

Understanding the Phenomenon of Leftover Women in China Is it Reality or Myth?

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the term "leftover women", "Single, Seventies, Stuck" SSS women, and "Single, Eighties, Stuck" SES women—highly educated, successful in their careers, unmarried in their late twenties—has emerged frequently in the mass media. The official interpretation and media representations of the phenomenon of leftover women, and points out that the term leftover woman is a stigma attached to single women by the state-led media campaign [1]. This article investigates the root causes of the phenomenon of leftover women, and reveals that the phenomenon of leftover women is the resurgence of gender inequality in China, which implies the traditional patriarchal ideology. At last, the article discusses the influence of patriarchal ideology on single women's attitudes toward marriage that further explores the phenomenon of leftover women from the perspective of single women.

Keywords: *Leftover women, Gender discrimination, Traditional patriarchal ideology, Egalitarianism, Gender equality*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid advancement of modern society, people's lifestyles and ideologies have also undergone great changes. While society has changed dramatically, the emergence of some social phenomenon has raised public attention. In recent years, leftover women phenomenon has gained widespread attention in China's mass media, particularly in popular culture and social media platforms, sparking heated debate. The term leftover women refers to women in their late twenties who have reached marriageable age but remain single. According to some, the term "leftover woman" refers to a social phenomenon in which an increasing number of women are deferring marriage or even choosing not to get married. This phenomenon may jeopardise social harmony, resulting in social problems. Others argue that the term "leftover women" stigmatizes single women. They point out that the term carries an implication of sexism. To understand the phenomenon of leftover women, by interpreting the phenomenon this article investigates the root causes of the phenomenon and further discusses the ideology that underlies the phenomenon of leftover women. It begins with an

explanation of the emergence of the phenomenon of leftover women, then analyses the current situation of single women labelled as leftover women, concludes with an examination of the phenomenon's root causes and implied ideology.

2. LEFTOVER WOMEN PHENOMENON IN CHINA

According to census data, the age of first marriage has been trending upward in China over the last decade, and the marriage rate has been decreasing year by year. It also pointed out that this trend is particularly pronounced among urban women over the age of 27 with higher level of education [2][3]. Owing to the postponed marriage, these high-educated urban single women were called as "leftover women". The term "leftover women" was widely used in China, followed with particular explanation by the official authorities, and then was heavily propagandized by the mass media.

2.1. The Official Explanation of Leftover Women

In 2007, the first official explanation of the term was given by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), a Chinese feminist agency, issued the first official definition of the term, defining a leftover woman as a highly educated, high-income urban woman who is still single at the age of 27. In the same year, the term leftover woman was included in the new Chinese word issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education [1]. Following that, the term "leftover women", or "sheng nv" in Chinese, was commonly used to describe women who passed the marriageable age but were still single. Furthermore, the word "sheng" in the Chinese word "sheng nv" literally means "surplus, left over, or remainder". Other definitions include the "Three High" women, which refers to unmarried women with higher education, higher income and higher age, similarly, the "Single, 70's, Stuck" SSS women, or the "Single, 80's, Stuck" SES women, which refers to unmarried women born in the 1970s and 1980s respectively [2].

2.2. The Stereotype of Leftover Women in Mass Media

Ever since the term leftover women was officially defined, it has become a hot topic of discussion in the mass media. The portrayal of leftover women in a variety of media outlets, including news, social media platforms, and popular culture, can be classified as positive, neutral, or negative. However, the majority of portrayals of leftover women in the mass media, particularly in popular culture, have been negative [4]. Many movies and TV dramas have depicted leftover women as a group of urban women who are over the right age for marriage but still remain single. They have high education, high income and outstanding appearance, but due to the high standard of choosing a spouse, they are unable to find a suitable partner and eventually left behind. As a result of long-standing negative representations of leftover women in the mass media, the public stereotype of leftover women as selfish, picky, and materialistic has developed [5].

2.3. The Sexist Stigmatizing Label

Many scholars have claimed in their studies that the term leftover women is a stigmatization of single women with sexist connotations [1]. In China, the equivalent single men are not labelled as "surplus", but rather are portrayed as "golden bachelors" and "diamond single men" by the media [5]. Obviously, labelling single women as leftover women perpetuates the stigma associated with single women, along with prejudice and discrimination on the basis of gender.

2.4. State-Led Media Campaigns

The number of leftover women in China is not significant compared to the number of leftover men. The traditional Chinese ideology of preference for sons over daughters China's one-child family planning policy since 1979, as well as fetal sex selection and abortion techniques at that time have contributed to the current skewed sex ratio of the population in China. Demographers predict that the population of Chinese men will outnumber women by 30 to 50 million in the coming decades, reaching a peak in 2030 [6]. Moreover, according to the data published in the China Statistical Yearbook 2020, in terms of the gender ratio of the population in each age group, by 2019, the gender ratio of the 20-24 age group which is just at marriageable age has reached 114.61, and the 25-29 age group with gender ratio of 106.65 (female=100). As a result, it is pointed out that the phenomenon of leftover women is not an empirical reality, but a product of mass media discourse construction [2]. Indeed, the media's discourse construction of leftover women was part of a state-led media campaign aimed at discouraging women from deferring marriage and exerting pressure on them, thereby achieving the goal of social harmony [1] [4].

3. LEFTOVER WOMEN IN MARRIAGE MARKET

As mentioned above, the phenomenon of leftover women is a false proposition concocted by the mass media, and is a state-led media campaign to stigmatize single women in order to maintain social harmony. In fact, media campaigns have a limited impact, whereas the underlying cause of the phenomenon of leftover women is discrimination against and restriction of high-achieving women [7].

3.1. Gender Inequality in the Marriage Market

Apart from gender discrimination in the media, single women face additional prejudice and unequal treatment in the marriage market. Age, a high level of education, and a high socioeconomic status have all become barriers for women seeking partners in the marriage market.

3.1.1. Age

Age hypergamy, as a traditional Chinese marriage value, has restricted women's access to the marriage market. According to traditional Chinese marriage values, men generally prefer to marry women who are younger than themselves. men use age, appearance, and fertility of women as criteria when selecting a spouse [4]. Women who are attractive have good looks, are young, and have reproductive capacity. However, as women age, these characteristics will be devalued in the

marriage market. As a result, women over the age of thirty face a marriage squeeze [2].

3.1.2. High Education and High Socio-economic Status

High education further exacerbates the marriage squeeze on women. In marriage market, men generally reject highly educated women or women with higher education than themselves as their choice of spouse. Similarly women with higher socio-economic status also do not hold an advantage in marriage market [8]. Even after the completion of socialist revolution, Chinese women achieved emancipation and improved their social status, but the traditional gender norms continued to constrain them [9]. Male superiority and female inferiority are the 2,000-year-old traditional social gender roles in China, which prescribes a dominant role for men and a subordinate role for women. Additionally, in traditional Confucianism, women are expected to be virtuous wives and good mothers. Women have an obligation to promote family virtues and to serve their families [4]. This traditional gender norm restricts the female role to the private sphere (namely family) [5] [9]. As a result of their exposure to such traditional values, these successful women clearly do not conform to traditional gender role norms, putting them at a disadvantage in the marriage market.

3.1.3. Gender discrimination in marriage market

As mentioned above, while women are disadvantaged in the marriage market due to their age, high education, and high socioeconomic status, in contrast, men face a very different situation. Age does not become a disadvantage for men when it comes to selecting a spouse. Additionally, men with a higher level of education and socioeconomic status are more popular in the marriage market. The gender double standard [9] in the marriage market is clearly prejudice and discrimination against high-achieving women [2].

3.2. Traditional Patriarchal Ideology

In fact, the restrictions and gender discrimination that women suffered in the marriage market reveal the resurgence of patriarchal ideology [1] [7]. To begin, it is a devaluation of women's value based solely on their age, appearance, and fertility [2]. Second, women were objectified as commodities in the marriage market [4], with men choosing those who adhered to traditional marriage values and gender role norms and leaving behind those who did not [10]. Men hold the dominant power over women in the marriage market, while women remain passive and face obstacles and gender discrimination, demonstrating that patriarchal ideology is still prevalent today. Therefore, the above evidence indicates that the phenomenon of leftover women is not

due to women entering marriage market later and thereby postponing marriage. The root cause is that men would refuse to consider these high achievement women as potential marriage partners [7]. On the whole, the phenomenon of leftover women reveals the resurgence of gender inequality in China [1] and imply the patriarchal

ideology [7] [10].

4. THE MARRIAGE ATTITUDE OF SINGLE WOMEN IN MODERN SOCIETY

In modern society, single face not only external pressures from restrictions and gender inequality imposed by patriarchal ideologies, but also internal struggles and conflicts [4]. In response to being labelled as leftover women, some women are pressured to reconcile with patriarchal ideology, on the contrary, others choose to fight against gender inequality and strive for women's rights.

4.1. "Reconciliation" With The Patriarchal Ideology

Some women accepted their identity as leftover women and were subjected to extreme pressure as a result. Their family, friends, and society all exerted pressure on them. Early marriage and universal marriage remain the dominant marital practices in China [9], and those who delay marriage are considered deviants [4]. Furthermore, parental pressure can interfere with children's marriage choices, particularly in one-child families. As in Confucian thought, there are three types of unfilial performance, and not getting married and having children is the most unfilial to parents [12]. Therefore, due to pressure and filial piety, these women have to reconcile with the patriarchal ideology and are forced to make "sacrifices", such as giving up their careers and lowering their standards for spouse selection in order to marry.

4.2. Fighting Against Gender Inequality

In contrast to the women mentioned previously, despite intense pressure from all sides, other women refused to be assimilated into the patriarchal ideology and chose to resist gender inequality and pursue egalitarianism. To begin, these women would actively reject men with patriarchal ideological beliefs as potential objects prior to initiating a relationship, preferring an egalitarian relationship [7]. Moreover, women nowadays possess sufficient capacity to be self-sufficient and pursue their personal goals and ideal lives, with marriage not being the ultimate goal of life [4]. Most importantly, under the influence of egalitarian ideology, female self-consciousness has gradually awakened and more and more women are choosing to

fight against gender inequality, they are striving for female rights in their specific fields.

4.3. Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women

To sum up, in the current society, where traditional patriarchal ideology coexists with modern egalitarian ideology [9], the label of leftover women has pushed single women into self-struggles and conflicts [4]. When women consider the leftover women phenomenon from their perspective, the label does have an effect on their thoughts and lives in a variety of ways. Given the fact that the phenomenon of leftover women is a stigma and gender discrimination against women, promoting gender equality and women empowerment is a critical issue that must be addressed. Gender equality is not only about human rights, but also a prerequisite and a goal for sustainable development. In accordance with the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5- gender equality, which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. In particular, the first target of SDG 5 aims to end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere. As a result, we must respect each woman's choice and empower women, only then can gender equality be achieved.

5. CONCLUSION

According to the controversy triggered by the phenomenon of leftover women in recent years, this article provides an in-depth interpretation of the phenomenon's emergence, root causes, and consequences from three perspectives: mass media, marriage market, and single women themselves. First, the term leftover women is the stigma and gender discrimination against women. The phenomenon of leftover women is not an empirical reality, but a state-led media campaign that aims to prevent women from postponing marriage and maintain social harmony. Second, the phenomenon of leftover women reflects the restrictions and gender discrimination imposed on women under patriarchal ideology, demonstrating the resurgence of gender inequality and traditional patriarchal ideology. Thirdly, in societies where traditional patriarchal ideology coexists with modern egalitarian ideology, the label of leftover women has varying effects on women. Owing to their sense of self-cognition crisis and filial piety, some women have reconciled with the patriarchal ideology and chosen to make sacrifices in their careers or spouse selection criteria in order to enter marriage quickly. The other part of women, influenced by the egalitarian ideology, have gradually awakened the female self-consciousness and have chosen to fight against the patriarchal ideology and gender inequality, they strive for women's rights and achieve gender equality in their individual spheres.

In conclusion, based on the fact that the phenomenon of leftover women is a manifestation of gender inequality, it is critical to eradicate prejudice and discrimination against women and empower women in order to achieve gender equality. Given that this article examines the phenomenon of leftover women from a female perspective, future research could examine the phenomenon of leftover women in popular culture from a male perspective and compare it to a female perspective. A male and female perspective on the phenomenon of leftover women in China would yield novel insights.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Xu Yadi conducted literature reviews and wrote this article.

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