

Research on the Hindrance Mechanism of Traditional Gender Concept to the Career Promotion of Married Women in China

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Abstract. As a deep cultural norm, the traditional gender concept continues to affect the career development of married women in China. This study focuses on the core issue of "how traditional gender concepts hinder the career promotion of married women in China." Based on gender theory, role conflict theory and concept system mutual construction theory, this study constructs a three-dimensional chain analysis framework of "concept internalization-family division of labor-organizational evaluation," and systematically reveals the internal mechanism by which traditional gender concepts hindering the career promotion of married women. The study yields three main findings. First, traditional gender concepts constitute a compound system of barriers through three paths: concept internalization, family division of labor, and organizational evaluation, each acting on individual psychology, family interaction, and organizational structure. Secondly, the three paths are nested and circularly strengthened, forming a vicious cycle of "concept internalization → housework division → organizational evaluation → re-internalization", which makes the traditional gender concept self-reinforcing. Thirdly, the hindering effect shows significant group heterogeneity, and married women with lower educational levels and young children face more severe promotion difficulties. Based on the above conclusions, this study puts forward intervention suggestions from the four dimensions of concept remodeling, family support, organizational change and social policy.

Keywords: Traditional gender concept, married women, career promotion, obstruction mechanism

1. Introduction

Since the implementation of the basic national policy of gender equality in China, women's education level and labor participation rate have continued to increase, and women's contributions in the workplace have become increasingly prominent. However, married women still face barriers that are difficult to break through in career promotion. Among them, the traditional gender concept, as a deep hidden factor, has a prominent restrictive effect. In terms of career promotion, gender inequality is particularly prominent. According to a survey of 3,857 valid samples, the average monthly salary of women in the workplace in 2026 is 9299 yuan, and the salary gap between men

and women remains at about 13% [1]. More noteworthy is that in the promotion barriers, 15.3% of women said that they experienced a passive loss of promotion during the stage of marriage and childbearing, while only 2.7% of men said the same; 32.4% of women have encountered gender hints in job descriptions, and 60.9% of women have been asked about marriage and childbirth in job searches. At present, the "China Women's Development Program (2021-2030)" clearly proposes to "eliminate gender discrimination in employment and promote women's equal participation in career development and promotion [2]." In this context, it is not only an inevitable requirement to implement the basic national policy of equality between men and women, but also an important measure to release the potential of women's human resources and promote the high-quality development of society to systematically explore the obstacles of traditional gender concepts to the career promotion of married women.

Married women are in the intersection of family and workplace, under the pressure of dual role expectations. The division of labor mode of "The man is the breadwinner and the woman is in charge of housekeeping" shaped by traditional gender concepts not only affects the allocation of resources and time within the family, but also penetrates into the process of workplace promotion through organizational evaluation, institutional arrangement and other channels. Existing research shows that traditional gender norms will hinder women from holding leadership positions, and this negative effect is more pronounced among married women, women with only secondary education, and women born before the reform and opening up. In addition, when the wife's education level exceeds the husband's, they are more likely to withdraw from the labor market due to the pressure of 'gender display', while the husband is more inclined to increase his labor force participation.

This study combines theoretical analysis with a literature review to reveal the mechanism of traditional gender concepts hindering the career promotion of married women, providing theoretical reference and practical suggestions for building a more equal career development environment in the future.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Social gender theory

Social gender theory is the core theoretical achievement of feminist scholarship, which has experienced a unique localization development process in the Chinese context. Gender research has evolved from 'female research' and 'female sociology' to the disciplinary evolution of gender sociology, forming a variety of research paradigms. The core of this theory is to distinguish the two fundamentally different concepts of physiological gender and social gender. It is believed that the difference between men and women is not mainly determined by physiological factors, but shaped by social and cultural factors. Through institutional forces such as family education, education system and mass media, society constantly transmits and strengthens the division of pattern of 'male breadwinner - female caregiver'.

Scholars have gradually built a localized theoretical system. Wang, et al. systematically expounded the theoretical construction and practical application of gender theory in the Chinese academic field, and discussed the unique set of issues of Chinese gender theory from the dimensions of gender ethics, gender philosophy and gender aesthetics [3]. Qing's research also pointed out that gender is not only an individual attribute or demographic characteristic, but also reflects the deep social structure, which profoundly affects people's opportunities, choices and life trajectories [4]. Wu summarized the research paradigm of gender sociology in China as "the power hierarchy

paradigm with gender as the stratification mechanism," emphasizing the cross-cutting theoretical and analytical strategy of bringing important dimensions such as class back to gender research [5].

Social gender theory provides a basic analytical framework for understanding the obstacles of traditional gender concepts to married women's career advancement. According to this theory, the traditional gender concept is not a simple collection of personal attitudes, but a set of normative systems embedded in the social structure. For married women, through the role expectations of 'good wife' and 'good mother', this normative system exerts continuous and legitimate pressure on their career pursuits. When traditional norms such as "men are career-focused, women are family-focused" are internalized by women into self-awareness, women will consciously reduce their career aspirations and take the initiative to avoid promotion opportunities.

2.2. Theory of role conflict

Role conflict theory, one of the most influential theoretical paradigms in the field of work-family relationship research, emphasizes that individuals play multiple roles in social life at the same time. When the requirements of different roles are incompatible in time, energy or behavior patterns, role conflicts will occur. In Chinese academia, role conflict theory is widely used in the study of women's career development.

Based on the role theory of 'role cognition-role behavior-result' framework and the logic of social information processing theory, Yin Jun et al. systematically discussed two types of role conflicts faced by female managers: work-family conflict and active-symbiosis conflict [6]. Through a longitudinal follow-up survey of 137 female managers, the study found that work-family conflict is one of the core obstacles to women's career development. The results show that when female managers face higher work-family conflict, their work-family balance behavior will be markedly affected. This study divides role conflict into different types based on time, energy and behavior patterns, which provides theoretical support for understanding the multiple role pressures faced by married women in career advancement.

The core proposition of role conflict theory is that when the requirements of multiple roles are incompatible in time allocation, energy input or behavior patterns, individuals will experience conflict between roles. The degree of role conflict is closely related to the degree of role involvement, the flexibility of role requirements, and the social and cultural environment in which individuals are located. In the professional context of married women, role conflict is mainly manifested in three forms: time squeeze effect, energy dispersion effect and opportunity cost effect. Married women play the dual roles of both workplace workers and family caregivers, and the traditional gender concept strengthens the primary requirements of family roles for women, thus exacerbating the intensity and frequency of role conflicts. Yin's research found that when female managers face higher work-family conflicts, their work-family balance behavior will be significantly affected. The direct consequence of this conflict is that women either actively lower their career aspirations to comply with family expectations, or are marginalized in the competition for promotion due to their inability to meet the organizational culture that demands 'around-the-clock-availability'.

3. Path analysis of the hindrance mechanism

3.1. The internalization mechanism of concept

The mechanism of concept internalization refers to the transformation of traditional gender concepts into self-limiting professional behavior through women's recognition and acceptance. According to

the theory of social gender, when traditional norms such as 'men are mainly career-oriented and women are mainly family-oriented' are internalized by women into their self-concept, women will consciously reduce their career aspirations, thus actively avoiding or giving up promotion opportunities. The key to this mechanism is that the hindrance does not come from external coercion, but from women's own cognitive self-identity of "how women should be." The internalization of ideas involves three progressive stages: the first is the stage of contact and acceptance, in which women are constantly exposed to traditional gender norms through the socialization process of family, education, and media; the second is the stage of identity and internalization. These external norms are transformed into a part of self-identity. 'I should put family first' becomes the inner moral law. Finally, in the behavior compliance stage, when faced with career promotion opportunities, women take the initiative to give up or retreat.

The existence of this mechanism is confirmed by the data of "2025 China Women's Workplace Status Survey Report": when asked about promotion barriers, 15.3% of women chose to "being in the marriage and childbearing stage and passively losing promotion," while only 2.7% of men; 10.2% of women chose to "taking care of the family leads to workplace energy dispersion," which was significantly higher than 6.1% of men [7]. Xu Yanhui's empirical research based on CFPS data shows that gender concepts affects women's career promotion outcomes through the mediating role of women's promotion willingness. The more modern the gender concept, the greater the possibility of women's career promotion [8]. These data and research together show that the obstacles of traditional gender concepts to married women's career advancement first occur at the individual psychological level - women actively or passively shrink their career aspirations in the process of internalization of concepts.

3.2. Family division of labor mechanism

The mechanism of family division of labor refers to how traditional gender concepts shape the family labor distribution model of 'the man is the breadwinner and the woman is in charge of housekeeping' family labor distribution model, so that married women bear a disproportionate share of housework and child care responsibilities, and then crowds out the time and energy for career development. According to the theory of role conflict, married women face the dual role expectations of workers and caregivers, while traditional gender concepts assign a higher priority to family roles for women and aggravates role tension and time conflict.

The reality of this mechanism is particularly prominent. According to the "2024 Survey on the Living Conditions of Working Mothers", 77.2% of working mothers spend more than 2 hours on housework every day, which is significantly higher than 47% of working fathers [9]. Jiang's analysis based on CFPS 2014 data found that working women still bear most of the housework within the family, and the increase in daily housework time significantly hinders women's career development [10]. Su points out that the expectation of family roles such as "good son and devoted husband" and "good wife and mother" in the traditional gender concept makes the demand side of the labor market subjectively worry about the reproductive responsibilities that women of childbearing age may bear and the impact of family roles on work performance, thus excluding the employment of women of childbearing age [11].

3.3. Analysis of organizational evaluation mechanism

Organizational evaluation mechanisms refer to how traditional gender concepts are translated into negative evaluative biases against married women via organizational culture and promotion systems.

This mechanism works through three channels: first, the stereotype of leadership role, that is, the image of leaders is socially encoded as masculinity (decisive, rational, strong), and female characteristics (collaboration, empathy, nurturing) are regarded as 'inconsistent with leadership'; the second is maternal punishment, that is, employers and colleagues generally believe that mothers' investment in work will be reduced due to family responsibilities; the third is the signalization of marriage and childbearing status, that is, in organizations with strong traditional concepts, the marriage and childbearing status of married women itself becomes a signal that she is 'unreliable' or 'lack sufficient energy'.

The real-world manifestations of organizational evaluation mechanisms are equally striking. Qin's analysis found that there was significant gender inequality in promotion opportunities within the work organizations. In the high-level position of the organization, women's disadvantages in promotion are more obvious, and the 'ceiling effect' has been verified to a certain extent [12]. Zhang's empirical research found that men's opportunities for promotion within the company began to rise after marriage, reaching a peak when their wives were pregnant with their first child ('fatherhood premium'). On the contrary, women's opportunities for advancement are limited by marriage and the raising of pre-school children ('motherhood penalty') [13]. 62.5% of women reported being asked about their marital and parental status during job hunts--up from 48.8% in 2024--while 32.4% encountered gender-coded language in job postings. These data show that marriage and childbearing status have become an implicit label for screening and evaluating women in the labor market.

4. Conclusion

Through theoretical analysis and discussion of mechanisms, this study draws the following main conclusions:

Traditional gender concepts exert a significant adverse impact on the career advancement of married women. This hindrance constitutes a composite mechanism system through three paths: concept internalization, family division of labor, and organizational evaluation. At the level of concept internalization, the traditional gender concept is transformed into self-limiting professional behavior through women's own identity and acceptance, which is manifested in the decrease of promotion willingness and the contraction of career aspirations; at the level of family division of labor, the traditional "male breadwinner, female homemaker" norm places a disproportionate burden of household and childcare responsibilities on married women, and the double squeeze of time and energy directly weakens their workplace competitiveness; at the level of organizational evaluation, through organizational culture and promotion system, traditional gender concepts have been transformed into implicit biases such as 'motherhood punishment' and 'leadership role stereotype', systematically excluding married women from promotion channels. The three hindrance mechanisms are nested and cyclically strengthened, forming a vicious cycle of 'internalization of ideas → division of household chores → organizational evaluation → re-internalization', and this hindrance effect is more significant in married women with lower education levels and minor children. There is a clear superposition effect between 'motherhood punishment' and traditional gender concepts.

To address the barrier mechanisms outlined above, this study puts forward targeted interventions across four dimensions. In terms of concept reshaping, gender equality education should be incorporated into the national education system, and new gender roles such as "father participation in parenting" and "female leadership in the workplace" should be shaped through mass media and public publicity, so as to weaken the influence of traditional gender concepts from the source. In

terms of family support, we should implement the policy of male paternity leave and parental leave, increase the actual utilization rate through the 'male quota system', vigorously develop childcare services, socialize family care responsibilities, and reduce the burden on female families. In terms of organizational change, transparent promotion standards and evaluation processes should be established, a "gender blind review" system should be implemented, unconscious bias training should be carried out regularly, and an internal complaint and punishment mechanism for gender discrimination in the workplace should be established. In terms of social policy, employment anti-gender-discrimination laws and regulations should be refined, and practices such as inquiring about marital and parental status and blocking promotion on these grounds should be explicitly classified as prohibited discriminatory acts, a gender equality certification system should be established, and gender statistics and data monitoring should be strengthened.

However, the research is mainly based on the second-hand data of the existing literature, and fails to conduct empirical tests through first-hand survey data. The micro-process of mechanism operation is not fully revealed, and the subjective experience of married women is not deeply presented. The cross analysis of urban and rural, intergenerational, class and other dimensions is limited. Future research can be improved from the following aspects: conducting quantitative empirical research to test the mediating effects of the three hindrance paths; combining qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews to explore the lived experiences and coping strategies of married women; incorporating cross-dimensional perspectives to examine the differentiated barrier mechanisms experienced by women across diverse social strata.

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