

## *Original Paper*

# The Impact of Husbands' Childcare Participation on Women's Subjective Well-Being: Evidence from CFPS 2020 Data

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### **Abstract**

*Against the dual background of boosting fertility and improving people's livelihood well-being, this study explores how to enhance female subjective well-being by increasing husbands' childcare participation in the stage of high-quality economic development. Using three waves of data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) from 2016 to 2020, this paper empirically tests the impact of husband's childcare on female well-being with the ordinary least squares (OLS) model. The results show that: (1) Husband's childcare participation has a significant positive effect on female subjective well-being; (2) Female family decision-making empowerment plays a partial mediating role in this relationship. Specifically, husband's childcare promotes female labor participation, changes their relative resource endowment within the family, and thus grants them more family decision-making power, which ultimately improves their well-being.*

### **Keywords**

*female subjective well-being, husbands' childcare participation, intra-household decision-making empowerment*

## **1. Introduction**

Female subjective well-being refers to the pleasant feeling generated when individuals make subjective evaluations of their quality of life and life value. It not only affects women's physical and mental health but also serves as an important indicator to measure a country's welfare level. While developing the economy, the country should also focus on improving people's livelihood well-being and take the people's aspiration for a better life as the highest pursuit of all economic activities (Xi, 2022). As the basic unit of society, the role division and interaction mode within the family have an important impact on the well-being of family members. However, with the sustained development of China's economy,

the family structure is undergoing profound changes. Childcare is no longer the exclusive responsibility of women, and the role and function of husbands in the childcare process are becoming increasingly prominent.

Traditional Chinese family concepts hold that women should bear family responsibilities such as childcare and housework, and the awareness of gender division of labor is still very strong today. With the liberalization of the fertility policy, women are facing dual pressures of childcare and employment, as well as the possibility of employment instability or even unemployment, which reduces the relative resources available to women. Husband's childcare participation is generally considered to have positive effects, as it can effectively increase female labor supply (Li & Mao, 2022). Mutual support and assistance between spouses within the family are important factors to enhance the personal well-being of both parties. The choice of participating in childcare or working depends not only on individuals but more on the availability of time for both spouses and the strength of family decision-making power. However, husband's participation in childcare cannot fully determine female well-being. When husbands undertake most of the childcare responsibilities, women can go out of the home and enter the labor market, effectively improving their personal and family economic levels, which is conducive to enhancing their well-being. At the same time, economic independence will significantly affect women's sense of achievement and well-being by influencing their family discourse power (Wang, Zhou, & Yan, 2019).

In view of this, this paper uses the 2020 CFPS data to observe the correlation between husband's childcare participation and female well-being in families, aiming to answer the following questions: First, does husband's participation in childcare affect female well-being, and what kind of impact does it have? Second, what role does female family decision-making empowerment play in the impact of husband's childcare on female well-being? This study expects to provide new perspectives and ideas for research in the field of female well-being.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Subjective Well-being and Its Influencing Factors*

Subjective well-being is an emotional experience including affection and cognition, which is a positive evaluation generated by people's comprehensive assessment of their own living conditions (Luo & Liu, 2022). The academic community generally explores the influencing factors of female well-being from both macro and micro perspectives. First, the micro factors that play a decisive role in individual well-being mainly include gender, fertility, marriage, health, income, etc. Among them, economic factors including employment have always been the focus of research. Second, macro factors include income inequality, social equity, government size, public expenditure, etc.

Social pressure caused by gender discrimination contributes to gender differences in well-being. Higher social expectations for men make men have lower well-being, while women have higher well-being than men (Li, Liu, & Sun, 2017). Well-being tends to decrease after the birth of the first child, and it

will also reduce parents' future fertility intentions (Luppi & Mencarini, 2018). The gender of children has an important impact on parents' well-being, and sons bring significantly lower well-being to parents than daughters (Lu, Liu, & Li, 2017). Marital satisfaction is part of personal feelings, and its impact on individual well-being has been theoretically demonstrated. People in marriage have significantly higher well-being than those not in marriage (Xu & Chen, 2020). A spouse with a happy marriage will provide support and encouragement to their partner, thus enhancing the partner's well-being (Luppi & Mencarini, 2018). Residents' health status, including physical and mental health, has a positive promoting effect on well-being (Lai & Yu, 2024). Income generally has a positive impact on well-being, but as income increases, the sensitivity of well-being to income decreases (Xu & Chen, 2017). High-quality employment is an important source of well-being. Stable employment with fixed employers has higher job satisfaction than unstable employment such as labor dispatch and casual work, thus having an indirect positive impact on well-being (Qing & Zheng, 2016).

Macro factors are also important indicators affecting well-being. Quantifiable inequality is mainly concentrated in income inequality, so a large number of literatures focus on the impact of income inequality on well-being. The higher the degree of income inequality, the lower the well-being of the people (Yue & Zhang, 2018). Social equity has a significant positive impact on residents' well-being, which can alleviate the decline in well-being caused by unequal opportunities and promote equalization of residents' income acquisition and children's education opportunities (Ni, 2020). However, an excessively large government size damages the well-being of low-income groups and widens the happiness gap between urban and rural areas and regions (Chen, He, & Liang, 2016). Public expenditure affects residents' well-being mainly by increasing consumption, and social expenditure in fields such as education, medical and health care, and social security is the main expenditure that promotes well-being (Hu & Lu, 2012).

### *2.2 Husband's Childcare Participation and Its Influencing Factors*

The factors influencing husband's participation in childcare are mainly summarized as gender, time and relative resources. Men with low self-evaluation believe that women have natural advantages in child care compared with men, so men invest very little in care and ignore the importance of husband's participation (Lin & Lu, 2019). The role expectation of husbands as the main breadwinners and the concept that wives are the most ideal caregivers for children make fathers invest more in economic life (NICHOLAS, 2000). Husbands who are economically dependent sometimes reduce their childcare participation to demonstrate their male status, and traditional concepts restrict some fathers from making childcare arrangements based on differences in economic characteristics (Zhang & Meng, 2023).

The time mothers spend on childcare is less affected by fathers' wages (Bloemen & Stanca, 2014), but the time fathers spend with their children is positively correlated with mothers' wages (Raley, Bianchi, & Wang, 2012). When mothers have jobs and earn more than fathers, fathers will significantly increase the time they invest in childcare activities (Raley, Bianchi, & Wang, 2012). Unemployment

rate and relative human capital are strongly associated with the possibility of “full-time fathers providing care” (Kramer & Kramer, 2016). Husbands’ childcare skills and feedback from childcare experiences also have a significant impact on their level of fulfilling paternal responsibilities. Positive returns obtained in childcare experiences will improve fathers’ participation level (Xu & Zhang, 2009).

### *2.3 Female Family Decision-making Empowerment and Its Influencing Factors*

Research on female family decision-making empowerment mainly focuses on employment, economy, education, child gender and other aspects. To a certain extent, the traditional Chinese family concept of “men work outside and women work inside” determines that it is difficult for women to independently decide major family affairs, making women in a subordinate position to their husbands for a long time. Women’s non-agricultural employment affects rural women’s family decision-making empowerment by influencing the relative income gap between them and their spouses and changing gender role concepts (Yang, Ding, & Zeng, 2023).

The economic resources mastered by both spouses are important influencing factors in the game of family rights. When the economic resources mastered by the wife are higher than those of the husband, the wife is more likely to fully control the family decision-making power (Treas & Tai, 2012). Women with higher education levels have stronger ability capital, will participate more actively in various family affairs, and have a higher decision-making status in family affairs (Chen, 2015). Giving birth to boys has a positive impact on rural women’s family decision-making power. Having the first child as a boy and eventually having boys both significantly improve women’s decision-making power in daily consumer goods purchase and children’s education (Yin, Wu, Wang et al., 2018).

## **3. Theoretical Analysis and Research Hypotheses**

### *3.1 The Impact of Husband’s Childcare on Female Well-being*

According to the work-family conflict theory, the competition for resources between the two fields of work and family leads to work-family conflict (Huang & Yang, 2024). That is, when people do not have sufficient time and energy to fulfill the responsibilities of one field, they may use resources from another field. Although many families in China are no longer in the traditional family model, women are still the main bearers of childcare responsibilities. Studies have found that caring for infants and young children reduces female labor force participation rate (Song, 2016), and the more children there are, the lower the female labor force participation rate (Zhang, 2011). Therefore, when childcare activities occur, women often choose to transfer some resources from the work field to the family field. However, these resources could have reflected their economic value. Women bear the time and opportunity costs of raising children, such as reducing or even giving up work and depreciation of human capital (Li, Wei, & Xie, 2021). Moreover, some women still identify with traditional gender role expectations, so they may choose almost unpaid “family-friendly” jobs for better childcare. Their economic value may not be generally recognized by society and families, leading some women to remain in a vulnerable position dependent on men and facing confusion such as lack of confidence,

which is likely to have a negative impact on their own well-being (Luo & Lin, 2024). But husband's childcare can significantly inhibit women's parenting costs (Huang & Yang, 2024) and effectively promote female employment. Therefore, husband's childcare can alleviate the conflict between women's work and family, increase female labor force participation rate, reflect their economic value and reduce economic dependence on men, change the economic inequality within the family, and enhance women's well-being. Based on the above analysis, this paper proposes the first hypothesis.

H1: Husband's participation in childcare has a positive impact on female subjective well-being.

### *3.2 The Role of Female Family Decision-making Empowerment in the Impact of Husband's Childcare on Female Well-being*

The relative resource theory of spouses holds that the family status of both spouses can be measured according to the size of their relative resource endowments. The party with larger resource endowments can not only determine the distribution of resources within the family but also influence the behavioral decisions and social welfare of family members by virtue of their advantages in education, career, income and other resources (Wang, 2014). That is, family status centered on relative resource endowments largely determines the family decision-making power of both spouses, such as major affair decision-making power and housework division, which in turn affects women's subjective welfare (Luo & Lin, 2024).

In contemporary society where men and women have more equal rights, husband's participation in childcare can effectively increase female labor force participation rate, improve women's economic capital, human capital and social capital endowments, and thus change the relative resource endowments within the family. On the one hand, husband's childcare promotes women's employment by alleviating their work-family conflict. Through employment, women realize their self-economic value and improve their human and social capital, reducing their economic dependence on men or even achieving economic independence. According to the 2021 China Rural Female Employment Research Report, economic independence is the main reason for the improvement of women's family status. This means that the gap in the economic contribution of both spouses to the family is narrowing, and the relative resource endowments within the family have also changed accordingly. On the other hand, with the improvement of women's relative resource endowments within the family, women are given more disposable rights over family affairs, which satisfies their material and psychological needs and will help improve women's well-being. Based on the above analysis, this paper proposes the second hypothesis.

H2: Female family decision-making empowerment plays a mediating role in the impact of husband's childcare on female well-being. That is, husband's childcare changes women's relative resource endowments within the family by promoting their labor participation, giving them more discourse power and thus affecting their well-being.

## 4. Research Design

### 4.1 Data Source

The data used in this paper comes from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) implemented by the Institute of Social Science Survey of Peking University. The CFPS sample covers 25 provinces/municipalities/autonomous regions, and the survey objects include all family members in the sample households, mainly involving data at the individual, family and community levels, reflecting the changes in China's society, economy, population, education and health. To better explore the impact of male childcare participation on female well-being, this paper selects the latest 2020 survey data, targeting married women of childbearing age aged 20-49 years.

### 4.2 Model Construction

Since the measurement of the explained variable "well-being" in this paper is a continuous variable, the OLS model is used to estimate the impact of husband's childcare on female well-being, as follows:

$$happiness_i = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 childcare_i + X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where, is the well-being score of female  $i$ ; is the childcare participation of husband  $i$ , and the coefficient measures the degree of impact of husband's childcare on female well-being; is the control variable, including individual characteristics and family characteristics; is the random disturbance term.

### 4.3 Main Variables and Descriptive Statistics

**Dependent variable.** The dependent variable of this paper is female subjective well-being: according to the subjective attitude part of the individual self-response questionnaire, select "How happy do you think you are?" to obtain the respondents' self-rated well-being score, with 0 representing the lowest and 10 representing the highest. Since this paper mainly examines female well-being, only female samples are retained to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the data.

**Independent variable.** The core variable of this paper is husband's participation in childcare: drawing on the method of Mao and Wan (Wang, 2014), it is determined according to the daily life part of the children's questionnaire. Select "Who takes care of the child during the day?" and "Who takes care of the child at night?" to determine. If the caregiver is "the child's father" during the day or night, it is assigned a value of 1, otherwise 0.

**Mediating variable.** The mediating variable of this paper is female family decision-making empowerment: according to the household income and household expenditure part of the family economic questionnaire, select "Who is the head of the family?" and "Who is the accountant for living expenses?" to determine the family decision-maker and household expenditure distribution decision-maker. Among them, if the answer is male, it is assigned a value of 0, and if it is female, it is 1.

**Control variables:** According to previous studies, female well-being is also affected by employment

participation status, individual characteristics and family characteristics (Luo & Lin, 2024). Therefore, this paper will control the following variables: female personal characteristics such as employment participation status, age, education level, political participation, social trust, internet use, and family characteristics such as the number of minor children, spouse's age, spouse's education level, spouse's employment status, and family annual income. The definition and descriptive statistics of main variables are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Definition and Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables**

<i>Variable type</i>	Variable name	Variable definition	Mean	Standard deviation
<i>Dependent variable</i>	Well-being	Female subjective self-rated score (0-10)	7.60	1.90
<i>Independent variable</i>	Husband's childcare	Caregiver is "the child's father" during the day or night = 1, otherwise = 0	0.19	0.39
	Family head decision-making power	Family head is the wife = 1, otherwise = 0	0.96	0.17
<i>Mediating variable</i>	Household expenditure distribution decision-making power	Living expenses accountant is the wife = 1, otherwise = 0	0.95	0.20
	Age	Years	38.4	6.99
	Employment participation	Worked at least 1 hour in the past week = 1, otherwise = 0	0.83	0.37
	Education level	1 = Primary school and below, 2 = Junior high school and high school, 3 = University and above	1.99	0.67
<i>Control variable</i>	Political participation	Participated in village/neighborhood committee election voting = 1, otherwise = 0	0.32	0.47
	Social trust	Believe that most people are trustworthy = 1, otherwise = 0	0.60	0.49
	Internet use	Use mobile devices to surf the internet = 1, otherwise = 0	0.82	0.38
	Number of minor Individuals		1.05	0.92

children				
Spouse's age	Years		38.5	7.14
Spouse's education level	1 = Primary school and below, 2 = Junior high school and high school, 3 = University and above		1.98	0.68
Spouse's employment status	Yes = 1, No = 0		0.88	0.32
Family annual income	Yuan		122384.8	160941.5

## 5. Empirical Results and Analysis

### 5.1 Benchmark Regression Results

The regression results of the impact of husband's participation in childcare on female well-being are shown in Table 2. The results show that husband's childcare participation can significantly promote female well-being ( $\beta = 1.43$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). After gradually controlling female personal characteristics and the number of minor children, husband's childcare still significantly promotes female well-being at a high level, and hypothesis H1 is tested.

**Table 2. Benchmark Regression Results**

Variable	Female well-being		Family head decision-making power	Household expenditure decision-making power
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Age	-0.001	-0.008	0.0004	-0.001
Employment participation	0.02*	0.02**	0.09*	0.01*
Education level	-0.21***	-0.27***	0.03***	-0.005
Political participation	0.11*	0.10	0.001	0.007
Social trust	0.41	0.33***	0.03***	0.01*
Internet use	0.06	0.11	-0.01	-0.008
Number of minor children	-0.07*	-0.07*	0.003	-0.002
Spouse's age	-0.008	-0.006	-0.001	-0.0003
Spouse's education level	0.10*	0.15**	-0.03***	0.008

<i>Spouse's employment status</i>	-0.02	-0.07	0.01	0.01
<i>Family annual income</i>	0.000000	0.000000	0.00000031	0.00000021
	324	196	9	4
<i>Husband's childcare</i>	1.43***	1.30***	0.04***	0.02**
<i>Family head decision-making power</i>		2.34***		
<i>Household expenditure distribution decision-making power</i>		2.19***		
$R^2$	0.1063	0.2334	0.0204	0.0087
$\Delta R^2$	0.1040	0.2311	0.0179	0.0061
$F$	47.01***	103.12***	8.21***	3.45***

Note. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; Direct effect (Model 1), total effect (Model 2), effect of independent variable on mediating variable (Model 3 + Model 4).

The regression results of the control variables are basically in line with expectations and consistent with existing studies on the influencing factors of female well-being. From the perspective of women's personal characteristics, women's employment participation and education level have high significance levels and are important factors to enhance female well-being. Employment participation is an important way for women to obtain self-recognition and social interaction. Through employment participation, women achieve economic income, alleviate family economic pressure, and enhance their happiness experience. Education level, as the main manifestation of human capital, represents a certain level of human capital to some extent, and based on the comparative advantage effect, women with higher human capital have higher well-being. However, the impact of women's political participation on female well-being is not significant. A possible explanation is that in the sample selection, the proportion of women participating in political life is relatively small, and the sample difference is small, so the impact of political participation on female employment is weak.

From the perspective of the number of minor children, the more minor children there are, the higher the husband's childcare participation. Under the condition of fixed time, reducing women's time to take care of children will increase the possibility of their well-being improvement. Women whose spouses have higher education levels have higher well-being. Both family head decision-making power and expenditure decision-making power have significant positive impacts on female well-being.

Table 2 further empirically tests whether female family decision-making empowerment has a mediating effect in the impact of husband's childcare on female well-being, that is, whether husband's childcare improves female family decision-making empowerment and thus enhances female well-being. Family head decision-making power and household expenditure distribution power are selected as proxy variables for family decision-making empowerment respectively. Models 3 and 4 in Table 2 show the regression results with family decision-making empowerment as the mediating variable. The results show that after adding the mediating variable, the impact of husband's childcare on female well-being

is still significant  $\beta = 0.04, P < 0.001$ , explaining an additional 1.79 of the variance, indicating that family decision-making empowerment plays a significant mediating role, that is, the relationship between husband's childcare and female well-being is partially realized through family decision-making empowerment. Therefore, hypothesis H2 is verified.

### 5.2 Clustering Robustness Test

This section verifies the robustness of the previous benchmark regression analysis results. Considering that family division of labor affects female well-being, a clustering robustness test will be conducted at the family level.

The OLS regression results in Table 3 show that in the family division of labor, whether the husband focuses on career and the wife focuses on family or the wife focuses on career and the husband focuses on family, husband's childcare can significantly improve their well-being. The significant impact of husband's childcare on female well-being has not changed, and the mediating effect of family decision-making empowerment has not changed either. The above results indicate that the conclusions of this paper are robust.

**Table 3. Clustering Robustness Test Results**

<i>Variable name</i>	OLS regression results	Clustering robustness test results
<i>Husband's childcare</i>	1.30***	1.29***
<i>Family head decision-making power</i>	2.34***	2.35***
<i>Household expenditure distribution decision-making power</i>	2.19***	2.20***
<i>Control variables</i>	Controlled	Controlled
$R^2$	0.2311	0.2334
$F$	103.12***	124.59***

Note. \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001.

## 6. Conclusion

Improving husband's childcare participation and enhancing female well-being are important measures to meet the people's needs for a better life and enhance the people's sense of gain, happiness and security. This paper uses the 2020 CFPS data and applies the OLS model to empirically test the impact of husband's childcare on female well-being and the mechanism of family decision-making empowerment in it. The main conclusions and implications are as follows.

First, husband's childcare can significantly improve female well-being. After controlling for personal characteristics such as age, employment participation and education level, the number of minor children and spouse characteristics, it can still significantly promote female well-being.

Second, husband's childcare improves female well-being by enhancing their family head decision-making power and household expenditure distribution decision-making power. Under the condition of fixed childcare time, husband's childcare can effectively reduce women's childcare time, enabling women to reduce their investment in the family field and increase their possibility of entering the labor market, so that women can obtain more resources.

Based on this, the following implications can be drawn: First, the government should strengthen policy guidance for female employment. It is necessary to create a family atmosphere that encourages husbands to participate in childcare, support men to participate in childcare and share child care and housework activities, meet women's needs for employment participation and gender equality, and give play to the economic and social benefits of gender dividend. At the same time, it is necessary to develop, standardize and make full use of flexible employment and new format industries to meet women's pressure to alleviate work-family conflicts. Second, improve female family decision-making empowerment and recognize the correctness and feasibility of female decision-making. Establish equal family concepts, break traditional gender stereotypes, improve women's family status, and balance the discourse power between men and women. Third, establish a sense of gender equality. Promote husbands' awareness of childcare responsibilities and responsibility sharing, guide society to change the traditional family division of labor role that "childcare is women's responsibility", and give full play to the happiness effect of female employment while reducing husbands' economic pressure.

Of course, this paper also has shortcomings: limited by the availability of required control variables, only the latest cross-sectional data is used. Although it can better reflect the current changes, it lacks the analysis of the long-term trend between husband's childcare and female well-being.

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