

Research on the Causes and Countermeasures of Women's Workplace Dilemmas from a Multi-Dimensional Perspective: Based on an Integrated Analysis of Society, Enterprises and Health

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Abstract. This study, based on the theories of gender, the glass ceiling, and role conflict, systematically examines the multi-dimensional challenges faced by Chinese women in the workplace from the perspectives of society, organization, and individual. The research reveals that women not only encounter explicit and implicit gender discrimination in recruitment and promotion, persistent pay gaps, and the "glass ceiling" effect, but also endure the psychological and physical stress caused by the dual role conflict of work and family. These challenges are deeply rooted in the complex interaction of traditional gender cultural norms, structural flaws in enterprise systems, and insufficient policy implementation mechanisms. This paper further constructs a three-level collaborative countermeasure framework of "policy-organization-culture," proposing to break the cycle of gender segregation and discrimination through systematic paths such as improving gender equality legislation and evaluation mechanisms, promoting enterprises to establish transparent promotion and flexible working systems, and facilitating the reshaping of gender concepts in the media and education fields. This study provides an integrated analytical perspective for understanding the formation mechanism of women's workplace challenges and puts forward operational policy suggestions and practical directions for promoting substantive gender equality at the government, enterprise, and social levels.

Keywords: Women's workplace challenges, Gender equality, Glass ceiling, Work-family conflict, Countermeasure research.

1. Introduction

With the advancement of society and economic development, the proportion of women participating in professional labor has been continuously increasing, and their contributions to economic and social development have become increasingly significant. However, in the workplace environment, women still commonly face various forms of difficulties and inequalities. According to the "2023 China Women's Workplace Status Survey Report," more than half of women were asked about their marital and reproductive status during the job search process, and approximately 30% of women

have experienced career restrictions or discrimination due to gender factors. At the same time, the "glass ceiling" effect in women's career advancement channels is still obvious, the gender pay gap remains above 12%, and women face severe work-family conflicts due to the additional responsibilities of family care, which impose dual pressures on their career development and physical and mental health.

Existing studies mostly analyze women's workplace issues from a single perspective, or focus on discrimination phenomena, or discuss policy guarantees, lacking systematic integration analysis of social culture, organizational systems, and individual experiences. Especially in the domestic context, the social expectations based on traditional gender role concepts, the hidden structural biases in enterprise organizations, and the inequality in family division of labor jointly constitute the multiple constraints on women's career development, but this interaction mechanism has not been fully explored.

This study is based on the theories of social gender, the glass ceiling theory, and role conflict theory, constructing a multi-dimensional analysis framework, aiming to systematically examine the generation logic and manifestation forms of women's workplace dilemmas in China, and propose practical and feasible countermeasures. The research focuses include the following: first, revealing how explicit and implicit gender discrimination in society affects women's career choices and development; second, analyzing the promotion obstacles, pay inequality, and support absence issues in enterprise systems; third, exploring the negative impact of work-family conflicts on women's career sustainability and mental health; and fourth, combining international experience with China's reality and proposing systematic solutions from the policy, organizational, and social culture levels.

This study not only helps deepen the theoretical exploration of gender equality and workplace justice but also provides empirical evidence and strategic references for the government to formulate more gender-sensitive public policies, enterprises to build inclusive organizational systems, and society to promote gender cultural transformation. In the context of global sustainable development and inclusive growth, resolving women's workplace dilemmas has become an urgent issue for achieving social fairness and optimizing the allocation of human resources.

2. Analysis of the current situation of women's workplace challenges

In China, women still face certain challenges in the workplace. This chapter will analyze these challenges from the perspectives of social culture, organizational systems, and the individual level, based on the gender discrimination faced by women.

2.1. Explicit and implicit discrimination at the social-cultural level

From the perspective of social culture, this discriminatory behavior can be divided into explicit and implicit forms. The explicit level refers to visible discriminatory behaviors that everyone can observe. In the job market, it mainly takes the form of gender preferences in recruitment and sexual harassment; the implicit level exists within traditional gender concepts. The traditional gender role norms of "men outside, women inside" lead to women being implicitly regarded as the main bearers of family responsibilities, and their importance in career development is underestimated by society.

According to the latest data from the "2024 China Women's Workplace Status Survey Report," the phenomenon of workplace gender discrimination is still significant: 63.5% of women were asked about their marital and childbearing plans during the job search process, an increase of 2.3 percentage points compared to 2022, and significantly higher than the 35.2% of men; 32.8% of women stated that they had encountered explicit restrictions or rejection from recruitment units due

to gender reasons; 21.7% of women were forced to give up career development opportunities due to the need to undertake family care responsibilities; and 9.2% of women stated that they had experienced different forms of sexual harassment in the workplace [1].

2.2. Structural barriers at the organizational system level

The structural barriers that women face at the organizational system level mainly manifest in three aspects: promotion obstacles, salary gap, and the absence of support systems.

Firstly, women in the workplace still encounter a clear "glass ceiling" effect. According to the "2024 China Women's Career Development Report," the proportion of women among senior executives of listed companies is only 18.7%, and it takes women on average about 2.3 years longer than men to advance from middle management to higher positions [2]. Mary Guy's "glass wall" and "sticky floor" theory reveals the multi-dimensional obstacles in women's career development: "sticky floor" is manifested as women being assigned to auxiliary positions at the beginning of their employment; "glass wall" is reflected in women being mostly assigned to support departments after entering the management level, making it difficult for them to enter the core decision-making level [3].

Secondly, the gender salary gap remains significant. Data from 2023 shows that the average starting salary for female graduates is 11.8% lower than that of male graduates, and this gap widens with the increase in job level [4]. At senior management positions, women's salary is only 76.5% of that of men in the same position.

Furthermore, the impact of career interruptions on women's salary growth is prominent. Childbirth is the main cause of women's career interruptions, and about 67.3% of women experience delayed salary growth after giving birth. Among them, 32.5% of women are forced to accept salary cuts or job transfers after returning to the workplace [4]. 28.9% of women experienced unfair treatment during pregnancy, including disguised salary cuts (15.7%), being transferred from key positions (9.3%), etc.

These data indicate that the structural barriers at the organizational system level not only limit women's career development space but also have long-term negative impacts through the salary gap and the development obstacles after career interruptions.

2.3. Dual pressures at the individual level and health deterioration

From the perspective of the individual level, the predicament of working women involves role conflicts and mental health risks. Role conflicts refer to the severe "work-family conflict" faced by professional women, who have to fulfill their duties at work while also undertaking a large amount of unpaid household labor and parenting responsibilities, resulting in a significant depletion of time and energy. Such long-term pressure and potential discriminatory environments make women more prone to psychological problems such as job burnout, anxiety, and depression, which affect their professional performance and quality of life.

Studies have shown that over 60% of professional women believe that negative emotions, such as stress, have a negative impact on their psychological conditions, and over 70% of professional women believe that stress has led to a decline in their physical health. Over 40% of professional women need professional course guidance to adjust their mental and physical health status [5]. Moreover, the probability of women suffering from depression is 1.7 times that of men. Over 80% of working women believe that they are under excessive pressure, which affects their mental health [6].

The above analysis reveals the multi-dimensional manifestations of the female workplace predicament from the social culture, organizational system, and individual levels. However, these levels are not isolated but interwoven and mutually reinforcing in a complex system. A single-dimensional analysis is difficult to fully grasp the essence of the problem, and an integrated analytical framework is urgently needed to reveal its internal mechanism.

Based on the theoretical basis discussed in the previous section, this section will shift to a multi-dimensional integrated analysis. By analyzing the interaction between social culture, enterprise systems, and family division of labor, this analysis will reveal the systemic cyclical characteristics of the female workplace predicament. This improvement in the analytical level is conducive to going beyond mere phenomenon description and deeply understanding how various factors jointly constitute the structural barriers to women's career development and laying the foundation for proposing systematic solutions in the subsequent stage.

3. Multi-dimensional integrated analysis: the interwoven dilemmas of society, enterprises and families

Based on a systematic analysis of existing literature and policy texts, this study reveals that the female workplace predicament is a systemic cycle that is mutually intertwined and mutually reinforced by social culture, organizational systems, and family division of labor.

3.1. Social cultural norms shape family expectations and enterprise practices

The different requirements in social culture for men and women make women more prone to gender discrimination in the workplace, and they are often expected to shoulder more parenting responsibilities in the family.

In Chinese history, the concept of "men being superior to women" still persists, and women are often trained to be "low-key, gentle, and humble", otherized, and expected to be the "good wives" of future husbands. They are burdened with the shackles of chastity and reputation, lacking subjectivity; while men are often taught to be "upwardly mobile, ambitious, and career-oriented", having "inborn" subjectivity. Specifically, in the growth of women, families often default to the daughter's marriage, and the alienated mother will train the daughter in a "past experience" manner, making her possess the qualities of becoming a "good wife", such as washing clothes, cooking, sweeping, and mopping, with the context often having an "invisible" male, who defaults that the woman is an accessory of the man, ultimately leading to the weakening of her subjectivity. And the weakening of subjectivity makes it easier for women to choose silence when facing gender discrimination in the workplace, thereby tacitly acknowledging the existence of the female workplace predicament. At the same time, under this social and cultural training, it also leads to the fact that women in families with children need to bear more parenting pressure and responsibilities.

When enterprises encounter female workers who have career interruptions due to childbirth, they often avoid such women due to employment costs, making women have to face workplace predicaments; traditional gender concepts bring more parenting responsibilities and gender biases, making women face certain employment discrimination. These two reasons jointly lead to the problem of lagging salaries for re-employment after childbirth.

3.2. Deficiencies in enterprise systems intensify social pressure and family burdens

The lack of support systems in enterprises will exacerbate the social pressure faced by women and the family burdens they have to bear.

Many enterprises lack universal flexible working systems, mother-and-baby-friendly facilities, and other systems that support the development of female employees. The absence of such support systems will prevent women who have given birth from conveniently taking care of their children during working hours, making it impossible for them to fulfill the expected parenting responsibilities in society, and thus subjecting them to greater social pressure.

Furthermore, the absence of female leaders leads to the lack of a female perspective, which reduces the diversity of enterprise decisions and fails to eliminate the income disparity between male and female colleagues at the same level, further exacerbating gender discrimination. According to the research of Yang Jianglin from the School of Business Administration of Capital University of Economics and Business, "The relevant report of the United Nations in 2023 shows that only 28 countries worldwide have a female head of state or government. In the list of the top 500 global enterprises released in the same year, there are only 29 female CEOs." These data all illustrate the phenomenon of women losing power, which is one of the reasons for the female workplace predicament under gender discrimination.

3.3. Fixed family division model affects career performance

The fixed family division model has a negative impact on women's career development and exacerbates the predicament in the workplace.

In the workplace, both married men and women need to balance work and family to varying degrees. Society, family, and the workplace have different requirements for "ideal workers" and "ideal parents" for each male and female employee, which is a kind of pressure for every male and female in the workplace [7]. "Ideal workers" prioritize work and follow the spirit of dedication, work full-time outside, often work overtime, and receive generous compensation, stable jobs, and promotions [8]. "Ideal parents" have requirements for women that are far more demanding than those for men. "Ideal mothers" should put family first, follow the family dedication model, believe that mothers are the most ideal and suitable caregivers for children, and aim for the maximum benefit of children's physical and mental development, fully devote themselves to the care and education of children, and even sacrifice their own needs and interests [9]. Therefore, women need to face dual expectations from all sides. Combined with traditional role division, women are required to take on more parenting responsibilities, which often makes them sacrifice their careers and devote themselves to the family, restricting their career development. Over time, society, family, and the workplace have lower expectations and less trust for women's career development, and women will face certain injustice from the interview to employment.

4. Analysis of the issues and reflection on policies

4.1. Limitations and negative impacts of current policies

The current policies still have certain limitations. Taking the "Mom's Post" in Hubei Province as an example, although it can, to some extent, improve the employment situation of women in the short term, from the perspective of their long-term career development, it is more detrimental than beneficial.

The implementation of the "Mom's Post" is to provide positions for women whose employment has been interrupted due to childbirth. Due to the particularity of this position, it to some extent limits the career advancement space of re-employed women. From a socio-cultural perspective, the establishment of the "Mom's Post" continues the traditional family division narrative that attributes parenting responsibilities to women. In the long run, women may face greater pressure.

According to the seven normative principles proposed by Nancy Fraser to describe gender equality, the anti-poverty principle and anti-exploitation principle. While reducing poverty, it is necessary to pay attention that if the specific implementation of the assistance measures is directional, isolated, and insulting, it will instead hinder gender fairness. The anti-exploitation principle states that the guarantees provided by welfare measures should be to reduce women's exploitable dependence on their husbands or bosses in the family and workplace so that women can gain more discourse rights and bargaining power in unequal relationships [10]. However, the implementation of the "Mom's Post" is both directional and isolated, and it will also aggravate the exploitable dependence on bosses in the workplace. The women on the post not only cannot gain more discourse rights but will also be "devalued" because the "Mom's Post" implies the need to bear more family responsibilities while being unable to create sufficient value for the company.

4.2. Gender equality policies in nordic countries

Nordic countries, particularly Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland, are often regarded as global leaders in gender equality. Their policy concepts not only focus on opposing discrimination but also emphasize the systematic promotion of equality through proactive measures. The following three points can specifically address the challenges faced by women in the workplace and are worthy of appropriate learning and reference.

Firstly, Nordic countries generally have comprehensive anti-discrimination laws. For instance, Norway passed the "Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act" in 2017, which integrates previously scattered laws and not only prohibits discrimination based on gender but also extends to other discriminatory grounds, clearly requiring public and private institutions to actively promote equality [11]. These laws typically prohibit direct discrimination (such as explicitly limiting the recruitment of only men), indirect discrimination (seemingly neutral regulations that actually have adverse effects on a certain gender), and harassment [12].

Secondly, gender equality policies in the education sector aim to eliminate gender stereotypes in the education system. For example, Norway's "Gender Equality Act" focuses on the use of teaching materials and teaching aids to ensure that they do not reinforce traditional gender roles. It also encourages students to break the traditional gender segregation in careers and freely choose learning and career development paths [12].

Furthermore, Nordic countries support men and women to jointly undertake family responsibilities through generous family policies, which is the essence of their model. The core of the policy is the "use or cancellation" parental leave system, especially the "Daddy Quota" exclusively for fathers. If fathers do not take this part of the leave, the family will lose the corresponding number of leave weeks, which strongly encourages fathers to participate in parenting. Additionally, the universal and high-quality public child care system significantly reduces the burden of parenting for parents, especially women, enabling them to quickly return to the labor market [13].

5. Countermeasures suggestions

Based on the multi-dimensional analysis in the previous section, the resolution of the female workplace predicament requires the collaborative efforts of policies, organizations, and social culture. This study proposes systematic countermeasures from three levels:

5.1. Policy level: improve institutional guarantee

Policy support is the key to breaking through structural barriers. Suggestion:

First, formulate specific legislation against employment discrimination, clearly defining the criteria for gender discrimination, the burden of proof, and penalty measures, and elaborating on the rules for identifying implicit discrimination, providing a basis for judicial practice [14].

Second, implement a mandatory gender quota system, stipulating that the proportion of women on the boards of listed companies and state-owned enterprises should not be less than 40%, ensuring that women have substantive decision-making power at the decision-making level, and establishing a supervision mechanism to prevent marginalization.

Third, incorporate gender impact assessment into the policy-making process, especially in areas such as maternity support and tax incentives, avoiding reinforcing traditional gender roles, and through designs such as "dad posts," encouraging men to participate in family responsibilities [14].

5.2. Organizational level: establish inclusive systems

Enterprises need to undergo systematic organizational changes:

First, establish transparent promotion and salary management systems, regularly release gender equality reports, disclose promotion standards and salary structures, and ensure the fairness of the system.

Second, implement inclusive flexible working arrangements, establish a flexible working system covering all employees, reduce employees' family care pressure, and improve job satisfaction.

Third, conduct unconscious bias training, incorporate gender equality into the performance assessment of management levels, and conduct bias intervention in key aspects such as recruitment and promotion.

Fourth, establish female leadership development programs through training and job rotation, cultivate female managers, and provide support for reintegration after career interruptions.

5.3. Social and cultural level: rebuild gender concepts

Change gender biases deeply rooted in social culture:

First, promote media to represent diversity, break gender stereotypes, present diverse gender role images, and change the fixed public perception.

Second, incorporate gender equality education into the national education system, cultivate students' awareness of equal sharing of household chores, and respect career choices.

Third, establish an enterprise gender equality certification system, give certifications to outstanding enterprises, guide the market selection, and form a virtuous cycle.

The three aforementioned levels of countermeasures support each other and are indispensable: the policy level provides institutional guarantees, the organizational level creates an equal environment, and the social and cultural level promotes a change in concepts. Only through this systematic and coordinated intervention can the female workplace predicament be fundamentally resolved and true gender equality be achieved.

6. Conclusion

This study systematically analyzed the causes and solutions of women's workplace predicaments from multiple perspectives and mainly reached the following conclusions:

First, the women's workplace predicaments are a systemic problem formed by the interweaving of social culture, organizational systems, and individual factors. Traditional gender role norms have led to explicit and implicit discrimination against women in employment, promotion, and salary and have intensified the structural obstacles to their career development through the unequal distribution of family responsibilities.

Second, this study constructed a three-level policy-organization-culture countermeasure framework. The research found that only through the coordinated efforts of policy guarantees, organizational changes, and cultural reshaping can substantive progress towards gender equality be achieved.

Third, the current policies have obvious limitations and may even reinforce gender stereotypes. The design of policies like "mom positions" may exacerbate long-term occupational gender segregation and the identity predicament of mothers.

Fourth, organizational implicit discrimination and cultural stereotypes are the core issues that need to be addressed urgently. Phenomena such as the glass ceiling reveal the deep structural biases in the workplace, while contradictions in social culture place women under dual role pressures.

Future research should focus on the mechanism of the association between women's health and career sustainability, the impact of new organizational models on women's career development, and the role transformation of men in the sharing of family responsibilities. The value of this study lies in constructing a systematic analysis framework and providing comprehensive solutions for policymakers and business managers. Building a systematic support system that runs through policies, enterprises, and social culture is the key path to promoting gender equality in the workplace.

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