

Factors Affecting Chinese Women's Employment and Related Policy Discussion: After the Reform and Opening Up

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Abstract. China used to have a rising number of female employees. Since the reform and opening up, the operation of China's labor market is no longer the same as before, which reflects the characteristics of the decline of female employment. Female employment rate is of great significance in the study of public economics. This paper discusses the reasons for the change of women's employment rate from the two dimensions of labor market conditions and social values, and provides corresponding insights on how to improve women's employment: After the reform and opening up, the family division of labor under the revived traditional culture and the profit-making nature of the market have a common impact on the subjects including companies and individual female employees, the lack of policy-oriented markets cannot prevent the intensification of the continuous decline in women's employment. From the perspective of public economics, the research on the female employment rate in China's labor market provides us with many useful lessons.

Keywords: Women's employment; Chinese labor; social values; labor market conditions.

1. Introduction

As a socialist country, after the reform and opening up of China in 1978, great changes have taken place in the women's employment in the labor market of China. The convenience brought by the gradually revitalized economy has created more diversified employment opportunities [5]. However, gender related employment problems have also begun to take place: The number of women employed in China continued to rise after the economic transformation in 1978 but declined in the late 1990s [4]. Many past scholars have observed this situation. For example, Mukherjee [17] said that the improvement of the education system after the economic reform has expanded the participation of Chinese women in the labor market. In similar vein, Wu [20] believes that family employment decision-making factors affect the subsequent decline of Chinese women's employment through a micro angle. These studies broaden the analytical perspective of the concept of female employment, and are very helpful to the subsequent research of this concept.

In the research on female employment in western countries, Rubery and Fagan pointed out that the organization and industrial structure of the production system, labor market conditions, and social values are important factors that probably play a role [15]. However, there have been few studies that analyzed systematically by combining Chinese traditional culture and economic status. According to Cooke's point of view, using an interdisciplinary analytical framework to combine these perspectives can provide a more comprehensive explanation of the factors affecting women's employment [7]. For example, based on the traditional culture in China, it might be difficult for women to give priority consideration to their employment as men do, and the change of market structure caused by China's economic reform can probably make this influence of traditional culture manifest in the market [21]. For this reason, this essay will provide comprehensive analysis by combining different angles to put forward targeted policy solutions.

In view of the lack of research on the combined analysis of the factors affecting Chinese women's employment, this paper will put forward two questions and answer them. Firstly, this paper will discuss the factors have probably mainly affected the women's employment in China. Secondly, this paper will introduce the kind of policies the government set to improve the employment environment of Chinese women and the effectiveness of those policies.

To answer these questions, this paper will be composed of three main parts. The first part will analyze female employment data in different periods, and point out the current situation of the decline

in female employment. The second part will discuss the main reasons for the current situation of women's employment. The third part will be based on the second part and discuss the measures that the government set on. Finally, this research aims to prove that the causes of women's employment problems are integrated from more than two levels, and some effective national legislation and policy intervention may improve the situation of women's employment.

2. Method

The data of this paper draws primarily from the National Bureau of Statistics of the PRC, which includes the official data on the number of female employments before and after 1998. These data will be used to analyze the trend of the number of women employed in China by years. Due to the lack of official data on women's employment in some years, this paper will also quote the data provided in other resources such as Wu's paper [20]. In addition, this paper will also cite data analysis from other countries include Iceland [18], Spain [8], and other developing countries in Amin's research [1], so as to discuss the effectiveness of policy implementation to be discussed in the second half of the paper through valid comparison.

3. Results

At the beginning of reform and opening up, the number of female employees once rose rapidly. According to the data of the National Bureau of statistics, the number of urban female workers in China increased almost 80 % from about 31.28 million in 1978 [3] to 56.87 million in 1997 [4].

However, since 1998, the number of female urban workers in China has decreased significantly. The number of urban female employees fell to about 46.78 million in 1998, and then maintained a downward trend. More intuitive data show that in 1990, the labor participation rate of urban working-age women was 85.25% [4], which fell to 74.87% in 2000. In this way, the decline in female employment in this period exceeded 10% [20].

More specific data show that from 1997 to 1998, the number of urban male and female workers decreased by 13.22 million and 10.09 million respectively [4]. Since the number of men employed in this period is about twice that of women, it can be seen from the comparison that the number of women employed decreased more than that of men.

Before 1997, the number of Chinese women receiving higher education also experienced relatively rapid growth in line with the growth period of female employment. In 1982, the proportion of women in urban areas receiving higher education was almost zero. By 1990, it had exceeded 1.2%. In 1998, the proportion was close to 3% [20]. The ratio maintained an increasing trend after 1998. By 2000, the proportion of urban women participating in higher education had increased to 11% [3]; By 2008, although the growth trend actually slowed down, the rate still increased to 12.6%.

In addition to the trend of female employment, some data also illustrate the situation in female employment after 1997. According to the statistics in 2000, the industries in which the proportion of female employment is more than 60% only account for less than 30% of the total amount of the surveyed industries, among them, this 30% is mainly concentrated in more female-related industries, such as medical care [6]. When women applied for employment, according to Jin, 49.7% of female employees suffered discrimination from the companies. The situation of married women and unmarried women is also different. From 1995 to 2002, the employment rate of female workers in marriage decreased by 16.5%, while in comparison, the employment rate of female workers not in marriage decreased by only 8.1% [20]. Under these different data, Wei has brought a reality: In a survey mainly for female respondents, the results show that 31.4% of respondents hoped that men would be promoted when there was only one promotion vacancy in the department, while only 7.4% hoped that female workers would be promoted [9].

In order to improve the employment situation of Chinese women, the state has formulated some social welfare policies, such as maternity leave. Nowadays, according to national regulations, the

maximum period of maternity leave in China is 12 weeks, but almost all provinces have extended this period, the most common is to extend it to 4.7 months, and the corresponding subsidy wages can reach a high proportion of more than 75% or even full subsidy [19]. In addition to maternity leave, some countries such as Spain have put forward the paternity leave system. For example, in the reform of the Spanish family welfare system in 2007, paid parental leave for men was extended by 16 weeks, which increased the rate of re-employment of Spanish housewives after childbirth by 11% [8]. And since the introduction of the paternity leave system in Spain, since the late 1980s, the employment rate of women with children under 1-year-old in Spain has increased from 25% in 1987 to 60% in 2015. The situation in Iceland is similar to Spain. Iceland introduced a two-week paternity leave system in 1998. The corresponding data show that compared with 1991, the employment rate of Icelandic women in 2005 was higher, which was 74.6% and 77.8% respectively [18].

4. Discussion

4.1 The situation of women's employment in China

In 1997, China underwent a large-scale market economy reform, which can be called as privatization reform. The reform led to the bankruptcy, merger and reorganization of a large number of state-owned enterprises, and led to the unemployment of a large number of employees [6]. According to the data, the rising trend of female employment in China and the downward trend after the 20th century take the adjacent 1998 as the dividing point. This shows that the economic reform has had a certain impact on women's employment, and the declining trend of female employment is based on the privatization reform of state-owned companies after 1997. The specific data on the decline in the number of workers of different genders during this period also proves that although the number of male employees has been decreased more in the tide of unemployment after the reform, based on the overall number, women have been more seriously affected by the reform.

4.2 Impact of Education

Traditionally, education has been regarded as an important factor affecting women's employment. Mukherjee mentioned that in the study of China, women's access to higher education does seem to narrow the gender wage gap to a certain extent [17]. In the human capital theory, in a perfectly competitive market such as China's free market after reform and opening up, the expected income of workers depends on their investment in human capital such as education [20]. For this reason, education as a factor was probably influential in China before 1997, because according to the data, there was a positive correlation between the number of women receiving higher education and the growth of female employment in China from the reform and opening up to 1997.

4.3 Marketization trend and the role of traditional values

(i). Employers' choice

Jin focused on the economic reform movement after 1997 [6]. The privatized market economy has brought more employment opportunities and employment incentives to a certain extent. However, with the improvement of the degree of privatization, companies, especially private companies, are increasingly pursuing interests. Data showed that after entering the 20th century, employment discrimination against women began to increase, and it became difficult for women to find jobs other than women's occupations under the traditional views. This is because, from the perspective of labor value, companies might think that the value brought by female employees is far lower than that of men. There is a negative correlation between women's working time and housework time [5], and under the traditional Chinese concept, women are more responsible for taking care of the family. Therefore, compared with men, women will probably face more barriers to productivity [21]. In the view of profit-seeking companies, due to the need to reduce production costs to improve profits, companies prefer male employees to equally qualified women, and even choose to fire more female workers in order to reduce costs. This not only makes it more difficult for women to find jobs with

higher pay than men, but also makes it more difficult for women workers laid off due to changes in state-owned companies.

(ii). Female employees' choice

The family structure under traditional culture also plays an important role in the issue of whether individual women choose to work [20]. After marketization, with the growth of household income in various cities and towns, women in some high-income families may no longer choose employment. First, this is probably due to the income effect [12]. Because of the increase in income, people have the ability to enjoy leisure time, while the incentives brought by work are reduced and the labor supply is also reduced.

Due to the situation of "Men's work centers around outside, Women's work centers around the home", "Be a good wife and a good mother" in traditional family relations [5], when facing with choices, female workers have a collective tendency to favor their family compared to their careers. In other words, the increase in income probably brings greater "not to work" incentives to female workers in traditional Chinese households than males. Through the comparison of data, the employment rate of married women has a greater decline than that of unmarried women in the overall declining trend of women's employment rate. In addition, married Chinese women also have a much greater disadvantage in terms of wages than unmarried Chinese women [10], which have probably become an incentive for some housewives to be unwilling to work. This situation reflects the impact of the family, especially the synergy of concept and income.

In general, today's women's employment may be mainly affected by the profit-seeking nature of the market caused by the marketization trend and the traditional concept of Chinese families. This impact not only affects companies, but also individual female employees, and leads to the declining trend in the number of women's employment in China today.

4.4 Government policies

According to the survey data, many women may lack a supportive attitude towards the promotion of female workers in their companies. This situation shows that the overall job confidence of women in the society is decreasing, and the declining trend in the number of female employments probably will aggravate this process [9], which will lead to decline expectations of women workers and increase the possibility of women's involuntary unemployment. For this reason, some policy solutions have been proposed to improve this situation.

(i). Welfare policy for women

The continuous improvement of the social security system can bring certain employment incentives to female workers. This includes the maternity insurance system [13]. Professional women are probably difficult to maintain labour before and after childbirth, in this situation, the state and companies will provide maternity benefits and life security to ensure that women workers can restore their working ability and return to work on the premise that their families receive necessary care. In this way, the traditional family responsibilities of female workers can probably be shared to the social level. According to the current national policy on maternity leave mentioned in the Results, female workers in China enjoy a higher standard of maternity leave system. Such a relatively complete welfare system can probably weaken the incentive given to women by the traditional family division of labour, because there is no need for them to actively or passively lose their jobs due to marriage and childbirth, and can invest more time in their work.

(ii). The effect of male paternity leaves on female employment

In most countries, the large majority of leave-takers are women after a child is born [8], however, the paternity leaves can cooperate with the maternity leave system to alleviate the problem of women's employment by recent studies. Amin believed that there is a strong positive correlation between the provision of paternity leave and women's employment [1], this can be proved by the data from Spain and Iceland, which both set up the paternity leave system around 1990s. The data showed that the implementation period of this system coincides with the growth period of employment rate and

reemployment rate of housewives in the two countries. This paper believes that the results in both two countries can probably be significant to the policy research of China on women's employment.

Firstly, paternity leave is conducive to breaking the traditional family relationship. Men's participation in childcare can reduce women's burden in traditional families and enable women workers to invest more energy in work and other life without losing employment opportunities. Women's employment problems caused by family factors can be improved [11]. Secondly, due to the attention of companies to interests, the high subsidies of the maternity leave system may lead to the loss of incentives for companies to hire female workers. The implementation of relevant paternity leave policies, supplemented by a subsidy system like maternity leave, will help to balance the subsidy burden of the company on their female employees. Therefore, the negative impact of labour values on women's employment in the free market may be alleviated. Last but not least, from the perspective of gender equality, the promotion of paternity leave system is conducive to the formation of the partnership between men and women [19], especially between husband and wife, promote men's empathy for women's family responsibilities, and then promote men to participate in the action to reduce employment discrimination.

5. Conclusion

This study raised two issues related to dominant factors and government policies to study the employment situation of women in China by answering these issues. According to the results, the number of female employments has a downward trend after Chinese privatization reform. By combining cultural factors with the economic background in China, this study found that the family division of labor under traditional culture and the profit-seeking nature of the market have a common effect on subjects include the companies and individual female employees, and lead to the decline in the number of female workers. In the second half of the study, we found that the interaction between the maternity leave and the paternity leave system can probably alleviate the female employment problem caused by the two factors.

With regard to the research of this paper, it can closely combine the topics in the field of public economics with sociology by using data analysis and quoted views [7], so as to enrich the content of the subject and rigorously draw the research conclusion.

This study aims to give relevant researchers some materials worthy of reference. In addition, this study also hopes to give suggestions to policymakers to improve the means of protecting women's employment. This is because if female employment continues to decline, the traditional concept of family may be re-accepted in Chinese society [9], and the resulting gender discrimination, such as employment discrimination, may become serious. Therefore, it is urgent to alleviate and solve the plight of women's employment, and it needs to become one of the key policy objects of the country.

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