Doing Gender under Explicit Equality: Implicit Division of Labor in Dual-Income Families under China's Two-Child Policy

Wenyue Chen

Metro International Secondary Academy, 2 Simonston Boulevard, Thornhill, ON L3T 4L1, Canada

wenyue055@gmail.com

Abstract. Amid China's discourse of "explicit equality" and the implementation of the "universal two-child" policy, this study employs doing gender theory to explore the hidden inequality in domestic labor among dual-income families in China. Drawing on in-depth interviews with seven households in Xi'an, it reveals that the birth of a second child becomes a critical turning point that reconfigures family dynamics. Under the combined influence of market pressures, national policies, and patriarchal traditions, families shift from relatively equal labor division to the conventional model of "men work outside, women work inside." Women not only shoulder increasing domestic and emotional burdens but also internalize and rationalize unequal responsibilities through mechanisms such as "self-reinforcement of maternal identity" and "family-first" ideology. This process demonstrates how gender inequality is continuously enacted and reproduced in everyday practices. The study concludes that advancing gender equality requires addressing family micro-politics and transforming the social meanings of gendered labor.

Keywords: Gender Role Performance, Household Division of Labour, Maternal Role Identification

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening up, Chinese society has undergone unprecedented economic transformation and ideological liberation. Following the de-gendered political discourse of the Maoist era, the rise of market-oriented reforms has not only revitalized China's economy but also profoundly reshaped gender orders and social discourses [1]. On the one hand, women have been encouraged to enter the market as "independent individuals," pursuing economic autonomy and personal achievement, making "feminism" a popular market symbol. On the other hand, market rationality and the revival of traditional patriarchal culture have formed a paradoxical alliance, openly or implicitly calling on women to "return to the family" and realize their value within it [2]. This paradox of "market-oriented traditionalism" forms the distinctive social backdrop of gender discourse in contemporary China. Within such a context, gender equality is publicly celebrated as a social consensus at the institutional and discursive levels, yet the daily practices within private spaces—especially the family—often contradict this ideal.

The introduction of the "universal two-child" policy in 2016 has further intensified gendered inequalities within household labor. Many women have found themselves caught in the dilemma of balancing career ambitions and domestic responsibilities, revealing the fragile foundation of gender equality under market-driven traditionalism. This shift provides a valuable lens through which to explore how gendered divisions of labor are reproduced in Chinese households. Here, "explicit equality" refers to the legal and policy-based establishment of gender equality principles—constituting a formal, institutionalized consensus—while "implicit inequality" captures the subtle, often invisible mechanisms that sustain gender hierarchies within everyday family life. Existing research has demonstrated that the birth of a second child significantly increases women's domestic burden and constrains their professional advancement [3]. For example, a nationwide study found that after having a second child, women's time investment in housework and childcare was six times that of men's—a disparity rooted more in gender ideology than in economic rationality [4]. While these studies have richly depicted the empirical landscape of inequality, most remain descriptive, focusing on "what it is" rather than "how it happens."

Building on this gap, the present study introduces the theoretical framework of "Doing Gender" to examine how the universal two-child policy functions as a pivotal catalyst that interacts with post-reform market transformations and the re-emergence of traditional gender norms. This intersection of structural reform and cultural continuity reveals how gender is continuously "done" and "undone" through everyday family practices. This study employs qualitative interviews with dual-income families to explore the micro-processes through which the two-child policy reshapes gender relations. It pays particular attention to how husbands' behaviors and attitudes influence their wives' gender perceptions, and how women, in turn, negotiate, internalize, or resist these gendered expectations in daily life. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to uncover the hidden mechanisms of inequality beneath the surface of explicit gender equality, to illuminate how policies that ostensibly promote family well-being may paradoxically reinforce patriarchal divisions of labor, and to contribute to broader sociological understandings of gender, policy, and everyday life in post-reform China.

2. Theoretical Framework

The "Doing Gender" theory proposed by West and Zimmerman forms the theoretical foundation of this study. This framework posits that gender is not an inherent biological attribute but a social construct continuously produced and reproduced through everyday interactions [5]. The household division of labor vividly exemplifies this process of "gender performance," challenging essentialist understandings of gender as biologically determined. Within this performative system, men sustain an image of strength and competence by minimizing participation in domestic work, while women fulfill the culturally prescribed ideals of being "virtuous wives and devoted mothers" by shouldering greater household and caregiving responsibilities. Over time, these repetitive performances have institutionalized and legitimized the enduring stereotype of "men working outside, women managing the home" [5].

This study adopts the "Doing Gender" perspective precisely because it provides a dynamic and process-oriented lens for analyzing transformations in family labor division under China's "universal two-child" policy. Rather than treating gender as a fixed status, this theory conceptualizes it as an interactive accomplishment—an ongoing negotiation enacted through behavior and social expectations. From this viewpoint, the arrival of a second child becomes a critical moment that reactivates and reshapes spousal interactions, prompting behavioral adjustments, renegotiations of responsibility, and redefinitions of gender roles within the family. Drawing on this theoretical approach, the present study investigates how couples reproduce and reinforce gendered role characteristics through daily interactions after the birth of a second child. More importantly, it illuminates women's subjective experiences as they confront and respond to unequal gender arrangements. Through processes of cognitive negotiation, emotional adjustment, and self-justification, women internalize prevailing gender expectations and, either actively or passively, assume additional domestic responsibilities. In doing so, the "Doing Gender" framework fills a critical gap in existing scholarship by explaining how the second child functions as a catalyst for the reinforcement of gender roles through conscious and unconscious behavioral strategies.

3. Literature Review

Domestic research provides an important empirical foundation for this study. Drawing on national survey data, found that women in dual-income households devote significantly more time to household chores than men [3]. This excessive workload not only diminishes women's subjective sense of well-being but also deprives them of time and energy to enjoy daily life, gradually leading to emotional exhaustion and declining interest in marriage and family.

Similarly, recent research demonstrates that cohabitation with elderly parents further reinforces traditional gender norms. Influenced by deeply ingrained cultural and educational backgrounds, older generations often hold rigid gender views, expecting and assisting women to undertake more

domestic work—thereby perpetuating the gendered division of labor [6]. A 2021 report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences likewise highlights that dual-child families place additional constraints on women's professional advancement, manifesting in slower promotion rates, reduced working hours, and greater career interruptions.

Although existing research has richly documented the phenomenon of unequal household labor division, it largely lacks a process-oriented analysis of how the birth of a second child functions as a triggering mechanism for gender inequality. Moreover, women's subjective intentions, emotional negotiations, and behavioral strategies remain underexplored. In the Chinese context, state policy, market transformation, and patriarchal culture collectively shape the meaning of femininity and the social construction of family roles. Since the reform and opening up, women have been encouraged to pursue economic independence through workforce participation, yet are simultaneously expected to uphold traditional maternal responsibilities.

This dual expectation generates deep psychological tension, often prompting women to internalize inequality through self-anxiety, rationalization, and adaptive coping. Addressing this research gap, the present study investigates how post-second-child family interactions reshape gender roles and identities [7]. By focusing on this critical juncture, the study seeks to uncover how the arrival of a second child activates gendered practices within families and reveals the transformative—and often ambivalent—journey women experience in navigating these shifting expectations.

4. Methodology

To gain deeper insights into the issue, this study employed a semi-structured in-depth interview approach. Recognizing the prevalence of salaried workers in contemporary China, research was conducted from September 1 to 20, 2025, in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, focusing on seven dual-income families with a second child. The interviewed women, aged 32 to 38, worked in diverse fields including teaching, full-time childcare, and healthcare. To ensure a relaxed and candid atmosphere despite geographical constraints, interviews were conducted via online video conferencing.

The interview framework was guided by the "doing gender" theory, allowing a nuanced exploration of participants' authentic perspectives aligned with the study's objectives. This approach facilitated the collection of rich, detailed data on marital dynamics and cognitive processes, bridging abstract theoretical concepts with everyday family practices. The findings indicate that challenges associated with having a second child extend beyond increased workloads, often triggering a structural reorganization of family responsibilities.

5. Results and Analysis

This study adopted the semi-structured in-depth interview method to study the dual-income families. During the process, many problems brought by the second child were found, which were shown in the following aspects.

5.1. From "Symbolic Participation" to "Structural Withdrawal": The Ossification of Male Roles Under Economic Pressure and learned Helplessness

During the first-child phase, most families exhibited a superficial gender division of labor, in which husbands occasionally assisted with minor household chores during their leisure time. However, following the birth of a second child, men's domestic participation declined sharply, leaving nearly all responsibilities to women. This study finds that such reduced male involvement is not merely a matter of laziness or indifference, but rather a behavioral outcome of doing gender under structural pressures. It reflects a subtle alliance between economic rationality and patriarchal masculinity—an alliance continuously reinforced through everyday marital interactions.

On one hand, the financial burdens of raising a second child have intensified men's self-identification as the primary breadwinners. Escalating living costs and educational expenses compel

men to justify their masculine identity through increased workloads, overtime, and professional socializing—activities that simultaneously serve as excuses for their withdrawal from domestic duties. As Ms. Liu from Family C noted, “He always says, ‘Where do you think the money comes from to raise two kids?’ Yet he also complains that I’m too busy with work to take care of them. His overtime becomes justified—he thinks that as long as he earns enough, everything at home is my job.” By emphasizing financial contribution, husbands rationalize their physical and emotional absence from household responsibilities. This withdrawal is not personal inertia but a role solidification shaped by the collusion of market logic and patriarchal norms.

On the other hand, some men deliberately perform incompetence—what this study terms a “learned helplessness strategy”—to evade domestic responsibility. Such behavior arises through marital interactions rather than innate incapacity. When husbands repeatedly display clumsiness or inefficiency, wives—driven by time pressure and efficiency concerns—gradually take over all tasks. As Ms. Wu from Family F recalled, “When he makes milk formula, it’s either too hot or full of lumps. No matter how many times I show him, it’s like the first time. When he reads to our child, he falls asleep mid-story. Eventually, I stopped asking for help—it was easier to do it myself.” Through repeated enactments of incompetence, husbands successfully transfer household responsibilities to their wives, while subtly reinforcing the belief that men are inherently unsuited for domestic work [8]. Ms. Lin from another family corroborated this shift, “When our first child was born, he sometimes bathed or soothed the baby. After the second child, he assumed I already knew what to do and left it all to me—even when he came home early.”

This gradual transition from “symbolic participation” to “structural withdrawal” vividly demonstrates doing gender in action: men reinforce masculinity through performance and role retreat, while women internalize caregiving as moral duty. Gender thus becomes a dynamic process of negotiation, enacted and reaffirmed through micro-level family interactions. Having a second child brings not only a heavier workload but also greater managerial complexity. Women must simultaneously handle multiple tasks—childcare, housework, and emotional coordination—requiring sophisticated temporal and cognitive management. As Ms. Cheng from Family B, a primary school teacher, described, “The hardest part isn’t physical—it’s mental. My older one needs homework help, the baby needs feeding, and I’m still planning lessons for tomorrow. My brain never stops.”

Traditional assessments of household labor often ignore this invisible “mental load,” yet it dramatically increases women’s psychological strain. The exponential growth of 1+1>2 reflects not only quantitative expansion but also the intensification of emotional and cognitive labor. Society’s expectations of motherhood extend far beyond housework. Mothers must act as emotional managers, mediators, and coordinators, constantly ensuring family harmony. By internalizing and excelling in these roles, women fulfill gendered ideals of “good motherhood,” even as such labor remains unrecognized. The invisibility of emotional labor thus symbolizes the deeper entrenchment of gender norms through social construction and everyday performance.

5.2. From "Linear Labor" to "System Management": The Complexification of Household Tasks and the Concealment of Emotional Labor

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5.3. Generational "support" and "resistance": The reproduction of traditional gender concepts

For families with elderly members, the arrival of a second child often necessitates intergenerational assistance—but this support frequently reproduces traditional gender hierarchies. The behavior of older relatives itself constitutes a form of doing gender, as their supervision and commentary subtly discipline younger women into traditional maternal roles.

As Ms. Zhao from Family D shared, “My mother always says that childcare and housework are a woman’s job. Whenever she visits, she nags and criticizes if she sees my husband resting.” Such invisible oversight marginalizes men’s participation while reaffirming the norm of “men working outside, women managing inside.” This aligns with the findings of existing research that cohabitation with elders tends to strengthen gendered divisions of labor [6]. Intergenerational interactions thus operate as a powerful normative mechanism, where elders’ supervision, evaluation, and practical participation intervene in nuclear family dynamics. Together with spousal interactions, these forces jointly reproduce the moral expectation that women bear ultimate responsibility for domestic affairs.

5.4. "The Motherhood Vortex": Pressure from Children, Husbands, and Elders

This study reveals that women's stress isn't caused by a single factor, but rather a "pressure cocoon" formed by children, husbands, and elders, gradually trapping them in an inescapable "motherhood vortex" until they subconsciously accept this role. First, children's demands—especially when doubled by the workload after having a second child—create the most direct and irresistible "kidnapping" effect. This is not intentional but stems from internalized motherhood ideologies and societal expectations. For instance, when the eldest needs homework help and the second child requires feeding and bedtime routines simultaneously, mothers become anxious. Any unmet need may trigger emotional breakdowns or accusations from husbands or elders. As Ms.Cheng from Family B lamented, "My mind is constantly multitasking," this persistent mental strain and anxiety about "failing as a mother" force them to compress their personal space, prioritizing children's needs and taking on all responsibilities, either willingly or reluctantly. Second, husbands' withdrawal or token participation creates a second layer of pressure. As mentioned earlier, husbands 'absence from household chores isn't just a shift in workload—it transfers the "ultimate responsibility" for family affairs to wives. Wives now must not only complete their own work but also become the family's "commander-in-chief." The husband's absence makes mothers the sole outlet for children's emotional and practical needs, with any coordination failure being blamed as "negligence." Most critically, elders' involvement further reinforces traditional gender norms. As Ms.Zhao's mother, a homemaker, once put it:' Household chores and childcare should be women's responsibilities.' This intergenerational oversight not only directly limits fathers 'involvement but also perpetuates the traditional' virtuous wife and good mother' standard through constant scrutiny. When women feel exhausted and wronged, they must endure this moral pressure.

"The Vortex of Motherhood" epitomizes the "doing gender" mechanism at its most concentrated manifestation within family systems. Women are not born as "perfect mothers," but are collectively "shaped" and "disciplined" through daily interactions with children, husbands, and elders. Children's needs create "necessity," husbands' withdrawal fosters women's "exclusivity," while elders' supervision reinforces "normativity." Caught in this triple constraint, women gradually become entrenched in maternal roles through constant responses to societal expectations, eventually becoming trapped in this cycle. Through persistently fulfilling gender roles expected by society, the structural dilemma of unequal division of labor is internalized as an unavoidable daily reality that individuals must confront.

5.5. Acceptance and Rationalization: Women's coping strategies and the construction of gender identity

In response to the unequal division of labor, women transform structural inequality into seemingly voluntary and emotionally meaningful choices through various discursive strategies. This process not only reflects individual-level cognitive negotiation but also illustrates how national policies, market rationalities, and patriarchal culture have collectively shaped feminine identity and family roles since the reform and opening-up era. Many women interpret their excessive domestic labor as an inherent expression of maternal responsibility, engaging in what can be called a self-reinforcing maternal identity [10]. Ms. Zhou from Family E exemplifies this sentiment: "Seeing my two kids play together makes all the hard work worthwhile. I'm their mom—who else would care?" Such seemingly ordinary remarks, widely heard among new mothers, reveal how the language of sacrifice becomes indistinguishable from the language of love. By equating "sacrifice" with "love," women reframe systemic inequality as a personal emotional choice, transforming social obligation into moral self-fulfillment. This is not passive endurance but an active enactment of gendered subjectivity: through emphasizing traits such as motherly love and selflessness, women internalize externally imposed expectations, reinterpreting social responsibility as personal virtue and thereby constructing their feminine identity within the limits of patriarchy and market logic. Some highly educated women adopt a logic of economic rationalization, openly acknowledging inequality while redefining it as the product of rational family optimization. As Ms. He explained, "From the perspective of maximizing family utility, our division of labor is the optimal solution. By prioritizing family needs and letting him focus on his career, we achieve the best result for everyone. It may seem unfair, but it's the smartest move." Such reasoning cloaks structural disparities beneath the rhetoric of collective family interests, presenting unequal arrangements as the outcome of scientific and rational calculation. Yet this "rationality" rests upon the implicit hierarchy of gendered value—men's careers deemed essential, women's contributions considered supplementary. Through this logic, women perform the role of the "modern rational woman" while remaining bound by patriarchal norms co-authored by market and cultural forces. Over time, repeated failures to renegotiate roles lead some women to abandon hope and embrace essentialist beliefs that men are inherently unsuited to domestic work. Ms. Wu from Family F remarked, "Men just aren't made for this. Even if you force them, they'll mess it up or delay it. I might as well save myself the trouble." This attribution to biological difference naturalizes inequality from its root, marking the ossification of the "doing gender" process. By interpreting men's avoidance as innate incapacity, women legitimize the unequal division of labor as natural and inevitable, momentarily alleviating anxiety but ultimately deepening their own subordination. These coping strategies are not merely individual psychological adjustments but socially conditioned responses to a broader configuration of fertility policies, market transformations, and patriarchal revival. Since the reform and opening-up, women have been simultaneously encouraged to become independent professionals and pressured to return to domestic roles, a dual expectation that has profoundly shaped their emotions, actions, and gendered subjectivities. Through this process of renegotiation and internalization, women both perform and reproduce gender roles within the very structures that constrain them, revealing the paradoxical texture of gender in post-reform China—liberation intertwined with renewed dependence.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals that China's "universal two-child" policy functions as a prism—refracting and amplifying pre-existing gender inequalities in dual-income urban families. The birth of a second child often transforms a relatively negotiated household division of labor into a rigid, traditional pattern, where women assume the vast majority of domestic responsibilities. Moreover, women's responses to this unequal reality are not merely passive acceptance but active rationalizations shaped by cultural, structural, and emotional forces. They interpret their excessive household workload as an expression of maternal love, as a form of family rationality, or as the result of innate gender differences, thus

converting structural inequality into emotionally meaningful self-justifications. Yet this "acceptance" is not a genuine surrender, it is a compromise born from the intersection of policy imperatives, market pressures, and patriarchal norms, reflecting a deep internal struggle over identity and value. The husbands' symbolic participation and gradual withdrawal not only intensify women's physical and emotional burdens but also reinforce the cognitive norm that domestic labor is inherently women's duty. Through such daily interactions, the gender order is not merely reproduced but continuously enacted and reconstructed, vividly illustrating the relational and performative nature of "doing gender."

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of how gender inequality is reproduced through micro-level interactions under macro-level policy contexts. By connecting the universal two-child policy with the theory of "doing gender," this research demonstrates that gender is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic social process shaped through family negotiations, institutional expectations, and emotional practices. It also expands existing discussions on family sociology and feminist theory in China by showing how state policies, market logics, and traditional norms converge to shape gender roles. Moreover, the study underscores the need for policy interventions to move beyond formal equality, emphasizing the importance of addressing invisible labor, emotional work, and everyday negotiations that sustain inequality.

Advancing gender equality, therefore, requires more than top-down policy advocacy. It demands attention to the micro-politics of everyday life—to the subtle ways through which individuals enact, negotiate, and internalize gender norms. Future research should further explore how different social classes, occupational structures, and regional cultures mediate the experiences of families under the two-child policy.

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