

A Review of Literature on the Work-Life Balance of Female University Faculty from the Perspective of Patriarchal

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Abstract

This paper reviews the challenges faced by female university faculty in balancing professional advancement and maternal responsibilities, framed within the theoretical context of patriarchy. Drawing on feminist, the study traces how patriarchal norms have historically defined women's roles in both private and public spheres, particularly in the Chinese context. Although China promoted formal gender equality after 1949, the persistence of traditional family structures and implicit gendered expectations continues to constrain women's career mobility. The analysis highlights the dual burden faced by female academics: while they benefit from relatively stable institutional environments, they remain subject to performance evaluations that overlook the disproportionate domestic labor they perform. Furthermore, the structural barriers in academic promotion, research productivity, and leadership appointments also highlight the disadvantaged position of female teachers. The paper argues that addressing these disparities requires not only legal protections and flexible policies but also gender-sensitive reforms in academic evaluation systems, expanded institutional support, and greater political recognition of women's contributions. Ultimately, the professional development of female academics is not just a matter of individual equity but one of broader social and political significance.

Keywords: patriarchy, feminism, motherhood, female university faculty, gender inequality

1. Introduction

In public discourse, the term "university faculty" is frequently constructed through a gendered lens, often defaulting to portrayals of male academics. Media and scholarly texts tend to depict this group through dimensions such as age, compensation, and academic achievement. On one hand, early-career faculty may be labeled as "academic worker bees," emphasizing their labor-intensive roles. On the other hand, senior scholars are more likely to be characterized as "experts" or "authorities," underscoring their academic influence. Ritzer (2004) has noted that in sociological analysis, the term "gender" is frequently used as a euphemism for "women," reflecting a persistent androcentric bias. When the identity of university faculty intersects with gender, female academics are often portrayed in idealized terms, elegant in demeanor, intellectually accomplished, and embodying both beauty and talent. Yet, there is a notable lack of inquiry into how their gender may expose them to the structural injustices of patriarchy. This paper will use patriarchy as a theoretical framework to explore the issue of balance in women's career development, especially with higher education, and to develop a summary of existing research on the realities they may face in the face of invisible patriarchal rules.

2. The Role of Women in the Private Sphere of the Family

British legal historian Henry Maine introduced the concept of patriarchy from the perspective of kinship systems in his seminal work *Ancient Law*. Drawing on ancient texts such as *The Homeric Epics* and *The Old Testament*, Maine (1906) inferred the existence of the concept of the "despotic father" in early legal thought. This notion

reflected the structure of ancient familial life, in which all family members, under either biological or fictive kinship established by legal fiction, were subject to the rule or governance of a single patriarch. This patriarch, typically a senior male relative such as the father, grandfather, or great-grandfather, exercised absolute authority. Within this structure, children and other family members, regardless of gender, were considered extensions of the patriarch rather than autonomous individuals and were deprived of personal and property rights, effectively rendering them akin to slaves within the family unit.

Weber (1978) identified three historical types of legitimate domination, namely traditional authority, charismatic authority, and legal-rational authority. For Weber, the essence of patriarchy lies in the power relation between the ruler and the ruled, between the master and the servant, the patriarch and the child (Zhu, 1995). At its core, patriarchy is rooted in obedience. Weber astutely observed that “tradition” continually sacralizes the patriarch’s status, reinforcing both the arbitrariness and the limitations of patriarchal rule through the formal delineation of patriarchal boundaries (Fujii, 2005).

While Maine and Weber analyzed the inequalities under paternal authority largely from legal and structural perspectives, later theorists such as Anthony Giddens and Friedrich Engels offered more socially embedded critiques of patriarchy grounded in biological and property-based differences (Cui, 2009). Giddens (2009) argued that physiological differences between men and women assigned to women the biological and social function of motherhood, thereby subordinating them within the social order. Engels (2001) linked the subordinate position of women within monogamous marriage and the nuclear family to the unequal development of private property and class structures. Patriarchy, which exists as a limitation of the capitalist system, will disappear with the stage of socialism (Liu & Wang, 2003).

Huang (2021) argues that the question of how to conceptualize motherhood has long been a central dilemma in feminist theory. The notion of patriarchy, initially used to explain men’s direct exploitation of women within the private sphere of the family, later extended to the public domain, where male dominance in discourse relegated women to marginal or non-existent social status (Dai, 2001). Within this context, women have often been portrayed in the role of “motherhood,” with their unpaid labor for the family receiving a degree of symbolic recognition. However, with the changing pattern of social division of labor, more and more women are moving into different social positions. And in the new model of family development, it has become an issue that the patriarchal tradition and the feminist movement have had to argue fiercely about whether to silently inherit the tradition of letting motherhood turn women into slaves or to abolish motherhood (i.e., to abolish this obligatory role of women that is the foundation of patriarchy and to stop the unpaid labor and the emotional patterns that are fixed in place).

3. Patriarchy and Feminism in the Public-Private Interface

The concepts of “matriarchy” and “patriarchy” both originate from analyses of power relations rooted in modes of production and ownership of the means of production. Fox (1988) argued that any theory of patriarchy must simultaneously account for both the superstructure and individual subjectivity. However, efforts to theorize patriarchy have faced persistent disagreement over the historical roots of women’s oppression (Beechey, 1979). Feminists have endeavored to theorize the functioning of patriarchy in specific contexts, defining different manifestations (Kandiyoti, 1988) and explaining its changing interactions with capitalism (Walby, 1990).

With the emergence of the concept of patriarchy, traditional concerns with intergenerational relations in classical studies gave way to analyses centered on “gender conflict” and “gendered exploitation” as frameworks to explain women’s subordination across historical periods. A key figure in radical feminist thought, Shulamith Firestone, advanced what she termed *The Dialectic of Sex*, arguing that the sexual class system originates directly from women’s biological reality of childbearing (Firestone, 1970). In her view, the familial structure embeds patriarchy into the reproductive relations of humankind. Similarly, Lerner (1986) pointed out that in early human societies, functional divisions of labor between men and women created asymmetrical dependencies, whereby women became reliant on men for survival.

During this period, women actively sought to demonstrate their social value, asserting that they, like men, are integral members of society and rejecting the notion that social respect and recognition are privileges reserved exclusively for men (Lu, 2021). Influenced by the ideals of liberty and equality emerging from the French Revolution, women began to awaken to their political consciousness and to fight for rights within a male-dominated society. Wollstonecraft (1891) argued that both women and men should be regarded as rational beings, and that society should be restructured based on reason. This vision inspired countless women to break free from domestic confines and pursue public engagement. Women of this era expressed their aspirations for freedom and independence by imitating male social behaviors and engaging in political activism, most notably through the campaign for suffrage. These acts symbolized a collective rejection of gendered limitations and an effort to assert their rightful place in civic life.

With the advancement of the first and second waves of the women's movement, women increasingly stepped out of the domestic sphere and entered broader social and public life. By the 1930s, propelled by a new surge in feminist activism, women's social status had markedly improved. All women's liberation movements during this period were framed as efforts to dismantle the patriarchal system and to establish a new social order (Elliot, 1992). As victories were achieved in securing suffrage, access to education, and the right to employment, feminist agendas expanded to include demands for equal pay, economic independence, the right to retain property and wages after marriage, and legal recognition of child support obligations. Some scholars have further argued that women across all social classes experience forms of male oppression (Acker, 1989). Therefore, the feminist revolution within the patriarchal structure was not simply aimed at abolishing male power, but rather at eradicating the very notion of structural gender difference.

As more and more women enter society and work successfully, driven by this wave of historical development, new problems have come to light, i.e., the increasingly acute conflict between family, marriage, and work. Education became a pivotal factor influencing this complex issue. In fact, whether women had access to education became a class issue (Nie, 2003), resulting in a divergence: middle-class women, often equipped with higher education, were able to pursue professional employment, while women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds remained trapped in precarious labor conditions as a means of survival.

4. Patriarchy and Women's Liberation in China

Unlike Western societies, the structure of Chinese society is deeply embedded in an ethical order. As Fei et al. (1992) famously theorized through his concept of the "differential mode of association", social relationships in China are organized along concentric moral hierarchies rather than abstract legal equality. Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) categorized patriarchal systems into two broad models: the African pattern found in sub-Saharan societies, and what she termed classic patriarchy, common in South Asia, East Asia, and the Muslim Middle East. According to her typology, China falls under the latter. That is to say, in an environment that conforms to the productive needs of an agrarian society, where the patriarchal structure is at the center of family development, where the male elder controls the others (people and things), and where women can establish their individual status in the family only by giving birth to a male, and have no power over family property, dowry or bride price.

Early Confucian thought in China regarded family life as embedded within a hierarchical social order. The concept of "the family and the state as one" positioned the family as a microcosm of the ideal relationship between the individual and the state, with domestic norms serving as moral extensions of political governance into the private sphere (Sangwha, 1999). Within this framework, Chinese women are during a traditional ethical requirement that makes them subservient without a subjective identity, and the gender division of labor in society, where men are in charge of the public sphere and women are in charge of the domestic realm, reinforces the difference between the male and female roles (Li, 2018). This division contributed to the institutionalization of gendered power asymmetries, whereby social expectations in traditional Chinese society mandated that men be strong and dominant, while women remain weak, inferior, and submissive. This normative structure was further solidified by the Confucian doctrine of the "Five Cardinal Relationships", which codified interpersonal roles into a moral system (Ma, 2008). As a result, gender relations were not only naturalized but also moralized, sustaining both cultural and familial ethics that underpinned the broader sociopolitical order in China, one that appeared disorderly on the surface but was in fact deeply structured and regulated through these traditional norms.

In the process of China's economic development, state power actively promoted the image of the "Iron Girl", a symbol of the laboring woman, as a class equal to men. Women came to be regarded as an essential component of the national labor force in the construction of socialist China. The promulgation of the Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China in 1950 marked the first time gender equality was codified into law, affirming the equal rights of women and men. Unlike the implicit moral constraints embedded in traditional Chinese ethics, this new legal framework sought to redefine women's social identity. As Harriet Evans (2008) has observed, women were no longer judged solely by their roles in terms of the body, gender, and family interests. Instead, they were conceptualized alongside men as both subjects of class construction and agents of political development. But even more insidious is the fact that even though women are given equal rights under the law and are equally responsible for building the nation's development by participating in the affairs of society, the social responsibilities and duties of these iron girls are not limited to this. Despite their public roles, many still adhered to patriarchal familial norms at home, following state-sanctioned ideals that reinforced traditional gender roles within the private sphere (Leung, 2003).

Since the launch of the Reform and Opening-Up policy in 1978, China has pursued a path of economic modernization. Under the impact of market-oriented reforms, the previously state-enforced gender equality began to erode, and patriarchal structures, once challenged by socialist ideology, re-emerged. Women were again

positioned as contributors, expected to sacrifice for the collective good. But this sacrifice and contribution remain unchanged to this day, within the patriarchal structure and demanded by the traditional obligation of the need to maintain family harmony (Leung, 2003). More troublingly, women themselves reinforce the inevitability of this “vulnerable” role, repeating the need to maintain harmony, persuading women against women, and reinforcing patriarchy to move to the center again.

Gender-discriminatory labor divisions continue to impose a dual burden on women: they are expected to participate in the workforce and contribute economically, while simultaneously fulfilling caregiving and domestic responsibilities. Although the Chinese government has consistently emphasized gender equality in official discourse and has introduced legal protections against discrimination, structural inequities persist. With the relaxation of childbirth policies, women face increasing demands on their time and energy. Responsibilities related to childbirth and caregiving often lead to career interruptions, family conflicts, and reduced job mobility. While these are seen as expected contributions, they in fact hinder women’s professional development (Li, 2016).

There is a negative correlation between taking on motherhood and women’s career development. Women’s employment increases women’s life chances and their sense of self-control, but the critical period of women’s career development often overlaps with the time of childbearing and child-rearing, which can lead to the phenomenon of childlessness in society. The study found that although located in the same East Asian region, compared with the M-shaped employment pattern of women in Japan and Korea, the employment pattern of women in China is inverted U-shaped (Li, 2017). When women re-enter the labor market after assuming the burdensome tasks of motherhood. When women re-enter the labor market after taking on the heavy tasks of motherhood, the precariousness of the job, the low income, the family conflict caused by the income gap and the potential gender discrimination of the employer are once again reinforced, and women will suffer the wage penalty at this time. The temporal overlap and mutual exclusivity between motherhood and professional development can place women in precarious situations, where a single misstep may result in a cascade of disadvantages and even existential hardship. Whether women choose the so-called “career ceiling” during their peak professional years or are forced to prematurely retreat from the workforce during periods of decline (Yang, 2013), the challenge of balancing motherhood and career remains a persistent dilemma.

5. Academic Careers: Occupational Mobility of Women and Working Mothers

Compared to women in general, the career paths of female teachers in higher education are relatively relaxed, and the corresponding institutional shelters can protect teachers who take on motherhood duties (Wu et al., 2015). Nonetheless, they are still largely constrained by the inverted U-shaped career development pattern. Because of the high entry barrier for university teachers and the high level of education of this group of practitioners, there is a small difference between women and men in terms of specialized knowledge and skill acquisition. Also, because college teachers are mainly engaged in mental activities, their stable work, free time, and high social status are prominent career characteristics that make this career choice favored by highly educated women. However, unlike other professions where work hours tend to correlate directly with output, the professional performance of female academics remains subject to the constraints of their natural obligations. As a result, despite the ostensibly egalitarian nature of academia, performance-based evaluations that emphasize individual output often reproduce the same promotional barriers observed in other sectors (Ye, 2021).

Both domestic and international studies have consistently shown that female university faculty members face significant disparities in opportunities for upward career mobility compared to their male counterparts. These disparities are particularly evident in areas such as promotion to full professorships, qualification as doctoral supervisors, and appointments to university leadership positions. Due to the burden of “invisible” gendered responsibilities, namely, most notably caregiving, female academics remain trapped under the career development dilemmas like women in other professional fields. The higher the academic or administrative rank, the lower the proportion of women (Liu et al., 2012; Alshdiefat et al., 2024). Beyond the unequal ceiling of promotion and access to career development opportunities, gender-based divisions of labor also affect the time female faculty can devote to research. Compared to their male colleagues, female academics often have less personal time for scholarly work due to their domestic obligations (Zhu & Lu, 2014). This leads to a persistent disparity in research productivity, with women generally producing fewer academic outputs than men (Cole & Zuckerman, 1984).

The root causes of gender disparities in academic career development are multifaceted. An increase in the number of children a woman bears significantly reduces her labor supply (Zhang, 2011). Meanwhile, based on the traditional patriarchal demands on women’s family responsibilities and division of labor in the family, there is a clear difference between men’s and women’s investment of time and energy in work (Nguyen, 2013; Wolfinger et al., 2008). Within institutional evaluation systems, gender bias is often embedded and difficult to avoid (Macfarlane & Burg, 2019). Consequently, flawed organizational assessment mechanisms can serve as

major barriers to the professional advancement of female university faculty (Brooks et al., 2014). The unequal allocation of individual resources between work and family inevitably leads to a competition for resources between the two domains, giving rise to bidirectional work-family conflict. This conflict manifests in two ways: in work-to-family conflict, women report that the demands of their jobs interfere with the fulfillment of family roles by creating psychological, temporal, and behavioral disruptions; in family-to-work conflict, women often find that the time and energy devoted to family responsibilities impede their ability to perform in professional roles (Frone et al., 1992).

As a deeply embedded social structure, patriarchy exerts comprehensive and pervasive influence on women's lives. Recent research increasingly suggests that legal protections, economic support, and political enforcement measures can all shape whether women are more likely to conform to or challenge prevailing gender norms (Tankard & Paluck, 2017). Fox (2005) found that remarried female scientists outperformed their first-marriage counterparts in terms of research productivity. The study attributed this outcome to the tendency of remarried female scientists to choose spouses who are also scientists, thereby receiving more intellectual and emotional support for their academic careers. Such findings appear to echo MacKinnon's viewpoint that all of women's social accomplishments are mediated through their relationships with men (MacKinnon, 2007). If women are to balance the labor costs required for professional development while simultaneously fulfilling the heavy responsibilities of motherhood, greater support from the broader social environment and institutional structures is essential (Tong, 2001). Even in the United States, female faculty continue to face challenges similar to those experienced in China, particularly in the gendered division of domestic labor (Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021). Given the specificity of the requirements for career advancement in higher education, even if organizations adopt flexible work hour systems for women to guarantee fair opportunities (Padavic, 2020) or extend the assessment cycle for evaluating tenure (Antecol et al., 2018), these measures or policies to guarantee fairness, because they apply to all groups of faculty, may instead be more favorable for male faculty to highlight their competitive advantages.

6. Conclusion

After centuries of patriarchal constraint, even elite women such as university faculty members still require robust policy and institutional safeguards to realize genuine gender equality. The well-known slogan "Women hold up half the sky" is not merely rhetorical; in practical terms, the restricted development of women represents not only a personal loss but also a broader societal setback. For female university faculty, behind the image of highly educated women given by social symbols, there is still a need for a more relaxed and equal research environment, and more opportunities for career advancement in favor of women's quotas. The elimination of invisible gender discrimination in the workplace and the protection of the voice of women who participate in the intellectual and physical labor of society are not only of social significance but also of far-reaching political significance.

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