Case Report

Women Power in Family Matters from Perspective of Intersectionality Theory

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The gender imbalance in family 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 autobiographical case study to investigate the power practice of highly educated urban professional women. 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 case study illustrates how the interaction between education, occupation, urban background, and gender can shape family power dynamics for a highly educated urban professional woman in contemporary China. Their power practices are neither traditional one-way gender domination nor confrontational empowerment by marginalized groups, but rather characterized by equal negotiation, flexible adaptation, and autonomous leadership. This emerging form of female empowerment, rooted in daily negotiation and strategic compromise, provides a new dimension for understanding the evolution of gender relations 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, “family power” refers to the framework proposed by Yoder and Kahn[1], which denotes women’s capabilities and 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 power exhibits new characteristics of the era. 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. These theoretical contributions shifted family studies from gender neutrality to gender sensitivity, though early research was predominantly based on Western contexts with limited attention to diversity in developing countries[6].

In empirical research, scholars have revealed the complex factors influencing women's household power through quantitative and qualitative methods. Resource theory emphasizes the crucial role of economic contributions: for example, Kabeer[3] found that Bangladeshi women gain household bargaining power through wage income, yet remain constrained by patriarchal norms. Dutta[7] pointed out that the employment of middle-class women in Kolkata did not fundamentally alter husbands' decision-making dominance in major affairs. The perspective of relative resources is equally important. 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 empowerment. Abrahams[15] demonstrated that women negotiate identity and power through community participation, though racial and class disparities remain pronounced. Odwe et al.[16] 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. Methodologically, while the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches is advocated[6], in-depth case studies on urban professional women remain scarce.

Current research exhibits notable gaps. Firstly, most empirical studies focus on rural or low-income women, overlooking the unique status of educated urban working women in family power dynamics. These women may both challenge patriarchal structures through economic independence and face new challenges due to work-family conflicts[4] or traditional role expectations[17]. Secondly, interdisciplinary analysis remains insufficient: systematic exploration of how factors like education, occupation, and geographic location interact to influence women's family power is lacking[8]. 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 case study methodology to examine power dynamics among urban working women in family affairs through a feminist intersectional lens. The 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 lens for understanding the interdependence of multiple identities, illuminating the dynamics of power structures through the intricate interweaving of race, gender, and class[18]. Single-identity analyses cannot adequate explain women's experiences, as individuals embody overlapping social identities (e.g., ethnicity, socio-economic class).

Individual identities are not composed of a single dimension, but rather are formed by multiple social factors such as gender, race, class, age, and sexual orientation, which interweave with each other in specific social relationships, creating complex structures of oppression and privilege[18]. Intersectionality Theory can explain the multiple inequalities faced by marginalized groups, such as invisible privileges of dominant identities[19].

Crenshaw's[20] Intersectionality Theory emerged from insights obtained from the double marginalization of black women. In the United States in the 1980s, the anti-discrimination legal system was trapped in a "either-or" dilemma. In employment discrimination cases, black women could neither obtain protection through the racial discrimination clause nor be fully covered by the framework of gender equality. This legal blind spot made Crenshaw[20] realize that a single-dimensional analysis of oppression simply could not capture the unique experiences of black women. Their predicaments were not a simple combination of racial and gender oppression, but rather a product of the entanglement of the two in the power structure[21].

The core of Intersectionality is to reject the notion of treating social identities as isolated variables. Crenshaw[20] pointed out that identity categories such as race, gender, and class are "interdependent" in nature. For instance, the workplace discrimination faced by black women is always embedded within the racialized gender bias. They are labeled as "unprofessional" both due to their gender and race, and are restricted to low-paying positions. The cumulative effect of these related oppressions cannot be explained by analyzing race or gender alone[22]. White middle-class women may face career advancement barriers, the poor black women may lose even basic employment opportunities due to the intersection of "race + gender + class"[23]. Bright et al.'s[24] causal analysis further proved that this difference is not an accidental individual difference, but a necessary product of the power structure at specific intersection points of identities. In intersectional research, only 73.1% of the studies clearly

defined the core concepts, while 17.5% of the studies mistakenly included categories unrelated to social power in the analysis, exposing a misunderstanding of the "interdependence" concept[21].

In Crenshaw's[19] framework, intersectionality encompasses structural, political, and representational dimensions—structural and political dimensions relate to institutional oppression and identity politics, respectively, while representational intersectionality critiques cultural symbol violence[22] (e.g., media portrayals of black women reinforcing race-gender prejudice;).

Intersectionality Theory is adaptable to be used for studying various social situations. Bauer et al. [21] views Crenshaw's[20] Intersectionality Theory as an "analytical sensibility" as it does not provide a fixed theoretical framework but rather requires researchers to constantly ask: Which identities are intertwined in a specific context? How does power generate unique oppression through this interweaving? Whose experiences are obscured by the mainstream narrative? Only by maintaining this critical stance can one avoid the theory becoming a formalized label game and truly achieve Crenshaw's[20] original vision, that is, allowing the voices of marginalized groups to emerge from the intersectional blind spots. Crenshaw[20] sharply criticized the "dominant effect worship" in quantitative research because calculating only the independent effects of race and gender would mask the "excessive oppression" faced by black women. She advocated for the use of methods that can capture interaction effects, such as regression models with interaction terms, or cross-category analysis[21].

However, intersectionality faces the risk of being diluted in its dissemination. Davis[23] pointed out that when this concept becomes an academic "buzzword", some studies simplify it to an "identity list", merely listing categories such as race, gender, and class, while neglecting inquiries into the power structure.

Intersectionality Theory has also been extended to analyze cross-pressures such as class, sexual orientation, and immigrant identity[18]. In linguistic research, this theory enables researchers to pay attention to the "cross-encoding" of female metaphors in media. For example, the metaphorical representation of black women may simultaneously incorporate racialized "animalization" (dehumanize as animals) and genderized "objectification" (reduce to objects). This dual encoding can only be fully decoded through intersectionality[22].

This study employs an intersectional theoretical framework that captures the experiential narratives of working women in scenarios such as family decision-making, childcare division of labor, and kinship relations. It focuses on analyzing how their identity intersections influence the acquisition, exercise, and resistance of power. For instance, intersectional research must address contextual specificity: the practice

of family power among urban working women may exhibit significant variations due to regional culture, generational differences, or immigrant backgrounds.

3. Method of Study

This study employs the 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 family power structure. 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[25]. 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 the family power negotiation mechanisms of specific groups (i.e., highly educated professional women) through "analytic generalization".

The research data primarily derive from the subject's autobiographical narratives, systematically documenting pivotal life milestones spanning marital decisions, reproductive planning, and career development. 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[26]. Thematic analysis was employed to identify core practice domains related to family power dynamics.

Of particular significance is the study's emphasis on critical reflexivity. 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. To ensure objectivity, the study employed peer review and member verification (including having the husband verify descriptions of family power dynamics), thereby safeguarding the research outcomes. The second researcher also provided an objective perspective by questioning the narratives of the first researcher to tease apart the impact of gender, race and class on day-to-day decisions in the family.

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.

4.1. Marital Residence Choice

The marital residence decisions of the research subject and her spouse is a reflection of women 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. Liuzhou and Nanning are 241 kilometres apart, a driving distance of 3 hours. A train journey is about 1.5 hours. 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. He secured a position as a doctor at a local hospital in Liuzhou.

The research subject's marital residence model can be characterized as "women initiating the decision while men actively adapt". In the decision-making process, the subject's career stability and academic potential were key attractions. Her professional identity as university lecturer is an asset because her monthly salary is above average. She is also well-respected in the community. Furthermore, the human capital represented by her master's degree challenged the traditional gender norm of women being less educated than men. 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.

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. The process involved an intersection of "gender + class" as the research subject is of middle class.

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 many countries/marches, the decision-making power in children's marriages remains with parents, especially fathers and male elders, and girls often have little or no say[27]. The parents of both families respected their children to be decision-makers in choosing the location of their marital home. In terms of education, their children were more highly educated than their parents. 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. This is a move away from the traditional power dynamics where parents have greater say than the children on the marital home location.

4.2. Bride Price and Dowry Negotiation

It is interesting that in the negotiation of dowry and bride price, 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. Different regional arrangements include northern rural areas prioritizing substantial cash bride prices paired with

furniture, and southern cities favoring symbolic amounts or joint assets like real estate down payments, while common family conflicts involve dowry amount disputes (exorbitant demands exceeding financial capacity leading to broken engagements) and bridal property ownership disputes (groom's family claiming dowry as joint property versus bride's family asserting it as her personal asset).

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 dowry 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. Both parties regard it as a "cultural symbol of marriage rituals". The fact that both the research subject and her spouse are Master's degree holders, and this freed them from the traditional dowry customs. 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". 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. If the couple didn't have professional jobs, it might not have been as easy because they and their parents would have been under the social pressure of the community to comply with traditional dowry practices.

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[28]. 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. 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, and the first child is already 10 years old. The availability of intergenerational support is partly due to the respect and support from the older generation, which stems from the subject's high education and professional status.

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.

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 abroad. 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. 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.

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. 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. This gives her the privilege of pursuing her career goals to the extent of going abroad for a doctoral degree. In the traditional context, there would be a gender problem because women are not expected to pursue high education. In families who still follow traditional practices, particularly in rural areas, the research subject might have to leave her job to take care of her child. However, her parents-in-law recognized the importance of her job, and pitched in to help out in the household and childcare duties. If the research subject were holding a lower-level job that is not seen as “a professional job”, her parents-in-law might not be as accommodating. 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. China’s one-child policy was implemented nationwide around 1979–1980 to control population growth and promote economic development[29]. Starting in the mid-1980s, the policy began to be relaxed: rural households, especially those with a first child who was a girl, were often allowed to legally have a second child, while ethnic minorities and some provinces had more lenient quotas, forming two sets of birth regulations— “strict in cities, relatively relaxed in rural areas”[30]. For those who exceeded the birth limit, the government imposed economic and administrative penalties such as social maintenance fees (high fines), wage deductions, demotions, or even job loss[17]. In the early days,

extreme measures like forced contraception and abortion were also used[17]. In 2013, the “one-parent two-child” policy was allowed, and since 2016, the universal two-child policy has marked the official end of the one-child era[31]. Today, facing low birth rates and an aging population, China has shifted to supporting policies for two and three children, including extended maternity leave, cash or tax subsidies in some regions, and support for childcare and education, to reduce family upbringing costs and encourage multiple births.[32].

The research subject’s educational background in urban, along with professional identity, gave her power in decision-making. 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.[33].

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 such as “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], framing their expectation around the children’s companionship and shared care responsibilities to avoid imposing 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. 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.

5. Discussion

This study yields four key findings. First, the "female-dominated, male-adapted" decision-making model in this study reveals the unique foundation of power dynamics in urban professional women's families with higher education. Kabeer[34], based on research on Bangladeshi women, pointed out that wage income serves as the core resource for women to gain bargaining power in family decisions. Low-income women enhance their influence through paid labor participation, yet remain constrained by implicit patriarchal norms. In contrast, the research subject in this study did not obtain power through direct wage advantages. Her core capital lies in the career stability and development potential brought by higher education. The professional identity of university lecturer, characterized by geographical permanence and long-term growth potential, grants her an implicit advantage in geographic selection, a stark contrast to Kabeer's[34] findings, highlighting the unique value of educational capital in middle-class women's power practices. The essence of this difference lies in the identity intersection between the study subject and Kabeer's[34] research sample: Bangladeshi women's power practices are embedded in a cross-frame of "low income + low education + rural background," while the subject in this study occupies a cross-position of "high education + high profession + urban background." These distinct identity combinations lead to fundamentally different power foundations.

Dutta[7] found in his study of middle-class women in Kolkata that although women participate in paid employment, they remain subordinate in major family decisions, with husbands holding the final say in core matters such as housing and careers. The marital residence decision-making in this study, however, shows an opposite trend, where the subject's career choices directly determine the family's geographic positioning, and spouse actively aligns with their career development needs. This difference stems from the cross-influence of occupational characteristics. In Dutta's[7] study, middle-class women mostly engaged in auxiliary occupations with strong substitutability, whereas the subject in this study held highly irreplaceable academic positions. The continuity of academic careers requires geographical stability, and this combination of occupational traits and educational backgrounds grants them dominance in decision-making. Additionally, 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 family power and prevents one gender from dominating knowledge and cognition.

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 family power structure. The marital residence decision-making in this study further confirms the promoting effect of urban environment on gender equality. 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 contrasts with the decision-making logic of "family interests first" in rural families. However, the innovation of this study lies in revealing 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 enriches Xu's[10] research on urban-rural power disparities and provides a new perspective for the refined analysis of urban family power.

Secondly, the egalitarian negotiation model of dowry and bride price demonstrates 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. In contrast, the marriage practices examined in this study completely transcend this objectification logic. Dowry and bride price are positioned as cultural symbols of marriage rituals rather than tools of power control. 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 stands in stark contrast to Altay.'s[2] findings, highlighting how the intersection of "education + occupation + urbanization" deconstructs traditional marriage customs. This disparity 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 can reconstruct power dynamics in marriage customs through identity capital.

Thirdly, the dynamic restructuring of household and childcare responsibilities reflects the 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 the 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. This fundamentally differs from the traditional male-dominated "dominant power" in traditional families, enriching 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. This division of labor pattern contrasts with Shi's[4] research on rural women, who found that 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 were able to break through 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 demonstrates that the construction of gender roles deeply intersects with identity dimensions such as education, occupation, and region.

Kabeer[3] posits that women's family 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 exemplifies the core embodiment of women's family power. This contrasts with Dutta's[7] research on middle-class women in Kolkata, where the group, despite employment participation, often prioritized family responsibilities over career development due to occupational status disadvantages and insufficient educational capital. 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, validating 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 demonstrates the 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. In this 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), which contrasts with the occupational discrimination and resource scarcity faced by African women in Demissie et al.'s[12] study, highlighting the cross-influence of professional identity and geographical environment in reproductive decision-making.

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. 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 reveals the fertility power advantage of highly educated groups within urban areas, providing a more refined stratified perspective for gender research on fertility decisions.

Odwe et al.[16] emphasized that the practice of family 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 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 uniqueness of family power among highly educated urban professional women in China, providing empirical support for the application of Intersectionality Theory in non-Western contexts.

6. Conclusion

A case study on the decision-making of family affairs by a highly educated urban professional woman offers a context-specific illustration of an emerging form of everyday, negotiation-based empowerment within one highly educated urban family in contemporary China. It is rooted in the intersection of high education, professional identity, and urban residency rights, and achieves empowerment in the dynamics of family power through flexible negotiation rather than confrontational resistance. This study employs an autobiographical case study method, focusing on the power practices of highly educated urban professional women in four core family domains: marital residence choice, dowry negotiation, household and child-rearing division of labor, and fertility decision-making. The core findings of the study confirm that the family power of highly educated urban professional women is not the result of a single gender factor but a comprehensive product of the cross-interaction of educational identity, professional identity, and urban identity. The case study provides preliminary findings on a new form of women's empowerment in the context of social transformation in China in terms of gender equality in family relationships. At the same time, the study also finds that power practices of an educated, urbanized professional is somewhat free of traditional gender concepts, parental pressure and societal expectations. For policy makers, to address the work-family balance needs of highly educated professional women, flexible working arrangements can be optimized and childcare services improved. For inter-regional marriages and families, efforts should be made to modernize and adapt traditional wedding customs.

7. Limitations

This study is based on a single autoethnographic case (N=1) and therefore does not aim to produce statistically 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, and gender) may be negotiated in family decision-making within a particular socio-cultural setting. The findings rely primarily on the first author’s retrospective narratives, which may be subject to recall bias and interpretive bias. 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. 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, and life stages.

Besides, the present study is focused on the representational dimension of Crenshaw’s[19] Intersectionality Theory, and did not dwell on the structural and political dimensions because of the family context. where power is most visibly enacted through discourses, everyday interactions, meanings, and identity constructions, rather than through formal institutions or policy processes. 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. By concentrating on the representational dimension, this single-case study offers an in-depth understanding of how power operates symbolically and discursively within a specific social setting. Future studies could adopt multi-case comparative or mixed methods to expand the research scope, comparing family power practices among highly educated urban professional women from different regions and occupations, and further exploring the influence of factors such as regional culture and institutional policies.

Statements and Declarations

Funding

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Potential Competing Interests

No potential competing interests to declare.

Ethics

This study is an autoethnographic case study. The participant (the first author) provided consent for the analysis. 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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