

A Study on Gender Inequality in the Family during COVID-19 in Shanghai China

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Abstract: During the COVID-19 lockdown, people would be under great stress of maintaining a normal life for their families. Such an extreme situation has enlarged women's responsibilities at home. They have to rush to purchase necessities such as tissues, food, and sanitary products either online or offline. Meanwhile, they have to pay more attention to their children's online classes to avoid their kids from being distracted. Reversely, according to the traditional idea in China, what a man can do at home is very limited, even the simplest housework such as sweeping or washing clothes is not included. Under such context, this paper studies gender inequality in the family during COVID-19 in Shanghai, China. Online questionnaires are used as the main research method of this paper, and the results show that women are under more pressure than men in the family during the COVID-19 pandemic since many Chinese still have a deep stereotype toward women.

Keywords: Gender inequality, COVID-19, Family, Shanghai, China

1. Introduction

Successful businesswomen are always asked how they balance their work and family, and it seems that no one has ever reflected on the rationality behind such questions. Journalists continue to ask platitudinous questions to those female managers who are as wise and insightful as male managers. The implication behind this phenomenon is not complicated: women are kidnapped by traditional ideas. In other words, people are actually bonding women with family even if they are successful in their careers. In Chinese culture, women are suppressed; their rights of obtaining education and achieving equal political participation are not being respected for a long time. After the event of reform and opening, Chinese women got more opportunities to be educated and are more respected. They can have their academic pursuit like men do rather than regarding marriage as their sole goal in life. They can also have their own careers, and some of them even become important figures of the country. However, in contemporary society, many women are still bonded with family. For example, housework, children's education, and other things that are thought to be subtle. In this paper, the author demonstrates why these traditional thoughts are not acceptable by conducting a questionnaire survey in Shanghai, the most advanced city in China. By doing this research, the situation of females in Shanghai during such a special time period will be clearly exposed, and this can help in finding the problems and conflicts between Chinese couples.

2. Literature Review

The earliest feminist movement took place during the first industrial revolution in the US, having marked that women started to realize that they should get equal rights and opportunities as men. Although the word “feminism” did not appear at that time, women were already fighting for suffrage since they gained economic independence by working in the factory. The rise of female consciousness is reflected in many works of literature. In the year of 1989, French author Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her book that “nature does not define woman: it is she who defines herself by reclaiming nature for herself in her affectivity” [1]. The book achieved great success and had a deep influence on western women. In addition, American author Johanna Neuman demonstrates in her book that American women were only able to overthrow the male patriarchy after persuading men that it was in their best interests to share political power. Adding the protracted fight for women's voting rights to the metanarrative of US history [2]. More than forty years after the “new wave” of 1960s feminism, Walters addresses the challenges and injustices that women today confront, including challenges in juggling domesticity, parenthood, and outside-the-home employment [3]. In the book *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, Brownell and Jeffrey focus between femininity and masculinity, between subjects traditionally associated with feminism (such as family life) and those rarely considered from a gendered point of view [4]. In China, the first feminist movement came relatively late. It exists during the movement on May 4th, and after that, women’s status in China has risen a lot [5]. Chinese author Li Y.H. mentions in her book *Feminism* that feminism is to finally achieve equality between men and women in all mankind [6]. In another book, she makes a historical investigation and realistic description of the Chinese family structure and scale, the way and standard of choosing a spouse in love, the marriage ceremony, and the residence after marriage [7]. It is found that, in China, many people still can not cast off the traditional ideas about women. For example, in Shandong, many families do not allow women to eat with men, since they are only regarded as cooks. In many people’s opinion, modern society is very fair that men and women are fitting in the position they are good at. Men are responsible for earning money and women should take care of the housework. This idea is toxic. It seems that men and women are equally treated, but women cannot gain economic independence under the influence of this idea. Without economic independence, there is no possibility that they can gain independence in mind, politics, and other things that men can easily approach with their gender dividend. In Shanghai, where this research was conducted, many mothers are playing an important role in their workplaces just like their husbands. However, women’s situation has not been improved since they do not get rid of the stress from housework while applying for jobs. In a mega city like Shanghai, the pressure of living is more than in other places, so many families become double-income families. However, in this research, 81.2% of mothers still have to do most of the housework in the family and 75% of mothers are undertaking both work and chores which is called a “second shift”. This concept is first used in *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. As the author mentioned, “adding together the time it takes to do a paid job, housework, and childcare, I averaged estimates from the major studies on time use done in the 1960s and 1970s, and discovered that women worked roughly fifteen hours longer than men each week. Over a year, they worked an extra month of twenty-four-hour days. Over a dozen years, it was an extra year of twenty-four-hour days” [8]. Women are actually doing much more work than men do since they have to work and do chores at the same time.

3. Method

Since there were a large number of women complaining about their role in the family when Shanghai was locked down because of COVID-19, the author found it significant to study this

situation and explore the reason. An online questionnaire survey was designed and sent to a website where it is possible to precisely investigate married people in Shanghai. 113 questionnaires were sent to ask participants about how the housework was distributed in their families. An identical number of males and females took the questionnaire and the result turned out to be interesting.

4. Result and Analysis

In this research, 93.8% of the samples are double-income families, which can just fit into the situation Hochschild mentioned in her book. Among those double-income families, 75% of females are burdening housework while only 53.1% of males are doing housework. It can be seen that although women are able to get jobs, many of them are still bonding with household chores. Furthermore, 81.2% of mothers who participated in the survey are doing most of the chores in the family while their husbands are mostly spending their time chatting, gaming, and watching TV shows. This situation does not change a lot even after COVID-19 took place and people were blocked in their houses. It means that even though many males are staying at home, they will not help with the housework. One of the participants who is a mother said that “when I was anxiously purchasing necessities and food, my husband could not understand how serious the situation was and kept complaining what I’m doing was meaningless and unnecessary. He said it was not even worth mentioning, and I was exaggerating the whole thing, but when the food was well-cooked, he gorged himself on it.” By contrast, the husbands in the interview totally lack awareness of the difficulty of buying food and necessities. They do not recognize the value of housework.

Although most of the fathers do not recognize the value and hard of housework, three males in the research have a lot to say about the difficulties of housework. They complained that their wives were doing nothing at home and believed that women were superior to men in the family. They are the only three males who thought that the distribution of chores was unfair and they were unsatisfied with it, accounting for 6.1% of the male samples. In contrast, mothers showed much more resentful emotions toward the housework distribution in their families. Only 37.5% of mothers were satisfied by their situation where their husbands were taking some responsibility of doing chores, or some of them thought that doing housework was what women should do.

However, for those unsatisfied mothers, their fatigue was revealed by their complaints. For example, one mother said that “I have to work during the day, as well as taking care of my child and doing housework after a day of working. This life is frustrating, and I can’t see an ending to it.” Another mother who has a pupil child mentioned that after the lockdown, she had to both work and take care of her child at the same time to ensure that her child will keep concentrating and not do other things when taking online courses. Furthermore, she had to be responsible for the kid to make sure he does his homework, and corrected his exam paper, even becoming an invigilator. She said that even though her husband tried to share the responsibility with her since he has no experience in tutoring a child, he was totally unfamiliar with what to do and had no idea of how much patience and energy it takes to teach a child. And this demanding work of being both a knowledgeable teacher and an efficient coach has always been done by her.

Based on the information collected, many mothers from double-income families are still struggling in the “second shift” without being valued. They are “taught” by the whole society to take a second work and are sacrificing their private time on it. Under the influence of COVID-19, this fact has caused more conflicts between wife and husband than before. For example, a lady was complaining in the survey that when the food was insufficient in her family, her husband was once caught stealing some food and eating on the balcony. “I’m totally disappointed.” She said, “I can’t believe he is so surprisingly selfish; when the whole family is consuming the storage systematically, it is so shocking that he is stealing food from us even though he knows that his behavior will break our perfect order. I would never expect that even my husband can be a threat during this time.”

Although such an exceptional case cannot show the overall situation of Shanghai, from the fully arranged divorce arrangement from Civil Affairs Bureau, family conflicts are completely triggered by the virus and the lockdown. From this questionnaire survey and investigations, it is reasonable to infer that the strong demand for divorcing is mostly cost by such family affairs.

Although everyone considers it a basic principle that society should give equality to everyone, the result of the research shows that the bias toward females still exists, and many people, even some women themselves, are seeing it as normal. Everything has been labeled with “should” and it kidnaps women from their own careers. To solve this issue, people should take gender equality in the family seriously and try to fix the problems caused by inequality. Women’s Federation should publish some booklet or slogan to notify people that the inequality between men and women is existing all around and some advice should be given to eliminate gender inequality in the family as much as possible. Furthermore, the government can add articles about gender equality in the teaching materials to keep students away from gender stereotypes, for example, “only girls like dolls” or “boys should not cry”. Those stereotypes are toxic both for males and females.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, for the future development of society and for freeing women from social stereotypes and the burden of doing almost all the housework at home, people should understand that gender should not be a standard to judge whether a person is supposed to bond with family and women’s working ability is as good as men. Many Chinese still have stereotypes toward females, and that is a significant problem for Chinese society. This research is not perfectly precise because the time is limited. For future enhancement, the investigation can be divided by different areas people from, more precise questions can be set and more samples can be collected. Only 113 samples were collected during the research, so the results may not be representative of all situations, however, it is proved that the problem of housework distribution does exist and many mothers are complaining about their “second shift”.

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