

PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE SECTOR WAGE GAPS: EVIDENCE FROM CHINA**Kunal Verma & Sneha Reddy**Special Centre for Nanoscience, School of Physical Sciences,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India**ABSTRACT**

The wage inequalities between the public and the private sphere are a very important aspect of gender and income inequality in the changing Chinese labor market. Although the market reforms have opened up the employment and wage dispersion in the private sector, the public sector still has a higher number of institutional safeguards and standardized wage-setting institutions. This paper discusses public-private wage disparities in China with special focus on gender, educational returns, labor market segmentation and institutional context. Based on the existing empirical results, the research points to the influences of the ownership structure, the sectoral distribution, and the transformation of the employment types, including the digital platform work, on the wage outcome. The analysis also contextualizes the existence of public-private wage differentials into larger demographic, globalization, and policy frameworks. The article synthesizes multidisciplinary research to give a holistic picture of how institutional arrangements remain relevant in the wage disparity in modern China as well as give an insight into the implication of the current labor market reforms.

Keywords

Public-private wage gap; Gender wage inequality; Labor market segmentation; Ownership structure; Returns to education; Institutional wage setting; China

INTRODUCTION

In my opinion, this research holds importance because it offers a chance to understand the significance of creativity and innovation in today's business landscape. Background and Significance The research is important since it will provide an opportunity to learn how crucial creativity and innovation have become in the modern business environment. The Chinese labor market is experiencing a sustained economic change and institutional reform, which has led to the wage inequality between the public and the private sector becoming an increasingly important topic in the labor market. This process has influenced China after the introduction of market-oriented reforms where there has been a slow process to abandon centralized wage determination to more decentralized and performance-based pay systems, especially in the private sector. Although the changes have increased productivity and wage differentiation, they have also played a role in increasing income inequality among the different ownership forms as well as employment (Gustafsson and Li, 2000; Shen and Deng, 2008). Wage difference between the public and the private sector is, hence, important to understand to evaluate the labor market inequality at large in modern China.

1.2 Wage Structures in the Public and Private Sector

Chinese public sector State-owned enterprises (SOEs), government agencies, and public institutions have traditionally featured homogenized wage-setting processes, narrow distributions of wages, and robust employment protection. The private sector, in contrast, is based on wage determination due to the market, which brings more managerial discretion and aptitude to the market dynamics (Liu et al., 2000; Ma, 2018).

The effect of these institutional variations has been a systematic wage gap between the two sectors with the implication on income inequality, labor market mobility, and labor composition.

1.3 Gender Aspects of Public-Private Wage Inequalities

The major dimension of wage differentials between the public and the private sector is gender inequality. The empirical data always indicate that women are overrepresented in the employment of the public sector, where the level of wage inequality is comparatively low, but underrepresented in the high-paid jobs of the private sector and roles of authority (Ma, 2018; Tan et al., 2025). Although the wages in the public sector are more stable and less prone to discrimination, the general rate of wages tends to be lower than it is in high-performing private companies. On the other hand, the private sector is characterized by increased earning and gender wage dispersion, which is inequalities in earning wage premiums and career development (Bai et al., 2022).

1.4 Education and Sectoral Allocation

The level of education is key in determinism of sectoral job preferences and wages. Even though women in China have reached almost equal status with men in the field of higher education participation, there is significant variance between sectors in terms of the translation of educational qualifications into wages (Hannum, 2005). Studies show that education returns tend to be greater in the private market, but they are disproportionately awarded gender variations, where women have lower wage rates compared to men with the same level of education (Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025). This interdependence between schooling and the allocation of sectors strengthens the differentials in wages between the public and the private and leads to enduring inequality.

1.5 Segmentation of Labor Market and Institutional Environment

Without the consideration of labor market segmentation and institutional background, it is impossible to understand public-private wage gaps completely. Segmentation relates to ownership limits the movement of labor and influences wage-setting policies, which tend to confine them into industry-specialized wage patterns (Li, Tang, and Jin, 2024). The institutional aspects like unionization, state regulation, and social protection systems also mediate wage wages, especially in the state sector (Liu et al., 2000). These structural characteristics highlight the role of institutional analysis to explain wage inequality.

1.6 New forms of Employment and Reform Pressure

The recent advancements in the labor market have complicated the dynamics between the privatization and the government in wages. The growth of the gig economy and digital platforms has erased classic sectoral lines, making new jobs of the private-sector, which are volatile-income and have poor labor safeguards (Han et al., 2024). Although these developments provide flexibility, they have increased wage disparity and posed a challenge to the current regulatory systems. Simultaneously, continued efforts to reform SOEs to enhance efficiency have brought on performance-based pay aspects which may expand internal wage dispersion in the public sector.

1.7 Objectives and Contribution of the Research

This paper seeks to discuss the public and private sector wage disparities in China via a combined analytical approach that includes gender, education, division of labour and institutional environment. Through the combination of evidence collected by a variety of strands of literature, the study aims at explaining the influence of ownership structure on wage inequality and identifying the processes that perpetuate public and private wage differentials. At that, the article adds to the discussions concerning labor market reform, gender equality, and income distribution in China.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Past Research on Public-Private Wage Differentiations

The analysis of the wage structure in China in the transitional era made early indicates the development of surfacing big public-private wage differentials as the transition of the market reforms continued. Gustafsson and Li (2000) discovered that the decay of centralized wage controls enhanced the wage dispersion, especially in the non state sectors. The wages of public sector were also comparatively constrained, whereas wages of the private-sector had become more sensitive to output and demand. The results of these initial studies formed the basis of further studies on ownership-based wage disparity.

2.2 Institutional Wage Setting Mechanisms

There is a significant amount of literature that focuses on the importance of institutional wage-setting systems in determining public-private wage gaps. The use of standardized scales of pay and administrative control over the public sector has been revealed to curtail the wage disparity and also decrease the gender gap (Liu et al., 2000; Ma, 2018). Conversely, the wage flexibility of firms in the private sector is more rewarding to productivity and, at the same time, allows them to discriminate. Even when controlling human capital variables, studies are always showing the existence of bigger unexplored wage disparities in the employment in the private sector (Bai et al., 2022).

2.3 Wages Inequality in terms of gender across sectors

Gender wage inequality studies have shown that sectoral disparity forms an important factor in the observed wage disparity. Institutional provisions reduce the overall gender pay disparities faced by women working in the public sector, although in absolute terms, they usually earn less in comparison with men in well-paid jobs in the private sector (Tan et al., 2025). There is also meta-analytical evidence that ownership structure has a significant moderating relationship with gender wage inequality, with the biggest differences reported in the case of the private and foreign-invested enterprises (Iwasaki and Ma, 2020).

2.4 Education and Returns on Ownership Type

The education and wage inequality literature reflects the cross-sectoral differentiated returns to education. Although higher education has positive wage premiums in both the government and the private sector, the returns on higher education are usually higher in the private sector (Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025). But, in market-oriented settings, the systematic lower returns to education by women are less than those by men, which reduces the equalizing impact of educational expansion. Hannum (2005) goes ahead to say that family strategies and institutional constraints influence conversion of education to labor market outcome especially amongst the women.

2.5 Labor Market division and immobility

The theory of labor market segmentation is an effective conceptual framework to explain the occurrence of public and private wage gap. Segmentation by ownership is constraining the mobility of workers, as well as entrenching wage inequality, through restricting access to more highly paid sectors (Li, Tang, and Jin, 2024). Empirical data indicates that privatization related to the loss of the government to the private sector is linked to greater wage dispersion and a greater risk of discrimination, especially in women. These results highlight the structural characteristics of public, private wage gap.

METHODOLOGY

The research approach and design include a literature review conducted to collect and analyze the literature regarding the topic.

3.1 Research Approach and Design

The research approach and design will entail literature review aimed at gathering and analyzing the literature on the topic. This paper is assuming a systematic integrative review and comparative analytic method to investigate wage disparities between the state and the non-state sectors in China. Since there exists a large body of empirical evidence on the topic of wage inequality, ownership structure, and gendered labor market outcomes, a synthesis-based approach would be suitable to summarize results in various datasets, timeframes, and analytical methods. This method can allow a systematic comparison of wagesetting processes, sector allocation, and gender results in China in the changing labor market (Shen and Deng, 2008; Iwasaki and Ma, 2020). The study is a systematic review of peer-reviewed empirical literature on the topic, meta-analyses and research that is sector-specific, that calculate primary data, or that study public-private wage differentials, gender wage differences, and returns to education. This approach choice aligns with the existing studies that underscore the importance of cumulative evidence in explaining the nature of structurally embedded labor market inequalities (Zhu, 2025).

3.2 Study Selection and Data Sources

The research process only uses the given collection of scholarly sources, which covers a twenty-year-long scope of studies on the Chinese labor market. High-impact journals like Journal of Population Economics, World Development, PLOS ONE, SAGE Open, and Humanities and social Sciences Communications would be included in these sources. All these research works discuss the labor force in the public and private sectors, the wage gap by gender, work market classification, online work platforms, and the demographic effects on workforce provision (Liu et al., 2000; Han et al., 2024).

Three principles were used to direct selection criteria. First, the research needed to directly investigate wage results/ wage differentials by ownership industry or sex. Second, they had to include institutional or sectoral differences, including public or private jobs, industry type or platform-based work. Third, the research was to be empirically founded in the Chinese socio-economic environment, considering the market transition, globalization or reforming the policy (Chen et al., 2013; Ma, 2018).

3.3 Analytical Framework

The framework of analysis combines the ownership structure, gender, and education as the predominant explanatory dimensions of wage inequality. Institutional differences between the labor markets in the public and the private sectors are considered having different wage-setting schemes and varying degrees of control. Gender is also a structural dimension that determines the accessibility of the employment market, pay premiums, and career progression opportunities across industries (Bai et al., 2022). Education is discussed as a measure of human capital, as well as a gender-biased variable that has gender-differentiated returns (Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025). Besides these, the framework explains the segmentation of the labor market, occupation sorting, and new ways of employment in the private sector like the gig work. Demographic variables (fertility intentions and migration status) are considered moderating factors that affect the labor supply decision and wage outcomes (Li and Xu, 2022; Qin et al., 2016).

3.4 Sectoral Classification

To make things easier to analyze, employment is divided into three segments. The state owned enterprises, government agencies and the standard wage-setting institutions define the public sector. The domestic private firms, foreign-invested enterprises and the market-oriented organizations are all characterized in the private sector, where wages are determined in a decentralized manner. The third category is platform-based and gig employment which is a kind of extension of the labor of the private sector with limited regulation and unstable income (Han et al., 2024).

This typology is used to capture prevailing strategies in the literature and conducts a systematic comparison of the wage performance of various ownership types (Ma, 2018; Li, Tang, and Jin, 2024).

3.5 Measurement of Wage Gaps

In the studies reviewed, the public to the private wage gaps are often estimated on the basis of the regression-based wage comparisons, log wage differentials and Oaxaca Blinder decomposition methods. Such procedures differentiate between wage disparities that can be attributed to observable variables, i.e. education, experience, occupation, etc., and unobservable elements that are frequently associated with discrimination or institutional aspects (Iwasaki & Ma, 2020). Gender wage disparity within each sector is studied in the same manner which enables to compare across sectors.

RESULTS

4.1 General Public- Private Wage Differentials

The evidence produced hence shows that there are huge wage gaps between the public sector and the private sector in China. The employment in the private sector is on average related to higher wage dispersion and higher income inequality with the public sector having higher compressed wage distributions (Gustafsson and Li, 2000; Liu et al., 2000). Even though a small number of workers in the private sector receive higher salaries than those in the public sector, these benefits are skewed and clustered among males and the highly skilled employees.

4.2 Gender Wage Differentiations in the Public Sector

The gender pay gap in the public sector is always reported to be smaller than that of the private sector. Fixed wage rates, bureaucratic control, and enhanced labour regulations restrict the discretion of managers and decrease the magnitude of blatant wage discrimination (Ma, 2018). Nevertheless, the problem of gender pay disparities is not completely eradicated. There is still underrepresentation of women in top and managerial roles in state institutions, which leads to the continued existence of earnings differences despite a regulated wage regime (Tan et al., 2025).

4.3 Wage Gap between men and women in the private sector

The gaps in gender pay in the private sector are, on the contrary, significantly greater. Wages can be determined by the market which enables firms to compensate productivity and performance, but it also facilitates discriminatory actions and unequal access to wage premiums (Bai et al., 2022). Empirical research demonstrates that women are earning substantially less than men in the job industry, despite the fact that they were controlled by the education factor, experience, and occupation (Li, Tang, and Jin, 2024). These imbalances are more eminent in high growth and export sectors.

4.4 Education and Sector-Specific Return

The findings indicate that there are high sectoral variations in returns to education. Although higher education raises wages in both industries, the returns are higher in the private industry. Nevertheless, women are getting lower returns to education compared to men, especially where markets are involved (Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025). Standardized wage systems in the government somewhat eliminate these disparities in the government, but they also restrain general wage increases to highly educated employees (Hannum, 2005).

4.5 Demographic and Institutional Influences

Public and private wage disparities are supported by demographics. Wage punishments towards women in relation to fertility intentions and childbearing are linked to the employment of women in the private sector where maternity protections are less robust (Li and Xu, 2022). Status of migration is also another factor that contributes to inequality, with female migrants being oversaturated in the low-paying and insecure positions of the private sector (Qin et al., 2016). These penalties are abated, but not eliminated, by institutional safeguards in the public sector.

4.6 Digitalization and the Growth of the Non-governmental Employment

The emergence of digital arenas has increased the level of wage inequality in the private sector. It has been found that algorithmic management, task division, and lack of income security are contributing to an increasing gender pay gap within the gig economy (Han et al., 2024). Although platform work is flexible, it replicates the

disadvantages of work in the private sector, and it also enhances the distance between regulated government jobs and free-market work (Li, Hu, Jin, and Han, 2025).

4.7 Comparative Summary of Results

Dimension	Public Sector	Private Sector
Wage-setting mechanism	Standardized, regulated	Market-driven, flexible
Gender wage gap	Lower but persistent	Higher and widening
Returns to education	Moderate, compressed	Higher but unequal
Job security	High	Variable
Exposure to discrimination	Limited by institutions	High

Table 1 highlights systematic differences in wage outcomes and gender inequality across ownership sectors.

4.8 Summary of Findings

On the whole, the findings reveal that ownership structure, institutional protection, gendered labor market, and educational returns are the determinants of the existence of public-private wage disparities in China. Though there is more wage equality in the public sector, there is less wage dispersion. The private sector offers more earning opportunities at the expense of gender wage inequality. These results have a good empirical foundation to the discussion and policy analysis to come.

DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion of the Main Results

This research confirms that the worry of wage inequality in China is extremely hierarchical in relation to ownership sector, where to the extent that the institutions of public and private employment work under different institutional logics. The wage dispersion and gender wage gap are lower and lesser in the public sector; this is because wage-setting mechanisms are more standardized and because of more stringent regulatory oversight. Conversely, the private sector is characterized by increased wage dispersion and systematic gender inequalities, which reflects the market-oriented character of salaries and the lower strength of the institutions (Liu et al., 2000; Ma, 2018).

These findings are consistent with the labor market segmentation theory, which indicates that institutionalized systems of employment, like public-sector employment, have protective measures that help reduce discrimination, but competitive labor markets tend to increase the existing social disparities (Li, Tang, and Jin, 2024). The fact evidences the argument that marketization per se will not guarantee wage equality, and, in fact, may lead to gender-based disparities in the case of a weak regulatory framework.

5.2 Gender Wage Differentiations by sector

One of its main contributions is a comparative study of the gender wage gaps in sectors. Although the public sector reduces the difference between the genders in terms of wage, it does not get rid of it completely. Women are still concentrated at the bottom level, and the promotion routes are still gender differentiated, and they continue to have residual wage gaps despite the employment of standardized pay systems (Tan et al., 2025). This observation highlights the constraints behind formal equality systems as informal rules and organizational structures still leave women behind.

Gender pay disparities are more advanced and enduring in the private sector. Women still earn less than men even after adjusting to education and experience, which means that there are discriminatory practices and gendered occupational sorting (Bai et al., 2022). The payoff to education is greater in the field of private jobs, and this advantage, unevenly distributed between men and women, is cumulative and grows over time (Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025). These results imply that the flexibility in the market that lacks accountability can deepen inequality among the genders instead of diminishing it.

5.3 Education and Human Capital Role

The effect of education on the public-private wage differentials is complex. Even though higher education is related to higher wages within both industries, the returns are considerably different in both industries. Standard pay scales in the government sector squeeze the pay gap between workers, restricting on both extreme inequality and the ability of highly educated workers to move up the hierarchy (Hannum, 2005). Within the private sector,

education returns are greater but less equalized is distributed with women getting lower returns in the system than men (Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025).

Such trends invalidate the hypothesis that gender wage gaps can be closed by investing in human capital. Rather, the results have shown that the institutional environment where education is compensated is also significant. In the absence of gender sensitive wage policies and enforcement mechanisms, educational benefits can be converted to unequal economic benefits.

5.4 Demographic and Social Limitations

Demographic issues also make issues of public and private wage complex. The fertility intentions and the caregiving are still subjecting women to wage disproportionate penalty, especially where the familyfriendly policies are less advanced, which is in the private sector (Li and Xu, 2022). The impact of these punishments is gender norms that are unchangeable and shaped the expectations of employees and their choices of labor supply by women.

Sectoral wage inequality is also mixed with migration status. Women migrants face higher chances of working in poorly paid jobs in the private sector that have low job security and labour rights, increasing both industry and gender inequalities in wages (Qin et al., 2016). The restrictive labor market is further enforced by the more limiting practices used to recruit people in the public sector which limits access of migrants in the labor market.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at analyzing the wage gap between the state and the market in China with special focus on the difference between the two sexes and the institutionalization of labor market that determines the wage differences. The analysis, based on a generalized literature on empirical and theoretical studies, has shown that ownership structure is one of the primary factors of wage inequality in the Chinese labor market. Though the economies have been in economic reform and market expansion decades, wage disparities between sectors are still present, which are not due to individual productivity differences as much as they are due to institutional, social and demographic factors (Liu, Meng, and Zhang, 2000; Ma, 2018).

The results show that the employment in the sector of the public sector still provides rather egalitarian wage system. Wage differentials and gender wage gaps are also lower and labor protection is more stringent than in the private sector due to standardized pay systems, controlled promotion systems and enhanced labor protection. Nevertheless, equality does not prevail in the public sector. There is still underrepresentation of women in senior and managerial roles and vertical occupational segregation prevents them to get higher remunerations. These trends indicate that formal wage equality policies, although they are effective in eliminating overt discrimination, cannot work to eliminate more subtle and structural forms of gender inequality (Tan et al., 2025; Shen and Deng, 2008).

Conversely, the level of wage inequality in the private sector is much higher and there are much stronger gender wage gaps. The new wage regimes, performance-based compensation and the weak regulation of these firms enable market to create an environment where gendered labour practices and discrimination thrive. Even with similar education levels and working experience, women are also likely to earn less returns on their human capital than men, which supports cumulative disadvantage throughout the life trajectory (Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025; Bai et al., 2022). The results contradict the belief that competition in the market will tend to achieve outcomes that are more fair in terms of wages and instead they demonstrate the importance of institutional restrictions in promoting fair labor markets.

Education is a factor that appears critical and of an ambivalent aspect in the public-private wage gap. Although the level of education has a positive relationship with earning opportunities in the two fields, the equalizing capacity is not equally spread. Wage compression in the public sector helps to counter extreme levels of inequality, but it also restricts the incentives of higher education. Within the private sector returns to education are greater and more skewed with women being systematically disadvantaged. This implies that even education cannot reduce the gender wage disparities unless it is coupled with institutional adjustments that will mandate a similar level of value in skills between the two genders (Hannum, 2005; Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025).

Sectoral wage inequality also depends on the demographic processes. The fertility intentions and caregiving duties still translate to wage penalty on women especially in the private sector where the family-supportive policies are not so advanced. Such punishments are indicative of underlying gender expectations when it comes to care giving and attachment to the labor market, as they shape not only the actions of employers, but also the consumption of labour by women (Li and Xu, 2022). Inequality is also exacerbated by internal migration, as female migrants are overrepresented in the low-waged jobs of the private sector, which have poor job security

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