

The Dilemma of Motherhood Duties in the Context of Involution: Responsibilities and Expectations

-- A Case Study on Haidian Mothers

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Abstract. The traditional gender division of labor assumes that men should be primarily responsible for the financial duties of the household, while women are responsible for the more elaborate tasks of family care, including the birth and education of children. American sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild discovered that women suffered from both physical and emotional stress caused by the great tension between professional and family responsibilities in 1989. Although women can join the public workforce, the traditional burden of housework does not diminish. Based on existing research findings, this paper focuses on the Haidian District of Beijing, China, where there is a unique group of women called "Haidian mothers" who have to cope with the pressure of educational involution, high self-imposed demands and social expectations. This paper analyzes the causes of these dilemmas at three levels: individual, family and society, and proposes feasible suggestions in terms of institutional construction and conceptual renewal, hoping to provide certain referential information for academic research on the gender revolution and the solidification of gender concepts.

Keywords: Gender revolution; Gender-role attitude; Involution.

1. Introduction

In early societies, the biological differences between men and women lead to a different social division of labor within the family. It was natural for the men, who were more physically capable of protecting the family, to play the role of guardian, while women, due to their fertility nature, assumed more of the family responsibilities. Under this traditional distribution of family responsibilities, the man is regarded as the breadwinner and the woman as the manager of the household. These conventional concepts led to the loss of women's social roles and rights, and they gradually became subordinate to men in the family. Under the pressure of patriarchy and the marital system, women are forced to sacrifice and overpay for the family.

Since the 20th century, the unpromising situation seems to have taken a turn. Female employment has become not only ubiquitous but expected. These changing gender relationships in the public and the private spheres are referred to as the gender revolution [1]. With the awakening of women's consciousness, an increasing number of mothers are no longer satisfied with assuming a single role in the household, so they go to schools, factories, and offices, where they can establish new social values and identities. The gender revolution includes two parts: the first one is women's entry into the public sphere, and the second one is men's entry into the domestic sphere [2]. While women are stepping out of the home, most men are still stuck in the traditional gender division of labor and choose not to return to the family.

In China, despite declining figures over the last decade, Chinese women's labor force participation rate has remained above 60%, steadily accounting for a significant portion (43.5%) of society's entire employed population for decades [3]. Women have made very remarkable professional achievements, and the lines of gender division of labor seem to be blurred gradually. However, this was not the case. In a survey on childcare pressure of professional women in Xiaogan City, Hubei Province, 21% of professional women would at risk of losing promotion space due to childbirth, 59% were in a fatigued state of not being able to study and work properly, and 62% thought they were overcommitted with no one helping share the responsibility of raising children [4]. It is clear that working women face the dual dilemma of work and childcare.

A relatively common phenomenon in modern society is that working mothers are more likely to overwork, and more prone to fatigue, anxiety and other physical and mental distress. They devote more time and energy to their children's education consciously or unconsciously. Yet, they seem to have no regrets and are always passionate about all the challenging assignments, even those beyond the scope of their responsibilities. Family and social expectations of female gender roles result in women perceiving themselves to be more responsible. Under the privatization of child-rearing duties in China, mothers' physical energy is repeatedly squeezed, and women face increasingly heavy pressure under the dual exploitation of family and work. In the context of "education is a competition of mom's abilities", mothers become brokers of their children's socialization, helping them to stand out in the fierce social competition [5].

A thorough analysis on this "work-family" dilemma for females is presented in the book *The Second Shift—Working Families and revolution at Home* written by an American sociologist, Arlie Russell Hochschild, in 1989. She investigated several dual-income families and found that people will strategically solve the problems they encounter under the influence of formed varied gender concepts [6].

However, the dilemmas and solutions faced by women vary from region to region due to different domestic policies and socio-economic conditions. Few studies have explicitly focused on Haidian mothers, a unique group of women in Beijing, China, who dedicate a considerable amount to their children's education. Correspondingly, the studies and discussions about Haidian mothers all lie in the context of the involution, without any further consideration about its preconceived equation of children's education with the responsibility of motherhood. In the case of the Haidian mothers, the gender expectations and responsibilities of females in the gender division of labor have been ignored to a great extent, which is implicitly unfair.

On a personal level, women naturally need to take on more responsibilities for their children's education. On a family level, the differences in material conditions do not seem to moderate the unequal parental input on the issue of children's education. On a social level, the unique economic and socio-cultural characteristics of the Haidian District objectively place higher demands on working mothers living here as well. There seems to be a regional economic and socio-cultural tension behind the mechanism of action. In order to give a more effective response to the speculations and hypothesis above, this paper adopts the case analysis method to focus on the family and occupational roles of Haidian mothers, a unique female group in Beijing, China and then analyzes the underlying reasons for these problems following by offering feasible corresponding solutions.

2. A High-pressure Group Under the Involution

Haidian mothers is a Chinese Internet buzzword that refers to a group of women who live in the Haidian district of Beijing, who are physically and mentally focused on their children's education, and are ready to give their all to their kids. In addition, these women have advanced degrees and they are highly intelligent and successful in their career life.

Haidian District is the richest area in Beijing and even in the country regarding educational resources, where many famous universities and research institutes such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Tsinghua and Peking University are gathered. As a result, many high-profile families settled here, with parents from all walks of life, including college teachers, doctors and nurses from various hospitals, employees in state-owned enterprises, owners of private sectors, etc. Because of the unbalanced educational resources, the area with the highest concentration of educational resources also gathers the strongest demand for higher education from parents.

Although both parents have high expectations for their children's education, in reality, this expectation is mainly manifested in the father's efforts to provide his children with better living conditions and more advanced educational resources. Meanwhile, the mother is the one who is busy accompanying her children to extracurricular classes, taking them to various standardized exams, exchanging experiences with other mothers to keep up the pace, and taking care of the children's daily

lives. As a result, the mom is the one who knows everything about her children's growth and progress, rather than the dad.

In a program called "China Teen Stories," the crew interviewed the families of Haidian children about their education. A regular day for Ruoyu, a sixth-grader at Yuquan Primary School in Haidian District, Beijing, reported: his mother picks him up from school to attend an intensive training session at a cram school and orders take-out for him. The family moved to Beijing from Tianjin in order for the child to acquire better educational resources. In the interview session, the mother was talkative and knew everything about the kid's studies, while the father was in a suit and quietly stood by, unable to intervene.

Although Haidian's unique regional characteristics release intense anxiety and a more challenging family-work balance for the moms, Haidian mothers remain an over-labeled group with significant internal differences. There are ordinary working-class moms who rent apartments or take out a loan to buy a school district house. They are the so-called "first-settled generation" who work hard with the hope of providing their children with better educational resources so that their children can stand on a higher pedestal. There are also families born and raised in Beijing who feel anxious to unwind about their children's education. As a result, the mothers have to accompany their children to courses such as programming or kayaking. Finally, there is a category of mothers who have enjoyed great success in their careers, such as being the co-founders of enterprises, but still have to worry about their children's education and training. In the vast majority of cases, the husband seems to have a deficient presence.

3. Analysis of the Dilemma Faced by Haidian Mothers

3.1 On a Personal Level

3.1.1 Solidified gender concept

The traditional gender division of labor concept assumes that the human resources in the course of industrialization are organized in such a way that women are responsible for most of the childcare work. While fathers are primarily responsible for financial duties, mothers are responsible for the day-to-day care of the family.

According to Hochschild's observations, there are three main ways in which dual-income families in the United States respond to the unequal gender division of labor, which are traditional family, transitional family, and egalitarian family, with the vast majority of families remaining the transitional type in modern society [6]. The husband is able to accept the fact that his wife's career development is better than his own, which is already the most significant contribution he can make. Therefore, even though the husband is interested in his children's development, he is restraining himself from giving. He reckons that his full commitment to his children's education is a huge compromise which is difficult to be accepted by his inherent gender division of labor. The wife, on the contrary, even if she needs her husband's help in their children's education, tends to think it is her duty to handle it well, forcing herself to become a super mom who perfectly balances family and career.

When women get dissatisfied, public opinions try to weaken their resistance and make them accept the traditional gender division of labor, recognizing men's economic contribution as a gift to restore inner serenity in consumption [5]. However, this view actually undermines the value of women's labor in their children's education and denies the fact that working women are highly engaged in both the economic and educational aspects of their lives. It also contradicts the original intention of the gender-equitable division of labor in modern families. As a result, more and more women feel anxious and self-conscious about this issue.

3.1.2 Children's education - an exclusively female inconsequential issue

After an exhausting day in the workplace, moms return home to an open-ended second shift. An underlying mindset is that caregiving tasks, including daily schooling for children, are often deemed

trivial tasks to be taken for granted, which in turn may lead the general public to further underestimate the tasks' value and the effort being taken to accomplish the work. Consequently, although working mothers have higher self-esteem than full-time housewives and they are less likely to fall into depression, they are prone to experience overwork symptoms than their husbands.

The current situation is that the intensification of childcare responsibilities and the involution of children's education impose a severe childcare burden on Haidian mothers. The involvement of consumer discourse and expert discourse also constructs new parenting pressures for women. In addition to the child-rearing duties, women have to endure the social reproach of women's gender traits and personal abilities, the uncertainty of their children's growth and the family issue arising from the child-rearing dilemma. Behind the seemingly perfect integration of responsibility and feminism in the context of super moms is the twofold oppression of women's bodies and physiology by the patriarchal as well as consumer culture.

In a nutshell, the combination of traditional gender stereotypes and the factors of "education is a competition between mothers" and "intensification of mother's responsibilities" inevitably causes women to take on more work, which contributes to the formation of both social expectations and the self-internalization of stereotypes.

3.2 On a Family Level

3.2.1 From the household's material conditions

Survey shows that working mothers return to the workplace because they consider "it is important for women to be financially independent" and "they don't want to be out of touch with society", "To keep a sound self-state "and " due to "economic pressure" are also important factors that encourage working mothers to return to the workplace after having children [7]. However, as stated in the previous section, Haidian mothers are not a group that can be generalized because there are obvious status differences among them, ranging from a generation of immigrants who came to Beijing from small cities through their own efforts, to native Beijingers, as well as women with high-level professional status.

Many of the freshly-settled Beijingers live under severe pressure; they could give up the things they enjoyed as long as it would change the living conditions of their families. Nevertheless, they dare to venture out and work hard, and can quit their jobs in the institutional sector and engage in commercial activities to improve their livelihood [8]. They are more than capable and love to be held responsible, considering their children's education and raising their children well as their natural obligations. They do not ask their children what they desire; rather, they quietly take on everything and push their children towards the established path towards excellence [8].

Nowadays, schooling is definitely not a competition for children themselves. The role of involution concentrated on the comprehensive family capacity. More favorable material conditions result in more top-notch educational resources but do not change the fact that women assume all the education responsibilities. The only difference is the differing concepts of education. Families with favorable material conditions will respect their children's choices, with a more advanced philosophy of education, cultivating their children's self-dependency and respecting their children's personal development. However, the only thing that remains the same is that mothers blame themselves first when they encounter problems. The family will consider that it is the mother who is not fulfilling her duties, leading the mother to be harsh on herself. The father, on the contrary, remains to be a completely passive outsider.

For example, a documentary called "Amazing Mom" recorded the experience of an "atypical" Haidian mother in raising her child. After the birth of her son, the mother gave up her start-up company and worked in a traditional bank. Although she highly respects her child's route of growth, she still arranges all his interest classes, including soccer, drama and programming. In the interview, the mother asked her son, "Why is it that taking care of the children is always the mother's job, and involving the father seems to be a kind of prayer to let him do his extra work." [9]. The son replied, "Mom has breast milk, so the mother has to take care of it at the very beginning, but she can't hand

it over after that." [9]. This response also reveals that women's biological characteristics make them carry a greater burden of childcare responsibilities, seemingly tying them perpetually to caring for their children. All kinds of self-focused concerns are signs of irresponsibility.

The contradiction between economic and social development and family care results from a systemic social problem that society shift poses to every single family, and every single family further shifts that problem onto moms. Despite women gaining higher education and greater financial independence, gender roles tend to persist in the family sphere [1]. This kind of tension, as Hochschild quoted, is "the stagnant of gender revolution" [6].

3.2.2 The inevitable absence——A neglecting father

There is a popular term on the internet called "absentee fathers", which refers to fathers' absence in their children's education [5]. There are many pseudo-single mothers in our society, whose husbands leave home early and return late or do not communicate with their children. In better cases, although husbands do spend time involved in their children's education, they are generally not as involved as their wives. The fathers appear to be accompanying their children but are actually more self-centered in their interactions. In the face of this injustice, society has nonetheless consistently admonished women and lectured them on the need to eliminate the adverse effects of "absentee fathers" by adapting their attitudes rather than fighting against or actively seeking solutions [5].

The mothers' own growth experiences, i.e., the gender division of labor in their original families, can also take an influential role in shaping women's gender perceptions. They basically replicate the gender division of labor in the original families, believing that it is the mother's natural duty to take care of the children's studies, while the absent father is a perfectly normal phenomenon, a division of labor that can be accepted as understandable.

Fathers define their role as a financial breadwinner for the family, assuming that trivialities such as taking care of the child should be the wife's duties. Any supportive actions are considered a gift for a kind of unconventional practice. Although these behaviors can be viewed as a progressive practice towards gender equality, it is beyond the scope of their obligations. The father is unwilling to compromise completely, and wants to maintain his authoritative figure firmly. It is considered degrading for them to become child-centered househusbands who take the children to extracurricular classes and take care of all the trivialities of their children's daily lives.

With tremendous physical and mental pressure, mothers are subjected to social stereotypes that naturally bind child-rearing to women and impose high demands. Consequently, moms prefer to solve problems independently rather than communicate with their husbands to share the burden of their children's education.

3.3 On a Social Level

The dilemma of Haidian mothers comes from the unconscionable logic of people in the transitional stage of social evolution. The theory of gender revolution has pointed out that along with women's entry into the public sphere, men should consciously step back and assume or at least share part of the responsibility of child care [2]. However, before the public applauds women's remarkable vocational achievements, people have to face the reality of the involution of child-rearing responsibilities. Furthermore, society needs to deal with the commodification of motherhood shaped by the consumerism and market economy of modern society.

There are deep structural reasons behind the dual dilemmas of Haidian mothers at the social level. The market-oriented reform has brought about a vacuum of public education resources and the market-oriented transformation of education typically results from the commercial capital, which is accompanied by a relative tightening of social class mobility routes. However, education has always claimed a more equitable approach. This discordance has led to the delicacy of child-rearing and the anxiety of mothers [10]. The elaborate parenting approach poses high demands on the physical energy of the caregiver, splitting the mother's life into fragments centered around the growth of her children. In addition, the new family relationship advocates equality and care, which further raises the social

standards for evaluating children's development and increases the mental burden of mothers, requiring them to be responsible for their children's behavioral problems and long-term growth.

In a word, in the context of market-oriented transformation, young Haidian mothers have to cope with the strict requirements of raising children in an increasingly professional discourse, containing voices from all walks of life and the construction of excellent mothers' themselves. At the same time, they have to try their best to achieve the high standards set by the competition in the workplace for individual professionalization [11]. In this process, women's subjectivity as workers and mothers is constantly compressed, transforming them into new women dominated by technology and consumption.

As the current evaluation mechanism of society is relatively limited, education is a threshold to entering society. A famous school implies that the kid may have more options in the long run. For students from ordinary family backgrounds, education is their only path to promotion; hence mothers are required to bear heavy expectations and pressure on their children's education. For children from well-off families, their parents will not skimp on education expenditure. They will only be exposed to superior education resources to improve their capabilities and quality in all aspects, which makes the Haidian District, where education resources are concentrated, the center of the involution and the place where mothers are most anxious and experience the strongest physical and mental pressure.

4. A Viable Way out of Multiple Dilemmas

4.1 On the Institutional Construction Level

For a long period, Chinese society has evaluated women in a one-way manner, with women being expected to take care of children and run the household, while men are assessed in terms of their economic capabilities and career achievements. Therefore, the modern power structure needs to be changed at the legal, public sphere and basic institutional levels. Institutionally, men should be given sufficient time with their children and be provided with improved companionship and parenting skills.

In *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*, Hochschild presents that in Norway, parents of newborns receive 11 months of paid leave. Parents of younger children between the ages of 1-3 who are unable to attend public childcare centers may receive a cash allowance [6]. These experiences may be difficult to replicate in developing countries with large populations. Still, viable ways to balance work and childcare issues can be found by offering parents with children a more permissive time-off scheme and flexible working hours to reduce role anxiety.

A longer-term change is to enhance the socialization of education to cope with the status quo of delicate child-rearing brought about by the involution. When there are abundant social resources, increased promotion channels, and no obvious class division in society, the burden for children will be reduced significantly, with the mothers' child-rearing anxiety being alleviated as well. Besides, society should fully expand the model and definition of talent training. By emphasizing academic and technical talents equally, society will allow each child to develop their potential and provide systematic support for the child's development. Hopefully one day the group of Haidian mothers will be endowed with a new definition [9]. They will no longer be super mothers who are burdened with involution and work pressure, but independent women who are joyful about growing up with their children together with their husbands in a flexible work system.

4.2 On a Conceptual Level

4.2.1 From an individual perspective

The primary step women can take is to be aware that raising children is not their inherent responsibility. Women need to liberate themselves from the high expectations and demands they have on themselves. Regardless of whether they play the role of mother or not, they are first and foremost themselves. They need to have their own passions and pursuits. Women need to liberate themselves from the high expectations and demands they pose for themselves. The increasing number of bloggers

speaking out on self-media and the growing popularity of feminist books and visual materials will gradually make mothers realize that the education of their children is not their natural duty, but an issue for which they should seek family and social support. They ought to put their physical and mental health in a more critical position, cease self-denial and resist external judgment and criticism. These incredible women need to arouse their sense of independence and free spirit to raise questions about injustice as they have fought their way through. Instead of passively accepting reality, women should actively change the status quo.

4.2.2 From a family perspective

Current debate claims males should stay home and be full-time husbands when the wife earns a million bucks a year, which indicates that more and more people no longer judge men by their financial achievements. Their ability to take care of their families and children is valued as well. A voice arises that men do not need to be the backbone of the family, not all houses need beams; they just need to be like a brick and find their own place. Indeed, this situation only applies to some situations as the husband also needs to take on an important financial role when the wife's income is not good enough to support the expenses of the family.

In terms of promoting the involvement of fathers, the traditional gender role perceptions of people can be reversed by setting up positive examples, and society should focus on this particular category of fathers while publicizing omnipotent mothers. There shall be fathers who on the one hand are engineers in Silicon Valley, owners of startups with elite status and majestic economic power; on the other hand, they are also actively involved in household chores and children's growth, fulfilling the responsibilities of fathers. These influential figures in the workplace need to be convinced that they are just as capable as super moms. Only when more and more positive guidance makes public opinion shift beyond traditional male stereotypes can more fathers become comfortable and fully engaged in their children's development.

4.2.3 From a social perspective

It is essential not to be overly critical of women and to respect their work and contributions. Hopefully, more We-Media and official media will focus on the group of women with children in the workplace so that their exhaustion can be seen and their voices can be heard. In addition, the whole society needs to reflect together on the contributing factors to this phenomenon and whether they themselves have been holding a stereotypical gender division of labor bias that naturally ties mothers to the duty of educating their children.

Whether through books, films, posters, brochures or exhibitions, all forms that can reach the public shall fully demonstrate the pressure on women and the harsh duties that society is taking a heavy toll on women. Gender equality courses should be provided at the formative stage of children's mindset, teaching children to develop a complete and inclusive gender perspective. Schools ought to educate children to appreciate and respect their mothers' contributions. Kids need to understand that companionship and child care are not the exclusive domain of mothers; everyone should be able to care for their family and be passionate about their work. Couples should work together to make the home a cozy and loving place for their children to grow up and face the inevitable frustrations and challenges jointly. The most effective way to give children a sense of security is to create a family environment of equal communication.

5. Conclusion

Women's childcare responsibilities are not reasonably shared by the family and society, as they need to take good care of the family, educate the children, and earn money together with their husbands to support the family. Especially in China's Haidian District, a place with an unparalleled concentration of educational resources and a severe situation of involution, expert discourse, both from within the family and from society, has raised higher demands for their children's education. This has made the Haidian mothers to be exposed to the heavy duties of motherhood and work

pressure, as well as living under the double yoke of self-constructed gender stereotypes, which are difficult to unwind both physically and mentally. Being excellent but exhausted, Haidian mothers' demands are often ignored and they do not enjoy adequate social awareness and systematic support in the context of the marketization of education and marital dilemmas.

At an individual level, this gender division of labor pattern in the family has solidified, making Haidian mothers inevitably develop path dependency, and will reflect on themselves when problems arise. At a family level, the absence of husbands in their children's education has become a common phenomenon, and they try to restrain themselves from giving to maintain their authority figures. At the same time, although the material conditions of different families in Haidian vary, such differences are more reflected in various educational philosophies, and what remains unchanged is women's devotion and deep commitment. At the social level, in the context of market transformation, Haidian mothers have to cope with the increasingly strict requirements of raising children in professional discourse, and the involution of parenting responsibilities has once again brought about an upgraded reshaping of mothers' duties.

To solve the above problems, close cooperation between individuals, families and society is needed. At the institutional level, parents need to be given sufficient time to spend with their kids and companies need to adopt a lenient leave and flexible working hours system. More high-quality educational resources and comprehensive talent evaluation criteria are required to cope with the pressure caused by the involution. At the conceptual level, women themselves, their families and society should give up unrealistic expectations of females and respect their multiple identities. Husbands should not be trapped in the concept of traditional gender division of labor, but rather need more courage and confidence to participate in all-around family affairs and children's education. Society ought to cultivate a more equal and inclusive cultural atmosphere through education and publicity.

Although this paper analyzes the causes of this problem at three levels and gives corresponding countermeasures, it does not make further data collection and feasibility analysis on the solution of the problem. No more quantitative tools were used to investigate the distribution of social perceptions and the cost and process of promoting flexible work systems in companies. A subsequent study, based on more specific and detailed data, will hopefully give a more practical and systematic approach to extricate Haidian mothers from their double dilemma.

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