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Family and Cultural Influences on Young Men's Views on Feminism in China

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Abstract. This article explores how family and cultural factors influence young men's views on feminism in China. It seeks to investigate how family structure and education experiences shape their sensitivity to gender-related issues. Employing a qualitative research design, this research uses semi-structured interviews to investigate how socioeconomic and cultural family backgrounds influence young male individuals' attitudes toward feminism. Findings reveal a general endorsement of gender equality among participants; however, those raised in male-dominated households often demonstrated a superficial understanding of feminist concepts, with minimal awareness of gender inequality in their daily lives. Overall, this research underscores the need for more intentional and open discourses around feminism and gender equity within both educational settings and family environments in China.

Keywords: Feminism, Male Perspectives, Gender Equality, Family Influence

1. Introduction

Attitudes toward gender roles and feminism have long been a key focus in sociological research, with prior research stating that family background --such as cultural upbringing and parental education-plays a critical role in influencing individuals' attitudes toward gender roles and gender equality. Indeed, households that emphasize egalitarian values often demonstrate greater support for feminist ideals. However, existing scholarship has predominantly centered on women's perspectives, leaving comparatively little examination of how males develop their views on feminism. In particular, it is less clear how specific aspects of family background, such as socioeconomic status, might alter men's attitudes towards feminism.

This study aims to address this gap by asking the question: What role does socioeconomic and cultural contexts within families play in shaping male's perspectives on feminism? Drawing on 20 in-depth interviews with high school students, this study investigates personal narratives about family environments, parental beliefs, and the ways these factors intersect to shape respondents' understandings of gender issues. Participants include males from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and parenting backgrounds, thereby enabling a nuanced analysis of how various family contexts may promote or hinder supportive views of feminist ideals.

Investigating these understudied dynamics is sociologically significant because it broadens the discourse on gender socialization, highlighting the importance of family backgrounds in shaping

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men's attitudes toward feminism. By focusing on an area that has received limited attention in gender studies, the research seeks to contribute to broader discussions on how best to enhance people's gender awareness, offering insights that may inform policies, educational programs, and community initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive attitudes towards feminism.

2. Literature review

Gender role socialization is the process through which individuals internalize societal expectations about gender roles [1]. A substantial body of literature has examined the factors that shape individuals' gender attitudes, with much of this research concentrated in Western contexts. Notably, Kågesten et al. [2] provide a comprehenseive global review, including a summary table that shows the key influences on gender norms across various settings. The review highlights interpersonal-level factors, particularly parental interactions, as significant in shaping adolescents' gender views. Specifically, it mentions that gender attitudes appear to be linked to mothers and/or father's gender-related attitudes and behaviors, with these associations varying by the child's biological sex [3,4]. Additionally, gender attitudes are associated with parental education levels and work status [5,6]. Interestingly, the review also cites two studies indicating that the genderer division of household labor—such as discrepancies between mothers' and fathers' time spent doing housework—does not directly influence their children's gender attitudes [3,7]. While the review provides valuable insights, it remains largely focused on the western contexts and has a less explicit focus on young men.

To address this limitation, recent research has begun to explore how gender socialization unfolds in East Asian contexts, where traditional cultural values intersect with modern social policies. In the Korean context, Byun[8] investigates how government policies incentivize men to take on caregiving roles through parental leave, yet deeply ingrained Confucian ideals of masculinity create social barriers for fathers who take on these responsibilities. The stigma faced by Korean fathers who deviate from traditional norms shows how traditional gender norms still persist despite policy changes. While Byun's findings show males' attitudes towards feminism and gender equality in an era of social change, many meso-level, family related factors such as such as parental beliefs and family socioeconomic status are not investigated. It therefore points to a need for more comprehensive analyses.

In the Chinese context, Luo's[9] research demonstrates that gender attitudes in China have evolved differently across generations, influenced by economic development, social policies, and education. Cohort replacement theory provides a useful framework here, suggesting that younger generations bring more egalitarian views shaped by shifting societal contexts as they take over older cohorts. Nevertheless, Zhang[10]cautions that while young Chinese men increasingly support gender equality in principle, their practical expectations regarding marriage and family roles often diverge from these stated beliefs. Such discrepancies underscore the significance of family background, including parental beliefs and household structures, in continuing to shape men's opinions on feminism

Despite these insights, much of the existing literature on East Asian males 'attitudes towards gender emphasizes macro- level social trends rather than nuanced family dynamics and the role of socioeconomic factors. Thus, this study addresses these gaps through in-depth qualitative interviews, offering a more nuanced perspective on how cultural and economic background shapes males' attitudes toward feminism.

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3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to investigate how socioeconomic and cultural family backgrounds influence young male individuals' attitudes toward feminism. The study conducted interviews with 9 male and 5 females participants, all of whom were either high school students or first-year university students. The participants of the interviews were recruited by three ways: (1) referrals from a college admissions counselor who recommended students interested in participating, (2) outreach to children of family friends and their extended relatives who expressed interest in speaking about their views, and (3) invitations extended to peers from summer programs. To encourage participation, a small monetary incentive was given out to the participants after the interviews.

The selected participants reflected a range of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, aligning with the study's goal of investigating how such factors influence male adolescents' views towards feminism. Several females were also interviewed for the research to directly compare whether the two different genders have different perceptions towards feminism, thereby allowing a clearer interpretation of male responses.

The interview guidelines were tailored slightly between female and male participants but consistently covered the topics of basic family background, gender roles in household labor, parental authority, expectations tied to gender stereotypes, personal experiences or observations related to gender equality or inequality, media influence on feminism, evolving gender attitudes over time, and future expectations for gender roles in their families. All the interviews were conducted via the Tencent meeting platform and were voice-recorded with the participants' informed consent. Recordings were then transcribed verbatim in Chinese and reviewed by the interviewer. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns and insights across participants. One researcher performed the coding using Excel, organizing data into categories such as: "gendered labor division," "parental authority and gender norms," and "media-induced perceptions of feminism." All participant data were kept anonymous during the analysis process and transcription, with data securely stored and only accessible to authorized researchers.

4. Findings

The findings of this study highlight key themes identified through the thematic coding of 14 structured interviews. The results show how family structure, cultural backgrounds, and the experiences of individuals shape participants' perspectives on feminism. While the analysis mainly focuses on the male participants' responses, female viewpoints are also integrated to provide a comparative dimension and deepen the understanding of gender-based differences in attitudes.

4.1. Gender equality in principle, feminism in question

First, all male participants expressed support for the principle of gender equality, with none denying its value. This suggests that among adolescents and young adults, gender equality has become a socially desirable norm. For example, Ethan mentioned, "[gender equality] means giving everyone equal opportunities—no extra benefits for anyone, and more importantly, no obstacles should be placed on someone just because of their gender." Similarly, Kevin pointed out the need to challenge gender stereotypes, "There shouldn't be discrimination between boys and girls… like assuming boys are better at science or that girls are weak—those mindsets need to be challenged." Daniel further stated, "Equality is a social concept. We need to create an environment that eliminates these innate

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imbalances, so that everyone can be given the same amount of opportunity. I think that's the ultimate goal of gender equality." Even though there is variation in the background of young men, the concept of gender equality is important for them. Whether they emphasized on fairness, gender stereotypes, or eliminating inequality in the society, male adolescents have collectively indicated that gender inequality is a pressing social issue. At the same time, diversity in the depth and framing of male respondents' responses reveals varying levels of understanding and engagement with the concept of gender equality.

Despite male participants expressing support for gender equality, their attitudes toward feminism were often marked by confusion and ambivalence. Several participants associated feminism with extremism, referencing online discourses that frame "女权" (feminism) as aggressive. For example, Max said, "I do recall there being some. Well, I wouldn't call them jokes exactly—more like mockery. For example, when my friends talked about feminism, they would mock those so-called 'fake feminists' online, saying the 'feminism' they refer to is more like 'fist-ism.'" In addition, Ryan also has the same viewpoint, "Sometimes the word for 'rights' in feminism gets replaced with the character for 'fist,' as if feminism is trying to create a new kind of inequality like patriarchy. That's something I don't like." These opinions demonstrate a disconnect between the principle of equality and the cultural language used to advocate for it. In particular, the negative connotations attached to feminism in digital spaces and extremist discussions appear to easily alienate young men, suggesting that the concept needs to be more widely defined and discussed especially in male-dominated environments.

4.2. Family dynamics and gender role socialization

Most male participants stated that they grew up in households where traditional gender roles were the norm. Their mothers usually handled domestic work, and their fathers were seen as the primary decision-makers. These early exposures often shaped their assumptions about gender dynamics. Ethan said, "I wouldn't say who has more authority, but I think my father has slightly more. When there's a disagreement—which is rare—it's usually my father who makes the final decision." Similarly, Noah explained, "My mother mainly takes care of the housework, but everyone helps when needed. My father usually does the cooking, and I take care of things like taking out the trash, cleaning the litter box, or washing dishes. Lately I've been busy with senior year, so I do less, but I still try to help out on weekends when I can." These accounts indicate that while there is some degree of flexibility, traditional gendered divisions of labor and authority remain common in Chinese households. As such, even though males realize the enduring issue of gender inequality, the persistence of traditional gender roles in their families still implicitly affects their attitudes towards feminism.

However, in households with non-traditional divisions of labor, males appeared more aware of traditional gender beliefs and the topic of gender equality. For instance, Ryan mentioned, "I think my mom has more influence at home because her work has given her broader connections and greater insight. Compared to my dad, she's more like a career-oriented, strong woman… her views tend to be more forward-looking." He went on to define the term "gender equality" by saying, "Simply put, girls can succeed in their careers like my mom, and boys can take care of the home like my dad. Everyone should have the freedom to choose their own path, without being limited by gender." Ryan's responses suggest that male adolescents raised in households that deviate from traditional gender roles of Asian families tend to have more open-minded and nuanced views on feminism. This may stem from being exposed to alternative domestic dynamics, where mothers are active in their professional lives and fathers taking care of the household chores. This contrast

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allows them to unconciously develop thoughts about gender roles and gender equality. Thus, young males growing up in diverse family environments tend to recognize and engage more readily with gender-related issues in everyday life.

4.3. Experiential knowledge and feminist engagement

While both male and female participants expressed support for feminism, the depth of their answers varied greatly. Male participants tended to define gender equality in fair treatment and equal opportunity. However, several of them displayed confusion about the meaning of gender equality and feminism, mostly relying on peer opinions or internet sources rather than their own experiences. Some referenced traditional gender roles—such as men being the dominant decision makers and women being the caretakers for the housewere—as commonplace, and often acknowledged these roles as natural rather than problematic. On the other hand, female participants grounded their understandings of feminism in lived experiences. Their responses often emphasized structural inequality, social expectations, and safety issues. Females pointed out gendered double standards and unequal treatment across different aspects of life. For instance, Mia remarked, “Whether it's feminism, men's rights, or equality—it's all part of a thinking process. Anyone fighting for their legitimate rights is simply exercising their entitlement,”and added, “My mom and aunts even had to wash their male siblings' underwear—I found that outrageous.” Lily shared, “My mom grew up in a sexist household… and because she experienced unfair treatment, she made sure not to pass that on.” Similarly, Sophia also gave examples: “One of my friends believes her younger brother's birth displaced her access to resources… that’s what pushed her to engage more deeply with feminism.” The overall contrast between male and female attitudes towards feminism was striking, as females have real-life examples of discrimination, but males often only refer to abstract or external sources.

In a few cases for young male participants, certain forms of experiential knowledge—such as identifying with a nontraditional sexual orientation or having been exposed to more diverse or progressive cultural environments—may contribute to greater sensitivity toward gender inequality in everyday life. Daniel, who identifies himself as homosexual, provided deep insights into the conversation. He recalled, “In the fitting room, there was a conversation—some guys were talking about these kinds of topics among themselves. Although I didn’t say anything at the time, what they were saying was indeed quite inappropriate. When I did say a word or two, it made me seem like the odd one out. Later, in Japan, during my first year of university… there was a group chat with other Chinese international students. A few classmates from the same department joined, and they started talking about Chinese girls, Japanese girls, and it was clearly from a sexualized perspective. That’s just how it was.” Ben, a student at one of Beijing’s top international schools, said, “I think my dad is more proactive, mainly because my mom is very busy with work and doesn’t have much time to manage household matters.” He then mentions, “Women do take on a lot in marriage—for instance, pregnancy is a major difference between men and women, both physiologically and in how it affects life. So is this inequality? I honestly don’t know. But it might be. Both sides—women toward men and men toward women—probably have some unreasonable expectations.” These accounts suggest that male adolescents exposed to diverse backgrounds or have nontraditional sexual orientations notice these everyday gender inequality scenarios more than others. Such environments appear to encourage deeper reflection on social norms and provide space for independent thought regarding feminism and gender equality. Thus, experiential knowledge plays a meaningful role in shaping young males’ hightened sensitivity and critical engagement with this topic.

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5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the research indicate that the majority of Asian family households follow traditional gender norms, with men being in the “outer circle” of the family (public sphere) whereas women are in the “inner circle” (domestic sphere). While many participants acknowledged instances of gender inequality in their everyday lives—such as observing their mothers undertaking most of the housework—their thoughts on this phenomenon were often limited in depth, and their definitions of gender equality remained vague. However, males who have been exposed to diverse or progressive environments demonstrated more sensitivity about this topic, providing specific examples of real-life scenarios of gender inequality and talking about reversed dynamics. Across the interviews, participants demonstrated an evolving understanding of gender equality, pointing out that gender equality heavily means providing the same opportunities for both genders and not limiting people based on their sex. Females, in particular, contributed more detailed and personal insights, frequently drawing on real-life experiences of gender inequality.

The results of this research highlight a pressing need to incorporate the discussions of feminism and gender equality more explicitly in the Chinese education curriculum. Both educators and policymakers need to take an active role in teaching students about societal expectations, systemic inequalities, and gender-based stereotypes. Doing so will help cultivate a generation of young people who are more critically engaged with these issues and committed to fostering a more equitable society.

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