



Young Women's Employment in China: Trends, Challenges, and Policy Responses

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Abstract. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the employment landscape for young women in China, examining trends from 2000 to 2020, identifying persistent challenges, and proposing targeted policy interventions. Despite significant educational advancements—evidenced by the proportion of young women with bachelor's degrees rising from under 5% in 2000 to approximately 20% in 2020—the employment scale has notably declined, particularly among those aged 16-19, dropping from over 2 million to under 500,000. Employment quality has improved, with a shift towards commercial service and professional roles, yet unemployment rates have escalated since 2020, reaching 14% for women aged 15-24 by 2023, and peaking at 17.1% for the 16-24 age group (excluding students) in urban areas by July 2024. Occupational gender segregation has worsened, reflecting deepening gender inequality in the labor market. Key challenges include intensified employment pressure on female college graduates, the prevalent "slow employment" phenomenon, implicit gender discrimination, a lack of digital skills, and difficulties in achieving work-life balance. To address these issues, the paper recommends a multifaceted policy framework: stimulating job creation in female-dominated sectors, abolishing the two-year retention of graduate status to curb delayed employment, reducing disparities in employment security between public and private sectors, combating implicit gender biases, aligning educational curricula with market demands, enhancing STEM education for women, supporting female entrepreneurship, and improving work-life balance through expanded childcare services and flexible work arrangements.

Keywords: Female Youth Employment; Gender Inequality; Occupational Segregation; Labor Market Policy

1 Introduction

Employment is the foundation of people's livelihood, and the employment issue of young people is of utmost importance. In July 2024, the unemployment rate of the 16-24 year old labor force (excluding students) in Chinese urban areas reached 17.1%. The overall employment situation for young people is not optimistic, and female young people may face a worse employment situation than male young people. From 2000 to

2020, the employment scale of Chinese women aged 16-29 decreased significantly, and the employment proportion of women aged 16-34 also dropped to about 43%. The labor participation rate of female young people is significantly lower than that of male young people, and the rate of decline in the labor participation rate is also faster than that of males[1-2]. Globally, in 2022, the proportion of employed female young people was 27.4%, while that of male young people was 40.3%. The probability of male young people being employed is nearly 1.5 times that of female young people. The duration of unemployment for female young people is generally longer than that of male young people, and the probability and duration of female young people being unemployed, uneducated, or without skills training are also higher than those of males[3-5]. Female young people are a key group in the employment market. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized that it is necessary to ensure the overall stability of the youth employment level and do a good job in the employment of groups such as women. Studying and solving the employment problems of female young people is of crucial academic significance and policy value for the stability of the entire social economy and the high-quality development of the population. Therefore, based on the data from the fifth, sixth, and seventh national population censuses and the data from the annual "China Labor Statistical Yearbook", this paper depicts the overall employment situation of female young people from the perspectives of youth employment scale, employment quality, changes in the unemployment rate, and occupational segregation, analyzes the current problems in the employment of female young people, and proposes corresponding solutions.

2 Current Employment Situation of Chinese Female Youth

2.1 The Educational Level of Young Women has Increased, but Their Employment Scale has Decreased

Education is an important positive factor in promoting the employment of young women. Education not only improves women's employability but also changes their employment concepts. From 2000 to 2020, the educational situation of young women has been greatly improved. In 2000, the proportion of young women with a bachelor's degree in all age groups was less than 5%. By 2020, the proportion of young women with a bachelor's degree was about 20%. In addition, the educational gap between young men and young women has gradually narrowed. In 2000, the overall educational level of young men was higher than that of young women. The proportions of women who had never been to school, only attended literacy classes, or only completed primary school were all higher than those of men of the same age. By 2020, the proportions of women with a bachelor's degree or a master's degree were almost all greater than those of men (as shown in Table 1 and Table 2). It can be seen that with the economic and social development and the popularization of higher education, the educational level of women in China has been significantly improved, which provides more potential opportunities for them in the employment market and also reflects the significant improvement of the social gender concept in China to a certain extent.

Table 1. Educational situation of young women in 2020 Unit: %.

Education level	Aged 15-19		Aged 20-24		Aged 25-30		Aged 30-34	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Never attended school	0.23	0.20	0.30	0.30	0.31	0.36	0.37	0.48
Preschool education	0.25	0.27	0.06	0.07	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.04
Primary school	2.50	2.40	2.77	2.57	3.73	3.75	5.09	5.57
Junior high school	25.75	21.28	27.65	21.99	35.52	32.17	41.31	39.99
Senior high school	51.61	52.03	21.98	17.93	22.99	20.04	22.07	20.11
Junior college	11.30	12.60	23.34	26.08	19.24	20.93	16.03	16.91
Undergraduate degree	8.35	11.20	22.17	28.62	15.84	19.57	13.29	14.77
Master's degree candidate	0.01	0.01	1.63	2.36	2.01	2.85	1.55	1.92
Doctoral degree candidate	0.00	0.00	0.09	0.09	0.32	0.29	0.26	0.20

Table 2. Educational Attainment of Young Women in 2000 Unit: %.

Education level	Aged 15-19		Aged 20-24		Aged 25-29		Aged 30-34	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Never attended school	0.69	1.15	0.90	1.80	1.06	2.51	1.14	3.02
Literacy class	0.09	0.17	0.25	0.49	0.34	0.81	0.39	1.17
Primary school	12.05	15.44	14.89	19.66	20.20	27.95	23.88	34.65
Junior high school	57.64	54.79	54.40	51.35	55.18	49.29	54.38	45.92
Senior high school	19.31	15.13	12.17	9.26	11.30	8.62	10.83	8.01
Secondary specialized school	6.93	9.89	8.16	9.56	4.61	4.78	2.86	2.77
Junior college	1.59	2.00	5.28	5.17	5.06	4.53	4.26	3.20
Undergraduate degree	1.70	1.43	3.81	2.59	2.03	1.37	2.07	1.18
Postgraduate	0.00	0.00	0.15	0.12	0.21	0.14	0.19	0.09

In terms of the employment scale of young women, the number of employed women aged 16-19 has declined sharply, dropping from over 2 million in 2000 to less than 500,000 in 2020. The main reason for this change is that the total population of women in this age group has rapidly decreased from 40.32 million in 2000 to 2.9 million in 2020. Another reason is that the improvement of women's education level and the extension of their years of education have led to a decline in the labor-participation rate of women in this age group. In 2000, the proportion of women with a junior college

education or above was 2.76%, while in 2020, this proportion reached 15.3%. The number of employed young women in the 20-40 age group showed an upward trend from 2000 to 2010, but decreased sharply in 2020. From 2000 to 2010, the total population of women in this age group decreased, but the number of employed women increased, indicating that during this period, the labor-participation rate of young women aged 20-24 increased significantly, which is also the result of the rapid economic development that created more job opportunities for women. From 2010 to 2020, the number of employed women in this age group decreased, mainly due to the decline in the total population of women in this age group. In addition, the increase in the unemployment rate of young women is also an important factor. The unemployment rate of young women aged 15-24 increased from 8.6% in 2010 to 11.4% in 2020. The number of employed women in the 25-29 age group has been gradually decreasing, mainly due to the decline in the total population of women in this age group. The employment scale of women aged 30-34 decreased from 2000 to 2010, mainly due to the decline in the total population of women in this age group; the employment scale of women in this age group increased from 2010 to 2020. However, the total population of women in this age group decreased during this period, indicating that the labor-participation rate of women in this age group increased significantly during this period (as shown in Figure 1).

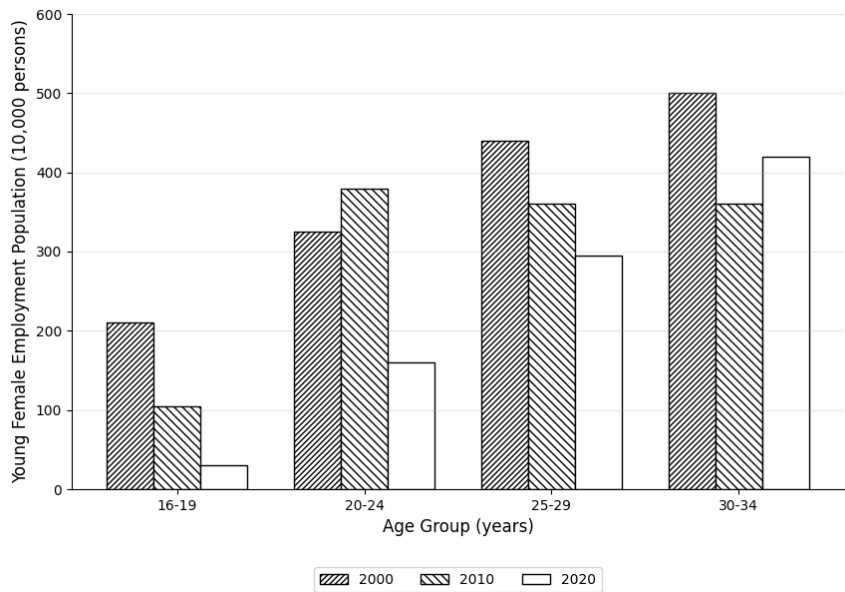


Fig. 1. Young Female Employment in China by Age Group (2000-2020).

In terms of the employment proportion of young women, generally, the employment proportion of young women has been declining. From 2000 to 2010, the employment of women aged 20-34 was relatively stable, and the employment proportion of women aged 16-19 decreased from about 50% to about 45%, indicating that the employment proportion of men in this age group increased. From 2010 to 2020, the employment

proportion of women in all age groups decreased. Among them, the employment proportion of women aged 16-19 dropped below 40%, indicating that the gap in employment opportunities between young women and young men in all age groups widened during this period (as shown in Figure 2).

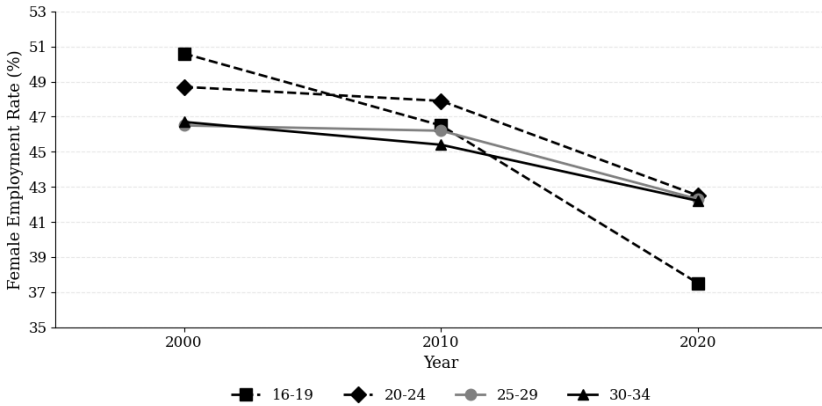


Fig. 2. Employment proportion of young women from 2000 to 2020.

2.2 The Employment Quality of Young Women Has Been Continuously Improving

From the perspective of the occupational changes in the employment of young women, the occupations of young women are constantly upgrading. Before 2010, agriculture and sideline industries were the occupations with the highest employment proportions for both men and women. However, by 2020, this proportion dropped rapidly. Especially among young people, this proportion dropped to below 10%. Commercial service personnel became the main occupation of young women, accounting for more than 40%. This is closely related to the changes in the industrial structure of China's economic development. In 2000, the added-value of the primary industry and the tertiary industry in China accounted for 14.7% and 39.8% of the GDP respectively. In 2020, these proportions were 7.7% and 54.5% respectively. The employment opportunities in the service industry increased significantly. Coupled with the improvement of the education level of young women, their willingness to engage in agriculture and sideline industries decreased significantly. In addition, the proportion of young women engaged in professional and technical personnel increased significantly over 20 years, from 7.66% in 2000 to 22.5% in 2020, and this proportion was much higher than that of men (10.17%). The proportion of young women serving as unit leaders also increased slowly, but the proportion of young men serving as unit leaders has always been slightly higher than that of young women. Generally speaking, the career development of young women is gradually rising, but there is still a certain gap between their proportion in top-level occupations and that of young men (as shown in Table 3).

Table 3. Gender ratio distribution of major occupations in China Unit: %.

Major Occu- pation Cate- gories	Year 2000				Year 2010				Year 2020			
	Female		Male		Female		Male		Female		Male	
	Over-	Youth	Over-	Youth	Over-	Youth	Over-	Youth	Over-	Youth	Over-	Youth
	all		all		all		all		all		all	
Unit Heads	0.62	0.43	2.54	1.28	1.00	1.01	2.40	1.75	1.42	1.35	2.76	2.22
Professional												
and Technical	6.51	7.66	5.04	5.15	7.83	10.58	6.04	7.06	14.16	22.50	7.90	10.17
Personnel												
Clerical Staff	2.07	2.27	3.95	3.56	3.20	4.38	5.24	5.13	6.64	9.37	7.19	7.04
Commercial												
and Service												
Industry	10.12	11.65	8.40	9.27	18.76	23.44	14.12	17.48	36.09	41.03	32.48	40.21
Workers												
Agricultural												
and Sideline	69.01	61.66	60.77	56.31	53.29	39.56	44.38	34.05	23.44	8.69	18.60	7.97
Workers												
Industrial												
Workers	11.68	16.34	19.29	24.43	15.93	21.03	27.81	34.53	18.25	17.05	31.08	32.39

From the perspective of the industry distribution of young women, influenced by the nature of industries and traditional employment concepts, young women are mainly distributed in the wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, education, accommodation and catering, as well as agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery. In the education industry and the wholesale and retail trade, the distribution of young women is significantly higher than that of young men. In the construction industry, transportation, warehousing and postal services, the distribution of young women is significantly lower than that of young men. In other industries, the distribution ratios of men and women are similar (as shown in Table 4).

Table 4. Distribution ratio of young Chinese women in various industries in 2020 Unit: %.

Industry	Male	Female	Industry	Male	Female
Agriculture, Forestry, Animal Husbandry and Fishery	8.18	8.86	Real Estate Industry	2.33	2.33
Mining Industry	0.98	0.26	Leasing and Business Services	3.54	4.03
Manufacturing Industry	22.74	18.63	Scientific Research and Technical Services	2.13	1.73
Production and Supply of Electric Power, Heat Power, Gas and Water	1.05	0.54	Management of Water Conservancy, Environment and Public Facilities	0.46	0.36
Construction Industry	13.84	3.54	Resident Services, Repair and Other Services	3.81	4.51
Wholesale and Retail Trade	13.93	20.52	Education	2.37	9.62

Transportation, Warehousing and Postal Services	7.10	2.48	Health and Social Work	1.14	5.32
Accommodation and Catering Services	6.01	6.02	Culture, Sports and Entertainment Industry	1.01	1.28
Information Transmission, Software and Information Technology Services	3.62	3.03	Public Administration, Social Security and Social Organizations	4.00	4.15
Financial Industry	1.76	2.78			

From the perspective of the employment status of young women, although young women are increasingly prominent in the employment market, they still face many challenges. According to the data from the China Labor Statistical Yearbook, among young women aged 16-29, about 90% are employees. Among young women aged 30-34, the proportion of employees decreases, while the proportion of employers and self-employed individuals increases. Among young female employees, the vast majority have fixed employers. However, among young female employees with fixed employers, the proportion of those who have not signed labor contracts reaches about 20%. In addition, there are also some casual workers and day laborers without fixed employers. There are still significant problems in the job stability and rights protection of young women who have not signed labor contracts and those who are engaged in casual and day-labor jobs. An important reason for this is that in the process of recruitment and entrepreneurship, women often face implicit or explicit gender discrimination. Some enterprises set unreasonable restrictions on women during recruitment, or give priority to investing in men during entrepreneurship. As a result, young women in the employment market often concentrate in low-paying or casual jobs, and often encounter the "ceiling effect" in career development, especially being at a disadvantage in terms of labor income, working environment, and social security.

2.3 The Employment Quality of Young Women has Been Continuously Improving

Changes in the Unemployment rate of Young Women. Since December 2023, the National Bureau of Statistics has released the unemployment rates of the labor force aged 16-24 and 25-29 excluding students (as shown in Figure 3). China's official statistics have never released the unemployment rate specifically for young women. The World Bank estimated the unemployment rate of young women aged 15-24 based on China's publicly available overall youth unemployment rate, and the results are shown in Figure 4. By combining Figure 3 and Figure 4, the following trends in the unemployment rate of young women can be observed. First, in the long-term, after 2000, the unemployment rate of young women aged 15-24 has been gradually rising. From 2003 to 2019, the unemployment rate of young women aged 15-24 remained stable at around 8%. Since 2020, the unemployment rate of young women has started to rise rapidly, reaching 14% in 2023. Second, according to on-the-spot surveys and existing research, young women's employment is more affected during economic shocks. Therefore, the overall youth survey unemployment rate reflects the unemployment situation of young women to a certain extent. It can be inferred that the unemployment rate of young

women aged 25-29 is relatively stable, while that of young women aged 16-24 is significantly higher. The overall youth unemployment rate reached 17.1% in July 2024, and the corresponding unemployment rate of young women may not be lower than this figure. In addition, the youth unemployment rate shows certain cyclical changes. The rapid increase in the unemployment rate in July may be due to two reasons. On the one hand, a large number of college graduates enter the job market, increasing the labor supply and making the youth job market more competitive. On the other hand, the number of unemployed college graduates has increased the total number of unemployed people.

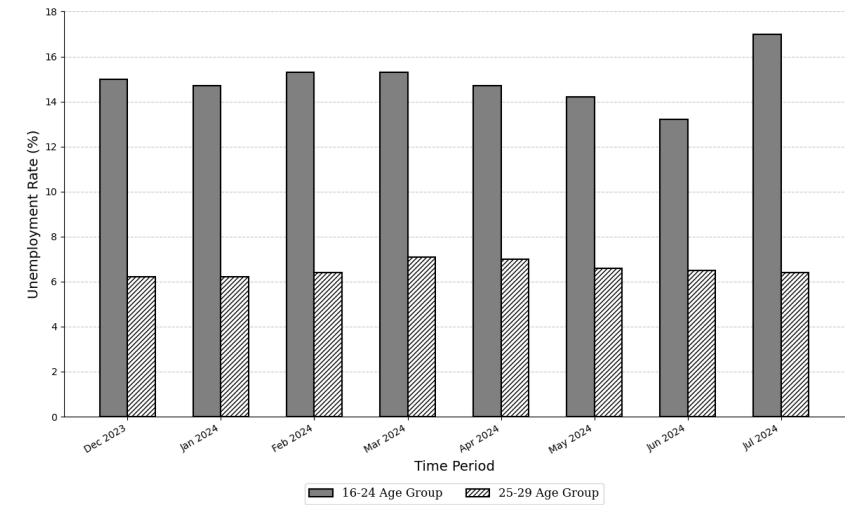


Fig. 3. Youth Unemployment Rate from December 2023 to July 2024.

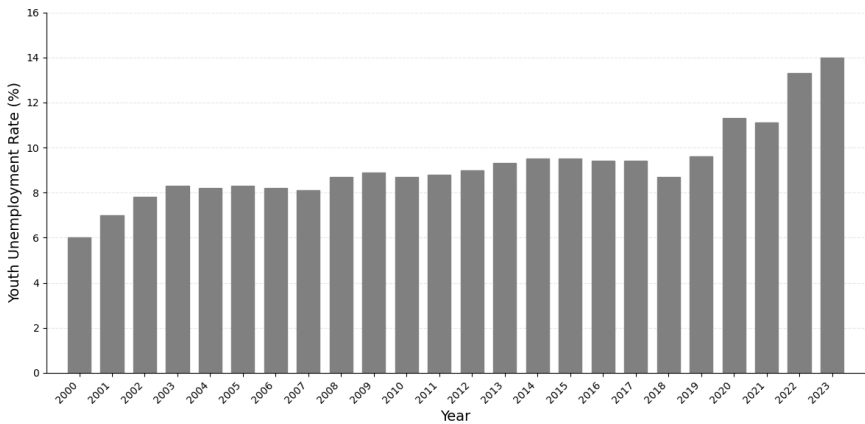


Fig. 4. Unemployment Rate of Young Women Aged 15-24 in China from 2000 to 2023.

Figure 5 shows the estimated unemployment rates of young women aged 15-24 in major countries from 2000 to 2023 by the World Bank. The unemployment rate of young women in France has always been at a relatively high level. From 2010 to 2016, it once remained at nearly 25%, far higher than that of other major countries in the world. The unemployment rate of young women in the UK has also been relatively high, reaching around 16% in 2012. In contrast, the unemployment rate of young women in China remained below 10% before 2019, but started to rise rapidly after 2019. By 2023, it was close to 15%, gradually exceeding that of the United States, the UK, and Japan. The unemployment rate of young women in Japan has always been relatively low, and since 2012, it has been gradually decreasing, showing no obvious upward trend after the pandemic.

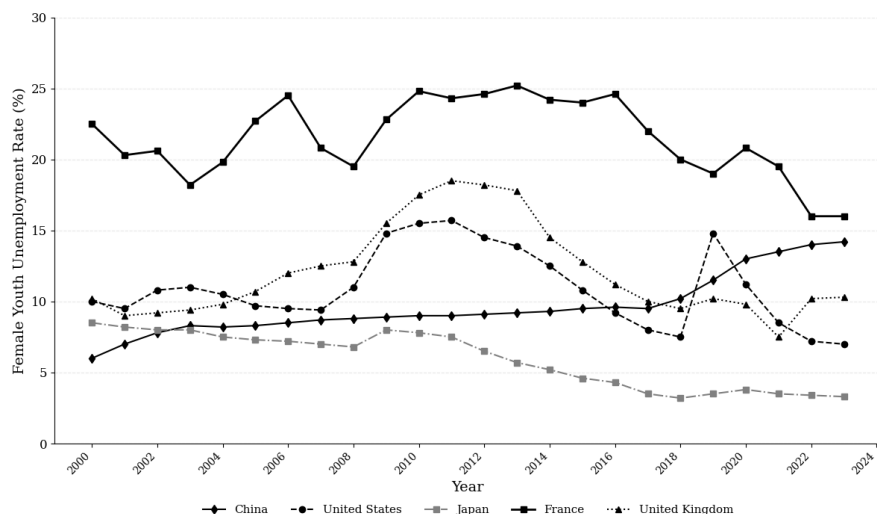


Fig. 5. Unemployment Rates of Young Women Aged 15-24 in Various Countries.

Analysis of the Reasons for the Changes in the Unemployment Rate of Young Women. First, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the economy, reducing the overall employment absorption capacity of the economy. In the short term, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many enterprises faced a sharp decline in orders and operational difficulties. A large number of enterprises chose to close down or halt production, resulting in large-scale layoffs. The youth group with less work experience was the first to bear the brunt. Moreover, this labor-saving employment model has developed a certain inertia, affecting the long-term employment demand of enterprises. In the long term, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment through consumption, exports, and expectations has gradually emerged. First, the pandemic has influenced residents' consumption behavior. Residents' consumption behavior has become more rational, diversified, and conservative, especially among low-income groups. Second, in terms of exports, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the shocks on the supply and demand sides, triggered trade barriers, and spawned uncertain risks[6]. Coupled with the Sino-US game entering a deep-water zone, the United States

and Europe have strengthened the "decoupling and disconnection" from China in the fields of trade and investment. In 2023, the proportion of imports from China in the total imports of the United States and the European Union has dropped to historical lows of 13.7% and 9.3% respectively[7]. Finally, due to the impact of the pandemic and the real estate market entering an adjustment period, the overall social expectations are weak, which has affected investment behavior. The superposition of these three factors has led to insufficient aggregate demand, a sharp reduction in enterprise investment, and a corresponding decrease in the number of new jobs created by enterprises. Since the youth group has less work experience and mainly relies on newly created jobs to solve their employment problems[8], the insufficient creation of new jobs has gradually weakened the employment absorption capacity for young female groups. Although the economy has returned to normal operation for two years, the "scar effect" brought about by the economic shock has not disappeared.

Second, the growth rate of industries with strong employment absorption capacity for young women has slowed down. By calculating the employment multiplier of industries and observing the development status of industries, the reasons for the rising unemployment rate among young women can be analyzed more meticulously at the industry level. The employment multiplier reflects the elastic relationship between final demand and employment, that is, for every one-unit increase in final demand (such as an increase in fixed-asset investment), the number of directly and indirectly increased employees. According to the definition of the employment multiplier and the availability of data, the input-output partial closure model is used to calculate the employment multiplier by industry.

Given the equation: $Y = AX + D$. Among them, A is the direct input coefficient matrix in the input-output table, X is the column vector of the total output of sectors, and D is the column vector of the total demand of sectors. The solution vector of the above matrix equation is: $X = (I - A)^{-1}D$. Let the matrix $B = (I - A)^{-1}$, that is, the inverse matrix of the Leontief matrix, then $X = BD$. Then the employment multiplier of the i -th industry is: $M_i = \sum_{j=1}^n b_{ji}$. Among them, b_{ji} is the coefficient in the j -th row and i -th column of the inverse matrix of the Leontief matrix, and represents the labor demand coefficient per unit of total output[9].

Based on the input-output table of 2020 and the data from the 7th National Population Census, the total employment inducement coefficients, female employment inducement coefficients, and female youth employment inducement coefficients of various industries in China were calculated. The analysis shows that the industry of agricultural, forestry, animal husbandry, fishery products and services has the largest employment inducement coefficient. The main reason is that the technological level of this industry develops slowly and it is a labor-intensive industry. Except for the industry of agricultural, forestry, animal husbandry, fishery products and services, for both female youth and all female labor forces, the accommodation and catering industry, and the industry of textile, clothing, shoes, hats, leather, down and their products have relatively large employment inducement coefficients. For female youth labor forces, industries such as textiles, residential services, repair and other services, health and social work, culture, sports and entertainment, and education have relatively large employment inducement coefficients, while industries such as petroleum, coking products and nuclear

fuel processing products have very small employment inducement coefficients. Therefore, by comparing the growth rates of added value by industry in recent years, it can be found that the accommodation and catering industry, which has a strong ability to absorb female youth employment, had a growth rate of -14.62% in 2020. Although it recovered later, it was still -1.51% in 2022, and the average growth rate from 2020 to 2023 was only 5.055%. Although the overall growth rate of the manufacturing industry remained stable with fluctuations, the textile industry, which has a strong ability to absorb female youth employment, declined severely. In 2022 and 2023, the growth rates of the added value of large-scale textile industries were -2.7% and -0.6% respectively, and the growth rates of the added value of large-scale clothing industries were -1.9% and -7.6% respectively. On the one hand, this was due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and on the other hand, it was due to the relocation of the textile industry chain. Residential services, repair and other services, as well as the culture, sports and entertainment industries also recovered slowly after the pandemic, resulting in insufficient employment opportunities for female youth. Generally speaking, the slow recovery of industries such as the catering and textile industries, which have a strong ability to absorb female youth employment, after the pandemic is the main reason for the increase in the unemployment rate of female youth after the pandemic.

Third, the development of automation technology has reduced the demand for labor. Since 2000, information technology has developed rapidly in China, and automation technology has penetrated into various industries. As a representative of automation technology, although the computer increases the demand for highly-skilled labor by complementing with it, its substitution effect on labor engaged in routine and codable tasks cannot be ignored. For example, bank tellers, cashiers, data entry clerks, etc. These are also industries where young female labor is concentrated. The substitution effect generated by automation technologies such as computers has reduced the demand for the corresponding labor. As can be seen from Table 5, the average number of computers used in industries that absorb more young women, such as education, wholesale and retail, and manufacturing, reaches more than 50 per 100 people. Robots are another type of automation technology with a strong labor substitution effect. In 2022, China's industrial robot installation volume accounted for more than 50% of the global total. From 2017 to 2020, the growth rate of China's industrial robots reached 13%. A new generation of information technology represented by artificial intelligence is rising rapidly. From AlphaGo defeating the world-champion Go player Lee Sedol in 2016 to the release of the text-to-video model Sora in 2024, the time interval between each technological leap in the field of artificial intelligence is shortening, and it is gradually transforming from professional artificial intelligence technology to general artificial intelligence technology. The expansion of professional knowledge formed by artificial intelligence technology targets non-routine tasks originally performed by highly-skilled labor, further expanding the substitutability of work tasks and reducing the demand for labor in the market. Although the education level of young women has been increasing year by year, the disconnection between the education system and market demand still exists. Especially for women majoring in liberal arts, they may face the unemployment problem caused by the mismatch between skills and market demand.

Table 5. Computer usage by industry in 2022.

Industry	Number of computers (per 100 people)	Industry	Number of computers (per 100 people)
Mining industry	28	Real estate industry	39
Manufacturing industry	33	Leasing and business services industry	24
Production and supply of electric power, heat power, gas and water industry	76	Scientific research and technical services industry	91
Construction industry	15	Water conservancy, environment and public facilities management industry	15
Wholesale and retail trade	59	Resident services, repair and other services industry	14
Transportation, storage and postal services industry	40	Education	118
Accommodation and catering industry	26	Health and social work	61
Information transmission, software and information technology services industry	127	Culture, sports and entertainment industry	71

Fourth, the real estate industry has entered an adjustment cycle, and there are policy controls in the education and training industry. Although the real estate industry ranks relatively low in terms of its ability to drive female youth employment, it occupies a very important position in the overall economy and has a significant impact on the upstream financial and construction industries as well as the downstream home decoration and property management industries. In previous years, real estate and related enterprises, which had a strong ability to absorb college graduates for employment, hardly had any new recruitment positions in 2024. The current downturn in the real estate industry has caused college graduates to lose an important employment direction. In addition, the real estate industry's entry into the adjustment period has also changed residents' overall economic expectations, reduced consumption, and the nature of houses is changing from investment products to consumer goods. Investment in the real estate and related industries has plummeted, reducing the creation of new jobs from the aggregate demand side. Meanwhile, in 2021, the "double reduction" policy in the education industry dealt a heavy blow to the education and training industry. Many education and training institutions went bankrupt, training classes closed, and some companies transformed into other industries. The education industry itself has a relatively strong ability to absorb female youth employment, but currently it is unable to absorb relevant employment personnel, narrowing the employment channels for female youth. As employment opportunities in traditional industries decrease and emerging industries

raise the skill requirements for the labor force, female youth have failed to adapt to this change in terms of skills and experience in a timely manner, leading to an increase in the unemployment rate.

Fifth, in the traditional gender employment concept, women are required to take on more responsibilities for child-rearing and housework in the family. From the perspective of the micro-level reasons for unemployment, compared with men, at all age groups, the proportion of female youth who have never worked is higher than that of men, indicating that at all age groups, the difficulty of female youth's first employment is higher than that of men. Another significant difference is that, compared with men, the proportion of women aged 25-34 who are unemployed due to taking care of their families is very high. For unemployed women aged 30-34, nearly half are unemployed because they need to take care of their families, while the proportion of men unemployed due to taking care of their families is less than 5% (as shown in Table 6). In the current difficult economic and employment situation, the increased difficulty of female first employment has exacerbated the rise in the unemployment rate of female youth. Coupled with the pressure on women's careers caused by the gender role expectations of society and family, some female youth choose to withdraw from the labor market.

Table 6. Reasons for Unemployment among Young Men and Women in 2023 Unit: %.

Reasons for unemployment	Male				Female			
	16-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	16-19	20-24	25-29	30-34
Never worked	47.60	54.20	17.20	3.10	53.20	60.60	20.10	6.70
Health or physical reasons	0.10	1.30	2.10	3.10	0.80	1.60	4.30	4.50
Taking care of the family	0.30	0.70	3.70	4.80	2.70	3.70	22.20	44.20
Participating in study and training	15.00	9.00	6.30	2.10	11.90	8.60	9.10	2.40
Dissatisfied with the previous job	19.30	16.10	28.70	27.90	16.60	13.70	21.40	15.70
Completion of the previous job task	9.70	8.10	17.00	22.50	6.90	5.00	7.70	6.70
Fired	1.00	1.20	2.80	3.70	2.10	1.10	2.10	2.60
Seasonal closure	1.30	0.60	1.70	3.00	0.40	0.20	0.70	1.40
Closure of the unit/self-employed business	1.40	2.80	6.70	9.30	1.80	2.00	4.20	5.40
Other	4.30	6.0	13.80	20.40	3.60	3.40	8.40	10.40

The Situation of Occupational Gender Segregation Among Young People has deteriorated. Occupational gender segregation refers to the phenomenon where a large number of people of the same gender are concentrated in the same occupation[10], or men and women are respectively concentrated in different occupations[11]. This may lead to gender inequality issues and affect overall work efficiency. By using the data

from the fifth, sixth, and seventh national population censuses and adopting the standardized Duncan index to measure the occupational gender segregation situation of Chinese young people, it is found that from 2000 to 2010, the occupational segregation situation among young people improved significantly. However, whether occupations are classified into six major categories or sixty-three categories, from 2010 to 2020, the occupational gender segregation situation among young people deteriorated, indicating a trend of increasing gender inequality in the youth employment market in the past decade. From 2000 to 2010, China's economy was in a stage of rapid development, which provided a large number of job opportunities for young women. In addition, the improvement of the education level of young women and the gradual weakening of the society's gender-role concept towards women led to the improvement of occupational gender segregation among young people. However, from 2010 to 2020, the occupational gender segregation situation among young people deteriorated, indicating a trend of increasing gender inequality in the youth employment market in the past decade (as shown in Table 7).

Table 7. Overall level of occupational gender segregation among Chinese young people.

Category	Year 2000	Year 2010	Year 2020
Standardized Duncan Index for Youth (Six Major Occupation Categories)	21.36	16.81	21.63
Standardized Duncan Index for Youth (Sixty-three Occupation Categories)	-	27.08	29.01

Based on the gender ratio within youth occupations, occupations with a proportion of young women below 30% are referred to as youth "male-dominated occupations"[12]. Appendix Table 3 shows the changes in China's youth "male-dominated occupations" in 2010 and 2020 and the proportion of young women in them. In 2010, there were only 14 "male-dominated occupations", and only 1 had a proportion of young women below 10%. By 2020, the number of "male-dominated occupations" had increased to 23, and the number with a proportion of young women below 10% had increased to 3. In 2010, the lowest proportion of women in occupations was 6.95%, while in 2020, the lowest proportion was 5.15%. Overall, the gender gap among the youth group has widened, and the employment situation for young women has deteriorated.

New Business forms and Young Women. The new business forms have broken the traditional rigid employment model and are more flexible, mobile, and inclusive. For young women, this flexibility is particularly important because such jobs allow them to better balance work and family responsibilities. The roles and impacts of young women in new business form jobs also reflect significant economic and social transformations and changes in the labor market. New forms of employment relying on the Internet, digital, and intelligent technologies, including e-commerce (such as product design, customer service, and marketing), the platform economy (such as ride-hailing and shared accommodation), and online education (such as remote teaching, live streaming,

and content creation), have attracted a large number of young women to participate. Some young women with parenting responsibilities can work from home, continue their careers in the form of flexible working hours, short-term contracts, and freelancing, or on a part-time basis, which also allows them to freely allocate their personal time.

Meanwhile, with continuous breakthroughs and innovations in fields such as information and communication, biotechnology, new materials, and new energy, the integration with traditional industries has created a large number of new employment fields, providing women with a broader range of career choices, innovating traditional work content and forms, expanding women's work options, and creating a relatively fair and open environment, making it easier for women to enter the high-skilled talent market. Based on the online data from China's recruitment platforms, Appendix Table 4 shows the youth gender ratio in the new employment form of artificial intelligence from 2019 to 2021 and the basic distribution of this gender ratio in different industries. Among them, only in the two industries of the financial sector and public administration, social security, and social organizations did the recruitment proportion of young women exceed 20%. Industries with relatively low proportions include agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, and fishery, mining, resident services, repair, and other services, and real estate, all of which did not exceed 14%.

Furthermore, based on the online data from Chinese recruitment platforms, the gender income gap among young people and industry differences in the new employment format of artificial intelligence from 2019 to 2021 were analyzed, as shown in Appendix Table 5. Among them, significant gender income gaps were observed in the accommodation and catering industry, information transmission, software and information technology services, manufacturing, health and social work, resident services, repair and other services, construction, real estate, wholesale and retail, education, culture, sports and entertainment, production and supply of electricity, heat, gas and water, scientific research and technical services, leasing and business services, and the financial industry. The income of young women in artificial intelligence positions was significantly lower than that of young men.

Although the new business formats have brought new opportunities, young women also face challenges in these new formats. First, emerging industries and future industries have provided abundant career development opportunities for young women, which should have offered more chances for women to break through the old occupational barriers. However, gender stereotypes still act like invisible shackles, hindering them from obtaining equal opportunities in these technology- and science-intensive fields. These stereotypes may be deeply rooted in industrial practices through artificial intelligence and data algorithms, resulting in young women often facing dual obstacles in education, employment, and even promotion opportunities when entering STEM fields, invisibly solidifying and spreading gender inequality. Second, flexible employment forms such as remote work and flexible working hours seemingly provide greater freedom for women. However, this flexibility also makes it easier for society and individuals to regard the work-life balance as an individual responsibility, blurring the boundaries between work and life, and even ignoring issues such as the need for social system support in employment. As a result, women encounter more invisible pressure in the workplace. That is, while taking on heavy responsibilities such as housework,

child-rearing, and elderly care, they still need to maintain high-efficiency work performance. Finally, although the new business formats offer freedom in terms of time and location, they also weaken the institutional protection of workers' rights in traditional labor relations. Due to the lack of a stable income source and a comprehensive social security system, female flexible employees are more vulnerable to market fluctuations economically. In addition, the lack of occupational health and safety protection also exposes them to greater risks at work. Therefore, it is urgent to improve legal protection, innovate social insurance, provide career support, and raise public awareness.

3 Challenges Faced by Young Chinese Women in Employment

3.1 Female College Graduates Face Relatively High Employment Pressure

The employment landscape for female college graduates has deteriorated significantly in 2024, despite relative stability during the pandemic period. This deterioration manifests through declining contract signing rates, insufficient institutional support positions, heightened market competition, and elevated psychological pressure. The primary drivers include reduced labor demand across traditionally female-employing sectors, particularly real estate, education, and manufacturing. Although the expanding new energy sector—characterized by the "new three export items" (electric vehicles, lithium batteries, and photovoltaic products)—has generated employment opportunities, these positions typically require technical expertise that disadvantages female graduates concentrated in humanities and social sciences.

3.2 The Phenomenon of Slow Employment Among Female College Graduates is Prominent

"Slow employment"—the strategic postponement of labor market entry after graduation—has become increasingly prevalent among female college graduates. This phenomenon, affecting approximately 20% of graduates according to the 2024 Zhaopin Employment Competence Research Report, involves graduates either continuously seeking optimal employment opportunities or preparing for competitive public sector examinations despite having received employment offers. While potentially enhancing long-term career prospects, this approach carries significant risks: missed initial employment opportunities, accumulated experience deficits, and the "unemployment scar effect" that diminishes subsequent employment quality.

Four primary factors drive this phenomenon. First, graduates overvalue the two-year "fresh graduate" status policy (instituted in 2018 and reinforced in 2020), despite its limited practical impact on employer recruitment practices. Second, substantial disparities exist between employment within and outside the public system, particularly regarding job security, social benefits, and family-supportive policies. Employees outside the system face significantly higher dismissal rates, circumvention of labor protections, inadequate unemployment benefits, and inferior social security provisions. Third, contemporary graduates exhibit reduced financial pressure and heightened preference for

employment stability, particularly in state-owned enterprises and government institutions. Fourth, a structural mismatch persists between higher education curricula—especially in female-dominated humanities disciplines—and labor market demands, exacerbated by insufficient enterprise involvement in curriculum development.

3.3 Young Women Face Implicit Gender Discrimination in the Workplace

Despite comprehensive legislative protections—including the Employment Promotion Law, the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, and regulatory notices specifically prohibiting gender-based hiring restrictions—young women continue to encounter pervasive implicit discrimination. This manifests as disproportionately low female representation in interview pools, reduced selection rates, compensation disparities, and inappropriate questioning regarding marriage and family planning. These practices stem from both statistical discrimination (employers' probabilistic assessments of group characteristics) and anticipated productivity disruptions associated with maternity leave.

3.4 Young Women Lack Digital Skills

The escalating importance of digital competencies in contemporary labor markets has revealed a significant gender-based skills gap. Female graduates demonstrate lower rates of strategic skill development in critical areas including artificial intelligence, big data analytics, industrial internet applications, and blockchain technologies. This deficiency correlates with persistent underrepresentation in STEM education, with UNESCO data indicating only 30% female participation in STEM fields globally and particularly low representation in information technology, natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics.

This educational pathway divergence stems from deeply entrenched gender role socialization that propagates misconceptions about female aptitude in scientific disciplines, emphasizes employment challenges in male-dominated fields, and channels women toward humanities and social sciences under the premise of enhanced work-family compatibility. Ironically, this educational stratification channels women away from precisely those occupations characterized by superior compensation and career advancement opportunities, particularly in the artificial intelligence era where STEM competencies command increasing premium. The technological displacement of humanities-oriented occupations consequently exacerbates labor market gender disparities.

3.5 Young Women Face Challenges in Balancing Family and Work

Work-family reconciliation remains the paramount challenge confronting young professional women. The dual impact of intensive workplace demands (time constraints, unpredictable tasks, performance pressure) and disproportionate domestic responsibilities (particularly child-rearing and eldercare) creates acute role conflict that disproportionately affects women. While potential mitigating factors exist—including familial

support networks, domestic service utilization, and flexible work arrangements—their accessibility remains limited for many women. As Nobel economist Claudia Goldin has demonstrated, the prevalence of "greedy jobs" (positions rewarding extended availability with enhanced compensation and advancement opportunities) fundamentally undermines gender equity. Family utility maximization typically results in one partner (predominantly women) adopting flexible, lower-remuneration employment to accommodate caregiving responsibilities—a key mechanism perpetuating gender wage disparities.

4 Policy Recommendations for Promoting the Employment of Young Women

4.1 Strengthen Efforts to Create New Job Opportunities

Strategic investment in industries with high female employment coefficients—namely accommodation and catering, textiles, residential services, health and social work—represents an efficient mechanism for alleviating unemployment pressures. Local governments should implement dual-track support systems: (1) streamlining administrative processes for business registration, licensing, and operation, particularly for graduate entrepreneurs; (2) providing targeted fiscal incentives including start-up loans, rent subsidies, and tax deferrals for eligible female-owned enterprises. For the textile industry specifically, policies should simultaneously leverage RCEP and Belt and Road opportunities to expand export markets while addressing persistent recruitment challenges through workplace environment improvements and enhanced social security provisions.

4.2 Cancel the Regulation of Retaining the Fresh-Graduate Status for Two Years

The current policy allowing graduates to maintain "fresh graduate" status for two years post-graduation inadvertently encourages employment postponement and creates misaligned incentives. Evidence indicates this designation has minimal practical significance in employer hiring decisions, yet substantially influences graduate behavior, potentially causing candidates to forgo viable employment opportunities. The abolition of this status would encourage prompt labor market entry while maintaining essential employment support services for genuinely unemployed graduates.

4.3 Bridge the gap in the "Dual-track system" of Employment Security between the "System-affiliated" and "Non-system-affiliated" Sectors

The pronounced security differential between public (system-affiliated) and private (non-system-affiliated) employment represents a fundamental driver of female graduates' reluctance to enter private sector employment. Policy interventions should ad-

dress: (1) employment stability—enforcing open-ended contract provisions after continuous employment tenure, subsidizing skills development programs, equalizing maternity provisions across sectors with partial government cost-sharing, and establishing robust complaint mechanisms for discrimination cases; (2) social security parity—enforcing comprehensive social insurance compliance, increasing private sector contribution bases following the pension system integration reform of October 2024, and streamlining administrative procedures to facilitate benefit claims.

4.4 Address the Implicit Gender Discrimination in the Employment Market

While China has made significant progress addressing explicit gender discrimination, countering implicit biases requires multi-dimensional intervention. Recommended measures include: (1) implementing gender equality awareness programs through workplace training and media campaigns; (2) incentivizing enterprises to adopt bias-mitigation strategies including anonymous resume reviews and gender-neutral performance evaluation frameworks; (3) establishing systematic audit mechanisms to identify discriminatory patterns through gender-disaggregated recruitment, promotion, and compensation data analytics; (4) creating enforcement mechanisms including preferential procurement for gender-equitable employers and sanctions for non-compliant organizations.

4.5 Optimize the Curriculum Settings of Colleges and Universities

University curricula require systematic realignment with contemporary labor market requirements. This necessitates structured industry-academia partnerships where leading enterprises contribute to curriculum development through guest lectures and skills requirement communication. Particular emphasis should be placed on integrating digital competencies across all disciplines, developing interdisciplinary programs combining domain expertise with technological proficiency, and strengthening artificial intelligence teaching capacity, with targeted support for resource-constrained institutions in western regions.

4.6 Strengthen the Cultivation of STEM Skills Among Young Women

Addressing the digital skills gender gap requires coordinated interventions across educational stages. Primary and secondary education reforms should focus on combating gender stereotypes through teacher training, developing gender-responsive STEM curricula, and providing female role models in technical fields. Higher education institutions should establish specialized mentoring programs, research opportunities, and STEM-focused scholarships. Complementary career guidance systems and industry partnerships can facilitate transition pathways into technical employment sectors, while continuing education programs and professional networks can support workplace retention and advancement.

4.7 Encourage the Cultivation of Female Entrepreneurship and the Entrepreneurship of Young Women

Entrepreneurial development represents a critical pathway for enhancing female economic empowerment. Comprehensive support mechanisms should include: (1) tailored entrepreneurship education programs covering business planning, financial management, and marketing; (2) networking and mentorship structures connecting nascent female entrepreneurs with experienced counterparts; (3) gender-specific financial instruments including preferential loans, tax incentives, and subsidies; (4) market access facilitation through procurement quotas for women-owned enterprises. Additionally, targeted executive development programs should be established to increase female representation in senior management positions.

4.8 Promote Work-life Balance for Young Women

Enhancing work-life reconciliation requires both institutional support and workplace culture transformation. Priority interventions include expanding childcare infrastructure for children under three through standardization, quality assurance, workforce professionalization, and service model diversification. Concurrently, workplace flexibility policies—as mandated in the "Decision on Optimizing Fertility Policy to Promote Long-term Balanced Population Development"—require expanded implementation in private enterprises through regulatory enforcement. Additionally, strict enforcement of existing working hours legislation is essential to combat pervasive overtime cultures that disproportionately impact female workers with caregiving responsibilities.

5 Conclusion

Young women are an important force in the labor market. Adequate economic empowerment not only enhances the sense of gain, security, and happiness of young women but also holds significant importance for high-quality population development and the achievement of common prosperity. Research has found that currently, young women in China are facing issues such as rising unemployment rates, intensified gender inequality in the job market, insufficient digital skills, and an imbalance between work and family. As big data and artificial intelligence technologies rapidly penetrate into economic life, algorithmic bias may exacerbate the potential employment dilemmas of young women[13]. Therefore, it is necessary to promote communication and collaboration among multiple sectors, formulate a scientific and feasible macro-policy framework, provide a basic framework and practical guidelines for the employment and career development of young women, and promote high-quality and full employment for young women. Specifically, it is necessary to start with industries with strong employment absorption capacity for young women, create new job opportunities by promoting consumption and expanding investment, and fundamentally relieve the current employment pressure on young women. At the same time, it is also necessary to address the

contradictions between employment and childbearing faced by young women from aspects such as improving social security, enhancing women's employment and entrepreneurship capabilities, and strengthening social support for childbearing.

Acknowledgments

This study was funded by National Social Science Foundation Youth Program (Grant Number: 22CSH048) and Zhejiang Provincial Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning Special Project on "Higher Education Basic Research Funding Reform" (Grant Number: 25NDJC153YBMS).

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