

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Socio-economic determinants of female vulnerable employment in China

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Abstract

This analysis investigated the socio-economic factors that affect female vulnerable employment in China, utilizing graphical & correlation analysis in World Development Indicators, covering the time span of 1990 to 2020. Analysing the results, the trend of decline in female vulnerable employment remained consistent during the time span, coupled with diverse movements in economic development, foreign direct investments, dependency ratios, as well as fertility rates. During the periods of high economic development and foreign investments, the decline in women's employment vulnerability turned out to be steeper, indicating the impact of industrialization, urbanization, and formal employment. Social terms, specifically dependency ratios and fertility rates, remained significantly correlated to female vulnerable employment, indicating the impact of taking care of dependents & demographic factors. When the trend of declining female vulnerable employment turned persistent in 2010, in spite of low economic development & growing dependency ratios, it is evident that deep structural transformations, such as the impact of education, employment, & institutional development, turned influential in women's employment. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2026; 30 [8]:76-84*).

Keywords: Dependency ratio, fertility rate, female vulnerable employment.

Résumé

Cette analyse a examiné les facteurs socio-économiques affectant l'emploi précaire des femmes en Chine, en utilisant des analyses graphiques et de corrélation des Indicateurs du développement dans le monde, sur la période 1990-2020. L'analyse des résultats révèle une tendance constante à la baisse de l'emploi précaire des femmes durant cette période, corrélée à diverses évolutions du développement économique, des investissements directs étrangers, des taux de dépendance et des taux de fécondité. Durant les périodes de forte croissance économique et d'investissements étrangers importants, la baisse de la précarité de l'emploi des femmes s'est avérée plus marquée, témoignant de l'impact de l'industrialisation, de l'urbanisation et de la formalisation de l'emploi. Les variables sociales, notamment les taux de dépendance et les taux de fécondité, sont restées significativement corrélées à l'emploi précaire des femmes, indiquant l'influence de la prise en charge des personnes à charge et des facteurs démographiques. Lorsque la tendance à la baisse de l'emploi précaire des femmes s'est maintenue en 2010, malgré un faible développement économique et une augmentation des taux de dépendance, il est évident que de profondes transformations structurelles, telles que l'impact de l'éducation, de l'emploi et du développement institutionnel, ont joué un rôle déterminant dans l'emploi des femmes. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2026; 30 [8]: 76-84*).

Mots-clés: Taux de dépendance, taux de fécondité, emploi des femmes vulnérables.

Introduction

Vulnerable employment is defined as the sum of own-account workers and contributing family workers, who usually operate outside any formal employment arrangements⁵. Consequently, workers in vulnerable forms of employment are more likely to experience low and unstable incomes, limited social protection, weak legal coverage, and restricted collective representation.⁶ These features make vulnerable employment a fundamental indicator of labour market fragility and social exclusion.

Vulnerable employment occupies a central place in global development frameworks. It was one of the four core labour indicators under the Millennium Development Goals for monitoring progress toward full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people⁴.

The number of females participating in the global labour market has shown some improvement over the years, but huge disparities still exist when it comes to labour market engagement and working conditions. The global labour force participation rate for females aged 15 and over was approximately 29

percentage points lower than that of men in 1990, which casts a shadow of deep-seated structural issues in labour markets¹. Nonetheless, the number of females participating has shown improvement to 48.7 percent in 2023 and 51.1 percent in 2024, but the extent to which these numbers reflect improvements for females' security of employment and working conditions has not shown any marked improvement^{2,3}. A huge number of employed females across the globe still tend to be lodged in precarious forms of labour.

It has been found in existing studies that vulnerable workers are disadvantaged in economic power, skills, earnings, social status, and social security protections, thus making them more susceptible to economic downturns and economic crisis conditions^{6,7}. Women are overrepresented in such types of work due to certain structural and social factors that limit them. Childcare and eldercare responsibilities are important in influencing women's participation in the workforce and pushing them more towards such informal and vulnerable job arrangements⁸.

China, with its dramatic economic change, has transformed the labour market, while in some way, the gender aspects of vulnerable employment still exist. China sees the increase in the educational level for women; however, there is inequality in the types of jobs that women are placed in, which are unpaid, informal, or vulnerable, in the services, agricultural and home businesses sectors. It has been found that women in China are still vulnerable comparatively to men, both in society and in the economy, due to gender inequalities in care, labour markets, and gender norms⁹. Socio-economic differentials like income, rural or urban distribution, social protection, and care work impact the extent of vulnerable employment for women.

Despite the prevalence of female vulnerable employment and the acknowledged role of socio-economic factors, there is still considerable dearth of focused research investigating how these determinants uniquely relate with female vulnerable employment especially in China. Most studies have investigated vulnerable employment at an aggregate level or at wide regional samples mostly within other climes^{1,6,8,10} while very few in China have considered gendered dynamics. This paper aims to fill this gap by graphically analysing the linkage of socio-economic determinants with female

vulnerable employment in China. Applying the data-driven approach, the study will seek to highlight patterns and associations with a view towards targeted policy interventions in contributing toward a more nuanced knowledge of gendered labour market vulnerability in China.

Literature review

Uwajumogu *et al.*¹¹ analysed the nexus between globalization and the share of women in vulnerable employment in sub-Saharan Africa under the Sustainable Development Goal 8 umbrella. Their investigation covered the economic, social, and political aspects of globalization with the distinction between de facto and de jure states for the period of 2000 to 2016 for the 37 SSA countries included in their model. The observations proved the increased effect of the de facto states compared to the decreased effect of the de jure states on the share of women in vulnerable employment as the outcome variable. In addition, the researchers found that the economic as well as the socioeconomic aspects of the former caused the negative effect, whereas the latter invites women to increased vulnerable employment. According to their findings, the relation between globalization and women's vulnerable employment is complex rather than linear in sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, the researchers proposed that women's vulnerable employment in sub-Saharan Africa necessitates both socioeconomic actions as well as effective political reform for improved gender governance quality. Yerrabati¹² examined the role of vulnerable employment as a possible factor for poverty reduction, especially as it has generally emerged as a very prevalent means of survival for the poor. The paper employed a panel data set of 65 developing countries from 1995 to 2019 to analyze the impact of vulnerable employment on the incidence, rate, and severity of poverty under the \$1.90 and \$3.20 poverty lines. Vulnerable employment was further distinguished based on the total, male, and female workforce. The results of this research showed that vulnerable employment has a marginal impact on reducing poverty under the \$1.90 poverty line but lacks significance under the \$3.20 poverty line. Additionally, significant gender differences emerged. In conclusion, this research showed that although vulnerable employment served as a

temporary respite for the poor, it did not serve as a long-term sustainable mechanism for the eradication of poverty. According to the researcher, policies that transform the workforce from vulnerable to decent employment are urgently required to ensure sustainable improvements for poverty reduction.

Bue *et al.*¹ investigated the presence of gender inequality in vulnerable employment through harmonized household survey data from developing countries. The authors analysed long-term trends, regional patterns, and key determinants of gender disparities in precarious forms of employment characterized by low earnings and poor working conditions. The findings showed that, controlling for individual and household characteristics; women were about seven percentage points more likely, than men to be in vulnerable employment were. Marriage and parenthood were found to be key drivers of this gap. Cross-country evidence suggested that gender disparities were smaller in countries with higher wealth, lower fertility rates, and more gender-egalitarian legal frameworks. This has been seen especially in laws governing family relations, asset ownership, and entrepreneurship. There were findings, at the same time, of reduced woman's vulnerability compared to that of men since the increases in female education and declines in fertility since the 1990s. However, recent gender gaps are largely unexplained by conventional labour supply factors.

Chen *et al.*⁶ studied the correlation between urbanization and vulnerable employment through panel data from 163 countries from 1991 to 2019. The study explored the spatiotemporal dynamics and correlation between the urbanization rate and vulnerable employment to demonstrate a theoretical connection between the two factors. The empirical results showed a strong correlation between urbanization and vulnerable employment, with China as a case study to illustrate this correlation for G7 countries and BRICS nations. The regression results showed urbanization to have a negative and significant impact on vulnerable employment, with a correlation where every one percent rise in the urbanization rate reducing vulnerable employment by 0.168 percent. The researchers linked this result to changes in rural-urban sector transitions or changes in employment relationships due to urbanization. Additionally, the study showed

country heterogeneity to have more pronounced effects on urbanization, especially noticeably greater in more developed and large economies. The study generally showed urbanization to be a mechanism reducing vulnerable employment while emphasizing the importance of decent work.

Methods

In the study, the researcher used the comparative analysis approach in the socio-economic variables linked to female vulnerable employment in the Chinese context. In the analysis, the researcher utilized the time-series data from 1990 to 2020, at five-year intervals, from the World Bank World Development Indicators¹³, and explored the relationship for the economic variables of economic development and foreign direct investment with female vulnerable employment. The World Bank World Development Indicators (WDI) dataset is used to obtain annual macroeconomic, labour, and development indicators that are comparable across countries. In this analysis, female vulnerable employment is estimated using the indicator “vulnerable employment, female (% of female employment),” which is modeled using ILO estimates. Economic development is proxied by indicators such as GDP per capita and economic growth, which are used to indicate structural transformation and economic development. Foreign direct investment is estimated using FDI net inflows as a percentage of GDP. Furthermore, the dependency ratio and fertility rate were also investigated in the analysis for their relationship with female vulnerable employment.

Estimation-procedures

In breaking down the link between vulnerable female employment and some socio-economic factors in China, the use of GDP per capita as well as foreign direct investment as the indicator for economic conditions was appropriate, as was the use of the dependency ratio and fertility rate as indicators of social conditions. In this regard, since the focus of this analysis is also limited, a graphic method has been adopted for ease of understanding due to the simple visualization of trends between the selected indicators.

Table 1: Measurement of variables

Variable	Code	Measurement	Source	Expected sign
Economic factors				
Economic development	ECD	GDP per capita growth (annual %)	WDI	+
Foreign direct investment	FDI	Foreign direct investment, net inflows (% of GDP)	WDI	+
Social Factors				
Dependency ratio	DPR	Age dependency ratio (% of working-age population)	WDI	+
Fertility rate	FRT	Fertility rate, total (births per woman)	WDI	+
Variable of Interest				
Female Vulnerable Employment	FVE	Vulnerable employment, female (% of female employment) (modeled ILO estimate)	WDI	NA

Data analysis

Graphical analysis, as well as correlation analysis, was chosen to fulfil the purposes of this research. This is because the method can be utilized to identify and observe patterns and trends, enabling the creation of a complete description of the phenomenon being investigated using visuals, which are of great help in this research as indicated by Zheng et al.¹⁴, Zhou et al.¹⁵, Ail et al.¹⁶ and Gao et al.¹⁷.

Ethical considerations

This analysis utilized aggregated and anonymized data collected from the World Development Indicators (WDI), which do not contain the risk of harm or disclosure of identifiable information. The analysis also did not use individual data and followed the guidelines imposed by the data source. This analysis followed a systematic, transparent, and rigorous analysis process, and the analysis results have been made public. Obtaining ethical approval was also not necessary since this analysis did not include human or animal subjects.

Results

Correlation analysis

The correlation analysis provides initial insights into the linear associations between female vulnerable employment (FVE) and selected economic and social determinants in China.

Of the explanatory variables, the correlation between ECD and FDI is highly positive and significant ($r = 0.7150$, $p < 0.01$). Female vulnerable employment strongly correlates positively with the dependency ratio (DPR) ($r = 0.8599$, $p < 0.01$). FVE also displays a moderate positive association with foreign direct investment (FDI) ($r = 0.4351$, $p < 0.05$) and fertility rate (FRT) ($r = 0.4516$, $p < 0.05$). The correlation between economic development and FVE is positive but with a weaker and not significantly related ($r = 0.3445$, $p \approx 0.06$). T2

Results of economic factors

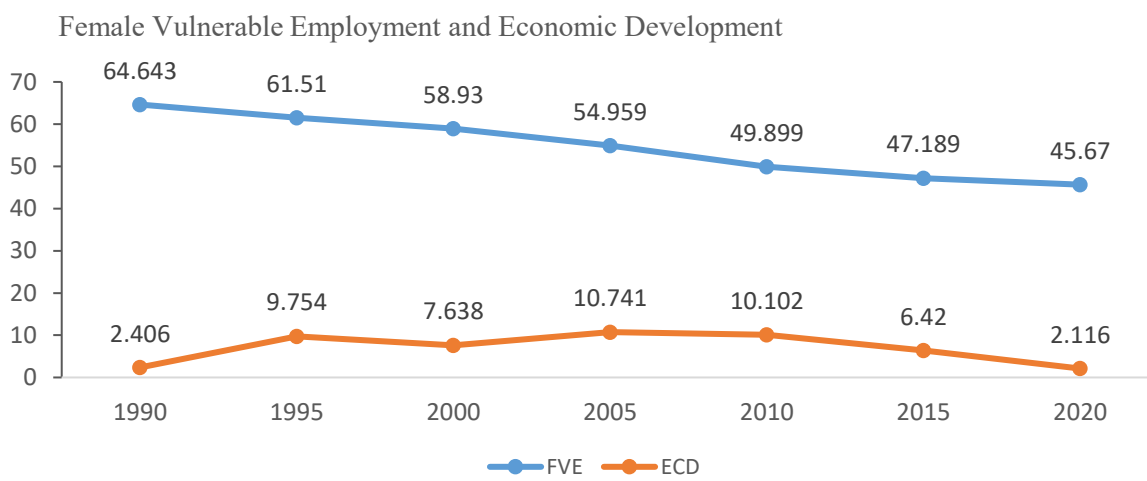
From Figure 1 above, there is a noticeable downward trend from 1990 to 2020 for female vulnerable employment percentage in China, which decreased from 64.6 percent to 45.7 percent. However, during the same period, economic development, as indicated by the GDP per capita growth, experienced fluctuations rather than a steady increase. For instance, during the periods when economic growth rates were high, such as from 1995 to 2005 and 2005 to 2010, there were significant declines in female vulnerable employment percentages. However, the decrease in economic growth rates after 2010 did not improve the female vulnerable employment percentages.

In Figure 2, it can be seen that there was a downward trend in vulnerable female employment in China between 1990 and 2020, with fluctuations in foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows. There was a decline in vulnerable female employment from approximately 64.6 percent in 1990 to 45.7 percent

Table 2: Correlation analysis

Correlation Probability	FVE	ECD	FDI	DPR	FRT
FVE	1.000000	-----			
ECD	0.344512 0.0577	1.000000			
FDI	0.435138 0.0144	0.714953 0.0000	1.000000		
DPR	0.859970 0.0000	0.006532 0.9722	0.176130 0.3432	1.000000	
FRT	0.451640 0.0108	-0.190162 0.3055	0.405351 0.0237	0.558665 0.0011	1.000000

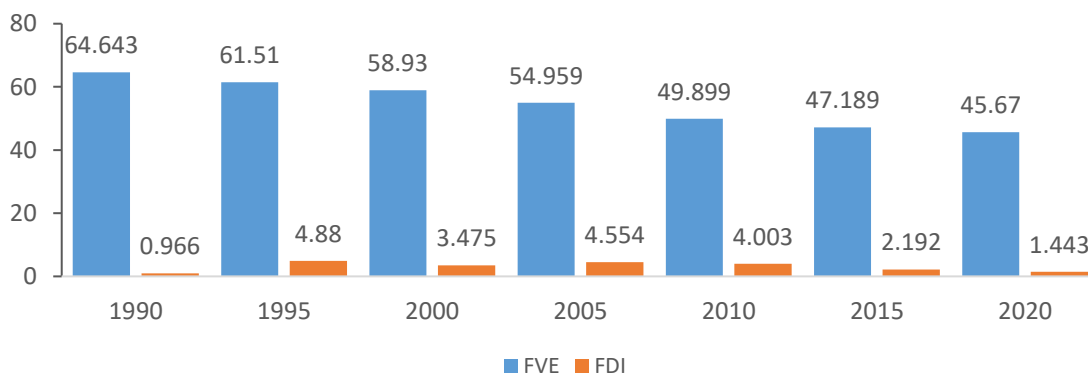
Source: authors` computation



Source: authors` computation

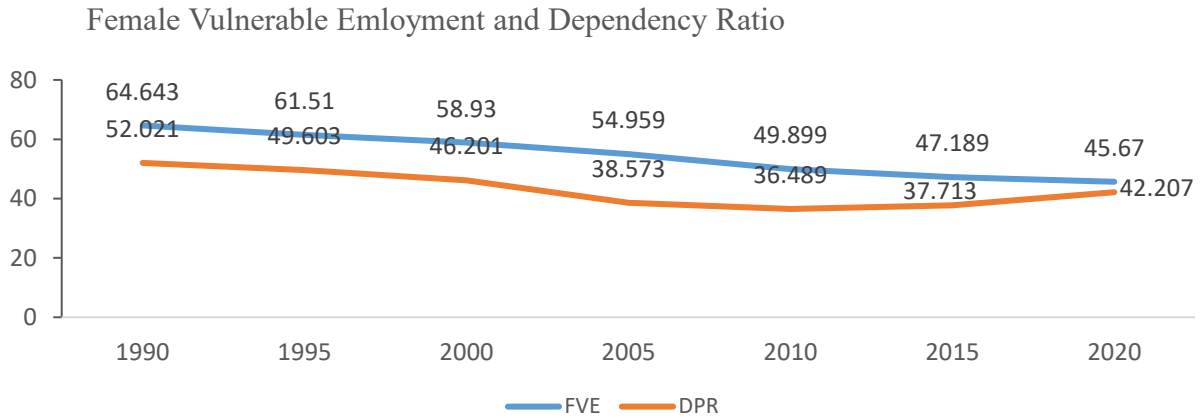
Figure 1: Relationship between female vulnerable employment and economic development in China

Female Vulnerable Employment and Foreign Direct Investment



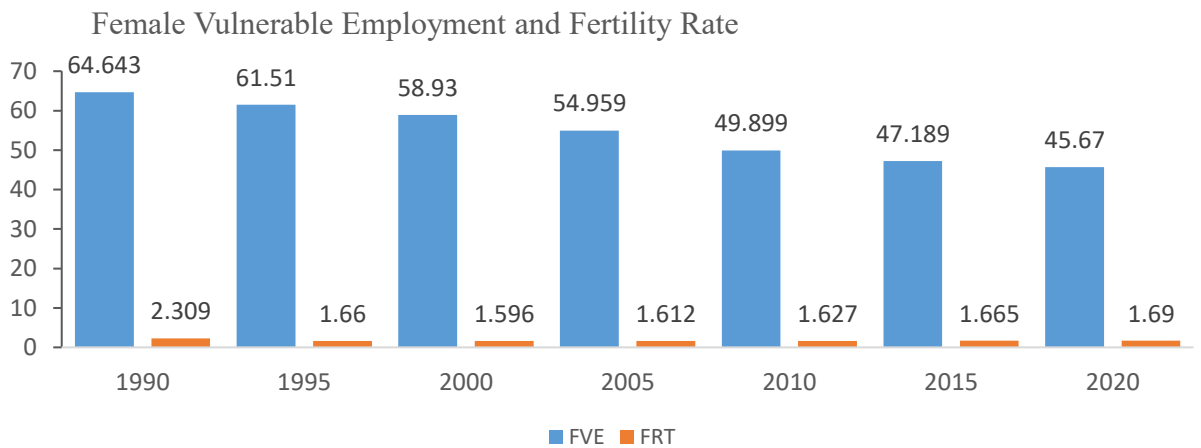
Source: authors` computation

Figure 2: Relationship between female vulnerable employment and foreign direct investment in china



Source: authors' computation

Figure 3: Relationship between female vulnerable employment and dependency ratio in China



Source: Authors' Computation

Figure 4: Relationship between level of education and female suicide in South Africa

in 2020, while FDI inflows soared in the 1990s and mid-2000s and decreased steadily from 2010 onwards. Large inflows of FDI during the periods between 1995 and 2010 were accompanied by substantial declines in vulnerable female employment.

Results of social factors

In figure 3, there is a strong relationship between female vulnerable employment and the dependency ratio in China from 1990 to 2020. Both series show significant drops from 1990 to 2010, by which time female vulnerable employment dropped from 64.6

percent to 49.9 percent and the dependency ratio dropped from 52.0 percent to 36.5 percent. But after 2010, while the dependency ratio started to go up due to aging, female vulnerable employment started to drop, though at a slower rate.

Figure 4 depicts the correlation between vulnerable female employment rates and the fertility rate in China between 1990 and 2020. For vulnerable female employment, the trend has been a steady reduction since 1990, dipping from 64.6 percent to 45.7 percent vulnerable employment by 2020. From 1990 until 2000, the fertility rate indicated a significant drop but then reached a stable point until it began a steady increase after the year 2000.

Discussion

The result of FVE and DPR shows that as the dependency ratio increases, the female vulnerable employment rate also increases, indicating that more responsibilities related to care and domestic work might lead women to be involved in the vulnerable employment sector. The weak and positive relationship between FVE and FDI suggest that higher variables of FDI and fertility rates correspond with higher female vulnerable employment, which might be attributed to the poor absorption of labour in the labour market or discriminatory labour absorption, as well as rising caring burdens on females. The weak and statistically insignificant positive correlation suggests that economic growth did not consistently improve employment security for women. This may reflect uneven, capital-intensive growth and persistent structural constraints, such as labour market segmentation and care burdens, which limited women's access to secure employment. Based on the graphical evidence, the data shows the steady decline in the number of vulnerable women in terms of employment in the period from 1990 to 2020 while being paired with the different patterns in the selected economic and social indicators. It can be said from the result that the decline in the women's vulnerable employment pattern was affected by different factors. Analysis of the relationship between vulnerable female employment and economic development indicates that during the periods with high GDP per capita growth, there were sharp declines in female vulnerable employment, especially between 1995 and 2010. The fast growth during this period may have helped to absorb female workers from their current engagements in own-account and family-based businesses to formal sector employment through industrialization, export growth, and the expansion of jobs in urban areas. Despite the slowdown in growth in the post-2010 period, the trend of decline in female vulnerable employment did not change, implying that structural changes such as industrialization, education, and changes in the labour market sector had impacts that lasted even beyond the period of fast economic growth.

Foreign direct investment also tended to follow the same trend. Significant inflows of FDI in the late 1990s and subsequent decades were

accompanied by sharp reductions in female vulnerable employment, suggesting a possible role of foreign investment companies in job formalization, especially in the manufacturing and service sectors. It is also apparent that the reduction in vulnerable employment accelerated in the post-2010 period even as the level of FDI slowed down.

There is the strongest correlation shown in the dependency ratio in terms of female vulnerable employment. During the period that started in 1990 through 2010, the reduction in the dependency ratios, due to low fertility rates and the increased working age group, occurred alongside the precipitous decrease in the female vulnerable employment rates. This could be due to the alleviated dependency, hence the women's ability to participate in more secure employment. However, since 2010, the aging of the population contributed to the rise in the dependency ratios, but the decline in the female vulnerable employment rates, although less pronounced, still occurred.

This is similar to the findings of previous studies highlighting several socioeconomic and behavioural dynamics shaping wellbeing and development outcomes in China. Travel burden significantly affects healthcare accessibility, especially through extended inpatient travel time¹⁸. Inequality in hospital bed distribution has also been identified as a determinant of maternal mortality¹⁹. Gender stereotypes continue to constrain women's career progression in media industries²⁰, while graduate employability is shaped by multiple predictive factors including skills and institutional support²¹. Household time allocation strongly influences family wellbeing²². Advanced econometric approaches, such as functional-coefficient quantile regression, improve panel data analysis with latent structures²³. Moral attitudes shape consumer behaviour toward counterfeit luxury goods²⁴, and HRM system configurations influence organisational effectiveness²⁵. Parental gender preferences continue to affect fertility ideals in China²⁶.

Finally, fertility trends indicate that falling fertility in the 1990s contributed to female employment vulnerability reduced through lower care burdens. The continued fall in vulnerable employment after fertility stabilised and later increased, however, suggests that fertility cannot be a sole explanation for recent trends. Instead, broader

socio-economic changes, including urbanization, labour market formalization, and rising human capital of women, became increasingly important.

Strengths and limitations

The research offers a broad analysis by considering both economic and social factors affecting vulnerable female employment, thus ensuring a well-rounded perspective of the subject within a Chinese framework. The application of data from three decades, spaced five years apart, ensures that a long-term analysis and structural shifts is effectively noted. The application of both graphical analysis and correlation analysis improves the readability of the results by ensuring visual representations of data, which ensures simple comparisons, can be made, and the results can easily be accessed. However, the research has both strengths and weaknesses. The application of both graphical analysis and correlation analysis in the research ensures a constrained level of analysis, failing to factor in other possible elements such as lifestyle, accessibility to health care, and genetics, among others, which could have been present and were excluded mainly due to a lack of data.

Policy implications

Based on these findings, policy efforts should go beyond reliance on aggregate economic growth to focus on targeted interventions that enhance women's access to secure employment. Labour market formalisation needs to be strengthened, especially in sectors where female participation is high, to ensure that growth and investment result in decent jobs for women. Policies of inclusive and labour-intensive investment are needed, especially in manufacturing and modern services, to increase the employment gain from foreign and domestic investment alike. Given the strong influence of dependency burdens, the expansion of affordable childcare, elder care, and family support services has to be raised to reduce women's concentration in vulnerable work. In addition, continued investment in girls' and women's education and skills will also enhance their employability and facilitate transitions from vulnerable to formal employment. Finally, social protection policies for informal and vulnerable workers need to be strengthened as part of the response to employment insecurity associated

with population ageing and a changing demographic structure.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the link between socio-economic factors and female vulnerable employment in China through graphical analysis and correlation tests. Results indicate the steady decrease in female vulnerable employment rates in China over the years 1990 to 2020. During the periods of high economic performance and high foreign direct investment in the Chinese economy, the rates of decrease in women's employment vulnerability became more pronounced, reflecting the significance of industrialization, urbanization, and labour market restructuring. Social factors such as the dependency ratio and changes in birth rates correlated highly with female vulnerable employment, reflecting the significance of taking care of dependents. However, the further decline in female vulnerable employment rates, despite lower economic performance, lower FDI, and increased dependency ratios, since 2010, tends to clarify that structural changes, such as education, formalization, and institutionalization, became a definitive factor. Therefore, the results clarified that to reduce the magnitude of female vulnerable employment, structural changes facilitated by economic policy intervention are necessary.

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