

The Perennial Dilemma: Motherhood, Employment and Impact on Children

Dr Kriti Vikram, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, NUS

As featured in Lianhe Zaobao, 3 June 2018

The last century has witnessed a historic rise in women's labour force participation rate across the world. Even though these rates vary across countries with some now witnessing a reversal or slowing of this trend, women now constitute an integral part of the global work force. This increase has been particularly noteworthy in Singapore where the female labour force participation rates have increased from 28.2 percent in 1970 to 60.4 percent in 2016. Women's participation in the labour force is valuable, providing economies with increasingly educated workers, and families with an additional source of income. However, reconciling a caregiving role with labour force participation remains a challenging task for women. Women are compelled by tradition to perform a 'second shift' at home, which refers to women's performance of housework and childcare after a full day of paid work. In this context, it is not surprising that a great deal of public and scholarly attention is directed at the effects of maternal employment on children's cognitive development, especially when the responsibility for childcare is viewed to rest primarily on their shoulders.

Frequently, the challenge of balancing the two conflicting roles results in women dropping out from the labour force following marriage and motherhood. In 2016, there was a 10-point difference in female labour force participation rates between the ages of 25-29 years and 40-44 years suggestive of the role of marriage and fertility in withdrawal from the labour force in Singapore. Even though this gap has narrowed since 2007, it has remained fairly stable across the last four years. Singapore needs women to participate actively in the workforce to compensate for an aging and shrinking work force. At the same time, there is a need to cultivate human capital to keep the economy vibrant and maintain its competitive advantage. Therefore, it is important to investigate how maternal employment impacts children's cognitive development and what can be done to support working women and their children.

Maternal employment potentially has both positive and negative consequences for children. Employment may impose demands on women's time, competing with the time allocated to childcare or children's education, but at the same time, it may result in additional income and self confidence that may increase investments in children. Research even suggests that income in the hands of women is more likely to result in child-focused investments than income in the hands of men. However, the stress or fatigue associated with balancing employment, childcare, and household chores may negatively affect women's interactions with children. It is often assumed that a mother's employment leads to some reduction in the time she will spend with her children, but this view is heavily contested. Some studies in the US find that a mother's employment does not necessarily result in decreased time with her children; instead, it leads to a re-arrangement of her schedule that affects only her sleep and leisure time. Other research suggests that mothers may compensate for the possible negative effects of employment by improving the quality of the time they spend with their children. The literature on maternal employment and child development is extensive but inconclusive, and the question of whether maternal employment has detrimental, beneficial, or no effect seems to hinge on a range of factors, including the type and timing of

maternal employment, parenting styles, the socio-economic class of the family, and the quality of childcare arrangements. My research with Dr. Feinian Chen and Dr. Sonalde Desai of the University of Maryland investigates how maternal employment is associated with children's reading and arithmetic achievement for school-going children aged 8 to 11 years in India.

We find that the relationship between maternal employment and children's cognitive achievement depends on the nature of mothers' work. Working mothers in India are less likely to be involved with school-related activities, and their children are disadvantaged in math and reading skills, but this simple dichotomy does not capture the rich diversity of maternal employment experiences. Children of self-employed women who work in their household businesses or on family farms, perform at the same level as those of stay-at-home mothers. Children of women who work outside of the households or who hold more than one job show deficits in math and reading skills. However, this relationship is drastically different for employed women with more education where their children demonstrate a significant academic advantage.

We find that employed mothers suffer from time constraints, specifically related to those school activities central for children's cognitive development. In the case of more flexible work, such as work from home, it may not be so difficult to combine work and child-rearing activities. For less educated women who are employed outside the household, the inflexible schedule or location of work may restrict the time mothers have for activities such as PTA meetings or supervision of academic work at home. Highly educated women who are engaged in employment outside the household are able to adjust their schedules to accommodate these tasks. For women who combine multiple jobs, the long hours of work can be physically demanding, resulting in less involvement in their children's school work. Maternal involvement in academic activities therefore emerges as an important mechanism that links maternal employment and child's cognitive achievement. Similar results have been observed for the US and UK.

Additionally, economic resources clearly matter. Well-to-do families substitute mothers' time with private schools, additional classes and tutors, essentially a trade-off for less time spent with children. These additional resources result in higher academic performance.

Two notable lessons emerge from these findings. First, we find that children of less educated mothers who are engaged in casual, low-skill work are academically disadvantaged. Such women may suffer from 'time poverty' as coined by social economist Naila Kabeer, where women, especially poor women, spend long hours in domestic chores in addition to their employment. In this scenario, employment takes time away from childcare but does not compensate it with additional academic resources for children. At the other end of the education spectrum, maternal employment is characterized by increased investments in children's academic activities. The time constraints of well-educated employed mothers do not interfere with academic activities, and, at the same time, their employment permits greater investment in private schooling and additional coaching.

Our findings have important implications for policy. First, work-family policies should support women's ability to balance childrearing and employment by offering greater

flexibility and resources such as quality child care and after school care. Evidence from developed countries also finds support for flexibility in the workplace as an enabler that helps mothers in balancing the two roles. Second, it is important to especially focus on children of working mothers with fewer socio-economic resources who may face significant deficits. The state as well as private employers should provide additional resources such as childcare subsidies, scholarships, and educational initiatives to bolster their academic performance. Third, schools should recognize the demands on working mothers and schedule parent-teacher meetings in evenings or over the weekends to facilitate their participation. Reliance on parental input to improve children's educational outcomes should also be reduced.