Urbanization and Women's Social Status: Progress and Challenges in China

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Abstract. This paper examined the relationship between urbanization and women's social status by analyzing China's case from 2010 to 2022. The paper first analyzed how the conditions have improved in aspects of education, pay, health, and gender conceptions, then identified challenges that still exist, including underrepresentation of women in STEM fields, reduced employment, unhealthy mental conditions, and domestic violence. According to the challenges and based on successful cases in other parts of the world, the promotion of gender-sensitive education, encouragement to react to gender discrimination, promotion of social support, and provision of domestic violence support programs are suggested. The analysis of China's case on the problem showed that urbanization influenced women's social status both positively and negatively. Urbanization provides women with a wide variety of opportunities for personal development and independence attainment but may expose them to mental health issues, reduced employment, and domestic violence. Problems including the limited number of women working in STEM fields remain unsolved due to cultural norms and conventional gender conceptions.

Keywords: Urbanization, women's social status, gender equality.

1. Introduction

From the 1970s to the 1990s, many countries started on their way to attempt urbanization, including China's "Reform and Opening-up," South Korea's "New Village Movement," and Japan's "Municipal Mergers and Dissolutions" [1]. Indeed, some policies succeeded, and some failed, but these countries have all managed to urbanize to quite a high level. Coming along the rising levels of urbanization was rapidly progressing science, technology, education, and many crucial industries and fields, and in the past decade or so, gender equality has become a topic of heated discussion as well as public interest [2]. It is certain that urbanization has had a significant impact on women's roles in society – more and more women are able to jump out of the "conventional" role of daughters, wives, and mothers and achieve their values as an individual in society. What role did urbanization have in raising women's social position, then? Many of the impacts involve more women getting educated at a higher level, more women becoming more respected as individuals, and more women becoming financially independent and receiving higher salaries. However, many problems still remain. Even with high levels of urbanization and a rise in women's social status, issues such as social norms, gender stereotypes, employment discrimination, and domestic violence are holding back the progress of women's liberation. These issues bring public concerns to the rise yet have remained unsolved with limited effective solutions put to trial.

In the past, research papers have discussed many topics about how women have faced problems such as workplace discrimination, wage differences, and educational disparities, mainly focusing on the mechanisms behind the specific phenomenon. However, none has explicitly discussed the impact of urbanization on women's general social status. By filling in such a research gap, the results found will be helpful in advancing the understanding of policies relating to factors influencing women's social status and gender equality. At the same time, the research can be helpful in informing policy-making decisions to consider the implications of policies on women more completely. Furthermore, research on this topic may provide a direction for future empirical studies in this field. Thus, this paper will look into the question of how urbanization influences women's social status. In this paper, China has been chosen as the geographic location of research, and this is for several reasons. However,

one of the primary reasons is that it is a country with patriarchal traditional social norms still powerful and has sufficient resources for study [3]. Thus, research will be conducted on the relativeness of urbanization to women's social status.

The research will be conducted through three steps: current situations and improvements, existing problems, and suggestions. In the first step, changes in women's social status due to urbanization since 2010 will be explored with evaluations of data. Then, problems that still exist will be identified and explained. Following the problems, suggestions will be provided in response, using examples of how similar policies have shown effectiveness elsewhere. Finally, the conclusion will be drawn based on the history and development of the influence of urbanization on women's social status. The structure of this paper will follow how the research is conducted. First, a brief overview of urbanization and women's social status in China since 2010 will be provided. Then, the improvement of women's situation in education, pay, health, and gender conceptions will be discussed. Following, the still-existing problems of underrepresentation of women in STEM fields, reduced employment, unhealthy mental conditions, and domestic violence are identified and explained with supporting data. Accordingly, suggestions to promote gender-sensitive education, encourage reactions to gender discrimination, promote social support, and provide domestic violence support programs are suggested based on successful examples in other areas of the world. Finally, an answer to the problem of how urbanization influences women's social status is given in the final part of the paper.

2. Urbanization and Women's Status in China

2.1. China's Urbanization Since 2010

Since the 1970s, when the reform and opening-up policy was implemented, China has experienced incredibly high-paced urbanization [2]. As shown by data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the urbanization rate of China in 2010 was 49.7%, and it rose to 63.9% by 2020, increasing by 14.2% in total. Historically, China's economy has been agricultural intensive since ancient times, and even in 2010, when the urbanization rate was 49.7%, China was still accounted for as an agricultural country. China has always worked hard in urbanization, and the development was rapid; when the urbanization rate exceeded 50% for the first time in 2011, China had become a new urbanized country [2]. At this point, more than half of the Chinese population lived in urban areas, marking a critical historical moment. However, researchers have questioned the truth about China's urbanization level. With its urban-biased policies, there was a tremendous number of rural residents in urban areas, where they no longer counted as farmers or "agricultural residents", yet still, due to the strict "hukou" system, they could not become true "urban residents" [2]. It was not until 2018, when China's "New Era" was started that policies for urbanization shifted from being urban-biased to urban-rural integrated development [1].

2.2. Chinese Women's Social Status Since 2010

A few national organizations in China are making efforts to raise the status of women. The National Bureau of Statistics of China, in collaboration with the China Women's Federation, conducts the Survey on Social Status of Women in China every ten years. In the survey, the two organizations research on the changes in women's lives and status, looking into topics including the economic, education, political, health, and family status [4]. At the end of each decade, the suvey results are published among a national program aimed at helping women develop. The survey results demonstrate a significant enhancement in the average social status of Chinese women from 2011 to 2020. This improvement is particularly evident in the domains of gender equality, general development, as well as women's perception of gain, fulfillment, and security [4]. Even though there have been significant advancements, there are still some areas where women's rights need to be better protected [4].

3. Urbanization and Women's Social Status

3.1. Reduction in Education Disparities

As shown by data from a survey by government organizations, the mean number of years of education attained by women aged 16 to 64 in China as of December 2011 was 8.8% [5]. Furthermore, the average disparity in educational attainment between men and women was determined to be 0.5 years [5]. Additionally, 33.7% of all women between the ages of 16 and 64 were said to have completed high school [5].

In 2020, girls of primary school age had a net enrollment rate of 99.9% for six years in a row, and the survival rate for the nine years of compulsory education was 95.4%, up 4.1% from 2010 [4]. The proportion of girls enrolled in the nine-year compulsory education increased by 2.8% simultaneously [4]. Additionally, according to the findings presented in a government report on women's social status in China, there has been an increase in the average years of education attained by women aged 18-64. This group's average years of education now stand at 9.41 years, slightly lower by 0.25 years compared to men. Furthermore, for women aged 18-24, the average years of education received is 12.81 years. This represents a notable increase of 1.85 years over the past decade, surpassing men of the same age by 0.81 years [6]. Based on available data, it can be observed that there has been a significant reduction in the educational gap.

As shown, actions have been taken in the past years to increase girls' literacy, which can help them achieve financial independence and lead to a healthier and freer life, contributing immensely to gaining social status in their later life [7].

3.2. Decreasing Wage Disparities

Urbanization reduces the gender wage gap, which improves women's social status. Based on a government investigation in 2010, a significant wage disparity was seen between male and female laborers. Among the employed female labor force, around 71.1% experienced a substantial wage gap, earning an average of just 67.3% of their male counterparts in urban regions and a mere 56.0% in rural areas [5]. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, by 2017, there was a noticeable reduction in the gender wage gap, with women earning about 80% of what men made. However, the gender wage gap varied with the level of education attained and age, shrinking as the level of education attained increased and widening as the age surpassed 45.

3.3. Improving Health and Healthcare

Urbanization has been shown to have a positive impact on the healthcare received by women, both in terms of quantity and quality. This improvement in healthcare services contributes to enhancing their overall health conditions, hence leading to a certain degree of advancement in their social position [2]. The progress made in medical and healthcare circumstances plays a pivotal role in women's pursuit of equitable societal standing.

Two prominent measures of women's health, namely life expectancy and maternal mortality rates, exhibit positive trends indicative of improvements in women's overall well-being. Over the course of the previous ten years, there has been a notable rise in the mean life expectancy of females, with figures indicating an increase from 77.37 years to 80.88 years [4]. Regarding maternal mortality, data from the government reports a reduction of nearly 40% from 2010 to 2020, with the result that for every 100,000 live births, only 16.9 maternal deaths occurred [4]. According to the cited source, the incidence of the specified condition is 14.1 cases for every 100,000 live births in urban areas and 18.5 cases for every 100,000 live births in suburban and rural areas, as reported [4].

Additionally, there have been notable advancements in the delivery and accessibility of healthcare services for women. In terms of service provision, it is noteworthy that there was a significant rise in the number of maternity hospitals and obstetricians and gynecologists by 2020, with a doubling of the former and a 55.7% increase in the latter compared to the figures recorded in 2010 [4]. Simultaneously, there has been notable progress in women's healthcare from the perspective of

service recipients. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the rate of hospital deliveries has consistently exceeded 99% since 2012, ultimately reaching a rate of 99.9% by the year 2020. There has been a notable enhancement in the provision of care, as seen by the rise in coverage rates for prenatal and postnatal care, which now stand at 97.4% and 95.5%, respectively [4]. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the screening rate for prevalent diseases among women experienced a significant rise of 25.4% in 2020, reaching an impressive 86.6% compared to the rates recorded in 2010 [4].

3.4. Improving Social Gender Conception

Society's conceptions and attitudes toward one are among the most significant factors in determining one's social status. Society's conceptions and attitudes towards women as a whole group are crucial in determining their social status. Such conceptions and attitudes that happen along with urbanization should contribute to improving women's social status.

Chinese society is finding the idea of women's independence more acceptable. As shown by a survey conducted in 2020, the idea that "women's capabilities are not any worse than men" was accepted by 94.1% of all respondents, which is 10.6% higher than in 2010 [6]. At the same time, people disagreed more with the idea that "men's role is primarily in society while women's role is confined to the household," with 50.9% of men and 58.3% of women [6]. These figures indicate a respective increase of 14% and 14.7% compared to the data from 2010 [6]. It is worth noticing that around 80% of female respondents aged under 35 disagreed with this idea, and 94.6% of the same group of respondents disagreed with the idea that "the responsibility of childcare only belongs to the mother" [6]. Almost 70% of all respondents refused the idea that "wives should be obedient to husbands at home" [6]. The increasing awareness of women's independence, especially among the younger generation, is visible. More women are realizing that their value exceeds being a daughter, wife, and mother, that they are worth more in society and at work, and that more are realizing the importance of independence.

4. Existing Problems

4.1. Underrepresentation of Women in STEM Fields

According to the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, of the 3.14 million postgraduate students enrolled and graduated in 2020, 50.94% were female [8]. Women are receiving higher-level education, yet their representation in STEM fields is still very low. According to the Ministry of Science and Technology of the People’s Republic of China, there were 7.55 million research and development (R&D) personnel in 2020, of which only 1.98 million were female, which is less than 26.5% [9].

As for the reason for this issue, empirical research shows that the underrepresentation is due to the low motivation for achievement that women in this field tend to have, especially when the motivation for achievement is compared to that of men [3]. However, girls in universities were found to have better academic performances than boys [10]. Thus, in the identification of factors that caused low motivation, it was found that families tend to have lower career expectations [3]. The teachers and professors in classrooms and labs tend to have a gender bias when it comes to education [3]. In contrast, the men were often involved in the process of the experiment, and women were set aside to record data [3].

4.2. Reducing Female Employment

In 2010, the Chinese government reported the employment rate of women aged 18-64 of 71.1%, 60.8%, and 82.0% of women employed in urban and rural areas correspondingly, and 75.1% of women in rural areas are employed in agriculture [5]. As for labor force participation, according to the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China the ratio for both men and women decreased in rural areas from 2011 to 2017, corresponding to a 5.2% reduction and an 11.5%

reduction. In urban areas, employment disparities seem even worse, with 72.6% of men employed and only 53.7% of women employed.

According to data and estimation, researchers argue that as income increases, families can manage an everyday life relying on only the men's income, which would allow women to leave the workplace and invest time and effort in raising children as society expects [11]. At the same time, it was found that men with mothers who didn't go to work were less likely to support their wives to go to work [12]. Women in such situations would have limited access to job opportunities and are more likely to be discouraged from joining the workplace. Due to such cultural norms and family attitudes, women will also face challenges in finding work-life balance and career advancement opportunities. However, unemployed women will eventually lose competitiveness in the workplace as they age and will become dependent on their husbands and children, which would impair their social status. Therefore, ensuring women can be employed equally is crucial.

4.3. Mental Health Problems

Past research has shown that women around the world tend to have worse mental health conditions in comparison, but an empirical study on work burden and mental health has shown that this problem is particularly intense in China [13]. The study found that the impact of an hour of addition on the mental health conditions of all genders is the same [13]. However, with the social norm of "men outside, women inside," women, especially working women, have to work both in the workplace and at home and so tend to work more hours and have worse time poverty [13]. For women who desire higher social status, work at the workplace is required, yet at the same time, the family expects marriage and children. This means that women would have to, on the one hand, work for higher status and, on the other hand, comply with family expectations and take on a large amount of unpaid domestic work. Thus, women tend to have immensely worse mental health conditions than men in China.

4.4. Domestic Violence

While the general attitude towards women in China has been improving in the past years, domestic violence remains a serious problem. According to research in 2023, in a questionnaire filled by 412 married and previously married women from Beijing and Shanghai in four income brackets, 27.91% experienced physical domestic violence, and 30.1% experienced sexual violence [14]. At the same time, along with rising income and increasing economic empowerment for women (which rises with urbanization), the risk of experiencing domestic violence does not decrease. The study found that women with the highest incomes faced almost the same risks of domestic violence as other women, and women who either currently have a higher income or previously had a higher income than their husband faced higher risks of physical violence the those who had lower or equal income in comparison to their husband [14]. Thus, with improving gender conceptions and increasing income for women that follow the increasing urbanization, married women are put at higher risks of domestic violence.

5. Suggestion

5.1. Promoting Gender-sensitive Education

Schools, universities, and institutions can provide gender-sensitive education for students. To address the problem of underrepresentation of women in STEM fields, a number of universities and institutions in the United States have implemented support policies, including increasing training to staff on topics such as implicit bias and holding workshops to identify bias in the staff recruiting process, and studies have shown the policies to be effective [15]. China can implement similar policies to ensure staff are aware of gender bias. However, the patriarchal gender norms remain to be a compelling thing in Chinese society [3]. This means that in addition to such policies, enforcement may have to be stricter through regular anonymous student surveys. At the same time, workshops and

keynote speeches can be held regularly for lower-level education institutions and schools. The guidance and inspiration of female role models in STEM fields will ensure that young girls have equal opportunities for exposure to STEM at a young age.

5.2. Encouraging Reactions to Gender Discrimination

Rather than relying on legal policies and regulations, women should speak up for themselves and make use of policies and regulations when encountering gender discrimination in the workplace. According to research, gender discrimination can directly influence a firm's success due to the dissatisfaction of employees [16]. At a macro level, monitoring legal regulations is difficult for the government, requiring tremendous time and effort. Instead, by encouraging women to stand up and make use of such regulations, firms will be impacted directly by gender discrimination, which increases awareness of gender discrimination in the workplace more effectively. The research results also support this. In countries with gender equity is enforced more strictly in the legal system, consequences of gender discrimination are more severe, so such situations are less likely to happen [16]. This will require support from the legal system, including serious treatment of such cases in court. At the same time, the promotion of protection laws and regulations should be increased to ensure women's awareness of such protections for usage. Finally, women should be encouraged to put these legal tools in use to build up an environment that treats gender equity in the workplace seriously.

5.3. Promoting Workplace and Social Support

Social support is the perception of care given to others in society, including resources such as providing companionship and creating relationships and belongingness, which should be beneficial to relieve stress, anxiety, and depression [17, 18]. Based on research conducted on the topic of social support and its impact on Pakistani women, it has been found that social support can effectively alleviate anxiety, stress, and depression among married women both employed and unemployed [18]. This means that social support is effective in improving women's mental health. Thus, China can take the example of Pakistan as an example and provide social support such as community organizations or workshops and adopt workplace support such as childcare services or parental leave to reduce women's work burdens. However, support from the government will be required to encourage such organizations to be started.

5.4. Strengthening Support Programs

There may be a need to enhance support programs in order to effectively tackle the issue of domestic violence. In the United States, domestic violence programs have been shown to be effective in providing help to domestic violence survivors [19]. In domestic violence programs, they engage in activities that can increase their self-confidence and efficacy, and activities that increase their access to resources and opportunities to manage a normal or better life [19]. In straightforward terms, these programs are specifically meant to have a beneficial effect on the social and emotional welfare of survivors and their children. In China, similar programs should be encouraged. In addition to programs targeted to domestic violence survivors, programs targeted to domestic violence prevention, such as programs to promote anti-domestic violence laws, help-providing hotlines, and conflict resolution should also be funded. With help from these support programs, domestic violence may be reduced, and survivors may be able to lead on to a better life with help to rebuild their autonomy.

6. Conclusion

With the literature reviews, past data review and analysis, and case studies, this paper looked into the research question of how urbanization influences women's social status through an analysis of the situation in China since 2010. Based on the analysis of what has improved since 2010, this paper pointed out some still-existing problems in Chinese society regarding women's path to equality and

higher social status. At the same time, this paper put forward suggestions with policies proven effective in other countries and adjusted to suit the Chinese situation better.

Through the previous analysis, the situation in China suggests that urbanization has both positive and negative influences on women's social status. Urbanization provided women with a wide variety of opportunities for personal development and independence attainment, including education, wage, health, and respect. However, it is also found that urbanization and some of the positive implications may cause severe negative impacts, including mental health issues, reduced employment, and domestic violence. At the same time, problems such as the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields have not been improved with the increasing education and employment opportunities from urbanization due to cultural norms and gender stereotypes. Thus, attention and awareness will be required. These findings will be helpful in the making of policies related to gender equality and female empowerment, or in fact, every policy that has an impact on women. The suggestions provided are based on successful foreign examples adjusted for China's conditions, which can also help in informing policies and strategies, which is a significant force in the attainment of gender equality and empowerment of women. At the same time, this paper and its findings can be helpful for the understanding of policies made.

This paper researched the question qualitatively, focused on the case of China, which limits the identification of some other situations and influencing factors. In future studies, research should not be limited to the geographic location of China. At the same time, quantitative empirical studies can be conducted to understand better the relationship between urbanization and women's social status and provide a more thorough answer to the research question.

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