

Gender Inequality in the Twenty-First Century China

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1 Introduction

While China’s rapid economic growth since market reform has garnered extensive scholarly attention, the implications of these transformations on gender inequality have been comparatively under-explored. Although the topic of inequality in China has attracted significant research interest, most studies examine disparities at the household level, overlooking the critical dimension of gender (e.g., Piketty, Li, and Zucman (2019); Zhang (2021)). The literature on gender inequality remains fragmented, with research typically addressing isolated issues rather than providing a cohesive synthesis.

This literature survey addresses this gap by offering a comprehensive overview of gender inequality in twenty-first century China. Specifically, it synthesizes existing research on key dimensions of gender inequality, including labor force participation, the gender wage gap, occupational segregation, and unpaid care work within families. The paper also examines how market reform and globalization shape these gender disparities. In doing so, it highlights what has been accomplished by existing research and identifies key gaps that future studies need to address.

2 Background

Before China’s economic reforms began in 1978, gender inequality was formally addressed by state policies promoting gender equality, particularly in employment. The socialist state actively encouraged women’s participation in the labor force, supported by public institutions offering extensive services such as childcare and maternity leave (Attané 2012). Despite these progressive measures, women continued to face significant barriers, frequently concentrated in lower-paying jobs and rarely occupying senior managerial or political roles (H. Liu 2011).

Since initiating economic reforms in 1978, China has transitioned from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one. Early market reforms began in rural areas with the introduction of the household responsibility system, which dismantled collective agriculture, and promoted rural industrialization through township and village enterprises (TVEs). These changes significantly reshaped China’s rural economy and laid the groundwork for subsequent urban reforms (see Wu 2019; H. Liu 2011). Urban reforms accelerated in the mid-1980s, emphasizing managerial autonomy and efficiency in state-owned enterprises (SOEs). A pivotal shift occurred in the late 1990s

with the extensive privatization of SOEs, fundamentally altering urban employment patterns and catalyzing rapid economic growth, though also deepening gender disparities in labor markets (H. Liu 2011; Brussevich, Dabla-Norris, and Li 2021). China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 further integrated its economy into global markets, intensifying globalization’s dual effects—generating employment opportunities, especially in export-oriented sectors, while exacerbating gender inequalities and occupational segregation (Chen, Ge, and Wan 2013; F. Wang, Kis-Katos, and Zhou 2020).

3 Gender Inequality in the Labor Market

3.1 Women’s Labor Market Participation

Despite China’s rapid economic growth in the twenty-first century, substantial gender inequalities persist in its labor market. Women continue to face significant barriers, including lower labor force participation, wage disparities, occupational segregation, and disproportionate responsibilities for unpaid care work. This section synthesizes recent research to examine these dimensions of gender inequality and explores how market reforms and globalization have influenced women’s labor market outcomes.

Women’s labor force participation in China has declined significantly in recent decades, particularly in urban areas. Brussevich, Dabla-Norris, and Li (2021) report that the gender gap in labor force participation nearly doubled, increasing from approximately 9 percentage points in the 1990s to about 15 percentage points by 2020. Similarly, L. Wang and Klugman (2014) document a notable decrease in urban women’s labor participation rate, falling from about 77 percent in the early 1990s to 61 percent in 2019. Attané (2012) further details this decline, noting urban women’s participation dropped from 77.4 percent in 1990 to 60.8 percent in 2010, while urban men’s participation experienced a smaller reduction from 89.4 percent to 80.5 percent. In rural areas, women’s participation decreased from 79.4 percent in 1990 to 70.8 percent in 2010, compared to a less pronounced decline among rural men, from 92.0 percent to 84.3 percent.

Family responsibilities significantly contribute to these declining trends in women’s labor participation. Connelly et al. (2018) emphasize that women spend approximately two to three times more hours per day than men on unpaid care tasks, such as childcare and eldercare, substantially restricting their availability for paid employment. These responsibilities are intensified by rural-to-urban migration patterns, as approximately 61 million children in rural China have been left behind by migrating parents, with caregiving duties predominantly falling on women who remain behind. Moreover, H. Liu (2011) highlights that the privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the late 1990s disproportionately affected female workers, who represented around 60 percent of laid-off employees and experienced reemployment rates about 20 percentage points lower than their male counterparts, further suppressing women’s labor market participation.

Globalization has had mixed effects on women’s labor market participation in China. On one hand,

integration into global markets through export-oriented industries and foreign direct investment has substantially increased employment opportunities for women, particularly in manufacturing sectors. Chen, Ge, and Wan (2013) find that female workers constituted approximately 56 percent of employment in foreign-invested enterprises, compared to only 36 percent in state-owned enterprises. Conversely, F. Wang, Kis-Katos, and Zhou (2020) show that increased import competition following China’s accession to the WTO negatively impacted women’s employment, reducing their employment share by roughly 4 percentage points in sectors heavily exposed to imports, pushing many women into informal or lower-paid positions.

3.2 Gender Wage Gap

The gender wage gap in China has persisted and, in recent decades, widened, particularly following market reforms. Before 2000, the gender wage gap in urban China was relatively modest but had already begun to increase during the 1990s. Gustafsson and Li (2000) documented that the average gender earnings gap in urban areas rose from approximately 15.6% in 1988 to 17.5% in 1995. This widening gap reflected women’s disadvantaged position in a rapidly restructuring labor market, as men benefitted disproportionately from higher-paying positions in expanding market-oriented sectors.

In the twenty-first century, the gender wage gap has continued to widen significantly. Brussevich, Dabla-Norris, and Li (2021) found that despite rapid economic growth, the gender wage gap noticeably increased, driven largely by structural changes and labor market shifts following China’s accession to the WTO. Between 2000 and 2013, women’s wages fell further behind men’s, with the gap rising to approximately 36%.

Segregation across labor market sectors has played a significant role in shaping gender wage disparities. Li, Tang, and Jin (2024) highlighted that by 2013, the gender wage gap was smallest and most stable in the public sector (approximately 21%), whereas the gap was substantially larger and rapidly expanding in the private sector (around 40%). This widening disparity was attributed primarily to increasing gender discrimination within the private sector and to the privatization and restructuring of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which disproportionately disadvantaged female workers. H. Liu (2011) similarly noted that women constituted about 60% of those laid off from SOEs during privatization, facing greater barriers to reemployment, significantly contributing to their declining relative income.

Globalization has had complex effects on the gender wage gap. Chen, Ge, and Wan (2013) found that while globalization expanded employment opportunities for women, especially in export-oriented manufacturing, it also exacerbated wage inequality. Female employees were concentrated in lower-paying, labor-intensive roles, comprising 56% of workers in foreign-invested enterprises compared to only 36% in state-owned enterprises. Notably, in the export-oriented sector, most of the observed gender wage gap could be explained by differences in skill levels; however, the gender wage gap in the domestic private sector included a significant component attributable to gender

discrimination. Additionally, F. Wang, Kis-Katos, and Zhou (2020) provided evidence that import competition following China’s WTO accession adversely affected female employment and wages, reducing female employment share by approximately 4 percentage points in import-competing industries and pushing many women toward informal or lower-paid jobs.

Moreover, parenthood has contributed substantially to the gender wage gap. Ma (2022) demonstrated that parenthood significantly penalizes women economically while benefiting men: mothers experience wage penalties, whereas fathers typically enjoy wage premiums. These contrasting dynamics notably widen the gender wage gap, particularly among middle-aged workers, reflecting entrenched societal norms and employer biases regarding gendered family roles.

In summary, gender inequality in China’s labor market has persisted and even intensified during recent decades, despite rapid economic growth. Women’s labor force participation has markedly declined, driven by increased unpaid care responsibilities, rural-to-urban migration patterns, and job losses following the privatization of state-owned enterprises. Meanwhile, the gender wage gap has widened significantly due to structural shifts in the labor market, occupational segregation, globalization, and entrenched gender norms around parenthood. Addressing these inequalities thus requires policies targeting not only labor market conditions but also institutional and cultural factors that perpetuate gender disparities.

4 Gender Inequality in Unpaid Care Work

In addition to inequalities observed directly within the labor market, gender disparities in China are reinforced by unequal responsibilities for unpaid care work within households. Indeed, these disparities form a critical dimension through which gender inequality is perpetuated.

Gender inequality in unpaid care work remains pronounced in China, with women consistently shouldering a significantly heavier burden than men. Unpaid care work encompasses domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and grocery shopping, as well as caregiving responsibilities for children, elderly, and other family members. According to Dong and An (2015), based on data from China’s 2008 Time Use Survey, women in urban areas spent approximately 27.6 hours per week on unpaid care activities compared to only 12.9 hours by men. The disparity was even more significant in rural areas, where women devoted roughly 26.9 hours per week to unpaid care work compared to men’s 8.1 hours. This considerable gender gap in unpaid labor contributes substantially to the total working hours of women, causing them to work around seven hours more per week than men when both paid and unpaid labor are combined.

Ji et al. (2017) highlight the interconnectedness of unpaid care work and women’s disadvantaged position in the labor market. They emphasize that the privatization and restructuring of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the late 1990s significantly reduced workplace-provided social services, such as childcare centers, subsidized eldercare, and family-friendly employment policies. Coupled with broader reductions in state welfare provision during market reforms, these changes shifted

the responsibility for care from the state and enterprises back onto families. As a result, women's unpaid care burdens increased substantially, constraining their available time for paid employment and limiting their career advancement opportunities.

Expanding on this argument, Dong and An (2015) further underline how the dismantling of social support systems from the Maoist era exacerbated women's unpaid care responsibilities. Specifically, they document that the number of childcare and preschool programs in rural areas sharply decreased from approximately 10,700 in 1995 to about 5,000 in 2003, severely limiting access to affordable care alternatives. This decline forced many women, especially in rural areas and migrant families, to bear increased caregiving responsibilities without external support, significantly hindering their economic opportunities and reinforcing gender disparities.

Moreover, unpaid care responsibilities frequently conflict with paid employment schedules, disproportionately affecting women's labor market outcomes. Qi and Dong (2015) found that unpaid care activities often interfere with women's paid work, directly disrupting working hours and productivity. Their analysis reveals that such interference significantly reduces women's earnings compared to men's, accounting for around 28 percent of the observed gender earnings gap in urban China.

The disproportionate care burden borne by women is further exacerbated by deeply entrenched gender norms and expectations. Connelly et al. (2018) argue that despite increased female labor force participation since the reform period, persistent traditional gender roles continue to assign primary responsibility for household tasks and care provision to women. This gender norm limits women's ability to negotiate a more equitable distribution of unpaid care tasks within households. Dong and An (2015) additionally stress that commodification of care services has primarily benefited higher-income groups, leaving low-income women reliant on familial networks, particularly grandparents, who often face economic and health constraints themselves.

In sum, gender inequality in unpaid care work substantially constrains women's economic opportunities and amplifies existing labor market inequalities. Persistent gender norms, limited public support systems, structural conflicts between paid and unpaid labor, and the retreat of state support for care provision collectively reinforce women's disadvantaged status, highlighting the need for policies that recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care responsibilities more equitably between women and men.

5 Cultural Roots of Gender Inequality

While the previous sections examined gender inequalities stemming from labor market structures and institutional policies, cultural norms and societal attitudes also profoundly shape gender disparities in China. Deeply embedded traditional values continue to define gender roles within families and society at large, significantly influencing women's opportunities in education, employment, and household responsibilities. For instance, Chen, Ge, and Wan (2013) found that a significant portion of the gender wage gap within non-export private firms in China could not be explained

by differences in skill or productivity, indicating considerable discrimination against women. Similar evidence highlighting substantial gender discrimination unrelated to skill differences has been reported in other labor-market contexts in China as well (Gustafsson and Li 2000; H. Liu 2011).

Traditional Confucian beliefs emphasizing distinct gender roles still hold substantial influence in contemporary China. According to Q. Wang, Chiang, and Xiao (2024), a recent nationwide survey revealed that more than 60 percent of respondents agreed with the traditional idea that “men should primarily focus on career, and women should focus on family,” with fewer than 30 percent explicitly disagreeing. Furthermore, over 70 percent disagreed with the statement that “husband and wife should share housework equally,” underscoring persistent expectations regarding women’s roles in the household. Additionally, approximately 41 percent agreed that “men are more capable than women,” reflecting entrenched notions of male superiority (Q. Wang, Chiang, and Xiao 2024).

These enduring attitudes reinforce the longstanding cultural preference for sons, which, despite recent weakening, continues to influence educational investments, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged regions. Attané (2012) reports that as recently as 2010, approximately 25 percent of rural Chinese women agreed that “men are superior to women,” while about 33 percent believed that “a woman’s natural place is in the household.” Such beliefs drive families, especially in rural areas, to allocate fewer educational resources to daughters. Consequently, significant gender disparities in education persist, with rural girls averaging only 7.5 years of schooling compared to urban girls’ average of 10.3 years (J. Liu 2014).

Cultural norms also significantly influence employment opportunities and economic stability for women. According to Q. Wang, Chiang, and Xiao (2024), approximately 12 percent of respondents explicitly supported prioritizing women for layoffs during economic downturns, reflecting an enduring perception of women’s secondary economic status. Furthermore, nearly half of respondents agreed that “a good marriage is more important for a woman than managing a career,” highlighting the internalization of traditional gender roles (Q. Wang, Chiang, and Xiao 2024). Such perceptions limit women’s professional ambitions, economic independence, and long-term career development, reinforcing their marginalization in the labor market.

In sum, deeply rooted cultural attitudes significantly shape gender inequalities in education, unpaid care responsibilities, and labor market outcomes. Effectively addressing these inequalities requires both targeted policy reforms and broader cultural transformations promoting more egalitarian gender norms and equitable family investments in both girls and boys.

6 Conclusion and Future Research

This survey has synthesized existing literature on gender inequality in twenty-first-century China, highlighting persistent disparities in labor force participation, wages, unpaid care responsibilities, and the cultural norms underpinning these inequalities. Despite substantial economic progress, women continue to face significant barriers, exacerbated by market reforms, globalization, and

entrenched gender norms. The evidence clearly indicates that economic modernization alone has been insufficient in addressing deeply rooted gender disparities.

While existing scholarship extensively examines gender wage gaps and women’s labor market participation, important dimensions remain under-explored. Notably, unpaid care work has received comparatively limited attention, despite its substantial impact on women’s economic opportunities and household welfare. Additionally, although many studies address the consequences of domestic market reforms, there is considerably less analysis of how globalization influences gender inequalities, especially through global production networks and trade dynamics. Future research should thus prioritize these understudied areas, deepening our understanding of unpaid care responsibilities and exploring more fully the nuanced impacts of globalization on gender dynamics in China.

7 References

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