

Research on Gender Differences in Intergenerational Mobility among College Graduates

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Abstract: In recent years, each graduating class has been humorously referred to as encountering the “most challenging job market year”, making it crucial to explore how to promote higher-quality employment for college graduates. This study utilized survey data on the employment status of the 2020 cohort of college graduates and employs statistical description methods to examine the disparity between the occupations of fathers and the initial occupations of graduates empirically. The findings reveal that among graduates whose fathers are in the same occupational class, males have a significantly higher probability of entering privileged social class positions compared to females. Females have a slightly better advantage in entering the middle-tier positions, while both male and female graduates have a relatively low proportion entering the basic job sectors. When analyzing different types of colleges, among graduates whose fathers are in the same occupational class, male graduates have a greater advantage in entering privileged social class positions compared to female graduates. However, the gender disparity in employment is most prominent among graduates from prestigious colleges, followed by general undergraduate institutions, and is smallest among vocational colleges.

Keywords: College Graduates; Employment; Intergenerational Mobility; Gender Differences

1. Problem Statement and Research Design

1.1 Problem Statement

According to the Blue Book of Examinations: China's College Entrance Examination Report (2019), the gross enrollment rate in higher education in China has reached 45.7%. Based on the three-stage theory of “massification of

higher education” proposed by American sociologist Martin Trow, higher education in China has entered the stage of massification and is moving towards universalization. With an approaching 50% enrollment rate, it means that the opportunity for Chinese young adults to enter college has significantly increased, leading to a growing number of graduates each year. In recent years, each graduating class has been humorously referred to as encountering the “most challenging job market year” by the media. This is closely related to the increase in the number of graduates.

The current phenomenon of difficult employment is not only manifested in the overall low employment rate, low starting salaries, and “high education-low position” situations, but also in the presence of employment inequality among different groups. These groups include different family backgrounds^[1], social classes^[2], genders^[3], and more. Therefore, the current situation for graduates not only exhibits a lack of quantity and quality in employment as a whole but also shows employment inequality among different groups. Among these groups, empirical research on different genders consistently shows that women are at a disadvantage in employment, including lower employment rates than men, lower starting salaries, and lower job satisfaction^[4], indicating that there are differences between male and female graduates in their employment prospects, with women being in a disadvantaged position in the job market. Given that previous studies have mainly focused on empirical research on gender differences in the employment status of graduates from different genders, there has not yet been a comparative analysis of the father's occupational class and the child's occupational class in the employment of college graduates in terms of gender differences. Therefore, this study mainly analyzes the differences in the intergenerational mobility effects of higher education on graduates of different genders

from the perspective of intergenerational mobility, with the aim of analyzing the reasons behind the current phenomenon of “employment gender differences” and proposing relevant policy recommendations.

1.2 Research Design

To accurately describe the differences in intergenerational mobility among male and female college graduates in higher education, the questionnaire survey was conducted among recent graduates from over 10 colleges in 5 provinces and cities across China from May to June 2020. The survey consisted of four parts. The first part collected basic information, including gender, graduating institution, and current status. The second part gathered details about the current employment situation, such as work location, job type, and estimated monthly salary. The third part focused on factors influencing career choices, including job organization, work location, personal factors, family background, and the college attended. The fourth part explored family background, including the location of the family, parents' educational attainment, and occupation. A total of 2,200 questionnaires were distributed, and 2,005 were collected, resulting in 1,857 valid responses, with an effective response rate of 92.6%. Among the valid samples, 19.3% were graduates from prestigious colleges, 62.3% were from regular undergraduate institutions, and 18.4% were from vocational colleges and institutes. The ratio of graduates with associate degrees to those with bachelor's degrees was 18.4% to 81.6%. The proportion of male and female college graduates was 43.9% and 56.1%, respectively. Since this study focused on graduates who had found employment before leaving school in June, the final research sample consisted of 1,010 individuals with the status of “employed” (as shown in Table 1).

The classification of social strata used in this study was based on the standards set by the research group on “Contemporary Social Strata Structure in China” at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The current occupational structure in China is divided into ten major strata based on the possession of organizational resources, economic resources, and cultural resources. The first three strata, characterized by their advantages in resource possession, are classified as the privileged

stratum. The middle four strata are classified as the middle-tier stratum, while the last three strata, characterized by their disadvantages in resource possession, are classified as the basic stratum. For the convenience of this study, the three-tier classification method used by the aforementioned research group was adopted.

Table 1. Statistics of Graduates' Pre-Departure Status

Frequency	Percentage		Effective percentage	Cumulative percentage
Employed	1010	54.4	54.4	54.4
Unemployed	632	34.0	34.0	88.4
Continued education	209	11.3	11.3	99.7
Studying abroad	6	.3	.3	100.0
Total	1857	100.0	100.0	
Total	1857	100.0		

The research method employed in this study involved comparing the occupational stratum of the fathers of college graduates with their own initial employment stratum. By exploring the gender differences in the stratum into which the graduates from similar occupational backgrounds initially enter, this study aimed to identify disparities in employment conditions among graduates of different genders and propose policy recommendations for improvement.

2. Survey Results and Analysis

2.1 Overall Results of Intergenerational Mobility for College Graduates of Different Genders

Table 2 presents the significant test results, indicating a significant correlation ($R=0.015$) between gender and the occupational stratum in which college graduates initially enter. This suggests that there are notable differences in the initial employment stratum for college graduates of different genders.

From the statistics in Table 3, the intergenerational mobility characteristics of college graduates of different genders are as follows: Firstly, among graduates from advantaged social strata, the average proportion of those who initially enter the privileged stratum is 8.5%, which is significantly higher than the proportion of the privileged stratum in the overall occupational stratum (2.1%). This indicates a strong

intergenerational transmission within the advantaged social strata. When examining gender differences, the proportion of male graduates is 16.7%, while the proportion of female graduates is 1.4%. The proportion of males is 15.3 percentage points higher than that of females, suggesting that males from advantaged social strata have more opportunities to enter higher strata in their employment. The average proportion of graduates initially entering the middle-tier stratum is 77.5%. Among graduates initially entering the basic stratum, the proportion for males is 8.3%, while for females it is 18.8%. The proportion of females is 10 percentage points higher than that of males, indicating that females from advantaged social strata are at a disadvantage in the job market, as they are more likely to enter the middle-position and basic strata rather than the privileged stratum. Moreover, the data reveals that among graduates from middle-position families, there is a lower proportion of male graduates entering the privileged stratum compared to their female counterparts. The gender difference in the proportion of graduates entering the middle-tier stratum is not significant, while for those entering the basic stratum, the proportion of male graduates is lower than that of female graduates. This indicates that the disparity between male and female graduates from middle-position families is primarily observed in the proportions of entering the advantaged and basic strata. However, this difference is contrary to the gender disparity seen in advantaged social strata families, where female graduates from middle-position families have a higher proportion of entering the privileged stratum than their male counterparts, and a lower proportion of entering the basic stratum.

Additionally, among graduates from basic strata families, the average proportions of initially entering the three major strata are 2.4%, 77.8%, and 19.1% respectively. Among male graduates, the proportions are 2.4%, 68.7%, and 28.8%, while among female graduates, the proportions are 2.4%, 89.3%, and 8.3% respectively. From the data, it can be observed that among graduates from basic strata families, the proportions of initially entering the privileged stratum are the same, while the proportion of female graduates

initially entering the middle-tier stratum is higher than that of male graduates. On the other hand, the proportion of male graduates initially entering the basic stratum is higher than that of female graduates. This suggests that among graduates from basic strata families, female graduates hold a certain advantage in employment. They have equal opportunities to enter the privileged stratum as male graduates, and a significant proportion of female graduates have upward mobility towards the middle-tier stratum, with only a lower percentage remaining in the basic stratum.

Furthermore, the survey results indicate that among graduates from the same occupational stratum families, male graduates have a distinct advantage in entering the privileged social class, while female graduates have a certain advantage in entering the middle-tier stratum. This can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, traditional gender biases prevail in society, with deeply ingrained notions of “men as breadwinners” and “women as homemakers”, reinforcing the unconscious biases of employers when recruiting employees. Consequently, women are often excluded from better positions, and job seekers, especially women, may internalize these traditional beliefs, doubting their own competence for higher-level positions and therefore opting for lower-level positions during job searches. Secondly, the choice of major plays a crucial role in the employment prospects of college graduates, as their career options are closely tied to their fields of study. Research has shown that there are gender differences in the choice of majors among college graduates, with individuals gravitating towards disciplines traditionally associated with their gender roles^[5]. As a result, males tend to prefer STEM disciplines, while females tend to lean towards social sciences and humanities. Therefore, the employment rates across different majors indicate that males have a certain advantage in the job market.

2.2 Intergenerational Mobility Results for Graduates from Different Types of Colleges

This study categorized colleges in China into three types based on their level of academic excellence. The first type comprised colleges that are part of the “211” and “985” Project,

which are directly managed by the state and receive focused support. These colleges are distinguished by their high-quality faculty, teaching standards, student body, and resource allocation. They offer undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs. The second type included provincially managed undergraduate colleges, which encompass general undergraduate institutions, private colleges, and independent colleges. These colleges are primarily overseen by provincial authorities and have slightly inferior faculty, teaching

standards, student body, and resource allocation compared to the key colleges. They primarily offer undergraduate programs, with a smaller number of master's and doctoral programs. The third type consisted of vocational and technical colleges, which are predominantly governed by provincial authorities and offer specialized programs at the diploma level. The intergenerational mobility outcomes of college graduates from different types of colleges are summarized in Table 4.

Table 2. Correlation Test Results between Gender and the Occupational Stratum of Students

		The occupational stratum of students	Gender
Occupational stratum of graduates	Pearson Pearson correlation	1	-.077*
	Significance (two-tailed)		.015
	N	1004	1004
Gender	Pearson Pearson correlation	-.077*	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	.015	
	N	1004	1010

*. There is a significant correlation at a 0.05 level (two-tailed).

Table 3. Intergenerational Mobility Statistics for College Graduates of Different Genders

	The occupational stratum of students								
	Male			Female			Total		
Paternal occupational stratum	Privileged stratum	Middle-tier stratum	Basic stratum	Privileged stratum	Middle-tier stratum	Basic stratum	Privileged stratum	Middle-tier stratum	Basic stratum
Privileged stratum (%)	16.7	75.0	8.3	1.4	79.7	18.8	8.5	77.5	14.0
Middle-tier stratum (%)	0.1	86.4	13.5	1.0	88.5	10.4	0.6	87.6	11.8
Basic stratum (%)	2.4	68.7	28.8	2.4	89.3	8.3	2.4	77.8	19.1

Table 4 displays the statistical findings on intergenerational mobility for graduates from top colleges. The intergenerational mobility patterns among male and female graduates from top colleges are as follows: Firstly, among graduates from privileged backgrounds, the proportion of male graduates entering the privileged social class upon initial employment is significantly higher than that of female graduates. However, the proportion of female graduates entering the middle-class is slightly higher than their male counterparts, while the proportion of female graduates entering the working-class is significantly higher than that of male graduates. This

indicates that within graduates from privileged backgrounds, male graduates have an absolute advantage in terms of employment class. Secondly, among graduates from the middle-class, the gender differences mainly manifest in the proportion of graduates entering the middle-class upon initial employment. Specifically, male graduates have a higher proportion of entering the middle-class compared to their female counterparts, while female graduates have a higher proportion of entering the working-class compared to males. Thirdly, the mobility outcomes for graduates from working-class backgrounds also highlight the

advantage male graduates possess in employment. They have more opportunities to enter both the privileged social class and the middle-class. Overall, there exist gender disparities in the employment classes where graduates from top colleges initially enter. Male graduates exhibit an absolute advantage

in entering the privileged social class, while female graduates do not possess a visibility of advantage in entering the middle-class. Therefore, it can be concluded that the current employment situation highlights the clear disadvantaged position of female graduates from top colleges.

Table 4. Intergenerational Mobility Statistics for Graduates from Prestigious Colleges by Gender

Paternal occupational stratum	The occupational stratum of students						Total		
	Male			Female					
	Privileged stratum	Middle-tier stratum	Basic stratum	Privileged stratum	Middle-tier stratum	Basic stratum	Privileged stratum	Middle-tier stratum	Basic stratum
Privileged stratum (%)	8.0	84.0	8.0	0.1	85.7	14.3	0.6	84.4	5.0
Middle-tier stratum (%)	0.1	99.8	0.1	0.1	88.9	11.1	0.1	97.9	2.0
Basic stratum (%)	1.0	98.9	0.1	0.1	95.5	4.5	0.8	98.4	0.8

Table 5 presents the intergenerational mobility outcomes for undergraduate graduates from general undergraduate institutions. Firstly, among graduates from privileged social backgrounds, the proportion of male graduates embarking on their initial employment in the privileged stratum is significantly higher than that of female graduates. Conversely, female graduates have a higher proportion of initially entering the middle-tier stratum, while the proportion of female graduates entering the basic stratum surpasses that of males. This indicates that male graduates from privileged social backgrounds possess an absolute advantage in the professional hierarchy. Secondly, among graduates from middle-tier social backgrounds, the gender disparity primarily lies in the proportion of graduates

entering the middle-tier stratum. Specifically, male graduates have a higher proportion of initially entering the middle-tier, whereas female graduates have a higher proportion of entering the basic stratum. Thirdly, for graduates from lower-tier social backgrounds, male graduates similarly demonstrate advantages in their initial employment prospects. They have more opportunities to enter both privileged and middle-tier strata. In summary, among undergraduate graduates from general undergraduate institutions, male graduates hold a certain advantage in initially entering the privileged strata. However, unlike in prestigious colleges, female graduates from general undergraduate institutions possess a greater advantage in accessing the middle-tier stratum.

Table 5. Intergenerational Mobility Statistics for Graduates from General Undergraduate Institutions by Gender

Paternal occupational stratum	The occupational stratum of students						Total		
	Male			Female					
	Privileged stratum	Middle-tier stratum	Basic stratum	Privileged stratum	Middle-tier stratum	Basic stratum	Privileged stratum	Middle-tier stratum	Basic stratum
Privileged stratum (%)	21.2	69.7	9.1	2.0	84.0	14.0	9.6	78.3	12.1
Middle-tier stratum (%)	3.3	80.0	16.7	1.4	91.9	6.7	1.9	88.5	9.6
Basic stratum (%)	5.7	86.7	7.6	0.5	91.3	8.2	2.7	89.4	8.9

The intergenerational mobility outcomes of graduates from vocational colleges and

technical schools are presented in Table 6. Firstly, it is evident that male graduates from

privileged backgrounds hold a significant advantage in initial employment, with a higher proportion entering the privileged stratum compared to their female counterparts. However, female graduates exhibit a slightly higher proportion in the entry to the middle-tier stratum, while their proportion in the basic stratum exceeds that of male graduates. This indicates that male graduates from privileged backgrounds enjoy substantial advantages in employment within vocational colleges and technical schools. Secondly, among graduates from middle-tier background households, there is no significant gender difference in the proportion of initial employment in the privileged stratum. However, female graduates demonstrate a higher proportion in the middle-tier stratum compared to their male counterparts, while male graduates have a higher proportion in the basic stratum. This suggests that female graduates from middle-tier backgrounds have a certain advantage over male graduates in employment, although the gender difference is

not significant. Thirdly, among graduates from basic background households, female graduates exhibit higher proportions in initial employment in both the privileged and middle-tier strata, surpassing their male counterparts. Conversely, male graduates show a significantly higher proportion in initial employment in the basic stratum compared to female graduates. This indicates that female graduates from basic background households possess a certain advantage in employment, as they have more opportunities to upwardly move into the privileged and middle-tier strata. In conclusion, the intergenerational mobility differences among graduates from vocational colleges and technical schools differ from those of prestigious colleges and general undergraduate institutions. Notably, only male graduates from privileged backgrounds demonstrate employment advantages, while female graduates from middle-tier and basic background households hold relatively greater advantages in employment.

Table 6. Intergenerational Mobility Statistics for Graduates from Vocational Colleges by Gender

	The occupational stratum of students						Total		
	Male			Female					
Paternal occupational stratum	Privileged stratum	Middle-tier stratum	Basic stratum	Privileged stratum	Middle-tier stratum	Basic stratum	Privileged stratum	Middle-tier stratum	Basic stratum
Privileged stratum (%)	50.0	49.9	0.1	0.1	54.4	45.5	7.7	53.8	38.5
Middle-tier stratum (%)	0.1	54.4	45.5	0.1	69.1	30.8	0.1	62.4	37.5
Basic stratum (%)	0.1	15.1	84.8	3.4	78.0	18.6	1.2	37.8	61.0

The presented findings from various types of higher education institutions reveal that male graduates from privileged backgrounds hold significant advantages in initially entering the privileged stratum across all three types of institutions. The differences among the institutions are as follows: in prestigious colleges, male graduates from all three strata demonstrate advantages in entering both the privileged and middle-tier strata, while female graduates exhibit higher proportions in the basic stratum. In general undergraduate institutions, female graduates from all three strata display higher proportions in entering the middle-tier stratum compared to male graduates. In vocational colleges and technical schools, female graduates from both the

middle-tier and basic strata have higher proportions of employment in higher strata than their male counterparts. The reasons behind these disparities can be attributed to traditional gender biases in society, which place men in dominant positions within the employment market. Moreover, higher-level education generally leads to better employment prospects, but limited quality educational resources result in only a select few being able to access such opportunities. While these opportunities may seem determined by individuals' scores in entrance examinations, it is important to recognize inherent differences among individuals. Studies indicate that gender disparities exist in access to higher education, manifested in the

fact that, with the expansion of higher education enrollment, the gender gap gradually narrows. However, there remains a significant difference in access to quality educational resources, with males having more opportunities to obtain such resources compared to females. On the other hand, there is relatively smaller disparity between males and females in accessing ordinary educational resources^[6]. These gender differences in access to quality educational resources lead to females having to settle for less desired positions in the employment market. Thus, the proportion of females entering the middle-tier stratum even surpasses that of males. Lastly, students of different genders tend to choose majors that align with traditional gender norms, resulting in males being more concentrated in STEM disciplines and females leaning towards humanities and social sciences. However, societal demand for STEM disciplines far exceeds that of humanities, further exacerbating the disadvantages females face in the job market.

3. Main Conclusions

Based on the empirical investigation and analysis presented earlier, this study tentatively concludes with the following two main findings.

3.1 Male Graduates from the Same Occupational Background Have a Significant Advantage in Initially Entering the Privileged Stratum, While Female Graduates Possess a Certain Advantage in Entering the Middle-Tier Stratum

This outcome indicates that traditional gender norms continue to deeply influence our society, granting men higher social status and easier access to privileged occupations compared to women. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that higher education currently serves as a vital pathway for intergenerational mobility, and the influx of educated women into the middle-tier stratum plays a significant role in fostering a more balanced society, aligned with the concept of an “olive-shaped” structure.

3.2 The Higher the Quality of Educational Resources in Different Types of Higher Education Institutions, the More Pronounced is the Disadvantaged Position of Females

In prestigious colleges, male graduates from similar occupational backgrounds generally achieve higher stratum employment compared to their female counterparts. In general undergraduate institutions, male graduates still enjoy a slight advantage in stratum employment compared to female graduates, albeit to a lesser extent than in prestigious colleges; however, female graduates demonstrate an advantage in entering the middle-tier stratum. In vocational colleges and technical schools, male graduates from privileged backgrounds have an advantage in employment, while female graduates from middle-tier and basic backgrounds outperform their male counterparts in initial stratum employment. As different types of higher education institutions represent various levels of educational quality, the employment outcomes of their graduates indirectly reflect the reputation of the institutions. Previous studies have highlighted the gender inequality in access to higher education, particularly concerning the acquisition of quality educational resources. It is disheartening to observe that the same phenomenon persists even in the transition to employment. The more pronounced the advantage of accessing quality educational resources, the more evident the disadvantage faced by women, posing significant challenges to their equitable employment opportunities and the establishment of a harmonious society.

4. Policy Recommendations

Society, with its inherent biases and complexities, does not offer absolute equality among individuals. The complete eradication of inequalities is undoubtedly an arduous task. However, we can strive to mitigate these disparities by implementing policies aimed at reducing their magnitude, thereby ensuring the nation's sustainable and prosperous development. Therefore, several recommendations are put forth regarding the amelioration of the gender-based disadvantages in employment.

4.1 Transforming Traditional Gender Perspectives: Embracing a Progressive Gender Outlook in the New Era

The findings of this study demonstrate the existing disparities in employment outcomes among graduates of different genders. Overall,

except for graduates from vocational and technical colleges, male graduates generally hold advantageous positions while female graduates face employment disadvantages. One reason for this is the deeply ingrained traditional mindset in China, which perpetuates the notion of male superiority, female inferiority, and traditional gender roles. These concepts significantly hinder the professional development of contemporary women in the job market. Although the status of women has improved considerably in modern society, with women participating in various aspects of social life and even holding positions as heads of state in some countries - a progressive step for society, these instances still remain relatively rare compared to men. It is evident that our current society continues to function within the confines of traditional, patriarchal values. To truly transform this situation, it is necessary to change people's conventional views on gender, foster a modern concept of gender equality, and enable women to compete fairly with men in the job market. Moreover, appropriate measures should be implemented by the state, government, and relevant authorities to intervene, monitor, and coordinate any entities or individuals that disrupt a fair employment environment, ensuring true justice and fairness.

4.2 Increasing Opportunities for Women to Access High-Quality Educational Resources, Promoting the Elevation of Their Social Status

The pursuit of higher education has become a crucial means for individuals to achieve social mobility across generations. Research findings indicate that the proportion of female graduates entering the middle-tier social stratum even surpasses that of male graduates, which is advantageous for our country in creating an “olive-shaped” society. However, female graduates face significant disadvantages when it comes to securing positions in the advantageous social strata, largely due to their limited access to high-quality educational resources. Studies demonstrate that as the scale of higher education expands, the opportunities for women in our country to receive higher education are gradually increasing, but still noticeably lower than that of men on the whole^[7]. The unequal quantity and quality of

educational opportunities in higher education signify an unfair starting point for students of different genders. Fairness in the starting point serves as a prerequisite for achieving fairness in outcomes. Therefore, in order to improve the status of women in the future job market, it is imperative for the government to formulate policies that tilt towards women, providing them with more opportunities to access high-quality education resources. By doing so, not only can the nation fulfill its aspiration of constructing a “harmonious” society, but it can also inject more vitality into its development.

4.3 Reducing Gender Segregation in Major Choices and Fostering a Gender-Integrated Approach in Professional Fields

The choice of major in college is closely related to future employment prospects. Currently, women's employment is predominantly concentrated in middle-tier and foundational positions, which is influenced by their choice of majors. Due to physiological, psychological, and other differences between the sexes, students of different genders tend to choose majors that align with their own gender. Consequently, women often opt for social sciences and humanities, while men mainly concentrate in STEM fields. However, such major choices further impact the income levels and social status of male and female graduates in their chosen careers. Although the current selection of majors is driven by students' own choices, offering guidance specifically to female students during the process of selecting majors can lead to a partial resolution of gender inequality in higher education employment. By encouraging capable women to choose traditionally “male-dominated” fields, some of the gender disparities in employment outcomes can be addressed to a certain extent.

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