



The Dilemmas and Countermeasures of Career Development for Grassroots Female Civil Servants: A Social Gender Perspective

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Abstract. This study aims to explore the difficulties faced by grassroots female civil servants in their career development from the perspective of gender, and put forward corresponding countermeasures. Taking A County in G City as an example, through in-depth investigation and analysis, the study found that grassroots female civil servants generally face challenges such as weak career development awareness, high work pressure, and difficulty in balancing family and work. The shaping of social gender roles on female civil servants has made the conflict between family responsibilities and work a major problem, while the lack of gender awareness in administrative organizations has also exacerbated their career difficulties. This study adopted various methods such as questionnaire survey, in-depth interview, and literature review to comprehensively understand the current situation of the career development of grassroots female civil servants and the difficulties they face. The main findings include: grassroots female civil servants generally lack effective support and opportunities in their career development, and the social gender role positioning has a significant negative impact on their career development. In addition, the lack of gender awareness and gender division of labor within administrative organizations also limit their promotion opportunities, which leads to the phenomenon of reduced self-awareness among grassroots female civil servants. Based on the above findings, this study proposes several suggestions: first, establish a inclusive childcare system to reduce the family burden of female civil servants and promote the balance between family and work; second, break promotion barriers and establish a fair and transparent promotion mechanism to provide more career development opportunities for female civil servants; third, pay attention to the mental health of female civil servants and improve their psychological quality and coping ability by introducing psychological training and modern information technology means.

Keywords: grassroots female civil servants; career development; social gender construction; case study

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In light of the ongoing societal advancements and the evolving notion of gender parity, the engagement of women across various spheres is on the rise. Nevertheless, female civil servants operating at the local level encounter a multitude of obstacles and complexities in their professional progression. These challenges not only impede the personal and career growth of female civil servants but also hinder the overall efficacy and caliber of civil service. Hence, it is imperative to investigate the career development challenges experienced by grassroots female civil servants and devise efficacious strategies to mitigate them.

In the contemporary societal milieu, female civil servants grapple with conflicting roles and pressures. They are required to fulfill familial obligations as mothers, spouses, and the like, alongside discharging their duties as civil servants in the workplace. The strain arising from these dual responsibilities poses additional hurdles for female civil servants in advancing their careers. Moreover, entrenched gender norms and stereotypes exert an adverse influence on the professional progression of female civil servants. Consequently, exploring the career development dilemmas confronted by grassroots female civil servants assumes considerable significance in fostering gender equality, enriching the composition of grassroots civil service cohorts, and enhancing the efficiency of grassroots governance.

1.2 Research Significance and Purpose

The primary objective of this study is to advance and refine the existing theory on women's career development. Through an extensive examination of the career obstacles encountered by female civil servants at the local level, the research aims to deepen the understanding of how gender-related factors impact career progression and the underlying mechanisms at play. Furthermore, it intends to introduce novel perspectives and insights that can contribute to theoretical advancements in relevant academic domains.

On a practical level, the research outcomes have the potential to provide tailored policy recommendations and pragmatic advice for governmental agencies, businesses, and other institutions. By investigating the root causes and influential elements contributing to the career development challenges faced by female civil servants at the grassroots level, practical solutions and strategies can be formulated to support them in surmounting barriers and fostering mutual growth for both individuals and organizations.

1.3 Research Status at Home and Abroad

Research conducted on the advancement of women's careers within academic spheres, both nationally and internationally, has produced significant findings. In Western countries, scholars have explored the factors and mechanisms influencing women's career progression from various angles, including gender bias, conflicts arising from familial roles, and organizational ethos.^{[1][3][5][6][10]} Moreover, they have suggested viable

remedies and strategies, such as bolstering gender equality education and refining career development policies.^{[2][4]}

In China, there is a burgeoning interest in the professional growth of female public servants. Some researchers have scrutinized the existing conditions and obstacles encountered by female civil servants in their career trajectories at both policy and practical levels. They have also recommended pertinent enhancements and proposals [7][8][11][13][16]. Nevertheless, in contrast to studies on women's career advancement in other sectors, there remains a scarcity of research on the career progression of female civil servants at the grassroots level in China. This domain necessitates further enhancement and elaboration.

In essence, this study endeavors to bridge this research gap by employing a social gender perspective to proffer tailored solutions through a comprehensive examination of the root causes and influencing elements behind the career development hurdles faced by grassroots female civil servants. The overarching objective is to contribute positively towards fostering gender parity within the civil service cadre.

2 Research Design

2.1 Research Methods

Case Study: G City and A County as Specific Examples. This study focuses on A County in G City, conducting an in-depth investigation and analysis of grassroots female civil servants in this area to uncover their challenges and requirements in career development. A County in G City is chosen as the research subject due to its regional representation, as well as its gender distribution and career development within the civil service system, which gives this study broader practical significance.

Data Collection Methods. The study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the career development challenges and requirements faced by grassroots female civil servants through two primary research methods: in-depth interviews and a questionnaire survey. The in-depth interviews will involve 10-15 participants selected from various civil service administrative organs in A county of G City, focusing on aspects such as career experiences, obstacles encountered, needs, and future career aspirations to gather detailed insights.

For the questionnaire survey, a random sampling approach was employed to ensure the breadth and depth of the research, enhancing data representativeness and accuracy. A total of 323 questionnaires were distributed in G City and A county, with 315 valid responses received, yielding a recovery rate of 97.52%. To maximize sample coverage within resource and time constraints, the study included diverse units and departments. Emphasis was placed on common issues relevant to the research topic to facilitate in-depth discussions.

The questionnaire was meticulously designed to cover a wide range of topics including basic information of grassroots female civil servants, their career development status, work-life balance, psychological stress, among others. This comprehensive

approach aims to collect systematic and detailed data to support subsequent analysis and discussions. The study seeks to deepen insights into the career development of female civil servants, identify influencing factors, and provide a scientific basis for policy formulation.

2.2 Research Concepts

The primary objective of this investigation is to conduct an in-depth examination of the professional advancement of female civil servants at the grassroots level in A county. It involves a comprehensive review of existing research both domestically and internationally to establish a clear research context and objective. Subsequently, the study defines fundamental concepts, formulates research inquiries, and outlines the research methodologies and data collection techniques. Throughout the research process, the utilization of gender role theory is introduced to furnish a robust theoretical framework for analyzing the career progression of grassroots female civil servants. By posing pertinent inquiries, dissecting the root causes of issues, and deliberating on specific challenges, the study progressively unveils the myriad factors influencing career development, with a particular focus on key concerns. In addressing these issues, the research integrates real-world scenarios to propose strategies and recommendations aimed at enhancing the professional growth of grassroots female civil servants. These recommendations are designed to alleviate current obstacles, foster career advancement among this demographic, and offer valuable insights for the development and implementation of pertinent policies. Finally, the paper concludes by reviewing and reflecting on the entire research process, summarizing the findings and limitations, and providing valuable insights for future research endeavors. This study adheres to the established standards and rigor of academic research, striving to offer substantial support for a comprehensive comprehension of the career trajectory of grassroots female civil servants in A county, while also furnishing practical references for research and application in related domains.

3 Analysis of the Career Development of Grassroots Female Civil Servants

3.1 Analysis of Causes

Social Dimension. While social inequality is a deliberate creation of human beings, gender inequality possesses a structured nature characterized by the ongoing subjugation of women. The challenge faced by women civil servants in reconciling family responsibilities with work obligations can be attributed to two primary factors. Firstly, societal expectations regarding the roles of women in both work and family spheres; and secondly, the issue of gender equality within familial settings.

Construction of Women's Roles in Society. Historically, society has held distinct career expectations for men and women, with a prevailing belief in the equal drive for

achievement between the genders. However, due to the distinct gendered socialization processes, men and women have developed differing perceptions of family and work, consequently shaping disparate aspirations. Men typically aspire to career success, while women lean towards achieving familial perfection. Both genders internalize gender-specific expectations from various sources such as family, peers, and education, leading women to adjust their goals to align with societal norms.^[15] Essentially, societal constructs of gender roles, disseminated through media, culture, and policies, dictate that women primarily fulfill family duties, inadvertently sidelining their professional roles.

The emergence and progression of the feminist movement have enabled women to break free from the confines of solely assuming domestic roles, with many women attaining success in professional spheres. Nonetheless, societal pressures and expectations for women to prioritize family responsibilities persist. Men are still encouraged to excel in their careers, while women are not only expected to excel professionally but also to shoulder the bulk of household chores. Studies indicate that while fewer junior female civil servants are now pressured to abandon their careers for homemaking, they continue to face gender biases externally and grapple with the stereotype of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers, all while bearing the primary burden of family care.^[14]

Gender Equality within Family Dynamics. Within the framework of societal gender roles, men typically assume the role of primary breadwinners and decision-makers in families, while women are tasked with household chores and childcare responsibilities. Consequently, men's involvement in domestic tasks and child-rearing is often minimal or nonexistent. For grassroots female civil servants, the absence of a supportive partner exacerbates the imbalance between family and work roles, intensifying the conflict they experience. In the professional realm, grassroots female civil servants at the lower echelons often face hindered career progression due to childbirth, compounded by the dual pressures of family and work responsibilities. This predicament frequently leads to a career stagnation, significantly impeding their professional advancement^[12].

The Influence of Administrative Organization on Gender Roles in Career Development. The societal impact on the establishment of female gender roles is evident not only in everyday life but also in the professional realm, affecting the career trajectories of women. For female civil servants at the grassroots level, gender roles play a significant role in all aspects of policy formulation and implementation within administrative organizations, inadvertently impeding their career advancement.

Deficiency in Gender Awareness in Policy Making. The existing policies and regulations related to the management and progression of civil servants exhibit a noticeable lack of gender consciousness.^[9] Firstly, there is an inadequacy in incorporating gender considerations, particularly in addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by female civil servants. Secondly, the policies lack specificity and targeted measures, especially in terms of special promotion opportunities for grassroots female civil servants, thereby hindering their career progression. Thirdly, unclear lines of responsibility result

in challenges in policy implementation, impeding the achievement of policy objectives. Additionally, the absence of viable alternatives when encountering implementation obstacles further complicates the situation. Lastly, the current policies aimed at safeguarding women's political rights and interests exhibit contradictions, with vague and programmatic content that diminishes their supportive role in the career development of grassroots female civil servants.

Impediments Due to Inherent Gender Division of Labor.

a) Gender Bias in Recruitment

During civil service recruitment, a prevalent trend is the labeling of numerous positions as "male-recommended," while fewer positions are designated as suitable for women, often concentrated in general management roles. This practice somewhat restricts the initial entry points for women into the public management system, posing a potential barrier to the career advancement of female civil servants.

b) Promotion Procedures

In the training and evaluation processes, there is a noticeable absence of tailored support and consideration for female civil servants. Despite their significant efforts in their civil service careers, women encounter challenges in accessing similar promotion opportunities as men, facing the dilemma of the "glass ceiling." This scenario limits the career advancement prospects of grassroots female civil servants, confining their professional growth to a certain level.

c) Gender inequality in job distribution

In the allocation of positions among grass-roots civil servants, there remains a noticeable presence of gender inequality. This gender-based distribution of positions has restricted opportunities for female civil servants to access certain fields traditionally dominated by male counterparts. The majority of grass-roots female civil servants are typically assigned transactional roles. Additionally, the absence of a post rotation system hinders the ability of female civil servants to transition into key decision-making roles and engage in project-based tasks that are conducive to career advancement. Consequently, this lack of opportunity leads to a decline in motivation and enthusiasm for work among female civil servants, further complicating their professional development.

d) Training and assessment link

In the training and evaluation programs provided, there is a noticeable absence of tailored support and flexibility specifically designed for female civil servants. This study revealed that 62.2% (196 individuals) of the participants had never engaged in training programs tailored for female civil servants. This deficiency contributes to increased challenges in their professional advancement and hinders their ability to achieve optimal performance. The absence of specialized training and assessment frameworks for female civil servants represents a significant impediment to their career progression.

The aforementioned occurrence not only presents challenges for numerous female civil servants at the grassroots level in adjusting to the swiftly evolving work environment, but also frequently results in self-blame and overlooking the deficiencies within the organization's internal system. Misattributing responsibility in this manner

exacerbates the hindrances to the professional advancement of grassroots female civil servants, thus emerging as a novel impediment to their career progression.

Psychological Level. The psychological well-being of grassroots female civil servants is significantly impacted by societal prejudices, work-family conflicts, and uncertainties regarding career advancement. This often results in detrimental psychological states such as job burnout and cognitive biases.

Job Burnout. Job burnout is commonly observed among these individuals due to their focus on immediate tasks without long-term planning, leading to confusion about career progression and development. This dissatisfaction and confusion not only diminish their work motivation but also reduce work efficiency over time, culminating in work-related stress compounded by familial responsibilities. The struggle to balance work and family alongside career uncertainties contributes to physical and mental exhaustion, ultimately resulting in job burnout.

Psychological Cognitive Bias. Psychological cognitive biases are prevalent among grassroots female civil servants due to societal gender role stereotypes and the increasing conflict between work and family obligations. These biases manifest as feelings of inferiority, dependence, and self-doubt, undermining their competitiveness and self-worth. The internalization of societal expectations leads them to attribute work challenges solely to personal shortcomings, further eroding their confidence and enthusiasm for work. This negative self-perception impedes their career progression by diminishing their initiative and hindering their professional development.

3.2 Discussion of Specific Ethical Challenges

Striking a Balance Between Family and Work Obligations. The issue of balancing family responsibilities with professional commitments emerges as a significant dilemma in the career progression of female civil servants at the grassroots level. Numerous participants in interviews and surveys have articulated their personal experiences regarding this ethical quandary. One interviewee succinctly highlighted this challenge by stating that female civil servants are not constrained by their capabilities but rather by their limited energy resources (Interview Record 2). Juggling demanding work schedules with familial duties, grassroots female civil servants frequently encounter difficulties in managing their time and energy effectively. They are tasked with attending to household matters and their children's education while simultaneously handling a myriad of work-related responsibilities. Rooted in traditional cultural norms, women are often designated as the primary caregivers within the family unit, assuming the responsibility for nurturing and raising children. This familial role further complicates the ability of grassroots female civil servants to harmonize their family and professional commitments while striving for career advancement. For instance, Ms. C's children opted to pursue education in the provincial capital to access superior academic resources, necessitating Ms. C to dedicate numerous hours each week commuting

between the county and the provincial capital. She remarked, "I find myself needing to work overtime during weekdays to fulfill both my daily work obligations and additional tasks assigned by my superiors. However, the pursuit of career progression may entail missing out on numerous opportunities" (Interview transcript 3).

Challenges Encountered at the Administrative Organizational Level.

Issue of Promotion.

Table 1. Promotion of grassroots female civil servants

Items	Frequency	Percentage	Effective percentage	Cumulative percentage
Number of promotions	There is no	150	47.6	47.6
	1 time	99	31.4	79
	2 times	44	14	93
	3 or more times	22	7	100
Number of job promotions				
	0 times	1 times	2 times	More than 3 times
Years of service	2 years or less	78.9%	21.1%	0.0%
	3-5 years	75.5%	20.8%	3.8%
	6-10 years	45.5%	36.4%	18.2%
	10-20 years	34.7%	37.5%	19.4%
	21 years and older	22.5%	37.1%	22.5%

In the context of administrative organizational challenges, the issue of promotions among grassroots female civil servants was examined. The data presented in Table 1 illustrates the promotion status of these individuals based on the frequency of promotions and years of service. The survey findings reveal that 47.6% (150 individuals) of grassroots female civil servants have not received any promotions, while only 7% (22 individuals) have been promoted more than three times. Notably, none of the female civil servants with less than 10 years of service have achieved more than three promotions. Conversely, 22.5% (20 individuals) of grassroots female civil servants with over 21 years of service have not been promoted.

During the questionnaire distribution and interview process, respondents highlighted a prevailing belief that women lack inherent advantages in civil service roles. This perspective underscores the pervasive skepticism and bias prevalent in society, including among women themselves, towards female leadership. Consequently, female civil servants often encounter heightened pressure and obstacles in the promotion trajectory. An interviewee, Ms. G, noted that rapid promotions for women may trigger unwarranted scrutiny and doubts regarding their qualifications. Despite possessing exceptional abilities, some individuals may question the legitimacy of their promotions, attributing it to factors other than merit. This skepticism reflects ingrained societal attitudes that impede the advancement of female civil servants.

'Greedy Work'.

Table 2. Work pressure and sources of grassroots female civil servants

Projects	Fre- quency	Percentage	Effective percentage	Cumulative percentage	
Whether you feel stressed about your cur- rent job duties	I couldn't agree more.	35	11.1	11.1	11.1
	agree	97	30.8	30.8	41.9
	General	138	43.8	43.8	85.7
	Disagree	35	11.1	11.1	96.8
	Strongly disagree	10	3.2	3.2	100
Sources of stress at Work	Heavy workload and heavy content	175	55.6	55.6	55.6
	High self-demand	57	18.1	18.1	73.7
	Coworker Rela- tionships	12	3.8	3.8	77.5
	Leadership expec- tations	30	9.5	9.5	87
	Spousal influence	3	1	1	87.9
	Parenting (if any) issues	26	8.3	8.3	96.2
	Gender factor	1	0.3	0.3	96.5
	Other	11	3.5	3.5	100

Table 2 illustrates the work pressure and sources of stress experienced by grassroots female civil servants. The data reveals that 41.9% (132 individuals) of these civil servants perceive high work pressure, with 55.6% (175 individuals) attributing this pressure to heavy workload and content. The survey indicates that the work of grassroots female civil servants is marked by demanding tasks, monotonous content, and irregular work schedules. This situation exacerbates the conflict between their professional and familial responsibilities, impacting the psychological well-being of these individuals.

Challenges Encountered at the Individual Level.

Lack of Self-Awareness. One common obstacle faced by women in professional settings is low self-awareness. When women opt out of significant promotion opportunities or decide to prioritize family responsibilities, they often attribute these choices to personal factors such as "personality reasons" or "female perfectionism" [13]. These individuals tend to internalize conflicts and hold themselves accountable for their decisions.

For instance, during an interview, Ms. D expressed her belief that her hesitance to pursue rapid promotion stemmed from her personality traits: "I think when young people are leaders nowadays, you may not be able to hold down the people below you. My personality makes it difficult to work at the grassroots level" (Interview Record 4). In discussing gender differences, another interviewee, E, highlighted how women may exhibit more cautious decision-making processes due to a tendency towards perfectionism: "If a man is right, I may do it first, while if a woman is thinking that I need to repeatedly demonstrate whether it is correct and can have a good effect, it may be that

I think more carefully in this aspect and have a little perfectionism" (Interview Record 5). Despite demonstrating motivation and aspirations for advancement, female civil servants at the grassroots level often shoulder the blame for not being promoted, leading to a decline in self-identification that undermines their confidence and career progression motivation.

Concerning Psychological Well-Being. The mental well-being of female civil servants at the grassroots level is a cause for concern due to the detrimental effects of demanding work responsibilities. According to interviews conducted, there is a noted intolerance among women towards work-related stress. The daily routine tasks often lead to feelings of anxiety, internal conflict, and other negative emotions. Despite the common advice to transform stress into motivation, many find this process challenging. The pressure faced by grassroots female civil servants extends beyond the workload itself, encompassing emotional, physiological, and other stressors. Additionally, heavy workloads and monotonous tasks were highlighted as significant sources of stress by interviewees. These factors contribute to a sense of stagnation and uncertainty about future prospects among grassroots female civil servants. Consequently, many exhibit a pessimistic outlook towards career planning, prioritizing adherence to organizational directives over personal aspirations. Thus, while some may have career plans in place, they perceive them as inconsequential in influencing future career progression.

4 Countermeasures and Suggestions to Break through the Dilemma of Grassroots Female Civil Servants' Career Development

4.1 Suggest the Implementation of an Inclusive Child-Care Service System to Alleviate the Familial Responsibilities of Women

To promote gender equality and alleviate the burden on women in balancing family and work responsibilities, it is imperative to establish an inclusive childcare service system that liberates women from traditional family roles. This can be achieved by leveraging community resources, such as community centers, health stations, and schools, to provide a diverse range of childcare services for grassroots female civil servants. Additionally, there is a need to address the unequal distribution of family labor by encouraging male partners to share household and childcare duties. By challenging the notion that women are solely responsible for domestic work, particularly childcare, and promoting a more equitable division of labor within families, the challenges faced by grassroots female civil servants and women in general can be addressed. Furthermore, policymakers should reconsider the relationship between productive and reproductive labor and develop new cost-sharing mechanisms to support childcare and family care within the evolving economic and social landscape.

4.2 Advocate for the Exploration of Various Avenues for the Advancement of Grassroots Female Civil Servants within the Organizational Hierarchy

The development of diverse promotional channels for female civil servants at the grassroots level is crucial for achieving gender equality in key positions and project-based work. Firstly, establishing an open and transparent promotion mechanism is essential to minimize gender discrimination during the promotion process, particularly addressing any unseen biases from leadership during recruitment. Secondly, implementing a post rotation system can offer grassroots female civil servants the chance to work in various departments and roles, including opportunities to gain experience in core positions. It is important to ensure that women are not disadvantaged in accessing core and project-based work due to maternity reasons. Thirdly, providing professional training and development opportunities is vital to enhance the skills and competencies of female civil servants at the grassroots level. This includes offering training on specific challenges faced by female civil servants, such as managing work-life balance and returning to work after childbirth.

4.3 Emphasize the Importance of Safeguarding the Mental Well-Being of Grassroots Female Civil Servants through a Range of Support Mechanisms

From the internal perspective of administrative organizations, it is recommended to enhance the evaluation system for local governments and civil servants at the grassroots level, streamline the assessment procedures for grassroots civil servants, implement differential salary structures favoring grassroots positions, enhance motivational and feedback mechanisms for female civil servants at the grassroots level, and increase recognition and rewards for long-serving civil servants with exceptional performance. The objective is to alleviate stress and job burnout among female civil servants at the grassroots level resulting from demanding workloads and a lack of incentives. Additionally, psychological training programs commonly utilized in large corporations should be introduced early in the career development of female civil servants and continued through vocational training.

Regarding third-party support channels, the emphasis should be on integrating pertinent psychological courses into work and personal life contexts, vocational training, and other relevant areas, while also providing access to psychological counseling resources. Specifically, efforts should be made to prioritize mental health counseling for female civil servants at the grassroots level in offline work settings, conducting group counseling activities to address mental well-being. Furthermore, given the scarcity of psychological counseling resources within grassroots government operations, leveraging online platforms is crucial. For instance, utilizing mobile internet advancements and government information systems to develop mobile applications for meditation training or incorporating mental concentration training modules into existing government learning applications. Leveraging modern information technologies to establish mental health consultation hotlines and create cultural spaces and online platforms for mental health support is also recommended.

5 Conclusion and Prospect

This research delves into the professional advancement of women working as civil servants in A County of G City, shedding light on the obstacles and challenges they encounter in their career trajectories through comprehensive interviews and data analysis. By conducting a thorough examination of the underlying causes, it was discerned that gender role expectations, the struggle to balance family responsibilities with work commitments, and the absence of a culture of gender equality within the organizational framework are the primary factors impeding the career progression of female civil servants. The fundamental finding of this study underscores that in their pursuit of career growth, female civil servants must not only surmount external constraints but also navigate the tensions between their familial and professional roles. Consequently, fostering the career development of female civil servants necessitates collaborative efforts from society, institutions, and individuals to cultivate a more equitable and inclusive professional milieu. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its enrichment of the discourse on gender equality and career advancement, offering novel insights and methodologies for future investigations. On a practical level, this research serves as a guide for policymakers in formulating decisions that can advance gender equality policies and bolster the professional progress of female civil servants.

Nonetheless, there exist certain limitations in this study. For instance, the representativeness of the study sample may be constrained by geographical location and industry, suggesting that future research endeavors could broaden the sample scope to enhance the study's generalizability and relevance. Furthermore, this study predominantly concentrates on the career development of female civil servants, prompting future investigations to delve into the professional growth of male civil servants and explore the disparities between the two groups. Moving forward, it is anticipated that more studies will center on the career advancement of female civil servants, engaging in comprehensive discussions from diverse perspectives and levels. Simultaneously, it is hoped that all sectors of society will prioritize gender equality, foster the dissemination of a culture of gender parity, and establish a more equitable and inclusive professional environment for female civil servants.

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