

LABOR MARKET SEGMENTATION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON FEMALE LABOR SUPPLY

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ABSTRACT

Labor market segmentation has been recognized as a critical determinant of gender inequality and labor supply decisions in contemporary China. This study examines the structural and institutional mechanisms that shape female labor participation, with a focus on sectoral, occupational, and ownership-based segmentation. Drawing upon evidence from empirical research on wage differentials, employment structures, demographic factors, and the emerging gig economy, the article investigates how segmentation influences the labor supply behavior of women, particularly in urban settings and high-wage sectors. Findings highlight that women are disproportionately concentrated in lower-paying occupations and sectors, face unequal returns to education, and are affected by institutional barriers such as hukou restrictions, firm ownership structures, and digitalization in platform-based employment. Moreover, demographic variables including fertility intentions, family responsibilities, and migration status significantly modulate women's labor supply decisions. The study contributes to the literature by integrating traditional labor market segmentation theory with contemporary evidence from digital labor markets and socio-demographic dynamics, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding female labor supply patterns in China. Policy implications underscore the need for institutional reforms, equitable educational returns, and targeted interventions to mitigate structural barriers that limit women's labor market participation.

Keywords:

Labor market segmentation; Female labor supply; Gender wage gap; Occupational segregation; Sectoral allocation; Digital labor; Ownership structure; Fertility intentions; Migration; China

INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in the labor market has been a central concern in labor economics, particularly in rapidly transforming economies such as China. Over the past four decades, China has undergone extensive economic reforms that have reshaped employment structures, wages, and occupational allocation (Gustafsson & Li, 2000). These transformations have produced heterogeneous labor markets, where institutional, sectoral, and demographic factors influence labor supply decisions. While the overall female labor participation rate in China remains relatively high compared to global standards, disparities persist in terms of employment quality, sectoral allocation, and wage returns (Li, Tang, & Jin, 2024).

Labor market segmentation theory posits that the labor market is divided into distinct sectors or segments characterized by differential access to resources, wages, employment security, and career progression. In China, segmentation manifests through differences in sectoral ownership (state-owned vs. private), industry type, firm size, and emerging digital platforms (Liu, Meng, & Zhang, 2000; Ma, 2018). Women are disproportionately represented in lower-paying and less secure segments, which not only reduces immediate earnings but also affects long-term career trajectories.

1.2 Institutional and Demographic Context

China's labor market is shaped by institutional arrangements such as hukou-based residency systems, union presence, and state intervention in wage-setting, which interact with gender norms and family responsibilities to affect female labor supply (Qin et al., 2016; Shen & Deng, 2008). Demographic factors, particularly fertility intentions and childbearing responsibilities, also have a significant impact on women's labor participation decisions. Women may reduce labor supply or opt for part-time and flexible work arrangements due to family obligations (Li & Xu, 2022). These demographic constraints are further exacerbated in private and emerging sectors, where labor protections are weaker and institutional support is limited.

1.3 Sectoral and Occupational Segmentation

Segmented labor markets result in unequal occupational opportunities for women, restricting access to high-paying and high-prestige jobs. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) and public institutions traditionally offered more equalized wage structures and better career security, resulting in relatively smaller gender wage gaps (Liu et al., 2000). Conversely, private-sector firms and high-growth industries often rely on market-driven wage systems and managerial discretion, which amplify gender inequalities in wages and opportunities (Tan et al., 2025). Women's concentration in lower-paying sectors reduces their labor supply elasticity in response to wage incentives, as the returns to entering higher-paying sectors are limited or uncertain.

1.4 Digital Labor Markets

The rapid expansion of digital and platform-based employment further complicates labor market segmentation and female labor supply decisions. Gig economy participation offers flexibility but also entails income instability and unequal access to high-reward tasks, which disproportionately affect women (Han et al., 2024; Li, Hu, Jin, & Han, 2025). Women often enter digital labor markets as a coping mechanism for household responsibilities or due to limited access to formal sector employment. While digitalization provides new labor opportunities, it simultaneously reproduces structural inequalities and reinforces gendered occupational segregation.

1.5 Research Objective and Contribution

This article aims to synthesize existing evidence on labor market segmentation and its influence on female labor supply in China. By integrating sectoral, occupational, and demographic perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive framework that connects institutional arrangements, wage structures, educational returns, and digital labor dynamics. The analysis highlights persistent structural barriers that limit women's labor supply decisions and underscores the importance of policies aimed at promoting equitable access to high-paying sectors and employment security.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Labor Market Segmentation

Labor market segmentation theory has been widely applied to explain gendered differences in employment and earnings. The dual labor market framework distinguishes between primary sectors, characterized by higher wages, job stability, and advancement opportunities, and secondary sectors, marked by low wages, precarious employment, and limited career progression (Shen & Deng, 2008; Liu et al., 2000). In the Chinese context, this segmentation is influenced by ownership type, industry, and institutional factors, leading to persistent wage gaps and differential labor supply responses among women.

Human capital theory complements segmentation analysis by highlighting the role of education and skills in shaping employment opportunities. While increased educational attainment should theoretically enhance women's labor supply and wage prospects, empirical evidence indicates that women often receive lower returns to education compared to men, particularly in private-sector and high-wage industries (Li, Hu, & Jin, 2025; Hannum, 2005). This disparity reflects structural barriers that limit women's access to high-paying occupations, thereby constraining the elasticity of their labor supply.

2.2 Sectoral and Ownership-Based Segmentation

China's labor market is segmented along sectoral and ownership lines, with state-owned enterprises (SOEs) historically providing stable employment and equitable wage structures (Ma, 2018; Liu et al., 2000). In contrast, private-sector firms operate under market-driven wage systems, which increase pay dispersion and heighten gender wage gaps (Tan et al., 2025). Studies show that women in private sectors often encounter limited promotion opportunities and wage penalties, reducing their incentive to supply labor at higher levels of effort or remain in these sectors long-term (Bai et al., 2022).

Industry-specific segmentation also affects labor supply. High-wage industries such as finance, energy, and technology demonstrate large wage premiums, but women are frequently underrepresented in these sectors, highlighting the interaction between gender, sectoral allocation, and labor supply (Jong-Wha Lee & Wie, 2017; He & Goncalves, 2025). The concentration of women in lower-paying, lower-prestige sectors reinforces occupational segregation and limits upward mobility.

2.3 Demographic Influences on Female Labor Supply

Demographic variables such as fertility intentions, marital status, and migration status play a significant role in shaping women's labor market behavior. Fertility-related interruptions reduce labor supply, particularly in private-sector employment where maternity protections are limited (Li & Xu, 2022). Internal migrants face compounded disadvantages due to hukou-based restrictions, which limit access to formal employment and

social services, resulting in reduced labor supply and wage penalties (Qin et al., 2016). These findings underscore the importance of considering demographic context when analyzing labor supply patterns.

2.4 Digital Labor and Emerging Inequalities

The gig economy introduces a new form of labor market segmentation, characterized by algorithmic management, task-based payment, and flexible employment arrangements. Women often occupy lower-paying tasks and face limited access to high-value digital work, which reinforces existing wage gaps and influences labor supply decisions (Han et al., 2024). While digital labor markets offer flexibility for balancing household responsibilities, they often lack social protections and stable career paths, affecting the long-term supply of female labor (Li, Hu, Jin, & Han, 2025).

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gaps

Existing literature demonstrates that labor market segmentation—across sectors, occupations, and digital platforms—interacts with education, demographic characteristics, and institutional factors to shape female labor supply in China. Despite increased participation in formal and informal employment, structural barriers such as ownership-based segmentation, occupational segregation, unequal educational returns, and digital labor inequalities continue to constrain women's labor market behavior. However, gaps remain in integrating these dimensions into a unified analytical framework that captures both traditional and emerging forms of employment, highlighting the need for comprehensive studies that consider the intersection of sectoral, demographic, and technological factors (Zhu, 2025; Li, Tang, & Jin, 2024).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a systematic literature review and integrative analysis approach to examine labor market segmentation and its influence on female labor supply in China. Given the complex and heterogeneous nature of China's labor market, an integrative methodology enables the synthesis of findings from multiple disciplines, including labor economics, sociology, demography, and digital labor studies (Shen & Deng, 2008; Iwasaki & Ma, 2020). By consolidating empirical evidence across decades, this approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of structural, institutional, and demographic factors that shape women's labor supply decisions.

The study emphasizes the interaction between sectoral allocation, ownership structures, occupational segregation, and demographic characteristics in influencing female labor market behavior. Unlike a primary data study, this research draws upon peer-reviewed studies, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews that provide quantitative and qualitative insights into gendered labor market outcomes, including wage differentials, participation rates, and the distribution of women across sectors (Li, Tang, & Jin, 2024).

3.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The analytical base of this study is derived from the curated references previously provided, which collectively encompass over two decades of research on female labor participation, gender wage gaps, and labor market segmentation in China. The studies selected span multiple types of employment, including state-owned enterprises (SOEs), private firms, foreign-invested firms, and emerging digital platforms (Liu et al., 2000; Ma, 2018; Han et al., 2024).

Inclusion criteria were guided by three primary considerations:

1. The study must explicitly address female labor supply, gender wage disparities, or labor market segmentation.
2. The study must provide empirical evidence from China, accounting for urban and rural contexts, institutional frameworks, and sectoral differences.
3. The study should examine sectoral, occupational, or demographic influences, such as fertility intentions, migration, or educational attainment (Li & Xu, 2022; Qin et al., 2016).

This approach ensures analytical coherence, allowing the integration of findings across sectors, ownership types, and labor arrangements while maintaining relevance to female labor supply outcomes.

3.3 Analytical Framework

A multi-dimensional framework was employed to examine the determinants of female labor supply in segmented labor markets. This framework integrates four major dimensions:

1. Sectoral Segmentation – Distinguishing between public sector, private sector, high-wage industries, and the gig economy. The public sector is characterized by standardized wages and institutional protections, while private and digital labor sectors demonstrate higher wage dispersion and employment precarity (Liu et al., 2000; Han et al., 2024).

2. Occupational Segmentation – Examining women’s concentration in lower-paying and lower-prestige occupations versus men’s access to managerial, technical, and high-wage positions (Li, Tang, & Jin, 2024; Bai et al., 2022).
3. Institutional Factors – Ownership type, union presence, hukou restrictions, and regulatory protections that influence women’s labor market participation (Ma, 2018; Qin et al., 2016).
4. Demographic and Socio-economic Factors – Fertility intentions, migration status, household responsibilities, and educational attainment as moderators of labor supply decisions (Li & Xu, 2022; Hannum, 2005).

This framework allows for a holistic understanding of how structural, institutional, and demographic factors collectively shape female labor supply in China.

3.4 Measurement and Synthesis Approach

Gendered labor outcomes are primarily measured through labor force participation rates, wage differentials, and occupational distributions. Studies employ quantitative methods including regression analysis, Oaxaca–Blinder decomposition, and cross-sectional wage comparisons (Iwasaki & Ma, 2020; Li, Hu, & Jin, 2025). Qualitative findings, particularly those exploring demographic and digital labor dynamics, were synthesized narratively to contextualize quantitative results.

By integrating these approaches, the study identifies consistent patterns and mechanisms that influence female labor supply decisions across different sectors, occupations, and demographic contexts.

3.5 Validity and Limitations

The validity of this study is enhanced by the reliance on peer-reviewed, methodologically rigorous sources that span multiple regions and labor market segments. Cross-validation across studies increases reliability, especially where similar results are observed across different sectors and time periods (Iwasaki & Ma, 2020).

However, limitations include variations in measurement techniques, sector definitions, and sample populations, which may introduce comparability challenges. Rapid changes in the digital labor market and regional disparities in China suggest that some findings, particularly regarding gig economy participation, may evolve rapidly (Han et al., 2024).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Overview of Female Labor Supply in Segmented Markets

The literature consistently indicates that labor market segmentation significantly constrains female labor supply in China. Women remain overrepresented in secondary labor market sectors characterized by lower wages, limited career advancement, and insecure employment (Li, Tang, & Jin, 2024; Liu et al., 2000). Despite high overall female labor force participation rates, women’s distribution across sectors is uneven, reflecting the structural barriers imposed by both institutional arrangements and occupational segregation (Ma, 2018; Shen & Deng, 2008).

4.2 Sectoral Differences and Ownership Influence

State-owned enterprises (SOEs) and public institutions demonstrate relatively smaller gender wage gaps and more stable employment conditions, contributing to higher labor supply continuity among women (Liu et al., 2000). Private-sector and foreign-invested firms, by contrast, show higher wage dispersion and weaker institutional protections, resulting in reduced female labor supply, particularly for married women or those with child-rearing responsibilities (Tan et al., 2025). Women in high-wage industries such as finance and energy are underrepresented, despite higher potential earnings, reflecting both gendered occupational sorting and structural barriers to entry (Jong-Wha Lee & Wie, 2017; He & Goncalves, 2025).

4.3 Educational Returns and Labor Supply

While increased educational attainment has expanded women’s labor market access, the returns to education are unequal across sectors and occupations. Women often receive lower wage premiums than men for equivalent qualifications, particularly in private-sector firms and high-growth industries (Li, Hu, & Jin, 2025). Lower returns reduce the incentive to supply labor in higher-paying but competitive segments, reinforcing concentration in lower-wage sectors (Hannum, 2005; Bai et al., 2022).

4.4 Demographic Moderators of Labor Supply

Demographic variables significantly influence women’s labor supply behavior. Fertility intentions, family responsibilities, and marital status reduce labor participation and limit engagement in high-demand sectors (Li & Xu, 2022). Internal migration poses additional constraints: female migrants face hukou-based restrictions and limited access to formal employment, resulting in both lower labor supply and reduced wage levels (Qin et al., 2016). These demographic realities interact with sectoral allocation to further shape employment patterns.

4.5 Gig Economy Participation

The gig economy offers flexible labor opportunities but introduces new constraints on female labor supply. Women disproportionately undertake lower-paying tasks on digital platforms and have reduced access to high-reward assignments, reinforcing segmentation effects and limiting overall labor supply in high-value sectors (Han et al., 2024; Li, Hu, Jin, & Han, 2025). The combination of flexibility with income instability creates trade-offs that influence women's participation intensity and long-term engagement.

4.6 Summary of Key Patterns.

Table 3. Female Labor Supply Patterns Across Segmented Sectors in China

Labor Segment	Market Sector	Female Labor Supply	Key Constraints	Representative Studies
Public (SOEs)	Sector	High	Limited wage growth	Liu et al., 2000; Ma, 2018
Private Sector		Moderate	Wage dispersion, lower promotion	Tan et al., 2025; Bai et al., 2022
High-Wage Industries		Low	Gendered occupational barriers	Jong-Wha Lee & Wie, 2017; He & Goncalves, 2025
Gig Economy		Moderate	Task allocation, income instability	Han et al., 2024; Li, Hu, Jin, & Han, 2025
Migrant Labor		Low	Hukou restrictions, limited access	Qin et al., 2016

The table highlights that women's labor supply is closely tied to sectoral characteristics, institutional protections, and demographic realities. Sectoral segmentation and unequal returns to education reinforce concentration in lower-paying segments and reduce engagement in competitive, high-wage industries.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Structural Determinants of Female Labor Supply

The findings from this study underscore that labor market segmentation is a key structural determinant of female labor supply in China. Women remain disproportionately concentrated in lower-paying sectors and occupations, despite increased participation in the labor force overall (Li, Tang, & Jin, 2024; Liu et al., 2000). This aligns with dual labor market theory, which emphasizes the division of labor into primary and secondary segments with distinct wage structures, employment security, and advancement opportunities (Shen & Deng, 2008). In China, these segments are further shaped by ownership type, institutional oversight, and regulatory frameworks, which determine access to high-paying, stable employment.

State-owned enterprises (SOEs) and public institutions illustrate how institutional structures can mitigate gendered inequalities. Standardized wage-setting, formal promotion procedures, and stronger union presence contribute to relatively higher female labor supply and narrower wage gaps (Liu et al., 2000; Ma, 2018). Conversely, the private sector and high-wage industries, which operate under market-driven wage systems and rely heavily on managerial discretion, exhibit wider gender disparities in both wages and labor supply (Tan et al., 2025; Bai et al., 2022). These sectoral differences highlight the interplay between structural segmentation and institutional governance in shaping women's labor participation.

5.2 Education and Returns on Human Capital

Education plays a complex role in influencing female labor supply. While women's educational attainment has improved markedly in China, the returns to education remain unequal across sectors and occupations (Li, Hu, & Jin, 2025). Women frequently earn lower wage premiums than men for equivalent qualifications, particularly in private-sector firms and competitive high-wage industries (Hannum, 2005). These unequal returns reduce incentives for women to supply labor in high-effort or high-paying roles, resulting in persistent occupational segregation (Bai et al., 2022).

Moreover, educational gains are constrained by structural and institutional factors. Highly educated women often face barriers to entering managerial or technical positions due to discriminatory practices, social norms, and limited professional networks (Li, Tang, & Jin, 2024). This interplay between education and structural constraints underscores the importance of integrating human capital considerations with broader labor market segmentation analyses.

5.3 Demographic and Socioeconomic Influences

Demographic factors, including fertility intentions, family responsibilities, and migration status, exert significant influence on female labor supply (Li & Xu, 2022; Qin et al., 2016). Fertility-related interruptions and caregiving

obligations reduce labor market engagement, particularly in private-sector employment where maternity protections are weaker. Internal migration exacerbates these challenges, as female migrants face hukou restrictions that limit access to formal employment, social protections, and housing benefits, resulting in lower labor participation and reduced wages (Qin et al., 2016).

The interaction between demographic characteristics and labor market segmentation is particularly critical. Women with children or household responsibilities are more likely to remain in flexible but lower-paying roles, including gig or informal work, rather than competing for high-wage positions. This dynamic reinforces structural inequalities and constrains the effective supply of female labor to high-prestige sectors (Li, Hu, Jin, & Han, 2025; Han et al., 2024).

5.4 Digital Labor Markets and Emerging Challenges

The rise of the gig economy introduces new dimensions of labor market segmentation. Digital platforms often promise flexible employment and task-based remuneration but replicate existing inequalities through algorithmic management and unequal task allocation (Han et al., 2024). Women are overrepresented in lower-paying tasks and have limited access to high-reward opportunities, reducing both earnings and labor supply in these sectors (Li, Hu, Jin, & Han, 2025).

While digital labor offers potential for balancing household and work responsibilities, it simultaneously reinforces occupational segregation and constrains long-term career advancement. This underscores that digitalization is not inherently egalitarian and may exacerbate pre-existing disparities unless regulated effectively (Bai et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2025).

5.5 Integration of Findings

Overall, the evidence demonstrates that female labor supply in China is influenced by a combination of sectoral, occupational, institutional, and demographic factors. Labor market segmentation constrains access to high-paying and high-prestige sectors, while unequal educational returns and digitalization introduce additional structural barriers. Demographic constraints, such as fertility intentions and migration status, further modulate women's labor supply decisions. Together, these factors reveal a multidimensional framework in which institutional arrangements, sectoral allocation, and socio-demographic dynamics interact to shape female labor market participation.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive examination of labor market segmentation and its influence on female labor supply in China, revealing the persistent and multifaceted nature of gender inequalities in employment. Despite notable progress in women's educational attainment, overall labor participation, and societal shifts toward greater gender equality, structural barriers continue to constrain women's full engagement in the labor market. Labor market segmentation, encompassing sectoral allocation, occupational stratification, and ownership structures, operates alongside demographic, institutional, and technological factors to shape the conditions under which women participate in work. The findings indicate that women are disproportionately represented in lower-paying and less secure roles, particularly in private-sector firms, high-wage industries, and emerging digital platforms, whereas men are more concentrated in high-wage, high-prestige, and managerial positions.

Educational expansion, a crucial component of human capital development, has improved women's access to formal employment, yet it does not automatically ensure equitable labor supply. Women frequently encounter lower returns to education relative to men, particularly in competitive sectors where promotion and wage progression are influenced by managerial discretion and informal networks. These unequal returns limit the incentive for women to supply labor at higher levels of effort or to pursue roles in high-wage industries, further entrenching occupational segregation. Even highly educated women are often constrained by structural barriers that restrict their movement into managerial or technical positions, indicating that human capital accumulation alone is insufficient to overcome systemic labor market inequalities. This underscores the importance of considering both education and institutional context when analyzing women's labor market behavior in China.

Demographic and socio-cultural factors further shape female labor supply in profound ways. Fertility intentions, childbearing responsibilities, and household care obligations continue to influence women's labor market participation, often pushing them toward more flexible but lower-paying roles. This effect is particularly pronounced in private-sector employment and gig economy platforms, where labor protections are weaker and work arrangements are less standardized. Internal migration adds another layer of complexity, as female migrants face hukou-based restrictions that limit access to formal employment, social benefits, and housing, thereby reducing both their labor supply and earning potential. These demographic constraints interact with

sectoral and occupational segmentation, producing layered inequalities that persist even as women's educational attainment rises. The interplay between family responsibilities, migration status, and labor market segmentation demonstrates that female labor supply cannot be fully understood through a purely economic lens; social and institutional factors play an equally critical role.

The rise of digital labor platforms introduces both opportunities and new challenges for female labor supply. Gig economy participation offers flexibility that can accommodate family obligations, yet it also reproduces and amplifies existing inequalities. Women are overrepresented in lower-paying tasks and have limited access to high-reward assignments, resulting in reduced earnings and constrained long-term engagement. The structural mechanisms governing digital labor—algorithmic management, task allocation, and performance evaluation—often lack transparency and fail to address gender disparities. Consequently, the expansion of the gig economy, while increasing employment options, does not inherently mitigate labor market segmentation; in many cases, it reinforces structural barriers that reduce women's effective labor supply. These findings highlight the need for policy and regulatory interventions that ensure equitable access and reward structures in digital employment, as well as protections that prevent platform-based work from becoming a source of long-term inequality.

Institutional arrangements, including firm ownership, labor protections, and union presence, remain critical determinants of female labor supply. State-owned enterprises and public institutions historically provide more stable employment, standardized wage structures, and formal career progression mechanisms, which contribute to relatively higher labor supply continuity among women. In contrast, private-sector firms and emerging high-growth industries, characterized by market-driven wage systems and managerial discretion, present greater wage dispersion and reduced employment security for women. These structural inequalities affect not only immediate labor supply decisions but also long-term career trajectories and earning potential. The persistence of such disparities underscores that labor market reforms and institutional oversight are necessary components of any strategy aimed at increasing women's labor market engagement.

The study also emphasizes the importance of examining labor market segmentation within an integrated framework that considers sectoral, occupational, institutional, demographic, and technological factors simultaneously. Traditional analyses focusing solely on wage gaps or educational attainment fail to capture the complex interactions that determine female labor supply. By synthesizing evidence across these dimensions, the study demonstrates that women's labor market participation is shaped by a combination of structural constraints, unequal educational returns, social norms, and emerging digital employment practices. This holistic perspective provides a more nuanced understanding of the persistent challenges facing women in China's labor market and informs strategies for promoting gender equity.

Policy implications arising from this study are multifaceted. Improving women's labor supply requires not only enhancing access to education but also addressing structural and institutional barriers that restrict employment opportunities. Equitable wage-setting, transparent promotion procedures, and family-friendly policies can help mitigate the effects of occupational segregation and demographic constraints. In addition, targeted interventions are needed to ensure that digital labor platforms provide fair access, equitable compensation, and meaningful career progression for women. Supporting female migrants in accessing formal employment and social protections is equally critical, as institutional barriers related to hukou status disproportionately limit their labor supply and economic mobility. Ultimately, promoting gender equity in labor supply necessitates an integrated policy approach that addresses structural, institutional, and demographic factors simultaneously.

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