The Changing Patterns and Determinants of Stay-at-Home Motherhood

in Urban China, 1982 to 2015

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents trends in and examines determinants of stay-at-home motherhood in urban China from 1982 to 2015. China once had the world's leading female labor force participation rate. Since the economic reforms starting from the early 1980s, however, some mothers have been withdrawing from the labor force due to diminished state support, a rise in intensive parenting, and heightened work-family conflicts. Based on data from the 1982, 1990, and 2000 Chinese censuses, the 2005 mini-census, and the 2006–2015 Chinese General Social Survey, we find mothers' non-employment increased for every educational group and grew at a much faster rate among mothers than it did among fathers, particularly those with small children. Moreover, the negative relationships between mothers' education and non-employment, and between mothers' family income and non-employment weakened overtime. This is possibly due to women with more established resources can better "afford" the single-earner arrangement and more emphasize the importance of intensive parenting, than their less resourced counterparts. These findings signal the resurgence of a gendered division of labor in urban China.

Keywords: stay-at-home mothers, female labor force participation, childbearing, intensive mothering, work-family conflict, China

INTRODUCTION

Past decades have witnessed reduced gender inequality around the world (Goldscheider et al., 2015). The rate of female labor force participation signals women's autonomy to participate in the public spheres beyond their roles in the private spheres (England, 2010). However, even as women continue to make significant progress in the labor market, their responsibilities in the household have not reduced proportionately (England, 2010; Shu & Meagher, 2018). This inconsistency has been especially prevalent in Asian societies, such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and China. These societies promote a "pro-work" conservative gender ideology (Knight & Brinton, 2017) that emphasizes women's educational and career advances while also expecting women to assume the "second shift" at home, taking care of household responsibilities and being devoted mothers, after their "first shift" at work (Brinton & Oh, 2019; Hochschild & Machung, 2012).

Reform-era urban China presents a unique case for examining this stalled progress of gender equality. In the socialist time, the Chinese Communist Party fervently promulgated the slogan "Women Hold up Half the Sky", producing the world's highest rate of female labor force participation (He & Wu, 2017; Mauer-Fazio et al., 1999). However, since the economic reforms that began in the early 1980s, the "iron girl" figure, which presents women as passionate and capable workers, has gradually yielded to the traditional image of "wise wives and good mothers" (Fujimura-Fanselow, 1991; Xiao, 2014). Following the collapse of the urban work unit (*danwei*) system, institutional support for daycare centers has diminished (Lu & Perry, 1997). The rise of intensive parenting has involved a concerted commitment to children's development through reading, enrichment programs, talent training, and

interactive companionship (Feng et al., 2014; Liu, 2016). These parenting responsibilities often disproportionately fall on the mothers (Hanser & Li, 2017).

To date, relevant scholarship has focused on the penalties experienced by working mothers in China. Research shows that compared to fathers, mothers are more likely to experience reduced income, disrupted career development, worsened subjective well-being, layoffs, and less likely to receive promotions (Mu & Xie, 2016; Cao & Hu, 2007; Yu & Xie, 2018; Zhao, 2018). They also experience more discrimination at work, have lower job expectations, and receive lower starting salaries than their male counterparts (Ochiai & Aoyama, 2014; Xiu & Gunderson, 2013; Zhang et al., 2008). Mothers experience a greater gender pay gap than non-mothers as well (Ji et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2008). Yet, most of these studies focused on working mothers. Although a critical population of study, estimates about mothers' realistic challenges in work and family solely based on working mothers would be biased if mothers leave the labor market in systematic patterns.

Moreover, although many studies have speculated about the social implications of mothers' labor force participation (e.g., He & Wu, 2017; Ji et al., 2017; Yu & Xie, 2018), or documented trends in all women's labor force participation (e.g., Wu & Zhou, 2015), none have used nationally representative data to systematically document the trend in and examine the determinants of stay-at-home motherhood. As the labor market penalty for women is deeply implicated in the responsibilities associated with childbearing and childrearing (Zhang et al., 2008), studies that document the implications of mothers' heightened work-family conflicts are imperative. The rise in intensive parenting plays an important role in shaping women's labor force participation as mothers may retreat or are pressured to stay-at-home motherhood to fully devote themselves to educating their children (Yochim, 2018). In

this scenario, diverse economic resources among families mean varying capabilities to finance the arrangement of stay-at-home motherhood. Therefore, research on both overall patterns and socioeconomic variations in the trends of stay-at-home motherhood is overdue.

This paper uses data from Chinese censuses (1982, 1990, and 2000 censuses and the 2005 mini-census) and the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) 2006–2015 to document trends in and examine determinants of stay-at-home motherhood. Specifically, we assess how women's education, family socioeconomic status, and age of youngest child affect women's decisions to focus on motherhood at the cost of formal employment.

THE STALLED PATHWAYS TOWARD GENDER EQUALITY IN THE FAMILY

Gender inequality has dramatically declined around the world in the past decades (Goldscheider et al., 2015). Once constrained to the private sphere as homemakers and mothers, women have emerged and thrived in the public spheres by pursuing education and participating in the labor force (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004). For example, in 2017, the labor force participation rate for women aged 15–64 was 63 percent for OECD member countries and 66 percent for East Asian and Pacific countries (World Bank, 2018). For education, women reached parity with, or even surpassed, men in enrollment in 37 percent of countries for primary education, 51 percent of countries for secondary education, and 65 percent of countries for tertiary education (United Nations, 2015).

However, as England (2010) asserts, this progress of gender equality is uneven and stalled. Even as women increase their involvement in the public sphere, men have not increased their responsibilities in the private sphere in a commensurate way (Brinton & Oh,

2019; Hu & Yucel, 2017). Admittedly, men have boosted their participation in caregiving and housework chores. Yet, those household responsibilities are still considered women's primary obligations, and women can only "choose" to participate in the public spheres in addition to their roles in the private spheres, rather than freely move between the two spheres. This pattern has been further perpetuated by the labor market, as evidenced by the historically lower earnings among employed women, compared with employed men (Blau, 2012; Smock et al., 1999). That is, the changes in gender equality have facilitated women's labor force participation without challenging the gendered specialization model within the household, based on which men are to become capable providers and women as devoted housewives (Hu & Mu, 2021; Knight & Brinton, 2017).

The persistent norms of within-household specialization—despite women's economic independence—has led to a rising "motherhood penalty," wherein the motherhood role affects women's economic and career prospects (Budig & England, 2001; Gough & Noonan, 2013). First, the socialization of women's roles as homemakers leads women to spend less time in the labor force, thus accumulating less employment experience and ultimately lower wages than men (Yu & Xie, 2018). Second, women with primary childrearing responsibilities also have less energy and time for labor market activities than women without children. Particularly, to facilitate their household responsibilities, some mothers may resort to more flexible and accommodating jobs, which usually offer lower compensations (Gough & Noonan, 2013; Stone, 2007). Finally, gendered differences in the accumulation of marketable human capital and mothers' pursuit of flexible jobs may signal to the labor market that mothers are not productive employees, which may place mothers under employers' discrimination (Budig & England, 2001). More importantly, those

objective forces shape and reinforce the gendered expectations that women should prioritize motherhood over their personal goals, without conformity to which social pressures or even stigma would be attached (Damaske, 2011; Gilbert, 2008).

The rising emphasis on children's enrichment and the corresponding practice of intensive parenting further aggravate women's work–family conflicts (Calarco, 2018). Modern parenthood emphasizes the value of children as "economically worthless" but "emotionally priceless" (Zelizer, 1994). Parental attention has increasingly focused on educating and nurturing children to facilitate their success and fulfillment (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2011) rather than to provide old-age security for the parents (Hoffman et al., 1978). To do so, parents, particularly mothers, are expected to be intensively involved in a concerted commitment to their children's development through spending great amounts of quality time and doing a wide variety of interactive activities with their children (Calarco, 2018; Collins, 2019; Hays, 1998).

The availabilities and effectiveness of institutional supports for parents, particularly for women to juggle work and family, and family-friendly work environment also influence mothers' employment (Collins, 2019; Gilbert, 2008; Stone, 2007). For example, in Sweden, where the state provides universal benefits regardless of gender and social classes, the employment rate for mothers is as high as 83.1%. In comparison, in Germany, where caregiving responsibilities are expected to be shouldered by families and communities, employment rate for mothers is only 69% (Collins, 2019). Specifically, in Sweden, mothers are supported in their family responsibilities by both their employers and the state through a combination of policies ranging from direct financial remuneration to parents, extended and gender-neutral parental leave, the public childcare system, and parents' rights to reducing

work hours to tend to their childcare responsibilities (Collins, 2019; Knight & Brinton, 2017). These systemic and comprehensive policy efforts have enabled the social mindset which deems family responsibilities as gender-neutral and alleviated the stigmatization of women who pursue their personal goals over motherhood (Collins, 2019). Without such systemic policymaking, women's decisions about their employments are largely constrained by the institutional and ideational influences. Even when they think they are making a deliberate decision to stay out of the labor market, it is likely to be driven by internalized social norms and pressures about their expected roles as a woman. In this sense, women are often pushed out, rather than opt out of the labor force (Stone, 2007).

Asian mothers face particularly challenging task of balancing work and family. On the one hand, the meritocratic cultures encourage both men and women to pursue upward mobility and personal success through education and career development. This meritocratic temperament has also been reflected by the emphasis on children's education. For many Asian families, children's education has become a meaningful cause to which mothers are expected to devote themselves, sometimes at the cost of the mother's career development, especially for families with established socioeconomic status (Schneider et al., 2018; Yochim, 2018). On the other hand, persistent emphasis is still placed on traditional, nuclear families with financially responsible husbands and domestic wives (Mu & Xie, 2014; Tian, 2013). Knight and Brinton (2017) conceptualize the norms behind this conflict between Asian women's public and private roles as a "pro-work conservative" gender ideology. That is, although women are encouraged to pursue economic independence outside the family, the change in the public sphere has not been decisive enough to challenge traditional gender-role expectations. In this paper, we aim to explicate this rising challenge in balancing work and

family in urban China, an Asian society with emphasis on the value of children, traditional familism, and meritocracy. To do that, we systematically documented trends in the prevalence of stay-at-home motherhood and examined social factors that affect women's decisions to stay out of the labor force.

THE CHINESE CONTEXT

During China's socialist era until the late 1970s, women's employment rate was among the world's highest, namely, more than 90 percent (Lavely et al., 1990). The state initiated a series of policies that aimed at increasing women's labor force participation and promoting equal employment, equal pay, and equal benefits between men and women, prioritized in the development of Chinese socialism (Zuo & Bian, 2001). These policy efforts to enforce gender equality have been reflected by Mao's famous slogan "Women Hold Up Half the Sky" (Mauer-Fazio et al., 1999). Although these affirmative actions never actualized gender equality, the gender gap in labor force participation was narrower in socialist China than in other parts of the world.[3]

Before the 1980s, the Communist state effectively assumed control over various aspects of social, political and economic functioning, including individuals' family lives. Many living arrangements and household responsibilities were managed and organized by state-owned work units (*danwei*), may it be a factory, a store, or a government office (Meisner, 1999; Whyte, 2005). Workers and their families were not only dependent upon

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[3] We cite women's rising labor force participation as a social progress not because we assume that participation in the public spheres is more important to the society and to the women themselves but because it indicates women's gained autonomy of self-development beyond their roles in the private spheres.

their *danwei* for job-related resources, but also for support of their private lives (Xie & Wu, 2008). For example, work-unit-based daycare centers, which were sponsored and subsidized by the state, were widely available (Du & Dong, 2010).

Since the early 1980s, China's reform era has demonstrated complex historical trends. In addition to the rapid economic growth and increased standard of living, severe market competitions have returned women to their previous disadvantaged economic positions (Mu & Xie, 2014). A narrowed focus on short-term efficiency and profit-making among many employers had led to rising discrimination against women within the labor market (Summerfield, 1994; Zhang et al., 2008). Also, the state had started to retreat from its control over individuals' private lives. Particularly, the government had retracted institutional sponsorship and subsidies from *danwei*-based daycare centers. Many mothers had to sacrifice and compromise their career development, or even leave the labor market altogether to fulfill the caregiving role. In this way, the women of Mao's slogan have yielded their half of the sky to retrieve the traditional Confucian virtues of being "wise wives and good mothers" (Fujimura-Fanselow, 1991).

Changes in China's public education system have added pressures and workloads on the shoulders of parents, particularly mothers. Compared to Western countries, in China, the public education system in China used to be relatively equal. First, it is free prior to the secondary level, and even the secondary and post-secondary levels are generally affordable (Hannum, 1999). In order to maintain the overall quality of the system, the government has frequently evaluated the quality of the public schools (Hannum, 1999; Zhou et al., 1996). Moreover, school used to run from 7am to 6pm, even for primary schools, following nationwide standardized educational curricula designed by the central government with

entrance to good schools largely based on exam scores (Tsang, 1996). The above

characteristics indicate that most of the students' time was managed and their academic

performance was evaluated by the public education system in a highly comparable way,

regardless of family socioeconomic status (Ye, 2015).

However, since the late 1980s, with the aim of producing well-rounded students, there

have been several policy promotions of the "Reducing the Study Load" campaign (*jian fu*),

in 1988, 2000, and 2010 (Yochim, 2018). Based on this series of campaigns, school time has

been significantly cut short, and classes are over as early as 3pm every day. More

importantly, regarding teaching materials, to embrace the "quality-oriented education" (*su

zhi jiao yu*), study designs have involved more use of modern technologies and required help

and monitoring from the parents, in the form of take-home projects and parent-child

interactive reading programs, among others. Evaluations and school admissions have also

started to incorporate components based on the "quality" and extracurricular abilities of the

students, such as talent training and officially certified specialties (Yochim, 2018).

These changes in China's educational systems have increased the burden on parents.

As students spent less time in rigid and formal education settings, parents had to fill this time

and to equip their children with the newly demanded "qualities." To cope with these extra

burdens, the division of labor are subject to rearrangements. Fathers are expected to provide

richer financial resources for their children, and mothers often revert to domestic roles

monitoring and navigating their children's education and growth. These gendered

responsibilities likely lead mothers to opt out or to be pushed out of the labor force.

Moreover, the likelihood of stay-at-home motherhood may differ across the levels of

household responsibilities shouldered by the mothers, according to family socioeconomic

status, mother's education, and child's age, about which we will discuss in detail in the next section.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The interplay of the persistent gender norms of women's roles as the primary caregiver, the rising emphasis on children's all-around development, and the declining roles of the institutional support may have jointly shaped patterns of stay-at-home motherhood in China. Particularly, the contextual influences may be reflected in the varied patterns of stay-at-home motherhood across family socioeconomic status, mother's education, and child's age.

Family income may influence mothers' employment status through counteracting forces. On the one hand, women from such families may encounter greater opportunity costs regarding their career development and social network maintenance when they stay out of the labor force (Damaske, 2011; Oh, 2018). On the other hand, families with more established resources are more likely to emphasize children's education and enrichment and also can better afford the single-earner arrangement (Hu & Mu, 2020; Damaske, 2011; Orgad, 2019). Thus, it warrants an empirical understanding of the link between family income and stay-at-home motherhood. Moreover, as the practice of intensive mothering intensified in the 2010s (Tian & Jing, 2021), particularly for mothers from better-off families, it is likely the link between family income and stay-at-home motherhood differs over time.

Women of different educational backgrounds may vary in their motivations of employment and in their commitments to and emphasis on intensive parenting (Damaske,

2011; Oh, 2018; Orgad, 2019). Compared with less-educated women, better-educated women emphasize more the importance of children's all-around development through intensive parenting (Ishizuka, 2019; Lareau, 2011). They also attach more symbolic meanings to employment beyond financial considerations (Damaske, 2011; Oh, 2018). While less-educated mothers make their decisions between employment and stay-at-motherhood mainly drawing on comparisons between the economic benefits and costs, better-educated mothers tend to value employment as a way to maintain their public status (Oh, 2018). Given the convoluting social forces, it is worthwhile to empirically examine the educational gradients of stay-at-home motherhood. Meantime, the rising practice of intensive mothering over time may also lead to varying patterns of the links between education and stay-at-home motherhood.

Furthermore, as children at younger ages require more intensive attention and care, the lack of institutional support for younger children and the intensified focus on early child development may further add to the childcare burdens for mothers of younger children (Leibowitz et al., 1992; Phillips et al., 1987). Moreover, in contemporary China, the institutional support for childcare is clearly classified by child's age. Specifically, children start primary school at age 6, and public education after this stage is compulsory and free. Before school age, public-sponsored kindergartens are also available for children between ages 3 to 5. However, for children between ages 0 to 2, it has been challenging. As aforementioned, before the economic reforms, public-sponsored daycare was provided by urban *danwei* to support female employees' labor force participation (Du & Dong, 2010). Since the economic reform, this service vanished along with the dismantling of the *danwei* system. Currently, there is no formal institutional support for childcare before age 3.

Drawing on the above social patterns, we aim to answer the following two research questions in this study. First, how are family income, mother's education, and the youngest child's age associated with the likelihoods of stay-at-home motherhood? Second, how do the above three associations change over time? Drawing on the research questions, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Family income is negatively associated with the likelihood of stay-at-home motherhood. However, the negative association gets weaker over time.

Hypothesis 2: Education is negatively associated with the likelihood of stay-at-home motherhood. However, the negative association gets weaker over time.

Hypothesis 3: The younger the youngest child's age, the greater the likelihood the mother will stay at home. Moreover, this association gets stronger over time.

DATA AND MESURES

Data

Our data were comprised of two sources of data: Chinese censuses (1982, 1990, 2000 censuses, and 2005 mini-census) and Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS 2006–2015). The employment status questions were asked in a comparable way in both data.

The obtained samples from the 1982 and 1990 censuses are 1 percent random samples, harmonized by the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series − International project. To make the sample sizes comparable, we draw a 10 percent random sample from the 1982 and 1990 samples. The obtained sample from the 2000 census is a 0.095 percent random

sample. The 2005 mini-census is a 1 percent sample of the Chinese population, and the obtained 2005 sample is a 20 percent random sample of the entire mini-census dataset.

Beginning in 2003, the CGSS is a nationally representative and repeated cross-sectional household survey for Chinese adults aged 18–69. The CGSS sample was stratified in a four-stage sampling scheme separately for urban and rural areas (Bian & Li, 2012). CGSS data between 2003 and 2005 were excluded because the questions about employment status were asked differently than in other years. To make the results comparable to the census data, we classified CGSS data into two periods: 2006–2010 and 2011–2015.

There are four restrictions on the samples. First, we restricted the sample to mothers with at least one child who is under age 18. Second, we restricted to mothers between ages 20–45, which is the prime working age for women. Also, as the mean age of childbearing in China is around 25 years old (Tian, 2016), 45 is a reasonable approximation of the maximum age for women to have children at ages 18 or younger. Women under age 20 were excluded because the legal minimum age at marriage for women is 20 years old in China. Third, we restricted to the urban sample who are more likely to be exposed to market competition and the new norms of intensive parenting. This sample includes both urban residents (with urban household registration) and migrants (without urban household registration but residing in the place of survey for six months or more).

Measures

Labor force non-participation. Both census data and CGSS ask the employment status with the question "Last week, did you work for at least one hour for pay?" Respondents can choose answers from the options including "yes", "(un)paid leave, study, temporary break or

seasonable break", and "not working". We coded those who reported "not working" as non-participation. For those who are not working, the surveys listed eight specific reasons[4], including "full-time study", "disabled", "retired", "housekeeping", "not employed after graduation from school", "lost the job due to reasons of the employer", "lost the job for personal reasons", and "the contracted land was expropriated". We dropped respondents who were not working because they were students, retired, disabled, or lost land, as they are not at the risk of employment. Students were excluded because their roles as a student and as an employee were not compatible in the current Chinese labor market (Tian, 2016).

In addition, we excluded those who were forced to leave the labor force from the non-participation outcome. Chinese urban labor market has experienced massive laid-off as a result of the dismantling of state-owned enterprises in urban China in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Bramall, 2009; Wu, 2010). Since the 1990s, the reform of state-owned enterprises has privatized, merged, and closed most *danwei* and transferred all welfare functions associated with the *danwei* system, such as hospitals and schools, to local governments (Bramall, 2009). The dismantling of the *danwei* system led to massive layoffs of urban workers (Dong & Pandey, 2012; Giles et al., 2006).

As we are only interested in understanding the experiences of mothers who decided not to work, we need to identify and exclude those who were forced to leave the labor force due to this external shock. Specifically, we coded mothers who cited the reasons for non-participation as "lost the job due to reasons of the employer" as a forced leave. Thus, non-participation equals to 1 if the mother is currently not working for reasons of

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[4] The specific reasons included in 1982, 1990 censuses, and the 2006 and 2008 CGSS datasets differ although they all include items pertaining to non-employment due to reasons of the employer.

"housekeeping", "not employed after graduation from school", and "lost the job for personal reasons", and 0 otherwise, excluding forced leaves.

The key independent variables include education (categorical, measured as junior high or below, senior high, and college and above), family net income (continuous in logarithm scale, measured as family income minus the focal women's own income), and age of the youngest child (categorical, measured as ages 0 – 2, 3 – 5, and 6 – 18). Children's age was categorized to indicate the three stages of child growth regarding availabilities of institutional support, namely, no public childcare, with public childcare, and school age. The control variables include mother's age, number of children, marital status, residential registration (*hukou*) status, migration status, living arrangements, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership (only in CGSS), and region.

Variable definitions and descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1. Because of the large sample sizes, the difference of the mean values of most variables between the census and CGSS data are statistically significant. Most noticeable differences[5] between the surveys lie in education, *hukou* status, migration status, and living arrangements. Compared to mothers in the census data, mothers in CGSS are more likely to be college educated, which can be attributed to the college expansion since the 2000s (Hu & Hibel, 2014). Mothers in CGSS are more likely than those in census to be migrants in the host city, and less likely to be urban-*hukou* holders and to live in extended families. These patterns may be due to the rapid urbanization and influx of rural-to-urban migrants to Chinese cities (Liang, 2016).

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[5] We define differences where the bigger value is at least 20% larger than the smaller value as noticeable.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

RESULTS

Overall Trend: 1982–2015

Figure 1 presents the rates of Chinese urban mothers who are not in the labor force between 1982 and 2015. The rates of year 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2005 are from the census data and the 2006–2010 and 2011–2015 rates are from the CGSS data. The non-employment rate (with forced leaves) is in solid line and the non-employment rate (without forced leaves) is in dotted line. Father's non-participation rates (with and without forced leaves) are also included for comparison.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

In general, mothers' non-employment (with forced leaves) rate increases over the 32 years covered. Specifically, in 1982, 9.5 percent of mothers were not working; in 2005, the percent more than tripled to 31.7 percent. It dropped slightly in late 2000s but rose again and reached 32.2 percent in 2015.

The comparison between mothers' non-employment with and without forced leaves shows that the slight bumpiness in the overall trend is due to massive layoffs that occurred in urban China in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As shown in the graph, the massive layoffs lasted for about ten years, emerged in the 1990s, peaked in the 2000s, and ended in the 2010s.

To single out this period effect, we focus on the trend in the non-employment rate without forced leaves. As shown, the non-participation rate without forced leaves shows an increase between 1990 and 2015. The 1982 and 1990 censuses did not collect information about layoffs, but as the reform of state enterprises started in the 1990s, very few layoffs should occur before 1990. Thus, we use the rate in 1990 as a reference point. It was 12.4 percent in 1990, and it almost doubled to 21.6 percent in 2000 and reached 25.7 percent in 2005. Similar to the overall trend, it also dropped slightly in the late 2000s and rose again to 31.6 percent in the 2010s. In other words, almost three times as many mothers had not been working in 2015 compared to that in 1990. Wu and Zhou (2015) also observed this short-term U-shaped trend and attributed it to the skyrocketing housing prices and the rising costs of living.

Mothers' declining trend in non-participation is even more striking when compared to that of fathers. Although the patterns of fathers' non-participation are similar to those of mothers, the levels of fathers' non-participation are much lower than those of mothers. For example, in 2015, fathers' non-participation rate is only one fourth of that of mothers.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The change in mother's non-employment rate without forced leaves (hereafter non-employment) may be driven by selection. That is, women who are highly attached to the labor market may delay or forgo motherhood. However, as shown by Table 2 and Figure 1, selection is not the only factor explaining the rising rate of non-employment for mothers in urban China. Specifically, while the percentages of women who had at least one child only

declined about 10% between 1982 and 2015, the non-employment rate rose by 20% during

the same period.

Net Family Income

To explore the responsiveness of mother's work status to family resources, we examine the

relationship between mothers' net family income and non-employment. Because the income

measure is only available in CGSS, we can only compare the 2006–2010 and 2011–2015

periods. The results are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Model 1 examines the association between net family income and mother's likelihood

of non-employment (in log odds), with interactions between net family income and the

period variable. The net family income was adjusted by the Consumer Price Index to the

level of 2006. The coefficient of net family income is negative, indicating that family

resources reduce mothers' likelihood of staying out of the labor force. In other words, the

higher the family income, the less likely the mothers are to be staying-at-home. This may be

because that women who have higher family income are often those with better human

capitals and extensive social networks. Thus, forgoing employment incurs greater

opportunity costs for them. The period coefficient is negative, which suggests that, given the

same level of net family income, fewer mothers opted out of labor force in the 2011–2015

than in the 2006–2010 period. This period change is closely related to the rising economic

inequality and skyrocketing costs of living in urban China in the 2010s (Xie & Zhou, 2014), when fewer families could support mothers to be full-time housewives.

Yet, the interaction between net family income and the period variable is positive. It indicates that while fewer families can afford housewives, the negative association between family income and mothers' likelihood of non-employment became weaker over time. Specifically, while in 2006–2010, the odds of mothers' non-employment reduce by 26 percent ($1-e^{-0.296}$) with every one unit increase in net family income (in logarithm scale), the odds only reduce by 13 percent ($1- e^{-0.296+0.158}$) in 2011-2015.

Figure 2[6] visualize how likelihoods of stay-at-home motherhood differ across family income and period. For example, in period 2006-2010, the predicted probability of non-employment for a mother with a net family income (in log) of 5 was 68 percent, and for a mother with a net family income (in log) of 11 was 26 percent, indicating a difference of 42 percent. However, during the period 2011-2015, the difference between the same group of mothers was only 18 percent (42 percent versus 24 percent, respectively). This indicates that, given the gender specialization of single-earning fathers and full-time mothers and intensive parenting both require family resources, across years, mothers with high family income are more likely to stay out of the labor force.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

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[6] According to Payton et al. (2003), 95% confidence intervals would often overlap with each other when $p < 0.05$. Thus, it is better to plot 83% or 84% confidence intervals if non-overlapping confidence intervals are used to evaluate whether the coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level.

Drawing on the empirical results, Hypothesis 1 is fully supported. Although family income is negatively linked with mother's likelihood to stay at home, the family income gradients have weakened over time, likely due to the rising emphasis on intensive mothering over time, particularly among economically established families.

Mothers' education

Next, we examine the trend in mother's non-employment by levels of educational attainment. Education is found to be one of the strongest predictors of gender egalitarianism attitudes and labor force participation for Chinese women during the economic reforms (Shu & Meagher, 2018; Wu & Zhou, 2015). Models 2 and 3 show coefficients on education and its interactions with the period variable along with all control variables respectively using the census and CGSS data. For both models, the coefficients for education were negative and significant, suggesting that the more education the mothers had, the less likely they were to be staying at home. The interaction terms in Model 2 (the census data) were positive and significant but those in Model 3 (the CGSS data) were not statistically significant. The results suggest that the educational gap in mothers' non-employment rate narrowed from 1990 to 2005 but did not change between 2005-2010 and 2011-2015. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported for the 1990-2005 period.

Figure 3 plotted the predicted probability of mothers' non-employment between 1990 and 2015. For all educational groups, the probability of non-employment grew before 2006–2010 and stabilized during 2011–2015. Yet, the gap between college-educated mothers and less-than-college-educated mothers enlarged between 1990 and 2010s. In 1990, the probability of non-employment is 14.5 percent for mothers with a junior high education or

below, 3.7 percent for mothers with a senior high education, and 0.2 percent for mothers with

a college education or above. In 2011–2015, the probability of non-employment is 34 percent

for mothers with an education of junior high or below, 25 percent for mothers with a senior

high education, and 8 percent for mothers with a college education or above.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Yet note that, while in 1990, the probability of non-employment of mothers with a

senior high education was almost 19 times (3.7 percent versus 0.2 percent) of the probability

for college-educated mothers, the same ratio was only around 3 times (25 percent versus 8

percent) in 2011-2015. This indicates that although college-educated mothers' absolute

predicted probability of non-employment remain lower than the other two educational

groups, their rate of growth showed a consistent increase over time. Specifically, the

probabilities of non-employment for college-educated mothers grew from 0.2 percent in

1990, to 2.8 percent in 2000, 5.4 percent in 2005, 8.2 percent in 2006–2010, and 8.4 percent

in 2011–2015. For the past thirty years, staying out of employment has become an option for

a non-trivial and rising proportion of college-educated mothers.

Child's Age

In this section, we examine the responsiveness of mother's work status to the demand of

childcare. Models 4 and Model 5 of Table 1 presents results for age of the youngest child and

its interactions with the period variable along with all control variables. Between 1990 and

2005 (the census data), the relative log odds of non-employment showed significant increase

for mothers with small children aged 0-2 and aged 3-5 than mothers with school-aged children (6–18 years old). Between 2006-2010 and 2011-2015 (the CGSS data), the log odds of non-employment sharply increased for mothers with very small children aged 0-2 compared to mothers with school-aged children. The interaction terms are positive and significant only for 2006-2015, indicating that the gap in non-employment between mothers with small children and school-aged children enlarged significantly between 2006-2015. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is only supported for the period 2006-2015, possibly attributed to the dramatic increase of the practice of intensive mothering since the late 2000s (Tian and Jing, 2021).

Figure 4 plots the predicted probabilities of mothers' non-employment, by the age of the youngest child. Overall, the probability of non-employment for mothers with small children aged 0 to 2 skyrocketed, echoing the lack of institutional support for mothers with children between 0 and 2. In 1990, when the *danwei* system was still in place and provided daycare for young children, the vast majority of mothers with children aged 0 to 2 were in the labor force. Specifically, only 13.6 percent were not working, and the gap was not very large compared to 7.14 percent for mothers with school-aged children. However, with sponsored daycare centers vanishing, mothers with very small children were disproportionately more likely to leave the labor force. Specifically, the probability of non-employment for mothers with 0–2-year-old children grew to 31.0 percent in 2000, 43.7 percent in 2005, 48.7 percent in 2006–2010, and reached 51.0 percent in 2011–2015. That is, in the most recent past, one in two urban mothers with very small children stayed out of the labor market.

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

In comparison, the increase for other mothers was less dramatic during the same period. Specifically, the pattern of change for mothers with 3–5-year-old children paralleled mothers with 6–18-year-old children throughout the 1990s and 2000s, rose from 10.4 percent in 1990 to 23.4 percent in 2006–2010. This similarity is sensible given that the institutional support of childcare is provided for both age groups. However, from 2006–2010 to 2011–2015, patterns of these two age groups diverge, with a seemingly steeper increase in the probabilities of non-employment for mothers with children 3–5 years old. Although institutional support is provided for mothers with children in both age groups, the years between ages 3 and 5 are a bridging stage between the toddler years and school years, which can be more flexible, less structured, and more subject to parental influences than the school years. Thus, compared to mothers of school-age children, mothers of children aged 3–5 face greater pressures to invest in their children's personal development and quality building, and to prepare their children for fierce competitions later on.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, using data from both Chinese censuses and the Chinese General Social Survey, we documented trends in stay-at-home motherhood from 1982 to 2015. We also systematically examined how mothers' family socioeconomic status, education, and age of the youngest child shaped their decisions about stay-at-home motherhood. Our findings show that mothers' rates of non-employment increased between 1990 and 2015, namely, from 12.4

percent in 1990, 21.6 percent in 2000, 25.7 percent in 2005, to 31.6 percent in 2015. The non-employment trend was more dramatic among mothers than it was among fathers, whose non-employment was 1.3 percent in 1990, 4.8 percent in 2000, 5.0 percent in 2005, and 7.6 percent in 2015. This gender difference suggests that the economic reforms have disproportionately affected mothers, making them more likely than fathers to leave the labor force.

While the findings showed a negative relationship between net family income and mother's probability of non-employment, the negative effects decreased over time. This echoes the particularly strong emphasis of intensive parenting among richer families. Although Chinese parents hold universally high expectations for their children's education, families with more established resources particularly emphasize their children's enrichment and their all-around development through deliberate and well-planned investments (Hu & Mu, 2020). Better resources also allowed families to specialize into the single-earner arrangement where the husband worked outside the home and the wives became full-time mothers and devoted themselves to the "cause" of mothering.

Education also has affected women's non-employment. While the absolute levels of non-employment remained lower among college-educated mothers than the other two educational groups, the probability of non-employment among college-educated mothers increased more steeply over time. In 1990, only 0.2 percent of mothers with a college education or higher chose non-employment. This proportion increased to 2.8 percent in 2000, 5.4 percent in 2005, 8.2 percent during 2006–2010, and 8.4 percent during 2011–2015. This finding indicates that, for the past thirty years, a non-trivial and increasing proportion of college-educated mothers have opted out or been pushed out of the labor force.

Regarding the influences of children's age, the probability of non-employment for mothers with children aged 0 and 2 years has skyrocketed since 1990. In 1990, when the *danwei* system still provided daycare centers, most mothers with children aged 0 and 2 participated in the labor force. However, as public support for this childcare faded, the probability of non-employment among mothers with children aged 0 and 2 grew to 31.0 percent in 2000, 43.7 percent in 2005, 48.7 percent during 2006–2010, and 51.0 percent during 2011–2015. There was also a dramatic rise in non-employment among mothers with kindergarten-aged children (3–5 years old) in the 2010s, possibly due to the uniqueness of this stage regarding intensive parenting. The years between the toddler and school years can be more flexible and less structured with children more subject to parental influences than they are during their school years. Thus, parents may take these bridging ages as a crucial time to prepare their children for fierce competitions later in their lives. Thus, compared to mothers of school-aged children, mothers of children aged 3–5 years may face greater pressures to invest in their children's personal development and quality. The difference may also be attributed to the rising practice of intensive mothering in the 2010s, which requires more parental involvement from mothers of younger children.

These findings imply that the progress toward gender equality in China is incomplete, stalled, and even reversing. Chinese mothers, particularly mothers with young children, have been burdened with responsibilities in both the public and the private spheres. Many have sacrificed and even given up their newly gained roles in the public sphere by withdrawing from the labor force to focus instead on intensive mothering. Meantime, while the pattern is less pronounced for better-off families, rates of non-employment among mothers of all educational levels have increased. This finding further emphasizes the rising value of

children, the thriving of intensive mothering, and the revival of gendered division of labor, wherein fathers work harder to be capable providers and mothers devote themselves to monitoring and navigating their children's education and growth.

We acknowledge some limitations of the study. First, all data used in this paper were cross-sectional. Thus, the proposed mechanisms behind the determinants of mothers' non-employment may be reversed. For example, it is possible that women's unemployment led to their decisions of childbearing. Second, mothers' rising non-employment may have been accompanied by informal and creative work opportunities that were not reflected in the survey questions used in this paper. It would be ideal to account for these issues when relevant data become available. Third, we are aware that family income and mothers' education are correlated. In order to distinguish their nuanced conceptual differences, we use the net family income, i.e., total family income minus the income earned by the mothers, to indicate the families' economic resources that make the arrangement of stay-at-home motherhood affordable. It would be ideal when more direct measures of social class avail. Fourth, given we examine the patterns of non-employment relying on measures of employment outcomes, we can only understand the potential decision-making processes by interpreting the findings drawing on relevant social contexts. Qualitative studies to directly and comprehensively understand women's decision-making mechanisms would be a worthwhile direction for future research. Finally, the findings shown in this study are embedded in a social setting where parents place high expectations and emphasis on children's educational successes with limited institutional support. It would be valuable to extend the same analytical framework to other social settings as a future research direction.

Despite the limitations, the implications for women's declining employment rates can be profound. First, women may feel discouraged from pursuing higher and better education, given the blocked pathways to success in the public sphere. This outcome may constitute a huge waste of human capital and add instability to the supply of productive labor for China's future development. Moreover, women's rising economic independence and diverse options for self-fulfillment mean that many may opt out of marriage and choose not to have children. The declining total fertility rate and limited responses to the relaxation of the one-child policy in 2015 already reflect this tendency (Wang et al., 2016). A persistent decline in fertility may lead to problems associated with population aging and lack of productivity. Therefore, at its core, declining employment among Chinese mothers signals a persistent gender inequality and the limited autonomy women have in their options between the public and the private spheres. In turn, the extent to which women's economic empowerment can effectively create equal and sustainable gender relationships within the marriage framework may determine the significance and health of families in China.

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of independent variables, census and CGSS.

	Census	CGSS	Variable Definition
	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D.)	
Education[b]			Categorical, highest diploma obtained.
junior high / -	0.547	0.503	Junior high school includes no education, primary school or junior high school.
senior high	0.298	0.259	
college / +	0.155	0.238	Senior high school includes mothers who had senior high school diploma, senior vocational school diploma, or junior technical school diploma. College or higher includes associate degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree or doctoral degree.
Net Family income (log)		9.356 (2.86)	Continuous, annual family income minus mother's annual income. Values were adjusted by the Consumer Price Index to the level of 2006.[c]
Age of the youngest child[a]			Categorical, age of the youngest child, classified by the level of institutional support.
0 - 2	0.144	0.148	
3 - 5	0.148	0.160	
6 - 18	0.708	0.692	
Age[b]	35.71 (0.03)	34.41 (0.08)	Continuous, reported age
Number of children[b]	1.41 (0.006)	1.32 (0.008)	Continuous, number of alive children in the same household
Currently married[b]	0.983	0.956	Dichotomous, 1 = currently married
Urban hukou[b]	0.854	0.651	Dichotomous, 1 = had urban hukou
Migrant[b]	0.079	0.156	Dichotomous, 1 = without local hukou
Living in extended family[b]	0.276	0.194	Dichotomous, 1 = living with relatives
CCP member		0.055	Dichotomous, 1 = CCP member
Region[b]			Categorical, by levels of economic and social development.
east	0.382	0.373	East includes Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shandong, Guangdong, and Hainan;
middle	0.235	0.249	
northeast	0.153	0.123	
west	0.230	0.255	

	Census	CGSS	Variable Definition
	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D.)	
			Middle includes Shaanxi, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Anhui, and Jiangxi; Northeast includes Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang; West includes the rest of Chinese provinces.
Year			Survey year in census
1990	0.360		
2000	0.391		
2005	0.249		
Year			Survey year in CGSS
2006 - 2010		0.496	
2011 - 2015		0.504	
Observations	23,172	5, 512	

a. The difference between census and CGSS is significant at the 0.05 level.

b. The difference between census and CGSS is significant at the 0.001 level.

c. We use the CPI adjustment because it is an accurate and consistent measure of inflation rates in the Chinese context (Hwang & Wu, 2011).

Table 2: Percentages of women who have ever married and had child(ren), census and CGSS data.

Survey	% ever married	% had children (≥ 1)	sample size
1982 census	81.6	83.3	83,996
1990 census	78.6	82.0	76,985
2000 census	87.5	74.9	76,671
2005 mini-census	85.7	55.8	71,830
2006 - 2010 CGSS	77.8	70.7	5,004
2011 - 2015 CGSS	83.4	73.3	6,026

Table 3: Logistic regression results predicting mother's non-employment (without forced leaves), CGSS and census data.

	Income	Education		Child's age	
	Model 1 (CGSS)	Model 2 (Census)	Model 3 (CGSS)	Model 4 (Census)	Model 5 (CGSS)
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Net Family income (log)	-0.296*** (0.053)		-0.212*** (0.038)		-0.211*** (0.038)
Education (ref: junior high/-)					
senior high	-0.424*** (0.082)	-1.421*** (0.147)	-0.419*** (0.107)	-0.690*** (0.049)	-0.430*** (0.082)
college/+	-1.784*** (0.124)	-2.346*** (0.154)	-1.859*** (0.175)	-2.604*** (0.122)	-1.803*** (0.125)
Youngest child's age (ref: 6-18)					
0-2	1.408*** (0.112)	0.388*** (0.071)	1.410*** (0.112)	0.324* (0.136)	1.256*** (0.141)
3-5	0.369*** (0.100)	0.093 (0.066)	0.367** (0.100)	0.317* (0.132)	0.127 (0.134)
Survey Year (ref: 1990)					
2000		0.796*** (0.062)		0.980*** (0.067)	
2005		1.159*** (0.067)		1.302*** (0.071)	
Survey Year 2011-2015	-1.699* (0.694)		-0.100 (0.086)		-0.231** (0.084)
Family income * 2011-2015	0.158* (0.068)				
Education * survey year					
senior high * 2000			0.852*** (0.162)		
senior high * 2005			0.862*** (0.167)		
college/+ * 2000			1.355*** (0.416)		
college/+ * 2005			1.772*** (0.412)		
Education * year 2011-2015					
senior high * 2011-2015			-0.018 (0.151)		
college/+ * 2011-2015			0.134 (0.217)		
Child's age* survey year					
0-2 * 2000				0.001 (0.147)	
0-2 * 2005				0.190 (0.155)	
3-5 * 2000				-0.349* (0.155)	

	Income	Education		Child's age	
3-5 * 2005				-0.194	
				(0.160)	
Child's age * year 2011-2015					
0-2 * 2011-2015					0.323+
					(0.175)
3-5 * 2011-2015					0.486**
					(0.175)
Age	-0.024**	-0.030***	-0.024**	-0.030***	-0.024**
	(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.008)
Number of children	0.212***	0.140***	0.214***	0.143***	0.210***
	(0.058)	(0.020)	(0.058)	(0.020)	(0.058)
Currently married	0.739***	-0.469**	0.738***	-0.455**	0.736***
	(0.189)	(0.143)	(0.189)	(0.143)	(0.189)
Urban *hukou*	0.053+	-0.159**	0.153*	-0.147**	0.158*
	(0.077)	(0.054)	(0.077)	(0.054)	(0.078)
Migrant	-0.024	0.554***	0.155	0.555***	0.121
	(0.092)	(0.067)	(0.092)	(0.067)	(0.092)
Living in extended family	-0.281**	-0.374***	-0.278**	-0.399***	-0.279**
	(0.082)	(0.052)	(0.082)	(0.053)	(0.083)
CCP member	-1.082***		-1.063***		-1.062***
	(0.261)		(0.260)		(0.260)
Region (ref: coastal)					
middle	0.146+	0.233***	0.148+	0.233***	0.151+
	(0.088)	(0.056)	(0.088)	(0.056)	(0.088)
northeast	0.415***	0.635***	0.425***	0.624***	0.428***
	(0.108)	(0.060)	(0.108)	(0.060)	(0.108)
west	0.033	0.274***	0.039	0.275***	0.041
	(0.088)	(0.055)	(0.088)	(0.055)	(0.088)
Constant	2.245**	-0.982***	1.387**	-1.118***	1.453**
	(0.646)	(0.250)	(0.526)	(0.251)	(0.526)
Log-likelihood	-2856.34	-7898.12	-2858.80	-7917.50	-2854.35
Chi-square	875.57***	1739.84***	870.65***	1863.89***	879.54***
Observations	5,512	23,172	5,512	23,172	5,512

Note: † p < 0.10; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001 (two-sided test).

Figure 1: Non-employment rate of mothers and fathers, 1982-2015

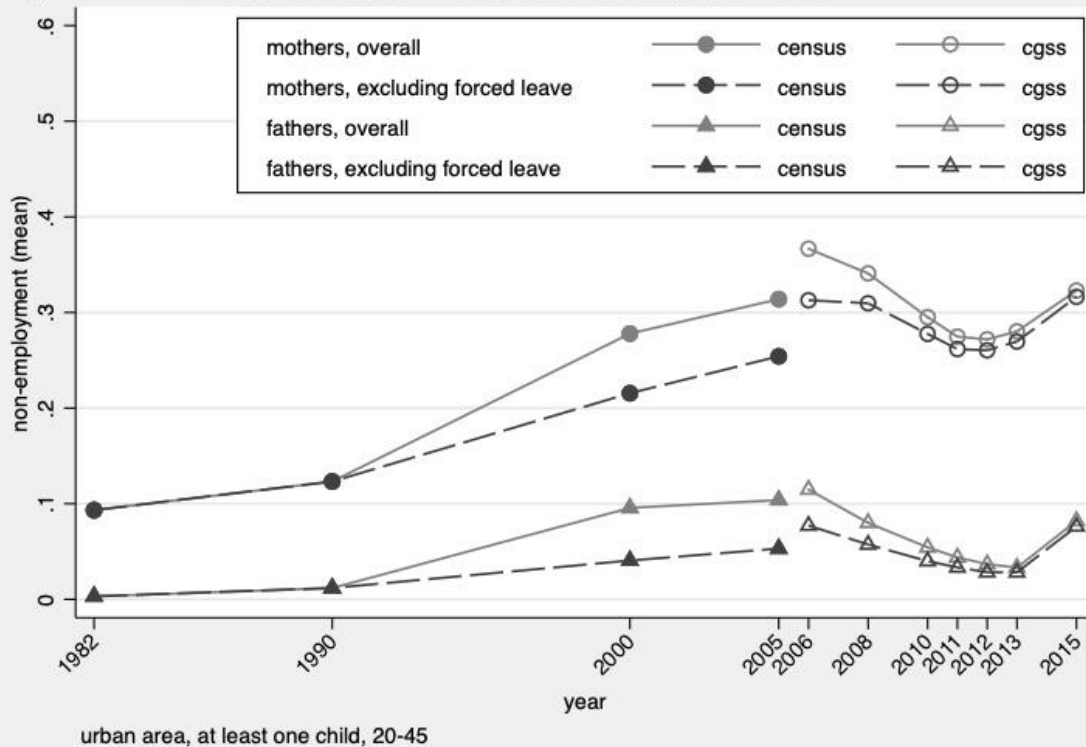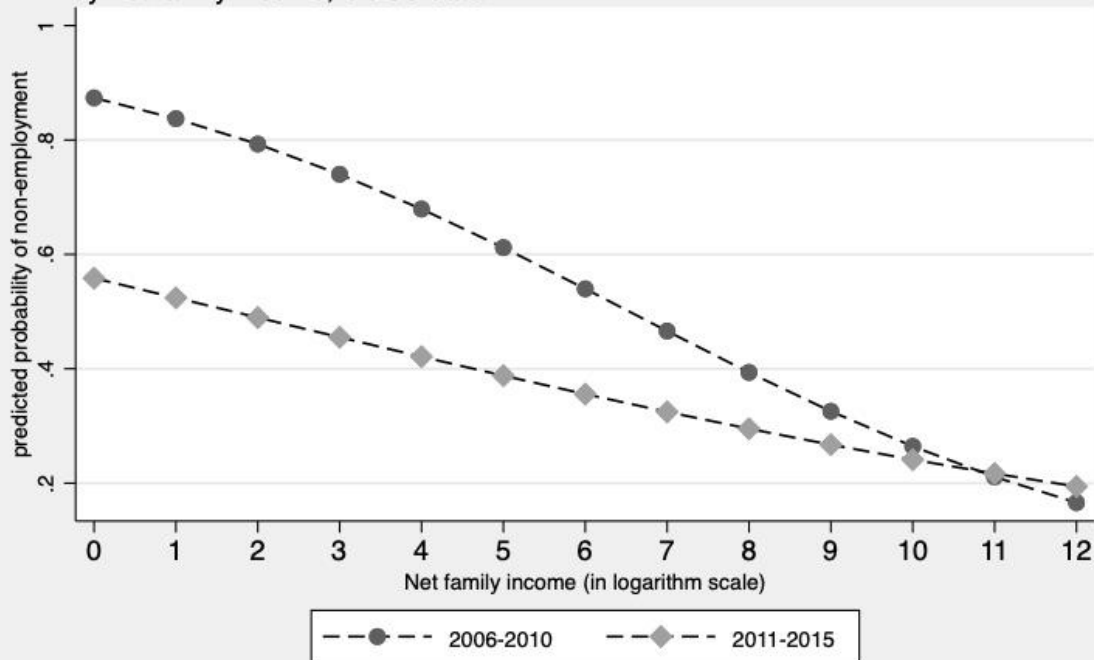|				
mothers, overall	●	census	○	cgss
mothers, excluding forced leave	●	census	○	cgss
fathers, overall	▲	census	△	cgss
fathers, excluding forced leave	▲	census	△	cgss

urban area, at least one child, 20-45

Figure 2: Predicted probability of mother's non-employment (without forced leaves) by net family income, CGSS data


2006-2010   2011-2015

Note: All control variables are set at the mean levels, based on Model 1 in Table 3.

Figure 3: Predicted probabilities of mothers' non-employment (without forced leaves) by levels of educational attainment, census and CGSS data
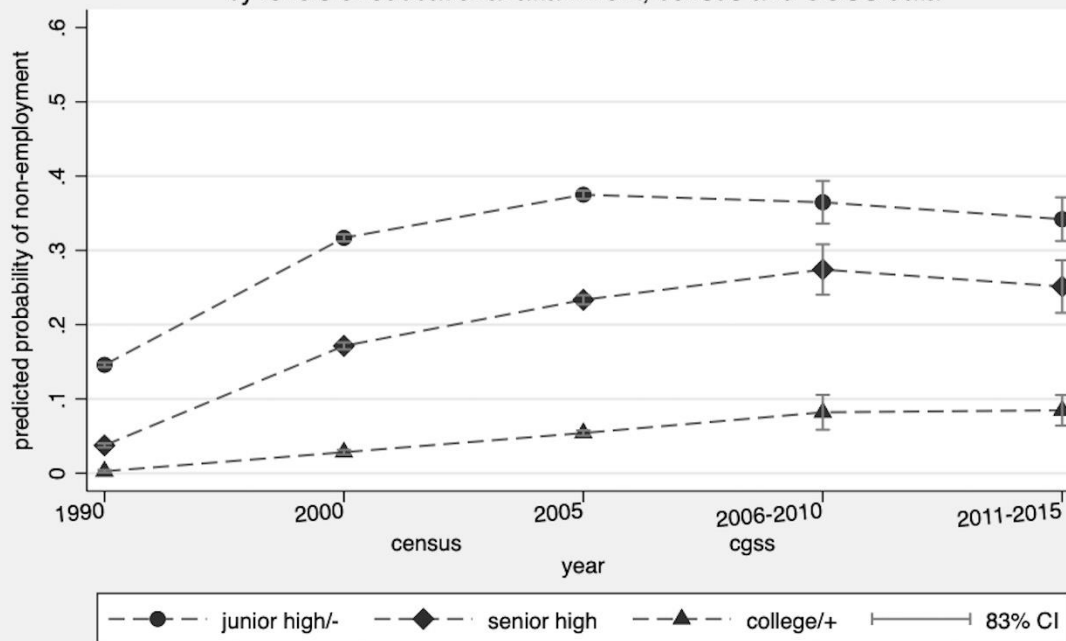
Note: All control variables are set at the mean levels, based on Models 2 and 3 in Table 3.

Figure 4: Predicted probabilities of mothers' non-employment (without forced leaves) by youngest child's age, census and CGSS data
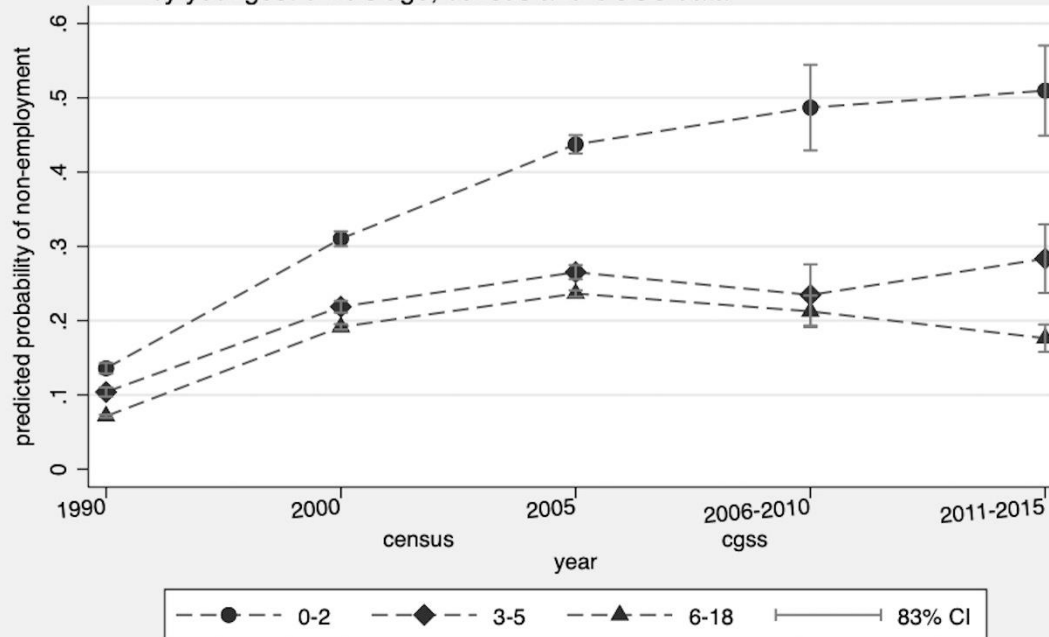
Note: All control variables are set at the mean levels, based on Models 4 and 5 in Table 3.

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