

PAPER

The Influence of Family Socio-Economic on Children's Gender Expectations in Macau

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Macao, Chinayxwei777@163.com**ABSTRACT**

Gender roles reflect the way people are influenced by social expectations and specific cultural contexts. Parents usually project their gender beliefs into their childrearing. Macau, as a special administrative region, combines Asian and Western culture with authoritative parenting models and Western encouragement styles. This paper aims to explore how Macau parents' socioeconomic status (SES) influences their gender expectations and their approach to gender education for young children. We gathered 84 valid questionnaires titled "Macau Parents' Gender Expectations of Young Children" via an online portal. We examine the frequency of toy purchases, parental career expectations for their children, and the gender of primary caretakers, assessing variations by SES group. Ultimately, we conclude that higher family SES affords greater resources and opportunities for children while diminishing traditional gender stereotypes.

KEYWORDS

gender expectation, family socioeconomic status, parents' belief

1 INTRODUCTION

Gender, as a label, is often used to define characteristics that males or females are deemed to develop as a result of social experience [1]. People may rely on gender roles to direct their behaviors, personalities, beliefs, and attitudes. Traditional beliefs hold that women as caretakers work full-time at home to support their families, whereas males in leadership positions prioritize financial responsibility and decision-making in the home and workplace [2]. Even now, the gender gap between males and females reveals how gender inequality impacts women's entire lives, resulting in a subservient position in the male world.

In terms of how gender beliefs are developed within individuals, parenting practice plays an important role. Parents often prefer that their children adhere to traditional sex roles and are concerned when they do not [3]. For example, girls are taught to be selfless, tolerant, compassionate, trustworthy, and responsible to

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their family. Boys, on the other hand, are raised to be fair decision-makers, cooperative, logical, and strong, as well as future breadwinners for their families [4]. However, parents from different socioeconomic statuses (SES) may differ in how they influence children's gender socialization. [5] finds a correlation between the socioeconomic status of parents and their childrearing values. Middle family SES parents adhere to a tolerance of child-rearing values based on their social status and beliefs, providing more educational resources and self-regulation rights for their children. Lower family SES parents, on the other hand, give a sense of obedience towards outside authorities' top priority.

Macau is a male-dominated society, where Chinese patriarchal values dominate perceptions of women's roles and status. Nevertheless, the conventional position of women has evolved, with women now distributing their endeavors among domestic responsibilities, professional pursuits, and other social engagements. [6] Moreover, Macau has achieved a succession of economic marvels and has emerged as one of the wealthiest cities globally. [7] Considering Macau's progressive economy and changing society, we still question if Macau residents unwittingly hold gender biases in their beliefs and pass them on to the next generation. Therefore, our aim in this paper is to explore the impact of socioeconomic status on parents' gender beliefs, and we examined whether parents from different social classes in Macau held different gender concepts about children.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Gender role

Gender roles refer to societal norms and expectations of behavior, attitudes, and responsibilities that are considered appropriate for both men and women. These roles are deeply rooted in cultural, social, and historical contexts and shape how individuals perceive themselves and others in society.

From a sociological perspective, gender roles are learned through a process called gender socialization, which begins at a young age. Children observe and imitate the behavior of adults and peers, internalizing norms that define male or female meanings. This process is influenced by various social systems, including family, education, media, and religion [8].

For example, traditional gender roles often require men to be confident, independent, and career-oriented, while women should be cultured, passive, and focused on household chores. These roles are not only prescriptive but also prohibitive, which means they define what individuals should and should not do based on gender. Violating these norms may lead to social sanctions or opposition.

Gender roles are strengthened through daily interactions and social expectations. [9] argue in their study that these roles reflect the social structure and division of labor in a specific society, perpetuating gender inequality. In particular, the gender wage gap and inegalitarian gender role attitude trends in China are substantially influenced by gender role attitudes, as evidenced by the fact that men exhibit higher wage levels than women. [10] The impact of cultural economics on gender inequality will result in a social divide, continuing to deepen, leading to the next stage of genderization.

Macau, a special administrative region of China, has a distinct policy and economy from China until 2049. But similar to Asian traditional cultural ideas, its society is worried about their families and getting nice and decent employment. Their self-image is built upon their Chineseness. Moreover, local people in Macau hold

similar Asian social expectations for their children to achieve high performance [11]. [12] indicate that female freshmen in Asia are more influenced by expectations due to their internalization of cultural gender stereotypes. They require additional effort to attain the same opportunities as men, which may also result in increased stress and sadness. Consequently, under the Asian cultural context, gender roles in Macau may continue to be reproduced and modified by society, appearing both naturally and unnoticed in individuals' lives.

2.2 Parental gender expectations from different socio-economic status

An important factor that may shape parents' gender expectations is the family's SES. It includes economic, occupational, and educational experience, illustrating important markers of social class or SES [13]. SES affects access to resources, which affects social capital gained via personal and collective social networks [14]. Based on SES, the high family social status of parents demonstrates children's academic performance, family-based characteristics, preference for future careers, and parenting model [15].

Research suggests that parental gender expectations can vary across SES, and these variations may influence children's gender perceptions and overall development. For example, research by [16] highlights that due to their finances and progressive values, middle SES families are more likely to support gender equality and nontraditional gender roles. Conversely, studies by [17] and [18] indicate that lower SES families may emphasize traditional gender roles, influenced by economic constraints and cultural norms. These differing expectations can shape children's self-concept, academic interests, and career aspirations [19]. For example, children from lower SES families may internalize traditional gender norms, restricting their participation in STEM for girls and caregiving for boys [20] [21].

In Confucian cultural contexts, East Asian societies emphasize family hierarchy and collective well-being; gender expectations often align with traditional roles. For instance, boys are frequently viewed as bearers of the family legacy and prioritized for education, reflecting the "son preference" rooted in Confucian ideals. However, research in Japan and China reveals that well-educated parents with higher SES support gender fairness and encourage sons and daughters to succeed academically and professionally. These parents promote academic success and non-traditional gender norms, encouraging females to study STEM subjects and sons to pursue non-traditional hobbies.

Conversely, lower-SES families have more traditional gender expectations. Due to economic constraints and cultural standards, boys are pushed to seek secure, income-generating occupations while girls are expected to care for others. In some Asian cultures, boys are given priority for few resources due to their anticipated position as future providers.

In Macau, a unique blend of Confucian heritage and modern urbanization influences parental gender expectations across SES groups. Preliminary findings suggest that higher SES families in Macau reflect similar progressive attitudes to those observed in broader East Asian contexts, while lower SES families demonstrate patterns consistent with traditional Confucian norms.

2.3 Parental beliefs and the social context of Macau

Parents' beliefs about their children's educational outcomes are based on their social and cultural beliefs and are expressed in different parenting practices.

Asian parents have more expectations and are more authoritative about their children's outcomes compared with European and American parenting styles [22]. Asian heritage parenting styles have been a study interest for many years, whereas Macau, as a special administrative region, is understudied. Macau, a former Portuguese colony that was turned over to China in 1999, is a Chinese-dominated society that remains independent from mainland China until 2049. It has been under foreign control for centuries. Since Macau has a unique status and is not subject to China's socialist system, it is one of the two so-called Special Administrative Regions (SAR) of China [23]. Macau, as a bridge, combines eastern and western culture in a tight social network. On one hand, it remains traditional Chinese culture, such as Confucianism, demonstrating a solid foundation to construct strong family support for their children's attention [15]. On the other hand, Macau has been controlled by Catholicism for over a century, which spreads individualism, freedom, and Catholic identity to the society [24].

Due to its unique history, the people of Macau have been influenced by many different countries, and different cultures and ethnicities have blended and taken root in this region. Therefore, taking into account the differences in regional and cultural backgrounds, the gender concepts of parents and children in Macao, as well as the definitions of gender roles in Macao's regional environment, may be different from those in mainland China. Macau's special geographical and historical background has influenced the gender concepts of young children and parents to a certain extent, but with the continuous changes and development of society, Macau's gender concepts are also gradually evolving.

2.4 The present study

Over the past 30 years, China's development of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has seen significant policy and practice changes. China has recently made significant national efforts to increase kindergarten enrollment [25]. Moreover, with the rapid development of living standards, parents begin to attach importance to their parenting education, which provides more educational resources and involvement for their children. In this study, we plan to survey the gender awareness of Macau parents with children aged 0–8 years old to consider how tolerant Macau parents are towards gender concepts nowadays and how much they are influenced by traditional gender concepts. We also expect that parents' views from different SES will have different gender beliefs. We expect that parents from high SES will provide more freedom of choice for children, whereas low SES families will follow the traditional gender belief to guide their children.

By survey questionnaire, we will infer the potential problems that may exist in young children's understanding of gender, including the children's primary caregiver, the types of toys, and the expectations of children's future careers.

3 MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Participants and data collection

This study focused on parents in Macao with children aged 0–8 years. A total of 93 questionnaires were distributed, and 84 valid responses were collected, resulting in a response rate of 90.3%. The sample included 25 male and 59 female respondents,

with the majority falling within the 30–39 age range, although participants aged in their 20s to over 50 were also represented.

3.2 Questionnaire design

The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions, structured into three main sections:

1. **Demographic information:** Questions about the respondent's age, gender, occupation, family income, and relationship to the child.
2. **Parental expectations and roles:** Questions exploring career aspirations for their children, the gender of the primary caregiver, and caregiving dynamics within the family.
3. **Toy preferences and gender norms:** Questions on recent toy purchases, categorized by gender norms into masculine, feminine, or neutral toys.

Responses were collected using a mix of multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions. The structure ensured clarity and ease of response for participants from varying educational and social backgrounds.

3.3 Data classification and segmentation

The collected data were categorized based on family income, aligning with the socioeconomic classifications defined in the *2021 Macao Human Resources and Salary Survey*. Family income was divided into the following four categories:

1. **Low-income:** ≤ MOP 15,000
2. **Lower-middle-income:** MOP 15,001–30,000
3. **Upper-middle-income:** MOP 30,001–45,000
4. **High-income:** ≥ MOP 45,001

The variables of interest—career expectations, primary caregiver roles, and toy purchases—were segmented by SES and child gender to identify patterns of gender-specific expectations and behaviors.

3.4 Data analysis

The data were processed using descriptive statistics and comparative analysis techniques to evaluate the frequencies and percentages of responses. The following steps were undertaken:

- **Career expectations:** Responses were classified by SES and child gender to assess SES-related biases in parental aspirations for boys and girls.
- **Primary caregiver roles:** The percentage of families with male caregivers, female caregivers, or shared caregiving responsibilities was calculated across SES categories.
- **Toy preferences:** Toys were categorized by gender norms (masculine, feminine, neutral) and analyzed separately for boys and girls. Bar charts were used to visually represent purchasing trends across SES groups.

Statistical tests, including chi-square tests of independence, were performed to evaluate associations between SES and the variables of interest. Segmented tables and visualizations were used to summarize and present findings.

3.5 Descriptive statistics

The analysis was based on 84 valid responses, with 30 responses (32.5%) from families with boys and 54 responses (67.5%) from families with girls. Among the SES groups:

- **Low-income families** (21.4% of the sample): six families (33.3%) had boys, and 12 families (66.7%) had girls.
- **Lower-middle-income families** (44.0%): 12 families (32.4%) had boys, and 25 families (67.6%) had girls.
- **Upper-middle-income families** (21.4%): seven families (38.9%) had boys, and 11 families (61.1%) had girls.
- **High-income families** (20.2%): seven families (41.2%) had boys, and 10 families (58.8%) had girls.

For career expectations, the data were further segmented to compare specific aspirations for boys and girls across SES groups. Similarly, toy preferences were analyzed in detail, highlighting differences in the types of toys purchased for boys and girls, segmented by socio-economic standards.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality, and all responses were collected and processed in compliance with ethical research guidelines. Respondents provided informed consent prior to participation.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Parents' expectation of children's future career under different SES

Table 1. Parental expectations for children's future careers by family income and child gender

Monthly Income (MOP)	Gender	Career Aspiration	Frequency	Percentage
≤15,000	Boy	Self-decided	4	66.7%
		Doctor	1	16.7%
		Lawyer	1	16.7%
	Girl	Self-decided	5	33.3%
		Teacher	4	26.7%
		Doctor	2	13.3%
		R&D	1	6.7%

(Continued)

Table 1. Parental expectations for children's future careers by family income and child gender (*Continued*)

Monthly Income (MOP)	Gender	Career Aspiration	Frequency	Percentage	
15,001–30,000	Boy	Self-decided	4	28.6%	
		Teacher	2	14.3%	
		Government Official	2	14.3%	
		R&D	1	7.1%	
		STEM	1	7.1%	
		Artist	1	7.1%	
		Doctor	1	7.1%	
	Girl	Self-decided	8	30.8%	
		Teacher	10	38.5%	
		Doctor	4	15.45%	
		Government Official	1	3.8%	
		Artist	1	3.8%	
30,001–45,000	Boy	Self-decided	5	71.4%	
		STEM	2	28.6%	
	Girl	Self-decided	3	23.1%	
		Teacher	3	23.1%	
		Doctor	2	15.4%	
		Government Official	1	7.7%	
		STEM	2	15.4%	
	≥45,001	Boy	Self-decided	5	71.4%
			Doctor	1	14.3%
			Government Official	1	14.3%
Girl		Self-decided	2	22.2%	
		Teacher	3	33.3%	
		Doctor	1	11.1%	
		Stable job	2	22.2%	
Language Translator	1	11.1%			
Own Business	1	11.1%			

Parental career aspirations vary by SES and reflect how parents see their children's futures. Higher SES parents have more explicit and ambitious job aspirations for their children, especially daughters. This pattern matches research showing that high SES families have more resources and chances to help their children choose prestigious or stable jobs such as teaching, medicine, or entrepreneurship [26].

For boys, the data refer to Table 1) suggests that parental SES may not affect career expectations for boys. Macau's Confucian culture suggests that parents, regardless of money, may give males more vocational freedom. This development may reflect

gender norms that enable boys to explore more professional possibilities or have less strict expectations than girls [18]. Cultural assumptions that boys are more independent or capable of navigating job routes may also influence parental expectations.

Interestingly, the data highlights a persistent gender stereotype in lower SES families, where there is a stronger tendency to envision traditionally gendered roles for their children, especially for girls. Because Macau's parents in lower SES still have been influenced by Asian culture. Teachers have relatively stable salaries and less frequent workplace changes compared to other professions; they are more suitable for the stereotype in society that women need to take care of their families more.

As income levels rise, parents exhibit a broader range of career aspirations for their daughters, including non-traditional fields such as STEM and entrepreneurship. This shift suggests that SES can influence the breaking of traditional gender roles, with higher SES families more likely to support diverse career paths for their daughters [27].

In Macau, a region dominated by Chinese, we can still find out that while SES influences parental expectations, it does so in a gendered manner, potentially perpetuating traditional career paths for girls, especially in lower SES contexts. This implies that gender equality is influenced by statuses, and lower SES families will be hardly open to their children choosing their careers.

4.2 Gender of parents as primary caregivers in different SES

Table 2. The percentage of family primary caregivers in different family SES

Monthly Income (MOP)	Family Primary Caregiver	Percentage
≤15,000	Female only	13%
	Male only	0%
	Female and male caregivers	5%
15,001–30,000	Female only	20%
	Male only	2%
	Female and male caregivers	19%
30,001–45,000	Female only	11%
	Male only	0%
	Female and male caregivers	10%
≥45,001	Female only	11%
	Male only	2%
	Female and male caregivers	7%

As young children spend a long time with their family members at the early stage, the interactions between parents and young children will subconsciously affect their physical and mental development, learning of emotional life, and formation of ethical values. Therefore, the distribution of roles among family members in caring for children will also subtly affect the development of children's social roles. In low SES families, they have the least access to social resources. Parents as female caregivers in this socio-economic position are most affected by the traditional gender roles in society.

According to Bourdieu, humans create cultural practices to defend their social structures [28]. To maintain social order and meet the ruler's resource allocation, lower SES families have male labor cores and female family cores. As social and

cultural capital in reproduction is duplicated [28], children trained in this home milieu then replicate this phenomenon. In Macau, gender inequality in children can shape men and women’s social identities. Children’s behavior will internalize gender bias, hindering gender equality.

Male childcare engagement has increased in middle- and high-SES families and is similar to women solely (refer to Table 2). This suggests that parents with higher cultural capital provide their children more experience, knowledge, and attitudes to navigate society [29]. It also means that higher-SES parents will be more open to their children, helping them grasp social roles through male caretakers. According to the findings, Macau fathers play a larger role in family caregiving as their socio-economic position grows. This structure helps young children break gender preconceptions and establish a wider range of gender roles. In long-term, it will help young children grasp gender equality.

4.3 Types of toys purchased by parents for young children under different SES

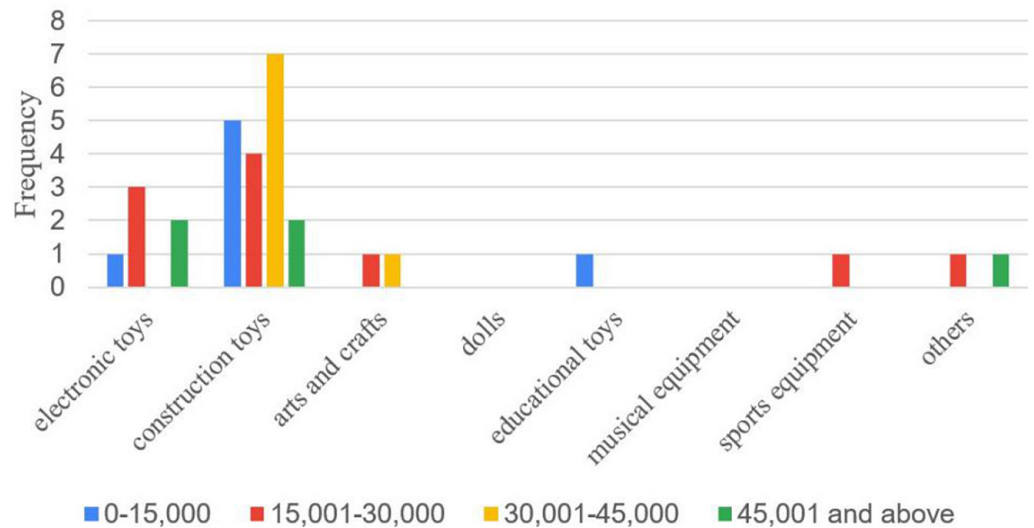


Fig. 1. Parents buying tendency for boys

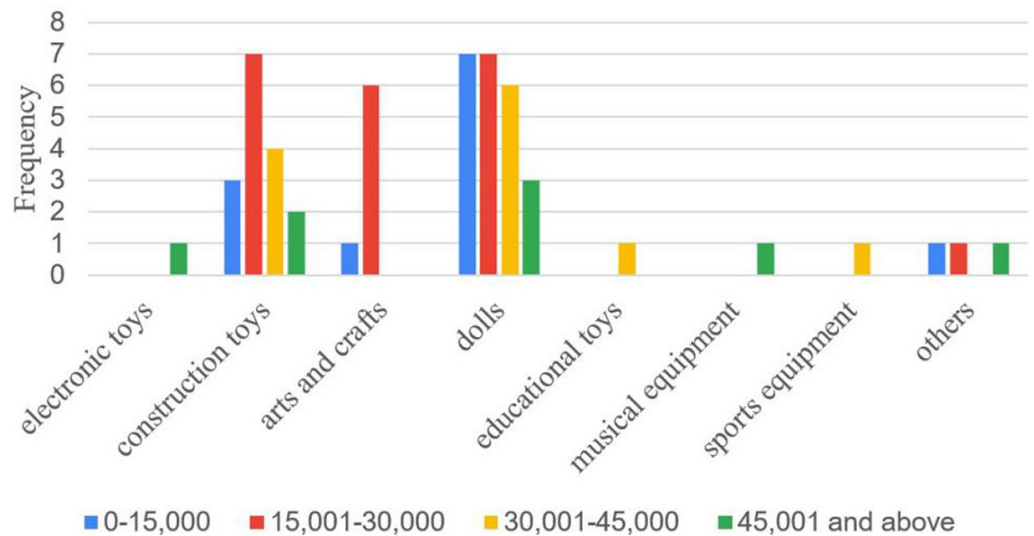


Fig. 2. Parents buying tendency for girls

Traditionally, parents prefer to buy toys that are appropriate for their child's gender. Both girls and boys play with these gender-appropriate toys. The gender roles they perform in their daily lives are influenced by this playing environment, which in turn affects their social perceptions [30]. Based on [31], we identify toys that are metallic, hard, and exciting as male-oriented toys, such as electronic toys, construction toys, and sports equipment. Toys with soft fabrics, low DIY, easy to operate, and calming toys were regarded as female-oriented toys, such as arts and crafts and dolls. Musical equipment and educational toys are regarded as neutral toys.

The toys defined as gender stereotypes for girls and boys are distinct in different SES groups. In low SES families, they do not have the material motivation to invest in their children's education. In choosing toys for their children, the traditional social concept of gender is still the main ideology, with boys choosing mechanically manipulative toys (see Figure 1) and girls choosing dolls (see Figure 2) that meet the feminine qualities of women, such as quietness and good behavior.

The family is the main place of socialization for young children [30]. After such a household atmosphere, children would also get the traditional gender perception that boys prefer remote control cars and girls like dolls. Middle-SES parents are wealthier and more culturally diversified than low-SES parents. Middle SES parents buy fewer gender-affirming gifts for boys and girls (see Figures 1 and 2). This is more noticeable in high-SES families.

High-SES parents buy males arts and crafts and girls manipulative toys. More parents choose toys with male social roles for girls than for girls in other SES families (see Figure 2). As parents' socioeconomic status increases, they will give more diverse settings and situations for their children's development and become more open-minded. Middle-class families, the largest social category, are still affected by traditional gender ideology, especially for boys who are expected to follow men's social roles. Girls are still hoped to conform to traditional standards of feminine roles and be quiet and well-behaved.

Despite internal gender tension in middle and high SES classes, some parents are breaking down gender stereotypes by giving a variety of toys to children of different genders. This suggests that gender norms influenced by socioeconomic status can affect long-term gender equality. Greater SES allows Macau's parents to be more open about macro ideas such as their children's future occupations and caregiving, but they still have a traditional effect on toy preferences for different gender. These micro-choices may continue to influence children's gender equality.

5 CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role of SES in shaping parental expectations, caregiving dynamics, and toy preferences, which collectively influence children's gender role development in Macau. Higher SES families demonstrate more progressive and ambitious career expectations for daughters, while traditional gender norms are more pronounced in lower SES families, particularly in caregiving roles and toy preferences. These findings underline the persistent influence of SES on gender socialization, revealing both opportunities for and barriers to achieving greater gender equality.

In the future, changing social and educational processes can disrupt gender preconceptions. Policymakers and educators in Macau can use these findings to improve gender socialization. To reduce gender stereotypes, schools should emphasize educational equality in teaching and policy [32]. Gender-sensitive curricula can

challenge norms, develop different role models, and foster gender equality conversations in schools. Workshops with non-traditional professionals such as female engineers or male nurses might motivate pupils to think bigger. Children learn gender roles from their environment. Schools can create a female league to influence public options and teach gender-specific curriculum. Schools may elect more female administrators to political offices to inspire girls to become leaders [33].

Public campaigns by community organizations such as the Macau Women's Federation can boost these efforts. Campaigns that promote gender equality and provide resources to families can help low-income families change gender norms. Seminars and online content for parents can emphasize non-stereotypical caregiving and career advising for children of both genders.

For disadvantaged families, government-backed initiatives should prioritize equitable access to resources that foster gender equality. This includes providing financial aid for extracurricular programs that encourage STEM participation for girls or arts involvement for boys and offering professional training to educators to address gender biases in the classroom.

In an increasingly globalized world, Macau's education system has the opportunity to serve as a model for integrating cultural heritage with progressive practices. By equipping future generations with the tools to embrace inclusivity, society can ensure that children are not constrained by traditional gender expectations. Ultimately, fostering an egalitarian view of gender will help every individual reach their full potential, contributing to a more equitable and dynamic society.

6 RESEARCH LIMITATION

In the questionnaire collection process, families with a medium monthly gross income were the main target group, while data from low-income families and high-income families were inadequate. This sample characteristic may affect the generalizability of our findings. Because the group of lower SES families was still heavily influenced by traditional gender expectations in our study, we would concentrate on low-income families in future research. From the perspective of their vacations, family responsibilities, and spending hours, as well as time with children in lower SES families, we can learn more about their gender expectations for children.

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