

Do Chinese Women Face Subtle Discrimination in Job Hiring?

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Gender discrimination has long been the problem that exists in the entire world, including China. However, as more and more people are focusing on the general gender discrimination, the group recognized an extension of such discrimination—pregnancy discrimination in job hiring (the discrimination that women who are pregnant or have the inclination to pregnancy receive in hiring). The possible subtle pregnancy discrimination may be one of the main causes that lead to the declining fertility rate in China. The group decided to conduct an experiment to determine whether women are receiving more subtle discrimination in job hiring due to their identity as mother than men with children, men without children, and women without children. Using the form of questionnaire and resumes, the team found that Chinese women are indeed enduring subtle discrimination in work hiring. The experiment highlights the importance to promote further equality among women. However, there are some confounding variables, like the level of patient of the HR who reads the resume, affecting the ultimate result of the study.

Keywords: gender discrimination, women's career, Chinese job market, pregnancy discrimination, fertility rate in China

Introduction

Gender equality has long been a topic of serious concern. In Chinese tradition, gender inequality has developed for hundreds and thousands of years. This phenomenon is also reflected in the employment market. Despite claims that men and women are now equal after the Chinese Cultural Revolution, previous studies have shown that discrimination against women still exists. According to a study done in 2021, Chinese women are less likely to receive a callback than men when applying for jobs (Zhang, Jin, Li, & Wang, 2021). Due to women's growing participation in the job market, discrimination towards women seems to be increasing on the job market, including pregnancy discrimination. Women who have a pregnancy plan, are pregnant, or have children may be discriminated against due to their pregnancy status. The team noticed that China is also experiencing a serious decline in its fertility rate. Around 50 years ago, China still suffered from overpopulation. And due to this overpopulation, the Chinese government adopted a population control policy of one-child-per-family. The population decreases as the will dictates, but the continued decline of the population has exceeded the expected rate, and started to cause some serious economic problems because of the lack of labor and the aging of the population. In 2016, the Chinese government decided to relax this population control policy in an effort to improve the economy. However, according to the research that the Chinese researchers Yingchun Ji and Zhenzhen Zheng have done in 2020, the relax in such population control policy did not alleviate the declining fertility rate. As Chinese traditional gender perception assumes women are taking a more significant role than men in child care (Li & Zheng, 2021), it is very likely that modern Chinese women abandon their role as a mother

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and work harder in their careers as they are viewed as “child-keeper” as soon as they have a baby. Such a bias might also let people assume women will be distracted from works when they have children to take care of, so that they’re unable to maintain their working performance quality. However, when the team was doing research, it is realized that most of the research nowadays focuses more on the long-existing gender discrimination appearing in the labor market, and only a few studies focus on the topic of pregnancy discrimination. Although gender discrimination is indeed a problem existed, but the discrimination within the female gender has not been seen. Also, a lot of the studies are standing on the perspective of the laws, where they usually assume that the women workers are protected by laws. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there’s no implicit and subtle discrimination appearing in the labor market. And this discrimination that women are likely to receive in the workplace will possibly stop them from taking pregnancy into their considerations. Thus, the team decided to create an experiment to measure the subtle pregnancy discrimination among Chinese women. To reduce the execution difficulty of the experiment, the team narrowed the range from all types of pregnancy discrimination to discrimination towards Chinese working mothers. In this study, the group workers design two experiments to test the degree of pregnancy discrimination. The team decided to use the form of questionnaire and creating resumes, which involves the response of thousands of Chinese working mother and the reactions from a HR. According to previous studies, married women received fewer interview opportunities than single women (Arceo-Gomez & Campos-Vazquez, 2014), and childless women were more favored than women with children by employers (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). Thus, the team predicted that Chinese working mother do have received more subtle discrimination in job hiring than men with children, men without children, and women without children.

Method

To determine whether Chinese women receive subtle discrimination in hiring, our team designed two experiments. The team first designed a questionnaire for women aged 18-44 years old, which is the child-bearing age (Hu et al., 2021). Samples are selected from all 34 provinces in China. For each province, 1,300 women are randomly selected by using a random generator, in which 50 women from each generation are chosen. In total, there is a sample size of 44,200 people. Selecting the same amount of people and selecting from every age range can help us control uncertainties. For example, the different levels of discrimination can be caused by cultural differences in each region. In addition, this relatively large sample helps alleviate biased responses, since a wider sample reduces the possibility of a biased response. The questions inside the questionnaire are all related to job hiring. The group tried to keep the length of the questionnaire short (eight questions) so that the participate will not be too weary of the upcoming questions. Questionnaire includes questions about the applicant’s memory during the job application process. Within the survey, they were explicitly asked if they had been discriminated against during their hiring, and if so, what they believed had caused this attitude of discrimination. The key question of our experiment asked, “Why do you think you are discriminated against?” Participant then can respond to this question accordingly by selecting choices. In the process of designing this questionnaire, the team deliberately modified this core question into a multiple-choice question. It is believed that the options in the multiple-choice questions could prompt participants’ memories of their past, because in the case of free-responses to the questions, they would most likely not remember why they received discrimination. At the same time, if free-response questions are included in the questionnaire, participants would likely be impatient because they would need to type and thus be reluctant to think and recall. And both of these would greatly reduce the accuracy of our experiment.

According to our design, this questionnaire reflects the current state of society. However, it is still important to test the companies for such discriminatory attitudes; thus it is significant to verify the answers received from the questionnaire. Our team decided to create fictitious resumes with insights gathered from research done by a group of Chinese researchers (Zhou, Zhang, & Song, 2013), and send them to consulting firms, and then measure the callback rate. The team employed a two by two design, where the two components of the study are gender and their parental status. As gender is included as a variable into our experiment, it is easier to distinguish the discrimination that these women received from gender discrimination to pregnancy discrimination. In order to avoid the lookism that exists in the Chinese hiring market (Niu, Hirudayaraj, Sims, & Kawashima, 2018), pictures are not provided in the resume. Instead, typical Chinese female and male names are used to indicate their gender. Four types of resumes are created:

Table 1

Types of Resumes

Type	Gender	Have children or not
1	Male	Yes
2	Male	No
3	Female	Yes
4	Female	No

Source: Owner-draw.

For each type of resume, the plan is to produce 50 identical versions. Then a sample of 100 HR professionals coming from different consulting firms will be employ, where 50 of them are male and 50 of them are female to keep balance. Then, each HR gets 25 resumes that are randomly selected from the four different types of resumes, where five of each type of resume are provided. After sending the resumes, the team waited for the callbacks and then recorded the callback rate, expected salary for the candidates, speed of the callback, and the length of the callback. Note here that the qualifications indicated on all four types of resumes are equivalent. Hypothetical candidates are created in this case, where each of them has a hypothetical address in Beijing to eliminate HR's bias towards a specific region of China; a bachelor's degree; graduated from universities of a comparable ranking in China; approximately 10 years of analyst experience; comparable leadership experience. The resumes created still need to undergo each company's initial review in order to ensure the same quality of the resumes. As gender is a very fundamental element of resumes, it was decided to include the parental status of candidates in the questions section. One question that is commonly answered in the resume is whether the candidate is willing to relocate for the sake of the job. The way the team decided to indicate that candidate's parental status is to answer this question by saying: "I am willing to relocate with my children", whereas candidates without children just need to answer: "I am willing to relocate". The subtle discrimination rate is measured by analyzing the responses of the HR department from four perspectives: willingness to hire, expected salary, speed of response, and length of callback. In light of the possibility that subtle discrimination may not have been factored into the hiring decision, expected salaries, the speed of response, and the length of the response are added to indirectly assess the values of the candidate that HR evaluated. Since professional callbacks are usually pretty natural, it is only possible to evaluate their positivity through the comparison of their speed and length. It is believed that the length and the speed of the callback indicate HR's attitude toward the candidates. In our model, Resume Type 3, which

is fictitious resumes that have children and are female, might experience more rejection (no callback), a lower salary expectation, shorter callback length, as well as a shorter response time.

Discussion

It is very likely that our experiment proves the existence of such discrimination against pregnant women on the Chinese job market. This stresses the importance of promoting equality in workplaces in order to reduce discrimination. In Chinese tradition, women are generally responsible for household tasks, while men are the ones who work outside, which has only changed in recent years. The discrimination that Chinese women face at work, however, discourages them from working, as it limits their promotion opportunities and makes them less motivated. This stops many talented women from contributing to the development of society, which is a huge loss. From another perspective, women who have to choose between work and family will have a lower status within many traditional Chinese families as they could not support their family financially. This might cause women emotional damage or a sense of belittling. Additionally, the group considered that this discrimination is one of the factors that led to the decreasing Chinese fertility rate. Studies show that the common marriage postponement contributes significantly to the decline of Chinese fertility rates (Yang, Jiang, & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2022). The widespread postponement of marriage could be related to this discrimination against women in the workplace, as they might not want their marriage and pregnancy plans to affect their job promotions. The decreasing fertility rate will cause a decline in the young population, and rapid population aging. In the long run, this may lead to a labor shortage, thus affecting the overall growth of the country. However, our team has summarized some of the limitations that might affect the accuracy of the experiments. For the questionnaire portion of the study, it is difficult to ensure that each participant was telling the truth and not giving random or false answers. Also, for some groups that did not want to answer, they may have chosen to fill out the questionnaire randomly or they may refuse to answer. In this case, the sample collected is biased. For the fictitious resumes portion of the study, one outstanding limitation is that in a highly competitive job market, subtle differences between resumes may contribute to a difference in hiring outcomes. For example, a slight variation in the working experience or the educational backgrounds of candidates might cause different hiring decisions among different HRs, where these decisions are not based on any conscious or unconscious discrimination. Moreover, because consulting firms are selected as our HR sample, the level of discrimination may have varied among different professions, so the results of the study cannot be generalized to all working women in China. The order in which resumes are read by HRs is also significant, because as time passes, the HRs' level of patience and fatigue may decrease. Therefore, they will not evaluate the resumes they read later as they did the first one, which will eventually alter the results. Our study provides a fundamental understanding of the unfairness that Chinese women receive in hiring. However, the focus of the study remains narrow, since it only covers a limited number of subjects. There are still several areas in which the limitations of female worker protection laws are poorly understood. Future studies can improve the questionnaires based on our study, and investigate more on the causes and inducements of this phenomenon, so that the Chinese government can reduce this type of discrimination accordingly. For example, further studies can try to test whether government subsidies to the company would alleviate this discrimination. If the result proves that the subsidies indeed alleviate this discrimination phenomenon, Chinese government can fix this situation by providing subsidies to the company. In order to stabilize the growth of the country, the government should focus on crafting policies, programs, and treatments that support women who are pregnant at work. The reduction of such discrimination encourages more

women to participate in work, and at the same time eases the decline in fertility rates, which promotes the overall development of the society.

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