Inequality among women: The Hukou System

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Inequality Among Women and China’s Hukou System

Literature Review

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Introduction

China’s Hukou system had been in place since 1958 and has been a major socio-economic institution that governs the lives of Chinese individuals in China. The Hukou system is a household registration system introduced by the government to control social movement between rural and urban areas in China. The main purpose of the system was to prevent mass migration of the rural people into the cities to maintain structural stability and protect the urban areas from degrading to poverty by regulating labour in both rural and urban areas. In this case, the Hukou system not only identifies the residential status of an individual, but also controls the economic aspects of an individual. It restricts migration between rural and urban areas and prevents illegal migrants from getting job opportunities outside of their residential area. To protect its urban workers who are seen as non-productive workers as compared to farmers, urban workers are guaranteed with state welfare such as education, housing and healthcare. This led to differential social impact between rural and urban residents, as well as economic consequences.

In recent years, Hukou system has undergone reforms that allow relaxation over its overarching stratification system, such as allowing rural residents to obtain temporary urban residential permits and allowing the line of succession of Hukou status from both father and mother, allowing women to be less disadvantaged. However, Hukou system is still been seen as a form of caste system in China, stratifying its people into different hierarchy of standing, there has been demand n abolishing the entire system away to ensure freedom and rights of China people. While the system may be on its way to being abolished, it is important to look into the impact of such a system towards social inequality in China.
There has been many research done that are related to the Hukou system in China. Quite a few of such research highlighted the social stratification between the rural residents and urban residents, identifying inequality in terms of access to State welfare and benefits, educational attainment, job opportunities and wage differences. There has also been study on inequality among urban locals, permanent migrants and temporary migrants.

When looking into the research on how Hukou system has impact the lives of women, there have been a few studies such as the marriage migration of rural women and a gendered division of labour in regards to the system. While China has a high female labour participation rate, it is important to note women still face inequality in work. Therefore, it is important to study more on women who are marginalised by both their educational level and Hukou status in comparison to women who are urban residences in terms of their job opportunities and wage difference.

**Impact of Hukou**

Many studies have highlighted the importance of Hukou system in China and its social consequences that follow after its implementation. Cheng and Selden (1994) studied the historical flow of the Hukou system, explaining the factors that led to the implementation of this housing registration law which is a reflection of how the governance back then shaped the collectivist socialism structure to ensure its urban economic growth using the support from its mass rural land and residents. While they went into the in depth details on the Hukou functions and changes made throughout the 1950s to 1960s, they also pointed on the social effect of its functions, especially focusing on the differential treatment of the rural and urban people (Cheng & Selden, 1994). However, while their study effectively provide an overview of the Hukou system and its social the impact, it is largely restricted in the form of a
historical understanding of the governance in China through the Hukou system during the 1950s to 1960s, and does not provide any insights towards the current situation that Hukou system has affected.

In more recent studies, there have been empirical researches on effects of individuals having different Hukou system and how their Hukou status brought about different opportunities or lack thereof. Such studies can be divided into two types: those compare rural and urban residents, and those that compare residents within the urban area that holds different status local as urban local and migrants. In the first type of studies, the research focused on social and economic inequality between people living in rural areas and urban areas due to the different State benefits provided for the different Hukou status. Economic inequality has been a major topic when discussed about rural versus urban status in China. Studies such as looking at the income gap by Sicular et al. (2007), identify inequality based on empirical data of the different household status. They used household-level surveys conducted by external agencies to analysis the current gap among the two types of people (Sicular et al. 2007). In this research, to be more comprehensive in their study, they considered the differences in cost of living between rural and urban areas, as well as including rural migrants among the urban residences to recalculate size of the gap.

On the other hand, in Liu’s (2005) paper, it provided empirical evidence on inequality between rural and urban through comparing the change from rural Hukou status to urban Hukou status in income and labour market outcomes. While this research also uses data from external party, it provides a hypothesis at individual level and quantifies the impact of the Hukou system in the individual instead on the economic performance (Liu, 2005). Nonetheless, while both studies that were mentioned had different approaches in identifying
inequality between rural and urban areas, they both provided a general overview of the social and economic inequality created by the Hukou system.

Another way to look at social inequality between rural and urban areas is to look at the social identity created by the Hukou system and the impact it has on the response towards economic incentives (Afridi, Li, & Ren, 2012). In this study, it focused on how inequality resulted by Hukou system has towards individuals’ significant social identity resulting in poor performance by rural residents which widens the economic gap as well (Afridi et al. 2012). This research shows how not only Hukou system affected economic inequality, but also created a social caste of Hukou status that ties to one’s identity and shaped their actions.

In the second type of studies, it focused on comparing people within the urban area that hold different Hukou status, such as urban locals, permanent migrants and temporary migrants. Such studies look at the difference among people with different status within the same labour market, thus creating hierarchies with the market itself in relation to the Hukou status. In Fan’s (2001) work, she uses Guangzhou’s survey data to determine the income returns of between the different Hukou status groups and identified that permanent residents enjoyed higher benefits than temporary migrants who are denied permanent residence rights in urban areas. It also suggests that labour-market returns are highly influenced by ascribed status of the Hukou thus leading to market segmentation in urban areas (Fan, 2001).

In her subsequent research (2002), she look further into the social stratification in urban areas caused by the Hukou system, as internal migration and labour market development resulted in rural residents flocking to cities for the high demand of cheap labour. This resulted in them being only temporary migrants without State-sponsored as compared to permanent migrants
and thus being treated as outsiders and being marginalized (Fan, 2002). Likewise, in Dong’s (2010) paper, he argues that the discrimination and regulations of Hukou system has created racialized identifications and reinforced stereotypes of rural migrants. While he does not provide any quantitative data, he does brought forward the concept of racism in the Chinese context whereby rural migrants are discriminated using racial theories by looking at their oppression and exploitation by the development of the labour market (Dong, 2010).

Women and Hukou

While the above literature have provided a clear outline of the Hukou system and its divide between the rural and urban status, creating social and economic inequality between rural and urban areas and within urban areas itself, it does not mention the significance of Hukou system when comes to gender. While women participating in labour market may be high in China, when we look at the quality of work and gender inequality within the labour market, we might find that the Hukou system plays a part in women’s role within the labour market.

The Hukou system has largely influenced internal migration within China, especially for women from the rural areas. In the research done by Fan and Huang (1998), they identified that one of the factors leading to women migrating to urban areas through marriage is partly due to the Hukou system. As marriage may seem as the only choice for women to change their Hukou status, many married to the urban areas in search of better job opportunities within urban areas (Fan and Huang, 1998). However, this research does not touch upon women of different Hukou status and their opportunities to enter different labour market.

Whereas in Huang’s (2001) article, using the 1990 Census, she argued that occupational attainment for female migrants in urban areas are at a disadvantaged due to their doubled
marginalized identity of being an outsider and a female at the same time. She also argued that while women did manage to get jobs, most likely they work in less prestigious jobs as compared to their male counterparts and falls into the gendered stereotyped market segmentation (Huang, 2001).

Moreover, Fan (2004) argued that gender relations have transformed in both the rural household and urban labour market resulting in young women entering urban work as a migrant. Through interviews from Sichuan and Anhui households, she discussed that due to the surplus of rural labour and poverty, many women are forced to find jobs outside of farming for income, thus temporary migrate to urban areas as low-skilled workers and are exploited by the labour market for their cheap labour and social vulnerability (Fan, 2004).

This impact of economic transition within the market and the restriction of the Hukou system has resulted in gendered market segmentation whereby women of rural Hukou fall into the lowest end of the hierarchy, and are stereotyped to these low-end jobs where wages are low, working hours are long, and short-lived job security (Fan, 2003). Through both quantitative and qualitative surveys, Fan (2003) demonstrated that migrant women with multiple marginalized identities face greater social and economic inequality as compared to their male counterparts and the Hukou system reaffirms the gendered market segmentation which thus oppressed women within urban labour force.

However, there is a literature gap within which among women as a social group itself, there are inequality as women with urban residences has much better access to both education and job opportunities. There is also no research to compare among female permanents migrants who attained their roles through marriage as compared to urban locals and temporary
migrants in terms of wage differences and labour market returns. While it is important to note that women may have relatively good social standing in China, nonetheless majority of the women are still being oppressed and researching the gap among women may help to relief this oppression against certain types of women.

Conclusion

To sum up, Hukou system in China has caused many social and economic consequences for the individual as it shaped an understanding of a caste differentiation based on one’s Hukou status and thus reinforced stereotypes of rural migrants within urban areas. It has definitely resulted social and economic gap between the rural and urban areas, as well as migrants and locals within the cities, creating a hierarchy, whereby women migrant as a multiple marginalized group falls to the bottom. However, further research need to be done to compared the gaps within women as a social group itself to understand the different forms of discrimination to different types of women in relation to their Hukou status so that women can be relieved from the oppression.

References


