

# Using Intersectionality to Explore Social Inequalities amongst Dagongmei in China

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*Abstract: Young rural women who migrate to China's large cities for work (Dagongmei) occupy a liminal position in space and time that is conditioned by a particularly gendered form of mobility and relationship to place(s). As migrants, they live away from their homes but are not fully incorporated into urban society, and anticipate eventual return. As unmarried women, they are poised between childhood and adulthood. Their unique position creates vulnerability and gives rise to feelings of ambivalence. This article is a reading of Collins's concept of intersectionality, the relationship between oppression and resistance, and the politics of empowerment.*

*Keywords: Intersectionality, gender, Dagongmei, inequality, urban – rural migrants*

## 1. Introduction

Intersectionality, the mutually constitutive interactions among different social identities (Crenshaw, 1989), permeates contemporary feminist thinking. According to Collins (1990), many feminist scholars now understand that an individual's social location, as reflected in intersecting identities, must be at the forefront of any examination of gender. However, it's commonly argued that gender studies, and the field's focus on intersectionality, are disproportionately located in the global north, whereas there's a dearth of scholarship on indigenous identities, such as caste and hukou (Chinese household registration status) for women in the global south (Parnell & Oldfield, 2014). Consequently, Menon (2015) suggested that feminist scholars should gravitate to the lived experiences of women outside Europe/the USA, whose gender problems are 'complicated with more and more layers' compared to their Western counterparts. Inspired by this account, this essay adopts an intersectional approach to undertake a gender study of a relatively undocumented group in the global south - 'Dagongmei', i.e., young, single female rural-urban migrant workers in post-Mao China (Pei, 2021).

To achieve this, the essay draws on the work of Crenshaw (1991), who recognises three basic dimensions of intersectionality: structural, political and representational. Specifically, structural intersectionality examines how the individual experiences of people at the junctures of multiple marginalised identities are qualitatively different from others; political intersectionality discusses how different identity groups organise themselves between multiple political agendas; and representational intersectionality explores how marginalised identities are intertwined to create oppressive stereotypes through various cultural forms.

The essay firstly introduces the background of *Dagongmei*. Then, the experiences of this group will be examined via the three dimensions of intersectionality, with the merits and limitations of each discussed. It concludes by arguing that for *Dagongmei*, intersectionality provides gender studies with an inclusive, multi-layered and critical framework, despite certain nuances that mean it's most effective when applied in coordination with certain other approaches.

## 2. Dagongmei's Marginalised Identities

There are 286 million rural migrant workers in China, 33.6% of whom are *Dagongmei* (NBS, 2020). The constituent parts of the vernacular term *Dagongmei* are revealing. Specifically, '*Dagong*' translates as rural people who leave home for urban factory work and '*mei*' means young sister (Pun, 1999). Therefore, the term discloses that this group suffers the 'double-burden of oppression' of being rural and of being women (Harris, 2003). Specifically, under the hukou household registration system, rural people are born with 'agricultural' status and it's very difficult to change this to 'non-agricultural' (Wang, 2015).

Such a status restricts rural residents from receiving equal social security as urban citizens, and it bars them from permanent settlement in cities. Consequently, if they move to cities to work, they become part of the ‘floating population’ (Li, 2006), which has limited potential for upward mobility. Moreover, in China, where Confucianism persists as a cultural norm, women have traditionally been expected to ‘obey fathers when young, husbands when married, and adult sons when widowed’ (Shu, 2004). Despite considerable improvements to women’s status in the post-Mao era (Zuo & Bian, 2015), a notable gap endures between the Communist rhetoric of liberation and the persistent Confucian defence of gender inequality, and gender remains a fundamental variable of exclusion. Therefore, through the lens of intersectionality, the interplay of these two marginalised identities leads *Dagongmei* to face ‘multiple and intersecting sites of oppression’, which is greater than the sum of sexism and hukou discrimination (Alinia, 2015). This will be discussed next.

### 3. Structural Intersectionality

By interacting with other social locations, structural intersectionality visualises the complexity that lies at the centre of gender studies at the socio-structural level. For *Dagongmei*, it helps to emphasise the interconnection of sexism and hukou discrimination. As Wang, Cheng and Bian (2018) discussed, compared to male migrant workers and urban-registered women, *Dagongmei* ‘have a qualitatively different way of life’, as they have to experience (1) sexism in the context of hukou, and (2) rural hukou discrimination in the space of gender. These two points will be examined in turn.

Firstly, sexual discrimination becomes more visible when it’s associated with hukou-related attributes. Such hukou-related sexism accompanies *Dagongmei* before, during and after their migration. For example, according to Pei (2021), in contrast to urban China where the one-child policy was widely implemented, multiple births remained common in rural China. This is relevant as with limited economic resources, rural parents tend to allocate educational opportunities, and life chances in general, to their sons (Wang, 2005). Consequently, rural girls generally leave school earlier than boys, and are therefore often labelled as ‘low quality’ (*di suzhi*) labourers (Zhang, 2014.). This prejudice, alongside the long-standing substantial gender pay gap, creates ‘disadvantage of disadvantage’ for *Dagongmei* in the labour market (Song, 2007), and increases the likelihood that they will be employed in low-skill, labour-intensive and monotonous work with lower income (Su, 2016). This assumption corresponds with Wu, Pieters and Heerink’s (2020) analysis, which documents that *Dagongmei*’s earnings are 16–18% lower than their male counterparts, and that this is driven by both ‘observed differences in labour characteristics’, i.e., gendered labour division, and ‘unequal returns to labour characteristics’, i.e., discriminatory treatment of female migrants. Furthermore, compared with male migrant workers, *Dagongmei* are likely to be forced to quit urban factory work and return home at an earlier age by their families. As Massey (1994) noted, rural women’s autonomy is significantly constrained despite their geographical separation from their hometowns. Specifically, *Dagongmei*’s families deploy traditional gender norms, most notably concerning spousal issues, to discipline them during their migration. For example, Fan (2004) noted that *Dagongmei* are often urged into marriage when they reach ‘marriageable age’. Moreover, Shen (2016) examined how the traditional conception of ‘filial daughters’ leads many *Dagongmei* to return to their villages to care for their parents. To conclude, exclusion from their host communities, most notably in the labour market, in conjunction with traditional gender norms imposed by families, pose ‘peculiar’ challenges for *Dagongmei* that differ from those faced by other women (Roger, 2006).

Secondly, not only do *Dagongmei* encounter sexism in the context of hukou, they also encounter hukou discrimination relating to gender, i.e., rural hukou-based attributes situate them in an inferior position compared to urban women. Such inferiority is explicitly revealed in both the labour and marriage markets in urban China. To start with, the most notable indicator of treatment outcomes in the labour market is earnings, and according to Wang and Zhao (2018) women with a rural hukou earn 19.9% less than urban women with the same observed characteristics. Huang (2014) attributes this to differing educational attainment, caused by the unequal distribution of educational resources, as 38.4% of rural women are illiterate/semi-literate, a rate which is 18.1 percentage points higher than urban women. Meanwhile, Cohen (1993) perceives the wage gap arises from the stigma associated with a rural hukou, whereby those with this status are viewed as ‘unenlightened’, ‘helpless’, and ‘desperately in need of education’ by urbanites. Therefore, the objective educational gap and negative subjective judgements jointly create the pay gap. Moreover, although no comparative statistics are available, many scholars suggest that *Dagongmei* are at the bottom of the marriage market (Fang, 2013; Gaetano, 2008; Natalia, 2014). As Wang (2012) discussed, several restrictions surrounding *Dagongmei*’s rural hukou render their match-making in cities particularly tenuous. Lui (2016) attributes the poorer mate selection outcomes

that *Dagongmei* achieve to the unequal socioeconomic resources possessed by rural women relative to urban women. He argues that as a rural hukou provides less benefits (health, housing, children's education), getting married to a *Dagongmei* is like 'marrying a series of problems' (Ibid, 2022). Zhou (2019), on the other hand, drew on Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of cultural capital and habitus, and suggested alternative indicators such as a perceived rustic lifestyle, low quality and low taste to explain *Dagongmei*'s unpopularity as they make it less likely they will be a 'decent' wife. Therefore, as demonstrated by the labour and marriage markets, *Dagongmei* have reduced life chances compared to urban women.

However, while this analysis demonstrates that structural intersectionality is effective in uncovering the complexities of gender studies, we must consider its limitations. For example, although it illuminates *Dagongmei*'s double jeopardy, it's problematic in that it assumes the stability and explanatory ability of monistic doctrines (male and urban hukou in this case) (Cooper, 2016). In other words, structural intersectionality reiterates gender (and hukou) dichotomy and possesses 'critical hegemony' while exploring its permutations (Wiegman, 2012). This sits in contrast to the post-structural framework which proposes a deconstructive strategy to examine gender (Butler, 1990). To resolve this, we can use Butler's deconstructive strategy alongside intersectionality to gain a more holistic understanding regarding the deconstruction of identity while also locating structures of power.

#### 4. Political Intersectionality

Moving away from the structural level, political intersectionality examines gender problems from the institutional perspective and evaluates how the feminist movement and gender policy strategies produce, implement and maintain the privileges of certain women while marginalising others according to their multiple identities (Shields, 2008). Specifically, in this case, gender politics in China privilege urban women, and reproduce *Dagongmei*'s subordination.

Despite Chinese government claims that gender equality is a basic state policy and that it provides extensive insurance for female workers (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 2022), most legislation is only applicable to women with urban residential status, those in stable employment, or those who hold at least a bachelor's degree, none of which typically apply to *Dagongmei* (Zhao, 2017). Indeed, as Chen (2017) highlighted, there's currently no effective legislation to safeguard the employment rights of female migrant workers, apart from one policy (Special Provisions on Labour Protection for Female Workers, 2022), which states that they should receive equal wages for work of equal value as men. However, this policy only applies to female migrant workers who have a formal labour contract, and the fact that 60.6% lack this negates the policy for most *Dagongmei* (Wang, 2020). Furthermore, some scholars adopt an even more critical perspective and argue that many gender-responsive policies 'discriminate', 'exploit', and 'stymie' *Dagongmei* (Honig, 2006). An example arises from Shanghai's Maternity Leave Policy (Municipal Commission of Health and Family Planning, 2022), which stipulates that women with a Shanghai hukou are entitled to 80% of their monthly salary during leave, and that employment cannot be terminated due to pregnancy, maternity or breastfeeding. However, women with a rural hukou do not have these rights (Ibid, 2022). Without legal protection, pregnancy for *Dagongmei* frequently means no wages and even unemployment (Chen, 2017). Consequently, *Dagongmei* are often reduced to just their reproductive potential. We can conclude that such a 'selective' policy shapes a dual labour pattern in contemporary China (Zhang, 2015), where urban women's basic rights are protected through legislation, whereas *Dagongmei*, are left exposed 'under the sway of marginal mechanisms' (Moon, 2003).

However, although political intersectionality convincingly recognises the failure of some gender-inclusive policies to establish coalitions across different groups of women, some scholars critique it for creating 'new methodological problems' (McCall, 2005). Specifically, it skews policies towards more complicated variables and sub-groups and then leaves scholars and policy makers to decide what to do with it/how to use it. Similarly, Garry (2011) emphasised its limitations, stating 'it does not abolish categories, instead they become more complex, messy and fluid.' In the case of *Dagongmei*, sub-groups such as rural women, rural women without contracts, and those without a bachelor's degree, are created, and policy makers are left with these messy categorisations without clear methodological guidance of what to do next.

## 5. Representational Intersectionality

Finally, representational intersectionality provides a way for gender studies to understand how beliefs and stereotypes about certain women are produced and how their 'axes of multiple inequalities' are presented over time through cultural mediations (Cole, 2008). In this case, mass media in contemporary China reinforces sexist and rural hukou-inspired stereotypes of *Dagongmei* by stigmatising them as hyper-sexualised peasants (Gaetano, 2008).

Such media representation is largely formed in the gendered rural-urban migration process. In particular, before migration, rural people as a whole are portrayed as agricultural labourers, who are a 'culturally distinct and alien other...in the grip of ugly and fundamentally useless customs', but without too many gendered and sexualised characteristics (Cohen, 1993). However, when they enter the urban labour market, the 'discursive and institutional orders of state, market and family' refashion rural migrants' identities to 'configure place, mobility and labour in gendered ways' (Gaetano, 2008). Specifically, male migrant workers tend to concentrate in the manufacturing and construction industries, which are labour intensive and physically demanding, while female migrants gravitate towards service work that prioritises qualities like vigour, deference, sexuality and charm (Song, 2015). Consequently, this gendered labour division results in the contrasting representation of male and female workers, where the rural stigma associated with male workers is mediated and normalised in popular discourse with phrases such as 'iron men'(yinhan), suggesting that rural male workers are hardworking and ambitious, whereas the rural stigma for *Dagongmei* is reinforced with discourses such as 'eating spring rice'(chichunfan), suggesting they are country bumpkins who lack technical abilities and who therefore rely on their youth and femininity to earn a living in cities (Zhang, 2014). This also contrasts to urban women whose stereotyped feminine identity can be reconciled with their urban hukou and its privileges (i.e., increased educational, social and economic resources) and which provides them with more choices and opportunities in the labour market, and in society in general. Consequently, compared to *Dagongmei*, urban women are more likely to be labelled with terms like 'new generation women' (xin nvxin), which denote sophistication, strength, and independence (Zhang & Liu, 2015). An example comes from the film, *Dagongmei in Special Economic Zone*, in which the heroine, a *Dagongmei* named Caiyun, is depicted as an insane and dissolute woman who randomly seduces a man with an urban hukou in Shenzhen in order to marry him and stay in the city, but eventually fails to achieve this goal. The hero Sixi, on the other hand, succeeds in achieving hukou transfer through hard work, and getting married to an equally career-oriented urban woman. Therefore, it's clear that male migrants and urban female workers, who have singular subordinated identities are normalised, whereas *Dagongmei* are intersectionally marginalised through media representation.

However, while representational intersectionality captures the complexity of *Dagongmei*'s identity without reducing simultaneous experiences of oppression, scholars argue that the 'irreducibility' and the 'endlessness of difference' of identities weaken this approach (Shuddhabrata, 2006; Ludvig, 2006). In other words, it's hard to discern the specific form of categorical prejudice that constructs the representation of stigma. In *Dagongmei's case*, although gender and hukou have been analysed as the two main subordinated identities that lead to their stigmatisation, in practice, it's difficult to know with certainty the contribution that one's hukou, gender, or other factors, such as class, accent or appearance, make to driving such discrimination.

## 6. Conclusion

Through the case study of *Dagongmei*, this essay concludes that intersectionality effectively addresses 'the most fundamental and contentious' question within feminist scholarship, i.e., 'which women's experiences?' (Kings, 2017). Specifically, structural intersectionality helps conceptualise how *Dagongmei* find themselves marginalised because of the intersecting structural barriers of sexism and hukou discrimination; political intersectionality disruptively discovers the 'under-inclusion' of gender-inclusive policies in China; and representational intersectionality captures how the cultural image of *Dagongmei* is stigmatised intersectionally. Overall, the intersectional approach recognises the fact that the convergence of gender and hukou inequalities underline the continued reproduction of the marginalisation of *Dagongmei* and their reduced access to opportunities. However, scholars should also keep the tension between structural stability and identity deconstruction in mind (a problem that can be resolved by coordination with Butler's deconstructive strategy), be aware of its methodological pitfalls, and be cautious about which categories of oppression are salient while making judgements regarding discrimination.

Since this essay is only a preliminary attempt to use intersectionality to discuss the experiences of *Dagongmei*, more studies are needed to illuminate the complexities that lie in the convergence of their marginalised identities. Two suggestions are offered for future studies. Firstly, under the intersectional framework, it would be valuable to focus on sub-groups within *Dagongmei*, such as those with differentiated education or income levels, and empirically examine which intersectional conditions influence them and to what extent. Second, this study only provides a top-level analysis of the post-migration labour outcomes for *Dagongmei* in China. Future studies should examine more specific migration outcomes, including opportunities for promotion and prospects for improved living standards. Such investigation would generate more precise and enlightening ideas on the negotiation of *Dagongmei*'s marginalised identities.

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