Construction of the Private Responsibility Discourse on Period Poverty in China from the Perspective of Nancy Fraser's Misrecognition Theory

Liren wang *

School of Maxism, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710049, China

* Corresponding Author Email: loiswang1996@stu.xjtu.edu.cn

Abstract. Period Poverty, defined as the economic inability to access safe sanitary products, clean water, privacy, and menstrual health knowledge, remains a pervasive yet marginalized issue in many developing countries, including China, where it is largely excluded from public policy agendas. This study employs a case study methodology, informed by Nancy Fraser's theory of misrecognition, to deconstruct the Private Responsibility discourse surrounding period poverty in China. Through an in-depth semi-structured interview, this research investigates how one woman internalizes and is affected by the cultural narrative that frames menstruation as a private matter. The analysis demonstrates that this misrecognition operates by stigmatizing menstruation, negating its impact on women's productivity, and categorizing menstrual products as personal care items rather than as necessities. The case study reveals that this norm compels the individual to unconsciously accept period management as her sole responsibility, thereby concealing the structural nature of the problem. It is concluded that this misrecognition effectively silences discourse on period poverty and causes its neglect within the public and policy areas.

Keywords: private responsibility, period poverty, Nancy Fraser.

1. Introduction

Period poverty refers to the inadequate access to menstrual hygiene tools for women and adolescent girls. It also associated with period shame and stigma, as well as poor menstruation education [1]. Nowadays, up to 500 million women and girls are experiencing the period poverty in the world [2]. Due to period poverty the associated issues of menstrual shame and health concerns, female are forced to suspend their studies or work, falling into a vicious cycle of "period poverty - impaired health - inability to develop - even greater poverty".

In China, there are 5% of girls in rural areas have no access to the sanitary products, while 13% feel ashamed of asking their parents for money to buy them [3]. However, the issue has always remained on the periphery of social attention, and currently, it has not entered the public policy agenda and lacks systematic governance.

The core factor lies in the "private responsibility" discourse, which shapes the public's traditional perception. Menstruation is constructed as a private matter of the individual, and therefore the responsibility for obtaining menstrual products should also fall on the individual or the family, with the expectation that personal issues should be resolved by individuals themselves.

Nancy Fraser's theory of misrecognition provides an analytical tool for deconstructing the formation of the personal responsibility discourse behind menstrual poverty. Misrecognition is the primary manifestation of gender injustice at the cultural level, referring to the institutionalized androcentrism cultural norms that construct specific groups especially women as inferior, excluded and invisible entities, thereby devaluing their identity, neglecting their basic needs, preventing them from obtaining equal social respect and institutional recognition from men, and this cultural-level injustice is intertwined and mutually reinforcing with inequality in distribution in economy and misrepresentation in politics, jointly constituting a closed loop of gender oppression [4,5].

This paper aims to show how the private responsibility discourse surrounding period poverty is constructed and institutionalized in the Chinese context, leading to the misrecognition of women's needs and the subsequent neglect of this issue as a public problem. By applying Nancy Fraser's theory

of misrecognition, this study will analyze how this discourse perpetuates gender injustice by framing menstrual needs as private thing rather than collective concerns. Ultimately, the research seeks to argue for the re-framing of period poverty and promote the realization of gender equality.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Definition of Period Poverty

Period poverty refers to inadequate access to menstrual hygiene products, education, and facilities due to financial constraints, stigmatization, and infrastructural deficiencies [6]. Researchers generally emphasize that the essence of this issue is not merely a problem of economic resource scarcity, but rather a deprivation of women's rights at the societal level, namely, the basic right of women to access safe menstrual products has not been guaranteed by institutions and social security [7]. Moreover, some studies argue that menstrual poverty is not merely a shortage of supplies, but also implies the hidden deprivation of health rights. This deprivation extends to education and employment, forming multiple forms of vulnerability [8].

2.2. Three Important Factors

At the economic level, the gender income gap is widely recognized as one of the causes of menstrual poverty. Unequal pay for men and women doing the same work is a common phenomenon. For single mothers and female university students, etc., due to their weak economic background, menstrual products have become an unbearable economic burden, and they even need to reduce food and education expenses to ensure basic needs [9].

At the cultural level, the culture of menstrual shame has exacerbated the concealment of menstrual poverty. Women in distress are afraid of social discrimination and thus actively suppress their needs and avoid seeking help, further falling into poverty. When there is a shortage of hygiene products and improper management during menstruation, it will further aggravate their sense of inferiority and create a vicious cycle [10].

At the political level, some countries lack systematic planning for sanitation facilities, impose high taxes on feminine hygiene products, and have insufficient public policies to provide assistance, all of which indicate a lack of attention to women's menstruation issues in policies. These factors are not conducive to alleviating the menstrual burden of poor women [7].

2.3. Private Responsibility Discourse in Period Poverty

The Private Responsibility Discourse is associated with menstrual shame, and the two have been constantly reinforced. It conveys an unclean perception and links it with negative images such as contamination and trouble. In additon, it establishes communication taboos, believing that discussing menstruation topics in public is disgraceful. Ultimately it reinforce the concept of the responsibility for managing menstruation independently [11].

Additionally, menstrual shame is also related to the social atmosphere of fear of talking about sex, where menstruation is regarded as a physiological phenomenon associated with the female reproductive system and is considered a privacy taboo. Women's expression of their need for menstrual products is regarded as inappropriate, and under the constraints of various cultural regulations, menstrual poverty has become an inexpressible predicament [12].

There are also many related quantitative studies in the academic community, providing data support for this phenomenon, such as a study on the influencing factors of menstrual shame based on Logistic regression analysis [13].

From a practical perspective, many women in certain regions are still bound by China's traditional gender norms. For example, in some local customs, menstruating women are prohibited from entering temples, kitchens, participating in sacrifices, and even being restricted from attending family gatherings [14].

These phenomena all reflect the discrimination and misunderstanding of menstruation in society, solidifying the perception of menstrual responsibility as private, making menstrual poverty difficult to break through prejudice and enter public governance.

3. Research Method

The research method of this article is semi-structured interviews. The interviews use a semi-structured outline and are conducted on a single female subject for case analysis. The interview lasts for 1 hour. This article mainly explores the construction of the "personal responsibility" discourse regarding menstrual poverty, as well as the subject's identification and reflection on this discourse during its growth process.

Ms. Tong, 30 years old, a female from a provincial capital city in Northeast China. She graduated from two top universities and worked as a high school teacher after graduation. Her monthly income is between 4,000 and 5,000 yuan, and she has social insurance, housing fund, and other social subsidies and guarantees. Although Ms. Tong does not belong to the poverty-stricken group, she is in a state of limited financial freedom and believes that she will be affected by menstrual poverty to some extent.

Her living situation reflects the common challenges faced by groups with limited economic means in China when dealing with period poverty. Selecting her as an interviewee therefore provides us with a perspective from women representing the largest demographic in Chinese cities, which is crucial for understanding the construction of the discourse on period poverty.

4. Result

4.1. A Troublesome Necessity

First, Ms. Tong shared her views on period poverty and talked about the challenges and anxieties surrounding sanitary pads.

"The price of sanitary pads is still relatively high among the general female population because they are essential items that women cannot do without and cannot avoid. Women generally believe that using sanitary pads is closely related to their own health, so they tend to choose high-quality, big-brand, and high-function products (like sleep pants), but this will cost more. This expense is quite expensive."

Ms. Tong repeatedly emphasized the safety of sanitary pads in the interview, which is closely related to the frequent incidents of "shoddy cotton" and "bug eggs" scandals in recent years. She said that female colleagues in the office would often discuss which sanitary pads are safe and affordable.

4.2. About Menstrual Shame

Ms. Tong had difficulty talking about menstruation during her adolescence and even after reaching adulthood. And even though there is some discussion in society nowadays, she still believes that such discussions are only applicable to the so-called "cultural circle" and cannot reach the general public.

"My menstrual shame began during adolescence, and it has persisted even after starting work. But it gradually decreased. With the growth of age and the continuous influence of education, my thinking has gradually opened up. However, I still cannot escape the influence of my family and living environment from when I was young. I have also heard a lot of discussions about menstruation. The recently popular podcasts and talk shows, I have watched them all and was deeply touched. But this topic seems to only become a related discussion about feminism in certain cultural occasions and is difficult to sink into daily life. If I discuss this topic in my daily life, it will make people feel strange."

4.3. A Blind Spot

Ms. Tong has also paid attention to the current public policies related to menstruation, such as period leave policy. She has very realistic thoughts on the implementation and believes that they will

be very difficult to come true in the end. Because the traditional social perception of menstruation is very hard to change. Under the current employment situation, women will only encounter more severe criticism due to menstrual issues.

"The issue of period poverty cannot be talked about extensively. It is not regarded as an excuse for women, although most of us experience extreme discomfort during periods. However, in today's employment environment where gender discrimination exists, you cannot simply not work well or affect efficiency just because you are in your menstrual period. Once you actually take period leave, you will be seen as being overly sentimental, and as a result, mangers will deny your work ability."

"Due to the heavy teaching tasks, many teachers even do not fully take their maternity leave. The theoretical duration is six months, but if it happens at the end of the semester, the leader will call to fell out, and this behavior is very difficult to refuse. My workplace environment is that maternity leave is also very difficult to complete, let alone period leave, which is a derivative of the female reproductive process."

5. Analysis from the Perspective of Nancy Fraser's Misrecognition Theory

Nancy Fraser's Misrecognition Theory believes that society constructs specific groups through inferior, excluded and invisible cultures, systematically denying female, leading to cultural gender injustice. In the issue of menstrual poverty, the formation of the Personal Responsibility Discourse is the result of the effect of misrecognition.

Through cultural construction of menstruation, society turns menstruation into a private matter. By combining the interview case of Ms. Tong, it can be found that this construction mainly consists of three elements: value negation, subject marginalization, and inequality concealment.

5.1. Value Negation

Fraser emphasizes that one of the manifestations of misrecognition is to deny the attributes or needs of specific groups through cultural narratives, reducing them to non-essential and personal burden.

Ms. Tong mentioned that "sanitary pads are essentially necessities like rice, flour, and oil, just for women's use". In reality, rice, flour, and oil are included in the livelihood security system and have price regulation and strict quality supervision. However, sanitary pads clearly lack the same institutional treatment and have no strict price control. This difference is essentially a negation of necessity through the cultural level, narrowing it down to a private consumption for women.

Society dilutes the menstrual demand from women's survival rights and health rights. Fraser believes that the recognition of rights is the basis for groups to obtain social justice, and the dilution of menstrual demand's rights makes it difficult to obtain institutional and resource support. Although Ms. Tong realizes that "menstrual poverty should be a public domain issue", she also admits that "becoming a social welfare seems unlikely", and this cognition stems from the general negation of menstrual rights by society. If menstruation is not acknowledged as a fundamental right warranting public support, the responsibility falls solely on the individual as a private matter.

5.2. Subject Marginalization

Misrecognition often accompanies the marginalization of groups in cultural narratives and public discourse, where the dominant group monopolizes the power of discourse, preventing the voices of the disadvantaged groups from being heard. In the process of constructing the Private Responsibility discourse, women, as the subjects of period poverty, have very limited channels to express their needs. Eventually, they find themselves in a predicament where they want to speak but cannot, and even if they do speak, their words are ineffective.

Menstrual shame traps women in the taboo of expression, and women who have been socially and culturally disciplined tend to suppress their needs. Fraser emphasizes that cultural taboos are the hidden tools of misrecognition, which, by shaping the self-examination of the group, achieve the self-

suppression of the expression of needs. Ms. Tong mentioned that "even during adolescence and adulthood, there is a difficulty in talking about menstruation", even though the mind has gradually opened up, they still believe that the topic of menstruation "is only applicable to the so-called cultural circle and cannot sink into daily life", and if discussed in daily scenarios, "it makes people feel completely bewildered". This silencing is essentially the result of the internalization of shame culture, and society's association of menstruation with "impurity" and "privacy" can easily lead to no one being able to speak, which ultimately reinforces the private respoinsibility discourse of period poverty.

The prevailing public discourse continues to be shaped by androcentrism, which prioritizes male-dominated cultural norms and leads to the systemic neglect of female specific needs, resulting in women's voices failing to be echoed in public issues. Fraser believes that male-dominated cultural norms filter out women's specific needs, making women invisible in the public agenda. Ms. Tong's observation on "the difficulty of implementing menstrual leave" confirms this: although there is a concern for women in current policy-making, the actual implementation lacks a gender perspective. Policy designers have not considered the actual impact of menstruation on women's work. The current employment environment in society generally assumes that "taking time off due to menstruation indicates a lack of personal ability", and this perception is rooted in the male-centered discourse logic. Because men do not need to face menstruation issues, it is difficult for them to empathize. Therefore, when women's expressions in the public domain are not responded to or even denied, they can only be forced to turn the problem back to the private domain and accept the imposed private responsibility by society.

5.3. Concealment of Structural Inequality

Another important manifestation of misrecognition is to conceal the structural predicaments faced by the group through cultural narratives, attributing them to personal issues, thereby masking the injustice at the institutional and social levels. In the issue of period poverty, the personal responsibility discourse precisely uses such a strategy of obscuring and silencing to transform the structural causes of period poverty into insufficient personal income capacity, and even leads women into the cognitive trap of self-doubt.

Behind period poverty is structural inequality, and the problem has complex institutional and economic causes. However, currently, consumerism leads women to simplify it as a problem of personal consumption choices, ignoring the physiological necessity of sanitary products [15]. Ms. Tong mentioned that "the price of sanitary pads is still relatively high" and "choosing high-quality products will cost more", but she did not realize that in her context, sanitary pads are socially regarded as an individual's choice, ignoring the need for public intervention.

In addition, cultural narratives guide women to attribute menstrual poverty to insufficient personal ability, which further solidifies the personal responsibility. Ms. Tong mentioned that "female colleagues in the office would discuss which sanitary pads are safe and cheap", but she did not realize that this price comparison behavior is essentially an individual coping strategy, and they did not make targeted appeals to public policies. When society does not recognize menstrual poverty as a public issue, most women naturally look for reasons within themselves, such as "not earning enough" or "not being rational in consumption", rather than questioning this gender injustice.

6. Conclusion

This study is based on Fraser's misrecognition theory, combined with semi-structured interviews and case analysis, focusing on the construction logic of the Private Responsibility Discourse in the issue of period poverty, and revealing its intrinsic connection with cultural injustice. The study found that the Private Responsibility Discourse is not a natural social consensus, but a result caused by misrecognition.

Ms. Tong's case further confirmed that miscognition has formed a subconscious cognition of period poverty. To seek a solution to this problem, it is necessary to start from recognition, and exert

efforts from three aspects: cultural value reconstruction, granting women's voice right, and improving institutional guarantees. Pulling period poverty from private area back to public area.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The primary limitation is the small sample size, which is common in qualitative research but means the findings cannot be easily generalised to a wider population. Additionally, the participants involved may not fully represent the diverse experiences of all women in China, particularly those from different regional or economic backgrounds.

Furthermore, future research should examine the relationship between the three elements of Fraser's framework. Specifically, it is important to investigate how better economic support (redistribution) and greater political inclusion (representation) might help to reduce the misrecognition of women.

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