

The impact of the COVID-19 on women employment: evidence from labour market in China

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Abstract. Worldwide, women already face gender discrimination in the labour market. And the outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019 further exacerbated the situation. Emerging evidences and related studies have shown that the shock of COVID-19 has compounded vulnerabilities faced by women in employment, further marginalizing them in the labour market. In view of women employment issue under the epidemic, this paper analyzes the negative impact of COVID-19 on women employment in the labour market of China from three levels: the perspective of government, enterprises, and individuals. The study suggests that the family burden of women and unpaid work hours has increased during the pandemic. And such negative impact was amplified by factors such as the lack of relative employment security, gender discrimination and, female psychology. This will not only exerts a negative effect on female laborers but also on the society, hindering social development and economic recovery in the long run. The government should play an vital role and take effective actions to improve the situation.

Keywords: COVID-19; Women Employment; gender discrimination.

1. Introduction

Worldwide, women already face gender discrimination in the labour market. There is a significant gender gap in employment, which means women are facing more difficulties and hidden barriers in the process of job-seeking and promotion. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), in 2021, the employment to population ratio of female (aged 15 and above) was 43%, much lower than the ratio of male in the same age group which was 67%. The outbreak of COVID-19 epidemic in late 2019 made the situation even worse. The COVID-19 has brought a severe economic recession to the whole world, accompanied by business downturn, companies closure, and eventually the rise of unemployment rate. Under the lockdown and stay-at-home policies, people had to change their living and working patterns, switched to working from home. That will undoubtedly add to existing barriers in employment -- especially for women. An ILO report shows that in 2019-2020 alone, the employment rate of women fell by 4.2% and that of men by only 3%. The shocks of the COVID pandemic has resulted in a more difficult situation faced by women laborers in employment, further marginalizing them in the labour market.

Gender discrimination in employment has long been a concern in China. In the labour market in China, there is also a huge gender gap. In 2021, China's employment to population ratio was 70% for men and 59% for women. Although it is higher than the average world level, there is still a gap of more than 10%. At the same time, due to cultural and historical reasons, gender discrimination is reflected not only in the relatively low proportion of employed female laborers, but also in the gender segregation between different occupations and industries. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of China shows that women laborers are more concentrated in industries include education, health care, accommodation and catering, wholesale and retail, and nursing. In other industries like manufacturing, information, real estate, and scientific, the proportions are mostly less than 50%. These women-concentrated industries have been severely impacted by the COVID, increasing the unemployment risk faced by women.

The shock of the COVID can pose challenges for the survival and development of women in the long run. For women job seekers, it will increase the difficulty and the cost of getting employed. Many studies based on samples from different regions have shown that women experienced an

increase in their unpaid work time during the epidemic, which also increased the difficulty of keeping their work-life balance [1]. This will lead to further declines in women employment and relative wage, and even cause physical and mental health problems. Emilia Barili et al. (2021) conducted a survey of more than 4000 female respondents, which showed that women's mental health was affected by the pandemic, and one of the main reasons was their fear of the future, such as the fear of losing a job. At the same time, the impact of the COVID-19 could also exacerbate the existing gender discrimination in the job market [2]. For the society, a higher level of gender discrimination in employment will lead to more female laborers forced out of the job market, resulting in waste of human resources and loss of efficiency [3]. In the long term, the existing occupational gender segregation will be aggregated, resulting in a higher gender gap and thus distorting the normal market rules [4].

Therefore, in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic, the employment of women calls for more attentions. In view of that, this paper analyzes the negative impact of COVID-19 on women employment in the labour market of China from three levels: the perspective of government, enterprises, and individuals. And then puts forward policy suggestions for the government to improve the situation.

2. The Impact of COVID-19 on Women Employment

2.1 Government Policy

Gender discrimination in employment has long been a concern in China. Although China has formulated employment security policies, such as the equal pay for equal work policy and policies to protect women's rights and interests. However these policies are not enough to solve the problem, and even further exacerbate the situation. This is largely due to the fact that women actually spend more time doing unpaid work than men. Influenced by traditional gender norms, women tend to bear more family responsibilities such as caring for the elderly, dealing with housework and child rearing, which makes it more difficult for them to keep a balance between work and life. This has created a great barrier to women employment and put them at a disadvantage in the competition for jobs. While policies and measures such as equal pay for equal work and maternity leave can partially protect women's rights and interests, they can not solve the problem of unequal family responsibilities between men and women.

The shock of the COVID-19 has greatly amplified the problem. Lockdowns and stay-at-home policies during the epidemic have forced people to return to home to work or study, and while paid work time has declined, the demand for unpaid work time has soared, with women being the main bearers. According to global data released by UN Women, the number of unpaid hours taken by women has doubled during the epidemic, posing a great challenge to the work-life balance of the female workforce. The greatly increased family burden will undoubtedly aggravate the vulnerability of women employment, further weaken the competitiveness of women laborers, and eventually force them out of the labor market. And even worse, the corresponding compensation and guarantee system is still missing.

At the same time, the impact of the COVID-19 on women has been given scant attention in news coverage and publicity. The Center of Social Media Research of the Peking University conducted a research on 23 China's news media including the People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, CCTV news and other domestic news media and analyzed the content of 2020 COVID-19 news reports. The research found that among 331 news report about women, only 1.8% of them shows the perspective of gender equality, while in most of the reports women still appeared as traditional gender stereotypes such as wives and mothers. These news reports normalize the situation that women have to take more unpaid work hours within home, yet fewer job opportunities and less paid work hours. The media fail to objectively present the plight of women under the epidemic, which further worsens the social environment for women.

2.2 Enterprises

Most enterprises still have gender preference in the process of employment, therefore the employment threshold of women is generally higher than that of men. In a considerable number of industries, employers tend to preferentially recruit more men than women with the same qualifications. And women -- especially women of childbearing age, are more likely to encounter employment barriers and discriminatory conditions on marriage and childbirth. To consider it from an economic view, for enterprises, there is an implicit extra employment cost to hire female labor force than male. On the one hand, it is due to the "naturally-attached cost" brought by childbirth and menstruation. On the other hand, under the traditional gender norms, women's unpaid work time within house will occupy the paid work time, thus reducing the working efficiency and benefits they bring to their employers. And not all employers can consider it rationally and make hiring decisions based on reasonable measures of costs and benefits of hiring female employees. This has led to the formation of a stereotype that hiring female labor force is less cost-effective and inefficient for the enterprises, resulting in gender barriers in employment [5-8].

The COVID-19 has increased the domestic responsibilities of women and doubled the unpaid hours they work at home, which will undoubtedly increase the perceived cost for companies to hire female laborers. And that will push female workers into an even more difficult situation in labour market. Under the current context of the overall economic downturn, business closures and mass layoffs, the increasing gender preference among enterprises means that more female workers will be facing higher risk of income reduction and unemployment [9].

In China's labor market, due to persistent gender preference and discrimination, there has long been an occupational gender segregation. According to the All-China Women's Federation, women laborers are more concentrated in industries include education, health care, accommodation and catering, wholesale and retail, and nursing. These women-concentrated industries have been severely shocked by the epidemic, forcing many female laborers to leave their jobs. And even in some male-dominated industries women are also disproportionately unemployed [10]. Elise Gould, economist from the Economic Policy Institute has pointed out that because female laborers are underrepresented in the middle and senior ranks of these industries, they are more likely to be cut when push comes to shove. This deepens the employment dilemma faced by women under the pandemic.

2.3 Individual

The impact of the epidemic on women employment is also reflected in their mental conditions. The COVID-19 epidemic caused many physical and mental health problems. Studies have shown that women experienced a higher average increase in mental distress than men during the epidemic. Chinese studies have also shown that the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of women is more serious than that of men, and the probability of having physical symptoms such as anxiety, depression and insomnia of women during the epidemic is 1.5 times higher than that of men. The study of Emilia Barili et al. (2021) also suggest that women under the epidemic are more likely to be driven by the fear of future uncertainty, which would have a negative impact on their mental health. Compared with men, women are facing greater unemployment risk under the epidemic, which makes them more sensitive to pressure and thus more conservative in their employment choices, which further deteriorates their situation.

3. Conclusion

The COVID-19 epidemic has increased family burdens and unpaid work hours for women. And such negative impact was amplified by factors such as the lack of relative employment security, gender discrimination and, women's psychology. This will not only exerts a negative effect on female laborers but also on the society, hindering social development and economic recovery in the long run. The government should play an vital role and take effective actions to improve the situation. Based on the above analysis, this paper puts forward the following suggestions:

From the perspective of the government, it is indispensable for the government to reduce gender discrimination and ensure gender equality in employment especially under the current context of the COVID-19. On the one hand, the government should ensure the implementation of security policies such as employment gender equality and equal pay for equal work to effectively protect the equal rights and benefits of female workers in the labour market. On the other hand, considering that many female-concentrated industries are more severely affected by the pandemic, the government should also support these industries to mitigate the negative economic impact of the epidemic on women.

From the perspective of enterprises, one of the main reasons behind the gender discrimination in recruitment and promotion is the extra employment cost. This cost has increased during the epidemic, making it more difficult for female laborers to find jobs and increasing the risk of unemployment. In view of this problem, not only do the government need to strengthen supervision and management of the labour market, but also the relevant social departments should take their responsibilities to implement security policies. By providing public services and providing subsidies for affected enterprises and families, this cost will be "socialized", so as to reduce the burden of individuals and enterprises. If you follow the "checklist" your paper will conform to the requirements of the publisher and facilitate a problem-free publication process.

At the same time, there is a need for more positive publicity coverage of female image during the COVID-19 epidemic. Considering the fact that women received scant attention during the epidemic even though they had taken on more family responsibilities and made a lot of contribution to the whole society. Social media should not only strengthen the gender equality perspective in news reports, but also objectively show the family and social contribution made by women. It also includes strengthening the publicity of the concept of gender equality, so as to break the influence of the existing traditional gender norms, and promote the reasonable division of work within the family, so that women will not be limited to the traditional roles.

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