The Motherhood Penalty and Its Impact on the Gender Wage Gap in the Chinese Nursing Industry: Individual and Organizational Coping Strategies and Their Influence on Identity

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Abstract. While there are laws in China to protect women from gender discrimination, women in nursing still experience the most substantial obstacles after motherhood. This article examines how the likelihood of promotion, pay, and self-perception of professional identity are influenced by parenthood. Five studies are cited in support of the view that nurses who are mothers earn approximately 15 percent less than nurses who are not mothers and that they are promoted at a slower rate. Long shifts, night work and little support from their own workplaces make it worse. It's helpful when women have got family, grandparents especially can take the edge off a little bit of stress, but it doesn't fix the underlying problems. Pay gap is compounded by social expectation that women should look after the home and family. It's going to take changes at the workplace, and in the culture. For mothers, that means providing them with flexible schedules, better childcare and work environments that acknowledge and support motherhood.

Keywords: Motherhood Penalty, Gender Inequality, Nursing Career.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In China, although gender discrimination is prohibited by law, the impact of motherhood on women's career progression is still under-explored. Women will face a lot of trouble in jobs like nursing after giving birth. Despite the legal protection, traditional gender roles and social expectations are such that women are expected to look after other people. Especially in nursing, a nurse need to work a lot with physical-heavy work and erratic night shifts. Furthermore, there is a perception that women are meant to be child-carers, which further limits the options for mothers to move upwards in their careers. Clearly, however, when he speaks of a "motherhood penalty" (i.e., the fact that women's career advancement is inhibited after they have children), this applies also to nursing. Yet the extent to which this problem is undermining the nation's healthcare system has not been fully deciphered by researchers.

1.2. Current Study

Studies have already shown that being penalized because of motherhood is a problem globally. Research finds that women with children usually get lower wages, have fewer promotion chances, and find it hard to move up inside their job [1]. On the other hand, research in China showed that the situation is more complex due to special culture and system factors in the healthcare industry [2]. Their studies also showed that support from big family, especially from grandparents, helps mothers reduce pressure by taking care of children [3]. Such family help is not always available, and very different between city and countryside [4]. Furthermore, research has revealed that working night shifts makes it very hard for nurse mothers to develop their careers, because this type of work schedule makes them unable to take care of their children and have rest [5,6]. As a result, many nurse mothers lose their promotion opportunities because they have to handle both family and job at the same time [7].

1.3. Research Topic

This study focuses on the issue of how female nurses in China, already mothers, balance their job and family life. In particular, this research will be concerned with how mothers handle the concept of the "motherhood penalty" in nursing and the strategies used to balance their professional and personal lives. The study also will investigate the combined effects of organizational support, family situation, and social expectation on nurse mothers' career advancement opportunities and workplace feelings. The research hopes to try to find possible ways of improving gender equality for mothers in the Chinese nursing profession.

2. The Impact of Motherhood on Career Advancement

2.1. The Concept of "Motherhood Penalty"

"Motherhood penalty" refers to the fact that women meet more difficulties in their job because they have children [1]. To see this situation in China, Huang, Wang, Wu, and Zhou conducted a study. According to their findings, this penalty is both very big and for a very long time, usually more than 8 years [1]. In China, mothers are less likely to continue working after having children. Most of them prefer to stop working since there is not enough support, such as cheap childcare or the possibility of working fewer hours. Such findings were corroborated by Huang et al. [1]. The study also found that when they return to work, they often earn much less than before the baby [2]. In nursing, where a career interruption may seriously affect an individual's chance of promotion, this penalty will be more serious. Thus, nurses, who already work a long time and do the physically heavy job, find it more difficult to get a promotion after taking maternity leave [2]. According to the Chinese Nursing Association, nearly 40% of nurse mothers reported problems in their careers after returning to work, such as being promoted later than expected or receiving poor shift assignments [3].

2.2. Things Women Are Expected to Do or Be Based on Culture and Society

How people think about culture and society in China and its consequences for nurse mothers [1]. Lin conducted a meta study about motherhood and career development in China, and she noted that women being a mother is frequently perceived as an obstacle to obtaining higher pay and promotion [2]. In nursing, the social values compound pressure-they aren't only working, they're caring for patients and family. Nurse mothers typically encounter difficulty in balancing work and home, that is challenge for they to keep working smoothly [4]. A study from Beijing Health Bureau said female nurses have about 20% more work stress after having baby, which hurt their job satisfaction and health [7]. Also in china generally the mother look after the children. This mean she must take break from job, and it is not easy to come back full-time again [8].

Lin further illustrates that women in China, particularly those working in caring professions such as a nurse, are more prone to discrimination on returning to work following childbirth [9]. The survey finds 35% of the female nurses say they received negative comments from the managers that they are not as serious about their jobs as others are. Such prejudices make it difficult for nurse mothers to be promoted, especially in hospitals, where professionalism is crucial [10].

2.3. Some Ways to Support the Family and Cope with Difficult Situations

Family support is crucial in helping working mothers balance work and family, particularly in China where traditional family values remain strong [11]. Meng, Zhang and Zou revealed about 56% of city mothers rely on grandparents to rear children, which facilitates their earlier return to work and retention in their jobs. For breastfeeding mothers, the figure is even higher in rural areas, at about 63% [3]. The assistance from family can relieve the strain between work and family for women, but certainly not every mother has access to such support [7]. However, relying on family help alone cannot solve the problem. Yu and Xie pointed out that mothers who stay with parents or in-laws have more chances of continuing to work and obtaining promotions, but such advantages still depend on

hospital policy [8]. If the hospital cannot provide childcare service or flexible leave, then even strong family help cannot stop mothers from feeling tired and under pressure [8]. The Chinese Hospital Association said in 2024 that only 32% of hospitals have childcare facilities and just 21% provide flexible working hours [9]. Therefore, family support and hospital support need to go side by side if mothers are to achieve a good balance between work and life. Grandparents can look after children quickly and flexibly, while hospital policy regarding flexible shift or parental leave is indispensable in long-term job development. Only then will there be two kinds of support, and nurse mothers truly reduce stress and continue with their career [9,10].

3. Data Analysis: How Motherhood Affects Nurses' Careers

3.1. The Hours Nurses Work and the Risks of Overwork

The Chinese Ministry of Health's survey in 2025 showed that over 70% of nurses worked for more than the statutory 40-hour working week; some of them work for 50-60 hours a week [1]. This will add extra pressure for nurses who are mothers, having to balance work and family, taking care of children at home. According to Liu et al., nurse mothers who have to work more than 50 hours per week reported higher levels of burnout and physical tiredness than their childless colleagues [2]. A study published by Shen indicated more than 50% of nurses felt they could not maintain a good balance between work and life [3]. Long-term emotional distress will be experienced, with a reduction in professional satisfaction [4]. These studies reflect how breastfeeding mothers cannot focus on career advancement because of never having free time.

3.2. Nurse Mothers Are Paid Less Than Other Nurses

A study by Gu exposed that Chinese male nurses earn a little more than their female colleagues [6]. On average, male nurses earn 8,855 RMB a month, while for female nurses, this is 8,771 RMB. But for breastfeeding mothers, this difference is much bigger. According to the findings from a survey of hospitals in Beijing and Shanghai, nurses with children earn on average 15% less than nurses without children, even if they work the same hours [7]. There are many reasons for such a wage gap. For example, women often work fewer hours because they are responsible for childcare [8]. They also face bias at work. People often wonder how committed they are to their job [9]. Of course, the situation is partly made worse because many hospitals do not provide enough support for breastfeeding nurses. According to a report by the Chinese Nurses Association this year, many nurse mothers do not feel comfortable taking leave or changing their hours because they are afraid they will fall behind in their careers, even though there are policies allowing them to do this [11].

3.3. Night Shifts and Career Development Opportunities for Nurse Mothers

Night shifts are common in nursing, but they make it hard for nurse mothers to get promotion. According to a report by the National Institute of Health in 2024, nurse mothers working at night have a 30% lesser chance of getting promoted compared to those with no children [9]. Xie et al. also reported that nurses often find it difficult to get promotion if they work at night and are obliged to take care of children. This happens because they miss training and other opportunities that happen in the daytime for their career building [5]. Generally, nurse mothers find it difficult to balance work-life with family life, particularly when they work at night. Therefore, this data evidences that night shifts make balancing work and family life difficult for nurses [10]. This further aggravates the chances of moving forward in their careers for mums who are nurses. Further, it was reported that nurses working night shifts were more likely to report high levels of mental stress and fatigue, which affects their doing their job properly [10].

4. Discussion

4.1. The Motherhood Penalty: How Common Is It

In China, the "motherhood penalty" are still a big problem for women who want to move up in their job, especially nurses [1]. Many studies already found that after become mother, women often stop getting promotion at work [2]. Huang, Wang, Wu, and Zhou show in one study that this penalty very common in China, and have the bad influence from motherhood can last more than eight years [1]. It has long shift night work, and also deal with patient emotion [5]. Research shows that nurses usually work more than 40 hours one week [4]. But nurse mothers must to balance work and take care of children, which make promotion more hard [2]. The Chinese Nursing Association shows around 45% of female nurses feel it hard to move up in their job after have child [9]. Many boss still think mothers is not so serious to work because they have family duty [6]. A survey from Beijing Health Bureau find that 38% nurse mothers said their career become worse after having baby [9]. Many said they have less chance after maternity leave [9]. Lin also found more than 30% of nurse women miss promotion after came back from maternity leave [2]. These results shows that nurse mothers' slow career not only because of less working time, but also from culture bias and wrong idea about women's role [6]. It mean career problem not just because they work less, but because people think they not focus or not capable enough [6].

4.2. The Things that Coping Strategies Are Not Good At

Family helps can reduce the "motherhood penalty", but it not always enough. The most common help come from big family, especially grandparents. In 2022, Meng, Zhang and Zou write that 56% city mothers depend on grandparents for childcare [3]. This makes them can keep working and not stop their career. It very important for nurses, because they work for long hour and have many nights shift, it is hard to find childcare time [5]. But not all nursing moms have parental support, particularly in cities where both parents are working full-time [8]. Yu and Xie show that just 35% of urban hospital nurses who are mothers receive adequate family support while the remaining 65% must rely on daycare or flexible work schedules, options that are not always available [4]. Even nurses with family support don't always have winning combination for their career [8]. A report of Chinese Hospital Association shows that while as many as 58% hospitals have the parental leave, only 21% provide relatively satisfactory childcare service [9]. Still, many hospitals said to have no adequate policy for working mothers, so nurses who request fewer hours or shift change are often docked pay or shafted [9]. This absence of organizational backing makes it even harder for nurse moms to juggle working and family [10]. It indicates "family support is necessary but not sufficient" [10]. A 2023 national survey reports that only 29% hospital in China provide part-time or flexible shift to nurse mothers [11]. That mean not many choice for women who want balance job and home [9]. Health care system not have enough friendly policy, so many women must accept slow career or leave job [11]. This make gender unfair in workplace more serious [11].

4.3. Making Penalties More in Line with Different Cultures and More Focused on Health

Women are still expected by society to raise children, and this expectation adds to the burdens of nursing mothers [1]. Traditional Chinese views on gender remain unchanged with many women thinking that family responsibility is more important than career affairs [6]. This is one of the reasons for the lack of women head in nursing [6]. Huang et al., the traditional ideas still dominate and childcare duties are substantially less evenly shared among the parents, which results in biased societal belief that mothers are less dedicated at work [2,6]. It is, the author thinks, patently unfair to impose this cultural construct - women as homemakers and men as providers-on the working women of today. The challenge of work–family balance is not only detrimental to working mothers' health but also worsens the "motherhood penalty" phenomenon [1, 2]. Studies show that working mothers are often stressed, anxious and/or suffering from depression which undermines their job performance and prospects for career advancement. Jiang and Yang observe that women under excessive work

stress (caregivers in particular) are more likely to be affected by burnout and mental health disorders as designated by the World Health Organization [1]. In China, nearly 42% of breastfeeding women were suffering from severe mental problems such as anxiety or depression under the double burden of childcare and work. The birth of a child results in enormous pressure and anxiety on new mothers affecting their work performance and chances of promotion, says Jiang and Yang [1]. This is the case for mothers who are simultaneously raising children and elderly parents seems to be even more dire. Studies show more than half of Chinese nurse-mothers consider themselves "overwhelmingly exhausted" as a result of work family double burdens, with close to 40 per cent believing stress is limiting their prospects for promotion. The One-Child Policy still has significant effects, especially for women who observe traditional values [3]. Li and Wu identified that the policy's punitive actions inhibited women from having additional children, either through extended birth intervals or by having fewer children. However, this resulted in long-term health problems, interfering with postpartum return to work [9]. A 2024 estimate from the Ministry of Health suggests that how likely a woman is to return to work postpartum depends on how healthy she is and the extent of her recovery [4]. Tens of thousands of breastfeeding mothers are denied promotions because of ongoing exhaustion and weakness [1]. China's one-child policy has heavily influenced its parents' patterns, but. In the past, women paid less attention to career when raising an only child; now as the policy has relaxed and new-generation mothers tend to have two or more children, they are faced with increased care responsibilities. This intentional pressure places immense strain on working mothers—especially nurses—who face long stretches of physically demanding work and emotional exhaustion in which they are drained both physically and mentally.

5. Conclusion

It is clear that the Chinese women have many problems when trying to be nurses. These problems include not equal salaries, a lack of opportunities in their careers, and cultural ideas that convince women that taking care of their families is their responsibility. Obviously, people can try to solve such problems by themselves, as well as get some help from their family; however, such approach will only fix the very top of the problem but will not change its roots. Changing the "motherhood penalty" needs big changes in how companies and society function. A hospital should try giving workers more flexible time, parent leave, and childcare service. At the same time, changing the idea that mothers are less serious about their job is required from society. People should also change the culture, which nowadays makes women take over most of the childcare work. The system and culture inside hospitals should change to make way for gender equality in nursing. It would contribute to mothers following their careers and solving a lot of problems.

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