Case Report

Women's Power in Family Decision-Making: An Intersectional Perspective

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The gender imbalance in women's decision-making power under traditional patriarchy has long existed. Existing research mostly focuses on the lack of status among rural or low-income women. However, little is understood about the little and big ways in which the educated women in cities in China exert power in the family. Based on Intersectionality Theory, this study adopts the method of autoethnographic case study to investigate the power practice of one highly educated urban professional woman. Four core family domains were examined: marital residence choice, bride price and dowry negotiation, household and childcare division of labor, and fertility decision-making. This single autoethnographic case study illustrates how the intersection of education, professional status, urban middle-class position, gender norms, and familial emotional dynamics shapes women's decision-making power dynamics for a highly educated urban professional woman in contemporary China. Their power practices are neither traditional one-way gender domination nor confrontational women's decision-making power by marginalized groups, but rather characterized by equal negotiation, flexible adaptation, and autonomous leadership. This context-specific form of women's decision-making power observed in this single case, rooted in daily negotiation and strategic compromise, offers a tentative new analytical dimension for understanding the evolution of gender relations among similar demographic groups in contemporary China.

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1. Introduction

The distribution of power among women in household affairs constitutes a central issue in gender equality studies and a key focus of feminist scholarship. In this study, "women's decision-making power" refers to the framework proposed by Yoder and Kahn[1], which denotes women's capabilities and

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practices in family decision-making participation, resource allocation, and personal development autonomy. For centuries, patriarchy, a system institutionalized by male dominance, has maintained women's subordinate status in families through ideological control, labor division, and resource allocation[2]. However, with rising female education levels and expanded employment opportunities, traditional power dynamics in households are being transformed. Yet most studies concentrate on rural or low-income groups and found that women in these groups gain limited household bargaining power through economic participation but remain constrained by patriarchal norms[3][2] and that their household division of labor is still bound by the traditional norm of "men working outside and women managing inside" even with paid employment[4]. With the improvement of women's education levels and the expansion of their professional fields, the group of highly educated urban professional women has gradually emerged, and their practice of women's decision-making power exhibits appears to display context-specific traits reflective of contemporary social shifts for this demographic. However, little is understood about the little and big ways in which the educated women in cities exert power in the family.

Theoretically, feminist scholars had already critiqued the absence of gender perspectives in family studies as early as the 1980s and 1990s. Wiesner[5] advocated integrating gender as a core analytical category, similar to class, into social change research. Thompson and Walker[6] systematically reviewed gender relations in marriage, work, and parenting, emphasizing that gender is an interactive process of social construction rather than fixed roles. Yoder and Kahn[1] further proposed a binary framework of "dominant power" (power-over) and "empowering power" (power-to), laying the foundation for understanding the multiple dimensions of women's power.

In empirical research, scholars have revealed the complex factors influencing women's household power through quantitative and qualitative methods. Resource theory, which focuses on how economic and human capital shape bargaining power, has been widely applied in this field[7]. While Resource Theory emphasizes individual resources, Intersectionality extends this analysis by examining how institutional structures and cultural norms mediate the translation of resources into power. Resource theory emphasizes the crucial role of economic contributions: for example, Chen[8], based on China data, found that comparable educational levels between spouses can enhance women's power, but higher wife income may paradoxically weaken their decision-making power due to gender norms. Additionally, structural factors such as urban-rural disparities[9][10], cultural backgrounds[11], and policy environments[12] all shape the geographical characteristics of women's power. For instance, African

studies show that community wealth and women's media exposure positively influence family planning decision-making power[13], while intergenerational support in Asian households[4] and traditional concepts[14] often constrain women's autonomy.

The integration of intersectional perspectives has enriched research on women's decision-making power. Odwe et al.[15] revealed how patriarchal dynamics drive the intersection of intimate partner violence and child abuse in Ugandan households. These studies underscore the need for intersectional analysis of gender with race, class, and immigrant status[11]. However, existing intersectional research predominantly focuses on marginalized groups, with insufficient exploration of highly educated professional women, a demographic that combines educational privilege with gender challenges and have not incorporated affective factors into intersectional analyses, overlooking the shaping role of marital or intergenerational affect on women's decision-making power dynamics.

Current research exhibits notable gaps. Firstly, most empirical studies focus on rural or low-income women (Rathiranee, 2017), overlooking the unique status of educated urban working women in women's decision-making power dynamics. These women may both challenge patriarchal structures through economic independence and face new challenges due to work-family conflicts (Shi, 2023) or traditional role expectations[16]. Secondly, interdisciplinary analysis remains insufficient: systematic exploration of how factors like education, occupation, and geographic location interact to influence women's decision-making power is lacking[8]. Thirdly, there is the absence of an affective dimension analysis, failing to explore the interactive mechanisms between marital intimacy, intergenerational trust, and structural factors. Finally, while large-scale surveys can identify macro trends, they struggle to capture the micro-processes of power negotiation[9][10]. Although case studies could address this limitation, existing research in this area remains scarce.

This study employs authoethnographic case study methodology to examine power dynamics, identity intersections, and emotional factors among urban working women in family affairs through a feminist intersectional lens. As an exploratory, illustrative case contributing to analytic rather than empirical generalization, its objectives are:

1. to examine who makes the decision where to set up their marital home;
2. to describe how bride price and dowry arrangements are negotiated between bride and bridegroom and their families;
3. to examine what husbands do in housework and childcare; and

4. to explore the role of educated urban professional women in fertility decision-making processes.

2. Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality Theory is a critical analytical lens for understanding how multiple social identities interact within broader power structures to produce unique configurations of privilege and constraint, through the intricate interweaving of gender, class, occupation, and regional background[17]. Single-identity analyses cannot adequately explain women's family power experiences, as individuals embody overlapping social identities whose interactive effects shape unique power practices, rather than operating as isolated attributes.

Crenshaw's[18] Intersectionality Theory originated from an analysis of black women's double marginalization, revealing that systemic oppression stems not from the simple superposition of single identities but from their entanglement in power structures[19]. In this study, family power dynamics are analyzed through a household negotiation process analysis that integrates structural and representational intersectionality—the two main dimensions of Crenshaw's[20] framework actually mobilized in the case analysis. Intersectional evidence is defined as the interactive effects of institutional norms (e.g., university employment security, maternity leave policies), occupational characteristics (e.g., geographical mobility, professional prestige), kinship hierarchy (e.g., urban intergenerational power reconfiguration), and policy contexts (e.g., fertility policy) on the subject's family power practices. In this study, women's family power is framed as the product of dynamic interplay between these structural intersectional factors and representational factors (e.g., marital emotional discourse, intergenerational communication).

The core of Intersectionality Theory is rejecting the reduction of social identities to a disconnected "identity list"[21]. Crenshaw[18] emphasized that identity categories (e.g., class, gender, occupation) are inherently interdependent, and their cumulative effects on power dynamics can only be understood through analysis of their interactions, not separate examination of individual categories. Bauer et al. [19] conceptualize this theoretical approach as an "analytical sensibility", which requires researchers to interrogate how intersecting factors shape context-specific power experiences, rather than applying the theory as a formalized label. This study operationalizes this sensibility by centering analysis on the interactive mechanisms between structural and representational intersectionality in family negotiation, rather than passive enumeration of identity attributes.

In Crenshaw's[20] framework, structural intersectionality relates to institutional and systemic factors that shape foundational bargaining positions (e.g., occupational policies, labor market characteristics, fertility regulations), while representational intersectionality operates through cultural and interpersonal discourses, emotions, and daily interactions—the main theoretical distinction guiding this study's case analysis. In the family field examined here, structural intersectionality establishes the objective conditions for women's family power, while representational intersectionality mediates how these structural advantages or constraints are translated into actual power practices through marital intimacy and intergenerational emotional bonds. Emotion, as a carrier of cultural symbols and power discourse in the family's representational dimension, acts as a critical bridge linking these two core intersectional dimensions.

The key intersectional question guiding this study's analysis is: How do the interactive mechanisms of structural (institutional, occupational, policy) and representational (familial emotional, discursive) factors shape the acquisition and enactment of family power for a highly educated urban professional woman in contemporary China? This study employs this focused intersectional framework to analyze the subject's experiential narratives across core family decision-making domains, examining how the interaction of structural and representational factors influences power negotiation, rather than focusing on abstract theoretical extensions. For this specific case, contextual specificity is central: the subject's family power practices are shaped by the unique intersection of urban institutional norms, professional occupational status, and familial emotional dynamics, factors that are the primary focus of the subsequent empirical analysis. The closeness of emotional relationships emerges as a key representational moderator that shapes how structural intersectional advantages are translated into concrete family power practices.

3. Method of Study

This study employs an autobiographical case study method within the qualitative research paradigm, using the first researcher herself as the subject to analyze the dynamic experiences of a highly educated urban professional woman within the women's decision-making power structure. Autoethnography, as a qualitative research approach, uses personal experience to explore and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences[22]. This method is particularly suited for examining intimate family dynamics that are often difficult to access through traditional research methods. The selection of this method stems from the unique advantage of case studies in capturing contextualized features of complex social phenomena.

It allows researchers to reveal, through micro-level in-depth descriptions, how intersecting factors such as education, occupation, gender, and family roles specifically shape women's power practices[23]. By taking the first researcher herself as the case, the study does not aim for universal representativeness but rather seeks to provide a concrete and substantial theoretical entry point for understanding women's decision-making power negotiation mechanisms of specific groups (i.e., highly educated professional women) through "analytic generalization". This study focuses on the micro-interaction narrative of the interweaving of structure and emotion. The research data spans from 2013 to 2024, covering main family decision-making events and critical milestones in career development. Primary data includes the first researcher's personal journals, notes on significant life events, and records of conversations with her spouse, while secondary data consists of family ritual documents and academic career archives. All data have been systematically organized and archived.

Data generation involved retrospective narrative writing conducted between 2022 and 2025. The first author documented daily reflections, significant event narratives, and verbatim conversation excerpts in a private research journal, which was cross-referenced with family documents (e.g., wedding contracts, employment records) to verify dates and details. Narrative writing was structured around directive prompts across the four core decision-making domains to ensure comprehensive coverage of key events. The narrative writing undergoes multi-stage iterations and is simultaneously refined through dialogue with a spouse to obtain feedback, enabling cross-verification of the timing and specifics of events. Methodologically, this constitutes autoethnographic narrative material that contextualizes personal experiences within broader socio-cultural frameworks, including regional marriage customs, maternal expectations, and academic career trajectories[22]. Autobiographical narratives capture specific details of familial emotional interactions, providing data for emotional dimension analysis.

The study employed reflexive inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) three-stage coding process. Open coding identified initial semantic units related to power, negotiation, and identity. Axial coding linked these codes into conceptual categories (e.g., structural resources, emotional dynamics). Selective coding integrated categories into the overarching framework of intersecting power structures. Meaningful semantic units were coded and clustered to construct an integrated thematic framework encompassing structural identity and emotional relationships. Throughout the analysis, ongoing analytic memos were maintained to document coding rationale and interpretive insights. Thematic analysis independently extracts topics related to emotional dimensions and conducts cross-analysis with structural themes. To address confirmation bias, the first author maintained a reflexive

journal documenting how her dual role as researcher and subject influenced coding decisions, and the second author independently coded 30% of the data to establish inter-coder reliability (agreement rate = 89%). Discrepancies were resolved through iterative discussion.

Critical reflexivity was embedded throughout the research process to address the challenges of the first author's dual role as researcher and subject. As a highly educated urban professional woman, the author brought insider knowledge that enriched data depth but also carried potential interpretive bias. To mitigate this, she engaged in ongoing self-reflection on how her personal experiences shaped her interpretation of events, and member checking with her spouse provided alternative perspectives on family dynamics. The second author's independent analysis served as a critical check on subjective interpretations, ensuring analytical rigor. The researcher's reflective statement clearly defines their identity and research interests. As a highly educated urban professional woman and a higher education practitioner, the researcher possesses experiential knowledge of the study population. This identity not only shapes the main focus of the research but also carries potential positional biases. Throughout the research process, reflective journals were maintained continuously to examine and mitigate subjective biases during the narrative and analytical stages. The first researcher consciously acknowledges that her dual role as both narrator and analyst may introduce perspective limitations. Throughout the analysis, the researcher maintained reflexivity, continuously examining how her dual identity as "researcher" and "research subject" might influence data interpretation, ensuring objectivity through spousal verification. Spousal verification, as a core member-checking strategy, carries potential emotional bias that may lead to softened descriptions of negative aspects of family interactions. The study also employed multi-source triangulation and critical reflection to enhance research reliability. However, inherent memory bias in retrospective narratives could not be entirely eliminated, and the single-case design also limited the possibility of cross-case external validation.

The second author was responsible for the independent methodological validation and critical analysis of the qualitative research, with no involvement in any data generation processes to avoid a priori bias. They independently conducted double coding on 30% of the narrative texts, cross-validating the results with those of the first author. Coding discrepancies were resolved through face-to-face discussions, ultimately achieving consensus on the full analysis. Additionally, the second author engaged in in-depth probing of the narrative interpretations, further dissecting the influence of structural and gender factors on everyday family decision-making.

4. Results

In this section, the results for four core family domains are described: marital residence choice, bride price and dowry negotiation, household and childcare division of labor, and fertility decision-making. Table 1 shows the timeline of key events in the case study.

Year	Key Events	Corresponding Family Decision-Making Domain
2013	Researcher took up a lecturer position at a university in Liuzhou	Marital Residence Choice
2014	Researcher's spouse relocated to Liuzhou for medical doctor employment	Marital Residence Choice
2015	Birth of the first child; return to work after maternity leave	Household and Childcare Division of Labor; Fertility Decision-Making
2019	Initiated second child planning; COVID-19 pandemic outbreak	Fertility Decision-Making
2020	Birth of the second child	Fertility Decision-Making
2022	Began full-time doctoral study at a Malaysian university	Household and Childcare Division of Labor
2022–2025	Overseas intensive study for doctoral degree (10 months total)	Household and Childcare Division of Labor
Post-2025	Completed doctoral studies and returned to full-time teaching in Liuzhou	Household and Childcare Division of Labor

Table 1. Timeline of Key Events in the Case Study

4.1. Marital Residence Choice

The marital residence decisions of the research subject and her spouse are a reflection of women's decision-making power. After the subject graduated with a Master's degree and began working at a university in Liuzhou in 2013, her spouse faced a tough decision. They were not married yet at that time.

After graduating in 2014, he had to decide whether to move to Liuzhou or continue to work as a medical doctor in Nanning, the location of their original master study. If her spouse chose to continue to work in Nanning, this might have ended their relationship. Her spouse made the decision to look for a job in Liuzhou, where the subject was based. He put greater priority on their marital life together than staying on in his original city of Master study and living close to his parents. This choice reflects the subject's spouse's emotional identification with their marital relationship, with marriage prioritized over career and geographical preferences. He secured a position as a doctor at a local hospital in Liuzhou.

The research subject's marital residence model can be characterized as "female-initiated, male-adapted" decision-making. In the decision-making process, the subject's career stability and academic potential were key attractions. This decision reflects the intersection of gender norms, professional capital, and labor market structures. The institutional arrangement of university lecturer positions—featuring high employment security and low geographical mobility—establishes a structural advantage for the subject in marital residence negotiation, while the medical profession's labor market attribute of high geographical mobility enables the spouse's occupational adaptation to this decision. Notably, this advantage is contingent on the subject's urban middle-class position and educational capital, which would not be available to women in less prestigious or more geographically mobile occupations. Her professional identity as university lecturer is an asset because her monthly salary is above average. She is also well-respected in the community. The research subject's spouse had a Master's degree at the time when he made a decision to work in Liuzhou. Their educational levels were equal. It can be interpreted that equal educational attainment between the couple fostered an emotional foundation of mutual respect, which underpinned this female-initiated decision-making model.

While this outcome represents a departure from traditional patrilocal residence norms, it also reveals the continued influence of gendered expectations. The spouse's relocation was framed as a sacrifice for the relationship, placing implicit emotional pressure on the subject to reciprocate through future family compromises.

In the decision-making negotiation, neither party engaged in overt power struggles. While they shared a common goal of maintaining their professional relationships, the career development need of the research subject was given priority. Two factors contribute to the absence of overt power struggles in the selection of the location of the marital home. First, the research subject's position as a lecturer in a government university is not easy to obtain. Because of this, the couple could not easily give up the research subject's position in Liuzhou University as she might not be able to secure another teaching

position in a university in another location. A university lecturer's position is considered a middle-class occupation in China. On the other hand, the research subject's spouse could find a comparable position as a medical doctor in another government hospital because of the need for medical personnel. The research subject's academic position which does not offer geographical mobility and her spouse's medical profession, which offers geographical mobility, eases the negotiation to settle down in Liuzhou and start their family. This can be interpreted that the facilitation of structural factors in negotiation is further amplified through marital emotional consensus.

Second, neither party faced coercion from their families of origin. Parents served merely as advisors, and they did not assert their authority as parents. Traditionally, in China, the decision-making power in children's marriages remains with parents, especially fathers and male elders, and girls often have little or no say[24]. The urban kinship hierarchy, which is reconstructed by the high education background of the subject and spouse, weakens the authority of traditional parents in marriage decision-making, thus forming a representative intersectional condition, which further strengthens the structural advantage of the subject's occupational status in the choice of residence. The parents of both families respected their children to be decision-makers in choosing the location of their marital home. The respect of parents comes from the intergenerational emotional trust, not just the children's high education and independent consciousness. The research subject's parents were retired primary school teacher and housewife. The parents of the research subject's spouse were factory workers. Both sets of parents accepted the independent mindset cultivated by their children's higher education backgrounds. There is an intersection of "age + education + family" rank where education takes precedence over age and family rank in the intergenerational power dynamics within urban middle-class families.

4.2. Bride Price and Dowry Negotiation

It is interesting that in the negotiation of dowry and bride price. Bride price refers to financial and symbolic gifts provided by the groom's family to the bride's family to mark the marriage agreement. Dowry refers to financial and material assets prepared by the bride's family for the bride, which are brought into the marital household by the bride. The bride (from Ganzhou city, Jiangxi province) and bridegroom (from Huanggang city, Hubei province) seemed to have equal power. The research subject's family and her spouse's family adhered to the principle of "respecting tradition while ensuring equality". The bridegroom's family prepared a bride price of 88,000 yuan (a number considered auspicious in Chinese culture symbolizing prosperity), a set of "three golds" (gold necklace, ring, earrings) as per

Huanggang city's traditional emphasis on symbolic jewelry, and ritual gifts of high-grade tea, alcohol, and sweet pastries. Her parents reciprocated with a dowry of 66,600 yuan in cash (a Ganzhou preference for "smoothness"), household appliances, hand-embroidered bed linens (a signature Ganzhou wedding custom), and additional gold bracelets, adhering to local traditions by retaining core customs of both places—Ganzhou's focus on practical dowry items and Huanggang city's emphasis on ritual sincerity—while inviting key relatives from both sides to jointly confirm details. It is interpretive that the two families reached a consensus through negotiation, with the key being their shared pursuit of marital happiness for their children, thereby forming an emotional bond.

In the case of the research subject, the two families let the couple have the upper hand in making the final decisions. The two sets of parents provided only advice on the customs as the older generation often believed that the younger generation are not well-informed. The couple agreed on 88,000 yuan, a set of "three golds" (gold necklace, ring, earrings), and ritual gifts. The bride price symbolizes the financial capability of the bridegroom's family, and the value placed on the bride who is entering the patriarchal family. In the context of traditional wedding customs, a higher dowry accords greater value to the bride because "women are treated as exchange goods", and the bridegroom's family is acquiring the daughter-in-law from her parents.

In the case of the research subject, we see a breakaway from the traditional model of parents making the decision on the dowry to a negotiation model of the couple making the decision. There was subtle integration of modern gender equality concepts. The research subject, as a highly educated professional woman, does not perceive dowry as a symbol of "economic dependence" nor does her spouse's family view it as a tool to control marital relations. This leads to the interpretation that both parties regard it as a "cultural symbol of marriage rituals". The symbolic transformation of dowry and bride price relies on the structural foundation of economic independence and emotional respect between spouses and within families. As both of them are earning a good salary, they have economic freedom, and do not need to rely on the dowry to set up their own family. In addition, although both families originated from rural areas, the subject and her spouse had been engaged in professional work in cities for a long time. Their urban occupational identity and high-level education background led to the family breaking through the constraints of traditional marriage customs. Their wider families cannot expect them to comply totally with traditional dowry practices. In the matter of the research subject's dowry, we see the intersection of "class + age + region" coming together to make it possible for the couple to make their own decision, freed of their parents' "interference". It can be inferred that intergenerational emotional bond eliminates

resistance to the autonomous decision-making of couples and forms the transfer of power at the emotional level. The young couple having professional jobs in an urban area enabled them to challenge the age-old customs and the parental prerogative in deciding the dowry.

This negotiation process illustrates the intersection of class, education, and generational change. The couple's economic independence and educational capital allowed them to redefine traditional customs as symbolic rather than transactional. However, this autonomy remains partial. The retention of bride price and dowry rituals suggests that they still needed to accommodate familial and community expectations to maintain social harmony, reflecting the continued influence of patriarchal cultural norms. A hypothetical extension of this case suggests that non-professional occupational status for the couple would have increased community pressure to comply with traditional dowry practices, creating greater barriers to their autonomous decision-making.

4.3. Household and Childcare Division of Labor

In a traditional household in China in the early 20th century, the husband goes to work while the wife stays at home to take care of the children and the housework[25]. However, in the life of the research subject, her husband shared household and childcare duties, showing a reconfiguration of gender roles. After the birth of her first child in 2015, the research subject had three months of maternity leave, and returned to her work as a university lecturer. This division of labor reflects the intersection of gender norms, professional identity, and family support structures. The national maternity leave policy and the university's flexible work arrangement for female faculty form structural institutional support that enables the subject to resume professional work post-childbirth, while the spouse's medical profession's shift system and the mother-in-law's intergenerational care provision create a familial care network that mediates the subject's caregiving burden. However, a critical analysis reveals that the subject still bears the primary cognitive and emotional load of caregiving. She coordinated feeding schedules, managed childcare arrangements, and remained the primary nighttime caregiver during early infancy. This invisible labor, while unrecognized in the formal division of tasks, represents a persistent gendered burden.

The child was still being breastfed, so she prepared expressed breast milk in advance with a breast pump each morning before work, which her mother-in-law warmed and fed to the baby at regular intervals during the day when she was not around. At night, the research subject took care of the baby. While she primarily breastfed the baby when it woke up, her spouse would get up to prepare warm water and clean

the bottle if supplementary feeding was needed Her mother-in-law helped in household tasks such as purchasing daily groceries, cooking dinner, washing dishes, and laundering the baby's clothes, easing the burden of childcare and housework for both the couple. There was a "grandparental assistance + spousal collaboration" parenting model which continued until today. The interpretation is that the contribution of the mother-in-law stems from intergenerational emotional trust, while the spouse's cooperation directly reflects marital intimacy. Intergenerational emotional bond is the bridge that transforms the respect brought by structural identity into practical support.

During this phase, the research subject prioritized career over household commitments. The rigid demands of university teaching and academic development led to a "career-first" principle in the division of labor. Her spouse supported her by being understanding about her work commitments such as late hours, and even took up household and childcare responsibilities. This suggests that the understanding of spouse originates from the consensus of the marital emotion of "mutual achievement".

Their second child was born in 2020. Two years later, the research subject decided to pursue a full-time doctoral degree at a Malaysian university. She was still teaching in the university for most of the year but she had to travel to Malaysia for intensive study twice annually during the three-year program. Her time abroad amounted to ten months. The university's institutional policy of approving study leave for academic advancement and the spouse's medical profession's adjustable work schedule form dual structural conditions that support the subject's doctoral study. The intergenerational care provision of both in-laws further mediates the childcare gap created by the subject's overseas study, translating the subject's structural occupational prestige into the practical power to prioritize academic development. During this period, her spouse assumed core childcare responsibilities such as picking up and dropping off children, supervising the children's homework, daily care, attend parent-teacher meetings as well as children's extracurricular activities. Her mother-in- law prepared nutritious meals for the children daily, help with bathing and dressing the children, and stepped in to pick up the children from school when he had night shifts at the hospital. While her father-in-law assisted with household maintenance and grocery shopping to ease logistical burdens. The comprehensive family support is the dual manifestation of structural, marital and intergenerational emotional factors. Her spouse successfully balanced hospital work and family responsibilities, ensuring the child's developmental needs while providing crucial support for the research subject's academic advancement. This phase marked a complete departure from the traditional "men work outside, women stay home" framework, establishing an inverted division of labor where "women pursue career development while men shoulder primary family responsibilities."

The sustainability of this model stems from the spouse's educational background (master's degree) fostering gender equality concepts, as well as the value accorded to the research subject because of her respected academic position. It can be inferred that marriage and intergenerational emotional trust provides sustainable emotional security for non-traditional division of labor.

Notably, this model of care is highly contingent on the availability of unpaid intergenerational labor from the mother-in-law. Without this support, the subject would likely have faced greater pressure to reduce her professional commitments, highlighting how empowerment in this case is dependent on class privilege and access to extended family networks. This also raises questions about the redistribution of care burdens within the family, as the mother-in-law assumes a significant share of unpaid domestic labor.

Upon completing her doctoral studies, the research subject returned to full-time teaching in Liuzhou University. She was able to take up more household and childcare commitments. They made adjustments based on their respective work schedules, with no significant blame-shifting observed. The couple had a flexible labor division system in household and childcare duties. Neither partner regarded household and childcare as exclusive responsibilities of one party, but rather as shared obligations of the family, including the parents. It follows that flexible division of labor depends on the emotional trust and mutual understanding between husband and wife. In the context of Intersectionality Theory, we see the research subject having power because she is highly educated, works as a university lecturer in an urban region. The structural intersection of high occupational prestige (university faculty) and urban institutional norms (gender-equal work-family expectations) grants the subject the power to pursue advanced academic education, while the representational intersection of marital intimacy and intergenerational emotional trust translates this structural advantage into practical family support. This gives her the privilege of pursuing her career goals to the extent of going abroad for a doctoral degree. It is a reasonable hypothesis that adherence to traditional gender role norms, particularly in rural family contexts, would create significant barriers for women to pursue advanced higher education after childbirth, and may even require them to exit the workforce to assume primary childcare responsibilities. However, her parents-in-law recognized the importance of her job, and pitched in to help out in the household and childcare duties. For this specific case, a contrasting hypothetical scenario would be that a non-professional lower-level job may alter the in-laws' perception of the role's value, leading to less accommodating support.The research subject did not face career advancement barriers but instead enjoyed a favorable division of labor where her husband and his parents shared household and childcare responsibilities.

4.4. Childbearing Decisions

Childbearing decisions are influenced by individual autonomy, intergenerational expectations, and social dynamics. The research subject's educational background in urban, along with professional identity, gave her power in decision-making. This reproductive autonomy reflects the intersection of state policy, professional status, and intergenerational dynamics. The structural intersection of China's progressive fertility policy adjustment (universal two-child policy) and the university's flexible reproductive planning norms for faculty grants the subject foundational autonomy in fertility decision-making. The urban kinship norm of respect for adult children's reproductive wishes—a representational intersectional factor—further eliminates intergenerational pressure on fertility timing. For their first child, born in early 2015, the couple agreed to have a child immediately. Both sets of parents did not harass them about having a child earlier, as is common in traditional families[26]. Parents do not urge for childbirth, stemming from intergenerational emotional bond and respect for children's life rhythms and reproductive wishes.

The decision to have the second child was more intricate. After the first child entered the senior class of kindergarten in 2019 at four years old, the research subject started planning for a second child. She wanted her first child to have company at home, and her parents-in-laws expected to the couple to have more than one child. She planned to have their second child in 2019. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 became a pivotal external variable, unexpectedly accelerating the timing of pregnancy. The second child was born in August 2020.

In the matter of childbearing, the research subject maintained full autonomy in her choices, with intergenerational expectations serving as advisory references rather than binding mandates. While her parents-in-laws expected multiple children, they were not coercive. They gave tactful suggestions that the elder kid is growing up alone, having a sibling would let them look out for each other, and we're still healthy enough to help with childcare, you two won't have to bear all the burden[14], which suggests that they framed their expectation around the children's companionship and shared care responsibilities to avoid imposing pressure. The representational intersection of intergenerational emotional communication and gender-equal discursive practices within the family mediates the structural advantage of the subject's professional status, preventing intergenerational fertility expectations from becoming coercive power. The gentle advice from in-laws, based on intergenerational emotional communication and mutual respect, did not translate into power pressure. The research subject's higher education background and her professional status conferred her independence and earned her respect

from her parents-in-law. Her academic role as university faculty, characterized by flexible reproductive planning, combined with maternity leave policies and academic autonomy, enabled her to strike a balance between parenthood and career advancement, thereby strengthening her decision-making authority. It can be interpreted that occupational structure brings reproductive autonomy, which is successfully implemented through intergenerational emotional communication. The pandemic-induced slowdown in daily routines objectively created temporal flexibility for second-child births, forming a tripartite mechanism of "personal preference + intergenerational expectations + external environment." The subject's dual professional identities fundamentally ensured her decision-making autonomy.

However, the subject's decision to have a second child was still influenced by familial expectations, and she framed the decision in terms of family cohesion rather than purely individual desire. This suggests that even with structural advantages, women's reproductive choices remain embedded in relational contexts shaped by gender norms. Additionally, the subject's ability to balance career and childrearing is contingent on the availability of intergenerational care support, which is not universally accessible.

5. Discussion

This exploratory case study yields four context-specific findings. First, the "female-dominated, male-adapted" decision-making model observed in this study reveals how the intersection of educational capital, professional prestige, and urban middle-class position can reshape traditional gender dynamics in family decision-making. Both parties' equal educational levels provide a cognitive foundation for equal negotiation, which aligns with Chen's[8] study, indicating that the equilibrium of educational levels between spouses significantly enhances women's decision-making power and prevents one gender from dominating knowledge and cognition. This study addresses the limitations of Chen's[8] research by establishing a cognitive foundation for educational equity while simultaneously fostering an emotional foundation of mutual respect between spouses.

Xu[10] pointed out that in rural Chinese families, the proportion of husbands holding more actual power is as high as over 40%, while urban families have the highest proportion of equal rights, and the urban-rural disparity significantly affects the women's decision-making power structure. The marital residence decision-making in this study further suggests the promoting effect of urban environment on gender equality, acknowledging the cross-sectional contextual gaps in Xu's[10] research. The subject and her spouse belong to the urban middle class, who are less constrained by traditional patriarchal norms, and career development and personal happiness become the core considerations in family decision-making,

which reflects a contextual difference from the decision-making logic of "family interests first" in rural families. However, this study's situated analysis identifies the heterogeneity of power practices within the urban middle class. The power of highly educated professional women is not simply "equal rights," but rather "contextual dominance" based on cross-identities. When career development is associated with geographical choice, their cross-advantages in professional identity and educational capital enable them to gain decision-making dominance. This finding offers a context-specific nuance to Xu's[10] research on urban-rural power disparities and provides a contextual refinement for the refined analysis of urban women's decision-making power. The internal power heterogeneity within the urban middle class is highly correlated with the quality of family emotional relationships.

Secondly, the egalitarian negotiation model of dowry and bride price illustrates the power dynamics of highly educated urban professional women within traditional marriage customs. Altay's[2] study on rural marriage customs in Bangladesh reveals that dowries often serve as a tool for male families to control women. The "status" women gain through dowry amounts essentially reflects economic dependence, with women having virtually no voice in marriage custom negotiations. While Altay's[2] findings reflect the gendered dynamics of dowry in low-income rural Bangladeshi contexts—markedly different from the urban professional setting of this case—the marriage practices examined in this study reflect a contextual reconfiguration of dowry and bride price meanings rather than a full transcendence of traditional marriage custom logics. The subject's economic independence (stable income from university teaching positions) eliminates their need for dowry as financial security, while their equal educational backgrounds grant them bargaining power. This contextual difference also corroborates Annan et al.'s[13] perspective that women's educational attainment and occupational status are key variables in breaking traditional gender norms. Highly educated professional women may shape a context-specific reconfiguration of power dynamics in marriage customs through identity capital. Marriage and intergenerational emotions are important moderating variables that help to contextually adapt traditional marriage customs in the context of structural identity.

Thirdly, the dynamic restructuring of household and childcare responsibilities reflects the context-specific modern transformation of gender roles in urban professional women's families with higher education. Yoder and Kahn[1] proposed a dual framework of "dominant power" (power-over) and "empowering power" (power-to), where the former manifests as one-way control and obedience, while the latter represents collaborative power that promotes personal development. In this study, the division of labor during the doctoral candidate's research period, where the spouse assumed primary household

and childcare responsibilities, exemplifies a context-specific practical form of "empowering power." The spouse actively assumes family responsibilities to empower the candidate's academic development, while the candidate reciprocates through professional achievements, forming a bidirectional empowering power relationship. The motivation of the two-way power relationship is the marital intimacy between spouses. This differs in its contextual manifestation from the traditional male-dominated "dominant power" in traditional families, offering a context-specific illustration of the application of Yoder and Kahn's[1] power type theory in the family domain.

Thompson and Walker[6] emphasized that gender is a socially constructed interactive process rather than a fixed role, with the equalization of household division of labor serving as the core manifestation of gender role reconstruction. The division of labor patterns in this study corroborate this perspective: from the "grandparental assistance + marital collaboration" after the birth of the eldest child, to the "male-dominated household + female academic focus" during doctoral studies, and then to the "dynamic balanced division of labor" after graduation. Gender is no longer a preset standard for division of labor but is flexibly adjusted according to family needs and personal development. The redefinition of gender roles cannot be separated from the emotional interactions within the family. Acknowledging the rural-urban and educational contextual divides between this study's subject and the rural women in Shi's[4] research, this division of labor pattern reflects a contextual departure from Shi's[4] findings, where rural women's household division of labor remains constrained by the traditional norm of "men working outside, women managing inside." Even when participating in paid labor, they still bear primary family responsibilities. In this study, highly educated urban professional women exhibit a context-specific departure from such fixed roles, with the key lying in the gender concept innovation brought by educational background and the bargaining capital granted by professional identity. This further illustrates that the construction of gender roles deeply intersects with context-specific identity dimensions such as education, occupation, region, marital intimacy, and intergenerational emotional connection.

Kabeer[3] posits that women's decision-making power manifests not only in decision-making participation but more fundamentally in their autonomy to pursue personal development. In this study, the subject's ability to continue doctoral studies after having two children stems from flexible division of labor in household and childcare responsibilities. This autonomous pursuit of career advancement represents a context-specific core embodiment of women's decision-making power. The subject's academic positions in higher education institutions enjoy high social recognition and career prospects,

while their master's degrees lay the foundation for doctoral studies. This "education + career" synergy enables them to balance family obligations with personal growth, offering a context-specific empirical illustration of Kabeer's[3] assertion that "development autonomy constitutes core power" and extending its applicability to highly educated professional women.

Finally, the autonomy in reproductive decision-making illustrates the context-specific power practices of highly educated urban professional women in reproductive health. Demissie et al.[12] found through their African women's study that women's reproductive decisions are often controlled by both husbands and families, with media exposure and community wealth levels serving as key external variables influencing their decision-making power. Noting the substantial cross-cultural and structural context differences between this urban Chinese case and the Sub-Saharan African women in Demissie et al.'s[12] study, the reproductive decisions of the subject were centered on personal will, with intergenerational expectations from in-laws only serving as reference factors without forming mandatory interventions. This difference stems from the independent consciousness brought by the subject's and her spouse's higher education backgrounds, as well as the moderate estrangement of intergenerational relationships in urban families. Meanwhile, the subject's professional identity (university teachers) enabled them to access relatively flexible reproductive support (such as maternity leave and flexible working hours), illustrating the context-specific interaction of professional identity and geographical environment in reproductive decision-making. Intergenerational emotional communication gives women the power to make reproductive decisions in this specific urban professional context.

Guo[14] pointed out in his research based on China data that traditional fertility concepts still impose implicit constraints on women's fertility decisions, especially in the context of second-child births, where intergenerational pressure often becomes a significant driving factor. In this study, although the subject's decisions regarding second-child births were influenced by their in-laws 'expectations, the final decisions were still based on personal willingness. This "referencing rather than compliance" intergenerational relationship is closely related to the subject's educational background. Higher education equips them with independent thinking and self-awareness, enabling them to rationally negotiate between intergenerational expectations and personal needs, rather than passively accepting the constraints of traditional concepts. Intergenerational emotional communication can weaken the restrictive effect of traditional reproductive concepts in this context. This finding partially aligns with the conclusions of Xu[10], who discovered that urban women have significantly higher fertility autonomy than rural women. However, this study further identifies a context-specific fertility decision-making

autonomy pattern among highly educated groups within urban areas, providing a nuanced stratified perspective for gender research on fertility decisions within urban Chinese contexts.

Odwe et al.[15] emphasized that the practice of women's decision-making power is the result of the interweaving of multiple identities, with power in reproductive decision-making particularly manifested as the intersection of dimensions such as gender, education, and occupation. This study corroborates this perspective, where the female gender of the subject endows them with the physiological responsibility of reproduction, while higher education background grants them the autonomy to decide on reproductive intentions, and the professional identity of university teachers provides them with the practical possibility of balancing reproduction and career. The intersection of these three factors fosters a reproductive decision-making model characterized by "autonomous leadership and moderate negotiation." This model differs in its contextual expression from the traditional state in which women's reproductive rights are dominated in families, as well as from the overly individualistic reproductive decision-making emphasized in Western studies. It highlights the context-specific uniqueness of women's decision-making power with emotional factors among highly educated urban professional women in China, offering a situated empirical illustration of Intersectionality Theory's applicability to an under-explored non-Western subpopulation.

However, these findings also highlight the limitations of this form of empowerment. The subject's power remains relational and contingent on spousal and intergenerational support. She still bears significant emotional and cognitive labor, and her ability to pursue professional goals depends on the unpaid labor of other women in the family. This suggests that while individual women may negotiate greater autonomy within their families, broader structural gender inequalities persist. The empowerment observed in this case is thus partial and context-dependent, rather than a complete transformation of patriarchal power structures.

6. Conclusion

This autoethnographic case study offers a context-specific, exploratory illustration of negotiated family power practices within one urban Chinese household. It demonstrates how the intersection of structural factors (educational capital, professional status, institutional policies) and representational factors (marital intimacy, intergenerational emotional bonds) shapes women's decision-making power. Such power practices are enacted through flexible familial negotiation rather than confrontational resistance, a dynamic examined across four core family decision-making domains: marital residence choice, bride

price and dowry negotiation, household and childcare division of labor, and fertility decision-making. This study's context-specific insights illustrate that the power of the subject is not shaped by a single gender factor alone, but by the interplay of structural institutional conditions (e.g., employment security, occupational mobility, fertility policy) and representational familial dynamics (e.g., emotional communication, intergenerational trust).

In this specific case, the family power practices of the educated urban professional woman are relatively unconstrained by traditional gender norms, parental interventional pressure and conventional societal expectations associated with women's family roles. This relative lack of constraint is underpinned by structural advantages afforded by the subject's professional and urban identity, and supported by the representational emotional dynamics of her family system, a key contextual finding of this single-case analysis. While the findings cannot be generalized to all highly educated urban professional women, they contribute to analytic generalization by illustrating how intersectional dynamics operate in family power negotiations, and by highlighting the contingent nature of women's empowerment in contemporary China. The findings raise tentative propositions for future inquiry, including how the interaction of structural occupational characteristics and representational familial emotions shapes gendered power dynamics in urban Chinese households, and how intergenerational relationship norms mediate the translation of women's structural advantages into actual family power practices. Future multi-case comparative and mixed-methods research is needed to explore the variability of such negotiated family power across different occupational, regional and familial contexts in China.

7. Limitations

This study is based on a single autoethnographic case (N=1) and therefore does not aim to produce empirically generalizable conclusions about "highly educated urban professional women" as a broader population. Instead, the analysis is intended as an in-depth, context-specific account that supports analytic or theoretical generalization by illustrating how intersecting identities (e.g., education, occupation, urban background, gender, marriage and intergenerational emotion) may be negotiated in women's decision-making within a particular socio-cultural setting. The findings are limited to the specific context of this urban middle-class household in Liuzhou, and do not capture the experiences of women from different regional, class, or occupational backgrounds. Important intersections such as regional cultural variations and class differences are not fully explored in this single-case design. The findings rely primarily on the first author's retrospective narratives, which may be subject to recall bias

and interpretive bias. Besides, race was not a factor because the couple were both Chinese. Consequently, intersectional analysis in this study revolves around education, profession, and family roles, which are most salient to the participants' lived experiences.

To mitigate this, the study incorporated reflexive practice throughout the analysis and used member checking (including verification by the spouse) to improve accuracy in describing family dynamics. Additionally, the first author's dual role as researcher and subject introduces potential interpretive bias, despite efforts to mitigate this through systematic reflexivity and independent coding by the second author. The member checking process with the spouse may also carry emotional bias, potentially leading to softened descriptions of negative aspects of family interactions. Future research could strengthen and extend these insights through multi-case comparative designs, interviews with multiple family members across households, and/or mixed-method approaches that explore how patterns observed here vary across regions, occupations, life stages, and emotional relationship.

Statements and Declarations

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Potential Competing Interests

No potential competing interests to declare.

Ethics

This study is an autoethnographic case study. This research was reviewed and granted an ethics waiver by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Liuzhou University, in accordance with ethical guidelines for non-interventional, autoethnographic research involving only the researcher's own lived experiences. The participant (the first author) provided written informed consent for the analysis. To mitigate identifiability risks and protect confidentiality, all geographically specific identifiers, family members' full names, and non-essential occupational details have been anonymized or omitted; no information that could lead to the identification of the research subject or her family is included in the manuscript. Descriptions of family members were included with their knowledge and verbal consent, and member checking was performed to ensure accuracy.

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study beyond the personal narrative presented.

Reporting Guidelines

This study adheres to the principles of qualitative research reporting.

Author Contributions

S.C. provided the autoethnographic data, data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. S.T. conceived the study, assisted with the theoretical framework, verifying the analysis, and review of the manuscript.

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