

Gender Equality, Human Capital and Regional GDP: Contrasting Hangzhou's Digital Economy with Tangshan's Industrial Model

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Abstract. As China's demographic dividend fades and per capita income enters the upper-middle-income range, sustaining growth depends increasingly on the intensive use of human capital rather than on expanding the labour force. Against this backdrop, workplace gender equality is required for China to develop in a high-quality manner under demographic pressure. Hangzhou and Tangshan are selected as case studies with different economic structures, and the impact of workplace gender equality on GDP per capita is studied. Hangzhou is a model of the digital economy with technology-intensive industries, innovation and more flexible employment, whereas Tangshan is a traditional industrial model based on manufacturing and heavy industry. Analyse the economic mechanism and examine how gender equality affects productivity, innovation and economic development in this paper. Other reasons for lower female labour force participation include career breaks, gender stereotypes and workplace discrimination. Therefore, the above data suggest that promoting gender equality in the workplace will help China make better use of its human resources and drive economic development and high-quality development.

Keywords: Workplace Gender Equality, GDP Per Capita, Human Capital, Labour Productivity, China

1. Introduction

1.1. Institutional and macroeconomic environment

Workplace gender equality is now required for social fairness and the high-quality development of the economy. Many governments and international organisations believe that when men and women have the same opportunities, society and the economy will be better. When people are able to do work according to their skills and education, the economy will be able to use its human resources more effectively [1]. Therefore, this paper will create a fair-opportunity working environment to improve labour efficiency and drive continuous economic development. China is a typical case. At around 61 per cent, women's participation in the labour force is higher than in other countries, and they work in manufacturing, services, technology, etc. At the same time, after the GDP per capita reaches 12,000 US dollars, the country will be in a high-quality growth model [2]. China also has

new economic problems at present. The population is ageing, the birth rate is falling, and the former demographic advantage is diminishing. Therefore, in the future, economic growth will be driven by the improvement of productivity rather than an increase in the number of workers. At this time, the company can make full use of the talents and skills that women have [3]. However, there are still many problems. Although more than half of the university students are women now, many still face barriers to employment, promotion and pay. Occupational segregation and career breaks for childcare have reduced their promotion opportunities and resulted in the waste of human capital. These problems are also economic and social. Highly educated women are unable to use their full potential, and valuable human capital is being wasted. It will reduce the economy's scale and curb innovation. Research has shown that promoting the cause of gender equality could add trillions of yuan to the global economy, and given a large workforce and a developing service industry in China, it is expected that this trend will benefit from it to some extent. Workplace gender equality is required at a time when China is developing in a digital and innovation-driven economy. E-commerce, artificial intelligence, finance and healthcare are all relatively knowledge- and creativity-intensive industries that do not require physical strength. The above enterprises can benefit from the equal participation and promotion of women. Some traditional industrial sectors have not shown significant changes in gender equality and are therefore relatively less economically developed and less attractive to work. Given the above, this paper studies the relationship between gender equality in the workplace and regional GDP per capita in China. Hangzhou and Tangshan are representative cases of different industrial models, and their economic results under gender-inclusive labour allocation are compared here. The results offer a reference for policymakers and enterprises in employing their idle staff to drive new-era development and promote high-quality growth of the Chinese economy during the economic restructuring.

1.2. Theoretical foundation and previous research

Many scholars have studied gender equality in the workplace from all sides, such as economics, business management and sociology. Most research has shown that in order to promote the all-around development of the economy and society, women should be given the same opportunities as men. Reduce the gender gap to improve labour productivity and innovation for the economy. Most of the previous studies have examined the connection between gender equality and labour productivity. Many scholars believe that if women are given the same opportunities as men in education, employment and promotion, then these talented individuals will be able to make better use of their abilities for the company. It is more likely that the employees will be appointed to the posts based on their abilities and skills rather than on gender. As a result, the company will be more efficient and help the economy develop more vigorously [3]. The second is a study of human capital utilisation. Although the proportion of university students among women in China and abroad has risen substantially, problems remain. Wage penalties, promotion bottlenecks and hiring discrimination all reduce the efficiency of human capital utilisation and lower overall productivity. Women are generally more likely to be the initiators of daily activities. Various management teams have different viewpoints on the company, and in areas such as female-consumer-influencer-driven sectors, they can bring creativity and market responsiveness to improve the company's competitiveness [4].

An additional link between gender equality and household income and consumption. Women's earnings expand the family's funds and increase spending on education, healthcare, and other high-quality services. This redistribution will increase demand and expand the macroeconomic effects of gender-inclusive growth. Recently, scholars have indicated that the digital economy is dual-edged

[5]. Although ICT-intensive industries offer more flexible working hours that are suitable for women's participation, these opportunities are mainly in large cities, and many other areas are not available. In short, the above studies have shown that gender equality promotes human capital efficiency, productivity and innovation; however, significant gaps at the sector and regional levels still exist and provide the basis for this regional study.

1.3. Identification of the regional gap

Many previous studies have explored the reasons for the need for gender equality at work in economic development. The problems that have been raised by the women include their employment conditions, the wage gap, leading roles and labour productivity. Based on the above studies, dealing with the problem of gender imbalance will help optimise the utilisation of human resources for economic development. However, there are still some places that have not been studied. First, many of the existing studies use national data or compare different countries. Although the above studies provide some references, they do not fully elaborate on the differences among regions in China. China is unevenly developed in terms of region, economy, industry and employment. Cities of different industries have varying degrees of gender equality in the workplace. Therefore, due to the different sizes of the areas, additional data will be collected on the effect of gender equality on economic development in those areas. Second, many scholars have only examined indicators of the labour market, such as the employment rate, wage gap and promotion opportunities. Fewer studies have examined the impact of gender equality at work on GDP per capita directly. Determinants of Economic Growth: Labour productivity, innovation, industrial structure and household consumption. Workplace gender equality may affect all of the above areas, but the overall connection is not well understood. Another problem is that many of the earlier studies were conducted before the development of China's digital economy. Recently, many new kinds of jobs have appeared in e-commerce, artificial intelligence, online services and digital finance. These industries are generally more focused on knowledge and professional skills than on physical strength, so they are more suitable for equal participation by men and women. At the same time, the traditional industries of steel production and mining have also shown slow progress in achieving gender equality of opportunity. Research has not yet compared the different economic environments. Most of the studies to date that have linked gender equality and economic development have done so through large-scale statistical data. Although this way is feasible, it will not show how local policies, business practices and industrial features affect the careers of women. A case study can offer some particular examples of the above differences and help explain why some areas have achieved better results than others. For the above reasons, this paper studies the impact of workplace gender equality on GDP per capita in Hangzhou and Tangshan under different economic conditions. Based on the above comparison, the research gap of regional differences has been addressed, and an application-oriented understanding of the connection between workplace gender equality and economic development has been provided. 1.4 Analytical Framework and Case Selection Hangzhou and Tangshan were selected as case studies in this paper to investigate the impact of gender equality in the workplace on per capita GDP in China. The two purposes of this paper are to introduce the advantages of gender equality at work and to examine the problems that still need to be addressed. Based on the above introduction and theoretical analysis, the following three sections will be presented. First, this paper introduces Hangzhou and Tangshan as typical cases of China's digital and industrial models, respectively. Second, this paper investigates the channels by which gender equality improves productivity, consumption and innovation, and also studies enduring barriers such as career interruptions and stereotypes. Finally, this paper proposes policy recommendations for

institutional reform, industrial upgrading and cultural changes. The above measures seek to optimise human capital allocation and promote high-quality development of the region. Based on this research system, the following cases will be presented in the paper to demonstrate how gender equality at work relates to economic development in different areas. It also puts forward some practical ideas to help build a fairer labour market and drive high-quality development of the economy in the future.

2. Comparative case profiles: Hangzhou and Tangshan

2.1. Hangzhou: the digital economy model

As the capital of Zhejiang Province, Hangzhou is now one of China's top areas for the digital economy. In the last ten years, the system has developed an all-weather ecosystem of e-commerce, fintech, AI and cloud computing. Many of these industries are knowledge-based or professional and do not require heavy physical labour. Given the industrial structure of Hangzhou, many job opportunities for women are available in technology, education, healthcare, finance, online business, etc. Many companies have introduced flexible working hours and remote work options to help employees have a good work-life balance. More women are now employed in management or running their own businesses. As a result, the situation of gender equality at work in Hangzhou is relatively good compared with many other old industrial cities. At the same time, Hangzhou also has one of the highest GDP per capita in China and is relatively developed.

2.2. Tangshan: the traditional industrial model

Tangshan is a large city in Hebei Province and an old heavy-industry area in China. Its economy is based on the old industrial system of steel production, coal mining and equipment manufacturing. These industries are generally physically demanding and have historically employed a larger proportion of men. Although the GDP per capita is relatively high, most of the women's jobs are in administration, education and services, and there are few opportunities for technical or management positions in the primary industry. Due to the old patriarchal system in Hangzhou, there were few work options for women, and balancing work and family life was difficult.

2.3. Divergent paths to gender-inclusive growth

Hangzhou and Tangshan have taken different development paths; one is an innovation-driven service economy, and the other is a resource-intensive industrial model. The above structural differences lead to different genders of employment opportunities, skills requirements and work-life balance [6]. Table 1 shows the main comparison attributes used in the following analysis of the effect of gender equality on regional GDP per capita.

Table 1. Comparative profile: Hangzhou vs Tangshan

Dimension	Hangzhou (Digital Paradigm)	Tangshan (Industrial Paradigm)
Core Industries	ICT, E-commerce, Fintech, Services	Steel, Mining, Heavy Manufacturing
Primary Skill Set	Cognitive & Technical	Physical Stamina
Female Employment	High in tech, management, and entrepreneurship	Concentrated in admin, service, and support roles

Table 1. (continued)

Work Flexibility	High (Remote, flexible hours)	Low (Fixed schedules, on-site labour)
Gender Equality Level	Relatively High	Moderate to Low
GDP per Capita	Top-tier in Zhejiang	High in Hebei, industry-driven

3. Mechanisms and frictions in the gender-health nexus

3.1. Enablers: gender equality enhances productivity

Optimised human capital allocation. Gender equality will promote merit-based employment and promotion to optimise the use of human resources. Thus, more talented people will be placed in positions that are suitable for their knowledge and skills, and the overall efficiency will increase. Over the past few decades, China has invested in education to some extent, and now a considerable proportion of university graduates are women. Many women have excellent professional skills and are qualified to work in areas such as technology, finance, healthcare, education, science and research [7]. However, if women are discriminated against in recruitment and promotion, these skills cannot be fully realised. It is a waste of human capital and lowers the efficiency of the labour market. Hangzhou is a typical case. The digital economy will promote more cognitive-skill-oriented development for women and provide access to leadership and technical positions. Match the right people with the work to enhance the company's general strength and output. Tangshan is still mainly a heavy-industry city. Some of the work requires physical strength, and traditional ideas about gender roles may also affect hiring decisions. Therefore, women have fewer opportunities to work in technical or managerial roles. It is not feasible to use the labour force efficiently, and women cannot participate in the economic development of the country. Optimise the Distribution of talent to achieve gender balance and drive economic growth and sustainable development.

Consumption-led demand expansion. Gender equality will increase the family's income and consumption. When women have equal employment prospects and earn a living, their families will also be relatively well-off. A higher income can be used by the family to purchase more education, healthcare, housing, leisure and other goods and services. The first reason for the growth of the economy is rising consumption. With an increase in people's incomes, demand for the products and services of enterprises will also rise [8]. The company will increase production, hire more staff and purchase new equipment. Thus, more people will have jobs, earn a living, and thus boost the economy further. Women are frequently responsible for determining how much money the family will spend. As they gain more financial independence, these families will be able to provide better education and healthcare for their children and purchase higher-quality goods. The above-mentioned types of expenses can improve the living conditions of the people and promote the development of high-value-added industries, such as education, healthcare, tourism and digital services. Hangzhou is a typical case: Strong employment for women in the service industry has increased household income and consumption, thus raising its high GDP per capita. Tangshan's industry-led model has weak consumption links because of limited female employment, and thus, although industrial output is strong, domestic demand is also weak. Based on the above differences, gender-inclusive employment promotes consumption-led growth.

Innovation and industrial upgrading. Gender equality in the workplace will also promote industrial upgrading and innovation. With the development of the Chinese economy, many industries

have moved away from traditional manufacturing and are now high-tech or digital-economy-oriented. These new industries require more knowledge, creativity and cooperation than physical strength [9]. Therefore, if men and women are given the same opportunities, both will be able to succeed. Different groups expand the scope of thought and address problems creatively. Therefore, women will also be included in the decision-making to improve corporate adaptability and competitiveness. Hangzhou's Digital Ecosystem shows this logic. Women are leading the way in e-commerce, fintech and entrepreneurship to drive the application of technology and build high-efficiency enterprises. Tangshan is still mainly a traditional industry city with steel production and heavy manufacturing, unlike Hangzhou. Most of these industries focus on production rather than on innovation. Therefore, fewer women have been able to pursue careers in research, technology and management. It will slow down industrial upgrading and reduce the city's capacity for new-industry development. Gender parity will create a multi-faceted, innovative workforce that is suitable for high-end, long-term growth of per capita GDP.

3.2. Persistent frictions in gender-inclusive growth

The motherhood penalty and career interruption. Although there have been some changes, the "motherhood penalty" still exists. After giving birth, some women have been unable to return to work at the same place or continue their career development as before. Others will reduce their working hours or stop working altogether due to family responsibilities. Career Breaks Impact Both Employees and Enterprises. Women will lose some professional skills by not working for a long time, be unable to be promoted, and reduce their future income. It is also harder to compete with employees who have remained at the company without interruption. As a result, many highly educated women are unable to use their knowledge and experience fully [10]. The company will have to pay more for recruitment and training. The company will have to spend more time and money hiring new staff or training the current staff. Many staff members will leave, and as a result, the work efficiency and harmony of the team will decline. The problem is relatively worse in areas with fewer childcare institutions and flexible work arrangements. Women are generally responsible for more of the family's life, and thus find it difficult to manage work and family life. Employers are reluctant to hire or promote women of childbearing age in some cases because they expect higher employment costs. There are different opportunities for work for different people. Hangzhou has increased the number of flexible work arrangements and family-friendly policies, but problems still exist. Many traditional industries in Tangshan have fixed working hours and physically demanding work, so it is even harder to balance work and family life. Therefore, career breaks continue to reduce women's labour force participation and limit the full utilisation of human capital. If many talented women leave the workforce or are unable to advance in their careers, then the economy will lose these talented people. Labour productivity will decline, the economy's growth will be slowed down, and high-quality development will not be achieved.

Deep-seated gender stereotypes limit equality. Patriarchal norms still exist, and men are expected to be the main providers for the family. These ideas continue to motivate people to work and study. Employer stereotypes may influence the choice of and promotion for employees. Some companies believe that women are more likely to leave their jobs for childbirth and family reasons. Therefore, employers may be more willing to hire men and give them greater responsibilities than they are to hire women. Even if women have the same education and work experience, they may be given fewer chances to be appointed as managers or leaders. Stereotypes of women also limit their career options. Some women do not apply for difficult jobs because they anticipate higher pressure from the demands of balancing work and family. Others will choose lower-paying jobs with more flexible

working hours because they do not have the skills for the higher-demand positions. Over time, this will widen the income gap between men and women and reduce the proportion of women in senior management. Cities with a higher number of traditional industries have suffered more damage from the old gender model. Heavy industry in Tangshan has long been the domain of men, and women are more frequently employed in administrative or auxiliary capacities. Therefore, it will be harder for women to join the technical department or take the lead. On the other hand, the modern service industry and technology companies in Hangzhou are generally more open about work culture and evaluate employees based on their skills and performance rather than on gender. If the old stereotypes of work still exist, many talented women will not be able to show their true abilities. It will be less efficient in the labour market, and economic growth will be restricted due to underutilised human resources.

Compliance costs and hiring bias. A third type of friction is the compliance cost of the mandatory maternity protection system. The above policies are required to promote the health of women and protect their legal rights. However, the enterprise will have increased employment expenses, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises. Some employers do not wish to hire women of childbearing age due to higher costs or the short-term absence of staff for maternity leave. Due to the above risks, some enterprises have been reluctant to hire women or have not given them significant responsibilities. Most of the above types of discrimination are subtle, but they still result in unequal employment. Small businesses have relatively weaker finances and are thus more vulnerable. If a long-term-absent, experienced employee needs to take extended leave, the company will need to hire temporary staff or have other employees assume some of the responsibilities. Operating expenses will be relatively higher and efficiency lower in the short run. The problems may thus perpetuate the cycle of disparity. Employers are reluctant to hire women; they have fewer career prospects for women, and thus, the companies fail to attract capable staff. With time, the economy will be less efficient at using labour resources and will fail to develop steadily. Hangzhou and Tangshan are not the same place either. Many of the large technology companies in Hangzhou have stronger financial support and more flexible management systems for the staff on maternity leave. They will also be more inclined to work remotely or flexibly. Companies in the traditional sector generally have fixed production plans and a large number of manual workers. It will be harder to find replacement workers for the extended leave, and the employer will be more reluctant to hire women. Protecting the interests of employees should be in line with the long-term development goals of the company, and otherwise, cost-based discrimination will continue to repel talented individuals.

4. Policy implications and corrective measures

4.1. Alleviation of the motherhood penalty

One reason many women have not been able to work is the demands of their families at home. Most women are unable to be promoted or advance in their careers after childbirth because of the career interruption. Therefore, the construction of more family-friendly employment policies is to improve gender equality in the workplace [11]. Strengthen support at the government level to enhance childcare services and provide financial assistance for families with young children. Affordable childcare centres would enable more parents to return to work after having children. At the same time, public childcare services would reduce the time that parents, especially mothers, need to be occupied with daily childcare. A few more flexible working arrangements will be available. Flexibility in working hours, remote work, part-time options, etc., can all help people enjoy their

lives more. The above policies have become more common since the COVID-19 pandemic, and it has been shown that many jobs can still be performed effectively outside the office. Provide the same career opportunities for employees who return from maternity leave. Training programmes and career development plans will help women rapidly update their skills and continue learning throughout their lives. In the performance appraisal, only the individual's capabilities and work results will be taken into account, not the career break caused by childbirth.

4.2. Promoting gender equality through industrial upgrading

Different areas have different jobs for women. Generally speaking, the working conditions in the new service industry and digital economy are more equal than in the old heavy industry. Thus, industrial upgrading can also promote the development of gender equality in employment. The government will continue to promote the development of industries such as information technology, digital services, healthcare, education, finance, science and technology, etc. As the foundation of these industries, they require relatively high levels of knowledge and professional skills; thus, men and women of different strengths should be allowed to compete fairly [12]. At the same time, the traditional industry will also need to increase employment. The company will organise more technical training for its female staff and motivate more women to apply for positions that have been difficult for women to obtain in the past. Leadership Development Programmes can help increase the proportion of women in senior management as well. Schooling is also a kind of education. Schools and colleges should motivate more girls to learn science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). These Positions are generally higher-paying and have better career prospects. Give young women more confidence in entering technical industries, and the government will reduce occupational segregation in the future. Set up reasonable recruitment and promotion regulations for the company. Based on the candidates' educational background, abilities, relevant work experience, etc., select suitable people for different positions without considering gender. Transparent Promotion criteria will reduce bias and motivate employees to improve.

4.3. Cultivating inclusive norms and institutions

Strengthen policies to create more jobs and adjust people's mindsets at the same time to promote gender equality in the workplace. Often, the cause of the gender gap in these enterprises is not only company policies but also traditional ideas about the roles of men and women. Therefore, the government can build an all-inclusive working environment to reduce discrimination and create a fair chance for all. Strengthen public education by promoting gender equality in schools, media and community organisations. The above activities will motivate more people to explore different careers and reduce stereotypes about women's abilities. Young people should be aware that both men and women can achieve success in their chosen areas if they have the same opportunities. The company will also be held accountable. Regularly organise training for employees on equality in the workplace and create a fair-treatment environment for all staff. Based on ability, performance and contribution, rather than gender, assess the employee's worth. Clearly state the rules against discrimination and provide a safe space for all employees. Increase the number of women in senior management at the company. Provide leadership training, a mentor system and career development opportunities for female employees at the company. Older managers will transmit some professional knowledge and help young employees prepare for a future position of leadership. An increasing number of women in leadership will also serve as role models for young women. The family will provide some support. Split the division of domestic chores between men and women more evenly.

When both parents are responsible for raising the children and taking care of the household, the mother will have more time to work. At the same time, men will also have a better work-life balance. Divide the family's living expenses among all members equally.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Key findings

Gender equality at work in China has begun to show some signs of progress. With the development of the innovation-driven economy, all the skills and talents of every person, men and women alike, will need to be fully utilised to drive continuous economic growth. Research on the Connection Between Gender Equality in the Workplace and GDP per Capita in Hangzhou and Tangshan (Two cities with different industrial structures and employment conditions). Comparative analysis shows that, at the same time, women and men invest in human capital, innovation and household consumption equally. Hangzhou's digital economy is based on the above trends to promote productivity; Tangshan has remained in the realm of heavy industry and thus failed to increase women's participation in the workforce. Structural friction also includes forms of the motherhood penalty, deep-seated stereotypes and compliance-cost discrimination that disrupt labour allocation. The above problems will harm the economy and inhibit continuous high-quality development. In light of the above problems, this paper proposes strengthening family-friendly employment policies, promoting industrial upgrading and building an all-encompassing workplace culture. The above measures will help establish a fair-wage system and promote the development of a high-productivity economy. At the level of the government, enterprises, educational institutions, and families need to promote gender equality in the workplace.

5.2. Policy recommendations

There are both practical and social applications of this study. It can be seen that the problem of gender inequality at work is also an economic one. Create a fair playing field for women in the economy and improve the general business environment. Hangzhou and Tangshan are also good cases that can help other areas balance economic development and social equity. 5.3 Limitations and Future Research. However, this study also has some defects. Based on secondary data and published research, rather than collecting primary data through surveys or interviews, this study will be conducted. Only two cities were selected for comparison, and their cases may not be representative of the rest of the country. Future research can cover other areas and collect primary data from employees, employers and policymakers to deepen the study of gender equality at work in China.

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