

Gender Imbalance and Urban “Leftover Women”

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Abstract

Gender imbalance has already become a serious social problem in China. Meanwhile, a different mismatch of single men and women of marriageable age is present in large and mid-sized cities. Urban “leftover women” is categorized into “active” and “passive” types. Factors resulting in the two types are different, including level of education, concepts of love and marriage, age, types of occupation and so on. To solve the urban “leftover women” phenomenon, both government and society should take countermeasures and single person is encouraged to change standards for selecting a mate.

Keywords

Gender Imbalance, Urban “Leftover Women”, “Active” and “Passive” Types

1. Introduction

Since China enacted the planned birth policy, the male-to-female birth ratio has been constantly imbalanced. In 2010, the male-to-female ratio for newborn infants was 118 to 100, the highest imbalance of human gender in the world. The current gender imbalance has already resulted in serious problems: the number of unmarried men of marriageable age in rural areas increased from 14.68 million in 2000 to 22.07 million in 2010. If this trend persists, it is estimated that by 2020 at least 30 million men of marriageable age will be unable to find marriage partners. This means that, on average, one out of five men will be unable to find a mate, a problem that is particularly pronounced in rural areas (The Lancet, 2011).

A different mismatch of single men and women of marriageable age is present in large and mid-sized cities in China. The number of single women is far higher than that of marriageable age men, giving rise to the increasingly serious phenomenon of “leftover women”, labeled as “sheng nü” (it is 剩女 in Chinese), which usually refers to single, highly educated females in their late 20’s and 30’s with high income and stable careers. Howev-

er, it is difficult for many women in this group to find suitable men for marriage, even if they desire marriage (Gao Bingji, 2009). The number of women classified as “leftover women” in urban areas rose from 3.28 million in 2000 to 15.16 million in 2010. The estimated number of women in this group will increase to approximately 33 million by 2020. The increasing speed of urban “leftover women” will be faster than that of “leftover men” in rural areas between 2010 and 2020. Consequently, an urgent need exists to analyze and resolve the problem of the urban “leftover women” phenomenon (Xu Xing, 2011).

2. The Category of “Leftover Women”

There is a survey about people’s attitude to “leftover women” in Shanghai with 589 available questionnaire. The informants consist of 68.63% female and 31.37% male. The age of 56.85% informants is between 26 and 35, which is suitable for marriage. According to the survey, 68.63% informants approved that the age of “leftover women” is from 28 to 35, and 11.76% of them approved that the age above 35 is “leftover women” (see Figure 1). Obviously, the women which age is between 28 and 35 believed to be the majority of “leftover women”, some of the 11.76% part maybe willing to be single.

As to the reason for becoming “leftover women”, the majority selected that “society is more inclusive, the concepts of love and marriage is diverse”, “people is becoming indifferent”, “economic independence brings spiritual independence” and “the pressure of study and work is too heavy so that miss the perfect age to marry”. For the different reasons for becoming “leftover women”, scholars try to classify it (see Figure 2). According to the survey, “society is more inclusive, the concept of love and marriage is diverse” and “people is becoming indifferent” are the main attitude of the surveyed people. At the same time, economic independence as well as employment also is important to solve this serious social phenomenon.

Urban “leftover women” is a complex socioeconomic phenomenon which has been categorized into “active” and “passive” types. The urban “active leftover women” type represents those women who choose to be single. Because the education level of women in urban areas has greatly increased, the relative wage difference between women and men has shrunk, giving women economic independence. In 2010, the percentages of girls in Chinese universities and colleges obtaining bachelors, masters and Ph.D. degrees were 49.9%, 48.2%, and 34.7%, respectively, of the total number of students. With the increase of female education levels, the overall employment rate for women has reached 45.5%. The income gap between men and women has also decreased. In urban areas, the ratio of average annual income of working women to working men increased from 70.4% in 2000 to 83.4% in 2010. The motivation for Chinese women to marry has changed from the traditional desire for marriage for financial and material reliance to the current-day marriage with the goals of emotional reliance and companionship for life (Li Peilin, 2011).

The traditional concepts of love and marriage, as well as the division of labor in families, still have an influence on women’s choices in a mate. The Chinese traditional concept of love and marriage stresses marriage between

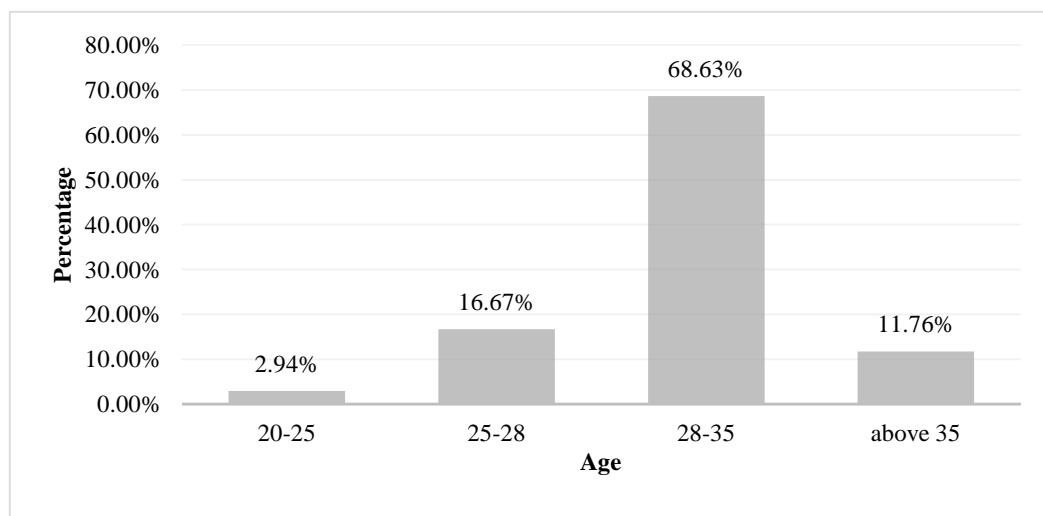


Figure 1. People’s attitude toward age of “leftover women”. Source: (Zhu Li, 2013).

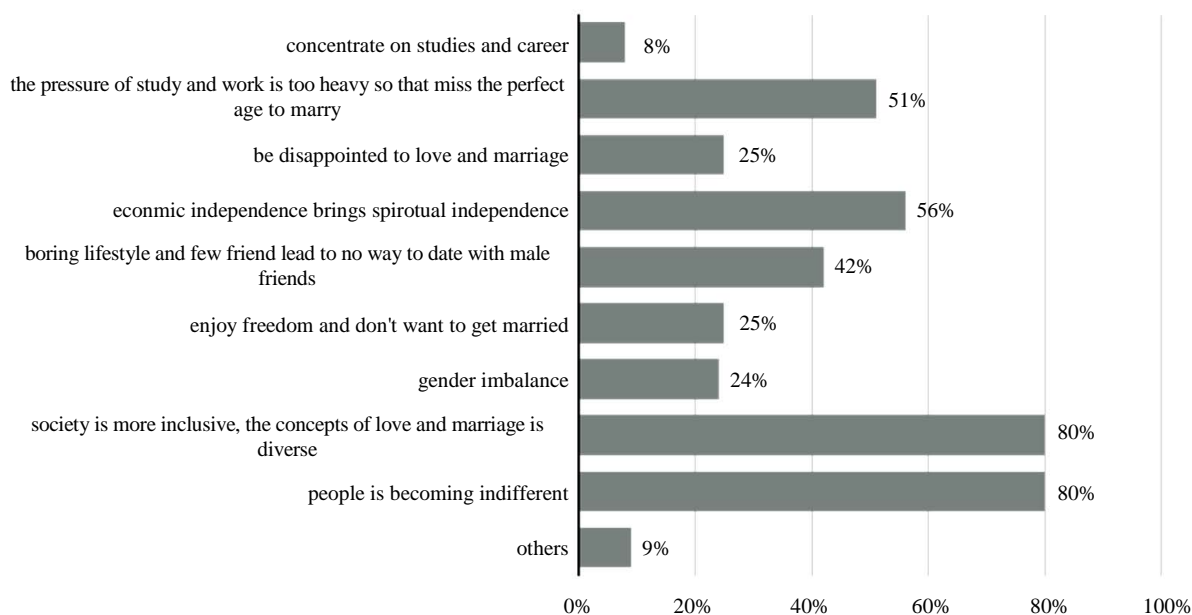


Figure 2. Reasons for becoming “leftover women”. Source: (Zhu Li, 2013).

families of equal social rank. Women tend to seek a mate with the same or higher education level and income than themselves. Moreover, women have rigid requirements for mates with respect to age, height, and family conditions. On the other hand, men tend to choose women of relatively lower social status or capabilities than their own for marriage. Because the socio-economic status of women in the surplus group is higher, it is fairly difficult for them to find a mate with similar or higher status (Chen Hui, 2010). In traditional Chinese families, men play the dominant role in society, whereas women generally take care of domestic household and childcare. Surveys show that among married couples, more than 53% of women take care of “most” or “all” household duties in the family, including cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, etc. Frequently, when women must decide between their careers and household duties, most choose their careers over marriage.

The phenomenon of urban “passive leftover women”, which accounts for majority of “leftover women”, is a result of the “default” marriage age expectation of men and society. Among those women who are interested in love and marriage, there emerges a problem of supply being greater than demand, which results in the “passive leftover women” in urban areas. As a woman gets older, her chances of getting married decrease. The 2010 Survey on the Love and Marriage Situation among Chinese revealed that the pressure on women to select a mate largely stems from men’s requirements on the age of their partner. More than 90% of men surveyed believe that women should be married before the age of 27. Thirty-two percent of men surveyed believe that the optimal marriage age for women is between twenty and twenty-four years of age. Men’s requirements in choosing a mate are fairly strict with regards to external features such as age, appearance, and body figure. With increased age, a woman’s external features gradually lose attractiveness (Xinhua Online, 2010).

Because of high pressure from work and their limited social circles, women have less time to seek their “Mr. Right” (Tang Liping, 2010). Statistics show that women working in business- and customer-related services, including the catering industry, tourism, entertainment, and medical assistance service, face high pressure at work and, consequently, spend more time on their work duties, exacerbating the problem of “leftover women”. However, the group of women who work for state organizations, mass organizations, and institutions display a lower rate of “leftover women”. A survey revealed that among the 41,616 urban female interviewees, “lack of a way to understand the opposite sex”, “passive waiting”, and “romantic idealism” were the foremost reasons for involuntarily remaining single or “leftover”.

3. Recommended Measures

Main countermeasures to resolve the urban “leftover women” phenomenon can be considered as the following.

It is necessary both for women to relax their standards for selecting a mate and for men to rectify their standards for choosing a mate. The field of daily social interaction should be expanded. Those areas with high numbers of older unmarried individuals, should implement training or a regular lecture series on love and marriage. The interdepartmental, company-to-company, and business-to-business basis of blind dates and fraternal activities may provide more chances for single working women to meet more people and seek potential marriage partners at work. Moreover, reputable marriage intermediaries will be conducive to resolving the urban “leftover women” phenomenon by coordinating with the work-place intermediaries to actively seek appropriate mates (Wang Xiaolu, 2010).

Accelerating the development of rural areas and encouraging city-to-countryside love and marriage may also improve the situation. To accelerate the progress of urbanization in rural areas, integration and equalization of urban and rural household registers, as well as social security must be achieved. Urban-rural disparity and discrimination should be eliminated. Enterprising rural men should be encouraged, guided, and trained to start their businesses and to work in cities. These measures will help alleviate the problem of imbalance in the urban marriageable age male-to-female ratio.

Currently China has just decided to end One-child One-family policy which has been enforced more than thirty years and allow a couple to have the right of owning two children by Eighth session of the Fifth Plenary Session of the CPC Central Committee. Of course, this is a huge step forward, but family planning policy still exists. In order to completely resolve the problem of surplus women or leftover women phenomena, family planning policy should be completely abolished; in fact, birth right is entitled and should not be decided by others except by the micro-family subject. Only in doing so is the right way of solving the Chinese left-men and left-women social issues.

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