

Research on the Glass Ceiling Effect in China: Decomposition of Causes and Management Countermeasures

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Received: 28 May 2025/ Accepted: 18 June 2025/ Published online: 24 June 2025

Abstract

As China's economy and labor market evolve, the "glass ceiling" phenomenon in women's employment and promotion has drawn substantial attention, rooted in persistent patriarchal norms and structural inequalities. This study employs a quantitative approach, using a questionnaire survey of 316 respondents to analyze the existence, causes, and challenges of the glass ceiling faced by Chinese women in professional roles. This study constructs a five-dimensional model of influencing factors for the glass ceiling effect, including workplace gender discrimination, organizational culture, and support systems, policy, cultural Environment, promotion cognition bias, and work-family conflict. Women aged 35 and above, navigating concurrent career and family demands, exhibit both acute barriers and proactive coping mechanisms, such as skill enhancement and networking. The study concludes with recommendations for organizations to implement transparent promotion frameworks, flexible work policies, and gender-inclusive training alongside policy interventions aimed at reshaping cultural norms and strengthening family support systems. This research contributes to understanding gender equality challenges in emerging economies and proposes context-specific strategies to dismantle career barriers for women.

Keywords: Glass Ceiling; Gender Inequality; Chinese Women's Employment; Career Barriers

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, female employees have made some achievements in various fields, but there is still a minority of women occupying management-level positions in organizations. This issue is referred to as the "glass ceiling", which means there is an invisible and untouchable barrier between women employees and high levels of success. The term "glass ceiling" has been formally defined by the US Department of Labor as artificial barriers that are based on organizational bias or attitudinal prejudice and that prevent qualified individuals from climbing their career ladder to

attain management-level positions within their organizations (US Department of Labor, 1991). In essence, female employees tend to be treated fairly when they are corporate staff. However, if they are promoted to senior management, they will not be treated as fairly as male employees. This phenomenon does not only exist in certain countries, it has become a significant issue in a global context.

There are a range of negative impacts of the “glass ceiling” on female employees, including lower wages, underestimated ability and skills, and being assigned less qualified work. The effects of this phenomenon lead to women employees experiencing difficulties when climbing their career ladders in various societies worldwide. China is no exception to this situation, as women there are also experiencing and struggling against the “glass ceiling”. In China, the “glass ceiling” remains a significant issue of continuing ongoing concern. The reasons that Chinese women are coming up against the “glass ceiling” and struggling to attain management-level positions are multiple and are influenced by Chinese traditional culture and social values to a large extent. Female employees are compared to their male colleagues. Female employees’ abilities are undervalued, and they are given fewer promotion opportunities. It is also noticeable that women and men do not have equal opportunities when competing for career development in China. However, with the development of China’s economy and society, the female labour force is required by the market and gender discrimination therefore needs to be decreased in China.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the fundamental causes of the “glass ceiling” in China and to provide management countermeasures. First of all, this study reviews the existing studies and key findings at home and abroad. Secondly, this study discovers a five-dimensional model of influencing factors for the glass ceiling effect. This study employs a quantitative approach and have collected 316 questionnaires, and then presents and interprets the data analysis. This research extends the scholarly exploration of the glass ceiling phenomenon within the Chinese context, thereby furnishing both theoretical frameworks and practical guidelines for subsequent investigations in this domain.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of the “Glass Ceiling”

In the 1980s, Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986) first introduced the concept of the “glass ceiling” to describe the seemingly transparent yet formidable barriers that female employees face when attempting to advance in the corporate ladder. The US Department of Labor further defined it as artificial barriers rooted in organizational bias or attitudinal prejudice, which impede qualified individuals from ascending the career ladder to reach management positions. In contemporary society, the “glass ceiling” has become a prevalent metaphor for gender inequality in the workplace. It implies that women and minorities are often precluded from senior management positions by organizational barriers despite possessing the requisite skills and experience.

In China, the concept of a “glass ceiling” is a matter of great concern. Since 1995, when gender equality was established as a basic national policy, men and women have, in principle, enjoyed equal employment opportunities in most organizations. In some service industries, the number of

female employees even surpasses that of male employees. However, senior management positions are more likely to be predominantly held by men. Despite the Chinese government's enactment of laws such as the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests in 1992 and the Employment Promotion Law in 2007, in practice, women continue to face difficulties in achieving equal treatment. There are notable disparities in areas such as salary and promotion.

2.2. Theoretical Background

The phenomenon of women's challenging career advancement and the existence of the "glass ceiling" can be attributed to multiple factors, which can be broadly categorized into five main aspects: cultural factors, gender inequality and discrimination, individual factors, organizational factors, and work-life balance conflicts.

Gender inequality is a global problem, and China is no exception. Influenced by cultural factors, society holds gender-role stereotypes. Men are often perceived as more competent in the workplace and, thus, more suitable for promotion to senior management positions. This perception is deeply ingrained and contributes to gender-based discrimination. As a result, women are frequently underestimated and face limited opportunities for career advancement. In China, despite legal provisions against gender discrimination, in reality, women still encounter various forms of unfair treatment, such as lower pay for equal work and fewer promotion opportunities.

Individual factors also play a role in women's career progression. Career ambitions can vary significantly between men and women. Some women may prioritize family over career, leading to a reduced drive for senior management positions. Additionally, gender-based self-perceptions, influenced by societal norms, can undermine women's confidence and ambition. For example, women may internalize the belief that they are less capable than men, which can limit their career aspirations.

Organizational factors contribute significantly to the "glass ceiling" phenomenon. Organizational culture can be a major obstacle. In male-dominated organizations, the culture, policies, and work environment may not be conducive to women's career development. Moreover, certain human resources management practices, such as recruitment, training, and performance appraisal, may be biased against women. For example, women may receive fewer opportunities for training and development, which are crucial for career advancement.

Work-life balance is a critical issue for women, as they often face a greater burden in juggling work and family responsibilities. In China, the traditional gender-role division in the family means that women are more likely to be responsible for household chores and childcare. This can lead to conflicts between work and family life, making it difficult for women to commit to their careers and pursue higher-level positions fully..

2.3. Theoretical Framework

2.3.1. Social Role Theory

Social role theory posits that men and women are assigned different roles in society based on their gender (Eagly, 1987). In the context of family and work, these gender-based roles lead to the allocation of different responsibilities. Men are often expected to be more assertive and career-

oriented, while women are associated with nurturing and care-giving roles. In an organizational setting, these gender-role expectations can influence the evaluation of male and female leaders.

In China, traditional culture has deeply influenced the social roles of men and women. Research by Cao and Chai (2014) on time allocation in daily activities shows that Chinese men tend to dominate outdoor activities, while women are more involved in indoor tasks. This gender-role allocation can limit women's career development as they are expected to prioritize family over work. Consequently, women may have less time and energy to invest in their careers, and their abilities may be underestimated in organizations.

2.3.2. Theory of Gender-Based Differences in Leadership Style

Studies have found differences in leadership styles between men and women. Eagly and Johnson (1990) reviewed numerous studies and found that women tend to adopt a more democratic or participative leadership style, while men are more likely to use an autocratic or directive approach. Desvaux et al. (2010) associated these differences in leadership style with corporate performance.

However, these differences can also pose challenges for women in leadership positions. Women are often perceived as less confident than men, and their leadership identity may be undermined by gender bias. Additionally, the leadership styles expected in organizations may not align with the typical feminine leadership style, which emphasizes collaboration and effective communication. In China, female leaders face the challenge of balancing the expectations of communal qualities (such as kindness and concern for others) and agentic qualities (such as confidence and assertiveness) required for leadership positions (Oakley, 2000).

2.4. Breaking the Glass Ceiling in the Chinese Context

In response to the growing issue of gender inequality and the "glass ceiling" in Chinese society, the Chinese government and various institutions have taken steps to support women's career development. In China, with the transition from a planned economy to a market economy, more women have entered the labor market. The Chinese government has issued a series of laws and policies to ensure gender equality in employment. For example, the China Labour Law in 1994 stipulates equal employment rights for men and women and equal pay for equal work. China is also a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and has committed to implementing measures to end discrimination against women (Zhang & Ma, 2023). However, the enforcement of these gender-equality legislations has been weak. There is still a significant gap between policy intentions and actual practice. Despite legal provisions, women continue to face discrimination in the workplace, and it remains difficult for them to achieve real equality with men (All-China Women's Federation [ACWF], 2023).

2.5. Research Gap

This literature review has explored various concepts and theories related to the "glass ceiling" phenomenon. Women employees encounter numerous challenges on their path to higher positions, stemming from factors such as patriarchal society, cultural traditions, and organizational culture. Chinese female employees, in particular, face difficulties due to long-standing gender stereotypes.

These stereotypes lead to misunderstandings and underestimation of women's abilities in the workplace, resulting in a relatively small number of women in senior management positions.

However, there are still gaps in the existing research. It remains unclear whether the "glass ceiling" is a universal reality in the Chinese context or if it is related to other underlying problems. Moreover, there is a lack of in-depth research on how Chinese women can effectively mitigate or overcome this issue. Given China's rapid development, empowering women and enabling them to secure top-management positions is of great significance. Future research should focus on filling these gaps to better understand and address the "glass ceiling" problem in China.

3. Construction of a Five-Dimensional Causal Model for the "Glass Ceiling"

Based on a systematic review of career development challenges faced by Chinese women, this study constructs a five-dimensional causal model to explain the "glass ceiling" phenomenon, as shown in Figure 1. The model comprises five dimensions: policy and cultural environment, organizational culture and support systems, work-family conflict, promotion cognition bias, and workplace gender discrimination.

3.1. Policy and Cultural Environment

At the macro level, the implementation efficacy of gender equality policies intersects with the latent constraints of traditional gender norms, creating structural tension. While legal frameworks such as the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women provide institutional safeguards for women's career advancement, persistent patriarchal ideals—epitomized by the "men as breadwinners, women as homemakers" ethos—remain deeply embedded in societal structures. This cultural inertia reinforces workplace assumptions that prioritize women's "family roles," thereby undermining the practical enforcement of policies aimed at equitable distribution of professional opportunities (ACWF, 2023; Shen, 2020).

3.2. Organizational Culture and Support Systems

Organizational culture serves as a direct contextual field shaping women's career advancement. In organizations dominated by "masculinized" leadership cultures, promotion criteria often implicitly favor traits such as "absence of family burdens" and "high competitiveness". Concurrently, the absence of gender-inclusive policies—such as flexible work arrangements and childcare support—exacerbates women's resource disadvantage in professional development (Gender and Development Research Center, Peking University, 2022; Catalyst, 2019).

3.3. Work-Family Conflict

Chinese society's expectations of women's "dual roles" (balancing professional responsibilities with caregiving duties) present unique challenges. This structural imbalance triggers a "family drag" during critical career advancement stages (ages 30–45), whereby employed women face disproportionate barriers. Concurrently, employers often implicitly restrict women's development opportunities by citing concerns about their "insufficient energy" (China Family Panel Studies [CFPS], 2021).

3.4. Promotion Cognition Bias

Women’s assessments of promotion potential and self-efficacy are shaped by socially constructed gender narratives. On one hand, stereotypes such as the “lack of female leadership competence” may diminish women’s willingness to pursue senior positions. On the other hand, some women internalize organizational presuppositions about a “career ceiling”, forming self-limiting cognitive traps that lead them to proactively downsize career aspirations (All-China Academy of Social Sciences [CASS], 2020; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

3.5. Workplace Gender Discrimination

Both overt discrimination (e.g., gender exclusion in recruitment, “quota restrictions” in promotions) and implicit biases (e.g., devaluation of women’s decision-making styles and double standards in performance evaluations) collectively create systemic barriers. Particularly in male-dominated sectors such as technology and finance, the “non-feminized” occupational culture systematically excludes women from accessing critical resources and core professional networks (China Association for Science and Technology [CAST], 2023; Li & Smith, 2020).

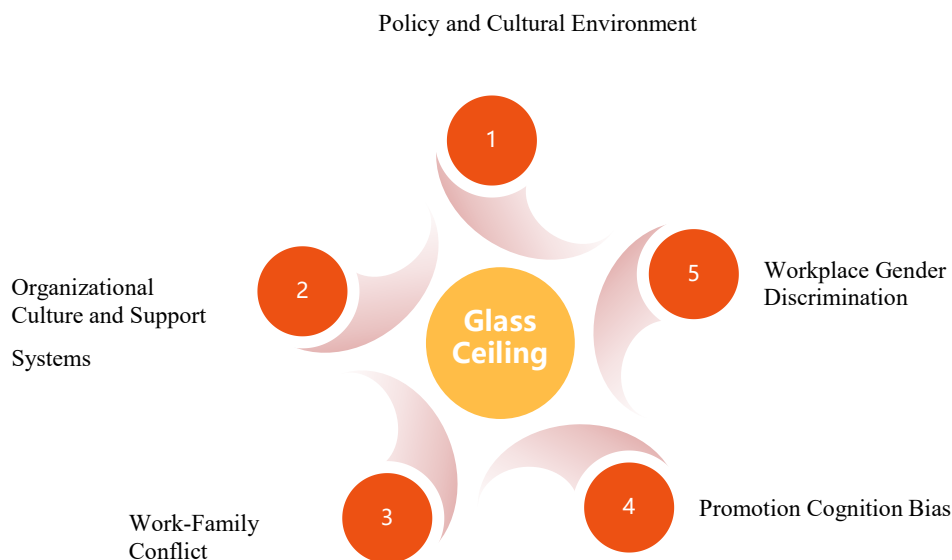


Figure 1. Five-Dimensional Causal Model for the “Glass Ceiling”

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Philosophy and Approach

This study adopts a quantitative research design grounded in a post-positivist paradigm. The research employs deductive reasoning to test hypotheses derived from existing theories of gender inequality and the “glass ceiling”. Numerical data are collected through structured surveys to identify systemic patterns and statistical relationships among variables.

4.2. Methodological Strategy

The research utilizes the quantitative method to measure career barriers faced by women aged 35+ in enterprises. A Likert-scale survey (5-point scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) is administered to collect data. A structured questionnaire was distributed to 316 women aged 35+ employed in enterprises.

4.3. Sampling

A purposive sample of 316 women (aged 35–55: 93.66%; 56+: 6.34%) was selected to focus on mid-to-senior professionals likely to encounter systemic barriers. Industry distribution (private: 81.96%; state-owned: 18.04%) reflects China's dual economic structure.

4.4. Time Horizon and Ethical Considerations

A cross-sectional time horizon is used for the research due to the constraints of the research timeline. This approach allows for the collection of data at a specific point in time, providing a snapshot of the “glass ceiling” situation among the target group. Throughout the research process, ethical considerations are of utmost importance. For the quantitative research, approvals are informed consent is sought from all participants. In the quantitative survey, respondents are provided with clear instructions about the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. All data is collected, analyzed, and reported in accordance with ethical standards to protect the rights and privacy of the participants.

5. Data Overview

This study is based on 316 valid questionnaires (using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), focusing on the glass ceiling phenomenon in the career development of Chinese women aged 35 and above. The questionnaire comprises 30 questions organized into several dimensions.

5.1. The Current Status of the Glass Ceiling in China

5.1.1. Low Confidence in Career Advancement

The results indicate widespread low confidence in advancing to senior management positions, with 97.6% of respondents expressed disagreement (51.2%) or strong disagreement (1.2%) or neutral attitudes (45.2%) towards having confidence in being promoted to senior management within the next five years, and only 2.4% of respondents expressed agreement or strong agreement. This reflects the negative impact of the glass ceiling on career development expectations. This reflects that the lack of confidence in career development expectations among Chinese female professionals is one of the key manifestations of the glass ceiling effect in Chinese workplaces.

5.1.2. Constraints on Career Bottlenecks

Concerning career bottlenecks, 98.7% of respondents disagreed (49.6%) or strongly disagreed (2.6%), and held a neutral attitude (46.8%) that personal efforts alone could break through current

career bottlenecks, with only 1.3% agreeing, indicating that most perceive career bottlenecks as constrained by structural factors rather than individual capabilities.

In summary, the “glass ceiling” phenomenon in the workplace is reflected in two core manifestations: first, the weakening of confidence in career promotion expectations among female professional groups in the workplace; second, the significant existence of structural bottlenecks in career development.

5.2. Analytical Framework

5.2.1. Workplace Gender Discrimination

Concerning structural discrimination, data show that 97.3% of respondents agreed (51.2%) or strongly agreed (2.2%), and held a neutral attitude (43.9%) that men are more likely to obtain high-challenge project opportunities than women, reflecting implicit gender biases in resource allocation. 98.3% of respondents agreed (50.9%) or strongly agreed (0.6%) or held a neutral attitude (46.8%) that there is implicit gender preference in promotion decisions, indicating doubts about promotion fairness. These findings collectively point to the existence of institutional and cultural discrimination in the workplace.

5.2.2. Promotion Cognition Bias

Regarding obstacles in promotion pathways, 96.7% of respondents agreed (44.3%) or strongly agreed (7.2%), and held a neutral attitude (45.2%) that women need to exert more effort than men to achieve the same promotion opportunities, confirming the phenomenon of climbing costs. 98% of respondents agreed (52.2%) or strongly agreed (1.5%), and held a neutral attitude (44.3%) that career development significantly slows down after childbirth, highlighting the conflict between childbearing and career progression. 94.4% of respondents agreed (47.1%) or strongly agreed (5.6%), and held a neutral attitude (41.7%) that the lack of female representation in senior leadership undermines promotion confidence, reflecting the psychological impact of role female model absence. The various practical dilemmas faced by women in career advancement serve as one of the key contributors to the “glass ceiling” phenomenon in the workplace.

5.2.3. Work-Family Conflict

Concerning the impact of family responsibilities on career development, 95.4% of respondents agreed (47.4%) or strongly agreed (2.8%), and held a neutral attitude (45.2%) that family responsibilities (such as caring for children and the elderly) significantly limit career commitment, indicating significant external pressures from traditional gender divisions. 94.6% of respondents agreed (47.4%), and strongly agreed (4.7%) or held a neutral attitude (42.4%) that societal perceptions that women should prioritize housework influence career choices, demonstrating tensions between cultural norms and career development. The conflict between family and career roles emerges as a core obstacle to female career advancement, which is one of the core causes of the “glass ceiling”.

5.2.4. Organizational Culture and Support Systems

Regarding organizational environment support, 97% of respondents disagreed (48.7%) or strongly disagreed (4.7%), and held a neutral attitude (43.9%) that immediate supervisors actively pay attention to female employees' career development needs, indicating low gender sensitivity among management. 96.4% of respondents disagreed (42.4%) or strongly disagreed (3.4%), or, and held a neutral attitude (50.6%) that promotion channels for female employees are transparent and fair, though more than half hold a neutral stance, reflecting ambiguous perceptions of procedural fairness. The lack of organizational support constitutes one of the critical factors exacerbating the "glass ceiling" phenomenon.

5.2.5. Policy and Cultural Environment

Concerning macro policies and cultural atmosphere, 95.7% of respondents disagreed (47.1%) or strongly disagreed (3.4%), or, and held a neutral attitude (45.2%) that national childbearing policies (such as maternity leave and childcare leave) effectively alleviate career pressures, suggesting a gap between policy outcomes and expectations. 95.7% of respondents agreed (48.1%) or strongly agreed (3.7%), and held neutral attitude (43.9%) that stereotypes about female managers (such as lack of decisiveness) hinder promotions, highlighting cultural prejudices as invisible barriers. Cultural inertia and delayed policy implementation collectively perpetuate the gender inequality landscape, serving as a notable contributing factor to the "glass ceiling" phenomenon in China.

6. Policy Recommendations

The "glass ceiling" confronting Chinese women aged 35 and above arises from the interplay of sociocultural biases, organizational mechanism deficiencies, family responsibility pressures, and inadequate policy support. Building upon these empirical findings, this section proposes a tripartite framework spanning organizational, policy, and individual dimensions to establish a multi-stakeholder support ecosystem for women's career progression.

6.1. Organizational Level: Optimizing Institutional Design and Resource Provision

6.1.1. Strengthening Gender Equality Mechanisms Through Institutional Refinement

Enterprises should establish standardized and transparent promotion evaluation systems by incorporating quantitative metrics (e.g., key performance indicators and competency frameworks) to mitigate the influence of subjective biases in promotion decisions. Building on international experience, organizations are advised to set time-bound targets for female representation in senior management (e.g., a minimum of 30%) and publicly disclose progress in corporate social responsibility reports. Additionally, comprehensive institutional frameworks encompassing anti-discrimination policies and regulations for preventing workplace harassment should be developed, complemented by regular gender equality training programs aimed at enhancing inclusive leadership among management.

6.1.2. Innovating Support Models to Alleviate Work-Family Conflict

Flexible work systems, including flexible hours, remote work arrangements, and compressed workweeks, should be promoted to empower women with autonomy in balancing work and family commitments. To mitigate career interruption risks post-childbirth, enterprises can institute childcare subsidies, on-site childcare facilities, or partnerships with external childcare service providers. Return-to-work support mechanisms for post-maternity women, such as vocational skills retraining and job adaptation counseling, should also be implemented to reduce the "motherhood penalty" effect.

6.2. Policy Level: Enhancing Institutional Guarantees and Cultural Guidance

6.2.1. Improving Policy Systems to Strengthen Fertility Support Efficacy

Governments should further optimize fertility policy support measures, extending the duration of maternity and parental leave while reducing enterprises' labor costs through tax incentives and fiscal subsidies. Inspired by the European Union's gender equality certification frameworks, a context-specific certification system for corporate gender equality should be established, offering policy benefits (e.g., reduced social security contributions, priority project approval) to compliant enterprises to foster a virtuous cycle of policy incentives and corporate accountability. Concurrently, public investment in childcare infrastructure, such as community-based childcare centers and affordable kindergartens, should be scaled up to alleviate familial care burdens.

6.2.2. Reshaping Social Cognition and Challenging Gender Stereotypes

Mainstream and social media platforms should be leveraged to launch gender equality campaigns, addressing stereotypes identified in this study (e.g., "female managers lack decisiveness") through public service announcements, documentaries, and narratives of female leadership success. Educational authorities should integrate gender equality curricula into basic education to cultivate egalitarian employment attitudes from adolescence. Academic institutions and industry associations are encouraged to publish annual white papers on women's career development, providing data-driven insights to inform policy-making and public discourse.

6.3. Individual Level: Enhancing Career Capital and Social Solidarity

6.3.1. Building Occupational Competitiveness and Proactively Addressing Development Bottlenecks

Women aged 35 and above are advised to engage in targeted professional skills training and leadership development programs, accumulating diverse experiences through cross-departmental rotations and high-stakes projects. Developing individual career development profiles to regularly assess competency gaps and formulate improvement plans is recommended. Proactive networking, participating in industry forums, professional associations, and mentorship networks, can facilitate access to career-critical information and resources.

6.3.2. Cultivating Support Networks for Collective Learning and Mutual Aid

Regional and industry-specific women's career development communities should be fostered, organizing experience-sharing forums and mentorship programs through hybrid online-offline

channels. These communities can curate qualitative case libraries featuring narratives of women who have navigated the glass ceiling, offering practical insights for members. Within enterprises, employee resource groups (ERGs) for female staff should be institutionalized to provide emotional support and collaborative problem-solving for career-related challenges.

7. Conclusion

This study, through a five-dimensional causal model and empirical data, reveals that the “glass ceiling” phenomenon for Chinese working women stems from the interweaving of workplace gender discrimination, organizational culture and support systems, policy and cultural environment, promotion cognition bias, and work-life conflict. The research highlights that this phenomenon not only hinders women’s career advancement but also reflects structural shortcomings in workplace gender equality. Addressing this requires collaborative efforts among governments, enterprises, and individuals. Governments must strengthen fertility-friendly policy provisions and gender equality institutional safeguards. Enterprises should improve transparent promotion mechanisms and flexible support systems. Women should enhance career capital and leverage community networks to overcome development barriers. Only through multi-stakeholder systemic change can the “glass ceiling” be effectively shattered, driving workplaces toward inclusive equality and achieving symbiotic growth between women’s career values and social progress.

Author Contributions:

Conceptualization, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, visualization, supervision, project administration, and funding acquisition were all conducted by Yidan Sun. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding:

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement:

Not applicable.

Acknowledgments:

The authors thank Dr. May Zhao for constructive comments on the manuscript and the participants for their valuable insights.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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