

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unequal gender-based attraction toward public sector employment in China: The role of perceived discrimination and public service motivation

Yan Yang^{1,2} | Bo Wen³ | Lei Tao⁴ 

¹Department of Public and International Affairs, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

²School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China

³Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Macau, Avenida da Universidade, Taipa, Macau SAR, China

⁴Department of Social Sciences and Policy Studies, Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

Correspondence

Lei Tao, Department of Social Sciences and Policy Studies, The Education University of Hong Kong, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, New Territories, Hong Kong SAR, China.
Email: taol@eduhk.hk

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Abstract

Promoting demographic diversity and representation in the public sector workforce is a critical prerequisite for achieving social equity. This study investigates gender differences in public sectoral preference in China, subsequently exploring the underlying mechanisms that cause such a gender gap. Based on social psychological theories, this study develops and tests a moderated mediation model that examines public service motivation (PSM) as the mediating mechanism and perceived discrimination as the moderator. Utilizing the nationally representative China Education Panel Survey, our findings suggest a strong gender effect regarding the attractiveness of public sector employment in China. In terms of the specific mechanism whereby gender helps predict public sectoral preference, PSM indeed plays a mediating role. Specifically, the gender gap in public sector employment will be further widened by PSM when perceived discrimination is high. Overall, this study contributes to the extant literature by exploring the effects of gender on public sector preferences and to the practice by helping policymakers ideate solutions to enhance diversity effectively.

KEYWORDS

China, gender equity, perceived discrimination, public sector employment, public service motivation

1 | INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that gender inequality in employment exists at all levels in the public sector (Colley et al., 2021; Johnston, 2019; Maranto et al., 2019). Unbalanced gender distribution in the public sector workforce is detrimental to representation and social equity. Despite the increasing attention given to recruitment and environmental barriers faced by women public sector employees (Choi & Park, 2014; Guy, 1994; Newman, 1996), empirical explanations of what influences women's attraction to public sector employment at the pre-entry level and the associated mechanisms remain insufficient.

In developed countries such as the United States, Australia, and Canada, numerous studies have indicated that women are more likely

than men to join the public sector (Cohen et al., 2005; Korac et al., 2020; Ng & Sears, 2015). However, relatively little effort has been invested in generalizing this finding to a different cultural and social setting, such as China, where gender inequality is more apparent. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, China ranked 106th among the 153 countries surveyed (World Economic Forum, 2019), implying that women are not treated fairly compared to men. Regarding public services, the most recent national statistics reveal that, although women accounted for nearly half the population in China, they represented only 24.1% of public servants in 2013 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Women's intention to work for the government serves as a prerequisite for ultimately joining the public service workforce; the Chinese government must design

policies at the pre-entry and school levels to encourage more women to aspire to the public sector and promote demographic diversity in government.

Evidence suggests a significant gender difference in public service motivation (PSM), an individual's desire to serve the public and society (Perry & Wise, 1990; Riccucci, 2018). Women develop a higher level of PSM (DeHart-Davis et al., 2006; Parola et al., 2019). This suggests that PSM may serve as a mediator that links gender and the attractiveness of public sector selection. Although studies have primarily used gender as a control variable to suggest that women are more likely to choose the public sector, few have investigated the possible effects of gender on public service preference and the mediating role of PSM (Korac et al., 2020). Furthermore, the boundary conditions this relationship holds are yet to be investigated. Recent evidence suggests that perceived discrimination is an important factor influencing the minority's job selection (Davison & Burke, 2000; Storvik & Schöne, 2008). However, few scholars have taken a holistic view that simultaneously considers PSM and perceived discrimination when studying the effects of gender on public sector preferences.

Therefore, we aimed to examine the gender differences in government work preferences among Chinese adolescents and subsequently explore the underlying mechanism that causes such a gender gap. Furthermore, this study goes beyond merely testing the mediating role of PSM; it also examines whether perceived discrimination functions as a boundary condition moderates the effects of PSM and gender effects on job selection. Thus, we developed a moderated mediation model that examines PSM as a mediating mechanism and perceived discrimination as a moderator.

Our findings, which utilize a nationally representative dataset, the China Education Panel Survey (CEPS), suggest a strong gender effect on the attractiveness of public sector employment in China. Regarding the specific mechanism whereby gender helps predict public sector preference, we find that (1) PSM mediates the relationship between gender and the attractiveness of public sector employment, and (2) perceived discrimination moderates the relationship between gender, PSM, and sectoral preference. Specifically, the gender gap in public sector employment is further widened by PSM when perceived discrimination is high.

This study contributes to existing literature in several ways. First, there is a dearth of research that simultaneously considers PSM and perceived discrimination in studying gender effects in public sector selection. By examining the mediating role of PSM in the relationship between gender and sectoral selection, we found that this relationship could be moderated by perceived discrimination in the environment. Second, this study responds to the recent call to consider the gender effects of studying the attractiveness of public-sector employment (Korac et al., 2020). The non-Western context helps examine the applicability of current gender research. Contrary to what has been found in the North American context, Chinese women are less likely to choose public sector work than men. The difference in findings between North America and China reveals the significance of considering cultural backgrounds when studying social equity, calling for more nuanced attention to equity issues in developing

nations. Practically, our results suggest the critical role of a non-discriminatory environment and pre-entry-level PSM regarding women's job attractiveness.

The next section illustrates the theoretical framework and hypotheses on gender, PSM, perceived discrimination, and government employment. This is followed by a description of the data source, measurement of variables, and analytical approach. Finally, we present our main findings and discuss their theoretical and practical implications.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS MAKING

2.1 | Gender and sectoral attractiveness

Scholars and practitioners have long noticed occupational gender segregation (Gross, 1968), in which women occupy lower-level and lower-paid professions than men. One possible contributing factor is organizational discrimination, wherein employers prefer to grant privileges and promotions to men (Reskin, 2000). This unequal distribution may also result from women's preferences (Petersen & Saporta, 2004). Due to social and family pressures, women in most societies are responsible for childcare and housework. This makes women prefer careers that ensure stability and help them balance the dual responsibilities of home and office (Rowe & Snizek, 1995).

The public sector is generally characterized by job stability (Ritz & Waldner, 2011). Compared to men, women are more likely to join the public sector workforce in the United States and the United Kingdom, mainly because of their job stability (Cohen et al., 2005; Ng & Sears, 2015). In addition, although there is a subtle disparity in discrimination between the public and private sectors, the public sector is less discriminatory than the private sector (Channar et al., 2011; Leasher & Miller, 2012). Lee and Zhang (2021) showed that women had a more positive image of the public sector than men, further prioritizing the public sector.

Although Western scholars generally find that women prefer the public sector, the picture in most Asian countries is different. Women in China and other East Asian societies are less likely to join the public sector (Howell, 2006). This is because, women consider not just job stability, but also professional development and expect to play an important role in shaping the public policy agenda to create a more equitable social environment (Auster & Prasad, 2016; Clerkin, 2017; Khairy & Ghoneim, 2023). Contrary to most North American and European countries, the public sector in most Asian societies is male-dominated (Wei et al., 2010). Consequently, women have fewer chances of being promoted to higher positions, making it difficult to influence policy decisions. This situation is extremely serious in China, where most political positions, especially higher ones, are dominated by men (Howell, 2006). Thus, owing to the lack of inclusion and opportunities for promotion, women generally avoid joining male-dominated occupations (Williams et al., 2012). Therefore, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1. In China, women are less likely than men to choose governmental employment.

2.2 | Gender difference, PSM, and public sectoral attractiveness

PSM is commonly characterized as an individual's altruistic inclination to do good for society (Perry & Wise, 1990). Studies suggest significant sex differences in PSM (DeHart-Davis et al., 2006; Parola et al., 2019; Riccucci, 2018). For example, Riccucci (2018) posited that women have higher levels of PSM than men for genetic and biological reasons. Environment and socialization also contribute to gender differences in PSM (Parola et al., 2019). Women are expected to be responsible for childcare and housework, leading them to become more empathic and altruistic. Thus, compared with men, women are more socialized to express the core values of PSM, such as empathy and compassion (DeHart-Davis et al., 2006).

In addition, the literature establishes a positive link between PSM and public employment (Christensen & Wright, 2011; Korac et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2011). The person-environment fit framework (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011) argues that individuals choose a certain type of work because it fits well with their values. Many empirical studies have found that public-sector employees have higher intrinsic value and PSM than their private-sector counterparts (Houston, 2000; Taylor, 2010). As the public sector largely represents public values, individuals with high levels of PSM prefer a public job because of value congruence (Wright & Christensen, 2010). This finding suggests that PSM, as the most critical if not the only incentive, prompts individuals to select public employment.

Based on the two strands of thought that gender influences the PSM and that PSM serves as a significant predictor of public sector selection, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H2a. Women develop a higher PSM level compared to men in China.

H2b. PSM positively correlates with the individual's attraction to a government job.

H2c. PSM mediates the relationship between gender and public sector selection. Specifically, women with a higher level of PSM will be more likely to join the public sector.

2.3 | Moderating role of perceived discrimination

Perceived discrimination is generally understood as an individual's self-perception of unfair treatment owing to a specific identity, such as gender or ethnicity. Perceived discrimination is a type of social exclusion that makes individuals feel alienated, depressed, or lonely (Major & O'Brien, 2005). In a school setting, perceived discrimination from peers and within the classroom can have a greater influence on

adolescents' psychological status and health (Wang et al., 2021). Existing research has different views on discrimination. Studies have found that adolescents are less empathetic when they perceive discriminatory environments (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006). In addition, perceived discrimination negatively correlates with helping behaviors and prosocial tendencies (Brittian et al., 2013). Holt and Choi (2022) demonstrated that non-discrimination and diversity management significantly cultivate PSM. Students who interacted with diverse ethnic and gendered groups developed higher PSM levels. Thus, adolescents who live in non-discriminatory environments are likely to develop high prosocial motivation, as they may enhance their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

By contrast, other studies have shown that marginalized groups exhibit higher levels of political participation after discrimination (Page, 2018; Stronge et al., 2016). Prior research suggests that perceived discrimination can buffer the negative impact of minority identity on women's psychological well-being (Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt et al., 2002) and political participation (Mattila & Papageorgiou, 2017). Specifically, women who perceive discrimination may develop higher PSM than men. One possible reason for this is that minority groups, such as women, are more sensitive to discrimination cues. Studies suggest that women are socialized to become more aware of their feelings, relationships, and relatedness, making them more emotionally sensitive to discrimination cues (Cross & Madson, 1997). For example, Stronge et al. (2016) argued that recognizing inequality toward one's group inspires support for political rights and increases well-being by generating group identity. In other words, when women perceive disparities, they are more motivated to fight for equality.

In particular, the MeToo movement in the new era promoted the liberation of women's minds (Hu et al., 2020). In the past, women were more responsible for their families and seldom participated in managing social affairs (Chen & Hsieh, 2017). The perceived discriminatory environment inspires women's public service awareness, as they are eager to seek opportunities to help victims and change the status quo of social inequality. Oskooii (2016) confirmed that discrimination against marginalized groups in the United States increased the likelihood of civic participation. Despite receiving unfair treatment, they strive to minimize societal inequities by assisting marginalized groups in overcoming psychological obstacles. Consequently, perceived discrimination may reinforce the discriminatory groups' PSM.

Although scholars have diverse view on the relationship between discrimination and service motivation, we argue that women are no longer sensitive or vulnerable to discrimination. With the advancement of time and receiving more diverse information from the media, women will more actively assist others in seeking equal treatment despite discrimination. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3a. Perceived discrimination moderates the relationship between gender and PSM. Specifically, women develop a higher level of PSM compared to men when the perceived discrimination is high.

From a developmental perspective, the discrimination that adolescents experience in the classroom setting influences their beliefs and behaviors at a later stage. Assuming that perceived discrimination moderates the effects of gender on PSM, it is likely that it conditionally strengthens the indirect relationship between gender and sectoral attractiveness. Specifically, when perceived discrimination is high, women are more likely to join the public sector through PSM than men. The existing literature supports the opinion that perceived discrimination is the main consideration in job selection, especially for minority groups (Ng et al., 2012). For example, Storvik and Schöne (2008) found that women in Norway are less likely to apply for management positions than men when they expect strong discrimination. However, a discriminatory work environment may also work in another way, motivating women applicants to change the status quo. As Bilodeau (2017) suggested, the impact of perceived discrimination is complex. Discriminated groups are more likely to be politically active in non-electoral political activities than non-discriminated groups. Discrimination stimulates a group's desire to make a difference, which can lead to the group becoming politically active and eliminating discrimination. Consequently, women are eager to enter the public sector to help develop fair policies that ensure their safety and dignity. Thus, a moderated mediation pattern between these two variables was expected. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3b. Perceived discrimination moderates the indirect relationship between gender and public sectoral preference. Specifically, women are more likely to join the public sector through PSM than men when the perceived discrimination is high.

Considering the challenging environment in the workplace, we propose that gender is positively correlated with the preference for government employment, indicating men are more inclined to choose government employment. Subsequently, based on the crucial role of PSM in individual attitudes and behaviors, we hypothesize that PSM mediates the direct effects of gender and preference for government jobs, with women exhibiting higher PSM compared to men and individuals with higher PSM showing a stronger inclination toward government employment. However, environmental factors may moderate individual preference choices, especially in discriminatory environments, motivating discriminated groups to pursue their interests. Thus, we suggest that when the perceived discrimination is high, with a high level of PSM, women will be more likely to join the public sector than men. Figure 1 shows the hypothesized relationships.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Data source

We used data from the CEPS. This was a long-term tracking survey conducted by the National Survey Research Center at Renmin

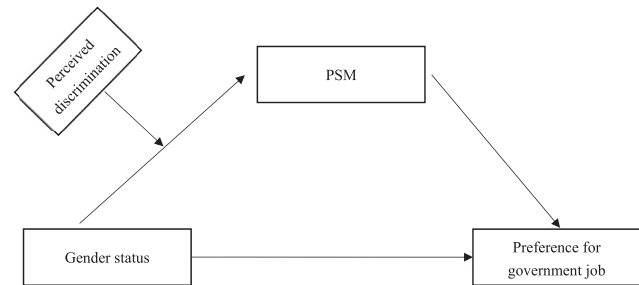


FIGURE 1 Model for the hypothesized relationships.

University of China on junior high school students. The survey was divided into a baseline and follow-up. The baseline survey began in 2013, and the sample included seventh graders, ninth graders, parents, teachers, and school principals. For the questionnaire, 112 schools and 438 classes were selected through random sampling. All the students in the selected classes were included in the survey. A total of 19,487 students, including 10,279 seventh graders and 9208 ninth graders, were surveyed at the baseline. With a 91.9% follow-up rate, 9449 seventh graders were successfully tracked the following year.

This study employed baseline and tracking data for analysis. We selected seventh graders' demographic information, including gender, ethnicity, *hukou* (household registration system in China), relationships with classmates, and family economic conditions, from the baseline data. Students' career preferences, PSM, and perceived discrimination information were drawn from the follow-up data. After merging the data from the two rounds and excluding missing variables, the final sample comprised 7638 students.

3.2 | Measures

3.2.1 | Preference for government jobs

Adolescents' public sector preferences were assessed based on their expected employment attractiveness. In the second survey wave, respondents were asked, "What do you most want to do in the future?"—1. Be a staff member of a public institution or government official; 2. managing an enterprise/company, and 3. becoming a scientist, engineer, doctor, programmer, pilot, or astronaut; 4. become a teacher, lawyer, accountant, or translator; and 5. be a professional designer (such as in clothing, landscape architecture, and advertising), and 6. go into the arts (including writing, painting, broadcasting, directing, and screenwriting); and 7. Professional athletes; 8. Skilled workers (including a driver, cook, or maintenance person); and 9. Joins the military and police; 10. a middle-level service staff member (stewardess, nurse, hairdresser, or beautician) working in a general office; 11. becoming self-employed (such as opening a small shop); 12. Other; 13. it does not matter. All government positions, including the military and police, were coded as one and the others as 0.

3.2.2 | Gender status

Students' gender status was used as an independent variable. In the personal information section of the baseline survey, the first question was, "What is your gender?" If the respondent answered "boy," we coded it as 1 and 0 for women.

3.2.3 | Public service motivation

Following previous studies (Kim et al., 2013; Tao & Wen, 2021; Vandenaabeele, 2008), three items associated with PSM-related values were employed to measure PSM indirectly. Scholars have demonstrated that the abbreviated measure of PSM shares an equivalent utility with multidimensional measures (Kim, 2017). Employing a measurement scale other than the standardized one in a nationally representative sample may provide additional insights into the antecedents of PSM (Ward, 2014). These items asked about students' intentions regarding several prosocial behaviors corresponding to the three sub-dimensions of PSM: compassion (e.g., *I am willing to help old people*), commitment to the public interest (e.g., *I obey orders and queue up conscientiously*), and civic virtue (e.g., *I am sincere and friendly*). Each item is measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). After summing the three dimensions, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.66.

3.2.4 | Perceived discrimination

Adolescents' perceptions of discrimination are linked to diverse factors such as gender and race. Men have higher levels of discrimination perception, and African Americans receive discriminatory treatment more frequently than other racial groups (Romero & Roberts, 1998; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). The *hukou* system divides a population into urban and rural categories in China. This system has

important implications for individuals' social and economic statuses (Chan, 2010). Local students' attitudes toward students from non-indigenous cities and rural areas reflect the discriminatory atmosphere in schools. For example, local students complain about non-local students, resulting in social exclusion (Hill & Zhou, 2021). Therefore, non-local students feel discriminated against by the local students. Accordingly, we measured perceived discrimination based on students' intuitive feelings. In the school situation section of the baseline data, two sample items were "Do you think the local students in your class will complain about or slander students from other cities?" and "Do you think the local students in your class will complain against or slander students from rural areas of other counties?" If the student answered "yes," which indicated that non-Indigenous students lived in a discriminatory environment, we coded it as 1, whereas a non-discriminatory environment was coded as 0. We merged the two items and obtained the Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha = 0.62$).

3.2.5 | Control variables

Studies have shown that individuals' sociodemographic characteristics influence their employment preferences in the public sector (Lewis & Frank, 2002; Woo, 2010). Minorities prefer to work in the government sector because public departments prohibit discrimination against disadvantaged groups (Blank, 1985). Therefore, ethnicity was selected as the control variable. *Han* nationality (the majority in China) was coded as 1, whereas other minorities were coded as 0. In addition to nationality, individuals' family background significantly predicts career choices (Woo, 2018). Thus, we considered students' family economic conditions as another control variable. A sample item measuring family economic condition was, "How is your family's current economic condition?" Participants responded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *very poor*, 5 = *very rich*). Table 1 presents specific measurement information, sample observations, and mean values of the variables.

TABLE 1 Variable descriptions.

Variables	Measurements	Obs	Mean
Dependent variable			
Preference for government job	Dummy = 1 if the student expects to work in the public sector	7638	0.16
Independent variable			
Gender status	Dummy = 1 if the student is a boy	7638	0.51
Mediator			
PSM	The aggregated index of the PSM-related values	7638	3.82
Moderator			
Perceived discrimination	The aggregated index of individual perception of discrimination	7638	0.11
Control variables			
Ethnicity	Dummy = 1 if the student is of the <i>Han</i> nationality	7638	0.92
Family economic condition	Five-point Likert scale (1 = very poor, 5 = very rich)	7638	1.85

3.3 | Data analysis process

This study utilized a moderated mediation model to examine the relationship between gender status and public sectoral preferences. Hayes (2013) and Preacher et al. (2007) proposed a theoretical background and analytical method for a moderated mediation model. Hernandez et al. (2016) provided three conditions for model effectiveness. First, the indirect effect is significant. Second, the mediator and the moderator should have significant interactions. Third, via the mediator, the independent variable should have diverse conditional indirect effects on the dependent variable at different moderator levels. Therefore, we first developed a simple mediation model and tested H2a, H2b, and H2c. A step-by-step regression method was used to examine the mediation effect, and a Sobel test and bootstrapping were conducted to check the robustness of the results. Subsequently, we substituted the moderator into the model to explore the interaction between the mediator and moderator, which could also test H3a. Finally, we tested the moderated mediation effects (H3b) using model eight proposed by Hayes (2013).

3.4 | Mediation effect model

To describe the relationships between the variables and verify the mediation effect model, we estimated the following three equations:

$$PGJ = cGEN + e_1 \quad (1)$$

$$PSM = aGEN + e_2 \quad (2)$$

$$PGJ = c' GEN + b PSM + e_3 \quad (3)$$

where PGJ = preference for a government job, GEN = gender status, PSM = public service motivation, and e represents the residual. Baron and Kenny (1986) proposed a stepwise method to test mediation effects. First, the coefficient c in Equation (1) was tested. If coefficient c was significant, coefficient a of Equation (2) and coefficient b of Equation (3) were tested. Finally, the coefficient c of Equation (3) was tested to determine whether the mediation was full or partial.

Due to the low power of the sequential method, Sobel (1982) recommended the coefficient product method to analyze the mediation effect. Although the results of the Sobel test are more reliable than those of the sequential test (MacKinnon et al., 2002), the Sobel test emphasizes that the coefficients should fit a normal distribution. Therefore, scholars suggest using nonparametric percentile bootstrap methods with higher power (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007; MacKinnon et al., 2004). Bootstrapping considers the original sample as the population and repeats the sampling to obtain a similar bootstrap sample (Wen et al., 2010). After bootstrapping, the coefficient is considered significant if the confidence interval (CI) does not contain zero (Preacher et al., 2007; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The Sobel test and bootstrapping were used to determine the mediation effect.

3.4.1 | Moderated mediation model

To describe the relationships between the variables and verify the moderated mediation model, we estimated the following three equations:

$$PSM = a_0 + a_1GEN + a_2PD + a_3GEN * PD + e_4 \quad (4)$$

$$PGJ = b_0 + b_1PSM + b_2GEN + b_3PD + b_4 GEN * PD + e_5 \quad (5)$$

$$\text{Conditional indirect effect} = b_1 (a_1 + a_3PD) \quad (6)$$

where PD is perceived discrimination, and the remaining variables are consistent with those in Equations (1)–(3). Preacher and Hayes (2004) proposed testing the moderated mediation effect by calculating the conditional indirect effects, standard errors, and CIs. We employ a t -test model based on the two methods suggested by Preacher et al. (2007). The first is normal theory. The salient limitation of this approach is the assumption that the conditional indirect effects are normally distributed. To overcome the shortcomings of the first method, we employed the second method to verify its effectiveness. We obtained the conditional indirect effects, standard errors, and CIs after 500 bootstrapping replicates. Data analysis was performed using Stata 15.0 (StataCorp., College Station, TX, USA).

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Preliminary analyses

Table 2 presents the descriptive details of the variables by gender. Of the sample, 3742 were girls, and 3896 were boys. Boys reported relatively higher preferences for public sector employment (mean for girls = 0.08; mean for boys = 0.24) and perceived higher levels of discrimination than girls (mean for girls = 0.09; mean for

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics of variables.

Variables	Obs	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Girls					
Preference for government job	3742	0.08	0.27	0	1
PSM	3742	3.89	0.66	1	5
Perceived discrimination	3742	0.09	0.24	0	1
Ethnicity	3742	0.92	0.27	0	1
Family economic condition	3742	1.86	0.47	1	3
Boys					
Preference for government job	3896	0.24	0.43	0	1
PSM	3896	3.74	0.82	1	5
Perceived discrimination	3896	0.12	0.28	0	1
Ethnicity	3896	0.93	0.26	0	1
Family economic condition	3896	1.84	0.51	1	3

boys = 0.12), whereas girls presented a slightly higher level of PSM than boys (mean for girls = 3.89; mean for boys = 3.74). Regarding ethnicity and family economic status, most students were of Han nationality (mean for girls = 0.92; mean for boys = 0.93). The mean values for family economic conditions among girls and boys were 1.86 and 1.84, respectively, which indicates that the student's family economic conditions were relatively good.

As shown in Table 3, we performed a correlation analysis to explore the associations between the variables. The results demonstrated that gender status (boy = 1; $\gamma = 0.22, p < 0.001$) was positively associated with the preference for a government job, substantiating H1. Ethnicity (Han = 1; $\gamma = -0.04; p < 0.001$) and family economic conditions ($\gamma = -0.05; p < 0.001$) were negatively correlated with public sector attractiveness. Furthermore, gender status ($\gamma = -0.10; p < 0.001$) and perceived discrimination ($\gamma = -0.10; p < 0.001$) had negative and significant relationships with PSM. However, PSM was not significantly correlated with public sectoral attractiveness ($\gamma = 0.02; p = 0.08$), which revealed that H2 was only partially supported. For the control variables, the relationships between ethnicity and PSM ($\gamma = 0.03; p < 0.05$) and family economic condition and PSM ($\gamma = 0.07; p < 0.001$) were positively significant.

4.2 | Mediation analysis

We examined whether PSM mediated the association between gender and preference for government jobs. Table 4 reports the results of stepwise regression. Gender is negatively associated with PSM, supporting H2a. Moreover, PSM was positively correlated with

a preference for a government job, supporting H2b. Thus, consistent with H2c, the relationship between gender and preference for a government job is partially mediated by PSM. We conducted Sobel and bootstrapping tests to check the robustness of the mediation effects. The results of the Sobel test in Table 5 confirm that the indirect effect is significant ($z = -3.494; p = 0.000$). The bootstrapping results also supported H2c. As shown in Table 6, the 95% CI did not contain zero (bootstrap 95% CI = [-0.005, -0.002]).

4.3 | Moderated mediation analysis

To test H3a, which predicted that the negative association between gender and PSM would be stronger at high levels of perceived discrimination, we developed a moderation effect model. The results revealed that the interaction term between gender and perceived discrimination was negatively significant ($\gamma = -0.13, p < 0.05$). Figure 2 shows the simple interaction slopes at three levels of

TABLE 5 Sobel test for mediation effect.

Coef	SE	Z	p
-0.00	0.00	-3.49	0.000

TABLE 6 Bootstrap Results for mediation effect.

Coef	SE	LL 95% CI	UL 95% CI
-0.00	0.00	-0.005	-0.002

TABLE 3 Intercorrelations results (N = 7638).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Preference for government job					
2. Gender status	0.22***				
3. PSM	0.02	-0.10***			
4. Perceived discrimination	0.01	0.05***	-0.10***		
5. Ethnicity	-0.04***	0.02	0.03*	-0.02*	
6. Family economic condition	-0.05***	-0.03*	0.07***	-0.05***	0.09***

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

TABLE 4 Mediation effect model regression results.

	Dependent variables					
	PSM			Preference for government job		
	B	SE	t	B	SE	z
Gender	-0.15	0.02	-8.68***	1.32	0.07	18.61***
PSM				0.16	0.04	3.90***
Ethnicity	0.03	0.02	1.27	0.12	0.09	1.37
Family economic condition	0.11	0.02	6.30***	-0.25	0.06	-3.87***

Note. B is the regression coefficient; SE is the standard error.

*** $p < 0.001$.

perceived discrimination: one standard deviation below the mean of perceived discrimination, the average value of perceived discrimination, and one standard deviation above the mean of perceived discrimination. As shown in Figure 2, the slope of the correlation between gender and PSM is relatively steeper when perceived discrimination is high, which supports H3a. Specifically, compared with low levels of perceived discrimination, girls developed a relatively higher level of PSM than boys when they perceived high levels of discrimination.

We then estimated the conditional indirect effect of gender on public sector attractiveness via PSM at three levels of perceived discrimination. Table 7 details the results, including the regression coefficients, standard errors, *t*-values, and significance. Consistent with H3b, the indirect effect of gender status on government job preference through PSM was moderated by perceived discrimination. To check the robustness of the moderated mediation effects, we performed a normal theory-based test and a bootstrapping analysis.

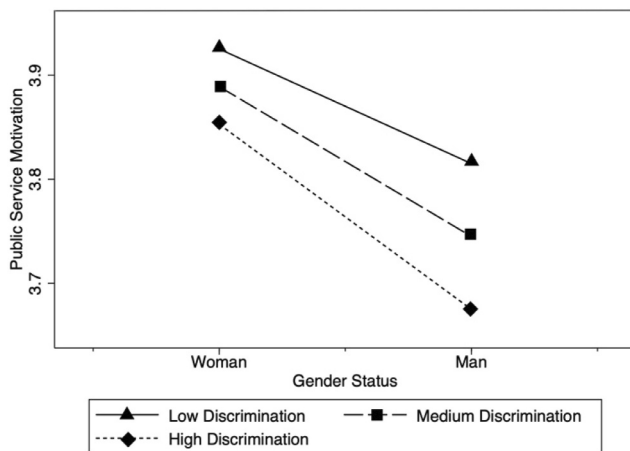


FIGURE 2 PSM predicted by gender moderated by different levels of perceived discrimination. Low discrimination = one standard deviation below the mean; Medium discrimination = mean; High discrimination = one standard deviation above the mean.

Table 8 shows that the three levels of the conditional indirect effects were negative and statistically significant. As the value of perceived discrimination increased, the conditional indirect effects decreased slowly. Moreover, Table 9 shows that the bootstrapped CI did not include zero, confirming H3b.

Concerning our control variables, family economic status was statistically significant. Compared to their counterparts from low-income families, students from affluent families showed a higher level of PSM and willingness to work in the public sector.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since promoting employment diversity in the government is key to achieving social equity and representative bureaucracy in China, we examined gender differences in governmental work preferences among Chinese adolescents. Utilizing a representative dataset and a moderated mediation model, we also explored the underlying mechanism that causes this gender gap in employment preferences.

First, our findings suggest that gender strongly affects the attractiveness of government jobs in China. This is consistent with the literature, which has consistently observed differing job values, expectations, and selections between men and women (Cohen et al., 2005; Maranto et al., 2019; Ng & Sears, 2015). Specifically, our results indicate that Chinese women are less likely than men to choose public-sector work. However, this finding contradicts several studies in the North American context that found a higher preference for public-sector employment among women (Steijn, 2008; Vandebaele, 2008). This variation may be attributed to cultural

TABLE 8 Normal theory-based test for conditional indirect effect.

Perceived discrimination	B	SE	z	p
-1 SD	-0.002	0.001	-3.120	0.002
Mean	-0.003	0.000	-3.650	0.000
+1 SD	-0.004	0.001	-3.57	0.000

	Dependent variables					
	PSM			Preference for government job		
	B	SE	z	B	SE	z
Gender	-0.13	0.02	-7.30***	0.17	0.01	19.27***
PSM				0.02	0.01	4.05***
Perceived discrimination	-0.14	0.04	-0.314**	0.01	0.02	0.64
Gender * perceived discrimination	-0.13	0.06	-2.23*	-0.02	0.03	-0.69
Ethnicity	0.02	0.02	0.95	0.01	0.01	1.33
Family economic condition	0.10	0.02	6.05***	-0.03	0.01	-3.91***

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

TABLE 7 Moderated mediation model regression results.

TABLE 9 Bootstrap results for conditional indirect effect.

Perceived discrimination	Boot. Coef	Boot. SE	Boot. z	Boot. p	Boot. 95% CI
-1 SD	-0.002	0.001	-3.100	0.002	(-0.004, -0.001)
Mean	-0.003	0.001	-3.58	0.000	(-0.005, -0.001)
+1 SD	-0.004	0.001	-3.48	0.000	(-0.006, -0.002)

differences. One salient aspect of traditional Confucian culture in China is male dominance, which explicitly states that men are superior to women (Blake, 1994). Thus, men are expected to take responsibility for governance, while women are responsible for family affairs. This internalized male dominance ideology shapes Chinese women's job expectations, reducing their willingness to join the public sector (Chen & Hsieh, 2017). The divergence in findings between North America and China suggests that any attempt to generalize the results of gender research from one context to another should be taken cautiously, as cultural backgrounds may significantly shape gender roles and expectations.

Second, regarding the specific mechanism whereby gender helps predict public sector preferences, this study finds that PSM plays a mediating role. This result is consistent with previous studies suggesting that PSM mediates the relationship between gender and behavioral outcomes such as organizational citizenship behavior (Alanazi, 2021). In particular, our study verified that adolescent girls develop a higher level of PSM than boys. Although previous studies have confirmed the gender dimension of PSM (DeHart-Davis et al., 2006; Parola et al., 2019) and identified gender differences in sectoral preferences (Cohen et al., 2005; Ng & Sears, 2015), few studies have examined the potential mediating process of PSM between gender and public employment attractiveness. Thus, this study contributes to the existing PSM literature by revealing the underlying mechanism that causes a gender gap in the attractiveness of government jobs.

Finally, this study goes beyond merely testing the mediating role of PSM; it also develops a moderated mediation model to examine whether perceived discrimination functions as a boundary condition that moderates the effects of PSM and gender on job selection. There is a dearth of research that simultaneously considers PSM and perceived discrimination in studying gender effects in public sector selection. Our results revealed that perceived environmental discrimination can significantly moderate this relationship. Specifically, the gender gap in public sector employment is further widened by PSM when perceived discrimination is high. This result is consistent with previous studies suggesting that the incentive effects of perceived discrimination inspire minority groups, especially regarding political participation (Page, 2018; Stronge et al., 2016). China's household registration system governs the allocation of urban and rural public services. It primarily distinguishes between urban and rural populations, as well as local and non-local populations (Chan, 2010). Owing to this system, migrant populations and temporary workers experience discrimination in accessing public services, resulting in unfair treatment compared to local urban residents

in areas such as medical care, housing subsidies, and children's education (Meng, 2019). We found that the surveyed students could discern the attitudes of local students. Girls who displayed stronger empathy than boys were more likely to experience disparities in learning, living, and psychological aspects resulting from discrimination. This sense of disparity arising from discrimination will likely inspire them to change, particularly by aiding others in overcoming discrimination and fostering an environment conducive to realizing equitable values. The prevailing value in China is that the government serves the people. Therefore, working in the government can maximize the realization of public interest, which attracts female students. This study adds to this line of research by demonstrating that perceived discrimination enhances girls' preferences for government jobs, either directly or indirectly, through PSM.

Our results demonstrate the moderating role of discriminatory environments. Consistent with previous research, our study echoes that perceived discrimination motivates women's prosocial behavior, facilitating their willingness to enter the public sector to change the status quo (Oskooii, 2016; Stronge et al., 2016). With the liberation of women's spiritual worlds, women in this century are no longer passive. Instead, they are more active and work to alter their circumstances. We must respect women's self-reliance and support them in advocating their interests. In China, the public sector access mechanism and gender ratio in high positions illustrate the social reality of male domination (Howell, 2006; Wei et al., 2010). Policy-makers should consider how the fairness inherent in institutional design impacts job preferences to minimize the gender gap in public service employment and ultimately facilitate an inclusive government. On the one hand, access mechanisms in the public sector must provide equal quotas for women. Specifically, visible and invisible gender barriers to entry should be reduced, such as mentioning only men during recruitment or asking women about their fertility and marital status during the application process. On the other hand, it is recommended that the public sector create more opportunities for women to rise through hierarchical ladders and become decision-makers, increasing women's interest in working in public services. Additionally, merely focusing on environmental barriers at the recruitment stage may be insufficient to attract women public sector employees. More attention should be paid to the pre-entry level to increase adolescents' willingness to join the government (Korac et al., 2019). School leaders and educational practitioners should provide opportunities to increase adolescent girls' PSM and willingness toward public employment. For example, the curriculum should be supplemented with prosocial exercises encouraging students to engage in volunteer work such as nursing homes and abandoned

children. Moreover, this research inspires policymakers to reconsider the discrimination arising from the household registration system, especially in categorizing people and providing public services. Policymakers should consider abolishing or replacing the household registration system and formulating fair resource allocation policies.

This study had several limitations. First, discrimination was measured subjectively. Owing to the limitations of the secondary dataset, we could not objectively measure the discrimination experienced by students in the classroom and at school. Furthermore, previous discrimination experiences may have affected students' discrimination expectations at later stages (Chavous et al., 2008). Further research could collect data on real discrimination experiences to rule out preexisting individual differences. Second, we used PSM-related values rather than a well-established four-dimensional scale to measure PSM. Although existing studies have verified that the abbreviated measure shares the same theoretical validity as the PSM construct (Kim, 2017), the risk of the predictive power of PSM being lowered still exists. Thus, additional efforts could be made to investigate the effects of discrimination on the sectoral preferences of minority groups using precise measures of PSM. Third, we used a moderated mediation model to explore adolescents' attractiveness of public sector employment. While we examined the mediating and moderating roles of PSM and perceived discrimination on the attractiveness of public sector employment, individual employment choices are multifaceted. Other personal or environmental factors may influence them. Future research should collect more comprehensive data to investigate these influencing factors further and incorporate them into the model, thus contributing to a more integrated framework and a robust moderated mediation model for understanding the determinants of individuals' preferences for public sector employment. Finally, the sample comprised Chinese teenagers with a strong Confucian cultural background. As we found that different cultural traditions would significantly shape the job expectations of minority groups, readers should be cautious when generalizing our findings to other cultural settings.

Despite these limitations, this study is one of the few attempts to focus on gender differences in sectoral preferences in China and to develop a moderated mediation model to examine the effects of perceived discrimination and PSM on job selection. This study contributes to the extant literature by exploring the impact of gender on public sector preferences and helping policymakers effectively ideate actionable plans to enhance diversity in the public sector. We encourage more scholars, particularly in the developing world and in different cultural contexts, to engage in this research area to focus on social equity issues and promote diversity in government.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in China Education Panel Survey at <http://ceps.ruc.edu.cn/>.

PRACTICAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Our study highlights the importance of a non-discriminatory environment and pre-entry-level public service motivation in influencing women's willingness to join the government. Policymakers and educators should aim to cultivate inclusive classrooms that promote adolescent girls' public service motivation and spark their interest in public employment.

ORCID

Lei Tao  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8717-3155>

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