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The Invisible Struggles of Middle-Aged Women: Gendered Burdens, Family Roles, and Health Inequalities Across Cultural Contexts

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Abstract. Despite important advances worldwide in promoting gender equality, middle-aged women encounter considerable challenges arising from the intersection of gender, age and social class. Existing research has addressed this phase of life only to a limited extent, and the practical constraints faced by middle-aged women have not been sufficiently researched. This study uses China and Sweden as comparative case studies to examine how institutional structures and cultural norms interact to shape women's work, care responsibilities, and health. The analysis is based on theoretical frameworks of gender socialisation, intersectionality and feminist political economy, while integrating demographic data, policy analyses and research results. Research in China shows how structural constraints, such as inadequate care facilities and work protection, and traditional attitudes to care, restrict women's work opportunities and widen health inequalities. In Sweden, although the social security system enables women to participate more actively in the labour market, society has failed to close the gap in unpaid care work. This continues to cause persistent stress and mental exhaustion. The findings demonstrate that, while social protection systems can help rectify structural inequalities, traditional social expectations and entrenched labour practices continue to fall heavily on middle-aged women. This study contributes to feminist research by showing how different institutions and cultures affect the lives of middle-aged women. The study notes the absolute necessity of political and cultural change before true gender equality can be obtained.

Keywords: Gender inequality, feminism, middle-aged women, unpaid care work, health.

1. Introduction

Despite global strategies aimed at promoting gender equality, women suffer from continual inequalities, especially women of middle age. This period of life presents a situation of obligations to work conflicting with the increasing care obligations towards children and the elderly, for which scholars have used the term the “double burden” to describe the situation. A recent comparison has shown that inequalities involved in women's unpaid work at home are not modified by any system of social security, nor are the opportunities for women to compete on even terms with men in the

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labour market [1]. Similarly, a worldwide investigation of family structure as carried out by the United Nations Women's Organisation has shown that, although many official attempts are made for the advancement of equal rights, structural impediments interfere essentially with women's health and economic security [2]. This global trend is particularly evident among middle-aged women, who often struggle to balance paid work and intensive family care responsibilities. Therefore, this group provides crucial insights into how gendered responsibilities and burdens across different life stages impact women's access to the labour market and their overall well-being.

While previous investigations have been devoted to the youth, the mothers of children and women workers, the particular status of women in middle age has often been neglected. Recent investigations have indicated that this group suffers particular challenges. A study conducted in China found that unpaid care work significantly reduces women's labour force participation and working hours [3]. In Sweden, research indicates that even with comprehensive social welfare systems in place, the gender composition of the workplace and the persistent imbalance between work and personal life contribute to women's higher rates of long-term sickness absence [4,5]. Together, these findings show that the unfavourable conditions for middle-aged women are both structurally entrenched and reinforced by cultural expectations, underscoring the importance of conducting a comparative study.

Accordingly, this study investigates how institutional regulations and cultural norms influence the gender-related burdens imposed on middle-aged women in China and Sweden. This study adopts a relatively traditional structure: after examining the relevant theoretical framework, it analyses the context of each country and finally discusses cross-national patterns and implications. The thesis is that while social security policies can mitigate certain structural barriers, deeply entrenched social norms and labour market practices reproduce gender inequality.

This study raises three principal questions: (1) How do family roles and cultural expectations (as causal factors) influence the health and employment status of middle-aged women? (2) What similarities and differences exist between China and Sweden in this context? (3) How do gender socialisation frameworks, intersectionality theory, and feminist political economy help explain the mechanisms that perpetuate this inequality? Discussing these issues not only helps to fill research gaps but also improves understanding of the structural and cultural factors perpetuating gender inequality.

2. Literature review

Current research on gender and inequality offers several useful conceptual frameworks for analysing the experiences of middle-aged women. Gender socialisation emphasises how cultural norms influence women's attitudes and choices, while intersectionality focuses on multidimensional inequalities related to gender, age, and class, and feminist political economy highlights how broader economic and institutional structures affect women's unpaid responsibilities and limit their access to stable and well-paid jobs in the labour market. Each of these perspectives offers a different understanding of women's invisible struggle and provides a theoretical basis for the following cases.

The theory of gender socialisation points out that cultural norms and expectations are learned from early childhood and continue to shape adults' behavioral patterns and self-esteem throughout their lives. Classical sociological studies claim that people internalise gender roles through family traditions, upbringing, and media representations, which then determines their decisions and aspirations in adulthood [6]. For middle-aged women, such deeply ingrained norms often foster a sense of responsibility, compelling them to sacrifice personal will to meet the demands of the household. When unable to fulfil societal expectations, this sense of responsibility intensifies self-

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imposed limitations and feelings of guilt [7]. These dynamic shifts are crucial for explaining internalised oppression, demonstrating that inequality is reproduced not only through institutions but also through the subjective consciousness of individuals [8]. Intersectionality provides an important basis for understanding the mechanisms through which different aspects of identity converge and shape women's experiences. Crenshaw's concept emphasises that gender equality cannot be viewed in isolation from other factors such as age, race, or social class [9]. For middle-aged women, this indicates that obligations related to gender and place of residence are interrelated, thereby limiting their growth potential. For instance, women in middle age are considered to be a member of the "sandwich generation" in that they are obliged to rear their children and at the same time take care of their parents who are advanced in years. For those doing so with low incomes, these difficulties are aggravated by the lack of financial resources and inability to use official institutions for the care of children, thus intensifying the structural handicap that they have to carry [10]. This view stresses that inequalities are not a simple problem, but the product of complex effects due to the interdependence of the social strata [11]. Feminist political economy lays emphasis on the structural causes of women's disadvantage by considering the antithesis between paid and unpaid work. Hence, it is argued by investigators that unpaid work in home care, which is mainly done by the female sex, constitutes a form of "time poverty", which acts as a hindrance to the search for permanent jobs and advancement in careers [12]. This approach emphasises that the disadvantages attaching to women are not due solely to personal choice, but are structural poverty conditions engendered by economic and institutional factors which undervalue reproductive work [13]. This situation is especially rife among women of middle age who have the responsibility of caring for both children and parents of advanced years in the family. The imbalance in care work directly impacts women's health, labour market participation, and long-term economic stability, revealing how gender inequality is reproduced through economic and social structures [14]. Overall, these theoretical perspectives underscore how cultural norms, intersecting identities, and structural configurations shape women's experiences in ways that are often overlooked. Gender socialisation explains the persistence of internalised oppression, intersectionality exposes the mechanisms through which gender, age, and social class interact and lead to cumulative disadvantages, and feminist political economy situates these dynamics within broader economic structures. Nevertheless, existing studies do not generally apply these findings to middle-aged women and rarely compare contexts with contrasting social protection systems. This gap justifies the case studies of China and Sweden [15].

3. Case study in China

In China, middle-aged women are often at the intersection of demographic changes and rapid changes in social expectations, which together exacerbate the conflict between family care responsibilities and labour market participation, leading to increasingly serious economic and health problems for women. The rapid ageing of the population and the impact of the one-child policy have jointly led to the emergence of the "sandwich generation". These people have to take care of both young children and elderly parents. At the same time, the urbanisation process and market reform have increased the demand for female labour, thus increasing the double burden of women in terms of family and work. These systemic factors have created the basis for their peculiar difficulties in daily life. Women aged 15 years and older employed in China fell from in excess of 62% in 2013 to the vicinity of 59.6% in 2024, according to the World Bank [16]. Although this total covers all women of working age, previous studies have shown that this decline has a particular impact on the middle-aged group. In addition, empirical research shows that middle-aged women tend to reduce

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their working hours because of heavy family responsibilities. Chai, Hu, and Coyote found that unpaid housework significantly reduced the working hours of middle-aged groups and disproportionately impacted female workers [17]. In short, the responsibility to take care of the family is a key factor in prompting middle-aged women to withdraw from the full-time labour market, which has led to the decline in the overall labour force participation rate of women. Time-use data further confirms this gender difference. According to the Third National Use Survey report, Chinese women spend an average of nearly twice as much time on housework and taking care of others as men, and this gap will widen further in middle age [18].

The pressure brought by employment and care responsibilities has also had a significant impact on the health of women in middle age. According to the data of the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study, family care work is significantly related to physical health conditions such as poor mental health, aggravated depressive symptoms, and poor self-evaluation, and this effect is more obvious in women [19]. Furthermore, a longitudinal study shows that the health status of women who take on childcare responsibilities continues to deteriorate over time compared to women who do not have such a burden [20]. These research results show that gender-specific care tasks not only increase stress and fatigue but also lead to long-standing inequalities in physical and mental health.

China's institutional environment has limited effects on reducing the excessive burden of middle-aged women. Despite the emphasis on gender equality, social policies often do not provide adequate support for families. Public childcare services for infants and young children are still limited and unevenly distributed, while care services for the elderly are relatively scattered, which means that families (especially female family members) bear the main care responsibilities [21]. Simultaneously, the implementation of labour protection measures, such as maternity leave and anti-discrimination provisions, is inconsistent. Recent experimental studies have shown that childbearing age and middle-aged women are often at a disadvantage in the recruitment process, which reflects a deep-rooted prejudice against their dual roles as workers and caregivers [22]. These differences show that institutional regulations allow women to be structurally disadvantaged.

In summary, the experience of middle-aged women in China is determined by the combined impacts of social expectations and various restrictions within the institutional policies. Gendered family roles reinforce women's care responsibilities, and the inadequacy of policies and care systems further exacerbates this burden. These burdens not only reduce labour force participation but also lead to long-standing health inequalities. Although the national discourse emphasises gender equality, the culture largely ignores the structural problems caused by political support restrictions. To better understand how the institutional context changes these dynamics, this analysis focuses on Sweden, which has a contrasting social protection system.

4. Case study in Sweden

Sweden presents a markedly different institutional and cultural context for examining the problems of middle-aged women, where extensive welfare provisions promote gender equality in employment. Nevertheless, Sweden still fails to cope with the persistent inequality of women concerning unpaid work in domestic affairs and in care. Sweden, as a Nordic welfare state, has long given priority to gender equality through comprehensive systems of childcare, generous leave provisions for parents and universal health care provisions. This policy is a part of a model of social democracy which aims at reducing inequality by redistributing the responsibility of care among the state, the market and the family. Despite these advantages, middle-aged women in Sweden are still saddled with a continuing gender-specific burden, particularly in the field of balancing work and

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family. A quantitative study of the benefits and drawbacks of the social model of middle-aged women's labour force in Sweden is provided in this report. The female labour force participation rate in 2022 was about 82%, which is still the highest among OECD countries. This is due to the implementation of many measures in favour of childcare and family support, making it easier for women to continue in the world of work [23]. But time-budget research shows that there is still a gender inequality feature in the field of unpaid work. The women of Sweden spend about 1.5 times as much time on matters of housekeeping and nursing within the family as do men [24]. This gap becomes more apparent in middle age, since the responsibilities of rearing children and nursing elderly parents are concentrated on women. Thus, while generous state support encourages high female participation in the labour market, unpaid domestic work remains an area of gender inequality, exposing the enduring influence of cultural norms and gender-based expectations that cannot be fully addressed by policy measures alone.

Despite the numerous social benefits provided in Sweden, middle-aged women are still struggling with health problems associated with the double burden of paid and unpaid work. The gender division of labour in the family and the workplace not only exacerbates the unequal distribution of care and emotional responsibilities but also directly leads to differences in the physical and mental health of middle-aged women.

In Sweden, it was found through registration statistics that sickness absence with long-term sickness (defined as 90 days sickness absence) was higher for women in female-dominated occupations, especially in the groups of 36-45, 46-55 and 56-64 years of age. Even considering the level of education and the economic sector, this is still the case [4]. These health disparities can be attributed in part to the high proportion of women in nursing and public service occupations, which involve emotional stress and low autonomy, and together contribute to persistent physical and mental health inequalities [25]. In this sense, cultural expectations surrounding the role of women's care reinforce occupational segregation and directly link the gender composition of the workforce with the outcomes of the health sector. Women also continue to assume a larger proportion of family responsibilities, especially in middle age [26]. This paradox demonstrates that even generous social security systems cannot eliminate gender-related burdens.

5. Findings

The comparison between China and Sweden highlights how the institutional framework and cultural norms interact to shape the experience of middle-aged women. In China, due to the lack of childcare facilities, the fragmentation of elderly care services, and the deep-rooted discrimination in the workplace, women bear the burden of inequality, do not receive any important institutional support, and have to sacrifice their work and health. In contrast, Sweden's well-developed welfare system has maintained a high participation rate of the female labour force and alleviated structural barriers. Nevertheless, both situations reveal persistent inequality: in China, this inequality stems from political restrictions and strong patriarchal norms, while in Sweden, this inequality stems from cultural expectations and occupational segregation. Therefore, while institutional design is important, it does not eliminate gender-based burdens.

By placing these ideas in a broader theoretical framework, their similarities and differences become clear. Gender socialisation explains why women in China and Sweden still internalise housework as a natural responsibility despite differences in social security systems. Intersectionality shows how the forms of injustice faced by middle-aged women overlap, creating a unique heavy burden in the case of cultural expectations, age discrimination, and class restrictions occurring at the same time. Feminist political economy also shows how structural arrangements systematically

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reproduce inequality, whether in China's market-oriented childcare model or in Sweden's part-time employment model. Overall, these views suggest that, although policy measures can remove material barriers, deeper cultural and structural dynamics continue gender-based oppression in various cases. Therefore, the struggle of middle-aged women is both visible and invisible.

6. Conclusion

This study has shed light on the unseen struggles of middle-aged women in China and Sweden, demonstrating that there continue to be gender-related problems, even within such very different institutional frameworks. The division of childcare and care of the elderly in China, and labour discrimination, have led to a low average percentage of women in labour market activities, with a detrimental effect on health. In Sweden, a social welfare provision has ensured that a high percentage of women engage in labour market activities, but still, they find that it is difficult to combine work with private life, with subsequent health problems being the outcome. These cases demonstrate that while institutional structures are important, cultural norms and structural practices ensure that the costs of care and health remain unevenly distributed across the population.

Theoretically, these conclusions reinforce insights from gender socialisation, intersectionality, and feminist political economy. Gender socialisation shows how the internalisation of domestic responsibility is continued, intersectionality highlights how age and socioeconomic class amplify inequality, and the feminist political economy indicates how unpaid care emanating from women reduces general work opportunities. Together, these perspectives show that political reforms alone are insufficient to overcome deeply entrenched gender norms and structural institutions, and that achieving substantive equality requires a transformation of both cultural expectations and institutional structures.

Future research should focus on middle-aged women who are often neglected in gender research and adopt longitudinal and transnational research methods. These studies can examine how social systems interact with changing family structures, labour market practices, and intergenerational norms. Ultimately, political debate needs to go beyond the problem of service provision and solve the deep-rooted cultural concept that “taking care of others is the inherent responsibility of women”.

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