

*Market Merits and Family Virtues: Family Caregivers in the Labor Market of Hong Kong**

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Abstract

When family-work balance arouses much attention in the modern world, there is increasing interest to understand how job seekers who need to take care of family members experience discrimination in the labor market. This study explores the gendered effects of family care responsibilities on employment outcomes of job candidates in Hong Kong, in the frameworks of market meritocracy and family moral virtuocracy. The authors adopt a mixed-methods research design and find that fathers and caregivers of ageing parents receive favorable evaluations and treatments in the combining power of market meritocracy and moral virtuocracy; mothers are evaluated as possessing market merits but are not favored in job offers. Sub-group analyses and

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* Research activities of the project are generously sponsored by a General Research Fund (#14610220) from the Research Grant Council of Hong Kong and a research grant from the Equal Opportunities Commission of Hong Kong.

qualitative data further demonstrate that market meritocracy fails to function for virtuous female caregivers in employment opportunities, largely due to structural and cultural barriers in the labor market, instead of stereotypes as often believed. This fundamental inequality needs to be addressed with policy interventions.

In the global discussion of labor rights, work-family balance and gender equality, how family care responsibilities at home impact on individuals' opportunity of employment and career development in the labor market has drawn increasing scholarly and policy attention. One important line of argument concerns the "status characteristics" of family caregivers, including men and women who need to regularly deliver care to children, the elderly, and adult family members.¹ By demonstrating the status of a family caregiver, one would be viewed in the labor market as in need of flexible hours, unable to fully commit to work, and unfit with the definition of "an ideal worker."² The "flexibility stigma" thus makes people with family care duties appear incompetent and in short of the important merits of being able to commit to work full time without leave taking or put in overtime.³

Researchers found that the status characteristics of family caregivers could work differently for men and women, workers in different race and social class, and people with different care duties.⁴ Accumulated empirical data in the literature have supported that mothers are usually penalized by their status, but consensus has not yet been reached regarding other types of family caregivers. The status of motherhood often puts women in disadvantage in the labor market because it indicates the lack of merits of a fully committed ideal worker.

While shouldering family care responsibilities could be viewed as a negative status in the meritocratic market logics of competence and efficiency, it is understood as a crucial and emphasized virtue of individuals, particularly in the Chinese cultural traditions. Virtuocracy, in which life chances including occupational selection and promotion are awarded to the virtuous, is believed to be a prominent character of the evaluation system of the Chinese culture.⁵ The Confucian teaching believes that men need to learn about family commitment before taking on political and national responsibilities, and taking care of one's family and pursuing one's career are two equally important elements in the establishment of adulthood. Providing proper care and guidance to children and