

Gender inequality in Chinese Civil Service System: Dilemma Faced by the Female in the VUCA world

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Abstract:

The role and socio-economic status of women in the public/private sphere are deeply influenced by a country's historical, political, economic, and social policy development. In today's VUCA era, the pattern of gender inequality still highlights women's disadvantages in education, employment, social security treatment, and political participation. In such a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous era, Asian women prefer the relative stability and security of the civil service in their employment choices. Still, they are often disadvantaged in the workplace due to gender discrimination. Despite the measures taken by the Chinese government, the important goal of achieving social equality between men and women has remained an unfinished political agenda due to the lack of a holistic redistributive mechanism that promotes gender equality. In the future, the awakening of women themselves and the development of gender mainstreaming strategies and social policies will have a profound impact on the realization of gender equality in China.

Keywords: VUCA ; Gender inequality; Civil service.

1. Introduction

In the 1980s, market economic development and social changes facilitated women's access to education, labor force participation, and income levels and, to a certain extent, improved the situation of gender inequality. At the same time, China's social policy has made remarkable progress in recent years in attempting to construct a gender system that balances employment and care, public politics, and family life. However, without a holistic redistributive mechanism to promote gender equality, realizing the important goal of social equality between men and women has remained an unfinished political agenda^[1]. In the social democratic type of welfare state, which emphasizes the principles of universalism and parity, there is a high degree of consensus among citizens, the state, and civil society on gender relations, i.e., the state's responsibility to create the conditions for a balance between family and work, for women's participation in the workforce and for gender equality, and to promote a broad basis for social solidarity^[2]. In 2020, the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 caused unemployment and diminished job prospects globally, causing more than 25 million job losses and affecting almost 2.7 billion workers, about 81 percent of the world's labor force. This VUCA context has exacerbated the young generation's obsession with work stability and financial security in the Civil Service system,

especially for Asian females who have suffered from their disadvantaged position in the workplace due to gender discrimination. For example, in China, this led to females' growing participation rate in the Civil Service Exam and a declining acceptance rate among female applicants. It can be seen that, although considered a safe net for females, jobs in the Civil Service system still could be more difficult to gain than their male counterparts. It leads to questions about what forces females to enter the fierce competition for jobs in Civil Service and why they are still not a safe net for them.

2. Gender Inequality and Dilemma Faced by the Female: Increasing Participation Rate and Declining Acceptance Rates

On the one hand, young females in China are getting more willing to participate in the National Civil Service Exam, with the number of applicants continuously increasing. In the post-pandemic VUCA context, the Chinese applicants witnessed a more than six times increase from 2020 to 2024, exceeding 3 million, and the proportion of female exam participants has continued to increase for years. Females' increasing obsession could be attributed to gender inequality they faced in the workplace and the patriarchal society in today's China. First, in the situation of the society with higher VUCA levels, females were losing

their jobs at a higher rate due to gender inequality in the workplace on a global scale. For example, by early March 2020, nearly 10 percent of female employers lost their jobs, compared with only 6 percent of male employers in China. In the Chinese job market, gender discrimination still widely exists, especially in industries of manual labor, high risk, and high technology. The negative job prospects for females are perhaps the reason behind their growing pursuit of work in the civil service sector, as it can offer permanent positions, job stability, and institutional protections for females, unlike profit-driven private enterprises lacking job security^[3]. In addition, compared with the beginning of this century, women's education level in China has risen significantly, especially in terms of higher education, with more than half of the women aged 16-24 and 25-29 accounting for undergraduate and postgraduate students. After higher education, women's job requirements have also increased, and they are more willing to engage in decent and stable jobs.

In addition, traditional Chinese society expects women to take on more domestic responsibilities, give birth to the next generation, and prioritize their families over their careers. Gender discrimination deeply rooted in traditional patriarchal values has limited female's professional opportunities and advancement in the workplace. For example, 61.2% of females were asked about marital and reproductive status in their workplace, and 38.3% of women showed that marital and reproductive status would impact their vocational perspective.

3. Sexism: Why is it difficult for women to advance in the workplace?

3.1 Sociocultural factors

Gender discrimination is rooted in socio-cultural factors. The traditional socio-cultural conception is that men should play a dominant role in the family and career, while women should play a protective and caring role in the family. This concept has become so deeply rooted in people's minds that it not only leads to unfair treatment of women in the workplace but also affects women's status in the family and society.

3.2 Workplace environment and culture

The workplace environment and culture are also important factors that affect the promotion of women. Men occupy most management and leadership positions in some companies and organizations, while women are confined to low-level positions. Statistically, women have relatively fewer opportunities for advancement in education and the workplace, and in politics, women are very underrepresented in politics and management^[4]. At the same time,

some workplace cultures may also bring pressure and discomfort to women, such as sexual harassment, discrimination, and prejudice.

3.3 Family responsibilities

Another obstacle to women's advancement in the workplace is family responsibilities. Many people believe that women should take on more domestic responsibilities and childcare while men are responsible for earning money to support the family. This perception leads to women's tendency to put in more labor and time and get less in return. At the same time, women are often required to actively step back and make way for the needs of the family and children, while men are more free to choose their own time and career paths. Compared to men, women play more roles in the family, such as taking care of children, doing household chores, and caring for older people. These responsibilities can take up women's time and energy, causing them to be unable to devote themselves fully to their work, thus affecting the chances and speed of promotion.

3.4 Gender Bias

Gender bias refers to the unfair attitudes people have towards men and women. In the workplace, many people believe that women are less able than men to perform certain jobs or that women are not as good as men at promotion and management. This bias can affect women's career development and advancement opportunities. Because the patriarchal concept was more prevalent in the past, the superiority of men in social status also gave men greater self-confidence and a sense of value. At the same time, women suffered a certain weakening of their self-perception and self-esteem^[5]. This concept has also formed a deep-rooted influence in people's psyche, leading to a certain degree of gender discrimination and prejudice that still exists in modern society.

4. Taking Civil Service Exam in the VUCA world: Play Safe or the Best Bet?

In such a context, it would not be surprising that, while females' participation rate in the Civil Service Exam performed an increasing trend, the acceptance rate of females was decreasing. The growing failure rates of female exam takers could mainly be attributed to the rising fierce competition and gender discrimination in recruitment. First, as the number of participants increases from 2022 to 2024, the admission ratio declines from 46:1 to 77:1, dramatically intensifying competition for one position in the civil service sector.

In addition, gender-specific recruitment practices further

diminish opportunities for females. In 2022, about 30.77 percent of jobs in the civil service sector were male-preferred, further implying the disadvantaged positions of females in recruitment. In 2024, about 22.32 percent of jobs were restricted to males, meaning female examination takers' rights were initially deprived. As can be seen from the figures below, gender restrictions are much more remarkable at the central government level, with the male-to-female gender ratio of requirements being 31.6: 1, compared with the provincial level 1.41: 1, indicating the male dominant position in the Chinese central governments. Regarding job distribution, gender discrimination is mainly concentrated in the railroad public security system, the maritime system, the entry-exit inspection and quarantine system, the customs system, and so on. The main reasons for restricting women from applying for the examination are the large labor involved and the long periods spent on business trips or at sea. In addition, gender discrimination is also prevalent in the legal profession, with some restric-

tions based on gender bias, in addition to some reasonable limits based on the needs of the duties of the post. A great deal of gender discrimination is expressed in the form of suggestive and soft restrictions, implying that women cannot apply for the exam, which is a distinctive feature of gender discrimination in civil service recruitment. Its softly suggested approach is more warm and caring. Still, it restricts women's right to choose their careers freely, reduces women's employment opportunities, and intensifies women's intense competition in civil service recruitment examinations.

Research in recent years has shown that much of the open discrimination in corporate recruitment or civil service recruitment has turned into hidden discrimination. There are many cases in which job advertisements do not state that they are for men only or suggest that men should apply for the job. Still, in actual recruitment, women are not allowed to be interviewed, or women's marital status is used as a criterion for hiring them.

Gender Restrictions for Governments in 2022

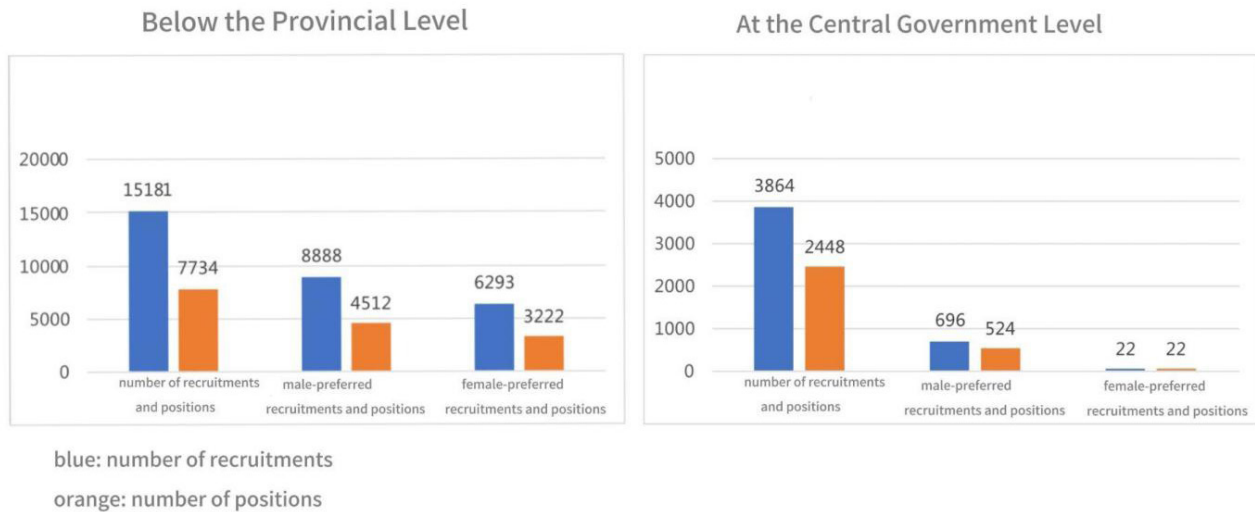


Fig. 1 Gender Restriction Ratio for Government Departments in 2022

5. A Way Out or Not: Coping Strategy and Present Contingents

The dilemma female workers face in private companies, and the national civil service system raises the question of what efforts to prohibit gender discrimination in employment generally failed in China and how to address this problem. First, while China has enacted laws to protect females' working rights, such as the Labor Law (1994) and Employment Promotion Law (2007), these laws lack clear definitions of what constitutes discrimination and provide insufficient enforcement mechanisms. Despite revising

The Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women in 2022, its effectiveness has been undermined by inadequate enforcement mechanisms and the persistence of discriminatory practices in hiring and promotion processes. For example, this law sets a fine of about 1400 dollars for acts of less serious gender discrimination, and such a light financial penalty might not be effective in preventing and eliminating the discrimination women face in the workplace. Other regulations, for example, requiring firms to pay females on maternity leave, may have unintended effects, such as making women less competitive in the job market. Because females have to leave their work

during their maternity leave and their employees have to pay for this, imbalanced allocation of professional opportunities between genders can still be witnessed.

Procuratorial organs should supervise and handle employment discrimination. Still, by the law, the scope of cases brought by procuratorial organs for public interest litigation is in the ecological environment and resource protection, food and drug safety, protection of state-owned property, and the granting of state-owned land use rights^[6]. Previously, many scholars said that the scope of cases in which procuratorial organs are involved in public interest litigation is too narrow. Supervision of gender discrimination in employment goes beyond the several major areas of public interest litigation specified in the Administrative Procedure and Civil Procedure Law. Still, the legal provisions list the scope of the case with the words “etc.” and “The word ‘etc.’ should be ‘outside etc.’.” The word ‘etc.’ should be ‘etc. outside etc.’. The legislative technique requires that the rigid provisions leave some space for practice development^[7]. Of course, in practice, there are also many areas where public power is needed to intervene to protect the public interest. Procuratorial authorities handle cases of gender discrimination in employment, which expands the scope of the public interest litigation of the procuratorate. Previously, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions and the All-China Women’s Federation had been promoting the formulation of policies against gender discrimination in employment. Still, group organizations did not have the power to enforce the law^[8]. Strengthening law enforcement supervision in this area by the procuratorial authorities not only improves the chain of supervision of gender discrimination in employment but also transforms legal supervision into law enforcement power, which will greatly benefit the protection of public welfare in this area^[9].

To help females address their problems and make the workplace more female-friendly, the Chinese government could improve its regulations, diminish systemic discrimination, and offer direct subsidies by learning lessons from other countries. For instance, Paternity Leave allows female partners to take care of babies in the UK. This policy not only makes females’ burden more likely to be relieved and shared but also might reduce male preference systematically. In addition, since 2017, legislation in the UK has required employees to publish gender pay gap data annually to close the gender pay gap. Furthermore, the proportion of women who received the bonus in the UK was also higher than the proportion of men who did so, and there is a decrease in the median bonus gender pay gap, dropping from 37.1% in 2022 to 25.4 percent in 2023.

6. Conclusion

The VUCA context has witnessed increased gender inequality faced by females and many of their failures in entering the civil service system, which has been related to securing jobs with the “iron rice bowl” in China. It could be attributed to gender discrimination rooted in traditional patriarchal values and existing in the current workplace. While efforts to prohibit gender discrimination in employment generally failed in China, Chinese governments could improve legal regulations, diminish systemic discrimination, and offer subsidies to reduce gender discrimination by learning from other countries. The ultimate goal of achieving reciprocal sexual recognition between men and women through rational social policy arrangements is to establish a just and objective system of social rights. The Government of China has made equality and recognition a noble form of human social life and a moral goal. How effectively do the forms of social movements and the reforms of social policy fit together? Have the awakening of women and the goals of the feminist movement been closely linked to the political and economic processes of the times? These are still profound questions that need to be asked in China today.

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