The International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220477

Analysis of Relationships between Cultural Gender Norms and Gender Gap

Jiamei Li[1,a,*]

[1]*BASIS International School Guangzhou, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China, 510700*
a. jiamei.li13486-bigz@basischina.com
**corresponding author*

Abstract: The gender gap is a continuous problem in the workplace and hinders opportunities for women. Despite its global narrowing over the last few decades, it has existed even in the most progressive and supportive of gender equity countries. Based on existing literature and research data, this paper searches for the deeper sociocultural factors behind the gap and provides suggestions for regulations on promoting gender equity and eliminating gender discrimination in the workplace. In short, the gender gap has divided radically since women gave birth to children, and the child penalty impacted women much more negatively than men. More radical policies on maternity and paternity leave may relieve women of the pressure of postpartum effects and encourage equal employment and equal pay.

Keywords: gender gap, gender discrimination, pay equality, equal employment, gender equity

1. Introduction

Former US president Barack Obama claimed in his speech that women earn 79 cents to a man's dollar and advocated for "equal pay for equal work"[1]. Though the simple data is accurate in revealing the gender pay gap, the "equal pay for equal work" campaign usually leads to misunderstandings of women doing less work than men. This ignores deeper cultural and social factors behind the real disparity between men and women. More research has proved that the gender gap did not begin until women gave birth to children and started taking more time off to focus on family. By analyzing models and data in past papers regarding the gender pay gap and related laws and regulations, this paper will analyze the relationship between traditional gender norms, especially child rearing and resulting job interruption(periods of six months or longer an individual was not working for pay), and the gender pay gap and gender discrimination in the workplace. Hopefully, the result of this essay will help explore the deeper causes of the gender gap and suggest potential solutions, eventually promoting gender equity in the workplace and challenging traditional gender norms.

2. Background and Historical factors for Gender Pay Gap

Since the United States in the past century has shown patterns to improve from a patriarchal society where women's main responsibility was to take care of families to establishing laws to reinforce gender equality, it will serve as an example of gender issues. Prior to the 1920s, women almost always exited the workforce after marriage if their partner could sustain the family[2]. Women's absence from the workforce continued into the 1950s. Most women were also not as educated as men and

© 2023 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220477

were legally discriminated against and prevented from taking more sophisticated and well-paid positions. Even for those who work, many are not married or have to support their families due to financial problems. Multiple factors led to the pay gap of 60 cents on the dollar in the 50s, including lower female education rates, the legalization of wage discrimination based on gender, and cultural norms about gender roles and aptitudes[3]. However, the women's liberation movement later empowered numerous numbers of women to be educated and work, challenging the male-dominated society. Hilary Clinton recalled in a Netflix documentary her surprise at seeing society progress and women being empowered to do things that previous generations of women could not have imagined[3].

Most of the factors that contributed to the gender pay gap in the United States have decreased over recent years. Similarly, the proportion of employed women who were married increased from 8% in 1890 to 26% in 1930 and 47% in 1950, while the proportion of single women in the labor force remained stable[2]. Nevertheless, the pay gap continues today even as more and more women become doctors, lawyers, or even heads of state[3]. What led to this phenomenon was the fact that the major factor — women's role as bearers of children — also remained. As long as women are assumed as the primary caregivers in families, gender discrimination during hiring and pay will appear and hinder women's opportunities in the workplace.

3. Gender Discrimination in the Workplace

3.1. Gender Discrimination against Women without Children

Discrimination based on gender was common in the workplace and intertwined with the cultural expectation and gender norms of women being the primary caregivers of children. In 2014, a Chinese organization inspecting gender discrimination in workplaces found that 58.48% of college-graduated women were asked during interviews if they planned to have a second child in the next few years[4]. The average time women were asked this question during interviews was 2.88 times[4]. Even women who have already given birth to children would still face discrimination and mistreatment. For example, women with children are required to not have another child in the next few years or give up the right to paid maternity leave[4]. By surveying some college students from Beijing, the All-China Women Federation demonstrated that 86.6% of college women have experienced one or more forms of gender discrimination during job applications, and the average number of experiencing gender discrimination is up to 17 times[4]. 80.2% of these women believe in the process of job application, gender discrimination is involved by only hiring or prioritizing hiring men; refusing to look over women's resumes; refusing to offer interview opportunities for women applicants; and raising the standards for women applicants[4].

In addition, women are having fewer options when deciding on their jobs. From the perspective of companies, women applicants are less competitive and are often labeled as having lower productivity and competence. According to the data collected by the Hunan Provincial Federation of Trade Unions Women Workers Committee from 14 companies in 6 cities, most companies believe hiring women required higher costs than men due to maternity leave and breastfeeding leave [5]. They also claimed that women will be more likely to take time off to give birth and focus on family[5]. Therefore, most companies are more willing to hire men over women when the two applicants are equally capable for the position or even when the women applicant is slightly better; a woman human resource being interviewed even suggested the preference of men applicants during job application is a rational behavior rather than a discriminatory one if the company wish to maximize profit and minimize costs[5]. Nevertheless, this statement does not make up for the discrimination women experience and instead reveal how the cultural expectation of women hinder their career paths.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220477

3.2. Gender Discrimination against Women with Children

Children accounted for most of the women's nonemployment spells, casting influences on women's earnings, careers, and choices on the trade-off between career and family[6]. Even in Scandinavian countries where there are better opportunities for women to balance career and family, preferences and norms regarding the appropriate role of women and men remain. A series of labor market results show that "women and men develop in parallel before the birth of the first child, and immediately after the birth of sharp differentiation, and no longer converge". This is the result of the Danish gender gap study[6]. This came to be known as the "child penalty," the proportion of women who fall behind men because of their children, with a long-term child earnings penalty of about 20 percent over the period 1980-2013[6]. The effects of children on women's decisions in the workplace begin even before birth and as soon as women anticipated and prepared for pregnancy. Women may invest less in education or select family-friendly career paths in anticipation of motherhood because they believe their family responsibilities are more important. Another postpartum effect is also an important factor that causes the gender wage gap, because women change their working hours, occupations, departments, companies, etc. according to their actual mother status. Women will need to change their careers, departments, working hours and companies according to their actual status as mothers. This is also another very important factor that causes the wage gap — postpartum effect[6].

According to evidence collected from Denmark, as the significance of the impact in the early stage of childbirth decreases has fallen over time, the impact of child penalties continues to increase. From more than 40% in 1980 to about 80% in 2013. This is a change in the proportion of gender inequality related to children. It can be seen that this proportion is rising sharply and changing with time[6]. Denmark, as a Scandinavian country, is appreciated for its efforts to encourage gender equality and has one of the highest female labor force participation rates[6]. As a result, data from Danish research will be used to demonstrate the ingrained factor for the gender pay gap: child-rearing.

Professionals conducted a research on the career dynamics of male and female MBAs who graduated from Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago from 1990 to 2006. This study focuses on potential gender discrimination in male dominated workplaces[7]. The labor income of male and female MBA is almost the same, which is at the beginning of their career. But that will soon change. That is, their income will be different soon. The same change is the proportion of female MBAs who are not employed within ten years after graduation. Specifically, the proportion has also increased significantly[7]. Nine years later, 13% of female MBA graduates left the labor market, while only 1% of men[7]. At present, the gender gap in the business sector is narrowing, but at the same time, attention should be paid to the fact that women's development in the business and financial sectors is still not fast enough. Women are underrepresented among the highest paid executives, which is more serious at the top of enterprises[7].

Differences in training prior to earning an MBA, variations in career interruptions, and variations in weekly working hours are three main factors that influence the gender pay gap in business[7]. While women took more marketing courses in business school, men took more finance courses and had higher GPAs. Due to their focus on home and children, women also experienced more job interruptions and worked less hours. In fact, women had a 22% higher chance than men of having at least one work interruption[7]. Additionally, women are more likely to choose family-friendly employment and steer clear of those requiring lengthy hours. These small variations eventually resulted in a significant salary gap.

Women without children had substantially smaller gender gaps than men, according to survey data, and their work schedules were comparable to those of typical male MBAs in the study. There is even a sizable imbalance between women with children and those without children because employment interruptions account for a sizable portion of the wages gap between men and women, and the

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220477

majority of career interruptions are caused by children[7]. For the first 15 years after receiving an MBA, women with children face a post-MBA experience gap of around 8 months, compared to just 1.5 months for women without children[7]. In a similar vein, women without children work an average of 24 percent more hours per week than males, while women with children work less.

4. Discussion and Potential Solutions for Gender Pay Gap

The above study illustrates how the gender pay gap is mainly caused by the difference in working hours and the tradition of emphasizing a fixed working schedule, typically from 9 to 5. Compared to the gender pay gap in other fields, MBA women have more difficulty balancing careers and families than women as physicians, PhDs, and lawyers. While less than half of MBA women were in the labor force and had children 15 years out, 65 percent of MDs and approximately 55 percent of PhDs and JDs were. Since physicians and PhDs can work more flexibly and are awarded only by the length of a working hour, the gender pay gap is also the greatest in the business field[7].

Though many countries have passed laws to promote gender equality and prohibit gender discrimination, they are likely to be vague and lack explicit regulation to trigger real differences. To initiate more radical progress, more radical policies can be more helpful. Countries can learn from Scandinavian countries that have a narrower gender gap, better opportunities for women to balance careers and families, and higher female labor force participation rates[6]. For instance, Iceland made the daring choice to offer mothers and men the same benefits for maternity and paternity leave[8]. This additional time off encourages both parents to take care of their children's needs, boosts employment, and evens out work prospects[8]. The chances for women on the job market improve significantly when more men in Iceland spend more time to raising children and taking paternity leave, allowing them to work full-time or longer hours and advance into senior positions that need more time and fewer interruptions[9]. In addition, more elaborated efforts should be made to promote gender equity and fight against gender discrimination in the workplace. Many countries' laws, for example, do not specifically define the term "equal pay for equal work," but it is perplexing due to different understandings and interpretations of "work" and "pay"[10]. Therefore, countries can learn from how Japan makes relevant regulations more practical by publishing guides to narrow the gender gap for firms and specifying criteria to testify if the treatments are reasonable and legal[10].

5. Conclusion

In general, an important factor in the widening gender pay gap today is the traditional cultural expectation that women are the primary caregivers of children. Women are discriminated against during job applications because they may take paid maternity leave. Even after giving birth, women take more time off to focus on their families, which hinders their chances of being promoted to higher positions. Therefore, more elaborated laws and regulations are demanded to relieve women's pressure from the "child penalty" and promote gender equity. However, this paper did not include many studies from developing countries, and more research can be conducted to improve women's status in these societies.

References

[1] *Remarks by the President on Advancing Equal Pay. (2016, January 29). whitehouse.gov. Retrieved September 26, 2022, from https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/29/remarks-president-advancing-equal-pay*

[2] *Goldin, C. (2006, April 1). The Quiet Revolution That Transformed Women's Employment, Education, and Family. American Economic Review, 96(2), 1–21.*

[3] *Explained | Why Women Are Paid Less | FULL EPISODE | Netflix. (2020, April 17). [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved September 12, 2022, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hP8dLUxBfsU&t=1s*

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/5/20220477

[4] *Lü, C., & Ma, X. (2018). Designing an anti-employment gender discrimination system for women of school age under the "comprehensive two-child policy" in China [J]. Anti-discrimination Law Review, (00):150-166.*

[5] *Guo, K., & Yan, S. (2015). Gender Gap in Labor Market and the Related Regulations[J]. Economic Research Journal, 50(07):42-56.*

[6] *Kleven, H., Landais, C., & Søgaard, J. E. (2019, October 1). Children and Gender Inequality: Evidence from Denmark. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 11(4), 181–209.*

[7] *Bertrand, M., Goldin, C., & Katz, L. F. (2010, July 1). Dynamics of the Gender Gap for Young Professionals in the Financial and Corporate Sectors. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 2(3), 228–255.*

[8] *Maternity and paternity leave in Iceland. (n.d.). Retrieved September 26, 2022, from https://work.iceland.is/living/maternity-and-paternity-leave/*

[9] *Arnarson, B. T., & Mitra, A. (2010, May 20). The Paternity Leave Act in Iceland: implications for gender equality in the labour market. Applied Economics Letters, 17(7), 677–680.*

[10] *Huang, J., & Bi, F. (2022). A Review of "Equal Pay for Equal Work" System in Japan and Its Reference and Inspiration [J]. Journal of Kunming University of Science and Technology (Social Science), 22(01): 10-18*