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Reproductive Challenges of Chinese Females---From Economic and Health Perspectives

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Abstract: Gender inequality has always been prevalent in China in the areas of economics, education, health, and politics. Ranked the 39th out of 189 countries on the Gender Inequality Index of the United Nations Development Program, China has persisting gender wage gap--- females' earnings are roughly 71.5% of males'. During the reproduction process where both genders undertake different physiological and social roles, inequality concerning wage, employment, social welfare, and healthcare exists. The study explores socioeconomic and health inequalities faced by Chinese females during the reproduction process compared to their male counterparts, including wage disparities, unemployment, downward job transfers, postpartum mental disorders, and physical health issues. The paper shows that the gender pay gap has been persistent in China in recent decades and demonstrates an ascending trend regarding the childbearing and child-caring periods. There is also a persistent employment gap between both genders, which worsens particularly after reproduction. The career positions of Chinese females are negatively influenced by motherhood. Besides socioeconomic status, research demonstrates a high level of postpartum depression and physical disorders in new moms. Last but not least, the study aims to carry out feasible approaches to cure inequalities during the reproduction process, guaranteeing females' sufficient access to broad social welfare.

Keywords: Gender equality, Chinese females, employment gap

1. Introduction

For millionaires, gender inequality in marriage relationships has remained a huge threat to females' welfare and their access to various resources and opportunities. Within the broad range of marriage issues, challenges encountered by women in the reproduction process have contributed drastically to gender inequality over generations. In modern China, prominent challenges that hamper women from obtaining even socioeconomic and health achievements after giving birth compared to their male counterparts are still prevalent. With the transformation to a market economy in recent decades and the skill-based technological change in workplaces, the gender wage gap has been increasing in China, which is especially evident during women's motherhood. In the meantime, postpartum moms with or without full-time careers are facing serious unemployment issues as well as downward job transfers. Physical and psychological problems also count as a crucial component

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of reproductive inequality. The present study focus on the gender wage gap, females' unemployment status, and postpartum physiological and mental health issues during parenthood.

There have been sufficient studies and literature related to various aspects of reproductive inequalities. In terms of the gender pay gap, a longitudinal study was conducted at UC Berkeley based on Chinese Family Panel Studies (CFPS) data from 2010 to 2016 provided by Peking University. Qi Xu's research from 1989 to 2015 introduced the concepts of "Fatherhood wage premium" and "Motherhood Wage Penalty" to examine the reproductive wage inequality.

Based on Chinese Household Income Project survey data from 2002 to 2018, Xinxin Ma's study emphasized the impact of parenthood on the gender wage gap and specifically, the employment rate gap in urban China. The research also explored how the number of children in a family may influence payment disparities, the degree of unemployment to either gender, and job transfer situations.

Regarding health challenges, a qualitative study made by Lai, Yt., Lin, Aw., Zheng, Zh. et al recorded postpartum symptoms like pelvic floor dysfunction among women in southeast China. The research published by Liu, N., Mao, L., Sun, X. et al investigated the Chinese postpartum tradition "Sitting Mouth" period and its impacts on new moms' psychological situations by restricting certain behaviors in the recovery period.

Despite the considerable number of former research resources regarding issues like the gender wage gap, postpartum unemployment, postpartum depression, and the shortage of social and family support after giving birth, there is insufficient literature combining all these aspects to analyze reproductive inequality that Chinese women are facing and give out constructive suggestions to either of these issues. Although these problems are gaining more importance and attention in recent years, there are still rooted social norms and traditional impacts in Chinese society, and some issues are seldom publicly discussed because people regard them as insignificant.

Summarizing various aspects regarding gender inequality in the literature and studies mentioned above, this paper aims to analyze the reproductive inequality status quo faced by Chinese women in recent decades from socioeconomic and health perspectives. The author will later analyze appropriate explanations for each phenomenon, and carry out possible approaches to alleviate reproductive inequalities in China from corresponding perspectives mentions in the above contents.

2. Status Quo of Socioeconomic Inequalities and Health Issues of Chinese Females

2.1. Deepening Gender Wage Gap during Parenthood

The gender wage gap in China has long been existing. While under Chairman Mao's socialist system, earning disparities between men and women, or other social groups should be small, the economic transformation towards a market economy from the 1970s has been stimulating a larger gender wage gap, according to research results. A longitudinal research conducted by Donghe Lyu at UC Berkeley examines the gender pay gap in China from 2010, which was based on representative data from rural to urban regions by China Health and Nutrition Survey, concluded that the gender wage gap has been constantly high in China[1]. Males employees were earning 38.4 % more than their female counterparts in 2010, and the surplus increased to 46.3% in 2012, 48.1% in 2014, and 42.8% in 2016. Among many factors contributing to the gender wage gap in china, females' reproduction process can be one crucial reason. It is referred to as the "Motherhood Penalty", which describes women's salaries being negatively impacted by childbirth and raising babies while men's income is normal. According to CHNS data from 1989 to 2015, a study focusing on spouses under the age of 50 found distinct evidence of 'fatherhood wage premium' and 'motherhood wage penalty', which is evident for the parenthood gender wage gap. The hourly wage

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of men with children exceeds that of men without children by 194 Yuan. By contrast, the hourly wage of women drops by 241 Yuan after childbirth[2].

From another study that probes into urban China's gender payment disparities from 2002 to 2018 with data from the Chinese Household Income Survey, it can be concluded that the gender wage gap persists during these 16 years[3]. Having children may impose different wage fluctuation directions on the two genders. Take more recent data in 2018 as an example, comparing to families with no child, fathers' monthly wages both grow in one-child and two-child situations, while mothers' wage decrease by 10.6% (except for families with three or more children, where both parents' wages decrease possibly due to higher burdens and time consumption brought by multiple kids). There is further evidence in this example demonstrating fatherhood wage premium and motherhood wage penalty with the variable of an increasing number of children.

2.2. Persistent Employment Gap between Two Genders and among Different Occupational Levels

On top of the lower wage for new moms, pregnancy, childbearing, and postpartum child care may lead to lower employment rates and smaller proportions in higher level/skill-intensive occupations for after-childbirth women compared to male counterparts. According to the research of parenthood wage gap in urban China from 2002 to 2018, in 2018, while there were reductions in both genders' employment rates when children numbers increase from zero to two, such rate fluctuations in females were more evident compared to their male counterparts. The gender employment gap between childless males and females was 20.3% (male employment rate minus female employment rate), and this number increases to 22.1% for two-child households and 28.0% for three-or-more-child households[3]. Following the incline of children's numbers, the unemployment rate for females becomes more severe than for males.

Besides the labor participation rate, the proportions of occupation in different levels of industries vary between different genders before and after childbirth, based on CHNS data mentioned above. After the transition to parents, the proportion of males engaged in professional skill-intensive and managing occupations increases from 18.0% to 27.4%, while the proportion of them in manufacturing and tertiary industries declined separately by 6.9% and 3.6%. The percentile of female counterparts who were occupied in professional skill-intensive and managing careers, and commercial tertiary industries reduced by respectively 2.7% and 8.9%, while the percentile of them engaged in agricultural and manufacturing careers increased by 4.1% and 7.2%[3]. It can be concluded from the perspective of different skill & technology intensity of occupations that postpartum women tend to transfer from high-skilled occupations to low-skilled ones.

2.3. Physical and Mental Health Problems after Giving Birth

Beyond socioeconomic status, inequalities in reproductive health inequalities deserve adequate attention. While newborns can bring about happiness and freshness to families, motherhood can also cause perishing disturbances in both physical and mental health. There may be short-term suffering like post-operation bleeding, fever, chest pain, infection, and long-term discomforts including the overactive pelvic floor, bladder pain, or urinary incontinence. Pelvic floor disorders are prevalent in China, and a meta-data analysis showed that around 31% of adult females suffered from urinary incontinence, which could lead to embarrassment and inconvenience in females' workplaces, exercises, social situations, etc [4]. One of the most severe symptoms is postpartum depression, also called "baby blues", which may be suffered by mothers from the first week after giving birth until up to 3 years time with symptoms of mood swings, anxiety, feelings of helplessness... A study made by Xinli Chi, and Peichao Zhang (et al.) in 2016 examines 506

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Chinese mothers within 3 years of delivery using an online survey[5]. The results showed that 30% of the mothers reported symptoms of risk for postpartum depression including enduring sadness, anxiety, feeling of impotence, guilt, and even suicide attempts. Another meta-data analysis of postpartum depression in China examined and compared the rate of postpartum depression mood based on a different type of administrative division of Chinese cities. It was found that the prevalence rate in directly-controlled municipalities was the lowest, approximately 12.9%, while the number for cities of lower administrative levels—provincial areas, sub-provincial areas, and prefecture-level cities gradually increases[6].

3. Reason Analysis

3.1. Females' Knowledge and Information Lag

Females' lower employment rate and job switches can be attributed to lower labor productivity after giving birth. For women who work part-time or full-time, the reproduction process can take months. This would include not only pregnancy but also the afterbirth recovery period. While most women feel recovered after about 6-8 weeks, they may be subjected to further child caring, which takes up months. Compared to male counterparts who work part-time or full-time, new mothers could lose several months up to years of working time or study period. According to the Ministry of Science and Technology of China, there were 330 thousand domestic high-tech enterprises in 2021, and Research & Development investment in high-tech enterprises occupied 70% of domestic R & D investment in enterprises. In modern China where the domestic economy has a growing dependence on technology and high-skilled talents, employees' constantly renewed knowledge base and education level are required to satisfy higher productivity. For female employees after giving birth whose knowledge base or skill level cannot be regenerated fast enough to meet high productivity needs, their competence in the labor market declines while enterprises tend to hire more skill-intensive candidates. This would lead to unemployment or job transfers from original posts to lower skill-intensive positions.

What's more, full-time mothers' socioeconomic status in China deserves exploration. According to the data published by Agne Blazyte, among women who have children in China in 2020, 56.6% were unemployed[7]. A survey tracking 9 full-time mothers in Chengdu, China found that these females all have previous careers including teachers, Human Resource managers, accountants, sellers, and programmers with education level ranking from a junior college to master degrees. Some choose to quit office because of family burdens to bear and raise children, while some resign due to being marginalized at the workplace after getting pregnant. Unemployment of full-time mothers could come from even lower competence and devotion in the labor market, and child-caring burdens separate their energy at work.

3.2. Skill-based Technological Changes in Workplaces

Declining salaries can be explained by females' switching employment status and job transfers from high-skilled work to low-skill ones. In a global economy, the demand for skilled labor has been rising faster than supply due to trade openness or globalization, and skill-biased technological changes, which require more productive intensive workers to replace low-skill workers. Thus, the unemployment situation for afterbirth mothers who cannot catch up with technology-sophisticated counterparts can account for lowering income. This can also be explained by the two-factor model. In the short run when capital is relatively fixed, a rise in high-skill laborers' technology level could result in higher wages for high-skilled labor and lower wage for lower-skill laborers [8].

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3.3. Cesarean Sections, Hormone Fluctuations, and the lack of Social Support

In terms of post-operational physical symptoms, especially for mothers receiving cesarean section, Chinese traditional medicine may explain. Around 35% of mothers receive c-section operations when having babies, while in Chinese traditional medicine, the disadvantages of c-section overweight the advantages. Traditional Chinese medicine believes that loss of blood during s-section cooperation and poor diet after the operation cause deficiency of both "qi" and blood. Besides, post-operation incision pain, insomnia, depression, and galactostasis can be caused by liver "qi" stagnation.

Other than surgical injury, hormone fluctuations and social-family pressure from Chinese traditional norms or stereotypes both lead to postpartum depression. Pregnancy hormones progesterone and estrogen reach high levels during pregnancy but drop dramatically after giving birth, which gives rise to feelings of sadness, anxiety, insomnia, etc[9].

In some regions in China, there are still postpartum customs existing: "Sitting mouth". This is usually a six-week period when females' bodies are recovering and returning to a non-pregnant state. In traditional views, females could be easily disturbed by extra "heat" or "cold" due to their loss of blood and "Qi" during reproduction. Many are banned by older generations from eating cold foods, having showers, washing their hair, brushing their teeth, and, wearing makeup because they are claimed to be bringing toxins to female bodies. A cross-sectional research in Hubei province has found that 18% of new moms never eat vegetables during the "Sitting Mouth" period, and up to 75% of them don't have fruit and milk[10]. Admittedly, the female body may be easily attacked by bacteria or disturbance and thus requires special treatment, while some traditional customs like not ingesting necessary nutrition and not conducting personal care in this modern society could be physical and mental constraints to mothers whose moods are already unstable due to post-childbirth hormones. It can lead to a shortage of vitamins, and protein, and prohibiting personal hygiene or aesthetic demands might deepen negative emotions. Other than the above needs, the lack of social and family support lead to postpartum depression to a large extent. "I guess I felt depressed more so with this one 'cause I didn't have the help from the father as much as I expected I was going to get." "I had to beg for it., to get [help] from my mother, like, to take the other two, or my father –" These are the reflections from African American and Latina mothers who received interviews about social and family supports[11]. Not getting enough comfort from males or elder generations during babysitting and postpartum recovery are also common in Chinese society, where toxic masculinity and gender role stereotypes are widespread. Husbands and older generations take it for granted that new mothers assume the majority of childcare burdens without much comfort from their spouses, which gives rise to females' feelings of helplessness.

4. Conclusions

It seems that society has taken it for granted that women accept most of the burdens during the reproductive and childcare process since it's a natural process that females foster in the younger generations. However, marriage and specifically, reproduction, is never a women's burden alone. In seek of gender equality in modern Chinese society, actions should be taken to improve women's full access to welfare and reproductive rights.

There are several possible solutions to cure the economic and health challenges faced by women after giving birth.

Firstly, vocational skills training for adult women could help them catch up with their male counterparts' knowledge base including professional skills and technology skills. Secondly, changing public stereotypes of traditional gender roles is critical. This process can be accomplished through education, social media, and public opinion. In Chinese traditional views, males are

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expected to take care of financial burdens outside the home. Changes in these stereotypes may release the intrinsic burdens of females by teaching male counterparts to take more responsibilities during the reproduction and child-caring period fundamentally.

Thirdly, other nations' experience in paid paternal leaves may be referred to. In Sweden, for example, parents are guaranteed 480 days of paid paternal leaves when a child is born or adopted. Paternity leave can offer valuable benefits, including strengthening relationships among spouses, fathers, and children, and improving the health of mothers by reducing their burden and feelings of powerlessness. Last but not least, others with full-time work often find it hard to balance working commitment and child care. In modern China, more flexible work schedules could be adopted to satisfy females' needs to care for their families at random moments. For example, online working through file sharing and telecommuting could be utilized to allow females more time at home. With Covid-19, telecommuting is becoming prevalent, which requires further perfection.

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