"Leftover Women": Stigmatize Unmarried Women in China

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Abstract. This article explores the phenomenon of unmarried women being stigmatized as "leftover women" in Chinese society and its underlying causes. It also examines the impact of culture, society, media and policy on this phenomenon through the lens of "doing gender" theory. Against the backdrop of traditional Chinese culture and social norms, the phenomenon of "leftover women" is deeply rooted in stereotypical images of women's marital roles, a stigmatization that is further reinforced by media portrayals. Policies such as the one-child policy and family planning have exacerbated the social pressure on unmarried women. This phenomenon reflects gender inequality and complex perceptions of marriage, which have a negative impact on women's social status and mental health. Understanding these factors can facilitate a societal shift towards gender equality and respect for different lifestyles. The study delves into the cultural context of traditional expectations of marriage, the role of the media in shaping societal views and the impact of policy in reinforcing the ideal of early marriage, emphasizing the complex interplay of cultural traditions, social change, media influence, policy impact and individual psychological dimensions in shaping the stigma of "leftover women".

Keywords: Leftover women; gender equality; marriage and parenthood stereotypes.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the development of society and the change of the times, the number of older unmarried women in China has been gradually increasing, and they have become a new group because of their iconic characteristics of being "older" and "unmarried". In 2001, the term "leftover women" with stigmatizing connotations appeared on the Internet, used to describe the group of older unmarried women, and then used by the media in their reports on related issues, making "leftover women" a group that has gained the consensus of all walks of life in the society. In 2007, the Ministry of Education released the "Report on the State of Chinese Language Life in China", which listed "leftover woman" as one of the 171 Chinese neologisms. Accompanied by a large number of media reports, "leftover woman" has emerged as the main topic of media coverage and online debate.

With the rapid development of China's economy and the acceleration of urbanization, more and more women are receiving higher levels of education, and are pursuing professional development and personal achievement, which is in conflict with the traditional beliefs that women should get married and have children at an early age. Against this backdrop, the term "leftover women" came into being to refer to women who are still single even though they have passed the traditional marriageable age. In traditional Chinese culture, the value of women is often closely related to their marital status. A woman who fails to marry at the "right" age is labeled as a "leftover woman," a label that not only calls into question her personal value, but also suggests that she is failing to fulfill a socially expected role. It reflects a deep-seated gender inequality in which women's identities and values are still largely determined by their marital status and fertility. Moreover, in many Chinese families and societies, marriage and childbearing are seen as important milestones in adulthood, especially for women. As a result, unmarried women often face pressure from their families and society, which may include urges to marry, matchmaking arrangements, and even public humiliation. This pressure not only affects women's personal choices, but also limits their lifestyles and possibilities for self-actualization.

The "Doing Gender" theory, developed by West and Zimmerman in 1987, is an important concept in gender studies [1]. The core idea of the theory is that gender is not an inherent attribute of a person but is constructed and expressed through a series of behaviors in the course of an individual's

interaction with society [1]. In other words, gender is realized through "doing," i.e., people "perform" their gender identities in everyday life by conforming to or rejecting socially prescribed gender norms and roles [1]. It is the way in which people "perform" their gender identity in everyday life by conforming to or rejecting socially prescribed gender norms and roles [1]. In addition, it is a kind of identity expression that an individual carries out in order to meet social expectations in different situations [2]. In applying the theory of "doing gender" to analyze the phenomenon of stigmatization of unmarried women in Chinese society, this phenomenon can be considered as an expression of social expectations of gender roles. In Chinese society, especially in areas where traditional attitudes are more deeply rooted, women are often expected to marry before a certain age, and this becomes part of their "doing gender". Unmarried women may be stigmatized and discriminated against for failing to meet this social expectation. At the same time, the media and public opinion may reinforce this phenomenon, influencing public perceptions and attitudes by portraying a particular image of unmarried women.

The fact that older unmarried women are often labeled as "leftover women" reflects, to a certain extent, gender inequality and gender stereotypes. This paper aims to explore the complex relationship between the cultural, social and media dimensions and their impact on the stigmatization of unmarried women through the lens of the "doing gender" theory, with a view to providing some insights into the solution to this problem.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Leftover Women

The term "leftover women" refers to women who have exceeded the age generally considered marriageable by society and have not yet married, especially a group of people who have an economic base. In China, the age of "leftover women" is generally defined as 25-35 years old, especially referring to older unmarried women over 28 years old [3]. It also refers to unmarried women who receive high education, possess high income, and have high intelligence levels [4]. The term "leftover women" has been widely used as a stigma against single women, comparing these women to those who have been picked over in the marriage market, expired goods, or high-maintenance single women who are not matched because of their demanding choices. Although the term "leftover women" is controversial and pejorative, some argue that this phenomenon can also be seen as a reflection of women's modernization, autonomy and independence. These women have the right to choose their own lifestyles, including deciding when and whether to marry. There is a similar phenomenon internationally, which shows that there is a global concern and evaluation of unmarried women.

2.2. Stigmatization

The term "stigmatization" was first coined and elaborated in the work Stigma: Notes on the Management of Damaged Identities by sociologist Goffman [5]. It generally refers to the labeling or imprinting given to a person, group, or thing that is unjust, negative, or demeaning, usually based on prejudice, discrimination, or misconceptions [6]. This process not only involves the exaggeration and simplification of characteristics but is often accompanied by prejudice against factors such as race, gender, nationality, or social status. The impact of stigmatization is far-reaching, as it can undermine an individual's self-esteem and self-identity, limit his or her social participation and opportunities, and even trigger broader social tensions and conflicts. The media, as the main channel for disseminating information, may inadvertently play a role in exacerbating stigmatization in this process.

2.3. Stigmatization of Leftover Women in Chinese Society

In Chinese society, unmarried women over the traditional marriageable age are at risk of being labeled as "leftover women". Behind this phenomenon is a combination of deep-seated socio-cultural factors and historical traditions [7]. Leftover women often face pressure from their families and

society, are negatively labeled as "leftover women", and experience mental health and workplace challenges [8].

Traditional Chinese culture has clear expectations of women's roles: early marriage, childbearing, and family caregivers. This cultural context shapes the public's inherent perception of the female life cycle. Under such a cultural framework, women who fail to follow the traditional trajectory are often questioned or even discriminated against. Second, with the rapid modernization of Chinese society, more and more women are pursuing higher education and careers. They seek personal fulfillment and financial independence, which sometimes leads them to delay marriage [9]. However, stereotypes of women who marry late or don't marry are still deeply rooted in society, and these women are often portrayed as critical, self-centered, or overly career oriented. At the same time, China's gender imbalance also contributes to the stigmatization of "leftover women". Due to the surplus of men, women are often viewed as a "resource" by society, while unmarried women are seen as an underutilized resource, subject to additional pressure from society and family. Although modern society is gradually promoting individual choice and gender equality, the concept of "leftover women" persists among certain groups, constantly mapping out deep-seated cultural and social structural problems.

3. Causes of the Phenomenon

3.1. Cultural Space: Traditional Culture and the Concept of Marriage

In traditional Chinese culture, the Confucian view of marriage emphasizes the traditional concept that when the man is old enough, the woman should be married, and marriage has always been regarded as a symbol of "maturity" for women. This emphasis on the importance of marriage and the responsibility of women to carry on the family line is one of the roots of the phenomenon of "leftover women". Meanwhile, the stigmatization of "leftover women" has existed in China since ancient times, when women who have not married for a long time were called "old girls" [8]. In this regard, people labelled women as “old” with their marital status instead of their actual ages. For a long time, under the influence of Confucianism, social expectations of women were still largely focused on having a family and children, which has also become the "doing gender" of women. Many Chinese families have a strong hold on this belief, which makes single women feel pressured by both family and society to get married before a particular age. This traditional notion of marriage is passed down through generations and reinforced in social interactions and behavioral practices. The groundwork is laid for stigmatizing unmarried women as a group that violates social norms.

3.2. Media Space: The Role of the Media and Social Construction

The mass media play a key role in shaping the phenomenon of "leftover women". Marriage programs, advertisements, and social media platforms often portray unmarried women as facing difficulties, anxiety, or social marginalization, intensifying their social pressure. For example, Andy, the heroine of the popular TV series "Ode to Joy", as a successful career woman, faces tremendous pressure from her family and society in the show because she is not yet married. This social construction can be explained by the Doing Gender theory, which states that the media creates a specific gender performance in society, which in turn influences people's perception of unmarried women. In a study of the media image of "leftover women", found that 32% of media reports about "leftover women" were negative, twice as many as positive ones [10]. Taking the China News Network as an example, the media image of "leftover women" is mainly the emotionally passive person who suffers from heavy pressure, the gullible person who is easily deceived, the demanding perfectionist, and the rational person who pursues true love in marriage [10]. This also means that the stereotypes and negative representations of unmarried women in the media further reinforce the social stigma of "leftover women". In addition, the discussion on social media also reflects society's concern about "leftover women". On Weibo, the hashtag #leftoverwomen has been read hundreds of millions of times, which demonstrates the high level of public interest in this topic. However, these discussions

often contain stereotypes and discrimination against unmarried women, further exacerbating social stigmatization.

3.3. Policy Space: The Impact of Policies and Social Expectations

A number of policy factors have also had an impact on the phenomenon of "leftover women". The Chinese government's population policy has undergone significant changes over the past few decades. From a strict family planning policy to one that encourages childbearing, these policies have had a profound impact on Chinese attitudes towards marriage and parenthood. For example, with the introduction of the two-child policy, Chinese society's expectations of childbearing have increased. However, this does not mean that society's expectations of women's roles have changed; women are still expected to find a balance between career and family. A study points out that such a policy tendency further reinforces the concept of early marriage, subjecting unmarried women to greater social and public opinion pressure [11]. At the same time, these policy provisions of family planning policy and marriage law also restrict women's freedom and rights to a certain extent, so that they are forced to accept the responsibilities of marriage and family. Over time, the “doing gender” for women to focus on marriage and childbearing is continually reinforced within the interactive space of social policies and social expectations, and social expectations put enormous pressure on women, while unmarried women are seen as failing to fulfill their social responsibilities, and thus suffer from the injustice of stigmatization.

The stigmatization of unmarried women as "leftover women" in Chinese society is a multilayered social problem, with the intertwined factors of longstanding traditional culture, media shaping and policy influence. The influence of traditional culture has made marriage and childbearing women's primary social roles, and the media's deliberate promotion of these concepts has further reinforced them, while policy factors have exacerbated the social pressure on and unfair treatment of unmarried women. This phenomenon not only affects women's social status and self-identity but also reflects society's complex perception of the concept of marriage and gender roles. An in-depth understanding of these factors will help to provide a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon of "leftover women" and promote social acceptance of and respect for gender equality and diversified lifestyles.

4. Conclusion

This paper examines the phenomenon of unmarried women being stigmatized as "leftover women" in Chinese society and its root causes. This stigmatization, which is deeply influenced by traditional culture, social attitudes, media constructs and policies, not only reflects gender inequality and stereotypes, but also negatively affects women's social status and mental health. Driven by traditional culture and social attitudes, Chinese society holds stereotypical expectations of women's marital roles, which are further exacerbated by negative media constructs that expose unmarried women to greater social pressure and discrimination. At the same time policies such as the one-child policy and family planning policy have exacerbated this problem. This phenomenon reveals the complexity of society's views on the concept of marriage and gender roles, while also highlighting the need for gender equality and awareness of diverse lifestyles. The intertwining of factors not only reveals the underlying social and cultural reasons behind the phenomenon of "leftover women", but also emphasizes the importance of understanding these factors to promote gender equality and the recognition and respect of diverse lifestyles. Through in-depth analysis, this paper aims to promote a more comprehensive understanding and awareness of this issue in society, thereby promoting gender equality and social acceptance of diverse lifestyles.

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