total compensation between male and female executives amounted to ¥151,000(in 2011) [2]. Notably, this income gap cannot be attributed to differences in performance between male and female executives and thus underscores the significant income disparity between genders, particularly in senior positions. The primary reason for this gender inequality phenomenon lies in the imposition of a series of negative labels on women, such as "untrustworthy," "emotional," "fragile," and more. These labels often lead to a lack of trust in female executives within organizations.

In addition to the evident wage gap, women often encounter the "glass ceiling" in their career progression, or more accurately, a complex and convoluted "labyrinth" they face throughout their entire professional journey. Within this "labyrinth," women must contend not only with overt or covert gender and appearance discrimination but also with the expectations stemming from societal scrutiny and evaluation of women, often referred to as the "male gaze," which extends beyond professional competence to encompass various aspects of their lives. Additionally, women face significant challenges in the workplace, including employment discrimination related to maternity leave. However, as mentioned earlier, data clearly show no significant differences in abilities between female and male employees. So, we may ask, what causes this significant inequality?

This article will analyze the phenomenon of labeling women from three main perspectives: culture, institutional factors, and education. Through the review of various sources, prior research data, and personal insights, we will find out the root causes behind this phenomenon. Ultimately, we will discuss potential solutions to address this issue.

2. Current Situation of Gender Inequality in the Workplace

During the job-seeking stage, women may encounter various forms of gender discrimination. When several equally capable job applicants compete for the same position, companies favor male applicants due to societal gender biases. This bias is especially pronounced in traditionally male-dominated industries, such as information technology, construction, and heavy industry. In these fields, women often face greater competition due to a misalignment with the traditional gender roles associated with these industries. These sectors are often linked to traits associated with "male strength" or masculine qualities, leading to fewer employment opportunities for women. Additionally, when women apply for leadership positions, they may face incredible difficulty securing these roles due to their traditional societal images, which are associated with lower power, income, and social status. This misalignment with the masculine characteristics typically attributed to leadership roles, often seen as male-dominated, can result in challenges and make it harder for women to be selected.

Furthermore, childbirth issues present another challenge for women during the job-seeking process. Many companies, and even some women themselves, believe that maternity could bring additional burdens to the company and its employees. According to the "2023 China Women's Workplace Status Survey Report" published by Zhilianzhaopin [3], 61.1% of women are asked about their marital and childbearing status during job interviews, with questions like "Do you have plans to have children in the future?" or "Our company offers children's holiday benefits; how many do you need?" These suggestive questions reflect the bias women face during recruitment. Among these women, 57% believe that maternity is an inescapable burden for women. Maternity-related matters unrelated to job performance may reduce women's prospects in job applications.

In addition to the challenges during the job application stage, women face childbirth-related pressure. When women require maternity leave, they may be away from work for a period, yet the company is still obligated to pay their salaries. This can lead to concerns within the company regarding the costs associated with childbirth and potential decreases in productivity. Consequently, companies may lean towards providing more opportunities to male employees who do not pose the same maternity leave-related challenges.

Moreover, in the fast-paced Chinese society, the period of maternity leave often results in a temporary disconnect from the workplace. When women return to their jobs after giving birth, they may encounter challenges due to the extended break, which can lead to a lack of familiarity with knowledge and business processes and a potential decline in human capital. Therefore, driven by profit maximization, companies may favor male employees who do not face the pressures of maternity leave [4]. Additionally, within traditional Chinese family values, women are expected to balance family and work responsibilities after childbirth, potentially leading to decreased work efficiency. As a result, companies may unfairly label women as lacking ambition or competence. Especially with the implementation of the comprehensive two-child policy in China, those who choose to have a second child are often older mothers. This demographic typically requires more time for postpartum recovery. Furthermore, after recovery, they must deal with the dual pressures of caring for elderly parents and raising young children. This may lead them to exit the labor market, becoming full-time homemakers.

Furthermore, another crucial and often concealed aspect is that women have minimal workplace advancement opportunities. This phenomenon is often metaphorically referred to as the "glass ceiling" or the "labyrinth".

3. Causes Behind the Phenomenon

3.1. Society and Culture

Gender discrimination finds its fundamental roots in deeply ingrained societal and cultural norms. In traditional Chinese values, women were expected to assume passive and protected roles within the home, responsible for caregiving and household chores. At the same time, men were the primary breadwinners and the "heads of the household." This traditional concept aligns with the principle that men work outside, and women manage the home. These deeply rooted beliefs have persisted for thousands of years and have not been significantly challenged. In the modern workplace, when gender roles and characteristics do not align, or women do not occupy positions that match their expected roles, they may face backlash effects. This means that when female leaders exhibit traits consistent with leadership roles, people may perceive them as lacking feminine characteristics. They may be seen as lacking leadership ability when they show more feminine features. Furthermore, this gendered stereotyping begins in childhood and profoundly impacts how women view themselves. Compared to men, fewer women may aspire to higher social status and leadership positions [5].

3.2. Political and Social Institutions

In contemporary China, the legal system and unique political structures have significant implications for gender discrimination in the workplace. Although Chinese labor laws explicitly stipulate the principle of equal pay for equal work, prohibiting discrimination based on gender, age, ethnicity, disability, and region, and strengthened the protection of women's rights through the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women" enacted on September 3, 1992 [6], these laws may fall short in practice due to limited enforcement and resistance to changing social norms. Due to women's unique reproductive function, many countries provide maternity leave to support them in their pre and postnatal recovery and rest. Some countries also offer

paternity leave for the partners of birthing women, enabling them to care for their partners and participate in the early upbringing of their children. However, there is inequality in the duration of maternity and paternity leave in China. Employers must fully pay their employees' salaries during maternity leave rather than receiving government subsidies. These potential costs may make employers reluctant to hire female employees due to their financial interests. Compared to developed countries like Europe and America, China's legal framework for gender equality still requires further refinement and strengthening.

3.3. Workplace Culture and Education System

In China, sexual harassment in the workplace is a widespread issue closely tied to the country's traditional male-dominated culture. This issue is rooted in the traditional belief that men hold a superior position and authority, relegating women to subordinate or secondary roles. This cultural perspective continues to manifest itself in the workplace. Female employees are seen not merely as equal colleagues and laborers but sometimes as potential sexual objects in the eyes of male colleagues or superiors. Certain companies even directly associate the appearance of female employees with their hiring criteria, where physical appearance becomes a benchmark for assessing the value of female workers. For instance, in a recruitment advertisement released by China Railway Third Bureau in 2022, female clerks were required to possess "well-proportioned features and a good figure." This implies that the company evaluates the worth of female employees based on their appearance rather than their professional abilities and potential. This warped workplace culture prioritizes physical appearance over professional competence, restricting the possibility of competent female employees.

According to the fourth China Women's Social Status Survey, the average years of education for Chinese women aged 18-64 is 9.41 years, while for men, it is 9.66 years. However, this data has biases, as in rural western China, women's average years of education dropped significantly to 7.44 years, with a noticeable decrease in the proportion of women receiving higher education [1]. In many underdeveloped regions of China, families prioritize educational opportunities for their young male children, often at the expense of their female children's education. These girls may leave home early to work or get married to support their younger brothers' education financially. This is due to the prevailing "son preference" ideology still dominant in these areas, where the teaching of female children receives less emphasis.

As a result of these women missing out on their educational opportunities, they face limited career choices and unequal treatment in the workplace. Despite China's well-established nine-year compulsory education system, the lack of gender equality awareness in societal norms is particularly evident in higher education.

4. Methods of Response

To address gender inequality in the workplace in China, many scholars believe that enacting appropriate policies is crucial. Scholars from Northeast Normal University argue that a comprehensive "Anti-Discrimination Basic Law" is necessary. This law should clearly define the boundaries of gender discrimination, including both explicit and indirect forms of discrimination. Furthermore, it should specify what constitutes "employment," requiring companies to transparently detail the location, duration, job benefits, and specific job responsibilities, demonstrating that their requirements are relevant. In addition, based on international experiences, a robust gender discrimination litigation system and third-party oversight bodies should be established to ensure that gender discrimination disputes can be impartially adjudicated by a third-party entity [7].

Equal pay for equal work and job security policies must be effectively implemented. Existing laws may guarantee women's employment benefits on the surface, but they need help in implementation.

The government is responsible for using more stringent measures to enforce these policies. However, research suggests that these two policies should complement each other. Ensuring equal pay while guaranteeing employment equality can reduce the negative impact of similar pay policies on women's employment and promotion. In practice, equal pay and employment equality may be the two most effective anti-discrimination policies. Still, neither is a Pareto-improving policy, and their adverse effects must be correctly identified and thoroughly assessed [8].

As mentioned earlier, women must balance work and family responsibilities, which can constrain their careers. The government should establish a comprehensive public childcare service system for children aged 0 to 6 to relieve women of childcare responsibilities and ensure compatibility between women's employment and childcare duties. In contemporary China, most childcare services are operated by private enterprises and are not part of public goods. If the government intends to include early childhood education as part of public services beyond the nine-year compulsory education, it will undoubtedly require more financial support [9].

The government should also implement occupational integration policies. Due to occupational segregation, women's concentration in "female" professions tends to depress female labor wages. However, if some women can choose "male" domains, it will reduce the overcrowding in "female" jobs. Wages must be increased to attract women to these professions, and gender labels should be removed [10].

At the societal level, society has a responsibility to promote gender equality concepts vigorously to improve the working environment for the next generation of women. While China's political climate does not allow public organizations too much influence, women's and gender equality organizations gradually contribute to gender equality in China's workplace as society develops. Scholars should also intensify research into the causes of gender discrimination, conducting long-term tracking studies on women. This involves analyzing factors influencing women's early growth and their ultimate impact on career development, aiming to identify and address the root causes of gender discrimination in the workplace [5].

5. Conclusion

This article aims to explore the issue of gender inequality in the Chinese workplace, analyzing its causes from various perspectives, including culture, institutions, and education. A literature review shows that despite China's progress in education and employment opportunities, gender discrimination persists in aspects such as unequal wages, negative labels for female leaders, discriminatory practices related to maternity leave, and the "glass ceiling" phenomenon.

Subsequently, we delve into the deeper roots of gender discrimination, as observed from cultural, institutional, and educational angles. These roots include traditional societal norms that prescribe rigid gender roles, deficiencies in legal frameworks, and gender inequality within the educational system. These factors collectively contribute to the continued existence of gender discrimination in China's workplaces.

Lastly, drawing from previous researchers' experiences, we offer some recommendations for breaking the objectification of women and combating gender discrimination in the workplace. These recommendations encompass policy measures that the government can enact, the establishment of third-party oversight bodies, and the importance of further academic research in this field.

In terms of academic contributions, this article provides a comprehensive perspective, conducting an in-depth analysis of various facets and causes of gender inequality in the Chinese workplace. This contributes to a better understanding of the issue's complexity and offers insights into potential solutions for future research.

However, this article has its limitations. Firstly, research data sometimes have constraints and may need to reflect the actual circumstances fully. For example, the Chinese Women's Social Status

Survey report only reflects information from surveyed regions, making it less convincing when portraying the development status of women in underdeveloped areas of China. Secondly, while policy recommendations are presented, their implementation may require further research and effort, considering the political environment. In conclusion, this article acknowledges the need for improvement in various research methodologies and the persuasiveness of specific insights. Gender inequality and the objectification of women are complex and profound social issues in China, currently requiring significant attention and concerted efforts from all sectors of society to address.

References

- [1] *China Women's News* (2021-12-27). Major Data from the Fourth National Survey on the Social Status of Chinese Women. *China Women's News*, 004.
- [2] Liu Yali & Liu Xiaoxiao. (2013). Research on Gender Differences in Compensation of Executives in Chinese Private Listed Companies. *Journal of Women's Studies* (04), 49-53.
- [3] Kuhn, P., & Shen, K. (2013). GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN JOB ADS: EVIDENCE FROM CHINA. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 128(1), 287–336. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26372499>
- [4] Zhang Tongquan & Zhang Yajun. (2017). The Impact of the Comprehensive Two-Child Policy on Women's Employment: An Analysis Based on the Mediating Effect of Labor Costs in Enterprises. *Population and Economics* (05), 1-11.
- [5] Zhang Ruijuan, Liu Jinju & Yin Pengfei. (2022). What Causes Obstacles to Women's Career Advancement? An Integrated Model Based on Multiple Theoretical Perspectives. *Chinese Human Resource Development* (11), 90-109. doi:10.16471/j.cnki.11-2822/c.2022.11.007.
- [6] Yang, S., & Li, A. (2009). Legal protection against gender discrimination in the workplace in China. *Gender and Development*, 17(2), 295–308. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27809231>
- [7] Jin Chuangai. (2013). *Research on Contemporary Women's Employment Issues in China* (Doctoral Dissertation, Northeast Normal University).
- [8] Guo Kaiming & Yan Se. (2015). Research on Gender Inequality in the Labor Market and Anti-Discrimination Policies. *Economic Research* (07), 42-56.
- [9] Zhang Kangsi & Gu Jingshuang. (2020). Research on the Impact of Childbirth on Women's Employment. *Population and Economics* (05), 19-29.
- [10] Liu Dezhong, Niu Bianxiu. (2000). Occupational Gender Segregation and Women's Employment in China. *Journal of Women's Studies* (04), 18-20.