Market Transition, Gender Backlash, and Mitigating Channels

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Abstract

Gender attitudes are widely regarded as a crucial subjective dimension of gender inequality. However, factors shaping gender attitudes beyond early-life experiences remain underexplored. Using cross-county variation in labor commodification during China's 1992–2008 market transition, we show that greater exposure to market-driven employment relations led to more traditional gender attitudes, especially among women and only in work-related domains. This backlash was attenuated in counties with a stronger history of the socialist-era women's movement and among daughters of mothers in leadership roles. The 2008 Labor Contract Law did not reverse the trend; instead, gender attitudes among women became more traditional after 2008, while men showed modest improvement, revealing a gender-asymmetric response to regulation. Results suggest that market-based production relations exert uneven pressures on gender attitudes, and that historical and familial institutions play critical buffering roles.

Keywords: Gender Attitude; Market Transition; Labor Commodification; Gender Equality
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1. Introduction

Gender attitudes are commonly defined as individuals' support for gender equality (Luo, 2021). Modernization theory argues that industrialization and modernization, even when taking diverse forms, tend to promote more egalitarian gender attitudes and thus lead to cultural convergence across nations (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). However, this expectation has been challenged by evidence from various countries and regions, as many postindustrial societies exhibit fluctuating gender attitudes rather than a linear progression toward egalitarianism (Brewster and Padavic, 2000; Knight and Brinton, 2017; Piotrowski et al., 2019). To better understand this inconsistency between modernization theory and empirical findings, it is necessary to examine the factors that shape gender attitudes and identify the constraints on the development of egalitarian views.

Existing research on the determinants of gender attitudes has focused largely on childhood and adolescent experiences, such as family conditions and educational attainment (Vella, 1994; Fan and Marini, 2000; Cunningham, 2001; Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Washington, 2008; Davis and Greenstein, 2009; Carlana, 2019; Dhar et al., 2019; Du et al., 2021; Zhang and Zhu, 2024; Hara and Rodríguez-Planas, 2025). Even planned interventions aimed at changing gender attitudes have primarily targeted adolescence (Dhar et al., 2022; Edmonds, 2023). By contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of work-related factors. Yet industrialization and modernization have profoundly transformed labor markets. Meanwhile, a substantial body of research has shown that both paid and unpaid labor are central to the production and reproduction of gender inequality (Risman et al., 1999; Carlson and Lynch, 2017). This highlights the importance of incorporating labor market and work conditions into analyses of individuals' gender attitudes.

A limited number of studies examining the influence of work-related factors on gender attitudes adopt two distinct approaches: micro and macro. The micro-level approach points out that employment status can shape young adults' attitudes on marriage and family formation (Blossfeld, 2005; Takenoshita, 2020), emphasizing how work conditions and institutional environments influence gender role attitudes, particularly among women (Cassidy and Warren, 1996; Rofel, 1999; Boehnke, 2011; Zhao and Yang, 2021). The macro approach looks beyond individual experiences to consider labor market characteristics, such as women's participation rates and the phenomenon of overwork among men, and their impact on overall gender attitudes (Baxter and Kane, 1995; Shu and Marini, 1998; Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Cha 2010, 2013; Cha and Weeden, 2014; Shu and Meagher, 2025). While these studies have produced valuable insights, further empirical research is needed to bridge micro- and macro-level perspectives and to overcome the fragmented state of knowledge on this topic. Moreover, much of the existing literature relies on short-term data, which limits the ability to capture changes in individual work experiences and evolving labor market structures over time.

China offers a valuable and unique case for a comprehensive and longitudinal exploration on this issue. China's economic reforms, initiated in the late 1970s, marked the end of a decades-long planned economy under state socialism and ushered in the era of a market economy. This fundamental shift brought about significant transformations in labor institutions at the macro level and led to markedly different working conditions, particularly for women, at the micro level (Zuo, 2014). At the macro level, China's market transition entailed a gradual process of labor commodification. Correspondingly, at the micro level, the "iron rice bowl," which had provided lifetime job security and guaranteed benefits, was dismantled, pushing workers into increasingly competitive labor markets. Therefore, this paper aims to use the case of China's political-economic transformation to analyze how work-related factors influence gender attitudes over the long term.

To explore how China's market transition reshaped gender attitudes and whether historical institutions or family-level factors can mitigate its effects, we develop an empirical framework grounded in the institutional transformation of labor relations during 1992–2008. During this period, the socialist work-unit (*danwei*) system that had guaranteed lifetime employment and social benefits was gradually dismantled, while private-sector hiring expanded rapidly without accompanying labor regulations. This shift exposed new labor market entrants to competitive, flexible, and largely unprotected employment. The timing of one's labor market entry and the local intensity of marketization across counties together created variation that we exploit for identification. Our framework shows that the shift toward market-driven labor relations generated pressure on gender attitudes across five different dimensions. They are *Ability* (beliefs about innate gender differences in competitiveness), *Work* (views on women's priority in job retention), *Labor* (expectations that men pursue careers while women focus on family), *Marriage* (the perceived value of marriage over employment for women), and *Housework* (attitudes toward equal sharing of domestic tasks).

We test these hypotheses using a multi-step identification strategy. First, we implement a cohort difference-in-differences (DID) model that compares individuals who entered the labor market during 1992–2008, a window defined by market-driven hiring and the absence of formal labor regulation, with those who entered before or after this window, across counties with varying degrees of marketization. We find that China's market transition triggered a gender attitude backlash, particularly among women and most sharply in the labor-market-related dimensions.

Second, we extend the analysis with an event-study specification that tracks how the effect varies by exact year of labor market entry. The results support our previous findings. Individuals entering the labor market during the rapid market transition exhibit significantly fewer egalitarian views.

Third, we adopt a triple-difference (DDD) approach to evaluate whether two pre-existing channels, macro-level historical women's movement and micro-level intergenerational transmission, buffer individuals against the gender backlash. We

find that the backlash was weaker in counties[†] with a stronger history of the socialist-era women's movement. It was also weaker among daughters of mothers who held leadership positions, who were less likely to adopt traditional views, while sons showed no such effect.

Finally, we assess the role of the 2008 Labor Contract Law, which reinstated baseline employment protections and marked the end of the unprotected market era. Using post-2008 survey waves, we examine whether the law halted or reversed the backlash. Contrary to expectations, we find that gender attitudes among women became more traditional after 2008, while the negative association weakened for men, suggesting a gender-asymmetric and limited policy response.

This study extends the existing literature from three perspectives. First, extant research has devoted attention to gender attitudes as an important subjective dimension to reflect gender inequality and has shown that gender attitudes are closely associated with objective aspects of gender inequality like occupational segregation (Dahl et al., 2021). Changing gender-biased norms and conceptions is a significant step toward gender empowerment (Anderson, 2022). However, this literature largely emphasizes pre-adult experiences and environments as the main determinants of gender attitudes (e.g. Cunningham, 2001; Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Davis and Greenstein, 2009), while giving limited consideration to other shaping forces. This research enhances the current understanding by examining how market transition influences gender attitudes, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive view of gender attitude formation. The market transition from a planned economy entails labor commodification and the expansion of labor markets at the macro level, alongside fundamental transformations in individuals' working conditions and experiences at the micro level. By analyzing the effects of market transition, this research incorporates work-related factors into the discussion of gender attitudes.

Second, many studies have examined the consequences of market transitions in post-socialist cases such as China and Eastern European countries (Szelenyi, 1978; Kornai, 1992; Walder, 1995; Solinger, 2002, 2009). Drawing on Polanyi's framework, many of these works conceptualize market transition primarily in terms of changes in the allocation of goods and services (Walder, 1996). Yet Polanyi (2001) argued that a market economy can exist only within a market society, implying that market transition should cause an expansive reconfiguration of social relations. In this study, we extend current discussions on the consequences to the gender domain by analyzing individuals' subjective perceptions of gender equality, thus enriching the understanding of post-socialist social transformation.

Third, a long-standing debate concerns whether a backlash in gender attitudes emerged in post-socialist China. Some scholars argue that the marketization of employment, together with shifts in gender ideology, led many female workers to withdraw from the labor force and contributed to a regression in gender attitudes

[†] In China, a county (*Xian*) is a third-tier administrative division situated below the province and prefecture-level city, and it serves as a basic unit of local government that typically governs multiple towns and townships.

(Honig and Hershatter, 1988; Gao, 2006; Zuo, 2014). But others who conduct quantitative analyses reach different conclusions, and only a subset of these studies finds evidence of such a backlash after the reform (Pimentel, 2006; Shu and Zhu, 2012; Luo, 2021). It is worth noting that most quantitative examinations identify cohorts using birth year and assess the presence or absence of a backlash through cohort comparisons. Nevertheless, this approach limits the ability to capture the influence of work on gender attitudes, which is central to this study. Considering that China's transformation profoundly altered employment structures and laborers' work trajectories, cohort definitions based on work-related variables provide a more accurate reflection of reform-era experiences. Accordingly, we classify cohorts by the year individuals entered the workforce and reanalyze the data to reassess the existence of a gender-attitude backlash.

The structure of the remaining paper is as follows. Section 2 provides background information on gender attitude backlash debate and economic reform in post-socialist China. Section 3 presents an introduction of data, and section 4 discusses the empirical specifications. Section 5 provides the empirical results, and the robustness checks. The last section concludes the study.

2. Historical Background

2.1 Debate on Gender Attitude Backlash in Post-Socialist China

Honig and Hershatter (1988: 250-255) noted that during the 1980s, as economic reforms in China compelled enterprises to be responsible for their own efficiency and profitability, many companies opted to reduce the number of female workers, consequently limiting women's opportunities for participation in the workforce. Another factor giving rise to the decline in the proportion of female employees was the opinion held by several economists in the 1980s that the female labor force was a significant cause in rising urban unemployment, particularly among men.

Although the Women's Federation challenged these views and conducted surveys to highlight women's willingness and needs to remain in the workforce, it remained common for most work units in the 1980s to encourage female employees to resign. Lots of enterprises invoked the rationale of protecting women's health to justify keeping them out of physically demanding roles. This discourse starkly contrasted with the narrative surrounding female labor during the Cultural Revolution, illustrating a shift in gender ideology from the state socialism era to a post-socialist context. This transformation in gender ideology is both influential and fundamental, as it reflected that gender essentialism emerged alongside the development of the market (Ji et al., 2017). Arguments relevant with gender essentialism at that time highlighted how socialist gender ideology suppressed the inherent differences between genders and led to gender erasure due to an equal division of labor (Rofel, 1999, 2007).

As a result of these factors, women's attitudes toward the workplace gradually shifted to a more negative stance, while their focus on household chores increased

(Zuo, 2014). This shift reveals a post-reform backlash in gender attitudes, especially among female laborers. This argument has been supported by interviews and discourse analysis about that time (Gao, 2006). Quantitative examinations, however, provide mixed evidence on whether such a backlash actually occurred.

Quantitative studies conduct comparisons of gender attitudes across different cohorts, using variables such as year of marriage or year of birth to classify cohorts. Pimentel (2006) categorized cohorts based on the year of marriage, resulting in three groups: the early Maoist cohort (married from 1949 to 1965), the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath cohort (married from 1966 to 1979), and the economic reform cohort (married from 1980 to 1991). Pimentel found that men in the later cohorts held less egalitarian gender ideologies compared to earlier cohorts, while women maintained egalitarian views.

In contrast, Shu and Zhu (2012) defined cohorts by birth year, creating seven distinct groups ranging from children of Old China (born before 1939) to children of Opening-Up (born from 1977 to 1983). Their findings indicated that both sexes in the youngest cohort exhibited the most liberal gender attitudes, with college education increasingly playing a significant role in fostering this change. Additionally, Luo (2021) also used birth year for cohort classification but divided individuals into three groups: “war babies” (born from 1926 to 1948), “pre-reform babies” (born from 1949 to 1977), and “reform babies” (born from 1978 to 1995). Luo observed that public sphere gender attitudes continued to progress toward greater egalitarianism, whether comparing pre-reform babies with war babies or reform babies with pre-reform babies. However, more egalitarian attitudes about the private sphere emerged only among the reform babies. In other words, there appears to be no backlash in gender attitudes from socialist to post-socialist China. In summary, the quantitative evidence surrounding the cohort effect reveals divergent conclusions about the existence of a backlash.

2.2 Economic Reform and Labor Market Development in Post-Socialist China

Before the economic reforms that began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, China operated under a planned economy for several decades. During this period, most urban workers enjoyed lifelong formal employment and received guaranteed benefits from their work units (Walder, 1988; Lyu and Perry, 2015). Although informal employment and precarious work did exist during this era (Lin and Zhu, 2024; Zhou and Zhang, 2025), a formal labor market had not yet emerged, and workers had little flexibility to transition between factories and enterprises. The assignment and allocation of the labor force were primarily determined by state planning at that time.

Subsequently, the economic reforms initiated in 1978 gradually dismantled the system of lifelong and permanent job assignments, granting enterprises the authority to select their own employees (Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 243). As the transition from redistributive economies to market economies unfolded, a private sector began to emerge and expand (Bonnell and Gold, 2002). The government employed market

mechanisms to enhance productivity and improve living standards for the population (Wu, 2006). The development of the labor market also facilitated greater occupational mobility, enabling workers to transfer between enterprises. During the process, 1992 marked a critical turning point, as Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour reaffirmed the direction and legitimacy of market-oriented reform (Naughton, 2006). Later that year, the Fourteenth Party Congress formally adopted the objective of establishing a "socialist market economy." Following this institutional reorientation, the labor market continued to evolve, with the introduction of the labor contract system. Moreover, the wave of layoffs that spread rapidly among industrial workers from the mid-1990s onward compelled many to enter the emerging labor market (Solinger, 2002).

Alongside the economic reforms, the urbanization process accelerated in the 1990s. A key driver of this urbanization was the influx of a large number of rural laborers migrating to urban areas. It is important to note that prior to the transformation of labor institutions, rural workers had limited opportunities to become factory employees and access long-term benefits (Hershatter, 2011). The rapid growth of private industries and the service sector since the 1990s created a variety of employment opportunities in the labor market, which attracted many rural migrants. However, this new category of workers often lacks guaranteed welfare and frequently faces severe workplace exploitation (Zuo, 2014). In 2008, the Chinese government began implementing the Labor Contract Law, making efforts to protect the rights and welfare of workers while regulating employer practices. This development marked a crucial moment in the evolution of the labor market.

3. Data

We combine several data sources to investigate the effect of the market transition in China in the early 1990s on gender attitudes. Our novel dataset links individual-level survey data on gender attitudes with measures of historical women's movement intensity and local labor market conditions. This integrated dataset allows us to exploit cohort-level variation in labor market entry timing relative to the onset of market reforms, while controlling for time-invariant local differences in historical gender-egalitarian institutions.

3.1 Chinese General Social Survey

The gender attitude measures used in this study are from the 2010, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2021, and 2023 waves of the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), one of China's earliest and most nationally representative social survey. The CGSS samples the population aged 18 and older, with no upper age limits, thereby capturing a wide range of opinions from all age groups.

Following Luo (2021), we construct gender attitude indicators according to five dimensions, classified into two domains: the public sphere and the private sphere. The public sphere questions capture beliefs about Ability ("men are born more

competitive than women") and Work ("women should be laid off first during a job shortage"), while the private sphere questions reflect views on Labor ("men should be career-oriented and women family-oriented"), Marriage ("a good marriage is better for a woman than a good job") and Housework ("husbands and wives should equally share housework"). Responses were recorded on a five-point scale with the following categories: "completely disagree", "somewhat disagree", "neither agree nor disagree", "somewhat agree", and "completely agree". All questions were recoded such that higher values correspond to more egalitarian attitudes.

In addition to the gender attitudes indicator, we also collected a set of individual demographic characteristics including respondent's age, birth year, education, employment status, party membership, marital status, household size, number of children, survey year and urban residence. Education is treated as a continuous variable and is demeaned by birth cohort to account for the changing returns and social meaning of educational attainment across generations (Yang and Land, 2013). This adjustment ensures that the education variable reflects deviations from the typical level of schooling with each cohort rather than absolute differences driven by historical expansion of access to education.

Moreover, we collect a work-related indicator for each respondent named Mom Cadre. It is a binary variable equal to 1 if the respondent's mother held a leadership position at or above the "fukeji" (deputy division-chief) level in the Chinese administrative hierarchy, and 0 otherwise. This variable serves as a proxy for exposure to high-status female role models during childhood, allowing us to test intergenerational transmission of gender norms.

3.2 Firm Registration and Population Database

To measure the market transition[‡], we construct a county-level indicator using firm registration data and population census data. The firm registration data used in this study is from the Chinese State Administration for Industry and Commerce (SAIC), which comprehensively covers all formally registered firms since 1949. The data include each firm's establishment and exit dates, ownership type, and county-level registration location. We classify firms as either state-owned or private based on ownership. Using the entry and exit dates together with location information, we calculate the number of private firms operating in each county in each year. This serves as a county-level indicator of market transition, measuring the degree to which local labor allocation occurs through private markets instead of state planning.

However, the number of private firms alone may overstate marketization in populous counties, where a large labor force could sustain more firms without implying a more market-oriented environment. We therefore normalize private firm counts by the county-level working-age population to construct a per-capita measure

[‡] Previous research employs the economic growth to measure the market transition in China (Nee, 1996; Xie and Hannum, 1996). Specifically, Nee (1996) introduces the number of local "nonstate" enterprises to capture the growth of market transition. We absorb this idea while incorporating local population size to more precisely reflect the degree of market development.

that better reflects individuals' actual exposure to market transition. Due to the unavailability of annual labor force data at the county level, we approximate labor supply using population counts from China's six national censuses (1953, 1964, 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2010), as provided by Wu et al. (2021). For each year in our sample, we assign the population from the nearest census year as the proxy for the size of the local labor pool. This approach is reasonable in the Chinese context during our study period, as internal migration was largely restricted by the hukou system before 2014[§], and county populations were thus relatively stable and closely correlated with the working-age population.

We construct a county-level measure of market transition, denoted $Marketization_c$, as the sum of annual private sector intensity in county c over the period 1992–2008:

$$Marketization_c = \sum_{t=1992}^{2008} \frac{PrivateFirm_{c,t}}{Population_{c,t}}$$

where $PrivateFirm_{c,t}$ is the number of private firms operating in county c in year t and $Population_{c,t}$ denotes the county's population from the nearest available census year in county c. The resulting ratio captures the local intensity of market transition in each year, and its cumulative sum reflects the overall intensity of market transition in a county during China's economic reform.

3.3 March 8th Red Banner Pacesetter

Starting in 1954, China launched a nationwide women's movement under the slogan "women hold up half the sky". While primarily aimed at mobilizing the entire labor force, this campaign also contributed to more egalitarian gender attitudes at the local level. As a result, regions across China inherited distinct historical "baselines" of gender attitudes. To account for this variation, we use the historical density of *March 8th Red Banner Pacesetters*, a national honor awarded to outstanding women and women-led collectives, as a proxy for the local intensity of the historical women's movement.

Our data on Red Banner Pacesetters come from the official compilation *National March 8th Red Banner Pacesetters, 1960–2019*, which records all individuals and groups received this award nationwide during that period. We geocoded the workplace of each March 8th Red Banner Pacesetter in the book using Baidu API service to identify the city where each awardee was based. We aggregate awards at the city level rather than the county level because nominations are formally administered at the provincial level, which leads to random variation in awardee counts across counties. Many counties report zero recipients, and aggregation at the city level mitigates this sampling noise while better capturing the spillover effects of the local intensity of women's movement. For each city, we sum the number of

[§] In July 2014, the State Council issued the *Opinions on Further Promoting Reform of the Household Registration System*, which called for fully lifting restrictions on household registration (Hukou) acquisition in towns and small cities.

awardees from the three large-scale award cycles (1960, 1979, and 1983[**]) and divide this total by the city's population to construct a measure of "Red Banner Pacesetters per 10,000 residents". A higher value of this measure suggests that the women's movement had a broader impact in the region.

3.4 Summary Statistics

We merge eight waves of the CGSS with county-level measures of market transition and city-level indicators of historical women's movement to construct our final dataset. We exclude migrants who no longer reside in their hukou-registered counties, as well as individuals who entered the labor market prior to 1956 and after 2008[††]. The year 1956 marks the establishment of China's *danwei* (work unit) system and the establishment of the socialist allocation regime, which fundamentally shaped employment relations and gender norms in the pre-reform era. In contrast, 1992 witnessed the formal consolidation of a decisive shift toward a market-oriented labor system. Our sample thus captures cohorts whose formative labor market experiences span the transition from the socialist *danwei* system to the emerging market economy. Table A1 reports summary statistics for the final sample, which consists of 52,464 individuals, including 25,643 women and 26,821 men.

4. Empirical Strategy

Our empirical framework proceeds in three steps. First, we estimate a cohort difference-in-differences (DID) model to identify the average effect of exposure to local labor marketization during 1992–2008. Specifically, we compare individuals who entered the labor market during this reform window with those who entered outside it, across counties that experienced different intensities of marketization. Second, we complement this baseline specification with an event study to assess whether the timing of labor market entry relative to the reform era systematically shapes outcomes, thereby testing the parallel trends assumption and examining how effects evolve over time. Third, we extend the DID design to a triple-difference (DDD) framework that examines whether two distinct channels, intergenerational transmission and historical women's movement, mitigate the backlash in gender attitudes associated with market transition.

4.1 Difference-in-Differences estimation

We adopt a cohort difference-in-differences (DID) identification strategy, following Chen et al. (2020), which exploits two sources of variation. First, there is cross-county variation in the degree of market transition. Second, even within the

[**] According to our calculation, only these three award cycles was exceptionally large cohorts with 10,002, 10,193, and 10,059 recipients, respectively; all subsequent rounds were much smaller in scale. The nomination process was open, relying on both organizational and social recommendations, with explicit emphasis on grassroots women and collectives across diverse sectors, and without fixed regional quotas or proportional allocations.

[††] But we extend the sample to individuals who entered the labor market after 2008 in the robustness check to see if labor contract law actually have significant effect on the gender attitudes.

same county, individuals' experiences with the labor market differ sharply depending on when they entered it, specifically, whether their labor market entry coincided with the acceleration of marketization after 1992. To estimate the average effect of market transition on gender attitudes, we estimate the following specification:

$$Gender_att_{ict} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(Marketization_c \times Reform_{it}) + \phi WomenMov_h + \gamma \mathrm{X}_{it} + \delta_{ps} + \theta_t + \varepsilon_{ict}$$

where the dependent variable $Gender_att_{ict}$ denotes the gender attitudes of individual i, born in cohort s and province p, surveyed in period t, and linked to county c. $Marketization_c$ measures the overall intensity of market transition without the protection of the labor contract at the county level between 1992 and 2008. $Reform_{it}$ is an indicator equal to 1 if individual i entered the labor market during 1992–2008, and 0 otherwise.

We focus on individuals who entered the labor market during 1992–2008. This is a unique period in China's reform era characterized by market-driven employment without formal legal protections for workers. Prior to 1992, employment relations were governed by the socialist *danwei* (work unit) system, which provided comprehensive job security and benefits. The year 1992 started the official endorsement of a socialist market economy and accelerated the transition from lifetime employment to flexible, market-based hiring, which is initially without accompanying labor regulations. Private-sector employment, negligible before 1992 (Figure A1), expanded rapidly thereafter. At the same time, the abolition of the state-assigned graduate job system (1993–1998) further exposed new labor market entrants to unregulated competition. This institutional gap, which is between the collapse of danwei-based protections and the absence of formal legal protections, defined the 1992–2008 window. It closed in 2008 with the implementation of the Labor Contract Law, which established a legal framework for employment contracts and reintroduced baseline protections for workers, effectively ending the era of unprotected market employment. The detailed timeline of the revolution is depicted in Figure A2.

The key coefficient of interest is β_1, which captures the differential change in gender attitudes among individuals entering the labor market during the reform era in more marketized counties, relative to those in less marketized counties. $WomenMov_h$ is a city-level historical measure of women's movement intensity, defined as the number of "March 8th Red Banner Pacesetter per 10,000 residents". This variable controls for pre-existing local institutions related to gender equality, which may jointly shape both labor market structures and contemporary attitudes.

X_{it} is a vector of individual-level controls, including cohort-centered years of education, number of children, household size, employment status, CCP membership, marital status, and urban residence. We include a full set of interaction fixed effects between birth cohort and province of birth (δ_{ps}) to absorb time-invariant differences across birth-location groups, and period fixed effects (θ_t) to control for nationwide

temporal shocks. We also control for county-period fixed effect for robustness check.‡‡ These results are listed in Table A1 in Appendix. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

4.2 Event-study approach

To examine how the effect of market transition varies with the timing of labor market entry, we implement an event-study specification. We partition individuals into two-year cohorts based on their year of labor market entry and interact each entry cohort dummy with the overall intensity of market transition (Duflo, 2001). The estimating equation is:

$$Gender_att_{ict} = \beta_0 + \sum_{k=1}^{K} \beta_k \left(1\{Entry_year_i \in I_k\} \times Marketization_c\right) + \phi WomenMov_h + \gamma \mathrm{X}_{it} + \delta_{ps} + \theta_t + \varepsilon_{ict}$$

The coefficient β_k captures the marginal association between marketization and gender attitudes for individuals who entered the labor market during interval I_k. This event-study specification allows the effect to vary across entry cohorts, capturing how initial labor market experiences relate to later gender attitudes. We control for city-level historical intensity of the women's movement ($WomenMov_h$), individual-level covariates (X_{it}), birth-cohort-by-province fixed effects (δ_{ps}), and survey-period fixed effects (θ_t). Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

4.3 Triple-difference estimation

We use a triple-difference (DDD) strategy to test how pre-existing sources of gender-egalitarian influence shape individual responses to China's market transition between 1992 and 2008. Our approach relies on three sources of variation. First, we exploit county-level differences in the extent of market transition during this period. Second, we compare individuals who entered the labor market during 1992–2008 with those who entered outside this window. Third, we examine two distinct historical factors that may condition the impact of market transition: the city-level historical intensity of women's movement and whether the respondent's mother held a leadership position at or above the deputy-division level.

The interactions identify whether market transition leads to more egalitarian outcomes only for individuals who also grew up in environments where gender-egalitarian institutions were historically strong. Specifically, we examine whether the historical intensity of the women's movement, as a proxy for collective mobilization,

‡‡ The main specifications omit county fixed effects to preserve the between-county variation required for identification, particularly given that our instrumental variable is time-invariant at the county level. As a robustness check, we later include county fixed effects in alternative specifications to access sensitivity to unobserved, time-invariant local characteristics.

or maternal cadre status, as a channel of intergenerational transmission, mitigates the backlash against gender equality. The estimating equation is:

$$Gender_att_{ict} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(Marketization_c \times Reform_{it} \times M_i) + \phi WomenMov_h^{\S\S} + \gamma \mathrm{X}_{it} + \delta_{ps} + \theta_t + \varepsilon_{ict}$$

here, the key coefficient β_1 captures how the effect varies with a third dimension of gender-egalitarian context, denoted by M_i. We consider two alternative definitions of M_i. First, the historical intensity of the women's movement in the individual's home city ($M_i = WomenMov_h$). Second, whether the individual's mother held a leadership position at or above the deputy-division level ($M_i = mom_cadre_i$).

5. Empirical results

5.1 Baseline results

We first present the main results of our paper. Table 1 presents the effects of the exposure to the market transition period (1992–2008) on gender attitudes across five dimensions. Consistent with our identification strategy, the dependent variables are coded so that higher values indicate more egalitarian attitudes. All specifications control for individual demographics, historical intensity of the women's movement, birth year-province fixed effects, and period fixed effects, with standard errors clustered at the county level.

The effects are significantly negative for four questions in the public sphere (work and ability) and private sphere (labor and marriage), with point estimates ranging from –0.197 to –0.406. This pattern suggests that individuals who entered the labor market during the reform era and were exposed to more marketized local economies hold less egalitarian gender attitudes, which indicates a "gender attitude backlash". Notably, the effect is strongest for the belief that "men are born more competitive than women". This statements directly contradicts the central idea promoted by women's movement during the 1950s–1970s in China, best captured by the slogan "women hold up half the sky". This phrase, widely promoted since the late 1950s, asserted women's equal capacity and right to participate fully in public and productive life. This suggests that market transition may have eroded a core message of China's earlier gender equality campaigns.

In contrast, the coefficient on housework, which is a more egalitarian norm about the equal division of domestic labor, is negative but statistically insignificant (–0.074, $p < 0.1$). This suggests that the backlash is concentrated in labor market norms, rather than in domestic roles, where egalitarian views face weaker pressure from market forces.

§§ When M_i is defined as city-level $WomenMov_h$, we omit this term from the regression to avoid perfect collinearity.

Table 1 Gender attitudes in the public/private sphere

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Marketization × Reform	-0.260**	-0.406***	-0.363***	-0.197**	-0.099+
	(0.078)	(0.074)	(0.073)	(0.069)	(0.058)
Historical intensity of the women's movement	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Individual demographic characteristics	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	44016	44650	44756	44550	44715
Period FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Birth year × Province FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Notes: + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. The baseline results without controls are shown in Table A2.

We then disaggregate these effects by gender to examine heterogeneity in the response to marketization. The results in Table 2 provide evidence of gender asymmetry, with women showing consistently larger negative coefficients than men. Among women (Panel A), the negative effect is larger in magnitude and more precisely estimated for attitudes in both spheres, particularly for the beliefs that "men are born more competitive than women" and that "men should be career-oriented and women family-oriented".

This pattern likely reflects the tendency of labor markets to place women in comparatively disadvantaged and vulnerable positions relative to men, offering female workers fewer employment opportunities, lower wages, and more limited opportunities for advancement (Blau and Kahn, 2017). Simultaneously, the market transition was accompanied by the dismantling of work-unit–based reproductive and care services, including childcare facilities and collective cafeterias. With the erosion of these institutional supports, women have borne a greater share of reproductive and caregiving responsibilities within the private sphere (Cook and Dong, 2011) and have experienced weaker institutional backing as the public and private spheres have separated (Ji et al., 2017). Together, these changes may have contributed to a realignment of women's attitudes toward more traditional gender roles.

In contrast, for men (Panel B), the backlash is weaker and less consistent. This pattern implies that the gender attitude backlash is primarily driven by women, not men.

Table 2 Gender attitudes in the public/private sphere with gender differences

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Panel A. Female					
Marketization × Reform	-0.235**	-0.424**	-0.384***	-0.205*	-0.123
	(0.086)	(0.137)	(0.109)	(0.099)	(0.080)
Observations	21311	21678	21737	21649	21724
Panel B. Male					
Marketization × Reform	-0.287**	-0.345**	-0.329**	-0.203+	-0.031
	(0.096)	(0.105)	(0.110)	(0.115)	(0.076)
Observations	22705	22972	23019	22901	22991

Notes: + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, historical intensity of the women's movement, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects.

Together, Tables 1 and 2 provide robust evidence that the market transition during China's reform era triggered a gender attitude backlash, particularly among women and especially in relation to norms that justify gender-based occupational sorting or reflect essentialist views about innate ability. In contrast, attitudes toward the equal sharing of household chores show no significant decline, suggesting that the effects are concentrated in spheres where market forces directly reshape gendered expectations about work, rather than in domestic roles, where gender norms are less shaped by labor market incentives.

5.2 Event study

The baseline results in Tables 1 and 2 provide evidence of a gender attitude backlash associated with overall intensity of market transition during the reform era (1992–2008), particularly among women and especially concerning norms that justify gender-based occupational sorting or reflect essentialist views about ability. To further investigate whether this effect is concentrated among individuals who entered the labor market during the policy window, we implement an event-study specification following Duflo (2001). We divide respondents into two-year entry cohorts and interact each cohort dummy with the overall intensity of market transition, allowing us to trace how the association between market transition and gender attitudes evolves around the onset of the reform period.

Figure 1 presents the results. We observe a clear negative shift in coefficients starting from the early 1990s, with effects becoming statistically significant and economically meaningful during the 1992–2008 window in the labor market related dimensions, such as ability, work, labor and marriage. This supports our baseline finding. Individuals entering the labor market during the rapid market transition exhibit significantly fewer egalitarian views.

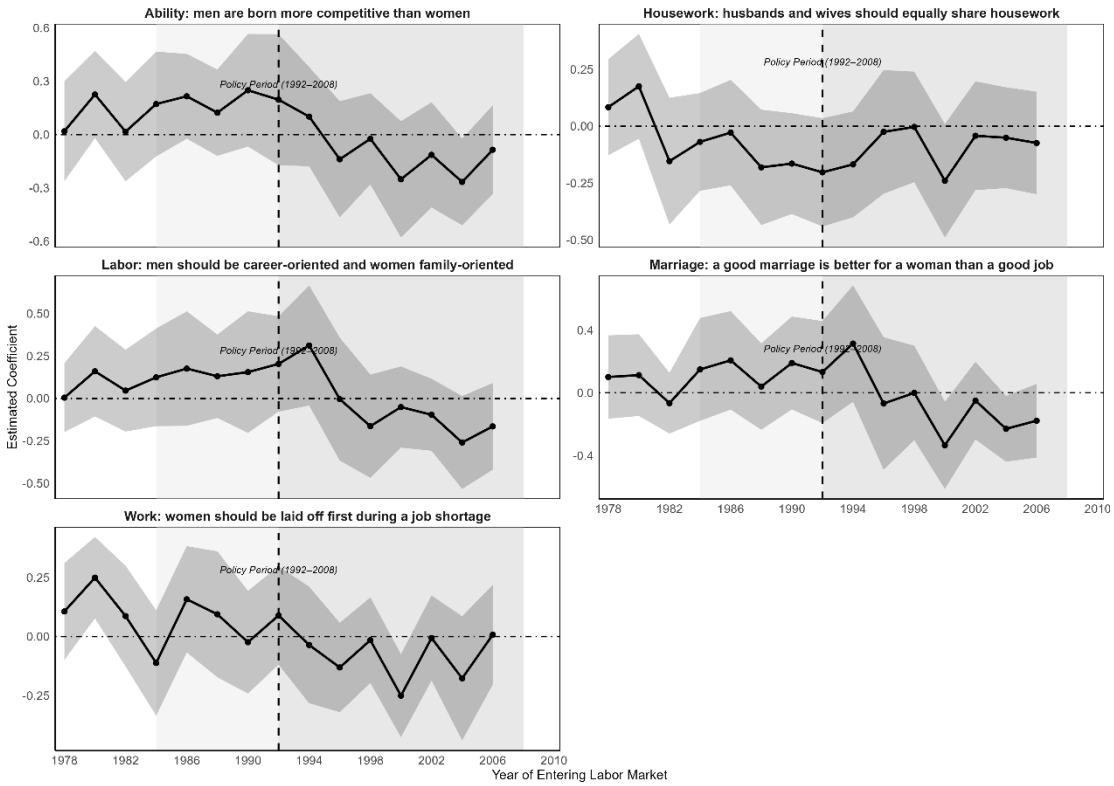


Figure 1 Effect of marketization on gender attitudes of different entry cohorts.

Notes: The vertical dashed line at 1992 marks the onset of the policy period during which private-sector expansion accelerated following Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour. We distinguish two periods to capture the evolution of market liberalization. The shaded light-gray region (1984–1992) corresponds to the early phase of economic reform, when private enterprise remained constrained under state planning; the medium-gray region (1992–2008) reflects the subsequent era of rapid market liberalization, during which private firms became a dominant force in urban employment. Coefficients are plotted relative to the zero-effect line (horizontal dashed line), with dark-gray bands indicating 95% confidence intervals.

Crucially, for "husbands and wives should equally share housework", there is no backlash pattern around 1992. Coefficients remain close to zero throughout the sample period, with wide confidence bands. This reinforces our earlier conclusion that the backlash is domain-specific, concentrated in areas where market forces directly influence labor allocation.

These event-study patterns strongly support the hypothesis that initial labor market experience during the reform era shaped long-term gender attitudes. The fact that the effect emerges precisely at labor market entry suggests that exposure to competitive, marketized labor markets during formative career stages led individuals, particularly women (Table 3 and Figure A4), to adopt more traditional views on gender attitudes in the labor market related dimensions. The fact that we find no effect for the norm that "husbands and wives should equally share household chores" shows that the backlash is not a general shift away from gender equality. Instead, it is specifically tied to the loss of workplace-based supports, such as childcare and job

security under the socialist work unit system, and the rise of competition in the labor market.

5.3 Mitigating Channels

We next turn to the question of what can mitigate this backlash. We identify two distinct mitigating channels. The first is external and macro-level. The history of state-led women's movements, measured by "Red Banner Pacesetters per 10,000 residents". This channel reflects a place-based institutional inheritance. The second is internal and micro-level. Intergenerational transmission within the family, operationalized by whether one's mother held a deputy-division-level (fukeji) or higher leadership position. Here, the mechanism is personal and experiential, where direct exposure to a maternal role model reshapes gendered expectations across generations.

5.3.1 Historical Women's Movement

We next examine whether the state-led women's movement during the socialist era mitigated the gender attitude backlash triggered by market transition. To do so, we interact the core treatment variable (Marketization × Reform) with a city-level measure of historical women's movement intensity. This measure captures the depth of historical women's movement prior to the reform era and is uncorrelated with post-1992 marketization trends.

Table 3 (full sample) shows that the effect on work dimension is significantly mitigated in cities with stronger historical women's movement intensity. The triple interaction term is positive and highly significant for work (0.774, $p < 0.001$), implying that in cities with broader impact of historical women's movement, the backlash on this dimension is effectively offset.

Table 4 reveals strong gender asymmetry in this mitigating effect. Among women (Panel A), the protective role of historical mobilization is evident. The triple interaction is large, positive, and statistically significant for work (1.033, $p < 0.001$) and marginally significant for ability (0.565, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that women who entered the labor market during the reform era in cities with a deeper historical women's movement were less likely to adopt traditional views about women's labor market priority or innate competitiveness. In contrast, among men (Panel B), the triple interaction coefficients are small, mostly negative, and statistically insignificant, indicating that the historical women's movement had little to no moderating effect on men's gender attitudes.

These results indicate that the socialist-era women's movement helped sustain egalitarian gender attitudes into the reform period. By promoting gender equality through local institutions and social practices, it mitigated the backlash among women in response to market-driven labor competition. This suggests that the retreat from egalitarianism was not inevitable, but depended on the strength of earlier institutional support for women's roles in public life.

Table 3 Heterogeneity by Historical Women's Movement

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Marketization × Reform	-0.540***	-0.506***	-0.424***	-0.309*	-0.02
	(0.097)	(0.111)	(0.103)	(0.123)	(0.098)
Marketization × Reform × Historical intensity of the women's movement	0.774***	0.295	0.159	0.285	-0.09
	(0.156)	(0.215)	(0.161)	(0.291)	(0.176)
Observations	44016	44650	44756	44550	44715

Notes: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects.

Table 4 Heterogeneity by Historical Women's Movement with gender differences

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Panel A. Female					
Marketization × Reform	-0.625***	-0.637***	-0.544***	-0.404**	-0.152
	(0.119)	(0.174)	(0.140)	(0.147)	(0.120)
Marketization × Reform × Historical intensity of the women's movement	1.033***	0.565*	0.424+	0.406	0.22
	(0.166)	(0.275)	(0.244)	(0.253)	(0.247)
Observations	21311	21678	21737	21649	21724
Panel B. Male					
Marketization × Reform	-0.381**	-0.256	-0.290+	-0.196	0.218
	(0.137)	(0.165)	(0.151)	(0.175)	(0.136)
Marketization × Reform × Historical intensity of the women's movement	0.309	-0.208	-0.138	0.084	-0.551*
	(0.259)	(0.382)	(0.334)	(0.426)	(0.218)
Observations	22705	22972	23019	22901	22991

Notes: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects.

We further conduct a regional heterogeneity analysis to assess the robustness of the results in Table 4. Notably, Northeast China (including Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning province) was a key site of early women's movement, where women's labor force participation and political integration were especially encouraged during the socialist era (Jin, 2006). Given that our main measure of historical women's movement may not fully capture the depth or distinct character of gender-egalitarian legacies in this region, we reclassify the sample by birthplace, specifically, whether individuals were born in the Northeast or elsewhere and re-estimate the effect of historical women's movement on gender attitudes separately for each group.

Table 5 shows the results. In contrast to other regions, the Northeast does not exhibit a statistically significant decline in egalitarian attitudes on the work dimension

following market liberalization during the reform era. The coefficient on the interaction between marketization and the reform period is –0.139 in the Northeast ($p > 0.1$) but –0.274 in other regions ($p < 0.01$). This finding is consistent with Table 3 and suggests that the historically deeper women's movement in the Northeast may lead them to expect more equal treatment relative to men in the workplace.

Table 5 Regional Heterogeneity

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Panel A. Northeast Region					
Marketization × Reform	-0.139	-0.517***	-0.292*	-0.126	-0.247
	(0.146)	(0.111)	(0.117)	(0.146)	(0.191)
Observations	5227	5279	5282	5268	5279
Panel B. Other Region					
Marketization × Reform	-0.274**	-0.390***	-0.369***	-0.203**	-0.071
	(0.086)	(0.080)	(0.082)	(0.077)	(0.057)
Observations	38789	39371	39474	39282	39436

Notes: + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, historical intensity of the women's movement, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects.

5.3.2 Intergenerational transmission

We next examine whether intergenerational transmission of gender attitudes operates through maternal cadre status. Specifically, we test whether individuals whose mothers held leadership positions are less susceptible to the gender attitude backlash induced by market transition. A professionally accomplished mother may transmit egalitarian gender attitudes to her children, reinforcing beliefs about women's capabilities and social roles.

Table 6 reports estimates for the full sample. The triple interaction is positive but statistically insignificant across all gender attitude measures, suggesting no detectable protective effect when pooling men and women. However, when we split the sample by maternal leadership status, a clear pattern emerges. The negative effect is concentrated among individuals whose mothers did not hold a leadership position (see Table A4). This heterogeneity motivates our subsequent disaggregation by gender and maternal cadre status.

Table 7 uncovers a strong gender asymmetry consistent with intergenerational transmission along gendered lines. Among daughters, a successful mother significantly attenuates the backlash—particularly on the *work* dimension ("women should be laid off first during a job shortage") and the *housework* dimension ("husbands and wives should equally share housework"). In these domains, having a cadre mother not only offsets the negative impact of marketization but is associated with substantially more egalitarian attitudes. In contrast, among sons, the

corresponding interaction coefficients are small and statistically insignificant from zero, indicating that mother's success does not meaningfully shape sons' gender attitudes.

These results support a model of gendered intergenerational transmission. Mothers' leadership experience influences daughters' attitudes in ways that counteract the regressive effects of market transition, but this channel does not extend to sons.

Table 6 Intergeneration transmission

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Marketization × Reform	-0.318***	-0.399***	-0.366***	-0.244**	-0.078
	(0.089)	(0.083)	(0.101)	(0.084)	(0.067)
Marketization × Reform ×	0.586	0.176	0.249	0.598	0.45
mom_cadre	(0.562)	(0.613)	(0.680)	(0.903)	(0.504)
Observations	36540	37102	37192	37009	37159

Notes: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects.

Table 7 Intergeneration transmission with gender differences

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Panel A. Female					
Marketization × Reform	-0.354***	-0.496***	-0.373**	-0.313*	-0.175+
	(0.091)	(0.138)	(0.124)	(0.123)	(0.094)
Marketization × Reform ×	1.852**	-0.399	-0.211	0.296	1.513**
mom_cadre	(0.625)	(0.642)	(1.091)	(0.819)	(0.493)
Observations	17669	18001	18049	17972	18040
Panel B. Male					
Marketization × Reform	-0.320**	-0.283**	-0.332*	-0.197	0.04
	(0.114)	(0.108)	(0.141)	(0.120)	(0.098)
Marketization × Reform ×	-0.174	0.546	0.701	1.081	-0.379
mom_cadre	(0.738)	(0.766)	(0.749)	(0.827)	(0.630)
Observations	18871	19101	19143	19037	19119

Notes: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects.

5.4 Robustness

5.4.1 Instrumental Variable Analysis

To address endogeneity arising from unobserved regional characteristics that may jointly shape both market transition and gender attitudes, such as pre-existing cultural norms, political legacies, or time-varying economic shocks. We employ an

instrumental variable (IV) approach. We construct our instrument as the sum of inverse distances from each county to the 18 early reform cities. This measure captures exogenous variation in exposure to China's initial wave of market-opening policies. Because these city designations were determined by central government decisions based on geopolitical and macroeconomic considerations rather than local gender norms, the instrument is plausibly unrelated to contemporaneous or historical attitudes toward gender roles, satisfying the exclusion restriction.

$$\text{SIDCO84}_c = \sum_{p \in P} \frac{1}{d_{c,p}}$$

where $d_{c,p}$ denote the distance (in kilometers) between the centroid of county c and city p. $p \in P$ indexes the set of 18 early reform cities, comprising the 4 Special Economic Zones established in 1980 (Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, Xiamen) and the 14 coastal open cities designated in 1984.

Table 8 reports the IV estimates for the full sample. Consistent with our baseline findings, the coefficients on the interaction between marketization and reform-era labor market entry are negative and statistically significant for public-sphere, particularly for *work* (–0.519, $p < 0.01$) and *ability* (–0.388, $p < 0.01$). In the private sphere, only the *labor* questions ("men should be career-oriented and women family-oriented") shows a significant backlash (–0.455, $p < 0.001$). This dimension is closely linked to labor market roles and thus bridges public and private gender expectations. By contrast, attitudes toward marriage ("a good marriage is better for a woman than a good job") and housework ("husbands and wives should equally share household chores") show no statistically significant decline, suggesting that the backlash does not extend to domains less directly tied to employment outcomes.

Table 9 presents IV estimates of the effect of market transition on gender attitudes, separately by gender. Among women, the interaction is negative and statistically significant in the *work* and *labor* domains—indicating a deeper backlash in attitudes toward women's employment rights. For men, the only significant effect appears in the *labor* item (–0.301, $p < 0.05$), with no evidence of backlash in the *work* domain and even a positive (though insignificant) coefficient on *marriage*. These results suggest that the gender attitude backlash driven by marketization is more consistent and deeper among women than among men.

These IV results help address concerns about omitted variable bias and support our main finding. Experiencing market transition during the reform era led to a real decline in egalitarian gender attitudes, especially among women, and particularly when it comes to beliefs that justify gender inequality in the labor market or assume innate differences in competitiveness between men and women.

Table 8 IV results

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Marketization × Reform	-0.519**	-0.388**	-0.455***	0.018	-0.171
	(0.171)	(0.131)	(0.100)	(0.189)	(0.115)
Observations	44016	44650	44756	44550	44715

Notes: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, historical intensity of the women's movement, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects. The first-stage results are shown in Table A3.

Table 9 IV results with gender differences

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Panel A. Female					
Marketization × Reform	-0.608**	-0.329+	-0.639***	-0.318	0.099
	(0.205)	(0.193)	(0.180)	(0.196)	(0.207)
Observations	21311	21678	21737	21649	21724
Panel B. Male					
Marketization × Reform	-0.334	-0.278	-0.301*	0.177	-0.31
	(0.214)	(0.190)	(0.142)	(0.262)	(0.203)
Observations	22705	22972	23019	22901	22991

Notes: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, historical intensity of the women's movement, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects. The first-stage results are shown in Table A3.

5.4.2 Validity of 1992 cutoff

To further assess the validity of our identification strategy, we conduct a placebo test using individuals who entered the labor market before the reform era (pre-1992). If the observed backlash were driven by time-invariant regional differences correlated with marketization, such as cultural attitudes or long-run economic development, we would expect to see similar (or at least non-positive) associations for pre-reform cohorts.

Contrary to this, Tables 10 and 11 show that higher market transition is positively and significantly associated with more egalitarian gender attitudes among pre-reform entrants. Across both public- and private-sphere, the coefficients are consistently positive and statistically significant.

This pattern is inconsistent with a spurious correlation between marketization and traditional gender attitudes. Instead, it suggests that in the pre-reform era, when market activity coexisted with strong state support for women’s labor force

participation, greater market transition was associated with more progressive gender views. The reversal of this relationship only after 1992 reinforces our central claim.

Table 10 Gender attitudes of pre-reform cohort

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Marketization × Pre-reform	0.260**	0.406***	0.363***	0.197**	0.099+
	(0.078)	(0.074)	(0.073)	(0.069)	(0.058)
Observations	44016	44650	44756	44550	44715

Notes: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, historical intensity of the women's movement, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects.

Table 11 Gender attitudes of pre-reform cohort with gender differences

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Panel A. Female					
Marketization × Pre-reform	0.235**	0.424**	0.384***	0.205*	0.123
	(0.086)	(0.137)	(0.109)	(0.099)	(0.080)
Observations	21311	21678	21737	21649	21724
Panel B. Male					
Marketization × Pre-reform	0.287**	0.345**	0.329**	0.203+	0.031
	(0.096)	(0.105)	(0.110)	(0.115)	(0.076)
Observations	22705	22972	23019	22901	22991

Notes: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, historical intensity of the women's movement, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects.

5.4.3 Validity of 2008 cutoff

We assess the validity of 2008 as the terminal year of our reform exposure window through three checks. First, we extend the sample to include individuals who entered the labor market after 2008. Table 12 shows that the negative association between market transition and work-related outcomes remains statistically significant, indicating that our main estimates are not an artifact of excluding post-2008 entrants.

Second, Figure A3 presents an event study covering birth cohorts from 1978 to 2024. After 2008, gender attitudes show a gradual improvement. This timing aligns with the implementation of the Labor Contract Law. However, the change is not statistically significant at conventional levels. This pattern is nonetheless suggestive of a potential attenuation of the gender-backlash trend in the post-2008 period.

Third, we directly compare gender attitudes between two reference groups: those who entered the labor market before 1992, prior to the acceleration of market transition, and those who entered after 2008, following the introduction of labor contract law. As reported in Table 13, the post-2008 cohort exhibits more negative associations between market transition and gender-egalitarian attitudes. This suggests that the institutional protections introduced by the 2008 Labor Contract Law, while restoring baseline employment safeguards, were insufficient to offset the deeper, longer-term gender-backlash embedded in the prior era of unregulated labor market expansion.

Table 12 Gender attitudes in the public/private sphere (including cohorts after 2008)

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Marketization × Reform	-0.275***	-0.417***	-0.340***	-0.168**	-0.07
	(0.055)	(0.067)	(0.067)	(0.060)	(0.050)
Historical intensity of the women's movement	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Individual demographic characteristics	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	49723	50366	50480	50259	50434
Period FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Birth year × Province FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Notes: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

Table 13 Gender attitudes of post-reform cohort

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Marketization × Post-reform	-0.237**	-0.489***	-0.349**	-0.165	-0.07
	(0.071)	(0.115)	(0.127)	(0.110)	(0.072)
Observations	37871	38466	38557	38378	38522

Notes: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, historical intensity of the women's movement, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects.

However, when we examine men and women separately (Table 14), the pattern differs markedly by gender. Among women, the backlash in gender attitudes becomes more negative after 2008. This implies that the Labor Contract Law did not protect women from the gendered pressures of marketized employment and may have left them even more exposed. In contrast, the negative association between marketization exposure and gender attitudes among men is no longer statistically significant in the post-2008 period, suggesting a potential buffering effect of the new legal framework for male respondents. These results are also supported by Figure A4, which shows

separate event-study trends for men and women during 1992–2008. After 2008, the trends in labor-market-related dimensions diverge. Men move toward more egalitarian attitudes, while women do not. This finding may also indicate that the implementation of the 2008 Labor Contract Law has not eliminated gender-based discrimination and unequal treatment in the labor market. Female laborers as a disadvantaged group are still confronted with intangible and deeply rooted challenges which hinder the formation of more egalitarian gender attitudes among them.

Table 14 Gender attitudes of post-reform cohort with gender differences

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Panel A. Female					
Marketization × Post-reform	-0.494***	-0.771***	-0.680***	-0.447***	-0.111
	(0.091)	(0.155)	(0.143)	(0.117)	(0.106)
Observations	18324	18682	18726	18650	18714
Panel B. Male					
Marketization × Post-reform	-0.08	-0.311+	-0.215	0.126	-0.061
	(0.103)	(0.167)	(0.184)	(0.171)	(0.088)
Observations	19547	19784	19831	19728	19808

Notes: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, historical intensity of the women's movement, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects.

5.4.4 Labor contract law

To assess the impact of the 2008 Labor Contract Law, we construct a province-level measure of the law's implementation intensity, denoted as *Law*. Since the reform primarily targeted non-state employment relationships, where legal protections were previously weakest. We define *Law* as the share of employment in non-state-owned and collective enterprises out of total employment in each province in 2008. This measure captures the extent to which a local labor market was exposed to the regulatory changes introduced by the law, as state-owned enterprises were already subject to relatively strong administrative oversight and were thus less affected by the new statutory requirements.

The employment shares are calculated using data from the China Statistical Yearbook (2008), which provides detailed information on the industrial and employment structure of each province. By interacting this Law indicator with the post-2008 period, we examine whether regions with greater exposure to non-state employment experienced stronger changes in gender attitudes following the introducing of the Labor Contract Law.

Table 15 Impacts of labor contract law on Gender attitudes

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Labor contract law × Post-reform	-0.18	1.720*	0.192	0.307	0.559
	(0.571)	(0.855)	(0.722)	(0.671)	(0.634)
Historical intensity of the women's movement	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Individual demographic characteristics	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	16805	16859	16889	16832	16873
Period FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Birth year × Province FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Notes: + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

The results are shown in Table 15. These findings align with our earlier placebo tests: in most domains, the 2008 Labor Contract Law did not halt the gender-attitude backlash. However, a notable exception emerges in the ability dimension, where the law appears to have attenuated the negative trend. This partial effect lends support to our choice of 2008 as the terminal year of the main exposure window.

We further address the potential confounding influence of early local labor legislation. Prior to 2008, several provinces and cities enacted their own labor contract regulations to protect workers' rights. To isolate the effect of the national 2008 reform, we exclude observations from jurisdictions that had implemented such local labor contract law by 2007. Information on the timing and location of these subnational laws is drawn from the PKU Law Database (Beida Fabao[***]), a comprehensive repository of Chinese legal instruments. The full list of regions with subnational labor contract law before year 2008 are recorded in the Table A5. Results from this restricted sample are reported in Table 16 and remain consistent with our main findings.

[***] https://www.pkulaw.com/

Table 16 Gender attitudes in the public/private sphere (excluding counties with local labor contract law before 2008)

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Marketization × Reform	-0.431**	-0.608***	-0.315*	-0.187	-0.195
	(0.162)	(0.166)	(0.136)	(0.166)	(0.150)
Historical intensity of the women's movement	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Individual demographic characteristics	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	31047	31534	31613	31454	31582
Period FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Birth year × Province FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Notes: + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

6. Conclusion

A long-standing debate asks whether gender attitudes backlashed in post-socialist China. Focusing on the rapid expansion of market-based labor relations after 1992, this study examines how market transition reshaped gender attitudes. We find that greater exposure to marketization led to more traditional gender attitudes, particularly among women, but only in work-related domains. In contrast, attitudes toward equality in household responsibilities remained unchanged, suggesting that the backlash was specifically tied to the pressures of a competitive labor market, not a broad reversal of support for gender equality.

This effect was weaker in counties with a stronger history of the socialist-era women's movement, showing that historical support for women's public roles helped sustain egalitarian norms. At the micro level, daughters of mothers who held leadership positions were significantly less likely to adopt traditional views, while sons were unaffected, highlighting a gender-specific channel of intergenerational transmission.

We also examine the 2008 Labor Contract Law, which restored basic employment protections but not change the labor relations. Contrary to expectations, the law did not reverse the trend. Among women, gender attitudes became even more traditional after 2008, suggesting that the legal protections introduced by the Labor Contract Law were not enough to reverse the lasting impact of earlier labor market reforms. For men, however, the negative link between market transition and gender attitudes weakened after 2008, pointing to a gender-asymmetric policy effect. This implies that the market-driven backlash in gender attitudes affects male and female workers asymmetrically, an asymmetry that a single labor protection law cannot fully offset. Market-based production relations, driven by profit maximization, generate

inherently unequal pressures across genders. In contrast, socialist production relations tend to provide a structural buffer that better sustains gender-egalitarian norms.

Together, these findings show that the gender attitude backlash was not inevitable. It depended on how labor markets were restructured, and on whether historical or family-level supports were in place to buffer their impact. Our results suggest that social policies matter, but their effectiveness in reshaping gender norms depends critically on timing, design, and the existing institutional context.

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Appendix

Table A1 Summary Statistics

Cohort	Control (Pre-1992)		Treatment (1992-2008)	
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male
Ability	2.878	2.902	3.354	3.129
	(1.223)	(1.201)	(1.224)	(1.170)
Work	3.772	3.698	4.196	3.914
	(1.025)	(1.015)	(0.890)	(0.962)
Labor	2.444	2.429	2.962	2.704
	(1.180)	(1.157)	(1.284)	(1.186)
Marriage	2.703	2.864	3.071	3.022
	(1.171)	(1.160)	(1.237)	(1.188)
Housework	3.870	3.750	4.052	3.660
	(1.006)	(1.052)	(0.983)	(1.070)
Marketization	0.160	0.161	0.176	0.186
	(0.192)	(0.191)	(0.211)	(0.216)
Law	0.109	0.108	0.114	0.115
	(0.045)	(0.044)	(0.047)	(0.047)
SIDCO84	0.026	0.026	0.026	0.027
	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.029)	(0.031)
age	55.476	56.174	34.341	35.066
	(10.147)	(10.215)	(7.475)	(8.259)
education	-0.883	-0.159	-0.534	-0.065
	(2.126)	(2.194)	(3.521)	(3.580)
children	2.032	1.932	1.326	1.135
	(1.144)	(1.136)	(0.827)	(0.819)
household size	10.325	10.448	10.738	10.160
	(14.952)	(14.527)	(14.914)	(11.872)
employment status	0.185	0.321	0.550	0.722
	(0.388)	(0.467)	(0.498)	(0.448)
CCP member = 1	0.047	0.140	0.088	0.174
	(0.211)	(0.347)	(0.283)	(0.379)
Partnered = 1	0.831	0.872	0.894	0.815
	(0.375)	(0.334)	(0.308)	(0.388)
Urban = 1	0.525	0.501	0.582	0.541
	(0.499)	(0.500)	(0.493)	(0.498)
Historical intensity of the women's movement	0.275	0.272	0.307	0.309
	(0.329)	(0.319)	(0.363)	(0.369)
mom cadre = 1	0.004	0.003	0.008	0.009
	(0.060)	(0.059)	(0.090)	(0.094)
Observations	19,175	20,298	6,468	6,523

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table A2 Gender attitudes in the public/private sphere

	Public Sphere				Private Sphere					
	work		ability		labor		marriage		housework	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Marketization × Reform	-0.285***	-0.275***	-0.313***	-0.421***	-0.326***	-0.405***	-0.235***	-0.258***	-0.071	-0.135*
	(0.071)	(0.082)	(0.076)	(0.071)	(0.076)	(0.070)	(0.062)	(0.061)	(0.055)	(0.056)
Historical intensity of the women's movement	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Individual demographic characteristics	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Observations	51404	44016	52165	44650	52298	44756	52050	44550	52253	44715
Period FE	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N
Birth year × Province FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
County × Period FE	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y

Notes: + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

Table A3 First-stage Results

	All Sample		Female Sample		Male Sample	
	Marketization	Marketization × Reform	Marketization	Marketization × Reform	Marketization	Marketization × Reform
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
SIDCO84	2.778*		2.577*		2.950*	
	(1.278)		(1.227)		(1.328)	
SIDCO84 × Reform		4.207***		3.994***		4.325***
		(1.004)		(1.080)		(0.950)
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Fixed Effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	44,893	44,893	21,819	21,819	23,074	23,074
First-stage F-statistic	2,857.30	5,294.60	1,152.10	1,927.90	1,589.80	3,174.60

Table A4 Heterogeneity of intergeneration transmission

	Public Sphere		Private Sphere		
	work	ability	labor	marriage	housework
Panel A. Mom_cadre = 1					
Marketization × Reform	-0.975	-1.168	-1.005	-2.452	2.473
	(2.417)	(1.903)	(2.986)	(3.408)	(2.795)
Observations	173	173	174	173	174
Panel B. Mom_cadre = 0					
Marketization × Reform	-0.319***	-0.395***	-0.369***	-0.237**	-0.069
	(0.091)	(0.084)	(0.102)	(0.084)	(0.066)
Observations	36367	36929	37018	36836	36985

Notes: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. All specifications include individual demographic controls, historical intensity of the women's movement, birth year × province fixed effects, and period fixed effects.

Table A5 Regions with subnational laws

City	Province	Publish Year	Start Year
Shenzhen		1994	1994
	Fujian	1996	1996
	Hainan	1996	1996
Guangzhou		1997	1998
Zibo		2000	2001
Ningbo		2000	2000
Shanghai		2001	2002
	Shandong	2001	2002
Hangzhou		2002	2003
	Jiangsu	2003	2003
	Anhui	2004	2004
	Ningxia	2005	2005
	Jilin	2007	2008

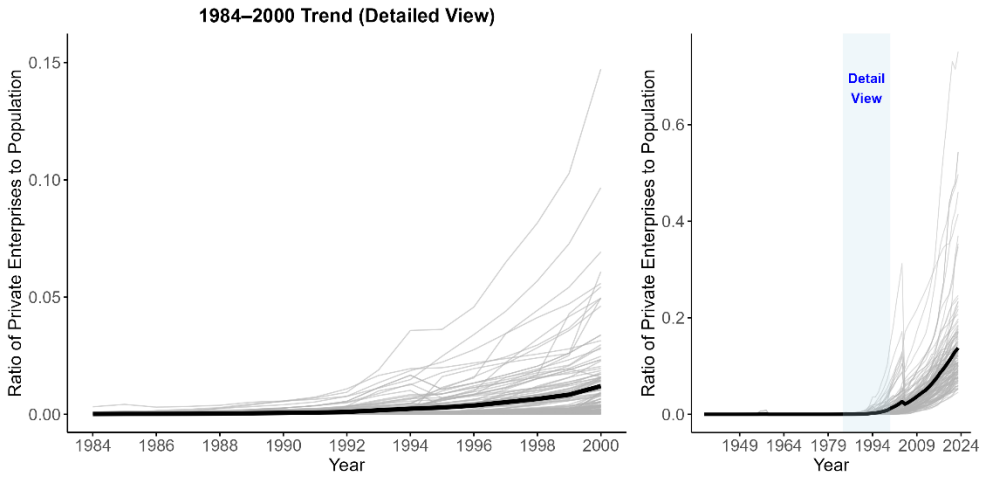


Figure A1

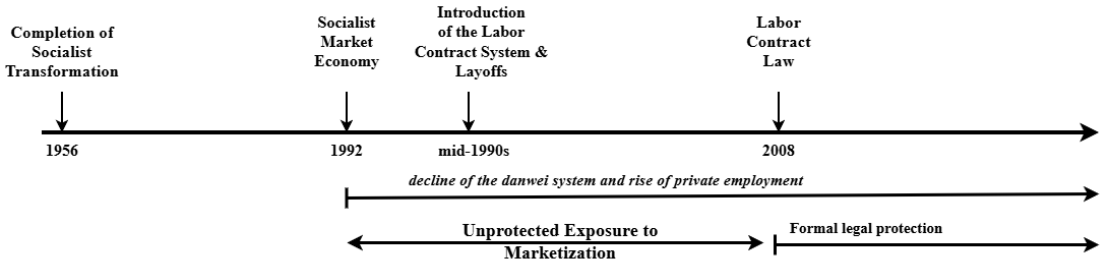


Figure A2 History map

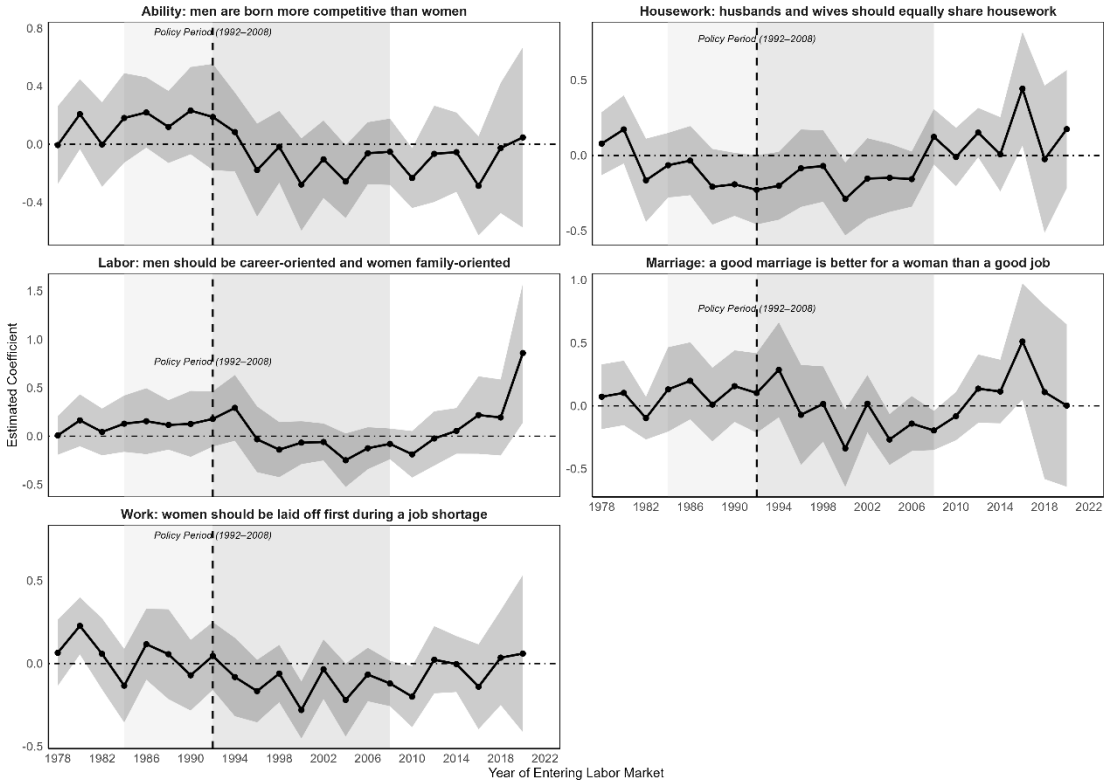


Figure A3 Effect of marketization on gender attitudes of different entry cohorts (1978-2024)

Notes: The vertical dashed line at 1992 marks the onset of the policy period during which private-sector expansion accelerated following Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour. We distinguish two periods to capture the evolution of market liberalization. The shaded light-gray region (1984–1992) corresponds to the early phase of economic reform, when private enterprise remained constrained under state planning; the medium-gray region (1992–2008) reflects the subsequent era of rapid market liberalization, during which private firms became a dominant force in urban employment. Coefficients are plotted relative to the zero-effect line (horizontal dashed line), with dark-gray bands indicating 95% confidence intervals.

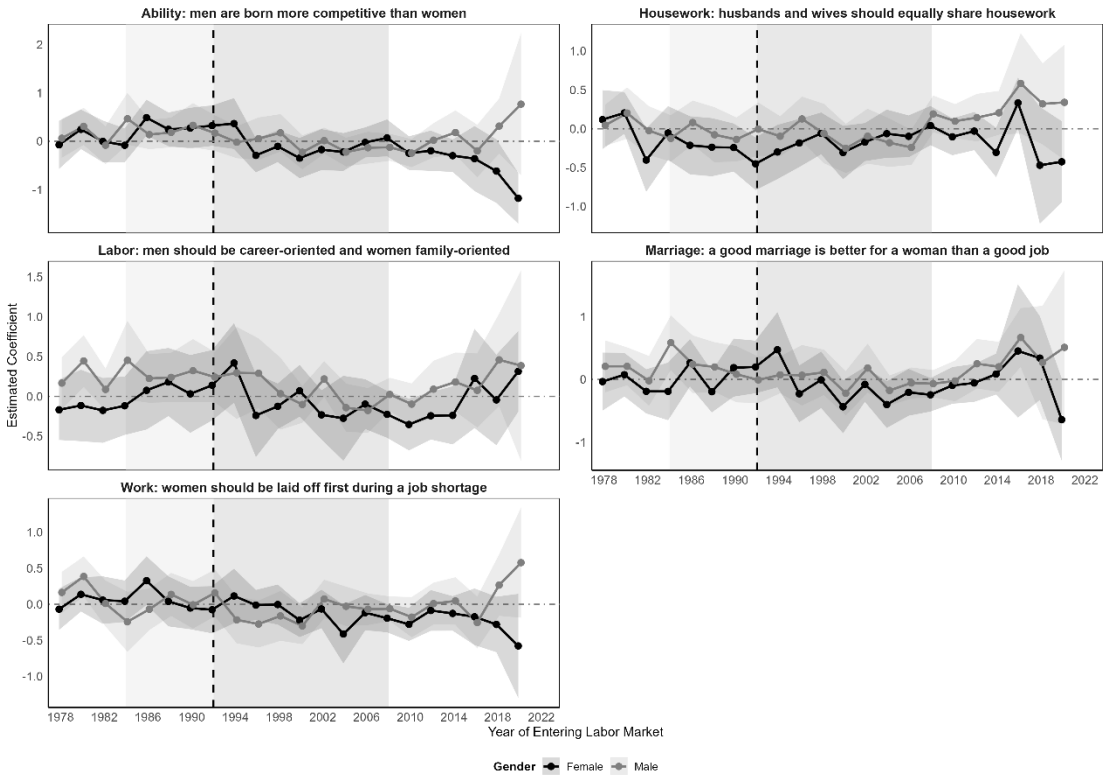


Figure A4 Effect of marketization on gender attitudes with gender difference (1978-2024)

Notes: The vertical dashed line at 1992 marks the onset of the policy period during which private-sector expansion accelerated following Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour. We distinguish two periods to capture the evolution of market liberalization. The shaded light-gray region (1984–1992) corresponds to the early phase of economic reform, when private enterprise remained constrained under state planning; the medium-gray region (1992–2008) reflects the subsequent era of rapid market liberalization, during which private firms became a dominant force in urban employment. Coefficients are plotted relative to the zero-effect line (horizontal dashed line), with dark-gray bands indicating 95% confidence intervals.