

The Occluded Role of Motherhood: The Parenting Dilemma of Disabled Women Based on Social Exclusion Theory

Song Siqi

School of Political Science and Law, University of Jinan, Jinan, Shandong, China

Abstract: This study explores multidimensional parenting dilemmas faced by disabled women, guided by social exclusion theory. Utilizing in-depth interviews and participant observation, it identifies intersectional exclusion across economic, institutional, cultural, and service domains. Economically, mothers experience limited employment and career prospects alongside heightened childcare costs. Institutionally, the absence of targeted policies leads to neglected needs. Culturally, they endure dual stigma and oppression from societal prejudices and dominant mothering norms. Service provision (healthcare, education, social support) inadequately addresses their specific requirements. The study contends that establishing an inclusive support system is imperative for improving disabled women's childcare environment. This necessitates transforming social attitudes, enhancing public services, and cultivating robust support networks to foster their social integration. It provides a theoretical framework and policy references addressing the research gap on disabled motherhood, aiming to promote the protection of disabled women's rights and interests.

Keywords: Disabled Women; Motherhood Role; Social Exclusion; Childcare Dilemma

1. Introduction

Due to physical factors, disabled groups have many inconveniences in terms of physiology or body functions, which make them encounter many difficulties and problems in their daily life that are unimaginable to ordinary people. Especially for women with disabilities, as a combination of two identities: disabled and female, they are subjected to more diverse and complex challenges in society than ordinary women or disabled people, and are in a very bad situation in various fields such as politics,

society, marriage and family. According to the Second National Sample Survey of Persons with Disabilities, women with disabilities "account for nearly half of the country's disabled population"[1].

Women with disabilities face distinct challenges due to intersectional marginalization as both "disabled" and "women". Mainstream discourse often obscures their experiences, particularly concerning motherhood. Societal norms construct the "ideal mother" around "able-bodiedness", demanding physical capacity for childcare, emotional endurance, and social engagement. These norms significantly shape public perceptions of motherhood while institutionalizing exclusion through legislation, policy, and public services. This institutionalization reinforces stereotypes about disabled women's fertility, child-rearing capabilities, and fitness for maternal responsibilities, exacerbating their parenting difficulties. Disabled mothers confront multifaceted challenges: overcoming disability-related barriers to social participation while simultaneously fulfilling culturally defined maternal duties, often compounded by economic disadvantages.

This confluence of vulnerabilities creates unique obstacles not typically faced by non-disabled mothers or disabled individuals without parenting roles. Specifically, disabled mothers encounter significant difficulties accessing parenting resources, securing employment, and participating in social interactions.

Academic research on childbearing among women with disabilities remains scarce, with discussions on disabled mothers largely absent from mainstream discourse. Social exclusion theory provides a novel framework for understanding their predicament, emphasizing how marginalization restricts resource access, social participation, and life opportunities. This study analyzes the parenting dilemma

experienced by disabled women through this theoretical lens. It addresses the core research question: How is this dilemma manifested across institutional, economic, and cultural dimensions? The study aims to reveal the multifaceted barriers these women face and explore how society can build more inclusive support systems.

By interrogating these questions, the research seeks to fill existing gaps in the literature. It will propose corresponding solution strategies and provide theoretical guidance and policy references. The ultimate objective is to promote the protection of disabled women's rights and contribute to building a genuinely equal and childbearing-inclusive society.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Relevant Studies on Women with Disabilities

There are few studies in the existing literature that specifically focus on disabled women. Chen Yaya has made an important attempt to study the theory of disabled women. She examines the survival status and identity of women with disabilities, investigates feminists' understanding of disability issues and disability researchers' views on women's issues, and then explores the necessity and feasibility of synthesizing feminist perspectives and disability perspectives in the Chinese context[2]. Research on women with disabilities reveals the current situation of women with disabilities: Hao Xin investigates from the perspective of health and rehabilitation of women with disabilities and finds that the rehabilitation of women with disabilities is worse than that of men with disabilities; the health of women with disabilities is worse than that of able-bodied women; and the rehabilitation of women with disabilities in the countryside is worrisome compared to that of women in the cities and towns[3]; Liu Bohong and other scholars point out the improvement, defects, and causes of defects in the survival of women with disabilities in recent years; and Liu Bohong and other scholars point out the improvement, defects, and causes of defects of women with disabilities in recent years. Liu Bohong and other scholars have pointed out the improvement of the survival status of women with disabilities in recent years, the

deficiencies, and the causes of the deficiencies[4]; Li Yong explored the causes and manifestations of the predicament of the rights of women with disabilities from the perspective of jurisprudence, and proposed a feminist view of disability justice[5].

This study has two principal aims: exploring cross-disciplinary dialogue between gender and disability studies, and providing a more comprehensive picture of women with disabilities' development globally or regionally. However, research on women with disabilities in China remains nascent. Disability studies lack autonomy within Chinese academia, primarily serving as a niche trajectory within other disciplines. While literature exists across numerous journals, few focus explicitly on disability, and none are dedicated, open-access disability studies journals. Furthermore, women with disabilities are marginalized within disability, gender, and feminist studies, failing to constitute an independent research group. Domestic scholars neglect this group and have not integrated insights from Western feminist disability theory.

2.2 The Role of Motherhood

The so-called motherhood is a patriarchal ideology that inculcates beliefs and values about the duties, responsibilities, and standards of motherhood practice, and it is extremely oppressive for women[6]. Foreign feminists have conducted richer studies on motherhood: some radical feminists tie motherhood to patriarchy, such as Shulamith Firestone, who argues that the core of a woman's oppression lies in her maternal nature to bear and raise children, and that differences between the sexes in childbearing inevitably lead to a radical division of labor and power in the family and in society, and that the only way to liberate women from this oppressive biological destiny, gender role differences can be eliminated, and ultimately an androgynous and egalitarian society can be formed[7]; Ritchie argues that patriarchy has succeeded in institutionalizing biological motherhood in such a way that women feel that a woman who isn't a mother isn't really a woman, and that a good mother should be someone who is all about the family and has no world of her own; at the same time, motherhood has succeeded in preventing women from raising their children in the way they want to raise their children.

The essence of female emancipation lies in regaining autonomy over one's own body[8].

In terms of the concept of motherhood in disability studies, foreign scholars have focused on three themes, including "social structure", "image of perfection", and "misogynistic attitudes in health care"[9]. These themes may have an impact on the identity and self-efficacy of women with disabilities as mothers. Mothers with disabilities have intersectional identities and belong to several high-risk groups for stigmatization. They are also disabled, women, and mothers. Multiple stigmatized or vulnerable identities drive women with disabilities to develop specific coping strategies to gain attention and recognition as mothers[10].

Domestic motherhood research and its related discussions first appeared around 2010, more than 30 years delayed from Western feminist motherhood research. Discussions about motherhood have become an enduring topic in both old and new media in China, with related terms such as "old mother", "intensive motherhood", "full-time mother", "widowed parenting", "motherhood", and so on. The emergence of new Internet terms such as "old mother", "intensive motherhood", "full-time mother", "widowed parenting", and "no marriage, no childbearing to keep peace" can also be seen in the domestic public, especially urban women's inequality and denunciation of motherhood. Wu Xiaoying points out that most of the research on motherhood in China focuses on criticizing the discourse of perfect motherhood or the ideology of "intensive motherhood". Although the norms of motherhood and the image of the ideal mother have been changing in different times, for married women with children, they are asked to always put their identity as mothers before their identity as independent individuals, or to hover between these two identities[11]; There is still a big gap in the research on motherhood of disabled mothers in China, which has not yet been fully paid attention to by the academic community.

2.3 Applied Research on Social Exclusion Theory

The theory of social exclusion was formed in France in the early 1970s, and was initially used to express "the phenomenon that a large

number of unemployed people are unable to be included in the national welfare system, and thus are excluded from the country's economic and social development"[12]; with the continuous expansion of the concept, academics now believe that social exclusion refers to "the deprivation of rights and opportunities in education, employment, social interaction, etc., of certain members of a society as a result of poverty, illness, crime or the breakdown or absence of other important social relations"[13].

Social exclusion theory, increasingly valued in China, explains vulnerable groups' marginalization mechanisms. It effectively analyzes disadvantaged groups' social problems, being widely applied in poverty, unemployment, and minority studies. Some gender research employs it to examine women's exclusion in labor markets and families[14]. However, studies integrating this theory with the parenting dilemmas of women with disabilities remain scarce. Current research predominantly focuses on vulnerable groups' lack of economic, social rights, education, and social security, rather than this specific intersection.

Existing research on disabled motherhood reveals significant gaps. Firstly, motherhood studies often neglect disability heterogeneity, assuming uniform experiences. Secondly, disability studies typically prioritize the individual, overlooking family dynamics and maternal fulfilment. Thirdly, prior case studies lack theoretical depth, offering superficial analysis. This study addresses these limitations by integrating social exclusion theory with an intersectional analysis of parenting complexities faced by women with disabilities. By deeply examining their dilemmas, it aims to provide a theoretical foundation for building an inclusive gender equality support system.

3. Research Design

This study primarily employs qualitative research methodologies, underpinned by social exclusion theory. It involves conducting semi-structured interviews with a total of nine disabled mothers from diverse geographical locations and disability categories, encompassing physical, visual, auditory, and other forms of impairment. The study focus on exploring their experiences of exclusion in the context of parenting. Additionally, in-depth

participatory observation is conducted in select cases, and the process of multiple exclusion and its underlying mechanisms are analyzed through case studies.

4. The Plight of Disabled Mothers in the Face of Multidimensional Social Exclusion

4.1 Economic Exclusion: The “Unaffordable Burden” of Childcare Costs

4.1.1 Maternity punishment is magnified in the workplace

Women with disabilities experience significant labor market disadvantages, which are exacerbated by the “motherhood penalty” following childbirth. This penalty, affecting mothers balancing work and childcare, manifests as career limitations, reduced promotion prospects, and notably, wage penalties. Disabled mothers face compounded discrimination due to their impairments, resulting in significantly lower employment rates compared to non-disabled women. They are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, precarious positions. This financial insecurity directly impedes their ability to afford basic childcare costs. For instance, employment initiatives like Province H's “mother’s post” pilot, intended to offer flexible work, often equate to poorly compensated, insecure jobs (e.g., as low as 80 yuan for 7 hours). Critically, these positions typically fail to accommodate the specific needs of disabled mothers[15]. A hearing-impaired mother pointed out: “Mom post recruitment is mostly telephone customer service, but I can’t hear the voice. But a text customer service post like the one that suits me requires no burden of childbirth. There are few posts suitable for us and most of them are posts that are hard work earning less.”

In addition to this, the career paths of disabled mothers are also easily closed, and the chances of promotion for disabled mothers are close to zero. This implicit discrimination not only hinders the promotion and development of disabled mothers, but also leads to a waste of human capital. A visually impaired mother working in a hotel said, “Able-bodied mothers may still go back to their core positions after maternity leave, but like us, we are placed in marginal positions by default when we return to work after giving birth to a child; after all, companies feel that it is good enough to take care of your employment, and we are not

qualified to make so many demands.”

4.1.2 Exclusion in the Consumption and Welfare Sphere

Social welfare policies frequently exclude disabled mothers through eligibility criteria based on “family income level” and “care capacity assessment.” Disabled mothers may be denied childcare or disability subsidies if their impairment is equated with “lacking caregiving ability” or if household income exceeds strict poverty thresholds. Some regions implicitly exclude cognitively or mentally disabled mothers by requiring “full civil behavior capacity” for childcare benefits.

Most disabled mothers remain welfare-dependent, but funding constraints severely limit consumption choices. Reliance on local government payments and disability subsidies typically covers only basic subsistence, leaving developmental expenditures like children’s education unmet. Interviews confirm most families curtail such essential spending. Furthermore, inaccessible environments critically undermine consumer autonomy. Online platforms present barriers like visual verification codes for blind mothers or inaccessible customer service for deaf mothers. Physical spaces are worse: early childhood facilities often lack ramps, and parent-child restaurants commonly refuse wheelchair users. This environmental exclusion restricts consumption and erodes confidence in social participation.

Notably, some disabled mothers develop compensatory consumption strategies. Deaf mothers, for example, may prefer visual baby monitors using light intensity to indicate crying severity. This represents both an adaptive parenting technique and a creative response to sensory limitations. However, the market remains grossly inadequate in addressing such specific needs.

4.2 Institutional Exclusion: a Blind Spot in Policy and Law

Institutional exclusion constitutes the root cause of disabled mothers’ childcare plight, fundamentally stemming from systemic policy and judicial neglect of “disabled motherhood.” This manifests as both textual deficiencies and implementation biases, creating systematic barriers to parenting rights, resource access, and social participation. China’s categorically fragmented welfare system isolates policy

domains, overlooking disabled mothers' needs. Compared to non-disabled women, they encounter institutional gaps in maternity support and childcare resources, exemplified by labor protection regulations lacking disability accommodations.

Critical disconnects exist between maternity support and disability protection frameworks. First, maternity leave systems disregard disability-specific requirements: some disabled women cannot utilize standard entitlements, while hearing-impaired mothers face communication barriers during childbirth without guaranteed sign language or text assistance. A wheelchair-bound mother with a spinal cord injury said frankly: "Because of my motor nerve injury, my postpartum recovery period was twice as long as that of an ordinary woman, but my organization only gave me 98 days of maternity leave. I had to quit my job after my maternity leave expired because my body simply couldn't take it." Second, policy designs remain siloed. Disability policies prioritize rehabilitation/employment, while childcare policies target ordinary families, omitting intersectional measures like disability-inclusive childcare subsidies or accessible facility standards. Consequently, maternal needs are marginalized within disability welfare, and childcare policies overlook disabled mothers. Finally, assistive devices and inclusive policies fail functionally during implementation. Public accessible mother-baby rooms often reduce "accessibility" to ramps, neglecting adjustable breastfeeding chairs or Braille signage. Community childcare services default to able-bodied norms—parent-child sports events requiring running, for instance, excluding physically disabled mothers. Subsidized assistive devices exclude childcare-specific aids like wheelchair-mounted infant trays or vibrating baby monitors, demonstrating systemic implementation failures that nullify theoretical inclusivity.

4.3 Cultural Exclusion: Stigmatization and Labeling Pressure

4.3.1 Double labeling of motherhood stigma

Mothers with disabilities face double stigmatization: labelled as incompetent both due to their disability and because their motherhood deviates from norms. Perceived simultaneously as vulnerable individuals

needing care and as risky caregivers, this results in denied parental autonomy via familial and societal over-monitoring, such as imposed parenting decisions. Consequently, they experience heightened maternal surveillance, enduring constant public scrutiny unlike ordinary mothers whose presence is unquestioned. One mother with a physical disability described, "Every time I feed my child with my feet, someone secretly takes a picture of me on Shivering Voice, with the caption 'Strong mom', and it feels like I'm just like an animal in a zoo being watched. But in fact, I'm just an ordinary mom, just that it will be a little bit more difficult than normal people in taking care of children. I hope everyone can look at the phenomenon of disabled moms raising children equally."

4.3.2 The violent discipline of "Omnipotent Mothers"

Traditional culture's construction of the "all-powerful mother" myth enacts violent discipline against disabled mothers. Society expects mothers to be omnipotent in meeting children's needs, viewing disability as a natural impediment to motherhood. Preconceived questions about disabled mothers' safety or educational capabilities negate their parenting legitimacy and ignore their agency. This ideology becomes violently internalized as self-stigma, compounded when health professionals either deny appropriate care or exhibit excessive control. Consequently, these mothers often develop heightened self-blame. The unattainable standards imposed by the "all-powerful motherhood" social structure position them as failures. Disabled mothers recognize these standards and society's enforcement of their "substandard" status. Thus, their fundamental challenge lies not in disability or motherhood itself, but in societal treatment—specifically the "all-motherhood" barrier segregating them from other mothers and their children.

4.3.3 Multiple barriers to parenting knowledge

Parenting knowledge is foundational for child well-being, yet mothers with disabilities encounter multidimensional barriers in accessing it, exacerbating parenting challenges and revealing social support deficiencies. Traditional dissemination channels often exclude them: mobility limitations hinder seminar attendance; scarce and outdated Braille materials impede visually impaired mothers;

inaccessible audio resources and lack of sign language interpreters disadvantage hearing-impaired mothers. Digital technology offers potential but creates new exclusions. Parenting apps and online courses frequently lack accessibility adaptations like screen-reader compatibility or sign language/captions, preventing full utilization by visually or hearing-impaired mothers. Furthermore, a digital divide persists: mothers with cognitive disabilities may struggle with complex interfaces, while economic disadvantage prevents others from acquiring necessary digital devices. These combined barriers underscore systemic gaps in supporting accessible parenting knowledge acquisition for disabled mothers.

4.4 Service Exclusion: Gaps in the Parenting Support System

Service exclusion critically impedes disabled mothers in childcare, manifesting as public services and support systems failing to adapt to their needs, creating institutional barriers and implicit discrimination in healthcare and education. Medical services neglect disabled mothers' requirements; postnatal visits and child vaccinations default to non-disabled norms, excluding adaptations. Critical health information lacks accessible formats like Braille, audio, or large print, preventing visually impaired mothers from accessing it. Furthermore, some healthcare professionals stigmatize disabled mothers as "high-risk", excessively intervening in parenting or suggesting custody relinquishment, violating their rights. Similarly, education systems structurally exclude disabled mothers. Ordinary schools lack accessible facilities, hindering participation in their children's education. In parent-teacher meetings and activities, communication barriers and inaccessible environments often reduce mothers with sensory impairments to "silent participants", unable to interact effectively. This systemic failure across essential services compounds the challenges faced by disabled mothers and their children.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The expanding population of persons with disabilities in China highlights significant challenges in healthcare and health equity, particularly regarding childcare for women

with disabilities. Despite general improvements in their circumstances, the reproductive situation of these women remains markedly vulnerable.

Employing social exclusion theory, this study utilizes in-depth interviews and participant observation with nine mothers representing diverse disabilities to analyze the intersectional exclusion experienced in motherhood. Findings reveal their parenting difficulties stem from the dynamic interplay of four exclusion dimensions: institutional, economic, cultural, and service, constituting a distinct oppression structure.

Economic exclusion intensifies the "motherhood penalty" through the intersection of disability and motherhood roles. The labor market confines disabled mothers to low-paying, flexible jobs while obstructing career progression. Welfare policies, with restrictive "competency assessment" thresholds, and inaccessible consumer environments further exacerbate economic deprivation. Institutional exclusion manifests a triple rupture: maternity leave systems overlook disability-specific needs, disability benefits often preclude childcare support, and assistive device subsidies frequently neglect actual parenting scenarios. Cultural exclusion enacts violent double stigmatization: the "moving narrative" marginalizes disabled mothers, while the "all-powerful mother" ideology delegitimizes their parenting capabilities. Service exclusion arises from public services lacking adaptability: medical institutions omit Braille parenting guides, the education system ignores communication barriers, and digital parenting resources typically lack accessibility, creating technological exclusion.

To address this systemic marginalization, an inclusive support system is urgently required. Societal attitudes must shift to eliminate cultural exclusion via government-led public education enhancing awareness and media promotion of diverse, positive motherhood narratives. Improving public services is vital to reduce economic exclusion. This necessitates increased government investment in accessible childcare facilities, tailored employment training and support policies for women with disabilities, and enhanced social security benefits. Furthermore, building a robust social support network—integrating family, community, and societal resources—is crucial.

Families need encouragement towards equitable labor division, communities should develop supportive childcare services and mutual aid, and social organizations must provide empowerment activities.

Future research must explore evolving challenges under policies like the three-child mandate and aging demographics, such as parenting pressures for older disabled mothers and resource allocation in multi-child families. Ultimately, transforming disabled motherhood from a marginal concern to a core societal discourse is essential for achieving a genuinely inclusive society.

References

- [1] National Bureau of Statistics, Leading Group of the Second National Sample Survey on Persons with Disabilities. Bulletin on the Main Data of the Second National Sample Survey on People with Disabilities[EB/OL].(2006)[2025-06-19].
- [2] Chen Yaya. Feminism and Disability: Reflections and Observations Based on Identity Politics[A]. In Zhang Wanhong, ed. *Disability Rights Research (Volume 1)*[C]. Beijing: Social Science Literature Press, 2014: 202–216.
- [3] Hao Rui. Analysis of the Basic Situation of Health and Rehabilitation of Women with Disabilities[J]. *Disabil Res*, 2013(2): 22–28.
- [4] Liu Bohong, et al. Developmental Dilemmas, Benefit Needs and Countermeasures of Disabled Women in China[J]. *Disabil Res*, 2013(2): 13–19.
- [5] Li Yong. Study on Feminist Concept of Disability Justice[D]. Chongqing: Southwest University of Political Science and Law, 2022.
- [6] O'Reilly A. *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*[M]. Los Angeles: Sage Publications Inc, 2010.
- [7] Budig M. Feminism and the Family. In Scott J, Treas J, Richards M, eds. *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families*[M]. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004.
- [8] Tong RP. *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*[M]. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998.
- [9] Kálmán Z. *Aki Álmában Is Látja a Fényt: Anyaság Akadálymentesítés Nélkül* [Seeing the Light With Eyes Closed: Motherhood Without Accessibility][M]. De Jure Alapítvány, 2010.
- [10] Lendvai L, Nguyen Luu Lan A. The Lived Experiences of Visually Impaired Mothers and Their Perception of Social Attitudes Towards Them[J]. *Alkalmazott Pszichol*, 2019, 19(2): 7–30.
- [11] Wu Xiaoying. The Paradox of Motherhood: From Feminist Criticism to Chinese Motherhood Strategies[J]. *J China Women's Coll*, 2021, 33(2): 30–40.
- [12] Lenoir R. *Les Exclus: Un Français sur Dix*[M]. Paris: Seuil, 1974.
- [13] Social Exclusion Unit. *Social Exclusion Unit: Purpose, Work Priorities and Working Methods*[R]. London: The Stationery Office, 1997.
- [14] Xu Xiaoling, Wei Rong. Social Exclusion and Vulnerable Groups: An Analytical Framework in the Chinese Context[J]. *Frontier*, 2012(11): 123–127.
- [15] Hu Minjie. Women's Equality Rights and State Protection in "Maternity Punishment"[J]. *Zhejiang Acad J*, 2023(4): 36–45.