

Challenging Stigma: Gender Self-Expression and Social Interactions of the Sheng Nu

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Abstract:

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With the gradual development of modern women's education level, an increasing number of women have achieved high levels of achievement in education and occupation. However, due to their delayed entry into the marriage, they are defined officially as leftover women in Chinese society. The single identity of leftover women is frequently not recognized socially and portrayed as selfish in the media. Some single women choose to weaken their advantages in education and occupation under social pressure and follow the traditional gender norms to enter marriage as soon as possible. However, some women create new femininity, constructing the social identity of single women and demonstrating positive aspects of leftover women. However, the specific strategies of leftover women's new social identity construction also remain blank. Therefore, this article will take a textual analysis of the posts and comments on the topic of leftover women on social media Xiaohongshu, exploring the strategies of leftover women groups in response to social pressure. The findings indicate that leftover women find empowerment through constructing positive lifestyles, choosing a new reproduction method, and forming their social support network and emotional dependence. In a series of strategies, they attempt to undo gender and challenge traditional gender norms to achieve the recognition of themselves.

Keywords: Leftover women; femininity; identity recognition

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, women's education lev-

els have improved and achieved more success in the workplace. There are an increasing number of women who are capable of individual financial inde-

pendence. Consequently, some women pursue self-independence instead of prioritizing marriage, childbearing, and having a stable family as their ultimate life objectives. These women who are over 27 years old, well-educated, well-paid, independent, and unmarried are defined officially as leftover women by the All-China Women's Federation and Ministry of Education. The term Leftover women has been interpreted by society and media as those unmarried women who are left behind and unwanted with a negative connotation. They are subject to stigmatization and discrimination, which may be attributed to their being too independent and professionally successful, which do not conform to the traditional gentle and obedient femininity. This study contributes to understanding the situation of leftover women under traditional social concepts and how they promote gender concept transformation through individual actions, which is of considerable significance for the advancement of gender equality awareness. This study focuses on analyzing the specific strategies adopted by leftover women to cope with the stigma and social discrimination they face. This study utilizes a literature analysis approach to identify and review relevant materials and literature. This method has the advantage of facilitating a comprehensive the current circumstances and challenges of leftover women and is conducive to the research. The primary aim of this study is to gain insight into the present situation of leftover women and the challenges of being stigmatized and to promote social cognition and practice of gender equality and inclusiveness. To achieve this objective, posts, and comments related to leftover women on the social media platform Xiaohongshu were collected as research materials to explore the strategies of independent and autonomic leftover women facing stigmatization.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This article adopts the theory of undoing gender to analyze. Deutsch believes that since gender can be constructed, it can also be deconstructed [1]. Gender institutions are changeable, and the social interactions that support these institutions are also changeable. Therefore, gender is not inherently fixed but can be continuously redefined in society through behaviors and interactions. When some women do not follow the traditional gender norms of early marriage and family responsibilities at marriageable age, but maintain single status for a long period, they will face various forms of discrimination from society. In the face

of social discrimination, they challenge the traditional expectations of gender roles through their own discourse, actions, self-expression, and other strategies to demonstrate to society their positive lives, break traditional gender norms, construct new gender identities, and thus resist the stigma and discrimination of leftover women in society.

2.2 Literature Review

Leftover women often possess advantages such as high education, high-paying jobs, and positions, but these advantages are stereotypically transformed into negative labels in real life. For example, leftover women may be reported by the media as being over-selective, and their psychological characteristics may be exaggerated into negative emotions such as anxiety [2]. The media also uses traditional concepts and parental views as a starting point to criticize leftover women for being unfilial [3]. Women with higher education are basically tomboys or masculine and non-feminine women [3]. The mass media also constantly propagates that they are selfish, undesirable, or have other physical or mental issues. For women pursuing independence and autonomy, the media portrays them as having too much agency, accusing them of being arrogant and eccentric for not conforming to norms, thus hurting men and authority. They are also commonly described as pushy and selfish, even threatening the stability and cultural integrity of Chinese society [4].

The use of the term leftover women does not aim to reflect the realities of the Chinese marriage market but rather conveys information about gender discrimination as a response to women's empowerment in education and career fields. To escape these negative labels, some leftover women choose to weaken their advantages in positions, education, and income by conforming to traditional social norms [2]. Sandy To once divided Chinese professional women samples in her research into four types based on leftover women's different partner choice strategies, among which traditionalists and maximizers still seek strategies within the constraints of social traditional norms. Satisfiers and innovators choose to break through the traditional patriarchal norms to find strategies, among which innovators do not take marriage as the ultimate objective and value personal autonomy and egalitarianism more than marriage [5].

Within the leftover women group, single young women with new feminist ideas have emerged. They are not afraid of age and singlehood, and empower themselves in various aspects of society, reflecting their identity values. They are called "lang jie". This comes from the hit show "Sisters Riding the Winds and Breaking the Waves", where the new term "lang jie" gives leftover women a

positive self-color [6]. They interpret “leftover women” as “victorious women” rather than “left-behind women” in response to the leftover women label, to demonstrate their confidence and success in resisting the stigma against them in society and media [7]. In addition, they enrich their single lives and improve life satisfaction and well-being. They believe that women’s well-being does not necessarily need to be measured by families and children, and they will seek emotional dependence from families and friends. This is a form of self-construction by leftover women to resist the mainstream view in society that single women are deficient because they lack families and children [7]. In Gaetano’s study, despite the lack of recognition and support for single women in Chinese society, these women challenge traditional gender norms by achieving their objectives in education and careers, establishing social networks, playing significant roles in society, and constructing self-fulfilling lives that challenge the patriarchal constraints on them [8]. There has been much research on leftover women groups constructing new forms of femininity, but gaps remain. This article will further study the specific strategies adopted by leftover women in responding to social stigma from the perspectives of lifestyle, reproduction, and mutual assistance.

3. Analysis

3.1 Lifestyle

Leftover women adopt positive lifestyles to respond to social stigma. Single women are frequently perceived as lacking sexual life, marriage, children, and cohabiting partners, and this identity is seen as inconsistent with traditional families and intimate relationships, presenting an incomplete identity [9]. Despite leftover women being successful in their careers, they may still be considered deficient because individuals tend to use marriage and family as the standard to judge a woman’s value, rather than her professional achievements. The well-being of single people is not necessarily lower than those who have married, and there is no significant difference between the two in terms of health and well-being. Besides, a significant proportion of single individuals also engage in intimate and enduring relationships and tend to exhibit more autonomy.

In a post expressing anxiety about being a “leftover woman” on Xiaohongshu, many fellow leftover women” commenters shared about their fulfilling, autonomous, and contented single lives. One commenter shared that at 38 years old, she lives alone without children, and normally spends time playing with her unmarried friends. Another commenter, nearly 50 years old, self-identifies as child-

free and works in a state-owned enterprise with an easy job. She allocates her free time to explore hobbies and develop side businesses and even desires more free time. She states that she is lucid not married or having children, affording her considerable leisure time to pursue her hobbies and side businesses. Other commenters also shared similar daily lives as single women. They agree that a single life offers freedom without the constraints of considering others, with time fully their own to do what they want, except being pestered about marriage by family. Their shared experience is using life more to focus on self-development, such as traveling, developing various interests, or side businesses. This is a notable contrast from the lives of married women of a similar age, as traditionally married women’s lives may be occupied by family and childrearing at home. However, single women can allocate more time to enrich themselves. These commenters’ descriptions of their single lives showcase their freedom, and independence, which are traditionally associated with masculinity. These descriptions also challenge the convention of being obedient wives skilled in household duties. They no longer equate women’s well-being with a stable family but pursue liberty, independence, and fulfilling, unrestrained experiences. This represents a concrete practice of attempting to undo gender.

3.2 Reproduction

In terms of reproduction, some leftover women satisfy their desire for children through in vitro fertilization (IVF). The practice of early marriage in China has a history of thousands of years, with a Chinese idiom saying, “There are three kinds of unfilial acts, but having no offspring is the worst.” Early marriage and early childbearing were regarded as filial piety towards one’s parents. Furthermore, the realization of East Asian women’s identities was believed to be achieved through marriage and childbirth. Consequently, leftover women who remain single may face more severe stigma and discrimination than single men [10]. One commenter shared that as a childfree person, she had anxiety about reproduction at 35 years old and wanted a child, so she had a mixed-race baby through scientific means. She reported feeling a sense of personal fulfillment and satisfaction with this decision. Another commenter shared that at 39 years old with economic independence, she had a daughter through IVF, and their lives as mother and daughter are filled with joy and contentment. These single women who choose IVF for reproduction often have relatively high economic capabilities. Since China currently only provides sperm banks for married women, they go abroad for surgery to give birth to mixed-race babies. According to tradition, women need to

first enter a marriage before reproduction, meaning married women need to take on dual identities as wives and mothers. Choosing this new reproductive method of IVF no longer makes marriage a prerequisite for childbearing. At the same time, it solves the reproductive issues of single women. They are independent and autonomous in reproductive matters, able to choose and decide on reproductive plans without external pressures. This new reproductive approach challenges the conventional view of reproduction premised on marriage. They can realize the identity of mothers without relying on family or marital relationships. They are not constrained by juggling the dual identities of wife and mother, surpassing traditional family structures' inherent expectations of women and demonstrating diversity in gender roles.

3.3 Mutual Assistance

Leftover women groups also establish their own social networks and social support structures to resist the stigma against them in society. While leftover women are autonomous in numerous domains of life, loneliness is inevitable, and they need to find personal emotional support. In Zhang Chao's research, leftover women are highly dependent on their parents emotionally, and loneliness often arises when parents leave. In later life, leftover women may face the issue of parents leaving. Therefore, they need to establish new social support systems and find new sources of emotional dependence and support. Some unmarried women in Xiaohongshu have proposed establishing organizations for unmarried women to address the problem of supporting leftover women groups in old age. A netizen named Xiaolongjie, who is 40 years old and unmarried without children, not only promotes the positive view that single women's lives can still be fulfilling on her own Xiaohongshu, but also envisions establishing organizations for older single women. At present, small groups have been formed online through social media chat groups, such as the Sisterhood Happiness Group and Old Age Partners Group. These online groups build a platform for leftover women to interact, share lives, and find emotional reliance and support among each other. In the future, they envision establishing larger organizations to age together by living in retirement homes together or renting retirement homes collectively. Another netizen named Isabel also shares similar ideas, and at 39 years old uses her Xiaohongshu to oppose anxiety about being leftover and promote single freedom and happiness, also preliminarily attempting to establish organizations for older women. It is traditionally the case that married women in old age may rely on their children or relatives for care, so single women's later lives could be perceived as unhappy.

However, leftover women groups are already establishing their own social support and social circles belonging to a single community. They have made preliminary attempts to show that the future of single older women can also be positive and happy, which challenges traditional views of aging and provides ideas for more single groups to address issues of social support.

4. Discussion

When leftover women choose independence and autonomy without adhering to traditional social norms for women, they face various forms of discrimination and stigma. At the same time, leftover women have responded positively to the leftover women label. They have adopted various proactive strategies to address challenges. They reinterpret the meaning of leftover women, believing themselves to be victorious women who not only do not want to shed the leftover women's label but take pride in their single identity. They also build positive lifestyles, enrich their lives, cultivate hobbies, and learn new things. They try new reproductive approaches like IVF to update traditional views of reproduction and gain autonomy in reproduction. Leftover women groups attempt to establish online chat groups and organizations for older unmarried women, as well as develop an orientation toward group aging, finding their own social support and emotional reliance. These are all specific practices leftover women undertake in constructing new social identities. These strategies challenge traditional gender norms and demonstrate that gender is socially constructed. Individuals can reshape and challenge traditional gender concepts through behaviors and social interactions. By presenting themselves positively to society, leftover women also make efforts to improve social tolerance and recognition of their single status. Their various strategies to resist stigma challenge traditional societal expectations of women, help more leftover women reimagine their own lives and social images, and help counter the stigma against leftover women in society.

5. Conclusion

The research finds that in response to social stigma against leftover women groups, they have made many positive responses and adopted proactive strategies. They have constructed positive lifestyles, chosen new reproductive approaches, and established their groups to build new social identities through expressing self-identification with society and trying to undo gender. This research provides valuable references for future studies in this area. The main impacts are improving social understanding of left-

over women groups and promoting social tolerance and recognition of them, rather than stigma. Future research should focus more on how to change society's traditional rigid views of gender and promote in-depth exploration of the direction of gender equality and inclusiveness in society. The overall conclusion drawn from this research is that through presenting themselves positively to society, leftover women groups are challenging traditional expectations and constructing new social identities and notions of gender through their concrete practices, behaviors, and organized efforts. This represents an attempt to undo and reshape perspectives on socially constructed concepts like gender norms and roles.

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