

Research on the Results of Chinese Women's Overseas Higher Education from the Perspective of Educational Equity: An Analysis of Employment Status among Returnees

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Abstract: Currently, Chinese women returnees receive preferential treatment in the job market due to their overseas educational background, but they also face inequalities. While there is considerable research on equity of higher education opportunities and processes, there is a lack of studies analyzing the equity of higher education results, specifically the employment situation of Chinese women returnees, from a gender perspective. This paper reveals the existing inequalities in the employment of women returnees in China, including disadvantages in domestic job hunting, inadequate utilization of professional skills in the workplace, and low level of career self-fulfillment. These issues are primarily associated with traditional gender role perceptions in China, the symbolical capital molded by enterprises, and gender stereotypes in the workplace. The paper suggests that addressing the employment issues of women returnees requires the establishment of a subsidy system by the government for employing organizations and increased regulatory efforts. Furthermore, employing organizations should objectively evaluate the overseas educational background of women returnees. Lastly, the government and enterprises can change stereotypes through correct public opinion and appropriate management. This study takes a gender perspective and focuses on women returnees as the research subjects, making positive explorations towards achieving equity in the results of higher education for women returnees and promoting their fair development in the job market.

Keywords: educational equity, women returnees, results of higher education, employment

1. Introduction

In the current international context, women's education has received increasing attention and has gradually extended from primary education to higher education [1]. More and more women are choosing to pursue higher education. Moreover, with changes in social ideologies and the elevation of women's status, there has been a growing demand for overseas higher education. However, while having a background of graduating from prestigious foreign universities gives women who have received overseas higher education an advantage in job hunting upon returning to their home country, they also face discrimination [1]. Gender segregation in the workplace is prevalent, and the different genders are assigned to different levels of employment positions, resulting in a mismatch between the higher education outcomes of some women and their educational backgrounds [2].

Existing research on equity in Chinese higher education is extensive and varied, but there is a lack of research on equity in higher education outcomes, especially with a gender perspective focusing on women returnees [3]. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the higher education outcomes of Chinese women returnees from a gender perspective, analyze the current domestic employment situation of this group, identify the underlying reasons, and provide recommendations. The study contributes to promoting educational equity and provides insights into addressing the current issues in women's employment [4]. By examining the underlying reasons behind this phenomenon, this research helps alleviate inequities in educational outcomes, preserve the educational achievements of highly educated women, and assist them in finding jobs that match their capabilities [1]. Moreover, this study is conducive to the discussion of gender equality in higher education outcomes and women's employment issues. Analyzing women's employment issues inevitably involves addressing gender discrimination. The strategies proposed in this article in response to inequities in educational outcomes are a response to gender equality issues [5]. Additionally, this research has significance in refining related studies in the field of Chinese women's higher education.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section is the Introduction, which provides an overview of the research background and significance. The second section, Literature Review, defines concepts and provides an overview of the current state of research on equity in higher education. The third section describes the current status of Chinese women's overseas higher education outcomes, analyzes the reasons behind this phenomenon, and offers recommendations. The final section is the Conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Equity in Higher Education Outcomes

Equity in higher education encompasses equity in access to higher education opportunities, equity in the educational process, and equity in the outcomes of higher education [3]. Equity in higher education outcomes refers to the fair opportunities for graduates to find employment and be accepted by society [3]. Being accepted by society means that the knowledge and skills acquired through education are effectively utilized in professions that meet societal needs [3]. Firstly, in China, equity in access to higher education is considered a concentrated manifestation of educational equity [5]. Ensuring equal access to higher education for students from rural and impoverished areas is key to achieving equity in higher education opportunities in China [6]. Secondly, equity in the process of higher education in China has also been widely discussed. Unfair allocation of resources, neglect of individualized development of students, and discrimination against disadvantaged groups contribute to inequity in the process of higher education in China [7]. Moreover, there has been limited research on equity in higher education outcomes based on social stratification. The abundance or scarcity of economic resources, organizational resources, and cultural resources among different social strata have a significant impact on the employment outcomes of university students [8]. Graduates with rich social resources are more likely to seize employment opportunities within the same timeframe. However, within this limited body of research on equity in higher education outcomes, there is a scarcity of exploration into gender-related equity in outcomes. Therefore, this paper aims to uncover equity in higher education outcomes from a gender perspective.

2.2. Research on Chinese Women's Higher Education Outcomes

Current research on Chinese women's higher education mainly focuses on the history, development, and current status of women's higher education or provides a holistic analysis of higher education from a feminist perspective, without specifically targeting any aspect of higher education opportunities, processes, or outcomes. While research directly focused on Chinese women's higher

education outcomes is limited, it is closely related to graduates' employment [3]. Therefore, research on the employment status of female university students is of reference value in exploring the outcomes of Chinese women's higher education. Employment discrimination has become an undeniable fact in China. Since the expansion of enrollment in 1998, the difficulty of female university students in finding employment has been a long-standing issue that has troubled the government [8]. The "Outline for the Development of Women in China (2021-2030)" explicitly points out that "the guarantee of equal employment rights for women still faces practical difficulties" [9]. According to a survey, among 572 female university students surveyed, 63% of respondents reported experiencing gender-based employment discrimination, with 22% stating that they frequently encounter such discrimination [10]. To date, there have been numerous studies on the employment situation of female university students in China, but research specifically focusing on the employment of Chinese women returnees is scarce. While some scholars have revealed the ongoing discrimination faced by this group upon their return to China, these studies are rarely based on large-scale data [9]. Few researchers have explored the employment situation of this group based on their identity as returnees. Even fewer studies have focused on the higher education outcomes of Chinese women returnees after their return to China. Therefore, studying the higher education outcomes and domestic employment situation of Chinese women returnees is significant.

In summary, there is limited research on equity in higher education outcomes for Chinese women returnees from a gender perspective. Therefore, this study focuses on gender as an entry point and investigates Chinese women returnees as the research subjects, aiming to contribute to the understanding of equity in higher education outcomes for Chinese women returnees.

3. Research on the Higher Education Outcomes of Chinese Women Returnees

3.1. Current Domestic Employment Situation of Chinese Women Returnees

3.1.1. The Disadvantages Faced by Chinese Women Returnees in Domestic Job Hunting

An analysis report on the employment of returnees shows that women have lower employment rates and higher unemployment rates. The employment rates for men and women are 88.94% and 84.51%, respectively, while the unemployment rates are 5.72% and 8.05% [11]. In some surveys, male respondents have stated, "Gender is an advantage for me when I look for a job. My boss has explicitly told me that unless female candidates have impressive resumes, they will not be given priority consideration" [2]. Women often need to balance family and career responsibilities, while men are more encouraged to participate in social activities [4]. It has been observed that "employers do not want to see too many women taking leave for family reasons, and the best and most effective way is to only recruit men" [2]. Additionally, some female returnees have described, "My boss is not willing to hire a woman in a stable relationship because that means taking maternity leave and paternity leave soon after starting the job" [12]. Even with excellent qualifications, women returnees face unfair treatment in the domestic job market. Employers' choices between candidates of different genders are unequal under equal circumstances.

3.1.2. Insufficient Utilization of Professional Skills of Chinese Women Returnees in the Workplace

Chinese women returnees seem to be more popular in the job market [11]. Some returnees have expressed, "Interviewers show great interest in my international study experience, and I can tell they like to hire returnees" [2]. Others have stated, "My boss arranges meetings with clients for returnee employees because they believe international graduates can represent a good corporate image" [2]. The overseas study background of women returnees undoubtedly brings them advantages in the

workplace but also poses challenges. Employers tend to assign them tasks unrelated to their professional expertise, such as meeting with business clients or attending conferences [2]. The energy of women returnees is forced to be diverted to tasks that are not directly related to their professional roles, which affects their job performance and career advancement. Employers value the educational background of women returnees more than their actual job skills [12]. However, it is the demonstration of their abilities in the workplace that is crucial for personal development. Unfortunately, some domestic employers do not provide sufficient opportunities for women returnees to showcase their skills [12]. As a result, their professional abilities are not fully utilized in the workplace, hindering their career development.

3.1.3. Low Level of Career Self-fulfillment among Chinese Women Returnees

In China, the proportion of women serving as leaders in enterprises and institutions and engaging in professional and technical work is lower than that of men, while the proportion of clerical staff is higher [11]. This fact remains unchanged even for returnees with overseas study experiences. In some fields, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), the gender gap in employment outcomes is a widely observed phenomenon [12]. Although women now have more freedom in career choices and participation in professional competition due to economic development and progressive thinking [5], the career status of highly educated women returnees is still lower than that of male returnees [2]. In international surveys, women Nobel laureates in science account for only 3%, and in natural sciences, it is 2.93%. International women entrepreneurs account for less than 30% of the total [11]. The career development of women returnees in China is undoubtedly limited. On one hand, they face challenges in working in industries and positions with higher returns, and on the other hand, they do not have sufficient advantages compared to male returnees in terms of their career ceiling.

3.2. Factors Contributing to the Current Employment Situation of Chinese Women Returnees

3.2.1. The Hindrance of Traditional Gender Role Norms in China to the Maximization of Employer Benefits in Hiring Women Returnees

Gender discrimination is a long-standing issue in the job market, and women returnees still face inevitable unequal treatment in employment [14]. Traditional Chinese culture has historically assigned different roles to genders, with men as the breadwinners and women as caretakers, portraying men in instrumental roles and women in expressive roles [15]. Even though gender role norms have diversified in modern times, the traditional gender norms that have persisted for thousands of years do not simply disappear. Women's commitment to family responsibilities means a reduced investment in the employing organization, which contradicts the principle of maximizing corporate benefits [15]. The responsibilities of childbearing and breastfeeding make it impossible for women to work or fulfill high workloads during pregnancy and postpartum periods [16]. Without government subsidies or support, women's maternity leave causes economic losses to employers. Therefore, there are concerns and apprehensions about hiring women returnees due to the traditional gender role norms that may hinder the maximization of corporate benefits.

3.2.2. Overemphasis on "Symbolic" Capital in the Domestic Job Market

International graduates are usually seen as talents who promote cross-cultural exchange and bring innovative ideas and advanced technology from abroad, or at least their degree serves as "symbolic" capital that signifies these qualities [17]. Symbolic capital is commonly designated as prestige,

authority, and position in distributions symbolically retranslated as a lifestyle [18]. Domestic employers construct international degrees and overseas study experiences as a form of symbolic capital [18]. They place greater emphasis on the study abroad background of women returnees and focus on the superficial benefits it brings. Recruiting women returnees is seen as a way to enhance the internationalization of enterprises [17]. Consequently, employers tend to assign social and business meeting-related tasks to this group, indirectly neglecting their professional capabilities. This also leads to an imbalance in the allocation of women returnees' energy between their actual job responsibilities and unrelated tasks, reducing their opportunities to demonstrate their true talents in the workplace.

3.2.3. Challenges that Stereotypes about Gender in Occupations Pose to Women Returnees' Career Development

The mismatch between education and actual abilities is one of the most prominent stereotypes faced by women returnees [19]. Some employers have concerns about the actual abilities of women with international degrees and believe that their skills do not meet the requirements of the job positions [19]. These occupational stereotypes hinder the self-fulfillment of women returnees in the workplace. They also contribute to the "glass ceiling" effect, which refers to the "artificial barriers" that prevent women from advancing to management and decision-making positions [19]. Many scholars, both domestically and internationally, have explained the manifestations of this effect, such as the lack of career guidance and planning for female employees, limited opportunities given to women employees, and social exclusion (women being excluded from informal networks), which constitute invisible "glass ceilings" in the promotion process for female employees [20]. Moreover, the stereotypes that hinder the career development of women returnees also manifest in the perception that they are more suited for education, service, clerical work, and less suitable for competitive, leadership, and armed industries [21]. Such stereotypes limit the career choices available to women returnees and restrict their career development prospects.

3.3. Recommendations for the Current Employment Situation of Chinese Women Returnees

3.3.1. Establishing a Subsidy System for Employers and Enhancing Macro-regulation and Supervision

This measure can compensate for the potential loss of benefits incurred by employers when selecting women returnees [22]. It can encourage companies with significant gender imbalances to actively recruit female returnees and promote equal employment opportunities for men and women. Specific measures can be implemented in three aspects. Firstly, tax reduction for companies. When the gender ratio in the workforce is no longer imbalanced, the government can consider reducing or exempting taxes. This indirectly compensates for the loss of benefits to employers, reduces gender discrimination in employment, and reflects the social responsibility of employers [22]. Secondly, improving the maternity insurance system. Shifting the cost and responsibility of maternity insurance from employers to the state reduces the labor cost burden for employers, balancing costs and benefits [22]. Government policies and economic subsidies at all levels can to some extent address the issue of reduced benefits for companies employing women [15]. These measures enable employers to objectively screen candidates and eliminate disadvantages faced by female applicants due to gender discrimination. Lastly, strengthening the supervision and regulation of employment gender discrimination. The government should increase the punishment for employment discrimination by employers and guarantee the equal employment rights of women returnees [12]. Additionally, it is essential to maintain smooth channels and institutions for supervision, reporting, and inspections to ensure effective regulatory oversight of enterprises [12]. These measures not only address the cost-

benefit balance in employing men and women but also fundamentally address the economic losses caused by traditional gender role norms through the implementation of relevant policies and regulatory measures [15].

3.3.2. Shaping an Objective Perspective on the Study Abroad Background of Women Returnees

Interviewers and employers should have a rational understanding of returnees during recruitment and in their formal work. They should focus on the actual abilities of applicants rather than placing excessive emphasis on the superficial value of diplomas or degrees [23]. During recruitment, specific job requirements, the match between candidates' abilities, knowledge, experience, performance, potential, and individual characteristics should be the more important considerations [24]. Employers should establish a sound and scientific recruitment system to improve the rationality, effectiveness, standardization, and fairness of the recruitment process [24]. They should also reduce biases and treat returnee applicants objectively, minimizing the negative impact of symbolic capital. Moreover, since the negative impact of symbolic capital also manifests in companies' tendency to assign non-core tasks to women returnees, which diverts their energy from their actual job responsibilities, it is important for employers to provide adequate space for this group to fully utilize their abilities. Balancing their core job responsibilities and social tasks allows them to have more time and energy for their career development [23]. It is also necessary to improve the employment system to regulate job responsibilities, reduce the allocation of non-core tasks, and encourage employees to actively contribute to their core roles for greater company benefits [14]. Through these approaches, the professional abilities of women returnees can be showcased, and the symbolic capital brought by their international degrees can be deepened, benefiting their career development and personal value realization.

3.3.3. Changing Stereotypes Through Proper Public Opinion Management and Appropriate Enterprise Management

Although gender equality is increasingly recognized, occupational stereotypes are gradually weakening. The choices of men and women in careers are no longer confined to the inherent gender roles of the past. However, to thoroughly address the issues caused by occupational stereotypes, the government should guide the media to promote the social roles of women and increase exposure to women who have achieved certain social accomplishments [25]. For example, mainstream media can feature stories of women excelling as astronauts, pilots, scientists, and other traditionally male-dominated professions. Through the use of media and public opinion, negative evaluations of women's roles in cultural and ideological domains can be gradually eliminated. This broadens the range of career choices for women and provides positive feedback on their work abilities and career prospects [25]. Moreover, to eliminate the "glass ceiling" effect and create a fairer work environment for women returnees, employers should improve their management systems and remove artificial barriers that hinder the advancement of women [14]. Additionally, providing guidance and planning for women employees' career development, offering them more job opportunities, and avoiding their exclusion from informal networks are necessary for the career advancement of women returnees [20]. Companies need to change discriminatory personnel policies, ensure a reasonable proportion of women employees in certain jobs or positions, create a fair and just employment environment, and foster a culture of gender equality [25].

4. Conclusion

Briefly, this paper investigates the outcomes of Chinese women returnees in overseas higher

education from the perspective of educational equity. Through analyzing the employment status of the returnee population, it is found that their domestic employment situation is not optimistic, and their higher education outcomes do not fully match their overseas educational backgrounds. Their professional abilities are not fully utilized in the workplace, their domestic job prospects are hindered, and their career self-realization is limited. The emphasis on "symbolic" capital in the domestic job market, traditional gender norms in China, and occupational gender stereotypes contribute to the above situation. Countermeasures to address the unfairness in higher education outcomes are proposed in the paper. The government should establish a subsidy system for employers and strengthen macro-regulation. Employers should have an objective perspective on the study abroad backgrounds of women returnees. Both the government and employers should work on changing occupational gender stereotypes through proper public opinion management and appropriate management practices.

In conclusion, this paper contributes to the research on educational equity in Chinese higher education. By adopting a gender perspective and focusing on women returnees, it offers innovative insights. However, the limitations of this article are also evident. The paper is speculative in nature and lacks extensive data support [25]. Additionally, the number of interview citations in this article is limited, and the sample size is insufficient. In future research, investigations on this topic can be conducted through surveys or interviews to collect more data for a deeper exploration of the outcomes of Chinese women returnees in overseas higher education from the perspective of educational equity, further improving research in this field.

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