

# *Feminism and Chinese women's employment*

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**Abstract:** In China, though women have witnessed significant improvement in their social status in recent years, there is still conspicuous discrimination against them in workplaces. This typically includes income gap, occupational gender segregation, and glass ceilings. Family-work conflict would be the ultimate reason impeding women's access to equal employment rights. Several schools of feminist theories will be introduced to explain the root causes of the plights of Chinese women, and the corresponding strategies for change will be analyzed. The complexities of the socio-historical background, traditional culture and biological traits render it a long-sustaining problem without a definite answer.

**Keywords:** Chinese women, Employment, Feminism, Family-work conflict.

## **1. Introduction**

The waves of feminism have brought sweeping effects on improvements of women's social status around the globe. In China, while women have witnessed significant efforts to ensure their equal access to education, employment and political activities, the inherent gender stereotypes in Chinese society still function as templates to confine both genders to the traditional gender order, providing a framework of what a man or a woman is expected to do. This is especially conspicuous in the structural discrimination against women in workplaces, including firms' preferences for male employees, unequal wages, glass ceilings, and occupational segregation. Though an increasing number of women are turning to high knowledge-based industries, there is still a visible gap in women's incomes, employment opportunities and professional knowledge compared to men. Undoubtedly, equal employment rights are the prerequisite for women to long-term sustain themselves and the primary approach to combat systematic marginalization of women. But this goal currently remains distant.

In previous studies, scholars constantly raise contending arguments explaining the root causes and measures to be adopted, most of which are directly quoted from western feminist theories. For example, according to some Marxist feminists, the exclusion from productive labor is the major source of female oppression, since it deprives their property rights and economic independence. However, their application within Chinese social contexts has been investigated insufficiently. Thus, this paper shall conduct a thorough research into the plights of Chinese women's employment at status quo, analyze their root causes and offer feasible solvencies by applying different schools of feminist theories to Chinese society. The historic feminist thoughts might inspire us to reflect the status quo and their applicability on pragmatic issues. However the complexities of the socio-

historical background, traditional culture and biological traits render it a long-sustaining problem without a definite answer.

The following structure of the paper contains a literature review in which marriage, pregnancy, housework, and other obstacles for women to gain equal employment rights as men will be reviewed and the basic theories of feminism will be introduced. Subsequently, explanations to the causes of the phenomenon and specific solutions will be brought up and correlated to specific feminist theories in the analysis.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Gender Discrimination in Chinese Labor Market**

Scholars have investigated how women are marginalized in Chinese labor market through field studies, sample surveys and interviews. There will be a classification of some obstacles impeding women's access to equal employment rights in the following paragraph.

In workplaces, employers usually exhibit a preference for male workers, especially for those positions that require high management skills and professional knowledge. Consequently, women are left with repetitive and low-paid jobs. This preference based on gender can gradually result in gender segregation in the labor market by self-perpetuation of gender stereotypes [1]. Occupational gender segregation refers to a disproportionate distribution of male and female workers across different occupations [2]. More specifically, horizontal segregation is understood as under or over-representation of men or women in certain occupations, and vertical segregation is a situation where there is less representation of women in higher positions in the organizational hierarchy, which is often referred to as the 'glass ceiling'. Another consequence of occupational gender segregation is the huge income gap between two genders, which increasingly underpins women's inferior social status and economic dependence on their spouses. Women's concentration on low-skilled jobs restricts their professional development and improvements in productivity, and this lack of diversity may lead to occupational immobility which indicate fewer chances of upward movements through the system of social stratification [3].

Outside of workplaces, according to Xu and Tan [4], the family-work conflict is the source other hindrances for women's career. Family-work conflict occurs when the pressure from domestic work is mutually incompatible with the work domains, so that any more effort into one must have deducted the same amount of effort into the other. This effect is termed as 'compensation' by Gong [5]. The first ten years of a career is a crucial period to acquire promotional opportunities, which exactly coincides with the expected age of marriage and pregnancy [4]. While men are anticipated to pursue a successful career and bear the burden of raising a family, the role of women is to remain loyal and silent in private spheres, devoted to domestic housework and raising children. The pressure of being regarded as a 'social deviant' forces women back to the unwaged labor at home, resulting in either 'the second shift' [6] or quitting jobs entirely. After the childbirth and parental leave, it becomes much harder for women to return to the original position with their outdated skills. According to PR Newswire, 36.1% of Chinese women resulted in a lower position and 32.5% of them experienced a decline in salary after childbearing in 2017. These facts and figures present an either-or framing for women in terms of work or family, personal development or childbearing.

The social networks and professional training are other opportunity costs of being fully dedicated to housework [4]. Glass ceilings can be attributed to a lack of career resources, since women rarely spare time to engage in informal social activities with their seniors. When domestic duties occupy most of their daily life, the possibility of further training and education is excluded as well.

## 2.2. Different Schools of Feminist Theories

Originated from the 19<sup>th</sup> century first-wave feminism, liberal feminism blames female subordination to a set of customary frameworks that block women's entrance to social resources such as education and employment [7]. Liberal feminists emphasize on pragmatic issues and strive for gender equality through political and legal reforms, attempting to advocate for change within the existing liberal democratic system. Instead of a revolutionary restructure of the society, liberal feminism is more often associated with centrism and a gradual change of the status quo.

On the other hand, radical feminism, arising from the second-wave feminism, searches for a radical re-ordering of the society in which men dominate and suppress women. This patriarchal structure is the fundamental and universal form of oppression that privileges men at the expense of women. The ultimate goal of radical feminists is to dismantle the patriarchy, eradicate gender differences and eliminate male supremacy over women by challenging gender norms entrenched in the society.

Diverging from radical feminism, cultural feminists return to an essentialist view of gender that highlights the innate differences between men and women, no matter biologically determined or culturally ingrained [8]. It attempts to reappraise the traits ascribed to both genders, denouncing the aggressiveness of men and commending women's attributes of gentleness, sentimentality and proclivity to nature. Cultural feminists regard femininity as superior and support separatism, such as women-only communes, matrifocal households and celibacy.

Marxist feminism ascribes female oppression to capitalist system in which women are forced into uncompensated domestic labor. The essence of oppressive monogamous structure is the class conflict between the owners of private properties and factors of production (husbands) and those who are exploited (wives). According to Marxist feminists, women can be liberated from unwaged labor only by the collapse of capitalism [9].

Post-modern feminism integrates postmodernism and post-structuralism into feminist theories, underscoring individual experiences of women instead of grand narratives, rejecting essentialism and questioning the existing ideologies. The concept of 'social construction' is constantly discussed by post-modernist feminists, suggesting that all genders are socially constructed rather than biologically preordained. From a post-modernist perspective, deconstructing binary oppositions of gender and stable identities might be the primary strategy for change.

## 3. Analysis

Though all feminists share the mutual goal of promoting women's rights, and campaign for political, economic, personal, and social equality of both sexes, different schools of feminism vary drastically in terms of their dialectic explanations of the root causes of female oppression, their ideal gender relations, and hence advocate distinctive measures.

### 3.1. Radical Feminism

Radical feminists would primarily attribute the gender inequality in labor market to the structure of traditional nuclear family, where patriarchy is culturally institutionalized. This is a self-perpetuating process, originating from gender differences, especially the extent to which they engage in reproduction. During pregnancy, females' subordinate position is constructed, considering their vulnerability and the need to be taken care of. And after the childbirth, mothers are naturally socialized into nurturing, domestic work, and emotional labor, while men continue to take the responsibility of earning income, taking advantage of their innate biological differences. Gradually, as women become increasingly dependent on their male counterparts, a patriarchal structure is reinforced. As for working mothers, many sociologists have noticed the 'dual burden' (or 'the second

shift') imposed on them [6], which occurs when the burdens of both paid work and domestic labor fall on them. The hierarchical power relation between two genders often results in objectification of women, domestic abuse, unequal distribution of social resources such as education, healthcare and social networks. In some extreme cases, females are even objectified as tools to prolong the generation. Therefore, from a radical point of view, reproduction and mothering are oppressive in nature, but are romanticized to be altruism and the labor of love, further ingraining women's inferiority in family and blocking their access to employment rights.

Since marriage and family are considered as the linchpin of patriarchy, radical feminists deny a functionalist view of the traditional monogamous family and gender roles, seek to liberate women from the 'tyranny of reproduction', and advocate to establish of an alternative set of family structures and sexual relationships. One of these methods is termed as 'political lesbianism', which encourages women to eschew heterosexual behaviors by celibacy or coupling with the same sex, in order to combat sexism and patriarchal oppression in the family. They proclaim that those women who engage in heterosexual relationships are 'sleeping with the enemy' and are complicit in maintaining male supremacy. Another group of radical feminists' appeal is to disrupt the existing gender relation by rebuilding a matrifocal society, a women-centered family structure where reproduction is exalted and respected.

A more moderate suggestion by the radical feminists is to compensate women in workplaces because of their special role in reproduction. These compensations ought to include the paid parental leave, ensuring women's stable economic status during pregnancy and childcare; the special healthcare provided for childbirth to protect their reproductive rights; women are entitled to their original jobs with the same pay and welfare after returning from pregnancy etc.

The standpoint of radical feminists is often accused by post-modern feminists because of its concentration on universal experiences and identical identities. Its emphasis on the grand narrative of sisterhood and unity ignores the intersectionality of other factors such as race, ethnicity and class that shape unique individual experiences. Another reason of the criticism is that the speeches of radical feminists are increasingly associated with the notion of men-hating and attacks on their personal behaviors. The 'misandry' feminist rhetoric, a word adopted for ironic use by radical feminists, might not only fail to improve women's social status practically, but also exacerbates gender antagonism and excludes the possibility of reconciliation and cooperation of two genders.

### 3.2. Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism is an intersection of Marxism and feminism. According to Marxist feminists, gender oppression is closely bound with capitalist societies and uncompensated labor, which is a gendered form of class exploitation in marriage and family. In *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Friedrich Engels brought up the idea that monogamous marriage exploited the working class and was established to maintain and expand private properties. As the society steps into agrarian era, the excess wealth from agriculture starts to accumulate. Since they mostly source from work outside of families, males tend to regard this abundance as their private properties, and intend to pass their legacy through male lineage, from which the traditional monogamous household is originated [10] Hence, females are forced to engage in unwaged labor of reproduction and continuously be exploited by males. The means of production and its ability to generate a surplus further transforms the family into a patriarchal form where women become the property of the father or husband. Marxist feminists argue that as gendered division of labor confines women in the private spheres, they are financially dependent on husbands, which makes them more subject to male dominance because of uneven wealth distribution. They regard economic dependence as the source of class exploitation on females. Also, this situation is perpetuated by their preoccupation in domestic duties and neglects of education and employment opportunities.

From the view of Marxist feminists, since gender oppression is a sub-class of class exploitation, the collapse of capitalism is the only approach to eradicate gender inequality, and only communism is a herald of new sexual relations. As long as social classes still exist, the disadvantaged groups would always be under subjugation of the superior. Therefore, the fundamental cure is the socialist revolutions that would replace capitalism with a classless society.

At status quo, economic independence is regarded as the priority. They appeal for socialization and professionalization of females' domestic work, for example hiring housekeepers and babysitters to include domestic work within the productive economy. In other words, Marxist feminists do not blame mothering and domestic work for gender oppression, but attribute it to the unequal labor value conferred to them by the capitalist economy. Alternatively, the childcaring should be provided by state-funded institutions, providing women with equal employment opportunities.

Contrarily, some appeal that women should embrace capitalism because it promotes material progress and individualism which emancipate women from sexist prejudices. The pull of market demand of capitalist economy has provided them with access to market participation, further empowering them with greater bargaining power and economic independence of hierarchies because the permanent goal of profit maximization is blind to gender, color or class.

### 3.3. Cultural Feminism

Cultural feminists return to essentialism, emphasizing biological gender differences and the subsequent social consequences. They underscore the intrinsic differences between men and women, praising female characteristics to be superior and more preferable than those of men in cooperation, relationships and peace. Common feminine temperaments such as gentleness, submissiveness, and sentimentality are praised to be 'female essence', also referred to 'ethics of care' by care-focused feminism [11]. This theory discusses how caring should have been respected as a human strength, but in reality is undervalued through masculine norms and male perspectives. Childcare for example, is degraded to be inferior work assigned to women, and so women remain disempowered in workplaces, especially top management teams. But unlike other feminists, cultural feminists are not so vehemently against women engaging in childcare and domestic spheres, considering their natural givens. Therefore, cultural feminists only attempt to incorporate new perspectives that redefine and revalue the attributes ascribed to femaleness, building a new culture aimed to reverse the valuation of two genders.

Though they admit the existence gender differences, no matter biologically determined or socially nurtured, it cannot justify the social structures that expose women to poverty, unequal employment rights and domestic violence. To deconstruct masculine mindsets, cultural feminists argue that women's attributes are more suited than men for powerful positions in organizations, though they remain undervalued. According to some research on masculine and feminine communication patterns, females tend to use indirect manners and empathy to resolve conflicts and maintain supportive relations with colleagues while the rude directness of male leaders tend to be paternalistic and ineffective. From a cultural feminist perspective, females have the ability to develop ethics of care towards people they are connected with, and therefore are more capable of leading in workplaces.

Cultural feminism is typically critiqued because of its essentialist point of view. Social constructionism, exactly the opposite, rejects the biological differences as the basis for differentiated treatment of two genders and denounces cultural feminism for reinforcing gender stereotypes and further constraining females to limited choices. Thus, females can be trapped in a vicious circle in which the social actuality of involving in domestic areas leads to them being seen as suitable for this position, while this view is regenerated through institutionalized social actuality. Cultural feminism also generalizes women's characteristics, ignores the individual diversity and suppresses other possibilities. Also, as it might be argued by radical and Marxist feminists, while commending the



motherhood, it provides good excuses to confine women in the private spheres and deprive their economic rights. The working women can consequently be condemned to be not 'virtuous' enough to fulfill their domestic duties.

### **3.4. Liberal Feminism**

Rooting from 19<sup>th</sup> first-wave feminism, liberal feminists see unequal civil rights and allocation of social resources such as education and employment as major obstacles of achieving gender equality. Instead of ascribing female oppression to patriarchy and male exploitation or seeking to overthrow the normative gender relations, liberal feminists do not prevent all women to be in heterosexual relationships, which could be a source of happiness and satisfaction for some women.

Being inherently pragmatic and modest, they advocate small changes through political and legal reforms that integrate women into the existing social structure, and tend to resist revolutionary movements promoted by radical and Marxist feminists. Regarding employment opportunities, anti-discrimination legislations such as Equal Pay Act and Sex Discrimination Act need to be formulated to eliminate wage discrimination and occupational segregation. Specific behavioral codes for firms might include compulsory standard of equal number of male and female employees, special protection for females from harassment in workplaces, and they must be forbidden to inquire about women's expectations for childbirths during job interviews. Meanwhile, education or training programs for women demand social funding to improve their career prospects and competitiveness in the labor market. Women's equal employment opportunities can be further ensured by improving social climate and public opinions on mass media, which should be a responsibility of the government to launch effective education programs for the general public.

While liberal feminists propose free choices for women to decide whether to pursue career development or continue to engage in motherhood and domestic duties, the potential double burden for 'working mothers' might not be scrutinized. It is usually argued that without a fundamental breakdown of patriarchy and a complete liberation from reproduction, women would be dominated by the 'tyranny of motherhood'. The formulated laws were as well criticized, considering the huge income gap and occupational segregation that persist today. The moderate policies of liberal feminists are subject to ineffectiveness and inefficiency, failing to elevate females' social status at an expected rate.

### **3.5. China's policies to promote gender equality in employment**

'Women hold up half the sky' is a quote from Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese Communist party, as a guideline and slogan of women's liberation after the founding of People's Republic of China. In the past few decades, under the influence of Marxist ideology, the concepts of class struggle and combating capitalist system were incorporated into women's liberation as well. With growing demand for labor productivity, the idea that men and women are the same prevails, and women are also regarded part of human resources for economic development. With Marxist feminist theories laying groundwork for the emancipation of women, a series of policies were adopted to help women gain economic independence through employment.

Legislations including the Employment Promotion Law and Special Rules on the Labor Protection of Female Employees were promulgated, strictly administering firms' recruitment. Questions regarding marital and childbearing status for female candidates are prohibited in job interviews, and gender-specific job announcements are not allowed. In 2021, Shenzhen imposed unprecedented regulations on sexual harassment, clearly stating its definition and range. Domestic housework was revalued as well. In 2021, a Beijing divorce court decided the husband need to compensate his wife

50,000 yuan for her unwaged labor at home during their marriage, which evoked heated debate regarding the value of housework.

Despite these efforts to promote gender equality and emerging feminist thoughts introduced from the west, the status quo still reveals much room for further improvement. As the number of working-mothers surges, the traditional value of gender remains penetrated in Chinese families pervasively, requiring slow and gradual changes. The OECD estimates that Chinese women spend 2.5 times more time on unpaid work than men, and the paternity leave will remain 15 days while maternity leave is extended to 158 days in Beijing, denoting an unequal degree of participation in domestic duties and childcare. And with the recent introduction of the three-child policy, firms become even more reluctant to recruit female employees or to pay maternity leave, further aggravating women's plight in workplaces.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this essay, the family-work conflict is emphasized to be the major impediment to women's equal employment rights. Because of females' procreative features, mothering and housework are seen as a 'natural' extension of 'nature of females', resulting in an unequal responsibility in domestic work and childcare. With this heavy burden, women are more inclined to sacrifice their career development for achieving the virtue of a traditional woman. Similarly, this cultural expectation disincentivizes firms to hire female employees, considering the cost of missing workdays from maternity leave. Subsequently, four strands of feminism are presented with respective explanations of the root causes and corresponding strategies for change.

Liberal feminism promotes equal employment opportunities for all men and women, so gender should not be a limiting factor in recruitment. Cultural feminists are not just satisfied with equal opportunities, so they further demand special protection or lower standards for female employees because of their feminine traits and vulnerable role in families. As for radical feminists, their thoughts of celibacy and political lesbianism might be the most disapproved and criticized in contemporary China, as they are against the Confucian thought where family ties are regarded sacred and venerated as the foundation of other social institutions. The 'decline of marriage' in China evokes much panic towards aging population as well. Marxist feminism encourages socialization of housework, state welfare for pregnant mothers, Equal Pay Act, and public services of kindergarten and pre-kindergarten, which seem more in tune with Chinese socio-historical contexts.

In reality, however, with a combination of feminist theories and social policies, gender inequality at workplaces remains unsettled, and may still persist without an essential change at an ideological level. Seldom can predict when the value of housework will be generally recognized by the public and when the males could also fulfill their roles as caregivers spontaneously. With the emerging reproductive technology such as artificial wombs, women might be gradually liberated from fertility, though it requires much more research on its applicability and time for adaptation. The process of gender equality in workplaces and on a holistic level as well, is doomed to be a sluggish but necessary historical transition.

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