2013

Maternal Employment: A Look at Non-Economic and Economic Factors

Cindy Dermo
cdermo@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/si

Part of the Sociology Commons

Maternal Employment: A Look at Non-Economic and Economic Factors

Cindy R. Dermo

Maternal employment: A look at non-economic and economic factors

The debate has long raged over whether mothers should stay home with their children or return to the workforce following the birth of a child. Media certainly plays a role in shaping how we think about mothers. The portrayal of the traditional stay-at-home mother à la *Leave it to Beaver* in the 1950s has come a long way (or rather hasn't) to *Desperate Housewives* in recent years. At the same time, working mothers have been vilified on television, often shown burning the candle at both ends and having no time for anything but perfunctory relationships with their family. The reality is that modern motherhood falls somewhere in between. It is true that mothers are working more than ever. The number of married women with preschoolers in the labour force in 1950 was just 12% in the United States, rising to 45% by 1980 (Eggebeen 1988). According to the OECD, in 2009 approximately 70% of Canadian mothers and 66% of American mothers were employed. With some questioning women's abilities to raise children and participate in the workforce, should we expect a return to more traditional motherhood roles?

Non-Economic Factors

While some would have us believe mothers are rushing from the home in droves to work, others beg to differ. There are a growing number of highly educated women who are doffing the suit in exchange for yoga pants and a less stressful life as stay-at-home moms. In attempting to meet their full potential, some moms are burning out and dropping out. In her New York Times article, *The Opt-Out Revolution* (2003), Lisa Belkin argued that the women's movement had succeeded in blazing the path for women to take their rightful place at the helms of businesses and in the political arena. Yet by the end of the 20th century they had not. Women made up half of graduating classes at prestigious law schools in the United States, yet represented only a small fraction of partners at law firms. Smaller still were the number of women CEOs and members of

the House of Representatives decades after the revolution (Belkin, 2003). In 1992, women made up over 70% of the graduating classes in health-related studies and education, and nearly 60% of social and behavioural sciences and law classes in Canadian universities. By 2007, not only had those numbers increased, but the gender gap had widened (Parsons & McMullen, 2009). Following gaining entrance into the male-dominated world of higher education in late 1960s, the push was on. Graduating classes of women in the 1970s were expected to compete with men in the business world (Belkin, 2003). We can recall the "super mom" image of the 1980s. She is the very picture of the modern working mother who could do it all, from having a career to looking after children and doing the lion's share of the housework. This so-called *second shift* left working mothers sleep-deprived and resentful of husbands who refused to help (Hochschild, 1989). After a couple of decades of the crushing pressure to succeed on the career front whilst worrying they were slacking on the home front, have women decided enough is enough? Belkin's penetrating question 30-some years after the beginning of the women's movement, "Why don't women run the world?" had a simple answer. Because they don't want to.

Recent discourse on the modern family supports a paradigm shift to a more egalitarian family picture, evidencing the shifting beliefs of each new generation (Zollinger Giele 2008). In 1920, women stopped working when they got married. By 1940, women stopped working after pregnancy, and most did not return to the labour force (Wenk & Garrett, 1992). Working mothers are certainly more prevalent today than in decades past. However, in the last 10 years, young educated women's notions of career and motherhood have remained largely the same. Women still expect to be primarily responsible for childcare in concert with pursuit of career aspirations (Deutsch, Kokot & Binder, 2007). Deutsch et al. (2007) examined the egalitarian family plans of senior-year undergraduate women at a college in the United States. They found

that women envisioned lives where they and their husbands each scaled back work in favour of family, both spouses strove for the work-life balance or both pursued high-powered careers while outsourcing domestic work and childcare. In any of these scenarios, the women still expected to do more unpaid labour than their spouses. For the couples expecting to farm out childcare, the women would still be responsible for seeing to those arrangements. This is consistent with previous research which shows that even when husbands shared the workload at home, women still did more of the day-to-day housework (Hochschild, 1989).

However, the existence of true egalitarian families are not yet borne out by research, as women continue to report doing more unpaid work than their spouses. In their time use study, Ravenara, Beaujot and Liu (2009) examined the division of unpaid labour within the home. Major determinants were having children and level of income. Income was negatively related to unpaid work for women, but positively related for men. Seventy-two percent of women earning less than $30,000.00 annually reported doing more unpaid work than their spouses, while just over half of women who earned at least $60,000.00 annually did less or an equal amount. This number fell sharply when women earned in excess of $100,000.00 annually, with only 39% of women in this income bracket reporting doing more unpaid work than their spouses. Ultimately, women with young children and lesser income did most of the unpaid labour in the home. Finally, whether only the wife both spouses had a degree, approximately 59% of women reported doing more unpaid work. Women without a degree, irrespective of her spouse's education, did more unpaid labour than women with a degree. Clearly, the presence of children, level of income and education are factors in determining the amount of unpaid work done by women. Based on the foregoing, egalitarian marriages are more likely to include well-educated women with high personal income. Interestingly, we see not only gendered differences but

socioeconomic differences among women in the literature on unpaid work.

Economic Considerations

Human capital perspectives, which look at level of education, experience and training as an investment in the economy, suggest that mothers weigh the cost of staying home versus returning to work (Wenk & Garrett, 1992). In other words, they must determine whether it is economically feasible to return work when the cost of childcare and other expenses are taken into consideration. Bourdieu's notion of reproduction suggests that this investment by their mothers will pass down to children. So, mothers must also consider how their decision will affect their children in terms of their ability to meet their potential. However, women often defer having children, or do not have any at all, due to inevitable economic losses (Joshi, 2002). There is a negative relationship between women's education and number of children they have. In Joshi's longitudinal cohort study (2002), only 30% of women born in 1970 had their first child by age 26, compared with 72% of those born in 1946. When education was factored in, however, the gap widened, with only 10% of well-educated women in the 1970 birth cohort becoming mothers by age 26. This differentiation in childbearing among modern women is suggestive of greater participation in the labour force. Accordingly, when women delay starting families while they complete their education and start careers, they ultimately have fewer children (Joshi, 2002). This is consistent across OECD nations, where maternal employment decreases as the number of children increases (OECD, 2009).

Research has shown a positive relationship between a mother's education and being in the labour force (e.g. Wenk & Garrett, 1992 and Eggebeen, 1988). In their study of maternal employment in the Netherlands of approximately 1,700 working, married or cohabiting mothers, Cloïn, Keuzenkamp & Plantenga (2011) discovered a positive relationship between education

and participation in the labour market, with 82% of mothers with higher education reporting employment versus only 58% of lesser-educated mothers. Mothers with higher education worked, on average, more hours per week (22) than their less educated counterparts (15). This may be because well-educated mothers saw the intrinsic value in their employment, whereas lesser-educated mothers viewed work as instrumental (Cloïn et al., 2011).

Returning to the workforce had trended up over the generations. Women in Joshi's 1946 cohort stayed home an average of 5.5 years following childbirth. The 1958 cohort stayed home just 2.2 years. This data would suggest a further decrease in today's women. In fact, mothers working more hours at higher status jobs are less likely to take time off around the birth of a child (Wenk & Garrett, 1992). As well, Wenk and Garrett (1992) found that mothers' education was positively related with a speedier return to the workforce. However, Canadian studies do not support this trend. The number of Canadian women who reported working in the first year following childbirth increased from 84% in 1984 to 91% in 1999. Coinciding with the introduction of the one-year parental leave, this number fell to 87-88% in the early 2000s. With no guaranteed job protection past one year, it is not clear why women are staying home longer.

For Canadian women, the maternity leave benefit totals 55% of average insurable earnings to a maximum of $485.00 per week. In keeping with women's ever-increasing educational attainment, the gap between men's and women's earnings has narrowed significantly since the 1970s. In 1972, British women earned 63% of a man's hourly wage, increasing to over 90% in 1996 (Joshi, 2002). For women with higher education and consequently higher income, this amounts to a significant decrease in family income. While mothers in the United States do not enjoy government-funded maternity leave, some employers have anteed up having found it cheaper and easier than training a new employee. Education was positively related to paid leave

as well (Laughlin, 2011). In spite of a potentially unpaid leave, only 79% of mothers in the 2005-2007 U.S. Census reported returning to work within one year of a first birth (Laughlin, 2011). Educational attainment and increased income put women in positions of contributing a large amount, if not all, of their family's income. It is not surprising, from an economic perspective, that mothers would return to work following childbirth.

Hypothesis

Consistent with the views of the human capital approach and the possibility that a recent dip in maternal employment is does not signify a trend, my first hypothesis is that the higher the education of the mother, the less likely she is to cite looking after children as her main activity. My second hypothesis is that the higher the education of the mother, the more likely she is to be employed.

Methods

The analyses in this paper are based on The Canadian General Social Survey (GSS), 2008. The target population of the 2008 GSS included all persons in Canada aged 15 years or older, excluding those in Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, as well as full-time residents of institutions. Data were collected from a stratified representative sample of Canadians by geographic area. The sampling frame consisted of all possible 10-digit telephone numbers. Random dialing reached 55.7% of eligible households and an attempt was made to conduct an interview with one randomly selected person from each household. The sample included a total of 20,401 people. For our purposes, we have filtered the total sample to look at women only. The number of women in the sample totals 11,563.

There are coverage issues due to that fact it was not possible to contact persons without a telephone or those with only a cellular phone. The authors of the survey state there is evidence

to suggest that the number of people living in households without a telephone is 0.9% and those with only a cell phone comprise 6.4% of the population. I note that transients, Canadian international students or those living abroad for other reasons would also have been missed from the survey. Missing responses to individual questions are noted.

For this study, I began with bivariate analysis of the zero-order variables. Multivariate analysis was conducted with the introduction of control variables. See Table 1 for a description of the variables.

Findings

Looking after children

Included in the post-secondary category ("well-educated women") in addition to women with a university degree were women with college diplomas. The rationale for this was that applied arts and technical colleges offer diplomas in some very well-respected and highly-paid professions, such as nursing, engineering technician, dental hygienist, etc. As well, completion of a college diploma is categorized as higher education in previous research (e.g. Joshi, 2002). In my initial bivariate analysis, I included only university-educated women. The percentages varied only slightly. However, the raw numbers changed considerably, indicating only a small number of women in the sample had a university degree. In the final model, I opted to use the more-inclusive category for well-educated women. Table 1 shows a fairly even split in terms of education, with about 52% of the women in the sample falling into the well-educated category.

Education and Looking after children

In contradiction to my hypothesis, the data show that a slightly larger proportion of well-educated women versus lesser-educated women reported looking after children as their main activity (Table 2). Although statistically significant, gamma shows the relationship is weak.

In my elaboration model, I controlled for marriage. The discrepancy within the well-educated group increased substantially. Table 3 shows a much larger proportion of well-educated married women reported looking after children than well-educated unmarried women. In fact, a substantially larger proportion of married women, regardless of education, reported looking after children as their main activity compared to unmarried women. Additionally, well-educated women were more likely to be married. A bivariate analysis of the relationship between marital status and looking after children showed very similar proportions to the elaboration model. It appears that marital status has a greater influence on looking after children than has education.

We see that education has a greater effect on looking after children among married women, with 3.5% difference in that partial, versus a 1.7% difference for unmarried women. Overall, gamma showed the relationship is not very strong. In order to further analyze the zero-order relationship, I would need to examine elaboration models using other variables such as income and employment status prior to childbirth. Given the limitations of the 2008 GSS, this was not possible.

The effect of education on looking after children was reversed in the unmarried partial. A smaller proportion of unmarried, well-educated women reported looking after children.

I suspected that more married women would report having children, which would account for the discrepancy between the partials. A bivariate analysis of marriage and number of children aged 0 to 14 (Table 4) showed a surprisingly strong *negative* relationship between marriage and having children in that age bracket. About two-thirds of married women and over 80% of unmarried women in the sample reported having no children aged 0-14. In and of itself this statistic is not surprising since nearly 25% of the women in the sample reported they were

retired.   In any event, married women were twice as likely to have children aged 0-14 than unmarried women. Accordingly, one would expect to see only twice as many married women looking after children. This calculation holds true of lesser-educated women. About twice as many lesser-educated married women reported looking after children than their unmarried counterparts. However, and very interestingly for my purposes, the data show that well-educated married women were nearly 8 times more likely than well-educated unmarried women to report looking after children. One can only speculate as to the reason for this. It could be that from an economic standpoint these women earned more money pre-pregnancy, as did their husbands, and consequently they did not need to return to work. Another reason may be that we are seeing a trend toward traditional motherhood roles for women.

Education and Employment

As expected, there is a fairly strong positive, statistically significant, correlation between education and employment (Table 5). Nearly 60% of well-educated women reported being employed, compared with only about one-third of lesser-educated women.   A second bivariate analysis of employment and having children (0-14) replicates the findings shown at Table 5.

Marriage did not have much effect on well-educated women's employment, as we see replication in the partials within both married and unmarried versions of this group, i.e. both groups reported nearly 60% employment rates. However, we see that lesser-educated married women are far more likely to be employed than lesser-educated unmarried women (Table 6). Marriage is an important factor in lesser-educated women's employment. Since education and employment are positively related in the bivariate analysis, it is unclear what role marriage plays in lesser-educated women's employment. We do not know the direction of the relationship. Education or employment could be factors in mate selection.

Conclusions

The body of research on the issue of maternal employment is vast. Much of it relates to how children fare in the mix. However, the literature which speaks to women's attitudes about returning to work often relates an internal struggle to fulfill both the role of mother and the role of worker. Doubtless, nearly every woman weighs her decision to return to work against the desire to be there for her children. This paper did not explore the role of modern day fathers, but there is evidence that they are taking on more household and child-rearing tasks (Ravenera, Beaujot & Liu, 2009). They are even taking parental leave in some cases after the birth of a new child. The literature indicated that education as a predictor of maternal employment appears to be in throes of change. The reasons are not entirely clear. However, the stress associated with the "second shift" lifestyle may have women rethinking their roles. Perhaps we are simply seeing a stabilization of women's roles as mothers and workers following a tumultuous several decades which saw marked change to society.

While a small proportion of women in general reported looking after children as their main activity, I expected to find a negative relationship between education and looking after children. However, the data suggest a very weak positive relationship between education and looking after children. My findings suggest that the relationship between education *(X)* and looking after children *(Y)* might have been at least partially spurious, and that marriage *(T)* was the intervening variable which helped to explain the relationship. The following model could apply to the relationship:

$$X \xrightarrow{+} T \xrightarrow{+} Y$$

The literature describes a socioeconomic disparity among women which appears to account for some of the differentiation in unpaid work. The limitations of the 2008 GSS prevented me from discussing these aspects of maternal employment. A look at US and European nations indicated employment differentiated on the basis of education. My hypothesis that education and employment would be positively related was supported by my findings. The introduction of marriage as a control variable highlighted the difference in the proportion of lesser-educated women's employment status. It could be that lesser-educated women are more likely to work when married because of the presence of children or expectations of the spouse. It is not clear how the unmarried women with lesser education in my sample support themselves. The unmarried category includes widowed, separated, divorced, and never-married women. This finding is interesting, and is worth further investigation.

It would appear from my findings that the correlation between highly educated women and being a stay-at-home mom may be trending upward. It is possible that mothers are making a choice to stay home until children start school or later. Whichever case is true, I suspect that these highly-educated moms are spending their time constructively. Whether they are involved in their children's schools or in local service or charity groups is unknown. However, a time-use study for highly-educated stay-at-home moms would doubtless provide interesting results. Further, much of the literature that suggested upheaval in maternal employment was from 1990s and early 2000s. This implies that decade was a time of change. Further research on this topic in general as we move into the 21st century will be interesting.

Reference List

Belkin, L. (2003). http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/26/magazine/26WOMEN.html

Cloïn, M., Keuzenkamp, S. and Plantenga, J. (2011). A matter of culture and cost? A comparison
of the employment decisions made by mothers with a lower, intermediate and higher
level of education in the Netherlands. *Work, Employment & Society, 25*(3), 468-486.

Eggebeen, D. J. (1988). Determinants of maternal employment for white pre-school children:
1960-1980. *Journal of Marriage and Family,50*(1), 149-159.

Hochschild, A. & Machung, A. (1991). The Second Shift. *The Canadian Journal of Sociology /
Cahiers canadiens de sociologie, 16*(4), 453-456.

Joshi, H. (2002). Production, reproduction, and education: Women, children, and work in a
British perspective. *Population and Development Review, 28*(3), 445-474.

Laughlin, L. (October 2011). Maternity leave and employment patterns of first-time to mothers:
1961–2008. Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p70-128.pdf

Parsons, G. and McMullen, K. (December 2009). Trends in University Graduation, 1992 to
2007. Retrieved from http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-004-x/2009005/article/11050-
eng.htm#b

Ravenara, Z., Beaujot, R. and Liu, J. (2009). Models of earning and caring: Determinants of the
division of work. *Canadian Sociological Association/La société canadienne de
sociologie,46*(4).

Statistics Canada. 2008. *General Social Survey, Cycle 22: Social Networks.* Ottawa: Ministry of
Industry

Wenk, D. & Garrett, P. (1992) Having a Baby: Some Predictions of Maternal Employment
around Childbirth. *Gender and Society (6)*1, 49-65.

Zhang, X. (December 2007). Returning to the job after childbirth. Retrieved from

http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/2007112/article/4096932-eng.htm

Zollinger Giele, J. (2008). Homemaker or Career Woman: Life Course Factors and Racial

Influences among Middle Class Americans. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies (39)*

3, 392-411.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Women, 2008

Variable	Percent (N=11563)
Main Activity in the past 12 months*	
Looking after children	8%
Employment	45.6%
Other Activities**	44.9%
Missing	0.6%
Total	(11492)
Education	
Degree(s) or Diploma	51.8%
Less than degree/diploma***	47.2%
Missing	1.0%
Total	(11444)
Marital Status†	
Married or Common-law	52.8%
Unmarried	47.1%
Missing	0.1%
	(11551)

*Variable recoded - All other main activities include looking for work, going to school, household work, retired, maternity leave, long-term illness, volunteering. Other, not stated and don't know were all recoded to missing data

**Nearly 25% (N=11563) of female respondents reported being retired

*** Less than post-secondary degree/diploma includes some college or university, high school, less than high school. Refused or don't know recoded as missing.

†Unmarried includes single, widowed, divorced

Table 2

Looking after Children and Level of Education Reported by Women, 2008

	Post-Secondary Degree/ Diploma	Less than Post-Secondary
Looking after children	9.0%	7.0%
Other Activities	91.0%	93.0%
TOTALS	5961 (100%)	5444 (100%)

Note: N = 11405; Missing = 158
Chi-Square = 15.42, df1, p<.01
Gamma = .136 p<.01

Table 3

Looking after Children, Level of Education, Marriage, 2008

	Married		Unmarried	
	Post-Secondary Degree	Less than Post-Secondary	Post-Secondary Degree	Less than Post-Secondary
Looking after children	13.6%	10.1%	2.5%	4.3%
Other Activities	86.4%	89.9%	97.5%	95.7%
TOTALS	3525 (100%)	2494 (100%)	2432 (100%)	2944 (100%)

Note: N=11395; Missing 168
Chi Square = 7.39, df1, p<.01
Gamma = .104. p<.01

Table 4

Marital status and number of children Reported by women, 2008

	Married	Unmarried
No children aged 0-14	67.6%	83.2%
At least one child aged 0-14	32.4%	16.8%
TOTALS	6107 (100%)	5444 (100%)

Note: N = 11551; Missing = 12
Chi-Square = 375.3, df1, p<.01
Gamma = -.408 p<.01

Table 5

Employment and Level of Education Reported by Women, 2008

	Post-Secondary Degree/ Diploma	Less than Post-Secondary
Employment	58.5%	34.2%
Other Activities	41.5%	65.8%
TOTALS	5961 (100%)	5444 (100%)

Note: N = 11405 ;Missing = 158
Chi-Square = 677.2 df1, p<.01
Gamma = .462 p<.01

Table 6

Employment, Level of Education, Marriage, 2008

	Married		Unmarried	
	Post-Secondary Degree	Less than Post-Secondary	Post-Secondary Degree	Less than Post-Secondary
Employment	59.6%	41.5%	57.6%	28.3%
Other Activities	40.4%	58.5%	42.4%	71.7%
TOTALS	3515 (100%)	2490 (100%)	2417 (100%)	2918 (100%)

Note: N=11340; Missing 223
Chi Square = 676.34 df1, p<.01
Gamma = .463 p<.01